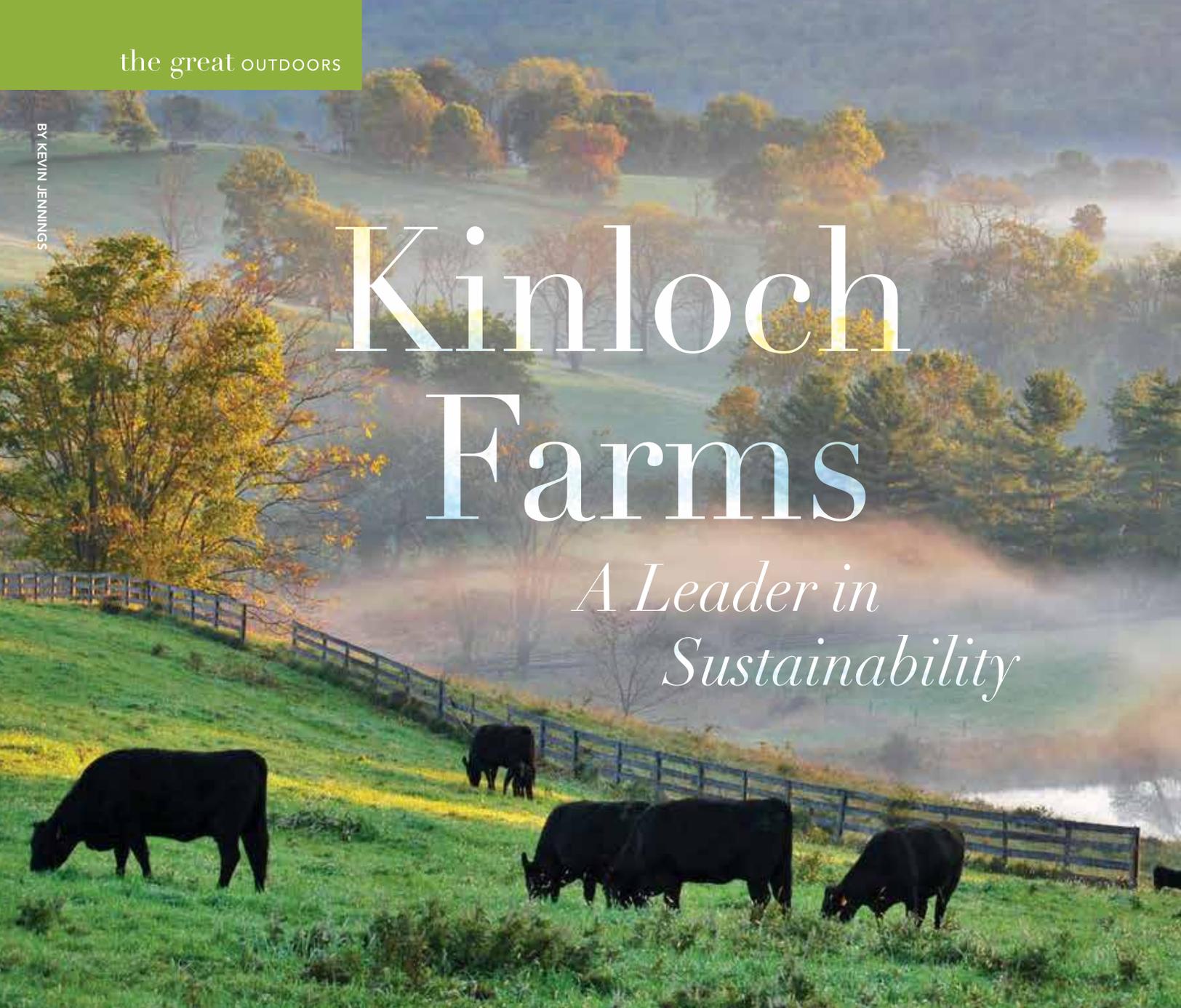


Kinloch Farms

A Leader in Sustainability



Farming ideology committed to land stewardship

Virginia Working Landscapes: part three in a three-part series

BY KATIE FUSTER

“There are our bees,” Kinloch Farm estate manager Jonathan Duffy proudly says as we pass a cluster of the farm’s well-tended hives. “And you can see some of the calves kicking it up on that hill.” Duffy and his sidekick Milo, a gregarious flat-coated retriever, are giving me a tour of Kinloch Farm, Inc. Kinloch is partnered with Virginia Working Landscapes (VWL), a program first profiled in the fall of 2016.

Duffy was at the first gathering of what would become VWL, which

took place at Jocelyn and Dr. Bill Sladen’s Walnut Springs Farm. “VWL was an ‘ah-ha’ moment of making connections with like-minded people,” Duffy says.

It was a natural fit for the farm. After all, Kinloch owner Andrea Currier had long believed in sustainable agriculture; she instituted organic cattle farming when she first took over Kinloch in the 1980s. After partnering with VWL, Duffy says, “we benefitted a lot from learning from other people.”



Below: Estate manager Jonathan Duffy identifies the queen bee of one of Kinloch's hives.



BY SARA HUNTINGTON



Above: A herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle graze in the fields at Kinloch Farm.

An example is Bruce Jones at Long Mountain in Rappahannock, a longtime advocate for biodiversity and native habitats. “He’s sort of a mentor for everybody in VWL. He’s been at this for about 20 years, and he likes to say we all learn from his mistakes,” Duffy laughs.

At 1,900 acres, Kinloch is a massive estate, larger than the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute that VWL operates from. The farm is in part dedicated to the production of grass-fed cattle. “We

are a cow-calf operation,” Duffy explains. “We don’t retail; we sell cows and calves to other people to raise.”

Kinloch specializes in Aberdeen Angus cattle, a Scottish breed. “They’re a smaller animal, lower to the ground, that marble well [attain a good combination of meat and fat] on grass,” Duffy says. “It takes time to build a herd—looking for where to find them, their history, it’s all very involved.” He credits farm manager Kevin Jennings with Kinloch’s success in this area. Jennings scours the country for available Aberdeen Angus, thoroughly investigating their genetics as he directs the growth of Kinloch’s herd of 300 head of cattle.

The herd used to be twice this size. “But about 6 years ago, Kinloch’s owner decided that they wanted to manage more for

wildlife and have fewer cattle,” Duffy says. Once cattle have grazed a pasture, it less hospitable to wildlife. So with the idea of being good stewards of the land and giving something back to the environment, we decided to cut the herd in half and manage half the land for wildlife. We’re now a quarter of the way through converting 750 acres into native meadows.”

Where Route 55 runs alongside Kinloch, farm workers have installed native grass hayfields. “There are two great things about them. First, they tend to be drought resistant,” Duffy says, noting that some species grow roots as deep as twelve feet. “Also, the hay gets cut later in the season, so it splits up our haying, and it allows bird nesting to have happened before we go in and mow.”

Since cool season grasses go dormant during the summer. Kinloch is also converting some pastures to warm season grasses for continuity of available grazing. The farm practices rotational grazing to reduce soil compaction and erosion while increasing the organic matter and microbes in the soil. “We rotate the cattle to a different piece of land every few days,” Duffy says. Farm workers use temporary electric fencing to create new boundaries for the animals. “We’re close to being able to do year-round grazing, so we’re not feeding

erosion and allows flora to grow.” These trees, plants, and grasses filter runoff [water] that would otherwise go straight into the streams and ultimately end up in the bay. The vegetation improves the health of the streams by creating shade, which keeps water temperatures down and allows beneficial aquatic animals to thrive.

According to Duffy, “Kinloch’s fields are about 50 percent warm-season grasses and 50 percent forbs,” which are herbaceous flowering plants. “This has attracted an enormous number of

all the wildflowers,” Duffy says. Kinloch’s honeybee operation has been designated as Certified Naturally Grown. The raw honey is sold by the pound at the Fair Oaks Whole Foods, Marshall’s Glascock’s Deli, and the Corner Store at Old Tavern.

In addition to establishing native meadows, Kinloch is trying to regenerate its forests of oak trees. Acorns are an important food source for many native animals, but northern Virginia’s enormous deer population can annihilate acres of oak saplings in



BY JONATHAN DUFFY

Above: Oaks and pine dot a native meadow at Kinloch

out a lot of hay in the winter.”

Farm workers have also installed thirty acres of riparian buffers, which are vegetated buffer strips alongside waterways where cattle are not allowed. “We have a number of streams that end up in Broad Run and then the Chesapeake,” Duffy says. “Fencing out the cattle protects the streambeds from

pollinators and birds. The Smithsonian’s been doing studies in some of those fields. It’s been cool because you put these grasses and forbs out, and the pollinators and birds just show up.”

The meadows are also a playground for Kinloch’s forty-odd hives of honeybees. “It’s been really wonderful to put them in these fields with

a blink. “So we have an eighteen-acre deer exclusion area of the forest that we put in about a year and a half ago,” Duffy says.

Kinloch approaches the project of reforestation with the seriousness and logic of scientists. “We have study plots,” Duffy says, similar to VWL’s plots at the SCBI (Smithsonian

Conservation Biology Institute in Front Royal). “We look at them in the beginning, see what’s in there, and see how it changes over time.”

Invasive species like Japanese stiltgrass cause headaches at Kinloch, decreasing the farm’s biodiversity. “Japanese stiltgrass needs very little light to grow,” Duffy says, “and it’s allelopathic.” This means that the stiltgrass puts out biochemicals that make it difficult for other plants to germinate and grow around it. “Garlic mustard is very much the same. The guys go out for a week every year and pull garlic mustard. They get dump trucks full of it.” Other bothersome invasives that Kinloch deals with are honeysuckle, oriental bittersweet, crown vetch, and barberry.

Kinloch is one of a handful of VWL partners who manage their fields and pastures using prescribed burns. “Our ecosystem developed over thousands of years of indigenous people burning,” Duffy explains. “There are certain oaks, chestnuts, and pines that need it. And when you burn, you retard the succession of the field turning into forest, you return nutrients to the soil, and you reduce some of the invasive plants.”

A prescribed burn is serious business, Duffy says. “Two of us took a course with the forestry department. We became certified as burn bosses.”

Conditions must be just right to apply a prescribed burn. The weather is a huge factor in the equation. “For example, the humidity has to be correct,” Duffy says. “If it’s too low, the fire might get out of hand. You also need wind to carry the fire, but too much. This is as much to control fire as to control smoke.”

Kinloch is extremely cautious and professional about its prescribed burns. “All the guys here have the proper equipment plus fire-resistant clothing,

BY JONATHAN DUFFY



Above: Managing a prescribed burn at Kinloch

and we make sure we have control at all times,” Duffy explains. Another VWL partner, the Farm at Sunnyside, “is three to four years ahead of us” in using prescribed burns. “The owner there, Nick Lapham, was instrumental in helping us take the plunge.”

Towards the end of our tour, Duffy points out a pair of black silos and a facility of dark-green buildings. “This was built in the 1960s,” he says. “Kinloch was sort of a conventional grain-finished cattle operation then. You can see the old

barn, where they would feed the cattle at the trough and then turn them out into the field.” He smiles placidly. “Now our cattle spend their entire time with us in the fields.” The animals remain exclusively on a pasture and forage diet during their time at Kinloch.

“This is a great place to work,” Duffy says as we leave the silos behind us and head back to Kinloch’s gate house. “It gets interesting sometimes. But I have some great people who work for me, and that makes all the difference.” ❖

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Learn more about this story by visiting her web site, katiewriteraboutlove.com.