



Conservation & Resource Management Plan for Fisher Farm Park

Wildlife Enhancement Collaborative
Updated January 4, 2026



Background

The Wildlife Enhancement Collaborative (WEC), formed in mid-2022 to enhance the wildlife features of Fisher Farm and Abersham Parks, includes members of Davidson Lands Conservancy, Davidson College, the Town of Davidson, Mecklenburg County, and the NC Wildlife Resources Commission. With 545 acres of mostly natural land, these parks provide the region with an invaluable natural and conservation resource.

The initial focus of the WEC is Fisher Farm Park (FFP). This 200-acre regional conservation gem offers visitors the chance to experience nature firsthand. Partly overcome by invasive species and still bearing scars of European settlement and FFP's past agricultural use, the Park falls well short of its profound potential as a native, wildlife-rich ecosystem. With generous funding from a variety of supporters, DLC and local partners intend to restore the Park to its authentic state by removing invasive plant species and replacing them with pollinator and wildlife-enhancing natives.

Prior to the Park's establishment, FFP was a working farm - home to hayfields and vast pastures of fescue. European colonists introduced foreign plants and species to the area during their settlement, leading to an invasion of native ecologies and a drastic reduction in the property's biodiversity. What was originally a region of prairies and savannas rich in plant and animal life, FFP was transformed into nonnative fescues, Bermuda grasses, and woody invasive plants in the forested areas. The current lack of wildlife diversity can be attributed to the sterile monoculture of the nonnative grasses which offer little food and cover for insects, birds, small mammals, etc.

Across previously plowed regions similar to FFP, wildlife biologists and conservationists have worked to recreate early successional habitats critically important to ecological stability. Fortunately, many of FFP's existing fields can be converted using similar processes to reintroduce rich meadows of native grasses and forbs that once offered a much richer ecosystem for wildlife—one that included pollinating insects that have since diminished in population.

Wildlife Enhancement Collaborative Members

Pam Hay, Chair, DLC Board member

Beth Wytiaz, DLC Executive Director

Andy Kane, Expert Advisor

Dave Cable, DLC Senior Advisor

Hayden Boyd, Citizen Conservationist

Lauren Collver, DLC Fellow, Assistant Director
Cathy Denham, Professional Educator, milkweed specialist
Gabriela Garrison, NC Wildlife Resources Commission
Angie Grooms. Professional Conservationist
John Isenhour, NC Wildlife Resources Commission
Brad Johnson, Davidson College professor, geologist, stream geomorphology
John Mackay, Retired Executive Director Discovery Place
Chris Matthews, Mecklenburg County Natural Resources
Chris Paradise, Davidson College professor, entomologist
Will Ruark, Catawba Lands Conservancy, Natural Resources
Andrew Sileo, Davidson Town Arborist
Kevin Smith, Davidson College professor, ecology
Mark Stanback, retired, Davidson College, ornithologist
Susana Wadgymar, Davidson College, plant ecologist
Devin Walker, Mecklenburg County Natural Resources
Leslie Willis, Town of Davidson, Parks and Rec

Research and Education

Research and education are core to the work of the WEC. Davidson College, one of the finest liberal arts schools in the US, houses environmental and natural science professors, programs, and course offerings which meld nicely with the re-wilding efforts at the Parks. Each student of the Environmental Studies department is required to complete a capstone project, and the wide array of research opportunities of the WEC effort offers diverse capstone opportunities. The WEC strives to have research as a cornerstone of this effort.

Conservation education is also a core part of the mission of the WEC's efforts. The WEC strives to intentionally include educational offerings to the public and participating volunteers for each component of the long-term restoration effort. This includes interpretive on-site signage, community engagement via volunteer opportunities, citizen science initiatives, and outreach.

WEC Mission and Vision

Vision: Permanently conserve and manage the Parks to enhance ecological diversity while balancing nature with human enjoyment and inspiring, educating, and practicing sustainable uses of the land.

Mission: To establish and implement science-based management plans for Fisher Farm and Abersham Parks by assessing biological communities and user needs, by improving habitat for biodiversity, and by modeling ecological stewardship for the general public.

Time Horizon

The WEC effort is a long term, inter-generational effort to better manage the Parks. The near-term management focus is two to five years, but the WEC fully embraces the reality that decades will be required to substantially restore the land, and even then, the on-going management needs will be constant and never ending. This effort is not about a project with an ending goal, but more about a process to enhance and maintain the land for increased biodiversity and contribution to local and regional ecosystems.

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Field A

Overview

Field A, also referred to as the Upper Field, is about three acres of open grassland located just below the main parking lot. It is one of two areas of grassland that have been prioritized for the establishment of native prairies following studies by WEC since 2023 focused on meadow restoration. The evolving science of meadow restoration makes it a difficult task and suggests that varied and incremental approaches are likely to present the best path forward.

The primary goal for this prairie is to convert the current mixture of native grasses, fescue, and non-native grasses into a native plant community. There is agreement among the WEC team that Field A holds little promise for native seed release, and so the subsequent approach has focused on complete vegetation removal by mowing, herbicide treatment, and burning followed by drill-planting of native species. Therefore in 2025 this field received more intervention than Field B.

The herbicide treatments of both Field A and B are conducted by NC Commercial Pesticide Applicator Eli Beverly and Associates. Additionally, we lean on the expertise of the WEC members including NC Wildlife Resources Commission and Davidson College faculty who are experienced ecologists and environmental scientists when approving treatment plans.

Intervention Assessment Surveys

Site visits have included the survey and identification of the plant community in this management area. These surveys are scheduled for monitoring progress and planning treatments. The WEC team has identified the following plants in the area:

Native Species: Carolina Horsenettle, Pokeweed, Blackberry, Dog Fennel, Queen Anne's Lace, Goldenrod, Spreading Dogbane, Common Milkweed, Verbesina

Non-native Species: Flat Stem Club Rush, Common Plantain, Queen Anne's Lace, Johnson Grass (high abundance), Bermuda Grass (low abundance), Rye Grass (high abundance), Fescue, Clover, Woolly Mullein, Bull thistle, Curly dock (naturalized), Shepherd's Purse (naturalized), Purpletop Vervain (naturalized), and Copperleaf hornbeam.

Educational Signage

In early October 2024, a sign was installed near Prairie A describing the basic management efforts of land stewardship including prescribed burning, mowing, and herbicide

treatment. This sign is an important part of our goal to include park users in our management activities and to educate the public about the work of the WEC.

In early 2026 we expect to plant native seeds across this field. The details are still being finalized.

Field B

Overview

Field B, also referred to as the lower field, is about 1 acre of grassland located directly to the southwest of Field A. The primary goal for this management area is, similar to Field A, to restore a native prairie community to enhance native habitat. Unlike Field A, this area holds more promise for native seed release due to a higher abundance of native botanicals. For this reason, the management approach is surgical rather than broadcast/wholesale.

Assessment Surveys

Site visits have included the survey and identification of the plant community in Field B. The WEC team has identified the following plants in high abundance in the area:

Native: Eastern Gamagrass, Beaked panic grass, Butterfly weed, Golden crownbeard, Wood sorrel, Lyreleaf sage

Non-native: Johnson grass (low abundance), Narrow leaf plantain, Cornflower, Field madder, Fescue (low abundance), Clover, Vetch

Management Progress of Fields A & B

2023:

- October: Both fields were mowed
- December 13th: [Herbicide application in both prairies](#)

2024:

- March 6th: [Controlled burn of both prairies](#)
- May 23rd: [WEC Team site visit](#)
- May 28th: Persimmons were removed and selective weed whacking.
- June 5th: Both fields were mowed
- June 20th: [Herbicide application in both prairies](#)

- October 1st and 20th: [WEC Team site visits](#)

2025:

- April 10th: [WEC Team site visit](#)
- April 17th: [Herbicide treatment of Prairie A](#)
- April 25th: [Follow up site visit](#)
- April 20th: [Herbicide treatment of both prairies](#)
- May 2nd: [Follow up site visit](#)
- May 7th: [Spot treatment in both prairies](#)
- May 9th: [Follow up site visit](#)
- May 14th: [Follow up site visit](#)
- May 28th: [Follow up site visit](#)
- June 12th: [Follow up site visit](#)
- June 23rd: [Follow up site visit](#)
- June 30th: [Follow up site visit](#)
- July 2: [Follow up site visit](#)
- July 17: [Follow up site visit](#)
- July 23: [Follow up site visit](#)
- July 30: [Follow up site visit](#)
- August 7: [Follow up site visit](#)
- August 13: [Follow up site visit](#)
- September 8: [Follow up site visit](#)
- September 10: Site visit to determine burn and planting timing
- September 24: Follow up site visit to determine treatment
- October 8: [Follow up site visit](#)
- December 1: [Follow up site visit](#)

Research Projects in Fields A & B

Entomology

Dr. Chris Paradise, Professor of Biology and Environmental Studies at Davidson College, and students have assessed and quantified arthropod populations since 2023 in these fields. This tracking of invertebrate species diversity in these fields throughout the intervention process provides valuable information around the success of these efforts. Summary reports are available [here](#). iNaturalist is currently being utilized in these

entomology surveys. iNaturalist is a powerful tool for harnessing citizen science to contribute invaluable data to scientific research.

Soil

Dr. Brad Johnson of Davidson College kicked off a soil analysis project in September 2025 to examine soils in a transect down from the parking lot into Fields A and B before the gas line easement (which disturbed soils significantly roughly a decade ago – our data from last year shows that ecology is significantly different in the gas line easement).

The students dug four soil pits (2 meters long, 1 meter wide, roughly 1 meter deep) and examined soil morphology to determine their quality for growing new grasses. Halfway through the semester, students dug two additional pits, one in the upper floodplain away from the river and one in the woods. We also used an augur to examine soils between holes on the hillslope. Our preliminary results indicate highly disturbed soil. Specifically, soils in the area show signs of heavy erosion (similar to most other soils in the region – see [paper](#)) as a result of Euroamerican settlement and deforestation in the late 1700s and early 1800s. This is what we expected given previous work in the region.

The soil in the floodplain at the bottom is much healthier and shows signs of deposition during the period of earlier erosion. More surprisingly, we see significant levels of disturbance deep into the soil profiles. Specifically, two of the four pits contained garbage deeper than 50 cm down with some garbage at nearly a meter depth. This was consistently confirmed by auguring. Only the soil in the floodplain and the forest show signs of good A horizon development (i.e., topsoil) suggesting that nutrients may be poor in the field and texture may make it difficult for new plants to establish. It also suggests that the seed bank previously thought to exist is likely not present. A first step towards addressing some of these problems would be to add organic material to the surface and try to rebuild the A horizon.

Cathy's Monarch Meadow

Overview

For the last decade, citizens of Davidson and the Town of Davidson Natural Assets Manager have identified and marked meadow areas that have naturally occurring milkweed with the primary goal of protecting and enhancing the habitat of the endangered Monarch butterfly. The Monarch meadow areas are protected from mowing by marking the meadows with large metal stakes and flags around the perimeter and alerting the mowers

certain times of the year. In addition, the Town maintains maps of the protected areas. Significant Monarch habitat has been protected in this way, enabling the Monarch butterfly to complete its life cycle. This effort has also protected significant pollinator and bird habitat. Cathy's meadow is about 1.75 acres directly adjacent to forested areas to the east and to the paved walkway to the west.

Management Progress

This meadow has been the target of a [carefully timed management schedule](#) in order to support milkweed growth and protect monarch butterflies, eggs, and caterpillars. The meadow was mowed in March 2024, and in early April 2025. WEC members assess the success and health of this meadow through regular and post-management activity site visits. Following the recommended management schedule, the area will continue to be mowed or burned in late March or early April of each year.

Educational Signage

In early October 2024, a sign was installed along the greenway that describes the importance of protecting Monarch habitat. The sign points out a few key Monarch-friendly plants that visitors can look for and describes management practices related to protecting the habitat.

2025

- Mowing in March
- Engagement with local students to mark and count milkweed areas in May

2026

- Meadow will be part of the prescribed burn
- Hope to install one additional sign at the actual meadow
- Engagement with local students to mark and count milkweed areas in May

Forest E & F

Overview

The forested area referred to as E is approximately 20 acres of mixed hardwood forest located to the east of the main parking lot and roughly in the center of Fisher Farm. The forest is on a southwestward slope and contains a range of high and low land and ravines. A well-traveled hiking trail crosses through the forest and connects with the larger Fisher Farm trail system. This area has had some invasive specie management work in 2024 and

some trail work in 2025 to help with erosion challenges. It has also been the subject of biodiversity research in 2023 and 2025 by Davidson College.

The forested area referred to as F is about 45 acres of mixed hardwood forest which has hiking trails and biking trails that connect to the system at Abersham Park. These trails have some significant erosion issues. In 2025 the first biodiversity study was conducted by Davidson College outlined below. Also in 2025, a walking bridge was replaced by Williams companies and work to cut off some rogue trails and establish stairs in a steep area was completed in partnership with the Conservation Corps of North Carolina.

Biodiversity Research

Dr. Kevin Smith, Professor of Biology at Davidson College, has led biodiversity and management research in Forest E since 2023. That summer, Dr. Smith and research students began a biodiversity survey and assessment project as part of an ongoing relationship with Davidson Lands Conservancy and the Town of Davidson. The goal of these surveys was to provide data to inform management activities occurring at Fisher Farm. The focus area was Forest E, the 20-acre forest plot adjacent to the main parking lot.

The research focused on documenting tree, shrub, and forest floor plant biodiversity to assess the current state of the habitat in the forest patch. Through data collection, analysis and interpretation, students focused on general biodiversity, tree abundance and size, light levels and forest floor coverage, and the presence of non-native species. The researchers established survey methods that can be re-conducted to measure change over time and the effect of management efforts.

The result of the 2023 research is outlined in the report available [here](#) along with the most recent 2025 research. In 2025, students also surveyed and assessed Forest F for the first time, establishing a baseline for ongoing research. Both forests are primarily hardwood forests with dry-mesic ridges and mesic washes and ravines. Oak-hickory forests are declining throughout the eastern United States, via two related processes, mesophication and oak regeneration failure (ORF), each of which is widespread in eastern forests.

Mesophication and ORF result from a lack of disturbance, especially fire, combined with the spread of species that compete with oaks and change forest environments, leading to a positive feedback loop of conditions that suppress oak reproduction and regeneration. We find strong evidence of mesophication in general and oak regeneration failure specifically at Fisher Farm. Younger tree life stages in Areas E and F are dominated by mesophytic species, including green ash, winged elm, and red maple in the understory and

sweetgum, red cedar, and tulip poplar in the canopy. In the regenerative life stages of seedlings, saplings, and small trees, oaks trees are vanishingly rare

This research has informed management decisions of the WEC team by providing evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the wildlife habitat of this section. This includes the recommendation for a prescribed burn for Forest E to be completed in the first quarter of 2026. Future management interventions, could include crown-release canopy thinning around mature oaks and hickories, would further address mesophication and support oak regeneration.

Invasive Plant Removal

Invasive plant eradication with the purpose of increasing forest biodiversity is a long-term need and effort. Contracted service through Native Roots and volunteer efforts to remove focal invasive plant species began in 2023 and are ongoing. In the fall of 2023, Davidson College student Lauren Collver conducted [invasive species treatment of about 6 acres of total area](#) within Forest E as a follow-up to the research conducted that summer.

Focal species include autumn olive, privet, multi-flora rose, English ivy, Japanese honeysuckle, callery pear, and others. Focal areas for past and future removal activity include forest perimeters, areas along the paved greenway, and the forested area that has been the focus of biodiversity studies from Davidson College researchers. The ability to measure the effects of these removal efforts is strong, due to the ability of college researchers to conduct ongoing biodiversity surveys and the monitoring of the conservation easement by DLC.

Prescribed Burning

Based on the recommendations of the Davidson College biodiversity survey, a low-intensity prescribed burn of Forest E is planned for the first quarter of 2026. This will be a low-intensity burn to open the understory and forest floor by killing invasive shrubs and overly dense small trees and clearing thick leaf litter.

By reducing the density of small trees and shrubs, the burn will support the health of our mature canopy while encouraging growth of native forest floor plants that support our native wildlife. In preparation for the burn to remove cedars lining a portion of the perimeter of the forest to prevent damage to larger native trees. This is why and how the cedar line wildlife habitat area was established.

Hiking Trails

Stewardship of the section of trail that passes through this forest has involved de-berming, bridge building and re-routing sections of trail to improve resistance to erosion from runoff. In July of 2025, a youth crew of local high school students led by the Conservation Corps of North Carolina will conduct trail repair, restoration and blazing of this area.

2025

- Preparation for prescribed burn in winter included removing cedar trees which were used for wildlife habitat
- Cutting off some rogue trails
- Bringing in Conservation Corps of NC with a local high school student crew to do trail restoration and wayfinding work for three weeks in the summer of 2025

Cedar Line

The line of forested land that runs south of Management Area E stretches South about 350 feet. On February 28th, 2025, a volunteer group helped DLC staff to move a large number of cut eastern red cedar trees, ranging from about 3-5 feet tall, to the edge of this forest line. The cedars were removed from the southwestern edge of Management Area E in order to prepare for a prescribed burn in the forested area. With these cedar trees now lining this forest line, we have established a management area that will provide unique habitat for small mammals and birds.

Biking Trails

Fisher Farm is home to a system of mountain biking trails that are spread across three separate locations around the park. These trails are maintained by the Tarheel Trailblazers and cover a total of about eight miles of trail. A full map of the trails is available on the [Trailblazers' website](#). In 2025, we hope to establish a stronger partnership with the Trailblazers with the goal of improving education on Leave No Trace principles and collaborating on trail repair and cutting off rogue trails in 2026 and 2027.

2. Park Signage

As a part of the WEC's prioritization of conservation education, signage is the focus of past and future enhancements to Fisher Farm. Two signs were installed in October 2024 to provide context to ongoing management work in the Native Prairies and the Milkweed. Currently, WEC members are in the exploration phase of designing a sign structure for FFP. This signage would include ample space for information about DLC, the Town and the work of the WEC. It would provide trail maps, education and allow visitors to engage with the

various wildlife and features of FFP. We are interested in opportunities to make the signage experience as inclusive as possible.

Between July and September 2023, a user survey was conducted by Davidson College researchers that focused on providing insights to what visitors value most about FFP and how they perceive management activity by the WEC and the town. [The survey results](#) support the value of increasing public understanding of the goals and potential outcomes of different conservation management activities. Existing and upcoming signage aim to contribute to improving visitor engagement with and understanding of the ongoing work of the WEC and the various ways to experience the Park.



“Land Stewardship” and “Monarch Habitat” signs installed along the greenway.



An example of a potential design for additional educational signage.

We are working to finalize work on the hiking trails to then begin to prepare content for a kiosk like above. As we raise additional funds we will look to construct something similar to this and then work with the Town and County to develop the signage. Our hope is to start in late 2025 and finish this project in 2026.

3. Invasive Removal

Removal of invasive plant species is key to the WEC's goal to preserve biodiversity and enhance wildlife habitat. Invasive removal is the focus of management plans in management sections A, B, and E, as described above. Additionally, several stewardship projects and contracts have facilitated invasive removal in other areas of Fisher Farm.

In 2023 and 2024, Native Roots was contracted to treat invasive plant species from the perimeter of Forest Patch E and along the west edge of the greenway. These treatments focused on autumn olive, Chinese privet, trifoliolate orange, multiflora rose, Callery pear, and mimosa.

On April 19th, 2023, a team from Williams participated in a volunteer stewardship project. They treated invasive plants in an area of brush/shrub cover to the south of Forest Patch E and the native prairies.

For 2025, we will manage invasives in Forest E with volunteers as we prepare for a prescribed burn in the winter of 2026.

4. Tree Planting

Tree planting is central to DLC's mission to protect and enhance Davidson's tree canopy. To date, three tree planting events have taken place at FFP, with a total of approximately 200 native trees planted. Almost all trees that are planted are 15-gallon trees, and include various oak species, beech, magnolia, eastern red cedar, pines, redbud, tulip poplar, red maple, sugar maple, shagbark hickory, dogwood, and arborvitae.

These tree plantings are made possible by close collaboration of DLC, the Town of Davidson's Parks and Recreation department the Town Arborist, Andrew Sileo and local volunteers. These tree plantings have taken place along the entrance to the park on Fisher Farm Road, along the greenway, and around the archery range. The planting around the archery range is in the first of three planting stages, with future plantings planned for along an upcoming path from the main parking lot to the archery range and for canopy restoration behind the range.

2025

- Planted 59 native trees near the Archery Range
- Plan for another 50 trees in Fall or Winter of 2026 near the Archery Range

5. UT West Branch Rocky River Mitigation Site

The UT West Branch Rocky River Mitigation Site is a 59-acre section within Fisher Farm that was established by the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, Division of

Mitigation Services. In January 2023, the NCDEQ contracted Davey Resource Group to conduct invasive species management across the site. In October 2024, DRG treated a total of five acres of primarily Chinese privet, autumn olive, trifoliate orange, and kudzu. DRG will inspect and treat the site in the spring of 2025.

6. Citizen Science

Citizen science is an important aspect of DLC's mission to engage park users in the work of the WEC and to educate the general public about conservation.

Chronologs

In conjunction with Mecklenburg County's West Branch restoration efforts, Davidson College and DLC are leading a citizen science program designed to assess through time the West Branch corridor and the dynamics of the stream. The initial stages of this program include two components: 1. installing Chronolog photo stations in strategic locations along the stream to create time series photographs of the stream and its environs; and 2. Engaging and leading citizens to describe and photograph the stream bed and log and debris snags. This program will help better understand the dynamics of the stream and relationships among aquatic life, storm events, and stream debris. The focus of the program will be to document the accumulation and movement of debris in the river.

Five photo locations have been established. Those sites were cleared and prepared by volunteers in October 2023. The Chronolog posts, signage and related equipment were installed in December 2023 and are being used by visitors to FFP to collect photos to create a time lapse. Citizen science volunteers have been recruited and trained and are currently collecting data. The data collection and analysis were expanded to include turbidity measurements, with a particular focus on sampling during rain events (as of June 2024).

As of February 2024, the Chronolog project is now paused until the West Branch Stream restoration, conducted by Mecklenburg County, is completed at FFP. At that time, they will be reinstalled at the original locations and evaluation will presume.

7. Stream Project

This is a natural channel design stream project being led by Mecklenburg County Stormwater division along the Rocky River running through the park. This project is part of the Davidson College efforts and Citizen Science project to understand water quality before and after the project.

The WEC has worked to influence the project through this project to minimize where possible some of the negative impacts and ensure native plantings that will thrive. The water quality research is related to the before and after of this stream project.

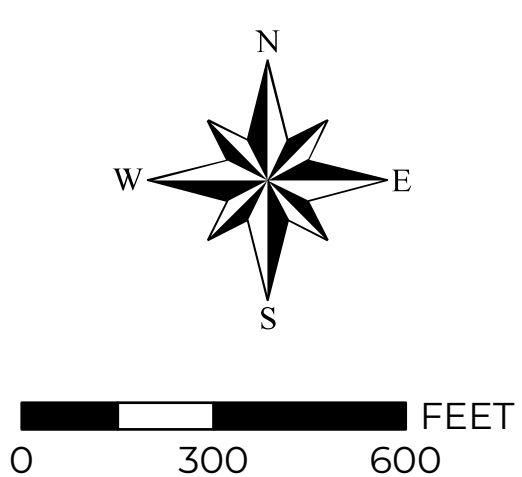
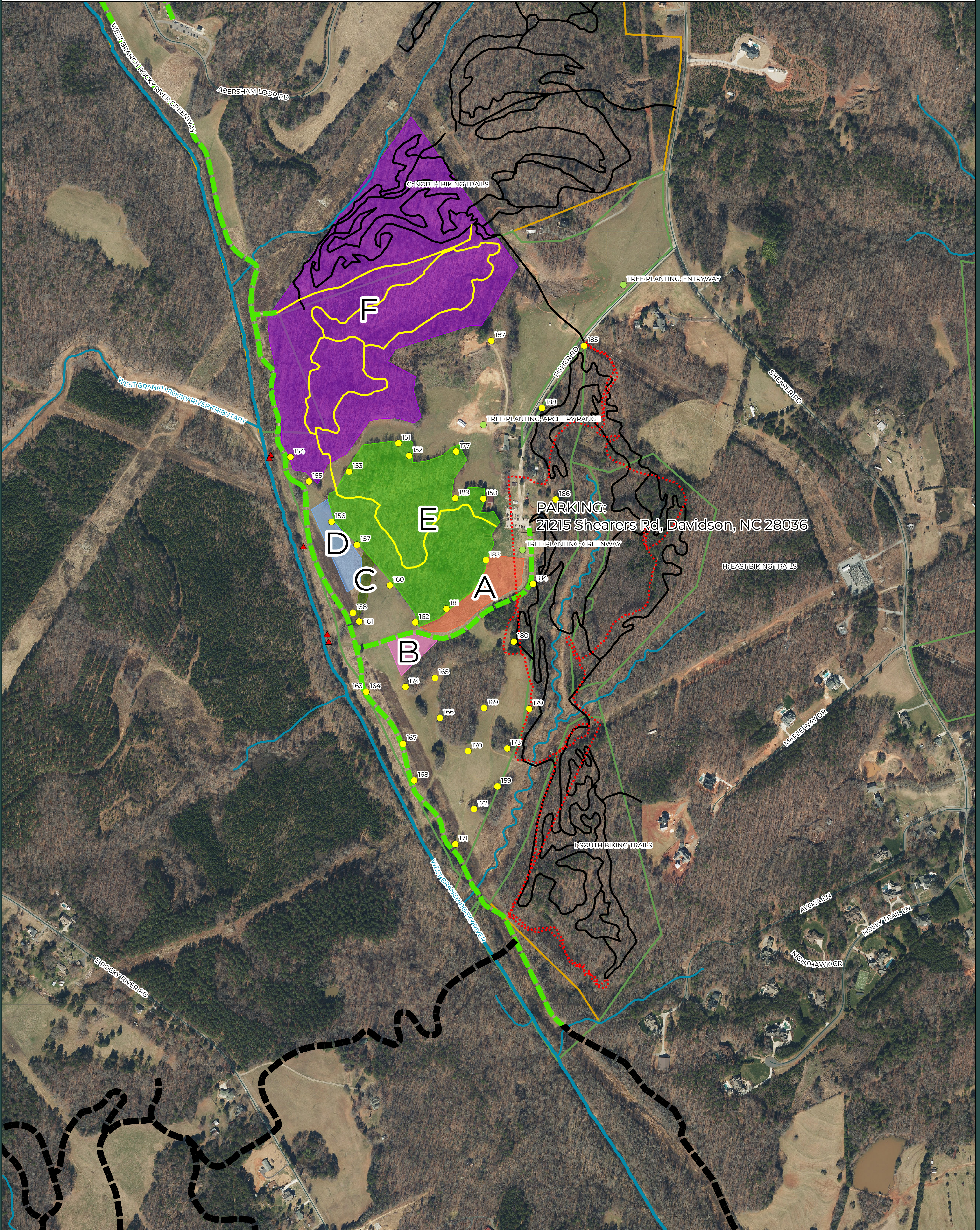
8. Bird and Bee Programs

Dr. Mark Stanback, Faculty Emeriti at Davidson College, currently monitors 34 nest boxes at Fisher Farm for bluebirds and tree swallows and has confirmed that these birds should not be negatively affected by any of the manipulations involved with the planned habitat improvement. Dr. Stanback is also conducting a study of the diversity and abundance of mason bees (Genus *Osmia*) and other species that use holes in wood for breeding. He installed 20 sets of bee blocks at Fisher Farm in early 2022 and has been monitoring their use since then. Hopefully by having data from before, during, and after the manipulations, we can better understand how the pollinator fauna responds to the manipulations.

Wildlife Enhancement Collaborative

Fisher Farm Management Areas

Davidson, Mecklenburg County, North Carolina
July 2025



LEGEND

● BIRD BOXES	 PARKS
 A: DAVE'S NATIVE PRAIRIE	 FISHER FARM EMERGENCY ACCESS
 B: ANDY'S NATIVE PRAIRIE	 ABERSHAM PARK AND FISHER FARM PARK BIKE TRAILS
 C: CEDAR LINE	 EXISTING GREENWAYS (MULTIUSE PATHS)
 D: CATHY'S MEADOW	 PROPOSED GREENWAYS
 E: DR. SMITH'S FOREST	 WALKING TRAILS
 F: PAM'S NORTH FOREST	 STREAMS, RIVERS, AND WATERBODIES
▲ CHRONOLOG LOCATIONS	 STREETS
● TREE PLANTING AREA	 COUNTY BOUNDARIES
 DLC PROTECTED PROPERTIES	