

2025 Annual Report



The Clifton Institute

Directors' Message

Our proudest accomplishment in 2025 was having our daughter, Thea. Alongside so many other changes over the last several months, becoming parents has given us a new perspective on the work we do here. As she grows up, we want Thea to be able to see Coral Hairstreaks, hear woodcocks, experience blooming remnant prairies, and watch Box Turtles trundle across the forest floor. So, we have a renewed sense of urgency as we work to conserve Virginia's biodiversity. Watching her grow and learn has also renewed our hope that the next generation will love and care for this place, too.

Our community—that includes you!—is another source of hope. We've been touched by the generosity of the people who have dropped off nature books and bug-themed onesies, the kindness of the people who left messages of encouragement and advice, and the patience of the people who waited for us to get back in the office after our family leave.

We are also amazed, as ever, by the number of people doing conservation work in our area. When you consider the 62 teachers who brought their students here on field trips, the 67 landowners we gave land management advice to in 2025, the 282 volunteers who contributed their time to our restoration and education programs, the 519 donors who financially supported our work, and the 1,963 people who participated in our adult education programs, that's almost 3,000 people learning about and taking care of native species! We're proud to be the hub where those people found inspiration, information, and their own community.

In addition to Thea, we welcomed two other team members in 2025. In May we brought on Cheyenne Hawkins as an Education Fellow to coordinate our Lawn Lab program and in October we hired Rachel Martin as our new Native Seed Project Coordinator. Thanks to these additions and the hard work of our entire staff, we not only carried on but continued to expand and improve our programs last year. You can read more about all of our staff's accomplishments in the stories below.

As we look ahead to 2026, we're excited to continue conserving, studying, and teaching people about Virginia's native species.

And we hope you'll come meet Thea sometime soon!

Sincerely,



Bert and Eleanor Harris
Co-Directors



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Help us save Virginia's native biodiversity!

Make a donation at cliftoninstitute.org/donate or send a check in the enclosed envelope. Thank you!

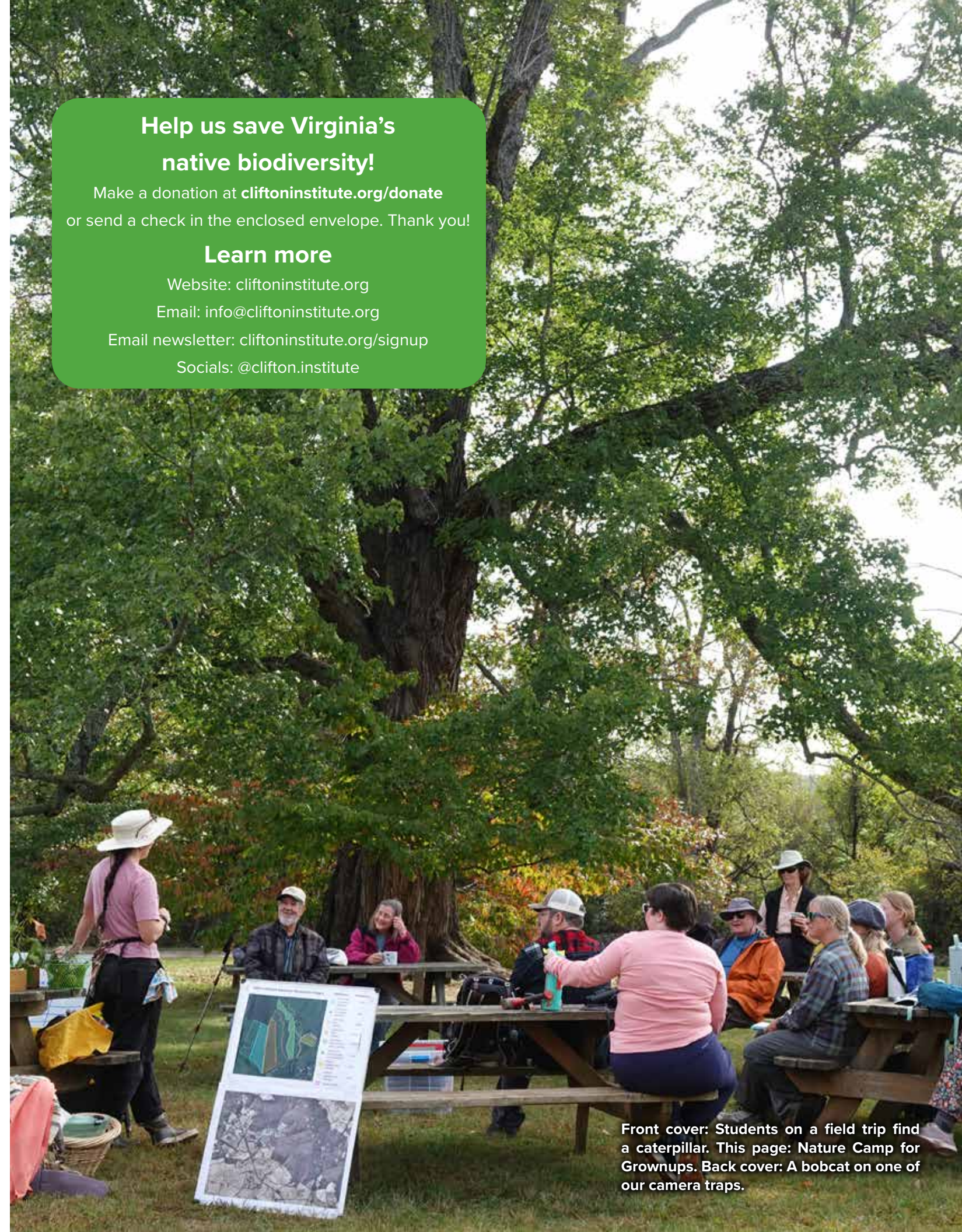
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Front cover: Students on a field trip find a caterpillar. This page: Nature Camp for Grownups. Back cover: A bobcat on one of our camera traps.

We're here to save Virginia's native biodiversity. We do conservation biology research to figure out how to support declining species of plants and animals. We use the results of that research to restore lost plant communities and support declining wildlife species. And we teach other people how to take better care of the environment. Our programs are rooted in curiosity about nature, love for native plants and animals, and the desire to foster a community of conservationists in our area.

conservation biology research



Community-science Monitoring

Through annual counts and bioblitzes, volunteers help us monitor local populations of plants and animals so that we can identify any that are declining.



Causes of Wildlife Decline

By tracking American Kestrels and Box Turtles, we are identifying which land management practices can help reverse declines in these and other wildlife species.

evidence-backed habitat restoration



Grasslands and Shrublands at Clifton

We manage 300 acres of grasslands and shrublands as habitat for the many plants and animals that rely on open habitats and as a demonstration to our thousands of visitors.



Landowner Outreach

We use our research and restoration experience to provide advice to local landowners and public-lands managers about how to support native plants and animals on their properties.



Saving Grassland Remnants

Starting in 2026, we are working with landowners, power companies, and other stakeholders to save patches of unplanted native grasslands that remain across the Piedmont.



Providing Native Seeds and Plants

We work with a network of farmers to launch the native seed industry in Virginia. Our in-house nursery operation produces 100% local-ecotype native seedlings for our biannual plant sales.

science-based education



Youth Education

K-12 students get hands-on experience doing scientific research, learn about the native biodiversity of Virginia, and have positive experiences out in nature.



Adult Education

We teach adults how to identify native and non-native species and how to manage land in the Piedmont and we foster a vibrant community of nature lovers.

Research

We do conservation biology research to determine how land management decisions affect declining species in our area. This helps us make recommendations for landowners who want to support wildlife on their properties. For the last several years we have been focusing on American Kestrels and Eastern Box Turtles, both of which are in steep decline in the eastern United States. Joe Kolowski at the Smithsonian's National Zoo and Conservation Biology Institute is a co-principal investigator on both projects; Alan Williams is a co-PI on the kestrel project and Tom Akre at NZCBI is a co-PI on the turtle project. Major funding for these projects comes from the Raines Family Fund, BAND Foundation, and Beatrice von Gontard. We are also thankful to the nine people who have adopted box turtles. You can adopt your own turtle at cliftoninstitute.org/donate.

Northern Virginia Piedmont Kestrel Project

Since 2020 we have tagged kestrels with GPS and radio transmitters, used security cameras in nest boxes to learn about diet, collected data on vegetation structure, and quantified the abundance of kestrel prey in different kinds of fields. In 2025 we completed the field work for this multiyear project and ramped up work on data analysis.

We found that small mammals, primarily Meadow Voles are the most important prey for kestrels in our area, followed by skinks, insects, and birds. We also found that kestrels select fields with short vegetation whereas Meadow Voles prefer denser and taller vegetation. When we controlled for vegetation height, we found that kestrels prefer meadows (unmowed native and non-native fields), the field type where voles are most common. But toward the end of summer when meadows grow too tall for easy hunting kestrels prefer cattle pastures.

Landowners can help kestrels by leaving unmowed strips



Our 2025 kestrel research technicians Sylvia Reed and Tyree Brown.

next to agricultural fields as refuges for voles and other prey animals, not using rodenticide, and installing nest boxes.

Together with our partners Virginia Working Landscapes, the Piedmont Environmental Council, the Old Rag Master Naturalists and many volunteers, we monitored 444 kestrel nest boxes in 2025 and there were a total of 492 fledglings produced across all of the boxes!

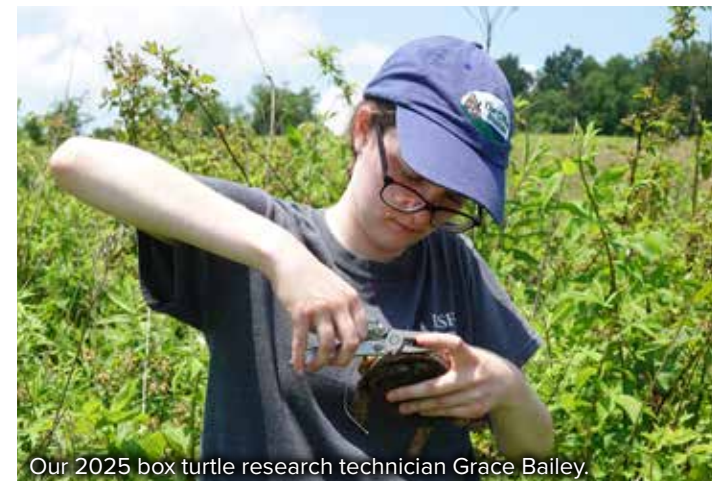
In addition to tracking their movements over our local landscape, over the last few years we have recorded the most detailed migration routes yet for American Kestrels. We have a small sample, but it appears that roughly half of our population migrates each year and that southern Georgia is an important overwintering area. Preliminary data indicate that irrigated row crops are the primary habitat used by the kestrels we tracked on their wintering grounds and in key stop-over sites. Improving how these habitats are managed will be an important part of kestrel conservation in the future.

In 2025 our colleagues published a paper in the Journal of Raptor Research based partly on our data and the paper was selected as the cover article! The paper shows that survival of kestrel fledglings (young birds who have recently left the nest) was much higher than previously expected. This indicates that low fledgling survival may not be a major cause of the steep kestrel population decline in the eastern US.

Box Turtle Project

For the last three years we have tracked Box Turtles to learn when they are in fields and how far they are from field edges so that we can provide mowing guidance. We have now collected 102,692 data points on turtles' locations, and an early look at the data suggests that May and June are the worst times to mow.

If you have a meadow, we recommend bushhogging annually in February to avoid killing Box Turtles (and



Our 2025 box turtle research technician Grace Bailey.

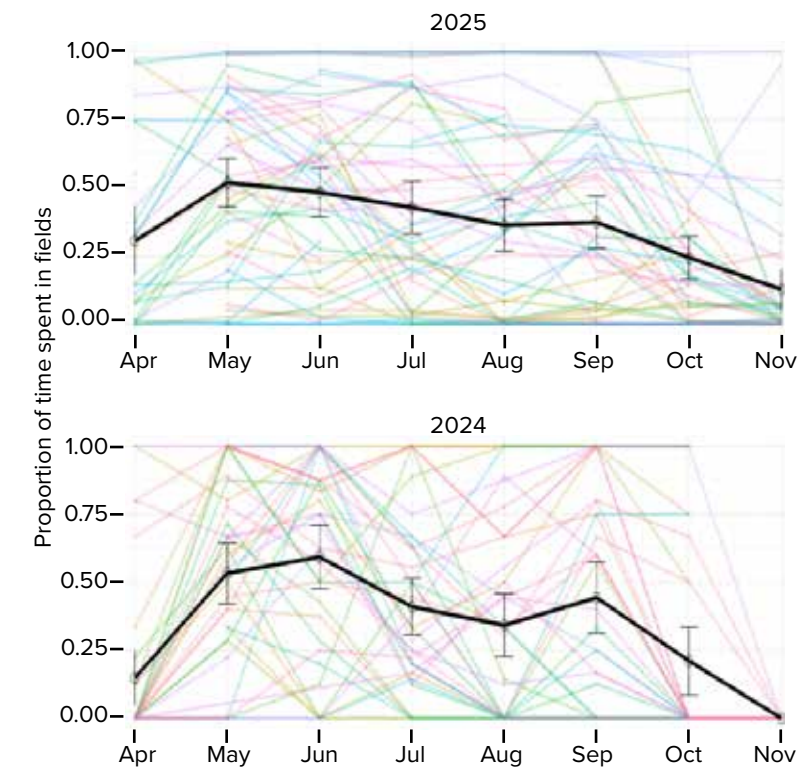
grassland birds). You can also help by raising the blade of the mower or bushhog to eight inches.

In 2025 we surveyed large plots at the Clifton Institute and the Raines property in Rappahannock County to estimate the size of Box Turtle populations at the sites. The team walked 826 miles during 800 hours of surveys (!) and found a lot of turtles (exact numbers and locations are confidential to discourage poaching for the pet trade).

Based on a statistical analysis of this robust dataset, we estimate that there are approximately three turtles per acre at our field sites. These high densities are great news given that other studies in the Mid Atlantic have found population declines of approximately 75% in the last few decades. This work is also being used to refine survey methods for box turtles that can be implemented across its range to better assess turtle numbers.



One of "our" turtles munching on a mushroom.



Box Turtles spend the most time in fields in May and June. Each colored line shows data for an individual turtle and the black line shows the average. The 2025 graph shows data from GPS tracking (54 turtles, 100,000 data points). The 2024 graph shows data from radio tags (38 turtles, 1,539 data points).

Community Science

In 2025 we hosted a variety of community science programs to collect data on underappreciated species and engage the public in biodiversity conservation. 50 volunteers helped us do two bioblitzes (events to find as many species as possible in a single day). We found 847 and 799 species at Sunnyside Farm & Conservancy and Camp Raines, respectively. **Among the many highlights were a threatened liverwort that was the first record for iNaturalist, two plant species that were new for Rappahannock County, and a rare fly that forms galls in hickory nuts.**

We also hosted our two annual dragonfly counts and annual butterfly count, during which 60 volunteers participated. This year we found 58 species of dragonflies and damselflies, including three new species for the count: Double-ringed Pennant, Little Blue Dragonlet, and Sweetflag Spreadwing. Butterfly numbers were low but we found a nice diversity (40 species) and one new species for the count, Northern Broken Dash. We also held our Christmas Bird Count, during which 55 volunteers found 94 species of birds, including a Lark Sparrow and an Ash-throated Flycatcher. We love hosting these events and we're thrilled with how interested the community is in participating in them.



Volunteer Ed LeGrand and Education Associate Bridget Bradshaw during a dragonfly count.



Dick Raines, Mike Wenger, and Co-Director Bert Harris during a bioblitz at Camp Raines.

Restoration

Our Property

Our mission to conserve Virginia's native species starts at home. We care for our 900-acre field station by maintaining native grasslands and shrublands for the birds, insects, and plants that need them.

In 2025 we **conducted 118 acres of prescribed burns in our grasslands and shrublands**. The native savannas that were widespread in the Virginia Piedmont historically were maintained by fire, and many declining species benefit from frequent prescribed burns.

We also **removed invasive species from 35 acres of grasslands and shrublands**. Temperate grasslands are increasingly under threat from woody succession and invasive species. We use basal-bark and cut-stump herbicide applications to control non-native woody plants. And we defend native woody plants, such as American Plum and Southern Crabapple, in our shrublands.

While there's always more to do, we know we're on the right track because the surveys of bird, turtles, and plants we're doing here show steady, if not increasing, populations, and we recently documented the 3,000th species at Clifton!

Across Northern Virginia

Beyond Clifton's borders, our Land Management Outreach program connects private landowners to the knowledge and tools they need to restore habitat on their properties for the benefit of declining native species. In 2025, **we advised 67 landowners who collectively manage 4,312 acres in 7 counties**. Some of the most common topics we provide advice about are how to manage invasive species, how to plant wildflower meadows, and how to mow or hay in a wildlife-friendly way. We also help landowners set up iNaturalist projects so that they can monitor the species that come in after improving their land management practices. In 2025 we held two landowner meetups so that environmentally-minded landowners can learn from one another and encourage each other to keep up the good fight.

If you're curious about how to improve your property to benefit native species, check out the landowner resources section of our website!

Seeds for Everyone

Through our plant propagation programs, we are working to make local ecotype seeds and seedlings available to Virginia and Maryland landowners for wildflower meadows and other restoration projects. Local-ecotype seeds are specifically adapted to thrive in the places they're planted, which also means that pollinators, birds, and other parts of local food webs can work together to create functional habitat.

Through our Native Seed Pilot Project, we provide seedlings to farmers to grow and harvest seeds from. In the fall **our farmers harvested 14.6 pounds of seeds of 8 species**, making it the most successful season yet.

We have been growing local-ecotype seedlings for several years now and **in 2025 we had our most successful plant sales yet**, distributing almost 1,500 seedlings. We also provided some of our plants for a new local-ecotype bed in the historic Schoolhouse #18 garden at the invitation of the Fauquier County Master Gardeners.

3,000
species
at Clifton

4,312
acres
advised on

14.6
lbs of seeds
harvested



A volunteer during a prescribed burn at Clifton.



A landowner meetup at the Harrises' home.



Kadiera Ingram points out a plant to a landowner on an outreach visit.



Megan Crapo of Kinloch Farm (one of the Native Seed Project farms) drying a recent harvest of native seeds.



We have a healthy population of American Woodcocks, including this baby spotted last year.



Clifton staff and other land managers visit an excellent example of a remnant native grassland at Manassas Battlefield.

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 2025 we provided 42 field trips for 24 schools and organizations that were attended by over 1,500 students.

Through our **Lawn Lab** program, we bring the kind of practical scientific research we do here at Clifton to a schoolyard where K-12 students can participate. Under our guidance, two schools with a shared schoolyard—Grace Miller Elementary and Liberty High in Bealeton—have stopped mowing two acres of land (except for once a year) and are mowing the rest of their fields once a week as usual. We visit the second grade at Grace Miller and the ecology class at Liberty periodically throughout the school year and take students out to the experimental field where they study the effects of mowing on native biodiversity. In 2025 we worked with 172 students over the course of 10 visits to Lawn Lab.

Through our **weekend programs**, children and their families form deep meaningful relationships with this place by coming back again and again. Our littlest visitors, two- to five-year-old Polliwogs, spend a morning each month exploring nature, reading stories, and discovering our mascot Blossom the Possum in the unlikely places. Our older students, members of our Nature Club, learn what it's like to have a career in conservation and biology by shadowing different members of our staff throughout the year. Adults, too, come back again and again to see Clifton in its different season and experience different natural phenomena. Our favorite programs are the ones where we go out to see a single species at its peak, like our Party in the Pawpaw Patch. Even better is when we get to go out at night, like when we go out to see Spotted Salamanders migrate, American Woodcocks display, or fireflies flash through the fields. You can find all of our upcoming education programs at cliftoninstitute.org/events.

3,378
children

2,022
adults

A Year of Education Programs



Walk with a Naturalist in January



Vernal Pool Monitoring in March



Nature Journaling Meetup in April



Lawn Lab in May



Bobolink Walk in May



Young Scientists camp in June



Young Explorers camp in June



Young Naturalists camp in July



Insect Investigation field trip in September



Nature Camp for Grownups in October



Piedmont Polliwogs in November



Lichen Workshop in November



Young Explorers summer campers look for insects.

Support

519

donors

282

volunteers

We could not accomplish our mission of conserving Virginia's native biodiversity without the help of people like you! We are so grateful to the donors, volunteers, partner organizations, and other members of our community who support our work. Thank you!



Isabelle Wheeler and Juan Gonzalez were two of our top volunteers last year. Here, they work on removing Autumn Olive.

\$10,000+

Anonymous, 5
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The Fourten Foundation
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\$100 — \$499

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Sally Anderson and Richard Cooper
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Michael Barreda and Leslie Grayson
Josh Bass
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Thomas and Sara Hurley
George Huttar
Gabrielle Jennings
Andy Johnston
Harry Jones
Stephen A. Jones
Chris and Angela Kemp
Carl Kerby
Claire Kluskens



It takes large teams of staff, volunteers, and partners to do controlled burns in our fields.

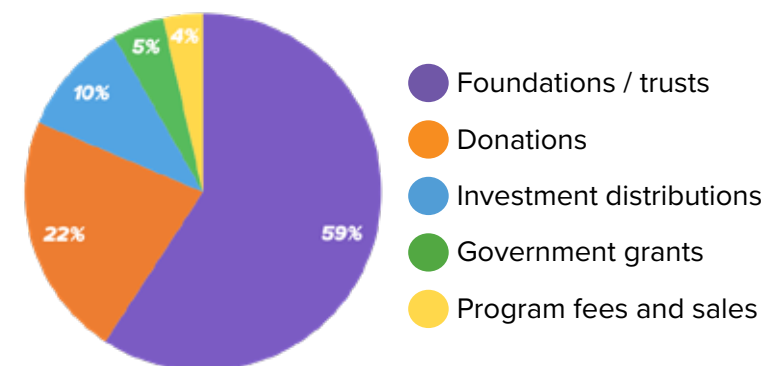
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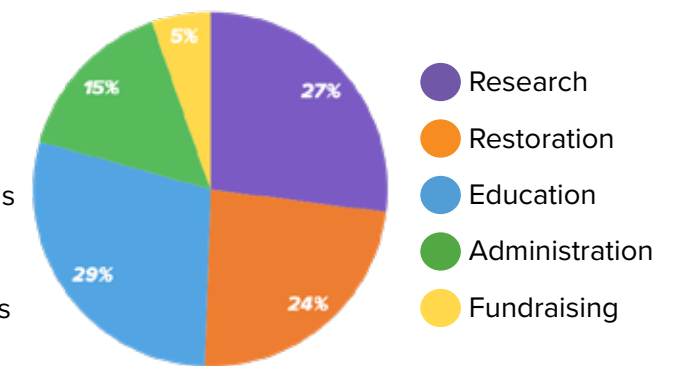
2025 Financial Report

The charts below show the sources of support and revenue we received and the allocation of our expenses in 2025. While foundations and trusts account for over 50% of our revenue, many of those are local family foundations.

\$1,162,707 in Support and Revenue



\$1,014,064 in Expenses





The Clifton Institute

6712 Blantyre Road
Warrenton, VA 20187

We hope we'll see you soon!

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