

MOUNTAINS

WORD FROM THE SMOKIES

Wilson helps provide safe passage for wildlife



Frances Figart
Word from the Smokies

Biologist Travis W. Wilson spends his days on the road — literally. It’s his job to assess the impacts of transportation projects and their effects on the fish and wildlife of North Carolina.

As the Eastern Department of Transportation Habitat Conservation Coordinator with North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Wilson is usually focused on the eastern half of the state. But lately he’s been studying roads in the Smokies as part of Safe Passage: The I-40 Pigeon River Gorge Wildlife Crossing Project.

Safe Passage is a collaborative effort that has been much in the news since early November when the North Carolina Department of Transportation announced a wildlife underpass will figure into replacing the Harmon Den bridge on Interstate 40 between Asheville and Knoxville. Wildlife crossing structures will be considered for several other bridge replacement projects in the Pigeon River Gorge over the next five years.

“I have had a fair amount of involvement on wildlife crossing projects in North Carolina,” Wilson said. “There are a lot of lessons learned, every situation has its unique challenges, and, with that experience, I was asked to participate in Safe Passage — first presenting some of the highlights from my region and then remaining onboard to participate in design review and technical committees.”

Wilson’s responsibilities include working with NCDOT, regulatory agencies, and other stakeholders in the planning, design, construction, and maintenance of wildlife crossing structures. His focus is determining how to address issues such as habitat fragmentation and highway permeability for both aquatic and terrestrial wildlife.

He can recall the first project in North Carolina that even recognized the need for a wildlife crossing. It was on a section of Interstate 26 in Madison County in the mid 1990s.

“The project was already designed and moving into construction, so NCDOT was only willing to install two box culverts that could easily be incorporated into the existing plans,” he said. “These structures were smaller than what biologists felt the site needed, and a 2008 study showed extremely limited use of the structures by wildlife.”

Then he saw the first comprehensive approach that considered wildlife in Washington County in eastern North Carolina on a proposed new section of U.S. 64.

“It was in the late 1990s, about the same time as the construction of I-26, but much earlier in the planning stages,” Wilson said. “This allowed biologists with NCWRC to evaluate and identify specific locations for wildlife crossing structures.”

Ultimately three locations were identified, and the agreed-upon structures were designed to be similar to the underpass structures on I-75 in Florida. Construction began in the early 2000s and was completed in 2006. Wildlife approved and still use these structures today.

Since that time, the state has benefited from several additional wildlife crossing structures: three wildlife underpasses along I-140 in Brunswick County; one structure designed for rep-



Each time animals like this coyote in Shenandoah National Park decide to cross a road, they risk their lives. When wildlife no longer takes that risk, the road becomes a barrier. PROVIDED BY BOB KUHNS



This aerial view of Interstate 40 shows the study area where Travis Wilson has been working in the Smokies lately as part of Safe Passage: The I-40 Pigeon River Gorge Wildlife Crossing Project. Photo made possible by Jake Faber and SouthWings. ANGELI WRIGHT/AWRIGHT@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

tiles and amphibian passage on a roadway that bisected two Carolina bays also in Brunswick County; and an underpass on U.S. 17 in Jones County was just completed in 2020.

“The next phase of U.S. 64 widening in Tyrell and Dare counties already has an agreed-upon wildlife crossing plan including 11 overpasses and dozens of smaller structures,” Wilson noted. “This highway project is currently not funded, but the groundwork has been completed for what would be the most comprehensive wildlife crossing project in North Carolina.”

Land conservation has always been a crucial piece of the safe passage puzzle statewide.

In the mid 1990s to the late 2000s, NCWRC helped to identify areas on the landscape with large intact corridors providing good habitat. Since then, NCWRC and NCDOT have collaborated to make highways more permeable with the incorporation of underpasses, bridge extensions, and other forms of road mitigation that can easily be incorporated into existing infrastructure.

“As the cost of those structures has increased and potential development seems to be a possibility everywhere in our state,” Wilson said, “large stand-alone wildlife crossings have become limited to areas that have conservation or protected lands adjacent to the structure.”

As our healthy economy, good quality of life, and attractions like Great Smoky Mountains National Park draw people to move into the state, more roads will be needed. So, it will be important to make wildlife crossing considerations



Travis W. Wilson, Eastern Department of Transportation Habitat Conservation Coordinator with North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, checks a camera used to monitor a wildlife crossing in Brunswick County. PROVIDED



On the afternoon of Dec. 4, 2018, this bobcat found a safe passage over Interstate 40 by traversing the top of the double tunnel, which formed a land bridge for wildlife when the highway was constructed in the 1960s. PROVIDED BY NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION AND WILDLANDS NETWORK

more and more commonplace.

“Without incorporating road ecology into a planning framework, wildlife corridors can be severed, leaving remnant fragments of habitat and increasing wildlife mortality,” Wilson said. “It is important to preserve those habitats and corridors now, not after a road goes through them or is widened.”

In early November, a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill passed the House, including \$350 million for a wildlife crossings pilot program that will provide grants to states, Tribes, local communities, federal agencies, and other land managers seeking to improve habitat connectivity by implementing wildlife crossing structures.

“The passage of this bill speaks vol-

umes to the growing awareness of road ecology and the need to think about wildlife impacts during the planning process,” Wilson said. “Transportation funding is stretched thin everywhere, and this money will hopefully allow transportation agencies to fund ecological highway improvements without compromising conventional highway project funds.”

Frances Figart is the editor of “Smokies Life” magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-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@gsmassoc.org.

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