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Conservationists Undertake Rescue After North Carolina's Most Destructive Hurricane Threatens One of the World's Rarest Salamanders

National Nonprofit Leading Mission to Prevent Salamander's Extinction After Disaster

HICKORY NUT GORGE, NORTH CAROLINA, July 28, 2025 - One of the most endangered amphibians on Earth is being given a fighting chance after landslides triggered by Hurricane Helene destroyed critical habitat in western North Carolina. The [Hickory Nut Gorge green salamander \(*Aneides caryaensis*\)](#), found nowhere else in the world, is now the focus of an urgent rescue effort led by the Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC) and partners, including the North Carolina Zoo.

With an estimated wild population of just 300–500 individuals, the recently discovered and described species was already teetering on the edge when massive amounts of rain from the 2024 hurricane caused catastrophic [landslides](#) throughout its tiny range. After the storm, initial surveys and [drone images](#) revealed that at least one known site had been completely lost, and another, which was one of the most important strongholds, was reduced to mud, downed trees, and debris.

“The drone footage showed a completely shattered landscape,” said JJ Apodaca, ARC Executive Director and conservation geneticist, who led the team that [first described the species in 2019](#). “Our most pristine habitat was gone.”

Habitat restoration wasn't an option to save the salamanders. “This species relies on mature forest canopies and moss-covered cliff faces,” Apodaca explained. “You can't rebuild that in time to save a population.”

Instead, ARC and its partners, including the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, The Nature Conservancy, and the North Carolina Zoo, launched a rescue operation to locate any surviving salamanders and establish a captive population that could help prevent extinction.

Reaching the site took weeks of planning and even required the Department of Transportation to rebuild a washed-out section of road. When the team finally began rescue operations in late spring, they faced one

obstacle after another. The first was a newly rechanneled, swift [river](#) lined by enormous [boulders](#) that had been washed downriver by the floods. Then the climb to the sites was through the area impacted by landslides and was full of [downed trees](#), tangled vines, and poison ivy.

“It was like an adventure race crossed with an obstacle course,” Apodaca recalled. “But we made it.”

On the first day of field operations, Apodaca located two [salamanders](#) and delivered them directly to North Carolina Zoo personnel. “That day was both heartbreaking and hopeful,” he said. “The forest was stripped bare by landslides. The habitat was gone. But there, in the middle of all that destruction, I found two salamanders. That small shimmer in the flashlight beam when I spotted them in rock crevices was a flash of hope.”

As of today, 15 Hickory Nut Gorge green salamanders, including some gravid females (carrying eggs), are being [cared for at the Zoo](#). While the long-term outlook for the species remains uncertain, the team is hopeful this founding group will lead to the first successful reintroductions for the species. Further rescue missions are planned for the fall.

“There is perhaps no other species on Earth that I feel more connected to than the Hickory Nut Gorge green salamander,” said Apodaca. “Our lives, mine and the salamanders’, have become strangely and deeply intertwined. We’re both mountain creatures shaped by storms and circumstance.”

Though much work remains, Apodaca says this effort is a powerful reminder of what’s still possible. “This rescue has reminded me of something essential,” he said. “Conservation is about showing up, even when things are at their hardest. Oftentimes, especially then.”

About Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy (ARC)

Amphibian and Reptile Conservancy, or ARC, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit focused on identifying and conserving the highest priority places for amphibians and reptiles in the United States. We protect endangered amphibians and reptiles through a strategic, scientific, and passionate approach. We believe the conservation of amphibians, reptiles, and the habitats they depend on is vitally important. To learn more, visit ARCProtects.org.

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