

**THE SIGNS ARE
EVERYWHERE—
NATURE
NEEDS YOU**

ANNUAL REPORT 2024

The Nature
Conservancy
Connecticut



Dear Friends,

We are so pleased to share this year's Annual Report. Nature needs you and all of us. Dr. Frogard Ryan, state director for The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut, and Bola Olusanya, TNC's vice president and chief investment officer, reflected on 2024's many wins and challenges. Here is a glimpse of their conversation.



DR. FROGARD RYAN

FROGARD: What a year it's been, for TNC and for nature. How are you feeling?

BOLA: I'm always thinking about how much work we have to do. It is truly life-changing for people and our planet. But I'm hopeful and excited when I learn about a new community partner joining a project, or ways we're co-managing land with Indigenous Peoples, or a reconnected river welcoming more migratory fish. How have things been in Connecticut?

FROGARD: We've been working heavily on community resilience and climate legislation, which has been especially urgent as we watch extreme weather ramp up—you may have seen Connecticut flooding on national news this summer when streams turned into rushing rivers during a 15-inch rainfall in the western part of the state.

BOLA: I did see that. It's the kind of story we hear from TNC chapters in the United States and across the globe. TNC is in more than 80 countries, which all have unique needs, but we see two big crises everywhere: biodiversity loss and climate change. For so many, the problems are scary and feel too big to tackle. But they are enormous signs that nature needs us—and that we can't wait. That's why TNC is working harder than ever.

FROGARD: What I'm always reminded of is that nature knows no state lines, no boundaries of any kind. I take comfort in knowing that what we do at home in Connecticut ripples across New England and beyond. We're doing work for our local land and communities, but it makes double the difference because that impact travels.

BOLA: On my team, that's exactly how we feel. We need to include more people in this dialogue, while finding innovative methods and investments to deploy nature-based solutions. When I must dig deep for inspiration, I think back to my trip to Rwanda—spending time in a local community and seeing the crises of biodiversity and climate through their eyes, especially the youngsters. Geographically, they're continents away, but we're bonded through our shared efforts. Nature is healing, for us humans and for its own challenges. We need to harness that power.

FROGARD: I'm so excited about how we're doing that at home in Connecticut and the ways we will reach big goals for our planet across TNC. So much went on in 2024, and we hope to show everyone that nature needs you—and that change happens when we connect and work together.



BOLA OLUSANYA

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Frogard J. Ryan".

Dr. Frogard Ryan

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Bola Olusanya".

Bola Olusanya



THERE'S SOMETHING IN THE WATER

The Farmington River ranked 6th on the 2024 Most Endangered Rivers list for the United States, due to concerns for fish and the local ecosystem. The health of the river is connected to a local dam.

What can be done about dams and culverts that render waterways non-navigable for migrating fish? The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut is creating solutions to reconnect and support rivers, like the Farmington River. ***Nature needs friends like you to join in.***

Support is growing. More than 100 people attended the chapter's first-ever "World Fish Migration Day" event in May. Guests hiked along the Farmington River, learned about local organizations and joint efforts to reconnect rivers, and enjoyed a documentary screening on river restoration—particularly how the removal of obsolete and vulnerable dams can renew an ecosystem and open wildlife passageways.

Only 1/3 of the world's longest rivers remain free-flowing. Freshwater plants and animals have declined by 83% since 1970. TNC is working to safeguard or restore 1 million+ kilometers of healthy rivers and streams by 2030.

Connecticut's work toward that goal will involve the Town of Groton: We're partnering to improve a culvert along Haley Brook, a tributary of the Mystic River. A new design would facilitate fish passage for critical migratory species like river herring and brook trout, with a more resilient crossing during extreme storm events and flooding.

"We hope that as more people understand the immense value of reconnecting rivers, we'll see additional support for these efforts," says Emily Hadzopulos, freshwater restoration project manager for TNC in CT. "Nature-based solutions bring positive outcomes very quickly in a local area, but also create a ripple effect."



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MARSHING ORDERS

\$4M GRANT TO SUPPORT RESTORATION WORK

For the salt marsh at Rocky Neck State Park, things have been...rocky.

The area is known for its stunning beach, train route, peaceful walking paths, and pavilion, but the marsh is a large and integral piece of the ecosystem. It's about to get some much-needed support through a \$4 million grant secured by The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

TNC in CT will manage the "Bride Brook Estuary Transformation Project" in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, which manages the park, and local partners. A team has launched a planning process for transformative work to restore the Bride Brook estuary and coastal marsh at Rocky Neck; ensure resilience; and improve visitor access to the park's natural resources.

TOP REASONS ROCKY NECK NEEDS SUPPORT

1. The marsh is drowning, with a loss of vegetation and open pools of water and mud. It should look like a grassy meadow and needs unimpeded tidal flow.
2. It provides unique habitat that supports immense biodiversity including plants, fish, mammals and birds—healthy habitats are essential as we tackle biodiversity loss.
3. A healthy marsh is necessary in a changing climate: It acts as a natural shield for the coastline, and reduces ambient air and water temperatures.
4. Bride Brook is home to the largest alewife run in the state. As migratory fish, alewife need healthy waterways with proper tidal flow.
5. Rocky Neck is one of the most popular state parks in Connecticut, and an important place for people to access, enjoy, and benefit from coastal resources.





"We are incredibly excited to have secured these federal funds to restore an important ecosystem in Connecticut, and for the benefits that will extend to everyone who loves and lives near Rocky Neck State Park. This was an ideal time to come together with the state and local partners."

— DR. JESSICA CAÑIZARES, TNC IN CT'S DIRECTOR OF COASTAL ECOSYSTEM PROJECTS

"It's believed that bridges and other infrastructure have altered the natural flow of water and disrupted how sediment moves through the system, leading to marsh degradation. This project will further study the issue, as well as determine and design solutions."

— TIM CLARK, TNC IN CT'S SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT PROJECT DIRECTOR

© *TEBBEN GILL LOPEZ*



SEEDLING IS BELIEVING \$2M GRANT TO BOOST URBAN FORESTRY

The power of a tree...Huge, if you think about it. Shade, oxygen, cooling effects, a home for wildlife, a filter for air and water, a tool for sequestering carbon, the backdrop to childhood memories.

That's why protecting trees is more urgent than ever, especially in the face of a rapidly changing climate. Through that work, The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut secured a \$2.2 million grant to establish the Connecticut Urban Forest Network for Equity and Resilience. Funding comes via the U.S. Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program and Inflation Reduction Act.

The network aims to build the state's urban forestry capacity, particularly in communities with very low tree canopy, and support more urban forest advocates and practitioners. Nature needs healthy trees—the signs were clear as extreme heat ran on repeat all summer. The heat island effect made it more intense in cities (when temperatures are higher due to buildings, pavement and parking lots).

The seeds were planted years ago, in more ways than one, when TNC's urban forestry work began in Bridgeport. Now, efforts are reaching statewide as a nature-based solution to tackle effects of climate change.

"There are numerous approaches to caring for and expanding Connecticut's urban forests, and many communities seek opportunities to learn from their peers. Time is of the essence, and bringing together communities across the entire state will maximize impact."

—DREW GOLDSMAN, TNC IN CT'S URBAN CONSERVATION DIRECTOR.



GOING OUT ON A LIMB

Imagine a future where Connecticut forests have lost some of their most recognizable, magnificent and essential native trees. American beech, Eastern hemlock, ash.

Invaded and decimated by pests and disease over decades, these native species are dying out, triggering a cascade of negative consequences beyond the loss of trees themselves.

They need people like you, who understand their immense value, as well as scientists and researchers, to join together for solutions. Luckily, that's happening through the Tree Species in Peril project, made possible by the Manton Foundation, which The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut has proudly called a partner for the last decade.

What's happening?

- Pests and disease attack trees
- Gaps emerge in the forest canopy
- Fewer native species thrive
- Invasive species grow unchecked
- Reducing native biodiversity and resilience across entire forests

What will it take to fix forests?

- ▶ Research at many institutions, including the University of Connecticut
- ▶ Resistance breeding with trees who are survivors
- ▶ Analysis, cultivation, exposure and selection of successful saplings
- ▶ Years and years

Species under greatest threat could one day be eliminated from diverse forest ecosystems, in Connecticut and across the country, from New England to the Midwest. So, since 2022, TNC has been rapidly coordinating efforts, alongside its primary partner, the U.S. Forest Service, to disrupt this destructive chain of events.

The blueprint will be used to rapidly respond to future pests, diseases, and climate challenges, keeping our forests healthy and diverse. Tree Species in Peril is a critical investment in the future of North American forests—because our work here matters everywhere.



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You're Invited

NATURE REQUESTS THE HONOR OF YOUR PRESENCE!

Where: Your local forest, hiking trail, city park,
beach, pond or garden

When: Today, tomorrow, anytime

Why: Because nature needs you, and you need nature

Thanks to your support, The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut protects more than 50 preserves. They're so much more than just beautiful, natural areas:



Habitats that are home to diverse native animal and plant species



Natural areas that support carbon capture and climate resilience



Refuge for our essential human need to connect with nature

Nature is for all, but it has to be accessible. People of all ages and abilities are finding new ways to connect with trees, water, plants and more through TNC in CT.



Welcome to TNC'S CONNECTICUT PRESERVES



Devil's Den Preserve in Weston installed a digital kiosk. Wondering about sunset? The kiosk lists a time. Need step-by-step trail directions? That's a screen tap away. It's all in English and Spanish, with video captions, too. A fun, modern tool, that appeals to different kinds of learners.



Devil's Den also offers guided hikes. Visitors may feel more confident going the distance with a guide, and others are new to hiking. Some are especially for youngsters just starting to connect with nature.



You might feel more comfortable heading outdoors when you have gear to pack and know how to use it. TNC in CT delivered backpacks full of supplies for outdoor exploration to a school in Bridgeport, thanks to a donation from Athletic Brewing Company. Then, everyone gathered outside to give them a test run.



Burnham Brook Preserve in East Haddam expanded programming in partnership with the Eightmile River Wild and Scenic Coordinating Committee and the East Haddam Land Trust to include citizen science opportunities, educational presentations, and guided preserve walks, all open to the public. The groups now share the preserve's field office—the former home of Dr. Richard Goodwin, a TNC founder.



Hiking trails are being reimagined: Burnham Brook now has an all-terrain wheelchair that will soon be available to the public. TNC's team is also preparing wheelchair-accessible trails and developing a volunteer network to assist with access to, and use of, the wheelchair.

**BURNHAM BROOK PROJECTS ARE
MADE POSSIBLE WITH GRANT FUNDING
FROM THE COMMUNITY FOUNDATION
OF MIDDLESEX COUNTY.**



DIVIDENDS A DECADE LATER IN STAMFORD

When The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut leads its Community Resilience Building process with a municipality or academic institution, the work doesn't stop there. It's truly just the beginning. The city of Stamford is seeing that firsthand.

Back in 2013, Stamford asked TNC in CT, in partnership with the Western Connecticut Council of Governments, to initiate its very own CRB process. Goals included helping the city become more resilient, sustainable, and equitable.

With 40+ participants representing 25+ organizations, the process led to agreement on climate action plans with a list of priority actions. One in particular provided TNC with an opportunity to help Stamford's Stormwater Management Department reduce flooding impacts and decrease stress that runoff from storms can place on municipal sewer systems and streams and rivers at the end of the pipes. The goal was to generate flood reduction and water quality improvement by installing green stormwater infrastructure projects (like bioswales, tree street planting, green roofs, rainwater harvesting, porous pavement, and other bioengineering techniques).

In the following years, TNC worked to secure funding and allowances to design and install Stamford's first bioswale in 2019. The location was sited in the downtown business district directly in front of the University of Connecticut Stamford Campus in hopes of educating residents and students on green stormwater infrastructure practices. Dr. Adam Whelchel, director of science for TNC in CT, worked with a contractor to install the bioswale—a success that resulted in Whelchel and TNC receiving the highest environmental honor that the city awards.

The project's importance and impact were clear. So clear, that Tyler Theder, Stamford's director of stormwater management, decided the city would be better off with more bioswales. Stamford is now installing 20 additional bioswales with \$1M in Congressionally directed funding.

"Bioswales fit in with a larger goal to make Stamford more resilient and sustainable, while also adding to the aesthetics of sidewalks with plantings and some greenery," says Stamford Mayor Caroline B. Simmons.

From providing a CRB, to identifying green stormwater infrastructure as a priority, to partnering on installation, and offering continued expertise, TNC is proud to have served as a catalyst for this work. In building strong partnership, and prioritizing nature-based solutions, the effort will help reduce climate impacts in one of Connecticut's biggest cities—while being a model for others anywhere in the state.

The Community Resilience Building process, which TNC began in CT in 2009, has been conducted in:

San Francisco Bay, greater Milwaukee, academic institutions in Atlanta, all of Cape Cod, island communities like Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, and rural communities in Maine, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Hampshire, and the Hudson River Valley in New York.



CAPITOL PROJECTS

The clock struck midnight on a May evening, ending the year's legislative session in Hartford. It had been an especially busy season for The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut, from crafting bills, and testifying in support, to meeting with legislators. Multiple TNC-supported bills were victorious:

- Legislation allowing the state's Department of Energy and Environmental Protection more authority to shut down dams deemed unsafe or dangerous.
- An act supporting solar, including solar canopies and a provisional lift of a solar cap.
- A bill allowing a 30-year contract option for offshore wind (OSW) power, which can help enable OSW deployment.

The session's end won't stop TNC from again advocating for a climate omnibus bill that did not come up for a Senate vote, but passed the house. When the new session begins, we'll build on that momentum.

Nature will need your voice, too.

BRINGING A VISION TO LIFE

TNC in CT has worked extensively with the City of Groton, including the development of the Southeastern Connecticut Regional Framework for Coastal Resilience. Next up: addressing longstanding issues from stormwater flooding in the Five Corners neighborhood by assessing affected areas and developing nature-based solutions. Infrastructure is being pushed beyond limits by the volume of water in the area.

TNC will work with community partners, businesses in the area, and designers to envision a resilient Five Corners neighborhood. Once the City of Groton's stormwater assessment is complete, the community can seek implementation funding and address life-threatening flooding.

"When I see our comments or testimony used in a final draft of a bill, especially at the federal level, it's tremendous to see we have worked together to create legislation or a program that will protect people and nature."

—CARY LYNCH, TNC IN CT'S
CLIMATE AND ENERGY MANAGER



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HARMONY FOR HIGHWAYS AND HABITATS

Connecticut is a unique mosaic of habitats, with connections between tidal and river environments, and forest, grassland and wetlands.

It all contributes to diverse wildlife: 84 species of mammals, 335 bird species, 50 species of reptiles and amphibians, 169 fish species, and around 20,000 species of invertebrates.

It also means wildlife is out and about near people—and vehicles. The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut is enhancing safety for all of the above.

In partnership with the Connecticut Department of Transportation and Department of Energy and

Environmental Protection, and supported by funding secured through the Federal Highway Administration's and Wildlife Crossing Pilot Program, TNC is leading a joint project to evaluate and protect movement of people and wildlife.

The expected results? A mapping toolset for state decisions on infrastructure and environmental projects, and, over time, fewer wildlife-vehicle collisions and increased habitat connectivity. **That means a safer home for people and animals.**

Habitat fragmentation and loss are the greatest threat to Connecticut's biodiversity. An average of 1,028 deer collisions occurred annually here from 2015-2022. Work will identify critical habitat blocks, and roads intersecting such blocks and migratory corridors.

MAPPING THE FUTURE FOR MIGRATORY SPECIES

You could say the Appalachian Mountains are like a highway for wildlife...crossing 19 states, and yes, that includes Connecticut up in our northwest corner!

As climate change drives ecosystem instability, plants and animals are shifting northward and upslope. They need connected lands like the Appalachians to provide safe passage and a thriving home. Through TNC's Resilient and Connected Appalachians Grant Program, two Connecticut land trusts received grants to conserve parcels in the mountain range.

TNC awarded \$50,000 each to the Norfolk Land Trust and the Warren Land Trust, creating a contiguous protected block of approximately 1,200 acres when combined with additional lands.

A stronghold of climate resilience and vital migration pathway for diverse species, the Appalachian range is a focal point for protection efforts. Indeed, a virtual superhighway for nature will be stitched together.

And it takes all of us—TNC, supporters like you, local land trusts and environmental organizations—to make that happen.



**MANY RARE SPECIES ARE
FOUND IN THE APPALACHIANS**

SALUTING OUR SUPPORTERS

Your dedication powers local and global solutions.

The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut wishes to thank the following donors for their support and service in fiscal year 2024. This list represents those who have contributed at least \$1,000 or more between July 1, 2023 and June 30, 2024 to the Conservancy's local, national, and international conservation work.

While we make every effort to ensure the accuracy and correct listing of each name, we apologize for any oversight.

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DONOR, VOLUNTEER, NATURE ADVOCATE: MEET JANE



Jane Aldieri has been a donor for The Nature Conservancy in Connecticut since 1997 and a volunteer since 2018. Supporters like you and Jane understand what nature needs—action here at home that connects to global change.

Jane, what are the places you care most about?

I live in the lower Connecticut River Valley, and the river and streams are part of my every day. But I care about the entire world, so I'm committed to being part of a global environmental nonprofit, while also working locally.

What conservation issues concern you most?

I'm concerned about biodiversity, and the climate crisis. I care about the conservation of natural habitat and a diversity of species. I'm also worried about single-use plastic

waste, and pollution in our waterways. Being part of TNC and organic gardening groups taught me about the big picture, and I take that knowledge wherever I go. You never know what information will stick with a person and create change.

Why should people support nature and TNC in CT?

It's our local organization, but at the same time it's part of this greater global initiative to preserve and protect nature. I share information about local projects and how they can get involved. I have brought neighbors to events like river clean-ups, and walks on TNC preserves. Every little thing we do matters. Each one of us can be a part of something larger through our actions, through our activism.

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY IN CONNECTICUT STAFF



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THE LANDS AND WATERS ON WHICH ALL LIFE DEPENDS.**

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