



YERKES
OBSERVATORY

2024

ANNUAL REPORT

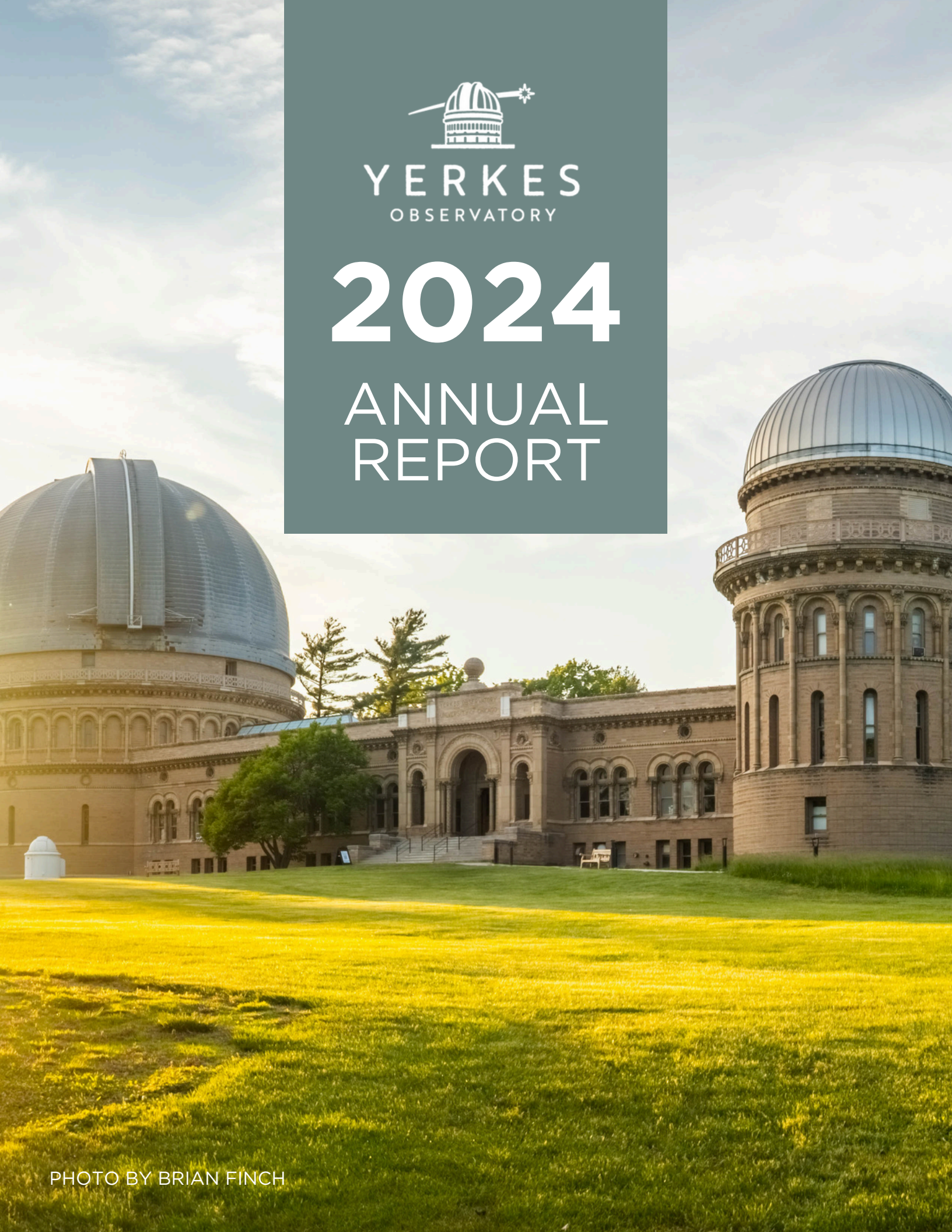


PHOTO BY BRIAN FINCH

DIRECTOR'S REPORT



This year saw Yerkes take exciting new steps toward our shared vision of creating an institution that brings together science, art, and nature in a way unlike any other.

Everything seemed to grow at once in 2024. Our native prairie plants and pollinator gardens, of course, literally grew. Public attention on the observatory's reinvention grew, as we were featured in *National Geographic* and covered by *The New York Times*, as well as hundreds of other outlets.

The Glass Tree festival—a true melding of art and science—grew virally on social media (glass being central to the lenses in our Great Refractor and to our glass plate collection, one of the three largest in the world).

And our ability to bring astronomy and experiences to the public grew, as well. We added a brilliant new project scientist, talented tour guides, new walking trails, night observing programs, and our first-ever Director of Development, Sherry Shaffer, who came to Wisconsin from the renowned Lowell Observatory in Arizona.

It was truly an exciting year of growth, from the budding of newly-offered school visits and teacher training programs to the expanding reach of our public programs. But with your support we're only just beginning... and the years ahead will bring new ideas and experiences to fruition at Yerkes.

-Dennis Kois, Executive Director

Yerkes Observatory is a dream unfolding in surprising and gratifying ways. In four years, the historic observatory was transformed into a gracious, welcoming place for exploration, education, music, and art.

In 2024, we added board members, completed the Strategic Plan, secured funding for the Play/Space, increased outreach to schools, welcomed summer interns, held musical events, hosted speakers, and capped the year with more visitors than ever before.

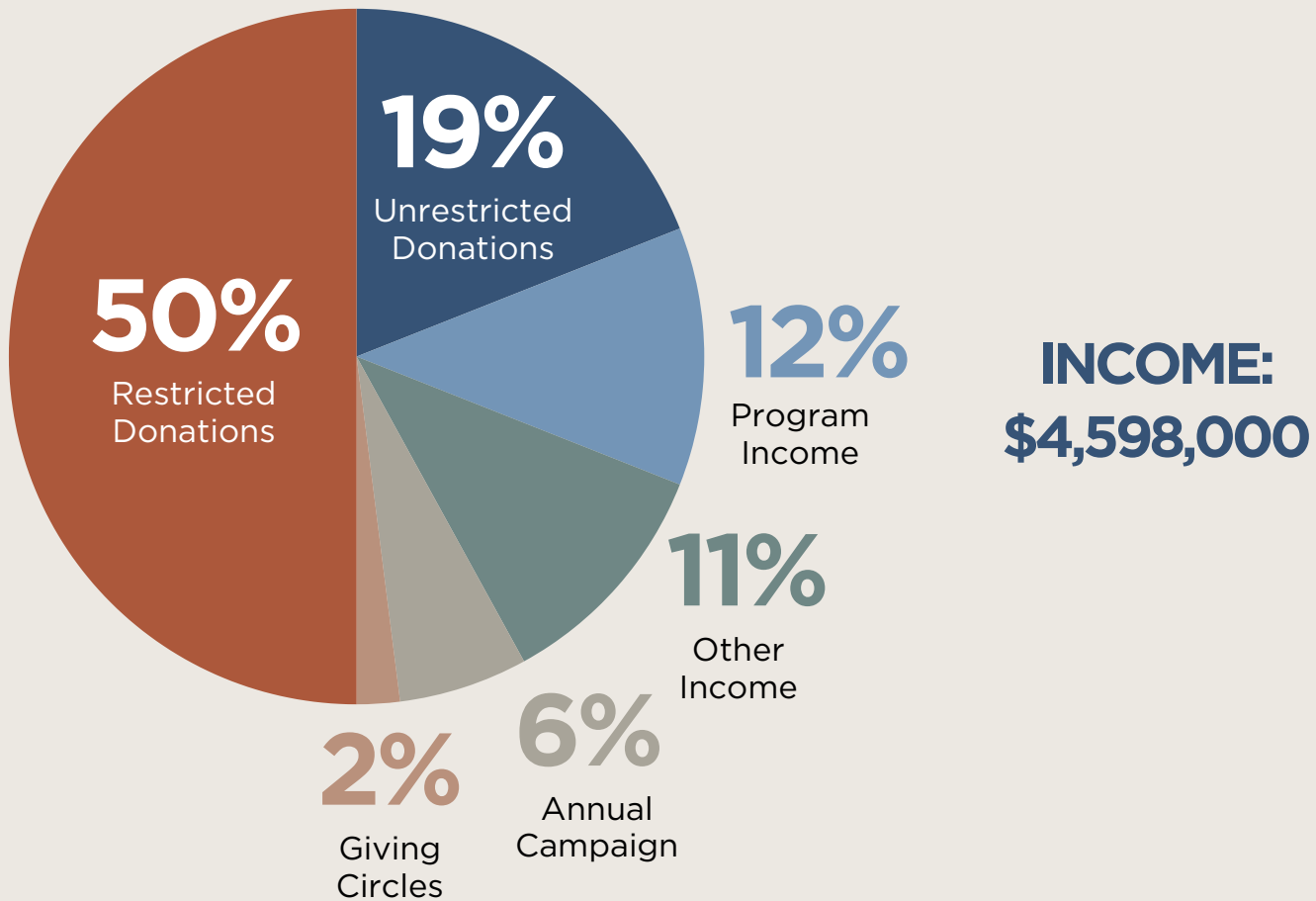
Now this community, this state, this country, this world has a destination for searching galaxies, walking trails through meadows and flower gardens, listening to scientists, artists, and musicians, and witnessing the ongoing history of Yerkes Observatory. We are so proud to be part of this!

-Dianna Colman, YFF Board Chair 2018-2024

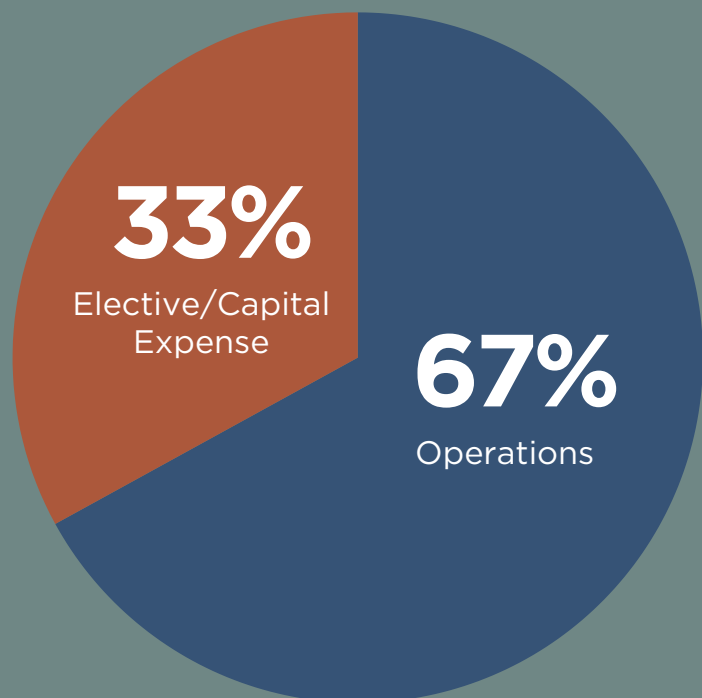
BOARD CHAIR'S REPORT



2024 FINANCIALS



EXPENSES:
\$3,390,000





The Great Refractor (photo by Brian Finch)

SCIENCE

2024 was a year of progress for science at Yerkes. We expanded our astronomy team to include Project Scientist Dr. Luke Schmidt and Observing Assistant Emily Wade. We also hosted several successful workshops at Yerkes, including the *Galactic Science with the Nancy Grace Roman Space Telescope* workshop in June.

Restoration, repairs, and improvements continued on the Great Refractor and the 24" and 41" reflecting telescopes. We opened the eyes of the Great Refractor to the skies for unique public observing opportunities throughout the year. Our summer research students completed projects using the 24" telescope and our extensive glass plate collection, and the observatory submitted funding proposals to the National Science Foundation and NASA to support research and education.

Work continued on the glass plate collection with a group of volunteers generating a catalog of the collection, re-enveloping plates, and responding to requests from astronomers to use scanned images of plates for research. We also started developing the digital infrastructure to store and make astronomical data available to people around the world.

Our goal in 2025 and beyond is to ensure Yerkes continues to advance astronomy and to be a destination site for science and discovery—an experience unlike any other where science, environment, culture, arts, and curiosity combine in novel and unique ways.

-Dr. Amanda Bauer,
Montgomery Foundation Deputy Director
and Head of Science & Education



2024 Blackbird Creative Lab at Yerkes Observatory

TOURS & EVENTS

In only our second full year open to the public, Yerkes saw continued increases in visitation as we expanded our offerings and enhanced visitor experience. Thanks to the Simms Family Foundation, in spring we opened an exhibit featuring a restored hemisphere made for moon research by astronomers Gerard Kuiper and Carl Sagan in 1958. Our summer Speaker Series featured Harvard-Smithsonian's Dr. Alyssa Goodman, NASA's Dr. Ed Lu, and Dr. Matthew Greenhouse, among others. Yerkes has created a space where astronomers are collaborating with artists of all types to create unique, cross-pollinated programs.

During June's Blackbird Creative Lab, 20 musicians from around the world were matched with seven composers for an immersion in the observatory's spaces. The two-week residency was led by four-time Grammy winners Eighth Blackbird, and collaborating artists included National Medal of the Arts and MacArthur Prize winner Ann Hamilton. The works written at Yerkes were performed for the public during five concerts in the Great Refractor Dome. Australian composer Amanda Lee Falkenberg was October's artist-in-residence. Falkenberg, who led an engaging public program at Yerkes, is the internationally-acclaimed composer of *The Moons Symphony* which has been performed by the London Symphony and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

In November, Yerkes volunteers lined our paths with 2,000 candles for an illuminated walk through the 50-acre Arboretum. In December, we hosted the World's Tallest Glass Tree Festival, highlighting the importance of glass in astronomy. The project featured the creation of a 36 ft. tall tree made from melting 6,000 recycled bottles. An estimated 12,000 people visited over the six days.

-Walt Chadick, Director of Programs & External Affairs



Community volunteers come together to plant a garden at Yerkes.

LANDSCAPE & GROUNDS

In 2024, we continued our work to preserve the landscape, educate, engage, and encourage all to wander and wonder. A key highlight of our efforts is the ongoing restoration of the historic 1906 Olmsted plan. Over one hundred trees were planted bringing us closer to restoring the vision laid out over a century ago. Work began on a comprehensive Site Master Plan, developed in collaboration with Saiki Landscape Architecture, and will be completed in early 2025.

Environmental stewardship remains a major focus. A native prairie was installed to help recreate indigenous soil conditions, and sedge rain gardens were added to manage runoff into Geneva Lake. Existing grass trails were expanded and trail markers added to help visitors navigate and enjoy the arboretum. A woodland trail system was established, and a conifer screen was planted at the front entrance.

Our dedicated volunteers have been central to these achievements. From planting to weeding to mulching, their tireless efforts keep the grounds thriving. Volunteers also collected and resowed wildflower seeds—both in our meadows and on their own properties—continuing the cycle of native plant restoration. In addition, prospective Eagle Scouts completed various landscape projects as part of their path to Eagle status.

Education and community engagement remain a priority. We hosted horticultural visionaries Roy Diblik, Briana Frank, Jeff Epping, and Jens Jensen for public and volunteer sessions. Our Cultural Gardener Workshops gave students hands-on horticultural experiences, nurturing the next generation of garden professionals. Due to popularity, our second annual Night Hike expanded to two evenings in the fall. Close to 1,000 guests attended this magical event exploring the grounds after dark with over 2,000 luminaries lighting the way to discovering a new sense of wonder in nature.

-Landscape Committee

2024 IN PHOTOS



Top: Astronomy on Tap at Duesterbeck's Brewing Company

Second row (from left to right): Solar Eclipse Open House. 2024 interns with Yerkes staff, World's Tallest Glass Tree Festival, and Nancy Grace Roman Workshop participants

Third row (from left to right): 2024 Night Hike and Executive Director Dennis Kois, Board Chair Dianna Colman with the Outstanding Citizen Award, and Director of Programs & External Affairs Walt Chadick with the Hospitality Award at the Visit Lake Geneva Annual Dinner & Impact Awards

EDUCATION & OUTREACH

From open houses to school visits to internships, our education programming at Yerkes Observatory is dedicated to inspiring curiosity and fostering scientific engagement and interest in astronomy, astrophysics, and other related STEM fields. In 2024, we doubled the number of opportunities for K-12 classrooms to visit and developed a variety of activities that educators can choose from, including an activity that explores the cause of solar eclipses, a design-your-own alien activity, and an activity that explores how the universe is expanding. We held our first educator professional development sessions and continued our successful internship program.

Thanks to the support of generous donors, Yerkes was able to welcome three undergraduate students for a paid, 8-week residential research internship during summer 2024. The students contributed to various projects, including asteroid monitoring with our 24" reflector and variable star research with our glass plate collection.

The internship application process was highly competitive, with over 80 exceptional student applications. We supported three students in 2024: Carlos Ayala (Caltech, BS 2024), who studied variable stars and helped streamline the digitization of our glass plate collection; Dylan Caudill (Purdue University, BS 2024), who studied variable stars and created a searchable database of our glass plate collection; and Michelle Giovacchini (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, BS 2025), who studied asteroids and other potential Near Earth Objects.

Since their time at Yerkes, two of the three interns have either been accepted into an astronomy graduate program or are employed in the field of astronomy. We also hosted one middle school intern and a high school intern who has been accepted by a college in an astronomy-related field.



Educator Professional Development Workshop (photo by Brian Finch)



*2024 Solar System Open House
(photo by Brian Finch)*

2024 was a successful second year of outreach programming at Yerkes Observatory. We continued the Exploring the Night Sky Tours, allowing members of the public to observe through the largest refracting telescope in the world. We also held four sold-out Open Houses, and one Community Day. In October we partnered with Duesterbeck's Brewing in Elkhorn, WI to host our first-ever *Astronomy on Tap* as part of the Wisconsin Science Festival.

Our outreach efforts aim to broaden public understanding of astronomy through community events that engage people from all backgrounds and interest levels with the history and future of astronomy through Yerkes' lens. By bridging historical achievements and modern scientific advancements, Yerkes Observatory serves as a hub for lifelong learning and inspiration.

-Mallory Conlon, Outreach Astronomer

2024 BY THE NUMBERS



20,000+

Total visitors,
including more than
10,000 on tours



4

Weddings with
600 guests
total



50

Educator
Professional
Development
participants



13

Private parties and
corporate events
with 1,200
attendees total



800

Students
visited



1,000

Open House
attendees



In 2024, staff completed restoration on homes from 1896 and 1940 on the property. This makes it possible for visiting artists and scientists to stay at no cost, freeing them to create public programs for visitors.



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PHOTO BY WILL BORGEN