

# FY 2023 IMPACT REPORT



**Friends** *of the*  
**VERDE RIVER**



# 2022 Resilience Prize

Friends of the Verde River



Every year, Arizona State University awards the Resilience Prize to one or more organizations that foster resilience in their communities. Friends of the Verde River won this amazing award in late 2022!

We were honored to receive this award in recognition of our efforts in leading a diverse group of stakeholders to implement upstream, data-driven solutions to ensure the long-term health of one of Arizona's last free-flowing rivers. In addition to our work preserving habitat and river flow, ASU cited our work in building capacity, community, and connections to the river. As Arizona faces challenges with reduced water from the Colorado River, the work we do becomes increasingly vital.

You can watch a heartwarming video on YouTube about the prize. Winning this award is a significant honor, and we invite you to join us in celebrating, as it wouldn't have been possible without our incredible partnerships, volunteers, and support from our community.

Check out this YouTube video

<https://youtu.be/swDQGyyexCE>



## Thank You to Our Partners and Sponsors

### State of the Verde Watershed Conference Sponsors

Salt River Project	The Nature Conservancy	Arizona Wildlife Federation
Arizona Public Service	Town of Clarkdale	American Rivers
DA Ranch	Verde Ranch RV Resort	City of Prescott
Verde Adventures	Southwest Vegetation Management Association	Arizona Water Company
Swire Coca-Cola	Green Living Magazine	Pines Inn & Suites
Salt River Materials Group	Coconino Plateau Watershed Partnership	KT Kayak Rentals
City of Cottonwood	Water Infrastructure Finance Authority	Arizona Green Box Farms
Trulieve	Cottonwood Chamber of Commerce	Town of Chino Valley
Town of Camp Verde	Coldwell Banker Northland, Rise Pavey	Wild Arizona
Keep Sedona Beautiful	National Park Service	Yavapai County
City of Sedona		

### Verde Valley Birding & Nature Festival and BioBlitz Sponsors

Salt River Project  
City of Cottonwood  
Town of Camp Verde  
Arizona Community Foundation of Sedona  
Pines Inn & Suites  
Arizona Public Service  
Northern Arizona Audubon  
Freeport McMoRan  
National Park Service  
Vortex ATV  
OneAZ Community Foundation

### Additional Sponsors for FY23

Arizona Humanities  
Salt River Project  
Christ Lutheran Church Endowment Fund  
Verde Adventures  
Alpacka Raft  
The Nature Conservancy  
Cornucopia Community Advocates  
Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust

**\*\*We love and appreciate all our volunteers and donors - we can't do this work without you - but in the interests of privacy we no longer publish your names in our annual report.\*\***



# LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

I am fortunate to live on the Verde River. I enjoy watching people paddling past Rancho Tres Brisas, enjoying the river and the outdoors. I love seeing people using and being on the river. Paddling, fishing, looking for rocks or even fossils, farming, hiking, birding, picnicking and more. As I stepped into the role of President of the Board in 2020, I knew that I wanted to preserve all we hold precious along the Verde. This is my last letter to you as Friends' President, having passed the gavel to Jeanne Swarthout as of July 1st. What an honor it has been!

Personally, this position has allowed me to grow, even at my 65 years. I have had countless Zoom meetings (more than I ever thought possible prior to 2020). I have relished learning about the programs we operate. But people are what this job is all about. I have cherished building relationships with farmers, government officials and everyday people like you, who all care about the river as much as I do.

As Jennifer Diffley, Tony Gioia and I leave board service in June 2024, I look back to how special it is that I was allowed to be an advocate of our Verde River. I plan to continue in this advocacy role. But as change is the only constant we can depend on, I am excited to see how our board and new president, Jeanne Swarthout, continues to work collaboratively for a healthy, flowing Verde River system.



## FY23 BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Jeni O'Callaghan, President  
Jennifer Diffley, Vice-President  
Tony Gioia, Secretary  
Brent Bitz, Treasurer  
Dimas Bejarano  
Kim Knotter  
Richard Lynch  
Blythe Newell  
Dean Pefanis  
Linda Stitzer  
Jeanne Swarthout  
Nancy L.C. Steele, Executive Director



# State of the Watershed Conference

In 2022, Friends convened the third State of the Verde Watershed Conference. From September 26 – 28, over 200 people came together in Camp Verde to talk about the future of the Verde River system. The theme of the conference was “Solutions for the Next Ten Years.” On September 29, US Environmental Protection Agency Region 9 and the Environmental Finance Center at Sacramento State offered a special workshop on “Meeting the Challenge of Funding Stormwater and Watershed Projects in Arizona.” The conference included opportunities for informal gatherings, including field trips held throughout the watershed and a welcome mixer at D.A. Ranch.



## Fiesta de la Garza 2022 Honorees

### President's Award

Tom O'Halleran, Congressman

### Boots on the Bank Award

Brent Bitz, Harry Sweet, and Thomasene Cardona

### River Friendly Living Award

Darin Dinsmore, TinyCamp Cottonwood Resort

### Business Partner

Pillsbury Winery, Sam Pillsbury

### Government

Ron Tiller and Meghan Smart, Arizona Department of Environmental Quality

### Nonprofit

Northern Arizona Audubon Society, Kay Hawkle, President

### Volunteer

Brennan Jernigan and George Braam





# RIVER FRIENDLY LIVING

## Inspiring a Culture of Voluntary River Stewardship



Through River Friendly Living we recognize and celebrate those who are taking steps to protect the health of the Verde River.

Since 2021, we have established four types of River Friendly certifications for homes, businesses, farms & ranches, and developments. With your support, we have completed 16 conservation projects that improve sustainable water supply, clean water, healthy habitat, and community connections to water.

### Mingus Union High School

This year we completed a transformative project at Mingus Union High School, at the corner of Fir and Camino Real, in Cottonwood. This project improves lives by reducing flooding and erosion while recharging two million gallons of water annually (roughly equivalent to the water usage of 25 homes) into the groundwater. Our partners at Shephard-Wesnitzer Inc, an Ardurra Company, designed a project that also includes opportunities for learning experiences by the high school student.



### TinyCamp Cottonwood Resort

We were excited when the developer of TinyCamp Cottonwood Resort approached us about becoming certified as River Friendly. We helped them incorporate greywater irrigation and rain water harvesting systems into their plans, along with a pollinator garden. Combined with their purchase of water offset credits through Verde River Exchange, the property is returning more water to the environment than it is using.

*"I learned the most from the greywater irrigation system that we put in with the help of [the River Friendly Living Grant]... It is great to be able to show guests that their shower water supports native pollinators,"*

- Darin Dinsmore, Owner of TinyCamp Cottonwood Resort

### TinyCamp Cottonwood Resort



### River Friendly Grants

River Friendly Businesses support ongoing work in our community. With their help, we were able to award \$10,000 in small grants for businesses and homeowners.

These grants have funded, over the last two years:

Six rainwater  
harvesting  
projects

Four pollinator  
gardens

One acre of  
invasive species  
treatment

Trail  
construction

Community  
Education

These projects not only conserve water, but also foster a thriving environment and community connection to rivers and streams. These accomplishments are made possible by you!

*"We are so grateful for the Friends of the Verde River grant that helped us purchase rain barrels for our home in the Rio Verde Foothills. Little did we know how important those rain barrels would become as the water situation in our area became tenuous. We are now using rainwater to soak dishes and water plants and have become even more conscious of how often our "taps" are open! Thank you Friends of the Verde River for all you are doing and all of your support."*

**Jessica and Ross Mehlman**



# Community Science

Friends' crew of community scientists is growing! We have projects that engage volunteers in sciences including biology and chemistry that will inform real changes on the landscape. Our community science projects include:

**Verde Water Watchers**  
**Verde Valley BioBlitz**  
**Otter Spotter**  
**Important Bird Area Surveys**



## Verde Valley BioBlitz

This April, we took almost 500 students, mostly fifth graders, on field trips to learn about nature and the Verde River. Students from schools in Clarkdale, Cottonwood, Sedona, and Camp Verde became student-scientists, collecting and recording data. Then they went back in the classroom, summarizing and analyzing what they found.

What is a BioBlitz? It is community-science activity to record as many animal, plant, and fungal species as possible within a designated location and time. We also engaged families at events including the Family Nature Fair and the Yavapai-Apache Nation Earth Day.

Elaine Nichols, Friends' Restoration Project Manager, said

*"I had two boys that were so happy to be outside they made up a song. It went 'we're on our way, we're on our way, we're gonna find a lizard today.' By the end of our walk all the kids in my group were singing it."*

While the students from Clarkdale-Jerome and Cottonwood-Oak Creek schools visited Dead Horse Ranch State Park, kids from Camp Verde met at Rezzonico Park and students from Sedona schools walked nearby trails. Afterwards, our partner Laurie Altringer, Science Vortex, took the kids through a classroom activity to apply math and science skills to their observations of nature.

A Cottonwood Community School fifth grade teacher told Altringer,

*"I just wanted you to know how much I appreciated you doing the BioBlitz. I am taking it to the next step with learning about ecosystems and I will have the students go back into iNaturalist to look at the different animals in our area and create food chains and food webs. So they will continue to be scientists."*

The BioBlitz has grown over the last three years and almost every 5th grade class within the Verde Valley participated this year.



	Observations	Observers	Classes Engaged	Students Engaged
2021	1028	31	5	122
2022	4951	466	7	201
2023	5928	584	18	476



# Verde Water Watchers

In 2021, in cooperation with Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, we started the volunteer-powered Verde Water Watchers program. Volunteers check for water health in the Verde River and its tributaries. They are part of the larger Arizona Water Watchers volunteer program, operated in cooperation with groups like Friends of the Verde River. Friends monitors specific locations along lower Oak Creek and Spring Creek.

Our volunteers are trained in the use of some cool equipment. A high-tech probe tests water for oxygen, temperature, pH, barometric pressure, and conductivity. These measurements tell us how healthy the water is for living organisms. Our teams also bring water samples back to our lab to test for the presence of bacteria, which is a measure of the safety of the water for humans. This information gives us a basic understanding about stream and river health. Over time, the data will paint a picture of the effects of human use, habitat loss, and a warming climate. This work is vital in preserving the health of our waterways and riparian habitat into the future.

## New Parameters

In 2023, we started testing water samples to look at the total metals content of the water. We are testing at sites that previously contained higher than normal concentrations of certain metals including arsenic, chromium, and fluoride. Next up we will test for nutrients, which can impair fish health while causing overgrowth of algae. This information will help ADEQ decide whether these stretches should officially be deemed impaired and in need of proactive measures to improve water quality.

*"Friends of the Verde has partnered with ADEQ's Arizona Water Watch since 2021 and has collected over 1070 water quality records! Community science participation to this degree from FVR is extremely valuable to help study and protect streams in the Verde Valley."*  
Meghan Smart, ADEQ

*"I first volunteered because I thought it would be a way to learn about parts of the river system I may not otherwise know about. It has been so much more than that. I feel like I'm doing a small part to protect and support a river that is alive and vital to our community."*  
Hamilton Wallace, volunteer

*"I look forward to volunteering with Friends each month. It gets me outside and keeps me involved in my community. Everyone I've met while volunteering has shown appreciation and respect for our rivers, and that gives me hope for the future of the Verde. I recommend to anyone reading this to volunteer with Friends when you have a chance; you will not regret it."*  
Matthew McCawley, volunteer

*"I thoroughly enjoy being a dedicated volunteer at Friends of the Verde River, where I am driven by my passion for the great outdoors, assisting in environmental solutions, and working with genuine good people who share the same goals and values of myself. Our commitment to water testing plays a crucial role in supplying vital information on water quality in the Verde Valley, aiding the State of Arizona in its mission to preserve and protect this precious natural resource."*  
Gregory Yori, volunteer



## Water Sampling Haiku by Peggy Chaikin

Water Q sampling,  
testing : per million critters  
How's the flow, high, low?

Feet and bodies splash  
Otter, fish, beaver: we thrive  
Due to water Q.



# Riverside Habitat Restoration

Working collaboratively for a healthy, flowing Verde River system is our mission - and our habitat restoration program is no exception. In the winter of 2022, we removed large stands of the invasive grass, giant reed (*Arundo donax*), from a private property on Oak Creek. Giant reed is a persistent and aggressive plant that can quickly take over and displace native habitat. Treating giant reed can be tricky because it has the ability to resprout from any of its many nodes if they are left in a suitable location, making it important to completely remove and chip the debris if possible. In this case, we were able to partner with the Coconino National Forest to put the chipped debris to work in an erosion control and native seed germination effort, adjacent to the work site.



[Read the article here](#)

## Treatment Stats:

1,350 stems giant reed treated and chipped

5 weeks of work

## Habitat Restoration- Giant Reed Removal



Before removal of giant reed



After removal of giant reed

## Collaborative Effort

Verde Earth Technologies (work crew), Coconino NF (native seed, chipping location), Private (project site owner)  
*Working together to restore our natural environment*



Winch used to transport debris out of the riparian area



Giant reed piles staged for chipping



Giant reed debris being chipped

*"When they completed the initial extraction, you could not tell anyone was ever on our property. We would recommend your group to other landowners. Hopefully, others will use your service to save the creek from this invasive plant. Thank you for giving us back the views to our creek."*

- Briggs and Bonnie Hubbell, Landowners



# Upland Habitat Restoration

## Healing Landscapes

Over the past four years, Friends has partnered with the Prescott National Forest to implement a grassland restoration project at Munds Draw, a subwatershed along the upper Verde. This area has a large gully system cutting through the valley bottom and had juniper moving into what has historically been a grassland. The Prescott National Forest deemed Munds Draw grassland restoration as an essential project for the improvement of this watershed.

## Project Benefits

- Improves soil productivity
- Improves habitat for pronghorn antelope
- Improves water quality in the Verde River
- Improves the water holding capacity of the landscape.

## Munds Stats

150 erosion control structures installed throughout the gully system since 2020.

These include rock structures and juniper structures installed to help slow the flow of water across the landscape and allow it to be absorbed into the ground, allowing grassland plants to take root and heal the land.

## Volunteer Event

In May of 2023, Friends partnered with the Natural History Institute and Prescott National Forest to host a volunteer event at Munds Draw. Fourteen volunteers joined us to construct 17 rock structures within the gully to slow the flow of water and allow the land to heal.

As they worked, the volunteers spotted evidence of a healing habitat. They found wildflowers growing and wildlife hiding within the restoration areas.



Munds Before



Munds After



Munds One Year Later

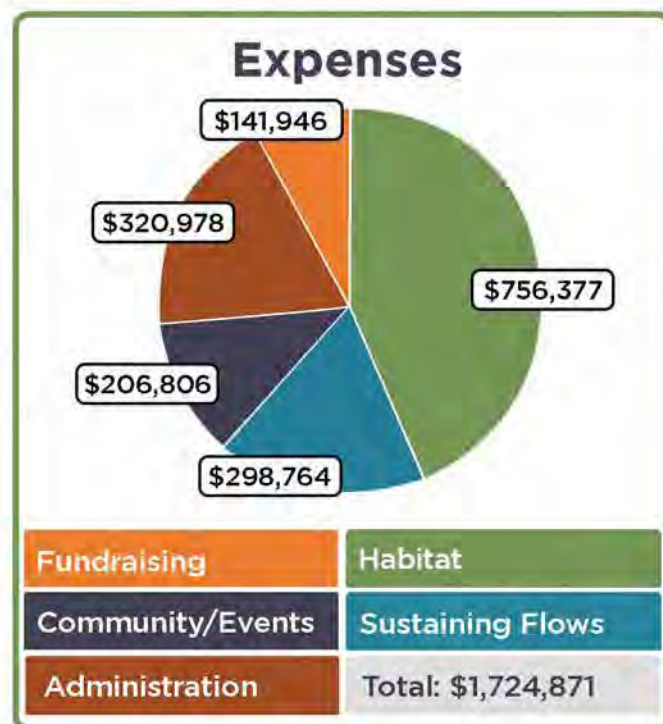


Our volunteers standing in a Munds Draw gully between rock structures they installed





# Financials



## Making a Gift of Stock is a Win-Win Opportunity

Hello Friends of the Verde River,

Jeni and I have been a friend of Friends of the Verde River for many years. Why? As residents of the Verde Valley who live adjacent to the river we recognize the importance of having that year-round free-flowing river for all Arizonans to enjoy.

During our 15 years of living along the river and working to keep the river a vibrant and “living organism” we have been generous, in time, non-cash items, and, of course financially, to Friends of the Verde River. One of those donations was a contribution from our stock portfolio.

While cash is the usual financial tool given, a gift of stock can work to benefit BOTH parties. How so?

If you sold the stock in order to make your donation you would most likely pay taxes on the capital gains. If, instead, you donate stock to a tax-exempt organization, there are no capital gains owed. The recipient receives more than if you donated cash and you receive a higher tax deduction.

If you find it is a good idea to rebalance your portfolio, donating stock can be part of that rebalancing review.

Please remember that you should talk with your financial advisor before you take the step of donating stock.

Stock donations, are limited to around 30% of your Adjusted Gross Income, meaning you may need to carry deductions into future tax years if your contribution exceeds this threshold. A most generous donation thus could give you a potential deduction for several years.

When you donate appreciated securities to a qualified charity, the fair market value is deducted from your taxable income and neither you nor the charity will be taxed on the capital gain. Different assets take different time frames to process, so be prudent when initiate your transaction.

As Margot Navins, a vice president and charitable planning consultant with Fidelity Charitable said, “The point is to be efficient, effective and give more to your favorite cause.” Donating stocks is one way to accomplish this goal.



**Mike O'Callaghan**



## LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Friends,

This is my final letter to you as Executive Director of Friends of the Verde River, the last time I will helm the annual report, as I hand off this work to others.

These past six years have been just amazing, working together for our beloved river. I have enjoyed getting to know you, laughing with you, and working beside you. A few memories stand out:



*Learning to identify birds from so many generous people at the Birding and Nature Festival.  
Hiking the beautiful upper Verde with the Natural History Institute and others.  
Watching Game & Fish experts band bats at Needle Rock Recreation Site in the lower Verde.  
Stopping in my tracks to let a band of rambunctious coatimundi make their way to Wet Beaver Creek while birding with Northern Arizona Audubon.  
Standing in humility before the ancient rock art stories at the Crane Petroglyph Heritage Site.  
Gorging my senses on the crayon colors of orange, yellow, and red leaves in West Fork Oak Creek.  
Puzzling over animal tracks the morning after a winter snowfall or in the silt after a flood event.  
Floating down the river, many times, in gratitude for the simple miracle of flowing water.*

I am grateful that you let me into your communities and your lives. I am grateful to have been allowed to stand beside you and say, this river matters, this river is important.

Because I can't imagine a world in which our children and their children and future generations don't experience the joy and wonder of our rivers and creeks, I will keep working for waterways.

Thank you for allowing me to join forces with you to keep the Verde River flowing and healthy. You are the best!

Nancy Steele  
Executive Director

## FY23 STAFF LIST



**Nancy L.C. Steele**, *Executive Director*

**Cynthia Butler**, *Water Quality Monitoring Technician*

**Isaac Dudley**, *Flows Project Manager*

**Grace Filson**, *Fundraising and Outreach Coordinator*

**Mark Hufford (through 5/23)**, *RFL Project Coordinator*

**Hudson Keffer**, *GIS Specialist/Restoration Technician*

**Melanie Miles (through 12/22)**, *Outreach & Events Manager*

**Shannon Murphy**, *Watershed Report Card Project Scientist*

**Elaine Nichols**, *Restoration Project Manager*

**Maya Rappaport (through 9/22)**, *Communications Associate*

**Katherine Sirimarco**, *Fundraising & Communications Coordinator*

**Tracy Stephens**, *Program Director*

**Mark Troksa**, *Finance & Operations Director*

**Susan Van Norman**, *Stewardship Director*

**Virginia Weis**, *Accounting Administrator*





*Get your copy of our  
new children's book,  
**On the Verde River.***



<https://friends-of-the-verde-river.square.site/s/shop>



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**VERDE RIVER**

