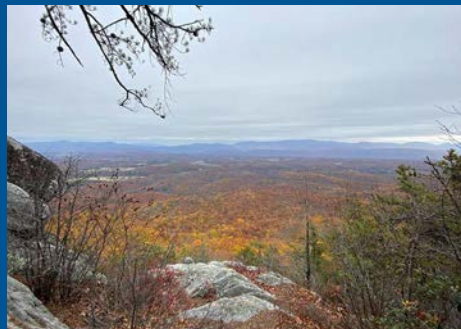




U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



CHESAPEAKE WILD

Chesapeake Watershed Investments
for Landscape Defense Program

Report to Congress

FISCAL
YEAR | 2023



Chesapeake WILD Program

PURPOSE

This report fulfills the requirement for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to provide an annual update on implementation of the Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense program, as directed by Title I, Section 111 of the [America's Conservation Enhancement \(ACE\) Act](#) (Public Law 116-188).

CHESAPEAKE WATERSHED INVESTMENT FOR LANDSCAPE DEFENSE PROGRAM

For more than a decade, the Service, led by its Science Applications program, has worked with partners to advance strategic conservation at scales needed to support natural systems and processes, protect biodiversity and help both human and wildlife communities successfully adapt to a changing world.

Signed into law in 2020, America's Conservation Enhancement Act directed the Service to establish the [Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense Program](#). Congress recognized the need for a complementary non-regulatory, partnership-driven conservation investment program that focuses on restoring, conserving and connecting habitat for fish and wildlife, and improving recreational access to and connections with nature. Reflecting input from partners representing a diversity of agencies and organizations, the program's framework document lays out a vision for coordinated collaborative conservation in the watershed.

The Service works closely with dozens of partners to ensure our long-term success in achieving shared watershed conservation outcomes. As directed by Congress, Chesapeake WILD:

1. Implements a competitive grant program and provides technical assistance and application support to grantees (Chesapeake WILD grants)
2. Coordinates a network of diverse partners to foster innovative grant proposals, ensuring access to conservation funding, and implementing on-the-ground conservation (Chesapeake WILD roundtable)



WHY THE WATERSHED?

Stretching from Cooperstown, New York, to West Virginia's Fairfax Stone, to its mouth at Norfolk, Virginia, the Chesapeake Bay watershed covers 41 million acres. The watershed is a mosaic of culturally and ecologically important natural resources: headwater creeks and streams flow through forests and grasslands ultimately merging into the Bay's freshwater and tidal wetlands. More than 18 million people live and work in the watershed, many depending on industries tied to the health of the watershed, like outdoor recreation, farming and fishing. The watershed, which has the largest estuary in the U.S., is also home to roughly 3,600 species of plants and animals who, like people, rely on clean water and healthy ecosystems. Investing in conservation and restoration projects that enhance the health and connectedness of fish and wildlife habitat across the landscape helps ensure we can sustain these industries, jobs and ways of life.

Cover page, clockwise from top left: Salt marsh sparrow/Bri Benvenuti, USFWS; Outlook over forested lands in western Virginia/NDPonics Inc.; Youth fishing off the banks of the Shenandoah River/NPS; Blue crab/Chesapeake Bay Program; Calvert Cliffs State Park in Maryland/Faren Wolter, USFWS; High School students birdwatching at Masonville Cove in Maryland/Chesapeake Bay Program.

Program Accomplishments 2022-2023

**\$11
million**

awarded in
federal funds

**\$15.5
million**

leveraged in
matching funds

**\$26.4
million**

total conservation
impact

36 projects funded



21 miles

of riparian forest and
wetland habitat restored



97,000 trees

planted



130 miles

of streams opened for
resident and migratory fish



31 miles

improved river or trail
recreational access

8,000 acres

permanently protected for fish and wildlife

Note, metrics are subject to change during the life of the project.

Chesapeake WILD Grants

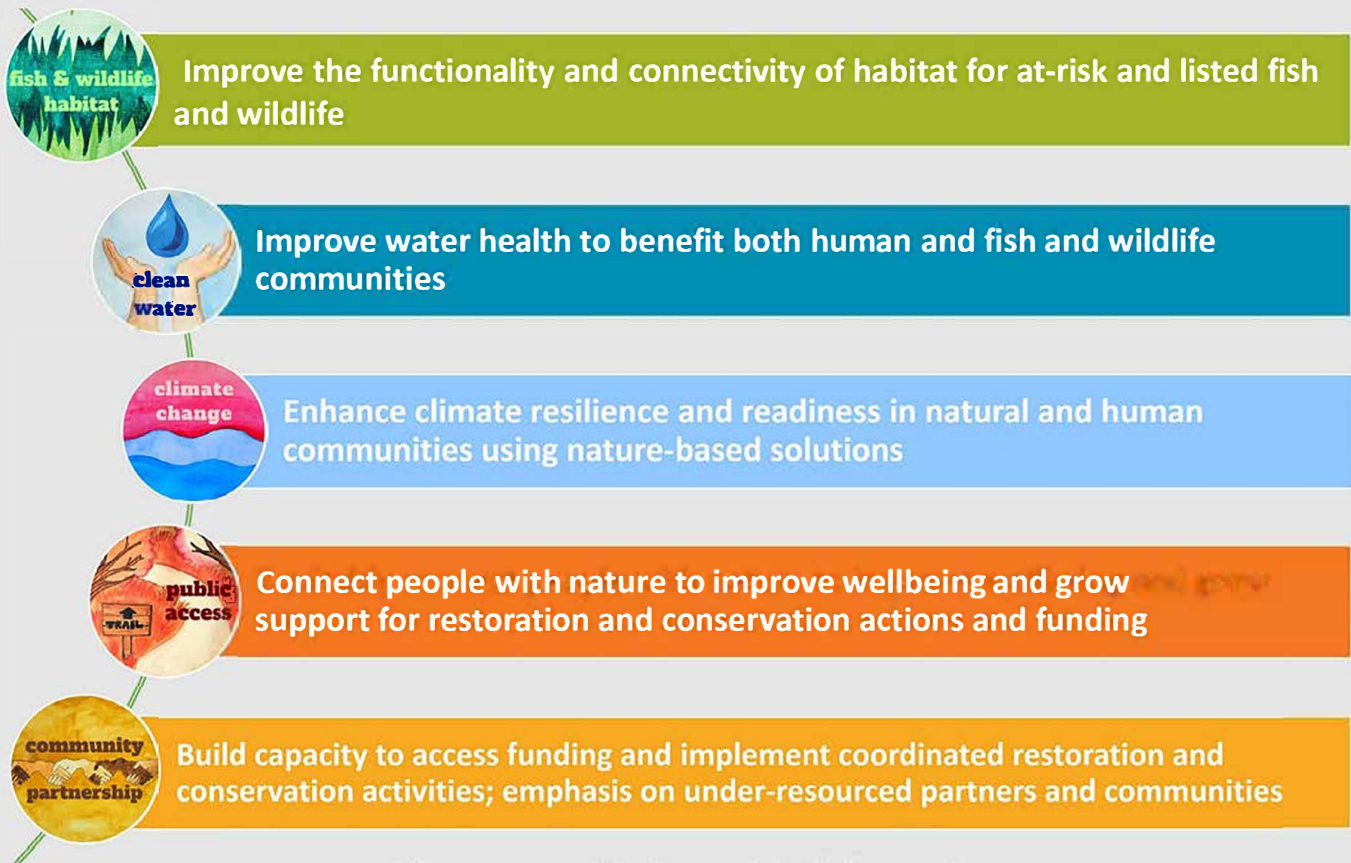


Grantees, along with NFWF and Service staff, pose with the “Big Check” at the Chesapeake WILD grants announcement event in November 2023/NFWF.

The Service’s Science Applications program administers Chesapeake WILD grants in partnership with the [National Fish and Wildlife Foundation](#) as part of their Chesapeake Bay Stewardship Fund portfolio. It is a competitive grant program that responds to a partner-identified need for coordinated action to restore, conserve and protect a resilient and connected landscape of healthy lands and waters. These conservation investments support unmet place-based needs that align with five shared pillars (see below). While fish and wildlife benefits are at the heart of this program, Chesapeake WILD grants also positively

impact people — on both public and private lands, across rural, urban and Tribal communities — through fair and merit-based grantmaking. Chesapeake WILD grants are building capacity and cultivating partner networks that support learning and sharing of information, resources and expertise with the goal of collaborative coordinated action.

Chesapeake WILD Pillars



To learn more, read the Chesapeake WILD Framework:

www.fws.gov/media/cheswild-program-framework

Original artwork by Sophia Seufert, USFWS

Chesapeake WILD Roundtable

Achieving healthy, connected lands and waters at the scale needed for the Chesapeake Bay watershed requires many people, communities, organizations and governments to work together. The Service collaborates with dozens of partners, including established partnerships like [Chesapeake Conservation Partnership](#) and [Chesapeake Bay Program](#), as well as federal, Tribal, state and local governments and community organizations. Our Chesapeake WILD roundtable connects a diverse network of partners to share and learn about innovative conservation strategies from each other, with the goal of inspiring coordinated collaborative conservation actions that restore and connect a resilient landscape of healthy lands and waters. Together we are identifying mutual conservation needs, advancing strategic priorities, ensuring equitable grantmaking, and facilitating science-based collective action that connects Chesapeake WILD conservation investments and actions across the watershed.



"Conserving and restoring the Chesapeake ecosystem and our beautiful wildlife will require coordination, funding, and engagement on an epic scale. We will need to leverage a network of networks to protect wildlife habitat, address environmental justice, enhance outdoor recreation opportunities and benefit water quality. By focusing on these activities, Chesapeake WILD is poised to be a game changer in our watershed."

— Joel Dunn, Founding Co-convener, Chesapeake Conservation Partnership



Senator Van Hollen speaks to a small group, including numerous program partners and Service and NFWF staff, about prioritizing habitat protection and restoration across the Delmarva Peninsula. Chesapeake WILD grants are supporting rural coastal communities and working lands vulnerable to rising sea levels by proving funding for land protection, marsh migration and resilience planning/ Faren Wolter, USFWS.

2023 Program Highlights

Chesapeake WILD has helped address a significant demand for conservation and restoration throughout the watershed. In fiscal year 2023, there was a high demand for Chesapeake WILD funding with just 53% of proposals being awarded. The FY23 Chesapeake WILD grant slate is projected to permanently protect more than 4,700 acres of forest, wetland, pollinator and marsh habitat. Additionally, it will open more than 120 miles of river for migratory fishes, restore more than 21 miles of critical riparian forest and wetland habitat, and increase river and trail recreational access by 31 miles.

**\$7.4
million**

in conservation
investments

**\$12
million**

leveraged in
matching funds

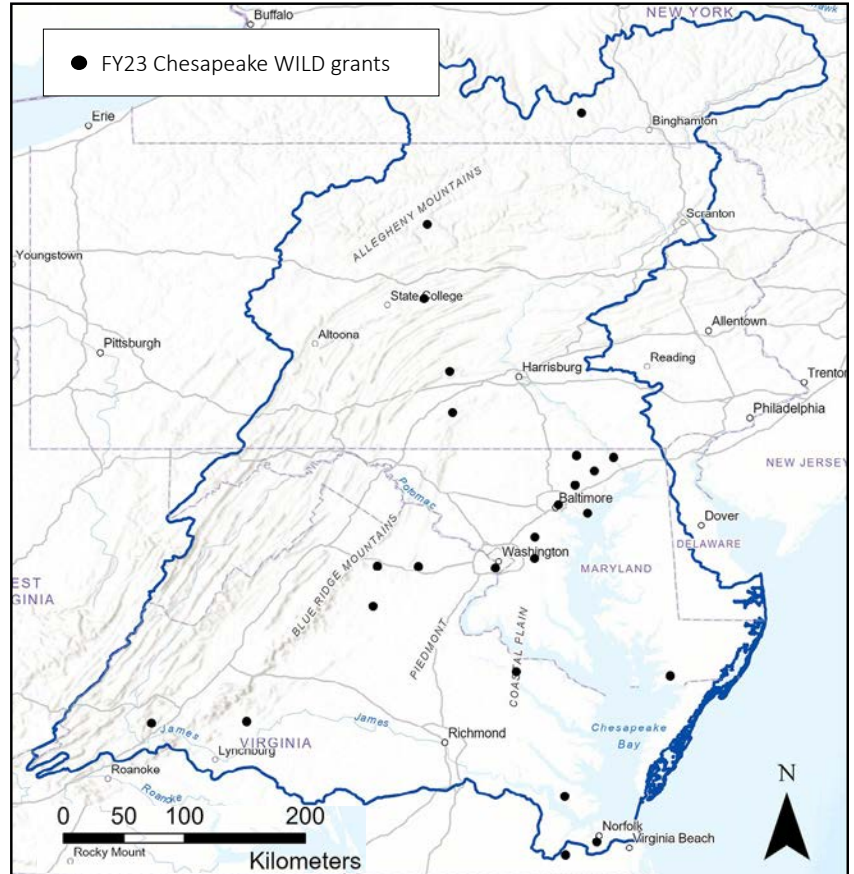
**\$19.4
million**

total conservation
impact

SIGNIFICANT SUCCESS IN EARLY STAGES

Chesapeake WILD has been successful in supporting habitat conservation and restoration efforts in all six states in the Bay watershed and the District of Columbia. By fortifying local partnerships, we are addressing unmet demand in both urban and rural communities and across a mosaic of habitat types from the coastal plain to the Appalachian foothills.

Early success of the program is partially due to the Service and NFWF providing a variety of technical assistance. One-on-one coaching sessions, applicant webinars and NFWF's Field Liaisons (on-the-ground technical experts who work locally with applicants) are helping to both grow a pipeline of competitive grant proposals and help new or inexperienced grantees build their grant writing skillsets.



Note, metrics are subject to change during the life of the project.

Rappahannock Tribe's Return to the River

VIRGINIA, RICHMOND COUNTY

Chesapeake WILD works closely with Tribes, Indigenous People of the Chesapeake, and communities of color to advance self-determined fish and wildlife habitat conservation, restoration and stewardship activities. Land is necessary for Tribes to exercise self-determination. Leveraging multiple sources of funding, a \$750,000 Chesapeake WILD grant will help the Rappahannock Tribe re-acquire 703 acres of ancestral homelands on the Rappahannock River at Fones Cliffs. Often called a crown jewel of the Chesapeake Bay region, the natural area will forever be conserved and available for educational purposes befitting the Tribe and the public. The Cliffs area is widely known for its importance as bald eagle nesting, migration, and wintering habitat across the entire breadth of the Atlantic Flyway.

For the Rappahannock Tribe, this reconnection to land is a powerful act of “Returning the Sacred to the Mother.” Chesapeake WILD grant funding will renew access to the rivers and land for the Tribe, restore fish and wildlife habitats, and protect cultural resources impacted by land use changes and climate change. Together with partners, we are aligning resources and combining western and traditional knowledge, advancing a new model for conservation land management with the Service’s Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge — as described by Anne Richardson, Chief of the Rappahannock Tribe, *“to co-steward Tribal and Refuge lands on the Rappahannock River as the eagle flies, not as the boundaries lie.”*



ICC Tribal Members (left, left to right) Former Chief Kenneth Branham, Monacan, Chief Frank Adams, Upper Mattaponi, Chief Anne Richardson, Rappahannock, Chief Robert Gray, Pamunkey, Chief Jerry Stewart, Eastern Chickahominy (not pictured Chief Stephen Adkins, Chickahominy and Chief Keith Anderson, Nansemond)/Rappahannock Tribe of Virginia; Views overlooking the Rappahannock River (right)/Duane Berger.

GROWING CAPACITY

Collective impact and collaboration will flourish for federally-recognized American Indian Tribes in the Chesapeake region through the creation of the Indigenous Conservation Council for the Chesapeake Bay. The ICC serves as an organized body through which the region’s Tribes can share resources and provide training and expertise for acquiring and stewarding land. ICC takes an Indigenous-led approach to mitigating the impacts of climate change and the ongoing depletion of natural resources. A Chesapeake WILD capacity building grant supports professional development and training for Tribal leadership and staff to better lead and implement on-the-ground conservation actions, stewardship and enhancements of fish and wildlife habitats and related cultural values.

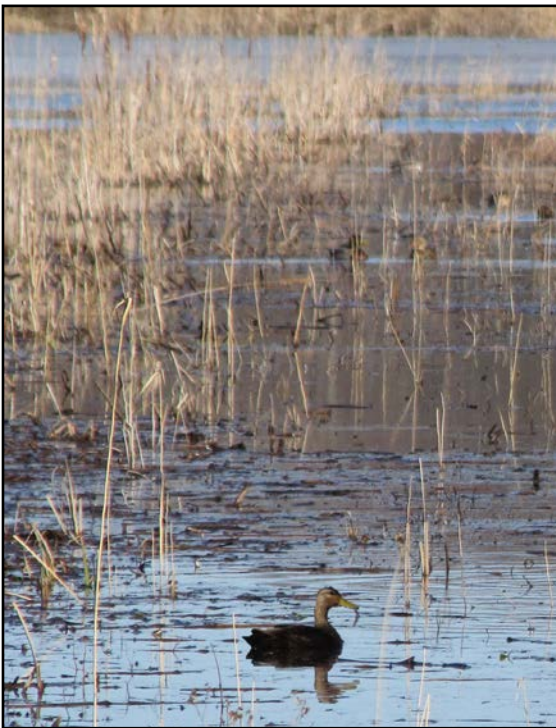


Enhancing Habitats on Working Lands

MARYLAND, SOMERSET COUNTY

On the Eastern Shore of Maryland, agricultural runoff has degraded water quality and negatively impacted habitat for waterfowl like the American black duck — a Species of Greatest Conservation Need within the Northeast Region.

A \$125,000 Chesapeake WILD grant is supporting the stewardship efforts of Ducks Unlimited and the Natural Resources Conservation Service on privately owned lands. Collaborative efforts will restore 20 acres of wetland habitat for American black duck, reducing agricultural runoff and improving coastal community resilience. This project demonstrates effective collaboration and coordination with private landowners and federal agencies on working lands in pursuit of a healthier Chesapeake Bay watershed. This project also includes local outreach showcasing wetland restoration opportunities and practices to expand voluntary conservation and protection on private lands across rural and coastal areas of the Eastern Shore.



Working with private landowners to convert agricultural fields (top) to restored wetlands (left) will expand American black duck habitat, improve water quality and enhance community resilience to the impacts of storms, floods and sea level rise/Edward Farley, DU. Substantial wetland losses along the on Eastern Shore have negatively impacted a range of species, including American black ducks (right)/Peter McGowan, USFWS.

Connecting People with Pollinators

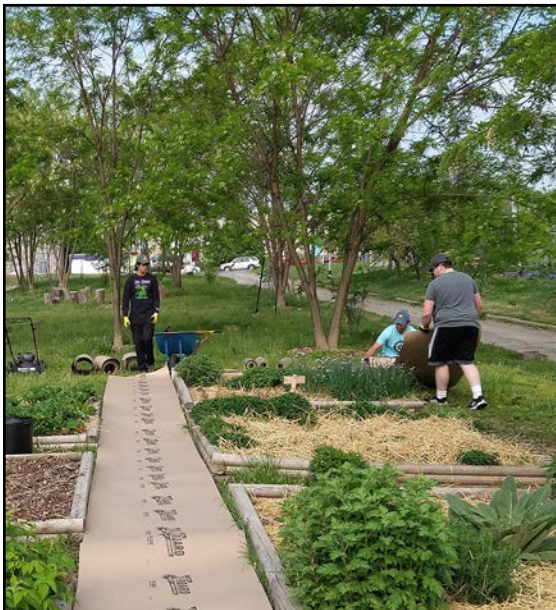
MARYLAND, BALTIMORE CITY

Pollinators are essential to flower and food production in the Chesapeake Bay watershed. Chesapeake WILD is investing \$75,000 in projects that combine research, education and habitat enhancements for bumble bees, an important pollinator that depends on high quality habitat. Baltimore Green Space is piloting “Pollinator Power,” an innovative project that will provide valuable educational experiences and job opportunities while increasing pollinator habitat in 12 community-managed green spaces. With support from neighborhood leaders, pollinator habitats will be installed in urban green spaces by Division Street Outdoor Contracting along edges of pocket parks, food gardens and urban farms. Neighborhood leaders and garden volunteers have been full collaborators in this project and will be participating in garden planning, installation and maintenance, all while learning to scientifically monitor pollinators in urban areas.

In partnership with the U.S. Geological Survey Native Bee Lab, Service biologists and other experts, these green spaces and pollinator habitats will serve as outdoor laboratories for city stewards who will conduct pollinator research using the “Ask a Bumblebee” monitoring protocol. This is a community-driven project growing out of a local passion for protecting pollinators, and residents will receive requested consultation with pollinator experts as well as a stipend for participation. This project should galvanize pollinator protection and continued stewardship in numerous Baltimore communities. The study will guide future Pollinator Power projects in Baltimore and beyond to maximize benefits to pollinators and communities.

A WIN-WIN: BENEFITS TO UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES AND PRIORITY SPECIES ALIKE

Chesapeake WILD continues to prioritize projects that benefit not only fish, wildlife and their habitats, but also people. In FY23, 83% of Chesapeake WILD conservation investments will positively impact people in both urban and rural communities.



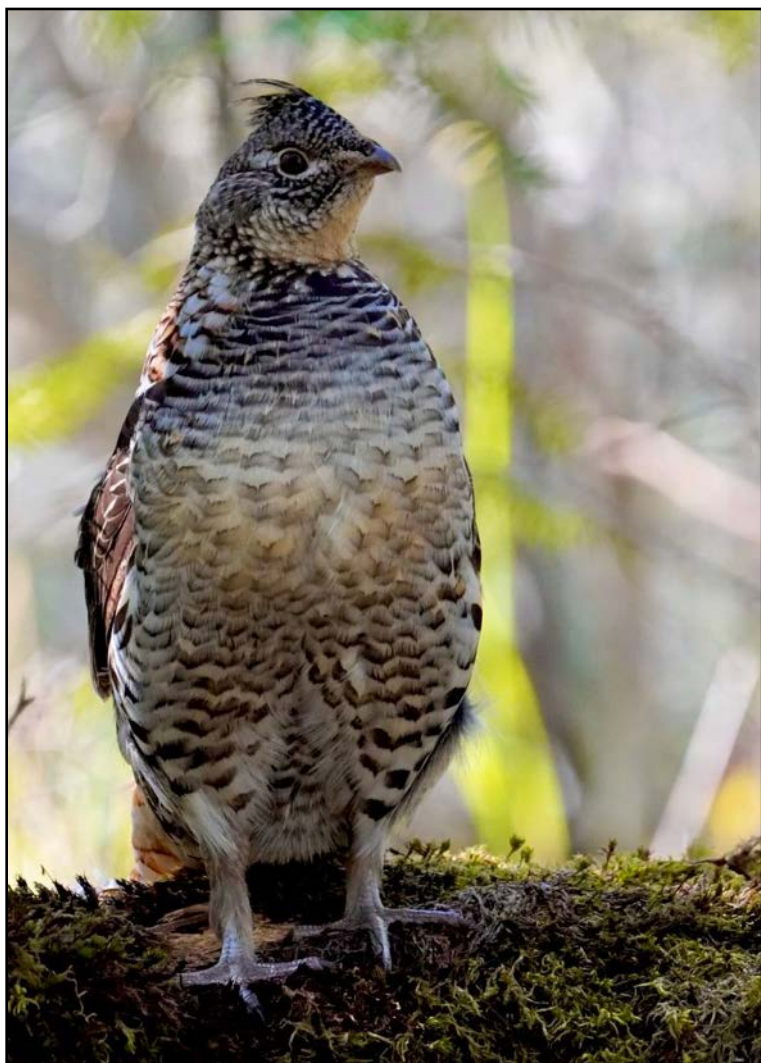
With support from neighborhood leaders and volunteers, pollinator habitats, like the Oliver Community Farm (left), will be installed by Division Street Outdoor Contracting/Liz Lamb. Alex Smith (right), owner-operator of Division Street Outdoor Contracting, provides ex-offenders with job opportunities through the beautification and improvement of the same communities they call home/Division St Outdoor Contracting.

Collaborative Forest Habitat Restoration

SOUTH CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA

Chesapeake WILD is grounded in landscape scale conservation through partnerships. Using a \$546,000 Chesapeake WILD grant, the Ruffed Grouse Society is collaborating with a wide range of partners to improve forest habitats, connectivity and climate resilience for 130,000 acres within the Kittatinny Ridge Conservation Landscape, along the Susquehanna River.

This newly formed partnership, the Kittatinny Ridge Forest Habitat Restoration Collaborative, will co-create forest management goals to restore more than 1,600 acres of state, municipal and preservation lands. This collaborative will provide a way for community members, partners and land managers to learn about and discuss adaptive forest and wildlife management strategies to protect headwater streams and ensure safe passage for resident and migratory fish. A variety of bird species will benefit as well, including ruffed grouse, American woodcock, wood thrush, cerulean warbler and golden-winged warbler. The conservation partnership will continue to prioritize outdoor recreation, enhancing opportunities for bird watching, as well as hunting and fishing.



Forest restoration, including invasive species control and tree thinning, will ensure sustainable tree harvests and improve habitat for many priority bird species such as the ruffed grouse (left)/Christine Warner-Morin, Flickr; RGS chapters (top right) have been working for decades along the Kittatinny Ridge with a range of partners, including the Pennsylvania Game Commission/RGS; Cerulean warblers (bottom right) will benefit from forest management as well/Greg Gard, Flickr.

Flexing Aquatic Conservation ‘Mussels’



Service Fisheries Biologist, Levi Morgan, a West Virginia Land Trust partner, holds a recently tagged James spiny mussel before releasing it back into South Fork Potts Creek/WVLT.

WEST VIRGINIA, MONROE COUNTY

In addition to protecting a 40-acre tract of land, West Virginia Land Trust will work to restore and preserve one of two remaining populations of James spiny mussel, a federally listed endangered species. A \$500,000 Chesapeake WILD grant will fund in-stream habitat restoration and streambank stabilization — planting rooted trees and vegetation to reduce soil erosion and improve water quality. In addition, WVLT and partners will enhance habitat for rare and endangered bats, grassland birds and native insects. Walking trails throughout the Paul Hughes Preserve at Potts Creek will become a community asset as new hiking and wildlife viewing opportunities will be plentiful.

NEW YORK, TIOGA COUNTY

The search is on to find additional suitable habitat for a threatened shellfish no bigger than a credit card. Improving the resiliency of brook floaters, a freshwater pearly mussel whose existing habitat is vulnerable to pollution, invasive species and the effects of climate change, is the focus of a \$74,000 Chesapeake WILD grant to the Research Foundation for The State University of New York on behalf of SUNY Oneonta. In a Tioga County, New York creek, which runs through a sub-watershed of the Susquehanna River watershed, a population of brook floaters, with an estimated population of less than 200, has rebounded after recent dam removal. The study hopes to double the number of brook floaters by working with landowners to survey and evaluate alternative nearby sites.



Graduate and undergraduate students from SUNY Oneonta snorkel in a shallow Tioga County creek, identifying and assessing pearly freshwater mussel populations/SUNY Oneonta.



Published: August 2024

Learn more about the Chesapeake Watershed Investments for Landscape Defense, visit www.fws.gov/program/chesapeake-wild