



VIRGINIA FOREST LANDOWNER UPDATE

Events, News, and Information Promoting the Stewardship of Virginia's Forest Resources

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Natural Resource Enterprises Provide Woodland Owners with Diverse Income Opportunities

By Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech, and Daryl Jones, Mississippi State University Extension Service

Most people are familiar with the proverb “Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.” In a literal sense, if you put all your eggs in one basket and drop or misplace it, you lose all your eggs. In the context of woodlands, this can be interpreted to mean don’t rely on only one source to generate income from your woods. Alas, in most cases, that is exactly what woodland owners do – we rely on income from timber production. While not all woodland owners are income-driven, most find it useful to have a reliable source of revenue from their land to pay taxes, insurance, and maintenance expenses.

As of late, relying solely on timber as a source of income is looking to be a bit of a gamble, with the announcement of saw, pulp, plywood, and containerboard mill closures in the US South this year. Additionally, for most family woodland owners, timber only produces income once or twice in a lifetime.

Landowners who want to ensure a reliable, regular income stream from their land may consider developing a natural resource enterprise (NRE) on their land. For example, demand for wildlife-related outdoor recreation continues to increase. According to the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, over 200 million outdoor enthusiasts spent nearly \$400 billion to hunt, fish, and view wildlife in the US in 2022. A substantial portion of this activity occurs on privately-owned lands, thus giving landowners the opportunity to charge guests for access rights to recreate on lands.

These recreational opportunities on private lands also can increase the economic value of properties, particularly those tracts that possess higher quality habitats that support both game and non-game wildlife species. A study of private lands sales in Mississippi found that wildlife-related recreation accounted for a 34% increase

in overall value of lands sold in the state (Jones et al. 2020). Thus, conservation practices incorporated on your land, such as vegetation for wildlife, prescribed fire, disking soils, and thinning forests (particularly in pine stands) can benefit wildlife, increase the value of your land, and potentially increase income generation by having an NRE on your property.



Assessing your resources is the first step to developing an NRE on your land.

There are opportunities for NREs for all forest types across Virginia. The type of NRE you pursue should be based on your skill set, interests, resources, land, and demand for the product or activity. Examples of NREs include raking pine straw for mulch, collecting wild fruits and mushrooms, creating trails for hiking, bike riding, and horseback riding, and providing access to wildlife-related activities, such as hunting, fishing, and bird watching. As with the US as a whole, there is strong demand for wildlife-related and other outdoor recreational activities in the commonwealth. In fact, in 2024, wildlife-associated recreation contributed \$12.5 billion to Virginia’s economy (VDWR 2024). If you are interested in developing any type of NRE on your land, assessing your resources and creating a plan are essential steps in creating a successful enterprise.

–NRE continued on page 3.



Events Calendar

For the most complete listing of natural resource education events, visit the online events calendar at <https://forestupdate.frec.vt.edu>

SCHEDULED EVENTS - OCTOBER 2025 - DECEMBER 2025

DATE	LOCATION / DETAILS	EVENT DESCRIPTION	CONTACT
Oct. 2	Henry County 8:30 AM - 4:30 PM \$45*/person \$80*/couple	Henry County Fall Forestry & Wildlife Field Tour Henry County has long relied on its forest resources which helped it become a major center for the furniture industry in the early 1900's. Today, with over 190,000 forested acres, forestry remains an important part of the economy. We'll learn how these forests are being managed sustainably and how the timber is being used to make wood products.	Jason Fisher jasonf@vt.edu 540-476-2147
Oct. 4	Farmville 9:00 AM - 3:00 PM \$80*/2 family members \$20*/additional family member	Generation NEXT Legacy Planning Workshop Join family communication, conservation, legal, and financial experts to learn how to plan for passing your land on to the next generation while keeping it intact, in forest, and in family ownership. Visit: https://sites.google.com/vt.edu/generationnext/home/workshops for details.	Karen Snape ksnape@vt.edu 540-231-6494
Oct. 9	Wise County 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM \$25*/person \$40*/couple	Wise County Fall Forestry & Wildlife Field Tour Wise County is full of forests - 170,000 acres in fact. From the beauty of the Guest River Gorge, to the Trail of the Lonesome Pine, these forests are an important part of the history and development of this remote Virginia county. On this tour we'll see the unique income opportunities developed in Wise as well as active hardwood forest management. Oh, and the views!	Bill Worrell bworrell@vt.edu 276-889-8056
Oct. 16	Virginia Beach 8:30 AM - 5:00 PM \$45*/person \$80*/couple	Virginia Beach Fall Forestry & Wildlife Field Tour Virginia Beach has been a Tree City USA since 1980. The benefits of this urban forest increase every year as trees continue to grow and thrive. Virginia Beach's urban forest is a vital component of the city's infrastructure, as important as efficient transportation and clean water.	Neil Clark neclark@vt.edu 757-653-2572
Oct. 17	Frederick County 9:00 AM - 4:30 PM \$45*/person \$80*/couple	Frederick County Fall Forestry & Wildlife Field Tour This county boasts a diversity of farms and forests equal to anywhere with a powerful history from Native American influence to Civil War scars. Past & present land uses have shaped & continue to influence the region. This story will weave through the sites we will visit from mountain forestry to the threatened wood turtle habitat.	Adam Downing adowning@vt.edu 540-948-6881
Nov. 7	Critz 10:30 AM - 4:00 PM \$45*/person	Timber Cruising for Woodland Owners Hiring a professional forester is the best way to ensure an accurate accounting of your timber volume and value. And it's important for you to understand where these numbers come from. This hands-on class will teach you how a timber cruise is conducted.	Jennifer Gagnon jgagnon@vt.edu 540-231-6391
Nov. 8	Virginia Beach 9:00 AM - 12:00 PM \$40/family	Generation NEXT Legacy Planning Mini Workshop See description above for the Farmville Workshop.	Karen Snape ksnape@vt.edu 540-231-6494

*Meal(s) included

ONGOING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Virginia Master Naturalist Volunteer Basic Training

Available statewide. Dates, times, and fees vary.

People who are curious about nature, enjoy the outdoors, and want to be a part of natural resource management and conservation in Virginia are perfect candidates to become Virginia Master Naturalists.

Visit www.virginiamasternaturalist.org for a chapter near you.

Fifteen Minutes in the Forest

Online video series. Every 4th Friday at 12:15 pm.

Join Virginia Cooperative Extension's Forestry Team for videos about natural resource-related topics.

Connect/find past videos:

- **YouTube:** <https://www.youtube.com/c/VirginiaForestLandownerEducationProgram>
- **Facebook live:** www.facebook.com/VFLEP

NRE, continued from page 1

First, although it may sound obvious, is to determine what your goals are for your land (i.e., what do you want from your land in the long term) and if a natural resource enterprise fits into those goals. If it does, then the next step is to inventory your natural resources. This inventory should include details such:

- Acreage (forested and open)
- Terrain (hilly, mountainous, flat)
- Forest types (pine, hardwood, young, mature)
- Water resources (lakes, ponds, rivers)
- Access points
- Neighboring land uses
- Infrastructure (lodging, storage, shelter, restrooms, roads)
- Species of wildlife using your land

You should also conduct an inventory of your family resources, including:

- Availability of skilled labor to run the enterprise.
- Access to funds to invest in the enterprise.
- Ability to keep records and manage the business
- Willingness to take risks associated with running an NRE.

After conducting your inventories, if you decide to proceed, the next step is to learn all you can about the NRE you are interested in. Visiting similar enterprises and talking to the operators is a good way to learn about running your enterprise. Research on your potential clients is also helpful to help you tailor your services to meet their needs. A good understanding of your potential clients can also help you develop a strong marketing plan. People need to know about and be interested in your enterprise for it to be successful.

If, after completing these steps, your NRE seems promising and you decide to proceed, you'll need to create a 3 to 5-year business plan. This plan should include:

- **An introduction.** Describe the type of enterprise, mission statement, goals, and measurable objectives timetable.
- **Resource inventories.** As described above.
- **Product or service offered.** Farm tours, guided wildlife game hunts, or fishing excursions. Marketing plan – describe the ways you plan to advertise or get the word out to your potential clients that could include a website and social media posts.
- **Operating plan.** Describe the day-to-day activities planned for your enterprise; facilities used to entertain guests; and how many employees will be needed and their work-related responsibilities.
- **Organization plan.** Describe the business structure of your enterprise, the key personnel, compensation for yourself and workers, and tax preparation plans.



A written business plan is an essential part of developing a successful NRE.

- **Financial plan.** Includes financial documents to support your enterprise and provide a realistic picture for the financial future of your enterprise. It is important to prepare a summary of the funds needed to start your enterprise, sources of capital and use of these funds, and loan repayment schedule and collateral availability if required.

You will want to ensure your enterprise has liability insurance. Liability insurance covers loss caused by negligence. Anyone who allows public use of their land for recreation should acquire sufficient liability insurance coverage. Liability insurance companies generally limit the total liability of the insurance company to a specific sum per occurrence, which may be much less than the liability incurred by the insured, but it does reduce the risk of loss. Other steps you can take to protect yourself include:

- Have customers sign a waiver to acknowledge the risks associated with being on the property/participating in the activity.
- Require hunting groups to have their own policy where you are shown as additional insured.
- Consider becoming a business entity like an LLC to reduce potential liability exposure.

If you are interested in learning more about developing an NRE on your property, the resources section below provides several Extension publications that provide more details on everything discussed above.

Starting your own NRE may seem like a large undertaking. But depending on your resources, it may create another basket to hold your eggs. If there is interest, there are opportunities to hold educational workshops in Virginia to discuss NRE opportunities on your land. If you would be interested in attending such an event in 2026, please e-mail Jennifer.

Resources

Jones, W. D. 2025. Natural Resource Enterprises – Income Diversification and Conservation Practices Implemented on Private Lands in the United States. *The Journal of Extension*, 63(2), Article 11. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.63.02.11>.

–NRE continued on page 5.

You Ain't From Around Here! Nonnative Invasive of the Quarter: Asian Needle Ant (*Brachyponera chinensis*)

by Dr. Scotty Yang, Virginia Tech

Invasive ants don't get as much attention as pests like ticks or mosquitoes that spread diseases, but the Asian needle ant (*Brachyponera chinensis*) is one you should know about. Quiet, cryptic, and increasingly common across the Eastern US, this ant can affect both the health of people and the balance of forested ecosystems. If you're a Virginia landowner, understanding this species can help you protect your land, family, and even native wildlife.

A Brief History: How Did They Get Here?

The Asian needle ant likely made its way to the US from Japan in the early 20th century. The first confirmed US specimens were collected in Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia. For decades, the species went largely unnoticed. But in recent years, its population and range have expanded. Today, it's established across much of the east and creeping northward into states like New Jersey, Connecticut, New York, and even Rhode Island. Outside the US, it has also been reported in parts of Europe, including Georgia, Russia, and Italy.

How to Identify an Asian Needle Ant

Asian needle ants are relatively small, only about 4–5 mm long, and at first glance they might look like a regular house ant. But there are a few features to help you spot them:

- **Color:** Shiny black body with lighter-colored (dark brownish) legs.
- **Body shape:** They have a narrow waist with a single "bump" (node). The bump is "rectangular-ish" shaped.
- **Stinger:** They possess a prominent sting that can pack a painful punch.
- **Foraging behavior:** These ants don't march in lines like fire ants. Instead, they usually search for food on their own. Sometimes, if one ant finds a good food source, she'll return to the nest and literally carry another ant in her jaws to bring her there, a behavior called "tandem carrying." Since they don't follow chemical trails like many other ants (which is usually the most effective way to get a whole colony feeding on bait), the usual baiting methods don't work as well.
- **Feeding:** In their native range, they specialize in hunting termites. After being introduced to the US, they broadened their diet to other ground-dwelling insects, though termites are still a favorite.
- **Nesting site:** These ants like damp, hidden spots, under logs, mulch, landscaping bricks, or leaf litter. In other words, the exact kind of cover you might have in a wooded backyard or along a forest edge. What's especially interesting is that they often move right in with termites, sharing the same log. Imagine if your favorite all-you-can-eat buffet was just one door away from your house. That's what it's like for them.



Worker ants of the Asian needle ant are slender and elongated when viewed from above, with shiny black bodies and lighter-colored legs (top). They have a narrow waist with a single, rectangular-shaped node, and a stinger at the end of the abdomen that can deliver a painful sting (bottom).

Why Should You Care?

Asian needle ants are more than just a nuisance. Here's why they're a concern:

1. **Human health risks:** Their sting can cause reactions ranging from mild itching to full-blown anaphylactic shock in sensitive individuals. Unlike fire ants, which are easy to spot before they sting, Asian needle ants are sneakier. People often get stung while gardening, moving firewood, or even walking barefoot in the yard.
2. **Ecosystem disruption:** Asian needle ants compete with and often displace native ants. They've been shown to reduce populations of important native ant species like *Aphaenogaster rudis*, a common woodland ant that plays a key role in seed dispersal and soil health. By changing which ants are present on the forest floor, Asian needle ants disrupt soil health, seed dispersal, and the plants and animals that depend on those processes.

Controlling and Preventing Their Spread

Asian needle ants are difficult to spot and even harder to eradicate once they've become established.

However, here are practical steps you can take to manage or prevent their spread:

1. **Inspect and reduce nesting sites:** Check shady, damp areas where ants like to hang out, including rotting logs, old stumps, thick mulch, piles of leaves, stacked firewood, or even under garden tools left outside. If you clear these out or move them around regularly, you'll make the spot less cozy for ants. Another good trick: keep mulch or compost piles raised up on pallets instead of sitting right on the ground. That way, your yard doesn't become their yard.

–Needle ants, continued on page 5.

Needle ants, *continued from page 4*



A disturbed Asian needle ant colony attempting to escape from its nest.

- 2. Use baits strategically:** Because Asian needle ants forage alone and don't form visible trails, baiting them is tricky - but still possible. Protein-based, granular ant baits (like those used for fire ants) can be effective, especially when slow-acting insecticides are used. These allow workers to carry the bait back to the colony. Place baits in areas where you've seen the ants. Watch closely - If they're taking the bait and bringing their nest-mates to work together to get more bait, that's a good sign.
- 3. Trojan Horse Strategy:** Since Asian needle ants love to eat termites, researchers have experimented with using termites as "Trojan horses." In this approach, termites are treated with a small amount of insecticide, then offered as food. The ants eagerly carry the termites back to their nests, where the poison spreads to other colony members through contact and feeding. While this strategy shows promise because it takes advantage of the ants' natural hunting habits and targets them directly, this method is still in the experimental stage, and more research is needed before it becomes a tool landowners can use.

Final Thoughts

You won't see big mounds or long trails like with fire ants, but that doesn't mean these ants are harmless. With painful stings and the potential to disrupt native ecosystems, they're a growing threat in Virginia forests and neighborhoods.

As a landowner, you can play an important role in slowing their spread. By staying vigilant, reducing suitable nesting habitats, and using baits where necessary, you can help protect both your land and Virginia's broader natural landscape.

If you think you've found Asian needle ants on your property, consider taking a clear photo and submitting it to your local extension office or pest management professional for confirmation. The more we know, the better we can respond.

Dr. Scotty Yang is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Entomology at Virginia Tech, scottyayang@vt.edu.

NRE, *continued from page 3*

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Got Grouse? Want Grouse?

by Crystal Johnston, Ruffed Grouse Society (RGS) & American Woodcock Society (AWS)

RGS & AWS are committed to restoring and establishing early successional habitat for ruffed grouse and woodcock. RGS is in partnership with the George Washington/Jefferson national forest along with other public lands throughout southwest Virginia to help in the conservation efforts for grouse and woodcock.

Ruffed grouse are considered a bellweather species, meaning that if your forest has a healthy population of grouse, then you have a healthy forest capable of supporting many types of species of animals, birds and plants. Ruffed grouse and woodcock populations have been on a steady decline for many decades. This is due largely to habitat loss with old growth forest dominating the landscape and fire suppression techniques.

I am looking for landowners that are interested in managing their properties to help restore this vital habitat. RGS & AWS are interested in creating Dynamic Forest Restoration Blocks (DFRB) within public lands and adjoining private lands. This makes no property too small for habitat creation as it would be part of a larger DFRB. I will consider all private properties, however.

Crystal Johnston is a Forest Conservation Coordinator, 304-704-2520, crystalj@ruffedgrousesociety.org.

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