

2024 Volunteer Impact Report



The Nature
Conservancy 

Protecting nature. Preserving life.

Photo: Hoosier Hikers Council member building trail at Green's Bluff
Nature Preserve in Owen County © Fauna Creative

Each January, I spend some time looking over the past 12 months and reflect on the work that we have done together. It always impresses me just how much passion and talent that The Nature Conservancy (TNC) volunteers bring to Indiana. I am grateful each day to get to spend time being a small part of your TNC journey.



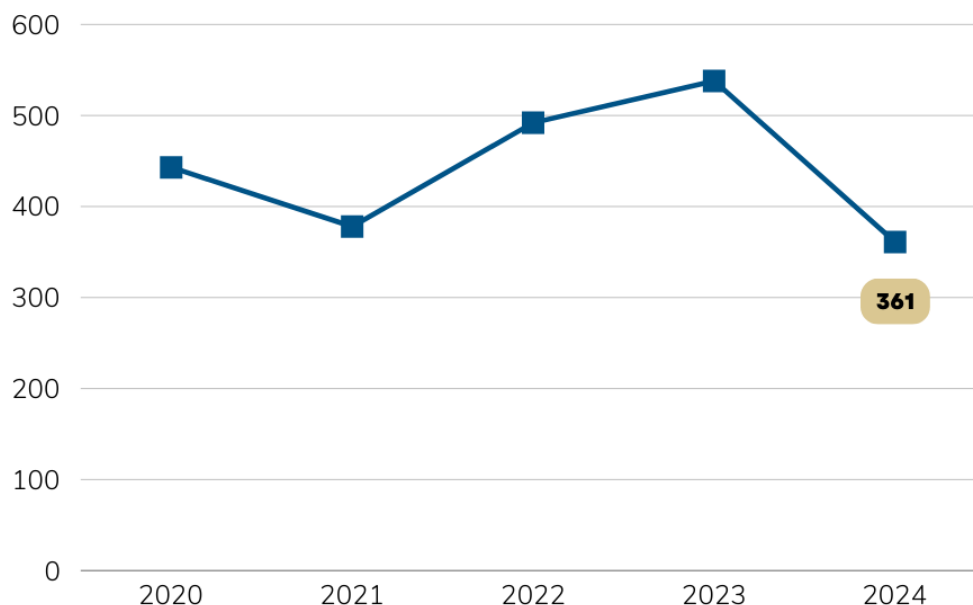
For the past two years, I've done an impact report that slices and dices some key volunteer engagement metrics, and this year I am pleased to present another granular-level impact report (that's code for this is a long email). I hope this year's report sparks reflection, inspiration, and of course, further service to nature. Enjoy!

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Volunteer & Events Specialist

Volunteers and Service Hours

The bread and butter of volunteer program metrics are how many people are involved, and how much time have volunteers spent giving to the organization's cause. These two measures are "started" in the graphs in 2020, the same year as the start of the pandemic. This allows us to see a snapshot of how volunteerism changed since the start of this major world event.

VOLUNTEERS OVER THE YEARS



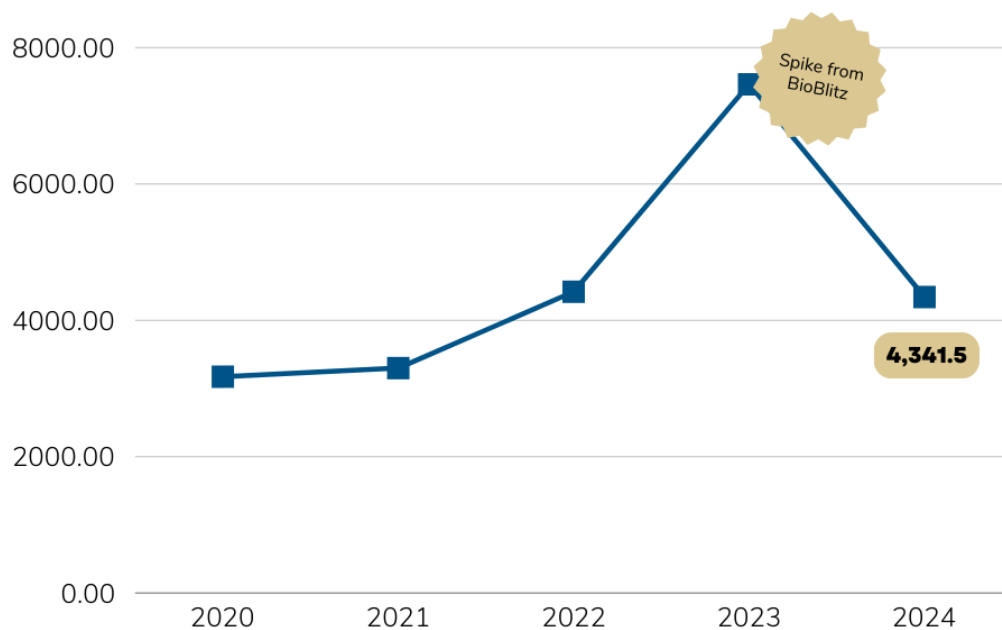
Don't panic! This number did go down from an all-time high of 538 volunteers in 2023. However, there are two big drivers of this drop, and neither are causes for concern.

The first reason is that we did not do a BioBlitz in 2024. This is a massive, 24-hour research-a-thon that brought 100 research volunteers to Kankakee Sands in 2023. Typically, sites only do a BioBlitz once every ten years to look at species density and biodiversity over a longer-term view. The Indiana Academy of Science is the organizer for BioBlitz events, and they rotate the organizations that are host sites.

The second reason for the drop is that TNC is no longer an organizer in the Good Turn for Nature program. This is a joint effort between DNR and the Crossroads Council of Boy Scouts. Each year, that initiative places 75+ Scouts in days of service with a variety of non-TNC host sites, and it continues to be a success. We made the choice to wind down our leadership in this program to focus on engaging volunteers on TNC properties across the state.

Broadly, if you take into account those changes, our volunteer engagement held steady and continues to deepen work on TNC lands. If you have more questions about this measure, ask me!

SERVICE HOURS OVER THE YEARS



Likewise, this measure declined from its all-time high of 7,464.25 hours in 2023, which was due in part to both the 2,400 hours of volunteering from the BioBlitz and the wind-down of TNC's Good Turn for Nature participation.

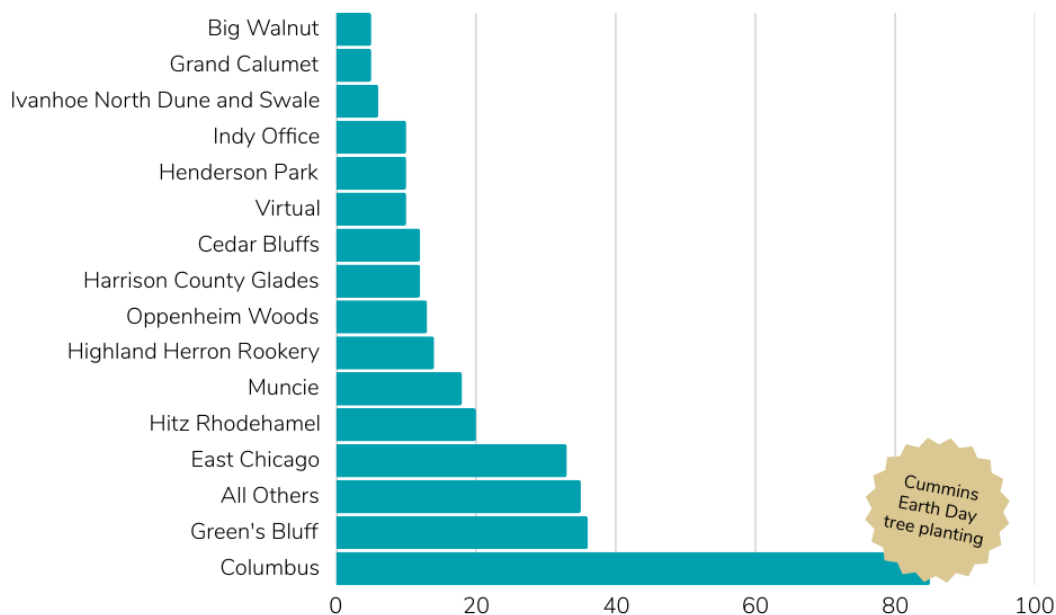
Something I want to be clear about is that hours of service is just that, hours. This is just a measure of time, rather than a measure of how hard you all have worked or a measure of the impact you've hand on our communities and natural areas.

I believe 2025 will shape up with steady growth in both these dimensions of volunteers and service time, but we won't see another 2023 spike. Instead, let's keep working together and keep working at bettering our natural world!

Volunteers and Service Hours by Site

This is one of my favorite ways to look at the program—where are we all showing up and where are we spending lots of time? This enables us to understand if a few volunteers are giving lots and lots of time at a site (e.g. Green's Bluff) or if lots of volunteers are giving each a little bit of time at a site (e.g. East Chicago).

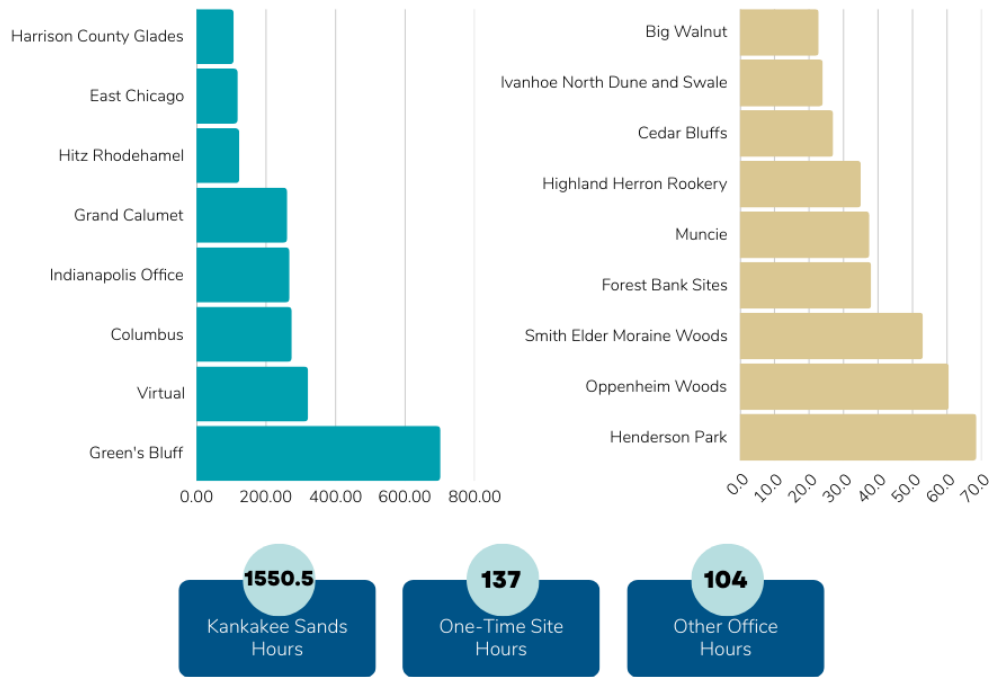
VOLUNTEERS BY SITE



In general, fewer than 40 individuals are active at each site, excluding Columbus and Kankakee Sands (which is excluded from this graph, but is charted out below).

What's going on with Columbus, you might ask? On Earth Day (April 22, 2024), TNC's Freshwater team and partners hosted 85 Cummins employees at a site in Columbus to plant about 1,500 young native trees. Talk about a huge day of service! These native trees will help with water quality through their sponge-like root systems, provide shade and habitat for wildlife, and also be the original carbon capture tools through their leaves. Oh, and trees are really pretty. Talk about a win-win-win-win!

SERVICE HOURS BY SITE



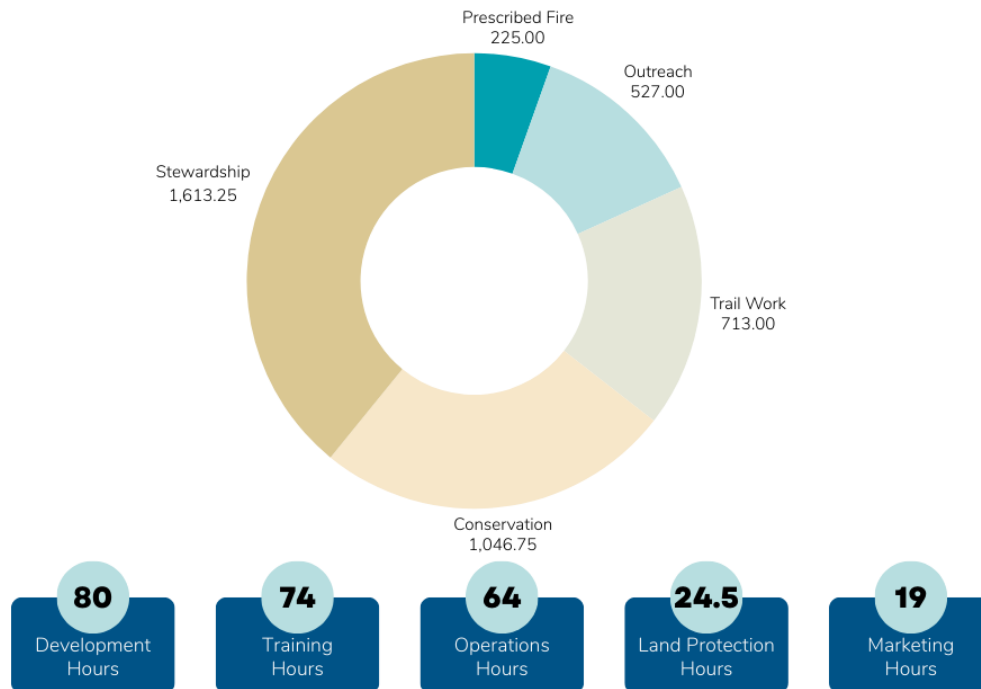
This year, I have broken the sites out into two big categories of over or under 100 hours of service, and pulled out a few sites that made the visualizations less reader friendly.

- Kankakee Sands has its own data display, coming up shortly, so hold tight to any questions about that site you might have.
- Truly one-time sites (think booths at festivals) are combined here for readability
- We have offices that are neither our Indianapolis office nor Kankakee Sands, and they are better displayed together here for readability.

Service by Category and Role

Another great way to think about volunteer effort is by focusing not on the who or the where, but on the what. This allows us to understand depth of service and where our program is really laser-focused on engaging volunteers.

SERVICE HOURS BY CATEGORY



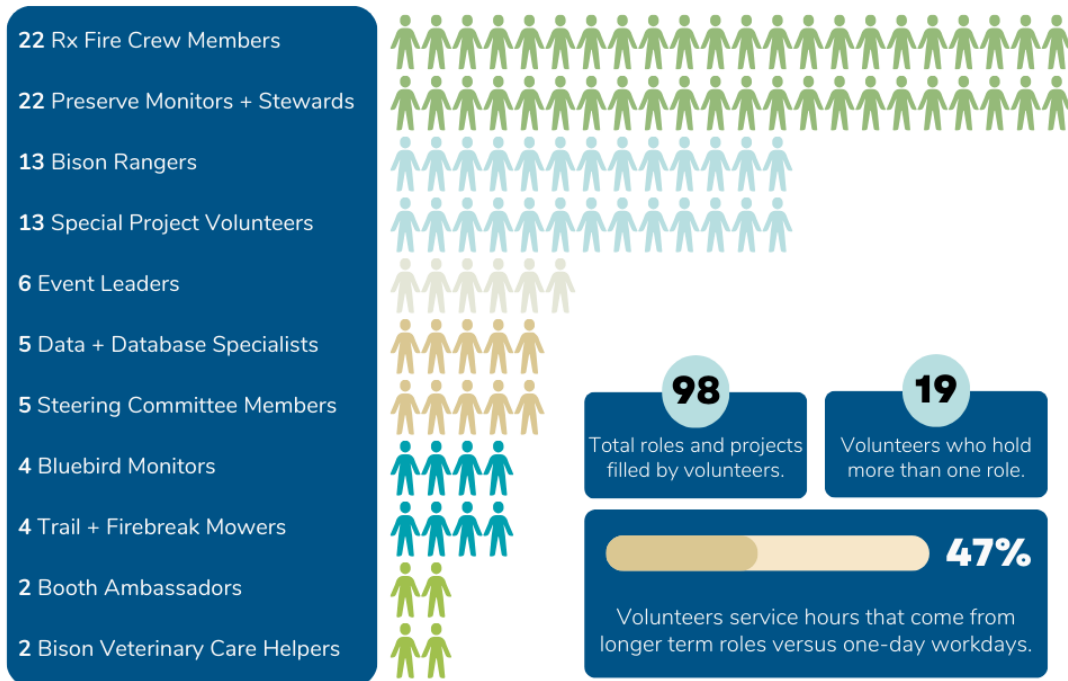
What do these categories mean? Here's a general breakdown of what is all rolled up into these overarching categories of service.

- **Prescribed Fire:** Conducting controlled burns on TNC owned or managed lands.
- **Outreach:** Event leading, Bison Ranging, helping with field trips, and representing TNC at booths.
- **Trail Work:** Flagging, building, or caring for trails on TNC lands, almost entirely through our partnership with Hoosier Hikers Council.
- **Conservation:** Planting trees or native plants, species monitoring, collecting seeds, conservation research, water sampling, and growing native plants in the Kankakee Sands greenhouse.
- **Stewardship:** Invasive removal, preserve monitoring, infrastructure care or construction, litter cleanup, mowing, trail care, and brush cutting.
- **Development:** Assisting our philanthropic team with organizing donor info and preparing thank you letters.

- **Training:** Orientations to TNC, trainings for prescribed fire, Bison Ranger training, and any other kind of onboarding that volunteers might need before beginning their service with TNC.
- **Operations:** A wide range of data entry, organizational, and admin projects that help us be a well-oiled machine of an organization.
- **Land Protection:** This is one project that didn't fit anywhere else! It involved organizing land protection records so staff could more easily find specific info.
- **Marketing hours:** Taking photos, organizing them, and editing videos of TNC's work to help us get the word out about conservation.

More than 37% of volunteer time is in the stewardship family! This speaks to just how important caring for our nature preserves is to TNC and to volunteers alike.

VOLUNTEER POSITIONS



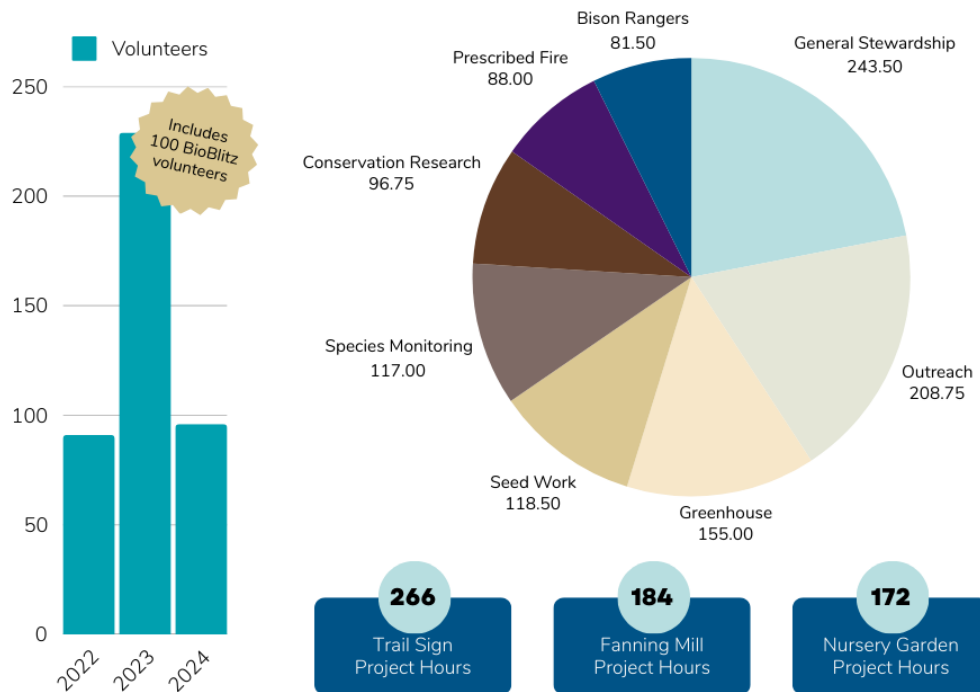
This dimension looks at longer-term roles and projects where volunteers are working shoulder to shoulder with staff. This might be my favorite look at the program! When I started combing through 2024 info, I never thought I would find that 47% of all volunteer service hours comes from long-term roles, or that **98 roles are being filled by volunteers.**

Truly, this is such a stunning look at how sustained engagement is a major way that all of you show up and give back.

Deep Dive: Kankakee Sands

As mentioned, Kankakee Sands has its own display. This is the single most active site in Indiana and has a LOT going on. A zoom-in became necessary last year, and this year I've added to it as things keep growing up in Newton County.

KANKAKEE SANDS VOLUNTEERISM



As you can see, the number of volunteers has returned to a more normal level since we did not do a massive BioBlitz in 2024.

Note that Kankakee Sands also was partially closed last year while construction of new trails, parking, pavilions, restrooms, signs, benches and viewing decks was underway.

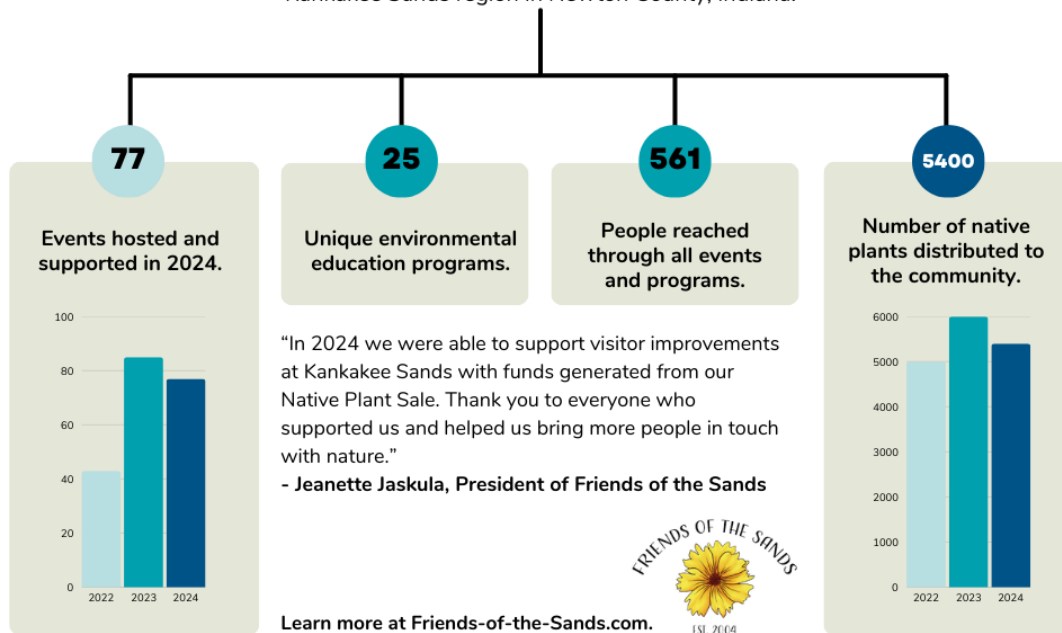
Even with that partial closure, volunteers kept showing up. Pulled out of the pie chart are three projects that small volunteer groups or just one person took on. This shift to independent projects while large workdays weren't always possible enabled Kankakee Sands to keep volunteerism front and center.

Deep Dive: Partners on Preserves

Two partner organizations, **Friends of the Sands** and **Hoosier Hikers Council**, are so involved in TNC's efforts that in order to understand the program, a deep dive into their work is necessary.

FRIENDS OF THE SANDS

The mission of FOS is to promote the natural areas and heritage of the Kankakee Sands region in Newton County, Indiana.

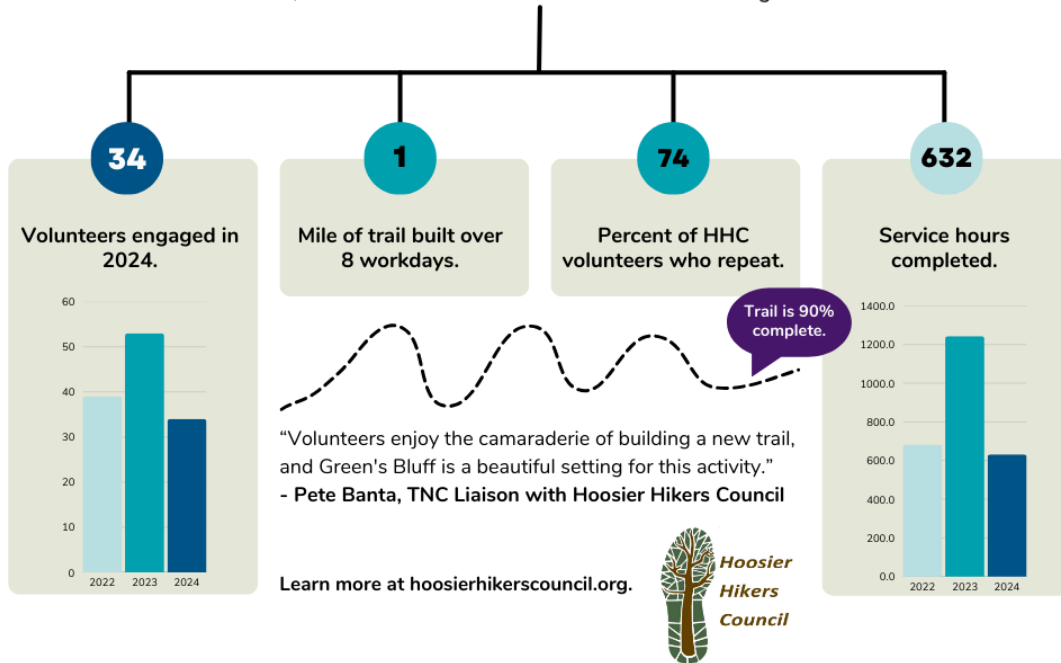


Friends of the Sands (FOS) was established in 2004, and it is a small group of knowledgeable volunteers who focus on environmental education and outreach. Each year they grow thousands of native plants, support and lead on dozens of events, and bring educational speakers to Kankakee Sands for programs that hundreds attend.

I highly recommend checking out their website for both their calendar of events (many of which are at Kankakee Sands) and for information about their native plant sale which happens each spring. Head here to check them out: www.friends-of-the-sands.com.

HOOSIER HIKERS COUNCIL

The mission of HHC is to build, maintain, and promote high quality, sustainable, natural trails to serve hikers and runners throughout Indiana.



If you have ever built a trail before, you know it is hard work. That's why it's better to do it with friends! The Hoosier Hikers Council (HHC) partners with land trusts like TNC to create natural-surface trails that showcase the best of the flora and fauna present on site.

Green's Bluff in Owen County has been the site for a trail extension for several years, and in 2024, over the course of just 8 workdays, HHC volunteers put in another mile of trail. That trail extension will result in a 5-mile trail system that shows visitors rolling hills, ephemeral waterfalls, lush forests, and so many birds and flowers. For clarity, a mile a year is a big deal as this is an entirely hand-dug trail!

I recommend looking to HHC if you are at all curious about trail building or are simply looking for a new group of friends who enjoy hiking and nature and volunteering. Look to their website at www.hoosierhikerscouncil.org to learn more.

Looking to 2025: Get Involved

And with that, 2024 is officially in the rear-view mirror for TNC's volunteer program. I hope these visualizations and reflections spark curiosity and inspiration for you as you consider where and how you want to volunteer in 2025.

We are actively populating the Volunteer & Events Calendar with winter and spring events, and getting involved is as simple as signing up. Hope to see you all out with TNC this year!

All good things,
Esmé