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the Forest Steward

Volume 10, Number 1

Celebrating 30 years - forging a healthy future for people and forests.

Arcata Community Forest was one field tour site during a 2025 member-hosted Guild Gathering in California.

Forest Stewards
 Guild

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P.O. Box 6058
Santa Fe, NM 87502
505-983-8992
ForestStewardsGuild.org

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■ Guild Leadership in Building a Culture of Forest Stewardship

By Colleen Robinson



Guild members at the Arcata Community Forest — a working Guild Model Forest that provides wood products and ecosystem services while supporting a wide range of recreational uses.

The Forest Stewards Guild

is celebrating its 30th year in 2025. This is a major milestone, and yet, we are just getting started. Relative to Indigenous stewards of land and forests in the places we work, our effort to build a culture of forest stewardship is in its infancy. Among conventional forestry views and practices, the Guild has always been far ahead of the game and pushing the envelope to forge a healthy future for people and forests.

In 30 years, this community has led shifts in policy, research, practice, and education that prove more essential every day. Guild members were pioneers of the now familiar “ecological forestry” approach across the country. The Guild is instrumental in building coalitions and capacity to better understand, prevent, mitigate, and recover from wildfires. Bringing science and practice together, it’s the Guild foundation upon which critical collaborations are built to uplift communities, professionals, and healthy natural systems to get responsible stewardship done. We nurture the relationships and connections to land that are the only way it all happens.

This celebratory edition brings some of this into focus through the words of members and staff across the United States. It is a tiny snapshot of the tremendous difference this organization has made in three decades.

Every day, it takes a *Guild*. It requires the presence, expertise and dedication of our staff, members, partners, and the landowners and managers we work with. From forestry to philosophy, policy to building relationships, science to art, the Guild is both writing and telling a story of our vision: stewardship as a national imperative. As you read, remember that you are a key part of everything you’re reading about. None of it could happen without everyone who supports and touches the Guild. The difference we can make together for people and forests in the next 30 years is very, very exciting.

Thank you!

Shining a light on the Guild's Positive Impact

Compiled by Guild staff

Guild members and staff are 'doers' focused on responding to urgent needs in the woods, office, and community. We are busy with thinning, restoration, planning, research, and community engagement. It is also important to reflect on our successes and to highlight our positive impact. In this article, two long-time Guild members, Jan-Willem Jansens and Christopher Riely, share their own reflections on that impact.

When the Guild began in 1995, the concept of ecological forestry was relegated to the fringes of the profession. Founding members were surprised and excited to connect with kindred spirits who share a passion for ecologically, economically, and socially responsible forest stewardship. Now, three decades of the Guild's thought-meets-practice leadership has helped the concept of ecological forestry become the expected standard for management in much of the U.S. While many others aided the rise of holistic stewardship, Guild members should feel proud of our part in demonstrating, explaining, documenting, and championing the culture of stewardship that emphasizes reciprocity with land.

Identifying and addressing needs

Since its beginning, the Guild has asked 'what is needed?' and sought to address the current or impending challenges. The Guild's early acknowledgement of anthropogenic climate change and its stress on forest ecology and values is one example. At a time when most professional organizations were mired



Mountainair Ranger District's Fall FSYC crew having just completed wildland chainsaw training. From left: Timiya Balatche, Aiden DePriest, Daymlean Brien, Javier Mauricio, Angelika Eylicio.

in debate, the Guild called out the crisis and dug into mitigations and adaptations. Jan-Willem pointed to wildfire as another example of the Guild's early identification of social-ecological crisis. In our characteristic blend of science and practice, the Guild's engagement in the wildfire conversation included an in-depth study of fuel treatments and fire behavior as well as conversations with prescribed fire practitioners.

The Guild realized that living with fire and bringing low-intensity fire back was essential for the health of forests and communities in the long term. The Guild's deputy director, Eytan Krasilovsky realized that while the Guild had invested in a decade

of fuel reduction treatments in New Mexico, we needed to do more to bring fire back as an ecological process. In collaboration with partners across the country, we doubled down on fire research, training, education, and policy, advocating for normalizing low-intensity fire for forest health and community safety. Jan-Willem recalled how the Guild engaged in modeling and research into Community Wildfire Protection Plans, setting standards, and facilitating implementation. These efforts continue with the Fire Adapted New Mexico Learning Network — a grassroots network of residents, planners, developers, land managers and civic institutions designed to reduce wildfire risk to homes and communities and help communities become more fire adapted. Recent wildfires in New Jersey and Connecticut highlight the importance of the Guild's work in fire management and community safety in places less associated with wildfire like Maine and Minnesota.

Christopher brought up another example of needs the Guild identified and addressed, in our work on harvesting forest biomass for energy. In 2010, Christopher joined a team of Guild members that developed biomass harvesting guidelines rooted

in peer-reviewed research—a practical and strong method that cuts through the noise—and this is still a respected set of guidelines. Forest products companies and states across the country have used guides the Guild developed for the northeast, southeast, and northwest. More recently, Jan-Willem and the rest of the Guild's Membership and Policy Council added practitioners' perspectives to the national discussion on mature and old-growth forests and drafted the recent Guild position statement on Stewarding Old Forests and Trees.

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Shining a light on the Guild's Positive Impact

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MAKING A
DIFFERENCE

Partners meet to learn about and discuss the interplay of fire and human history in the Chama, New Mexico area, consider landscape connectivity related to wildlife migration, and more. (USDA Forest Service photo by Preston Keres)

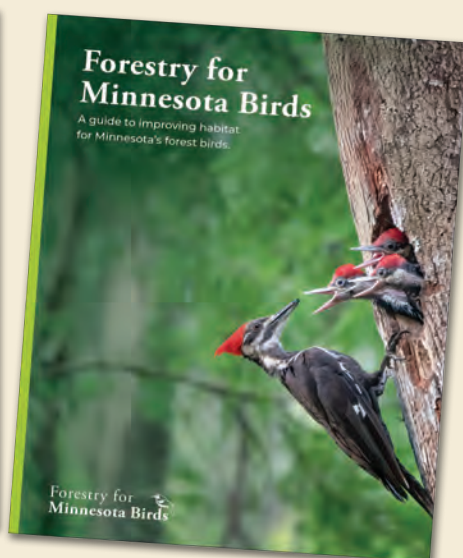
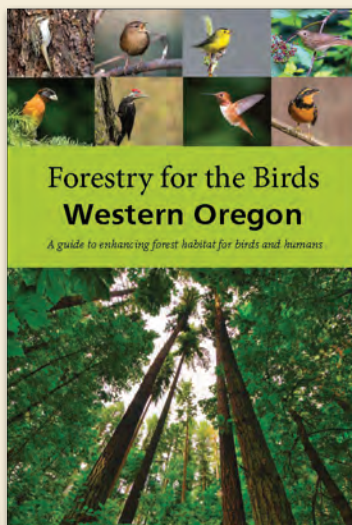
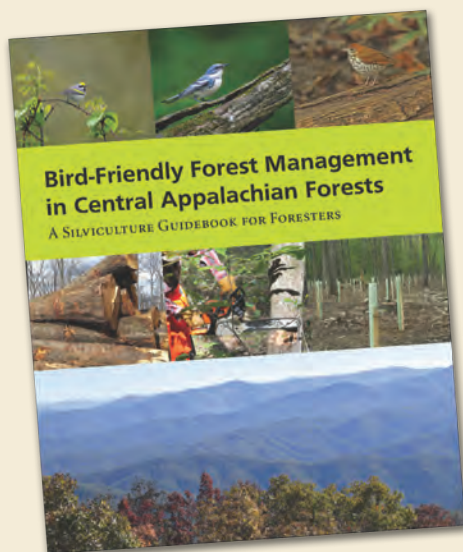
Emphasis on Community

Christopher noted that an essential characteristic of the Guild is creating space for multiple perspectives, including voices traditionally underrepresented in forestry. The Guild takes an expansive view of stewardship and recognizes how the profession of forestry has broadened. Successful stewardship includes professionals in wildlife, water quality, adaptation, fire, carbon, land conservation, soils, collaboration, policy, research, and outreach. By welcoming stewards with jobs that didn't exist when the organization was founded, the Guild has stayed vibrant and relevant. In many landscapes today, managers with job titles related to habitat, carbon, or fire have a greater influence on the forest than foresters. Even where timber production remains the landowner's top priority, stewardship requires holistic thinking. Christopher emphasized that the Guild's welcoming attitude for professional members, landowners, and all who support forest stewardship is remarkable. It is rare that one organization can embrace both professionals and supporters but the focus on values and principles at the Guild makes it possible. An example of the power of a broad stewardship community is the Women Owning Woodlands network. The combination of landowners and professionals allows the WOW network to link outreach and action, ensuring landowners can jump into stewardship with solid professional guidance.

Practicing and Promoting Stewardship

The Guild's strategic plan embraces synergies between members, staff, and partner projects. We are taking advantage of complementary efforts between training the next generation, on-the-ground stewardship, research, and policy to expand regional hubs in the Northeast, Southeast, Lake States, and Northwest. Having Guild staff in each of these regions nourishes the link to members and their work. Local projects led by members or staff keep the Guild engaged with the real-world challenges stewards face. These projects provide opportunities for training, outreach, member connections, and real-world input to research and policy.

Jan-Willem points to successes in northern New Mexico where the Guild's strategy of stacking complementary projects has had the most time to mature. "The Guild was the launch point for so much that is essential and valued in the Southwest region today," Jan-Willem said. Building on deep engagement with the Collaborative Forest Restoration Program, the Guild has been a leader in long-term restoration projects in the Jemez, Zuni Mountain, and Rio Chama landscapes. The Forest Stewards Youth Corps has expanded to include both fire training and early career mentorship. The Guild has also been part of the Southwest Fire Science Consortium since its creation and often brings practical experience to scientific investigations. Work in the fire-adapted forests of the Southwest has fed into efforts to educate policy makers about the realities



Guild efforts and coordination with partners have helped expand essential local programs and resources across the country. Forestry for the Birds is gaining ground in several states!



A Santa Ana field tour during the first Tribal Forest and Fire Summit, which gathered 180 people to create connections for collaboration in 2024 with the help of the Guild and partners.

of prescribed fire and fostering fire adapted communities. The Guild facilitates the Wildfire Resilience Coalition which provides a platform for a broad group of like-minded organizations to help connect policy to practice. Collaboration is essential at all levels and Jan-Willem noted how foresters, small businesses, and homeowners are empowered by the Guild's frameworks.

Without the Guild there would be far fewer opportunities for collaboration, leveraging impact, and support for individual stewards. Christopher emphasized the personal impact the Guild has had on his career: "Out of forestry school, I worked for a sawmill procurement person. The Guild helped me get connected with the right kind of foresters and organizations I wanted to work with when I was getting started with consulting practice. Guild members had good suggestions and were a good resource." Guild

members like Bob Perschel and Dan Donahue offered advice, encouragement, and tools at that time—from insurance to aligning with the right landowners—when Christopher thought about launching his consulting business. "Guild members have also been welcoming in sharing their knowledge and expertise and not being 'proprietary' about it. They didn't see me as a competitor."

"Without the Guild, I'd feel alone or isolated", said Jan-Willem, "Not empowered to do as much forestry work. I'd see less opportunity to integrate forestry with the watershed work I otherwise do." This connection and opportunity are exactly why the Guild was founded and continues to drive our growth. We are a community, aligned with core principles, ever strengthening the collective difference we make that lasts lifetimes.



Rekindling a Fire Culture

by Michael Lynch

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Natural Resources Conservation Service and Soil and Water Conservation District staff learn about prescribed fire as part of the Job Approval Authority training at Camp Ripley.

Can a culture of fire be rekindled after 100 years without flames? Will the public accept the sight of fire and smoke in areas it has not been in their lifetimes? What does it take to bring fire back into land stewardship? These are a few of the questions Guild staff, members, and partners have been trying to address in Minnesota.

Human ignitions play a role in all fire regimes, but they play a larger role in eastern ecosystems. Dry lightning storms of the west mean these landscapes will burn with or without human ignition – although the rate and timing may change. Lightning will occasionally start fires in the Great Lakes region, but it is uncommon to get lightning without significant rainfall.

Historical fires in Minnesota were largely the result of human ignitions. Lacking these ignitions, our ecosystems have changed.

These changes are not a surprise. Fire was the primary process that historically moderated the relationships between climate, soil, and vegetation across much of Minnesota. Frenchman Joseph Nicollet predicted these changes in his 1838 notes while traveling across Minnesota. “It is good testimony in favor of my opinion that all the prairies watered by the Mississippi and the Missouri are the work of the Indians who destroy by fire the rich vegetation to assure themselves of animal food. Let the vast and unshorn prairies that we cross remain untouched and

the forests, with time, will appear (translated from French).” Others noted similar patterns of oak and pine forests being maintained by Indigenous fire stewardship.

Euro-American settlers continued the tradition of burning in the early days of Minnesota’s statehood as they sought to clear prairie and forestland for farming, forest products, and settlement. At the same time, the region saw some of the deadliest wildfires in American history such as the

as a primary practice and process that maintained our plant communities. Many of these policies remain in place.

Now, most of Minnesota has not seen fire in over 100 years. In some areas, primarily in the north, this has led to a buildup of fuel, raising concerns about future catastrophic wildfires. In all areas it has meant a change in plant communities. Prairies and savannas have filled with trees, oak forests have transitioned toward mesic

hardwood (maple) forests, and pineries have filled with dense stands of balsam fir or been colonized by aspen. Is this a problem? There is a societal debate on this. People seem broadly concerned about catastrophic wildfire but less concerned about a forest dominated by oak transitioning into one dominated by maple. The Guild is working to build a community where information and access to prescribed fire is available to those interested in maintaining fire-dependent ecosystems.

A lot has changed in the last 100 years, in the human and plant communities, but also in the science, techniques, and tools available to modern prescribed fire practitioners to support the safe and effective return of fire to these landscapes. Prescribed fire is not without risk. Though maintaining the landscape without fire is also a risk — one we are taking, largely without full awareness of the ecological, economic, or social consequences.



Tim Notch (Camp Ripley) discusses options for prescribed fire operations to Camp Ripley area landowners.

1871 Peshtigo Fire (1.2 million acres; 1,500 to 2,500 deaths), 1894 Hinkley Fire (350,000 acres; 418 deaths) and 1918 Cloquet-Moose Lake Fire (250,000 acres; 452 deaths). These tragic events of the late 19th and early 20th centuries led the affected states to enact some of the most restrictive fire policies in the country. These policies, along with improved communication and transportation infrastructure, reduced the incidence of wildfire but also removed cultural burning

Next Steps Toward Rebuilding a Community of Prescribed Fire in Minnesota

A few years ago, Lake States Guild members asked if the organization could play a role in enhancing the awareness, community, and implementation of prescribed fire in Minnesota like they had in New Mexico. At the time we had written a few pieces and hosted a handful of meetings on the subject but had not launched a concerted effort.

Looking at New Mexico and other regions with success restoring their culture of fire we started by working with a small team of colleagues to breathe new life into the Minnesota Prescribed Fire Council (<https://www.mnprescribedfire.org/>). This group was formed through enabling legislation during the 2017 legislative session but had stalled during the pandemic. Conversations with numerous other states indicated that an active Prescribed Fire Council is key to bringing prescribed fire into broader use. These other states also highlighted the need for a statewide fire needs assessment.

The Guild worked with the Tri-state TNC Chapter (MN, SD, and ND) on a Cohesive Strategy grant and used this funding to develop a MN Fire Needs Assessment. This assessment highlighted that land stewards should be burning about a million acres per year to maintain the native plant communities found in the state — from southern prairies to northern forests (www.mnprescribedfire.org/mnfireneedsassessment). We have a long way to go to implement that level of burning in Minnesota.

Engaging and empowering private landowners is key to restoring these fire adapted ecosystems. We noticed there was no good system for private landowners to learn about prescribed fire. Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) offices throughout the state are often the primary points of contact for private landowners to learn about land stewardship and to seek cost share funding. Fortunately, the Minnesota State NRCS office was interested in serving as a catalyst for the increased use of fire on private lands. The Guild worked with MN NRCS, Camp Ripley Training Center, and Morrison

County SWCD to develop a multi-faceted project.

This project had three parts: 1) Develop and deliver Job Approval Authority (JAA) training for NRCS and SWCD staff, 2) Host landowner awareness trainings, and 3) Develop burn plans for twelve landowners in the Camp Ripley Sentinel Landscape to get the ball rolling on private land implementation.

The JAA system is used by natural resource agencies to establish a baseline awareness on a subject before staff perform the task or discuss it with landowners. Prior to the launch of this training program in May 2022, there were virtually no Minnesota NRCS staff with prescribed fire JAA. This meant that staff were not able to suggest prescribed fire in conservation planning for most landowners in the state. Over the next three years we were able to get 87 NRCS and SWCD staff JAA training in prescribed fire. This has made great strides toward increasing landowner awareness of prescribed fire for stewarding their forests and grasslands. Unfortunately, this program is no longer active due to current federal spending priorities.

During this time, we were also able to host nearly 150 people for landowner learn and burn workshops and develop twelve burn plans. Nearly all of these have been implemented, bringing fire back to the region. We are also working with partners to develop a Certified Prescribed Burn Manager program in Minnesota to ensure there is a cadre of trained contractors, agency and NGO employees, passionate volunteers, and landowners able to safely implement burns to meet land stewardship goals.

This work is ongoing. The Guild has been a proponent of ecological forestry since its founding and continues to provide thought-meets-practice leadership to ensure these concepts become the expected standard of forest management in North America. Part of our ongoing commitment to maintaining the health and biodiversity of forests as complex, interconnected ecosystems is to evaluate opportunities for improvement in all the regions we work in. Bringing fire back into some forested ecosystems is a key step along the way and we will continue to support building a culture of fire stewardship.



Carlos Saiz (Guild) and Jason Anderson (Pheasants Forever) use a sand table to discuss prescribed fire operations during a JAA training.



Using prescribed fire to set back woody encroachment into a Minnesota tallgrass prairie.



Address Service Requested

Celebrating 30 years!

Our Guild community is growing. More members are joining. Our staff and projects are expanding. Members continue to step up, do invaluable work, and engage with the Guild to spread the word about responsible forest stewardship, and all that it supports.

Let's celebrate together! Connect at member-hosted Guild Gatherings and key events that showcase our collective impact, invite your input, and help support our mission. Check out these upcoming events and let us know if you'd like to host one of your own! (Virtual events count! Book and snack clubs count! There are many Guild member authors.) It's all about getting together, building connections and support.

Thank you for keeping your membership current, spreading the word about the Guild, and sharing your stories and efforts.

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| June 18 | Forestry for Minnesota Birds in Cloquet, Minnesota |
| June 20 | 30th anniversary Guild celebration and woodlot tour in Maine |
| June 20 – 22 | Wilderness First Aid (NOLS) and optional CPR (HSI) certification courses in Virginia |
| July 24 | Mushrooms as Forest Health Indicators - a Taos County New Mexico Guild Gathering |
| October 9 – 11 | Northwest Innovative Forestry Summit 2025 |

Visit often: ForestStewardsGuild.org/events

All photos submitted by article authors or the Forest Stewards Guild unless otherwise noted.