

Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve

2025 COMMUNITY IMPACT REPORT



ABOUT THE VIRGINIA OUTDOORS FOUNDATION



The Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF) was created in 1966 by Virginia's legislature "to promote the preservation of open-space lands and to encourage private gifts of money, securities, land or other property to preserve the natural, scenic, historic, scientific, open-space and recreational areas of the Commonwealth." VOF now protects more than 930,000 acres across Virginia.



ABOUT BULL RUN MOUNTAINS NATURAL AREA PRESERVE

The Bull Run Mountains are the eastern-most mountains in Virginia. The Virginia Outdoors Foundation's Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve is approximately 2,350 acres that serves as a living laboratory and open-air museum in the backyard of our nation's capital. The Preserve contains 10 different plant community types and a plethora of regionally uncommon and threatened plant and animal species. In addition to the biodiversity, the Preserve permanently protects dozens of regionally important cultural history sites that tell the story of the land's diversely peopled past. In 2002, this land was dedicated by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation as a Natural Area Preserve to protect the unique ecosystems and cultural resources found here. As the owner and manager of the Preserve, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation is committed to protecting the mountain's significance and sharing it with the public through managed access. The Bull Run Mountains were an early hotbed of scientific activity, and the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve continues to serve as an important site for scientific research. We have a data-driven approach that is critical for our ability to effectively balance public use with our duty to preserve a healthy, natural ecosystem. With three different sections, the Preserve is an active and dynamic resource, hosting K-12 school groups, university students, and researchers throughout the year.

A NOTE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As the Executive Director of the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, I am proud to share the 2025 Bull Run Mountains Community Impact Report.

This year was marked by significant progress, including a 178-acre expansion made possible by the Sacharuna Foundation. We advanced construction on our long-awaited parking area and trailhead, which will soon provide safer, sustainable access for all visitors. Our commitment to stewardship remains central, from utilizing canine archaeology to map historic cemeteries to protecting rare species across our 10 unique plant communities.

These milestones are a testament to our dedicated volunteers and partners. Together, we are ensuring this "living laboratory" continues to inspire and educate for generations to come.



Brett C. Glymph

Brett Glymph

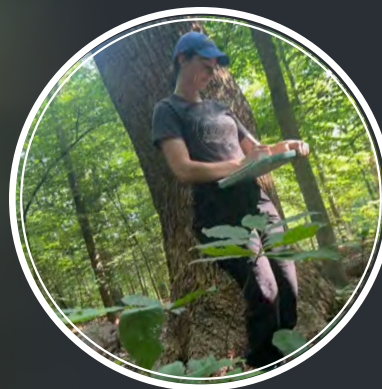
MEET THE PRESERVE STAFF



LESLIE GRAYSON
DEPUTY DIRECTOR



JOE VILLARI
PRESERVE MANAGER



DENEITH REIF
CONSERVATION
ASSISTANT



JOHN LENOX
CONSERVATION
ASSISTANT

RESEARCH

Ethnobotanical Growth Patterns

To investigate the potential of human influence of the growth pattern of Canadian black snakeroot (*Sanicula canadensis*), former VOF cultural history fellow and master naturalist Amber Miller dedicated this past summer to surveying this culturally and spiritually significant plant. Black snakeroot was used by early Black homesteaders to ease menstruation and menopause. It also was planted as a part of African American folkloric practices to keep evil out of the home and to guide spirits back to their own realm.

Amber used a gridded survey method to determine black snakeroot density around the south side of the "George Jones" site, one of the Preserve's earliest homesites, and plans to repeat this study in the coming summers to see if the pattern holds.



Sanicula canadensis in flower.

Preserve to Preserve



Javier Robayo, pictured here holding a black rat snake, is the executive director of Fundación Ecominga, which protects over 27,000 acres in Ecuador's Chocó and Tropical Andes. It was an honor to have him visit the Preserve in 2025.

Fossil Flora of the Bull Run Mountains

Dr. Ben Kligman from the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and Dr. Paul Olsen from Columbia University have continued their work on the Preserve's waterfall formation, uncovering the ancient ecology in the Bull Run Mountains 200 million years ago during the Triassic-Jurassic boundary.

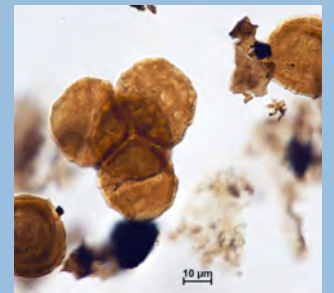


Dr. Carol Hotton displays an unidentified species of extinct tree fern.

We are excited to report that preparation and analysis of micro fossils has yielded further insight into the ancient environment here.

Jurassic palynology expert, Dr. Carol Hotton, together with her Smithsonian-based lab, prepared these photos of fossil spore and pollen samples of ancient and extinct conifers, fungi, cycads, and tree ferns.

The preparation and careful study of such disparate traces of life continue to add to the rich ecological picture of these mountains.



Classopollis sp.
(extinct conifer)



Lycopodiumsporites rugulatus (club moss)

Genetic Research on Bull Run Mountains' Forests



Dr. Neitzey collects a sample from the Preserve

Last September, Dr. Michelle Neitzey, who studies conservation genetics at the University of Kentucky, returned to her local childhood forest here in the Bull Run Mountains to include genetic samples from the Preserve's American beech tree (*Fagus grandifolia*) and Eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) population. The goal of the project is to identify climate-adapted genomic variation for seed banking and potential use in future breeding programs or for assisted migration.

There is a hope that this could lead to discovering potential population resistance to beech leaf disease (BLD). BLD is a relatively new disease affecting beeches that could, without intervention, kill off the trees within several years.

These collected leaf samples were sent to The Plant Computational Genomics Lab, where they will be measured against many other samples of beech trees to gain insight into our population's genetic descent and regional adaptations.

Canine Archeologists Help Map Cemeteries

At the end of 2025, VOF welcomed a team of canine archaeologists (Seamus, Sheena, Keegan, and Quest) and their human counterparts (Kathleen, Jan, and Jane).

This skilled human remains detection (HRD) team was led by Dr. Kathleen Connor, who kindly partnered with us to contribute to our understanding of the Preserve's cultural resources and keep these four-legged archaeologists sharp.

As a state-designated preserve, our "no dog" policy helps us reduce the spread of invasive plants and ensure that the Preserve's 2,500 acres remain as wild as possible. That said, we relished the chance to host this meaningful exception.



The HRD team pose after a good day's work.

The use of trained HRD dogs is an emerging remote sensing technique used to identify the locations of human burials. This method is often used to recover lost loved ones in search and rescue settings, but is an emerging non-invasive application used in archeological applications when paired with other data.

The HRD team's visit provided us with further evidence to ensure that the boundaries and burial count within our historic cemeteries are accurate as markers and other grave characteristics are not always obvious on the surface.



Sheena signals the source of volatile organic compounds.

RESEARCH

iNAT STATS 2025

**527 Citizen Scientists
Participated in 2025**

NEW SPECIES ADDED
181
Out of
1,125 species
recorded this
past year

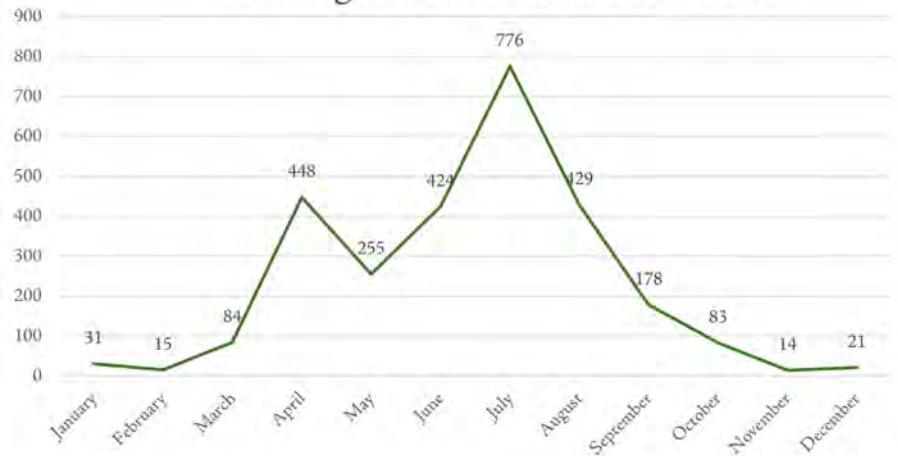


OBSERVERS
64
IDENTIFIERS
463



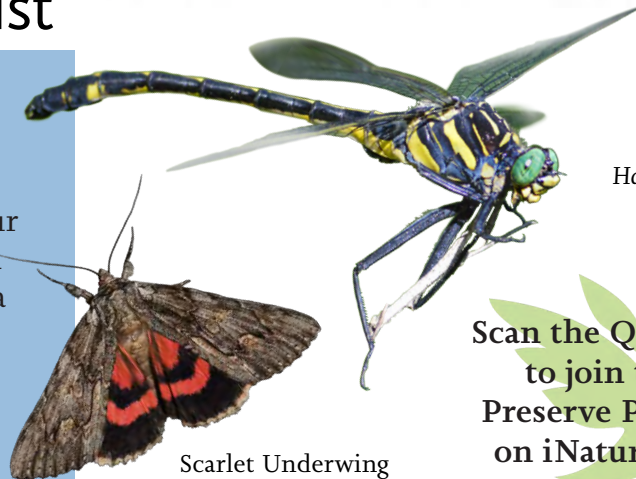
TOP OBSERVERS FOR 2025
@amberstar, 531
@theblokehardforoak, 408
@dendrologith, 371
@jvillari, 246
@mjwcarr, 238
2,758 OBSERVATIONS

Timing of Observations for 2025



Preserve on iNaturalist

The iNaturalist application enables anyone who visits the Preserve to record their species observations and contribute to the understanding of our biodiversity. Every year, VOF research associate Michael J.W. Carr compiles a year-in-review for the Preserve's iNaturalist project, where he presents statistics and highlights notable observations and contributions.



Scan the QR code
to join the
Preserve Project
on iNaturalist.



Blandy Experimental Farm Seed Collection

Staff from the Blandy Experimental Farm, home of the State Arboretum of Virginia, visited the Preserve with the purpose of collecting seeds to preserve local phenotypic genetics. There has been a large push to promote planting natives over ornamental plants in gardens, but the availability of local natives is lacking. Blandy has started a garden of local natives from Virginia's piedmont and mountain regions and will collect the seeds to continue distributing.

One tree of particular interest was the butternut (*Juglans cinerea*) a member of the walnut family. The Butternut tree has a canker, or fungal disease, that has significantly reduced the population of the species.

Native butternuts will also hybridize with Chinese butternuts making preservation increasingly difficult. Seven butternut trees have been found in the Preserve, and leaf samples were taken from six of them and sent to Purdue University for genetic testing. All six are pure natives!



USGS Uses the Preserve for Study on Geoelectric Hazards

In the spring of 2025, Dr. Paul Bedrosian and his team from the United States Geological Survey (USGS) installed equipment at the Preserve to collect magnetotelluric data. This data is being used to inform power companies and city planners on the optimal electric infrastructure placement and to map geoelectric hazards. The Preserve is just one of 150 locations across Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Ohio and Pennsylvania where data is being collected. This equipment requires minimal disturbance, only a few square feet of ground, and will help to stabilize our power grid. The Preserve is happy to be a host site for this five-year study and do our part to contribute to electrical grid resiliency.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

PEC Visits BRMNAP

We were honored to host the Piedmont Environmental Council (PEC) at the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve for a meeting, team-building exercise, and field trip that focused on piedmont conservation goals. The outreach and communications department for PEC is seen standing here on one of our more recent additions to the Preserve, which was made possible via a past grant award from the Virginia Land Conservation Fund.



Teen Job Shadowing

This November, Jessica Bolton, a teenager hailing from Tennessee, job-shadowed her Aunt Deneith at the Preserve. She performed a variety of outdoor work as a volunteer, gaining experience in the various job skills need for a future job in conservation. She helped clear a historic mill run with hand tools, checked camera traps, and learned about the cultural history at the Preserve. She also researched a botanical list made by H. A. Allard to see if there were any orchids our staff has yet to add to the iNaturalist project at the Preserve. To capstone her work, she crushed rocks with a sledgehammer and remediated 50 feet of trail. Jess was studious, strong, and curious about the wildlife at the Preserve and even sighted a black bear while doing a trail check.

Tracing the Footsteps of Alfred Robinson

Forensic genealogist, Phyllis Scott, and archeologist, Patrick O'Neill, worked with VOF to uncover information on the early life of Alfred Robinson, a family patriarch who was enslaved before coming to the Bull Run Mountains. Alfred Robinson's life was traced to the Estate of Joseph Thompson and son, William A. Thompson, who owned land south of Somerville and then to William Rowley and Lucy Smith, who had 19 children and owned thousands of acres near Bethel along Blantyre Road southwest of the Preserve. The ability to trace a formerly enslaved individual back through enslavement is an historical breakthrough. One of the Smith family farms, Blenheim, is now part of land owned by the Clifton Institute.

VOF staff, Phyllis, and Patrick visited the former Blenheim farm thanks to Clifton Institute's Felicia Brooks. Research shows that Alfred lived and worked on this farm from 1866 through 1875. Staff investigated the homesite area looking for clues as to where outbuildings and slave quarters may have been but nothing conclusive was found.

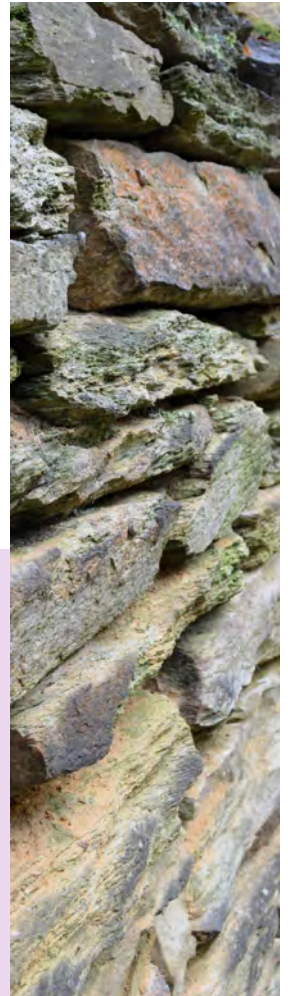
Alfred Robinson's descendants visit the Preserve regularly and we are happy to provide this tangible connection to family history and the place where Alfred Robinson established a home for his family around 1880.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Descendant Communities Connect with Historic Homeplaces

This year, in addition to the Corum-Robinson family, we had descendants from the Gaskins family (seen here at the North Section's stone house) visit their ancestors' mountain homestead. The Gaskins cabin, which is still standing on the North Section of the Preserve, was the home of John W. Gaskins, Sr., and Bertha Carr Hall Gaskins. Built in the early 1900s, the homestead had several outbuildings and stone walls, all of which have been reclaimed by the forest.



Phyllis Brent Gaskins, who was raised on the mountain also came out to visit and share oral histories. She discussed her beginnings as an artist, using pokeweed berries to draw on the rock faces exposed by the local quarrying neighborhood. She remembers the hardships created by living on the mountain and how it required one to be resourceful to survive. "I have never made anything ugly in my life," she told us. "Nothing is ever ugly to me. It always has a use or can be used to make other things look beautiful, somehow."

At the Corum-Robinson Descendants Day we continued building out family trees. These family trees enable younger generations to visualize the connection between family members and how they are related to Alfred Robinson and Susan Marshall, who settled within the Bull Run Mountains in the late 1800s.



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The Local Flavor of Conservation

Outside of the preserve, VOF staff tabled at two festivals this year. The Bluebell Festival located at Merrimac Farm Wildlife Management Area is hosted by Prince William Conservation Alliance around the emergence of Virginia bluebells (*Mertensia virginica*) in early spring. Then, at the end of September the White House Farm Foundation along with the Northern Virginia Conservation Trust hosted the Leopold's Preserve Fall Festival. These family friendly events are a great way for the public to connect with local conservation organizations and learn about places and opportunities they might otherwise miss.

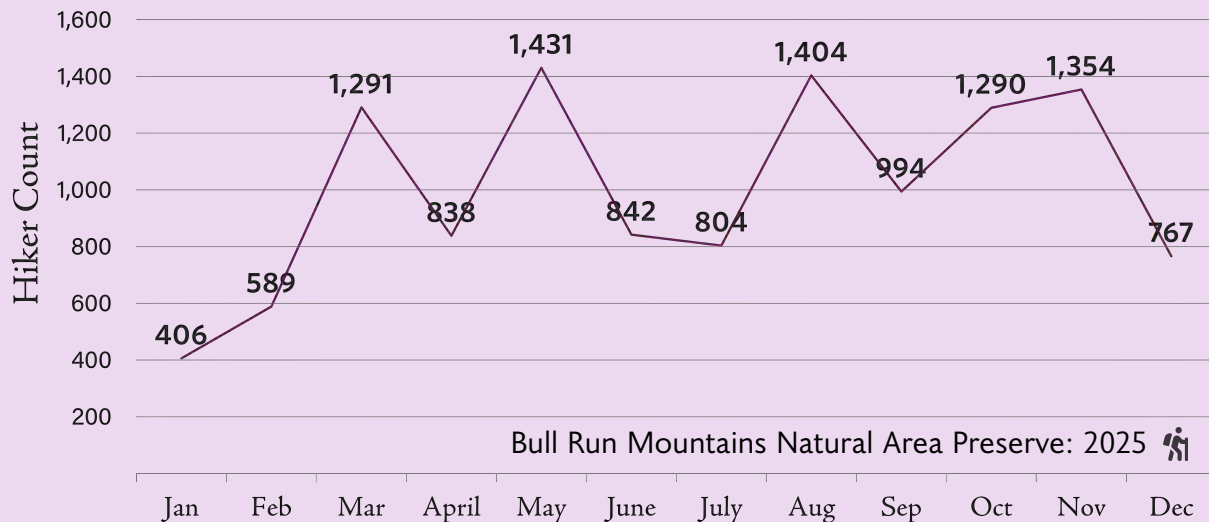


Museum Night

VOF was invited to the museum night at Chris Yung Elementary school in February. Laid out were artifacts for students to interact with and learn about what it means to steward a preserve and why the land matters for both its cultural and natural value. The most asked question of the students was, "Is that real?" The parents were more curious about the future museum at the Preserve to house the artifacts. A few students present remembered the field trip they took to the Bull Run Mountains the year prior and expressed their desire to return. It was a meaningful way to connect with our next generation of land stewards.



Preserve Trailhead Foot Traffic by Month



COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



252 Participants in VOF-organized public events in 2025

LAND MANAGEMENT

BRMNAP GROWS BY 178 ACRES!

The Virginia Outdoors Foundation was thrilled to announce a significant expansion of the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve in 2025, thanks to a generous gift from the Sacharuna Foundation. This gift, recorded in the Fauquier County Circuit Court Clerk's land records in June, marks a pivotal moment in the six-decade effort to protect this irreplaceable natural and cultural landscape. These four newly acquired parcels totaling 178 acres of prime mountain habitat and one culturally significant homestead have now been integrated into the existing Preserve!



Straddling the border of Fauquier and Prince William counties, the Preserve serves as a living laboratory and open-air museum in close proximity to the nation's capital. The Preserve is home to the headwaters of both Broad Run and Little River, crucial tributaries of the Occoquan and Potomac rivers, and supports ten distinct plant community types alongside a rich array of regionally uncommon and threatened flora such as Pale Corydalis (*Pseudofumaria alba*) and fauna such as Timber Rattlesnake (*Crotalus horridus*). Beyond its ecological value, the land safeguards numerous culturally significant historical sites, offering a window into the mountains' diverse past.



The addition of these 178 acres significantly strengthens the contiguous forest protection along the ridges and slopes of the Bull Run Mountains. This conservation work, begun in the 1960s by the Natural Areas Council with donations from Alice Mills and the Currier family and added to over the years by other donors and organizations, recognizes the Bull Run Mountains as an essential "green belt" and wildlife corridor in a rapidly developing region. The effort to complete the Preserve is still ongoing; VOF continues to work with interested landowners and seek opportunities to add key parcels to both north and south sections of the Preserve, and to link the two.

LAND MANAGEMENT

Big Changes at BRMNAP – Ongoing

The largest infrastructural project to date is underway at our future welcome area: the completion of our parking lot and stormwater system. With this milestone now complete, we are turning to the rest of the infrastructure to make this community space ready for visitors, the largest of which is officially relocating our pedestrian railroad crossing. We are currently working through the formal process with the Department of Conservation and Recreation, Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transport, and Norfolk Southern. We appreciate everyone's continued patience as we navigate this process.

02.17.2025



10.26.2025

Ship-Shape Stewardship

A stewardship hub has been constructed at the back of the welcome area that greatly enables our staff's ability to steward the Preserve, its trail system, and the natural and cultural resources the Preserve is designated to protect. The construction of this hub would not have been possible without the help from the dedicated volunteers that are a part of our VOF stewardship committee!



LAND MANAGEMENT

Invasive Plant Management

This year we focused our invasive plant management efforts on our three main access points. At the North Section we pushed back the woody invasives like multiflora rose (*Rosa multiflora*) and Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*) from the stone house wood line. While doing so we found two butternuts (*Juglans cinerea*) hiding in the area!

At Jackson Hollow, one of the few places on the mountain that have Eastern hemlocks (*Tsuga canadensis*), we treated the hemlock wooly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*). This invasive insect sucks sap from the hemlock trees and can prove to be fatal if left untreated. Jackson Hollow also has a patch of invasive bamboo we have nearly eradicated.

At the South Section we continued our work treating the meadow area created last year by the removal of tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*).

A large part of the area grew up with Japanese stiltgrass (*Microstegium vimineum*) which was treated, but there is promise of native species taking back the area. A total of 14 native grasses and wildflowers have been recorded in this area which was previously void of natives (list below).

Another big goal was the 250-plus tree of heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) treated at the Preserve this year. These trees are a host of invasive spotted lanternfly (*Lycorma delicatula*) populations, which are also hindered by removing their primary host plant.



Native Species That Appeared after Invasive Treatment

- Hemp dogbane - *Apocynum cannabinum*
- American burn weed - *Erechtites hieraciifolius*
- American penny royal – *Hedeoma pulegioides*
- American pokeweed – *Phytolacca americana*
- Maryland senna - *Senna marilandica*
- Horseweed – *Erigeron canadensis*
- Seedbox – *Ludwigia alternifolia*
- Eastern back nightshade – *Solanum emulans*
- Carolina horsenettle – *Solanum carolinense*
- Wingstem – *Verbesina alternifolia*
- White vervain – *Verbena urticifolia*
- Straw-colored flatsedge – *Cyperus strigosus*
- Purpletop tridens – *Tridens flavus*
- Forked witchgrass – *Dichanthelium dichotomum*

LAND MANAGEMENT

Grafting Historic Fruit Trees

In 2024 VOF was awarded a \$5,000 grant from the Fauquier and Loudoun Garden Club that allowed us to install a biocultural and pollinator garden around the stone house. In addition to the garden, the grant funded the preservation of historic fruit trees from Bull Run Mountain homestead sites. There are only a few surviving fruit trees today. They were once a common place around homestead sites, as confirmed by archival evidence and oral histories.



In the spring Preserve staff collected scions from the pear tree growing next to the Bleight house that is still standing along our green trail and from the apple tree next to the Robinson house on our North Section. These scions were then grafted onto rootstock and planted in a secure area to protect them from deer. We are happy to report there are survivors, enabling the preservation of these historic genetics.

DCR-DNH Support



The Department of Conservation and Recreation's Division of Natural Heritage is the deed of dedication holder for BRMNAP and each year their Northern region's team supports BRMNAP's stewardship goals. This year, the Northern region team and invasive species team came to the reserve to collect invasive plant management (IPM) protocols and provide expert guidance. Across the state there are 69 Natural Area Preserves covering over 65,000 acres. DCR-DNH is coordinating best practices across the state for IPM strategies. We are already planning for a stewardship project to utilize prescribed burn techniques in 2027.

Big Trees at Bull Run

The tree amigos are a group of dedicated big tree hunters who travel across Virginia looking for old growth trees that could be state records. They spent a weekend here at the Preserve looking for trees and found two trees of note. A large table mountain pine (*Pinus pungens*) that ranks third in the state and an American chestnut (*Castanea dentata*) that ranked among the top five in the state. The Preserve is home to the largest poison sumac (*Toxicodendron vernix*) tree in the state and could be harboring other giants within the 2,500 acres!



LAND MANAGEMENT

Old-Growth Forest Network Dedication

The Preserve was recently inducted into the national Old-Growth Forest Network (OGFN). The Preserve is the 14th Virginia forest to be inducted into the Old-Growth Forest Network and the second in Prince William County.

OGFN connects people with nature by creating a national network of protected, mature, publicly accessible, native forests. The network intends to preserve at least one forest in every county in the U.S. that can sustain a forest.



Since it was founded in 2012, OGFN has grown to include 315 forests across 40 states. OGFN also recognizes exceptional forest advocates, educates about the extraordinary ecological benefits of old-growth forests, and speaks out regarding immediate threats to specific ancient forests.”

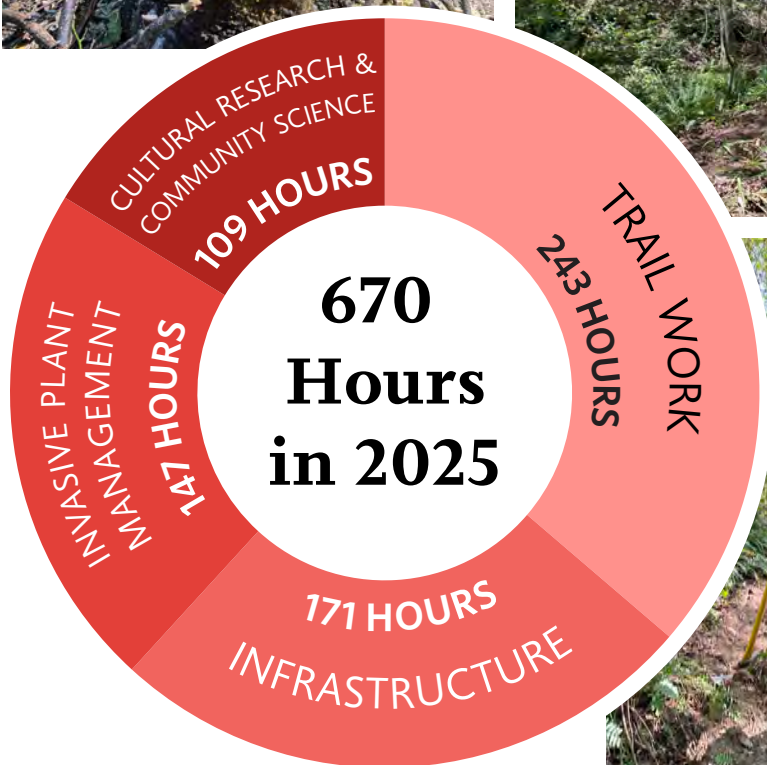
Homestead Stabilization Project Continues

The Downs Cabin, which kicked off our historic stabilization project last year, got a few more improvements this year. First, butyl tape was applied over the various holes in the metal roof. The roof is the most important factor in keeping our historic cabins standing; once the roof goes the wood structure underneath quickly deteriorates. Second, a portion of the sill that had completely rotted away was replaced with a reclaimed barn beam. Finally, the floor, which had been torn out in half the cabin but was still on site, was reinstalled along with a few piece that matched.



LAND MANAGEMENT

PRESERVE VOLUNTEERS



In 2025, volunteers provided a third of the working hours an employee can do in a calendar year!

LAND MANAGEMENT

A New Blue Trail

In 2026, the Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve will open a new trail on our South Section that will allow visitors to follow Catlett's Branch north from the confluence. This new trail will pass by the homestead sites of Alfred Robinson and Charles Corum, who were a part of an African American quarry neighborhood post emancipation.



These historic homesteads along with the landscape created by their inhabitation will be the focal point of the interpretative signs telling the story of our diversely peopled past.

While hiking our new blue trail visitors will experience gradual slopes and multiple views of Catlett's Branch on this two-mile roundtrip trail. At the end of the trail is a small loop taking you up the slope to overlook the remains of the Charles Corum homestead complex with a cellar, spring box, rock walls, and abandoned car.



A main feature of this trail is a "rock hop" crossing allowing hikers to navigate across Catlett's Branch. This rock hop was a team effort and focus of our 2025 National Trails Day Event in June, bringing out 13 volunteers. Volunteers, along with Preserve staff, moved rocks weighing hundreds of pounds into place using rigging equipment and brute strength to create a series of rock steps across the stream. This sustainable option uses on site materials and has already survived a significant flood without any damage.



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BULL RUN MOUNTAIN
NATURAL AREA PRESERVE
GUIDED HIKES GROUP

Special Thanks To

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTORS

Amber Miller
Angela Davidson
Annalise Zurasky
Barbara Saffir
Barinaale Dube
Bob Lee
Childs Burden
Claude Schoch
David Logan
Dr. Jonathan Shurberg
Dr. Ben Kligman
Dr. Kirk Smith
Dr. Mike Johnson
Dr. Paul Olsen
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Elizabeth Cummings
Gary Fleming
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Lori Udall
Mark Kellam
Matt Sheedy
Michael Barreda
Michael J.W. Carr
Michael Gaige
Michael Lott
Mike Custodio
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Committee
Nathaniel Green
Nicholas Carlsen
Patrick O'Neill

Pat McIlvaine
Phylis Brent Gaskins
Phyllis Scott
Preston Pennington
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Sandy Surabian
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The Body Family
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The Corum Family
The Currier Family
The Feagan Family
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The Lough Family
The Miller Family
The Oats Family
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The Washington Family
Theo Grayson
Tim Dunn
Tom Dragone
The Residents of Hungry
Run Road
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Val Neitzey
Virginia Warner
Wendy Pierce

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Archaeological Society of Virginia
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Blue Ridge Wildlife Center
Boy Scouts of America Troop #7369
Bull Run Mountains Conservancy
Chesapeake Bay Restoration Fund
Coalition to Save Historic
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Virginia Department of Historic Resources
Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources
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Browne Academy
Buckland Mills Elementary School
Chris Yung Elementary School
Deer Park Elementary School
Franklin Sherman Elementary School
George Mason High School
Gro Preschool & Natural Education Space
Hillside Elementary and Burgundy Farm
James Madison High School
Lemon Road Elementary School
London Towne Elementary School
Lorien Wood School
Mountainside Montessori
The Hill School of Middleburg
Thomas Jefferson High School
Thoreau Middle School

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Virginia Outdoors Foundation
Bull Run Mountains Natural Area Preserve
17502 Beverley Mill Drive, Broad Run, VA 20137
(571) 260-5200

www.vof.org

