

# MOUNTAINS

## Safe Passage film fest highlights road ecology



**Word from the Smokies**

Frances Figart  
Columnist

One of the great benefits and privileges of exploring Western North Carolina and East Tennessee is the opportunity to see a diverse array of wildlife wherever you go. But whether you live here or are just passing through, chances are you'll mostly be watching the spectacle from behind a windshield.

Driving from Great Smoky Mountains National Park over the mountains to Asheville, North Carolina, this time of year, you are pretty likely to see woodchucks, wild turkey, and white-tailed deer. Perhaps you get lucky and spot a black bear and or even an elk moving through the vegetation. Look up and you may find red-tailed and broad-winged hawks and the occasional osprey or bald eagle. Watch for the smaller life-forms too: box turtles, a variety of snakes, and even rare salamanders live right near the roadway.

"Highway travel always means risk for humans," says filmmaker Ted Grudowski. "But roads pose an even more serious threat to wildlife, forming barriers to the habitat connectivity that is necessary for species survival. One solution has been shown to improve safety for travelers and survival of both plants and animals: wildlife crossings."

Grudowski's films about road ecology will be featured at The Crossing, a short-film screening coming to Asheville's Pléb Urban Winery in the River Arts District on Oct. 26. The free event is presented by the Safe Passage Fund Coalition, which is working to understand where animals are getting killed in the Pigeon River Gorge between Asheville and Knoxville and how various types of wildlife crossing structures might help them cross.

"I didn't learn about the current concept of road ecology until I began making videos about it," says Grudowski, who will be traveling to the region from Seattle. "But I sure remember seeing a lot of roadkill on the sides of roads growing up in the Midwest. In the spring there were always dead skunks everywhere! It seemed that there were more dead than alive."

Grudowski studied photography while attending Southern Illinois University. When he graduated, the internet and digital media were just beginning to take off.

"I went from photography to multimedia to creating short videos for an internet audience," he says, "but the lure of making something more substantial drew me to storytelling and making short documentary films."

Grudowski got involved with Conservation Northwest, a regional nonprofit advocating for wildlife crossings and working to restore and acquire lands adjacent to Interstate 90. He did a short video with colleague Kris Browne in 2015 highlighting a remote trail camera program in the forests of the Cascade Mountains in Washington.

"That program contributed to the realization that there was a major wildlife highway running north and



Although larger animals like deer or black bear are often the most obvious forms of roadside wildlife for passing travelers, salamanders and many other small amphibians and reptiles must also cross roadways to find food, shelter, or a mate. SUE WASSERMAN

south through the Cascades that was bisected by I-90," he says. "Shortly thereafter, the coalition of nonprofits and other groups was coming to an end because the decision to incorporate the wildlife passages into the highway improvements was already made and the first leg of funding secured. They wanted to document the story of how unlikely partnerships were made in order to get the passages and road improvements to happen, and so I was approached about making 'Cascade Crossroads.'"

Released in January 2018, "Cascade Crossroads" is a 30-minute documentary that chronicles a monumental project combining conservation, collaboration, and innovation that eventually led to the construction of one of North America's largest wildlife crossing projects in conjunction with major infrastructure improvements for motorists. The film won two Telly awards in 2018, gold in the nonprofit category and bronze in the nature/wildlife category.

"When we had made the first short video, I hadn't really grasped the depth and breadth of how incredible

and unlikely it was to build the wildlife passages, as well as the implications of re-connecting the north and south Cascades with its animal highways and ecosystems," Grudowski says. "Initially we were eager for a chance to create a longer story than we usually had the opportunity to tell, but after we began doing the background research, we all realized that there was something much bigger here unfolding, and that was very exciting."

In 2021, Grudowski and his production team released a follow-up film, "Critter Crossings in the Cascades," which was also well received.

"Making 'Critter Crossings' was very much like doing a victory lap in a sequel, because the successful results and improvements were already tangible, so it was a chance to show the world that this project was worth all the effort to make it happen," he says. "Cascade Crossroads' had been very well received in film festivals and other public screenings, as well as winning some awards, so we knew that the public had an appetite for successful stories about helping wildlife."

The second film also gave the team an opportunity to share the story and its success from the perspective of the Washington State Department of Transportation, which had to "create the plan for building it all, turn that plan into reality, and demonstrate to the public that this was the right thing to do. And, oh how right it was! How often do civil engineers get to be heroes?"

There have been literally thousands of animal crossings since the passages were completed and the guide fencing installed, with some unexpected animals using the passages—not just elk, deer, cougars, bears, and endangered aquatic species, but a badger and a moose as well.

Wildlife crossings have become a much bigger topic in the news since Grudowski made the first film. He is excited to visit Asheville in late October and share the success stories of the west.

"I get to come bringing good news and encouragement for your wildlife passages. I love seeing road ecology ideas taking root on that side of the country, and I'm excited to see what success stories you will write. The excitement of your community to provide and care for your own wildlife is infectious!"

When asked where he thinks the U.S. is headed in the future in terms of road ecology, he smiles.

"People love animals, people love wildlife, and people love good news about people doing good things. It's a counterpoint to all the bad news we are bombarded with about how people are doing things detrimental to our natural world," he says. "The success of it all is quantifiable and undeniable. I hope it leads to a greater awareness of the natural world around us and our effect on it, and I hope it leads to accommodating wildlife becoming part of the vocabulary of all infrastructure in the United States."

Register for The Crossing at SafePassage-Oct26.EventBrite.com.

Frances Figart (rhymes with "tiger") is the editor of "Smokies Life" and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsassoc.org.

## Warrant: Arden man charged in fatal Sweeten Creek crash arrested again

Ryley Ober  
Asheville Citizen Times  
USA TODAY NETWORK

ASHEVILLE — A man previously charged with driving while impaired and numerous other drug-related charges after a fatal head-on collision in December 2022 received an order for arrest after failing to appear in court, Asheville police warrants show, and appeared before a judge Sept. 26 in Buncombe County District Court.

Five days after an accident on Sweeten Creek Road that left one person dead and another hospitalized, Stephen David Cordell, 46, of Arden, was arrested and still faces multiple charges, including two for possession of drug paraphernalia, one charge of possession of methamphetamine, one charge of reckless driving to endanger, one charge of failure to wear a seatbelt, one charge of felony serious injury by a vehicle and one charge of felony death by vehicle.

Cordell was being held in the Buncombe County Detention Facility but was released Jan. 9 after posting a bond of \$110,500, according to spokesperson Aaron Sarver. Judge Allen Thornburg issued an order Sept. 11 for Cordell to be arrested again for these charges, after

he failed to appear in court on Sept. 5, according to a warrant obtained by the Citizen Times.

Cordell was arrested Sept. 25 by an officer with the Buncombe County Sheriff's Office and is currently being held on a total of \$150,000 in bonds, according to the warrant.

His case has been indicted to Buncombe County Superior Court, but Cordell had a hearing in District Court Sept. 26, where he appeared by video from jail. District Court Judge Julie Kepple said she could not address the bond that was set by a Superior Court judge and gave Cordell a court-appointed attorney. Although the attorney was not named in court, Ehsan Akhavi indicated that he will be representing Cordell.

"I didn't know anything about Superior Court. I got no calls," Cordell stated to Kepple. "I didn't miss court on purpose."

According to the initial police report, Cordell crossed the center lane while traveling south on Sweeten Creek Road in a 2020 Dodge Ram truck. He then allegedly hit a 2011 Mercury passenger van head-on at about 10 a.m. Dec. 11, 2022.

The collision sent a 99-year-old Hendersonville res-

See CRASH, Page 4A

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