



Wildlife in North Carolina 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION

For just the second time in the 20-year history of the *Wildlife in North Carolina* Photo Competition, a youth category photographer has won the Grand Prize.

Henning Bergeton of Chapel Hill won this year’s Grand Prize with a photograph of a marbled salamander that he entered in the Youth 13–17 category. He also won honorable mention in the youth category for a photo of a tiger salamander. The last youth photographer to win the Grand Prize was Kaylyn J. Gruber of Belmont in 2009.

Staff Photographer Jonothan Gruenke, one of the judges for the competition, had this to say about Bergeton’s winning image.

“I was captivated by the Grand Prize winner, a stunning image of a marbled salamander that was a testament to both photographic skill and a deep understanding of this elusive subject,” said Gruenke, a 20-year veteran behind the lens. “What truly set this image apart was the masterful use of flash, which created a dynamic scene highlighting the amphibian’s unique colors and textures while perfectly balancing the ambient light of the sun piercing through the forest. The lighting and composition emphasized the salamander’s beauty, accentuating a presence we seldom get to see. The image demonstrated that artificial light can be used to reveal the natural wonders around us.”

Art Director Marsha Tillett was also enamored with Bergeton’s photo.

“This year marks another historic moment for the *Wildlife in North Carolina* Photo Competition, as it is only the second time in the contest’s history that a youth photographer has won the Grand Prize, and the youth entries this year were really impressive,” said Tillett, who has been involved with the Photo Competition since its inception. “This competition, which receives entries from talented photographers from across the state, has traditionally seen adults take the top honor. This achievement highlights the skill and vision of this young photographer.”

Judges for this year’s Photo Competition included Tillett, Gruenke, Graphic Designer Bryant Cole, Digital Engagement Manager Ryan Kennemur and retired Graphic Designer Jodie Owen.

–Mike Zlotnicki

GRAND PRIZE WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION



Henning Bergeton, Chapel Hill

Marbled salamander

On a late winter afternoon, I was out flipping logs in a local forest to look for some common salamander species. I turned up a marbled salamander along with a few other species. To photograph it, I carefully placed the salamander on a patch of moss right next to its log. I positioned my camera to capture the sunset in the background and set my lens to a focal length of 24mm. It took a few test shots before I got the settings just right. After a quick photo session, I let the salamander crawl back under its log.

(Nikon D7100, Nikon AF-S DX Nikkor 18–55mm f/3.5-5.6G VR, f/13, 1/100 of a second, ISO 400, Godox V860II flash, Modified LumiQuest Softbox III diffuser)



BIRDS FIRST PLACE

Brady Linkous, Valdese
Backyard house finch

The house finch is very common in North Carolina and this one was photographed near my home. I spend many weekend winter mornings in a small, improvised photo blind in my backyard. This photo was taken on a partly cloudy February morning with some breaks in the clouds allowing just a bit of light to strike any bird that I was lucky enough to have land near me. The soft, directional nature of this light helps enhance what would have otherwise been just another “bird on a stick” photo.

(Canon 5D MKIV, Canon 500 mm f4, f/6.3, 1/3,200 of a second, ISO 6400)

BIRDS SECOND PLACE

Liam Waller, Zionville
Ruby-throated hummingbird

I captured this photo in my front yard last July after spotting a few ruby-throated hummingbirds enjoying the summer blooms. To get a closer view without disturbing them, I set up my pop-up hide and used a tripod. Nature photography is a passion and a form of self-care for me. I love sharing the moments I capture on Instagram and on my website (liamnikophoto.com). I am honored this image was selected in this year’s Photo Competition.

(Nikon Z8, NIKKOR 600mm f/6.3 PF VR S lens on a tripod, f/8, 1/1,250 of a second, ISO 1000)



BIRDS THIRD PLACE

Alan Clark, Raleigh
Goldfinch and sunflowers

I took this photo at the Dorothea Dix sunflower field in Raleigh several summers ago with the intention of capturing a yellow-on-yellow shot by sandwiching the American goldfinch between out-of-focus sunflower blooms. It was achieved by isolating the goldfinch by using a long focal length with a narrow depth of field, thus rendering only the goldfinch in focus.

(Nikon D850 camera, 500mm f/5.6 lens 1.4x teleconverter, 700mm, f/10, 1/250 of a second, ISO 640)





MAMMALS FIRST PLACE

Jacob Long, Sylva
Bedded bull elk

This image has become one of my favorites, taken during a peaceful evening spent with my wife as we watched the bull elk graze while the sun set. I was especially drawn to how the bull was bedded in a patch of yellow flowers, which beautifully captured the feeling of early spring. His antlers were still in velvet, a detail that shows a softer, often overlooked side of these powerful animals. Using my tripod, I got a low, eye-level perspective and was able to shoot with a slower shutter speed and low ISO, maintaining image quality in the fading light.

(Sony a7R IV, Sony FE 200–600mm f/5.6-6.3 G OSS at 600mm, 1/160 of a second, f/6.3, ISO 1600, gimbal head, tripod)

MAMMALS SECOND PLACE

Neil Jernigan, Snow Hill
Bathing bear

Late one evening while searching for black bear at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge, we discovered a set of wet tracks crossing the road. After deciding to see where they led, we found this male bear just sitting in the canal. We watched and photographed him for around 10 minutes as he bathed, scrubbed his face and just simply enjoyed the water. Having a super telephoto lens, I was able to capture this close portrait from a safe distance on the road. It was late in the day and overcast, so using a higher ISO and wide aperture allowed me to create this photo.

(Canon R5, Canon 600mm F4L IS II, f/4, 1/640 of a second, ISO 10000)



MAMMALS THIRD PLACE

John Mauser, Hubert
Surprise bobcat

Bobcats have been my photography arch-nemesis for years, until this cat fell in my lap. I was set up on a trail with my camera and tripod, waiting on bears. Something told me to look left. As I did, I saw this bobcat standing 25 feet away, staring at me. Somehow, I turned my body, adjusted my camera and dialed in my settings in slow motion without spooking the cat. I hid my eyes and used my LCD screen to photograph the cat. The bobcat lingered for five minutes; I don't think I took a breath the entire time.

(Sony a7 IV, Sony 200–600mm, tripod, 1/250 of a second, f6.3, ISO 12800)



REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS
WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION



REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS FIRST PLACE

Kevin Ricker, Pittsboro

Meditating treefrog

I'm a pediatric dentist, which can be a very loud job. On my lunch breaks, I usually grab my camera and head out to grab a few minutes of relative quiet. The retaining pond next to my office in Chatham County usually fills with Cope's gray treefrogs in mid-spring and then green treefrogs like this one as the summer settles in. I consider this tiny, green fella to be leading a momentary guided meditation, and it seems like the dragonfly agrees.

(Olympus OM-D E-M5 markii, Olympus 300mm Pro f/4, 1/2,000 of a second, ISO 1250)

REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

SECOND PLACE

John Mauser, Hubert

Green anole

I found this juvenile green anole on a yellow pitcher plant last summer. I decided to try to get an up-close portrait of it. The tiny anole was busy hopping from pitcher to pitcher, giving me little time to manually focus and take a shot. Eventually, the anole jumped behind a pitcher and peeked its head around. I held my breath and leaned forward until the lizard's eye came into sharp focus. I love that the anole's color perfectly matches the pitcher plant, while the edge of the leaf gives just enough color and contrast to make the image pop.

(Sony a7 IV, Sony 90mm macro lens, diffused Godox flash, 1/100 of a second, f/14, ISO 200)



REPTILES & AMPHIBIANS

THIRD PLACE

Erin Price-Erwin, Greensboro

Rough green snake close-up

My usual picture subjects are insects and plants, but I am eager when I chance upon a reptile or amphibian. On this cool morning, framed against the dark bark of a large pine, my eye caught the brilliant green of this slender rough green snake. I loved how the dew clung to its eye, and since it was cold and sluggish, I was able to get my macro lens close enough to get some pictures.

(Olympus OM-1, M.Zuiko 90mm, f/7.1, 1/160 of a second, ISO 400, Godox V350o flash with AK Diffuser)





INVERTEBRATES FIRST PLACE

John Mauser, Hubert

Snail close-up

It was late March, and spring was just beginning to awaken in eastern N.C. I walked along the banks of the Roanoke River with my new macro lens searching for any subject that presented itself. Eventually, I found this snail climbing along a pile of decomposing timber on the forest floor. With the depth of field being so shallow in macro photography, I needed the snail's eyes and the ridges on its shell to be the same height. As the snail continued to elevate and lower its eyes independently, I continued to shoot, until eventually everything lined up.

(Sony a7 IV, Sony 90mm macro lens, diffused Godox flash, 1/200 of a second, f/11, ISO 200)

INVERTEBRATES SECOND PLACE

Bryan Barnes, Jarvisburg

Jumping spider

I saw this jumping spider during a walk in Kitty Hawk Woods Coastal Reserve on a warm day last winter. It blended in well with the dead grass it was on, and I tried to use the grass as a background.

(Olympus OM-1, Olympus 90mm macro lens, MC-20 teleconverter, f/10, 1/250 of a second, ISO 1600, AK diffuser and Godox VIII flash)



INVERTEBRATES THIRD PLACE

Matt Williams, Mount Holly

Fly on echinacea bloom

Every year, I plant a flower garden for cut flowers and for the opportunities to photograph insects and other wildlife. I was out in the garden with my camera one day and noticed this fly sitting on top of an echinacea bloom. It was very still, which gave me the chance to get close enough for this macro photo. This was a single exposure in ambient lighting.

(Nikon D850, Tokina 100mm 2.8 macro lens, f/11, 1/320 of a second, ISO 1000)





WILD PLANTS **FIRST PLACE**

Karen Horner, Eagle Springs

Sunrise at Fort Fisher

Captured during sunrise at Fort Fisher, this image highlights a patch of native blanket flowers glowing in the early light. The vibrant colors stood out against the weathered rocks and dramatic sky, offering a striking contrast between delicacy and resilience. I was inspired by how this wild beauty thrives in such a rugged place—a reminder of how life persists with quiet strength. In that peaceful moment, I sensed God’s presence in the stillness and the light.

(Samsung Galaxy S23 Ultra, 13mm, f/2.2, 1/320 of a second, ISO 50)

WILD PLANTS **SECOND PLACE**

Matt Williams, Mount Holly

September in the mountains

One of my favorite times to hike in the higher elevations of the North Carolina mountains is September. I love the transition from late summer to early fall when the goldenrod and angelica plants are blooming. I was hiking the Art Loeb Trail near Black Balsam Knob when this angelic bloom caught my eye.

(Nikon D500, Nikon 55mm 2.8 macro lens, f/4, 1/500 of a second, ISO 400)



WILD PLANTS **THIRD PLACE**

John Mauser, Hubert

Fern after the fire

I found this freshly sprouted fern growing in the Croatan after a controlled burn. Once a fire subsides, ferns are often the first plant to sprout among the ashes, covering the blackened ground with vibrant greens. I set my camera to underexpose the image while using a diffused flash to front light the fern in the dim forest, causing the background to fall into darkness.

(Sony a7 IV, Sony 90mm macro lens, diffused Godox flash, 1/200 of a second, f/14, ISO 200)



OUTDOOR RECREATION

WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION



OUTDOOR RECREATION **FIRST PLACE**

Michael Berg, Goldsboro

Early morning angler

I took a day trip in February 2024 to photograph shorebirds at Atlantic Beach. While chasing the birds along the water break, I noticed this angler fishing from the beach. I loved the early morning light and the mist in the air as it created this mystical background. Then I noticed the angler and his pose (as he gazed back to the pier), so I lifted my camera and took this magical photograph.

(Nikon Z8 Nikkor Z 180–600mm f/5.6-6.3 VR at 220 mm 1/400 of a second at f/5.6, ISO 64 (-2 EV))

OUTDOOR RECREATION **SECOND PLACE**

Dennis Oglesby, Sanford

Fog on the lake

This photo was taken on a cool, foggy morning while I prepared to find some wildlife in the fog on Lake Trace (Carolina Trace Country Club) in Sanford. I had just put the canoe in the water and got my gear ready when I saw the perfect light on the still water. I quickly set up my tripod, and as the canoe gently floated in the fog and water, I snapped several photos that seemed to capture the moment perfectly. The serene atmosphere and cool air with the fog barely hiding the trees in the background gave it the right amount of light and contrast.

(Nikon Z 6II, Nikkor 24–70mm at 33mm, f/4, 1/400 of a second, ISO 100, Manfrotto 055 tripod)



OUTDOOR RECREATION **THIRD PLACE**

Caroline Prevost, Chesapeake, Virginia

Clamming on Ocracoke Island

I took this photo while at an inlet early one summer morning on Ocracoke Island. It was just after sunrise, and I was photographing wildlife and enjoying the peaceful beauty all around me. I noticed a fishing boat had anchored in the inlet. It was low tide, and the two fishermen were able to get out and search for clams. They were unaware of my presence as I snapped this anonymous photo of them.

(Canon R5, Canon RF 100–500mm F4.5-7.1 lens with Canon RF 1.4X Extender, 500mm, f/7.1, 1/2,000 of a second, ISO 250)



WILD LANDSCAPES
WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION



WILD LANDSCAPES **FIRST PLACE**

Wick Smith, Fayetteville

Stunning sunset

This photo was taken in west Beaufort looking across the bay (Newport River) between Beaufort and Morehead City at sunset in September 2024. Watching the color of the sky evolve was amazing. As was the case with this photo, the best sky color usually occurs well after the sun goes down. The sunsets here in the fall are spectacular when the conditions are just right.

(Canon R5, Canon EF16–35mm f/2.8L III at 17mm, 4/10 of a second, f/16, ISO 100)

WILD LANDSCAPES

SECOND PLACE

Greg Sides, Mount Gilead

Above the fog

This shot was taken with my drone positioned over the Pee Dee River to the right and a few large, open forested areas to the left. One of my favorite subjects to photograph is fog, and when I saw the fog as the sun was rising that morning, I knew I could get a great shot at this location. The sunlit golden fog to the left made a great contrast with the cool blue fog on the river to the right.

(DJI Mavic 3 Pro, 24mm, f/4, 1/10 of a second, ISO 100)



WILD LANDSCAPES **THIRD PLACE**

Neil Jernigan, Snow Hill

Bald cypress at dawn

While on a photo assignment, I got word of a beautiful bald cypress near Mackeys. About an hour before sunrise, I launched my kayak to search for the tree. After searching for a while, I finally found it and got in position so the sun would rise directly behind the tree. Just before the sun lifted above the tree line, a small fog began to form over the water. It was as if the swamp was on fire that morning and I was able to create this photo using my telephoto lens with a small aperture creating a large depth of field.

(Canon R5, Sigma 150–600mm, f/16, 1/800 of a second, ISO 100)



ANIMAL BEHAVIOR
WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION



ANIMAL BEHAVIOR FIRST PLACE

Sam Cranston, Dallas
Territorial osprey

I regularly make a quick stop by Kevin Loftin Riverfront Park in Belmont on my way to work. On this Wednesday in late June, I noticed a heron fishing along the island shoreline quietly stalking perilously closer to the resident ospreys. As expected, the female osprey swooped off her nest to mount a territorial defense, driving the hapless heron around the cove past my position in waist-deep water, then down the river. I worried this frame was too tight, but it strongly translates the intense, frantic, heart-pounding seconds.

(Canon EOS-1D X Mark II, EF 500mm f4L IS II USM, EF 1.4x Extender III at f5.6, 1/4,000 of a second, ISO 800)

INVERTEBRATES SECOND PLACE

Bryan Barnes, Jarvisburg
Green magnolia jumping spider

I found this green magnolia jumping spider guarding her eggs beneath a leaf next to my quail pen. I spent a few weeks watching her hatch the eggs. After they hatched, the spiderlings spent a few days moving around the nest until they began to leave. I used clips on tripods to hold the leaf upside down for this picture. I tried using a higher ISO to allow for the lowest power setting on the flash to try and fight the specular highlights that make these spiders so hard to photograph. And that was at 1250 ISO, f11, 1/100 second.

(Olympus OM-1, Olympus 90mm macro lens, MC-20 teleconverter, f/11, 1/100 of a second, ISO 1250 AK diffuser and Godox VIII flash)



ANIMAL BEHAVIOR THIRD PLACE

Trip Lamb, Greenville
Skimmers sharing

A female black skimmer accepts the nuptial gift of a grateful suitor at a nesting colony on Wrightsville Beach. The Wrightsville colony provides great opportunities to observe skimmer activity (foraging, nesting, courtship) at reasonable distances with minimal disturbance to the birds. Black and white birds can be tricky to photograph, so I try to pick overcast days for even lighting.

(Sony a7, Sony 600mm lens, f/9 at 1/640 of a second, on tripod)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17
WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17 FIRST PLACE

Shreyes Chalasani, Chapel Hill

Rat snake hatchling

While on a camping trip with my friends, I couldn't help but notice and appreciate the longleaf Savannah habitat and the biodiversity within it. I aimed to capture an image that would help represent the unique species that rely on and call this maintained habitat home. I was fortunate enough to encounter this hatchling rat snake searching for its first meal. It was amazing to see how well the young snake blended on the bark of the tree, showcasing the unique relationships different animals have with their habitat and why protecting and maintaining our landscapes are so important.

(Nikon D500, Nikon 20mm f/1.8G ED, f/13, 1/200 of a second, ISO 500)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17
SECOND PLACE

Seth Harris, Mooresville

Gray squirrel posing

I was on a walk at a local park with my camera, hoping to get photos of gray squirrels that usually came out that time of evening. After seeing a few squirrels, I came across one that wasn't spooked by me. I crouched down and used my hands to gently mess with the pine needles and ground cover in front of me, hoping the squirrel would come closer. It started to slowly move closer, within about four feet of me, before stopping and staring at me. I took a few dozen photos before it ran off.

(Canon M50, Canon EF 50mm f/1.8 STM, 50mm, f/2.8, 1/1,250 of a second, ISO 2000)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17
THIRD PLACE

Jake Hillygus, Durham

Basking anhinga

Wandering around Airlie Gardens in Wilmington, I noticed this female anhinga preening its feathers on a tree branch hanging low over the water. It basked in the morning light as it waited for its feathers to dry, paying me no mind as I approached to take its portrait. Whenever I go to Airlie Gardens, I experience memorable moments like this with the many anhingas, ibises and herons that visit the gardens and allow for a close approach.

(Canon R7, Tamron SP 150–600mm f/5-6.3 Di VC USD G2 f/8.0, 1/1,000 of a second, ISO 2500, EF-EOS R lens mount adapter)





YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

HONORABLE MENTION

Henning Bergeton, Chapel Hill

Tiger salamander crossing

On one December evening, I decided to utilize the rainy weather to search for amphibians crossing roads. The conditions made it perfect for many of the elusive species that are limited to breeding in the winter months. I was fortunate to encounter this large, male tiger salamander, a species declining in numbers. After escorting this individual off the road, I took some quick photos of him before he found his way into a seasonal wetland, one that he likely hatched in.

(Nikon D7100, Nikon AF-S DX Micro Nikkor 40mm f/2.8G, f/13, 1/250 of a second, ISO 320, Flash model: Godox V860II, modified Altura pop-up diffuser)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

HONORABLE MENTION

Teaghan Gillispie, Dobson

Orb weaver spinning a web

I spotted this female marbled orb weaver while bird-watching on a familiar trail in October. Known for their bold patterns and bright orange-yellow coloring, they're often called "pumpkin spiders" and are most active in the fall, building intricate webs to catch nocturnal insects. I found her spinning a web along the trail edge. Her constant movement made her difficult to photograph with the 600mm lens I had for birds, forcing me to stand far away. Still, the contrast between her colorful abdomen and the slate-blue background made it worth the effort. Nature will always surprise you!

(Nikon D5100, Sigma 150–600mm C lens, f/6.3, 600mm, 1/500 of a second, ISO 1000)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 13–17

HONORABLE MENTION

Jake Hillygus, Durham

Cormorants on the move

Pea Island is a magical place to watch birds, with innumerable cormorants, ducks and gulls calling the island home. A single flock of cormorants can take half an hour to fly overhead due to the sheer number of birds. While birding, I noticed that one such flock was flying directly in front of the moon. As more and more cormorants flew by, I had many opportunities to set up the right shot by positioning the moon in the middle of the birds with beach grass in the foreground.

(Canon R7 w/ Tamron SP 150-600mm f/5-6.3 Di VC USD G2 with EF-EOS R lens mount adapter, f/7.1, 1/500 of a second, ISO 100)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER

WILDLIFE IN NORTH CAROLINA 2024–2025 PHOTO COMPETITION



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER

FIRST PLACE

Alice Hylan Drust, Pittsboro

Anole portrait

My dad gave me his old Canon camera, so I got into taking photos of animals. One day, a lizard got into the house. Whenever a lizard comes inside, we always try to put them back outside, but this little anole would not stay still and kept squirming out of our hands. So, we decided to catch it in a cup instead. The cup had a red inside. I took a photo of it in the cup before we released it because I liked how the anole contrasted the background. I thought the quality was amazing in this photo and I really like lizards and anoles.

(Canon 7D, Canon EF 50mm 1:1.4, Movo Reverse Mount Macro Lens Converter, f/4.5, 1/160 of a second, +0.3 step, ISO 5000)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER SECOND PLACE

Alejandro Gervet, Charlotte

Great egret

A great egret stretches its feathers after a few successful fishing attempts. Egrets are beautiful birds, and I was very excited to capture this moment.

(Canon 70D Sigma Contemporary 150–600mm F5-6.3 DG OS HSM, f/6.3, 1/3,200 of a second, ISO 2000, 600mm)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER HONORABLE MENTION

Peaches Wright, Powells Point

Light show

The aurora borealis lights have never been visible at our home in North Carolina before, so when I saw it outside as I was being dropped off from volleyball, I had to run inside and get my camera! I was amazed at how the trees were silhouetted against the color of the sky and how the colors showed up at night! When I took this photo, I knew I had captured a memory that would last a lifetime.

(Nikon D3, 24mm lens, 5-second exposure, ISO 1600, f/2.8)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER HONORABLE MENTION

Owen Meck, Randleman

Tundra swan at rest

We were driving around Pungo Lake looking for waterfowl this winter. There were a lot of tundra swans in one of the impoundments. I took the picture because we only see swans in eastern North Carolina. It was neat to see so many in one place. I took a lot of pictures, but I chose this one because of the wide angle and exposure.

(Canon EOS R100, Canon RF-S 55–210mm at 55mm, f/9, 1/640 of a second, ISO 100)



YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER THIRD PLACE

Alejandro Gervet, Charlotte

Hawk on the prowl

A hungry red-tailed hawk was circling around a field looking for prey. It was great to see this happening so up close!

(Canon 70D Sigma Contemporary 150–600mm F5-6.3 DG OS HSM, f/8, 1/3,200 of a second, ISO 1000, 388mm)

YOUTH PHOTOGRAPHER 12 & UNDER HONORABLE MENTION

Adley Cooper, Selma

Pileated woodpecker

We were at Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve waiting for any signs of woodpeckers, and what we were looking for was not showing itself. Then, I went around the building and saw this beautiful pileated woodpecker in the longleaf pines. Birds are my favorite things to take photos of. I was ecstatic that I got a good couple shots in before it noticed me and flew off. I like how vibrant these birds are. They are beautiful and I love the sounds they make. They always make me smile.

(Canon PowerShot SX720, 172mm, F/6.9, 1/250 of a second, ISO 400)

