

Revitalizing Habitat with Partnerships

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The USACE team at Falls Lake is breathing new life into vital pollinator habitats, thanks to a new partnership with the Wake County Master Gardeners and students from Ravenscroft School. This collaborative effort directly supports our Environmental Stewardship mission by restoring and expanding native wildlife resources.

The team is proving that a holistic management approach, one that weaves together multiple USACE missions, can create outsized results. A recent revitalization of the gardens at the Falls Lake Visitor Assistance Center (VAC) is a recent example, demonstrating how ENS initiatives can directly support our Recreation mission as well, all powered by invaluable community partnerships.

The project highlights how we can leverage partner expertise to manage public lands effectively. The VAC gardens, first established in 2017, serve as a critical public-facing asset. They are the "front door" for thousands of visitors annually, offering a key opportunity for interpretation and education, a crucial component of our Recreation mission.

Like many USACE projects, the Falls Lake NRM team balances a wide range of management priorities with limited staff resources. Over the years, the once-vibrant VAC gardens began to show the strain.



Persistent pressure from deer and other local wildlife and the encroachment of aggressive, non-native weeds meant the gardens were starting to decline. Staff efforts to maintain the beds were overcome by these challenges, and the habitat was failing to provide the intended ecological or aesthetic benefits.

This is a common story in land management, but the solution at Falls Lake came from outside USACE boundaries. Our team turned to the local community, engaging two key partners who possessed the specific expertise and enthusiasm needed to turn the tide: the Wake County Master Gardeners (WCMG) and students from the nearby Ravenscroft School. The WCMG, a highly trained volunteer arm of the NC State Extension office, "adopted" the

struggling gardens. They didn't just offer to pull weeds, they brought their extensive horticultural expertise to the table, developing a comprehensive plan for a total redesign and replanting. After conducting a site analysis, the WCMG team developed a new planting strategy focused on native, drought-tolerant species and increased the diversity of pollinating flower species exponentially.

These plants are adapted to the local climate, reducing long-term maintenance and water needs. More importantly, they were chosen to maximize ecological value. The new design includes new species like rattlesnake master, blue vervain, small's beardtounge, wild quinine, golden alexander, and blazing star, along with classic native pollinators like purple coneflower, wild bergamot, and rudbeckia.

The project's scope tied into an existing and longer standing partnership with students from Ravenscroft School. While the Master Gardeners focused on the main VAC beds, the Ravenscroft students took on the challenge of a separate wildflower field. The students provided critical volunteer labor, tackling the removal of invasive species with little wildlife value that were outcompeting desirable plants.

This turned into a perfect collaboration. As the WCMG team redesigned the main garden, they identified healthy, established clumps of native goldenrod and aster that needed to be moved. Instead of being composted, these valuable plants were salvaged by USACE staff. The wildflower field, freshly cleared of invasives by the Ravenscroft students, became the perfect new home.

This adaptive management approach allowed the team to relocate these mature, high-value plants, using them to establish new, distinct "clumps" of pollinator habitat. Several other areas around the dam and park were also planted with new species and transplants and the sites were selected for high visibility and to create a patchwork of separate pollinator feeding areas. This "habitat patch" approach is more beneficial, as it creates a network of interconnected resources for wildlife rather than a single, isolated garden.

The Falls Lake NRM team successfully leveraged the expertise of the WCMG and the enthusiasm of student volunteers to solve a long-term maintenance challenge and reduce operations and maintenance costs at the VAC. The project restored a key interpretive feature, enhanced the recreational experience for the public, and expanded our stewardship footprint by creating new, resilient native habitats from salvaged plants.

The revitalized gardens and fields are already buzzing with activity, making the Falls Lake Visitor Assistance Center the newest stop on the butterfly superhighway.