

CHAMPIONS OF CONSERVATION WEEKEND

October 2–4, 2026

HIGHLANDS, NORTH CAROLINA

Presented by Highlands, NC

Join G&G for a curated weekend in Highlands, North Carolina, a place defined by its waters. The plateau sits atop the Eastern Continental Divide, fed by some of the most biodiverse cold-water systems in the country. This weekend, the region's rivers, farms, and wild places serve as the backdrop for a conversation about what it means to protect them, guided by the people doing that work.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 2

WELCOME TO HIGHLANDS

5:00PM | SKYLINE LODGE

The weekend opens with welcome drinks overlooking the plateau, hosted by editor in chief David DiBenedetto—bringing together past Champions, G&G editors, and friends of the magazine.

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 3

HIGH COUNTRY FLY FISHING 7:00AM

Depart for a private lease on Caney Fork Creek—a stretch of mountain water most people will never have the chance to stand in.

Guests spend the morning fly fishing in stocked waters alongside 2023 Champion of Conservation JJ Apodaca and guides from Brookings Anglers, experiencing the river through both scientific and Cherokee perspectives—from the “rainmaker” spring salamander to the Eastern red-spotted newt, known in Cherokee as “it burns” for its toxic skin. This area is renowned for its density of brook, brown, and rainbow trout, as well as species rarely found in public waters.

RIVERKEEPER DOCUMENTARY SCREENING

2:00PM | HIGHLANDS PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, MARTIN-LIPSCOMB THEATER

The South River winds through some of Atlanta's most overlooked neighborhoods, carrying decades of industrial neglect. RIVERKEEPER—which premiered at the 2026 Atlanta Film Festival, winning the Georgia Feature Award—follows Dr. Jackie Echols, a 2024 Champion of Conservation, as she fights to restore it, and asks whether the Clean Water Act's promise of fishable, swimmable water was ever meant for the predominantly Black, working-class communities along its banks.

Join G&G for an exclusive screening followed by a Q&A with director Jason Goldman and Dr. Echols.

AN EVENING WITH THE CHAMPIONS OF CONSERVATION: DISCUSSION & DINNER

6:30PM | HIGHLANDS SUPPER CLUB

For the first time, chef William Dissen—owner of The Market Place and Billy D's Fried Chicken—brings his signature focus on provenance and regional seafood to Highlands Supper Club. Paired with selections from Davis Family Vineyards, the multicourse meal showcases a distinctly Appalachian hand with regional game, local fungi, and fresh catch from Sunburst Trout Farms.

Before the meal, DiBenedetto moderates a lively conversation with the 2026 Champions of Conservation.

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 4

LAND TRUST HIKE 8:00AM

Guided by representatives from the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust, this private morning trek crosses protected terrain not typically open to the public—moving through preserved mountain landscapes where waterfalls and waterways speak to the conservation work that defines this region.

Along the way, guests hear directly from conservationists about land stewardship, habitat protection, and long-term efforts to preserve Western North Carolina for future generations.

SUNDAY BRUNCH AT THE STATION

11:00AM | HIGHLANDS BIOLOGICAL STATION

The weekend closes at the Highlands Biological Station, a research institution operating in these mountains since 1927. Guests reunite with G&G editors and Champions at the Sto Teaching Pavilion for a leisurely brunch from Highlands Smokehouse with curated beverages by Jeremy Carter of Highlander Mountain House and Outpost Inn.

Associate director Jason Love offers a look at his research tracking microplastics in mountain waterways before guests are encouraged to continue exploring Highlands at their own pace.



PRICING

All listed meals and activities are bundled into the inclusive ticket fee of \$1,500 per person. Transportation and lodging are not included.

RESERVE YOUR SPOT

ACCOMMODATIONS

Reserve your room at our partnering hotels with a special G&G rate:

SKYLINE LODGE (2 night minimum)

TRAILBORN (2 night minimum)

Contact G&G Events at events@gardenandgun.com or (843) 805-4200 with questions.

SPECIAL THANKS TO TURTLEBOX AUDIO

