



The Clifton Institute

2025-2026 School Year Report

Environmental education matters. When kids spend time outside in nature they gain improved mental health from being in a peaceful setting, improved physical health from getting fresh air and exercise, improved academic performance, new skills and perspectives, wonder and curiosity, awareness of and interest in conservation issues, and a sense of connection to the local landscape and community. Unfortunately, most schools don't have programs dedicated to teaching children about nature. We fill that gap by providing high-quality low-cost environmental education programs to thousands of children each year. Last school year we ran **177 programs that were attended by 5,234 people.**

Our Scientist for a Day field trips are our flagship education programs. During these field trips, K-12 students participate in real scientific research, learn how to identify native plants and animals, and get to explore a beautiful and wild piece of land. We visit as many classes as we can before their field trips to give students multiple opportunities to practice the skills we teach them and help connect what we teach on our field trips to what they are learning in the classroom. A teacher recently wrote to us that "I deeply appreciate how the instructors model authentic scientific thinking. They consistently pose open-ended questions rather than leading students toward a specific answer, honoring each learner's ability to think critically and form well-considered conclusions. **Clifton is the best educational opportunity we have,** and we go to a lot of different places in the state, simply because of the quality of the educators." Another wrote "Our group participated in three field trips at the Clifton Institute this school year, and they were **some of the most well-organized, thoughtful, educational, and fun hands-on learning experiences we've had.** We especially loved the use of real scientific instruments and authentic practices in observation, data collection, and analysis. It was inspiring for the kids and sparked so much curiosity!"

Last school year was the second season of our Lawn Lab program. In partnership with Fauquier County Public Schools and in support of Fauquier County's We Need Bees initiative, we set up an experiment to test the effects of mowing on native biodiversity at the schoolyard shared by Grace Miller Elementary School (a Title 1 school) and Liberty High School in Bealeton. 65 second grade students at Grace Miller and 30 ecology students at Liberty studied the plant and insect communities at the experimental field over the course of the school year and learned about the conservation issues surrounding lawns. Lawn Lab is a win for everyone: the students spend a significant amount of their school year outside and get hands-on experience doing scientific research, the county spends less money and emits less pollution by mowing less often, and the school campus is becoming better habitat for pollinators. At the end of the school year, we asked the high school students to write about their experiences. One wrote "Overall, Lawn Lab was not only fun but an educational experience. By learning and understanding the effects we have on our environment, we can come up with ways to help native species thrive."

We also ran four weeks of summer camp, a year-long pre-school program, a year-long Nature Club for middle and high school students, and 80 walks, talks, and workshop for adults. In the following pages, we want to share some stories about how our education programs this last school year fostered connection to native biodiversity, curiosity, conservation, and community. We are grateful for support for these programs from the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, the Patricia & Nicolaas Kortlandt Memorial Fund, the Virginia Native Plant Society Piedmont Chapter, and anonymous individuals.



Participants in an education program watch Spotted Salamanders migrating to one of our vernal pools.



CONNECTION

In a time when people feel increasingly isolated, it's more important than ever for people to feel a sense of connection, both with other people and with non-human creatures. When we pay attention to the plants and animals that live around us, we can't help but love them, at least a little, which is good for us and for the environment.



Catching bugs is often our students' favorite activity and they get so excited when they find something weird that they've never seen before. Here, students on a field trip are proud to have discovered an owl moth caterpillar.



During our Young Scientists camp, high school students spend a week studying a research project of their choosing. This student surveyed insects in different habitats and couldn't resist giving a name to every bug she found.



Lawn Lab students form a strong connection to the piece of land they visit over and over. They especially enjoyed keeping track of the Tree Swallows nesting in the box we installed, which we monitored with a camera.



People are often surprised to learn about the purple polka-dotted Spotted Salamanders that live right here at Clifton. Here, our pre-school Polliwogs get to see salamander eggs and frogs in one of our vernal pools.

? CURIOSITY

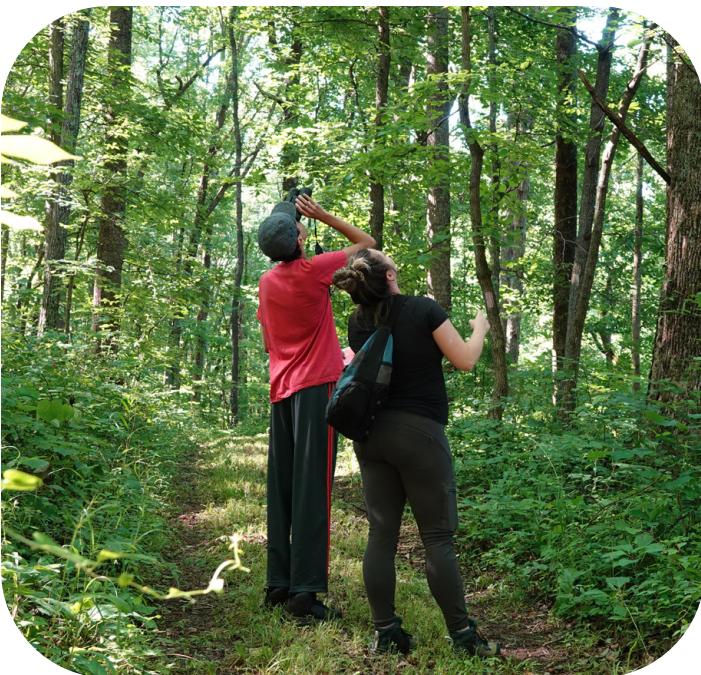
Anyone can do science anywhere they are. We want people to experience the joy of making discoveries about the natural world and to feel empowered to think scientifically. Our education programs give children and adults the opportunity to participate in real scientific research and to practice curiosity.



Students on our field trips help us monitor how our plant, insect, and bird populations are changing over time. Here, a high school student works on identifying a Crownbeard before recording it on a data sheet.



After collecting data, the next step is analyzing data. Here, our educators work with students to make evidence-based claims about how plants in our grassland are changing year to year based on a graph of their data.



Our Young Scientists do independent research projects from start to finish in just one week. Here, a high school student who loves birds counts how many Yellow-bellied Sapsucker holes are on different kinds of trees.



This past spring we ran our first ever DIY Science Day and five adults spent the day doing their own science projects. Here, Co-Director Eleanor Harris and a participant investigate what kinds of buds a sassafras has.



CONSERVATION

Not everyone owns land that is suitable for planting a native grassland or installing a kestrel nest box. But everyone can participate in conservation. Our education programs inspire people to take better care of the environment and teach them how to do so.



Sometimes we give kids the chance to do some hands-on habitat restoration themselves. Here, seventh graders on a field trip are working on removing invasive Autumn Olive from one of our fields.



The first step to stewarding a piece of land is to know what's growing there. During our grass identification workshop we taught people how to identify native and non-native grass species that they might find on their properties.



At Lawn Lab, students study the effects of mowing on native biodiversity, here, by surveying insects. At the end of the year, one student wrote "We believe there should be some non-mow areas so that pollinators can thrive."



Perhaps the most impactful way to inspire stewardship is to show people the amazing plants and animals that live right here in Virginia. Here, a child gets to meet an Eastern Box Turtle roaming our fields.



COMMUNITY

We know how enriching it is to find a place where you can meet people with similar interests and explore nature together and we aim to be a “third space” where people can form meaningful connections with each other. In all of our work, we are trying to make northern Virginia a better place to live for plants, animals, and humans alike.



A big part of doing science and conservation is teamwork and we design our field trips so that students have lots of opportunities to practice working together to achieve a common objective, for example, counting insects.



There aren't many other places where people can “geek out” over birds or bugs or trees with people who are just as interested as they are. Last fall, 17 people came to a lichen identification workshop!



Over the course of five days, campers create their own world of collective discoveries, inside jokes, and shared memories. Camp also lets kids develop relationships with adults who are just as excited about nature as they are.



We have seen so many years-long friendships start with a moment of connection on a plant or bird walk. Here, participants in our Nature Camp for Grownups pose for a selfie after a rainy night of camping out on the lawn.