The Nature Conservancy



Virginia

2026 Annual Report

Letter from the State Director



Dear friends, partners and supporters,

As The Nature Conservancy concludes its 75th anniversary, I'm reflecting not only on what we've accomplished in Virginia this past year, but on the global and historic scope of our conservation work.

Our migratory bird protection and eelgrass restoration at the Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve, for example, would not have been possible without years of direct land protection, the backbone of TNC's efforts since our earliest days.

Our more recent impacts are rooted in decades of science and relationship-building. And nowhere is this better demonstrated than through our work to help the ecosystem recover after it was damaged by Hurricane Helene in fall 2024. That work is ramping up in the western part of the state, as well as in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee. TNC Virginia has worked in the Appalachians—a global conservation priority area for TNC—for more than 30 years with private, public and nonprofit partners, giving us the experience and knowledge to respond to the urgent forest and water resource issues caused by the storm.

In expanding our conservation work over the next decade, we are working to strengthen communities' resilience to storms in the future. This year, we completed 27,000 acres of prescribed burns to restore degraded forests, and we plan to restore 160,000 acres and over 80 river miles in Virginia by 2035.

As we look ahead to the next 75 years, it's clear that our work is more urgent than ever before. People in Virginia and around the world are already facing the consequences of climate change and species loss, including increasingly severe storms. But as we build on our own history, we at TNC are uniquely equipped to respond to the complexity and scale of these crises. Together, we can continue to take action when and where it matters most.

Thank you for joining us on this journey toward a better world. We could not do it without you.

With gratitude,



Bettina K. Ring
State Director
The Nature Conservancy in Virginia

The Nature Conservancy in Virginia

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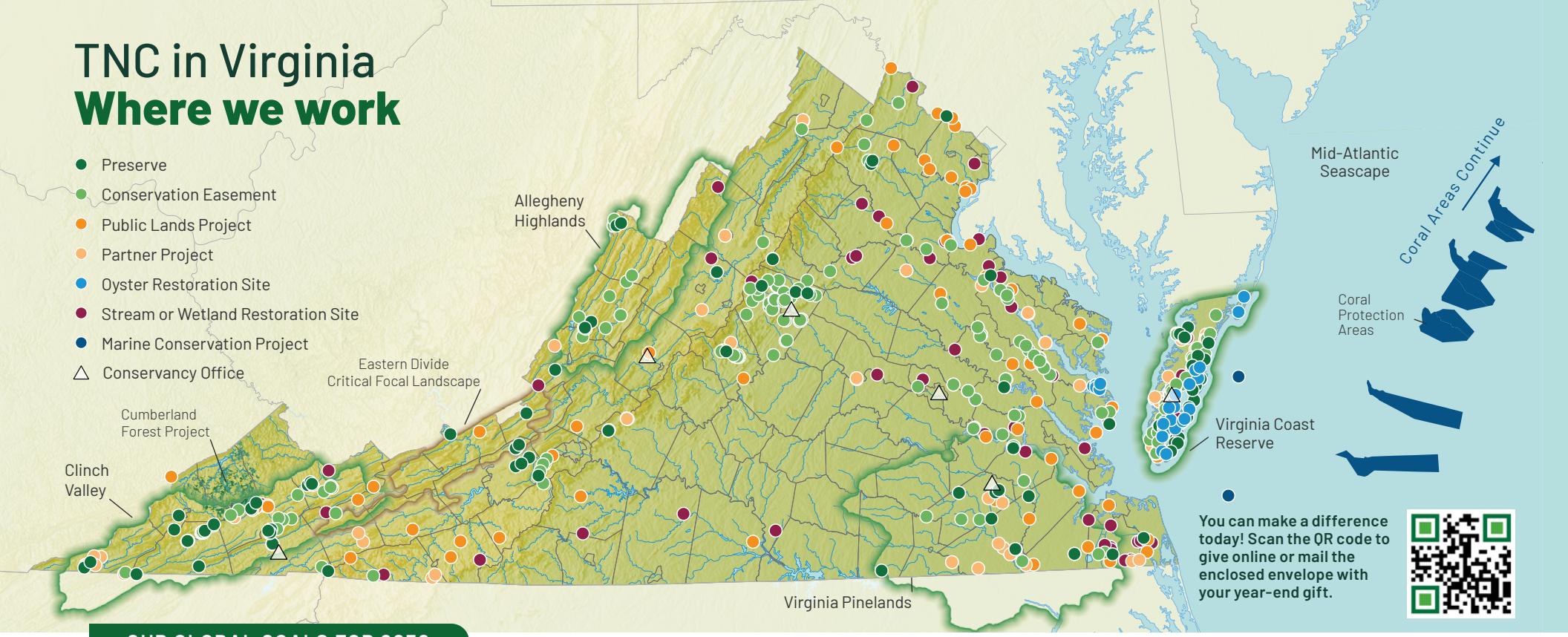
Cover: Great blue heron wading in Cape Charles, Virginia © Marina Pierce/TNC Photo Contest 2026; This page: Bettina Ring © Isabel Hayman/TNC; Opposite page: Map data from TNC, USGS and ESRI © Danielle Kulas/TNC

TNC in Virginia
Where we work



OUR GLOBAL GOALS FOR 2030

We're racing to hit these targets to help the world reverse climate change and biodiversity loss. Together, we find the paths to make change possible.

3B
Avoid or sequester 3 billion tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually—the same as taking 650 million cars off the road every year.

74M
Conserve 621,000 miles of rivers—enough to stretch 25 times around the globe—plus 74 million acres of lakes and wetlands.

10B
Conserve 10 billion acres of marine habitat—more than 10% of the world's oceans—through protected areas, sustainable fishing and more.

1.6B
Conserve 1.6 billion acres—a land area twice the size of India—of biodiverse habitats such as forests, grasslands and desert.

100M
Help 100 million people at severe risk of climate-related emergencies by safeguarding habitats that protect communities.

45M
Support the leadership of 45 million people from Indigenous and local communities in stewarding their environment and securing rights.

BY THE NUMBERS: VIRGINIA

500K
acres that The Nature Conservancy has protected across Virginia

139K
acres of public and partner lands we have helped protect

253K
acres across three states being managed under TNC's Cumberland Forest Project

2026 conservation wins



Clinch Mountain Coves Preserve

Connecting communities with nature

It takes a village to protect nature at the scale we do. This year, support from the local community, individual donors and our partners enabled us to acquire 418 acres at Clinch Mountain Coves Preserve, bringing us to 1,300 protected acres of forest along Clinch Mountain in Southwest Virginia.

The developing preserve is a notable win in the growing migration corridor The Nature Conservancy is knitting together across the Appalachians for species adapting to climate change. Protecting this landscape supports cleaner air, healthier ecosystems, and clean, reliable water for both people and wildlife.

In the second phase of the project, we expect to open the preserve to the public in the summer of 2028. Strategically located 20 minutes from downtown Abingdon, the preserve will be easily accessible to neighbors and visitors looking to enjoy Southwest Virginia's outdoor destinations.

"The creation of this new preserve will be an incredible recreational asset to the region," says Sean McMurray, executive director of Wellspring Foundation of Southwest Virginia, one of our supporting partners.

This year, we completed a master plan for the preserve, which includes trail building. When complete, Clinch Mountain Coves Preserve will be the result of three decades of our Clinch Valley program's work with local partners to protect and steward a biodiversity hotspot while engaging residents and supporting a sustainable economy.

Holly M. Hatcher, president and CEO of our partner the Anne & Gene Worrell Foundation, says, "Our foundation works to cultivate resilient communities and ecosystems. The preserve project does just that, bringing together community partners in Southwest Virginia to ensure the local ecosystem can thrive for generations to come."

TNC staff at Pinnacle Rock in Clinch Mountain Coves Preserve, which is expected to open to the public in 2028 © Nick Proctor/TNC



Virginia Pinelands

TNC moved the needle on longleaf pine restoration with the transfer of 870 acres in the Pinelands to the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) this spring, followed by more than 1,000 acres this fall. The acquisition by DCR is a crucial step in the effort to protect 1,900 connected acres of forests and wetlands in the ecologically important Albemarle-Pamlico watershed region at South Quay Sandhills Natural Area Preserve. Between the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge and South Quay, the area will serve as a key conservation corridor in the longleaf range. We're proud to assist partners like DCR to recover threatened landscapes faster and with greater impact on the ecosystem and the planet.

Cumberland Forest

In December, TNC and the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources signed a letter of intent to move closer to our vision of the largest open-space public access easement in Virginia history. The Cumberland Outdoor Access Legacy easement, covering nearly 65,000 acres across Buchanan, Dickenson, Russell and Wise counties, will provide unprecedented access to nature, recreation and economic opportunities in Southwest Virginia. The easement will permanently protect habitat for popular game species, including elk, deer, bear and turkey, as well as species of greatest conservation need, such as American woodcock and Big Sandy crayfish. In addition, the Russell Fork and Pound rivers run through the property, meaning expanded freshwater access to canoers and kayakers and anglers looking for trout and smallmouth bass.

Sunken Meadow

After a year-long community engagement process, our Stream and Wetland Mitigation Program (SWMP) recently announced restoration plans for Sunken Meadow in Surry County—nearly 700 acres of protected wetlands and forests. A dam has impacted Sunken Meadow for over a century, resulting in poor water quality for recreation and wildlife and stress on the native ecosystem. In the coming years, SWMP will restore approximately 150 acres of freshwater tidal and non-tidal wetlands, as well as reconnect 21 miles of streams to the James River. SWMP will also explore potential public access opportunities like birdwatching and fishing. TNC's restoration efforts will provide benefits for a diverse array of species including eels and river herring—essential food sources for herons, osprey and bald eagles.

Dr. Lytton Musselman, lifelong longleaf champion

In 1985, The Nature Conservancy acquired what became the Blackwater Ecological Preserve from the Union Camp Corporation paper and pulp manufacturing business. We then deeded the 318-acre property to Old Dominion University, where biologist Dr. Lytton Musselman has managed the preserve ever since. At the time, Blackwater was the only land dedicated to conserving the longleaf pine ecosystem at the northern edge of its range.

"That was the place where the flag was planted, starting this journey of restoring this ecosystem in southeast Virginia," says Brian van Eerden, TNC's Pinelands program director.

Without Dr. Musselman, it's hard to imagine a unified movement to conserve open pine savannas, which are refuges for over 900 plant species found nowhere else on Earth. Musselman brought people together from TNC, universities, and state and federal agencies that made management, especially prescribed fire management, of the landscape a reality.

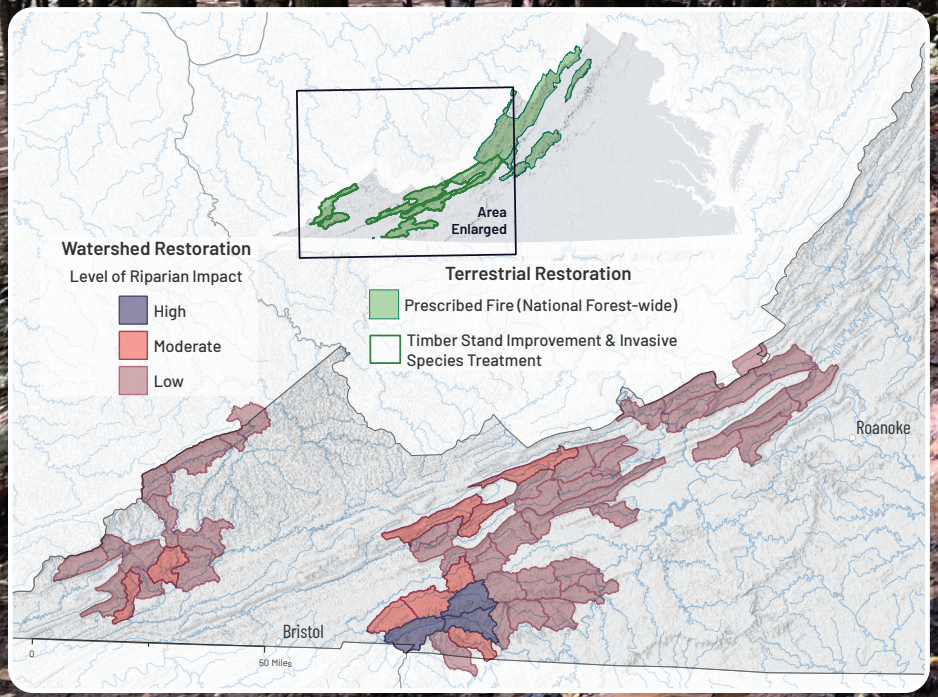


TNC honored Dr. Musselman's contributions this past April with an event at Raccoon Creek in the Pinelands. Through his decades of passionate teaching at Blackwater Preserve, he has also passed the torch to students who have gone on to be champions for longleaf pine conservation across the region.

Top: TNC is collaborating with partners to recover threatened longleaf pine savannas, which are hotbeds for biodiversity. © Robert Clontz/TNC; Right: Dr. Lytton Musselman teaches others about longleaf. © Courtesy of Old Dominion University

Two years after Hurricane Helene

Rebuilding more resilient forests and waterways



The Virginia Creeper Trail in Taylors Valley in October 2024 after Hurricane Helene © Meg Short/TNC; Inset map: Watersheds and terrestrial areas where TNC recovery teams will likely focus their work, with data sourced from TNC, USFS, USGS, US Census Bureau and ESRI © Danielle Kulas/TNC

Opposite page: View of the Big Wilson burn, one of the state's largest in recent years © Laurel Schablein/TNC

It's been more than two years since Hurricane Helene devastated the southeastern United States, leaving a profound mark on both the landscape and the people who call it home. Thousands of acres of forests, wetlands and streams in Southwest Virginia suffered downed trees, sediment and pollution that now threaten the health of wildlife and communities.

The Nature Conservancy's Warm Springs Mountain Preserve has served as a foothold for conservation collaboration in the Appalachians since 2002. Recognizing our decades of land stewardship and relationships in the area, the USDA Forest Service invited us to lead federal Helene recovery efforts on the ground, beginning in North Carolina and Virginia. Since 2025, we have been working hand in hand with our partners across states to help turn this moment of loss into lasting recovery.

Between now and 2035, we will be restoring hundreds of thousands of acres of forest across multiple states—including nearly 160,000 acres in Virginia alone—to promote the growth of climate-resilient native species, improve stream health for cleaner drinking water and support the landscape's resilience to future flooding in North Carolina and Virginia. Restoring public lands also drives the outdoor recreation economy and the tourism industry—critical revenue streams in the region.

This year, in addition to assessing the lands and watersheds most impacted by the storm, we helped conduct nearly 27,000 acres of prescribed fire in mixed-oak forests. Oaks are what TNC forest ecologist Jean Lorber calls "engines of biodiversity." After a disturbance like Helene, prescribed fire prevents other tree species like fast-growing, fire-intolerant red maple from overtaking the space that oaks need to survive and regrow.

In the year ahead, we plan to implement prescribed fire on 30,000–40,000 acres across western Virginia. We also plan to initiate six waterway projects for aquatic organism passage by restoring stream banks and replacing undersized culverts, which will benefit native species including the iconic Eastern hellbender, Eastern brook trout and federally endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel.

Hurricane Helene showed us the raw power of extreme weather. By restoring our natural defenses, we are helping strengthen ecosystem and community resilience in the face of future storms.

Read more: **nature.org/hurricanehelene**.

Spring fire crew calendar for western Virginia

Safely conducting prescribed burns requires careful planning and timing, and a lot of it. Fire crews must be prepared far in advance of a fire while also being ready to adapt to changing weather conditions and fire behavior on any given day.

140 Days	Burn prep
24 Days	Conducting the burns
13 Days	Securing the areas
2 Days	Monitoring



Large-scale restoration by fire

This spring, The Nature Conservancy, the USDA Forest Service and other partners managed large-scale forest restoration on more than 8,000 acres in the Allegheny Highlands through the Big Wilson prescribed burn. One of the state's largest in recent years, this burn will help increase forest biodiversity, encouraging the growth of hardwoods like oak and hickory—as well as native understory plants—that provide wildlife with the habitat they need.

A portion of the burn area was situated on TNC's Warm Springs Mountain Preserve, and the burn area extended into the George Washington & Jefferson National Forest. By connecting TNC's protected lands with public lands, we're growing a climate-resilient corridor for communities and wildlife throughout the Appalachians—a conservation priority for TNC.

Achieving a burn of this magnitude requires years of science, monitoring and, of course, teamwork, between TNC and partner staff, as well as dedicated volunteers.

Lauren Stull, a district ranger with the Forest Service, says, "We continue to reach new milestones like the Big Wilson burn not only because of our shared commitment to the land we steward, but because of the remarkable people who make this collaboration what it is."

Funding community in the Appalachians

The Town of Cleveland





Left: Cleveland is tucked away in lushly forested Southwest Virginia, about an hour from The Channels. © Nick Proctor/TNC; Right: The Town of Cleveland receives its third community fund grant in 2026. © Ryan Dye

As the coal industry in Southwest Virginia has declined over the years, people across the region have entered into new industries such as outdoor recreation and tourism. In small rural towns, however, necessary improvements and infrastructure for parks and recreation are often out of reach.

TNC's Cumberland Forest Community Fund is helping the Town of Cleveland make this transition. Since 2020, the fund has supported nature-based economic and community development projects in Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. This year, Cleveland was awarded its third grant through the community fund, bringing them to over $46,000 in investments from TNC.

"The Nature Conservancy is a big part of what keeps this town looking beautiful and makes nature accessible," says Thomas Vance, a city council member and maintenance employee for the town.

"All these improvements are for tourism and public access, so anybody that comes down here can see what we have to offer and enjoy it just as much as we do."

The fund serves TNC's goal in Virginia of expanding nature access for the nearly half a million people in the area, ensuring that they can enjoy sustainable economic opportunities and meaningfully participate in decision-making.

Cleveland Community Fund Projects

- **2026:** Concrete walking path for improved public accessibility and native tree planting to restore town park
- **2024:** Permanent protection of Tank Hollow Falls to expand the surrounding natural area preserve in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Conservation's Natural Heritage Program, along with several public access site improvements at the Cleveland Barrens Natural Area Preserve trailhead, including expanded parking and improved directional signage from the town
- **2023:** Native shrub and tree planting at the town-operated campground to enhance the landscape—to which birds are already returning—and provide economic benefit to the community

These projects are paired with other local initiatives, as well as ongoing state and federal investments to diversify and recover Cleveland's local economy.

Support for the community fund comes from a combination of Cumberland Forest Limited Partnership royalties and generous philanthropic contributions to TNC.

Remembering Virginia conservation giants



Barry Truitt, coastal conservation legend

The Nature Conservancy's Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve (VVCR) would not be the globally important living laboratory that it is today without scientist Barry Truitt's lifelong dedication to conservation. Truitt passed away this March after a 37-year career at VVCR, where he worked tirelessly to manage and protect the rare habitats and species found on Virginia's coast.

His early years at VVCR focused on laying the foundation for TNC's significant stewardship responsibilities after acquiring many of Virginia's barrier islands. He built the partnerships and conservation priorities that would guide our work for the following decades, in particular the protection and management of migratory bird populations and marine habitat restoration. Under Truitt's supervision, VVCR became a respected leader in this work, not only in Virginia but around the globe.

Truitt also spent a great deal of his personal time fishing and boating in the coastal wilderness that he worked so hard to protect. For him, the line between work and personal life was blurred: He was always keeping watch over the islands, coastal bays and their inhabitants. His legacy will forever be symbolized each year when the shorebirds begin laying their eggs and when the bays flower with eelgrass shoots.

Dr. Mitchell Byrd, trailblazer in red-cockaded woodpecker recovery



The Pinelands lost one of its earliest and most impassioned defenders this spring with the passing of Dr. Mitchell Byrd. A biologist with a seven-decade career at the College of William & Mary, where he was affectionately called "The Byrd Man," Dr. Byrd was a pivotal figure in TNC's protection of Piney Grove Preserve and the red-cockaded woodpecker.

TNC began managing Piney Grove Preserve in 1999, and a few years later Dr. Byrd established the Center for Conservation Biology at William & Mary, which is still responsible for monitoring the red-cockaded woodpecker population, and informing our recovery efforts, at Piney Grove.

Dr. Byrd was also widely known for his research and advocacy for species including the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, osprey and piping plover. To honor his influential conservation legacy, TNC dedicated a trail to him at Piney Grove Preserve in 2025.

Explore the longer conservation history of the Pinelands: **nature.org/landoflongleaf**.

Ruth Ann Douglas, a lasting gift for nature

Ruth Ann Douglas of Charlottesville spent a lifetime learning about and giving back to nature, a passion that grew from childhood and led her to degrees in biology and zoology, followed by decades in education. She remained a powerful voice for nature after her retirement 25 years ago, helping to establish the Blue Ridge Partnership for Regional Invasive Species Management and the Rivanna Master Naturalist program, and serving in various leadership roles with the Virginia Native Plant Society and the Ivy Creek Foundation, where she led wildflower walks and taught Master Naturalist classes. She was also an avid volunteer for The Nature Conservancy—often at our Fernbrook Natural Area—and generously left a portion of her estate to TNC to support our ongoing conservation work.

Left: Barry Truitt © Peter Frank Edwards; Right: Dr. Mitchell Byrd © Robert Clontz/TNC

Snapshots across the Commonwealth



Top row: Our Allegheny Highlands program hosted one of several staff enrichment days, and staff were delighted to find chanterelle mushrooms popping up on Warm Springs Mountain Preserve. © Alex Rich/TNC; Volunteers rake around longleaf pine trees that host red-cockaded woodpecker nesting cavities, removing leaf litter ahead of prescribed burns. © Jamie Wick

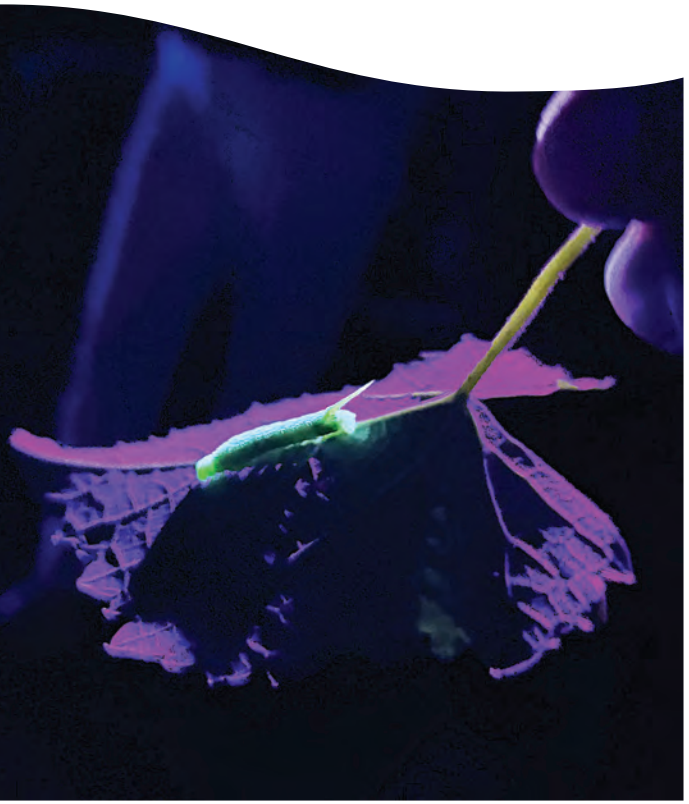
Bottom row: Volunteer clean-up of the Powell River © Nick Proctor/TNC; We celebrated the life of the oldest known red-cockaded woodpecker at nearly 20 years old. Male 270 was born at Piney Grove Preserve and served as the breeding male of Cluster 1 until this past spring. The average lifespan of the species is between 10–12 years. © Robert Clontz/TNC; Virginia Delegates Phil Hernandez and Katrina Callsen join TNC policy managers Lena Lewis and Mikaela Ruiz-Ramon plus TNC staff in harvesting eelgrass seeds at the Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve. © TNC















See more photos from our work year-round! Follow us at **instagram.com/nature_va**.





Top row: We held an educational Moth Night at Vandell Preserve at Cumberland Marsh and observed nocturnal insects using blacklights. © Brynna Strand/TNC; Bald eagle perched on tree branch in Mason Neck © Angela Camp/TNC Photo Contest 2026; Volunteer Margaret Chatham helps us remove the high-risk invasive species Japanese knotweed at Fraser Preserve. © Brynna Strand/TNC

Bottom row: Wild pony at Grayson Highlands State Park © Nikisha Eichmann/TNC Photo Contest 2026; Volunteers collect native river cane rhizomes for planting along the Clinch and Powell rivers to help improve streambeds and water quality. © Nick Proctor/TNC

Stepping stones

Where are our STEP interns now?

The Nature Conservancy's Short Term Experience Program (STEP) is training the next generation of conservationists. Since 2023, these paid, 10-week assignments have given interns the opportunity to gain firsthand experience through a wide range of roles and locations, from the Eastern Shore to the Clinch Valley. We checked in with three alumni to see where their STEP experience has led them.



Grace Dho, 2023 Land Monitoring & Stewardship intern



Current role: Senior coordinator for grants administration at the National Park Foundation

Current location: Washington, DC

How did STEP prepare you for your career? STEP allowed me to become more acquainted with nonprofit environmental sector work. It was also great to learn about how The Nature Conservancy functions at the state level: I gained a lot of new perspectives on how the nongovernmental organization sector plays into the state's larger conservation efforts.

Describe your STEP experience: The people at TNC truly made my STEP experience. Everyone was so kind and invested in interns' experiences. Special shoutout to the Allegheny Highlands office for being so welcoming and for all the great work they're doing!

Alex Laplace, 2024 Tidal Wetlands intern



Current role: Staff scientist at Anchor QEA, an environmental science and engineering consulting firm

Current location: My hometown of Norfolk, Virginia

Career highlights: Seasonal work as an environmental educator with the Elizabeth River Project, a local river nonprofit in Norfolk

How did STEP prepare you for your career? Working alongside senior conservation scientist Judy Dunscomb at the Charlottesville office introduced me to the world of tidal wetlands restoration and beneficial use of dredged material (BUDM). This helped me not only finish my college year with a thesis on the topic, but also helped me get recruited for my current job, where I am now working on multiple projects involving BUDM and restoration work.

Describe your STEP experience: My STEP experience was an incredibly valuable immersion in the field of environmental work that helped me build many connections and the confidence to continue delving into the field.

Alayna Knapp, 2024 Carbon Sequestration Analyst intern



Current role: Student at Oxford University pursuing a master's degree in biodiversity, conservation and nature recovery

Current location: Oxford, UK

Career highlights: After participating in STEP, I worked with Rainforest Trust for two years.

How did STEP prepare you for your career? I gained invaluable professional skills and practical conservation experience with STEP. The program helped me identify the facet of conservation I plan to pursue in graduate research and my career. Thanks to STEP, I had the resources and confidence I needed to transition from undergraduate education to the professional world.

Top: 2026 STEP interns on a group outing to Piney Grove Preserve © Taylor Fanelli/TNC; Left to right: © Courtesy of Grace Dho, Alex Laplace and Alayna Knapp

Bound by nature, roots that grow

Multi-generational TNC volunteer families

By Laura Liu

Before TNC had strategies, staff or even a mission statement, it had volunteers. Established in 1960, TNC's Virginia program remained an all-volunteer operation until the mid-1970s. Today in Virginia, around 1,000 volunteers contribute to more than 70 projects across our state every year. Through their dedication, they have made a lasting difference, from organizing digital conservation data and monitoring wildlife to cleaning watersheds.

Among these volunteers are families whose connections to TNC span generations. Parents, children and sometimes grandparents work together. Their stories show how volunteering with TNC can strengthen family bonds while leaving a legacy both for the environment and for future generations.

Planting a legacy through eelgrass seeds

Marnie, Terra and Brady—a grandmother, mother and son from Virginia Beach—love teaming up and volunteering for TNC.

In ancient Roman mythology, the name Terra translates to "Earth," and Terra certainly hasn't missed her calling. As a trained geologist and the founder of TerraScapes, an environmental consulting company, Terra was volunteering with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and working with the Pew Environment Group when she first connected with TNC and its eelgrass restoration project in 2009. A few years later, Terra welcomed a son, Brady, and a few years after that, Terra's mother retired and was looking for a meaningful volunteer opportunity. The family started doing eelgrass restoration together, and it became a cherished tradition for them.



Meet the author: 2026 STEP intern Laura Liu

Laura Liu is from Beijing, China, majoring in urban studies and geography at the University of California, Berkeley. Her interest in broadening her knowledge of conservation and sustainable solutions led her to TNC. As the 2026 Lands & Lives intern, she contributed to TNC's efforts around storytelling that expand our understanding of the places we protect.

A trail from volunteer stewardship to careers in nature

In the center of the state, the Weaver family's conservation story began along the trail through TNC's Fernbrook Natural Area just outside Charlottesville. Today, sisters Abby and Emma live in Christiansburg and work in conservation-related fields, but some of their earliest memories of nature were formed more than 20 years ago at Fernbrook with their parents, JoAnne and Tex.

For Abby and Emma, watching their parents volunteer—whether clearing branches or picking trash off the trail—provided a powerful example of environmental stewardship. Emma shares that their childhood memories have taught her "to just leave things as I found them or try to make them better."

Read more and find out how you can write the next volunteer story: **nature.org/volunteerfamilies**.







Left: Laura Liu © Courtesy of Laura Liu; Top to bottom; Three generations of seagrass volunteers © Terra Pascarosa; The Weaver family's conservation journey began at TNC's Fernbrook Natural Area, where they've been volunteers since 1990. © Mark Schwenk; JoAnne Weaver started volunteering as a young parent. © Courtesy of Tex Weaver

Educating the next generation of watershed stewards

Studies have shown that repeated field experiences have a measurable impact on student performance, which is why The Nature Conservancy aims to provide K-12 students on the Eastern Shore with multiple opportunities to visit the Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve (VVCR)—especially those who may not have access to the incredible landscape in their own backyard.

The program has long-standing relationships with two rural school divisions, Accomack and Northampton. Both serve a population of racially and economically diverse students and have limited resources to provide environmental education for students and teachers.

All grade levels learn about native plant and animal species, like the charismatic oystercatcher, and practice data collection using a variety of scientific techniques and equipment. Depending on their age, students get muddy in coastal salt marshes, beachcomb, explore oyster reef habitats, witness migratory bird breeding and nesting, and tour the seaside by boat.



Through these hands-on learning experiences, we make lasting impressions on students that keep them engaged in school and connected to the natural world around them.

High school students classify organisms found on the beach and learn about barrier island dynamics while exploring Cedar Island. © Barb O'Hare

Supporting our connection to nature



A self-professed "city boy," TNC trustee emeritus Bob Creecy has spent most of his life in Portsmouth, Virginia, but nature has always called out to him. "Nature to me is a connection to the universe," he says.

One of the most special natural places in Virginia for him is the Limberlost Trail in Shenandoah National Park. During his first time walking through the trail's cool spruce forest, he recalls, "It was so quiet you could hear needles falling to the ground. I felt something like reverence."

His support for The Nature Conservancy also began as a kind of calling. In 1986, he came across a short newspaper article about TNC. He and his late wife Janie were struck by the mission as well as the collaboration and adaptability that drives TNC's conservation work. They were moved to place a conservation easement, with support from TNC, on Janie's 400-acre ancestral farmland. Over the years, the Creecys have contributed unrestricted donations for TNC to be able to nimbly respond to the most urgent conservation needs when they arise.

Now living in a nursing home to support him with Parkinson's disease, Bob remains connected to nature—and the universe—through his ongoing relationships with TNC staff and his continued support of TNC. "I feel very fortunate to still be doing meaningful things," he says.

Visit **nature.org/virginia** to learn how you, too, can support nature.

Meet more people who make conservation possible. Follow us on LinkedIn at The Nature Conservancy in Virginia!

Janie and Bob Creecy © Courtesy of Bob Creecy

"High" tech

Migratory bird tracking at VVCR



Since the Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve (VVCR) was established over 50 years ago, migratory bird conservation has guided the protection and management of tidal marsh and barrier island habitats on the Eastern Shore. Habitat loss has long been one of the biggest threats to shorebirds, as coastal development and rising sea levels continue to shrink the areas where birds can nest, feed and rest during their migration journeys.

"Some of these birds travel thousands of miles without stopping and need VVCR to survive and finish their journey," says TNC coastal scientist Alex Wilke, who leads VVCR's migratory bird program.

Over the years, VVCR has evolved into a regional and international hub for bird tracking. To pinpoint locations that are critical for these birds beyond VVCR, the program is using innovative GPS tracking technology to map the full migratory patterns of species across the hemisphere. In collaboration with The Center for Conservation Biology at the College

Large: Willets and whimbrels migrating south during winter; Inset: Willet with transmitter © Mario Balitbit/TNC

of William & Mary and other partners, the program uses the data they collect to direct the efforts of TNC and other conservation groups where they matter most.

While bird tagging is not a new practice, more advanced tag design and capabilities are unlocking new potential for research. Currently, VVCR's migratory bird program focuses on whimbrel, oystercatchers and willets; as smaller tagging devices become available, we'll be able to expand our monitoring to smaller species. The latest GPS tracking is also three-dimensional, allowing TNC scientists and partners to see not only where tagged birds are, but how high they are flying. These crucial data can be used to integrate shorebird conservation considerations into industries such as offshore wind development.

"It's an evolving and exciting world of opportunity," Wilke says.

Learn more about VVCR's migratory bird program.







Top: TNC and our research partners check the fit of a transmitter for an oystercatcher. © Bryan Watts; Bottom (left to right): A Hudsonian whimbrel tagged for tracking © Mario Balitbit/TNC; American oystercatcher released after tagging © Mario Balitbit/TNC



Bringing back bay scallops

Once the country's leading producer of bay scallops, Virginia lost its entire scallop population in the early 1930s. A wasting disease wiped out the seagrass meadows, which had provided the scallops with protection from currents and predators.

To bring back this critical marine habitat, TNC's Volgenau Virginia Coast Reserve (VVCR) has been working closely with the Virginia Institute for Marine Science (VIMS) since 2003, with research support from the University of Virginia. Today, we have spread more than 800 acres of eelgrass seeds, which have helped establish almost 12,000 acres of eelgrass—the largest successful restoration project of its kind in the world—while also enabling the conditions for scallops and other species to thrive once again. VIMS has been producing scallops in their hatchery since 2009 for this project, and TNC assists with annual scallop monitoring.

While there is more work to do, seeing bay scallops recover is a crowning achievement of more than 50 years of land protection efforts at VVCR, which now encompasses 14 barrier and marsh islands. These undeveloped islands—the longest expanse of coastal wilderness remaining on the East Coast—help to protect the marine habitat and all the wildlife and communities that depend on it.

Read more at **nature.org/VAscallopcomeback**.

TNC's decades of conservation and seagrass restoration along Virginia's Eastern Shore have made the recovery of bay scallops possible. © Bo Lusk/TNC

The wave of the future

Sustaining recreational fishing with electronic reporting

Virginia's salty waters are a destination for roughly 750,000 anglers every year. This recreational harvest can take a toll on popular fish populations including striped bass, bluefish, red drum and cobia.

To maintain and improve fish abundance, The Nature Conservancy's Mid-Atlantic seascape program advocates for conservation-friendly fishing seasons, size limits and catch limits to ensure that anglers have fruitful days on the water now and for generations to come. However, the information scientists and managers use to set those regulations is based on outdated methods and can be highly uncertain. Unlike commercial harvest, which is carefully monitored through catch and sales reports, recreational fishing is not well monitored.

The Mid-Atlantic team is turning to digital applications to help collect this missing data on how many people are fishing and what they are catching. They have assembled best practices from a study of 25 fishing reporting apps and are collaborating with developers to ensure that apps serve both fisheries scientists and anglers.

Kate Wilke, TNC's Mid-Atlantic seascape director, says, "Typically when people think about sustainable fisheries, their concern centers on commercial seafood harvest. But the reality is, here in the Mid-Atlantic, recreational fisheries need conservation and management, too."

Importantly, TNC has also begun working with anglers to improve estimates of recreational fishing numbers, so we can help regulators make rules that benefit anglers while keeping fish populations healthy.

"Using electronic technologies for tracking catch and related fishing data is the wave of the future," Wilke says.







TNC and North Carolina State University scientists on a fishing expedition
© Cameron Luck

A natural solution

Reducing carbon emissions through forest protection



Through a historic federal grant for "natural climate solutions," The Nature Conservancy in Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina and South Carolina has been protecting forests and wetlands with high potential to store carbon emissions. This year, Virginia added 430 acres in the Clinch Valley to 10,090 acres protected across the four states since the grant was awarded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2024.

By 2029 in Virginia, we anticipate being able to improve more than 38,000 acres of forests in the Appalachians and 7,750 acres of the bottomland hardwood forests/longleaf pine ecosystem of southeastern Virginia, as well as 150 acres of wetlands. Working at this scale, TNC will support healthier communities by protecting water quality and boosting local economies by contributing to the outdoor industry.

This work is only possible through partnerships with local landowners. By putting conservation easements on privately owned forests, we are preserving and restoring our forests' ability to absorb carbon through tree planting, improved forest management, wetland recovery and the creation of living shorelines.

We anticipate that the grant-sponsored projects in Virginia will reduce an amount of greenhouse gases equivalent to 1.1 million tons of carbon dioxide by 2050, which is similar to taking 277,807 gas-powered vehicles off the road for a year.

Bettina Ring, TNC Virginia's state director, says, "At TNC, we recognize the many environmental, economic and community benefits our natural resources can provide if we support their resiliency and sustain them for future generations."

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Whitetop Mountain, near one of the recently protected private land parcels in Clinch Valley © Patti Black/TNC Photo Contest 2025

Enhancing climate resiliency in the Appalachians

Resiliency guides The Nature Conservancy's work around the globe. This is why, in Virginia, we prioritize efforts to restore the Appalachians. A rich array of plants and animals live here now because of the region's connected forests, which grow atop a vast range of landforms and soil types. Despite prolonged periods of extraction and neglect, these forests have managed to remain biodiverse.



However, as climate change becomes more extreme, the resilience of this region is starting to be tested—species will need to adapt in order to survive. The connected Appalachian landscape will continue to act as a migratory "superhighway" for adapting species, but forest degradation could limit their survival.

To help improve the impact of our conservation work in a changing climate, Jean Lorber, a forest ecologist for TNC in Virginia, recently led a team to grade resiliency for different forest types in the region, ranging from mixed oak to spruce highlands. By considering the climate suitability and quality of ecological function, along with traditional measures of biodiversity in each location, the team revealed the greatest threats to resiliency faced by these forests—focusing on the threats we can best tackle, such as low genetic diversity in red spruce, which we can address through strategic new plantings, and poor oak regeneration, which can be improved by prescribed fire.

Now when we plant a native oak, we should not only consider how that species will survive today, but how it will survive in the future climate, and what its acorns will mean for the resiliency of the future Appalachians.

Left: Eric Homan, Allegheny Highlands program restoration manager, in the forest near Hot Springs, Virginia, where TNC uses prescribed burns to improve climate resiliency © Greg Kahn; Right: Mixed oak forest, one of the most resilient forest types, is facing pressure from climate change.

Accelerating real-world conservation impact

In addition to our research and field work, we collaborate with policymakers and partners to find system-level solutions to our most pressing climate issues.

In a shining example of our success this year, our policy team led a coalition to support the passage of state legislation, SB256/HB672, to protect appliance energy efficiency standards. These standards lower the cost of utility bills, saving Virginians a remarkable amount of money while saving energy and water and reducing pollution.

Learn more about how we're protecting Virginia's lands and water through policy: **nature.org/takeactionVA**.



The Nature Conservancy in Virginia
652 Peter Jefferson Parkway, Suite 190
Charlottesville, VA 22911

nature.org/virginia
(434) 295-6106

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TNC's education program on the Eastern Shore welcomes more than 1,000 students each year between 5th and 12th grade. Here, TNC's conservation education specialist Kate Coleman guides rising 5th graders through the Summer School Shorexplorers program, a four-week course where students learn more about the natural world through both classroom and field experiences.

Get a glimpse of Shorexplorers in action at: **nature.org/educationinnature**.

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