



Denison Pequotsepos
Nature Center

**ANNUAL REPORT
2024**

Our mission is to inspire an understanding of the natural world and ourselves as part of it—past, present and future.

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Antonio DeCosta	Haley DelMonaco	Michael Farley
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Emily Macklin	Nicole Neigel	Abby O'Brien
Betty Pacelle	Julia Pratt	Una Schaffer
Sophie Stoll	Erin Toole	

STAFF

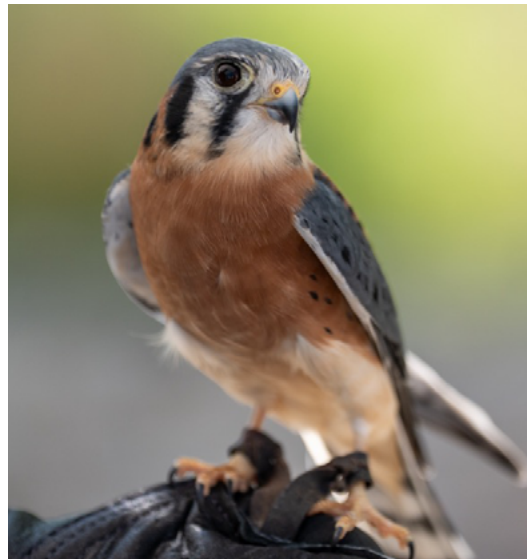
Al Brown	Publications & IT Associate
Sanny Chacanaca	Visitor Services
Sydney Donovan	Administrative Assistant – Finance
Lori Edwards	Animal Curator
Chelle Farrand	Volunteer Coordinator
Reid Kenney	Grounds Assistant
Koralee Lawrence	Giving Garden Manager
Sandra Lewis	Visitor Services
Roan Schaffer	Buildings & Grounds Assistant



GUIDED BY NATURE

In a time of uncertainty, it's refreshing to reflect on the past year at DPNC and see how our mission continued to thrive- to inspire an understanding of the natural world and ourselves as part of it—past, present and future. Using nature as our guide, we connect people to the local environment in countless ways every day.

The past year brought three new permanent raptor residents to our Nature Center. Atlas (pictured right) and Forrest, two American kestrel brothers, had imprinted on humans and become unreleasable. They joined us as their previous rehabilitator sought a long term home. We also welcomed Bellatrix, a female peregrine falcon with a permanent wing injury, who came to us through the raptor rehabilitation facility A Place Called Hope.



Environmental Education is at the forefront of what we do every day, and this past year we were excited to deepen our connection with some of our local schools. One highlight was our growing partnership with the Friendship School in Waterford, where we joined their museum-themed curriculum as an official museum partner. Through this collaboration, we reach all of their preschool students—over 400 children—with three in-school visits, followed by a field trip to the Nature Center. Students explored topics such as animal adaptations, life cycles, and habitats, sparking early connections to a lifetime of learning about the natural world. This is the second year of what we hope will be a long term partnership.

DPNC is honored to provide a refuge in nature for both wildlife and people. With over 10 miles of trails and diverse habitats to maintain, we are always excited when extra help arrives. In addition to a trail and bridge grant from Athletic Brewing Company, we had a wonderful Eagle Scout Project. Ty Curtis built new steps to Council Rock, replacing the decades-old stairs. Explore the trails and check out all of the improvements!

At our annual Green-Tie Celebration we were honored to present the second annual Maggie Jones Environmental Hero Award to the Mystic Garden Club, celebrating their 100th anniversary. The Club was instrumental in the founding of the Pequot-sepos Wildlife Sanctuary and continues to be a steadfast supporter today. As the first award recipient, Maggie presented the award to club president, Pat Hardy, who reflected on the decades-long history between the garden club and the Nature Center.

As we look to the future, we are excited to be developing a new strategic plan that will steer DPNC's growth in the years ahead. This plan, guided by nature, will help us strengthen our impact, expand our reach, and ensure that the natural world continues to inspire, educate, and connect our community.

Kim Hargrave
INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Karen Stone
BOARD PRESIDENT



A NEW HABITAT FOR NATURE PRESCHOOL

Nature plays a vital role in the social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development of young children. The Nature Center Preschool was formed in 2006 to encourage the study and love of nature and quickly became a leading early childhood education option in the region.

When the Preschool building faced a new rent increase and higher maintenance costs in 2024, the projected budget put the program's future in danger. At the same time, several other local preschools announced plans to close, leaving families scrambling for quality child care in an area already designated a childcare desert by the state's Office of Early Childhood.

Options included closing the Nature Center Preschool, raising tuition fees substantially—risking losing families who could not afford to continue—or thinking outside of the box. DPNC leadership chose the third option, and the September school year saw the preschool relocate to Coogan Farm. A portion of a grant from the Lord Foundation had previously provided for the conversion of the former Welcome Center into educational space. In 2024, additional renovations transformed that space into an amazing preschool classroom.

Left: Preschool Director Suzanne Burns shows an Eastern Screech Owl to preschool students at the new location; Above: Preschoolers help harvest potatoes in the Giving Garden; Below: Preschoolers read a book together in the new Avery Farmhouse classroom.

Responding to increased demand by local families, it was further decided to create a second classroom. The Jules X. Schneider Arts Barn has been the site for quality child care for school-aged children since 2016. Now, the second preschool classroom uses the JX Barn between the before-

and after-school sessions of Neighbors & Nature, maximizing childcare offerings to the community.

The renovations and additional materials required for licensing were the focus of the 2024 Spring Appeal, a grant from the Charles B. Allyn Foundation, and generous private donations. Some of these contributions were made by people who had contributed to the creation of the original preschool program almost 20 years earlier—a long tradition.





UPGRADES IN ANIMAL CARE

As a federally licensed wildlife rehabilitation and education facility, the Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center is committed to the care and recovery of native wildlife. Our Animal Care department collaborates closely with local animal and wildlife agencies and responds to more than 1,000 calls annually regarding local wildlife concerns, including injured or orphaned animals.

DPNC holds a Migratory Bird Permit through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), which allows us to specialize in the care of birds of prey and songbirds. In 2024, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) introduced new regulations for bird of prey rehabilitation facilities, adding another layer of oversight alongside USFWS. These updated standards aim to ensure the highest level of care and facility safety, but they also require significant upgrades for compliance.

In response, DPNC staff and volunteers began implementing improvements as quickly as our resources and infrastructure would allow. We have secured probationary approvals and have three years to complete the necessary upgrades to achieve full compliance. While the requirements are reasonable and reflect best practices in animal welfare, they also represent a substantial investment—particularly in replacing enclosures that were last updated in 1990.

Key updates include enclosures equipped with reliable electric power for heating and lighting, along with access to running water for food preparation and cleaning. Proper drainage systems will also be required to support these enhancements.

Above: Young Barred Owl in DPNC Animal Care; Right: Adult Barred Owl in enclosure.

Additional design improvements will ensure better protection for the birds and create safer, more efficient working conditions for staff and volunteers. Planned features include behind-the-enclosure hallways with shoe sanitation stations (foot baths) and new access doors that eliminate the need to pass through multiple enclosures. Solid roofs will further protect birds by reducing contact with wild populations and minimizing the risk of disease transmission, such as Avian Influenza. ([See our 2022 Impact Report for more on our Avian Flu protocols.](#))



Regardless of the new regulations, our raptor enclosures are long overdue for an upgrade. Originally built to house just five birds, the current space now accommodates 21 resident raptors, most of whom serve as ambassadors in our education and outreach programs.

As we move forward, the 2024–2025 Strategic Plan will serve as a blueprint for the future of this essential program. We look forward to sharing more updates on our progress and the role our community will play in supporting the next generation of wildlife care at DPNC.

GIVING GARDEN BY THE NUMBERS

How does one measure the value of the Craig Floyd Giving Garden? Is it the number of volunteer hours, the pounds of produce harvested, the number of acres planted?



VEGETABLES

11,800 sq. ft.



8,749 lbs



HERBS

960 sq. ft.



311.5 lbs



FRUIT

sprinkled throughout



155.5 lbs

INDIVIDUAL VOLUNTEERS

52 volunteers



1,913 hours

VOLUNTEERING ORGANIZATIONS

20 groups



1,111.5 hours

IRS MONETARY VALUE (CONVENTIONAL)

\$24,487.84

CALCULATED VALUE (ORGANIC)

\$35,506.99

REGENERATIVE-GROWN MONETARY VALUE

yet to be reliably calculated

GIVING GARDEN BY THE HEART

The value of the Garden is the families it feeds. Our neighbors throughout New London County receive farm fresh, nutritious fruits and vegetables. They may select bundles of herbs with recipes designed to enhance the flavors of their meals. United Way surveys of the clients of the Mobile Food Pantry have identified the most popularly requested fruits and vegetables, so that the local giving gardens can plant accordingly to fill those requests. Planting what has been asked for has all but eliminated food waste on pick up days.

THE UNITED WAY ESTIMATES THAT 37,660 PEOPLE IN NEW LONDON COUNTY EXPERIENCED FOOD INSECURITY LAST YEAR—THAT INCLUDES 1 IN 6 CHILDREN. FEEDING THEM IS THE REAL VALUE OF THE GIVING GARDEN.



Volunteer Beth Hoadley harvests rainbow chard in the Giving Garden.



OUR VOLUNTEER VILLAGE

An old African proverb says that “it takes a village to raise a child.” Variations of this idea can be found across many African languages, all conveying the importance of a community effort to accomplish this most valuable of processes. The Nature Center is fortunate to have its own village—a dedicated community of volunteers whose collective efforts help our organization thrive.

Our village consists of some members who arrive weekly to harvest crops or feed the animals. Other members return annually in groups to tackle larger projects from trail clearing to small construction jobs. Some of our village’s volunteers complete a day of service for their school or company, while yet more show up at our events to help set up or wrangle traffic. No one person—or one team—could do all of the tasks our volunteers generously perform. We would be lost without our village.



In total, **over 500 people donated over 7,500 hours** to the Nature Center. According to Independent Sector, which studies the impact of non-profit organizations, that translates to **over \$250,000 contributed to our village** this past year.

ANIMAL CARE: 35 volunteers not only feed our resident animals but also clean their enclosures or tanks. They commit to their hours, regardless of weather or holidays, knowing that caring for our animals never gets a day off. In 2024, they provided 1,975 hours of service.

EDUCATION: DPNC could not provide one of the most popular summer camps in the region if not for our teen volunteers. They assist with activities, share stories, and sometimes get as wet and dirty as our campers. A powerful corps of 11 volunteers donated 515 hours to give our campers a great summer experience.

EVENTS: By the time some volunteers have guided the parking of guests’ cars, many others have worked behind the scenes to set out jars of luminaria along the trails, install the decor at the Green-tie, or set up tables for Wild Mushroom Festival. Largely unseen, every event attendee will appreciate the 535 hours given by 73 unsung event heroes.

GIVING GARDEN: It starts in March with planting seeds and ends in late fall with cleaning up and putting away the irrigation system. In between, the maintenance, successional planting, and harvests occupy as many volunteers as we can possibly get. In the very hot 2024 season, that amounted to 257 individuals and corporate group members providing over 1,913 hours to deliver the most nutritious produce to the food insecure throughout New London County.

GROUNDS & FACILITIES: For some, the best feature of the Nature Center is the 10 miles of trails that meander through various habitats and connect separately owned parcels of open space. Keeping those trails as open and safe as possible is often the task of volunteers who work individually or in pairs, rather than large teams. The replacement of boardwalks and bridges and maintenance through trimming, sawing, or simply reporting fallen trees keeps our trails accessible. On campus, the 20-member Habitat Restoration Team continued to replace invasive species with native selections, while other volunteers fought invasive Ailanthus trees, prepared the new preschool space, and helped relocate the classrooms. These and other projects amounted to over 1,000 hours.

TRUSTEES: Usually working behind the scenes, the Nature Center’s trustees not only guide the organization’s direction but are also tireless workers. In addition to monthly board meetings, they run or join committees regarding finances, buildings and grounds, and large events. They also provide hands-on work on the trails, in animal care, and during events when we need “all hands on deck.” In 2024, that amounted to 1,560 hours.

SPECIAL PROJECTS

It's rarely "business as usual" at the Nature Center. Every year seems to have special projects or activities that mark the growth of our programs or campuses. Two subjects stand out for 2024.

COOGAN FARM PERRY

Following the reclamation of the pear and apple trees in the Gallup Orchard ([see more in the 2022 Annual Report](#)), orchardist Eliza Greenman suggested testing the Asian, European and hybrid pear fruit. Taste and sugar tests were performed by Benford Lepley, who was exploring the small world of perry, the pear's equivalent of hard cider. Benford's enthusiasm for the results led to the first fruit harvest in generations.

Maturation lasted nearly two years, but by February of 2024, the perry was ready for its debut. Seeking the guidance of someone who understands the creation of many kinds of beverages, we turned to Greg Post of Saltwater Farm Vineyard (also a DPNC member and parent of a Nature Center preschooler!). Greg led a standing room only evening of Coogan Farm Perry tasting—complete with a variety of paired hors d'oeuvres—and answered questions into the night.

With a new and appreciative following, everyone is looking forward to the right conditions for our next harvest.

NEW STORAGE

Later in the year, the increasing demand for accessible storage led to the addition of an exterior staircase at the JX Barn at Coogan Farm. Now, event supplies, archived records, and seasonal playground gear are finally within easy reach for the first time since the barn's renovation, making our work smoother and more efficient than ever before!

*Left: New stairs leading up to storage above JX Barn;
Right: A bottle of Coogan Farm Perry.*



BALANCING MISSION & MEANS

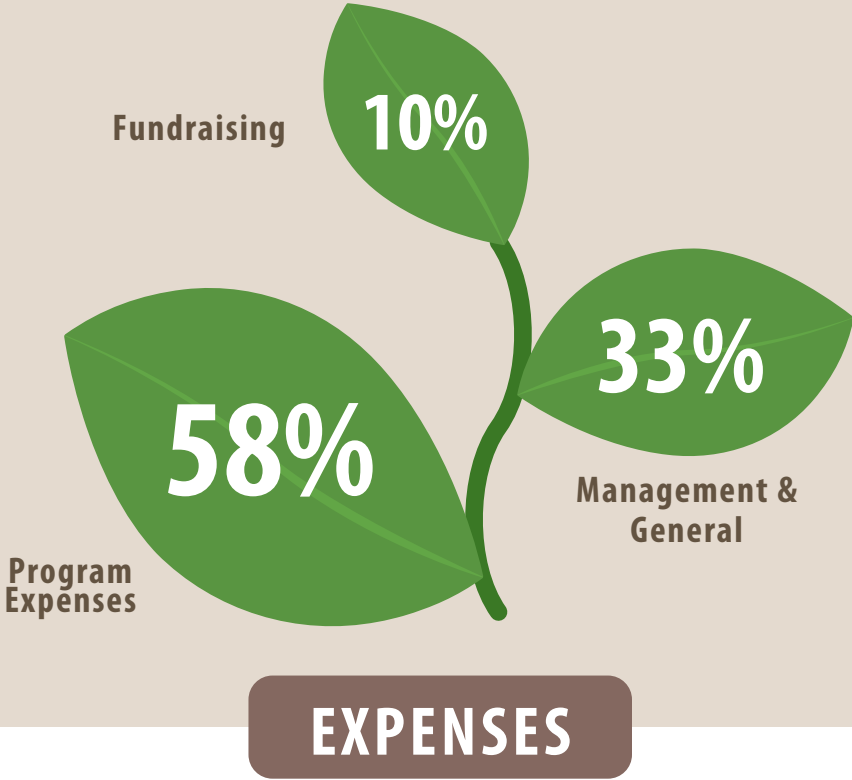
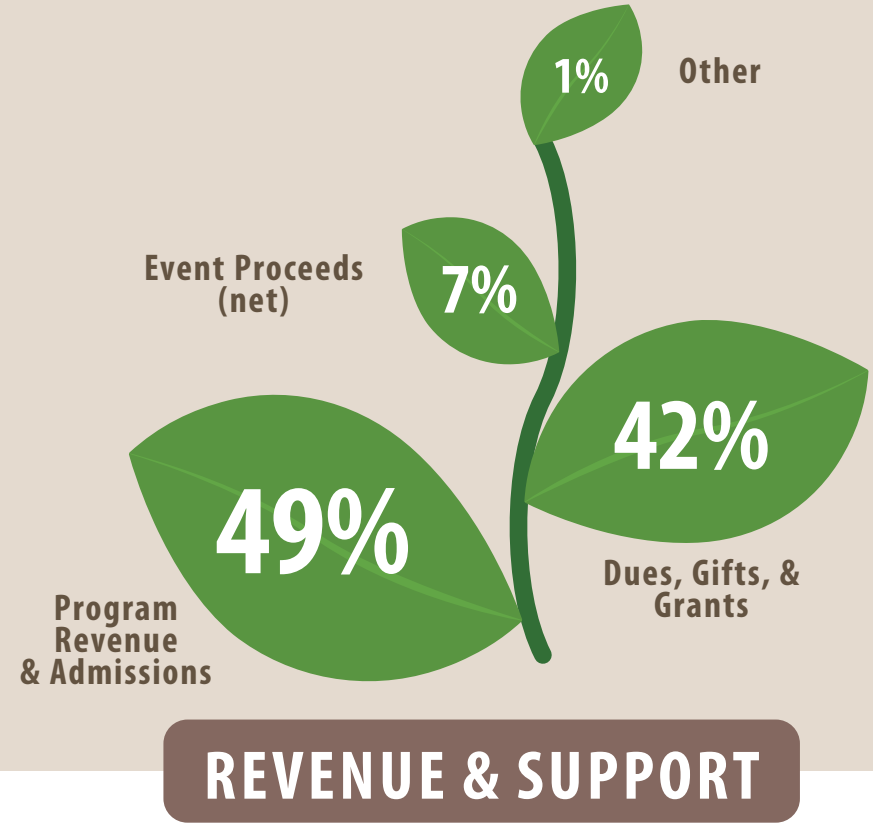
Based on our fiscal year

2024 was a financially solid year for DPNC. Revenue-generating programs and admissions to the Nature Center accounted for nearly half of our total income. The remainder came from the generous support of our community—donations, gifts, and fundraising events—which work in tandem with our educational programs like Summer Nature Camp, the Neighbors and Nature Afterschool Program, and Nature Preschool. This combined support structure is essential to sustaining our mission-driven work including wildlife rehabilitation, trail and habitat maintenance, and the Craig Floyd Giving Garden.

Delivering on DPNC’s mission relies on the dedication and passion of our incredible team, making staffing our largest expense. Like many households and organizations, we continue to face rising operational costs due to inflation. The cost of items such as mice for our raptors, snacks for our students, vehicle maintenance, garden tools, and program supplies has increased steadily, impacting our bottom line.

Despite these challenges, DPNC remains committed to keeping program fees affordable. We actively encourage families and individuals facing financial hardship to reach out for scholarship assistance. Nature should be accessible to all, regardless of economic status.

Thanks to the continued generosity of our donors and the strength of our programming, DPNC is positioned for the future. As we look ahead, we remain focused on maintaining a sustainable balance between mission impact and financial responsibility, ensuring that DPNC remains a welcoming resource for our entire community.





**BOTH OF THESE
EVENTS EXEMPLIFY
WHAT MAKES THE
NATURE CENTER
UNIQUE: BRINGING
TOGETHER THE
COMMUNITY,
LEARNING ABOUT
THE GREAT
OUTDOORS, AND
DOING IT ALL IN
NATURE.**



EVENTS

MR. BILL'S WOODLAND RAMBLE & THE WILD MUSHROOM FESTIVAL

Nature Center events are mainstays in the community. In June, we launched the newest addition to the lineup, the family-friendly Mr. Bill's Woodland Ramble. Planners designed a 5K trail route spanning both campuses and traversing all the habitats that DPNC stewards and maintains. Serious hikers, families, and walkers with leashed dogs all enjoyed a brilliant day.

The Ramble was largely organized by the Board of Trustees, who led the peer-to-peer fundraiser, and businesses throughout the area became Community Partners through generous sponsorships. Combined with registrations and individual donations, the Ramble raised \$30,000 to support Nature Center operations.

Above: Photos from the Woodland Ramble by Frank DiNardi; Right top: Mushroom identification table at the Wild Mushroom Festival; Right bottom: Mushroom food samples.



The perennial favorite Wild Mushroom Festival finally outgrew the Nature Center's capacity for parking, necessitating a change. Moving up the road a bit, the new home of the Mushroom Festival is the beautiful Deans Mill Farm on Pequot Trail. The Farm's 70 acres provided more than enough room for parking, spacious fields for Marketplace vendors, and—of course—the many pop-up tents for local restaurants to share some of their special nibbles and treats.

Participants enjoyed a full roster of presentations on mushroom foraging, cultivation, and recipes. Deans Mill Farm's trails provided new areas for exploration, and the beer garden offered a restful spot for recuperation between events.



COMMUNITY PARTNERS

What are Community Partners?

They are our neighbors, who happen to have local businesses. They value what the Nature Center brings to the community. They may have children who attend our programs, or they may have attended themselves. They sponsor events and underwrite DPNC activities.

Our Community Partners provide essential support that helps us keep program and event fees affordable—or even free—ensuring that everyone in the community has access to our offerings.

We show our appreciation however we can: through recognition in The Chickadee, program promotions, event signage, and social media. It's important to us that the community sees and celebrates the businesses that support the Nature Center, and we encourage you to support them in return.

WE TRULY APPRECIATE OUR COMMUNITY PARTNERS:

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A Greener Perspective | Advantage Personal Training | Andiamo Restaurant |
| Aquarion Water Company of CT | ASA Environmental Products | Cherenzia & Associates, LTD |
| CK Restaurant Group | Dime Bank Foundation, Inc | Dog Watch Cafe |
| Fleming's Feed | Fort Rachel Marina | Foxwoods Resort Casimo |
| Franklin's General Store | Go Fish Restaurant | Gowrie Group |
| Harbor Heights Apartments | Kelley's Pace | Mallove's Jewelers |
| Masonicare at Mystic | Mystic Harbor Group | Mystic Seaport Museum |
| N.L. Shaw & Company | Rob Rivers Salon & Spa | Stoneridge JV LLC |
| Vail & Robson | Waller, Smith & Palmer | |
| 85th Day Food Community | | |



REMEMBRANCE & TRIBUTES

IN HONOR OF

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|
| Grandchildren | Doris Rich |
| Dorrit Castle | The Dodds |
| Lori Edwards | Mother Earth |
| Mystic Garden Club | Paul Coutu |
| Rich Steele | Teresa McShane |
| Steak Loft for Dine to Donate | |
| Constance Denison Pemberton Gloré | |

IN MEMORY OF

- | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Joellen Anderson | Patrick Conway |
| Mildred 'Moonie' Crooks | Pamela Crandall |
| Kali Lynn Finegan | Erica Ann Foster |
| Susan Funk | Sally Halsey |
| Robert & Marie Holman | Erik R. Laisi |
| Jessie and Gordon Leitner | Doris Mager |
| Doris Mager and E.T. | Lorene Marks |
| Beth Kennedy Pfeiffer | Lois W. Poinier |
| Louise Quarto | Dr. Darwin Reed, DDS |
| Elizabeth Reed | Jules Xavier Schneider |
| Albert Stone | Nancy Thompson |
| Linda Vegliante | |



GRANT PROFILE: ATHLETIC BREWING

Sometimes funding success is simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time. While participating in the New York Marathon, then-Executive Director Davnet Conway struck up a conversation with a running mate. Reflecting on their exchange, Davnet shared, “He works for Athletic Brewing—and they give grants for trails.” That chance meeting resulted in a \$10,000 grant to repair and replace bridges and boardwalks along the 10 miles of trails stewarded by DPNC.

Nature Center staff identified six priority areas for improvement, and throughout the year, volunteer teams tackled each project. One such team included staff from Athletic Brewing, who spent a rainy day of service working on the Stone Bridges Trail. Despite the weather, nine employees contributed a total of 54 hours to the effort.

The final—and most ambitious—project was the replacement of the 300-foot Bog Walk, located at the far end of the pond at the Nature Center campus. Recognizing the scale of the work ahead, Volunteer Coordinator Chelle Farrand reached out to Dominion Energy’s volunteer team, known for their strength, skill, and determination.

Two full workdays were scheduled in early December. “The days were chilly but ideal for completing the tasks,” Chelle said. “The crew was wonderfully hardy and helpful, replacing footboards, post supports, and handrails.”

Thanks to the generous support of Athletic Brewing and the dedication of these spirited volunteers, hikers at both campuses can now safely enjoy the improved trails for years to come.

Above: Athletic Brewing Company volunteers build a boardwalk on the Stone Bridges Trail; Right top: Dominion Energy volunteers replace the Bog Walk near the pond at the Nature Center; Right bottom: The completed Bog Walk.



2024 GRANTORS

- Athletic Brewing
- Bafflin Foundation
- Bodenwein Public Benevolent Foundation
- Charles B. Allyn Foundation
- Chester Kitchings Family Foundation
- Community Foundation of Eastern CT
- Dominion Energy Charitable Foundation
- Helios Foundation
- Montauk Foundation
- Mystic Garden Club
- Rotary Club of the Stoningtons
- State of Connecticut
- Stonington Garden Club
- The Scripps Family Fund for Education and the Arts
- Town of Stonington
- Veolia North America

2024 MATCHING GIFT COMPANIES

- Charter Oak Federal Credit Union
- Pfizer, Inc.
- Raytheon
- Roche Molecular Systems

TWO LOCATIONS,
one great place

Denison Pequotsepos Nature Center

109 Pequotsepos Road, Mystic, CT

*Exhibits, Live Animals, Trails,
and Classrooms*

Coogan Farm Nature & Heritage Center

162 Greenmanville Avenue, Mystic, CT

*Trails, Classrooms, Giving Garden, Preschool,
and Neighbors & Nature*



Denison Pequotsepos
Nature Center

www.dpnc.org (860) 536-1216