

# North Georgia News

3 Sections 26 Pages

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## Sheriff's Office returns \$9,625 to scam victim

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
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A resident grew emotional with appreciation last week when Union County Sheriff's Maj. Shawn Dyer handed him a bank bag filled with \$9,625 – money he thought had been lost to a scam.

The incident being investigated began on May 24, when the resident got a phone call from a man impersonating law enforcement in Gwinnett County, where he used to live. The resident was told he had missed a federal grand jury summons and would have to come up with cash to prevent his arrest.

At first, the scammer requested \$300,000 to clear things up. When the resident said he didn't have it, the scammer said he would take 10%. Again, the resident

advised he did not have that kind of money, so the scammer asked him to get together whatever he could.

The resident complied, scraping his bank account and withdrawing nearly \$10,000 in cash. He was instructed to take the cash to a Coinstar machine at a Dawsonville grocery store to deposit for a cryptocurrency transaction. Scared and wanting to avoid arrest, that's exactly what he did.

After speaking with multiple people about the incident, including law enforcement in another county, the resident came to the realization he had been scammed. He reached out to UCSO on May 28, not expecting to see his money again but hoping he could help catch the criminal.

Law enforcement impersonation is a common

scam wherein a person pretending to be an officer cold calls an unwitting victim to convince him or her that arrest is imminent – unless they pay up.

In this case, the scammer faked a call from an outside agency, though sometimes, scammers use real names of local officers.

Lending legitimacy to the fraud, this scammer possessed personal information about the victim and even spoofed the jail phone number for Gwinnett County and played police radio traffic in the background.

"One thing I would like to get across to people is that it's just so real," the victim said. "They're good at what they do."

The scam so often works because it plays on people's fear using intimidation tactics designed to trick folks who

trust law enforcement. After all, law-abiding citizens want to stay that way, thereby making them ideal victims of such schemes.

But Maj. Dyer, who will serve as the next sheriff of Union County starting in 2025, said that law enforcement will never call people up to demand payment for anything; if the Sheriff's Office is going to arrest someone, deputies will arrive in person to do so.

The victim never imagined he could be duped like this, but Maj. Dyer said he was not surprised given how sophisticated scam operations have become, with criminals working around the clock to steal people's hard-earned money.

Over the last year or so, the prevalence of financial crimes has shot up so much that



UCSO Maj. Shawn Dyer fanning out nearly \$10,000 in cash recovered for a local scam victim, who was understandably grateful to get his money back last week. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## Rec Dept. reels in family fun with Fishing Rodeo

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

For the third year in a row, the annual Fishing Rodeo returned to the Byron Herbert Reece Farm and Heritage Center on May 29 courtesy of the Union County Recreation Department.

In all, about 55 kids showed up for an evening out in nature – a number that event organizer Dustin Rogers said is an increase from last year.

"I would say (attendance) is up," said Rogers, who serves as manager of the Union County Farmers Market. "We set the limit at 40, but we try to



The banks of Wolf Creek at the Reece Farm swelled with young outdoorsmen recently as the Rec Department hosted its annual Kids Fishing Rodeo. Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

## GDOT aiming to finish sinkhole fix 'this summer'

By Shawn Jarrard  
North Georgia News  
editor@nganews.com

According to the Georgia Department of Transportation, the sinkhole repair at Murphy Highway and Georgia 515 has been extended again, with the latest completion timeline for construction estimated as being "sometime during this summer."

"The contractor is actively working on the project installing a sewer line which will need to go beneath the roadway," GDOT District 1 Communications Officer Elizabeth Johnson said. "Once that is accomplished, they will



While work appears to have slowed down on the sinkhole repair, GDOT assures the public that construction continues apace. Photo by Shawn Jarrard

## 4-H Modified Trap Team excels at state competition

News Special

The Union County 4-H Modified Trap Shotgun Team posted some tremendous results in their recent appearance in the State Shoot at Rock Eagle in May.

Senior Team 1 scored 97 out of 100; Senior Team 2 scored 93 out of 100; and Junior Team 1 scored 93 out of 100.

Junior 4-H'er Mason Stephens scored a perfect 25 then advanced to a shoot-off on doubles, where he hit 9 out of 10. Then in a second shoot-off he scored 9 again resulting in his Second Place finish over all Juniors.

There were 863 Juniors and Juniors who participated in this year's Modified Trap event

at the Rock Eagle 4-H Shotgun facility in Madison, Georgia, a rise of 8% in attendance over last year.

Leading the Union County 4-H Modified Trap Team as coaches are Keith Herbert, Aaron Dills and Vanna Chambers.

"We as coaches are well pleased in the involvement of all parents and supporters for this year's season," the coaches said in a joint statement. "Looking forward to next season as it will begin in the fall for any new shooters from sixth grade through 12th who would like to participate in the 2025 season."

For more information, please contact the Union County Extension Office at 706-439-6030.



The student-athletes of the Union County 4-H Modified Trap Shotgun Team are to be commended for their hard work and dedication that culminated in a successful end to the season last month. Photo/Submitted

## Scottish Festival enjoys beautiful weekend weather

By Brittany Holbrooks  
North Georgia News  
Staff Writer

The 2024 Blairsville Scottish Festival and Highland Games went off without a hitch, and, in the words of Festival Chairperson Kimberly Miller, the event turned out to be "one of the best," with three world records broken over the course of the June 8-9 weekend inside Meeks Park.

On Saturday, Shane Sutherland of South Carolina took part in the Master's Men Lightweight Division in the 40-49 age category. First, Sutherland tossed a 16-pound

stone 41 feet and 10.5 inches, only to break another record by throwing a 28-pound weight an outstanding 65 feet and 11.5 inches.

Georgia's very own Randy McClure busted yet another world record on Sunday as part of the weight-over-bar's Master's Men Division. The 60-year-old hefted a 35-pound weight a staggering 17 feet and 7 inches over his head to clear the bar and set a new standard.

As explained by Danny Webster of Backyard Rebellion Highland Games, LLC, the feats are amazing considering that the games the athletes compete

in have been practiced for thousands of years; Sutherland and McClure's names can now go down in that history.

Another ancient sport practiced by the Scots was falconry, and it's been on display in some form or another just about every year at the Blairsville Scottish Festival. The earliest records involving the use of raptors date back to 2,000 years before the birth of Christ, and in the days before gunpowder, talons were the most effective weapon used in game hunting.

Banshee, a Harris's hawk trained and kept by Dennis

Mock of the Georgia Falconry Association, lived up to her name and periodically shrieked as Mock explained how the process works.

"She'll land in a tree and watch us while we try and flush game for her," said Mock, adding that most of Banshee's prey consists of rabbits and squirrels, but massive golden eagles – native to Scotland – have been known to take down coyotes and even wolves.

"When we flush game, we holler, and she knows when we see something, she'll go out and try to find it," Mock said.

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A weight-throw competitor at the officially sanctioned Highland Games during the Blairsville Scottish Festival June 8. Photo by Lowell Nicholson



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# Money Returned...from Page 1A

scams are now the No. 1 crime in Union County.

Catching scammers is incredibly difficult, because most fraudulent calls originate from outside the targeted area, and often internationally. And once a scammer gets a hold of someone's money, they disappear without a trace.

Fortunately, this story features a happy ending.

UCSO Financial Crimes Inv. Bob Calamari has developed excellent connections since starting in this position, which was created last fall to tackle the growing frequency of scam and fraud crimes in Union County.

Calamari reached out

to the Coinstar executive responsible for all North American machines, and likely due to the Memorial Day holiday, it turned out the money was still onsite in the Dawsonville machine after nearly a week.

The cash would have been too late to recover if it had been picked up for deposit, but since the money was still sitting there, it was subject to subpoena and confiscation.

So, when the resident responded to a request to swing by the Sheriff's Office last Thursday, he received a surprise that made him shed tears of gratitude.

"I never dreamt I'd get

any money back," the resident said. "I was just hoping to try to help catch them."

Of course, scams can happen to anyone, and Dyer said people should never feel too embarrassed to report a scam, as good outcomes like this one are always possible, especially with timely reporting.

Plus, knowing what is happening in the community helps the Sheriff's Office fight such crimes.

With the law enforcement scam, Dyer said residents can contact the Sheriff's Office at 706-439-6066 to check on the status of arrest warrants, even if they allegedly originate outside the county. And generally, Dyer

wants people to know they have an invaluable resource in UCSO.

"Before giving any information (over the phone or online), call us," Dyer said. "If ever in doubt, call us, and we'll find out for you if it's legit or a scam and save you money. That's why we have a financial crimes investigator.

"We'd rather take your phone call and answer your questions than work a whole case. It'll help us and help the citizens, too, to do that. Anytime somebody calls asking for money, call us."

This particular scam has been reported to the Federal Bureau of Investigation and remains under investigation locally.

In the meantime, the Sheriff's Office is continuing to work hard to educate the public with ongoing awareness classes, social media posts and printed materials, to let people know what to look for to avoid being scammed.

# Sinkhole Repair...from Page 1A

have to fill in the excavations and grade the roadway and allow it to settle before paving."

Work began late last summer after the 40-foot sinkhole opened during torrential rains on Aug. 29, and GDOT estimated then that the repair would take until Jan. 1.

In November, GDOT revised the completion timeline to February 2024, and then again in January to late April, with the most recent estimate aiming to see a complete restoration before the anniversary of the sinkhole's opening.

Initial work consisted of filling in the sinkhole before driving dozens of steel piles into the ground to get a retaining wall in place, shoring up the dirt so that crews could safely excavate the area,

determine what went wrong and replace the infrastructure there.

Soil saturation from the storm and a burst stormwater pipe softened the ground that rainy evening in August, but an ultimate cause of the failure has not been determined, as the pipe is so old that clear records of it could not be found, according to GDOT.

Crews with Pittman Construction Company have been working to replace the stormwater pipe before they can begin to backfill the area, and the City of Blairsville still has a compromised wastepipe that is in the process of being replaced.

The state-owned property is an important piece of right-of-way for GDOT, as the gravity-fed infrastructure

channels stormwater across 515. That's why this has been a priority project for the state, which is spending roughly \$5.1 million on the fix, according to recent cost estimates.

Two manholes collapsed in the sinkhole, one owned by GDOT and the other by Blairsville for sewage transport, and since then, stormwater has been pumped from the First Baptist Church side of 515 to the downstream side of 515 into the pipe under Murphy Highway.

The city has been pumping sewage from the manhole behind First Baptist to another one up the highway, bypassing the affected area until Pittman Construction can restore the city's sewer access.

"Once the pipes have been replaced, the construction barriers which held back the earth so that work could take place will be removed," Johnson said previously. "The earth will be replaced to recover the pipes and fill in the hole."

Construction has resulted in a massive transformation of that area, including tons of dirt moved and the temporary removal of a Murphy Highway entrance to the Blairsville Quick Stop and Sherwin-Williams Paint Store on the corner.

The state transportation agency said last year that, "once completed, the area will be the same as it was originally.

# DAR honors SAR Vietnam Veterans

The Old Unicoi Trail (OUT) Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) presented Vietnam veteran members of the Blue Ridge Mountains Chapter Sons of the American Revolution (SAR) with special commemorative coins in recognition of their service. The Old Unicoi Trail Chapter Regent Pam Greene and Vice Regent Barbara Weaver presented the commemorative coins to Vietnam veterans Sid Turner, John Mays, Jack Dugger,

Bruce Maney, Mike Zink, Richard Hoibraten, and Jared Ogden.

The members of the Sons of the American Revolution and the Daughters of the American Revolution trace their ancestry to Revolutionary War Patriots. Both organizations seek to spread knowledge of America's unique history, teach the responsibility of citizenship necessary to maintain America's democratic republic, and encourage virtuous and patriotic acts in the present day.

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# Scottish Festival...from Page 1A

From there, the bird divebombs unsuspecting prey and lands the killing blow.

In modern times, falconers can buy captive-born birds or catch them from the wild. If the species is native to the area, they can also be released when they retire from hunting. Usually, Mock says, they never look back.

Far from the piercing cry of Banshee, Amy Queen, her daughter and the latter's friend settled beside the peaceful

creek in Meeks Park to listen to the rocking Celtic music of Eireann's Call. The two little girls danced on the bank, holding hands and swaying.

"We always love it. I take vacation every year around the Scottish Festival so we can come," said Queen, a resident of Murphy, North Carolina, who has traced her ancestry back to the MacDonald Clan. "We love the food, but now, we love the parade with the drums – we like all of it."



Fluffy and lovable Highland cattle are always a big draw for families attending the Blairsville Scottish Festival & Highland Games.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

Meanwhile, Tom Keen, a piper of the John Mohr MacKintosh Pipes and Drums band, caught several eyes walking down the road in a historical pith helmet to keep cool. The distinct style, often recognized as "safari hats," was utilized by British soldiers stationed in India during the late 19th century.

"It's made of cork, so heat doesn't get through it. It's got ventilation holes in it, so when it sits on my head here, the air can rise up through it," Keen explained.

Clan Nan Con reenactors were also able to beat the heat in their historical costumes. Contrary to popular belief, the wool jackets worn by Appalachia's earliest Scottish settlers weren't necessarily a detriment under the brighter glare of a North American sky.

Neil Fitzgibbons, who has been with Clan Nan Con for at least 20 years and attended all but one of Blairsville's Scottish Festivals, described the insulating nature of wool and how, if a shirt was soaked in water, the coat over top of it would keep the cool feeling "in." Women practiced the same technique



The pipe and drum players participating in the Massed Bands performance did not disappoint the hundreds of guests gathered to watch the opening ceremony of the Blairsville Scottish Festival Saturday.  
Photo by Shawn Jarrard

with neckerchiefs.

With so many people breathing new life into the intertwining history of both the Appalachia Mountains and the Scottish Highlands, it's no wonder that history buffs would be drawn to the event.

David Edmonds was one such person and had even come dressed as a skirmisher that would have patrolled the English-Scottish border in the

1500s.

"We came here years ago, when it was about maybe a third or a quarter of the size," said Edmonds, believing that the Scottish Festival was always "very enjoyable." His favorite part, unsurprisingly, is wandering the grounds and meeting like-minded people.

"That's what I'm basically here for – my fellow history geeks," said Edmonds

with a playful chuckle.

There were plenty of them and other festivalgoers on both days, and by Sunday afternoon, when everything wound down at the Main Field with a final, moving performance of pipes and drums, everyone celebrated that the festival brought them all together for another year – and looked forward to the next season.

# Kids Fishing Rodeo...from Page 1A



A young local outdoor enthusiast holding up a prized catch at the annual Kids Fishing Rodeo last month.  
Photo by Brittany Holbrooks

never turn a kid away."

Each of those kiddos is allowed to go home with up to eight fish, so it takes a lot to properly stock up for the big event.

Fortunately, John Lee Thompson with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources at the Lake Burton Fish Hatchery organized the release of about 500 trout in the waters surrounding the historical property.

All along the bank, children, their parents and older siblings enjoyed reeling in their catches. That was certainly the case with Ashley Nix's family, as her husband and son focused on fishing as she kept an eye on 2-year-old daughter Hadleigh, who was more interested in other wildlife.

"We appreciate the county taking the time to put this on for the children. It's a good activity for them," she said.

"I think it's great that they do this for the kids,"

agreed Randy Veroline as he helped his daughter Holly untangle her fishing line. "It gives kids something positive to focus on rather than all the negative stuff that happens sometimes. It helps them to learn outdoors stuff, sportsmanship."

Meanwhile, buddies Asa Lunsford and William Jones fished together, exploring and socializing when they couldn't get a bite. It wasn't Lunsford's first rodeo, so to speak, as he enjoys fishing and has been to the hatchery before, though it was his first time attending the event.

"(Fishing) is a really fun time. Time to take a break and not worry about anything," said 11-year-old Lunsford, adding that his favorite part about the sport was bringing the fish home to eat.

Slowly but surely, as the evening wore on and the sun began to set, families started trickling in under the pavilion to grab dinner after reeling in

some big ones. A few children didn't nab anything right away, but Rogers and others were quick to help them reel in at least one or two fish.

Jerry Henderson's State Farm donated the food for the evening, which included hot dogs grilled by Recreation Department volunteers to go with a variety of chips. Along with that, guests enjoyed a raffle of outdoor supplies like tackleboxes and lures.

All proceeds from ticket purchases go back to the Recreation Department, and according to Rogers, there are talks of possibly doing more community outreach programs to get kids exploring nature. As it stands, the Fishing Rodeo occurs twice a year – once in Suches in April, and once in Blairsville in May.

"I'm just thankful for these programs," said Rogers, who wanted to add that he was grateful also to the county for allowing him to maintain the event.

# "Shrimp/Shop With A Cop" Fundraiser



3rd Annual "Shrimp/Shop With A Cop" Fundraiser to be held Saturday, July 6th

The 3rd annual Shrimp/Shop with a Cop Fundraiser is scheduled for Saturday, July 6th from 11 AM - 1 PM at the Blairsville Police Department.

Biram Chapman, the "Shrimp Snob" will be donating \$5 for each pound of his super fresh, wild-caught GA coast shrimp that is sold during the fundraiser.

You can order Shrimp by calling the Police Department at 706-835-1692. Deadline to order is Friday, June 28th.

"This fundraiser is a lot of fun and unusual. Teaming up to bring fresh seafood to Blairsville and raise money for our less fortunate kids at Christmas is a win-win for everyone involved," com-

mented Chief Baxter.

"It is always nice to come to the mountains and Blairsville. To be a part of this special fundraiser is just icing on the cake. I appreciate the support from the Chief, the PD and the folks of Blairsville," Chapman said.

Last year's sales raised over \$900 for the Shop with a Cop Christmas fundraiser.