



LEARN TO SWIM PROGRAM REPORT 2026

Friends of Virgin Islands National Park has offered free swim lessons to the St. John community for more than a decade! Our Learn to Swim program is designed after the American Red Cross Water Safety Course and includes beginner to advanced instruction levels for all ages. Friends sponsors the training and employment of the instructors and lifeguards. This report runs from October 2025 to September 2026.

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SUMMARY

The Friends of Virgin Islands National Park Learn to Swim Program exists to build water safety, swimming ability, environmental stewardship, and confidence among the youth of St. John. Living on an island surrounded by water makes swimming not only a recreational skill, but an essential life skill. Through year-round programming, Friends provides free, accessible, high-quality swim instruction while fostering a lifelong connection to the marine environment.

During 2026, Friends expanded its programming through summer camps, Saturday community lessons, and a new pilot school program, resulting in record participation and community impact. 234 swimmers participated in Learn to Swim Summer, 94 swimmers participated in Learn to Swim Saturdays, and 11 participants joined the first ever pilot program Learn to Swim 3rd Grade. In all, 68 sessions were hosted (40 Saturday lessons, 23 Summer Camp sessions and 5 3rd Grade pilot classes).

The aquatic education team ranges in age from 15 to 70, bringing together a remarkable blend of youthful energy, experience, and a shared passion for helping children feel safe and confident in the water. In all, 11 American Red Cross Lifeguards and 5 Water Safety Instructors were trained this season!

339

participants in Learn To Swim sessions

68

Learn To Swim sessions

16

American Red Cross Lifeguards and Water Safety Instructors trained

PROGRAM LOCATION & SAFETY

Location: Cinnamon Bay, Virgin Islands National Park

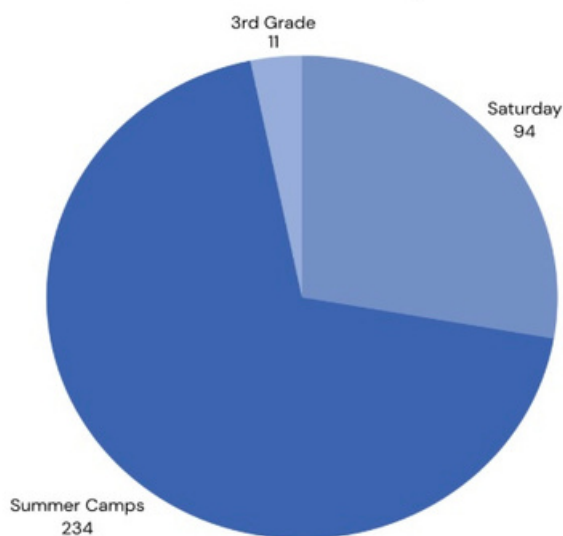
Staffing: American Red Cross-certified Lifeguards, Water Safety Instructors (WSIs), and Instructor Aides

Safety Focus: Daily water assessments, instructor-to-student ratios, Emergency Action Plan (EAP), weather monitoring, hydration and shade breaks, and age-appropriate instruction

The Learn to Swim Program is held at Cinnamon Bay within Virgin Islands National Park, providing participants with the unique opportunity to learn life-saving swim skills in the natural marine environment that surrounds our island. Every session begins with a comprehensive assessment of beach and ocean conditions to ensure a safe learning environment. Our team worked together to maintain appropriate instructor-to-student ratios while delivering individualized instruction and close supervision.

Staff are trained in emergency response procedures and continually monitor weather, water conditions, and participant well-being throughout each session. Frequent hydration and shade breaks are incorporated into the day, ensuring campers remain healthy, engaged, and ready to learn. This strong commitment to safety allows participants to build confidence in the water while giving families and community partners confidence in the program itself.

Learn to Swim Participation



LEARN TO SWIM SATURDAY COMMUNITY PROGRAM

Every Saturday, from October to August, Friends hosts free swim lessons open to the entire community and anyone of any age. This past year, there were 94 participants, with ages ranging from 4 months to 30 years. With overall attendance considered, Learn to Swim Saturdays experienced 424 swim education interactions!

One of the most unique and rewarding aspects of the Learn to Swim Saturday Program is the involvement of parents and caregivers. From cheering on the beach to joining their youngest swimmers in the water, families become active participants in their children's learning experience. This shared involvement helps reinforce water safety skills beyond our weekly lessons, whether at a home pool, the beach, or out on a family boat.

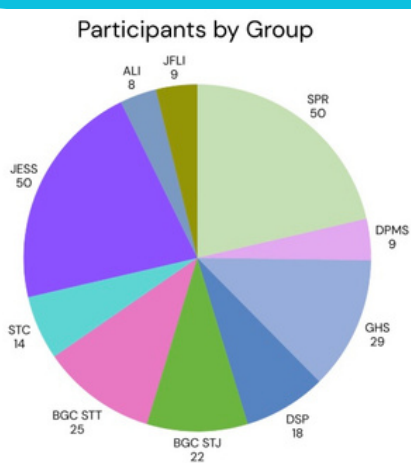
Because the program is offered free of charge, families choose to make a commitment to return week after week. As children participate throughout the season, we see noticeable improvements in their comfort, confidence, and swimming ability. Equally important, parents gain the knowledge and confidence to continue practicing these skills between lessons, creating opportunities for learning long after Saturday mornings have ended.

This year, we welcomed a growing number of infants and toddlers, making parent participation especially valuable. By teaching parents alongside their youngest swimmers, we are building a foundation of safe water habits from the very beginning and strengthening a culture of water safety throughout our community.

LEARN TO SWIM SUMMER PROGRAM

Swim and water safety lessons were offered in combination with onshore educational presentations about sea turtle biology, sea turtle nest protection, sea turtle stranding response, marine ecosystems, phyla of marine animals, and more. Eighteen American Red Cross-certified Lifeguards, Water Safety Instructors, and Instructor Aides worked nearly every day to provide exceptional instruction, supervision, and support to our participants.

Learn to Swim Summer lessons were offered in support of the following summer programs: Department of Sports, Parks and Recreation (DSPR), The Boys and Girls Club of St. John (BGC STJ), The Boys and Girls Club of St. Thomas (BGC STT), Dr. Peet's Music Suite (DPMS), Dynamic Summer Program (DSP), John's Folly Learning Institute (JFLI), Julius E. Sprauve School (JESS), Giff Hill School (GHS) and St. John Outdoor Love City Learning Summer Creative Arts and Literacy Workshop (ALI).



During the summer, our program provided swimming and eco lessons to a record 234 individual children ranging in age from 3-18 years. This resulted in an extraordinary 795 swim education experiences. Of those participants, 71 completed the American Red Cross requirements to advance to the next Learn-to-Swim level—a significant accomplishment requiring attendance at multiple sessions and successful demonstration of all required skills. While not every participant attended enough sessions to test for advancement, every child left with increased water confidence, stronger swimming skills, and a deeper connection to the ocean. Whether it is a child's first time putting their face in the water or their fourth visit building upon earlier successes, every experience contributes to increased confidence, safety, and enjoyment in the ocean.

In addition to swim skill progression, the students demonstrated incredible information retention, citing specific ecosystem structure concepts learned in years past and reaffirmed this summer. Each group showed a passion for learning about the ocean and had specific requests to learn more about specific animals such as orcas, crabs, jellyfish, and deep sea creatures. While snorkeling, the children were able to see and name animals and corals they had learned about in the eco lessons. Some students even requested to complete research on topics to assist with the presentation.

Our goal is to welcome each participating camp three times throughout the summer. Repeated exposure to the water allows children to move beyond initial apprehension, gain confidence, and develop skills that can truly change their relationship with the ocean that surrounds our islands.

These experiences are opportunities to build trust in themselves, their instructors, and the water. We are seeing children arrive hesitant to enter the water and leave with the confidence to float, bob, swim, and explore. As their comfort grows, so do their skills—progressing from foundational water safety and swimming skills to refining strokes and learning new techniques. Just as meaningful is the excitement they bring each time they return, eager to see their instructors, celebrate their accomplishments, and continue building their confidence. It has become abundantly clear that this program is changing children's relationships with the water. We are inspiring a lifelong connection to the ocean, developing safer, more confident swimmers, and giving children memories and skills that will last a lifetime.

LEARN TO SWIM 3RD GRADE PILOT PROGRAM

Friends launched its first 3rd Grade Learn to Swim Pilot Program in 2026 in partnership with Giffit Hill School. As part of an in-school learning experience, 11 third-grade students participated in five consecutive days of swim instruction, water safety education, and ocean stewardship programming. The pilot was designed to introduce students to essential swimming skills while fostering confidence and a deeper connection to the marine environment.

Our ARC-certified Lifeguards and Water Safety Instructors worked with students in small groups, allowing for individualized instruction and focused skill development. By the end of the week, all 11 students had demonstrated the skills necessary to attempt advancement from Learn-to-Swim Level 2 to Level 3. Nine students successfully completed the requirements during the program, while two students were encouraged to continue their progress through the Saturday Learn to Swim program after missing their final assessment.

The five consecutive days of instruction proved to be an effective model for accelerating skill development and building water confidence. Students arrived each day eager to learn, practiced diligently, and showed measurable improvement throughout the week. Feedback from the classroom teacher was overwhelmingly positive, including a request to continue the program during the Fall 2026 semester. She noted that during and after the 3rd grade Learn to Swim programming, students worked together more and brought lessons learned from swim class back into the classroom.

The success of this pilot demonstrated the value of introducing structured swim instruction at the third-grade level—a pivotal age for developing lifelong water safety skills and confidence. Throughout the year, Friends also worked collaboratively with our local education leaders to expand access to school-based swim programming. With approval now in place for public school participation, Friends looks forward to expanding the 3rd Grade Learn to Swim Program to serve even more students in the coming year.

DEVELOPING A TEAM AND A COMMUNITY

Beyond developing swimmers, this program is also creating opportunities for mentorship, leadership, and community connection. Our team ranges in age from 15 to 70, bringing together a remarkable blend of youthful energy, experience, and a shared passion for helping children feel safe and confident in the water.

This summer, Friends invested in building a stronger future for aquatic education on St. John through American Red Cross certification courses. Five new Water Safety Instructors and eleven new Lifeguards earned their certifications, expanding the island's network of qualified professionals dedicated to water safety, swimming instruction, and youth mentorship.

Six of our team members were brand new to the summer program this year and brought fresh energy and enthusiasm to our mission. Most of the team, including 12 lifeguards and water safety instructors, are active participants in the Saturday Learn to Swim program, creating continuity and consistency for our young swimmers. While the staff grew in size, returning and new staff also gained new skills and certification. A total of 11 American Red Cross Lifeguards and five Water Safety Instructors were trained this season!

Another rewarding aspect of the program has been watching our team members grow into leadership roles. A wonderful example is Maxim McMahon, a veteran of both the camps and Saturday program. He has truly stepped into a leadership position this summer, serving as both a Water Safety Instructor and lifeguard while helping guide newer staff and set a positive example for the entire team.

LOOKING FORWARD

As the Learn to Swim Program continues to grow, Friends is excited to build on this year's success through the following priorities:

- Continue to build and strengthen the 3rd grade program
- Develop additional ARC certified Lifeguards and Water Safety Instructors to meet growing demands for Saturdays & increasing summer camp requests
- Strengthen our community partnerships including the local schools, partner camps and local businesses

The ocean is central to life in the Virgin Islands. Through the Learn to Swim Program, children are developing not only swimming skills, but confidence, knowledge, and respect for the waters that surround them. Every lesson strengthens our community by creating safer swimmers, inspiring future ocean stewards, and opening the door to a lifetime of connection with the sea.





**THANK YOU TO OUR
VOLUNTEERS, MEMBERS
AND DONORS.**
YOU MADE THIS AMAZING
SEASON POSSIBLE!

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