ARKANSAS
2026 ANNUAL REPORT



A Million-Acre Milestone

Restoring the forests and wetlands that sustain wildlife and communities across Arkansas

Story on page 3.

The Nature Conservancy

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ON THE COVER: A great egret puts on a show at a restored wetland on the Ashley County property of Arkansas Trustee Craig Shackelford.
© Robert H. Holt

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Conservation is ultimately a story about people. Those who had the foresight to conserve special places before they were lost. Those who invested in solutions before the results were visible. And those who understood that caring for nature is one of the most meaningful ways we can shape the future.

That idea resonates deeply here in Arkansas, where our work has been guided by a simple belief: the choices we make today will shape the landscapes, waters and communities that future generations will inherit.

This year, The Nature Conservancy celebrates 75 years of conservation around the world. Here in Arkansas, we've officially been part of that story since 1982, with roots stretching back to the conservation of the 12,000-acre Hobbs Estate in 1979, a project that established Hobbs State Park - Conservation Area and helped lay the foundation for TNC's work across the state. More than four decades later, that vision continues to benefit both people and nature, reminding us that lasting impact is measured not only in years, but in generations.

As I reflect on that legacy, my overwhelming feeling is gratitude.

Thank you for your support, your partnership and your belief in our mission to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. The progress highlighted throughout this report would not be possible without you.

The stories in these pages showcase important successes from across Arkansas, but they also reveal something deeper. Each story represents years of collaboration, learning and dedication. They reflect the power of bringing together communities, landowners, supporters and partners around a shared vision for the future.

Together, we are building on that momentum. By following the best available science and scaling proven solutions, we're helping protect the natural resources that sustain Arkansas' economy, outdoor heritage and quality of life.

Anniversaries invite us to celebrate how far we've come, but they also remind us of the responsibility we share for what comes next. I'm inspired by the progress we've made and excited about the future we're building together.

Thank you for being part of this work and helping ensure Arkansas' lands and waters continue to support generations to come.

Best,

Roger Mangham, *Arkansas State Director*



A Million-Acre Milestone

"Reaching one million acres is a remarkable achievement," says Ron Seiss, Lower Mississippi River Program director for The Nature Conservancy. "It reflects decades of work by landowners, conservation organizations and public agencies to protect and restore an iconic landscape."

For more than 30 years, a transformation has unfolded across the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley (LMAV), which stretches from Missouri to Louisiana and was once home to more than 24 million acres of forests and wetlands. What began as a shared vision has grown into a landmark conservation effort.

Established in the 1990s, the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) program helps landowners restore and permanently protect wetlands while retaining ownership.

Recently, that work reached a remarkable milestone: more than 1 million acres restored and protected in the LMAV, including 280,000 acres in Arkansas. Along the way, more than 250 million trees have been planted, helping rebuild the forests and wetlands that define this region.

The benefits are immense. Restored wetlands improve water quality, reduce flood impacts and provide essential habitat for wildlife. For landowners, the WRE progam offers a way to restore marginal and flood-prone acres that are often difficult and costly to farm, while providing compensation and restoration assistance through a voluntary conservation easement.

Since helping launch the Tri-State Conservation Partnership in 2013, TNC has brought private funding, scientific expertise and collaborative restoration to Arkansas, expanding conservation opportunities and increasing the impact of every acre restored.

"We're proud to celebrate this achievement with you, the supporters, who helped make it possible," says Roger Mangham, TNC's Arkansas state director. "From the Cache to the White and Bayou Meto, these acres are restoring the forests and wetlands that make Arkansas one of the best places in the country to experience the outdoors."

The WRE program is proof that science-based partnerships can create lasting benefits for people and nature. As TNC works toward even bigger conservation goals, this success offers a blueprint for what's possible when people come together to leave a lasting legacy.

A Family Legacy Takes Flight

For four generations, Hogwallow has been part of the Shackelford family's story. For Craig Shackelford, a longtime trustee of The Nature Conservancy in Arkansas, the property reflects a lifelong commitment to conservation.

The 1,700-acre property in Ashley County was once forested and later farmed for rice, but by the late 1990s, farming it had become difficult. In 1999, the family enrolled the property in the Wetland Reserve Easements (WRE) program, helping secure its future while restoring 900 acres to forested wetlands.

Today, Hogwallow thrives.

Cypress trees rise from the wetlands, and each spring and fall thousands of migratory birds stop to rest and feed. This year, more than 62 roseate spoonbills, a striking pink wetland bird, were counted there.

"It's amazing to see what this land has become," Shackelford says. "And rewarding to know we've helped create a place where wildlife can thrive."

The Shackelfords continue stewarding the land, thinning trees as needed to maintain a healthy forest. Their commitment extends beyond Hogwallow. Today, three Shackelford family farms in Arkansas are enrolled in the WRE program.

For Shackelford, the success is measured in more than acres restored. A landscape once struggling to stay afloat is now a haven for wildlife and an example of how conservation can protect both family history and the places that make Arkansas special.

Roseate Spoonbills feed their baby at Hogwallow. © Robert H. Holt



Rooted in the Delta

From forest to farmland and back again: One family's Delta legacy comes full circle

For most of his life, Steve Jernigan has watched changes roll across the landscape of eastern Arkansas. In the small Delta town of Lepanto, where agriculture has long shaped both the economy and the landscape, his family's roots stretch back more than a century.

> "My daddy and grandpa first came to Lepanto in 1910," he says. "It was all woods."

The forests that once stretched across the Delta seemed endless. Timber companies eventually cleared much of that landscape, transforming vast hardwood forests into farmland. Over time, farming replaced forestry as the region's economic backbone, and generations of families, including Jernigan's, depended on those fields for their livelihood.

But one small patch of woods survived. "My dad decided to leave a little piece of timber down there," Jernigan recalls. "Every now and then he'd go sit and look at it and reminisce."

Today, Jernigan finds himself thinking about that patch of forest often. He inherited his father's 160 acres of farmland near Lepanto, land that has become increasingly challenging to farm. The property relies on rainfall rather than irrigation, making crop production a challenge. So when he read about The Nature Conservancy's Floodplain Reforestation Program, he saw an opportunity to rethink the future of his land.

"I read about the program and decided to reach out," he says. "That's how it all started."

The program helps private landowners restore marginal agricultural ground to native bottomland hardwood forest across the Delta. Participants receive annual incentive payments of $100 per reforested acre for 30 years, while site preparation, seedlings, planting and technical assistance are covered at no cost. Landowners maintain ownership of their property and can benefit from new opportunities such as hunting leases, potential tax savings and reduced costs associated with farming less productive acres.

For Jernigan, those benefits made sense. But they were not the primary reason he enrolled.

"I want it all to go back to trees," he says. "Oak, cypress, persimmon, whatever native species belonged here."

Jernigan is one of six active participants enrolled in the Floodplain Reforestation Program, including five landowners in Arkansas and one in Mississippi. Together, these projects will restore 175 acres of floodplain habitat by planting more than 52,000 native bottomland hardwood trees.

Restored floodplain forests create habitat for wildlife, improve water quality and help strengthen the health and resilience of the entire Delta landscape.

For Jernigan, though, the restoration is a way of honoring the past.

The trees that once defined this region are beginning to return, one acre at a time. And on his farm, the story is coming full circle. The land that was once forest is becoming forest again.

Wetlands and floodplain habitat © Rory Doyle



Helping farmers conserve water across the Delta

What began as a simple idea in Arkansas is now helping reshape water management across the Delta.

TNC's well timer program, designed to optimize groundwater use through more efficient pumping practices, started in 2019 as a pilot project in Arkansas. More than 660 farmers participated and quickly found that automated irrigation tools could improve water management without disrupting day-to-day farm operations. As the program's success grew and farmers shared their positive experiences, it became a model for expansion beyond state lines.

That momentum reached Mississippi this year. Nearly 140 well timers have already been installed in participating farms. What began with a goal of 250-375 units is now expected to reach as many as 500, thanks to efficient use of grant funding and strong support from project partners Delta F.A.R.M., Mississippi State University and FieldPro Management.

It is because of donors like you that the Arkansas pilot was a success and this growth is now possible.

Data collected from landowners revealed meaningful opportunities to conserve water while maintaining farm productivity. Water conservation is a critical need. More than 20,000 irrigation wells pump roughly 2 billion gallons of water each day from the Mississippi River Valley Alluvial Aquifer, the region's primary source of groundwater for agriculture.

Another factor in the program's quick spread was that growers embraced the technology. With few barriers to adoption and strong support, the program gained the credibility needed to attract new partners and investment in Mississippi.

The expansion demonstrates how conservation solutions can grow when they are practical and designed with landowners and producers in mind. Every new timer helps farmers avoid unnecessary watering while protecting the groundwater resources that agriculture depends on throughout the Delta. With your continued support and with ongoing investments in technology, partnerships and science-driven solutions, TNC is helping lead the way toward a more sustainable future for agriculture in Arkansas and across the Delta.



Advancing regenerative agriculture: our 2030 goals

By 2030, TNC will implement and influence regenerative agricultural practices on **1.7 million acres** and improve management practices on **100 miles** of river that support people, clean water and a healthy climate in Arkansas.

Across Arkansas, regenerative agriculture is taking many forms, but they all share a common goal: helping producers build a more resilient future for their land and livelihoods while strengthening the natural resources on which they depend. Whether restoring floodplain forests on marginal farmland or using innovative technology to conserve groundwater, these efforts demonstrate how practical conservation solutions can create lasting benefits for farmers and the Delta landscape.

Top: Well timer in Arkansas; Side: Rice growing in the Delta © Fauna Creative

Investing Where Nature Matters Most

Arkansas strategies in action

Guided by science, The Nature Conservancy identifies the places in Arkansas that have an outsized impact on the health of our lands, waters and communities. These are landscapes where wildlife thrives, rivers and streams support people and nature, and working lands depend on healthy soil and clean water.

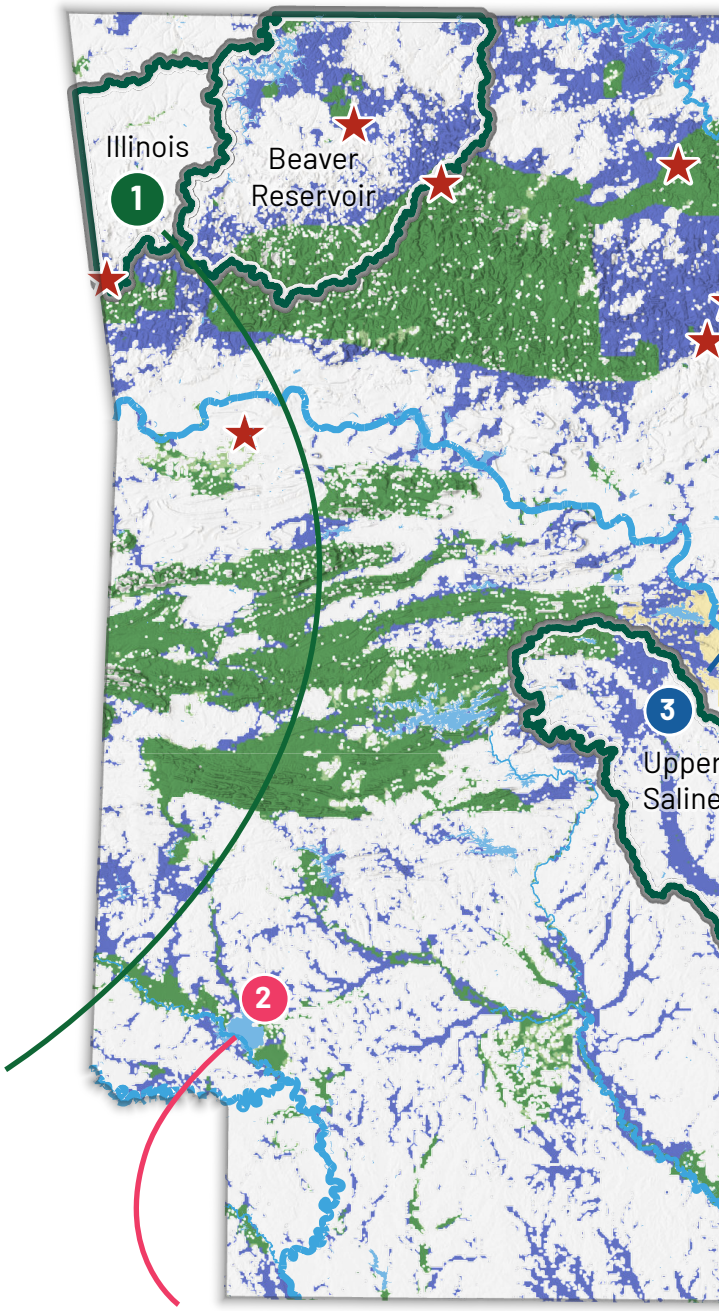
The map at right illustrates this. Green indicates resilient landscapes with exceptional biodiversity, blue notes freshwater systems that support clean water and rich aquatic life, and yellow represents the Arkansas Delta, where regenerative agriculture practices can strengthen farm productivity and natural resource conservation. TNC uses tools like this to help determine where investments in conservation will make the greatest difference.

Thanks to supporters like you, on-the-ground conservation work is underway in priority areas across the state.

Land protection also remains core to our mission. The stars in red represent **840 acres protected in 2026** through TNC-led conservation efforts. Together with our partners, TNC has helped protect **more than 320,000 acres** across Arkansas since 1982.

By investing where science shows the biggest returns for nature, Arkansas' lands, waters and farms can remain healthy, productive and resilient long into the future.

Learn more at **nature.org/arkansas**



1 PROTECTING WATER ABOVE AND BELOW GROUND

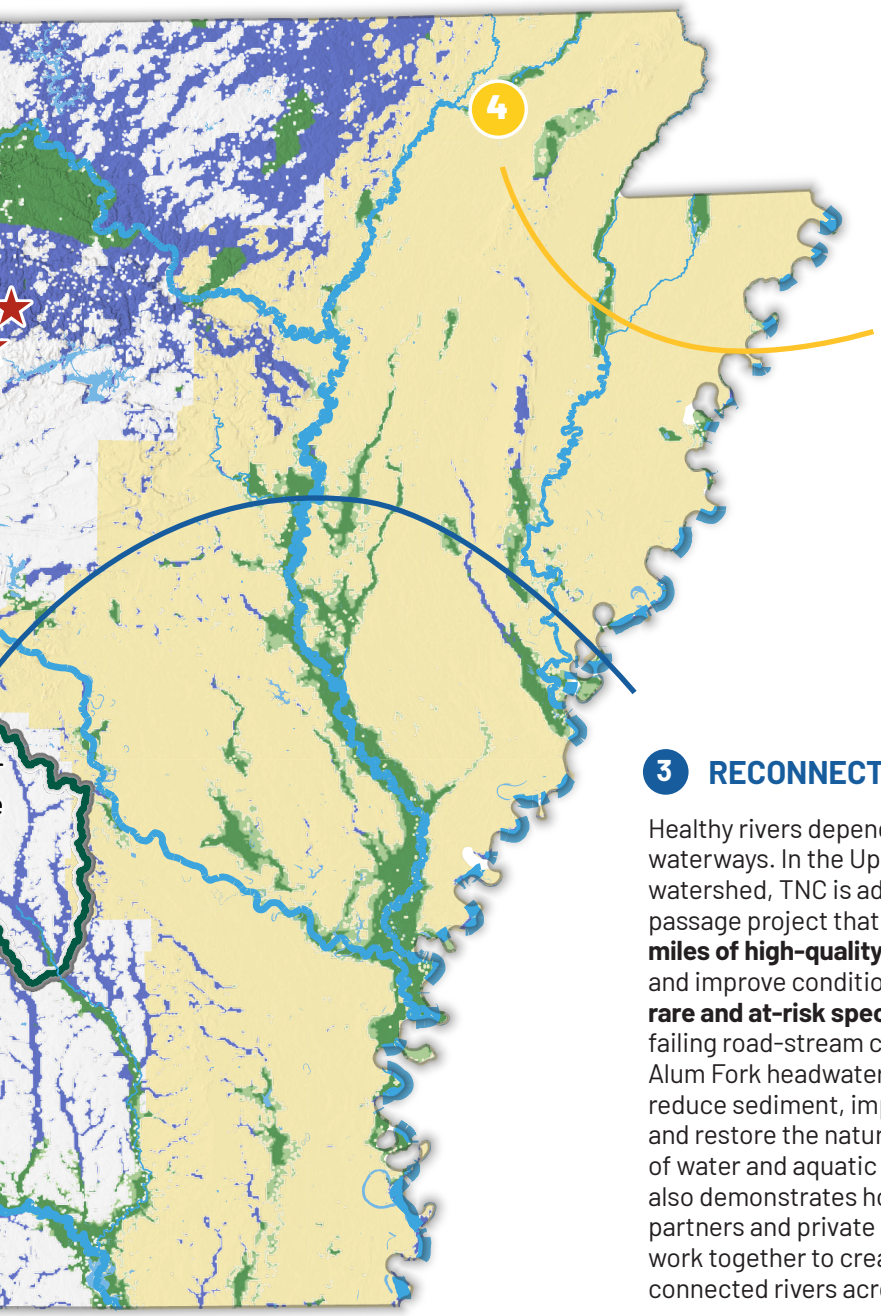


Spring feature in Arkansas © TNC

In the Illinois River and Beaver Reservoir watersheds, TNC is working with local conservation groups to put greater focus on sensitive karst landscapes, where activities on the land can directly affect groundwater and surface water quality. This year, TNC advanced projects to restore **100 acres of floodplain forest**, stabilize **500 feet of streambank** and improve habitat across **500 acres of public lands** with important karst features. These efforts protect clean water, reduce pollution and strengthen the health of connected streams, springs and aquifers.



Drone Training Exchange participants at Grandview Prairie © Clint Harri





Two-stage ditch © Blake Caldarera/TNC

4 WORKING WITH NATURE TO IMPROVE WATER QUALITY

Near Delaplaine, Arkansas, TNC partnered with the Beaver Dam Drainage District to complete a **9,300-foot (nearly two-mile) two-stage ditch** designed to work more like a natural stream. The project reduces erosion, improves water quality and supports reliable drainage for local farmers while lowering long-term maintenance needs. As a demonstration site, it also showcases how regenerative agricultural practices can benefit both producers and freshwater systems. By proving what works on the ground, this model can be replicated and scaled across the Delta to deliver lasting benefits for farms and rivers alike.

3 RECONNECTING ARKANSAS STREAMS

Healthy rivers depend on connected waterways. In the Upper Saline River watershed, TNC is advancing a fish passage project that will reconnect **14 miles of high-quality stream habitat** and improve conditions for more than **22 rare and at-risk species.** By replacing a failing road-stream crossing along the Alum Fork headwaters, the project will reduce sediment, improve flood resilience and restore the natural movement of water and aquatic life. The effort also demonstrates how conservation partners and private landowners can work together to create healthier, more connected rivers across Arkansas.



Failing road stream crossing in the Upper Saline River. © Tyler Fox/TNC



s/TNC

2 PRESCRIBED FIRE EXPANDS IMPACT ACROSS ARKANSAS AND BEYOND

Arkansas is helping train the next generation of fire practitioners and conservation leaders. This year, TNC Arkansas welcomed **18 practitioners** from across the U.S. for its 2nd annual Drone Training Exchange and **24 practitioners** from seven countries for its 17th annual International Fire Exchange, where participants learned prescribed fire techniques, partnership building and landscape-scale planning. TNC also partnered with the University of Idaho and the University of Central Arkansas to provide immersive prescribed fire training for students. Much of this hands-on learning takes place at Grandview Prairie Wildlife Management Area, a key site for fire training and land restoration. The knowledge gained here is helping fire practitioners restore healthier, more resilient landscapes in their own communities across the country and around the world.



Where Conservation Flows

Connecting conservation across the Ozarks and Ouachitas

The first time Cherie Moye visited a cave, she almost didn't go in.

While studying biology in western Maryland, Cherie took a field trip with her class. The cave entrance was nothing more than a three-foot-wide hole in the ground, but the professors and graduate students were already climbing down. Cherie looked into the darkness and thought, absolutely not. But curiosity won out.

"It was fantastic," recalls Cherie. "It was intimidating and frightening at first, but once I got down there, it was incredible."

That experience stayed with Cherie for decades. Today, she lives in northwest Arkansas and supports The Nature Conservancy's work to protect caves and karst systems across the Interior Highlands, a vast landscape that stretches across the Ozark and Ouachita mountains, through Missouri, Arkansas and Oklahoma.

The region holds some of the most remarkable freshwater resources in the country. Beneath its forests, hills and streams lies a hidden world of caves, underground waterways and natural filtration systems that quietly support life above ground.

That underground connection is one of the reasons Cherie believes conservation cannot stop at the boundaries on a map.

> We just don't realize that all of this is going on underground," says Cherie. "It goes across state lines. That's why we have to work in cooperation with other states. It benefits everybody."

For Cherie, that regional approach is what makes TNC's work so compelling. What happens in one part of the landscape can affect communities and ecosystems far beyond it. Protecting water quality and biodiversity requires looking at the entire system, not just the boundaries on a map.

Cherie hopes more people come to appreciate the connections beneath their feet and the role they play in the region's health.

"I'd love to see northwest Arkansas and every place in the country at its best," she says. "It's beautiful around here, and I'd like future generations to enjoy that too."

The work happening today across the Ozarks and Ouachitas is helping make that future possible, protecting the water, wildlife and special places that connect the region, both above ground and below.

Top: Exploring Bear Hollow Cave in northwest Arkansas © Roger Mangham/TNC;
Inset: Cherie Moye at cave entrance © Kim Dutton/TNC



Removing barriers, restoring streams

After a heavy rain, Rabbit Ridge Road in Van Buren County looks more like a stream than a road.

Water rushes across the road, carrying soil and gravel downstream. For local residents, the crossing turns into a hazardous route. For nearby streams, it creates a different problem: sediment washing in and damaging habitat for fish and other aquatic life.

"Every time it rains, you're getting a lot of sediment washed into nearby waterways," says Dr. Tyler Fox, river conservation manager for TNC.

This fall, TNC partnered with Van Buren County to replace two failing stream crossings with larger structures that are designed to keep water flowing naturally beneath the roadway and the road open above it. The projects will reduce erosion, improve water quality and reconnect 59 miles of upstream habitat for aquatic species moving through the watershed.

The implications of these projects reach far beyond one county.

Arkansas has more than 100,000 road-stream crossings. Many were built decades ago and are increasingly vulnerable to flooding and erosion. Counties often know which crossings need attention but lack the funding or technical resources needed to tackle the replacement projects.

That's what makes Rabbit Ridge Road important.

Rather than simply using a short-term fix on a failing crossing, the larger structures take a different approach. They're the result of county leadership, state funding and TNC's conservation expertise, and they're designed to work with the stream instead of against it.

> "We want this project to show that there are other ways to approach road crossings in Arkansas," says Fox.

The plan is for Rabbit Ridge Road to become a blueprint. If similar projects are replicated across the state, they can help reduce sediment pollution, improve stream connectivity and create healthier freshwater systems while saving counties money on long-term maintenance.

Like the underground waterways of the Interior Highlands, the Rabbit Ridge Road project reminds us that everything is connected: improving a crossing can strengthen waterways, wildlife habitat and communities far beyond a single project site.

Top: Stream crossing at Rabbit Ridge Road © Tyler Fox/TNC, Side: Damaged stream crossing on the Little Red River. © TNC



Protecting freshwater: our 2030 goals

By 2030, The Nature Conservancy will reconnect **1,000 miles** of rivers and protect **52 miles** of river corridors that are critical to clean water and biodiversity in Arkansas.

Across the Ozark and Ouachita mountains, TNC is removing barriers in streams, improving road crossings and conserving important karst systems that support life both above and below the ground. By partnering with communities, landowners, local governments and supporters like you, we can create healthier, more resilient freshwater systems across the state.



The Power of Restoration

Leading the way with fire

Warren Prairie Natural Area in southern Arkansas recently reached a conservation milestone 25 years in the making.

Home to one of Arkansas' rarest ecosystems, Warren Prairie has long served as a living laboratory, helping The Nature Conservancy and its partners better understand how prescribed fire can restore and maintain healthy landscapes. This year, ecological monitoring confirmed that the site's saline prairie ecosystem has reached its desired ecological condition, meaning it has regained the healthy balance of plants, habitat and natural processes needed to thrive over the long term.

"It's a really cool example of a place where we can showcase how prescribed fire works as a management tool," says Maia Larson, fire manager for TNC in Arkansas. "After decades of managing that landscape, we're seeing our restoration goals become reality."

The achievement reflects decades of collaboration among TNC, the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission and other conservation partners. Through consistent prescribed fire, land managers have restored natural ecological processes, improved habitat conditions and strengthened native plant communities. Today, Warren Prairie stands as one of Arkansas' leading restoration success stories.

Its impact reaches beyond a single site. Prescribed fire has played a critical role in restoring and maintaining habitat for species such as the red-cockaded woodpecker, whose recovery recently led to its reclassification from endangered to threatened under the Endangered Species Act, a major national conservation milestone. Arkansas' long-term stewardship and restoration efforts have been an important part of that success.

For Larson, Warren Prairie illustrates the broader impact of prescribed fire across the state. She oversees TNC Arkansas' statewide fire program, guiding strategy, partnerships and field operations. While prescribed burns may last only a day, planning them is a year-round effort.

> "Before fire ever touches the ground, there's a lot of work that happens behind the scenes," says Larson. "Monitoring, planning and preparation all help ensure we're putting the right fire in the right place for the right reasons."

Many of Arkansas' forests, woodlands and prairies depend on periodic fire to remain healthy. Without it, native grasses and wildflowers decline, wildlife habitat deteriorates and ecosystems become less resilient to drought and changing weather conditions. Prescribed fire helps restore that natural balance, creating healthier landscapes for people and nature.

Over the last year, TNC completed 100 prescribed fire operations across Arkansas, covering 25,980 acres, the highest annual acreage burned in the program's 30-year history. Thanks to the continued support of donors and partners, this work is helping create healthier, more resilient landscapes across the state.

Learn how TNC is preserving Arkansas' natural heritage through prescribed fire, stewardship and protection at **nature.org/arkansasland**.



Top: Prescribed fire in Arkansas © Maia Larson/TNC; Bottom: Red-cockaded woodpecker banding in Arkansas © Jess Novobilsky/ANHC



Returning shortleaf pine

Not long ago, shortleaf pine forests stretched across vast portions of Arkansas, forming open, sunlit woodlands that were alive with native wildflowers, birds and wildlife. These iconic forests shaped the landscape for centuries. But decades of fire suppression, land conversion and changing management practices have reduced them to a fraction of their historic range.

Today, restoring shortleaf pine forests represents one of the greatest opportunities to improve forest health and biodiversity across the state. Unlike many other southern pine species, shortleaf pine is uniquely adapted to periodic fire and supports a rich diversity of plants and wildlife that depend on open woodland habitat.

TNC and partners are restoring shortleaf pine ecosystems through prescribed fire, reforestation and seed collection efforts. Much of this work is taking place in the Ouachita and Ozark National Forests, where large, connected landscapes offer some of the best opportunities to bring these native forests back to life.

The results are already visible. Over the past decade, collaborative restoration efforts have restored or enhanced more than 1.5 million acres of shortleaf pine habitat across the species' western range. Prescribed fire has been a critical tool in this work, reducing competition from hardwood trees, opening the forest canopy and creating the conditions that native grasses, wildflowers and wildlife need to thrive.

As these forests recover, so does the diversity of life they support. Pollinators, songbirds and countless other species benefit from healthy pine woodlands. Restoring these forests also benefits people by protecting water resources and helping reduce the risk of large, destructive wildfires.

In the fall of 2025, TNC and partners celebrated a major milestone when Arkansas' first large-scale harvest of wild shortleaf pine seeds was successfully completed. At Poison Springs State Forest, one million seeds were collected to support future reforestation efforts across southern Arkansas. Those seeds are now being cleaned, stored and grown into seedlings that will one day take root across the region, helping restore forests for future generations.

The effort highlights an important truth about conservation: restoration does not happen overnight. From collecting cones and growing seedlings to conducting prescribed burns and planting trees, every step is part of a long-term commitment to rebuilding resilient forests.

See how TNC and partners are helping return shortleaf pine forests to Arkansas.

Scan the QR code or visit **nature.org/arshortleafpine** to watch the video and learn more.

Top: Shortleaf pine cone collection at Poison Springs State Forest;
Side: Shortleaf pine cones © Route 3 Films



Restoring healthy lands: our 2030 goals

By 2030, TNC will maintain or improve **2.6 million acres** of land across Arkansas, protect **30,000 acres** of critical habitat and restore **20,000 acres** through reforestation to support healthy forests, connected landscapes and thriving wildlife.

With your help, TNC is restoring the natural processes that have shaped Arkansas landscapes for generations, from reintroducing prescribed fire to rebuilding native shortleaf pine ecosystems.

The Nature Conservancy in Arkansas
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Juvenile little blue heron in Ashley County, Arkansas © Robert H. Holt