

# TENNESSEE BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION

## When the Heart of a Park is a little Boy: Jacob's Nature Park at Sinking Creek

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**Jacob's Nature Park at Sinking Creek** in Johnson City is a testament to community in the wake of tragedy. In 2004, a lively little boy named Jacob Luis Francisco who loved nature and climbing trees became suddenly ill with a malady that stumped his doctors. Tragically, Jacob could not be saved from what was later diagnosed to be a case of E. coli poisoning, which he caught from an unknown source.

Since Sinking Creek near their neighborhood had a known E. Coli situation, Jacob's father, mother, and brother became advocates for cleaning up the creek. Working with the Boone Watershed Partnership, they galvanized an outpouring of community spirit that resulted in local volunteers, students from East Tennessee State University (ETSU), and government and community organization support coming together to restore the Sinking Creek and its wetlands.



Jacob Francisco, left, and his father Bill releasing a tagged Monarch at the Park. (Jacob's photo taken by his family).

**Jacob's family galvanized an outpouring of community spirit, bringing volunteers, students, government and community organizations together to restore Sinking Creek and its wetlands.**

"Nothing cleans water like wetlands," says Connie Deegan, naturalist and Nature Program Coordinator for Johnson City Parks & Recreation. She enthused that after a recent high rain event, "we just sat back and watched the wetlands do their thing! The banks overflowed, and our wetlands captured all the water, then they slowly drained, protecting downstream houses from flooding."

The Park now encompasses **28 urban acres** designated by Johnson City as parkland, and it's an incredibly diverse space with five acres of wetlands, meadows, a chunk of hardwood forest, and through it all runs Sinking Creek.

The park's local neighborhood created a series of painted rock signs—in memory of Jacob's plans to hold a custom-painted rock sale that never happened—which guide people from the Tweetsie Trail, a rail-to-trail pedestrian/cycling path, to the back entrance of Jacob's Park just a few blocks away.

The rest of Jacob's Nature Park at Sinking Creek has benefited from the same level of community support. This urban oasis focuses on educating people about E. coli and how leaking septic tanks (since removed) contributed to contamination. Managers and volunteers alike hope to someday have the stream de-listed as an E. coli source.

**"Nothing cleans water like wetlands." - Connie Deegan, naturalist and Nature Program Coordinator for Johnson City**

But designating the park was just the beginning.

"It's truly a wildlife park," explains Connie. "No mowers! We have to maintain the meadow by mowing every second year, but otherwise the focus is on planting native species, 2 miles of volunteer-constructed nature trails, and education that focuses on ecological connections."

**"It's truly a wildlife park.  
No mowers!"**



Clockwise from top left: Baby Common Snapping Turtle, Viceroy Butterfly on boneset, Queen Snake, American Bumblebee shot from iNaturalist (viceroy & bumblebee by volunteer Melanie Kelley)

Grants have supported interactive interpretive signs, and a local church group helped to establish a pollinator arboretum with 30 tree species that tell a tale not only about each tree species, but also the pollinating insects and animals that rely on it. Running the park on a shoestring budget, Connie embraces just about any idea or expert who comes her way, including the use of technology such as QR codes to help people connect with and contribute to Jacob's Nature Park species inventories on citizen science apps such as **iNaturalist** and **eBird**.

Those citizen science data have led to certification of Jacob's Nature Park as both a **Monarch butterfly waystation** (supporting larval and adult stages of the migrating butterflies as they travel through) and a National Wildlife Federation-recognized **certified wildlife habitat**.

Another grant in 2019 will support the construction of a rustic outdoor classroom—accessible to people with disabilities—with a pounded earth floor and sloping "green roof" in which to hold educational programs.



A toad awaits the spring thaw under a layer of ice at Jacob's Nature Park at Sinking Creek.

“It will be wicked awesome!” says Connie. “Jacob would have loved it.”

### **Contributors to Jacob’s Nature Park**

- Johnson City
- Bill, Juanita, & Joshua Francisco
- Boone Watershed Partnership
- Johnson City Parks & Recreation
- Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation
- East Tennessee State University
- Americorps
- Tennessee Department of Agriculture Nonpoint Source Program
- Essyx Design & Fabricators, Inc.
- Tysinger, Hampton & Partners, Inc.
- Tennessee Department of Corrections
- Wilson Architects, Inc.
- Prosim Engineering, Inc.
- Grandview Christian Church 456 Youth Crew
- Tennessee Department of Agriculture



Above: ETSU students making “seed balls” handy for throwing into the middle of wetlands (a restoration technique!) and cleaning up trash.  
Below ETSU students building a trail, then blazing it.



An ETSU student planting paw paw seedlings, the host tree for Zebra Swallowtails found at the park.  
All photos by Connie Deegan, unless otherwise indicated.

