Virginia established its Natural Area Preserve System in 1989 to protect lands that harbor some of the best examples of natural communities and rare plant and animal species in Virginia and the world. In 1990 North Landing River was dedicated as our first Natural Area Preserve. As of July 2006, there are 46 preserves totaling 41,255 acres. Thirty-four of these preserves are owned by the Department of Conservation and Recreation. Public or private owners have dedicated the others to the Natural Area Preserve System. Each preserve is managed for the benefit of the rare plants, animals and natural communities found there.
The Virginia Natural Heritage Program was established to protect the state’s diversity of life. The program was started in 1986 as a cooperative effort of the Commonwealth of Virginia and The Nature Conservancy, a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of natural diversity. In 1988 the program became a component of the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) as the Natural Heritage Program. The Virginia program is a member of NatureServe, the international network of natural heritage programs that includes all 50 states, Canada and much of Latin America. This partnership greatly enhances the quality and utility of our conservation information. The staff supports the Virginia Cave Board and the Virginia Invasive Species Working Group.

The program focuses on the identification, protection and stewardship of natural heritage resources defined in the Code of Virginia as the habitat of rare, threatened or endangered plant and animal species, rare or state significant natural communities or geologic sites, and similar features of scientific interest benefiting the welfare of the citizens of the Commonwealth. The habitats of swamp-pink, the Shenandoah salamander, limestone caves, old-growth forests, freshwater tidal marshes and shorebird nests are but a few examples of these natural heritage resources.

Tasks required to protect natural heritage resources are divided among five interdependent units of the Natural Heritage Program.

**Inventory**

The first task is to identify, locate and assess the status of the state’s rare plants, animals and natural communities. This job is carried out by the Inventory Section, a staff of dedicated botanists, zoologists and ecologists who conduct extensive research and perform systematic field surveys to locate and document the condition of natural heritage resources.

**Information Management**

Once this information is collected, the Information Management and Project Review Section assemble it into a central database and a geographic information system (GIS). The group keeps the growing knowledge well organized for use within the Natural Heritage Program as well as by other agencies, private organizations and citizens. The staff plays a vital role in guiding development around significant natural habitats and in providing information for important land use and open space conservation decisions by local, regional and statewide conservation agencies and organizations.

**Natural Area Protection**

Information gathered in the inventory process is used to evaluate the importance of conservation sites across the state. Conservation sites are prioritized, and the Natural Area Protection Section contacts natural area owners to discuss various ways to protect the special resources on their property. Protection options may include the Virginia Registry of Natural Areas – an honorary designation that recognizes the special nature of the property and the owner’s voluntary commitment to protect it – or the use of special designation on federal lands, or legal protection through natural area dedication easements or land purchase. The strongest protection tool is natural area dedication, which is similar to a conservation easement in that it protects a site in perpetuity. Dedicated lands become a part of the Natural Area Preserve System.

**Stewardship**

The Natural Heritage Program’s Stewardship Section manages the state’s rapidly growing Natural Area Preserve System. Stewardship staff also works with private landowners and conservation partners, advising and providing technical support to improve management of natural heritage resources. Stewardship activities include conducting ecological studies, biological assessments, invasive species control actions, prescribed burns, hydrology restoration projects, and other actions needed to protect, restore, enhance, and maintain natural communities and rare species’ habitats.

**To learn more**

- Visit our website: www.dcr.virginia.gov/dnh
- Call: (804) 786-7951
- Write: Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
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