



# Celebrating

## Fifty Years of The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky

PEOPLE | PLACES | PRIDE



# Looking Back to Look Ahead



Chimney Top Rock © Kelly Freeman/TNC Photo Contest



In 2025, The Nature Conservancy is proudly celebrating 50 years of conservation in Kentucky. Our accomplishments across those decades rest on your generosity, trust, and perseverance. Thank you.

Whether as a dedicated partner, elected leader, talented colleague, steadfast community advocate or generous supporter, you are among the conservation heroes at the very center of our story.

In this special anniversary publication, we capture key moments of that story and highlight some of the vanguards and visionaries, past and present, who protect Kentucky's special places; restore rivers, wetlands and grasslands; and secure a healthier, more vibrant future for us all.

As we mark this milestone anniversary, I invite you to imagine how you can help The Nature Conservancy embark on our next 50 years and secure a livable climate, healthy communities, and thriving nature in Kentucky and around the world.

Handwritten signature of David Phemister.

David Phemister, State Director  
The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky





Dupree Nature Preserve in Kentucky River Palisades © Mike Wilkinson

## The Legacy of Leadership

“Like many of you, my family’s history and identity are closely tied to Kentucky’s natural heritage. Experiencing Kentucky’s natural beauty, whether hiking the Appalachians, floating the Green River, or fishing a favorite stream, makes me want to protect these remarkable places. I encourage you to explore Kentucky with TNC staff. You’ll learn a lot, and it’s great fun to hang out with them.”



**Stuart Brown** is from Louisville and served on the board of the Kentucky-based distilling business, Brown-Forman Corporation. He and his family are dedicated supporters of The Nature Conservancy in Kentucky, Colorado, Alaska and Africa. Stuart is currently a member of The Nature Conservancy’s Global Board of Directors.

### THE NATURE CONSERVANCY IN KENTUCKY 2025 BOARD OF TRUSTEES

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# 50 Years of Conservation, Together

We are grateful to everyone who has supported our work. As we celebrate 50 years, we reflect on key people and moments that were pivotal to our success. Tom Dupree, Sr., and Barry Bingham, Jr., both served as Board Chairs in the 1990s, supporting a period of innovation and success for our Kentucky program.

## Love, Land and Legacy

Ann Todd remembers childhood days on her family's Kentucky farm, hiding among weathered markers in the graveyard where ancestors of Mary Todd Lincoln were thought to rest.

She became friends with Lexington business and civic leader Tom Dupree, Sr. on the tennis court. After Tom's wife passed away, their friendship became a source of comfort, and they later married. "Tom and I had eight wonderful years together. He showed me the way to embrace nature so that it continues for others."

According to Ann Todd, "Tom had a vision of doing something for the world, something that would keep going." In 2013, Tom and The Nature Conservancy worked together to acquire land on the Kentucky River that became the Dupree Nature Preserve.

Tom passed away in 2018, but his love for nature endures at the preserve—and in Ann Todd's memory. "One spring day, I said to Tom, let's do a picnic at the preserve. I packed sandwiches, and we drove over there. A big storm began rolling in, but we sat on a bench for a few minutes longer, watching the lightning."



Tom Dupree, Sr. and  
Ann Todd Dupree  
Photo courtesy of  
Ann Todd Dupree



Redback salamander local to Boone County  
Cliffs State Nature Preserve © Fyn Kynd

## 1975

The Nature Conservancy formally establishes a chapter in Kentucky and protects Boone County Cliffs, now a state nature preserve.

## 1981

TNC hires its first paid state director in Kentucky, respected conservationist Hugh Archer. Mike Andrews assumes the role in 1983, and Archer returns when Andrews takes on a regional TNC position in 1985.





Barry Bingham, Jr., passed away in 2006. He left a conservation legacy, along with his wife, Edie Bingham, who first donated to TNC in 1975.  
Photo courtesy of Emily Bingham

## Knowing Kentucky

Barry Bingham, Jr., editor and publisher of *The Courier-Journal* and *Louisville Times*, loved trees. His daughter, Emily Bingham, remembers her father leading her and her sister on hikes when they were young. If they correctly identified a tree, Barry gave them a nickel. “I earned a few nickels, but the true value of those lessons did not sink in until adulthood. That is when trees came alive for me,” Emily says.

When the family sold the newspapers in 1986, Barry found renewed purpose through philanthropy and civic engagement. “*The Courier Journal* used to

deliver to readers in all 120 counties, and my dad felt responsible for knowing Kentucky. Serving on the Kentucky Board—eventually chairing it—deepened that knowledge and his love for the state’s many wonders,” continues Emily.

An accomplished historian and author, Emily and her husband, Stephen Reily, are restoring an oak savanna on their farm in Henry County and have planted more than 10,000 trees so far. That’s a lot of nickels.

## 1993

TNC starts an intensive land protection project around Horse Lick Creek, eventually leading to the protection of more than 7,000 acres that are now part of the Daniel Boone National Forest.



Kentucky prescribed fire crew © Mike Wilkinson

## 1994

TNC champions the establishment of the Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund, which has conserved 95,000 acres of natural lands and wildlife habitat across the commonwealth.

Meet more champions for nature and explore The Nature Conservancy’s history in the Bluegrass State at [nature.org/kentucky50](https://www.nature.org/kentucky50).

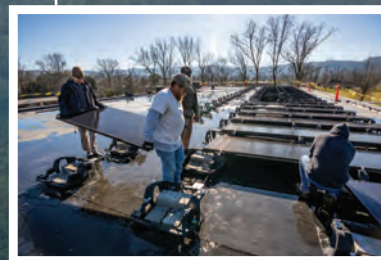
Cumberland Gap and portions of Cumberland Forest Project © Cameron Davidson

## 2009

TNC works with a host of partners to launch the Kentucky Prescribed Fire Council. This group advocates to use prescribed fire, a key restoration tool, to enhance grassland and fire-adapted forest habitats. TNC is recognized as a leader in the prescribed fire community.

## 2019

The Cumberland Forest Project launches and includes a community fund that provides grants to foster sustainable economic development. Kentucky communities have since received funds for cost-saving, climate-smart solar projects.



Community solar installation © Mike Wilkinson

## 2024

TNC, the Christina Lee Brown Envirome Institute at the University of Louisville and other Green Heart Louisville project partners celebrate results showing measurable improvements in human health in neighborhoods where significant numbers of trees and shrubs were planted.



A tree at Louisville's Wyandotte Park © Mike Wilkinson



# Across Kentucky, Across the Years Together

**In 1988, TNC establishes Mantle Rock Nature Preserve**, home to a 30-foot high natural sandstone bridge and portions of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail.

**TNC acquires Swan Pond in 1986**, later transferring it to Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources to become a 1,100-acre Wildlife Management Area.

**TNC and the Natural Resources Conservation Service begin a wetland protection and restoration initiative in 2003.** More than 20,000 acres of former cropland have since been restored, a success that is part of TNC's multi-state Mississippi River Basin project.

In our largest Kentucky land acquisition at the time, **TNC secures 6,856 acres in 2011** that now comprise the Big Rivers Wildlife Management Area and State Forest.

After nearly a decade of work, **in 2024 TNC and partners celebrate the last of three dam removals** that restore 198 miles of free-flowing conditions on the Green River and its main tributaries.

MISSOURI

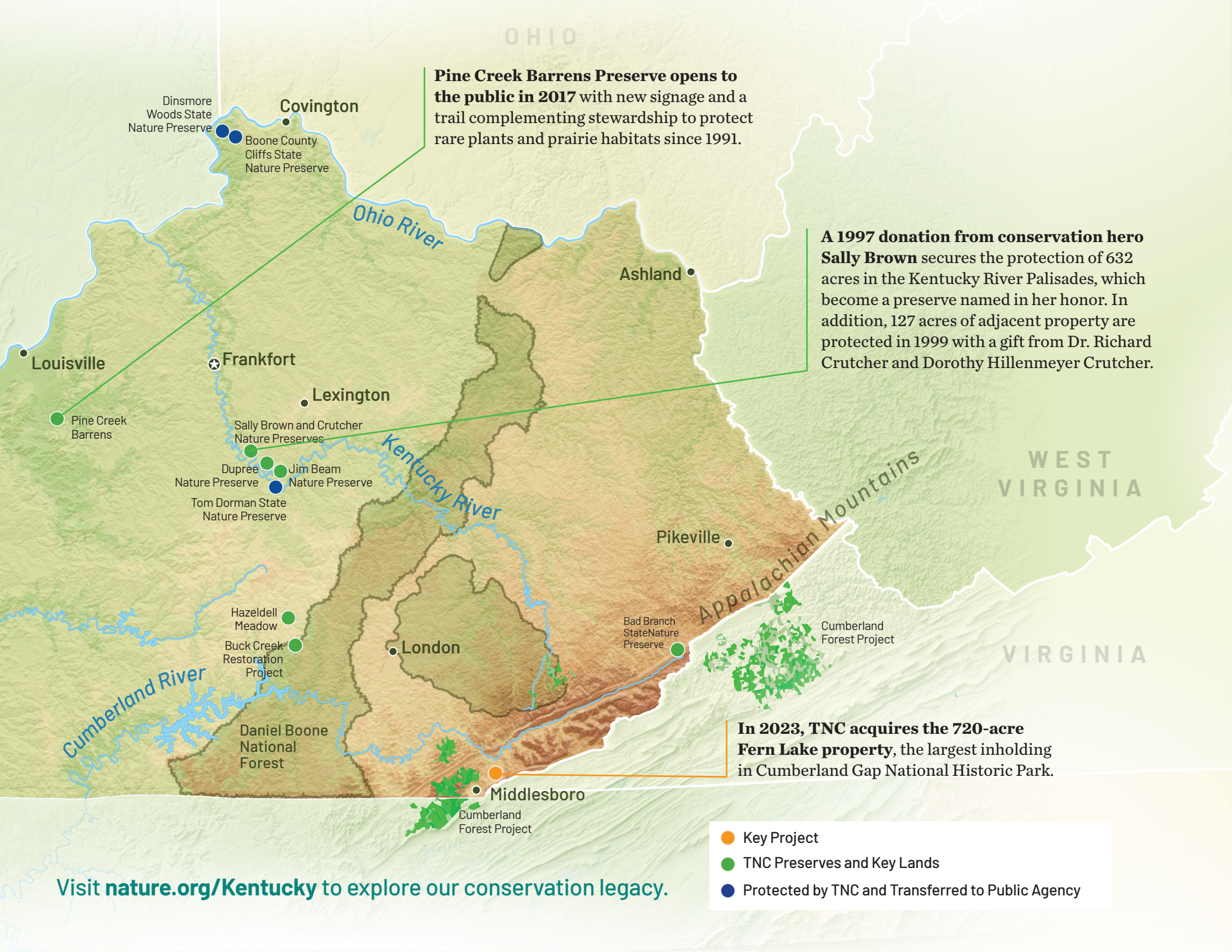
ILLINOIS

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**Pine Creek Barrens Preserve opens to the public in 2017** with new signage and a trail complementing stewardship to protect rare plants and prairie habitats since 1991.

**A 1997 donation from conservation hero Sally Brown** secures the protection of 632 acres in the Kentucky River Palisades, which become a preserve named in her honor. In addition, 127 acres of adjacent property are protected in 1999 with a gift from Dr. Richard Crutcher and Dorothy Hillenmeyer Crutcher.

**In 2023, TNC acquires the 720-acre Fern Lake property**, the largest inholding in Cumberland Gap National Historic Park.

Visit [nature.org/Kentucky](https://www.nature.org/Kentucky) to explore our conservation legacy.

- Key Project
- TNC Preserves and Key Lands
- Protected by TNC and Transferred to Public Agency





Volunteers plant trees on former mine lands on the Cumberland Forest property. © Mike Wilkinson

# Together We Blaze Trails

In 1955, a group of people in rural New York came together to save a treasured forest at risk of development. Their only option was to buy it, and that is what they did. The property was The Nature Conservancy's first land acquisition, and its purchase propelled the modern land trust movement.

**Grounded in place and guided by science, we have never been afraid to lead the way into the unknown.**

Today, TNC works in all 50 states, in more than 70 countries, and on global issues like climate change. How we define and accomplish conservation has evolved—and **Kentucky has been at the forefront of some of the most innovative leaps forward.**



Canoeing on the Green River © Mike Wilkinson

## Dozens of U.S. Rivers Are Healthier Today—and It all Started in Kentucky

In the 1990s, scientists observed alarming drops in populations of native mussels and fish in the Green River and its tributaries—so TNC experts got to work to find out why. They learned that to reduce flood risk in anticipation of spring rains, cold water from the bottom of Green River Lake was released through a dam into the river downstream. Concurrent with spawning season. The altered water temperature during spawning season was harming mussel reproduction.

That finding led to a first-of-its-kind initiative with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to test modifying dam operations to align with natural cycles without compromising the needs of people. Monitoring revealed meaningful increases in mussel populations, and that success inspired TNC to propose a broader partnership with the Corps, which manages most of the nation's dams. Now known as the Sustainable Rivers Program, **the concepts proven on the Green River are improving the health of at least 55 rivers across America.**





© American Forest Foundation

## A New Way to Finance Conservation and Community Renewal

There is no landscape more worthy of creativity than the ancient Appalachian Mountains. In 2019, TNC facilitated the acquisition of 253,000 acres of working forestlands in the Appalachian Mountains of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Known as the Cumberland Forest Project, this unique initiative combines impact investment financing, climate-smart forestry and a community fund. In 2023, the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources acquired a perpetual conservation and public access easement on all 55,000 acres of the property in Kentucky—the largest easement in state history.



Hiking along the Cumberland Forest Property ©Mike Wilkinson

“The secured easement not only ensures expanded access to public lands but also plays a vital role in our collective commitment to preserving and safeguarding our beloved mountains and the wildlife that inhabits them.”

Senator Brandon Smith (R-Hazard)

“This achievement is a testament to Kentucky’s commitment to conservation and public access. Together, we have secured a legacy of environmental stewardship and outdoor enjoyment for generations to come.”

Senator Robin L. Webb (D-Grayson)

## We’re Going to Need a Bigger Map

Today, we are drawing strength from our past to tackle urgent and complex environmental challenges. Because air, water and wildlife do not stop at state borders, we champion projects that push boundaries. Since 2009, we have contributed to a multi-state effort to protect the beautiful and biodiverse Appalachian Mountains, including supporting a skilled regional prescribed fire team that nimbly works where opportunity and need are the greatest. We also hired a forester who works across Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia to help family forest owners earn a return on sustainable forest management, which helps mitigate climate change and improve forest health.

In the years ahead, we will multiply our impact by further embracing this holistic and connected approach to conservation, matching the hard-working spirit and relentless optimism of our Kentucky families, friends and neighbors—like you.



TNC prescribed fire team conducting a burn © Kyle LaFerriere





A stream snakes through a western Kentucky wetland. © Mike Wilkinson

# We Reach for Solutions Together

Since 1975, partnership has been at the center of how The Nature Conservancy operates in Kentucky. We bring people together, seek common ground, and hold ourselves accountable for our share of the work.

Today, our state is wrestling with change on many fronts. TNC's science-based, nonpartisan, cooperative approach, coupled with our commitment to tangible, lasting results, earns us the trust of diverse leaders, partners and advocates. Together, we can meet the needs of people and nature.



Wetland restoration monitoring study  
© The Nature Conservancy

## Many Hands

You simply cannot tell our 50-year history in Kentucky without our partners. From the federal government that partnered with us to create the Daniel Boone National Forest with early land deals, to the Natural Resources Conservation Service that worked with us on wetland restoration, to Green Forests Work that helped us with mine land reforestation, to the Envirome Institute on the Green Heart Project, to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that worked with us on

dam removal, partners have provided essential expertise, resources, and credibility to every one of our signature achievements. We are grateful, and we trust that they see The Nature Conservancy as equally essential to many of their own successes.

Our previous five decades relied on partnership; our future depends on even more radical collaboration. In a divided world hungry for real solutions, we must increase the diversity and trust of our partnerships.



**“We must have new kinds of partnerships to tackle the tremendous challenges in our society, to build healthier communities and a healthier world. The Nature Conservancy understands the importance of building strong coalitions, and that has made them a critical part of the solution globally.”**

Christy Brown, Louisville civic leader and philanthropist and long-time TNC supporter





Kayaker paddling Flat Lick Falls © Brandon Jett/TNC Photo Contest 2019



Approximately 4.3 million Kentucky residents and visitors participate in wildlife recreation each year, spending more than \$11 billion.

## An All-Call for Change

Whether you hunt, hike or birdwatch, live on a city block, a suburban cul-de-sac or a country road—nature provides health, prosperity and joy. Despite those invaluable benefits, state investments to protect and improve Kentucky's wild places, parks and historic sites fall far short of other states in the region.

To honor the legacy of those who have come before and the responsibility we carry for the next generation, TNC is leading a coalition to secure increased and dedicated state funding for conservation. We are building a case based on data and learning from colleagues who crafted similar policies in other states to inform an approach that is right for Kentucky. These new investments would be transformative and would ensure that nature remains the foundation of a vibrant commonwealth.

**We are grateful for your generous and ongoing support. It is the foundation of our 50 years in Kentucky and the engine for our future successes.**

2

National  
Public Lands

20

State Wildlife  
Management Areas

31

State Nature  
Preserves/Natural Areas

**Fifty-three public lands** in Kentucky created or expanded by The Nature Conservancy





**Celebrate with us** on September 18, 2025,  
at Ashbourne Farms in La Grange.

Join fellow supporters and friends and  
enjoy delicious food, craft cocktails, and  
live music from The Local Honey's.

Buy tickets and explore sponsorship  
opportunities at **[nature.org/kentucky50](https://nature.org/kentucky50)**.



Our mission is to conserve the lands  
and waters on which all life depends.

