

THE BIRDS AND THE BEES

Flora and Fauna Thrive at Tufton Farm



Jefferson's Tufton Farm

By Keith Nevison, Manager of Farm and Nursery Operations

Tufton Farm, a rolling expanse of 561 acres bordering the Rivanna River and abutting Monticello on its northwest corner, was one of the original parcels of land patented by Peter Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's father, in the mid-1700s. During Jefferson's era, Tufton served as vital agricultural land, providing staple and cash crops to support the Monticello plantation. Operations were sustained by a community of dozens of enslaved workers who included Elizabeth "Betty" Hemings, Sally Hemings's mother. Archaeological undertakings are ongoing at Tufton to explore and document the lives of its past residents.

Since 1986, the Center for Historic Plants has been operating at Monticello, with Tufton Farm as its primary venue. CHP, as it is affectionately known, was founded to collect, preserve and distribute historic plant varieties and to promote greater appreciation for the origin of early garden plants. Each year, CHP distributes tens of thousands of plants to gardeners all over the United States through our on-

site shop, open house plant sales and mail-order business.

In addition to plants, Roseda Black Angus cattle and Russian honeybees are currently raised at Tufton Farm. In 2019, vegetable and seed production will be included to meet demand for farm-fresh produce in Monticello's Café and seed business. Beyond 2019, we are looking at launching additional farming projects at Tufton to include orchards, novel crops and an agricultural center showcasing sustainable and innovative farming techniques.

You can follow our progress through our Monticello Farm & Garden Facebook group ([facebook.com/groups/monticellofarmandgarden](https://www.facebook.com/groups/monticellofarmandgarden)).



Bluebirds Thriving at Tufton Farm

For those who have visited the Center for Historic Plants at Jefferson's Tufton Farm, you have probably caught glimpses of our resident Eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*).

Tufton Farm provides an ideal managed habitat for bluebirds with its abundance of pastures, fence perches and variety of



THE BUZZ ABOUT BEES

With the cold at our doorstep, it's worth noting that Virginia lost nearly 60% of its colonies last winter. The bees at Monticello beat odds stacked heavily against them, suffering no losses.

Bees and honey are only briefly mentioned by Thomas Jefferson. The *Memorandum Books* reveal many purchases of beeswax between 1769 and 1783, and two further purchases in 1791 and 1813. In

October 1789, Jefferson purchased two shillings' worth of honey on the Isle of Wight in England before returning home from Europe.

The bees flourishing today at Tufton Farm are descendants of Russian bees brought to the United States by the Department of Agriculture in 1997. Russian bees are a combination of Italian and Carniolan (from Yugoslavia) bees that

Monticello beekeepers inspect a hive of Russian honeybees.



Tufton Farm

Keith Nevison

tree species that provide food for birds through fall and winter.

Recently, volunteer Jamie McConnell built, donated and installed “Carl Little” bluebird boxes that are scattered about Tufton Farm. Within one week of installation, these structures were already hosting bluebird eggs that later hatched. Now, these boxes support thriving bluebirds.

With such success, our goal is to increase the number of bluebird boxes at Tufton to eventually have a true bluebird trail with boxes placed every 100 yards or so. Future plans also include installing additional bird boxes for smaller and larger birds, including wrens, chickadees, kestrels, screech owls and wood ducks. We look forward to seeing guests leisurely strolling across our property and marveling at the amazing sights and sounds.

If you are interested in building a nesting box and raising bluebirds in

your own yard, consult the Virginia Bluebird Society’s website and consider joining the North American Bluebird Society. After installing your bluebird box, remember to monitor it throughout the nesting season; often nests are infiltrated by snakes, mice, paper wasps and unwelcome bird species, such as house sparrows and English starlings, two common nest box interlopers.

Although Tufton Farm is not regularly open to the public, participants in the Heritage Harvest Festival pre-event at Tufton Farm had a unique opportunity to see our new bird boxes and many other recent on-site habitat improvements. *Jefferson’s Tufton Farm: Strong Roots, New Growth* featured a behind-the-scenes walking tour describing Tufton’s archaeological past, as well as future plans to restore farming to Monticello through the launch of an experimental farming center.



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The stovepipe pole guard deters snakes, raccoons, opossums and cats from accessing the bluebird nest.



Russian farmers brought to eastern Siberia in the early 20th century. Eastern Siberia is the original location of bee mites. The ancestors of Tufton’s bees developed a resistance to bee mites, which increased their chances of surviving. This trait has been passed down through the decades.

Paul Legrand, a beekeeper for more than 27 years, started Monticello’s apiary in 2010, and Tufton Farm’s in 2012.

Among the comforts he provided is polystyrene for hives, which “keeps the bees a little bit warmer in the wintertime and a little bit cooler in the summertime.”

The overwintering success allowed Monticello to donate four hives this past spring to New Roots Farm (sponsored by the International Rescue Committee) to revive an apiary effort there.

More than two dozen hives are kept at historic Tufton Farm and at a smaller yard near the main house at Monticello. The population grows to more than a million bees, pollinating many of the flora at the Center for Historic Plants and helping sustain CHP’s mission to collect, preserve and distribute historic plant varieties and seeds. Keeping bees is a labor of love and a point of pride.

