



NORTH CAROLINA YOUTH OUTDOOR ENGAGEMENT COMMISSION



ANNUAL REPORT 2025

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A MESSAGE FROM OUR EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Every young North Carolinian deserves the opportunity to experience the outdoors, to our state's trails, fish its lakes, and discover its transformative power. The North Carolina Youth Outdoor Engagement Commission exists to make these experiences possible. Despite funding challenges, this year marked continued expansion in both the reach and impact of our programs. Meeting the rising demand for outdoor education opportunities will require continued investment from the state, to support activities that will continue to pay dividends for youth across the state.

Our 2025 Annual Report showcases the increasing demand from educators across the state for support with outdoor experiences. While we have been unable to fund Go Outside "GO" Grants due to budget delays, we have continued to receive applications and inquiries throughout the year.

This year we hosted a successful second annual Trailblazers retreat in Cherokee, where we witnessed firsthand the transformative impact of our programs. Several students received scholarships based on their participation in the Trailblazers program, a testament to the leadership and outdoor skills they've developed. Perhaps most inspiring, we saw Trailblazers rise to the occasion in the wake of Hurricane Helene, using their knowledge and confidence to help their communities during this devastating natural disaster. These young people exemplify the mission of our Commission; preparing North Carolina's youth to be confident, capable, and caring stewards of both the outdoors and their communities.

Youth Sports Grants continue to provide schools with the means to support school sports and offer students opportunities to compete in teams on local, regional, and national levels. In a time of increasing digital integration, the benefits of such activities to youth health and wellness cannot be overstated.

The success of our programs relies on the exceptional commitment of North Carolina's educators, who work tirelessly to prepare youth as confident stewards of the outdoors. We are grateful to our donors and legislative champions whose support is essential to our mission. With demand for outdoor education at an all-time high, funding from the General Assembly will be critical to expanding access and ensuring that more of our state's youth can benefit from these life-changing opportunities.



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 Commission has now awarded over \$9.9 million to schools and nonprofits, impacting 98 out of 100 counties and over 324,000 students statewide.

The Commission is currently holding 311 unsolicited Go Outside (GO) grant applications, received since June 2024, totaling more than \$1.7 million in requested funding. Unfortunately, these cannot be reviewed or awarded, as FY2025 funding was not appropriated.

98/100

COUNTIES IMPACTED

1,700+

GRANTS AWARDED

324,000+

STUDENTS IMPACTED

\$9.9 million+

AWARDED TO SCHOOLS & NONPROFITS

TRAILBLAZERS

OUTDOOR CLUB PROGRAM



Since the Trailblazers Outdoor Club program was established in 2023, the program has grown to 132 schools participating, with 32 of those clubs welcomed for the 2025-2026 school year. The Trailblazers program represents 68 counties and has provided new outdoor opportunities for thousands of middle and high school students.

In June 2025 the Commission hosted their second annual Trailblazers Advisor Retreat in Cherokee, North Carolina. The 3-day event provided opportunities for teachers and principals that are in advisor roles for their club to learn more about outdoor activities and resources across the state, network with each other, and receive guidance from Commission staff on planning. Guest speakers included Schools in Parks Program Manager from N.C. State Parks, USA Archery, Rock Dimensions Climbing Guides, and SOLO Southeast Wilderness Medicine. Experienced advisors were selected to speak

on a panel and present at the event to share obstacles they faced, as well as provide advice for newly accepted schools. Advisors were also able to participate in an excursion of their choice that allowed them to learn new skills and gain confidence in an activity that they could take back to their clubs. Outdoor excursions included fly fishing and lure making, whitewater rafting, kayaking and paddleboarding, and a wilderness survival course.

Looking ahead, the Commission plans to reopen the program application and host a third annual retreat in summer 2026, contingent upon fiscal year funding. With growing interest from counties that do not yet have clubs, the Commission anticipates a significant increase in applications as the program continues to expand its reach across the state.



Three advisors were selected to receive awards based on their performance and dedication to leading the clubs at their school for the 2024-2025 school year.

The Advisor of the Year award was given to Kelly Pipes at Wilkes Early College for her effort in partnering with N.C. State Parks and assisting other schools in getting outdoor experiences supported by their science curriculum.

The Club of the Year award, given to a club that challenged themselves to learn a variety of outdoor activities to gain new skills, was given to Billie Conte and her club at South Stanly High School.

The Community Impact Award was given to Greg Stearns and his club at Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy, for their time and effort volunteering to help deliver 150 water filters to their neighbors in Swannanoa who were negatively impacted by Hurricane Helene.



Advisor of the Year: Dr. Kelly Pipes of Wilkes Early College



Club of the Year: Christy Wilson-Kaber and Billie Conte of South Stanly High School.



Community Impact Award: Greg Stearns of Thomas Jefferson Classical Academy.

Trailblazers Distribution by County as of December 1, 2024

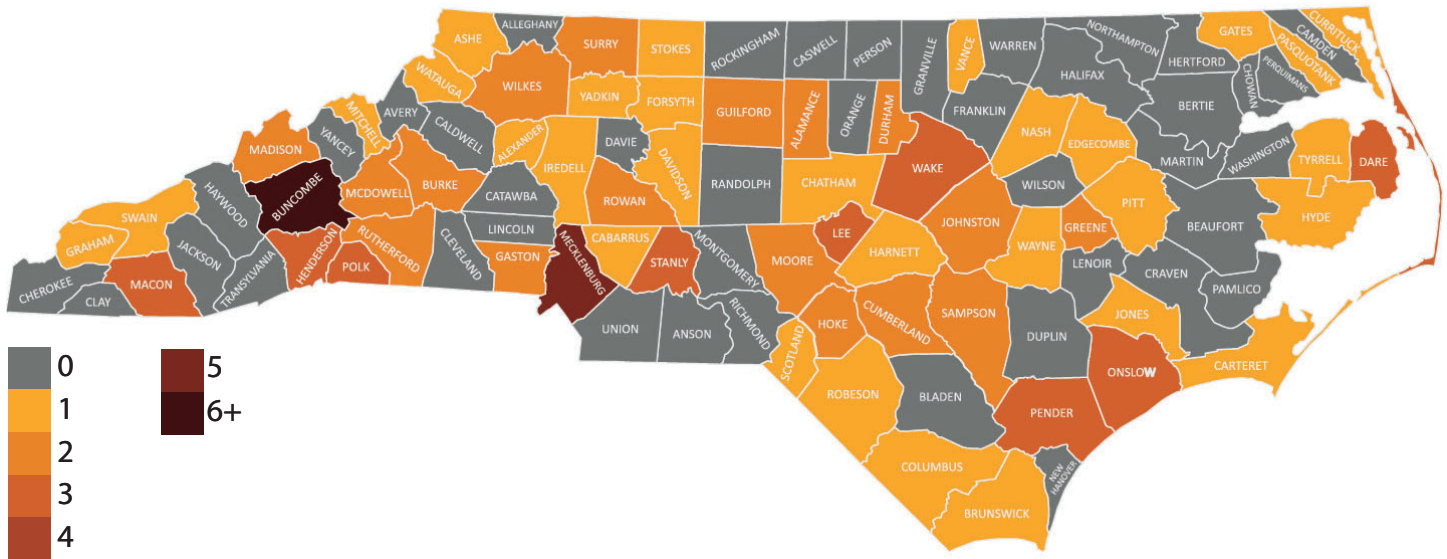


Fig 1. Map to show Trailblazers Club distribution by county in 2024.

Trailblazers Distribution by County as of December 1, 2025

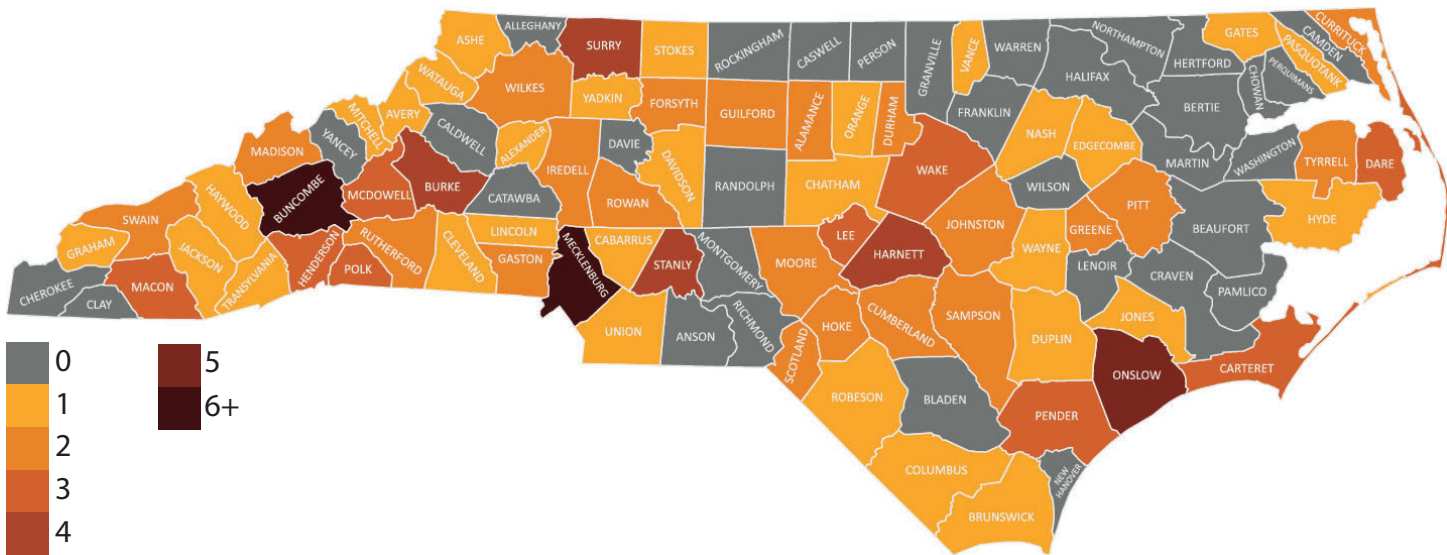


Fig 2. Map to show Trailblazers Club distribution by county in 2025.



Club members camped at Carolina Beach State Park and learned how to kayak.



Club members snorkeled the Blue Ridge Snorkel Trail at the Laurel Community Center.



Trailblazers learned how to safely shoot a bow and practiced their archery skills.



Trailblazers focused on hunter safety and gained skills in shooting sports such as archery, rifle, and shotgun. The teams' new skills qualified them for the Scholastic Clay Target Program Nationals in Ohio.



Club members took a variety of backpacking trips and students also delivered 150 water filters to assist the community in Swannanoa after Hurricane Helene.



Trailblazers braved the cold and challenged themselves to try skiing and snowboarding in the North Carolina mountains.

Youth Sports GRANT



In Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25) the Commission launched the Youth Sports Grant, a new offering appropriated by the General Assembly with the directive of providing funding to schools, city/county administrative units, and 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations for team travel and event hosting expenses.

The General Assembly appropriated \$1 million in recurring funds to the Commission in FY25, with \$500,000 available for host grants up to \$25,000, and \$500,000 available for travel expenses up to \$5,000 per county.

A myriad of unique events were funded in FY25 including Hatteras Community Sailing's Southeast US Regional Sailing Regatta in Dare County and regional shooting competitions hosted by Foothills Public Shooting Complex in Cleveland County.

In FY25, the Commission awarded \$500,000 in host funding and \$303,428.31 in travel funding.

Communications and grants staff conducted outreach to promote Youth Sports Grant offerings to schools and parks and recreation departments, resulting in an increase in application submissions.



FY25 Youth Sports Travel Grant Awards by County as of December 1, 2025

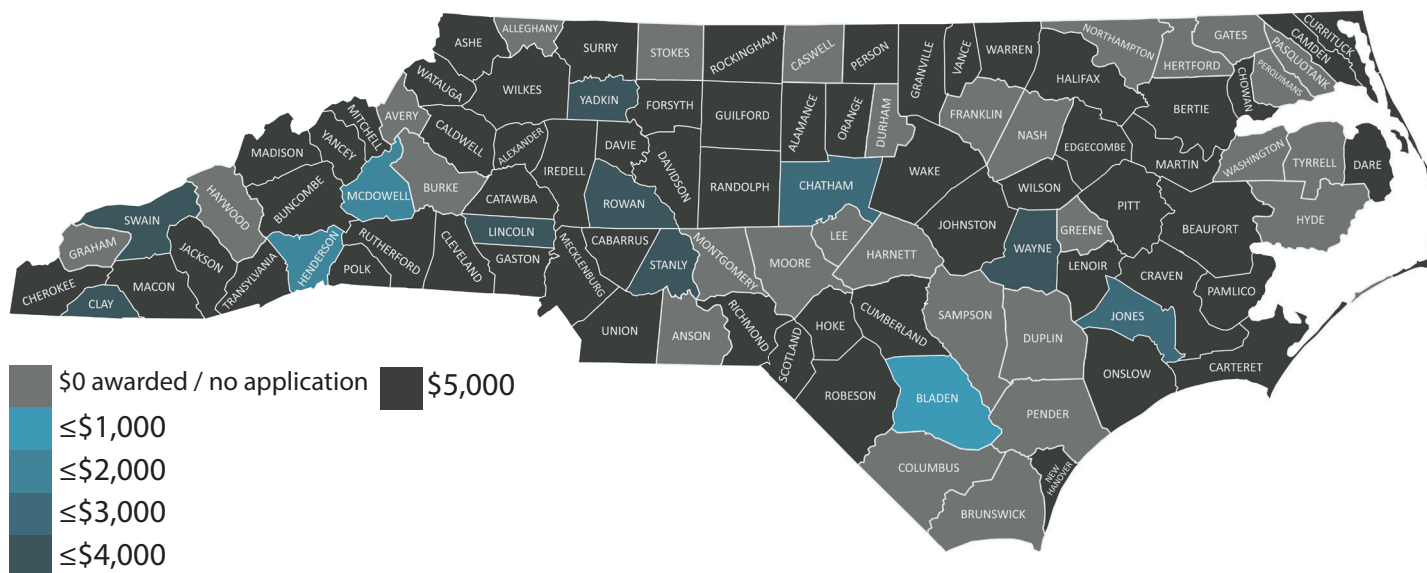


Fig 3. Map to show Youth Sports Travel Grant impact by county in FY2025, representing \$303,428.31 in funding.

Number of FY25 Youth Sports Host Grants per County as of December 1, 2025

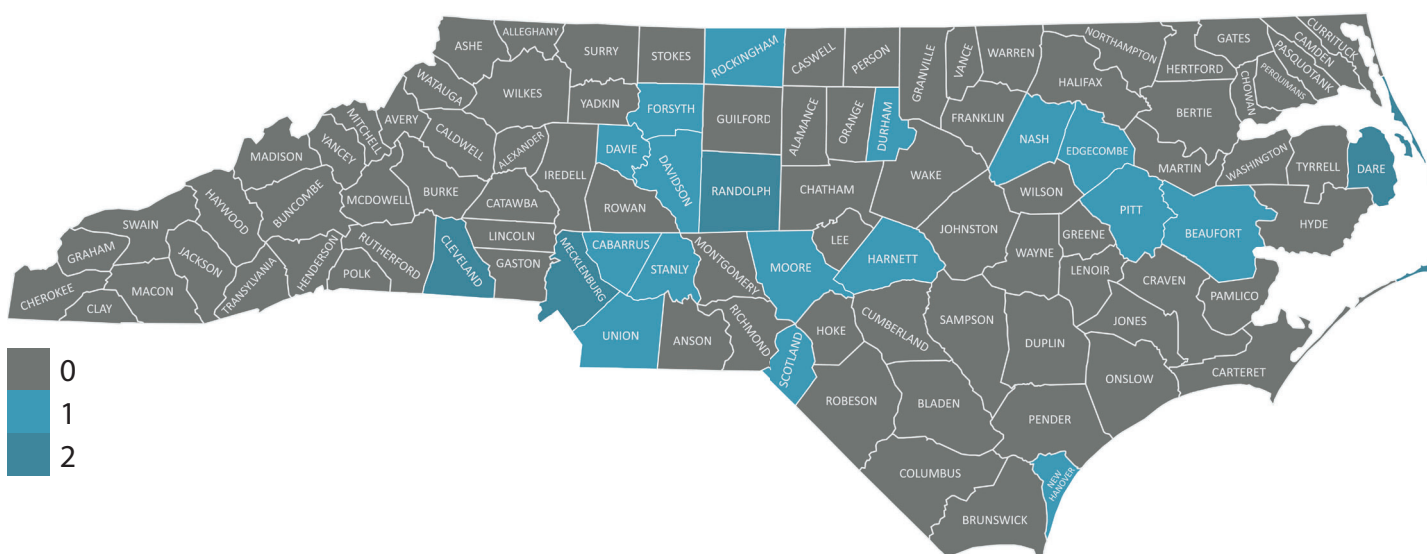


Fig 4. Map to show Youth Sports Host Grants per County from FY25, representing \$500,000 in funding.



EAST CAROLINA WRESTLING ACADEMY
ONSLOW CO. | GRANT #08

Funding to travel to a wrestling tournament in Virginia Beach.



CHARLOTTE INDEPENDENCE SOCCER CLUB
MECKLENBURG CO. | GRANT #26

Host funding for a regional soccer tournament for 200 youth teams.



WEST MCDOWELL MIDDLE SCHOOL
MCDOWELL CO. | GRANT #116

Travel funding for three teams for the spring season of games.



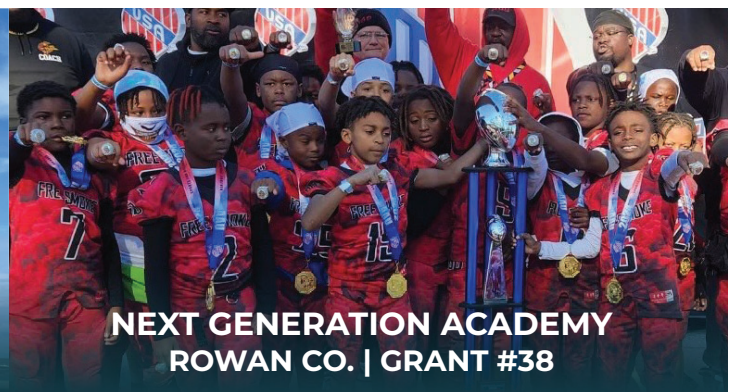
GIRLS GOLF OF AMERICA
NEW HANOVER CO. | GRANT #24

Funding to host the PKBGT Invitational at the Landfall Country Club.



USA SURFING
DARE CO. | GRANT #07

Funding to host a regional under-18 east coast surfing competition in Nags Head.



NEXT GENERATION ACADEMY
ROWAN CO. | GRANT #38

Funding to travel to and compete in the AAU Nationals.

Go Outside

GRANT



Since its launch in 2019, the Go Outside “GO” Grant program has opened doors for North Carolina students to experience transformative outdoor learning. Educators across the state can apply for funding to support field trips, on-site outdoor programs, and the construction of outdoor learning facilities.

The Commission did not receive appropriations from the North Carolina General Assembly in Fiscal Year 2025 (FY25), and were unable to award GO Grants this year.

By the end of FY25, the Commission received **311** unsolicited GO Grant Applications for review, totaling **\$1,737,524.07** in requested funding, demonstrating that there is a growing need for outdoor education support across the state.



Number of GO Grant Awards per County 2019-2024

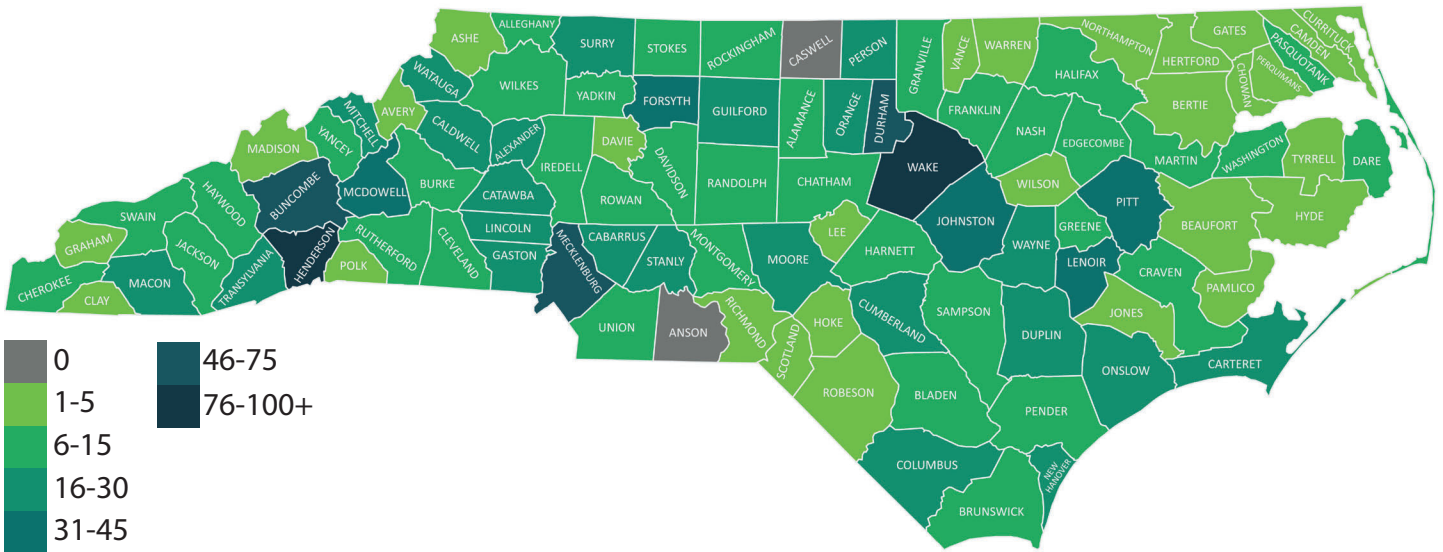


Fig 5. Map to show GO Grant impact by county from 2019-2024.

Number of Unsolicited GO Grant Applications per County as of December 1, 2025

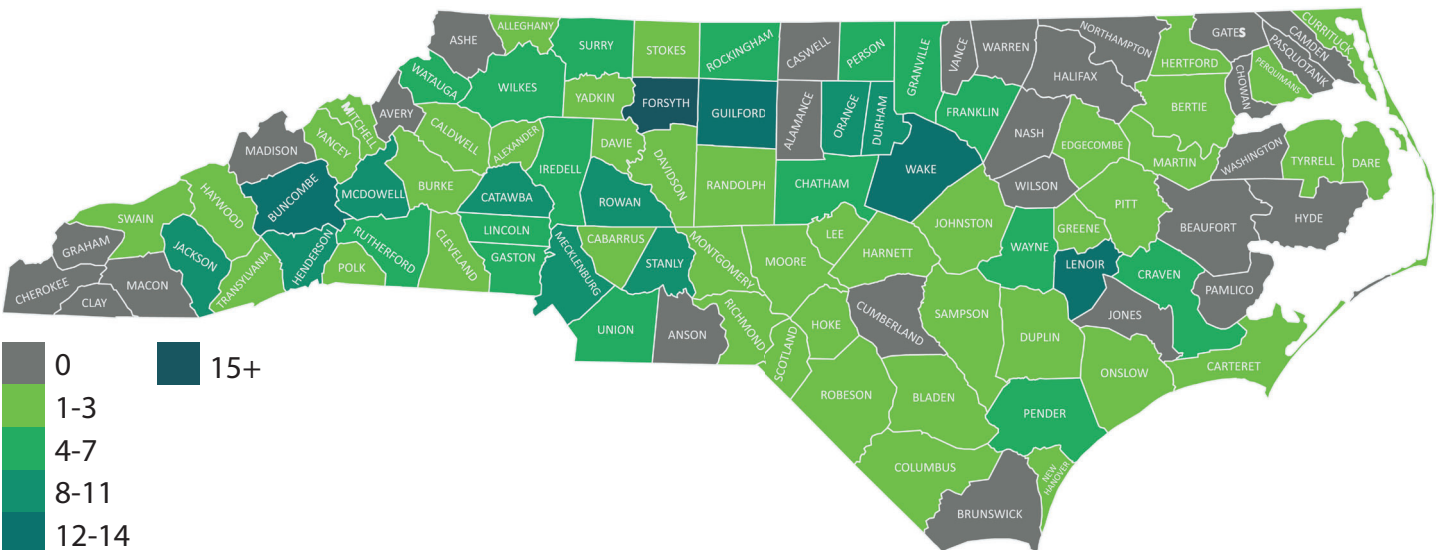


Fig 6. Map to show unsolicited GO Grant Applications received per County that cannot be funded due to budget delays, representing \$1,737,524.07 in requested funding.



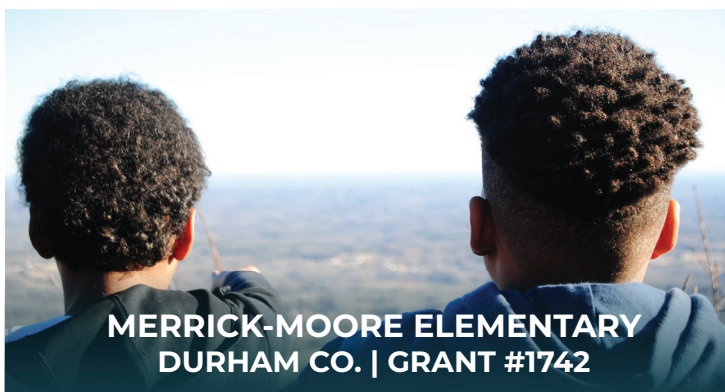
MOREHEAD CITY MIDDLE
CARTERET CO. | GRANT #1560

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 whitewater 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.



**NATURE SCHOOL AT CAMP ALBEMARLE
CARTERET CO. | GRANT #1554**

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.



**WHITE OAK HIGH SCHOOL
ONslow CO. | GRANT #1041**

This outdoor apiary and classroom was constructed to provide students with the opportunity to learn beekeeping and to demonstrate skills to other classes.



**POPSHOTS 4-H CLUB
GRANVILLE CO. | GRANT #1700**

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



**CLEVELAND HIGH SCHOOL
CLEVELAND CO. | GRANT #1323**

The school used their grant award to purchase a tractor for students to learn how to use as part of their agricultural science curriculum.



**SOUTH BRUNSWICK HIGH
BRUNSWICK CO. | GRANT #1849**

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



**EAST VOYAGER ACADEMY
MECKLENBURG CO. | GRANT #1894**

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

Outdoor Patches

PROGRAM



The Commission has continued to promote the Outdoor Patches Program to engage youth in outdoor activities at a variety of outreach events across the state, through newsletter emails, advertisements in magazines, and social media posts.

As a result, 5,011 patches have been earned as of November 2025 for outdoor activities.

Participants are encouraged to complete multiple outdoor activities to qualify them for the Outdoor Patch Leaderboard, which has proven to bring back participants year after year to compete for the top rank.

The relaunch in 2024 of Achievement Patch designs and educational workbooks for Archery, Fishing, Rifle, Shotgun, and Swimming activities has successfully shown an increase in participation this year as well as challenged older youth to keep returning to the program.





OUTDOOR PATCH LEADERBOARD

2025

 Current 1st Place (Age 12+)
  Current 1st Place (Age <11)

Successful Patches = 1 pt
Achievement Patches = 2 pts



Rank	Name	County	#	Rank	Name	County	#
1 	Lucas D.	Rowan	22				
2	Joshua D.	Rowan	21	9	Avary W.	New Hanover	8
3	Huntley H.	Rutherford	20	10	Rivers D.	Edgecombe	8
4 	Luke C.	Durham	11	11	Michaela S.	Wake	8
5	Logan H.	Davidson	10	12	Colette T.	Union	7
6	Ava P.	Wake	10	13	Palmer D.	Edgecombe	7
7	Elijah H.	Jackson	9	14	Tanner P.	Brunswick	7
8	Mason S.	Beaufort	9	15	Elizabeth M.	Northampton	6

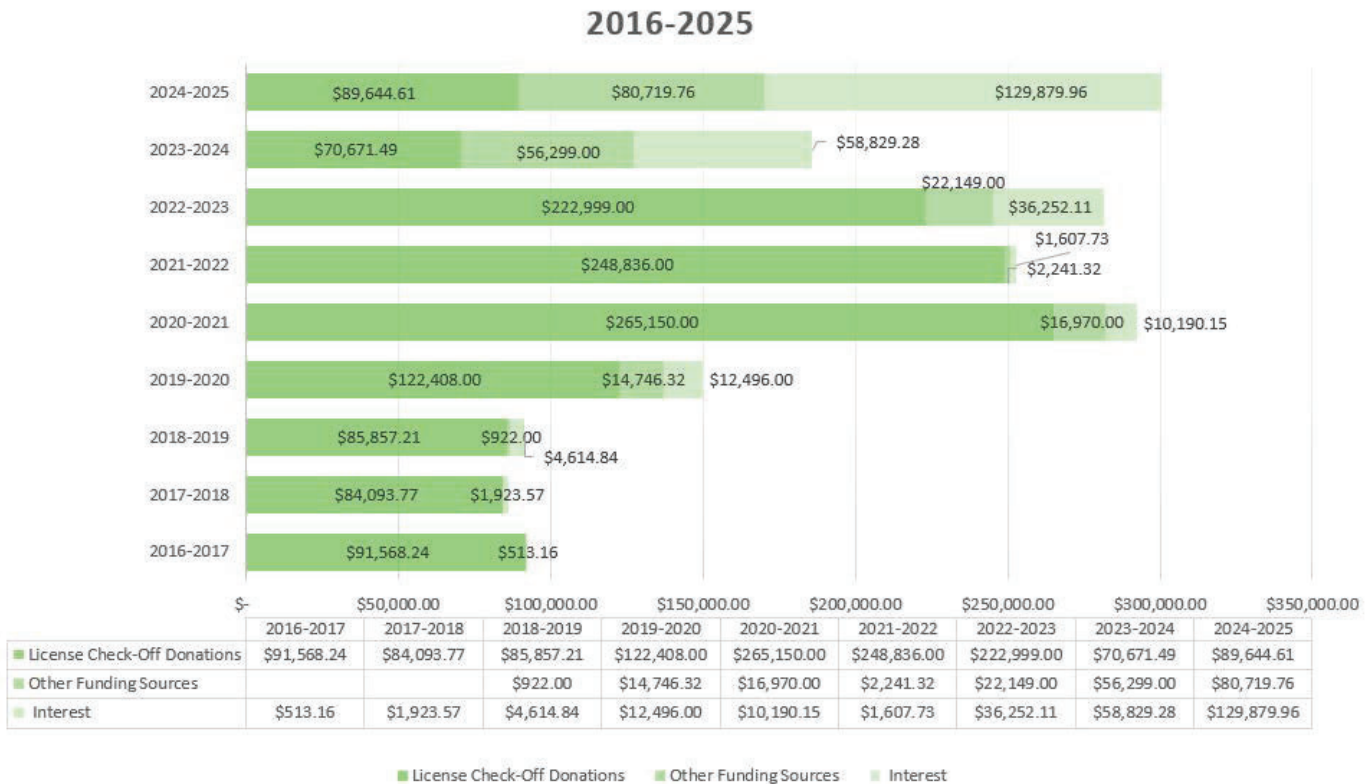
Fig 7. The 2025 Outdoor Patch Leaderboard as of November 2025, showing the top awardees of 2025 Outdoor Patches.



Fig 8. The new Deer Hunter, Duck Hunter, Saltwater Angler, Bird Watcher, Hiker and Paddle Adventurer Successful Patches.

FINANCIAL DATA

FY2024-2025



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

Fig 9. 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 July 2024 - June 2025, the Commission raised \$64,718.61 from license check-off donations and \$46,477.00 from other funding sources. Thanks to monthly donations from the North Carolina Outdoors Foundation, the Commission's donations are starting to increase following the recent decline beginning in Fiscal Year 24.

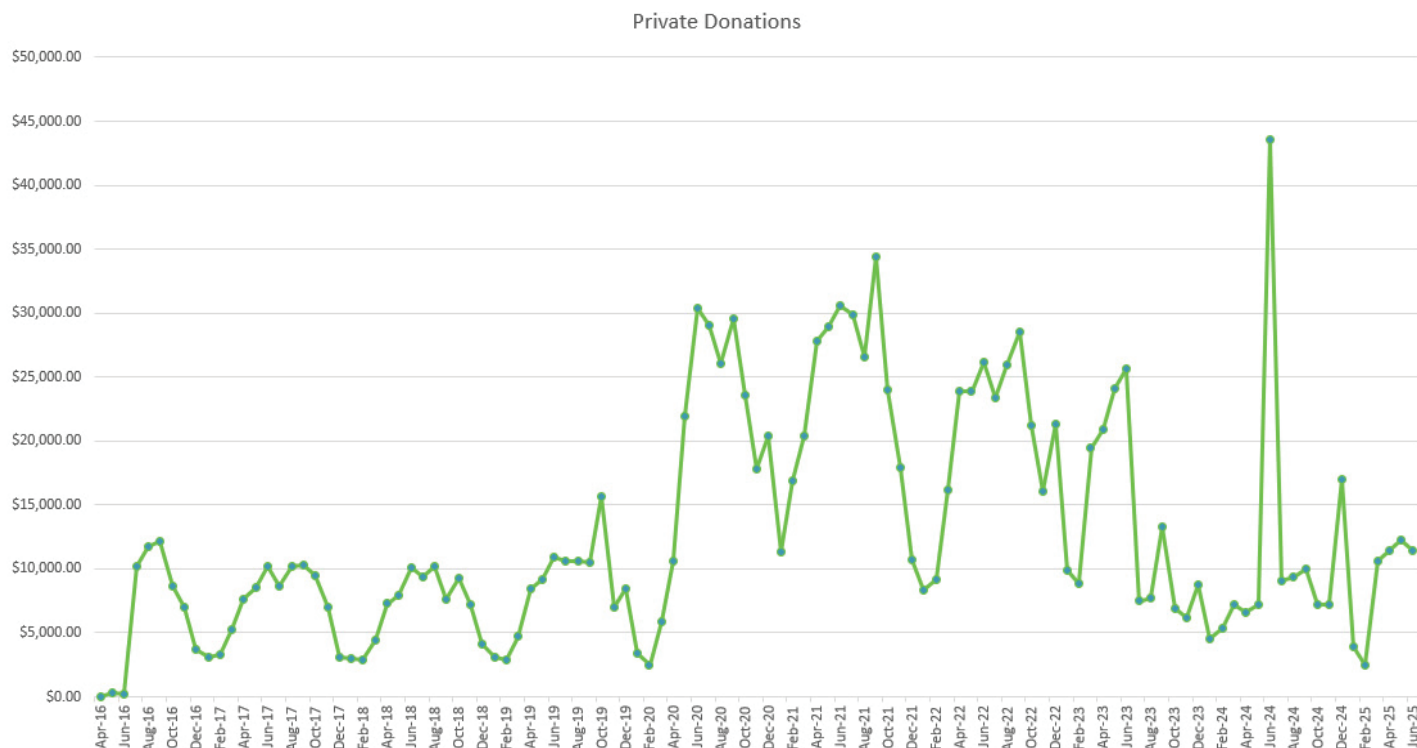


Fig 10. Graph to show the total monthly donations to the N.C. Youth Outdoor Engagement Fund since the Commission was eligible to accept donations.

OUR TEAM IN THE COMMUNITY



Left to right: Outdoor excursions with teachers at the Nantahala Outdoor Center; Staff at the Commission's booth at the NC State Fair; Representing the Commission at the NC Outdoors Invitational, hosted by the NC Outdoors Foundation; Elk viewing with teachers in Cherokee; Moderating a panel with teachers at the Trailblazers retreat in Cherokee; Staff welcoming teachers to the second annual Trailblazers retreat; Whitewater rafting with NC educators at the Nantahala Outdoor Center



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

Executive Director

Justin P. Burr | justin.burr@nc.gov

Communications Manager

Megan Law | megan.law@nc.gov

Program Manager

Noel Parra | noel.parra@nc.gov

Deputy Director

Alan Pomeroy | alan.pomeroy@nc.gov

Finance Manager

Layne Randolph | layne.randolph@nc.gov

Grants Coordinator

Anna McKnight | anna.mcknight@nc.gov

CONTACT

Mailing Address

N.C. Youth Outdoor Engagement Commission
1715 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699

Phone

919-707-4030

Email

GoOutside@nc.gov

Visit GoOutside.nc.gov to learn more and subscribe to our newsletter