



Prescribed fire practitioners attending a field exercise in Belize. © Creative Nature

Some Like It Hot

In Belize, TNC's prescribed burn practitioners build expertise around using fire to restore natural landscapes

For some, a February trip to Belize means a break from the winter cold and laid-back days lounging in the sun. Land stewards from The Nature Conservancy, however, arrive seeking a very different kind of heat: Each year, prescribed fire practitioners from around the United States make the journey to the Central American nation to participate in specialized controlled burning training that will aid their efforts to steward and protect healthy lands back home.

Fire has always been a part of the natural world, helping shape landscapes over millennia. Controlled burns are a proven way to restore our forests, and TNC uses these low-intensity fires as a key conservation strategy at many of its preserves around the country and in Pennsylvania and Delaware. Safely and carefully managing fire—instead of preventing it altogether—helps improve habitats for native plants and animals and reduces the risk of larger out-of-control wildfires.

The annual Belize trainings bring together top-certified burn crew leaders—known as Burn Bosses—along with junior staffers and representatives from partner organizations for a week of classroom instruction, field exercises and hands-on practice managing different aspects of active fires. This year, TNC's Delaware Stewardship Manager Natasha Whetzel and Pennsylvania Fire Specialist Stephen Ruswick attended the workshops.

Whetzel, who earned her Burn Boss certification in 2024, has participated in the trainings for several years running and now serves as a coach and mentor for her fellow attendees.

"It's always an amazing crew with awesome camaraderie and great wildfire suppression experience in both the leadership and trainee positions," Whetzel says. "It's a privilege getting to work with so many teammates and mentor them. Every fire is a learning opportunity." (*continued, over*)



TNC Delaware Stewardship Manager Natasha Whetzel © Creative Nature



Trainings in Belize allow prescribed fire practitioners an opportunity to learn and build expertise. © Natasha Whetzel / TNC

The trainings help advance TNC's reputation as a recognized leader and a trusted partner in using controlled burning as a valuable conservation and management tool around the country.

"Forests and nature in Pennsylvania and Delaware are changing and need our help," says Ruswick. "While fire isn't a cure-all, it can mitigate many non-native species issues, increase plant diversity and build resilience to future climate shocks while providing habitat for endangered and threatened insect, bird and animal populations."

To learn more about TNC's stewardship work, please visit nature.org/pennsylvania and nature.org/delaware.



Monitoring a controlled burn in Belize © Natasha Whetzel / TNC

The Nature Conservancy envisions a sustainable future for our forests. Whether we're planting trees to restore healthy tree canopies, conducting controlled burns to ensure vibrant species habitat or working with volunteers to build new hiking trails, our stewardship and management work helps build resiliency for both people and nature.

With your support, TNC and its partners can make a lasting impact and protect these critical lands and waters. In honor of National Trails Day on June 7, please consider a gift to help TNC continue its innovative management practices and implement conservation strategies that will ensure healthy, thriving forests for generations to come.

To learn more about how your gift can make a difference, contact us today at 610-834-1323 or email us at PADE@tnc.org.

PENNSYLVANIA DELAWARE



George Gress © John Hinkson / TNC

Nature's Renaissance Man

Over his 31-plus-year career with TNC in Pennsylvania, George Gress has embodied the spirit of a land steward. An accomplished photographer, woodworker and birding enthusiast, George has always loved documenting the natural world. He has led the annual bog turtle population survey at TNC's Acopian Preserve and kickstarted TNC's prescribed fire program in Pennsylvania in the 1990s, participating in 227 burns (serving as Burn Boss for 60 of those) across six states and more than 5,000 acres.

George's nature photography is frequently featured across TNC's channels and other publications. He estimates he has more than 50,000 images saved in his archive, many on original film negatives.

Upon his official retirement earlier this year, George reflected that he was grateful to have had "what I consider to be my ideal job." Thank you, George, for your lifetime of service and for sharing your unmatched dedication and passion on behalf of nature!

To read a full retrospective of George's extraordinary career, please visit nature.org/pennsylvania.