



# SANDY CREEK NATURE CENTER

# The Hyla

VOL. 42, No. 2

Sandy Creek Nature Center is a facility of the Athens-Clarke County Leisure Services Department

Summer 2026

## NATURE NEWS

### Sea Slugs contain chloroplasts and photosynthesize

Have you ever wondered if you could be like a tree and photosynthesize your food? If you were a sea slug in the *Sacoglossan* clade or a specific type of marine flatworm, you could do just that!



The *Elysia timida* sea slug eats a type of algae and steals the chloroplasts from the algae. Scientists aren't sure how they may use the stolen chloroplasts yet.

Source: eLife Sciences



### White Tailed Deer Give a Glow Up

Armed with a UV light, researchers explored Whitehall Forest for deer signs like scrapes and rubs. Turns out these signs fluoresce under the black light. Deer vision picks up the UV spectrum so this could be a way to communicate territory with other deer outside of the visual from the rubbing and the smell from urine. Scrapes glow mostly from the urine deposited. Rubs most likely have deposits from glands on their heads.

Source: Smithsonian Magazine

## THE TALE OF DORIS THE TORTOISE (A 25 YEAR REUNION)

By Anne Thomas, Program Assistant

Once upon a time, in a land not too far away, a young boy wasn't feeling well and couldn't go to school or play. The land was Nicholson, a few miles from Sandy Creek Nature Center, and the boy was named Cody. On this particular day, when Cody just happened to be at home instead of at school, a reptile

was making her way through his backyard. And Cody who loved to be outdoors, went outside at just the right time to find her. By his swing set he saw what he thought was some kind of large turtle. It was one he'd never seen before, so he didn't know she was a gopher tortoise who was very far away from home!

Cody ran inside to get his mom, and asked if he could please keep her! They offered her a tomato, which she seemed to really like. They also sprayed her with a garden hose, which she really did not like! Cody wanted to put her in his little swimming pool, but his mom thought it would be a better idea to take her to Lake Chapman at Sandy Creek Park, so that was where they headed. When they arrived,

Bobby Kerce, Facility Supervisor of the park at the time, recognized that she was a gopher tortoise, a land tortoise not a swimming turtle, and suggested they bring her to Sandy Creek Nature Center where animal caretaker Andy Howington could care for her. The nature center has special permits for the animals that live here, and

Andy got permission from the Department of Natural Resources for her to stay. That is how Doris the Tortoise came to live at Sandy Creek Nature Center – but that is only the beginning of the tale.

Gopher tortoises' natural homes are in the coastal plain of Georgia, not the Piedmont here where Cody lives. They also live in a small southern corner of South Carolina, most of Florida, southern Alabama and Mississippi, and a small south-east-

ern corner of Louisiana. They live where the soil is sandy and they can dig their burrows. They have front legs like shovels for digging. Their back legs are "elephantine" tortoise legs for walking and carrying a heavy shell. They can't dig burrows in the



*Cody Henderson proudly shows off the Gopher Tortoise he found in his yard last Wednesday. Experts at the Sandy Creek Nature Center said these tortoises are rarely found in this part of Georgia.*

Continued on Page 2.



# SANDY CREEK Nature Center

205 Old Commerce Road  
Athens, GA 30607  
706-613-3615

[www.accgov.com/](http://www.accgov.com/)

[sandycreeknaturecenter](http://sandycreeknaturecenter)

Located off Commerce Road,  
441 North, 1/2 mile north of the  
Athens bypass, on the left

### Hours of Operation

8:30 am to 5:30 pm

Tuesday ~ Saturday

Building closed Sunday & Monday

Trails open daily sunrise to sunset

### Nature Center Staff

Michelle Cash, *Naturalist*

Kaleish Hoynes, *Program Assistant*

Garrett Lane, *Recreation Assistant*

Kate Mowbray, *Naturalist*

Vacant, *Facility Supervisor*

Anne Thomas, *Program Assistant*

Blake Welch, *Program Leader*

Connor White, *Park Assistant*

### Friends of Sandy Creek Nature Center

The Board of Directors meets on the  
first Tuesday of each month  
(except holidays).

The public is welcome.

For more information about

SCNC, Inc. contact:

Emily Bailey, *Operations Coordinator*

[scncinc@gmail.com](mailto:scncinc@gmail.com)

To submit contributions  
to the *Hyla*, contact:

Kate Mowbray at

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*Doris with recently retired SCNC supervisor Randy Smith, Cody Henderson, and program leader and animal caretaker Blake Welch*

rocky and hard clay soil. Tortoises are ectothermic animals that rely on heat in their environment to warm their bodies. Had Cody not found Doris and brought her to the nature center, she probably would not have survived the winter above ground.

Because gopher tortoises dig burrows and share them with other animals who need their shelter, they are called a keystone species. Keystones are what hold the stones in an arch together, and gopher tortoises hold their ecosystem together by providing homes for more than 350 different species. Snakes, rabbits, mice, burrowing owls, and gopher frogs are just a few of the animals that depend on gopher tortoises' burrows. There are hundreds of invertebrates that depend on them for their shelter too. Their burrows provide a cool place to get away from hot summer temperatures, as well as a place animals can stay safe from fires which are also an important part of their ecosystem. The role gopher tortoises have in their environment is so important they are Georgia's state reptile! They are protected by laws in all of the states where they live because their numbers are threatened, and because they provide shelter for other threatened and endangered animals that depend on them for survival. Many people want to vacation and live in the same places that gopher tortoises live. When people build homes and shopping centers to buy the things they need there, they take away the space and resources the tortoises need.

Doris can't tell us how she got all the way to Cody's yard and what adventures she had along the way. Perhaps someone removed her from her natural habitat long ago. Hopefully before they took her, she was able to live a natural gopher tortoise life helping support the ecosystem she lived in. She was fortunate to wander into Cody's yard when she did, and Cody was fortunate to find her, so that this story has a happy ending.

This past November, Cody Henderson came back to visit and was re-united with Doris. He realized it had been 25 years since the day he stayed home from school and found her in his backyard. At that time it was estimated that she was around 25 years old – which would make her a 50 year-old tortoise today. In the wild a gopher tortoise can live to be around 60 and can live to be anywhere from 80-100 years in captivity. Blake Welch is her animal caretaker now. He and his team of dedicated animal care volunteers ensure she receives a healthy diet with lots of grass in the form of hay pellets, and leafy greens. She also has the special UV lighting and heat sources she needs. She has an outside habitat where you can visit her when the weather is warm, and on rainy or cooler days she can be found in her classroom habitat. She has spent the last 25 years helping her ecosystem by educating others about the importance of habitat conservation and management. She is a part of our school and public programs, visited and loved by thousands of children and adults who have grown up learning from and loving her. If you would like to learn more about gopher tortoises please come visit Doris at Sandy Creek Nature Center.

# Message from the Friends of SCNC President



*Edith Hollander*

This has been a busy year for the Friends of Sandy Creek Nature Center and I want to thank all of the Board members for their dedication and effort. Stepping down from the Board earlier this year was Roger Nielsen and this summer is Terri Martin-Yates. We can't thank them enough for their service, enthusiasm and commitment.

We had four new Board members join this year, as well as our first Board Fellow. Here is a bit about each of them. I hope this inspires more of our members to consider volunteering to serve on the Board, on a planning committee, or volunteer at the Nature Center. Reach out to me if you are interested.



**SHANNON CALDWELL** is a coach and career development leader, leading the Atlanta career management center for Georgia

Executive, Professional, and Online MBAs; she studies ecology in her spare time. For Shannon, the nature center offers some of the best forest trails around, making it a go-to spot for walks with her beloved dogs. "So many of the trails are dirt surfaced, so a walk there really immerses you in nature," says Shannon. "When I was young, my grandfather and parents took me into the woods and taught me about animals and plants, and gave me a sense of respect and connection for them. Sandy Creek Nature Center continues that same mission."



**ANDREW CRAIN** is an Athens native, returning to the area 10 years ago to work at UGA. His background is in human resources and he currently manages STEM research fellowship

programs in partnership with federal agencies. Outside of work, Andrew enjoys outdoor activities like hiking, camping, or kayaking, as well as the great music, food, and sports attractions in Athens. "When I moved back to Athens, Sandy Creek Nature Center instantly became one of my favorite 'go-to' spots in town. I really enjoyed having ready access to some great trails and quiet reflection space during my downtime. Now as a parent, our family loves coming to SCNC a few times a month to take advantage of the greenway, the environmental education programs, and the nature exhibits." For Andrew, joining the Board was a chance to give back to the community in a way that was meaningful to him.



**JAMES SEWELL** hails from the small town of Senoia in central Georgia, where growing up outside the city limits fostered a love for "the boonies" and just being

out in nature. James moved to Athens in 2001 for college and stuck around ever since, earning a degree in Music at UGA, working as Stage Manager at the UGA Performing Arts Center, and currently as Production & Events Manager for his alma mater, the Hugh Hodgson School of Music. In recent years, he set a daily step goal for exercise and found that one of the most conducive places to get those steps was at the Sandy Creek Nature Center—a place where the trails provide beautiful terrain and fascinating ecosystems that always make being there a restorative and energiz-

ing experience. As a new board member, James is excited and honored to be a part of a great legacy and hallmark of Athens, to promote conservation, education, and health for our community.



**BLAKE SCHNEIDER** is another native Athenian to join the board. After living in New York City and the D.C. area, Blake was excited to return to Athens 11

years ago for her dream job working at the UGA Performing Arts Center, where she currently serves as Assistant Director, working with internationally acclaimed artists. Her personal connection to Sandy Creek Nature Center goes way back to before she was even born! Her grandfather, Robert "Bob" Saveland, was one of the founding members of the Nature Center and served as one of the first board of directors. Serving on the Board is a true honor for her, continuing the legacy of service by Board members (including the children of other founding board members) that helped start the nature center. Blake and her husband and two young kids are frequent visitors to the nature center.



**CALEIGH CHRISTENSEN** joined the board this spring as a MBA Non-profit Board Fellow from the UGA Terry College of Business. As a Board Fellow, Caleigh will serve as an ex officio

member for the next two years as she earns her degree in strategy and finance. With a background in IT and business consulting Caleigh jumped right into working with the Finance Committee, helping to develop a three-year planning system for the board. The Board is also updating its website and she is a great resource in this area, too. She is a distance runner and enjoys skiing and snowboarding, boxing and pickleball.

# Sandy Creek Nature Center Program Guide

## Summer 2025

### Summer Programs for All Ages

#### Celebrate Mud Day

Come play in the mud with us and appreciate all the benefits of mud. Wear clothes that you don't mind getting dirty and shoes that will stay on your feet in the sticky mud. No flip flops, no bare feet!

Drop in for a few minutes or play the entire time. We will have a wash station to use before getting in your car.

- Ages:** Anyone that likes to play in the mud
- Date:** Saturday, June 13
- Time:** 10:00am-12:00pm
- Fee:** Free. Pre-registration **not** required.

#### Creek Walk

Take a walk in Sandy Creek for a cooling hike. Participants must wear closed toed shoes-no sandals and no crocs.

- Ages:** For all ages. Children under 13 must be accompanied by an adult.
- Date:** August 29
- Time:** 10am
- Fee:** Free. Pre-registration required.

#### Pollinator Census

Help us participate in the Great Southeast Pollinator Census. Participants will count how many different species of insects visit a particular flower in 15 minutes.

- Ages:** All ages. Children under 13 must be accompanied by an adult
- Date:** August 22
- Time:** 10am
- Fee:** Free. Pre-registration **not** required.



#### Journey Through the Stars for Families

Join us for our planetarium program in the Sky Center. We will journey through the night sky, exploring the great beyond.

#### Summer Skies

WEDNESDAY, JULY 18 - Come learn what constellations, stars and planets are visible in the summer night sky! Listen to stories of summer constellations.

#### For ALL Planetarium Programs:

- Ages:** Ages 5-Adult. ALL participants must pre-register. Children under 13 must be accompanied by a registered adult. Children under 5 will not be admitted.
- Time:** 10:00-11:00 am
- Fee:** \$5/ACC resident, \$8/Non-resident



#### Sandy Creek Nature Center

Friends of Sandy Creek Nature Center (formally SCNC, INC) are teaming up with nature center staff to bring a special event to the nature center. On **August 8th starting at 10:00 am** we are having a "Friends of Sandy Creek Nature Center" event. At this event we are celebrating friendship. Nature has a lot of unique friendships to offer. We are inviting special friends to help us celebrate.

Crafts, activities, and a whole slew of offerings including Kona Ice and model trains from Maurice Snook. Come celebrate with us as schools kick-off their start and as we celebrate our new name of "Friends of Sandy Creek Nature Center."

#### Nature Center Hours:

**Tuesday - Saturday**  
**8:30 am - 5:30 pm**  
 Trails are open every day from sunrise to sunset.

#### Program Information:

All programs are held at Sandy Creek Nature Center unless otherwise indicated.

Call 706 613-3615 for more information.

#### Program Registration:

Register online at <https://accgovga.myrec.com>

All pre-registration ends 2 days prior to program start unless noted otherwise.

Need-based scholarships are available for Athens-Clarke County residents under age 18. See department policy for refunds and cancellations.

# SUMMER IS BUSY AT THE NATURE CENTER!

## DAY CAMP

Summer break for children means summer camp for us. We host a day camp with sixty children between the ages of 7-12 years for seven weeks of camp. Camp begins **June 1st** and runs through **July 17**, 9 am-4 pm each day. We also host a mini camp for 24 children between the ages of 4-6 years.

We will have 3 sessions of Mini Camp throughout the summer. Classrooms will not be available for public use on June 10-12, June 24-26, and July 8-10 from 9:00 am-1:00 pm.

## MINI-CAMPS

Sandy Creek Day Camp is held at Sandy Creek Park on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays and at Sandy Creek Nature Center on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Drop off for camp on these days is 8:45 am-9:00 am and pick up is 4:00 pm-4:15 pm. The parking lot is very busy during these times so you may want to plan your visit time around this schedule. If an organized group plans to visit the nature center this summer, we encourage them to call and schedule their self-guided tour for times when it is less busy.

**BUSY DROP-OFF & PICK UP TIMES**

## Dam It Up Beavers

by Michelle Cash, SCNC Naturalist

**T**urns out semi-aquatic rodents are good for flying mammals. When beavers build a dam, the resulting wetland is a great habitat for bats and pollinators. These wetlands are filled with dead, standing trees and lots of insects. Bats find roosting sites in the trees and have an abundance of insects to eat. Turns out these beaver-built habitats are better than human-made habitats.

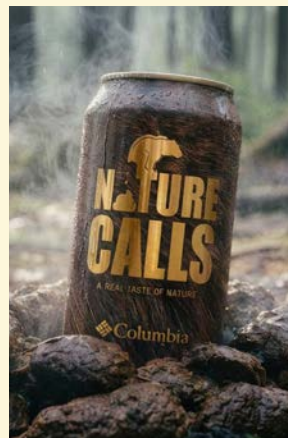
This information is backed by scientific studies and journals. (Smithsonian and Journal of Animal Ecology) The studies indicate beaver-made wetlands had 1.6 times more bat activity and a larger variety of species. Results determined an increase in pollinators, too. Primarily due to an increase in healthier habitats for plants.

Beaver-made wetlands have other benefits too; the wetlands help protect against wildfires, improve water quality, store carbon, mitigate flooding, and lessen effects of drought. Turns out that nature is better than human-made. Congratulations to the beavers, they are dam good engineers.



## Crappy Beer

by Michelle Cash, SCNC Naturalist



**P**icture sitting on a porch after a hot, summer day. You plop down in the rocking chair and open an ice-cold beer. You enjoy the notes of huckleberries and honey. You take another bold gulp of the “Nature Calls” beer. You focus your tired eyes on the ingredients listed on the can. “Water Infusion:


The brewing water is sterilized and infused with wild, Montana black bear scat.”

Aww, nice refreshing water infused with black bear scat. Wait, did you read that correctly? Scat in my beer? Scat equals poop. You mean that I’m drinking black bear poop beer? Being too tired to care, you kick back and continue to enjoy the crisp lager. When life gives you poop-make beer!


*Columbia Sportswear, in partnership with Milwaukee-based Breakside Brewery, has unveiled a new beer featuring a wildly unique ingredient: bear feces. The new brew is called “Nature Calls.”*

# Sandy Creek Nature Center Calendar of Events


## JUNE 2026

	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
SUNDAY	2	3			6
MONDAY	9	SUMMER MINI-CAMP; 9:30 am - 12:30 pm			13 Celebrate MUD DAY, 10 am - 12 noon
	16	17	18	19 SCNC CLOSED FOR HOLIDAY	20
	23	SUMMER MINI-CAMP; 9:30 am - 12:30 pm			27

## JULY 2026

SUNDAY	30	1	2	3 SCNC CLOSED FOR HOLIDAY	4
	7	SUMMER MINI-CAMP; 9:30 am - 12:30 pm			11
MONDAY	14		16	17	18 Journey Through the Stars for Families: Summer Skies, 10-11 am
	21		23	24	25
	28		30	31	

## AUGUST 2026

SUNDAY					1
MONDAY	4	5	6	7	8 Friends of Sandy Creek Nature Center Day, 10 am
	11	12	13	14	15
	18	19	20	21	22 Pollinator Census, 10 am
	25	26	27	28	29 Creek Walk, 10 am

Calendar Color Key  
 ◆ Kids  
 ◆ Everyone  
 ◆ Adults  
 ◆ Special Event

# Donors and Contributors

Thanks to all the following members who joined or renewed during this past quarter.

## SUSTAINING

Ken Cook  
Marlo Wiggans

## CONTRIBUTING

Gloria Baumgartner  
Larry and Gail Dendy  
Charlie Jameson  
Gregory Mitsoff  
Roger and Pat Nielsen

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## INDIVIDUAL

Marcia Caskey  
Kina Hood  
Cecilia Hyers  
Jeanie Whitener

## SPECIAL GIFTS

Carl Bergmann  
Elaine Crawford  
The Ashby M. Foster Memorial  
Fund at the Athens Area  
Community Foundation  
Dan Hope  
Charlie Jameson  
Oconee Rivers Audubon Society  
Watkinsville United  
Methodist Women  
Jeanie Whitener

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### EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Edith Hollander, *President*  
Chris Enders, *Vice-President*  
Vacant, *Secretary*  
Peter Sengson, *Treasurer*  
Emily Carr, *Past President*

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## Friends of Sandy Creek Nature Center Membership

Sandy Creek Nature Center, Inc. is the nonprofit organization which founded the Nature Center in 1973. Memberships help provide funding for educational programs and capital improvements. Members also receive a 10% discount on many of our programs and at our Frog Pond Gift Shop.

Join or renew your membership on our website here:



Also, if you are a current member, you will receive a renewal notice in the mail with a form you can fill out and return. Or call Emily at 762-400-7734 for more information.

Thank you for your contribution.



205 Old Commerce Road  
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A Quarterly Newsletter of Sandy Creek Nature Center

