

2024

Annual Report



The Clifton Institute

Directors' Message

We have a network of camera traps here monitored by a wonderful volunteer named Art Drauglis. Predictably, we see a lot of deer, raccoons and rabbits. But every now and then we see something a little more interesting. One of the most exciting photos Art got last year was of a Gray Fox, a bit blurred as it ran in front of the camera. Gray Foxes are uncommon in Virginia, so much so that none of our staff have ever seen one here besides on the camera traps. This photo reminded us how easy it is to overlook what's living in our own backyard. And how vital it is to manage land for the benefit of all native species, conspicuous and sneaky alike.

Another species that likes to hide in plain sight is the Box Turtle. We've learned from our tracking research that Box Turtles spend a lot of time in fields, where they can be hard to spot under thatch or in blackberry thickets. This makes them all the more vulnerable to being run over by lawnmowers and bushhogs driven by people who are oblivious to the turtles' presence. We're working not only to figure out where declining species like Box Turtles can be found at different times of year but also to spread the word about their habits to landowners so they can change their practices accordingly.

Perhaps no group of animals is more overlooked than insects. Many of them are so small that one sweep of a net can scoop up hundreds, and some people would prefer that their gardens and meadows be free of caterpillars and wasps and spiders. We are trying to do a little PR work for insects and other underappreciated organisms: programs like our Insect Investigation field trips and community-science dragonfly counts open people's eyes to the importance of the animals at the base of the food chain.

There's an entire type of habitat that we think doesn't receive as much attention as it deserves: shrublands. Shrublands are home to a unique assemblage of bird and plant species, many of which are in trouble. Here at Clifton our shrubland birds like Yellow-breasted Chat, Field Sparrow, and Common Yellowthroat are doing well and you can read below about the habitat management we're doing to make sure it stays that way.

If you're reading this, we expect you have a soft spot for the little guy too and we appreciate your support—whether it be through a donation, volunteer time, willingness to change land management practices, or just a little curiosity about unfamiliar species—as we work to make Virginia as hospitable as possible to all native species. Thank you! And we hope we'll see you soon!

Sincerely,



Bert and Eleanor Harris
Co-Directors



This page: A gray fox caught on a camera trap at Clifton. A Yellow-breasted Chat being banded by our collaborators. A Juniper Hairstreak at Clifton. Bert takes a kestrel fledgling out of a nest box so that it can be weighed and banded. Eleanor teaches about another under-loved group: mushrooms.

Support our programs

by making a donation at cliftoninstitute.org/donate or by sending a check in the enclosed envelope. Thank you!

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Warrenton Garden Club

This page: Summer campers learn about insects in our grassland. **Front cover:** Eleanor watercolors during a nature journaling program. **Back cover:** Barred Owl nestlings in our woods.



Our Programs



Causes of Wildlife Decline

The problem: American Kestrels and Eastern Box Turtles are declining rapidly, but the reasons why are poorly understood.

Our solution: We are conducting long-term tracking studies on American Kestrels and Eastern Box Turtles to understand how they use different habitats at different times of year. We use our results to advise landowners on how to improve mowing and grazing practices.



Grassland Restoration

The problem: There are few research-backed recommendations on how to restore native grasslands, Virginia's most diverse plant communities.

Our solution: We are conducting an experiment to test the effects of different restoration methods, in collaboration with Virginia Working Landscapes and the Oak Spring Garden Foundation. We have found that in order to restore fields dominated by non-native plants planting native species is required.



Shrubland Management

The problem: Shrublands are considered unsightly and hard to manage because it is hard to keep woody plants in check and they are vulnerable to invasion by non-native plants. This has led a decline in several shrubland bird, insect, and plant species.

Our solution: Since 2018 we have cleared 100 acres of shrublands of Autumn Olive and other invasives and we burn or mow them every 2-5 years. Our bird populations are holding steady.



Native Plant Propagation

The problem: Based on our surveys of remnant grasslands we have a good idea of what a native grassland should look like, but most of the species we found are not available from seed companies and those that are have out-of-state genetics.

Our solution: With our Virginia Native Seed Project we are working to make native local-ecotype seeds available on a commercial scale.

In addition to the eight programs listed below, we also provide monthly pre-school programs, run a Nature Club for middle- and high-school students, offer four weeks of summer camp, run community science counts and bioblitzes, provide internships and summer positions for young researchers, and manage our 900-acre property for the benefit of native biodiversity. You can read more in the following pages about all of our programs.



Landowner Outreach

The problem: Approximately 90% of the land in Virginia is privately owned. This places the onus of conserving biodiversity on private landowners.

Our solution: We offer free property visits to give landowners personalized advice about how to restore and maintain habitat based on our research and experience managing 900 acres of land here at Clifton. In 2024, we visited 76 properties totaling 5,415 acres of land.



Scientist for a Day Field Trips

The problem: We need future generations to pick up the mantle of conservation biology and environmental stewardship where we leave off.

Our solution: On our Scientist for a Day field trips, we teach K-12 students about the biodiversity of Virginia and how to do conservation biology. We also give children positive experiences out in nature. In 2024 over 1,100 children attended our field trips.



Adult Education Programs

The problem: Once we're out of school, it can be hard to find ways to learn about nature and to find a community of people with similar interests.

Our solution: The naturalists, scientists, and conservationists on our staff run over 80 adult education programs every year. These range from classes on how to identify groups like lichens and spiders to workshops on how to manage native habitat to nature journaling meetups.



Lawn Lab

The problem: Lawns provide poor habitat for native plants and animals, and mowing is a huge source of air pollution.

Our solution: In partnership with the Fauquier County Public School system, we started a mowing experiment at a schoolyard in Bealeton. K-12 students are learning how plants and animals recover when fields are mowed less frequently and getting hands-on experience doing real scientific research.

Research

Many native species are in trouble and before we can do anything to help them we have to understand why. Here at Clifton, we do research that helps us understand how land management decisions affect declining native species. And then we make sure that what we learn from our research gets back into the hands of the people who can use it. For the last few years, we have been studying American Kestrels and Eastern Box Turtles to figure out how to manage habitat for these charismatic species. We have also been studying native grasslands to learn about the conservation status of these habitats and come up with strategies to restore them.

Often times, we only know which species are in trouble because of long-term community science projects. It can take armies of volunteers years and years to collect enough data to say with any confidence that a given species is declining. To contribute to these important long-term monitoring efforts, we coordinate volunteers to participate in four annual community-science counts: the Audubon Christmas Bird Count, the

North American Butterfly Association Butterfly Count, and our own two dragonfly counts. In 2024, we also ran two bioblitzes to help landowners document the species on their properties, to inform how they manage their land, and to generate interest in lesser known biodiversity. We found over 700 species on each bioblitz!

Thank you to the Raines Family Fund, the BAND Foundation, the Virginia Society of Ornithology, and the Virginia Native Plant Society for funding our research projects in 2024! And thank you to our collaborators at the Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute, Virginia Tech, Virginia Working Landscapes, American University, and Hawk Mountain Sanctuary and our many technicians, interns, and volunteers for making this research possible.

This page: Participants in a bioblitz document moths and other nocturnal insects. **Opposite, top:** Research technician Mark Ketner finds a radio-tagged Box Turtle in the woods. **Opposite, bottom:** Bert Harris and co-PI Joe Kolowski of NZCBI attach a GPS transmitter to a kestrel.



As we always teach our students, the best research is guided by the steps of the scientific process. Here's how we carried out our research in 2024.

1. We asked a question.

How should we manage land in order to support declining species?

2. We collected data.

12 research technicians and interns tracked 19 American Kestrels and 11 Box Turtles from spring through fall.

3. We answered our question.

- Kestrels hunt in short grass, but their prey is more abundant in tall vegetation. We recommend leaving strips of wildflowers and grasses along the edges of pastures and hay fields to serve as food sources for kestrels and pollinator habitat.
- Many Box Turtles spend the summer in fields. We recommend bushhogging fields in February or delaying haying until until September to avoid killing turtles.
- We found that remnant grasslands are the most diverse plant communities in the state. Restoration efforts should be focused on meadows and grasslands rather than forests.

4. And we shared the results.

In 2024 we published 2 peer-reviewed papers* about our research projects and we gave 5 presentations and workshops about our results.

*PDFs are available on our website.



Restoration

When you hear “habitat loss,” you may think of bulldozers razing forests or pollutants wreaking havoc on ecosystems. Disasters like these certainly happen, but habitat loss often occurs through more insidious causes like the encroachment of invasive plants, uninformed land management practices, or simply lack of management. One of the most important things we can do to reverse this trend is educate landowners about how to support native species on their properties. In 2024, through our Landowner Outreach Program, we continued to provide free and personalized advice to landowners in six counties about how to manage invasive species, establish native plants, and support wildlife.

Our 900-acre field station is an important part of a corridor of natural habitat from Wildcat Mountain to the Bull Run Mountains, and our management serves as a demonstration to the thousands of people that visit us every year. In 2024, we managed 44 acres of grasslands and shrublands with prescribed burns. Our staff and volunteers cleared 10 acres of shrublands of invasive species and, thanks to a grant from the Virginia Department of Forestry, we hired a contractor to control 10 acres of Wavyleaf Basketgrass in our forests. If you’d like to explore these habitats on your own, it’s easier than ever thanks to the new Far Woods trail our volunteers helped build last winter.

Sourcing native plants is a challenge for any landowner working to restore native habitat. Our plant propagation program provides seedlings for our biannual plant sales and our own restoration projects: we sold over 1,000 seedlings last year. On a bigger scale, we created the Virginia Native Seed Project with our partners to jumpstart the native seed industry in the state. In 2024 we enrolled our eighth farmer in the project and sent the harvested seeds off to Ernst Conservation Seeds for cleaning. In 2025 we will enroll new farmers in the Coastal Plain, work to refine how the seeds are harvested, and develop a long-term business plan.

Curious about how to improve your property to benefit native species? Check out our Landowner Resources page! cliftoninstitute.org/landowner-resources



Above: A prescribed burn at Clifton. **Left column:** Volunteers plant seedlings in a wildflower meadow. A plant sale. A volunteer repots a native seedling. **Right column:** The opening ceremony for the new Far Woods trail. A volunteer makes a pile of Autumn Olive cuttings. One of the farmers enrolled in our Native Seed Project.



Education

Conserving native biodiversity will always be an ongoing effort and future generations will need to continue this work. We provide environmental education programs to showcase the incredible plants and animals that live here in Virginia, to teach people how to do science, and to inspire them to take care of nature.

On our flagship **Scientist for a Day field trips**, K-12 students learn how to do science by participating in one of five ongoing research projects here. They also learn about different groups of plants and animals (insects, grasses, amphibians, and trees) and have fun exploring nature. We supplement the field trips with in-class visits and align them with grade-appropriate Standards of Learning to make them as integrated into classroom learning as possible. In 2024 we provided 41 field trips for 24 schools and organizations that were attended by over 1,100 students.

In the fall we started a new **land-management experiment, Lawn Lab**, on the campus of Grace Miller Elementary and Liberty High in Bealeton to bring the kind of conservation biology research we do here at Clifton to a school where K-12 students can participate. Under our guidance, the schools stopped mowing two acres of land (except for once a year) and are mowing the rest of their fields once a week as usual. This allows the students to study the effects of mowing on native biodiversity and to spend a significant amount of time during the school year outside.

Learning doesn't just happen in school and one of the most valuable services we provide our community is providing people young and old a place where they can learn about nature. In addition to our school programs, we provide weekend programs for children and their families, summer camps, and lots of adult programs all year long. During these programs, we teach people how to identify the plants and animals that live in Virginia, how to conserve native biodiversity, and about different ways of interpreting and appreciating nature. In 2024 we also hosted seven high school and college interns to give them experience with conservation biology and environmental education. You can learn about all of these programs on our website. Come visit us soon!

196

educational programs

2,737

children

1,524

adults

These numbers are total attendees, not unique attendees.



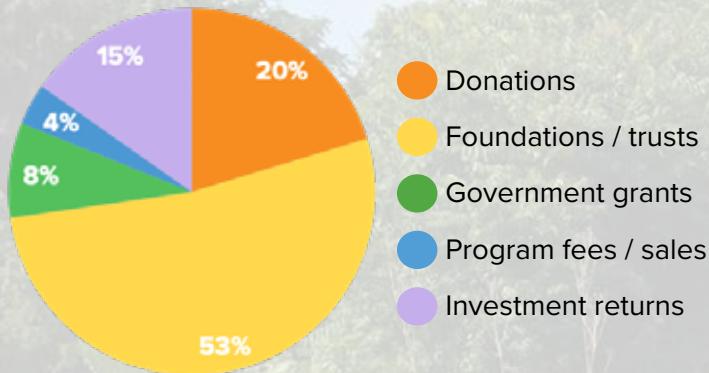


Left: Students on a field trip with an insect in a jar. **This page, left to right, top to bottom:** Students discuss the data they collected on a field trip. Students find a newt in the beaver pond. Students on a field trip in the grassland. Adults at a lichen identification workshop. Lawn Lab students take notes on the experimental plots. A high school intern studying Spotted Salamanders. A summer camper finds a leaf on the trail. A workshop on how to propagate native seeds. Students on a field trip nature journal in the woods. Students take data on the plants in the grassland. A nature journaling meetup. A pre-school student explores the beaver pond.

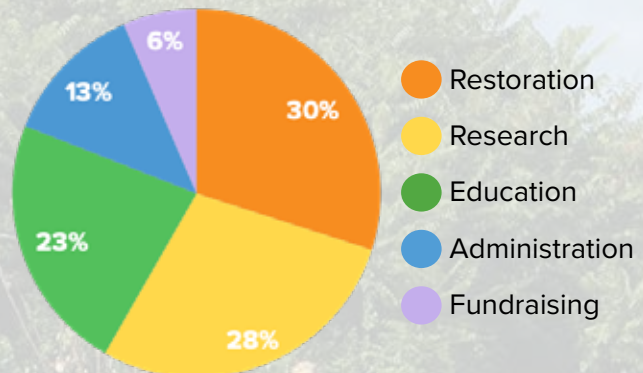
Thank you for

The charts below show the sources of support and revenue we received and the allocation of our expenses in 2024. While foundations and trusts account for over 50% of our revenue, many of those are local family foundations. We could not accomplish our mission without the generous support of our community. Thank you!

\$1,114,795 in Support and Revenue



\$973,508 in Expenses



\$10,000+

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Volunteers 252

people contributed

3,332

hours

Every year we rely on the help of hundreds of amazing volunteers to accomplish our mission. In 2024, 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!



Clockwise from top left: Volunteers help remove invasive species and clean up around vernal pools before our amphibian monitoring season begins. Carolyn Strand helps students on a field trip collect data in our grassland. Volunteers after an invasive species removal day. Rebeca Sanchez-Burr transplants native seedlings. A group of volunteers and staff pose after a prescribed burn.



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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