

Explore. Create. Protect.

story by Dale Weiler



CHAMPIONS
FOR WILDLIFE



Champions for Wildlife founder, Dale Weiler, assisting a student in sculpting a red wolf.

In classrooms across Western North Carolina, children bring that mission to life through creativity. They sculpt salamanders and Red Wolves, study native species, and create artwork inspired by the animals and habitats around them.

At Champions for Wildlife, art and wildlife education go hand in hand. Working primarily with K-6 students, the organization believes that

when children connect with wildlife early in life, those experiences can stay with them for years to come.

Many native species are misunderstood or overlooked. Through creative, hands-on learning experiences, students are introduced to these underdogs. Art helps children slow down and spend time with the animals they are learning about. Students who participate in these Wild

for Art programs often leave reflecting with pride on their creations, like a little boy who, after learning about the Eastern Box Turtle shared, "Look at how good my turtle looks! I can't wait to show my mom and dad and teach them all about turtles!"

That same connection between art and wildlife can be seen in the work of artist and Society of Animal Artists member Dale Weiler. His life-

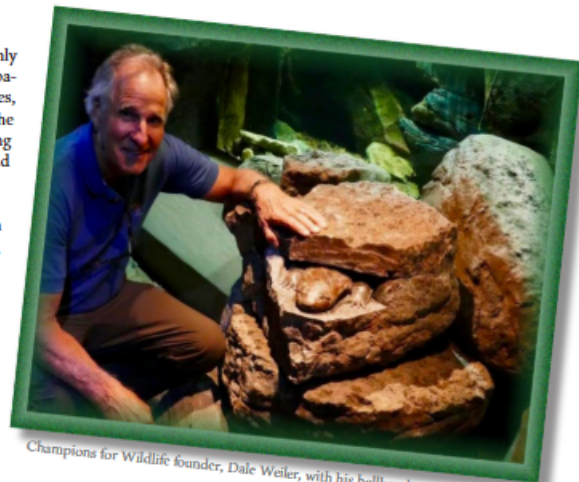
sized hellbender sculpture not only introduced people to one of Appalachia's most elusive native species, but eventually became part of the educational experiences helping students learn about wildlife and freshwater habitats.

The eastern hellbender, North America's largest salamander, lives in clean, rocky Appalachian streams and serves as an important indicator of freshwater ecosystem health. Because hellbenders rely on large rocks for shelter and nesting, even moving stones in a stream can unintentionally damage their habitat.

To help introduce visitors to this species, Dale created Hellbender's Rock, a life-sized stone sculpture of an Eastern Hellbender now displayed in the Streamside habitat at the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro. Designed as an interactive, touchable experience, the sculpture invites people to slow down, look closely, and connect with an animal many people have never seen before.

This piece would eventually become far more than a sculpture. Photographs of the artwork are now used in classrooms and educational programs to teach students about hellbenders and freshwater habitats. Through the artwork, children can study the animal's unique features up close while learning why clean water and protected habitats matter.

What began as an artistic creation evolved into a bridge between art, education, and wildlife connection. Whether students are sculpting wildlife, participating in nature journaling, or learning about spe-



Champions for Wildlife founder, Dale Weiler, with his hellbender rock sculpture.

16,724 pieces of
wildlife art have
been created by the
kids since 2022,
and the number
is growing!

The impact extends beyond the classroom. By introducing children to wildlife at an early age, Champions for Wildlife hopes to inspire a lasting sense of curiosity and care for the natural world that reaches into families and communities. Students often carry those experiences home with them, teaching siblings about the animals they discovered, proudly displaying their artwork, and sharing wildlife facts with parents and caregivers. In many ways, the learning continues long after the class has ended.

One recent story from a Champions for Wildlife volunteer perfectly captured the ripple effect of these programs. After hearing a teacher remark she had never seen her class so engaged, the volunteer later spotted one of those same students out in the community, excitedly pointing out flowers and teaching his family all about pollinators. Moments like

species habitats through interactive experiences, they are encouraged to explore through curiosity, create through art, and begin building the kind of personal connection that can inspire them to protect what they have come to know and care about.

these remind us that these experiences stay with students long after a program ends. These experiences stick with students, shaping what they notice and inspiring them to share that curiosity with the people around them.

Looking ahead, Champions for Wildlife hopes to continue expanding its creative wildlife programming and educational outreach, reaching more children and families through accessible, hands-on art experiences and a growing online exploration platform for kids that will launch soon.

For artists who care about wildlife, there are many ways to become part of the Champions for Wildlife community. Whether through volunteering, sharing artistic skills, supporting programs, or making a donation, every contribution helps bring creative wildlife experiences to more children and communities.

Artists can play a meaningful role in shaping how the next generation sees and values wildlife. Art has the power to spark curiosity and create lasting emotional connections. That belief is at the heart of Champions for Wildlife's work.

Because sometimes it all begins with something simple like a lump of clay and a salamander most people have never seen before.



Above: Champions for Wildlife volunteer, Cam, helping a student with his art project during a community event on pollinators.

At left: Student proudly displaying his nature journal after a Nature in Your Backyard program with Champions for Wildlife.



Student sculpting a Red Wolf out of clay.



Dale Weller, a longtime member of the Society of Animal Artists, and his wife Lotti Woods, founded Champions for Wildlife in 2022. Its mission is simple: to

inspire and empower the next generation to become champions for wildlife through the magical power of art. Today, 100 percent of the proceeds from Dale's sculpture sales support efforts to inspire the next generation through art and wildlife education.

Website: championsforwildlife.org

Instagram: [@championsforwildlife](https://www.instagram.com/championsforwildlife)

Facebook: [@championsforwildlife](https://www.facebook.com/championsforwildlife)

<https://www.linkedin.com/company/champions-for-wildlife>



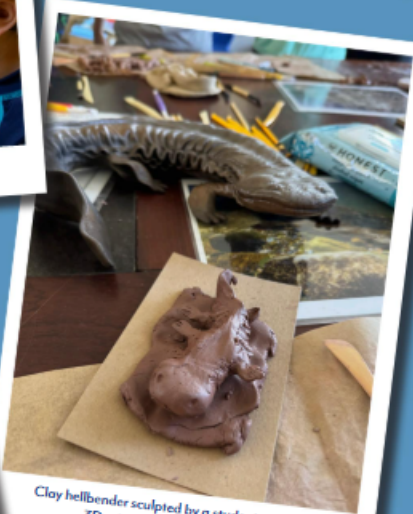
Student exploring outside with Champions for Wildlife in their Nature in Your Backyard program.



Students exploring biofacts.



Pollinator relief artwork create by students in a Wild for Art program.



Clay hellbender sculpted by a student next to a 3D printed hellbender model.



Hellbender sculpted out of clay by student in a Wild for Art Program.