

BY LAUREN STEPP / PEOPLE / JUNE 28, 2018

Helping the Underdog



Dale Weiler and his wife Loti Woods have traveled to more than 100 countries in the name of wildlife conservation. Photo by Karin Strickland

Some might think dragons exist only in medieval folklore, but ask any Western North Carolina native and they'll tell you different. The Hellbender, a giant salamander found in fast-flowing Appalachian streams, has inhabited this earth for 65 million years. Though undeniably antediluvian, Hellbenders — also called mud dogs, devil dogs, Allegheny alligators, snot otters (for their slimy texture), and the "last dragons" — neither breathe fire nor command 16th-century castles. Rather, the amphibians, which can grow to two feet long, prey on crickets, minnows, and crayfish, holing up under the same rock for their natural lifespan of 30 years. Harmless to humans, they are the largest aquatic salamander in the United States.

Once abundant, Hellbenders are now threatened by habitat destruction and water pollution. As a Species of Special Concern, they cannot be hunted, removed from the water, or intentionally bothered. Found locally in streams of Transylvania County's Davidson River and Henderson County's Mills River, their very presence is an indication of good water quality.



"Hellbenders Rock" is carved from a 400-pound piece of alabaster. Photo by Corrie Woods.

Earlier this year, the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission even asked the public, particularly anglers, to report any snot-otter sightings. But these guys are elusive and little known, and that's part of the problem. Compared with more popular threatened species — e.g. pandas or honeybees — "they're not the most charismatic subject," says Tryon sculptor and activist Dale Weiler.

Both Foothills transplants, Weiler and his wife Loti Woods have travelled to more than 100 countries in the name of wildlife conservation. Their organization, Weiler Woods for Wildlife, places art in the hands of private buyers to fundraise for outreach and advocacy. In the past, Weiler has carved gorillas from Virginia steatite, tawny eagles from Italian marble, and elephants from Colorado alabaster. Hellbenders are a new one.

"I didn't even know how to spell it," Woods laughs. She and Weiler learned of the species when a friend posted a photo of a cairn (a manmade stack of stones) on Facebook and another friend commented that moving rocks destroys Hellbender habitat. Weiler was puzzled: "We looked at each other and said, 'What in the hell is a Hellbender?'"



Hellbender nest boxes are placed in local streams, including in Henderson and Transylvania counties.

Love blossomed. "They're ugly," Weiler admits. Unlike many amphibians, Hellbenders do not have external gills; instead, they breathe through their unique loose, wrinkly skin. "But they have a very captivating, prehistoric look."

The couple's latest project, "Hellbenders Rock," debuted at the North Carolina Zoo in Asheboro in May. Carved from a 400-pound piece of alabaster, the male devil dog anchors a new exhibit featuring Hellbenders and a variety of fish species. The installment also joins local and national initiatives aimed at building Hellbender numbers, says Dustin Smith, curator of amphibians at the zoo.

Working with partner organizations including UNCA and the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, Smith has installed more than 30 Hellbender nest boxes in North Carolina's mountain rivers. The concrete structures weigh 100 pounds, face downstream, and allow females to lay eggs come fall. With ten more boxes in the pipeline, the project is a well-orchestrated attempt at remedying the effects of unsustainable farming. "Agriculture causes high turbidity," says Smith. "The silt fills natural cavities under rocks where Hellbenders might den."

In addition to fieldwork, the zoo will soon release a ten-year study evaluating native mud-dog populations. Meanwhile, Woods and Weiler are working to protect another threatened species: the red wolf.

"That's our mission: to use art to change the perception of animals that are down and out," says Woods.

Weiler chimes in: "We help the underdog."

For more information on Weiler Woods for Wildlife and the North Carolina Zoo installation, visit weilerwoodsforwildlife.com.

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