

Bluestem

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The State of Bluestem 2024

Bluestem Community came into being on February 9, 2021. Since that time, dedicated individuals from all walks of life have grown a community of believers, thinkers, and doers supporting one another through the many seasons of life and death.

Today, three years later, Bluestem is evolving into its vision as a place of reverence in nature, led by a cadre of community members and conveners, where people can practice ritual and provide service in ways that most directly connect them with nature.

2023 was Bluestem's first full year of operations. We managed an intense pace – for staff, for volunteers, and for Bluestem's governing board, called the Council of Stewards. With Bluestem now in full operational mode, that intensity of pace is no longer desired, and actually conflicts with the quiet and reflective experience Bluestem offers onsite.

A primary goal for 2024 is to continue iterating on the vision for Bluestem, while holding its reverential and sacred sense of place. Our commitment to this practice ensures that those who visit can find the peaceful, life-giving energy already present here on the land, and in nature.

Who We Are

Bluestem Community is an assembly of souls; the 47 buried residents in the cemetery, their families, 120 volunteers, 8 Council Stewards, interns from local universities, 2 part time staff, 2 Co-Directors, and a myriad of natural inhabitants on the land. Through solitary and shared experiences of meditation, reflection, land stewardship, mindful recreation, service and fellowship, we are fully grounded in this place, in Cedar Grove, North Carolina.

Daily, we practice respect for the land, for the living beings, natural habitats, for the stewardship of the fields, woodlands, and water features. We honor and remember the people who stewarded this land in the past and who continue to call it their home. We celebrate the lives of the people who are brought to rest here. The land supports us all here, as we navigate sorrow, loss, rest, and in time, healing.

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The impact of our collective work is best expressed by Bluestem volunteers:

“I appreciate being part of this flourishing endeavor, where the goals and daily reality have so much to offer me, our community, and our planet.”

“I’m committed to getting people outdoors for healing and restoration, and I like the idea of supporting them in times of loss.”

“Being on a burial crew is a special privilege in terms of helping a family and friends send their loved one’s body to rest. The moment is sacred and life lifting, truly an affirmation of the innate importance of every life. To have a small part in that is something I really take seriously. I truly appreciate the privilege.”

“The volunteers help run everything which makes Bluestem feel organic, holistic, active, alive. Rather than just going there as a decedent or hiker in the beautiful land, volunteers are turning over the soil, removing weeds and roots, transplanting ferns, and making trails. And for those of us who may be buried there, we are caring for the land where we will wind up after-life. A cycle of life and birth tended to by the hands of so many.”

Other words shared at volunteer gatherings are gratitude, purposeful, faithfulness, service, soulful, enriching, eco-grief, climate action, meaningful, deepening, sacred, awareness, nourishment, witness, kindness, and privilege.

Who We Serve

Bluestem’s growth has exceeded all expectations. What began with the acquisition of 87 acres of land in January 2022, has grown into an expansive collection of stewards. People are drawn to Bluestem for a wide swath of reasons. Nature meets each of them where they are, even as Bluestem services and programming focus in certain areas. Bluestem’s primary audiences are the grieving, our volunteers and partners, and the public.

In offering green burial, we support *grieving families* in the sacred process of returning their loved ones to the earth. We offer a way of burial that brings people together, connects people

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to nature, contributes to the permanent protection of this land, and offers families a forever place for being and healing in nature. Through the Bluestem Community Fund and continued outreach, a collective goal is to serve an ever widening and diversifying population with green burial. Bluestem hopes to launch the Bluestem Community Fund in late 2024 for at need burials.

Through volunteer engagement, Bluestem serves a wide variety of *dedicated stewards* who bring their service orientation and deep generosity to conservation, burial support, programming, relationship-building, outreach, and education. Volunteers are the heart of Bluestem. We serve them through time and care, with service opportunities, and community sharing opportunities in nature. Their dedication and presence makes Bluestem possible.

Finally, Bluestem serves *the public*. Bluestem is a place of reverence and recreation in nature open to the public from dawn to dusk. Bluestem provides education about land stewardship, conservation burial, and promotes collective conversation around our relationship to death, nature, and community care.

The Volunteer Role

Prior to opening in November 2022, volunteers focused on important site improvements to ready Bluestem for its role as a place of reverence in a nature preserve with a conservation cemetery for green burial. Site improvements continued in 2023, with the installation of a well, electrical upgrades and expanded trail construction. These improvements continue to draw neighbors and visitors, some of whom become volunteers, to experience the fullness that Bluestem has to offer.

Bluestem's volunteer corps is one of its greatest assets. Volunteers provide Bluestem tours, engage the community, show up for weekly workdays, and serve on burial crews. In 2023, staff managed the scheduling of 30 burial services, with volunteers performing critical roles as witnesses and closers of gravesites. Working in collaboration with volunteers means increasingly more staff time and attention must be dedicated to these important relationships.

Volunteers bring with them all the emotions, expectations and sometimes, even contradictions, that the word community implies. Staff strive to provide them with meaningful and satisfying volunteer experiences that contribute to, and strengthen, the organization. In times of conflict,

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we lean on Bluestem's mission: Dedicated to nourishing ecological stewardship, community service, and spiritual practice in shared fellowship.

In 2023, Bluestem staff and volunteers succeeded in:

- Service opportunities for 120 individuals resulting in 1500+ volunteer hours
- Educating 2000+ individuals with onsite tours, presentations & green burial services
- Convening 2 events for faith and community leaders
- Holding 4 volunteer appreciation gatherings
- Building bridges and expanding the trail network by another mile
- Adding 2 new community members to the Council of Stewards
- Establishing the Bluestem Community Fund to support families with financial need
- Meeting our fundraising goal for supporting restoration and programming activities

Governance

Council of Stewards. We established Bluestem Community with a commitment to building a solid governing body -- a Council of Stewards -- that ensures the organization can live up to its mission and commitments. The current Council of Stewards is composed of community members representing a broad section of professional and lived experiences. They guide the organization's direction by chairing subcommittees, approving and/or querying recommendations, overseeing financial stewardship, and representing Bluestem at public events.

Fiscal Responsibility. Bluestem's investment in its values of conservation and community require a commitment to strengthening its existing infrastructure and ensuring the long-term sustainability and management of the cemetery. To date, revenue from the cemetery program has been applied to upfit the roads, visitor parking, trails, fields, woodlands, burial equipment, and buildings for storage and operations. Donations made to the nonprofit ensure support for burial services, as well as adequate water quality protections, native habitat enhancement, and grassland restoration. As a 100-year project, Bluestem will have conservation and restoration obligations for years to come.

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Land Stewardship

Bluestem's aesthetic is measured in its simplicity, integrity, and durability. Decisions about "improvements" are made holistically through the lens of what's sustainably possible, for people, for the soils, for water quality, for the flora and fauna, and for the community. The absence of extraneous decoration and fuss, signifies our reverence for nature, and illuminates' beauty and wonder in its most natural form.

Fields. 2023 was a year for observing and responding to the conditions on the land. For the first time in decades, herbicides were not applied to the 35 acres of open land on the property. New plants emerged from dormant seed banks, and as expected, many weeds also materialized. Bluestem's 10 fields were formerly planted in tobacco, soybean, and corn, over many decades. In 2023, we planted another 300 pounds of wildflowers and grass species with the use of a seed drill rented through the Orange County Soil and Water District.

Species. Central to Bluestem's mission is restoring and broadening the species diversity of the property. To date Bluestem has introduced 51 new species to the property, including trees, shrubs, and a variety of grasses and wildflowers. Partners, friends, and families donated more than 40 trees, as well as several woodland shrubs.

Invasives. Our focus for invasive management has been the removal of Tree of Heaven. In 2022, we removed more than 300 trees, some as large as 18" diameter. In 2023, we continued to battle the war of attrition on this invasive. We held a volunteer bonfire consisting entirely of the Tree of Heaven they had removed over the last two years. It was a victory cry for the volunteers!

Prescribed Fire. On March 23, 2023, we burned 14 acres of Bluestem's grasslands. The fire supports the grassland habitat, eliminating invasive species, and advancing the expansion of the desired little bluestem dominant grass. We will continue to burn different portions of the property every 2-3 years for the foreseeable future.

Stormwater Improvements. Bluestem carefully sculpted the road grade and developed a series of planted catchments to absorb runoff. The grassland fields act as a stormwater filter slowing the flow of water into the ephemeral and perennial streams, ultimately affecting our drinking water sources.

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Trail Network. Bluestem currently has a combined 3.5 miles of grassland and woodland trails for hiking and enjoyment. In 2023, we contracted with the NC Conservation Corps and added one mile of woodland trail, paralleling 4000 feet of stream, and exposing visitors to new views and vistas, including stream overlooks, beech slopes and old historic roadbeds. More woodland trails are underway.

Our Partnerships

Orange County Department on Aging. Bluestem appreciates its strong partnership with the Department on Aging and its long-sought goal of providing Orange County residents with green burial options. Bluestem collaborates with OCDOA on green burial education and programming, including participation in Health and Wellness Fairs, ProjectEngage, as well as data collection for the Community Supports and Health Services Group with the Master Aging Plan.

Continuing Care Retirement Communities (CCRCs). Bluestem grew meaningful relationships with residents and Activities Staff at local CCRC's. Group field trips were arranged for residents seeking a quiet place in nature for reflection, as well as for active birders and hikers. Golf cart tours and online presentations were also offered to elders exploring end of life options. We look forward to expanding our program offerings to these important constituents in the years to come.

Service Providers. Bluestem continues to support and promote the work of local professionals in the death care industry. These include artists, Home Funeral Guides, Death Doulas, product makers, florists, flower farmers, funeral homes, musicians, and officiants. These colleagues play an important role in supporting families, and in onsite burial services. Bluestem maintains a list with contact information on the website.

Local Makers. Bluestem has set aside a building to store locally made samples of biodegradable caskets and shrouds for demonstration to interested families. Access to unfinished pine, hardwood and willow caskets and other burial vessels enables families to witness and touch products, as well as for immediate purchase at a time of need. Bluestem does not sell burial products; staff connect families directly with the makers of these products for their purchase.

University Programs. Bluestem has established connections with several university programs: UNC's School of Social Work, Duke's Nicholas School of the Environment and Divinity School. Graduate students from Iowa, Virginia, California and Missouri brought additional student

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inquiry to the site in 2023. Graduate students bring life experiences, skills and a diversity of perspectives that strengthen Bluestem. We continue to explore university relationships that value the practice space Bluestem provides to learners, and that can support paid fellowships or internships.

Moving Forward

2024 allows us more opportunity to practice our values, with authenticity and resilience as central themes and principles for guiding our work. We have learned that Bluestem cannot be everything for everybody. We will prioritize and grow the elements of our foundational purpose: Community, Conservation and Cemetery.

Community. Serving as a place of worship and community healing for visitors, volunteers, and Bluestem families. Providing volunteer service opportunities for land stewards, trail builders, tour guides, ambassadors, Citizen Science, communicators, and burial crew members. Experimenting with community offerings led by members and/or partners. Growing the Bluestem Community Fund.

Conservation. Managing a nature preserve. Attending to ongoing stewardship with grassland restoration, native species reintroduction, removal of invasives, installation of water quality buffers, stormwater management, prescribed burns, and trails expansion. In 2024, we will additionally work to refine and amplify Bluestem's climate action and resiliency messaging and finalize the conservation easement with conservation partners, Eno River Association and Triangle Land Conservancy. Citizen Science is in action, with Bluestem identified as an Orange County E-Bird Hot Spot, and data collection resource for the North Carolina Butterfly Monitoring Program.

Cemetery. Managing the 13th conservation cemetery in the country. Supporting families with meaningful and personally designed burial services and interments. Promoting conservation burial as a climate action. Recognized by the Conservation Burial Alliance as a model conservation burial ground serving the Triangle and Triad region. Achieving Green Burial Council certification as a conservation burial ground. Refining Bluestem cemetery standards, protocols, and systems. Establishing affordable burial alternatives.

In 2023, we tested many assumptions, outreach opportunities, and programming concepts. We committed to grounding Bluestem's decision making in our values of conservation, simplicity,

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utility, and sustainability. We spoke of narrowing our focus and creating guardrails for helping to *Sustain Bluestem*; all the while, continuing to meet our mission. In 2024, we will continue to refine our service to the public, our Bluestem volunteers, and to the families seeking a special place for natural burial in our region.

Staffing additions made in 2023, brought us closer to operating Bluestem at a more sustainable pace. Leaders have emerged from among our volunteer program areas, and in 2024 we will work with self-selected volunteers to cross train them for leadership positions. We will look to these important community members to help develop and operate Bluestem's programs.

Volunteer programs are divided into 5 categories:

- Outreach Ambassadors
- Tour Guides
- Land Stewards
- Burial Crew
- Sanctuary Stewards

Continued focus on land stewardship will include more invasive removal, habitat enhancement, cemetery mapping, and infrastructure improvements. Managing a climate resilient landscape means stabilizing Bluestem's existing structures and minimizing the number of maintenance obligations on the property. Impacts from wind, rain, and drought will present climate challenges we must monitor and attend to. We look forward to exploring solar powered equipment and sourcing onsite in the years to come.

Growing Edges

As delighted as we are with Bluestem's first years of life, we know there is more growing to do. Challenges lie before us, including increasing attention to climate, accessibility and inclusivity, and justice.

As the ecological crisis of climate change continues to unfold, Bluestem can offer *ecological stewardship and spiritual practice in shared fellowship* in direct and intentional response. Bluestem is a natural place for people to process their grief, act in service to one another *and the planet*, and to find restoration.

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As a community-based conservation project, Bluestem must continually evaluate and expand on its value of *inclusivity*, becoming truly *open and accessible to all*. One growing edge in this area is offering a natural space that is responsive to the needs of elder visitors, those with mobility issues, those with hearing impairment, and those for whom English is a second language.

We must also continue to intentionally shape our services, policies, programs, and organizational culture—for cemetery clientele and our volunteer community—in such a way that reaches broader audiences, across religions, cultural traditions, backgrounds, and identities. In coming years, we want to broaden diversity across levels of leadership and engagement at Bluestem and recognize that this will take deep, invested work in the relationships between Council Stewards, volunteers, staff, clients, and visitors to understand needs and to cultivate a more and more inclusive environment at Bluestem.

As a land-based project, Bluestem has the opportunity, and responsibility, to nurture a just and equitable engagement and relationship with Indigenous communities and historically marginalized communities, seeking a future on this sacred land that promotes the healing of past harm.

To truly *nourish community service, ecological stewardship and spiritual practice in shared fellowship*, Bluestem Community must continuously consider how to draw the circle of community wider while maintaining its commitment to its values of *conservation, community, simplicity, integrity, sustainability, and inclusivity*.

We opened Bluestem in 2022. We experienced an extremely rapid year of operations in 2023. In 2024, our goal is to operate the conservation cemetery with integrity, to support the public's need for a unique place for natural burial and connecting with nature, and to entrust this land with the energy that each of us brings into this place, whether volunteer, supporter, donor, resident, family member, visitor, or wildlife.