



Hellbenders Rock

by Loti Woods and Dale Weiler

How do you get instant joy? Just look outside. In your backyard, out your apartment window, on a hike. Are lightning bugs flashing their early summer arrival? Birds building a nest? A frog croaking in the night? Or maybe a Hellbender lurking under a rock in the stream you just crossed on your hike. A what?

That's the reaction we had when we first heard of Hellbenders. A hell what? And come to find out, most of our friends didn't know about Hellbenders (also called snot otters) until...

But let's back up to the very beginning of the story. We had just gotten married after a whirlwind engagement of 8 days in 2016. We were both in our 60's (so it is never too late!) and trying to figure out what we wanted to do with the rest of our lives. Sharing a common passion for nature and wildlife, we had the idea of using Dale's art to bring public awareness to the frightening decline of so many species, especially amphibians.

A Facebook post of a beautiful North Carolina stream with piles of rocks artistically placed on a stream bed caught our attention. We thought “how cool and very zen.” Then the first comment appeared. “Do you know if you move rocks in a stream you could be killing a Hellbender”. Then the second comment was posted about Hellbenders with a link to a documentary called “The Last Dragon”. Fascinated, we watched the video and wanted to learn more about these prehistoric looking creatures. Come to find out, they are right in our backyard, in our Western North Carolina streams where the water is clear and fast running. And if you move a rock, which might be the roof of their home, they could potentially die since Hellbenders can live under the same rock for 30 years. Oh my! Rocks piled in a stream suddenly represented the potential headstones of a Hellbender graveyard. These rock piles, come to find out, were not only not cool, but downright sinister.

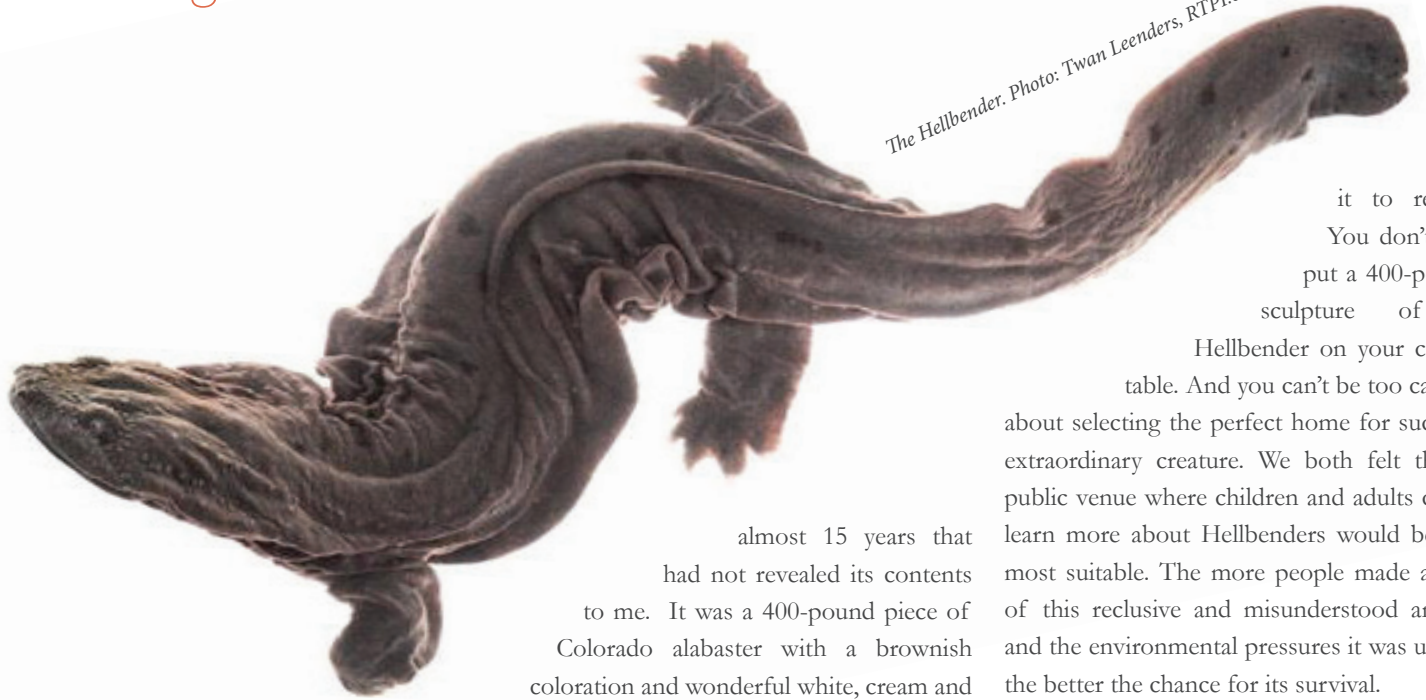
Why had we never heard of Hellbenders before? Being the largest aquatic salamander in the United States, reaching lengths of over 2 feet, you would think everyone would know about them. Living in streams from New York to Alabama, they are endemic to the Eastern United States. Armed with a little knowledge, we started researching them.

So what exactly does a Hellbender look like? To us, it is one beautifully unattractive creature. Resembling a flounder with legs, it is very flat (measuring only 2” high), which allows it to slide under shallow rock shelves to create its home. Once it finds its home, it rarely moves unless forced. They eat mainly crawfish with a few small fish and insects thrown into the menu. And since they breathe through their skin, Hellbenders are very susceptible to water pollution.

A Hellbender lazing in its stream. Photo: Twan Leenders, RTPI.org



The Hellbender. Photo: Twan Leenders, RTPI.org



almost 15 years that had not revealed its contents to me. It was a 400-pound piece of Colorado alabaster with a brownish coloration and wonderful white, cream and tan veining. Once I knew what I was looking for I could literally see a Hellbender tucking its head out from inside one corner of the stone.”

Now that we had an idea of what a Hellbender looked like, we set out to see a live one. But where would we find one?

Well, the Western North Carolina Nature Center in Asheville has a live one and is the very first one we met. He (and yes, it is a he) lives in a very unique tank that you can lay underneath and get a close-up view of his belly and feet. Now that is cool. The Roger Tory Peterson Institute in Jamestown, New York, where Dale just happened to be having a sculpture show, had 2 live Hellbenders. And then a visit to the North Carolina Zoo showed us even more Hellbenders. They seemed to be everywhere we turned.

We were now officially in love with these magnificent amphibians and of course, Dale, being a stone sculptor of wildlife, wanted to memorialize one. As Dale says “Upon learning about the Hellbender, I wanted to see if I might have one needing to be freed from the stone stash in my studio. It just so happened I did! I had been holding a piece of stone for

Now that Dale saw the Hellbender inside the stone, he got to work. “It took me over four months to complete the sculpture. Having no familiarity with this species, I needed to do some serious homework to understand the Hellbender’s anatomy and personality. I won’t begin a piece unless I am intimately familiar with the subject matter. To create a sculpture in stone, you need to be forever mindful of only subtracting that material which needs to be removed. There are no second chances or do-overs. Once the stone is taken away, there’s no putting it back, so there’s no room for error. It’s like a high wire act while operating heavy equipment.”

As Dale carved, we took pictures of the progress and posted them on social media. The more we posted, the more interested folks got in this giant salamander. We were thrilled so many people loved the slimy creatures as much as us!

Once the Hellbender was completed, we named it “Hellbender’s Rock”. How appropriate! Then we began looking at possible places for

it to reside. You don’t just put a 400-pound sculpture of a Hellbender on your coffee table. And you can’t be too careful about selecting the perfect home for such an extraordinary creature. We both felt that a public venue where children and adults could learn more about Hellbenders would be the most suitable. The more people made aware of this reclusive and misunderstood animal and the environmental pressures it was under, the better the chance for its survival.

We had already partnered with the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro on some wildlife conservation opportunities, so they were a logical choice for “Hellbender’s Rock”. The Curator of Amphibians, Dustin Smith, was generous enough to give us a “behind the scene” view of their Hellbender habitat and also enlighten us to the research work the zoo is doing help the species flourish, specifically in North Carolina. The zoo is one of the several organizations involved in creating habitat in the form of prefab housing (nest boxes) for these creatures. They have assisted in the design and fabrication of concrete boxes that mimic the natural stone structures in which Hellbenders typically live and can be placed in streams and rivers to give them additional housing options. How cool is that!

We soon began discussions with the zoo and started brainstorming the best way to use Dale’s sculpture to reach and teach the broadest audience. The zoo already had a small Hellbender exhibit but you couldn’t really see the giant salamanders since they hide under rocks. Hmm. What if the sculpture was used as part of a newly renovated exhibit to include native fish, Hellbenders and information about Hellbenders? What a concept!



A stream in Pisgah Forest with rock piles. Photo: Corrie Woods

So we donated the sculpture to the zoo and fast forward 9 months later, the new exhibit is open to the public. You can actually touch the sculpture, listen to “The Last Dragon” video, use a touchtone screen to learn more about salamanders and see the Hellbenders and fish swimming in the tank (when the Hellbenders are not hiding). The collaborative effort between us, the zookeepers, curators, and the exhibit builders ultimately culminated in an amazing new habitat for these aquatic creatures and a much more enlightening and engaging glimpse into their world.

There is even a Hellbender nest box right in the front of the aquarium to show how hellbenders might use it for habitat. The day the exhibit opened, a Hellbender was both in the nest box and actively swimming around, putting on quite a show for all the visitors. It warmed our heart to hear one little girl say “Daddy, what is that?” Watching her point to the swimming Hellbender and then watch her feel and explore the contours of the Hellbender sculpture made our day. It just doesn’t get much better! And this was direct affirmation art, especially sculpture,

can help teach us about wildlife by being able to physically touch a rendering of the actual animal.

But how do we save and protect them? Considered Near Threatened by the International Union for Conservation of Nature which evaluates animals and plant species for their conservation status, Hellbender populations have plummeted in the last few years. Since they have been around for about 65 million years, give or take a few million years, it would be a tragedy to lose



A Hellbender on rocks. Photo: Twan Leenders, RTPI.org

them. While they are very reclusive, they are like the canary in the coal mine. When the Hellbender populations decline, it is a warning something may be wrong with the water quality in the stream. Sedimentation, pollution, habitat destruction (including moving rocks in a stream) all have taken their toll on the Hellbender populations. When you see a live one, you know the stream is healthy. As more and more folks learn about them and want to protect them, we hope their populations will increase.

So if you are hiking near or through a stream, remember there may be a giant salamander hiding under the rocks. Moving or disturbing their rock could kill it or other aquatic creatures living in the stream. But at least we now know not to move rocks and we can educate others. The power of our voice and the power of

partnering with other folks can make a big difference in conserving our wildlife.

There are so many cool things right in our/your backyard if we just take the time to stop, listen, observe and learn. If we are curious about the animals with which we coexist and learn how we can help protect them, we think the world will be a better place for generations to come. And if just one Hellbender is helped by a piece of art, in this case, Dale's sculpture, then we have achieved success.

So what's in your backyard? What brings you joy just by looking out the window or going for a walk?

Next up for us? Red wolves, the most endangered canid in the world. And guess where they live? Right in our backyard, with

the only wild population on our planet in Eastern North Carolina. Hellbenders, red wolves and ... Only time will tell what is next on our horizon for partnering art with wildlife conservation. And we can't wait.

To learn more about Hellbenders, red wolves and other endangered and vulnerable critters, follow us at weilerwoodsforwildlife.com

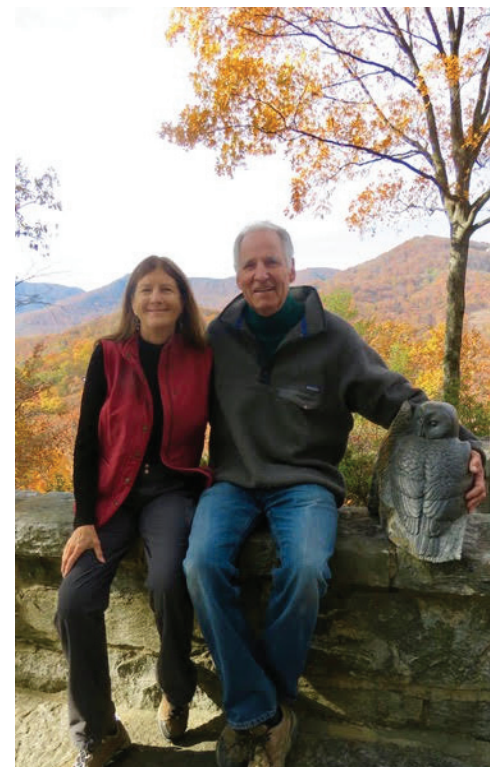




Checking out the progress on the Hellbender Rock. Photo: Loti Woods



Dale in front of the new Hellbender exhibit at the North Carolina Zoo with his sculpture.
Photo: Loti Woods



Loti Woods and Dale Weiler.
Photo provided by Loti Woods