



SUMMER 2019 Tennessee  
field notes

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# CONSERVATION WIN

TNC facilitates one of the largest land deals in its 40-year history of working in Tennessee.

The Nature Conservancy announced that it has spearheaded the acquisition of 100,000 acres of working forestland in the globally significant Central Appalachian Mountains of southeast Kentucky and northeast Tennessee. The property, known as Ataya, represents one of the most ambitious and innovative land conservation and ecological restoration efforts ever pursued by TNC in the eastern United States.

A significant portion of this project provides a critical linkage between the North Cumberland Wildlife Management Area in Tennessee and the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park and Kentucky Ridge State Forest—places located along the Cumberland and Pine Mountain corridor, which is considered key to wildlife migration in the face of a changing climate. Many people also use and enjoy the area for outdoor recreation.

**IN THIS ISSUE:**

- 3 More About Ataya
- 4 Prescribed Fire
- 5 Healthy Soils
- 6 Chestnut Mountain
- 7 Faces of Conservation
- 8 Tennessee Tidbits

CONTINUED ON PAGE 3



FROM THE DIRECTOR

# State Director's Chat



The Nature Conservancy has come a long way since acquiring our first property in Tennessee 40 years ago—a 173-acre parcel at Taylor Hollow. Today our founders, former leaders and earliest members would be proud and in awe of the scale at which we are working with the recent addition of the Ataya property and the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain to the portfolio of places we protect in Tennessee.

Front-and-center in this issue of *Tennessee Field Notes* is news about the acquisition of the 100,000-acre Ataya property that straddles the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Conserving lands and waters at this scale represents a significant step forward in ongoing multi-state efforts to permanently protect resilient and connected landscapes throughout the Appalachian Mountains, a region known to harbor globally-important forests, the country's most significant wildlife migration pathway, sources of drinking water for millions, and some of the most spectacular recreational opportunities in the eastern United States.

This month also marks one year since TNC assumed ownership of the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain. While collaborating with Bridgestone Americas, Inc. on forest management initially jump-started our work at Chestnut Mountain, we enjoyed spending the past year exploring and inventorying the property's abundant and diverse habitats and wildlife as its new owners. We report more on TNC's current and future plans at Chestnut Mountain in these pages.

For me, acquiring both of these properties—the Ataya property and the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain—represents TNC's unique ability to "think big." Built on a history of the ambitious, hardworking and visionary colleagues who came before me, and because of support from people like you, TNC has the ability to envision conservation success at larger and larger scales and then marshal the resources and expertise required to pull it off.

In addition, as you can imagine, neither of these projects end with signing the deed. Our work has just begun. We look forward to demonstrating, at both properties, how to manage working forests capable of yielding conservation outcomes that will also reduce carbon in our atmosphere and generate revenues to support local livelihoods and communities. We are off to an incredible start. Thanks for being part of the journey.

See you outside.

Terry Cook  
State Director



The Nature Conservancy's mission is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends.

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## CONSERVATION WIN

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“One of the unique aspects of this project is a recognition of the important role this area plays for both people and nature,” says Terry Cook, TNC’s state director in Tennessee. “These forests also generate jobs and revenue for the sustainable forestry and outdoor recreation industries.”

The Ataya property lies in the Central Appalachian Mountains: a global biodiversity hotspot, a major North American migration corridor and a source of headwaters for important watersheds. Conserving this landscape benefits wildlife habitat and water quality, stores atmospheric carbon and fosters investments in local economies.

“This is one of the largest conservation projects in TNC’s history of working in Tennessee and a truly phenomenal accomplishment,” says Senator Bill Frist, who serves on TNC’s Global Board of Directors. “I am proud to work with an organization that pursues projects with not only significant conservation value but positive health and economic impacts on local communities. I have spent extensive time in the Appalachian region, and support this effort to smartly preserve some of our nation’s most beautiful natural environments.”

## Importance of Forests

Throughout the Appalachian region, TNC is committed to connecting its conservation work with the needs and interests of local communities. That means employing local loggers and utilizing local mills as part of managing the working forests included in this acquisition. TNC also plans to seek certification by the Forest Stewardship Council, the gold standard for the long-term protection and responsible management of healthy, diverse and sustainable forests capable of generating revenue to support local economies.

The Conservancy is also pursuing opportunities for providing public access for wildlife viewing, fishing, hunting and other activities, and is collaborating with community-based organizations on economic development projects that are compatible with TNC’s mission and conservation goals.

“This property contains many headwater streams that flow into the Kentucky and Cumberland rivers,” says Alex Wyss, TNC’s director of conservation in Tennessee, who adds, “carefully managing the health of its forests is vital for people and nature since they serve as a giant filter for water and air—key ingredients to the survival of all living things.”

The Conservancy will also manage the Ataya property as a certified forest carbon offset project, under the rules of the California Air Resources Board, in order to store more atmospheric carbon and help mitigate climate change. Managing the property in this way can potentially generate revenue via the sale of carbon credits.

## Legacy of Mineral Extraction

As is common in this region, property ownership is divided in two: a surface estate, which TNC has acquired, and a sub-surface mineral estate, which will continue to be owned by third parties. TNC has no ownership of the mineral rights or control over current mining activities. TNC will work with regulators and mining companies using a collaborative, science-based approach to advocate for best environmental practices that minimize the impacts of mineral extraction and support restoration activities once a mining project is complete.

“Mining is expected to impact a relatively small percentage of the property’s forests,” says Gabby Lynch, TNC’s director of protection in Tennessee. “As the surface estate owner, TNC will redirect compensation received for damages towards managing the property. Royalties will go to third-party community organizations for local economic and community development.”

Working as a conservation professional in Tennessee, at larger and larger scales, has required Lynch to gain an understanding of the role mining still plays in the Appalachian landscape and find novel ways to work within that reality. She adds, “Ataya has been a much more complicated project than a standard acquisition, and the scale of the conservation gain is tremendous. We are proud to be a part of it.”



# FIRE RX

## Restoring habitats that depend on regular fire disturbances.

During three days this spring, fire crews from the National Park Service, the United States Forest Service and The Nature Conservancy took advantage of ideal weather to implement controlled burns on more than 4,000 acres in the Cherokee National Forest and on the smaller 240-acre Lynn Hollow parcel within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

“Lynn Hollow illustrates the reason why prescribed fire is key to advancing our mission here,” says Katherine Medlock, TNC’s East Tennessee program director.

Since the 1700s, Lynn Hollow has required regular fire disturbances to maintain the health of a forest boasting numerous 200-400 year-old shortleaf pine, white oak, chestnut oak, hickory and black-gum trees. The fires serve two purposes. They remove woody debris, leaves and other fuel known to generate dangerous and destructive wildfires. Also, they benefit species like short-leaf pine, which require that direct sunlight can reach a forest floor cleared by regular, low-intensity burning.

Prescribed fire also serves as an appropriate response to a rapidly changing climate expected to increase the frequency of severe, out-of-control fires that leave no hope for forest regeneration.

Medlock says, “It may seem counterintuitive to fight potential and dangerous fires, with more fire. But employing it as a conservation tool can prevent catastrophic events that destroy an entire forest, which releases a lot of CO2.” She adds, “We know from previous mapping data that approximately one-quarter to one-third of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park is made up of forest types, like those found at Lynn Hollow, that experienced and adapted to periodic burning before fire was viewed as destructive and, as a result, suppressed for many years. Now we know that it can be beneficial.”

Healthy forests—with their carbon storing abilities—represent one of the best solutions to reducing carbon in the atmosphere and reclaiming a more stable climate for all of us.



**Shortleaf pine trees** typically do not produce fertile cones until approximately age 20. Then, over a two-year period, the cones disperse 25 to 40 small winged seeds as far as two times the height of the parent tree. Historic records show that frequent, low-intensity fires taking place at one to four-year intervals open the forest understory and prepare the forest floor for optimum seed catch and cultivation.

Medlock’s colleague and TNC fire manager, Chris Minor, adds, “Despite negative connotations associated with forest fires, fire is a natural and even healthy element for certain ecosystems when applied correctly. In the absence of effective fire management, many important ecosystems will become extinct.”

In Tennessee, TNC has facilitated prescribed burning for eight years at targeted areas throughout the Southern Blue Ridge. Soon, thanks to a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, TNC will expand this work further west into the Cumberland Plateau.

“Some places will never be what they once were due to development and other land uses,” says Medlock. “But this work helps us identify areas where burns might help to prevent tree-killing wildfires and benefit wildlife habitat, forest health and surrounding communities.”







## Running For Cover

FEDERAL AND STATE GRANTS SUPPORT KEEPING PRODUCTIVE SOILS OUT OF LOCAL WATERWAYS.

Tucked away in West Tennessee, the town of Milan boasts approximately 7,600 residents, a population that more than doubles during “No Till Field Day”—an agricultural event that attracts people from around the world who are interested in growing crops with minimal disruption to the land. Now in its 30th year, the event was the brainchild of the late Tom McCutcheon, a farmer and researcher who sought to downgrade Milan’s distinction of having the most highly erodible soil in the United States.

“Tom sought to grow crops and fight weeds in ways that conserve, rather than destroy, our soils and the land,” says Holt Shoaf, a longtime Milan farmer and a Nature Conservancy trustee in Tennessee. “His vision made Tennessee the epicenter of no-till agriculture in the nation, and maybe even in the world.”

Preventing erosion is especially important in this part of Tennessee, where fertilizers and nutrients reaching local waterways eventually

flow into the Gulf of Mexico where a toxic red tide has become an all too common occurrence. This fuels the Soil Health Partnership (SHP)—a farmer-led initiative of the National Corn Growers’ Association that directs federal and state grants to innovative practices that keep soil out of waterways to benefit crop production and the environment.

Currently there are 140 SHP demonstration sites around the country. SHP is also in the process of identifying and enrolling up to an additional 15 growers in Tennessee who will contribute towards a goal of reducing nutrients reaching the Gulf of Mexico by 20 percent by 2025.

“It is a new way of approaching this challenge,” says Alex Wyss, TNC’s director of conservation in Tennessee. “To date, things have been piecemeal. This is the first time that we are partnering with farmers, at this scale, to find solutions that are good for profitability and for the environment.”

Holt Shoaf thinks that proving profitability will be key. He hopes that promising practices, like the use of cover crops, will achieve that. Often planted during off seasons to reduce erosion, cover crops boost soil health, diminish weeds, benefit water quality and welcome wildlife.

“Tennessee farmers are already on the cutting-edge of soil-health with the highest adoption rate of no-till agricultural production in the nation at more than 75 percent,” adds Shoaf. “As with no-till, cover crop practices will only succeed if they prove to be profitable while also benefiting nature. It’s possible. We can’t forget that saving the land means that we get to keep farming it forever.”

### SOIL HEALTH PARTNERSHIP (SHP)

Agriculture in the 21st century faces the challenge of producing enough food, fuel and fiber to support a rapidly growing population while safeguarding the land and water resources upon which we all depend. The farmer-led SHP tests, measures and advances progressive farm management practices that will enhance sustainability and farm economics for future generations. Administered by the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), the SHP’s vision is driven by funding and guidance from Bayer, the Environmental Defense Fund, the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research, General Mills Foundation, Midwest Row Crop Collaborative, National Wheat Foundation, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Pisces Foundation, Walton Family Foundation and The Nature Conservancy.



# Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain

Marking one year of ownership with exciting projects in the works.



No one expected a 5,763-acre gift back in June 2018. The Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain represents the largest gift in TNC's 40-year history of working in Tennessee. Since then, TNC's Tennessee staff has embraced many conservation opportunities made possible by protecting such a large and undeveloped piece of land.

## Inventoring Species

The Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain is part of a mosaic of 60,000 acres of protected public lands that include Virgin Falls State Natural Area, Fall Creek Falls State Park, Bledsoe State Forest and the state-owned 10,000-acre Bridgestone/Firestone Centennial Wilderness Wildlife Management Area. Its size and location provide an opportunity to conserve many types of forests, safeguard the headwaters to a river and protect hundreds of species, many requiring lots of room to roam.

"It is a large property with some portions that are difficult to access,"

says Alex Wyss, TNC's director of conservation in Tennessee. "Since taking ownership of the Reserve, we've been hiking all of the trails and exploring every corner of the property."

According to Wyss, TNC intends to conduct more intensive inventorying with additional help. Specifically, a grant from the Barbara J. Mapp Foundation has made it possible to organize a BioBlitz, which gathers scientists from a variety of fields—during a specific period—to rapidly survey plants and animals key to assembling a comprehensive list of wildlife found at the Reserve.

## Exploring New Markets

The Conservancy is also moving forward with plans to harness the carbon sequestering power of the Reserve's forests to mitigate impacts from greenhouse gasses. Currently, the property stores about 200,000 metric tons of carbon, equivalent to greenhouse gasses emitted by 155,697 vehicles in one year.

In order to increase the property's carbon storage, TNC is exploring the sale of carbon credits to businesses seeking to offset their emissions. Revenues from such transactions go towards restoring more of the property's forest cover. For example, TNC is carefully re-introducing fire into the landscape and treating trees for pests like the hemlock woolly adelgid to foster even healthier forests. As part of its donation, Bridgestone Americas, Inc. set aside credits to offset emissions from its new headquarters in Nashville.

"These efforts also help with scaling up other conservation projects across the Cumberland Plateau, which strengthens the landscape's overall health and resilience in the face of a changing climate," adds Wyss.

## Welcoming the Public

Once TNC has a better idea of the Reserve's plant and animal species, and associated needs, it will plan for public uses that are compatible with the property's natural values. In the near term, this includes hosting a community open house and working with partners to establish connector trails between the Reserve and the other protected lands in the area.

"We applaud Bridgestone Americas, Inc. for its commitment to the environment and are honored that they entrusted The Nature Conservancy to manage this important forest," says TNC's Tennessee state director, Terry Cook. "They're setting an example for how corporations can attain success while protecting the planet in collaboration with the conservation community."





# Philanthropy Staff Grows



Our new associate director of philanthropy, Amanda Tate, has more than ten years' experience in building relationships with supporters after managing institutional giving for national and state museums, a regional health and human services organization, and an award-winning library system. On weekends Amanda joins her husband Will and their rescue pup, Coupe, on hiking trails at the Warner Parks. She also likes to seek out wildflowers at TNC's Taylor Hollow Preserve. A city-dweller all her life, Amanda looks forward to watching TNC's mission expand into Tennessee's urban areas and in cities around the world.



The team's new philanthropy operations manager, Angela Schmidt, comes to TNC with a rich background in the environmental field after working at Oceana in New York City, and then in Nashville at the Tennessee Wildlife Federation and Cumberland River Compact. Outside of work, Angela is a SCUBA diver and kayaker, and loves hiking and looking for fossils. One of her favorite spots in Tennessee is at Pickett State Park and TNC's Pogue Creek Canyon Preserve where she enjoys exploring the rock formations, watching glow worms emerge in Hazard Cave and soaking in a sea of constellations.

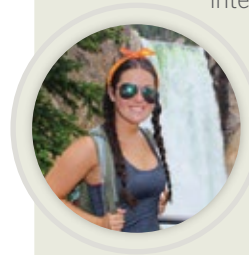


Last February, The Nature Conservancy's Global Board of Directors met in Nashville for their quarterly meeting. Thank you to Senator Bill Frist, who serves on the Board, for being a generous host and representative of Tennessee.

## Thank You Interns

The Nature Conservancy's Tennessee office extends a huge thanks to interns from Vanderbilt University, Samantha Mitchum and Ellie Scholtz.

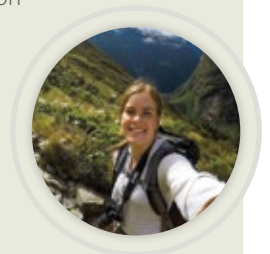
"I enjoyed gaining an inside perspective of working within a non-profit that has a global and local impact," says Samantha, a native of Fort Mill, South Carolina. "It was interesting to witness



how a multitude of individuals and teams work together to create a positive impact across Tennessee and beyond."

Samantha begins a position with Infosys Consulting in July after graduating with a masters degree in marketing from Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Business.




Ellie, who recently graduated with a degree in science communications, proved invaluable on



many projects, including one that involved digging into archives to discover articles and photographs dating back 40 years to TNC's first projects in Tennessee. She adds, "I have loved combining my creative spirit with a passion for the outdoors fueled by a childhood spent backpacking and taking long walks along the shores of Lake Michigan." Ellie started a job with TNC as a communications coordinator in her home state of Michigan in May!

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 TENNESSEE TIDBITS

## Piney Falls State Natural Area



As part of a partnership with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation's Division of Natural Areas, The Nature Conservancy acquired two parcels that more than double the size of the 440-acre Piney Falls State Natural Area (SNA). Located in Rhea County, the Piney Falls SNA features deep gorges carved out by the Piney River and Soak Creek, as well as waterfalls and pristine forest. The United States Department of Interior recognizes it as a National Natural Landmark. The Tucker Foundation and the Open Space Institute made it possible to purchase approximately 377 acres that expand the current SNA and protect the Piney Falls SNA view shed from development. A second, 341-acre parcel, co-purchased with The Conservation Fund, will enable the future expansion of Cumberland Trail State Park.

## Land and Water Conservation Fund

The Nature Conservancy's Tennessee board and staff members celebrate the permanent reauthorization of the nation's Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) which, for over 50 years, has provided Tennessee more than \$208 million conservation and recreation projects around the state.



**THANKS** to everyone who has supported The Nature Conservancy's work in Tennessee during this milestone year. We appreciate every donation. We couldn't pursue our mission—conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends—without you!