

# NORTH CAROLINA YOUTH OUTDOOR ENGAGEMENT COMMISSION



# ANNUAL REPORT 2024

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## COMMISSIONERS

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*Agriculture Commissioner Appointee; Duplin Co.*

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*Senate Pro Tem Appointee; Craven Co.*

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*House Speaker Appointee; Wake Co.*

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# A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**T**he North Carolina Youth Outdoor Engagement Commission strives to connect our State's youth with the great outdoors, whether it's hiking the Appalachian Trail, learning archery, or landing their first fish. This year has seen our agency continue to expand its reach and impact to more young North Carolinians with our grants and programs than ever before. With an increasing need and demand for outdoor learning opportunities, we have worked diligently to develop new partnerships and fundraising opportunities, all in support of youth outdoor education.

As you will read in our 2024 Annual Report, the number of students and schools we continue to support grows, the volume of counties and communities we impact increases, and the engagement with our grants and programs continues to propel youth to tackle incredible outdoor challenges and projects. GO Grant recipients have built fishing docks, archery ranges, 20ft. working greenhouses, and interactive nature trails. We've seen the Trailblazers Clubs testing their limits rock climbing, horseback riding, backpacking, and deep sea fishing. Students are learning new skills like campfire cooking, wilderness first aid, archery, and sport shooting; and we're witnessing teachers and students working together to plan life-changing adventures like hang gliding, sailing, and white water rafting.

In addition to operating our successful programs and working with our high volume of grant recipients, we have continued to engage in boots-on-the-ground community outreach across the state. Leadership and staff have presented to teachers from across the state, led collaborative learning and outdoor skills sessions in the mountains, promoted inter-agency cooperation at public tournaments and events, and represented our mission at the State Fair resulting in a record-breaking year for the Outdoor Patch program.

We look forward to sharing with you information about our new grant offering, Youth Sports Grants, and the newly formed North Carolina Outdoors Foundation, which raised over \$100,000 this year in support of our mission and youth outdoor education. Exciting news is our official partnership with USA Archery, an ally in working to expand archery education across the State, while demonstrating the importance of outdoor experiential learning for youth.

Our efforts would not be possible without the commendable dedication that North Carolina educators have shown in preparing youth to be confident and successful stewards of the outdoors. On behalf of the Commission, I wish to extend our gratitude to the donors and legislators, whose generosity and championing of our cause is integral to our mission. At the time of writing, over \$1.3 million has been requested in unsolicited applications from schools and nonprofits statewide and it is our hope that the General Assembly will appropriate funding in the upcoming year, so that we can continue our work to provide outdoor education opportunities to our State's youth.



Justin P. Burr



# OUR GOALS



## IMPROVE MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH



We support outdoor adventurous activities that promote and develop mental and physical wellbeing.

## REDUCE SCREEN TIME



By promoting “screen-free” activities, we’re providing opportunities for students to reduce stress and connect with nature.

## ENGAGE YOUTH WITH CONSERVATION



We fund field trips and projects that include conservation-based activities, such as hunting, fishing, and propagation of native fish and plants.

## BUILD SOCIAL AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS



Experiential learning gives students the opportunity to make friends and build their confidence in an outdoor learning environment.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Our grants involve a variety of community stakeholders and provide opportunities for students to support and learn from their communities.

## SUPPORT OUTDOOR RECREATION



Youth are exposed to new activities and potential career pathways in the outdoor recreation and agricultural sectors.



# OUR IMPACT



The General Assembly appropriated the Commission \$3.5 million in non-recurring funds in September 2023, which was fully awarded by April 2024.

## 98/100

COUNTIES IMPACTED

The Commission has now awarded over \$9.1 million to schools and nonprofits, impacting 98 out of 100 counties and over 270,000 students statewide.

## 1,515

GRANTS AWARDED

The Commission is currently holding 178 unsolicited grant applications, received since June 2024, totaling more than \$1.3 million in requested funding. Unfortunately, they cannot be reviewed and potentially awarded, as FY2025 funding has not yet been appropriated.

## 270,000+

STUDENTS IMPACTED

## \$9.1 million

AWARDED TO SCHOOLS & NONPROFITS



# GO OUTSIDE GRANTS



The Go Outside “GO” Grant program was launched in 2019 to provide North Carolina’s students opportunities for outdoor experiences and experiential learning. Educators across the state can apply for funding for field trips, onsite outdoor programs, and the construction of outdoor learning facilities.

As of December 1, 2024, over \$2.5 million has been awarded to schools and nonprofits, comprising 558 total GO Grants in fiscal year 2024.

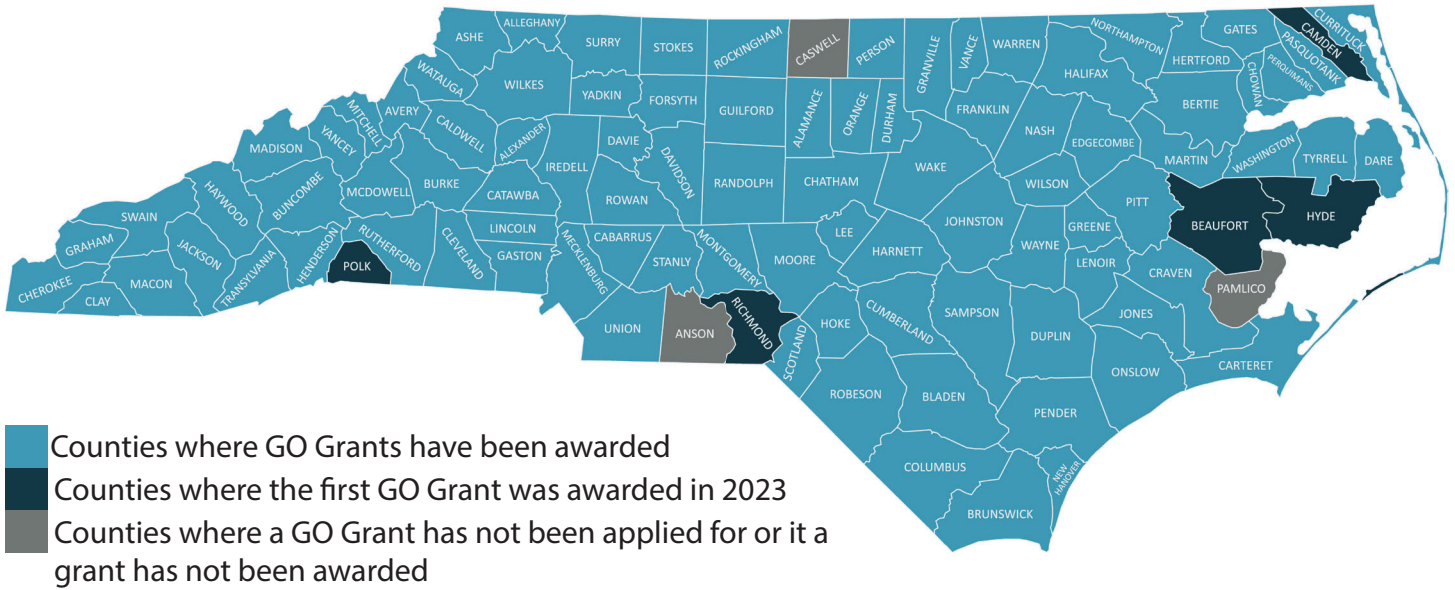
The Commission has been striving to impact all 100 North Carolina counties and, as a result of targeted outreach and the award of a grant to a Pamlico County school, has now impacted 98% of the State’s counties.

The Commission is currently holding 178 unsolicited GO Grant applications for review, totaling more than \$1.3 million in requested funding, but has been unable to promote, review, or award grants as fiscal year 2025 funding has not yet been appropriated to the Commission by the General Assembly.



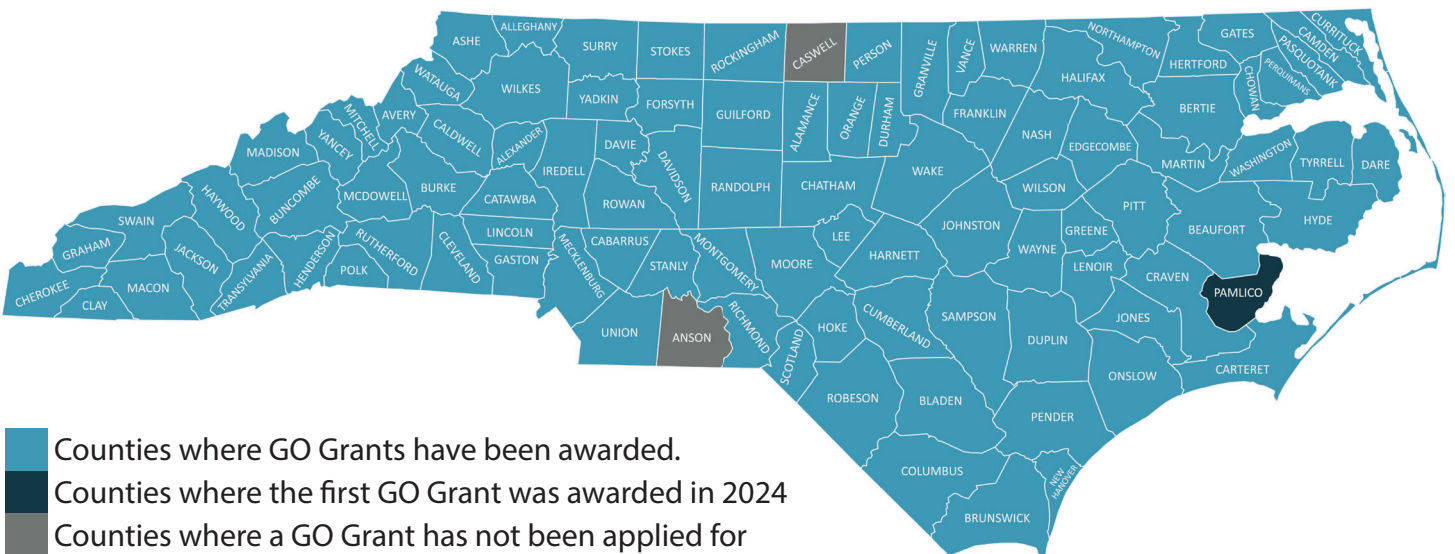


## GO Grant Distribution by County as of December 1, 2023



**Fig 1.** Map to show counties where schools/nonprofits had been awarded GO Grants in 2023. GO Grant distribution was expanded to Beaufort, Camden, Hyde, Polk, and Richmond Counties.

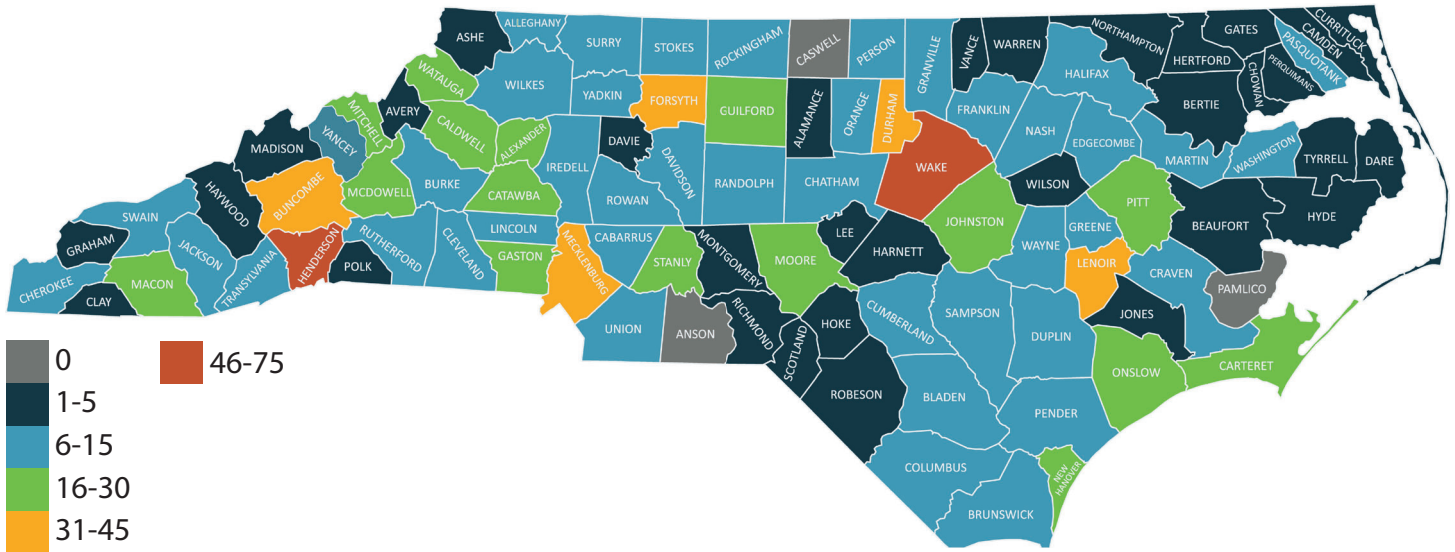
## GO Grant Distribution by County as of December 1, 2024



**Fig 2.** Map to show counties where schools/nonprofits had been awarded GO Grants in 2024. GO Grant distribution was expanded to Pamlico County.

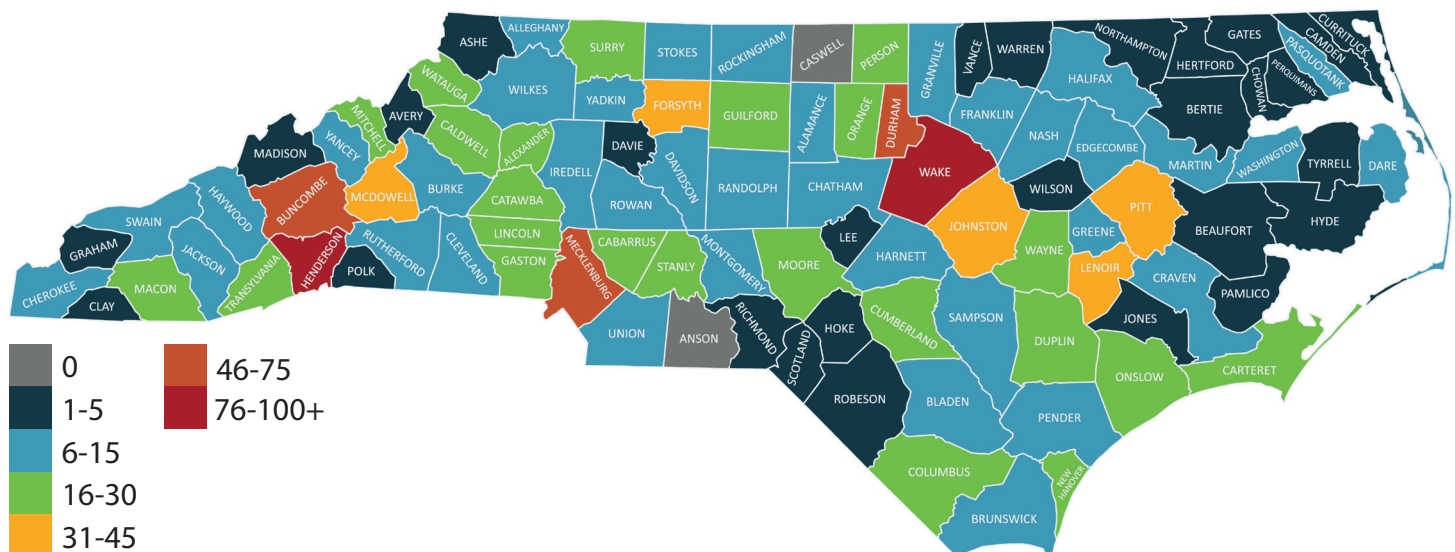


### Number of GO Grant Awards per County as of December 1, 2023



**Fig 3.** Map to show GO Grant impact by county in 2023. Buncombe, Durham, Forsyth, Henderson, Lenoir, Mecklenburg, and Wake Counties had successfully applied for and been awarded the most grants. Anson, Caswell, and Pamlico Counties had not applied for or not received a grant.

### Number of GO Grant Awards per County as of December 1, 2024



**Fig 4.** Map to show GO Grant impact by county in 2024. Buncombe, Durham, Forsyth, Henderson, Johnston, Lenoir, McDowell, Mecklenburg, Pitt, and Wake Counties have successfully applied for and been awarded the most grants. Commission staff have conducted outreach with Anson and Caswell County schools administration but a grant application has not yet been received.





**MOREHEAD CITY MIDDLE**  
CARTERET CO. | GRANT #1560

Students explored their coastline and engaged in an estuary exploration program, including a kayaking the coastal waters.



**REEDY CREEK ELEMENTARY**  
WAKE CO. | GRANT #1662

Students spent the day at the Agape Center for Environmental Education taking soil samples and learning about the ecosystem. Afterwards they hiked the trails on the property.



**MERRICK-MOORE ELEMENTARY**  
DURHAM CO. | GRANT #1742

Students went rock climbing at Pilot Mountain State Park and received a class from park rangers about the ecology and geology of the park.



**DAVIE COUNTY HIGH**  
DAVIE CO. | GRANT #1768

Students from the school's FFA club reared rainbow trout on campus and released them at Stone Mountain State Park. They took a fly fishing and ecology class and practiced their casting skills in the park.



**STUDENT U DURHAM**  
DURHAM CO. | GRANT #1889

In Bryson City, students went camping and challenged themselves with a white water rafting adventure.



**REEVES COMMUNITY CENTER FDN.**  
SURRY CO. | GRANT #1940

Guided by State Park rangers at Hanging Rock State Park, students hiked the trails and participated in paddle sports like canoeing and kayaking.





Grant funds were used to construct a 60ft onsite dock that will be used for fishing and as a launch point for kayaking the waterway that leads to the Bogue Sound.



This outdoor classroom was constructed with sustainable high-quality materials to provide a learning space for students to engage in a variety of subjects.



Popshots 4-H Club in Granville County received funding to purchase ammunition and equipment for their club shooting team.



The school used their grant award to purchase equipment and materials to expand their outdoor agricultural classroom, which includes plots to grow plants, and chicken coops.



The school purchased materials to construct an onsite archery range, built with assistance from the students.



Grant funds were used to build a greenhouse for students to use in hands-on learning lessons aligned with their science curriculum.





# NORTH CAROLINA TRAILBLAZERS OUTDOOR CLUBS



Last year the N.C. Trailblazers Outdoor Club program was launched. In March 2024, and with 33 clubs from the inaugural year, the Commission welcomed 67 additional middle and high school applicants, bringing the total club count to 100, representing 59 counties.

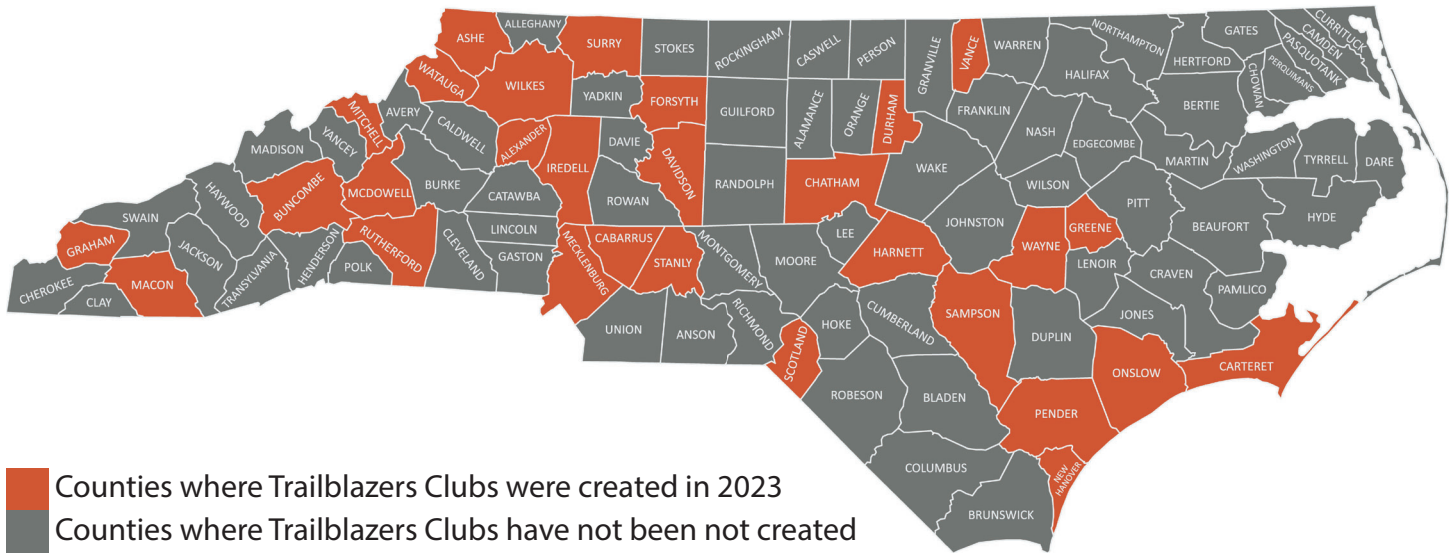
In June 2024 the Commission hosted the first Trailblazers Advisor Retreat in Asheville, North Carolina. This 3-day event was conceived as an opportunity for club advisors/teachers to learn more about the Commission and the program, network with one another, and learn more about outdoor activities and resources across the State.

Commission staff gave talks and presentations on subjects such as field trip

planning, club meetings, fundraising, grant reporting, and more. Guest speakers include N.C. State Parks and the U.S. Whitewater Center, who shared information on outdoor activity and education opportunities. Over 100 clubs advisors/teachers attended the retreat, from both new and existing clubs, where they were able to learn and practice outdoor skills to take back to their schools, such as archery, kayaking, and Leave No Trace principles.

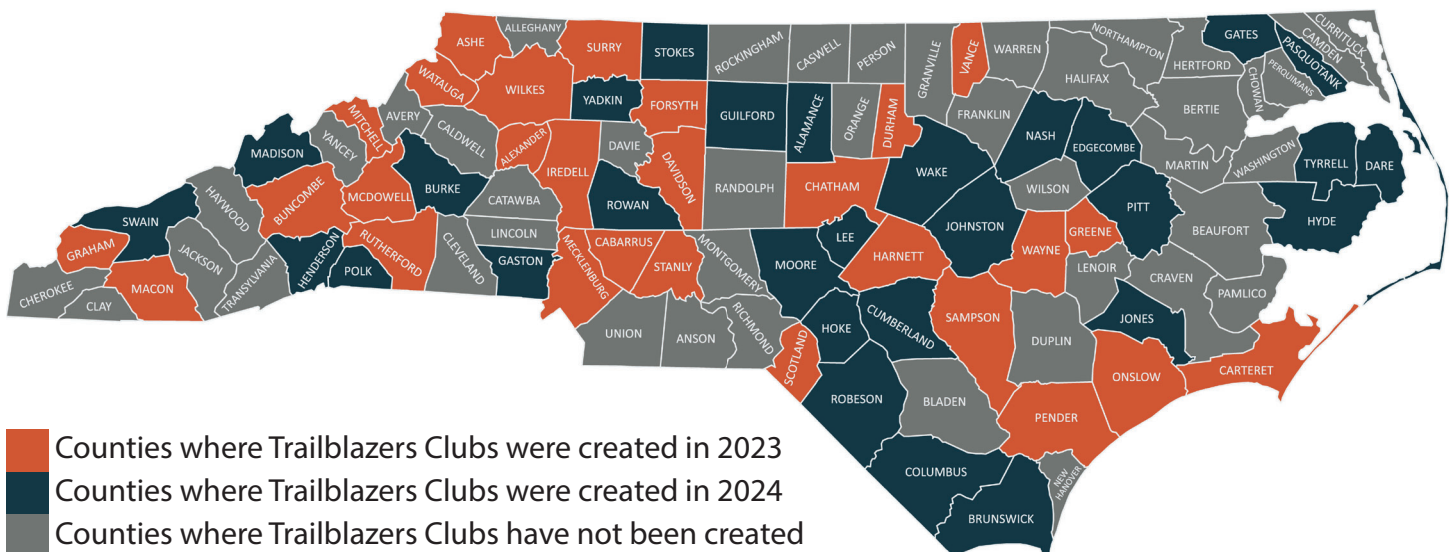
If the Commission receives fiscal year 2024-2025 funding, the program application will reopen in January 2025 and a second annual retreat will be held in the summer. Interest has been expressed by counties that do not yet have clubs and the Commission anticipates an increase in applications.

## Trailblazers Distribution by County as of December 1, 2023



**Fig 5.** Map to show Trailblazers Club distribution by county in 2023.

## Trailblazers Distribution by County as of December 1, 2024

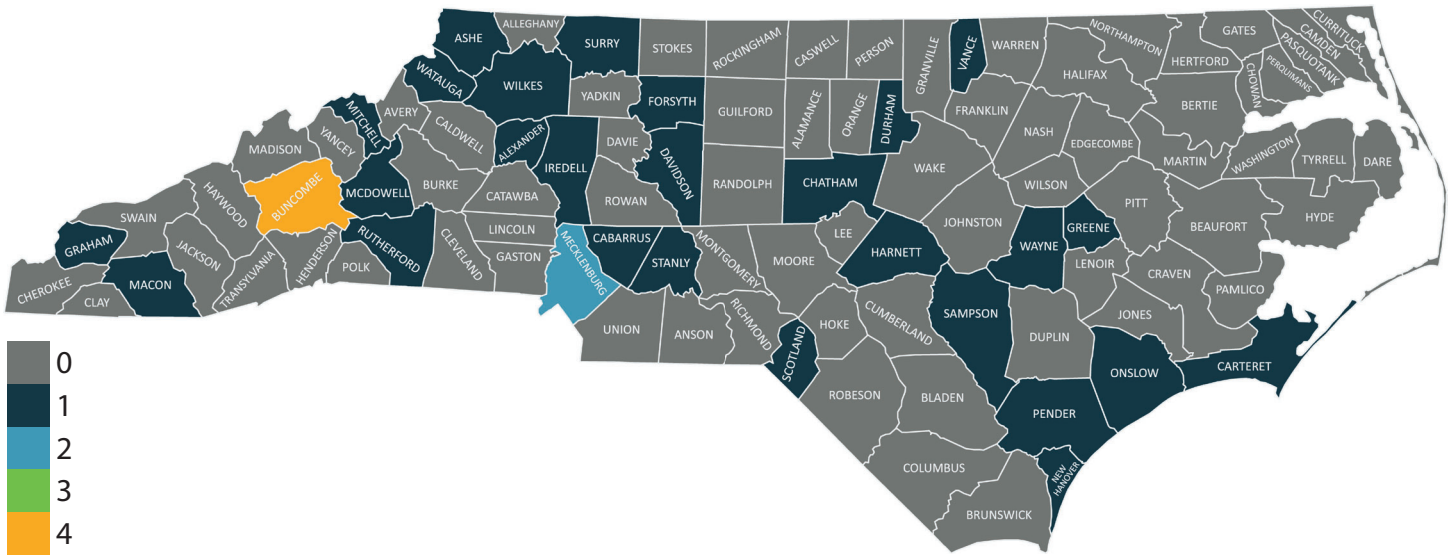


**Fig 6.** Map to show Trailblazers Club distribution by county in 2024.\*

\*The inaugural club located in New Hanover County was advised by the school system to return their funding and exit the program due to liability concerns over water-based outdoor activities. Efforts by Commission staff and school administration to resolve the situation were, unfortunately, unsuccessful.

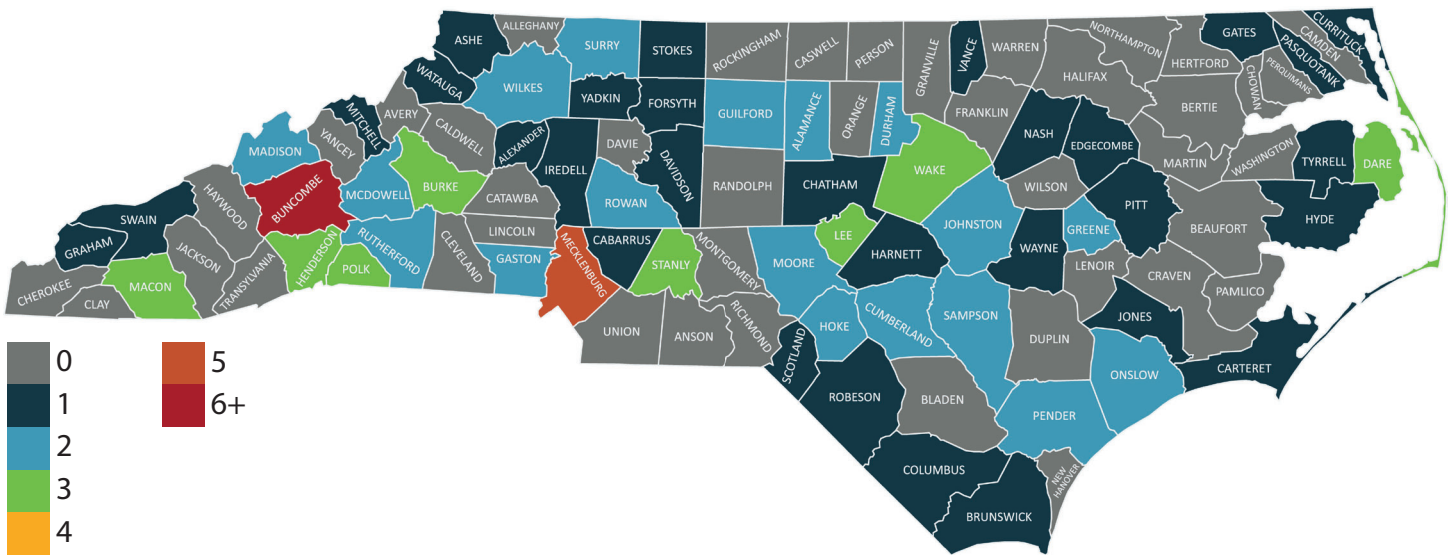


## Number of Trailblazers Clubs per County as of December 1, 2023



**Fig 7.** Map to show Trailblazers Clubs by county in 2023. Buncombe and Mecklenburg Counties formed the most Trailblazers Clubs.

## Number of Trailblazers Clubs per County as of December 1, 2024



**Fig 8.** Map to show Trailblazers Clubs by county in 2024. Buncombe, Burke, Dare, Henderson, Lee, Macon, Mecklenburg, Polk, and Wake Counties have formed the most Trailblazers Clubs.





**ROBBINSVILLE HIGH  
GRAHAM CO.**

Club members white water rafting at the Nantahala Outdoor Center.



**WOODS CHARTER  
CHATHAM CO.**

At sunset, club members went kayaking on the Haw River.



**AGRICULTURE & SCIENCE E.C.  
IREDELL CO.**

ASEC Trailblazers traveled to Mitchell County to collect and sort donations for hurricane relief.



**SOUTH STANLY MIDDLE  
STANLY CO.**

Practicing a campsite set up and campfire cooking on school grounds allowed club members to get familiar with the basics in preparation for a trip.



**THOMAS JEFFERSON CLASSICAL ACADEMY  
RUTHERFORD CO.**

Club members banded together to clean up their school campus and community after Hurricane Helene, by clearing trails.



**VANCE CHARTER  
VANCE CO.**

Trailblazers practicing their shooting skills on the range.





# OUTDOOR PATCHES



The Commission's communications and outreach strategy has continued to prioritize boots-on-the-ground community engagement and has given staff the opportunity to share program information at statewide events.

As a result, 7,529 patches have been earned by a mix of new and existing program participants. The total patches awarded in 2024 demonstrates a 173% increase compared to the 2,755 patches awarded in 2023.

This year the Commission added 3 new "success" patches to the program: Sunfish Angler, Biker, and My First Hunt.

Additionally, "achievement" patches were relaunched with new designs and redesigned

workbooks and award requirements. Achievement patches now include Archery, Fishing, Rifle, Shotgun, and Swimming.

The new workbook for the Archery Achievement Patch was developed in collaboration with USA Archery and features updated illustrations and educational information.








# OUTDOOR PATCH LEADERBOARD

## 2024

 Current 1st Place  
 Successful Patches = 1 pt  
 Achievement Patches = 2 pts

| Rank  | Name      | County   | #  | Rank | Name       | County    | # |
|---|-----------|----------|----|------|------------|-----------|---|
| 1  | Aiden S.  | Wilkes   | 11 |      |            |           |   |
| 2  | Evie H.   | Davidson | 10 | 9    | Nolan M.   | Guilford  | 9 |
| 3  | Joleen L. | Rowan    | 10 | 10   | Lana H.    | Davidson  | 8 |
| 4   | Wyatt I.  | Harnett  | 10 | 11   | Brycen P.  | Buncombe  | 8 |
| 5   | Drew T.   | Watauga  | 9  | 12   | Kannon     | Henderson | 8 |
| 6   | River T.  | Guilford | 9  | 13   | Emily K.   | Stokes    | 8 |
| 7   | Gentry W. | Forsyth  | 9  | 14   | Parks B.   | Henderson | 7 |
| 8   | Rhett H.  | Wayne    | 9  | 15   | Graysen W. | Currituck | 7 |

**Fig 9.** The 2024 Outdoor Patch Leaderboard as of November 2024, showing the top awardees of 2024 Outdoor Patches.

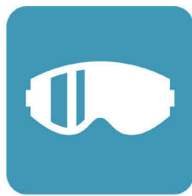


**Fig 10.** The new My First Hunt, 2024 Sunfish Angler, and 2024 Biker patches.



**Fig 11.** The redesigned Archery, Rifle, and Swimming Achievement patches.





# YOUTH SPORTS GRANTS



This year the Commission launched Youth Sports Grants, a new grant offering appropriated by the General Assembly with the directive of providing funding to schools, city/county administrative unit, and 501(c)(3) nonprofits for team travel and event hosting expenses.

Since July 2024, Youth Sports Grants have impacted counties from the mountains to the coast and funded exciting events such as a regional surfing event hosted by USA Surfing in Nags Head, and a statewide mountain biking tournament held by the Town of Mayodan.

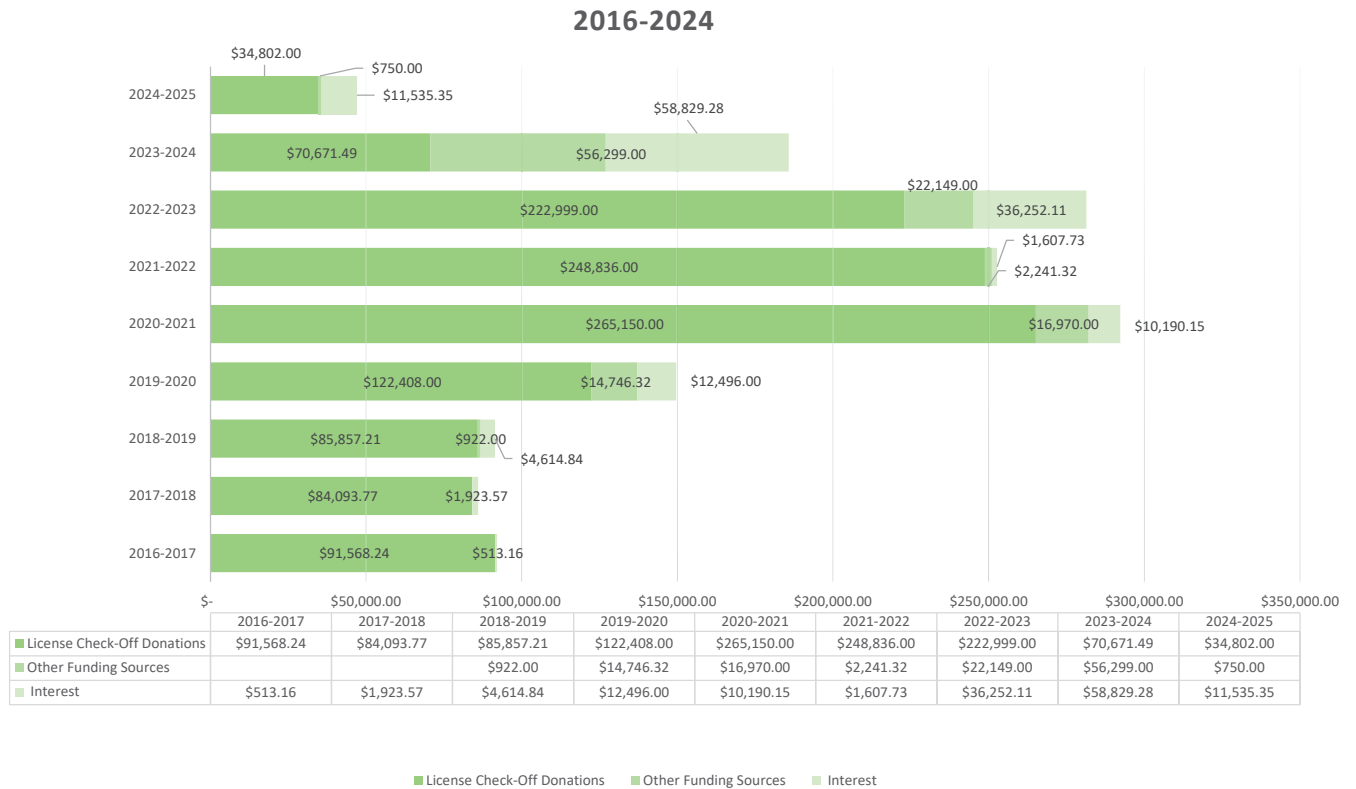
\$1 million was appropriated, with \$500,000 available for host grants up to \$25,000, and \$500,000 available to each of our 100 counties for travel expenses up to \$5,000. As of November 2024, the Commission has

awarded \$356,000 in host funding and over \$100,000 in travel funding. Communications and grants staff have been conducting outreach to promote the new grant offering to schools and parks and recreation departments, resulting in increasing application submissions.



# FINANCIAL DATA

## FY2024-2025

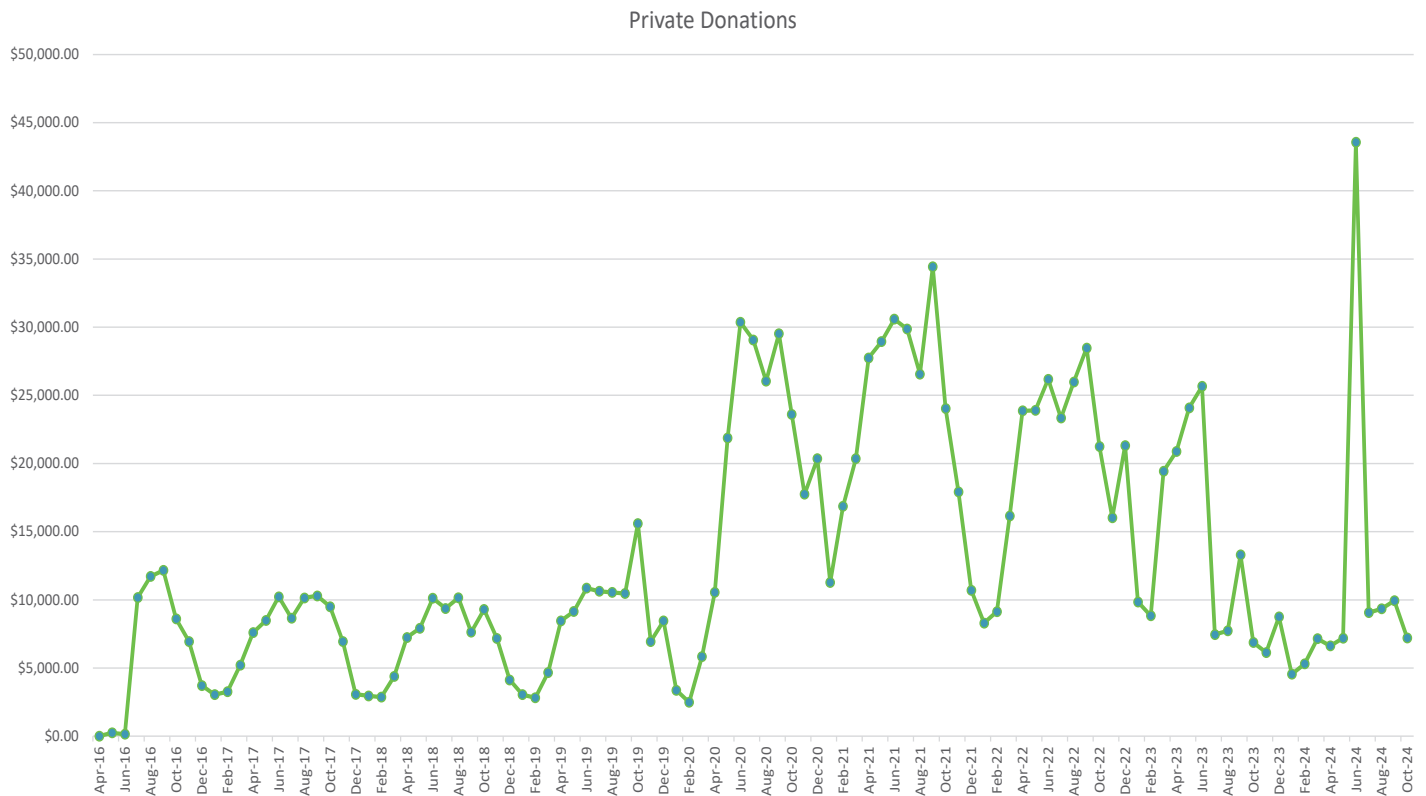


The North Carolina Youth Outdoor Engagement Fund was established in 2015 by the Outdoor Heritage Act. The legislation instructed the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission to add a check-off donation option when an individual is purchasing a fishing or hunting license.

**Fig 12.** Graph to show the total funds received by the N.C. Youth Outdoor Engagement Fund by fiscal year, including license check-off donations, other funding sources, and interest.

From January - October 2024\*, the Commission has raised \$67,465 from license check-off donations and \$44,804 from other funding sources.

\*At the time of writing, data is only available up to October 2024.



**Fig 13.** Graph to show the total monthly donations to the N.C. Youth Outdoor Engagement Fund since the Commission was eligible to accept donations.



**Fig 14.** Examples of Commission marketing materials available as gifts for donations to the N.C. Youth Outdoor Engagement Fund: a holographic duck sticker and branded hat.



# FUNDRAISING AND DEVELOPMENT



This year the North Carolina Outdoors Foundation was established with the objective of raising funds to directly support the Commission.

In May 2024 the Foundation held its first sponsored charity auction to benefit the Commission, which raised more than \$100,000 to support youth outdoor education.

The Commission announced an official partnership with USA Archery this year. USA Archery is the National Governing Body for the Olympic sport of archery and recognized by the U.S. Olympic Committee for the purposes of selecting and training men's and women's teams to represent the U.S. in the Olympic, Paralympic, and Pan American Games.

With a shared goal of promoting and supporting archery education across North Carolina, the Commission is excited to provide new archery opportunities to grant recipients and program participants.



# OUR TEAM IN THE COMMUNITY



**Left to right:** Assisting with a hummingbird education demonstration; Moderating a panel with Trailblazers Club advisors in Asheville; Filming a youth education segment for television at Weymouth Woods; Shooting at a grant-funded range at the Foothills Shooting Complex; Representing the Commission at the N.C. Outdoors Foundation Invitational; Awarding patches at Big Rock Kids; Leading a Leave No Trace hike in the mountains; Staff with patch recipients at the N.C. State Fair; Representing the Commission at the Outdoor Economy Conference in Cherokee.



## Our Mission and Vision

The North Carolina Youth Outdoor Engagement Commission was created in 2015, with a mission to encourage and strengthen young North Carolinians' connection to nature by providing opportunities to engage with the outdoors.

We envision North Carolinians engaging with the state's diverse natural resources and developing a lasting appreciation for the outdoors.

## #GoOutsideNC

## STAFF

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