The Connestee Falls News

CF Woodcrafters Build 8 New Homes for Our Local Bluebirds

By Mary Freudenberg for the NRSC

If you've taken a stroll through the Organic Gardens, golf course, Atagahi Park, or any of our lake berms and spillways this summer, you might have noticed some bright, cheerful flashes of blue darting through the trees. Eastern Bluebirds are a beloved staple here in Connestee, but finding the perfect real estate to raise a family can be tough for these little cavity-nesters.

Thankfully, they have some pretty incredible allies right here in the neighborhood.

Recently, Linda Cain, Debbie Bond, and Larry Estes of the **Connestee Falls Woodcrafters Group** stepped up to play landlord, generously volunteering their time, skills, and space to build 8 beautiful new bluebird nesting boxes for our community!

Woodcrafter Larry Estes, with Maintenance Superintendent Nathan Owen

Why Bluebird Boxes are a Big Deal

Unlike some birds that can weave a nest on any sturdy branch, bluebirds are "secondary cavity nesters." This means they rely on pre-existing holes—like old woodpecker hollows or dead trees—to build their homes.

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Because we naturally clear away dead trees near homes and trails for safety, natural nesting spots are hard to come by. That's where manmade nesting boxes come to the rescue.

From Left-Right: Woodcrafters Linda Cain, Debbie Bond,

The Woodcrafters didn't just throw together some wooden boxes; they crafted these with precision and care, ensuring they meet the exact specifications bluebirds need to thrive:

- **The Perfect Doorway:** Exactly in diameter—just big enough for a bluebird, but too small for larger, aggressive competitors like starlings.
- **Built-in Safety:** Designed to keep hungry predators (like raccoons or snakes) at bay.
- **Weatherproof Design:** Proper ventilation to keep the chicks cool in the summer, and drainage holes to keep the nest dry during our mountain rain showers.

These 8 new cozy homes (which are currently being stored in our Maintenance Building) are slotted to replace some of the existing community bluebird boxes (we have over 80), some which have already passed their useful life.

A big **THANK YOU** goes out to the Connestee Falls Woodcrafters for putting their craftsmanship to work for our local wildlife. This is the third year in a row, volunteers from this group have built boxes for us. ***It's volunteer efforts like this that make our community such a special place to live, both for us and for our feathered neighbors***.

Tactical Possum" Alert: What to Do If You Spot an Armadillo in WNC

By Mary Freudenberg for the NRSC

If you happen to spot what looks like a tiny, armored dinosaur waddling through your backyard, here in Connestee, or anywhere else in WNC, don't worry—you're NOT hallucinating.

Affectionately nicknamed the "tactical possum," the "pocket dinosaur," or the "possum on a half-shell," the **nine-banded armadillo** is officially making itself at home here in the Tar Heel State. Originally from Central and South America, these little guys have been naturally expanding northward for decades and wreaking havoc in their wake.

Since the first official WNC sighting in Macon County back in 2007, armadillos have been confirmed in dozens of counties—and state biologists need our help to track them.

If you run across one here in Connestee, here is exactly what you should do.

1. Snap a Photo (From a Safe Distance)

Armadillos are generally harmless and have terrible eyesight, but they can scramble quickly or jump surprisingly high (up to three feet straight in the air!) when startled.

- Keep a respectful distance and snap a photo or video if you can do so safely.
- **Note on Health:** You might have heard that armadillos can carry leprosy. While true, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) notes that the risk is extremely low (affecting 0% to 10% of the population). Still, it's a great reason to look but never touch!

2. Note the Key Details

To make your sighting useful for wildlife conservation, jot down a few quick details:

- **The Date & Time:** When did you see it?
- **The Location:** GPS coordinates are the gold standard, but the nearest crossroads, town, or landmarks work great too.
- **The Condition:** Was it alive and foraging, or did you spot it as roadkill? (Roadkill sightings are actually incredibly helpful for tracking where they live!)

3. Report the Sighting

You can report your "pocket dinosaur" in two ways:

1. **Option A:** Email your photo, the date/time, and the location coordinates to the state wildlife team at **armadillo@ncwildlife.org**.
2. **Option B: Use the iNaturalist App:** Upload your photo and log it directly under the **NC Armadillo Project** and also add it to the **Connestee Falls Biodiversity Exploration Project.**

So how are they impacting our native insects, plants, and other wildlife?

They consume massive quantities of beetles, beetle larvae (grubs), ants, wasps, termites, cockroaches, and grasshoppers, taking these food sources away from our native wildlife, especially baby birds that eat mostly insects for the first two weeks after they hatch.

Although they do not typically eat many plants, their foraging behavior is highly disruptive to plant life.

Because they forage along the ground, armadillos occasionally stumble upon the nests of ground-nesting birds and are known to eat their eggs. They also occasionally consume small native reptiles and amphibians, including toads, lizards, snakes, and eat their eggs too.

So, let's keep our eyes peeled, Connestee! Whether you spot one of these armored invaders waddling across a fairway, digging near a trail, or unfortunately on the side of the road, please do your part and report it. Together, we can help NC Wildlife track the great 'pocket dinosaur' expansion of 2026!"

The Nine-Banded Armadillo. Source: National Wildlife Federation

Why Are the White Pines Looking Distressed?

By Andy McCumber for the NRSC

White pine bast scale located under lichen. Photo by E. Voigt and L. Williams, Wisconsin DNR

There are few trees more closely associated with the mountains of Western North Carolina than the eastern white pine (Pinus strobus). Towering above hardwood forests, bordering roads and trails, and providing year-round greenery, Eastern white pines are the tallest native conifer in eastern North America.

Over the past several years, many of us have noticed that some white pines no longer appear as vigorous as they once did. Crowns have become thinner, needles have faded from their rich green color, and scattered dead branches have become more common. At the same time, it is important to remember that many eastern white pines are still healthy and continue to thrive.

What is causing these changes?

The answer is more complex than a single insect or disease. Forest health specialists increasingly recognize that white pine decline often reflects several interacting factors. Among those receiving the greatest attention are White Pine Bast Scale (Matsucoccus macrocicatrices), the native fungal disease Caliciopsis canker (Caliciopsis pinea), and environmental stresses such as drought, storm damage, and site conditions. Together these may contribute to what researchers describe as a white pine decline complex.

What is White Pine Bast Scale?

White Pine Bast Scale is a tiny insect that spends much of its life hidden beneath loose bark on the trunk and larger branches, where it feeds on the tree's phloem. Because it is concealed, infestations are rarely noticed until a tree begins showing symptoms such as thinning foliage, reduced growth, and declining vigor.

Where does Caliciopsis canker fit into the picture?

Caliciopsis canker is caused by a native fungus that has long existed in North American forests. Researchers are studying how this fungus interacts with White Pine Bast

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Scale and other stressors. Many declining trees show evidence of both, although the exact relationship is still an active area of research.

Eyelash like fruiting bodies associated with Caliciopsis Canker. Photo by Elly Voigt and Linda Williams, Wisconsin DNR

Why is this different from Hemlock Woolly Adelgid?

Many residents are familiar with the community's successful efforts to protect eastern hemlocks from Hemlock Woolly Adelgid. Those treatments are supported by decades of research and well-established management recommendations.

White pine presents a different challenge. At present, there is no broadly accepted management strategy for White Pine Bast Scale and the associated decline complex comparable to the treatments available for hemlocks. And unfortunately, some of our white pines are declining as a result. Research continues, and scientists are working to better understand how insects, disease, and environmental stress interact before effective management options can be recommended.

Looking ahead

The changing appearance of some eastern white pines reminds us that forests are dynamic ecosystems. Understanding the factors contributing to white pine decline helps explain what many of us are seeing across the landscape. As research advances, new management approaches may emerge. Until then, good stewardship begins with understanding, careful observation, and decisions guided by the best available science.