

# Towns County Herald

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## Parrot-feather remains a top county priority

By Daysha Pandolph  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Towns County Temporary Courthouse was packed on Tuesday, Jan. 16, for the regular county meeting. Community members were eager to hear from Sole Commissioner Cliff Bradshaw on the plan of action regarding the parrot-feather infestation in Lake Chatuge.

Parrot-feather is an invasive aquatic plant that has been spreading in the south end of the lake for the last couple of years, and it's looking to take several more years to completely rid the lake of the problem.

As of now, there has not been any parrot-feather identi-

fied in the North Carolina regions, but if not properly treated, it could overtake the entire lake – impeding boat mobility, decreasing recreational use, posing swimming risks and diminishing the tourism appeal of Towns County.

That's why so many see treatment as being vital to maintaining the cultural and economic viability of the town.

The Commissioner's Office understands these implications and plans to help in any way possible; however, due to red tape, the county cannot generate the necessary funds to take care of the parrot-feather alone.

Because a majority of the affected area falls on

private property, Bradshaw is unable to spend local tax money on a fix. And while he has reached out to request grant money from State Sen. Bo Hatchett and Gov. Brian Kemp, he expects the bureaucratic wheels to turn very slowly.

Since this issue is time sensitive to prevent further spread, he has turned to public donations to at least get the treatment process started by June. Then, once grant money starts flowing in, it will be added to the parrot-feather funds and used on continued treatments and maintenance.

Ray Catena, a founder of savelakechatuge.org – a website with news and updates on the invasive weed – ex-

plained the treatment plans being considered. He shared that two different aquatic chemicals will be used to combat the weed: ProcellaCOR and Endothall.

"They have both been certified by the U.S. government as safe chemicals; they are non-hazardous," Catena said. "They have been spraying these chemicals in the water in Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee, so this is not something new."

Although studies have demonstrated the safety of this treatment method, County Attorney Robb Kiker still has concerns about the liability involved in approving chemical use in the source of Hiawassee. See County Meeting, Page 7



On Jan. 16, Commissioner Bradshaw said the county is now accepting donations from concerned members of the community to solve the growing parrot-feather problem in Lake Chatuge. Photo by Daysha Pandolph

## Hiawassee DDA looking to replace key positions



The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority discussed a variety of business in their first regular meeting of 2024. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

The Hiawassee Downtown Development Authority held its first regular meeting of the year on Tuesday, Jan. 9, at Hiawassee City Hall for discussion on the under-construction Paris Business Center, plans for the 2024 Night Market, and staffing the DDA.

Following the resignations of former DDA Program Manager Steve Harper and DDA Board Members Tamela Cooper and Efrén Lopez last year, remaining DDA associates are looking to fill seats.

Currently, Hiawassee Mayor Liz Ordiales takes part in the meetings alongside Economic Development Director Denise McKay. Peggy Gard-

ner holds the position of DDA Chair and Tyler Osborn serves as DDA Co-Chair. Babette Dunn remains a board member.

McKay reported a lack of interest in filling the vacant DDA board seats, saying that potential replacements had backed out due to "the council drama" regarding development of the Paris Business Center. See Hiawassee DDA, Page 12

## Marine who died on Trail left lasting local legacy

By Brittany Holbrooks  
Towns County Herald  
Staff Writer

Many have heard how U.S. Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Sean M. Willey's remains were discovered about a mile from the Appalachian Trail in September of 2022, but not many know the entire tale of Willey's homecoming as it was relayed on Friday, Jan. 19.

Clay County, North Carolina, Sheriff's Chief Deputy Todd Wingate visited the Mountain Movers & Shakers for their weekly meeting to tell the story and honor the departed veteran's memory at the Sundance Grill in Hiawassee.

The chief deputy did his best to present Willey, 21, as a person. The bond between the two started when Wingate, a former Marine himself, discovered Willey's status as a fellow veteran.

Wingate shared that his own service began in 1987 on Parris Island, South Carolina, just after high school. He experienced Desert Shield and Desert Storm and finished his service in 1995. Originally from Florida, Wingate moved to the North Georgia Mountains to



Sean M. Willey  
USMC Lance Corporal

traversed on foot, and just over a mile into the forest, Wingate found the scattered remnants of Willey's camp.

At the start of the investigation, the camp was marked as suspicious because officers found the contents of Willey's billfold and other identifying information, but no sign of the man himself.

Cadaver dogs recovered bone fragments and hair that went out for testing, and later led investigators to a pair of boots laced with Willey's dog tags.

Not too many details were shared of Willey's personal life, though Wingate did mention that when faced with having to either take the COVID-19 vaccination or suffer an honorable discharge, he chose the latter.

It was shortly after his departure from military service that Willey left to hike the Appalachian Trail in late March or early April 2022 with a hope that, once he returned home, he could rededicate his life to his 3-year-old son.

Wingate secured and set up a projector to share photos, with assistance from retired. See Marine's Legacy, Page 7

## Chris Janson to rock the Music Hall Saturday

News Special  
Towns County Herald

Country music star Chris Janson will be headlining Anderson Music Hall this weekend for one of the first must-see local events of the year inside the Georgia Mountain Fairgrounds.

The concert will take place on Saturday, Jan. 27, with doors opening at 7 p.m. Tickets are still available and can be purchased at www.georgiamountainfairgrounds.com.

A proud member of the Grand Ole Opry and multi-platinum songwriter and artist, Janson is part of country music's new breed.

He is in touch with the lighter side of life with self-penned No. 1s "Fix A Drink," "Good Vibes" and the triple platinum "Buy Me A Boat," as well as the more thoughtful truths of "Done," "Things You Can't Live Without," and the CMA Song of the Year nominee and ACM Video of the Year "Drunk Girl."

Both "Boat" and "Girl" were named to the Nashville Songwriters Association International's prestigious "Songs I



Chris Janson

Wish I'd Written" list, which is why artists like Tim McGraw, Justin Moore, Cody Johnson, and the iconic Hank Williams Jr. reach for Janson's songs for their own projects.

Beyond his artistry are his live shows, where all that heart-on-the-four-wheeler songwriting meets the fans

where they come to rock.

Rolling Stone proclaimed him "a live legacy in the making," and Janson is a frequent presence at the nation's biggest country festivals, tours and unexpected sit-ins.

For a man known for his

## Drug complaint leads to arrest in Young Harris

News Special  
Towns County Herald

YOUNG HARRIS – On Saturday, Jan. 13, Towns County Sheriff's Deputies made a traffic stop during concentrated patrols in the Gumlog community.

Investigators received information regarding a residence on Highway 66 where information led to a search warrant.

A search was executed at the location, and methamphetamine was confiscated that field-tested positive. During the search, a subject at the resi-

dence was discovered to have outstanding warrants in Union County.

Daniel Eugene Mort, 46, of Young Harris, was arrested and charged with possession of methamphetamine and possession of drug-related objects.

Sheriff Ken Henderson commends the citizens for information regarding drugs in the Gumlog community.

"Everyone must work together in our fight against drugs," Sheriff Henderson said.

All individuals are presumed innocent until proven guilty in a court of law.



Daniel Eugene Mort

## January Term 2024 Grand Jury Indictments

The following individuals were indicted during the January Term 2024 of the Towns County Grand Jury:

William Jeffery McClure, two counts possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

John Walker Bryant, obstruction of an officer; simple

battery.

Ricky Ray Sorrells, aggravated assault, Family Violence; cruelty to children in the third degree; terroristic threats; obstruction of an officer.

David Warren Nugent, three counts aggravated cruelty to animals; two counts possession of a firearm by a

convicted felon.

David Baron Burrell, false imprisonment; 10 counts battery, Family Violence; 28 counts simple battery, Family Violence.

Grant Matthew Caldwell, four counts serious injury by vehicle; driving under the

See Indictments, Page 12

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Lake Levels

Blue Ridge 1,668.56  
Chatuge 1,917.71  
Nottely 1,760.93

**BASKETBALL**  
1/23 6 PM  
vs. LOA

**Parrot-Feather Update** See page 6

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## Lochaby Descendants visit Berrong-Oakley House



L-R: Descendants of Lochaby - Mandy Pugh (GG Granddaughter), Gavin Pugh (GGG Grandson), Syble Plott Blackstock, (Great Granddaughter) with a portrait of Bart.

Recently, descendants of Bart Lochaby visited the Berrong-Oakley House after hearing of the efforts by the Towns County Historical Society to save the historic house located in downtown Hiawassee. The house, built in 1905 for J. Miles & Maggie Berrong, is one of the last remaining historic homes in Hiawassee that was built by Lochaby.

Francis Marion Barto Lochaby was born in 1863 in Towns County. It is not clear when or from whom Bart Lochaby learned his knowledge of carpentry and housebuilding. He seems to have been in the trade around 1887 when he paid \$1.50 to build the gallows for the execution of Tilmon C. Justice, the only public hanging in Towns County.

His work is noted as being inspired by the Victorian Era. His work is always noted as including gables, gingerbread trim, and horseshoe designs. Some of his work included the old Hiawassee Masonic Lodge Hall, The Hooper House Hotel, The Dr. Johnson House, and the Dr. Kimsey House. Today, only two houses stand that he constructed, the Berrong-Oakley House and the Brown-Wood House, which has undergone



Lochaby's descendants on the front porch of the Berrong-Oakley House. Lochaby built the house in 1905 for the Berrong family.

several renovations over the years, losing its Lochaby inspired features. Both remaining houses were built based on plans purchased in 1903 from Radford Ideal Homes.

The descendants of Lochaby that visited were amazed at the craftsmanship that the house encompasses. While visiting, they made a generous donation in memory of Bart Lochaby, his son Venlo Lochaby, granddaughter Ruth Lochaby Plott, and great granddaughter Mona Plott Hord. In addition to this, they donated a portrait of Lochaby and his wife, to help tell the story of the once popular builder in Hiawassee. Syble Plott Black-

stock, great granddaughter of Lochaby, is excited to see the progress of the historic house restorations noting that it will be an asset to the community.

The Towns County Historical Society has been tasked with the restoration efforts of the historic Berrong-Oakley House, managing its restoration. After the work is completed, the society will continue to manage the house as a small event center and museum located in the heart of Hiawassee.

More info can be found at [www.townscountyhistory.com](http://www.townscountyhistory.com). Thanks to County Deputy Historian, Jason Edwards, for providing background information on Bart Lochaby.

## County Meeting...from Page 1

see's drinking water.

As a result, he has advised the county not to enter a contract with a treatment company. Instead, he suggested a separate organization enter the contract with help from the county.

MountainTrue, a regional nonprofit that promotes clean forests, waters and communities, took on the task. A representative from the group, Callie Moore, spoke about the progress they have made so far. They are awaiting feedback from three commercial companies.

"The three companies were chosen because they were recommended by Georgia Power and/or (Tennessee Valley Authority), and have done work on north Georgia lakes," Moore said.

"To keep the cost at some reasonable level through this first year, [savelakechatuge.org](http://savelakechatuge.org) and MountainTrue worked together to come up with a territory that we put in the requests for (company) proposals.

"It's about 250 acres, so it's a big portion of the affected part of the lake. But if you live in a part that is not in the group treatment area, you can still hire a company (independently to treat parrot-feather).

"As long as they are certified in the state of Georgia with an aquatics rating pesticide applicator, you don't have to have any kind of permit from TVA or EPD."

For areas that fall outside of the proposed initial treatment territory, MountainTrue, [savelakechatuge.org](http://savelakechatuge.org) and the Commissioner's Office are looking for alternative options.

For example, the TVA has offered to treat water treatment areas, boat docks and public beaches, and Bradshaw will be responsible for holding them accountable.

The TVA is also conducting a study on combating parrot-feather with carp fish, although the likelihood of this method working is slim. It would take seven to 15 carp per surface foot to eliminate the weed, so treating the entire lake would take an unreasonable number of fish.

Moore continued to explain the treatment plan, sharing that manual removal is not an option. Because Lake Chatuge sees constant boat traffic and a river flows di-



MountainTrue Western Regional Director Callie Moore attended the packed January county meeting to talk parrot-feather.

Photo by Daysha Pandolph

rectly through the lake, any broken pieces of the plant can be picked up and carried to new locations to take root elsewhere.

Draining the lake is not an option either. As long as there is some level of soil moisture in the lakebed, 80% of the parrot-feather will survive a drydown. And since TVA will not lower the lake to a level that will eliminate the moisture, chemical treatment seems the only viable option.

While chemicals tend to have a negative connotation, Moore, like Catena, emphasized the safety of these specific herbicides, which will be applied directly to the plants, not haphazardly dumped.

Moore said that the estimated treatment cost falls in the range of \$235,000-\$400,000. This is the amount the Commissioner's Office is hoping to generate in donations before June. MountainTrue will also be pursuing grants to help combat the parrot-feather.

Because the parrot-feather was likely the result of an outside boat bringing the weed into the water, the coun-

ty hopes to eventually install washing stations at each boat ramp, and planning is underway how best to educate anyone who would put a boat into Lake Chatuge.

Bradshaw will continue updating everyone on the issue at each monthly county meeting. These updates will include treatment progress and how much money has been raised.

Donations from local residents, businesses and other organizations for herbicide treatments are being taken at the Commissioner's Office. Checks should be made payable to Towns County and mailed or hand-delivered to 48 River Street, Suite B, Hiawassee, GA 30546.

People should mark the memo lines of donation checks with "Parrot Feather" so the Commissioner's Office can track the donated funds.

Also in the Jan. 16 meeting, Bradshaw said the renovated Towns County Courthouse should be move-in ready by April, with finishing touches taking place now, though weather complications may delay construction progress.

## Marine's Legacy...from Page 1

Marine Ash Todd, a member of local Marine Corps League Unicoi Detachment 783.

Snapshots of Willey's life were shown first, including an official photo of him in uniform, a candid shot taken during training, and finally one of his last selfies shared on social media.

"He was born and raised in upstate New York, and he is from Iliion, New York," Wingate said, identifying Willey's place of birth as a "small town" not so much unlike Hiawassee.

Willey had a grandmother who loved him dearly, and she met Wingate and the escort riders at the New York state line to complete the young man's homecoming journey back to Iliion last summer.

Wingate held back tears as he remembered how she rode through the rain on the back of a motorcycle in memory of her grandson. But before she joined the journey, Wingate and a whole team of fellow Marines, the Clay County Sheriff's Office, and other community members came out to honor Willey locally on June 28, 2023.

After a memorial service in Clay County, the escort team set out on the multi-state journey to take Willey back to Iliion. Alton "Doc" Coleman, who serves as commandant for MCL Unicoi Detachment 783, was unable to join the meeting that morning, but he was one of Wingate's co-riders during Willey's escort home.

Wingate thanked him not just for his role in helping organize the journey that spanned just under 1,000 miles, but also for his efforts to share Willey's story and honor his memory.

And then there was Todd, who handcrafted Willey's urn and a footlocker to accompany him. Although he was unable to take part in the ride due to surgery and having sold his own bike, Todd still felt compelled to honor a fellow Marine.

When the team stopped for the night in Harrisonburg,



Clay County Sheriff's Chief Deputy Todd Wingate addressing the Mountain Movers & Shakers about fellow Marine Sean M. Willey, who died on the Appalachian Trail in 2022.

Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Virginia, that wooden box containing Willey's ashes was taken into the hotel with the rest of the riders.

For the remainder of the trip, Willey rode with the footlocker, which served to collect handcrafted memorials from across the country that would help tell his story.

Marines and veterans left everything from challenge coins and poems to teddy bears for Willey's son, and Wingate documented everything he could in photos. Entire families lined street sides in some towns, waving flags or solemnly saluting Willey's honor.

Usually, when a service member dies, their family receives a single folded flag, but for Willey, there were three: one for his grandmother, one for his sister and one for his wife. The flags were presented to the ladies in a moving flag-folding ceremony when the fleet reached Iliion.

Some Movers and Shakers asked if it was ever discovered how Willey passed. On his death certificate, the cause of death is officially listed as "accidental"; the passage of time,

exposure to the elements and scavenging animals made it difficult to ascertain solid answers.

No one will ever know what happened out there for sure, but there was no evidence of foul play, and other members of the League speculate that Willey fell and was injured or met some other sort of "natural" end.

Though he doesn't want to make assumptions, Wingate believes that "based on what we saw with the gear that he took and the time of year, looking back at the weather conditions, it was a pretty cold spring, and I think that maybe that was just a wee bit more to bite off than what he was expecting."

Regardless of how he left this world, Willey is recognized for the sacrifices he made in the name of his country. Thanks to folks like Wingate, Coleman, Todd and those who stepped in to shine a light on Willey's memory, he's able to rest in dignity in the love of his hometown.

As the message once scratched into the side of Willey's old gun reads, "Memento Vivere": "Remember to live."

# Hiawasse DDA...from Page 1

Gardner agreed, saying she had seen little interest from viable candidates.

Dunn suggested looking for more people who have “brick and mortar” businesses in the city, and McKay said she would continue to examine recruiting options, to potentially include businesses run from home.

As for a new DDA program manager, Dunn suggested rehiring the position before filling it.

“You might want to revisit that job description and kind of fit it into what we need to accomplish, looking forward to the Paris Business Center as well,” Dunn said.

Gardner suggested setting up a time to “go over that job description” and revise the guidelines and duties of the program manager position, and the rest of the DDA agreed.

The group also talked

over options for vendors and musicians for the upcoming annual Night Market on the Town Square. While nothing is set in stone, suggestions for local musicians like True Youngblood, Mountain Gypsies and Teddy Baker were noted for further discussion.

Additionally, McKay said that the Young Harris apartments are “on schedule,” and as of the time of the meeting, 32 people were on the waitlist for the 48-unit setup.

“We do need to push that; I know that they are in Young Harris, but that is for the workers that live in the Towns County area,” McKay said, adding that while she hasn’t yet received a construction timeline, “the more people on the waitlist, the better we are.”

Regarding the Paris Business Center, McKay said the project recently received a construction extension from

the Appalachian Regional Commission, a grant partner.

“They estimate to hopefully be done in July,” McKay said, noting that the extension will include the month of September to “give us the cushion that we need” in response to supply chain issues like shipping delays and rising costs. It also provides time for properly closing out grants.

One thing Ordiales wanted to emphasize was that, referring to the recent dispute between herself and the City Council, “the chaos and the stupid stuff is over; that’s been settled. The loan has been approved. Everybody’s moving on.”

That said, the strife has certainly left its mark. The restaurant the DDA had hoped would take up residence in the Paris Business Center has more than likely backed out, according to McKay, judging by its lack of responses to DDA inquiries.

DDA meetings are held the second Tuesday of each month at 8:30 a.m. inside City Hall, with all meetings open to the public and attendance encouraged.

# Indictments...from Page 1

influence; driving under the influence (less safe) (alcohol).

Melvin Linn Masters, aggravated assault; possession of a firearm during the commission of a felony; obstruction of an officer; possession of methamphetamine; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce; possession of drug-related objects; possession of a firearm by a convicted felon; recidivist.

William Derek Chastain, possession of a controlled substance; taillight violation.

Macayla Ann Laster, sale of methamphetamine; sale of marijuana; possession of methamphetamine; possession of marijuana, less than an ounce.

Rebeka Renee Eichholz, identity fraud; financial transaction card fraud; criminal attempt to commit a felony.

Justin William Holoway, possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine.

Bruce Douglas Partin Jr., burglary in the first degree; burglary in the second degree; three counts theft by taking; recidivist.

Kimberly Faye Hall, sale of methamphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine.

Jeremy Austin Weaver, sale of methamphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine.

Brett Austin Teasley, sale of methamphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine.

Jason Earl Barrow, sale of methamphetamine; possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine.

Michael Alexander Radford, possession of a firearm by a convicted felon.

Billie Jean Eichholz, possession of methamphetamine; two counts possession of a controlled substance; possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute.

Samantha Jolee Dye, aka Samantha Burrell, pos-

session of a Schedule III controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects.

Jason Cole Lampert, possession of a Schedule III controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects.

Michelle Lee Ledford, possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine; possession of a Schedule II controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects.

Ronald Eugene Ledford Jr., possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine; possession of a Schedule II controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects.

Zackary Eugene Patterson, possession of methamphetamine with intent to distribute; possession of methamphetamine; possession of a Schedule II controlled substance; possession of drug-related objects.

Mark Anthony Roberson, possession of methamphetamine; possession of drug-related objects; dangerous drugs – sale, distribution, possession of dangerous drugs.

Susan Kimberly Spears, false imprisonment; battery.

Haden Devere Ellis, two counts terroristic threats; dissemination of information to promote terroristic act.

Tara Renee Gero, theft by shoplifting; reckless conduct.

Joshua David Bishop, burglary in the second degree; criminal damage to property in the second degree; obstruction of an officer; theft by shoplifting; theft by taking.

Thomas Roberts Leech, burglary in the first degree; possession of tools for the commission of crime; criminal trespass.

Renee Michelle MacCrea, burglary in the first degree; possession of tools for the commission of crime; criminal trespass.

The above individuals have been charged only and are presumed innocent until found guilty in a court of law.

# Chris Janson...from Page 1

outdoors lifestyle and collaborations with Bass Pro Shops and Cabela’s, making music from his own life has established the harmonica-forward multi-instrumentalist as the go-to guy for young country for the last decade.

Opening for Janson will be Jason Blaine, who was born to sing, write, play guitar and entertain. Blaine’s love for country music has taken him to the forefront of the Canadian music scene, where he has remained for over a decade.

With over 12 Top 10 singles in Canada, including hits such as “Cool,” “Country Side,” “Friends of Mine” and “Born to Love,” Blaine has also become a respected craftsman of hits for artists like Chris Janson, Parmalee, Petric, Madeline Merlo and others in the Nashville Community.

Originally from Pembroke, Ontario, Blaine moved

to Nashville in the fall of 2006 with his wife Amy and their 3-month-old baby girl.

He burst onto the scene in a big way in 2007 with his first No. 1 hit single “Rock In My Boot,” which led to multiple CCMA nominations and appearances and paved the way for a string of hit singles and major festival stages across the nation such as Big Valley Jamboree, Boots & Hearts, Dauphin Country Fest and many more.

Now, a multiple CCMA, SOCAN & CMAO award winner with over 20-plus radio hits, six full length albums and over 25 million digital streams, Blaine still feels like he’s just getting started with no signs of slowing down.

With a new Top 10 Hit Single, “The Road That Raised You Up,” and much more new music on the way, 2024 is set to be an exciting next chapter.

## AARP Tax Aide Free Tax Preparation



AARP Tax Aide is providing free tax preparation in Blairsville on Wednesdays from 10 a.m. – 2 p.m. beginning February 7 through April 10. Location is the Brackett Community Room, behind United Community Bank, 177 GA-515, Blairsville, GA.

This service is by appointment only. Please call (770) 403-7959 for reservations.

Other AARP Tax Aide locations are: Blue Ridge on Fridays from 10:00 - 2:00, February 9 - April 12 at St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, 7 Ewing Street, Blue Ridge; Ellijay on Mondays from 10:00 - 2:00, February 12 - April 8 at the Gilmer County Library, 268 Calvin Jackson Drive, Ellijay.

Blue Ridge and Ellijay are also by appointment only. Please call (770) 312-2258 for reservations at these locations.