

MOUNTAINS

Entomologist reflects on role of women in science



Word from the Smokies

Frances Figart
Columnist

When Becky Nichols was in graduate school there weren't many women studying to become entomologists. Over the years, she has seen this change dramatically.

"Now about half of the graduate degrees in entomology are awarded to women," said Nichols, Great Smoky Mountains National Park's entomologist. "This is not true in all scientific fields, however, and there is still work to be done to make these career paths more inclusive and equitable for all people."

With that goal in mind, the United Nations General Assembly declared Feb. 11 the annual International Day of Women and Girls in Science in 2015. The day recognizes the critical role women and girls play in science and technology.

Nichols grew up in a rural area in Washington and spent a lot of time outdoors surrounded by nature. "Our family vacations usually involved camping and hiking in state and national parks and forests," she said. "I developed an appreciation and respect for nature at a young age, and I've had an interest in biology for as long as I can remember."

She started college at Washington State University as a wildlife biology major, not certain what type of career to pursue. Taking classes in many biological fields of study revealed that her interests were in the branch of zoology concerned with the study of insects.

"My family, friends, and mentors were always supportive of whatever career choice I was interested in, and numerous people along the way provided encouragement and guidance," she said. "It wasn't always easy being one of the few females in my field of study, but over time this has changed, and it is now quite common to see women and people of all backgrounds in many scientific disciplines."

Nichols spent summers working for the U.S. Department of Agriculture on grasshopper control programs, which exposed her to different types of jobs in entomology. Research in graduate school at Texas



Entomologist Becky Nichols determines the peak display period for the famous synchronous fireflies of the Smokies. COURTESY OF JOYE ARDYN DURHAM

Tech and the University of Missouri focused specifically on aquatic entomology, insect ecology, and biodiversity, leading eventually to a job in the Smokies.

What we might find Nichols doing on any particular day depends largely on the season. In summer, we might find her in park streams collecting aquatic insects or in various other habitats studying insect populations. This time of the year she is often in the laboratory identifying insects, preparing specimens for the park's natural history collection, or working on a computer processing data.

Nichols first learned about the Smokies' famous

synchronous fireflies in 1998 just after she started working in the park. "The fireflies were well known by the local community at Elkmont when people still lived in the area," she said. "It was quite amazing to see the display for the first time with just a handful of other local people who knew about it." Now she determines the lightning bugs' peak display period by calculating "degree days," a measure of maximum and minimum air and soil temperature data from the Elkmont site.

Other insect-related duties include monitoring aquatic insect diversity to determine stream health, helping to coordinate the All Taxa Biodiversity Inventory, and working with cooperating scientists and park partners conducting research projects.

Nichols often gives presentations to students of various ages and genders about entomology, natural history, biodiversity, and her career path. "Many times, they are not aware of the types of job opportunities, and I like to encourage them to pursue whatever interests them," she said. "Also, I think seeing a female in my role helps them to realize that there are no boundaries."

During the summers Nichols hires interns or seasonal employees to assist with field work, and many are young women. Their experiences in the Smokies often help them to better determine what type of career they want to pursue, and Nichols provides as much guidance as she can. She is thrilled to see some of her former employees — both male and female — go on to become professional scientists.

"I think it's important for women and girls to feel like there are no barriers to pursuing whatever field they choose," Nichols said. "Women have made amazing contributions to science, and we need to continue working towards an environment that encourages equal participation of people from all backgrounds. A diverse group of scientists enhances creativity and ensures that we are more likely to come up with new ideas and perspectives."

Frances Figart is the editor of Smokies Life magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Learn more at smokiesinformation.org and reach the author at frances@gsassoc.org.

NCDMV removes Confederate flag from license plate options

Hunter Ingram Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

RALEIGH — Six months after acknowledging it had received complaints about the representation of the Confederate battle flag on a specialty license plate, the N.C. Department of Motor Vehicles will no longer issue or renew the plate for drivers.

The removal of the license plate, issued to members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans organization, quietly became effective at the start of the new year, according to a statement from the NCDMV.

"Effective January 1, 2021, the Division of Motor Vehicles will no longer issue or renew specialty license plates bearing the Confederate battle flag or any variation of that flag," the statement read. "The Division of Motor Vehicles (DMV) has determined that license plates bearing the Confederate battle flag have the potential to offend those who view them. We have therefore concluded that display of the Confederate battle flag is inappropriate for display on specialty license plates, which remain property of the state."

In July 2020, as the nation became embroiled in a reckoning with its racial past spurred by the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis police custody, the NCDMV confirmed it had received complaints about plates bearing the Confederate flag.

The plates incorporate a specific design for the Sons of Confederate Veterans (SCV), an organization founded in 1896 by the United Confederate Veterans, who were men that fought in the Civil War and wanted to pass on the South's heritage to their descendants.

Last summer, the state reported it had more than 2,500 active license plates that bore the SCV's Confederate flag emblem. As of Feb. 1, 2021, that number has increased to 3,015, according to NCDMV spokesman Steve Abbott.

Frank Powell, spokesman for the North Carolina chapter of the SCV, said members were not given a heads up on the discontinuation and only found out when they went in for renewals at the start of the year.

Powell said the plates are used as signs of membership in the organization and stated last summer they had no plans of forfeiting them because of complaints.

The DMV's statement on its decision specifically cites the ruling in the North Carolina Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans v. Faulkner, a 1998 court case that saw the SCV sue the state for recognition as a civic organization that qualified for the issuance of a specialty plates. The SCV won the case in a ruling upheld by the N.C. Court of Appeals, leading to the introduction of the Confederate battle flag plate.

In its statement, the NCDMV contends that it remains in accordance with the ruling, which it said does not extend to the actual contents of the specialty plate.

"Consistent with the ruling in North Carolina Division of the Sons of Confederate Veterans v. Faulkner, DMV will continue to recognize the North Carolina Division of Sons of Confederate Veterans ("SCV") as a civic organization entitled to the issuance of a specialty plate," the statement read. "However, SCV's classification as a civic organization does not entitle it to dictate the contents of the government speech on that specialty plate."

Powell refutes this stance and said the organization plans to fight the decision, having already assembled its legal team to look into the matter.

"Our plates were issued under a court order and it was upheld by the N.C. Court of Appeals," he said. "I don't care who is the commissioner of the Department of Transportation is, they cannot violate the ruling."

The DMV also states that it has reached out — unsuccessfully — to the SCV about submitting an alternative design for the organization's specialty plate that



The N.C. Department of Motor Vehicles has discontinued the Sons of Confederate Veterans specialty license plate because it bears the image of the Confederate flag. N.C. DEPARTMENT OF MOTOR VEHICLES

does not contain the Confederate battle flag.

"Since these efforts have proven unsuccessful so far, the DMV determined the agency would no longer issue or renew these specialty plates," the statement read.

Powell further refutes this claim, saying no one in the organization's leadership has been contacted by the agency about an opportunity to design another plate.

"That is a blatant falsehood," he said.

The DMV reaffirmed it remains open to considering an alternative design and would resume the issuance of a specialty plate for SCV members upon approval. But until such an agreement is made, it will "either issue SCV members standard plates and refund any specialty-plate fees paid or provide them with different specialty plates," according to the statement.

Abbott confirmed Feb. 1 the plates will remain valid for drivers who already have them until their annual renewal period. While they are not required to turn the plate in, it can no longer be used on their vehicle once expired and they must notify their insurance company if issued a new plate with a new number.

Among the nearly 200 specialty plates available in the state, the SCV plate cost drivers a \$30 personalization fee and a required \$10 plate fee.

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