

**ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF
CONSERVATION AND
NATURAL RESOURCES**

2022-2023 ANNUAL REPORT



**The Honorable Kay Ivey
Governor of Alabama
State Capitol
Montgomery, AL 36130**



Dear Governor Ivey:

I am pleased to submit the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' (ADCNR) Annual Report for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2023.

During fiscal year 2022-2023, Alabama State Parks implemented many design and renovation projects including improvements to infrastructure and facilities throughout the State Parks System. One of the most anticipated accomplishments was the rollout of a new, more user friendly reservations system that will make it easier for the more than 5 million annual visitors to our State Parks to choose the best overnight accommodations for their needs. These improvements helped make our parks popular destinations for outdoor recreation this year for Alabamians and visitors from across the country.

ADCNR's Marine Resources Division (MRD) was very busy this fiscal year managing Alabama's abundant fisheries along our Gulf Coast. Important game and food species like red snapper, gray triggerfish, flounder and oysters were monitored closely to balance the need to conserve these resources with our duty to provide access for commercial and recreational fishermen. This balance is crucial to maintaining the fisheries and supporting the eco-tourism and seafood industries that financially depend on these resources. Throughout the fiscal year, MRD also oversaw the state's popular red snapper season, continued expansion of our artificial reef system, and provided support for several important boating access projects.

Our Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division continued to improve access to fishing, boating, hunting and shooting sports with the construction and renovation of many freshwater boating access areas, the acquisition of thousands of acres of public hunting land for inclusion in the state's wildlife management area (WMA) system, and firearms instruction provided at WMA shooting ranges throughout the state. WFF also continued its public awareness and outreach efforts through a variety of innovative educational programs that introduce the types of outdoor recreation opportunities provided through ADCNR to those who have little to no experience with hunting, fishing or shooting sports. These programs help increase public awareness about the Department's conservation efforts.

The State Lands Division (SLD) provided administrative support for the disbursement of more than \$55 million in Gulf Of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA) program funds for 22 projects along the state's Gulf Coast focused on sewer infrastructure, water quality improvements, research, land acquisitions and recreational access improvements. Additionally, the state's popular Forever Wild Land Trust program added 11 tracts of land totaling 3,184 acres for outdoor recreation to the state's public land system in FY 2022-2023. SLD staff also hosted various outreach events across the state including youth hunting opportunities, camping and fishing weekends, sporting dog field trials and much more. Like WFF's outreach efforts, these events increase ADCNR's interaction with the public.

These are just a few of the many accomplishments you will find in this report. Thank you for your support and leadership to our agency and the State of Alabama.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Christopher M. Blankenship". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Christopher M. Blankenship
Commissioner**

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DEPARTMENT OVERVIEW



The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources is an executive and administrative Department of the State of Alabama created by statute. The Commissioner, appointed by the Governor as a member of her cabinet, advises the Governor and Legislature on management of freshwater fish, wildlife, marine resources, state lands, state parks, and other natural resources.

Scope of Operations

The Department's scope of operations includes the administration, management and maintenance of 21 state parks, 23 public fishing lakes, three freshwater fish hatcheries, one aquatic biodiversity center, 162 public boat ramps, 35 wildlife management areas, seven special opportunity areas, 12 shooting ranges, a saltwater mariculture center, and 645,000 acres of trust lands managed for the benefit of several state agencies, and the state's General Fund and the Alabama Trust Fund. Other departmental functions include maintenance of a State Land Resource Information Center and administration of the Forever Wild Land Trust program.

Organization

During Fiscal Year 2022-2023, the Department had four operational divisions and eight support sections. The operational divisions were Marine Resources, State Lands, State Parks, and Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries. Support sections were Accounting, Engineering, Communications and Marketing, Information Technology, Legal, Personnel and Payroll, Property Inventory, and Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration. The Commissioner was advised by a 13-member Conservation Advisory Board.

Division directors managed the Department's programs under their jurisdiction through authority delegated by the Legislature and the Commissioner. Throughout the fiscal year, the Department promoted wise stewardship, management, and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources. Active public education and voluntary participation programs were expanded, and new plans were implemented to achieve maximum multiple-use benefits consistent with resource conservation.

Department Goals

The Department's major goal is to promote the statewide stewardship and enjoyment of Alabama's natural resources and to ensure that future generations will be able to enjoy these resources.

Funding

Funding for the Department is generated through special revenues, which include federal money, cigarette taxes, user and license fees, mandated interest from endowment and federal regulations. The Forever Wild Land Trust received interest income from the Alabama Trust Fund. Specific revenue sources for the four operational divisions are as follows:

Marine Resources: Saltwater fishing licenses, fines, marine gas tax, and federal grants. Marine Resources also has an endowment, but it has not grown enough to enhance operations.

State Lands: Management fees from the sale of timber, minerals and various leases on state lands administered under the Lands Asset Management Program. Further, the division receives additional federal grants that support specific programs.

State Parks: User-generated funds in the form of entrance, rental, lodging, golf, and other recreational fees. State Parks received a modest amount of funding from cigarette tax revenue.

Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries: Fishing and hunting licenses and permits; fines; waterfowl stamps; federal allocations from excise taxes on sporting arms, ammunition, archery gear and some fishing tackle; and federal grants. Interest income continues to be generated by the Game and Fish endowment fund for resident lifetime hunting and fishing licenses. Direct donations and voluntary state income tax refund check-offs for the Nongame Wildlife Program continue to decrease from previous fiscal years.

CONSERVATION ADVISORY BOARD

The Conservation Advisory Board, created by statute, is composed of 10 members appointed by the Governor for alternating terms of six years and three ex-officio members in the persons of the Governor, the Commissioner of Agriculture and Industries, and the Director of the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. The Commissioner of Conservation and Natural Resources serves as the ex-officio secretary of the Board.

The Advisory Board assists in formulating policies for the Department of Conservation, examines all rules and regulations and makes recommendations for their change or amendment. By a two-thirds vote of the members present and with the

Governor's approval, the Board can amend, make any changes, repeal or create and promulgate additional rules and regulations. The Board also assists in publicizing the Department's programs and activities.

Meetings

The Advisory Board met two times during FY 2022-2023:

- March 11, 2023, at Alabama State University, 915 S. Jackson St., in Montgomery, Alabama
- May 20, 2023, at the Randolph School Thurber Arts Center, 4915 Garth Rd. SE, in Huntsville, Alabama

Conservation Advisory Board Members as of Sept. 30, 2023

Members	Hometown	Term Expires
Joseph Dobbs, Jr., Chairman	Livingston	March 28, 2027
Greg Barksdale	Hanceville	September 30, 2023
Brock Jones	Tuscaloosa	March 28, 2027
Kevin Savory	Dothan	March 28, 2027
Grady Hartzog	Eufaula	March 28, 2027
Raymond Jones, Jr.	Huntsville	May 9, 2025
Jeff Martin	Pell City	May 9, 2025
Ben C. Stimpson, Jr.	Mobile	September 30, 2023
Gary Wolfe	Fairhope	March 28, 2027
Tim Wood	Selma	September 30, 2023

Ex-officio Members

Kay Ivey, Governor, State of Alabama
 Dr. J. Mike Phillips, Director, Alabama Cooperative Extension System
 Rick Pate, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries

Ex-officio Secretary of the Board

Christopher M. Blankenship, Commissioner, Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

BUDGETS 2023	ACTUAL 2023	BUDGETED 2024	REQUESTED 2025
NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES	967	1,349	1,355
UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE FORWARD	109,374,847	131,757,131	85,450,178

Federal Funds			
0303 Marine Resources - Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission	1,063,076	1,865,000	1,333,000
0303 Marine Resources - Commerce	772,170	811,000	761,000
0303 Marine Resources - Interior	913,659	1,400,000	1,933,000
0304 Game & Fish - Interior	30,459,109	23,630,000	24,886,500
0304 Game & Fish - Misc	660,021	637,303	1,777,000
0305 Lands - Commerce	3,598,568	7,058,641	7,674,988
0305 Lands - Interior	28,800	525,000	525,000
1713 Restore Act	16,916,433	143,227,886	143,161,855
Total Federal Funding	54,411,836	179,154,830	182,052,343

National Fish and Wildlife Foundation	1,796,050	4,400,000	0
Licenses and Permits	30,749,692	28,450,000	28,005,000
Land Management Fees	4,035,784	3,117,223	3,634,012
User Fees	48,286,651	47,680,536	49,385,536
Timber Sales	969,522	500,000	800,000
Fines	613,309	550,000	800,000
Trust Fund Interest (MR and WFF)	593,276	700,000	880,000
Other	23,620,851	7,970,776	9,620,550
Total Departmental Related Receipts	110,665,135	93,368,535	93,125,098

Cigarette Tax	1,995,000	3,000,000	3,000,000
Gasoline Tax	2,814,402	2,700,000	2,670,000
Use Tax Discount Cap	2,928,434	1,361,000	2,280,000
Sales Tax Discount Cap	7,329,000	8,104,180	8,208,000
General Fund (Park Improvements & Renovations)	0	6,000,000	6,000,000
GOMESA	39,798,818	35,000,000	35,000,000
Forever Wild Land Management	900,000	900,000	900,000
BP Oil Spill/NRDA Reimbursements	5,401,898	26,000,000	27,000,000
State Reservoir Management Fund	1,269,500	1,269,500	1,269,500

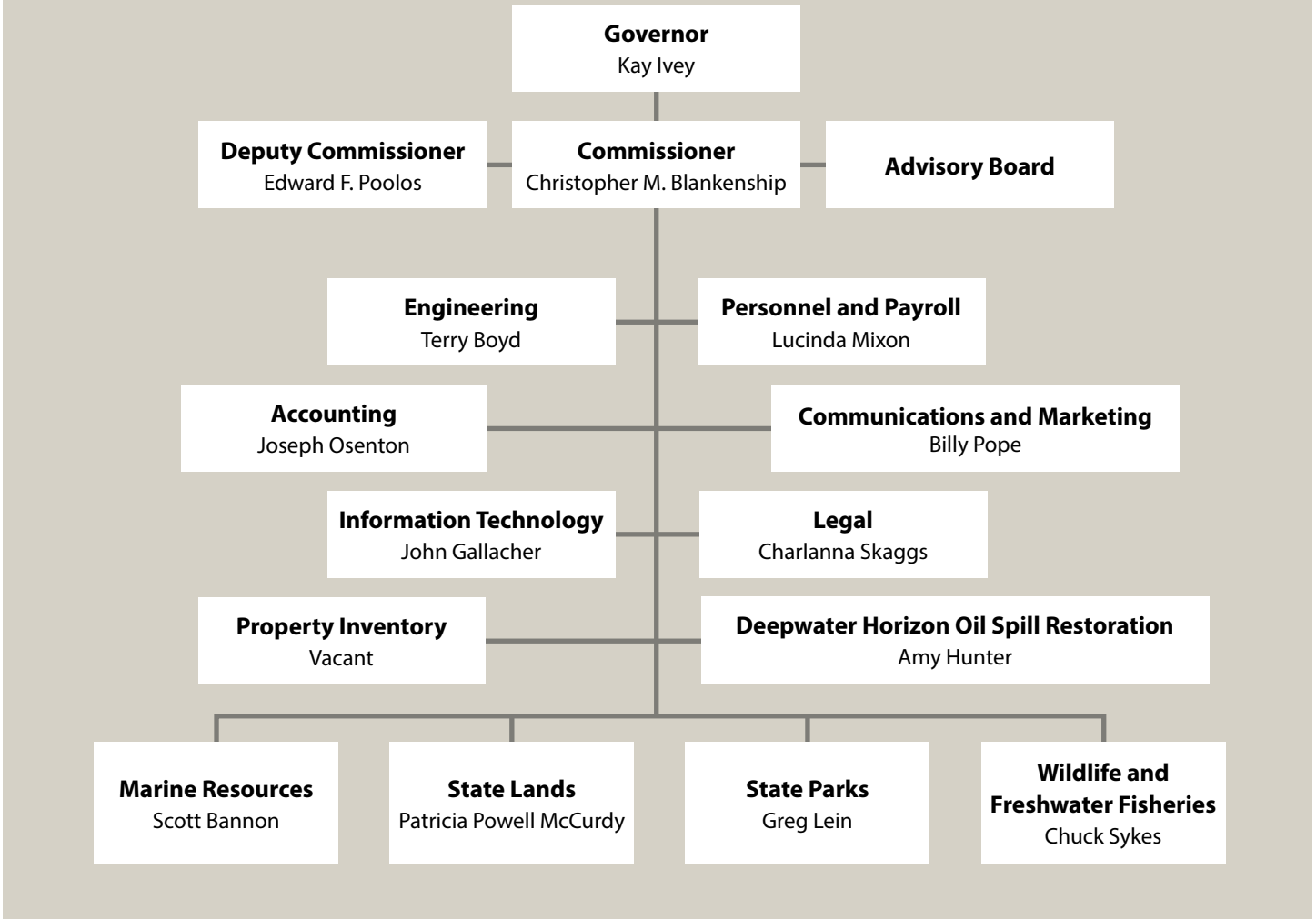
Total Other Receipts	62,437,052	84,334,680	86,327,500
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Administrative Transfer	9,516,824	10,750,000	10,750,000
Actual All Receipts	237,030,847	367,608,045	372,254,941
BFY 2023-2025 Expenditures or Budgeted	214,648,563	413,914,998	431,955,357
Revenues versus Expenditures--Over(Under)	22,382,284	(46,306,953)	(59,700,416)

UNENCUMBERED CASH BALANCE	131,757,131	85,450,178	25,749,762
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BFY 2023-2025 Expenditures/Budgeted	214,648,563	413,914,998	431,955,357
BFY 2023-2025 Federal Funding	54,411,836	179,154,830	182,052,343
BFY 2023-2025 State Funding	160,236,727	234,760,168	249,903,014

Department Organizational Chart as of September 30, 2023



FY 2022-2023 Budgets and Expenditures for Administrative Division

Section	Budgeted Amount	Actual Expenditures	Over/(Under)
Accounting	2,359,818	1,994,924	(-364,894)
Commissioner	860,696	777,000	(-83,692)
Engineering	548,110	403,949	(-144,161)
Communications and Marketing	1,203,844	911,110	(-292,734)
Information Technology	2,806,967	2,462,282	(-344,685)
Legal	1,215,427	1,091,404	(-124,023)
License	335,032	264,258	(-70,774)
Payroll and Personnel	1,408,746	1,472,869	64,123
Property Inventory	242,987	237,921	(-5,066)
Contingency	298,874	0	(-298,874)
Totals	11,280,501	9,615,721	(-1,664,780)

ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION

ACCOUNTING

The Accounting Section is the central clearinghouse for all ADCNR financial data. Accounting maintains and records all receipts and disbursements for the Commissioner's office, the administration sections, and each of the four divisions. Accounting is responsible for six internal functions: accounts payable, accounts receivable, budgeting, procurement, license sales, and financial reporting.

Accounts Payable reviews and approves all payment transactions and transfer journal entries for the Department. Over 26,000 transactions are processed on an annual basis.

Accounts Receivable reviews and approves all cash receipts and investment transactions for the Department. Over 7,500 transactions are processed on an annual basis.

The **Budgeting Office** prepares and submits the annual budget. It also processes budget modifications as required during the year. The Department expenses for FY 2023 were approximately \$214.6 million.

Procurement provides purchasing assistance to each administrative section and to all divisions. This office is the liaison between ADCNR and State Purchasing.

The **Hunting and Fishing License Office** The license office is responsible for receiving revenues from license sales and certifying them into the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries and Marine Resources funds.

Financial Reporting processes Comprehensive Annual Financial Report entries, closing entries, and reports on grants; calculates federal draws; and maintains grant budgets for the Department.

COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING

The Communications and Marketing Section provided a variety of services for the Department including writing news releases; publication and graphic design; editing, proofreading, and copywriting services; website development; video production; photography; email marketing; marketing analysis; and a weekly outdoors column sent to the media and published on the Department's website. Staff also coordinated special projects and events such as Outdoor Alabama hunting and fishing nights with two minor league baseball teams. Personnel included six full-time positions.

Accomplishments

- Managed the Department's email marketing and communication platform (GovDelivery) that is used to communicate with 1,415,156 subscribers distributed among 223 interest topics. Distributed communications included press releases, annual hunting and fishing license expiration reminders,

weekly outdoors articles, lapsed hunting and fishing license marketing incentives, and more. In FY 2022-2023, section email marketing and communications efforts generated \$701,715 in revenue from 11,855 license buyers.

- Developed landing pages on OutdoorAlabama.com for various marketing campaigns, outreach programs, and licenses. Those landing pages generated \$459,494 in revenue from 14,384 license buyers.
- Helped coordinate the 2022-2023 annual hunting and fishing license auto-renewal campaign that generated \$1,496,171 in license revenue.
- Partnered with minor league baseball and collegiate sports marketing groups to advertise to a broader and more diverse market segment. Working with Auburn University Football and Playfly Sports, ADCNR received more than 600,000 advertising views (impressions) per football game for a total of 13,000,000 during the season. Game day events with the Rocket City Trash Pandas and the Montgomery Biscuits allowed the Department to meet potential and current customers in person. The events provided more than 20,000 impressions onsite and digitally through partner social media posts and email marketing. These partnerships are an important component of ADCNR's efforts to become more relevant to all Alabamians.
- Partnered with ADCNR's State Parks Division, Alabama Tourism Department, and the Alabama Conservation Enforcement Officers Association (ACEOA) on the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest. Coordinated a traveling exhibit of the winning photos in locations across the state, such as state parks, museums, and libraries.
- Developed and edited 132 press releases (including weekly outdoors articles) focused on departmental programs, public events, and hunting and fishing regulations.
- Managed public information requests from local, regional, and national media outlets; nongovernmental and governmental agencies; and the public.
- Managed the Department's official Outdoor Alabama social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram. Facebook continued to be the most effective social media platform to connect with our constituents. The Outdoor Alabama Facebook page has seen continued growth in users and reach. In FY 2022-2023, the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page grew by 2,915 followers, for a total of 58,300. Total reach of the Outdoor Alabama Facebook page for the fiscal year was 910,300 Facebook users for a total of 5.6 million impressions, an increase of 336% over the previous year. Outdoor Alabama's other social media channels also grew in FY 2022-2023, including Instagram with 6,800 followers; X (formerly Twitter) with 4,698 followers; and YouTube with 7,740 subscribers.

- Oversaw and maintained content for two official Department websites – *OutdoorAlabama.com* and *AlabamaForeverWild.com*.

OutdoorAlabama.com

OutdoorAlabama.com

Users: 2,053,316

New Users: 2,048,490

Pageviews: 5,593,524

- Served as the liaison with the website contractor to provide solutions for various website issues as well as administrative and troubleshooting services for the Department.
- Designed various promotional items, digital and printed marketing materials, various annual species reports, advertisements, maps, calendars, signage, business cards, retirement certificates, and vehicle graphics and wraps.
- Shot photographs and video both on location and in studio in support of Department programs and events. Section staff also maintained video and photo archives for various departmental projects and distribution to news media, outdoor writers, and print and digital publications.
- Created public surveys and produced reports through the Qualtrics survey platform in support of Departmental staff research.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

The Information Technology (IT) Section provides computer hardware, software, and networking services for the Department. Hardware services include setup and installation of computers and mobile devices, management of Department servers, and installation and support for printers, monitors, copiers, and scanners. Software services include web-based application development and maintenance; analysis, design, and support for the Department’s E-Gov applications; support for all mainframe applications; and support and maintenance of Department websites. Networking services include support for all wired, wireless, and cellular technologies used throughout the Department. IT Section also provides support for email and cloud storage platforms through the Microsoft Office 365 Enterprise Agreement.

Facilities and Personnel

The IT staff consists of 19 employees: IT manager, programmer analysts (4), system specialists (5), system technicians (3), clerk (1), laborer (1), contractor-filled positions (2), and retired state employees (2). There are currently eight vacant merit positions in IT.

Accomplishments

- Modified the hunts application so that the Sandhill Crane Permit is now automated and sent to the hunter. This saves the WFF Division the cost of printing, stuffing, and mailing the permits
- Modified the hunts application for alligator, sandhill crane, and Special Opportunity Areas (SOA) to remove all registra-

tion fees, and added acceptance privileges to licensing for selected hunters

- Onboarded and trained additional technical staff due to agency needs
- Processed 7,000 support tickets for agency IT technical needs
- Completed project to convert all ADCNR locations to cloud-based Cisco Meraki networks for increased visibility, management, and security
- Wrote a new web service and administration website for ADCNR’s Marine Resources Division (MRD) to process and administer Snapper Check survey data
- Continued public Internet WI-FI projects to State Parks under the bond project
- Rewrote the public and admin photo contest websites and added additional functionality and enhancements at the request of the Communications and Marketing Section
- Continued deploying ADCNR Cisco WebEx Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) phone hub to facilitate the conversion of both external and internal offices to modernized cloud-calling services
- Migrated security awareness training to OIT, saving the Department training costs
- Wrote a new web service and administration and point-of-sale application website for MRD to process and administer oyster harvest data
- Continued server infrastructure project to migrate ADCNR web environment from a cloud presence to OIT’s datacenter
- Enhanced license sales and coordinated with CELS to allow U.S. citizens with no social security number to buy licenses through probate offices
- Modified annual license sales to remove Harvest Information Program (HIP) question from all queries except the HIP privilege
- Continued to expand internet bandwidth for external office locations to facilitate cloud storage, communication and VOIP
- Automated cash receipt processing into STAARs for license sales

LEGAL SECTION

The Legal Section provides legal counsel and advice to the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner, Division Directors, law enforcement personnel, and other employees of the Department.

The Legal Section also performs work relating to the acquisition of real estate for the Department, including procuring title evidence (title insurance, title opinion, title research), preparing

deeds, issuing Attorney General Title Opinions, closing acquisitions, recording deeds, and obtaining the final title policies/opinions, tax assessments, and payment of taxes due.

The Section handles ADCNR contracts and legal instruments of all types including, but not limited to, oil and gas leases, real estate leases, personal-service agreements, construction contracts, engineering contracts, easements, lease purchase agreements, State Parks concession contracts, and other documents as requested.

The Section corresponds with and meets and advises members of the Governor's Office, the Alabama Legislature, and fellow state attorneys on matters of legal, legislative, or regulatory interest related to the Department.

The Section drafts, reviews, and monitors legislation affecting the Department. It also drafts rules and regulations pursuant to the Alabama Administrative Procedures Act.

Litigation against the Department and its employees, as well as litigation initiated by the Department, is also managed by the Legal Section. This includes cases and appeals filed in state and federal courts, as well as those before state agencies and boards. Representation provided by the Legal Section includes all facets of conflict resolution and litigation, preparation of pleadings and briefs, and oral arguments.

PERSONNEL AND PAYROLL

The Personnel and Payroll Section provides personnel-related services to the Commissioner's office, Division Directors, Section Chiefs, and each employee of the Department. The Section serves as liaison to the State Personnel Department for ADCNR's personnel actions and activities.

The Section is responsible for processing all payrolls as well as maintaining all employee files and payroll records. The Section supports the advancement of ADCNR's employees in various ways, including facilitating training opportunities and assisting with the administration of benefits. Contact the Personnel Office at (334) 242-3501.

ENGINEERING SECTION

The Engineering Section assists the Department's divisions with professional planning and programming, architectural, engineering, landscape architecture, surveying, cartography, and related administrative services.

Facilities and Personnel

The Engineering Section had four employees during FY 2022-2023: one Engineering Services Chief, one part-time Construction Inspector I, and two retired state employees. The Section's facilities are in Montgomery.

Accomplishments

During FY 2022-2023, the Engineering Section administered approximately \$10 million in contracts. Section programs provided the professional expertise required to reach Department goals. Those programs included outsourced and in-house design and construction, master planning, and site planning for Department facilities.

Engineering provided surveying assistance and technical advice on construction projects, boundaries, and property corners for Alabama State Parks and the delineation and location of oyster reefs, public access areas, wildlife management areas, state lakes, and other state-managed property.

The Section continued to provide environmental-based assistance to the Alabama State Parks Division, including overseeing the wastewater treatment company to operate, run, and maintain treatment facilities at Lake Guntersville, Cheaha, Wind Creek, and Lakepoint state parks.

Engineering coordinated Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) disaster activities associated with Hurricane Sally and will continue to do so in 2024. The biggest of these is the repairs to Gulf State Park Pier. Engineering also coordinated the ADEM rubber tire paving project at Joe Wheeler State Park and the Wave Attenuator project at Lake Guntersville State Park.

PROPERTY INVENTORY

The Property Inventory Section is responsible for tracking all new assets acquired by the department as well as the disposal of all assets once they have reached their end of service. This includes assuring that all new property is barcoded and entered into the State Inventory Database as well as tracked throughout its lifetime within the department.

The Property Inventory Section is also responsible for coordinating and implementing the Department's yearly internal inventory of property as well as the bi-annual audit by the State Auditor's office.

PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER BAKER



DEEPWATER HORIZON OIL SPILL RESTORATION

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Restoration Section (DWHRS) coordinates administrative and technical aspects of restoration in coastal Alabama associated with the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Specific activities include participating in Natural Resource Damage Assessment (NRDA) Trustee Council meetings, participating in Trustee Implementation Groups, conducting public meetings related to NRDA activities, soliciting public input regarding potential restoration ideas, assisting with development of draft restoration plans and implementation of early restoration projects, and representing the interests of the NRDA trustees and the Governor's office.

The DWHRS assists the Commissioner related to his service as the Governor's designee to the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council, established pursuant to the Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities, and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act of 2012 (RESTORE Act), which directs 80% of Clean Water Act civil penalties resulting from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill for restoration projects within the five Gulf states.

The DWHRS also provides administrative support to the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council, which was established by the federal RESTORE Act to oversee certain funds allocated directly to the State of Alabama.

In addition, the DWHRS staff assists the Commissioner and coordinates with the Governor's office in relation to efforts by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) to distribute grant proceeds for coastal restoration from the Gulf Environmental Benefit Fund (GEBF). This fund resulted from two plea agreements entered in early 2013 resolving the criminal cases against BP and Transocean arising from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Significant accomplishments in FY2023 included:

- Initiated planning for NRDA Restoration Plan IV
- Initiated the acquisition of a 79-acre parcel located in Fort Morgan, southwestern Baldwin County. This area is part of the Gulf Barrier Island and Coastal Marsh Ecoregion within the larger Southern Coastal Plain Ecoregion.
- Initiated the acquisition of a 449-acre parcel in the Perdido Watershed to place in State conservation management
- Coordinated an amendment to the State Expenditure Plan (SEP) adding more than \$33 million to Spill Impact Component projects
- Alabama Center of Excellence completed a laboratory with 24 specialized tanks that will be used to study multiple stressors on marine communities. A ribbon-cutting event for the facility was held in January 2023.

- Administered 22 RESTORE Council Selected Grants totaling \$101,130,543. Grants focus on water quality and restoration of sensitive habitats in Mobile Bay.
- Submitted a grant application for federal RESTORE council-selected funding for the Coastal Alabama Water Quality Program that will initially fund more than \$16 million in water quality enhancement projects
- Implemented \$2.1 million Commitment and Planning Support grant from the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council (RESTORE-federal council) to support the State's efforts in collaborative planning for Gulf-wide restoration efforts
- Continued support, as administrator, for the Alabama Gulf Coast Recovery Council implementing Alabama's Multiyear Implementation Plan (MIP) and SEP as required under the RESTORE Act. The two plans describe more than 40 projects valued at more than \$390 million.

An overview of restoration projects benefiting the State of Alabama, organized by funding stream, is provided below. Additional project details are available at www.outdooralabama.com/alabama-coastal-restoration-program/alabama-coastal-restoration-about-us.

NRDA Early Restoration Projects

- Marsh Island Restoration Project (Portersville Bay) - \$11,280,000
- Dune Restoration Project (Gulf Shores and Orange Beach) - \$737,202 (complete)
- Nesting Sea Turtles Habitat Improvement Project - \$345,051
- Avian Habitat Enhancement Project - \$279,000 (complete)
- Gulf State Park Enhancement Project - \$29,221,693 (complete)
- Alabama Oyster Cultch Restoration - \$3,239,485
- Alabama Swift Tract Living Shoreline Project - \$5,000,080
- Point aux Pins Living Shoreline Project - \$3,800,000
- Osprey Restoration in Coastal Alabama Project - \$62,580
- Gulf State Lodge Project - \$56,000,000

NRDA Restoration Plan I Projects

- Fort Morgan Pier Rehabilitation Project - \$3,256,993 (complete)
- Laguna Cove Little Lagoon Natural Resource Protection Project - \$4,400,000
- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvements Project - \$1,000,000 (engineering and design complete)
- Dauphin Island Eco-tourism and Environmental Education Area - \$2,238,613

- Mid-Island Parks and Public Beach Improvements Project - \$1,210,200

NRDA Restoration Plan II Projects

- Magnolia River Land Acquisition (Holmes Tract) - \$5,138,162 (complete)
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (East Gateway Tract) - \$3,252,192 (complete)
- Weeks Bay Land Acquisition (Lloyd Tract) - \$3,606,900
- Lower Perdido Islands Restoration, Phase I - \$994,523
- Southwestern Coffee Island Habitat Restoration Project, Phase I - \$1,650,450
- Little Lagoon Living Shoreline - \$260,999
- Restoring the Night Sky - \$486,639
- Toulmins Spring Branch Engineering and Design - \$479,090
- Fowl River Nutrient Reduction - \$1,000,000
- Weeks Bay Nutrient Reduction - \$2,000,000
- Coastal Alabama Sea Turtle (CAST) Conservation Program - \$935,061
- CAST Triage - \$1,071,935
- CAST Habitat Usage and Population Dynamics - \$1,631,696
- CAST Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$906,874
- Enhancing Capacity for the Alabama Marine Mammal Stranding Network - \$2,432,389
- Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Protection: Enhancement and Education - \$686,374
- Assessment of Alabama Estuarine Bottlenose Dolphin Populations and Health - \$3,245,129
- Colonial Nesting Wading Bird Tracking and Habitat Use Assessment - \$1,547,500
- Oyster Cultch Relief and Reef Configuration - \$480,262
- Side-scan Mapping of Mobile Bay Relic Oyster Reefs - \$104,229
- Oyster Hatchery at Claude Petet Mariculture Center - \$156,159 (terminated)
- Oyster Grow Out Restoration Reef Placement - \$962,370

NRDA Restoration Plan III Projects

- Perdido River Land Acquisition (Molpus Tract) - \$0 (withdrawn)
- Bayfront Park Restoration and Improvement, Phases IIa and IIb - \$8,567,385
- Gulf State Park Pier Renovation - \$2,447,021
- Perdido Beach Public Access Coastal Protection - \$56,013 (terminated)
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Enhancement (Mobile Street Boardwalk) - \$3,227,212
- Stewardship of Coastal Alabama Beach Nesting Bird Habitat - \$2,067,381
- Dauphin Island West End Acquisition - \$7,938,770 (complete)

NRDA Regionwide Trustee Implementation Group Restoration Plan I Projects

- Restore and Enhance Sea Turtle Nest Productivity on Gulf of Mexico Beaches - \$7,655,000 (\$1,000,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Enhancements to the Sea Turtle Stranding and Salvage Network and Enhanced Rehabilitation - \$3,150,000 (\$50,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Regionwide Bird Nesting and Foraging Area Stewardship - \$8,510,750 (\$800,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Reducing Marine Debris Impacts to Birds and Sea Turtles Gulf-wide - \$7,040,000 (\$1,402,000 allocated to Alabama)
- Conservation and Enhancement of Nesting and Foraging Habitat for Birds - \$22,500,000 (\$5,630,000 allocated to Alabama for Pilot Town Acquisition and Restoration) (Complete)
- Improving Resilience for Oysters by linking Brood Reefs and Sink Reefs - \$35,819,974 (\$7,123,995 allocated to Alabama)
- Reducing Injury and Mortality of Bottlenose Dolphins from Hook and Line Fishing Gear by Utilizing Fishery Surveys, Social Science, and Collaborative Problem Solving: Alabama Component - \$340,000
- Pilot Implementation of Automatic Information System in the Gulf of Mexico Inshore Shrimp Fishery to Better Understand Fishing Effort to Inform Efforts to Reduce Sea Turtle Bycatch: Alabama Component - \$446,225
- Reducing Sea Turtle Bycatch at Recreational Fishing Sites: Alabama Component - \$729,872

NFWF-GEFB Projects

- Restoration and Enhancement of Oyster Reefs - \$3,750,000 (complete)
- D'Olive Watershed Restoration - \$12,700,000 (complete)

- Fowl River Watershed Restoration - \$3,300,000 (complete)
- Alabama Barrier Island Restoration Assessment - \$4,400,000 (complete)
- Alabama Marine Mammal Conservation and Recovery Program - \$1,900,000 (complete)
- Coastal Habitat Restoration Planning Initiative - \$4,200,000
- Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$1,800,000 (complete)
- Multifaceted Fisheries and Ecosystem Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters - \$2,200,000
- Grand Bay Acquisition - \$5,770,000 (complete)
- Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition Initiative, Phase I - \$286,000
- Mobile County Conservation Acquisition - \$4,260,000 (complete)
- Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement - \$12,500,000
- Alabama Coastal Bird Stewardship Program - \$1,460,000 (complete)
- Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project, Phase I - \$5,900,000
- Dauphin Island Conservation Acquisition - \$3,560,000
- Fowl River Spits Restoration, Phase I - \$1,100,000 (complete)
- Bon Secour/Oyster Bay Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$12,500,000
- Gulf Highlands Acquisition (Gulf Shores) - \$36,000,000 (complete)
- Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters, Phase III - \$4,400,000
- Little Dauphin Island Restoration Assessment - \$1,480,000
- Salt Aire Shoreline Restoration - \$12,700,000
- Mobile Bay Shore Habitat Conservation and Acquisition, Phase II - \$6,900,000
- Dauphin Island Bird Habitat Acquisition and Enhancement Program - \$4,500,000
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition - \$5,900,000 (complete)
- Enhanced Fisheries Monitoring in Alabama's Marine Waters, Phase IV - \$2,800,000
- Alabama Artificial Reef and Habitat Enhancement, Phase II - \$22,499,000
- Lightning Point Acquisition and Restoration Project, Phase II - \$16,578,000
- Restoration of the North Side of Dauphin Island, Phase I - \$329,000
- Deer River Shoreline Stabilization, Phase I - \$750,000
- Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration, Phase I - \$1,528,000 (complete)
- Bon Secour National Wildlife Refuge Acquisition (Three Rivers), Phase II - \$4,423,000 (complete)
- Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline Restoration Engineering and Design - \$250,000
- Lower Halls Mill Creek Protection - \$2,687,000
- Blackwater River South Tract Acquisition - \$5,212,000 (complete)
- Lower Fish River Watershed Restoration - \$6,554,000
- Dauphin Island Causeway Shoreline and Habitat Restoration, Phase II - \$22,631,385
- Dauphin Island East End Beach and Dune Restoration, Phase I - \$1,400,000
- Bon Secour River Headwater Restoration, Phase II - \$5,100,000
- Wolf Creek Headwaters Restoration, Phase I - \$500,000
- Deer River Shoreline Stabilization, Phase II - \$22,855,000
- Fowl River Spits Restoration, Phase II - \$19,798,000
- Restoration of the North Side of Dauphin Island, Phase II (Graveline Bay Marsh) - \$6,437,000



PHOTO: EVAN LANIER

- Dauphin Island Beach Nourishment Engineering and Design - \$1,143,000
- Beach Club West Conservation Acquisition - \$12,129,966

RESTORE - Direct Component Projects (Bucket 1)

- Alabama State Port Authority Roll-on/Roll-off Terminal - \$29,935,331 (complete)
- Dauphin Island Aloe Bay Harbour Town - \$17,412,014
- Historic Africatown Welcome Center - \$6,375,969
- Redevelop City Docks (City of Bayou La Batre) - \$30,683,840
- Mount Vernon Water Treatment Plant - \$1,541,978
- Mobile Greenway Initiative - \$14,284,128
- Northwest Satsuma Water and Sewer Project - \$3,938,520
- Innovating St. Louis Street, Mobile's Technology Corridor - \$11,501,990
- Bayou La Batre Water Distribution System Upgrades - \$7,990,180
- Mobile County Blueway Trail Development - \$14,264,355

- Gulf Shores Gulf Coast Center for Eco-tourism and Sustainability - \$13,666,271
- Baldwin County ALDOT Capacity Improvements - \$69,649,000
- Fairhope Working Waterfront and Greenspace Restoration

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 1 Projects (Bucket 2)

- Coastal Alabama Comprehensive Watershed Planning Project - \$4,342,500
- Alabama Living Shoreline Restoration Program, Categories 1 and 2 - \$6,250,000
- Comprehensive Living Shoreline Monitoring Program, Categories 1 and 2 - \$4,000,000
- Submerged Aquatic Vegetation Restoration and Monitoring Program - \$875,000
- Marsh Restoration in Fish River, Weeks Bay, Oyster Bay, Meadows Tract, Categories 1 and 2 - \$3,158,043
- Oyster Bay Marsh Restoration, Category 2
- Enhancing Opportunities for Beneficial Use of Dredged Sediments - \$3,000,000
- Upper Mobile Bay Beneficial Use Wetland Creation Site - \$2,500,000



PHOTO: BRENT EANES

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 2 Projects (Bucket 2)

- Alabama Commitment and Planning Support Grant - \$2,100,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3a (Bucket 2)

- Perdido River Land Conservation and Habitat Enhancements - \$26,800,000

RESTORE - Federal Council FPL 3b Proposed Projects (Bucket 2)

- Coastal Alabama Regional Water Quality Program - \$35,000,000
- City of Orange Beach Stormwater Master Plan - \$250,000
- City of Fairhope Sanitary Sewer Overflow Mitigation - \$820,099
- Town of Dauphin Island Stormwater Masterplan and Drainage Improvements - \$421,470
- City of Fairhope Stormwater Infrastructure Inventory - \$487,500
- Coastal Alabama Water Quality and Sediment Baseline Monitoring - \$3,103,959
- City of Bayou La Batre North System Sewer Improvements - \$206,200
- Grand Bay Sewer Service - \$337,344
- Dauphin Island Sewer Collection Improvements – Phase I - \$975,652
- Three Mile Creek Improvements Project – USA Campus - \$154,705
- City of Loxley Corn Creek Tributary Restoration Project - \$2,123,000
- Fish River Watershed Sediment and Stormwater Improvements - \$150,000
- Enhancing Hydrologic Connectivity in Justins Bay (Mobile Bay) - \$1,000,000
- Developing Ecological Flow Decision-Support for Mobile River and Perdido River Basins - \$3,400,000
- Perdido Watershed Water Quality Improvements and Restoration Assessment Program - \$1,500,000
- Gulf Coast Conservation Reserve Program - \$1,000,000
- State and Offshore Sediment Resources Inventory (U.S. Department of Interior) Alabama Component - \$3,000,000

RESTORE - Spill Impact Component Proposed Projects (Bucket 3)

- Characterization and Delineation of Significant Sand Resource Areas Essential for Beach Restoration, Offshore Alabama - \$975,170
- Alabama Gulf Seafood Marketing Program - \$2,972,435

- Development of a Regional Strategic Plan for the Coastal Alabama Region - \$666,375
- Replacement of Substandard Facilities at the ADEM Coastal Office and Mobile Field Office - \$8,088,599
- Extension of Effluent Force Main from Bayou La Batre Wastewater Treatment Facility - \$19,092,770
- Three Mile Creek Watershed Restoration - \$15,070,822
- Aloe Bay/Mississippi Sound Water Quality Enhancement Project - \$19,860,000
- Mobile County Dirt Road Paving Program (Sediment Reduction) - \$10,395,914
- Bayou La Batre Collection System/Lift Station Upgrades - \$14,701,150
- Mobile Area Storm Water Mapping and Resiliency Planning - \$3,600,000
- Perch Creek Area Sanitary Sewer Trunk Line Cured In-Place Pipe - \$3,665,048
- Implementing Storm Water Management Improvements for Toulmin Springs Branch and Gum Tree Branch - \$1,222,744
- One Mobile: Reconnecting People, Work, and Play Through Complete Streets - \$1,287,500
- City of Chickasaw Sewer Rehabilitation Project - \$2,649,000
- Longevity, Stability, and Water Quality Improvements (Bon Secour) - \$665,908 (Complete)
- Orange Beach North Sewer Force Main Upgrade - \$6,099,389 (Complete)
- Fairhope Sewer Upgrade, Phase I - \$13,515,000
- Expansion of the Orange Beach Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Program - \$722,255
- Environmental Restoration of Cotton Bayou and Terry Cove - \$515,000
- Auburn University Gulf Coast Environment Research Station - \$11,295,000
- Lillian Park Beach Habitat and Shoreline Protection - \$2,095,385
- Fairhope Area Community-Based Comprehensive Land Use Plan - \$714,500
- Canal Road Improvements East of SR161 - \$6,067,878
- Little Lagoon Restoration Project - \$6,175,557
- Fort Morgan Parkway Trail Extension - \$7,591,608
- Meaher State Park Improvements - \$4,853,500
- Alabama Point Seawall Repair - \$2,562,640 (Complete)
- Planning Grant to Amend SEP - \$300,000

RESTORE Centers of Excellence Research Grants Program (Bucket 5)

- Alabama Center of Excellence - \$7,964,464

MARINE RESOURCES DIVISION



The mission of the **Marine Resources Division (MRD)** is to manage the state's marine fishery resources through research, enforcement, and education for the maximum benefit of the natural resources and the citizens of Alabama.

MRD consists of the Fisheries, Enforcement, and Administrative sections.

The **Fisheries Section** makes recommendations of size limits, bag limits, and seasons to MRD managers based on research of growth, reproductive capabilities, environmental parameters, and abundance estimates. To meet this responsibility, section staff conduct varied monitoring programs to gather data for many species of fish and invertebrates. Programs are divided into fishery based and science programs. Fishery data is collected from commercial sources such as vessels or dealers and recreational sources such as individual anglers and charter boats. Data collected include location, trip time, number of anglers and fish lengths, weights and aging structures. Scientific data is collected by section staff conducting long-term monitoring programs using gear such as seines, trawls and gill nets. Habitat creation or restoration focuses on oyster reefs

and inshore and offshore artificial reefs. Marine aquaculture located at the Claude Peteet Mariculture Center (CPMC) focuses on supplemental stocking of fishes. Data collected through multiple programs, with staff working with the public as well as state and federal agencies along the Gulf of Mexico, determines the status of state and federal marine resources. Each year, the Fisheries and Enforcement sections partner to participate in public outreach programs educating the public on the resources and changes in management.

The **Enforcement Section** is responsible for patrolling Alabama's shorelines, coastal waters, and adjacent federal waters and enforcing state and federal laws and regulations relating to the conservation and protection of marine resources. Officers also enforce boating safety as

well as hunting and freshwater fishing laws and regulations. The section coordinates extensively with other state and federal agencies in cooperative enforcement operations, investigations, training, public safety, search and rescue, and other natural resource issues. In FY 2022-2023, the Enforcement Section employed 19 conservation enforcement officers.

The **Administrative Section** is responsible for accounting, billing, payroll, license sales, and public inquiries. MRD is housed at two facilities, one on Dauphin Island and the other in Gulf Shores. In FY 2022-2023, the two facilities supported 65 full-time employees, one part-time and eight temporary positions. There were 79 full-time, one part-time, and 12 seasonal employees budgeted during the year.

Accomplishments and Activities FISHERIES SECTION

Staff monitored oyster densities on Alabama's public oyster reefs to assist in the development of the 2022-2023 oyster season. Divers collected and processed 165 quadrat samples from reefs planted with new cultch between 2013 through 2016 and from unplanted sections of reefs for comparison. Abundances of legal-sized oysters increased from the prior year. Commercial effort increased by more than 100 additional licensed harvesters, resulting in an 18 day shorter season compared to the prior year's season.

Anglers provided staff with 437 fishes, representing multiple managed saltwater species, to sample for age structures, length, sex, and weight. This data is necessary to fishery biologists because it conveys the size at age of fish being harvested. Knowing the age distributions of the fish anglers keep assists staff with determining appropriate regulations for each species.

Staff participated in the NOAA Fisheries Access Point Angler Intercept Survey (APAIS) during FY 2022-2023. This survey gathers catch information directly from recreational saltwater



anglers. That information is combined with effort information from the NOAA Fisheries mail survey to determine recreational catch estimates and stock assessments for many managed finfish. Staff surveyed 5,872 anglers at various marinas, public boat ramps, and shore sites during FY 2022-2023.

Fisheries staff are currently participating in an at-sea observer program funded by the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) that was implemented on June 1, 2022. The program should run through 2026 and consists of an at-sea observer riding on charter boats where marine reef fish species are targeted. Staff assesses and notes discard methods and release conditions of fish caught and released during the trips. Priority reef fish are also tagged before being released if time allows without increasing mortality risk of released fish. Among the priority species are red snapper, gag, red grouper, gray triggerfish, and greater amberjack. From October 1, 2022, through September 30, 2023, 76 observer trips were completed, 1,482 reef fish were tagged, and 44 have been recaptured and reported to MRD.

During FY 2022-2023, MRD managed Alabama's portion of the Gulf-wide private recreational angler red snapper quota. Harvests were monitored through Alabama's mandatory Snapper Check reporting program to ensure compliance with the 591,185 pound quota provided Alabama in 2023. This 2023 quota reflected Alabama's originally planned quota being cut in half by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) due to calibrations with new landing estimate procedures. Snapper Check allows calculation of cumulative harvest within several days of being reported, which allows managers to monitor the quota very closely and reduces the risk the quota will be exceeded. The red snapper season for private vessel anglers in FY 2022-2023 was the sixth calendar year of an alternative management system whereby each state along the Gulf of

Mexico used data collection systems to monitor harvests against their respective quotas allocated by NOAA's NMFS. The May to September period closed on September 4 and was reopened from September 29 to October 16. The additional days were made possible as a result of improving science that has the ability to monitor daily harvests via Snapper Check and document when harvests are reduced or non-existent during poor weather days, including tropical weather systems.

The CPMC continued its fish stocking program. Three fish species were raised between October 2022 and September 2023: Florida pompano, Southern flounder, and spotted seatrout. Florida pompano releases totaled 140,000 fish. The spawning of Southern flounder resulted in 115,300 fish (1-2 inches) being released in local waters during spring 2022. Spotted seatrout were spawned and 182,600 fish were released into coastal waters. Additionally, facilities upgrades included the installation of protein skimmers to the broodfish system to increase water quality and stability. Construction of a new pier for the ponds was also started.

Staff used gillnets, otter trawls, and seines to gather information about the abundance and age of a variety of recreationally and commercially important marine species. Staff completed 260 field days with the sampling gear in Mobile and Perdido bays and the Mississippi Sound. Gillnet sets were deployed on 100 days, and 160 days were used for seine and otter trawl sampling activities. This sampling provided helpful data for establishing population trend information for a variety of species, including those that are key indicators of ecosystem health and those that are harvested commercially or recreationally. These sampling activities began in 1981. This data represents one of the oldest continuous datasets of its kind on the Gulf of Mexico.

A multi-year grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) that supported multiple projects managed by the Fisheries section is coming to an end. In one of these projects, the University of South Alabama is drafting a report of reef fish sampling efforts utilizing vertical line and bottom longline gears along structured (natural and artificial) and nonstructured habitats as well as mapping of water bottoms with side-scan sonar to characterize. Data generated from these monitoring programs will be very valuable to MRD to inform management decisions associated with Alabama's nearshore and offshore marine fisheries.

Staff continued artificial reefing activities to enhance the availability and quality of reef fish habitat and increase recreational/commercial fishing opportunities. During FY 2022-2023, four new inshore reefs were constructed in Mobile Bay and two memorial reefs were constructed in the offshore waters of Alabama. Additionally, the base from the Neptune oil/gas platform in Viosca Knoll was turned into an artificial reef through Alabama's Rigs to Reefs Program. GPS coordinates to those sites were published at www.outdooralabama.com. Staff also inspected and permitted 654 reef structures proposed by private reef builders. Each structure was evaluated to ensure compliance with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the GSMFC's Guidelines for Marine Artificial Reef Materials, 2nd Edition.

In cooperation with the GSMFC and the other four Gulf States, staff expanded a study to improve the quality and accuracy of commercial landings information. MRD previously collected reef fish and is now focused on samples of barracuda and king mackerel to validate, verify, and update conversions of gutted weights and units from seafood dealers to whole weight. The development of updated conversion factors allows commercial landings to be reported accurately in whole weight for use in fisheries stock assessment and management.

MRD, with assistance from the State Parks Division and Baldwin County Commission, maintained seven public boat launch sites in Baldwin and Mobile counties. In FY 2022-2023, MRD provided financial assistance (from Sport Fish Restoration Program funding) to the City of Daphne for parking lot improvements and installation of a kayak launch at D'Olive Bay Boat Launch. The parking lot improvements included a new entrance to improve traffic flow, an asphalt drive, and paver parking spaces. The kayak launch was a new addition for that location and increased recreational opportunities for both residents and visitors.

After completing the lengthy process to receive federal disaster relief funding via NOAA and the Office of Management and Budget, MRD received more than \$8 million in response to the Gulf States' 2019 flooding events. MRD was able to disburse the funds to qualified commercial anglers and seafood processors in FY 2022-2023.

ENFORCEMENT SECTION

During FY 2022-2023, MRD enforcement officers conducted 4,719 commercial angler inspections, 18,675 recreational angler inspections, 13,809 patrol hours, and 8,273 vessel boardings.

MRD officers continued participating in joint investigations with the NOAA Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) regarding Gulf reef fish, marine mammals, sea turtle protection, and international unreported/undocumented seafood. Additionally, staff conducted joint patrols with uniformed NOAA enforcement officers.

The Enforcement Section entered the 22nd Joint Enforcement Agreement (JEA) with NOAA/OLE. The JEA provides equipment and funding for officers to enforce federal laws and regulations. The most recent contract included funding for patrol vehicles, outboard engines, and vessel repairs. Additionally, it provided funding for underway and dockside patrols for federal priorities such as reef fish and turtle excluder devices and training for patrol officers.

The Enforcement Section continues to work on two grants funded with monies from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill. The first grant, Coastal Alabama Sea Turtle (CAST) Protection: Enhancement and Education project, aims to collect data related to sea turtle nesting and protect those nests from human interaction. A secondary aim of the CAST grant is to help educate the public about the dangers of interfering with sea turtles during vulnerable nesting periods.

The Enforcement Section was awarded a 2023 Port Security Grant through the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Homeland Security to purchase 21 new laptop computers. These computers were purchased to allow the officers better access to the MRD remote monitoring camera system.

This system currently has 28 cameras around Mobile Bay, Perdido Bay, and other locations. This system continues to grow and acts as a force multiplier, allowing officers to monitor different areas utilizing the cameras.

The Enforcement Section continues participating in the South Alabama Regional Search and Rescue group to provide regional search and rescue support. During FY 2022-2023, MRD officers worked closely with officers from other states, NOAA law enforcement officers, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in a variety of activities including the investigation, apprehension, and prosecution of persons in multiple federal fisheries violations that occurred in Alabama as well as other jurisdictions.

MRD enforcement officers participated in many outreach and education events, including the Mobile and Orange Beach boat shows. These events provide opportunities for officers to educate the public about fishing laws and fisheries management.

FUTURE ISSUES

The federal management of red snapper and other reef fish continues to be a high priority in the fishing community. MRD will continue to work with the federal government and the other Gulf States to manage the shared federal species to the maximum benefit of all user groups. MRD anticipates an increase to the Alabama quota for the 2024 season based on a rule approved by the U.S. Secretary of Commerce in late 2023.

The health and production of Alabama's public oyster reefs continues to be a significant concern. One oyster project planted 30 acres in Heron Bay with limestone rock to serve as settlement substrate for larval oysters.

MRD continues to address infrastructure damage caused by Hurricane Sally. Improvement projects will continue in 2024 that focus on docks, boat lifts, and shoreline protection.

Marine Resources 2022-2023 Budget		FUND 0303 (Seafood Funding)		FUND 1402 (NRDA Funding)
BUDGETED ITEM	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES	BUDGET	EXPENDITURES
PERSONNEL COSTS	\$3,824,491.00	\$3,356,964.15	\$350,114.00	\$98,312.09
EMPLOYEE BENEFITS	\$1,661,891.00	\$1,398,568.59	\$163,363.00	\$42,544.61
TRAVEL- IN-STATE	\$22,000.00	\$10,662.88	\$9,000.00	\$170.00
TRAVEL -OUT- OF-STATE	\$27,000.00	\$16,089.11	\$9,000.00	\$676.00
REPAIRS AND MAINTENANCE	\$923,555.00	\$175,578.59	\$52,283.00	\$3,398.38
RENTALS AND LEASES	\$59,000.00	\$34,609.89	\$4,550.00	\$75.00
UTILITIES AND COMMUNICATION	\$230,000.00	\$184,779.51	\$4,500.00	\$582.77
PROFESSIONAL SERVICES	\$355,000.00	\$254,799.12	\$389,875.00	\$-
SUPPLIES, MATERIALS & OPERATING EXPENSES	\$678,651.00	\$558,717.88	\$159,870.00	\$7,808.09
TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT OPERATIONS	\$659,862.00	\$504,578.66	\$99,000.00	\$24,607.45
GRANTS AND BENEFITS	\$10,134,643.00	\$9,391,290.86	\$310,800.00	\$86,453.37
CAPITAL OUTLAY	\$3,587,493.00	\$2,073,080.96	\$611,024.00	\$-
TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT PURCHASES	\$684,279.00	\$341,334.44	\$10,000.00	\$-
OTHER EQUIPMENT PURCHASES	\$270,000.00	\$103,558.13	\$127,891.00	\$32,877.59
ADMINISTRATIVE TRANSFER	\$812,470.00	\$800,614.00		
TOTAL	\$23,930,335.00	\$19,205,226.77	\$2,301,270.00	\$297,505.35

Fund 0303 (seafood funding) is MRD's general budget. Fund 1402 is funded through the federal Natural Resource Damage Assessment and Restoration Program (NRDA Restoration Program) that distributes restoration funds from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill settlement.

* NUMBERS FROM STATE OF ALABAMA BUDGET MANAGEMENT REPORT * BUDGET FISCAL YEAR 2022 THROUGH SEPT. 30, 2023



FISHING EFFORT SURVEY AIMS TO ADDRESS DISCREPANCY IN FEDERAL AND STATE NUMBERS

ADCNR's Marine Resources Division (MRD) has been a leader in Gulf of Mexico fisheries management, and this trend continues in a pilot study for 2024. The study aims to gain data on recreational fishing effort for Alabama's private anglers and state for-hire captains and compare that to the data compiled by NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

Alabama's survey is similar to the effort survey currently used by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries to estimate the fishing effort for its saltwater anglers. The survey is a partnership among NMFS, the Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission (GSMFC) and MRD.

MRD will contact licensed anglers and for-hire captains weekly to gather fishing trip information from the previous week.

PHOTO: WILL CHILDERS



As Alabama and other Gulf States have moved to state management of red snapper and continue to monitor other species that are federally regulated, concerns have arisen about how the federal surveys are conducted and the accuracy of their results. Specifically there are concerns regarding effort, or how many people are participating in a fishery. Alabama has been collecting red snapper landings through the Snapper Check program for six years and landings for gray triggerfish and greater amberjack for the last three years. The results of Alabama's electronic reporting differ from the numbers provided by the NMFS. Those differences are not favorable to Alabama or to fisheries management for those species in the Gulf. NOAA's numbers are generally more than twice those determined by MRD.

Florida, Louisiana, and Texas have reporting systems of their own. Mississippi and Alabama have chosen to have a trial year of 2024 to implement state data collection systems for all species. MRD will do side-by-side comparisons of the federal survey numbers compared to the states' pilot survey numbers.

Significant changes were made within the NOAA Fisheries private recreational survey method in 2018. The largest of the changes was contacting individuals via mail from randomly selected mailing addresses in coastal states, which resulted in much higher estimates of fishing effort. Those higher estimates were large enough to cause concerns within the marine fisheries management community regarding the accuracy of Alabama's saltwater fishing effort.

The biggest contention has to do with Alabama's signature saltwater species, red snapper, which thrives off Alabama's coast. Alabama has the largest artificial reef zone in the United States with nearly 1,100 square miles designated for habitat enhancement. Beginning in 2012, the populations of red snapper and other popular reef fish have been estimated annually through research from the University of South Alabama's School of Marine and Environmental Sciences. Recently, this research has been funded by anglers who purchase a Gulf Reef Fish Endorsement with their Alabama saltwater fishing licenses.

In 2018, the Gulf States were granted state management of red snapper, which included using state data collection programs to monitor harvests. Along with small increases to the annual catch limit (quota), the red snapper seasons also increased since implementing state management. For 2023, NOAA Fisheries insisted that harvest estimates from Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama data collection programs be calibrated to recognize the difference between the federal effort surveys and the state surveys.

As a result of calibration, Alabama's private recreational anglers had a 51% decrease in the 2023 red snapper quota. Alabama's private recreational catch limit went from 1,122,662 pounds in 2022 to 591,185 pounds in 2023. For the 2024 season, MRD anticipates a quota increase because of a calibration modification approved by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Gulf Council) in August 2023.

The NMFS recently announced that their effort numbers for private recreational vessels in a subsample of East Coast states have been inflated by 30-40%. Disturbingly, they have been aware of this since 2019. With NMFS admitting to the inflated numbers, MRD saw the opportunity to seek assistance to develop a more accurate system that would allow for better management decisions. The new state-led effort will take away more of the uncertainty regarding harvest of red snapper and the other federally and state-managed species as well.

MRD has contracted with South Central Planning, the contractor utilized by the state of Louisiana for several years, to conduct the pilot surveys. They have the knowledge and experience to ensure accurate data collection. Surveys will be conducted by phone and email utilizing angler information provided by MRD. Each week, a current list of licensed saltwater anglers and state-licensed for-hire captains will be used to randomly select a small group of anglers who will be contacted to ask about fishing trips finishing in Alabama in the prior week. Anglers and for-hire captains will be contacted by email first. If no email response is received within a day, telephone calls will be made over the next week. Surveys for private anglers will take very little time with only eight base questions to answer. Results from the private angler surveys will be sent from the contractor to MRD staff. State charter captains will be contacted by MRD staff and asked similar questions.

MRD staff anticipates being able to produce effort estimates weekly, a notable improvement to the minimum of 45 days needed to generate estimates within the federal survey.

By using the list of licensed anglers to contact, the accuracy and precision of the calculated effort estimates will likely increase. As part of the pilot study, catch estimates will be calculated for several species of interest, including red snapper, and compared to NMFS estimates.

MRD will compare pilot survey estimates to federal survey estimates throughout 2024, but it will take until early 2025 to do the final comparisons. The survey could possibly continue in 2025 if preliminary results show significant differences and additional funding can be secured. ■

PHOTO: DEBRA LUCAS



STATE LANDS DIVISION



The **State Lands Division (SLD)** manages undeveloped, state-owned trust lands that are specific as to their identity as well as to the income beneficiary. The land management program includes Sixteenth Section and Indemnity School Lands of approximately 30,000 acres; approximately 7,000 acres of Department of Mental Health trust lands; Muscle Shoals Grant Lands of approximately 8,000 acres; and other state agency lands, including submerged lands (inland and coastal), of approximately 600,000 acres. Resource uses include oil and gas exploration and development, timber harvesting, farming, coal mining, hunting leases, and commercial uses. SLD continues its efforts to identify additional means of revenue generation through management of these trust lands.

The Forever Wild Land Trust program is administered by SLD at the direction of that program's Board of Trustees. Division personnel provide administrative support including coordination of the assessment and appraisal process, land acquisition transactions, budget preparation, and annual reporting to the Governor and Legislature. In addition to these administrative services, SLD manages many of Forever Wild's 287,000 acres, as well as complementary tracts owned by SLD.

SLD conducts sales and leases of excess state-owned lands pursuant to the State Land Sales and Leasing Act. This law establishes a procedure aimed at ensuring the state receives full fair market value for lands that state agencies sell or lease and that the process is open, competitive, and subject to public scrutiny.

SLD maintains the state Land Resource Information Center (LRIC), which is a database of lands owned by the State of Alabama and its departments, agencies, and institutions. The database offers search capabilities, providing members of the public the ability to readily access information about state-owned lands. The LRIC database can be found by following the "state properties" and then "state land" links on the Open. Alabama.gov website. The LRIC currently contains more than 6,600 land records.

Animal and plant species and areas of biological significance that make up the rich natural diversity of our state are identified and inventoried as part of the Alabama Natural Heritage Data-

base maintained by SLD. This effort, which includes more than 6.1 million records, provides important biological information to conservation organizations, developers, governmental agencies, and the public. It also complements SLD's role in evaluating land acquisition nominations submitted to Forever Wild and implementing a multiple-use management strategy designed to maximize public access to Forever Wild tracts.

SLD operates three facilities dedicated to conservation and land stewardship educational programs and a fourth dedicated to sporting dog field trials, habitat restoration, and hunting programs for youth and individuals with physical disabilities. Located in Spanish Fort, the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center serves as a gateway to outdoor recreation, conservation education, and land stewardship in the Mobile-Tensaw River Delta.

The Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), located in Fairhope on Weeks Bay – an estuary of national significance, conducts education and outreach, research, coastal training programs, and stewardship activities related to the estuary and its watershed. The Wehle Land Conservation Center is located in Midway (Bullock County) and consists of the Robert G. Wehle Nature Center and the Elhew Field Station, both funded in part through the Robert G. Wehle Charitable Trust. Located in Alabama's Black Belt region, the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area is south of Greensboro in Hale County.



SLD oversees the administration of Alabama's Coastal Area Management Program (ACAMP), which was approved by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 1979 as part of its national Coastal Zone Management Program. ACAMP's purpose is to promote beneficial management of the lands and waters located in Alabama's coastal area through a comprehensive and cooperative program designed to preserve, enhance, and develop these valuable resources for the benefit of present and future generations. SLD works in cooperation with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to implement ACAMP and receives federal Coastal Zone Management Program grant funding from NOAA to support ACAMP and other federal coastal resource programs. SLD's Coastal Zone Management activities, as well as research activities and educational programs at the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, complement the Division's responsibilities for managing submerged lands, including promoting public trust resource awareness and the understanding of riparian/littoral area development and associated impacts on private property and public use of Alabama's tidal waters.

SLD administers a regulatory program that manages impacts and improvements to public tidal submerged lands in conjunc-

tion with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and their respective jurisdictions on state and federal waters. The SLD regulations are designed to balance the rights of riparian property owners with the public use of those tidal submerged lands for navigation as well as fishing and other recreational uses.

SLD supports the ADCNR Commissioner and Governor Kay Ivey in the administration of grants and programs funded by the Gulf of Mexico Energy Security Act (GOMESA). This act directs the U.S. Department of the Interior to distribute a portion of revenues generated from offshore oil and gas leases in federal waters of the Gulf of Mexico for purposes such as natural resource restoration, coastal protection, implementation of conservation plans, and other efforts to mitigate impacts of Outer Continental Shelf activities. SLD staff conducts an annual solicitation for project proposals, executes grant awards for projects approved by Governor Ivey, and monitors GOMESA project implementation and compliance.

SLD manages its responsibilities through a Land Management/Administrative Section, which includes Land Stewardship/Enforcement, Asset Management, Recreational Programs, and the Natural Heritage Program, as well as its Coastal Section, which

oversees Coastal Zone Management activities and submerged land regulations, Weeks Bay Reserve, and the 5 Rivers Delta Resource Center. At the end of FY 2022-2023, SLD employed 59 employees, including part-time or seasonal employees, in support of its programs.

Examples of various program and facility accomplishments during this past fiscal year follow:

ASSET MANAGEMENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Generated approximately \$51.3 million in revenue for distribution to state agency/entity beneficiaries including, but not limited to, the Alabama Trust Fund (\$46.4 million), Department of Education (\$1.06 million), State of Alabama General Fund (\$609,160), Alabama Historical Commission (\$570,000), and Department of Corrections (\$255,648)
- Assisted state agencies with revenue generation on trust lands through initiation of leases and sale of excess property pursuant to the Land Sales and Leasing Act's appraisal and bid process
- Administered revenue-generating activities on state-owned lands, including timber sales and issuance of hunting leases, shellfish aquaculture easements, riparian easements, river-crossing permits, submerged/upland pipeline rights of ways, dredge permits, farming/hay leases, oil and gas leases, and coal leases
- Continued a statewide leasing process associated with the 2020-2025 Hunting Lease Auction where a total of 145 tracts were offered for bid to generate revenue. This continued process resulted in 130 current leases which are expected to generate more than \$333,000 annually for state agency beneficiaries.

FOREVER WILD LAND TRUST ADMINISTRATION ACTIVITIES

- Administered and fully closed acquisition of 11 tracts across six counties adding a total of 3,184 acres to the program. These acquisitions leveraged approximately \$10,048,300 in federal grant funds. The closed program acquisitions included the following:
- Autauga WMA – County Road 112 Addition (580 acres, Autauga County) (USFWS Pittman-Robertson grant funded an additional 1,659-acre adjacent acquisition)
- Autauga WMA – Hart Addition (20 acres, Autauga County) (USFWS Pittman-Robertson grant funded an additional 60-acre adjacent acquisition)
- Cahaba River– Shelby County Park-Peel Addition (110 acres, Shelby County)

- Coldwater Mountain – McVey Addition (56 acres, Calhoun County)
- Coldwater Mountain – Robertson Addition (43 acres, Calhoun County)
- Freedom Hills WMA – Boddie Addition (149 acres, Colbert County)
- Perdido WMA – Snowden Branch Addition (620 acres, Baldwin County)
- Red Hills – Flat Creek-Phase IV Addition (269 acres, Monroe County) (USFWS Section 6 Recovery Land Acquisition-RLA grant funded an additional 491-acre adjacent acquisition)
- Red Hills – Flat Creek-Phase V (593 acres, Monroe County) (USFWS Section 6 RLA grant funded an additional 1,135-acre adjacent acquisition)
- Riverton Community Hunting Area (CHA) – Hurd Hollow Addition (237 acres, Colbert County)
- Riverton CHA – Barnett Mill Hollow (507 acres, Colbert County)
- Received grant award of \$99,200 in nongovernment grant funding to support longleaf reforestation activities
- Provided administrative support to improve the awareness and understanding of the Forever Wild Land Trust and the outdoor recreation opportunities it provides to Alabama's citizens
- Reviewed 40 nomination inquiries that resulted in 19 willing-seller tract nominations being processed and evaluated for potential acquisition by the Forever Wild Land Trust Board of Trustees
- Began implementing a Board of Trustees initiative to offer counties in which Forever Wild acreage is located an opportunity to enter a Memorandum of Understanding establishing cooperation and providing annual funding

FOREVER WILD RECREATIONAL AND LAND STEWARDSHIP ACTIVITIES

- Attracted more than 3,850 visitors to the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area (FWFTA) through 21 youth hunts, 13 days of physically disabled hunting, and 31 sporting dog field trial/hunt test events involving approximately 2,100 sporting dogs. Also hosted Alabama Audubon field trips, including one in conjunction with the Alabama Black Belt Festival. The Field Trial Area also served as a site for law enforcement training events.

- Furthered ADCNR's Collegiate Mentoring program by hosting students from the University of Montevallo and Tuskegee University at the FWFTA. Students participated in a Waterfowl Workshop and Wing Shooting Clinic, in addition to interacting with staff biologists and enforcement personnel regarding land management techniques.
- Hosted 1,703 visitors at the Wehle Land Conservation Center facilities for outdoor recreational and educational activities
- Expanded on existing public access opportunities by offering 36 open woods days at the Forever Wild Land Trust Sipsey River Recreation Area, and offered 25 open gate days during the hunting season at Old Cahawba Prairie, Splinter Hill Bog, and Lillian Swamp tracts
- Maintained approximately 390 miles of public recreation trails for activities such as horseback riding, hiking, biking, and canoeing at the Shoal Creek Nature Preserve, Walls of Jericho, Wehle Land Conservation Center, Splinter Hill Bog, Old Cahawba Prairie, Jacinto Port, Coldwater Mountain Complex, Dothan Park Trails, Grand Bay Savanna, Cahaba River Park, Perdido River Complex, Freedom Hills Complex, Indian Mountain Complex, Mobile-Tensaw Delta Wildlife Management Area (WMA), Gothard-AWF Yates Lake WMA, Turkey Creek Nature Preserve, Coosa County WMA, Tannehill Complex, Blakeley Addition, and Coon Creek Forever Wild tracts. For individual tract locations, visit alabamaforeverwild.com.
- Completed construction of a trailhead access, parking area, and 2.5 miles of trail at the Indian Mountain Tract in Cherokee County funded in part by a Recreational Trails Program grant of \$70,000 from the Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs (ADECA)
- Coordinated with the City of Springville to review and construct 4 miles of new trail at the Big Canoe Creek Tract. Funding for trail construction was provided by the City of Springville.
- Received 216 reservations for shelters and camping platforms associated with the Bartram and Perdido River canoe trails
- Performed annual informational kiosk updates including maps, guidelines of use, and hunting regulations at various Forever Wild tracts statewide
- Continued a citizen science habitat monitoring project at three locations (Grand Bay Savanna, Wehle Land Conservation Center, Old Cahawba Prairie) that invites visitors to photograph the habitat from a fixed camera bracket and share via social media, creating a long-term photo documentation of the landscape and attracting additional visitors.
- Employed both chemical and mechanical methods for control of exotic plant species as well as various trapping techniques for removal of invasive animal species on various tracts throughout the state.
- Completed timber contracts for thinning 190 acres on Barbour WMA and 200 acres on Coosa WMA-Weogufka State Forest Addition. Continued thinning of 381 acres on Uchee Special Opportunity Area (SOA).



PHOTO: CONNOR J PATON

- Completed harvest of a 375-acre sale of planted loblolly pine on Little River WMA to facilitate the restoration of a shortleaf pine forest. Also completed a final harvest of 30 acres of sand pine on Uchee SOA to assist in longleaf pine restoration.
- Conducted prescribed burns on almost 6,500 acres of public land statewide to maintain and enhance natural plant communities. Several fires were coordinated with Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division.

NATURAL HERITAGE SECTION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Performed biodiversity survey work, conducted habitat assessments, participated in trail planning, and continued collecting detailed GPS and GIS (geographic information systems) data of existing Forever Wild tracts to aid management and research of these tracts
- Maintained GIS server software that provides the public an interactive map of Forever Wild holdings and ADCNR facilities. This software is also being used to improve geographic information transmission within SLD and the Department.
- Maintained the Natural Heritage Section database, which is partially funded by a State Wildlife Grant. The database is accessible via a secure internet website for more than 1,130 approved users and currently contains more than 6.1 million records of plant and animal species occurrences throughout Alabama.
- Continued to increase the number of specimens in the Natural Heritage Section Herbarium collection to 8,750. Most of those have been digitized, photographed, and databased.
- Continued coordination of Section 6 funding from USFWS to support research benefiting at-risk plant species. Administered \$102,550 in federal matching funds, including subawards to Alabama universities.
- Coordinated fulfillment of grant awards for land acquisition and habitat restoration through the National Coastal Wetland Grant Program and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Cumberland Plateau Stewardship Fund

GULF OF MEXICO ENERGY SECURITY ACT (GOMESA) ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided administrative support to the GOMESA program by overseeing the disbursement of funds and providing support to the awarded entities

- Announced 22 new project awards totaling \$55,314,909 including the following:
- West End Renourishment Project (Town of Dauphin Island) - \$1,250,000
- Lewis Landing Public Access (Mobile County Commission) - \$1,500,000
- Chocolatta Bay Boat Ramp Replacement (Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries Division) - \$650,000
- Cedar Point Boat Ramp (Mobile County Commission) - \$4,300,000
- Nature Parks Expansion (City of Foley) - \$5,000,000
- Public Park & Boat Launch at County Road 6 (Baldwin County Commission) - \$4,820,000
- Viewpoint Boat Ramp Improvement at Weeks Bay (Marine Resources Division) - \$1,678,800
- Bayfront Park Amphitheater and Park Improvements (City of Daphne) - \$7,200,000
- Stormwater Management Improvements Phase I (City of Chickasaw) - \$2,474,500
- Hwy 90 Force Main Easement Stabilization (Daphne Utilities) - \$187,500
- Centennial Park Amphitheater (City of Robertsdale) - \$2,000,000
- Magnolia Beach Renourishment (City of Fairhope) - \$620,000
- Fairhope Fly Creek Stream Restoration Project (Mobile Bay National Estuary Program) - \$2,740,000
- Septic to Sewer Project (Mobile County Water, Sewer and Fire Authority) - \$1,327,500
- Brooks Park Public Access Improvements Phase II (City of Chickasaw) - \$485,000
- Dauphin Island Sewer Rehabilitation Project (Dauphin Island Water & Sewer Authority) - \$3,246,455
- Coastal Infrastructure Resiliency Study (Alabama State Port Authority) - \$200,000
- Bartram and Perdido Canoe Trail Expansion (State Lands Division) - \$1,906,000
- Healthy Oceans Initiative Phase II (University of South Alabama) - \$1,229,154
- Hall's Mill Creek Public Access Project (City of Mobile) - \$2,500,000
- Perdido Land Acquisitions (State Lands Division) - \$7,000,000

- Mobile Causeway Improvements (City of Spanish Fort) - \$3,000,000
- Closed out previously awarded grants for the following completed projects:
- Aloe Bay Land Acquisition and Boat Ramp Addition (Town of Dauphin Island) - \$4,065,000
- Gulf State Park Recreational Access Improvements (State Parks) - \$4,000,000
- Little Billy Goat Hole Public Access Improvements (Dauphin Island Park and Beach Board) - \$450,000
- Baldwin County Intracoastal Waterway Boat Ramp Construction (Baldwin County Commission) - \$2,601,500
- Graham Creek Nature Parks Expansion and Enhancements (City of Foley) - \$3,000,000
- Mobile County Public Access Master Plan Implementation (Mobile County Commission) - \$3,491,636
- Cypress Point Land Acquisition (City of Spanish Fort) - \$8,500,000
- Cedar Point Public Access Acquisition (Mobile County Commission) - \$2,160,990

COASTAL ZONE MANAGEMENT

- Administered and provided technical support for 16 new subawards totaling more than \$1,226,593 in National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) grant funding to benefit projects and activities in Mobile and Baldwin counties:
- Promoted sustainable tourism and improved public access in Alabama's coastal area through the Alabama Gulf Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau
- Supported multiple municipal planning efforts, including comprehensive planning, zoning, and mapping updates, stormwater management, subdivision regulation updates, and public access improvements (City of Citronelle, City of Daphne, City of Foley, City of Gulf Shores, Town of Loxley, City of Mobile, City of Saraland, and South Alabama Regional Planning Commission)
- Sponsored People Against a Littered State's (PALS) annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup. Organized, in partnership with PALS, the 36th annual Alabama Coastal Cleanup. During the event, SLD staff provided volunteers with supplies to clean up waterways and shorelines across Alabama. More than 2,300 volunteers participated at 28 locations throughout Mobile and Baldwin counties, removing over 21,300 pounds of trash from the waterways and shorelines.
- Assisted Geological Survey of Alabama in its administra-

tion of the Coastal Geospatial Data Group to increase opportunities for data sharing and to improve management of coastal resources

- Supported aerial mapping of gulf-fronting shorelines through the Geologic Survey of Alabama
- Published and distributed biannual Current Connection Newsletters in partnership with the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
- Supported research conducted at the Dauphin Island Sea Lab to understand interactions of oysters and predatory oyster drills in restored reefs
- Furthered watershed planning efforts undertaken by the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program
- Provided funding for the Alabama Department of Environmental Management's Coastal Program
- Continued integration of the Alabama Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Control Program into the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan
- Secured Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funding to enhance capacity as well as conservation and restoration efforts in the coastal zone
- Completed the State of Alabama Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Control Program submission, which is anticipated to receive final federal approval in 2024
- Participated successfully in the 5-year Coastal Zone Management Act Section 312 Program Evaluation conducted by NOAA
- Received a \$1,103,000 National Coastal Zone Management Habitat Protection and Restoration Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Grant award for fee simple acquisition of an approximately 490-acre acquisition on West Fowl River in Mobile County

SUBMERGED LANDS REGULATORY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Coordinated with federal, state, and local governments as well as individual property owners regarding potential impacts to state-owned submerged lands
- Continued to provide information about the SLD regulations to efficiently manage uses of public submerged lands
- Received, reviewed, and/or approved 197 permit applications for activities impacting nearshore public trust submerged lands such as dredging, implementing living shorelines, and constructing structures over state-owned submerged water bottoms



PHOTO: JENNA CROVO

- Received three Shellfish Aquaculture Easement applications for off-bottom oyster farms as part of Alabama's Shellfish Aquaculture Program, which promotes the cultivation and harvesting of hatchery-spawned oysters for commercial purposes. There are currently 55 acres of permitted off-bottom Shellfish Aquaculture Easements in coastal Alabama.

5 RIVERS DELTA RESOURCE CENTER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosted approximately 34,420 visitors from 42 states and 9 countries and hosted more than 340 events, receptions, meetings, guided boat tours, field trips, and educational classes
- Hosted the Annual Delta Woods and Waters Expo in conjunction with the City of Spanish Fort. The three-day conservation event attracted more than 2,080 participants.
- Conducted or assisted with more than 100 educational programs serving over 3,000 participants of all ages
- Hosted statewide exhibits in the Apalachee Exhibit Hall, including the Outdoor Alabama Photo Contest Exhibit and South Alabama Land Trust Photo Contest Exhibit
- Hosted the Annual Alabama Coastal BirdFest, which attracted 802 participants from 18 states and Canada for three days of guided birding tours, lectures, and workshops
- Attended Earth Day Mobile Bay and educated more than 600 guests during the single-day event
- Assisted Alabama Naturalists and various other conservation groups with education specimens
- Hosted several law enforcement training sessions, including drone training
- Provided 54 days of meeting space for state or federal agencies associated with conservation
- Hosted Daphne Search and Rescue's boat christening ceremony
- Assisted several facilities with education programming, including Weeks Bay NERR, Meaher State Park, and Wildlife and Freshwaters Fisheries District IV
- Hosted two art camps for youth ages 5-12
- Hosted 216 receptions and business meetings for nearly 8,000 participants, and continued to provide a venue for 28 public meetings conducted by local conservation organizations
- Continued to organize and host quarterly Outdoor Market events. These events showcase an average of 30 local vendors per event with an estimated 1,200 total visitors
- Hosted Spanish Fort Education Enrichment Foundation's 5K trail run with approximately 400 runners

- Maintained two public boat launches on Mobile Bay, including removing over 96 barrels of trash
- Hosted multiple Mobile Bay Kayak Fishing Association tournaments attracting more than 35 anglers
- Attended several public events educating approximately 1,800 attendees
- Served as Coastal Cleanup canoe/kayak site for 14 volunteers who removed litter from Sardine Pass, Justin's Bay, Blakeley River, and other surrounding waterways, and removed over 500 pounds of litter from local roadways
- Continued chemical and mechanical efforts to control exotic plant species, including cogongrass and Chinese tallow tree throughout property

WEEKS BAY NATIONAL ESTUARINE RESEARCH RESERVE ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Provided field experiences that introduced 1,346 students (4,055 contact hours) ranging from preschool to college students to local environmental and coastal related topics
- Partnered with Jacksonville State University to conduct two multi-day, field-based Teachers on the Estuaries workshops that engaged 24 local elementary school teachers in increasing their knowledge and appreciation of local environments, as well as acquiring the necessary skills to act as stewards of coastal resources
- Provided 45 educational vessel tours of the Weeks Bay Estuary for 976 participants from civic groups, educational institutions, and regional agencies
- Provided five public education events for National Estuaries Week
- Conducted 10 workshops for 151 community members, providing 1,640 training hours related to coastal resource management along the Gulf Coast
- Hosted 1,027 guest nights in the research dormitory, including researchers, GulfCorps volunteers, workshop participants, visiting educators, and state personnel. This was a 16% increase in occupancy over the previous year.
- Coordinated scientific research with universities and agencies on 15 projects within the Weeks Bay Watershed
- Collaborated on submitting five papers to peer-reviewed scientific journals for publication. Topics included distribution of invasive wetland plants and response to disturbance, effects of increasing phosphate concentration on chlorophyll, wave and nutrient interactions on marsh erosion, long-term wetland change dynamics, and wetland methane porewater concentration across the Southeast.
- Monitored marsh habitat via collection of 135 sediment elevation data points and Real Time Kinematic surveys of newly installed Sediment Elevation Tables as part of Weeks Bay NERR Sentinel Site Project Plan

- Managed a successful prescribed burn on 300 acres of the Damson Tract to clear Hurricane Sally storm debris and promote biodiversity within this pine flatwoods ecosystem
- Worked with GulfCorps teams to monitor management effects on a 360-acre pine flatwood habitat
- Treated exotic invasive species on 560 acres of Reserve lands
- Continued work on capital improvement projects including bog boardwalk, visitor boardwalk/parking lot and resource center
- Received \$147,000 award through the National Estuarine Research Reserve Habitat Protection and Restoration Bipartisan Infrastructure Law Competition for fee simple acquisition of 40-acre tract in Meadows Unit of Weeks Bay NERR
- Facilitated citizen science monitoring through three Reserve led programs: Alabama Water Watch, Gulf Nurdle Patrol (i.e., a small plastic pellet), and Weeks Bay Phenology Trail
- Served as Alabama Coastal Cleanup zone for 35 volunteers who removed 850 pounds of litter from Weeks Bay, Fish River, Magnolia River, and the surrounding land and roadways
- Collected continuous water quality and weather data from five sites in Weeks Bay as part of the Reserve's system-wide monitoring program
- Served the needs of coastal resource managers by providing technical training on the following: Facilitation Basics, Wetland Identification and Delineation, Wetland Plant Identification for Wetland Delineation, Living Shoreline Permitting, Landscaping with Native Plants, and Social Science Basics
- Provided state leadership for three Gulf of Mexico Priority Issue Teams: Education and Engagement, Data and Monitoring, and Habitat Resources
- Completed a successful NOAA federal section 312 programmatic evaluation that highlighted accomplishments of the Reserve over the past 7 years
- Conducted quarterly meetings of Weeks Bay Advisory Committee
- Coordinated with the South Alabama Land Trust in publishing quarterly newsletters
- Hosted 282 youths and adults for the Annual Bullock County Fishing Derby, co-sponsored by ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, the Bullock County Sheriff's Department, and Children and Mentors Outdoors
- Provided 178 students in grades four through seven from schools in Bullock and Macon counties access to conservation and environmental outreach programs
- Hosted students from Tuskegee University as part of ADCNR's Collegiate Mentoring Program
- Conducted prescribed burns on approximately 201 acres of the Wehle Forever Wild Tract to maintain or enhance the natural plant communities for the benefit of associated wildlife species
- Collaborated with ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division, Mississippi State University, and other conservation partners toward establishing gopher frogs on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract through head-starting as part of broader multi-state objectives of increasing populations
- Coordinated scientific research with universities on two separate projects on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Continued trapping efforts to manage feral hog populations for the benefit of habitats and native wildlife
- Continued hosting an iNaturalist Project with more than 2,950 species reported to date
- Continued participation as an official stop on the Wire-grass section of the Alabama Birding Trail. Wehle remained a popular hotspot on eBird with over 180 species of birds documented.
- Treated fishing ponds with herbicide to remove aquatic vegetation near banks to improve public fishing opportunities on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Administered U.S. Geological Survey Breeding Bird Survey in Alabama
- Continued leading an annual bird identification workshop for U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service biologists and conservation partners at Bankhead National Forest through a cooperative cost-share agreement
- Monitored and oversaw management actions for the red-cockaded woodpecker population on the Forever Wild Coosa WMA
- Continued operation of a Monitoring Avian Productivity and Survivorship banding station on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract
- Continued nest box monitoring and management on the Wehle Forever Wild Tract

WEHLE LAND CONSERVATION CENTER AND ELHEW FIELD STATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Hosted 533 visitors during 17 open trail weekends
- Hosted 399 visitors associated with state and county agency meetings and events, NGO meetings, technical workshops, and organized field trips
- Hosted 143 youths and adults for the Annual Bullock County Youth Water Festival



STATE LANDS 2022-2023 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

Section Name	* Budget	† Expenditures
Land Management & Stewardship Activities	\$6,241,822	\$4,739,958
Administrative Transfer to Department	\$887,500	\$726,558
Coastal Zone Management Program	\$3,341,184	\$1,977,255
Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve	\$2,018,027	\$1,010,850
Total per State Lands Fund	\$12,488,533	\$8,454,621
Forever Wild Land Trust Fund	\$15,355,054	\$10,626,233
Forever Wild Stewardship Fund	\$2,128,473	\$1,604,674

*AMOUNTS INCLUDE REQUESTED BUDGET SPENDING AUTHORITY ASSOCIATED WITH EFFORTS TO APPLY FOR GRANT AWARDS AND OTHER LEVERAGE FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES.

† INCLUDES EXPENDITURE OF PRIOR YEAR FUNDS THAT WERE AUTHORIZED FOR MULTI-YEAR CAPITAL OUTLAY.



VOLUNTEERS HELP KEEP ALABAMA BEAUTIFUL DURING ANNUAL COASTAL CLEANUP

Since 1989, the third Saturday in September is a day many coastal Alabamians and visitors look forward to each year – the Alabama Coastal Cleanup. Alabama’s Coastal Cleanup is part of the International Coastal Cleanup, an effort to remove marine debris from coastal areas around the world. The Alabama event, the largest single-day volunteer event in the state, is coordinated by ADCNR’s State Lands Division and Alabama People Against a Littered State (PALS).

PHOTO: STATE LANDS





PHOTO: STATE LANDS

During the event, volunteers from all throughout the state collect trash and marine debris at more than 20 clean up zones throughout Mobile and Baldwin counties. Each cleanup site has one or more zone captains, depending on the expected volunteer participation at the site. The zone captains, often volunteers themselves, ensure the success of this event year after year. Over the past 36 years, the event has welcomed more than 110,000 volunteer participants who have collectively removed over 1.7 million pounds of trash and marine debris from beaches, roadways, bayous, backwater and other areas along Alabama's Gulf Coast.

State Lands staff work long hours throughout the year coordinating logistics and planning for the cleanup, but it is volunteers who are the backbone and driving force of the event. Keeping Alabama's coastal communities clean and beautiful for all Alabamians and the many tourists who visit from other states and around the world is critical to creating a positive economic impact and promoting awareness of the state's unique natural resources. The cumulative and ongoing impact of this event serves as an important reminder of how anyone can serve as a steward of Alabama's coastal waters and shorelines. Event participants also enjoy interacting with other community members and experiencing the personal enrichment provided through volunteering their time toward the important cause of keeping Alabama's coastal areas clean and healthy.

After extensive communication and organization prior to the event, zone captains arrive at their sites early on the day of the cleanup to set up check in tables and begin welcoming volunteers. Zone captains provide the volunteers with directions to their cleanup sites and information on how to record data about what types of debris they collect. The zone captains also work with other volunteers to sort and dispose of the debris that is collected and returned by cleanup participants. In recent years, some of the cleanup sites have been very busy. For example, nearly 1,000 volunteers have participated in the cleanup at the

Fairhope zone in Baldwin County and Dauphin Island zone in Mobile County combined.

Participants are asked to record the different types of marine debris collected. Plastic bags, beverage cans, plastic bottles, cups, food containers, and fishing line are some of the most common items collected each year. This data provides a better understanding of the activities that create marine debris and aids in the creation of a framework to prevent it. Marine debris is an ongoing issue worldwide. Not only unsightly, it is also dangerous to the health of surrounding ecosystems and the creatures inhabiting them.

Annual media coverage of the event helps to promote the importance of the community's efforts to keep Alabama's coastal areas beautiful. Leading up to the event, local television reporters interview cleanup coordinators and provide information on how the public can volunteer. On the day of the cleanup, those media outlets often cover the event as well. Additional public outreach efforts have increased awareness of the Alabama Coastal Cleanup and have allowed for its continued expansion as an event that highlights the importance of environmental stewardship.

As the population increases along Alabama's coast, different recreational areas experience an increase in guests as well. In recent years, new cleanup sites have been added to the event to address the need for additional cleanup efforts. For example, the Wind and Water Learning Center located on Wolf Bay in Gulf Shores was recently added as a cleanup site. The Center provides direct access to Wolf Bay for participants to assist in marine debris removal by watercraft. This new site provides access to previously inaccessible areas of shoreline. The added access to Wolf Bay is a major benefit to the local community and all coastal cleanup volunteers. Event organizers continue to consider additional cleanup sites, as needed.

Plans are currently being made for the 2024 Alabama Coastal Cleanup. Learn more at www.alabamacoastalcleanup.com. ■



ALABAMA STATE PARKS

The **State Parks Division** administers 21 state parks encompassing 48,850 acres of stunning landscapes in Alabama. Whether guests seek a peaceful day of hiking or a luxurious resort experience complete with convention lodging, restaurants, and golf courses, our parks have something for everyone. From Gulf Coast beaches to the Appalachian Mountains, our parks offer diverse activities and amenities for individuals, groups, and families.

The mission of the State Parks Division is to acquire and preserve natural areas; develop, furnish, operate, and maintain recreational facilities; and extend the public's knowledge of the state's natural environment.

Goals of the Division include:

- Provide exceptional facilities and services tailored to creating memorable experiences for guests
- Manage the parks efficiently, ensuring financial sustainability
- Create opportunities for personal growth through outdoor experiences
- Encourage the use of Alabama State Parks to showcase the state's natural beauty
- Preserve parks for future generations to stay, play, and enjoy
- Promote goodwill and uphold Alabama's reputation through the Division's dedicated team members

In 2023, the Division completed several major renovation projects in keeping with these goals. Staff served with excellence through

every step of the improvement projects and provided access to outdoor recreation for park visitors throughout the state.

FY 2022-2023 highlights include:

- Welcomed 5,440,500 guests throughout the park system
- Introduced a new, user-friendly reservation system (www.reserve.alapark.com)
- Implemented multiple design and renovation projects throughout the State Parks System
- Returned Roland Cooper State Park to Alabama State Parks management
- Upgraded lodges, cabins, cottages, and chalets with new bedding
- Hosted 650 First Day Hike participants, who hiked 1,613 miles in January 2023
- Introduced an upscale camping trend, glamping, in five parks.

FACILITIES AND PERSONNEL

Of the 21 State Parks, 18 are maintained by State Parks staff. Staffing is determined by each location's size, development, and operation. The total number of employees for all parks varies from approximately 700 during peak season to approximately 500 during off-season. Three parks are staffed and operated through management agreements with local governments or concessionaires. The State Parks Division Central Office in Montgomery includes eight sections: Operations, Marketing and Promotions, Natural Resources, Education and Interpretation, Recreational Trails, Planning and Visitor Services, Law Enforcement, and Management Analysis.

OPERATIONS SECTION

The Operations Section is divided into North and South regions. The North Region includes the Northeast, Northwest, and Central Districts, and the South Region includes the Southeast and Southwest districts. Both are managed by Operations Supervisors who oversee everything from daily park operations to maintenance, law enforcement, and more. This team also handles insurance and property inventory, along with our hardworking team of over 600 employees.

Operational highlights for FY 2022-2023 include the following approximately 600 hourly and merit employees.

NORTH REGION:

Joe Wheeler

- Welcomed 173,391 guest visits during FY 2020-2021
- Welcomed 264,817 guest visits
- Hosted 13 interpretive programs and hikes for 405 guests
- Refurbished iconic large wooden sign on Highway 72
- Installed new commercial laundry equipment at Lodge
- Renovated the Lodge Convention Center
- Completed the new beach pavilion.
- Rebuilt shelter damaged by a tornado in 2019
- Renovated six hotel rooms
- Added new fiber optic Wi-Fi to cabins and cottages
- Implemented new online tee-time reservations for golf course
- Sold 17,550 rounds of golf
- Completed extensive repairs and updates to electrical system at marina

PHOTO: JOHN DENNEY III



Monte Sano

- Welcomed 140,326 guest visits
- Hosted multiple races and events with more than 4,000 participants
- Installed a new automatic gate at park entrance that secures the park overnight
- Updated signage leading to the park

Cathedral Caverns

- Welcomed 92,454 guest visits
- Constructed a meeting room inside the cave
- Provided cave tours to more than 135 school groups ranging from 25 to 300 students, 27 summer camp groups, 22 scout groups, 6 senior groups, and 29 other groups
- Hosted annual Running Lane events: Race to the Cave Half Marathon and 10K Runs, Conquer the Cave 5K, Cathedral Caverns 5K and 10K Trail Run. Each race averaged 700 runners per event.
- Hosted annual Easter egg hunt with 175 participants
- Installed a new storage facility for park merchandise
- Installed new picnic tables throughout park and grills at multiple campsites
- Initiated the development of a group campsite and developed two primitive campsites
- Renovated existing gem mining facility

Rickwood Caverns

- Welcomed 57,858 guest visits
- Hosted more than 22,000 guests for holiday event Wonderland Under Warrior
- Hosted more than 8,000 guests at the swimming pool
- Hosted 3,356 students through field trips to the cave
- Hosted 57 participants during a New Year's Day hike
- Held annual Cars at the Cave event with more than 70 cars participating
- Hosted four cave weddings and two covered bridge weddings
- Added a half mile to Karst Trail for hiking
- Installed new group sized grill at large pavilion
- Added paved Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) parking spot to the small pavilion
- Improved ADA parking spots for large pavilion and pool

- Renovated pool pump house
- Installed new metal roofs on both pavilions
- Hosted an Alabama Master Naturalist class

Lake Lurleen

- Welcomed 70,127 guest visits
- Hosted the annual Mount Olive Fire Department car show with more than 1,200 visitors
- Hosted a kids triathlon with more than 1,500 visitors
- Hosted annual Santa in the Park with 2,000 visitors
- Hosted Camp Fear Halloween event

Oak Mountain

- Welcomed 468,461 guest visits
- Hosted 168 interpretive programs for 4,506 guests
- Sold 32,752 rounds of golf
- Hosted 86,809 cabin and campground guests
- Added 277 acres to the park through Forever Wild Land Trust (FWLT) purchase
- Began renovation of the campground
- Began construction of parking lot, restroom, and pavilion at Belcher Tract addition
- Partnered with Central Alabama Honey and Apiary to install honeybee hives on park property
- Partnered with Shelby County to construct Lunker Lake Trail
- Added new rear entrance gate and cul-de-sac, so after-hours guests can turn around safely
- Repaired and painted siding on each of the 10 cabins
- Replaced roof on Tranquility Lodge
- Hosted 205 events, including: Harvest Festival (6,837 guests), Spring Market (4,487 guests), Mammoth March (3,300 guests), Fire on the Water (2,289 guests), and Mayhem on the Mountain (4,255 guests)
- Awarded a grant for a mobile classroom from Legacy Partners in Environmental Education
- Received and installed two memorial benches through the Alabama State Parks Foundation

Wind Creek

- Welcomed 299,756 guest visits

- Hosted 47 interpretive programs for 394 park guests
- Hosted Vulcan Orienteering Club's November and May meetings
- Hosted Southern Trails equine competition endurance race
- Partnered with Alabama Forestry Commission to conduct prescribed burns on large acreages
- Continued partnership with Lake Martin Resource Association and Renew Our Rivers
- Hosted more than 40 bass tournaments
- Hosted Water Festival with more than 400 Tallapoosa County 4th graders in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension System
- Hosted a learn to burn class and provided acreage for demonstration and prescribed burning in partnership with Alabama Cooperative Extension System
- Made significant renovations to drinking and wastewater system

Cheaha

- Welcomed 259,224 guest visits
- Hosted 333 Interpretive programs for 4,038 guests
- Awarded a grant to facilitate archery classes from Legacy Partners in Environmental Education
- Received local and national recognition for honoring WWII veterans in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) museum. Received an artifact from a fighter aircraft as a donation to the museum
- Hosted 11,636 guests at the CCC museum
- Hosted 1,730 guests at the Walt Farr Native American Relic Museum
- Hosted a total of 31,581 guests at 190 events including: 41 weddings, 18 professional conferences, 78 pavilion groups, three car enthusiast clubs, and two memorial rides
- Hosted six national and international road races with 1930 guests
- Partnered with tourism representatives to highlight outdoor cultural and historical resources, including a Muscogee Nation Delegation from Oklahoma and travel writers from the United Kingdom
- Made renovations to Bald Rock Group Lodge
- Installed new ADA picnic tables, pedestal grills, and pool furniture
- Installed two new chalet roofs and five new cabin HVAC systems
- Received and installed two memorial benches through the Alabama State Parks Foundation
- Renovated public gasoline tanks
- Renovated three trails
- Introduced an eighth glamping site in partnership with Timberline Glamping

Lake Guntersville

- Welcomed 327,644 guest visits
- Provided 95 educational programs for 4,197 park guests
- Took over ownership and management of 10 concessions operated camping cabins
- Established new glamping concession operation within campground
- Landscaping project completed to improve lake view behind lodge rooms and chalets
- Completed Wi-Fi upgrades with coverage to all campground sites
- Upgraded bedding for all overnight accommodations
- Hosted three Eagle Awareness weekends with 750 guests and 150 lodging packages sold
- Hosted Eagle Ridge Trail Race with 202 participants
- Hosted 126 conferences and events, including Marshall County Sports Hall of Fame, Mountain Top Round Up, Alabama Mountain Lakes Association Quarterly Meeting, and FWLT Board Meeting
- Hosted 97 Family Reunions at the Lodge, 40 weddings and receptions, 22 church retreats, and 22 live music performances in Pinecrest Dining Room
- Hosted Marshall Medical Center Foundation fundraiser with more than 450 participants
- Hosted New Year's Eve Party with 86 overnight packages sold and 200 in attendance
- Hosted an Elvis-themed clambake over Mother's Day weekend with hundreds in attendance
- Served 1,400 during Mother's Day buffet and Thanksgiving buffet in Pinecrest Dining Room
- Hosted six major fishing tournaments with 350 in attendance (many smaller tournaments hosted as well)
- Hosted the Rocket City Pandas minor league baseball team executive staff outing
- Renovated swimming pool
- Replaced carpet with luxury vinyl flooring in two lodge rooms for additional pet friendly units

- New dance floor rental option for banquet guests
- New chafing dishes and glasses for banquet functions
- Renovated signs for chalets and cabins
- New food and beverage equipment for buffet in Pinecrest Dining Room
- Completed removal of wallpaper and painted 36 lodge rooms
- Acquired two new pontoon boats for rental options to guests

Buck's Pocket

- Welcomed 9,957 guest visits
- Hosted AmeriCorps team (provided them with weekly luncheons, guest speakers, and mentoring sessions)
- The AmeriCorps team volunteered 2,000 hours for trail renovations
- Provided training in chainsaw safety certification for employees and the AmeriCorps team

DeSoto

- Welcomed 329,890 guest visits
- Provided 145 educational programs for 7,619 park guests
- Hosted several annual events, including Wildflower Saturday, Spookapalooza, Creative Spirit Art Market, and Fourth of July events
- Hosted Lost Falls Trail Run with more than 100 participants
- Installed an additional 20 bear-proof trash cans (60 now in place)
- Received and installed a memorial bench through the Alabama State Parks Foundation
- Replaced porch decking on five chalets
- Purchased and installed all new coin-operated laundry equipment for both laundry facilities in the improved campground
- Worked with Alta Planning to complete a master plan for a property that was recently purchased near DeSoto Falls

SOUTH REGION:

Chewacla

- Welcomed 106,509 guest visits
- Hosted races for Go Nuts with 80 participants and Auburn Flyers Mountain Bike Group with 150 participants

- Hosted the Chewacla Classic Camper Stay Event with 42 participants
- Hosted Merit Badge University for local Boy Scout troop with 85 participants
- Hosted USA Cycling Mountain Bike Race with 250 participants
- Updated internet service to fiber
- Created and filled Park Naturalist position
- Provided more than 30 programs for more than 1,000 participants

Frank Jackson

- Welcomed 18,105 guest visits
- Hosted Scarecrows in the Park with 1,228 visitors
- Hosted Fourth of July fireworks event for City of Opp
- Hosted Opp High School cross country competitions bringing 300 visitors and competitors to the park
- Added new coin-operated washers and dryers
- Updated internet service to fiber

Meaher

- Welcomed 57,338 guest visits
- Hired new Park Administrator I and Park Naturalist
- Provided 202 educational programs for 7,770 park guests
- Replaced decking and handrails on Mobile-Tensaw Boardwalk
- Installed ADA compliant drinking fountains/bottle fillers and bike repair station
- Hosted annual First Day Hikes, multiple nature walks, children's nature programs, and kids' fishing days with more than 200 participants
- Hosted the Spanish Fort Fire Department 5K Run and Bras Across the Causeway 5K Run
- Hosted the South Alabama Land Trust Coastal Cleanup with 100 participants
- Received the Governor's Award for Coastal Clean Up from Alabama People Against a Littered State

Roland Cooper

- Transitioned operations back to State Parks after seven years of private operator management

- Hired new Park Administrator I
- Established partnerships with the City of Camden and Wilcox Area Chamber of Commerce
- Participated in local events including Christmas in Camden
- Provided data for the Governor's Black Belt Heritage and Ecotourism Strategic Development Plan
- Renovated wastewater management facilities

Blue Springs

- Welcomed 41,223 guest visits
- Hosted Polar Plunge with 44 participants and Easter Egg Hunt with 58 participants
- Installed new gravel within campsite area and new tables and grills
- Added coin-operated washers and dryers
- Updated internet service to fiber
- Added a seasonal store to sell chips, drinks, and candy

Lakepoint

- Welcomed 172,924 guest visits
- Renovated 10 cabins, including new furniture
- Repainted and replaced roofs on 10 cottages and marina store
- Hosted multiple local, high school, and regional fishing tournaments, including 40 fishing tournaments with a total of more than 5,000 participants
- Hosted several church and school events, business conferences, and 17 weddings
- Hosted various motorcycle club events
- Hosted events for the 1103rd National Guard, Mercyhurst Rowing Team, and Hunt Retriever Club
- Served Thanksgiving and Christmas lunch to more than 1,000 visitors
- Updated internet service to fiber in lodge, cabins, and cottages
- Hosted 40 family reunions
- Hosted Fourth of July celebration
- Hosted Fins, Feathers, and Flowers event with 50 participants
- Upgraded bedding and linens for all lodging
- Upgraded kitchen with new equipment

- Hosted 15 Christmas parties
- Added 12 Off Road Vehicle Trail go-carts

Gulf

- Welcomed 3,600,023 guest visits
- Counted 1,067,652 trail system visits
- Provided 660 educational programs for 19,590 park guests
- Substantially renovated the Lakeside Cabins at Lake Shelby
- Constructed new public restrooms and parking area at Romar Beach
- Opened the Gulf State Park Visitor Center at Lake Shelby
- Introduced new Gulf State Park apparel and merchandise
- Received and installed 14 memorial benches through Alabama State Parks Foundation
- Repaved park headquarters parking lot
- Hosted the 2023 Southeastern State Parks Programs Seminar
- Hosted annual Ballyhoo Festival at Lake Shelby with 118 artists/vendors and 15,000 attendees
- Hosted annual Shark Week and Turtle Fest pier programs with 4,500 attendees
- Hosted the annual Grinchmas children's program with 2000 attendees
- Hosted the annual Dive for Debris at Gulf State Park Pier with 50 participants
- Hosted the annual Breakfast with the Grinch event with 300 attendees
- Hosted Big Beach Marathon, We Run This Beach Marathon, Good Life Ride, MS Ride, and Coastal Half-Marathon with 6,000 participants
- Received the Best Holiday Display Award from the City of Gulf Shores Beautification Board
- Voted Best Recreational Trail for the Hugh S. Branyon Back-country Trail through a USA Today Readers' Choice poll

MARKETING AND PROMOTIONS SECTION

The Alabama State Parks Promotions Section coordinates the advertising, marketing, and promotional efforts of the Alabama State Parks System. The section employed two people in the Montgomery office in FY 2022-2023, including one Public Relations and Communications Coordinator and one Administrative Support Assistant II.

Administrative functions include coordinating radio and television public service announcements; preparing and distributing promotional literature; coordinating print and photographic material for magazines, campground directories, and newspaper articles; coordinating with the Alabama Department of Tourism, chambers of commerce, convention and visitors bureaus, Alabama Department of Transportation (ALDOT) rest areas, tourist associations, and special event promoters; evaluating advertising opportunities; purchasing advertising space; producing advertisements and related material; assisting with promotional efforts at individual state parks; attending special events and various promotional exhibit expos; maintaining photos for marketing needs; presenting programs for various organizations; operating the toll-free nationwide phone line (1-800-Alapark); managing social media marketing, websites, and promotional park materials; ensuring mobile-first digital marketing; developing park promotional videos; and continuing the pursuit of affordable and effective marketing opportunities.

Accomplishments

- Placed advertisements in statewide magazines and other publications, including the Alabama Vacation Guide, Alabama the Beautiful Magazine, Business Alabama, Golf Alabama Guide, Gulf Coast Vacation Guide, and Alabama Press Association Directory
- Maintained the Alabama State Parks website (alapark.com), reporting 7,960,647 million page views as the primary source of Alabama State Parks promotions and events
- Continued using social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube) to enhance the image of the parks and promote events and activities
- Distributed rack card brochures for all 21 state parks to various outlets, including Alabama welcome centers, convention and visitor bureaus, Alabama Mountain Lakes Tourism Association, and other tourism-related organizations
- Continued publication of the Alabama State Parks overview brochure with distribution reach spanning the state through tourism partners to inform the public of park-specific amenities and features
- Attended trade shows, conferences, and other events as an exhibitor to distribute marketing materials and Alabama State Park branded giveaway items in promotion of the Alabama State Parks brand
- Distributed the Alabama State Parks monthly e-newsletter to more than 330,000 subscribers
- Continued marketing efforts for the Alabama State Parks license plate, with \$379,965 in sales revenue for park improvements
- Promoted membership in the Dirt Pass Trail Crew Program, encouraging volunteerism within the parks and garnering

donations of \$2,413.50 to aid in the maintenance of State Parks trails

- Continued promoting the Parks for Patriots program offering veterans and active-duty military free admission to Alabama's State Parks with \$2,173.46 in contributions for the year
- Continued promoting park concessionaire partnerships, including cabin rentals, zipline activities, kayak and boat rentals, equestrian facilities, and water cable skiing
- Continued promoting the Partners Pay the Way campaign and creating park awareness with community groups, civic partners, and elected officials for donations and funding
- Hired a Marketing and Promotions Manager in November 2023 with plans to hire a Public Relations and Communications Coordinator
- Began planning for State Park Ambassador Program to encourage visitors to share photos and videos for digital and print marketing efforts statewide
- Worked to ensure park usage increasingly reflects the communities in which State Parks are located in, while proactively connecting with underserved communities
- Continued conference room and meeting facility promotions, targeting regional corporate functions, training events, and large group meetings
- Continued work to improve technical and digital assets to streamline the work of park naturalists and customer service efforts to more effectively market programs, reservations, and park events

NATURAL RESOURCES SECTION

The Natural Resources Section was created in 1982 to help the parks enhance the quality of aesthetic, biological, historic, and recreational aspects of their land and water resources and to increase the public's understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of those resources. This section currently consists of the Natural Resource Supervisor and a Natural Resource Planner. These personnel use the latest science and technology to assist the parks with diverse natural resource and recreation objectives each year. This section oversees and coordinates grants dedicated to enhancing natural resources. It also manages the review and coordination of easements across state property, collaborating with applicants, park staff, engineering, and legal staff to ensure effective administration.

Accomplishments

Contributions to the quality of natural resource health and vitality include:

- Continued habitat restoration efforts at Gulf State Park through prescribed fire, including approximately 170 acres

burned in the lakeside cabin unit around Eagle Loop. These fires reduce fuel to reduce the wildfire risk, enhance wildlife habitat by refreshing food and cover sources, and control of brush thickets keeping the forest canopy open for better visibility and air flow for visitors. This prescribed fire was conducted through a partnership with the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC). Additionally, a prescribed burn was planned for more than 700 acres in the campground and northeast swamp unit of the park. This burn will be a conducted through a collaboration with the AFC. Additionally, staff partnered with local community stakeholders, local government officials, and local emergency personnel to ensure effectiveness and safety of the burn operations.

- Continued the restoration of existing longleaf/loblolly pine ecosystem at Lakepoint State Park through the use of prescribed fire. The lack of prescribed fire in recent years has allowed for the growth of thick understory vegetation, causing a lack of native grasses and the suppression of natural pine seedling regeneration. FY 2022-2023 was the third burn rotation of the 40-acre campground unit. The use of prescribed fire will improve wildlife habitat as well as improve the visitor experience. The Section was also awarded a Legacy in Environmental Education grant for the design and installation of 15 interpretive panels and two large trail-head kiosks for the new Lakepoint Discovery Trail within the campground.
- Continued habitat restoration of longleaf pine ecosystem at Wind Creek State Park. As part of the management plan, 500 acres were burned. The prescribed fires were conducted in two sessions. One session was a 200-acre burn in partnership with Alabama Extension Service's Learn to Burn Program. Wind Creek hosted both private and public landowners at the live fire event. Learn to Burn workshops provide those interested in learning how to use prescribed fire with hands-on opportunities to gain experience and knowledge about using prescribed fire as a land management tool. The second session was a 300-acre burn conducted through a partnership with AFC.
- Continued executing the Lake Lunker management plan at Oak Mountain State Park. With the assistance of ADCNR's Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division, a fish population survey was conducted. As a result of soil sampling, staff began fertilization activities of the lake. Recreational fishing is one of the most popular recreational activities in the U.S. The management plan will help staff to identify long-term strategies, goals, and objectives, resulting in a premier fishing location within the park.
- Continued to collaborate with the Chewacla Invasive Plant Working Group (CIPWG) on projects at Chewacla State Park. CIPWG is a group of volunteers focused on the improvement and protection of the park's ecological health through the reduction of non-native invasive plants. The Section successfully fulfilled the objectives of the Hearts of Stihl grant awarded in late 2022, which included procuring equipment for volunteer workdays and acquiring a trailer. The Native

Habitat Restoration Crew trailer serves as a mobile hub for community-led conservation efforts. This innovative program empowers volunteers to take part in habitat restoration efforts at various park locations, promoting hands-on engagement and stewardship in preserving native habitats.

- Facilitated an 80-acre timber sale in the north portion of Frank Jackson State Park. The park is located within the historic range of longleaf pine that once encompassed more than 90 million acres across the Southeast. The longleaf pine forests represent some of the world's most biologically diverse ecosystems and are home to nearly 600 plant and animal species including 29 threatened and endangered species. The timber sale is the precursor of a larger longleaf pine restoration project within the park.
- Continued to support park staff with a robust Integrated Pest Management Plan to reduce and control the invasive Argentine Ant population in parks located in the southern sections of the state. An evaluation of the Argentine Ant population determined that the best course of control was to add personnel. Personnel were added during FY 2022-2023 to manage the growing Argentine Ant population and other invasive species. The Argentine Ant population is at a level that negatively interferes with guests' enjoyment of the parks. The Integrated Pest Management Plan has been very successful at Meaher State Park and was expanded to include all the southern parks.
- Continued a partnership with WFF's Wildlife Section in support for the Special Opportunity Area (SOA) hunting program at Oak Mountain and Frank Jackson state parks. The SOA program allows more public access to hunting on public land and will help with the management of the deer herd in an urban park setting.
- Assisted with the continued use of herbicides for invasive and undesirable vegetation control within parks. This management tool was used at several park sites including Gulf, Wind Creek, Frank Jackson, DeSoto, Cheaha, Chewacla, and Oak Mountain.
- Applied for and received grant funding through the Alabama Association of Resource Conservation and Development Councils to design, create, and develop an educational native wildflower pollinator garden and/or pollinator garden story trail in 12 Alabama State Parks. Grant objectives specifically target the importance of protecting pollinators in Alabama State Parks.
- Began using ArcGIS tools for data collection. These tools enable mapping of longleaf pine tracts, prescribed fire objectives, and cogon grass and other invasive species.
- Assisted with land encroachment and boundary line disputes/discrepancies with private individuals and others. Section personnel also continued to work with local and state officials on specific projects regarding Alabama State Parks land boundary management and management of projects that could have impacts on the long-term sustainability of

Parks natural resources. Accordingly, the section continues to develop the Alabama State Parks deed files to maintain verified boundaries.

- Continued to work with colleges and universities to issue formal permits to individuals wishing to conduct research or collect scientific data within an Alabama State Park
- Continued to manage the construction and design phase of the Fort Morgan Parkway Trail Extension Grant – a project resulting from the RESTORE Act (Resources and Ecosystems Sustainability, Tourist Opportunities and Revived Economies of the Gulf Coast States Act).
- Helped host the Annual Fins, Feathers, and Flowers event at Lakepoint State Park.
- Attended the National Archery in the Schools State Championship in April 2023.
- Participated in the Prescribed Fire Council Annual Meeting, an event focused on wildland and urban interface fire control. Personnel from across the state attended the event to maintain their burn manager status. Attendees were informed about the latest prescribed fire techniques and regulations, ensuring proficient management of prescribed burns across diverse park landscapes.
- Participated in the Annual Alabama Invasive Plant Council Meeting, an event offering valuable networking opportunities with state and local natural resource managers. The annual gathering also provides access to cutting-edge research on invasive plant species, enabling our team to stay informed and proactive in addressing this critical conservation issue.
- Participated in the National Association of State Park Directors conference, an event fostering networking opportunities among state, federal, and Canadian park leaders. This participation allowed our team to exchange insights, share best practices, and build valuable connections within the broader park management community.
- Participated in the Association of Southeastern State Parks Directors conference, a significant event that offered networking opportunities focused on the Southeastern state parks community. This engagement facilitated collaboration, knowledge exchange, and the establishment of valuable connections with peers across the region.
- Continued to participate in the FWLT land acquisition program.
- Facilitated Parks field staff attending Prescribed Fire Certification Classes and becoming Burn Managers. During FY 2022-2023, four new burn managers were certified.

Future Efforts

The Natural Resource Section will remain focused on the sustainable management and restoration of ecosystems within Alabama State Parks. Efforts will include the use of prescribed fire programs to enhance ecosystem health and reduce the risk of wildfires. In addition to the restoration and enhancement of wildlife habitats, invasive species management will continue..

EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION

The Education and Interpretation Section plays a crucial role in fostering public understanding and appreciation of the state's natural environments through a range of educational initiatives. An Education Coordinator oversees a statewide team consisting of one district naturalist, eight park naturalists, three full-time interpretive assistants, eight seasonal interpreters, and a diverse group of park volunteers. The Section is engaged in providing place-based educational experiences, interpreting natural resources, introducing outdoor recreation, supporting wellness in nature programs, creating memorable experiences for park guests, assisting with safety communications, and managing park-specific interactions with the media.

Accomplishments

- Hired a full-time Education Coordinator
- Conducted 2,000 educational programs for 55,000 guests and visitors – a 77% increase in programs and a 119% increase in program participation compared to the previous fiscal year.
- Secured grant funding for summer college intern positions and educational program supplies.
- Participated in a grant-funded Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont Naturalist Training weekend in Tennessee.
- Represented Alabama State Parks at the National Association of State Parks Directors in Nevada, the Association of Southeastern State Parks Directors in Louisiana, and the Southeastern State Parks Programs Symposium in Kentucky.
- Updated the 1988 Park Naturalist Interpretive Training Manual.
- Partnered with the Southeastern Environmental Education Association to promote Alabama's environmental education opportunities across 16 states and partnered with the Environmental Education Association of Alabama to provide statewide support for K-12 programming.
- Collaborated with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES) to develop the Alabama Master Naturalist Program.

Future Efforts

The Section plans to hire four additional district naturalists and three additional park naturalists. Plans also include expanding partnerships with colleges and universities, working to expand the State Parks volunteer base, and establishing a consistent internship structure. Work to secure additional grants and corporate funding through collaborative efforts with Alabama State Parks Foundation is ongoing. The Section will also work to diversify educational programming through K-12 field trips, community outreach, and teacher workshops.

RECREATIONAL TRAILS

The Recreational Trails Section assists with the upkeep and management of more than 450 miles of trails within the State Parks System. The section also oversees the ongoing planning, development, and construction of future trails and trail amenities. Staff includes a Trails Coordinator and an Equipment Operator.

Accomplishments

- Worked to develop relationships with various state, national, and international trail organizations, and associations.
- Began planning a new beginner mountain biking system near the upper campground at Cheaha State Park.
- Submitted plans for a new trail connecting Oak Mountain State Park and its recent Belcher Tract addition.
- Constructed a new half-mile section of the Cutchenmine Trail at Lake Guntersville State Park. Additional trail improvements at the park are planned.
- Began work at Buck's Pocket State Park to create vertical climbing trails in partnership with the Southeastern Climbers Coalition (SCC). This new recreation opportunity is expected to introduce a new user group to the Alabama State Parks trails system.
- Transported trail equipment to a Public Lands Day event at Cheaha State Park to promote awareness of the new State Parks Trail Crew.
- Assisted parks with ongoing trail maintenance.
- Developed and implemented a plan to count trail users and user types on the Hugh S. Branyon Backcountry Trail System at Gulf State Park. The plan includes in-person counts, automated counts, and the possibility of geofencing in collaboration with Jacksonville State University's Department of Economic Development.
- Attended a meeting at Monte Sano State Park to discuss the Huntsville Area Mountain Bike Riders Master Trail Plan.
- Continued discussions with the Aimee Copeland Foundation about all-terrain wheelchairs at Alabama State Parks.
- Completed classes and received certifications from McDowell Technical Community College in the following: U.S. Forest Service Chainsaw Safety and Maintenance, Trail Safety and Personal Protective Equipment Training, Basic Sustainable Trail Assessment and Maintenance, and Trail Types and Experiences.
- Completed Mike Riter's Trail Master Trails Training Course hosted by Tennessee State Parks.
- Attended the Alabama Baptist Disaster Relief and Helton Forestry Enterprises Chainsaw Safety trainings.
- Met with the Student Conservation Association to discuss the possibility of a trail maintenance partnership with Alabama State Parks.
- Hosted an AmeriCorps crew at Cheaha State Park for four weeks as part of the Base to Summit initiative. During their stay, the team camped and worked on-site resurfacing and removing tornado debris from the Blue Lake Trail. Despite heavy rain, intense sun, and a manhunt, they were able to remove considerable amounts of debris, implement corrective erosion-control methods, and more to improve the trail.
- Attended the annual convention of the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conservation Council where staff met with officials regarding Alabama State Parks hosting a Best Trails Workshop. The workshop was held at Buck's Pocket State Park in December 2022.
- Established a partnership with the Boy Scouts of America to assist with in-person trail surveys at Gulf State Park. The survey provided useful information, including 16,000 photos of trail visitors.

PLANNING AND VISITOR SERVICES

Planning and Visitor Services is responsible for management of the Alabama State Parks reservation system. In FY 2022-2023, staff successfully released a Request for Proposal (RFP) for a new reservation system contractor. This RFP was one of the most comprehensive that Alabama State Parks has ever released. It outlined the need for a system that was uniquely designed to meet the varied needs of our State Parks. Through a rigorous selection process, the applicants were evaluated and in March 2023 a new contract was awarded to Rev'd Up, Inc.

During the fiscal year, staff worked in partnership with State Park superintendents and the new reservation system partner to build a system that includes reservations at our campgrounds, lodges, day-use areas, as well as marina contracts, food and beverage services, golf course management, and interpretive programming registration. The new system provides a guest-friendly interface, supports online reservation cancelations, and is more convenient for our guests to use. Cave tour reservations can be made online or in person at both State Parks featuring caves. Tee time reservations are also available online at the State Parks Systems' three golf courses.



Future Efforts

Planning and Visitor Services will continue to develop products that assist park managers in the daily operations of Alabama State Parks and that provide park guests with an improved visitor experience.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

Four of the five Alabama State Parks districts now have a District Ranger coordinating law enforcement and guest safety programs within the respective district parks. Rangers within each park report to the District Ranger, who handles scheduling, training, evaluations, and other related operational coordination.

Rangers also play a large role in our emergency response through District Strike Teams. These teams lead emergency recovery efforts after storms, clear roads of debris, and support utility crews and other teams in coordinated recovery efforts.

Future Efforts

In the coming fiscal year, a Law Enforcement Coordinator position will be developed to help fill the gaps within the State Parks law enforcement team.

MANAGEMENT ANALYSIS

The Management Analysis Section provides general administrative direction and coordination for management control, administrative cost analysis, performance reporting, data processing, general accounting, budgeting, payables, receivables, and purchasing.

Accomplishments

- Received, processed, and analyzed 2,184 performance reports for all Alabama State Parks
- Prepared Parks System Performance Reports as required by the Budget Management Act
- Received, processed, and analyzed operations plans, budget reports, and related reports
- Prepared Parks System Operation Plans and fiscal year budgets
- Processed \$55,746,598 in revenue and \$53,095,348 in expenditures
- Processed 27,422 payment documents
- Disbursed 15,953 checks to vendors
- Worked with the Department of Treasury to consolidate State Parks bank accounts
- Monitored data-processing output and distributed it to state-wide park cost centers
- Monitored managerial audits

Future Efforts

Management Analysis will continue to work with the State's Accounting and Resource System to develop detailed monthly financial statements of the State Parks System and specific operations. Management Analysis will also continue to revise resale inventory procedures to promote better accountability.

STATE PARKS 2022-2023 BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

Section Name	Budgeted	Expenditures
Parks Revolving Operations	\$45,841,144	\$45,362,569
Parks Revolving Capital Outlay	\$4,594,895	\$3,980,293
Administrative Transfer	\$5,269,540	\$3,674,760
Parks Fund Repairs and Maintenance	\$1,740,440	\$1,390,532
Parks Fund Capital Outlay	\$7,844,357	\$6,998,934
Total	\$65,290,376	\$61,407,088

BOND SUPPORT IN ACTION

On May 24, 2022, Alabamians voted in favor of the State Parks Bond Amendment that allocated \$80 million to enhance the Alabama State Parks System. In November of 2022, the bonds were sold, allowing the State Parks projects to move forward. Subsequently, the dedicated Alabama State Parks team has diligently initiated various projects. The State Parks Division also collaborated with the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) to secure approximately \$48 million in grant funding to upgrade the Parks System's drinking and wastewater facilities.

Currently, State Parks has enlisted the services of 10 design professionals, each tasked with working on projects across the state. With approximately 80 individual projects at different stages of development, progress is well underway (see Chart 1 for details).

Notable ongoing or upcoming construction projects include:

- Completion of the beach pavilion at Joe Wheeler State Park
- Completion of road resurfacing at Joe Wheeler State Park with support from ADEM and the recycled tire program
- Ongoing lodge renovations at Joe Wheeler State Park
- Campground renovations underway at Oak Mountain State Park
- Upcoming lodge room renovations at Lakepoint State Park
- Completion of cabin renovations at Lakepoint State Park
- Completion of Romar Beach improvements at Gulf State Park
- Completion of cabin renovations at Gulf State Park
- Beach renourishment project underway at Gulf State Park and surrounding communities
- Ongoing construction of the Gulf State Park Pier
- Ongoing renovations of the Beach Pavilion at Gulf State Park
- Ongoing improvements to the campground at Wind Creek State Park
- Ongoing construction of new cabins at Wind Creek State Park
- Ongoing renovation of cabins at Monte Sano State Park
- Ongoing renovations to the campground at Monte Sano State Park
- Pool house renovations at DeSoto State Park nearing the bidding stage
- Ongoing construction of campground store at Meaher State Park
- Ongoing campground expansion at Meaher State Park
- Upcoming bidding for pro shop renovations at Lake Guntersville State Park
- Ongoing improvements to the golf course cart path at Lake Guntersville State Park
- Ongoing Wi-Fi projects at various locations

Additionally, Alabama State Parks has three large projects in the design phase, pending budgetary alignment upon bid returns. These projects include the development of a new lodge at Cheaha State Park, a new campground at Gulf State Park, and substantial renovations at Lake Lurleen State Park.

PHOTO: JOHN MARVIN HILLSMAN, III





GLAMPING IN ALABAMA STATE PARKS

The Alabama State Parks Division strives to offer every guest the best overnight accommodations. To meet the growing demand for luxury and comfort in an outdoor setting, the State Parks Division has added glamping to its list of outdoor recreation offerings. Glamping, a combination of glamorous and camping, offers overnight guests the opportunity to immerse themselves in nature without sacrificing the comforts and conveniences of modern life.

This style of camping has become increasingly popular in recent years. In response to the public's interest in glamping, State Parks partnered with Timberline Glamping to introduce this exciting new offering at five State Parks: Cheaha, Chewacla, Lake Guntersville, Monte Sano and Wind Creek. At these five locations throughout the state, overnight guests can enjoy the great outdoors in style and experience unique and memorable camping experiences in a variety of natural settings.

Unlike traditional camping, where you pitch a tent and rough it for a few nights, glamping elevates outdoor accommodations to new levels of comfort. These glamping sites feature spacious canvas tents equipped with plush bedding, cozy furnishings,

air conditioners/heaters, mini fridges and coffee pots. The sites also feature electrical outlets so the kids can charge their devices while watching a movie under the stars. It's the perfect blend of rustic charm and modern luxury in the outdoors.

For families seeking memorable outdoor experiences without sacrificing comfort or convenience, glamping in Alabama State Parks offers the perfect solution. With Timberline Glamping's expertly curated accommodations and the stunning natural landscapes of Alabama's State Parks, this new overnight accommodation offers unique recreational opportunities and unforgettable outdoor adventures for the entire family. Book a glamping experience today and discover the joy of camping in style.

Reserving a glamping adventure is easier than ever. Visit alapark.com, select the new reservation system link and select the park of your choice. Make your plans, and once you've arrived, prepare to enjoy the amenities and outdoor recreation opportunities that await you. From hiking and fishing to swimming and birdwatching, there is no shortage of family-friendly fun to be had on an Alabama State Park glamping adventure. ■

WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES



The **Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division**, charged by law with protection, management, and enhancement of the state's fish and wildlife resources, is composed of the Administrative, Enforcement, Fisheries, and Wildlife sections. The Division meets its responsibilities by carrying out coordinated, scientifically sound enforcement, management, research, development, and educational programs designed to ensure protection and enhancement of fish and wildlife populations and habitats for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama.

ADMINISTRATIVE SECTION

Wildlife Grants

State Wildlife Grants and the Landowner Incentive Program are two federal funding sources intended to focus management on declining wildlife species and avoid their eventual listing under the Endangered Species Act. Both programs are administered by one biologist, the Habitat and Species Conservation Coordinator, who works closely with Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries staff. Both programs interact with a broad range of partners, including federal and state agencies, universities, NGOs, and private landowners. Conservation efforts funded include the following:

State Wildlife Action Plan Revision

State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP) serve as the blueprints for conserving our nation's fish and wildlife and preventing endangered species listings. A major revision will be completed by 2025. Each plan addresses eight required elements identified by the U.S. Congress. The plans are developed in collaboration with leading scientists, conservationists, private landowners, and other members of the public.

Reintroduction of the Eastern Indigo Snake

Seventeen snakes were released in May 2023, bringing the total release number to 255. After being released they are monitored throughout the year.

Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center (AABC)

AABC was established in 2004 to promote clean water and to restore rare freshwater species. This is accomplished through the propagation and reintroductions of rare aquatic species. See Fisheries Section for details.

Statewide Stream and River Assessment Program for Aquatic Species of Conservation Concern

This project collects statewide information on the distribution, abundance, species composition, and habitat requirements of at-risk aquatic species in Alabama.

Black Bear Research

Trapping and tagging of black bears is conducted in the two main reproducing populations, located in the Mobile River basin and in northeast Alabama. Once trapped, the bears receive a general physical exam and yellow tags in each ear, and they are injected with a Passive Integrated Transponder (PIT) tag. Female bears are fitted with GPS-enabled radio-telemetry collars to track their movements. Staff visit bear dens during winter months to document location, characteristics, and the number of cubs. Cubs receive an expandable collar to track their movements.

Habitat and Population Restoration of Gopher Frogs

The gopher frog is ranked as a Highest Conservation Concern species and is currently petitioned for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Gopher Frogs are state listed as imperiled due to low populations and are at a high risk of extinction. They were historically known to exist in multiple locations across the eastern



WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES BUDGET AND EXPENDITURES

Section	Budgeted Amount*	Expenditures
Admin	\$3,391,917	\$1,281,575.40
Law Enforcement	\$20,965,831	\$17,398,718.30
Fisheries	\$10,812,933	\$10,089,727
Wildlife	\$31,493,371	\$19,467,864.44
Wildlife Diversity	\$930,000	\$907,250
Transferred to Department Administrative Expenses	\$4,537,300	\$4,314,892
TOTAL	\$72,131,352	\$53,460,027.14

* The budget figures on this report reflect the approved spending authority for Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. They are not a representation of the available cash.

Funding includes Federal Aid in Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration monies apportioned to Alabama based on the state's geographical size and hunting and fishing license sales.

Seventy-seven percent of the variance between the total budget and expenditures is unspent capital outlay monies that have been retained and carried forward to the subsequent fiscal year.

WILDLIFE AND FRESHWATER FISHERIES DIVISION STAFFING

	FILLED	VACANT**
FULL-TIME POSITIONS	290	52
PART-TIME POSITIONS	28	0

** Vacancy count is based on the 2023 operations plan.

portion of Alabama but now are only found at two wetlands within the Conecuh National Forest. Research and monitoring activities are underway at those locations.

Flattened Musk Turtle

The flattened musk turtle is a small, aquatic, freshwater turtle endemic to the Upper Black Warrior River drainage of northwestern Alabama. Since receiving a federal listing status of threatened in 1987, studies indicate it has continued to decline throughout the range in spite of federal protection. Objectives are to perform a habitat suitability model, identify areas with threat and areas with potential for population reintroduction, conduct field visits to assess sites, collect tissue samples from across the range to analyze genetic variability across the range and within populations.

Black Belt Prairie Assessment

Black Belt prairies have been devastated by land use alterations with less than one-percent remaining, and these are small and highly fragmented. This study will acquire baseline data on rare species and perform an ecological assessment to assist managers with making conservation decisions.

Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3)

Since the funding model for state wildlife agencies relies on the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, the recruitment, retention,

and reactivation of license buyers is of utmost importance to the future of conservation. For that reason, a full-time R3 Coordinator focuses on R3 efforts across the WFF Division. Staff training and outreach engagement opportunities continue to be a priority for R3. In FY 2022-2023, staff completed quarterly R3 training regarding hunting, trapping, shooting sports, conservation history, customer service, and increasing community engagement. Each training and outreach engagement helps staff to further the Agency's mission to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance the wildlife and aquatic resources of Alabama for the sustainable benefit of the people of Alabama. This mission can only be accomplished with a concerted effort and a focus on the future of conservation.

Adult Mentored Hunting (AMH) Program

The AMH program is designed to provide participants with little or limited experience an opportunity to learn basic hunting skills and receive one-on-one guidance from experienced mentors. New skills include firearm safety and handling, woodsmanship, tracking, scouting, identifying where to hunt, and game cooking, cleaning, and preparation. The learning process starts at one of the Hunting 101 workshops, which are hosted around the state at Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs). After the workshops, participants are randomly selected to participate in one-day or three-day mentored hunting opportunities. In FY 2022-2023, WFF hosted six Hunting 101 workshops, three one-day mentored hunts, and six multi-day hunts with a total of 230 participants – 25% of those participants were female and 20% were minorities. Five events were conducted in Dallas County, four in Shelby County, two in Bullock County and Mobile County, and one each in Jackson and Limestone counties. These events were conducted in partnership with the Alabama Chapter of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTFF).

Go Fish, Alabama! Program

WFF staff conducted one Go Fish, Alabama! event using the Mobile First Catch Center from March to July 2023. Participants learned basic fishing skills, from knot tying and lure selection to finding places to fish and how to cook their catch. The total number of program participants for this period was 315 individuals. Of those participants, 79% were minorities and 45% were female. Several participants caught their first fish, and several families developed new traditions.

Firearms 101 Program

WFF Law Enforcement staff conducted 22 four-hour firearms classes that introduced new shooters to firearm safety and marksmanship skills. Complementing the handgun-focused classes, rifle and shotgun classes were added to the list of offerings. The classes were taught throughout the state at WMA public shooting ranges and other locations with community partners. WFF initiated these classes were in response to the national surge

in new firearm ownership, and they have been an overwhelming success. In 2023, 216 participants took at least one of the four-hour courses. Many of the participants enjoyed it so much that they took additional courses. Of those 216 participants, 64% were female and 44% were first-time license buyers.

Collegiate Conservation Outreach (CCO) Program

The CCO program was developed to increase engagement and involvement from Alabama's community colleges, culinary institutes, colleges, and public and private universities, including Alabama's Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). The top 20 largest colleges have a combined student population of almost 250,000 individuals. These individuals will be future community leaders, workforce professionals, and decision makers. As such, the CCO program aims to increase their involvement, awareness, and participation in hunting, fishing, targeting shooting, trapping, and other outdoor recreation activities so they will prioritize conservation throughout their careers and lives. In addition to recruiting, retaining, and reactivating participants, this program helps serve as an important recruitment tool for future agency employees and personnel. In the first year of the program, 32 events were hosted across eight counties including Bullock, Macon, Limestone, Madison, Hale, Shelby, Lee, and Tuscaloosa, with a total of 602 students participating. Of those participants, 57% of the students were minorities and 42% were female. Several of the students were not only first-time license buyers but they also experienced the outdoors for the first time in their lives.

Conservation Outreach

WFF's Conservation Outreach program provides public communication, outreach, and education services to proactively increase awareness of the Division's wildlife management programs, accomplishments, policies, and related topics. The program is also designed to encourage interaction between the public and the Division.

The Conservation Outreach Coordinator directly aids the public via phone, mail, online, and in person regarding hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife viewing, species' natural history, and all associated laws and regulations by responding to questions and offering information to those who would like to know more about Alabama's wildlife and fishery resources.

Throughout the year, the program coordinator monitors the Division's printed and personal interactions with the public and makes recommendations based on public needs and requests from the Division. The program coordinator also provides guidance and support to other ADCNR staff who interact with the public at a variety of outreach events in order to foster positive relationships and encourage sustainable use of Alabama's abundant natural resources.

TABLE 1:**FISH STOCKED DURING FY 2022-2023 INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS THROUGH THE FISHERIES SECTION'S PROGRAMS**

Species	Inch Groups	Number
Striped Bass - Gulf Race	1-2 inches	651,506
Hybrid Striped Bass	1-2 inches	467,268
White Bass	1 inch	21,860
Channel Catfish	7-19 inches	59,554
Bluegill Sunfish	1-4 inches	1,746,414
Redear Sunfish	1-3 inches	984,950
Southern Walleye	7-19 inches	80
White Crappie	2-7 inches	11,208
Rainbow Trout	8-14 inches	30,096
Redeye Bass- Cahaba	3 inches	960
TOTAL		3,973,896

TABLE 2:**FISH STOCKED BY PERMIT HOLDERS INTO ALABAMA PUBLIC WATERS DURING FY 2022-2023**

Species	Location	Date	Number or Weight
Rainbow Trout	Black Creek (Gadsden)	20/12/2022	500
Rainbow Trout	Mill and Mud Creeks at Tannehill State Park	27/04/2023	600 pounds
Largemouth Bass (Florida)	Guntersville Reservoir	13/05/2023	10,000
Channel Catfish	R.L. Harris Reservoir (Lake Wedowee)	16/05/2023	500 pounds

FISHERIES SECTION

Responsibilities and Functions

The mission of the Fisheries Section is to manage, protect, conserve, and enhance the freshwater aquatic resources of Alabama.

Accomplishments

Technical Assistance: Fisheries biologists conducted 254 biological checks of private ponds and provided practical solutions in writing for identified issues. Staff participated in several meetings and conference calls concerning the licensing and relicensing of hydroelectric projects. Staff provided technical assistance to government and non-government agencies on 384 occasions. District biologists investigated 14 reported fish kills and cases of pollution. Formal reports prepared by the investigators were sent to the appropriate agencies.

Environmental Affairs: Staff reviewed, investigated, and commented on 76 water-related permits and environmental impact statements with potential adverse impacts to state aquatic resources.

Public Fishing Lakes (PFLs): During FY 2022-2023, a total of 70,340 angler trips were made to Alabama PFLs, and 47,665 fish were harvested weighing a total of 46,382 pounds from 18 of the lakes. Each angler averaged 0.68 fish per trip that weighed an average of 0.97 pounds each. The number of anglers fishing at Alabama's PFLs has decreased by 15% over the previous fiscal year. The decrease of angler PFL usage is due to many factors including multiple temporary lake closures in recent years. Between FY 2021-2022 and FY 2022-2023, eight PFLs were temporarily closed due to manager resignations (health issues), financial issues, and a dam failure (Barbour PFL). Although PFL usage significantly increased during FY 2020-2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, angler participation at the individual lakes has since decreased to pre-pandemic levels. Angler trips to PFLs have also been impacted by inflation.

Fisheries biologists and support staff made 92 visits to PFLs to evaluate the condition of fish populations and to conduct various operational and maintenance activities. The Carbon Hill, Eastaboga, and Marion fish hatcheries stocked 2,405,595 fish into Alabama's PFLs. Species stocked included bluegill sunfish, redear sunfish, channel catfish, blue catfish, and threadfin shad. Additionally, 3,000 pounds of rainbow trout were stocked into Madison County PFL for a winter fishery.

Barbour County PFL remains closed after being drained in FY 2021-2022 to repair the drain valve and to enhance fishing opportunities. The lake never reached full pool due to dam failure and the future of this facility is being evaluated. Chambers County PFL was also closed for renovations and is set to reopen during the spring of 2024. The City of Luverne returned the management duties of Crenshaw County PFL to WFF in May of 2022 due to staffing issues. Crenshaw was drained during the fall of 2022 and a new drain tower is being installed.

Escambia County PFL managers resigned due to financial difficulties in September 2022. Escambia PFL was drained during the summer of 2023 in order to begin renovations. Walker County PFL manager passed away in June 2022. In the spring of 2023, a new manager was hired but resigned after only six months. Walker County PFL currently has new management in place with plans to reopen during the spring of 2024. Geneva County PFL managers resigned in August 2022 due to health concerns. A new manager was hired, and the lake reopened in the spring of 2023. Clay County PFL closed in December 2022 due to the lake manager's health issues. After new management was put in place, the lake reopened in September 2023. Monroe County PFL closed in June 2023 due to the lake manager's health issues. A reopening date was set for February 2024; however, without on-site management. Due to various issues, the Marion County PFL manager's contract was terminated in September 2023. The lake remains closed to evaluate dam repairs. The Coffee County PFL manager's contract was terminated in September 2023 to make operational changes. The lake will reopen in FY 2023-2024 under the joint management of the City of Elba and Coffee County.

Access Areas: During the year, staff conducted routine maintenance inspections of 116 access areas. These facilities included 145 boat ramps with 191 launch lanes, 124 courtesy piers, and 4,047 parking spaces.

Fisheries personnel completed routine tasks such as servicing, repairing, and maintaining equipment and ordering materials for various maintenance activities. Staff also completed general construction, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) upgrades, and maintenance projects at 76 access areas statewide. Maintaining access areas encompasses a large portion of the annual boating access budget. Overall, 128 repairs were completed at access areas statewide, including launching slab repairs, pier repairs, parking lot repairs, tree and debris removal, parking lot resurfacing and striping, erosion damage repairs, replacing signage, and storm damage cleanup.

New construction is another important part of the boating access program. A major renovation was completed at Mink Creek Public Boat Ramp in Jackson County. To accommodate more boating anglers, the parking lot was nearly doubled in size and an additional launching lane was constructed. The entrance/exit road was also widened to allow for two-way traffic. The parking lot at Eureka Landing Public Boat Ramp on the Alabama River in Monroe County was expanded and converted from gravel to concrete to allow for easier maintenance after floods. Additionally, new floating access piers were installed at Claysville and Tom Jackson Park public boat ramps in Marshall County. Additionally, the access pier was extended at B.B. Comer Public Boat Ramp in Jackson County. All renovations were completed to meet a growing demand for boating access statewide.

Fish Hatcheries: Fish production goals in FY 2022-2023 were met or exceeded for several fish species. Section staff stocked these and other fish species into public waters statewide, including PFLs, for a total of 3,973,896 fish (Table 1). Although infrastructure needs are extensive due to aging facilities, improve-

TABLE 3:**FRESHWATER MOLLUSK STOCKING ACTIVITIES BY AABC STAFF IN FY 2022-2203**

Species	Locality	Date of Release	Number Stocked
<i>Lampsilis ornata</i> Southern Pocketbook	Coosa River, Weiss Bypass, Station II, Site I, Cherokee County, AL	11/1/22	500
<i>Lampsilis ornata</i> Southern Pocketbook	Coosa River, Weiss Bypass, Station II, Site II, Cherokee County, AL	11/1/22	500
<i>Lampsilis virescens</i> - E Alabama Lampmussel	Paint Rock River, Jones Property, Jackson County, AL	5/25/23	5,000
<i>Cambarunio nebulosus</i> Alabama Rainbow	Blackburn Fork, near House Road, Blount County, AL	6/8/23	2,241
<i>Lampsilis virescens</i> - E Alabama Lampmussel	Bear Creek, near Rock Creek confluence, Colbert County, AL	6/9/23	1,500
<i>Lampsilis virescens</i> - E Alabama Lampmussel	Elk River, Winding Stair Bluff, Giles County, TN (TWRA)	6/13/23	1,949
<i>Medionidus parvulus</i> - E Coosa Moccasinshell	Armuchee Creek, Manning Mill Road, USFS Property, Walker County, GA	7/24/23	80
<i>Venustaconcha trabalis</i> - E Tennessee Bean	Paint Rock River, 4 shoals at PRRM 50.7, 49.9, 49.5, 49.1, Jackson County, AL	7/25/23	2,401
<i>Medionidus parvulus</i> - E Coosa Moccasinshell	Little Cahaba River, Wadsworth Site, Bibb County, AL	7/27/23	100
<i>Medionidus parvulus</i> - E Coosa Moccasinshell	Yellowleaf Creek, Westervelt Mitigation Tract, Shelby County, AL	7/31/23	100
<i>Medionidus conradicus</i> - PE Cumberland Moccasinshell	Bear Creek at Rock Creek, BCM 25.5, Colbert County, AL	8/1/23	422
<i>Toxolasma cylindrellus</i> - E Pale Lilliput	Duck River, Venable Spring, DRM 176.8, Marshall County, TN	8/9/23	1,000
<i>Toxolasma cylindrellus</i> - E Pale Lilliput	Duck River, Hooper Island, DRM 163.1, Maury County, TN	8/9/23	1,483
<i>Medionidus parvulus</i> - E Coosa Moccasinshell	Big Canoe Creek, Godwin's Mill, St. Clair County, AL	9/12/23	133
<i>Pleurobema atearni</i> - E Canoe Creek Pigtoe	Big Canoe Creek, Godwin's Mill, St. Clair County, AL	9/12/23	127
<i>Toxolasma cylindrellus</i> - E Pale Lilliput	Paint Rock River, at PRRM 50.7, Jackson County, AL	9/18/23	527
<i>Toxolasma cylindrellus</i> - E Pale Lilliput	Paint Rock River, 6 localities between PRRM 50.7 and 33.3, Jackson County, AL	9/21/23	3,140
TOTAL			21,203

ments are routinely made at all three state fish hatcheries. Carbon Hill Fish Hatchery installed permanent employee housing and initiated the installation of a new well pump and aeration system for improved fish culture. Eastaboga Fish Hatchery also expanded the aeration capabilities of its fish culture facility. To address the failure of an aging well and the subsequent loss of its water supply, the Marion Fish Hatchery installed a new deep water well along with a variable speed pump. This addition will allow for more flexible control of water during the culture season. Along with the new well, an elevated water tank was also installed that allows for constant water flow into the lab for rearing fish eggs. New electrical supply lines are being installed at several ponds at the Marion facility, which will enable the hatchery to use aeration more efficiently.

Public Water Fish Stockings by Permit Holders: Four permits for stocking fish in public waters were issued to individuals representing agencies and organizations. A list of the fish species and sites stocked by permit holders is provided in Table 2.

Aquatic Nuisance Species (ANS): Species introduced outside of their native ranges can create negative impacts to endemic species in aquatic environments and pose a significant threat to the State of Alabama. ANS are a direct threat to recreational and commercial fishing resources and can have significant adverse impacts to local economies dependent on aquatic recreational activities. The expansion of silver carp moving upstream in the Tennessee River from the Mississippi and Ohio rivers is the most

immediate threat to Alabama waters. ADCNR is currently conducting field sampling and cooperating with the state fisheries agencies of Tennessee, Mississippi, and Kentucky, as well as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS), to monitor silver carp expansion in the Tennessee River and in the Tennessee-Tombigbee waterway.

Fisheries staff performed 108 field days sampling for invasive Asian carp and associated work on the Tennessee River. The primary sampling methods utilized were electrofishing. Staff implemented work tasks supported by an approved USFWS grant supporting Alabama's ANS Management Plan. Staff performed seven field days and multiple non-field days on zebra mussel monitoring, developed signage and educational materials, and made improvements to Fisheries Section information on ADCNR's website.

Staff was involved in discussions with relevant agencies regarding decision analysis and the locations of Bioacoustic Fish Fence (BAFF) deterrents at locks on the Tennessee and upper Tombigbee rivers. Research is being conducted on the effectiveness of these barriers.

Publications: Staff prepared several scientific journal articles for publication. Staff also provided their knowledge to outdoor writers upon request for information pertinent to Alabama's freshwater resources.

PHOTO: BILLY POPE



Fisheries Research: Through the Investigation and Management Techniques for Public Waters Project (formerly Sport Fish Restoration F-40), one study continued with investigators from the Auburn University School of Fisheries, Aquaculture, and Aquatic Sciences (AU-SFAAS): "Estimating Population Impacts of Fishing and Natural Mortality of Black Bass at Neely Henry Reservoir, Alabama." Two new studies were initiated with investigators from the AU-SFAAS: "Evaluation of the Statewide 229-mm Minimum Length Limit for Crappies in Alabama" and "Recruitment and Growth Dynamics of Riverine Sport, Food, and Forage Fishes Related to Flow Operations and Temperature Conditions of the Lower Tallapoosa River."

Reservoir Management: Staff sampled largemouth bass, Alabama bass, spotted bass, black crappie, white crappie, bluegill sunfish, threadfin shad, and gizzard shad populations by several methods, including electrofishing, trap netting, prod pole, and seining in the following water bodies: Upper Bear, Wilson, Guntersville, Pickwick, Logan Martin, Martin, Mitchell, Neely Henry, Holt, Bankhead, Inland, Eufaula, Frank Jackson, Gantt, Coffeerville, and Millers Ferry reservoirs, as well as the Mobile-Tensaw Delta. Bass spawn checks were completed at Wilson and Guntersville reservoirs. Specimens were collected, measured, and weighed. Many were also aged to determine growth rate and sexed to determine sexual maturity and ratios. Thermal and oxygen profiles were collected from most of the previously mentioned reservoirs. Reconnaissance surveys were completed at Elk River, Wheeler, Guntersville tailrace, Neely Henry tailrace, Yates, and Bartlett's Ferry. Relative values of angler harvest, effort, and pressure were collected by creel surveys on selected reservoirs. A habitat project was completed at Martin Reservoir.

General Surveys: General surveys were completed at the Fish, Magnolia, Lower Alabama, Paint Rock, and Elk rivers, as well as Oak Mountain State Park (three lakes). Redeye Bass were sampled from 10 streams statewide. Southern walleye were sampled to determine abundance at Blackwater Creek, Marion County PFL, Mulberry Fork, and the Warrior, Cahaba, and Sipsey rivers. Additionally, spotted and longnose gar fin clips were obtained for genetic purposes from populations in Mulberry Fork, as well as Wheeler, Pickwick, and Eufaula reservoirs. One aquatic vegetation survey was completed at Neely Henry Reservoir.

Aquatic Education Program: Staff, with assistance from other WFF sections and cooperating organizations, conducted a total of 295 aquatic education events for 31,858 participants. These included 45 community fishing events offered to 6,205 participants. Staff also conducted 22 fishing classes for various audiences serving a total of 1,915 participants. Casting classes were taught to 3,026 participants during 76 events. Staff presented 84 talks about Alabama's aquatic resources to a total audience of 5,568 participants. Information on careers and other fisheries information was presented to 13,646 attendees at 30 events. One fishing instructor training was held for five participants. Thirty-seven additional educational presentations were offered to 1,493 participants.

Rivers and Streams Fisheries Program: Staff conducted 131 biological sampling trips during the fiscal year. Staff reviewed

applications for 326 general and 85 state-protected scientific collection aquatic permits, 211 permit collection notifications, 122 permit collection reports, and produced five permit amendment letters.

Southern walleye collection continued from Hatchet Creek and Lake Mitchell to establish a brood stock. This is the only viable Southern walleye population identified in the state. Fin clips from these fish will be used to determine effective genetic population size. Sampling continued in the Conecuh River to determine if a remnant walleye population exists; however, none have been collected to date.

Sampling began in the Conecuh River for river redhorse to determine the abundance, distribution, and habitat use of this rare fish. Fin clips have also been obtained to determine its lineage to other river redhorse populations throughout Alabama.

Staff continued implanting acoustic transmitters in Gulf sturgeon collected from the Choctawhatchee River near Geneva. Ten-year transmitters were implanted in 22 adult fish to examine movements and migrations of fall spawning fish and to ascertain the movement and habitat use in the Pea River above the breached Elba Dam.

Staff sampled for Alabama shad in the Choctawhatchee River. Three specimens were collected. All specimens were implanted with an internal acoustic transmitter and released alive. Movement and habitat use will be examined by a 33-receiver acoustic array deployed in the Choctawhatchee River/Bay watershed. This species will be repeteditioned soon for listing under the Endangered Species Act. Our past surveys indicated this species is becoming increasingly rare in Alabama waters. Staff will continue to annually sample the Choctawhatchee River for this species.

Sampling continued for Alabama sturgeon and Gulf sturgeon in the Mobile River Basin. No specimens were collected.

Staff sampled 91 streams and river sites throughout the state to determine and assess the index-of-biotic integrity, which is an indicator of the health of a stream based on fish species and abundance. Staff also assessed the distribution and abundance of the ironcolor shiner during stream sampling.

Six manuscripts were published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

Freshwater Mollusk Management and Research: Staff conducted 64 biological field trips to sample streams throughout the state. These focused on mussels and snails to document distribution and population health, locate brood stock for use at the AABC, and provide specimens for various genetics studies. Staff provided assistance and consultation regarding mollusk issues to the USFWS, Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), USGS, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Forest Service, Smithsonian Institution, Geological Survey of Alabama, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, University of North Alabama, University of Alabama in Birmingham, Jacksonville State University, University of Tennessee, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Clarkson University,

North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, the Nature Conservancy, and the Center for Biological Diversity.

AABC: Staff assisted with numerous research, recovery, and monitoring activities. AABC personnel also assisted in research projects with UFWS, USGS, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Auburn University, University of Alabama, University of Georgia, University of North Carolina-Charlotte, University of Mississippi, University of Michigan, and Virginia Polytechnic Institute.

Staff stocked 21,203 individual mussels into freshwater water bodies (Table 3) and completed 68 biological trips in support of aquatic species research and recovery activities statewide. AABC staff provided technical assistance to other state and federal agencies as well as to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on more than 119 occurrences. Staff also participated in 43 technical meetings, two habitat enhancement activities, and 17 outreach activities with other government agencies, academic institutions, and NGOs. Additionally, staff assisted with the publication of four scientific articles, two magazine articles, and seven technical reports.

Endangered Species Aquatic Studies: Through the Cooperative Endangered Species Conservation Fund (Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act), the following studies were conducted: Project 194, "Spawning Patterns and Movements of Spring and Fall Spawning Gulf Sturgeon in The Upper Choctawhatchee and Pea Rivers - Phase Five - 2023"; Project 222, "Status of Sturgeon in the Mobile River Basin - Phase Two - 2023"; Project 224, "Recovery of Anthony's Riversnail, *Atheurina anthonyi* in Alabama through Propagation, Reintroduction and Monitoring"; Project 225, "Assessment of Potential *Pleurobema taitianum* Habitat in Alabama River"; Project 226, "Quantitative Assessment of Federally Listed Mussel Reintroduction Efforts in the Paint Rock River and Targeted Qualitative Assessment of *Lampsilis virescens* (Alabama Lampmussel) Recruitment in the Paint Rock River and Bear Creek"; Project 227, "Conecuh River Survey for Round Ebony-shell (*Reginaia rotulata*)"; and Project 229, "Fisheries Endangered Species Surveys and Monitoring Project, A) Assessment of *Pleurobema strodeanum* Distribution and Mussel Community Habitat in Bottle, Burnt Corn, and Murder Creeks of Alabama B) Updated Surveys and Status Assessment for *Pleurobema perovatum*, *Pleurobema decisum*, and *Hamiota altilis*, in Addition to Other Rare Mussel Species, in the Lower Tallapoosa River Watershed Below Thurlow Dam." Formal final and interim reports prepared by the investigators were sent to the appropriate agencies.

Future Issues

The trend of stable to decreasing revenue from the sale of fishing licenses remains a major concern. These monies are the lifeblood of our agency and are a major source of conservation funding. If this downward trend continues without an additional revenue source, some Section programs face an uncertain future. To help recruit of new anglers into the funding model, staff conducts casting and fishing classes and assists with other agency programs. Increased marketing efforts are also being conducted to

recruit and retain new fishing license buyers.

The competitive job market is creating difficulties in hiring and retaining new employees. This issue is likely to impact our section's ability to perform important tasks in the future due to staffing shortages.

ANS continue to pose a significant ecological and economic threat to the State of Alabama. Staff will continue to monitor ANS prevalence statewide and rely on public education as a preventive measure. The implementation of regulations and the recommendation of control methods will be utilized when applicable.

The aging infrastructure at the state's PFLs remains a concern. Without additional funding for expensive, non-routine repairs and maintenance at these facilities, some locations could face closure. Contracting with qualified lake managers at rural lakes is also an ongoing issues. Low visitation rates at many rural PFLs and the increased costs of goods and services remain an issue. Alternative management options are being evaluated on a case-by-case basis, especially for lesser used PFLs.

The entire state fish hatchery system has numerous maintenance issues and renovation needs due to aging infrastructure. Many production ponds, drain kettles, water supply lines, drainage lines, facility buildings, and electrical power supplies either need to be repaired or replaced. A long-range plan has been developed with prioritized issues for improvements; however, this strategy can only be fully implemented with additional funding, as maintenance and repair costs are expensive.

Habitat loss and population fragmentation caused by the impoundment of rivers and streams, modification of natural flow/temperature regimes, water quality issues, and sedimentation from poor land use practices in Alabama has resulted in the decline or loss of numerous fish, crayfish, snail, and/or mussel species. Our Section will continue to document habitat and aquatic resource loss and advocate for ways to best avoid, minimize, or offset impacts to the State's fisheries resources. Some statewide recommendations include promoting regulated systems to mimic natural water flow/temperature regimes, maintaining, and improving water quality standards based on species tolerance limits at all life stages, and increasing fish passage throughout species ranges. The need for a statewide comprehensive water plan that emphasizes instream flow protection for the benefit of aquatic wildlife and habitats remains a priority.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SECTION RESPONSIBILITIES AND FUNCTION

WFF's Law Enforcement Section provides assistance in the protection and management of Alabama's wildlife resources and the safety of the public through a fair and balanced enforcement program.

Accomplishments

The Law Enforcement Section Hunter Education Unit's Handgun 101 program has been wildly successful. Held at WMAs throughout the state, this course teaches first-time firearms owners the fundamentals of firearms safety, marksmanship, and public range etiquette. The 4-hour course was designed specifically for first-time firearms owners – a rapidly growing segment of society with more than 13 million new gun owners in 2021 alone. Each course ends with a short talk explaining the Pittman-Robertson Act and how the funds generated by target shooters conserve the natural resource of our nation. On the heels of the success of the Handgun 101 course, three additional courses were developed: Handgun 102, Rifle 101, and Shotgun 101. Our Handgun 102 course is designed for students who have successfully completed the 101 course and want to expand their firearms knowledge. The 102 course covers safe storage and cleaning of firearms as well as a variety of additional topics that have been requested by those who have completed the 101 course. The Rifle 101 and Shotgun 101 courses follow the same 4-hour format as Handgun 101. Both are beginners' courses designed to impart the same level of knowledge and familiarity with rifles and shotguns as is taught in the Handgun 101 course. Each of the new courses has been very successful. Staff continued to host Nighttime Thermal/Night Vision Open Range Nights. These popular nighttime events are staffed by Section firearms instructors and provide an opportunity for shooters to practice shooting with their night vision equipped firearms and thermal sights at select WMA shooting ranges.

In January 2023, WFF conservation enforcement officers (CEO) and the ADCNR Honor Guard participated in the second inauguration of Governor Kay Ivey. Formed 15 years ago, they have become the premier honor guard in the State of Alabama. In addition to the service they provide the families of ADCNR employees in their time of need, the group represents the Department in a variety of events statewide.

In 2023, the Section modernized its fleet of patrol boats. This process began by selecting and purchasing approximately 26 new patrol boats for use within each of the Division's five law enforcement districts. Multiple models of Vexus and SeaArk boats were selected. A committee was formed in 2022 that was tasked with selecting the style and size of vessel that would be most appropriate for the many waterways throughout the state. For the first time, field officers had a great deal of input into the specific vessels that were purchased and how each vessel would be equipped. Historically, the patrol boats operated by WFF's Law Enforcement Section have had very few markings and often were not equipped with emergency lighting. All vessels purchased during 2023 have uniform markings, radio equipment, and emergency lights. This is the largest single purchase of boats by the Section in more than 20 years. All newly purchased vessels are now in operation and have been well-received by the officers who use them daily.

Awards

Officers with WFF's Law Enforcement Section were honored in 2023 with several awards. CEO Senior Luke Lemley was selected as the Mississippi Flyway Council Officer of the Year. Sergeant Bill Freeman was selected as the Alabama Wildlife Federation Officer of the Year and CEO. Senior Jason Perkins was selected as Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) Alabama Officer of the Year. In November 2023, CEO Senior Charles Moore received the Shikar Safari Law Enforcement Officer of the Year Award.

Two of the Section's newest officers won awards while attending the 190th session of the Northeast Alabama Law Enforcement Academy. CEO Trainee Michael Bunn won the session's Top Marksman Award. This award is presented to the recruit who consistently outperforms all others during the firearms portion of the academy. CEO Taylor Deyampert was awarded the academy's Director's Award – the highest award presented to any recruit attending the law enforcement academy. This award is given to the recruit who demonstrates the most leadership traits to the staff of the academy.

Future Issues

The Section hired nine new officers this year. With the latest round of hiring, the Section is nearing its full staffing goal of 145 officers. Retirements and promotions from the previous year necessitated the highest number of promotions to sergeants in 20 years. Ten officers were promoted to the rank of sergeant in May 2023. Every district in the state and both special task units received new sergeants. Additionally, three captains and two lieutenants were promoted this year to assist with the administrative operations of the Section.

The recruitment and retention of quality staff has been an issue for several years. Officers face many burdens within their first few months of employment. Moving their families to new counties, attending the state law enforcement academy, which necessitates nearly four months away from their family and friends, are only a couple of the hardships that often act as roadblocks to recruiting new officers. Over the last few years, a noncompetitive pay scale had compounded this problem. Approximately two years ago all state employees began seeing the benefit of several cost-of-living adjustments that over a relatively short period of time adjusted salary by 8%. In addition to this adjustment, the starting salary for the CEO trainee position was increased by 15%. It is hoped that these adjustments aid in the recruitment of the next generation of officers.

WILDLIFE SECTION RESPONSIBILITIES AND FUNCTION

The mission of the Wildlife Section is to manage and enhance the wildlife resources of Alabama for the sustainable benefit of the resources and the people of Alabama.

Wildlife Management Areas: Staff managed more than 790,000 acres within the WMA and Special Opportunity Area (SOA) system. During FY 2022-2023, staff held 6,545 managed hunt days on the 35 WMAs and 11 SOAs. WMAs also provided opportunities for trapping, fishing, hiking, picnicking, camping, research, and nature study. To support public recreation opportunities on the WMA/SOA system, staff maintained 137 office and operation support buildings, maintained equipment, painted and placed signs on 152 miles of property boundaries, maintained boat ramps, applied aggregate (crushed rock) to refurbish 110 miles of WMA public access roads, and maintained 94 access, parking, and campground areas.

Additionally, staff conducted prescribed burns on 40,604 acres of wildlife habitat, maintained 283 miles of fire lanes associated with prescribed fire activities, maintained 3,110 acres of wildlife openings and early successional habitat, and performed invasive species control for both plants and animals to enhance habitat for wildlife populations and public enjoyment.

Physically Disabled Hunting Areas: The Hunting Trail for People with Physical Disabilities continued to be a well-utilized program. The trail has 20 hunting areas located in 18 counties. This innovative program provides opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities to participate in hunting in an environment developed to meet their needs.

Youth Hunting Programs: Staff conducted 26 youth dove hunts across the state in 18 counties. The hunts are a cooperative effort between ADCNR, Auburn University, NWTF, local vendors, and private landowners. The 2023 youth dove hunts had 685 youth participants with 18% of those participants being first-time hunters. Additionally, 22 WMAs hosted youth deer hunts and 23 WMAs hosted youth turkey hunts on the weekends prior to the opening of regular gun seasons.

Land Acquisitions for FY 2022-2023:

- Acquired 744 acres through the Forever Wild Land Trust (FWLT) for the Riverton Community Hunting Area (CHA) in Colbert County
- Acquired 2,488 acres through a partnership between WFF and FWLT for the Red Hills WMA in Monroe County
- Acquired 620 acres through FWLT for the Perdido River WMA in Baldwin County
- Acquired 149 acres through FWLT for the Freedom Hills WMA in Colbert County
- Acquired 2,319 acres through a partnership between WFF and FWLT for the Autauga WMA in Autauga County

Forest Management Activities: WMA biologists and foresters worked to promote forest health and enhance habitats within the WMA system to benefit wildlife year-round. Revenue gener-

ated from timber sales on Wildlife Section-owned lands was used for general management efforts such as tract reforestation and/or utilized to fund additional land acquisitions.

- Autauga WMA: A 746-acre first pine thinning sale was completed. Also, a 314-acre storm damage salvage clearcut was completed.
- Barbour WMA: 210 acres of recent clearcuts were reforested with longleaf pine. A timber sale encompassing 425 acres of mixed pine/hardwood thinning was completed. Harvests on 1,700 additional acres of mixed pine/hardwood thinning and final harvest is approximately 90% complete. Additionally, 107 acres of mixed pine and hardwood thinning were sold to be fuel wood chips.
- Cedar Creek SOA: A 1,070-acre timber sale targeting Eastern red cedar was completed. Additionally, 43 acres of recently clearcut area was reforested with loblolly and slash pine.
- Freedom Hills WMA: A 235-acre pine and hardwood thinning has reached 60% completion.
- Geneva State Forest WMA: A 772-acre microchip pine plantation thinning sale is approximately 90% complete, and a timber sale encompassing 272 acres of second pine thinning and 43 acres of final harvest is approximately 50% complete. Additionally, 265 acres of recently clearcut reserve stands were reforested with longleaf pine, and 216 acres of recently clearcut reserve stands were aerially sprayed with plans for these to be reforested with longleaf pine in the winter of 2024.
- Lauderdale WMA: Harvests on 1,747 acres of first pine thinning and 119 acres of final harvest is approximately 90% complete, and an additional 93 acres of second pine thinning and 33 acres of final harvest were sold.
- Portland Landing SOA: The sale of 940 acres of pine plantation first thinning is approximately 90% complete.
- Skyline WMA: 418 acres of pine/hardwood thinning is approximately 85% complete, and an additional 220 acres of final harvest and mixed pine/hardwood thinning was sold.
- Upper State SOA: 105 acres of mixed pine/hardwood first thinning was completed.

Timber stands on the WMA system will continue to be evaluated and monitored for emerging forest health issues. Scattered, light mortality has been noted in early- and mid-rotation pine stands at Lauderdale and Autauga WMAs. These areas will be monitored to ensure the stands remain viable in the future. Silvicultural prescriptions will be planned and implemented as needed to ensure forest resources remain healthy and supply ample wildlife habitat to meet the Section's needs. Future thinning sales are being planned for specific tracts located on Geneva State Forest, Lauderdale, Barbour, and Lowndes WMAs and Cedar Creek SOA.

Invasive species such as tallow tree, Japanese climbing fern, and bicolor lespedeza were scouted and treated throughout the WMA system. Additionally, the aggressive nature of cogongrass has made Section staff more vigilant in spotting and treating infestations statewide. Scattered areas of the grass have been undergoing treatment on the Fred T. Stimpson, Upper State, Cedar Creek, and Portland Landing SOAs, as well as on the Upper Delta, Geneva State Forest, and Barbour WMAs for several seasons. The infested areas have been significantly reduced, but monitoring and chemical control will continue.

GAME SPECIES PROGRAMS

White-tailed Deer Management: Information was collected on various WMAs and other sites to determine deer hunter participation and success, the physical condition of deer, and the status of deer populations. A hunting activity telephone survey was conducted that supplied valuable data. During the 2022-2023 hunting season, 233,450 deer hunters harvested 308,729 deer. The data were used in determining recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits and evaluating the success of each hunting season.

Hunters reported 195,138 deer harvested through Game Check, Alabama's mandatory deer and turkey harvest reporting system, during the 2022-2023 hunting season. The 2022-2023 season was the seventh year for mandatory reporting of all deer harvests.

Samples from 3,609 deer were collected and tested for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) as part of WFF's statewide CWD surveillance efforts. One CWD-positive deer was detected in Lauderdale County as part of these surveillance efforts. This brings the total number of CWD-positive deer detected in Alabama to three, all in Lauderdale County.

Wild Turkey Management: Wild turkey observation, harvest, and reproduction information was collected statewide through the Avid Turkey Hunter Survey (ATHS) and wild turkey brood survey. Data on gobbling activity (number of gobblers and gobblers heard), turkeys seen, and gobblers harvested for each day hunted during the spring season was reported by 179 avid turkey hunter survey participants. ATHS data was used to monitor trends in gobbling activity, population, sex and age structure, harvest timing, and harvest rates. Section staff and volunteers collected observational wild turkey brood data in July and August 2023. They reported 668 observations of turkeys (hens, poults, and gobblers), and each observation during any day was recorded separately. The data were separated by five WFF districts, by six ecoregions (Piedmont, Southeastern Plains, Ridge and Valley, Southwestern Appalachians, Interior Plateau, and Southern Coastal Plain), and by public or private lands. Brood survey data was used to monitor trends in reproduction and the associated survival of poults being recruited into the population. The results of the ATHS and brood survey were published in the annual Full Fans & Sharp Spurs wild turkey report. The ATHS and brood survey data was also used in combination with results from the

Game Check harvest reporting system and Responsive Management post-season harvest survey to structure recommendations for hunting seasons and bag limits.

Hunters reported 18,209 harvested male turkeys through the Game Check system for the 2022-2023 hunting season. The Responsive Management post-season harvest survey estimated 47,131 male turkeys were harvested in the 2022-2023 hunting season.

In addition, Section staff continued to conduct game camera brood surveys. These surveys were conducted on Autauga, Barbour, Cahaba, Coosa, David K. Nelson, Freedom Hills, Lauderdale, Little River, Lowndes, Mulberry Fork, Oakmulgee, Red Hills Skyline, and Yates Lake WMAs. Staff also conducted surveys on Portland Landing and Uchee Creek SOAs. The game camera survey results will be compared to incidental observation results. These projects will continue in coming years.

Mourning Dove Management: The annual mourning dove study, as part of a nationwide project, consisted of trapping, banding, and releasing mourning doves. For this project, 999 mourning doves were banded and released, and the data was submitted to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory. USFWS will analyze data from reported band returns to provide parameters needed for dove population modeling such as band return rates, migration, harvest rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

Waterfowl Management: Annual biological surveys and research continued throughout the state to obtain information on waterfowl and their habitats to inform management of species. Aerial waterfowl censuses were continued on the Tennessee River, Mobile Bay, and Delta in the fall and winter. The winter count is conducted in conjunction with other states and USFWS as part of the annual mid-winter waterfowl survey to assess wintering waterfowl populations. Hunter bag checks were continued in the Mobile-Tensaw Delta and the Tennessee River Valley during fall and winter. As part of the nationwide project, 911 wood ducks were banded and released in Alabama, and data was submitted to the USGS Bird Banding Laboratory. USFWS will analyze data from band returns to provide parameters needed for wood duck population monitoring such as band return rates, migration, kill rates, and estimates for mortality and survival.

Research: For FY 2022-2023, \$2.95 million in Wildlife Restoration Federal Assistance funds and approximately \$405,461 in external sponsorship funds were used to support seven cooperative research projects between WFF and five different universities.

Of these cooperative research projects, four were ongoing from previous years, and one new project was established this past year. Staff worked with Auburn University, University of Tennessee, Cornell University, and the University of Maine, and Eckerd College.

NONGAME WILDLIFE PROGRAM

Bald Eagle Population Monitoring: Since the bald eagle was removed from the Threatened and Endangered Species List in 2007, Alabama bald eagle nests have been randomly monitored for productivity and survivorship. Biologists continued to record newly discovered or reported eagle nests and monitored the number of bald eagles overwintering in Alabama as part of the nationwide Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey. The number of bald eagles wintering in Alabama remains stable.

Golden Eagle Migration Project: Golden eagle camera surveys were conducted in Alabama on three WMAs, and one national forest with assistance from Section staff and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) staff to assess the eastern population of golden eagles. These surveys are revealing more information on the winter ecology of golden eagles to allow for better management efforts. Biologists did not attempt to trap golden eagles during the 2022 season due to Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) concerns. Biologists continued to track the eagles with active transmitters. Data gathered from the tracked birds will help to assess wintering golden eagle habitat in Alabama as well as provide information about their migration pathways and breeding habitat.

Annual Breeding Bird Surveys: Program biologists participated in the continent-wide Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) program administered by the USGS in 2022. Over the last 26 years, our nongame biologists have completed 235 BBS routes. The BBS program is the most important census program for tracking the population trends of landbirds across the landscape.

Christmas Bird Count: Conducted annually during December and January for more than a century, the Christmas Bird Count serves to gather winter population data on all bird species in the U.S., Canada, and many countries in the Western Hemisphere. Program biologists assist by conducting one Christmas Bird Count in south Alabama on Dauphin Island. Nongame Wildlife Program biologists also lead the Montgomery County Christmas Bird Count.

Banding Stations: Program biologists operated a bird banding station at the Autauga WMA from May 12 to August 3, 2023, to gather migration and breeding bird data. A total of 50 species were detected during that time. Nongame Wildlife Program biologists also assisted with two migration bird banding stations along the coast, on the Fort Morgan peninsula during spring migration, April 2023, and one at the Audubon Bird Sanctuary on Dauphin Island during fall migration, September 2023.

Southeastern American Kestrel Nest Box Program: Program biologists continued to monitor Southeastern American kestrel nest boxes placed at three WMAs, one SOA, the M. Barnett Lawley Forever Wild Field Trial Area, and in the Conecuh National Forest. A total of 35 boxes were monitored, with one box being utilized by kestrels. Unfortunately, a grey rat snake invaded that box.

Swallow-tailed Kite Surveys: Swallow-tailed kite surveys were conducted by plane along the Tombigbee River to monitor breed-

ing populations of kites. Three aerial surveys were conducted in July 2023 with a total of 126 individual kites observed along the Tombigbee River. This was the first survey conducted for swallow-tailed kites since 2011.

Wading Bird Rookery Surveys: Wading bird rookery surveys were conducted across the state to monitor known breeding locations and to survey for additional sites. A total of 19 rookeries were surveyed with 13 of those being active. During the surveys, six wading bird species were detected. Surveys will continue to better assess trends of breeding wading birds in Alabama.

Coastal Shorebird Surveys: Within Mobile County are located the most important sites for nesting shorebirds in Alabama are located within Mobile County. These sites include Gaillard Island, Cat Island, Marsh Island, and Isle Aux Herbes. Gaillard Island, the 1,400-acre dredge disposal island in Mobile Bay, held more than 5,000 pairs of nesting brown pelicans, 5,000 pairs of laughing gulls, and four nesting tern species. Notable was an estimated 2,800-nest colony of royal terns. Site construction work on the island completed before the nesting season benefited nesting terns. Cat Island, Marsh Island, and Isle Aux Herbes are located in the Mississippi Sound. Cat Island, now reduced to two and a half acres of mostly shell and sand, attracts terns and black skimmers. Three species of terns nested on Cat Island in 2023, including a colony of 1,000 royal tern nests. Nearby Marsh Island had an estimated 1,000 pairs of nesting laughing gulls. This is by far the largest concentration of nesting laughing gulls ever in the state located away from Gaillard Island. Vegetation on the island has spread rapidly and now covers most of the bare areas that attracted terns and skimmers. Shrubbery on the island now attracts nesting ibis, egrets, and herons. West of Marsh Island on Isle Aux Herbes were 140 pairs of Caspian terns. In addition, black skimmers, sandwich terns, royal terns, least terns, and gull-billed terns were found nesting on some of the narrow shell and sand beach areas. Also located here were three pairs of American oystercatchers. North of Isle Aux Herbes on the mainland coast is the Lightning Point Shoreline Restoration area at Bayou La Batre. Completed in 2021, this habitat creation project hoped to attract nesting shorebirds. No nesting was found, but shorebirds mostly used the area for foraging and loafing.

Bat Population Monitoring: The Alabama Bat Working Group held the annual Bat Blitz May 2-5 in Mobile and Baldwin counties. Each year the blitz targets a focal location in the state to inventory bat species present. This year's goal was to survey for northern long-eared bats (NLEB) in coastal Alabama where they have never been documented. The Nongame Wildlife Program bat biologist contributed significant time to plan, prepare, host, and participate in the Bat Blitz. Over three nights, 22 sites were surveyed at seven locations, with seven bat species captured. On the last night, one male and two pregnant female NLEB were captured and released at Perdido River WMA. The male was radio-tagged and later relocated by plane, but efforts to locate the bat's roost from the ground were unsuccessful. A second attempt was made to capture and radio-tag additional NLEB in late May with the goal of locating a maternity colony. One male

NLEB and one lactating female NLEB were captured. The male's radio-tag was found the following week on the ground not far from the capture location. The signal from the female was never heard again after the night of capture. This work shows there is a resident, breeding population of NLEBs in coastal Alabama.

Eastern Spotted Skunk Research: Program biologists conducted camera surveys for Eastern spotted skunks (ESS) in north Alabama from mid-January to mid-April.

Areas surveyed by Nongame staff were Bankhead National Forest (south), Sam Murphy WMA, Freedom Hills WMA, Cane Creek Canyon Nature Preserve, and Mulberry Fork WMA. Across these areas, cameras were placed at 29 distinct locations. ESS were detected on two areas, Sam Murphy WMA and Mulberry Fork WMA. On Sam Murphy WMA, ESS were detected on two separate camera-traps approximately one mile apart, on the extreme northern edge of the WMA in Marion County. These new sites were approximately 10 miles straight-line-distance from the ESS locations in the southern portion of the WMA in Lamar County where ESS were detected during the 2021-2022 survey season. On Mulberry Fork WMA, an ESS was detected in this first year of survey on this WMA. An ESS was detected at one camera-trap on two separate occasions, 10 days apart. We believe this to be the same individual. Additional attempts using multiple cameras at the site failed to acquire any additional ESS photos or videos.

We continue to occasionally receive reports of ESS from the public, generated by our outreach flyer and information on outdooralabama.com. Since the beginning of the campaign in 2016 we have received 48 verified observations

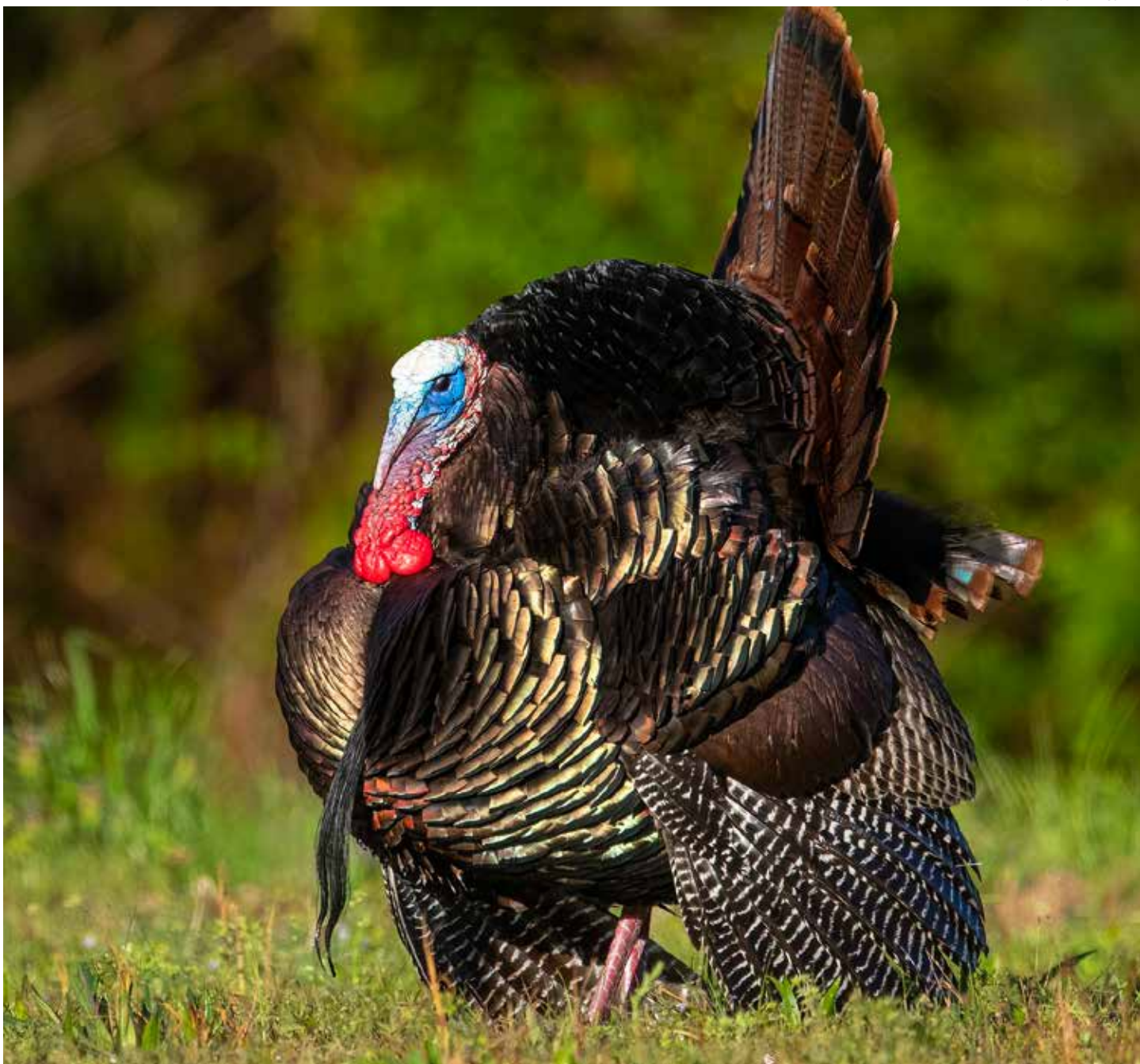
Long-tailed Weasel Research: Program biologists continue to receive reports of long-tailed weasels from the public after launching the citizen science campaign in 2021. Since the launch of that campaign, we have received over 40 verified reports, with a statewide distribution and frequency of reports suggesting long-tailed weasels may not be as rare as previously believed. Continued outreach is needed to obtain additional reports in the future.

Allegheny Woodrat Research: A collaboration with the University of North Alabama to investigate the distribution of the Allegheny woodrat continues. Dr. Jeff Ray at the University of North Alabama (UNA) established the capacity in his lab to prepare scat samples for DNA analysis. He then sends these to a lab to distinguish the Allegheny woodrat and the Eastern woodrat. Dr. Ray does this with no funding from WFF. Seven locations around Huntsville were surveyed for woodrat latrine sites and samples were found and collected at three of those. Two have been identified as Allegheny woodrat. Results from the third sample are pending. Although there are Allegheny woodrat museum vouchers from Alabama identified by skull morphology, this is the first time the species has been genetically verified as present in Alabama.

Endangered Species (Section 6) Research: WFF received \$444,727 in federal funds for projects on fish and wildlife species eligible for funding under Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act. Approximately half of the total funds were for projects administered by the Wildlife Section. Population and status surveys for the gopher tortoise, red-bellied turtle, and Black Warrior waterdog, along with red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) translocation and habitat restoration on state lands, are examples of projects made possible by those funds.

American Alligator Populations: American alligator population and harvest surveys are conducted annually throughout its range in Alabama. Data from these surveys are used to manage our alligator resources and make harvest recommendations for each of the state's five hunt zones. Population surveys are used to evaluate overall trends in alligator abundance. Hunter harvest data is also collected annually from all alligators harvested within each zone to evaluate the health of the population. Harvest information such as body weight, length, sex, and harvest location are collected. This information provides insights regarding trends in health as well as sex and age structure of our alligator populations. Long-term trends from harvest and population surveys continued to indicate that Alabama's alligator population is stable, and a conservative harvest is sustainable. Interest in the hunts increased in 2023. A total of 260 harvest permits were made available, and we received a total of 23,518 applications from 4,618 applicants. This was a 228% increase from the 7,167 applications received in 2022. Hunter success rates increased 4.6% from 2022 with a 63.8% success rate throughout the five hunt zones. Success rates within each hunt zone are as follows: Southwest 73% with 73 harvested, Coastal 54% with 27 harvested, West Central 72% with 36 harvested, Southeast 42.5% with 17 harvested, and Lake Eufaula 65% with 13 harvested. The hunts continue to increase in popularity, providing hunters with additional opportunities to enjoy a unique hunting experience. To further understand and manage alligator resources in Alabama, WFF initiated a collaborative research project with other state agencies and universities to obtain information regarding hunter harvest management, public satisfaction, and baseline population health within the Mobile-Tensaw Delta.

Falconry Permits: The Nongame Wildlife Program administers falconry permits for the state and provides technical assistance to permit holders. Staff administer falconry written examinations, conduct required falconry facility and equipment inspections, issue permits and inputs data to the federal falconry database. As of September 30, 2023, Alabama had 69 active falconry permits. These 69 permits were divided among eight apprentice permits, 32 general class permits, and 29 master class permits. Seven falconers did not renew their permits by the August 31 expiration date. During FY 2022-2023, two new apprentice falconers and one master class falconer were issued permits. Additionally, five apprentice falconers advanced to general class and two general class falconers advanced to master class.



PRIVATE LANDS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

Technical Assistance: The Wildlife Section employs seven biologists dedicated to providing technical assistance to private landowners, corporations, hunting clubs, and government agencies. Throughout the year, biologists made contacts and provided onsite inspections, reviewed, and drafted management plans, and conducted various other management outreach activities to enhance wildlife management of Alabama's wildlife resources. One of the most popular avenues for dispensing wildlife management advice is through the agency's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). DMAP included 126 landowners and hunting clubs with 123,235 acres enrolled last year.

Providing landowners and land managers technical assistance in implementing strategies to improve wildlife habitat on their lands continued to grow in importance. As a result, a mutually beneficial 10-year partnership continued with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). This partnership helps private landowners with obtaining farm bill program assistance while delivering better wildlife management advice. Under a cooperative agreement, technical assistance biologists worked out of NRCS offices and worked with NRCS personnel to deliver the programs. Seven section biologists worked in this partnership in FY 2022-2023. Biologists met with landowners to develop conservation plans and contracts. Biologists also participated in numerous workshops, tours, presentations, working groups, and training sessions that reached hundreds of landowners and dozens of

natural resource agency personnel. This partnership with NRCS will continue in FY 2023-2024.

Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Meetings: Staff continued meetings and site visits with personnel from Alabama Power Company (APC) associated with the Coosa Wildlife Management Plan, Harris Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project, and Martin Dam APC hydroelectric relicensing project. Staff reviewed documents regarding the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for the hydroelectric projects at Martin, Jordan, Mitchell, and Weiss lakes. Plans are required by the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. Staff will continue active involvement in the development of wildlife, shoreline, threatened and endangered species, and recreation management plans for all projects associated with hydroelectric power generation.

East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture: Section personnel continue to participate in various aspects of the East Gulf Coastal Plain Joint Venture, a partnership of 13 state, federal, private, and academic organizations that leads a regional habitat conservation movement founded on a science-based, landscape-scale strategy. The partnership can more effectively secure a sustainable future for birds and habitats.

Nuisance Wildlife: Nuisance wildlife information was disseminated to the public through a variety of media outlets, educational workshops, technical literature, and personal correspondence. Due to their destructive nature and negative impact on wildlife habitat, feral hogs are of serious concern in Alabama. Partnerships continued across the state with personnel from ADCNR, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, and USDA Wildlife Services to provide informative workshops regarding feral hog biology, impacts of feral hogs on wildlife habitat, disease implications, current control methods and techniques, and the need to eliminate relocation of this species. Control of other nuisance and predator species, such as beavers, coyotes, and raccoons, also generates many requests for assistance from landowners and land managers due to their potential impacts on game species, including white-tailed deer and wild turkeys. Personnel conducted and assisted with numerous workshops and seminars around the state to provide landowners, hunting clubs, forestry owners, and the public with information to be proactive in their nuisance wildlife management activities. Additionally, articles about dealing with these species were made available to the public online through ADCNR's website, www.outdooralabama.com. Personnel utilized the ADCNR nuisance manual to provide the public with current information on nuisance wildlife species and ongoing nuisance issues across the state.

Trapper Educational Workshops: Staff conducted 10 furbearer trapping education workshops. Workshops were held in Butler, Bibb, Escambia, Jackson, Jefferson, Baldwin, St. Clair, Covington, Barbour, and Pike counties. The two-day program begins on a Saturday morning with classroom presentations on trapping history, furbearer management, responsible trapping and conservation, and trapping regulations. Presentations continue with additional discussion on trap and snare types, trapping equipment and lures and baits, and hands-on trap-setting familiarization.

Saturday afternoons are devoted to trapline scouting and making sets with mentors. On Sunday mornings, the students meet at predawn to check traps and pull their trapline. The remainder of the day is devoted to fur-handling methods and techniques. Student participation in the workshops included 139 youth and 194 adults. Of the 333 students, 250 were male (75%) and 83 were female (25%). Of those participants 324 were white, one was Black, and eight were Native American. Most of our youth participants were accompanied by a parent or guardian. Plans for FY 2023-2024 are to conduct 10 two-day workshops throughout Alabama.

FUTURE ISSUES

Public Hunting: The loss of leased land in the WMA system is a continued concern. Land acquisitions supported with Federal Grant Programs are pursued each year to help offset losses in our private land leases. During FY 2022-2023, Wildlife Restoration (Pittman-Robertson) Federal Grant Assistance funds and matching funds from the FWLT were used to purchase 4,807 acres that were added to Red Hills WMA and Autauga WMA. Additionally, 1,513 acres were purchased by FWLT that were added to Riverton CHA, Freedom Hills WMA, and Perdido River WMA. More leased land is likely to be lost in the future as private and corporate landowners withdraw from their contractual agreements. The Section will attempt to contractually lease or fee-simple purchase other lands and provide additional incentives to encourage landowners to include lands in the program. WFF will also continue to work with FWLT to acquire land for public hunting.

Nuisance Wildlife: The occurrence of nuisance wildlife problems and conflicts continues to rise, especially as we deal with an increasingly urbanized society. This portion of the public is inexperienced in dealing with wildlife issues. Also, the urban/suburban setting limits common solutions to deal with many of these problems. At the district level, a considerable amount of work time is spent providing assistance on nuisance wildlife calls. As the Division becomes more active in dealing with these non-traditional wildlife issues, time management and funding will become more challenging. The Division's Wildlife Section has issued approximately 114 nuisance wildlife control operator permits across the state. These permits allow private companies/individuals to deal with nuisance wildlife issues.

State Funding: Federal funding associated with the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act has increased significantly during the past five years. The matching state dollars required to fully utilize all the federal dollars (25%/75%) have been limited and could lead to reversions of federal dollars if matching opportunities are not available. WFF staff has collaborated with the FWLT Board of Trustees and worked cooperatively to utilize Forever Wild funding as a state match source. This assists in capturing the federal apportionment that is beyond the amount our traditional state dollars can match, thereby providing aid for land acquisitions into the WMA system. We are exploring other options to fully utilize our federal dollars through partnerships with outside entities and third-party, in-kind match.



WHO MUST PURCHASE A LICENSE TO HUNT IN ALABAMA?

By Chuck Sykes, Director of the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division

WHY DO I NEED TO BUY A HUNTING LICENSE?

One of the biggest misconceptions I've dealt with since I became Director in 2012 is people thinking their tax dollars pay for the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) Division. I can somewhat understand the confusion from members of the general public because many state agencies are funded from their general tax fund. What surprises me is how many hunters don't understand the WFF funding model. And more perplexing is all the effort they will go through to avoid purchasing a license even if they do understand how we are funded.

PHOTO: BILLY POPE



So, who needs to purchase a hunting license? That seems to be a pretty easy question to answer, but let's come at this from a little different direction. It may be easier to start with who doesn't need to purchase a license to hunt here. In Alabama, three categories of people are exempt from buying a hunting license. The first is anyone under the age of 16. Next are Alabama residents aged 65 or older. Third are resident landowners and their resident immediate family members when hunting on family-owned property.

Our staff are often asked, "What is immediate family?" Regulation 220-2-.160 says, "For the purposes of Section 9-11-44(d), Code of Alabama 1975, 'immediate family' is defined as, landowner's spouse, children, parents, brothers, and sisters." So, if you are an Alabama resident and your father-in-law owns the property, you need a hunting license. If your uncle owns the property, you need a hunting license. If your father owns the property, you do not need a license to hunt. If you own the property, your mother-in-law must have a hunting license to legally hunt. I hope that clarifies the "immediate family" questions.

Each year we get quite a few calls from angry non-resident landowners who don't understand why they must purchase a license to hunt on property they own in Alabama. The way the statute is written, Section 9-11-44 defines who qualifies as a resident. In the most simplistic terms, a person must reside in Alabama for a continuous period of at least 90 days and have a valid Alabama driver's license or an Alabama non-driver ID, or be a member of the military stationed in Alabama. People holding multiple state driver's licenses do not qualify as Alabama residents.

Believe it or not, we spend a considerable amount of time validating whether someone is actually living here. It's pretty amazing the extent some people go to in an attempt to circumvent the license system and claim to be an Alabama resident. Between our license section, WFF Administrative Section, and Law Enforcement Section, countless hours are spent on this issue each year. I think it's worth noting that a non-resident falsifying information to obtain a resident license is considered a felony in the state of Alabama.

It's ironic that those who are trying to fraudulently save their dollars are spending your dollars. The time and effort spent on their antics is being paid for with monies from those of you who are making appropriate license purchases. It is also safe to assume that the people who are doing this are also claiming residency in another state and, therefore, not paying for a

non-resident license anywhere. However, if you hunt in their home state, you better believe they are receiving the benefits that your non-resident purchase provides to their state. Those who cheat the system aren't "sticking it to the man", they're sticking it to you.

Other than those three groups who qualify for exemption, everyone else should purchase a hunting license when going afield. Even if you aren't physically shooting at an animal, your participation in the event could be considered hunting. As the old saying goes, "It's better to be safe than sorry." If you really think about it, anyone who hunts, regardless of age or landowner status, should purchase a hunting license.

The North American Model of Wildlife Management is built on seven pillars, the first being that wildlife is a public trust resource. That means that all wildlife, whether it is found on public or private land, is owned by the people. It is not private property. WFF is charged with ensuring that current and future generations of Alabamians have wildlife and wild places to enjoy, and how we accomplish this is through services paid for, in large part, with license dollars.

Purchasing a hunting license does much more than simply keep you legal in the field. It also allows you to utilize our 20 archery parks and 12 public shooting ranges throughout the state. Additionally, it should be reassuring to know that your license purchase, regardless of why you bought it, is the most direct way that you can safeguard the natural resources of our state by providing funding for on-the-ground conservation.

WFF receives approximately half of its annual budget from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, not your tax dollars. For every dollar from state hunting licenses WFF generates, we can obtain three federal dollars (Pittman Robertson excise tax dollars). I wish all my investments had a return like that. Even if you don't hunt but you enjoy going outdoors and enjoying wildlife, our agency plays a vital role in the protection and enhancement of those natural resources.

Since the founding of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the monies collected from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses have had a direct impact on the protection and enrichment of the natural resources of our state, resources that every Alabamian – past, present, and future – own. Abundant game and generous seasons and bag limits indicate that we are using your license dollars wisely to manage these resources and provide you access to them. WFF works for wildlife conservation every day; thank you for making it possible through your license purchases. ■



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