North Carolina Museum *of* Natural Sciences

Advisory Commission Report FY2026

A Museum for the Next Generation



NORTH CAROLINA
Museum of Natural Sciences

October 1, 2026

Dear Members of the North Carolina General Assembly:

This has been another banner year at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences!

Curiosity has been part of this institution's DNA from the beginning, and this report is filled with remarkable examples of where curiosity can lead.

This year, Museum scientists helped rewrite what we know about the final age of the dinosaurs, documented biodiversity from North Carolina to Cambodia, and retraced the route of Lewis and Clark to understand how wildlife has changed over two centuries. Our educators carried science into classrooms and communities across our state. And our visitors encountered blue whales, ingenious animal defenses, honeybees, moon missions—and rocks younger than some of our staff.

We have incredible range at the Museum, and our talented staff make sure there is something of interest for every North Carolinian.

We are a place where a three-year-old can meet a dinosaur for the first time and where a scientist can make a discovery that changes what the world knows. We are a museum in downtown Raleigh and Whiteville—but our work belongs to all of North Carolina. And increasingly, we are finding new ways to bring that work to people wherever they are.

We are building the Mary Ann Brittain Education Center at Prairie Ridge, reimagining how people experience and access the Museum, and looking toward our 150th anniversary in 2029 with an important question: ***What can this Museum become for the next generation?***

Our new facilities plan and strategic roadmap are guiding our approach. We are so grateful to our state leaders for your ongoing commitment to the Museum—including the resources you allocated this year to better steward our scientific collections, prepare for our next new exhibits, and allow us to remain a resource that is available for everyone.

We are also appreciative of recent Repair & Renovation funds that are resulting in new passenger and freight elevators and that will repair our front doors and first floor issues. Non-state funds will further enhance the transformation of our entry experience—needed improvements for the state's most visited museum facility.

In the coming years, we ask for your same thoughtful consideration as we attempt to complete those projects and commence others that enhance our aging Nature Exploration Center facility and extend our reach across the state. We look forward to our continued partnership as we maintain the Museum's place as a trusted resource for families, educators, students, and scientists.

On behalf of the Advisory Commission of the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences,

Rhonda Beatty

Rhonda Beatty ▪ *Chair*

NCMNS By the Numbers

1,000,000+

In the past fiscal year, the Museum welcomed more than **1 million** guests to downtown Raleigh and regional museum locations.



Museum outreach and virtual programs served more than **5,000** pre-K-12 students in **31** North Carolina counties.

The Museum recorded direct engagement in all **100** North Carolina counties, including educational program delivery, biodiversity collections, and fieldwork.

More than **110** high- and middle-school students and **98** university students worked in the Museum.



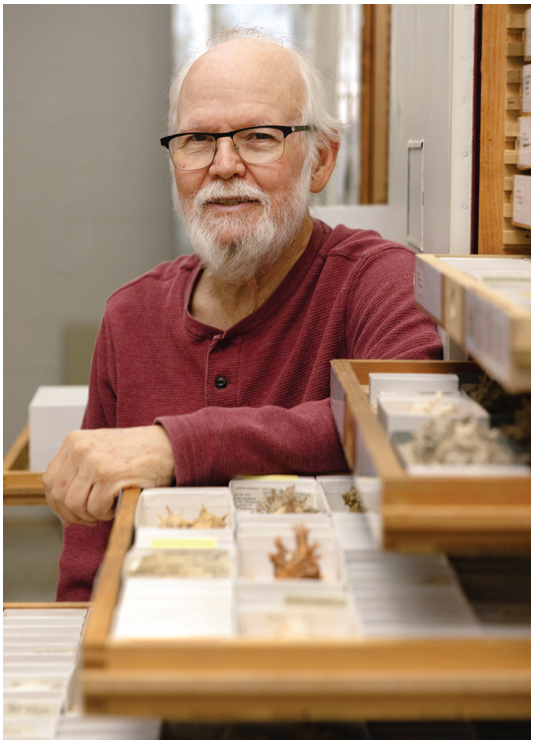
Museum scientists spent **740** days conducting research across **44** North Carolina counties.

Museum scientists published **77** peer-reviewed papers in FY26. Since opening the Nature Research Center in 2012, our scientists have published more than **1,000** papers that have been cited nearly **56,000** times.

Museum collections house around **4.5 million** specimens, representing more than **150** of the world's countries.

More than **2,000** Museum license plates featuring the *Acrocanthosaurus*—aka Terror of the South—are currently roaring down the road.













An Award-Winning Museum Team

At the heart of the Museum are passionate and dedicated staff members—representing scientific research, education, welcome services, marketing and more—some of whom received official recognition in the past year:

The North Carolina Wildlife Federation announced the winners of its 61st Annual Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards and **Dr. Arthur E. Bogan**, Research Curator of Mollusks, was named Natural Resources Scientist of the Year.

VisLab Manager **Matthew Faerber** was selected as the recipient of the prestigious North Carolina Science, Mathematics and Technology Education Center Informal Educator Award.

Guest Experience Representative **Valerie McNabb** received a 2025 North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources Secretary's Award for Excellence in recognition of her Excellence in Customer Service.

The Museum's "Blue Whales" bus ad designed by the **Communication & Marketing** graphics team won a national Adsposure Transit Award for its bus-wrap artwork featured the life-size image of a female blue whale fluke.

The **North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences at Whiteville** received the 2026 Best of Columbus County People's Choice Award, made several upgrades to the facility, and even got a shout out in *Southern Living* magazine.



Presenting World-Class Exhibits

The Museum's flagship location in downtown Raleigh is filled with immersive exhibits that transport you — from diverse ecosystems across North Carolina, to active research laboratories, to a habitat for butterflies, to the state's prehistoric past.

A NEW DIRECTION. Dueling Dinosaurs — the Museum's mash-up of high-tech research lab and dynamic exhibit space — became even more dynamic when head of Paleontology Dr. Lindsay Zanno confirmed to the world that one of the specimens was a *Nanotyrannus*. Always designed as a flexible space, exhibit staff had their hands full, rapidly upgrading panels and digital displays to reflect the new, immensely newsworthy information. Additionally, when SECU DinoLab manager Eric Lund's recently discovered infant *Triceratops* (nicknamed Clover) became the central figure of a BBC "Walking with Dinosaurs" episode, staff added its skeleton to the menagerie of specimens visible to visitors.

A MAIN ATTRACTION. Special Exhibitions continue to attract new audiences while rewarding Museum members with free entry and returning visitors with a fresh experience. "Blue Whales" expanded on the Museum's already significant display of whale skeletons with a deep dive into the largest mammal ever to call Earth home. "Staying Alive" featured 17 different habitats containing live animals from around the world, each with their own unbelievable self-defense strategies.



Enriching Science Education

The Museum is a champion of informal education. From hands-on labs to lifelike exhibits to live animal presentations, visitors can indulge their curiosity for hours. But Museum education efforts reach far beyond its Raleigh walls.

OUT OF AFRICA. For the first time ever, a dozen teachers from across North Carolina experienced South Africa like never before as part of a new Museum Educators of Excellence Institute. The goal of each Institute is for participating teachers to return to their classroom renewed in their passion for teaching. Nearly 900 have participated in these Institutes since 1987, sharing their newfound knowledge with an estimated 760,000 students.

SCHOOL OF ROCKFISH. This year students from 25 classrooms located in 13 North Carolina counties participated in the School of Rockfish program through the Museum. Students constructed fish tanks, monitored water quality and raised and released tiny fry (juvenile rockfish) in partnership with fisheries biologists from the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Students gained knowledge of food webs, river basins, water quality, and fisheries management. This year's School of Rockfish participants join the nearly 380 classrooms and more than 25,000 student alumni of the prior Shad in the Classroom program as future generations of conservation-minded residents.



Archiving the Natural World

The many wonders you find on display at the Museum are just the tip of the iceberg. Our collections are one of the largest in the Southeast, containing more than 4.5 million specimens cataloging biological, geological, and paleontological diversity. These specimens provide valuable opportunities for research well past their collection date, as new technologies and a new generation of scientists come along.

BABY ROCKS. Geology collections manager Allison Dombrowski received a rare donation from Susie Adams and the Crustal Dynamics & Geophysics Laboratory at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Two basalt samples collected from the southern caldera of Axial Seamount (a submarine volcano) during a 2015 eruption. These are the youngest rock specimens in the Museum's collection—only 11 years old. The oldest? Two meteorite samples from the dawn of the solar system, about 4.567 billion years old.

RETURN OF THE WILD. In spring 2026, a team of biologists led by head of the Biodiversity Research Lab Dr. Roland Kays, retraced the historic Lewis and Clark route from Pittsburgh to the Pacific Coast to conduct the first-ever scientific wildlife resurvey of their journey. The "Return of the Wild" team traveled 10,000 miles, visited 140 camera trap sites and talked with local research partners at every stop, comparing what Lewis and Clark documented in their field journals 220 years ago with what lives there today. Many species, from bison to beavers, are recovering, thanks to sustained public and tribal investment in conservation science.



Driving Research and Conservation

Research led by Museum scientists helps re-envision prehistoric ecosystems and re-invigorate conservation efforts—from 67 million years ago to the present day, and from the North Carolina Piedmont to the Kirirom Mountains of Cambodia.

NANOTYRANNUS CONFIRMED. What if everything we know about *T. rex* growth is wrong? The 100% complete tyrannosaur skeleton—part of the legendary "Dueling Dinosaurs" residing in the Museum's SECU DinoLab—recently ended one of paleontology's longest-running debates. Museum Head of Paleontology Dr. Lindsay Zanno definitively confirmed that *Nanotyrannus lancencis* is indeed a distinct species, and not just a teenage *T. rex* as many scientists believed. The implications are profound. For years, paleontologists used *Nanotyrannus* fossils to model *T. rex* growth and behavior. This new evidence reveals that those studies were based on two entirely different animals—and that multiple tyrannosaur species inhabited the same ecosystems in the final million years before the asteroid impact.

LOCAL CONSERVATION. North Carolina stands out along the Atlantic slope of the United States as a true biodiversity hotspot for sucker fish in the genus *Moxostoma*, which includes redhorses and jumprocks. In April, a group of scientists including Museum ichthyologists Gabriela Hogue and Dr. Lily Hughes completed the task of describing the Carolina redhorse and bestowing its scientific moniker of *Moxostoma carolina*, a critical step in the pursuit of funding for conservation efforts.



NASA/JOHN KRAUS

Inspiring a Love of Nature

Inspiration can snag a visitor at any moment. And the Museum casts a wide net within its seven exhibit-filled floors. On one field trip in downtown Raleigh a young student might find the fossil of a creature that lived before the Age of Dinosaurs or see live, lined seahorses flit through the water—there's an "A-ha!" moment around every corner.

LAUNCH PARTY. On April 1, more than 120 guests (including dozens of aspiring young astronauts) sat on the edge of their seats in the WRAL 3D Theater to watch the live launch of Artemis II, NASA's first crewed Moon Mission in more than 50 years. NASA astronauts Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover and North Carolina native Christina Koch (above), as well as Jeremy Hansen from the Canadian Space Agency, were about to become the first to return to the moon since Apollo 17. Koch was about to become the first woman ever to orbit the moon, an especially poignant moment for Museum patrons who may have heard her speak at Astronomy Days in 2023.

WHAT'S THAT BUZZING? When the managers of the Discovery Room reestablished their observation hive with thousands of live honeybees, it quickly became a huge draw. Manager Faye Goodwin gets a lot of questions from young visitors that are initially nervous about these insects, but after learning more about these amazing pollinators, they have a new appreciation for them.