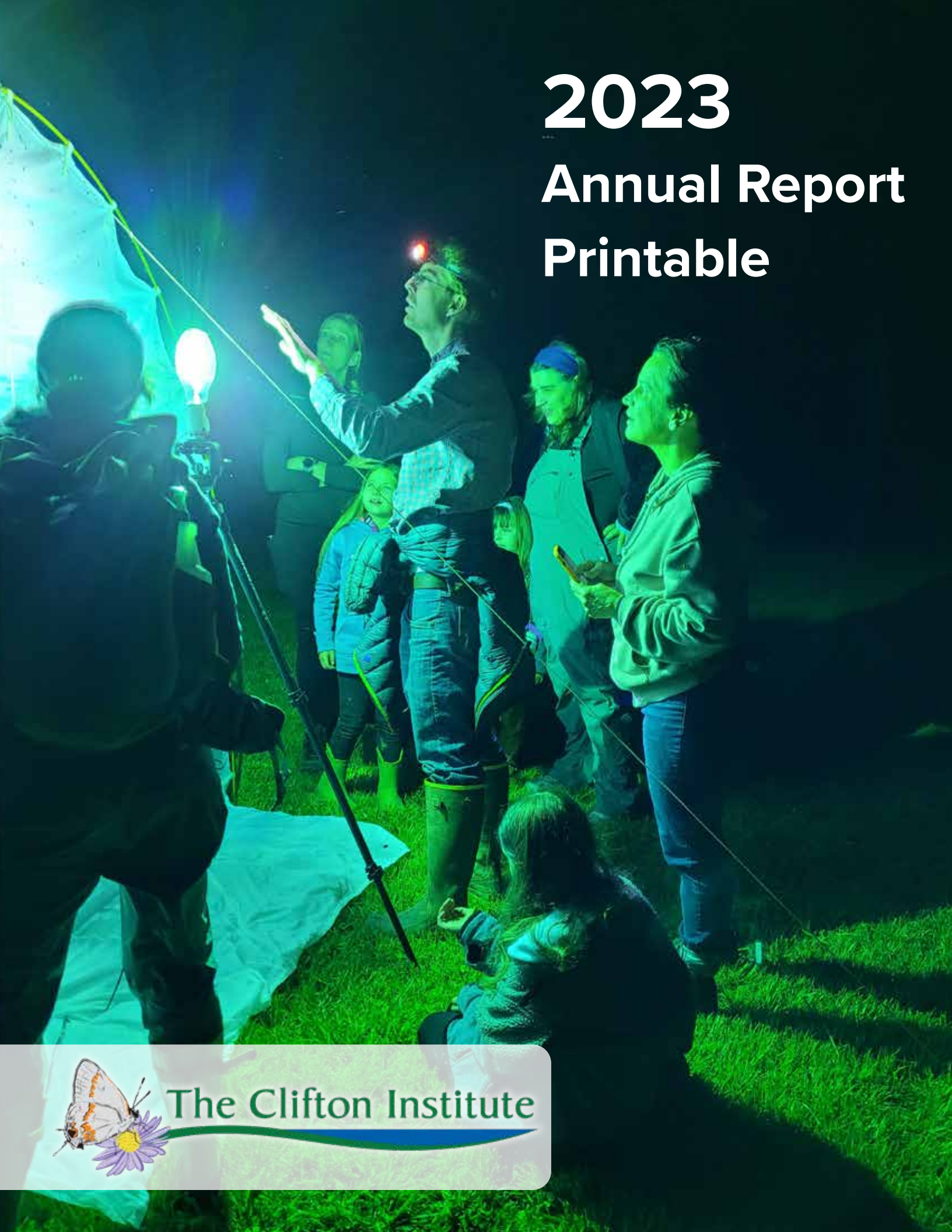

2023
Annual Report Printable

The Clifton Institute

Letter from the Directors

With another year on the books, we feel luckier than ever to live and work here: in an area where there are still large tracts of undeveloped land to explore; in an ecosystem with diverse native grasslands, forests full of box turtles, and vernal pools teeming with amphibians; and in a community full of people who want to learn about and conserve native biodiversity. Our goal is to conserve the special natural landscape of the northern Virginia Piedmont, which we do by restoring habitat, studying declining species, and teaching people about the incredible plants and animals that live right here.

In 2021 we started a landowner outreach program to give people advice about how to manage their properties to support native plants and animals. What works in another state or even another county might not be the best course of action for a landowner in Fauquier or Rappahannock or Loudoun County. Rather than giving blanket advice to landowners everywhere, we prefer to visit a site and learn about its specific history and soil and existing plant community before making any recommendations. In 2023 we provided personalized advice that will improve habitat on over 3,000 acres in our area.

In our restoration projects and in the advice we give to landowners, our goal is to promote plants that are native not just to North America, not just to Virginia, but to the county where we're working. If landowners are interested in restoring native habitats it's important to start by reestablishing plants with Virginian genetics. In 2022 we started a project to launch the native seed industry in Virginia so that eventually anyone will be able to buy seeds of locally appropriate species. 2023 was the first full year of that project and we're already starting to reap the rewards, both literally and metaphorically.

In our research projects we are trying to figure out how to support declining species on the mosaic of habitats found here in northern Virginia. Since 2021 we have been studying how American Kestrels move around the Piedmont. In 2023 we published the first peer-reviewed paper from that project. Our results thus far indicate that kestrels use pastures year-round but they prefer ungrazed meadows in the spring. Now we're working with our partners to understand why pastures and meadows are preferred over hay fields and how landowers can help to reverse kestrels' decline.

In our education programs we want to help people identify, understand, take care of, and appreciate the flora and fauna of our area. In 2023 we debuted new programs about Virginia's biodiversity and more people attended our education programs than ever before. Thank you for donating, attending our programs, volunteering, letting us do surveys on your properties, and helping spread the word about what we're doing! We are so grateful for our local community and we're looking forward to another great year together in the Piedmont.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Harris

Bert and Eleanor Harris
Co-Directors

Cover: Bert and program participants look for moths on a nighttime nature walk. **Back cover:** Nature School students explore our woods. **Above:** Bert identifies a Rose-pink on a walk. Eleanor sketches during a nature journaling workshop. **Opposite:** Participants on a Walk with a Naturalist visit our grassland.

We have more photos than could possibly fit in this report. Scan the QR code to the right to see an album of our favorites from last year!

Board of Directors

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In Memoriam

Our longtime board member Jocelyn Sladen passed away last year. Among many other passions, Jocelyn was an incredible champion for native plants and environmental education. Her boundless enthusiasm for Virginia's biodiversity inspired many people, including us. We miss her guidance and we are trying to make her proud.

Staff

Co-Director

Bert Harris, Ph.D.

Co-Director

Eleanor Harris, Ph.D.

Education Associate

Bridget Bradshaw

Habitat Specialist

Andrew Eberly

Native Seed Project Coordinator

Isaac Matlock

Landowner Outreach Associate

Kadiera Ingram

Administrator

Feliecia Brooks

Communications Associate

Kieran Paulsen

Educator

Julie Piñeiro

Groundskeeper

Ken Lang

Donate

We can only accomplish our mission with the help of people like you.

You can make a donation at cliftoninstitute.org/donate.

If you have any questions please email Eleanor Harris at eharris@cliftoninstitute.org.

Thank you!

Learn More

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Meet The Team

Andrew Eberly
Habitat Specialist

Much of my day is spent outside working on land management projects like bush-hogging our grasslands, maintaining trails, and controlling invasive plants. During the growing season I am often up in the woods doing plant surveys or running our small nursery operation, attempting to, and sometimes succeeding at, growing native plants of many species. I feel fortunate that this job allows me to get a close look at how plants and animals interact with one another and their environment. At the moment I am excited to try growing a few different oak species this year.

Bridget Bradshaw
Education Associate

I coordinate Clifton's youth education programs, which means writing lesson plans, lining up and teaching school field trips, pretending to be an opossum, visiting classrooms, and helping to orchestrate our huge number of in-house youth programs. I love working at a place where the staff and volunteers talk about the land like you'd talk about a person, worrying about how it's doing, noting small changes year to year, and celebrating milestones (first bloodroot!). As we write this in winter, I'm looking forward to bug season. It fills my bucket to see the looks of surprise and excitement as kids open up a sweep net to discover a multitude of bizarre and colorful little creatures that had, until that moment, been invisible to us.

Julie Piñeiro
Educator

As the part-time educator here, an aspect of my job that I love is the balance between the routine and the unknown. We prepare for each program pretty much the same way: we place sit-pads under the maple tree, map out the walk we will take with the students, gather demonstration materials, and so on. Then the school bus arrives, and the wondering begins: Who is going to step out? A child who walks slowly, noticing tiny details or one who just needs to run and leap? A nature nerd, wordsmith, artist, sleepyhead? What will each one need to be successful? What will I learn today? For me a joy of teaching is this juxtaposition of familiarity with the element of surprise.

Kadiera Ingram
Landowner Outreach Associate

Every day is a little different, but the majority of my time is spent visiting with local landowners and sharing land management advice. Last July, on my very first week, Bert and I found two state-rare plants, one of which was an orchid growing in my own neighborhood of Hume! That first week may have set the botanizing bar a little high, but the potential for making a discovery – be it of a fantastic native plant community, an ancient gnarly oak, or just a really healthy streambed – and getting the chance to help landowners protect and enhance the benefit of these wonderful natural features is what gets me out of bed in the morning.

If you've been here to Clifton, you've likely run into one or two of our staff, but you may not have met all of the naturalists, educators, and conservationists who work here. If this looks like a crew you might like to spend time with, there are lots of ways for you to get involved, including attending one of our education programs, volunteering with our education or restoration staff, becoming a camp counselor or summer research technician, or signing up for a visit from Kadiera. You can learn about all of these opportunities on our website. We hope we'll see you out here soon!

Feliecia Brooks
Administrator

Feliecia is too humble to say so, but she's the bedrock of Clifton and has been with the organization through its many forms. Her knowledge and ability to make order of chaos is a huge part of what allows the rest of us to be here doing the work we love. She says, "I enjoy my role at Clifton supporting the staff so they can create and execute meaningful programs. In 2024 I look forward to the completion of our 1820 cabin restoration project, an endeavor that holds a special place in my heart."

Isaac Matlock
Native Seed Project Coordinator

My role allows me to work with many wonderful folks, all with a common goal of increasing the abundance of native plants throughout Virginia. From collecting seeds in beautiful places, to working in a greenhouse, to visiting farmers and native plant enthusiasts, my days are filled with moments of hope for the biodiversity of our region. Teaching people about the native plants that are hidden in plain sight gives me a lot of satisfaction. I'm looking forward to seeing all the seeds we produce and harvest this year, as well as working with our many volunteers and partners around the state on the Virginia Native Seed Project.

Kieran Paulsen
Communications Associate

I'm responsible for Clifton's social media accounts, photography, email newsletters, and print publications (like this one!). I love getting to learn about different aspects of native ecology and restoration and sharing them with our audience. I also love highlighting all the amazing work of all our staff members. It's a passionate crew all the way from the interns to the directors. I'm looking forward to following the progress of our ongoing research projects and seeing what surprises the field station has in store in the years to come!

Partner Organizations

We could not accomplish our mission without the help of these partner organizations.

American Farmland Trust

American University

The Capital Region Land Conservancy

Center for Urban Habitats

Chesapeake Bay Foundation

Ernst Conservation Seeds

The Farm at Sunnyside

Fauquier County Parks and Recreation

Land Trust of Virginia

The Nature Conservancy

Oak Spring Garden Foundation

Old Rag Master Naturalists

Piedmont Environmental Council

Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute

Smithsonian-Mason School of Conservation

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation

Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

Virginia Native Plant Society

Virginia Outdoors Foundation

Virginia State University

Virginia Tech

Virginia Working Landscapes

Warrenton Garden Club

Phenology of the

Phenology is the study of when plants and animals go through different stages of their life cycles. Some species are remarkably consistent (Eastern Phoebes seem to arrive on March 5 on the dot), while others vary dramatically from year to year (Spotted Salamanders can migrate to our vernal pools anywhere between mid-January and late February). Paying attention to the timing of the plants and animals around us helps us understand their lives and how different species are being affected by climate change and other disturbances. Every place has its own specific phenology–fifty miles south or north of here, plants might bloom weeks earlier or later–and only by paying attention to the calendar of the plants and animals in our backyards can we get to know this specific landscape.

January February March April May June

Meloe blister beetles start coming out as soon as the weather is above freezing, as early as February.

We're always excited to see the first Six-spotted Tiger Beetles on warm days in April.

We see Pleasing Fungus Beetles mostly in May and June, although this pair was photographed in July.

Summer Azures are one of the first butterflies we see each year, usually in March. Photo by eemag on iNaturalist.

Golden-backed Snipe Flies show off their colors in late spring. Photo by tca12345 on iNaturalist.

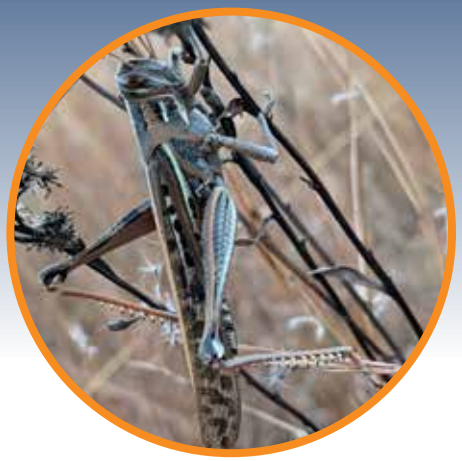
Clifton Institute

For the last couple of years our staff have been keeping a phenology notebook: as we come in from walks on the property we make note of the wildflower we found blooming or the bird we saw building a nest. Based on our observations, we time our land management activities to disturb animals as little as possible. And we schedule our education programs during the peak season for whatever it is we're learning about. In 2023 we started a phenology trail where we take children to monitor the annual cycle of six species of trees. In ten years we'll have a rich story to tell about these trees' lives. Our years are punctuated by the appearances of different plants and animals. Insects, like the ones below (all photographed right here at Clifton), provide perhaps the most dramatic entertainment, with many flying for only a few short weeks each year.

July August September October November December

Coral Hairstreaks can be seen swarming Butterfly Weed in the heat of midsummer.

We find the most caterpillars in August and September; this Red-humped Caterpillar is no exception.



American Bird Grasshoppers have one generation in spring and then a second generation in late fall.

When we're lucky enough to see a Southern Broken Dash butterfly it's usually in August.

Last year this Pipevine Swallowtail hung around into October! Photo by Sofie Marino.

Education

205
educational programs

1,373
children on field trips

1,334
children visited at schools

666
children at in-house programs

1,617
adult participants

These numbers represent total attendance at our programs, not the number of unique attendees.

In 2023, we ran 205 education programs that were attended by just under 5,000 people (4,990 to be exact). That's an average of four programs a week all year long, a mighty feat for a staff of fewer than ten people. A major development last year was our new in-school programs, which supplement our on-site field trips. We continued our in-house series for children and had higher attendance at our adult programs than ever before.

If you've ever come to one of our programs, you'll know that we're a bit fanatical for identifying plants and animals and mushrooms. Is that a firefly or a soldier beetle? How is the leaf scar of the Green Ash different from a White Ash? What plant family is this flower in? It might seem pedantic to identify every bird and tree we see, but identification is the first step to understanding and appreciating the species around us.

Learning to identify grasses and bees can be challenging, but everyone can do it, including—maybe especially—children. It's happened more than once that a student who attended a field trip came back months later on a walk and proudly pointed out the plants they learned to their parents. Our educators have seen children give the name Bob (yes, specifically, Bob) to more snails and slugs and turtles than we can count. As silly as that may sound, it reflects the deep-seated instinct we all have to give names to the living creatures around us.

We feel it's our responsibility to teach people about the species that live here. It's hard to love something without knowing its name and even more difficult to know how to take care of a plant or animal without knowing what species it is. Teaching people the names of living things is one way we're helping make sure there will always be stewards of this landscape. Last year we taught children and adults how to identify birds, bees, butterflies, fireflies, dragonflies, grasses, insect orders, lichens, mushrooms, plant families, sparrows, warbler songs, and wildflowers, and we're looking forward to adding even more taxa to that list in 2024.

Clockwise from top left: Summer campers look for birds on the pond. Students on a field trip look for amphibians in our vernal pools. Eleanor Harris demonstrates how we light prescribed burns to a group of students on a field trip. Participants on an all-day Walk with a Naturalist. A program to look for Spotted Salamanders migrating to our vernal pools.

Research-based Field Trips

In the fall of 2022, we started offering a new model of inquiry-based field trip and 2023 was the first full year of running these programs. Students attending our field trips now get to participate in the scientific research taking place on our property. Over the course of the year we provided 41 field trips for 20 schools, including eight Fauquier County public schools, the Hill School, Wakefield School, and Highland School. We have an ongoing partnership where we provide two field trips for each of the first through fourth grades at Highland, which gives those students eight chances to explore the field station. You can read some of the feedback we've gotten from teachers at these schools below.

During our inquiry-based field trips, students help collect data on five ongoing research projects. For example, do prescribed burns or mowing affect plant and insect communities in our experimental grassland? How are populations of amphibians changing over time? And how are trees' seasonal cycles affected by climate change? After an introduction to the day's research question, we take the students out onto our property, where we teach them how to identify the project's focal plants or animals (for example, five grasses

"Our experience at the Clifton Institute was AMAZING! Our kids got hands-on experience that they needed. They were super excited to collect all the data!"

"The Amphibian Monitoring program provided a glimpse of the real process of science inquiry to our middle school and high school students. It was a good exercise for the students to see that what is simulated in their lab class is actually what "real" scientists do in the field."

and wildflowers, six species of trees, or how to tell apart Jefferson and Spotted Salamander egg masses) and how to collect data (for example, surveying plants in a 10 meter by 1 meter transect adjacent to the trail). Students work in small groups to collect data about their designated plot, tree, or vernal pool. Finally, we bring the students back together to add their data to a graph showing all the data that have been collected on that project so far in the season and to draw what conclusions they can from their hard numbers.

When we transitioned to inquiry-based programs we worried that teachers and students might not find collecting data about things like grasses and beetles to be very fun. However, in the past two years of providing these field trips, we have seen the joy on children's faces when they correctly identify plants, bugs, and amphibians and when they learn and perfect new skills. And they're good at it! Children seem to be hardwired to learn how to identify even challenging groups of plants like grasses and often within a half hour of practice they're confidently correcting any mistakes our educators make.

In 2023, we also started offering free in-school visits to Fauquier County Public School groups prior to their field trip. Over the course of the year we provided 21 of these visits, including one joint program with the Piedmont Environmental Council and the We Need Bees Committee for all of Brumfield Elementary School. As powerful as a single field trip can be, they are even more meaningful when students have multiple opportunities to get to know our staff and the subject matter, connect classroom learning to outdoor learning, and practice being comfortable outside. You can learn more at cliftoninstitute.org/fieldtrips.

"Our students had such an amazing experience. They were talking about their field trip for many days afterwards and are excited to practice their bug catching techniques. Most importantly, all students left with a newfound appreciation for and curiosity about our native wildlife and nature in general... Due to the guidance and support of [the educators], students genuinely see themselves as valid members of our community who have the power to impart change."

"This is my favorite field trip of all time and I've been teaching for more than twenty years!"

"I have never seen my students so excited about science."

Students explore a meadow while looking for insects.

Adult Education Programs

While we love the abundant energy of our young explorers, we also love teaching (and learning from!) our fellow nature-crazy grownups. Whether you're an experienced naturalist or just dipping your toe into the feathered, slimy, buzzing, and endlessly fascinating world of natural history, you're welcome at Clifton.

The most popular adult programs of 2023 were Zoom programs about our American Kestrel research project and winter sparrow identification, which were attended by 91 and 49 people respectively. Our most popular in-person programs were our native seed collection and propagation workshop and our annual woodcock watch. This confirms what we already knew: people love learning about birds and seeds!

In addition to many one-off programs about different taxonomic groups, we have several ongoing series: last year we ran two landowner meetups, four nature journaling workshops, eight Walks with a Naturalist, and twenty bird walks. We also started a new series called Science Saturdays to show people what field science is really like and to get them involved in our research projects. We ran three Science Saturdays, during which participants watched a kestrel get fitted with a GPS transmitter and collected data on dragonflies (one of kestrels' favorite foods), used a radio antenna to track box turtles that had been fitted with radio tags, and surveyed our experimental grassland for twelve species of grasses. We're excited to keep this series going in 2024.

We want to thank the 1,617 adults who attended one or more of our 97 adult programs in 2023. Each and every one of you made our experience richer by being here. Thank you!

Top row: Eleanor Harris and participants during a grass identification workshop. Bert Harris and participants on a dragonfly identification workshop find a new species on the Lower Pond. **Bottom row:** Andrew Eberly shows people at a Science Saturday how we track box turtles. Participants at a nature journaling meetup sketch plants.

Young Scientists Research Experience

Our staff know firsthand how transformative the early experiences we had doing research were. Realizing that we had the skills to do science and the excitement we got from learning something new about the world helped us make the decision to pursue scientific careers. Science is often taught as a set of facts, with little discussion of how those facts are discovered. This means that students don't know how many open questions there still are and they don't experience the most fun part of science: figuring it all out!

During our Young Scientists Research Experience, middle and high school students spend a week conducting their own independent research projects. They get hands-on experience with every step of the scientific process, from making an observation and coming up with a question, through collecting and analyzing data, to communicating their results. In 2023 seven students participated and, as always, they found interesting answers to a wide variety of questions.

Elyssa found that more aromatic Spicebush trees actually have more insects on them, rather than fewer.

Grant found that bigger Redbuds have more pods

Lane found that spittlebug larvae prefer to live on goldenrod, blackberry, and crownbeard.

Liam and **Loreli** (middle) worked together to find that there were more dragonflies and damselflies in less acidic ponds, while there were more salamander larvae in more acidic ponds.

Logan found that Field Sparrows are more abundant in the fields we burn than in the fields we mow.

Sarah (bottom) found that insects prefer to eat lighter-colored leaves and that insect damage doesn't appear to affect leaf color.

Research

Native Grassland Restoration

Our research goals are to understand the causes of declines in native species and to produce actionable recommendations that people can use to improve land management. Grasslands are the focus of a lot of our research because they are home to more plant species and more rare plants than any other habitat in Virginia, they host more declining bird species than any other habitat, and open space is a large component of the landscape here in northern Virginia. If we can learn how to manage these habitats to be better for native biodiversity, that knowledge could be applied to fields across the Mid Atlantic.

When we first set out to convert our non-native fescue cattle pasture to native grassland, we received a flurry of well-meaning, but conflicting, advice. A lot of the research we found was done on Midwestern prairies. So we, together with Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL), the Oak Spring Garden Foundation (OSGF), and Dr. Leighton Reid's Restoration Ecology Lab at Virginia Tech, designed a long-term project with the goal of identifying the restoration methods that would be most effective in the eastern US.

We set up an experiment on a 100-acre field that had previously been cattle pasture and created eight plots to compare the effectiveness of herbicide treatments, organic establishment, prescribed fire, and mowing. Our partners established the same experimental plots on their properties.

Jordan Coscia, a Ph.D. student at the Restoration Ecology Lab, is studying the plants in the experimental plots as part of her thesis. There is still plenty more data analysis to be done, but some patterns are emerging:

. The number of native species has increased at all three sites since baseline data were collected in 2019.

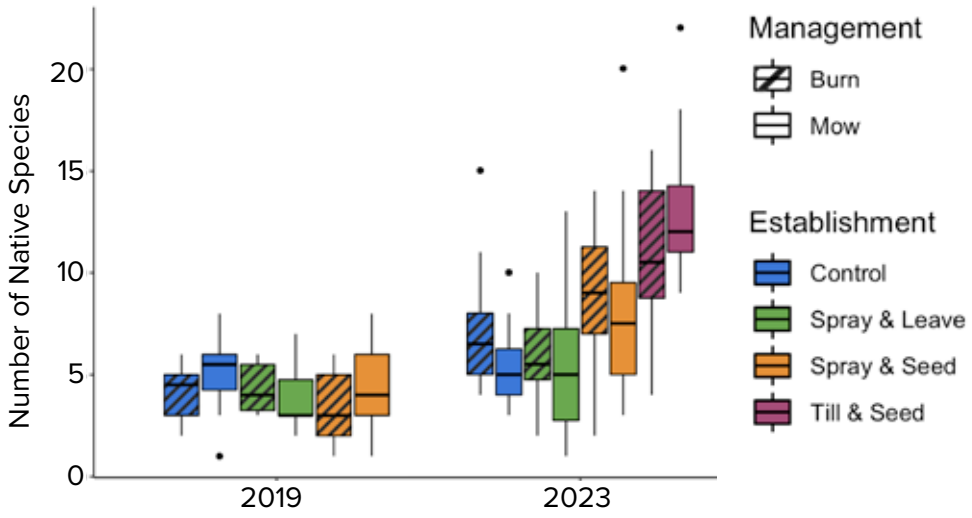
. Killing non-native plants and then planting seeds of native plants was more effective than letting the seed bank grow up.

. Managing with fire and mowing led to similar results

What does all of this mean for landowners? Simply taking cattle off a field and waiting for a few years can lead to an increase in native plants, but for the greatest increase in native plant diversity it appears to be worth the expense of killing non-native plants and planting seeds. The caveats are that the effectiveness of the different treatments depended heavily on what plants were found in the fields in 2019 and the results among the three sites varied a lot.

We are currently analyzing data from soil samples from before and after the experimental treatments were implemented; by next year we will be able to report on those analyses and we will have a much more complete understanding of the effects of the treatments. We are grateful to the Oak Spring Garden Foundation, NRCS EQIP, and the Raines Family Fund for supporting this project.

This graph shows the number of native plant species in eight plots before and after experimental treatments were implemented (the till and seed plots were not surveyed in 2019). All the plots had more native species in 2023 than in 2019. The plots where we planted native seeds now have more native species than those where we let the seed bank grow up.



A New Era In Box Turtle Research

Box Turtle populations in the Mid-Atlantic appear to be in steep decline. A likely cause in rural areas is mortality from mowing. It's easy to see how many turtles are killed by cars, but bushhogging and haying are quietly having big impacts. Box Turtles live up to 70 years in the wild, they take eight years to reach reproductive age, and their average clutch size is three eggs, though sometimes as few as one egg is viable. Due to their slow life history, Box Turtle populations are incredibly sensitive to adult mortality. Our partner Virginia Working Landscapes has created clear research-backed recommendations on how to time mowing to minimize grassland bird mortality in our area, but there are no such recommendations for Box Turtles.

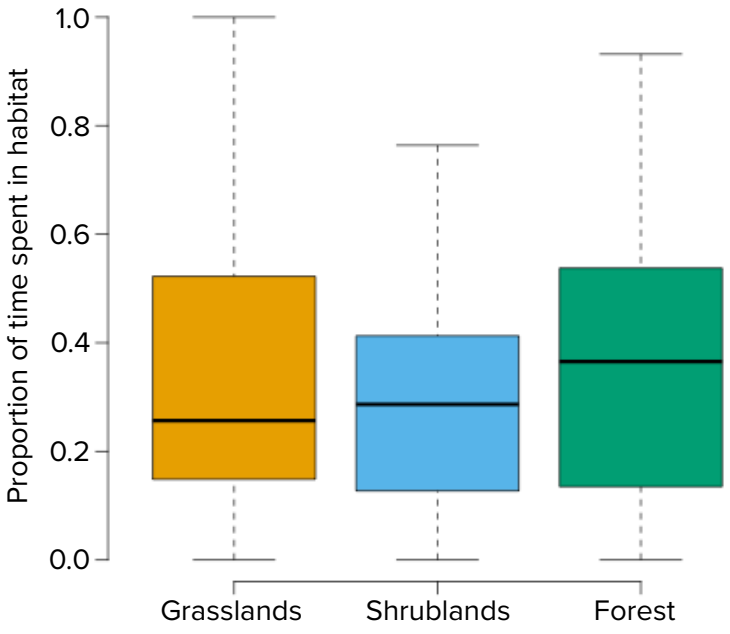
In 2022 we teamed up with Dr. Tom Akre's Turtle Conservation Ecology lab at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and Travis Gallo at the University of Maryland to study Box Turtles and begin to develop mowing guidelines for landowners. In 2023 Clifton staff attached radio transmitters to 40 Box Turtles in Fauquier and Rappahannock counties. Over the summer, Mark and Sofie used the radio transmitters to record the location of each turtle an average of 40 times. Meanwhile, our collaborators were marking and recapturing turtles to get a better understanding of the sex ratio and survival rates of the turtles. population.

We are still analyzing the data, but in our early analyses we were surprised to find that the turtles spent almost two thirds of the season in fields, even though we usually think of them as forest residents. This just confirms how vulnerable they are to mowing in our region. The turtles also showed significant preferences for areas with shrub cover (e.g. blackberry thickets) and downed woody debris (logs and sticks), and a strong preference for forests in the fall, presumably to find overwintering sites.

Based on our preliminary findings, we recommend that landowners leave some blackberry thickets in their fields for Box Turtles, quail, and other wildlife and bushhog fields annually in February while turtles are still brumating. If mowing is necessary between May and October, setting mower blades to 8 inches or higher will minimize mortality. So far, it seems that May and August are peak periods of activity (and therefore vulnerability to mowing), especially if it has rained in the last few days.

We're so grateful for support from the BAND Foundation and the Raines Family Fund for making this research possible.

The graph below shows that over the course of the year the radio-tagged box turtles spent about the same amount of time in grasslands, shrublands, and forest.



A Season of Firsts for Kestrel Research

Since 2021 we have been working with Dr. Joe Kolowski at the Smithsonian-Conservation Biology Institute and Alan Williams to study American Kestrels. In 2023, we expanded our GPS tracking efforts, installed video cameras in over 50 nest boxes, and started studying the abundance of kestrel prey. We were also excited to have our first paper related to this project published in the *Journal of Raptor Research* in December. Scan the code below to read the paper.

The core of our kestrel research project is using GPS transmitters to track kestrels' movements and study what habitats they use. The transmitters record the kestrels' locations every twenty minutes. This technology has enabled us to collect a staggering amount of data. Between 2021 and 2023 we tagged a total of 61 birds. On average we recorded the location of each bird 1,736 times; we have an incredible 7,696 data points on one bird. This is more data than we could ever get with radio tracking, the alternative to GPS tracking, and these data give us a comprehensive picture of the kestrels' behavior. In 2023, our research technicians worked to attach new GPS transmitters, keep all the transmitters working smoothly, and download their data, which has to be done in the field.

In the analyses published in our paper, we found that female kestrels have very small breeding territories (compared to other places where they've been studied) with little overlap. Females also took long forays outside of their territories, during which they were apparently scouting new territories to move to after breeding. These types of movements have not previously been observed in the species.

Our main goal is to understand what types of habitat (meadows, hay fields, and cattle pastures) kestrels utilize at different times of the year. As shown in the graph opposite, we have found that kestrels seem to prefer native wildflower meadows early in the breeding season, but once the breeding season is over they prefer cattle pasture; hayfields are never their preferred habitat. In order to understand why that is, last year we started studying how much prey is available to kestrels in different types of habitats at different times of year.

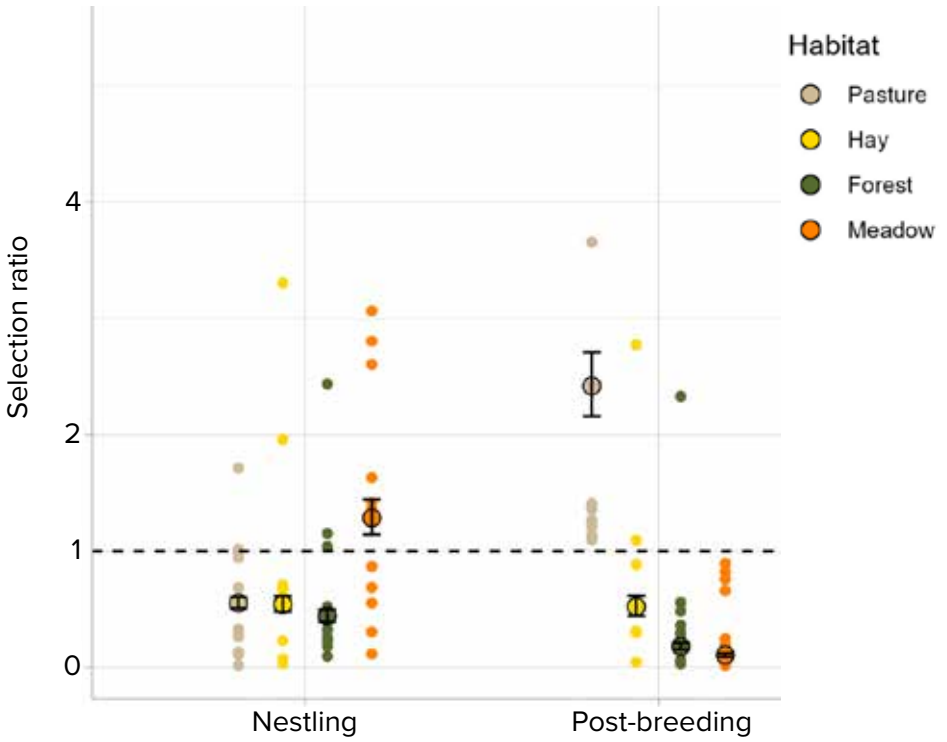
One way we are studying prey abundance is through motion-activated cameras. Thanks to Alan and generous landowners, we have access to over 250 nest boxes. In 2023 we installed cameras in 59 of those boxes. The footage shows us what kinds of prey kestrels are bringing into their nests to feed their offspring. We have multiple terabytes of footage that we are currently working on processing, but we already found some interesting results. Some of the most surprising recordings showed Red-bellied Woodpeckers (right) and Northern Flickers taking kestrel eggs out of nest boxes, the first ever records of woodpeckers predating kestrels.

In addition to installing camera boxes, in 2023 our research technicians and volunteers used track tubes and transect surveys to measure the abundance of voles, grasshoppers and dragonflies in fields surrounding nest boxes. These are all important food sources for kestrels. We are continuing these surveys in 2024, after which we will be able to report our findings about how much prey is available to kestrels in different types of fields.

While the goal of our project was not to study migratory behavior, we have been lucky to have multiple birds return to the study area after spending the winter as far south as Florida. This is in contrast to a long-term study in the Shenandoah Valley, where many kestrels are resident throughout the year.

We have learned a lot about the behavior and prey of American Kestrels, but much remains to be known. In 2024, we are going to keep running our prey abundance studies, monitoring nest box cameras, downloading data from the birds that currently have GPS transmitters, watching last year's camera footage, and analyzing the data we have collected so far. Many thanks to the Raines Family Fund, BAND Foundation, Nick Lapham, Washington Biologists' Field Club, Virginia Society of Ornithology, Peregrine Fund, and Janine Moseley for funding this project!

The graph to the right shows that while kestrels have babies in their nests they prefer to forage in wildflower meadows, but once kestrels are done breeding they prefer cattle pasture. The selection ratio is a ratio of how often they used a given type of field compared to the amount of that field type that was available in their territory. **Opposite, top:** The kestrel team takes data on a bird. **Opposite, bottom:** A Red-bellied Woodpecker stealing kestrel eggs.



Citizen Science Report

Last year, we hired five research technicians to help with our research projects. As hard as they worked and as many hours as they put in, there's still only so much we can do with a small team. Thankfully there are lots of people who are willing to volunteer their time helping us monitor different taxonomic groups through various citizen science projects.

Our iNaturalist project, a database of all the species found on the property, continues to grow: in October an observation of a Green Cheese Polypore mushroom was added, pushing us over 2,500 species. It's much easier to see a new fungus than it is to see a new bird; even still, two species were added to our eBird hotspot last year, Northern Shrike and Ash-throated Flycatcher, making us the birdiest hotspot in the county. We dedicate three days of the year to doing systematic surveys of dragonflies, butterflies, and birds, which we can only do with the help of a small army of volunteers. Here's what we found:

On the Clifton Institute Dragonfly Count

25 volunteers documented

57 species, including 3 new to the count,

on our NABA Butterfly Count

38 volunteers documented

39 species,

and on our Christmas Bird Count

53 volunteers documented

91 species.

Restoration

Leading By Example, Learning As We Go

Managing any piece of land is a big responsibility and the size of our 900-acre property makes it both a privilege and a challenge to manage. Every action we take and every decision not to act affects the plants and animals that live here. In our land management practices, our goal is to provide habitat for as many native species of plants and animals as we can and especially to support those species that are in decline.

We use the property as a demonstration for best land management practices to the thousands of pepole who visit us every year. And we use what we learn from our own experiences managing the property when we give advice to other landowners. In those ways, by taking care of this property we're helping improve land management across the region.

Most of our land management is focused on our grasslands and shrublands. These habitats require periodic disturbance to prevent them from turning into forests. Wildfires and animals like bison used to provide such disturbances; we use prescribed burns and mowing to maintain these habitats. In 2023 we burned over 50 acres of fields, thanks to the help of 32 volunteers.

Our early successional habitats also tend to be most affected by invasive species. In 2023, we focused on spot-spraying Canada Thistle and Spotted Knapweed in our grassland, cutting and painting Autumn Olive in our fields, and removing Multiflora Rose from around our vernal pools. One species that invades forests is Wavyleaf Basketgrass; in 2023, Blue Ridge PRISM lent us equipment to spray 10 acres of invaded forests. We're grateful for support from the Robert F. Schumann Foundation for both our prescribed burns and invasive species removal projects.

Managing our trail system is a lot of work. In 2023, twelve intrepid volunteers–Heidi Aboutaj, Ken Alm, Jennifer Dorrer, Walt Gerring, Tom Gill, Gary Harvey, Willy Kates, Kathy Killian, Jason Langhorne, Bob Lee, Brendan Toner, and Rob Williams–each adopted a stretch of trail to work on. Our trails are in better shape than ever and in January 2024 we were even able to open a new trail!

Last year we were honored to accept the Fauquier County Award for Preservation Excellence, presented by the Fauquier County Architectural Review Board for our work on our cabin dating to the 1820s. Administrator Feliecia Brooks managed the restoration of the unique and historic log structure with care and respect for its history.

Below: Volunteers on a Multiflora Rose removal day.

Above: Scenes from our prescribed burns.

Our Native Seed Project is Blooming

In 2022, we worked with the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation and other partners to launch the Virginia Native Seed Pilot Project, with the aim of making local-ecotype native seeds commercially available. There is a huge demand for native seeds from VDOT, solar farms, landowners, and public lands managers, but most seeds available for sale come from other states. Plants that grow from out-of-state seeds are often too tall or too short or bloom at the wrong time; they may even be different species. We are helping farmers learn how to grow native wildflowers and grasses for seed production, so they can make a profit and get seeds to the people that want them. It's a big goal, but we're well on our way!

In 2023, our Native Seed Project Coordinator Isaac Matlock—and lots of volunteers—collected seeds of 18 target species. From these wild-collected seeds, we grew 15,000 seedlings. Our partner Ernst Conservation Seeds grew 25,000 seedlings. Only one species, Rose-pink, has ended up being difficult to grow. The other 17 species look promising for large-scale seed production. For the next phase, we will add twelve more species of wildflowers. We select species that are good for pollinators, that are found across most of the state, and that are attractive to both wide-scale restoration projects and home gardeners.

To date, we have worked with our partner Virginia State University to recruit seven farmers for the project. Their farms are located in Rappahannock, Fauquier, Culpeper, Orange, Surry, Northampton, and King William counties. Three of the farmers started growing wildflowers and grasses for the project in the spring of 2023, and the remaining four established their plantings in the fall. Two farmers have already harvested seeds from a few species and the remaining farmers should see their first harvest in 2024.

In 2023, we also installed a demonstration plot at Clifton, where interested landowners and farmers can learn more about native seed production. This will also help us produce seeds commercially in-house. VSU has also established a Pollinator Smart solar farm demonstration planting.

In 2024, we will have our first full harvest from all participating farmers. This will give us an idea of the yield these species can provide in commercial operations. We also have plans for several new seed production plots, including one by the Rappahannock Tribe. By the end of 2024, we will have a best practice manual available to the public as a resource for anyone interested in learning more about native seed production in Virginia.

In addition to distributing seedlings to farmers for the Native Seed Pilot Project, we grow native seedlings to use in our restoration projects and to sell at our biannual plant sales. The plants we sell are all grown from locally-collected seeds and we focus on plants that are characteristic of native grasslands in our area and whose seeds are difficult or impossible to find from commercial seed sellers. We had a great turnout for our fall sale and we sold over 500 seedlings.

Thanks to the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Nature Conservancy, an anonymous donor, and George Ohstrom for supporting the Native Seed Pilot Project and to the Virginia Native Plant Society Piedmont Chapter for supporting our other native plant propagation work. We are also grateful to our other important partners on this project: the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources and the Capital Region Land Conservancy.

Improving Habitat One Property At A Time

We have been providing free land management advice to landowners in our fifteen-county service area since 2021. Our objective is to tailor our recommendations to the goals of each landowner and to the specific needs of each property. In 2023 we sadly said goodbye to our Landowner Outreach Associate, Marie Norwood, so she could start her graduate studies, but we were thrilled to welcome Kadiera Ingram to carry on the position. Three years into the program, we continue to have lots of interest from landowners throughout Fauquier and neighboring counties.

In 2023, we conducted 51 landowner visits, advising on over 3,000 acres. On most of the properties we visit, landowners are looking for advice about how to create native meadows and manage non-native plants, but we are happy to visit any property where landowners or land managers are interested in helping wildlife or native plants. Last year we visited a vineyard whose owner is interested in using use native plants to create habitat in and around the grape vines in the future 100-acre vineyard. Another highlight was visiting the campus of a private school with 94 acres, where staff are trying to create better native habitat for students to explore and study. On a select number of properties, we're working with Virginia Working Landscapes to do plant surveys before and after landowners implement our advice to study the effects of different land management practices.

We also held two meetups for land owners and land managers, where we discussed invasive species management, meadow installation, remnant prairie management, and native gardens. Through a Google group we administer, landowners can share their own experiences in restoring native habitats and they have formed a vibrant community there. Restoration can be hard work, but it's hugely valuable to get together as a group to discuss problems and solutions and to have a little fun.

Thank you to the Raines Family Fund, Beatrice von Gontard, and Bob Pender for supporting this program!

Kadiera Ingram and Bert Harris on a property visit.

A landowner meetup group at Bonny Brook Farm.

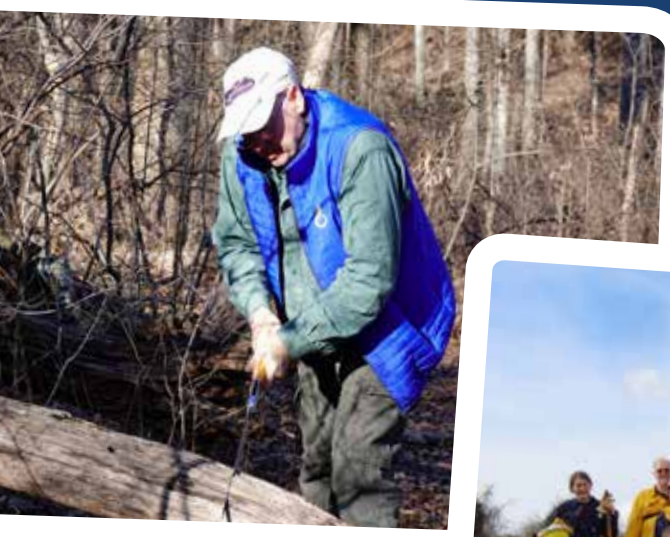
Opposite: Bert Harris talks to a visitor in our new greenhouse.

Volunteers

Every year we rely on the help of hundreds of amazing volunteers to accomplish our mission. In 2023, volunteers led bird walks, helped run field trips, built and maintained trails, monitored bluebird boxes, collected seeds for our native seed project, planted seedlings, grew plugs for our greenhouse, removed invasive species, helped conduct prescribed burns, documented species during bioblitzes, installed and checked camera traps, counted birds, butterflies, and dragonflies during annual counts, and more. It's truly a team effort and we're so grateful for everyone's help! We sometimes don't get everyone's names on our volunteer days so if we missed you please let us know and we'll add you to the invitation list for our volunteer appreciation barbecues!

213
volunteers contributed

2,436
hours



Heidi Aboutaj
Jenn Adams
Lisa Adcock
George Alapas
Robin Alapas
Ken Alm
Maria Almadezi
Amy Almazar
Sally Anderson
Kara Annis
Mike and Kelp Armstrong
Anne Douglas Atherton
Kevin and Sue Bailey
Scott Barbza
Danielle Bare
Jason Bare
Steve Barr
Josh Bass
Zoe Bergman
Bruce and Elizabeth Black
Bob Blakney
Dan Blymyer
Tanner Bosch
Joan Boudreau and Bob Abrams
Toby Bradshaw
Jean Buzby
Garry Campbell
Sean Campbell
Dave Carr
Dan Carter
Jimmy Carter
Bridget Chisholm
Arunie Clark
Jeff Clark
Maeve Coker
Corrinn Compton
John Cook
David Cox
Danielle Cross
Dawn Crothers
Maryam Dadkhah
Hillary Davidson
Todd Day
Rob Devening
Marky Dewhirst
Kathleen Didden
Barbara Dollison
Jennifer and Felix Dorrer
Mike Dow
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Izabella Farr
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Walter Gerring
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Bill Goodfellow
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Natalie Izlar
Josh Jakum
Ben Jesup
Clarence Jones
Greg Justice
Marcia Kaetzel
Willy Kates
Liz Keily
Alexandra Kelso
Kathy Killian
Michael Killian
Tabitha King
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Camron Robertson
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Lauren Scott
Megan Scott
Janelle Seymour
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Sue Weis
Jim Whatton
Melissa Wiedenfeld
Kaia Wiley
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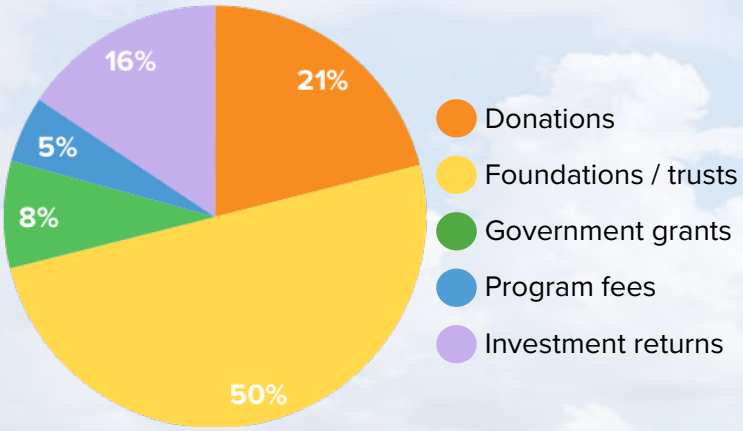
Rob Williams
Mathew Wilson
Wolf Wolfson
Brian Yoder
Jean Yoon
Kristin Zimet

Photos clockwise from top left: Tom Gill clears downed trees on the new Far Woods Trail he helped complete. Dragonfly count volunteers help monitor populations of dragonflies in the area. Volunteers sow native seeds for our greenhouse. Carolyn Strand helps a Nature School student look for bugs. A crew of volunteers after a prescribed burn.

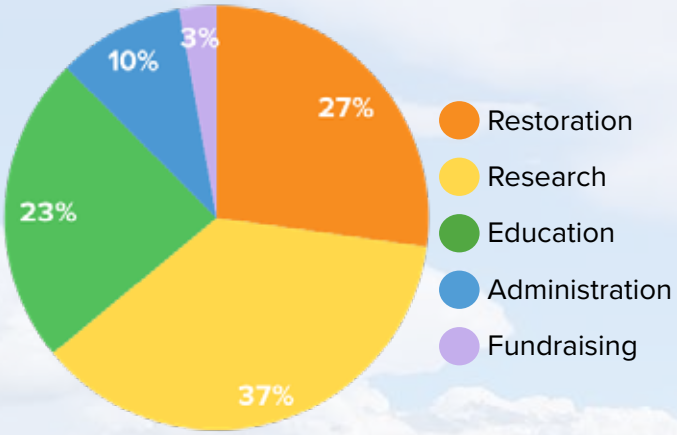
Thank you for

The charts below show the sources of support and revenue we received and the allocation of our expenses in 2023. The individuals, businesses, and foundations who contributed to the Clifton Institute in 2023 can be found on the next three pages. We could not accomplish our mission without the help of people like you. Thank you for your support!

Total Support and Revenue: $865,755



Total Expenses: $995,311



$10,000+

Anonymous, 2
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your support!

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Bridget Wolfe
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We hope we'll see you soon!

Until then, you can keep up to date with what we're working on by signing up for our monthly newsletter on our website (cliftoninstitute.org) or by following us on Facebook or Instagram (@clifton.institute). You can help us keep running our education, restoration, and research programs by donating at cliftoninstitute.org/donate. Thank you for your support!

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