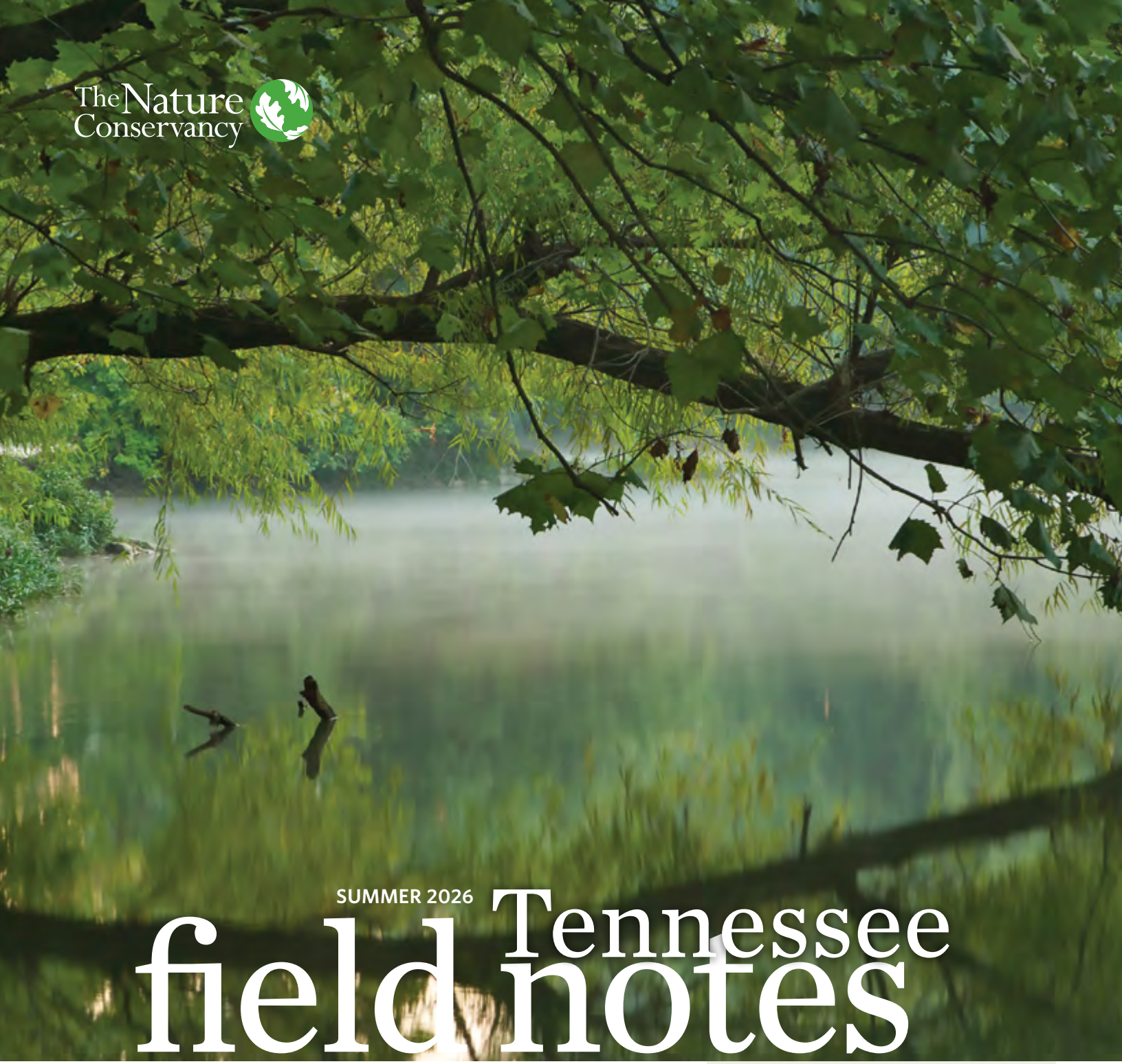

The Nature Conservancy

SUMMER 2026

Tennessee field notes

In this issue of *Field Notes,* explore how The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee is advancing conservation at scale, from collaborative leadership across the Appalachians and science-based planning for the Duck River to prescribed fire on the landscape and policy efforts that support land, water and wildlife. Together, these stories reflect how partnership, science and sustained investment are shaping a healthier future for Tennessee's people and nature.

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

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From The Director

Across Tennessee, the needs of our lands and waters are growing more complex. Throughout this issue of *Field Notes*, you will see how The Nature Conservancy, alongside our partners, is focused on meeting the state's highest conservation priorities with intention and impact.

Earlier this year, Tennessee had the opportunity to host The Nature Conservancy's Appalachians Conservation Leadership team in Granville. Colleagues from across the Appalachians came together to strengthen relationships, align conservation and policy strategies, and explore how we can maximize our collective impact across this globally significant region. These conversations reinforced a shared understanding that lasting conservation outcomes depend on collaboration across borders and on integrating science, policy and partnership at scale.

Protecting the Duck River remains one of our most important priorities. As one of the most biologically diverse rivers in the world, the Duck supports an extraordinary concentration of rare and sensitive aquatic species while also serving as the sole source of drinking water for approximately 250,000 Tennesseans. In these pages, you'll learn more about our active role in Governor Bill Lee's Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership and the collaborative, science-based work underway to ensure the river remains healthy and resilient.

You'll also find stories that take you onto the landscape during spring fire season, where prescribed fire is restoring fire adapted forests and savannas, from the Cherokee National Forest to TNC's Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain. These efforts are essential to maintaining healthy habitat, supporting native plants and wildlife, and building resilience in the face of a changing climate.

Policy continues to be a critical lever for conservation. This issue highlights our work during the 2026 Legislative Session to advance sustained funding for land, water and wildlife conservation across Tennessee. Strong public support for conservation, reflected in recent voter research, underscores the importance of these investments for Tennessee's communities and economy.

Taken together, the stories in this issue reflect the progress possible when we work together around shared priorities. I hope they leave you encouraged by the momentum underway and inspired by the role each of us plays in shaping a future where Tennessee's people and nature thrive together.

Thank you for your continued support and for choosing to prioritize nature in Tennessee.

To a healthier today and tomorrow,

Laurel Creech

Laurel Creech
Tennessee State Director

COVER *Duck River © Byron Jorjorian*
ABOVE *Courtesy/Laurel Creech*

Appalachian Leaders Convene in Tennessee

In February, TNC's Appalachians Program brought 35 conservation and policy leaders from across the region to Middle Tennessee for two days of collaboration. The gathering built upon decades of conservation work and relationships across every state in the region.

Together, participants paused from the day-to-day work of protecting lands, restoring rivers and strengthening forests to reflect, align priorities and look ahead at how conservation across this vast and interconnected region can continue to scale for greater impacts.

The Appalachians are designated as one of The Nature Conservancy's global focal landscapes, recognizing the region's remarkable biodiversity and its importance to communities, clean water and climate resilience across the eastern United States. Stretching more than 2,000 miles across 18 states, the region contains some of the most biologically diverse temperate forests on the planet and provides drinking water for tens of millions of people. As climate change accelerates, the Appalachians' connected lands and waters offer critical pathways for plants and wildlife to adapt and survive.

Tennessee's role in this landscape is especially crucial. Home to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which spans Tennessee and North Carolina and is the most visited national park in the United States, the state reflects both the ecological richness of the Appalachians and the deep connections people feel to these lands and waters.

"Our goal was to look beyond individual projects and focus on how we maximize our shared impact across the Appalachians," says Mark Thurman, The Nature Conservancy's director of conservation in Tennessee, who attended the retreat representing Tennessee and the southern Appalachians. "It was energizing to be in a room with colleagues from across the region who are thinking about conservation at this scale."

Over two days, participants explored how to better align work across state lines. Conversations focused on identifying high-impact opportunities, such as protecting small but strategically important parcels that help keep forest landscapes connected, restoring rivers in ways that benefit wildlife and people, and strengthening long-term forest resilience. Just as important were discussions about how people, with different expertise and roles, can work together more effectively when conservation challenges cross boundaries.

By the end of the retreat, participants left Tennessee with clearer priorities, stronger relationships and renewed commitments. The gathering reinforced a shared understanding that conserving the Appalachians depends on long-term collaboration and that by working together, we can ensure the lands and waters that define this region continue to support people and nature.

Appalachians Conservation Leadership Retreat 2026 © TNC

Policy Corner

Read about key developments from the recent legislative session and advocacy efforts at the Capitol, which were bolstered this year by voter research on conservation perspectives and the growing body of evidence showing that investing in nature delivers real benefits for communities and the state's economy.

Tennessee Legislative Session Recap

TWRA Funding

The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) plays a critical role stewarding lands and waters, protecting wildlife and supporting outdoor recreation. Proposed legislation to provide $18 million annually for the agency did not get passed, however Governor Lee and the Legislature approved $10 million in one-time funds. While this will begin addressing longstanding funding challenges, TNC strongly supports permanent and dedicated funding for TWRA.

Scenic Rivers Legislation

House Bill 1510/Senate Bill 1590 was successfully passed by the State Legislature to designate segments of the Buffalo River, Duck River and select additional rivers and creeks as Class II pastoral river areas. This designation will provide additional protections for these critical waterways.

Voter Perspectives on Conservation

Public opinion research conducted by New Bridge Strategies found in a recent poll of 600 Tennessee voters that there is overwhelming, bipartisan support for conservation across the state.

Key findings include:

- 95% of voters agree that national and state parks are essential to Tennessee's economy, and 96% agree they are essential to quality of life.
- More than 90% of voters say Tennessee needs to do more to protect land, water and wildlife habitat and support the General Assembly dedicating additional funding for conservation.
- 80% of voters oppose the federal government selling public lands to private interests.

Nature's Dividends

Nature's Dividends is The Nature Conservancy's research-based case for why investing in nature is a smart decision for people and communities.

Below are a few key statistics that highlight these benefits for Tennessee.

- Tennessee's outdoor recreation economy generates $13 billion in value added annually and supports 103,618 jobs and $5.3 billion in wages statewide.
- 460,000 hunters in Tennessee generate nearly $3 billion in economic impact each year.
- More than 1 million anglers spend $742 million annually while fishing in Tennessee. Fishing generates a total economic output of $1.2 billion and supports 8,000 jobs statewide.

Scan the QR code to explore the full Nature's Dividends report.

Days on the Hill

Trustees and staff advocated for conservation priorities with Tennessee legislators during Trustee Lobby Day, Outdoors Day on the Hill and Sportsmen's Day on the Hill. These events provided valuable opportunities to share the importance of conservation funding, public lands and outdoor recreation for Tennessee's communities and economy.

TNC staff Lindsay Hanna and Attie Marshall with Trustee Lisa Calfee; Outdoors Day on the Hill © TNC

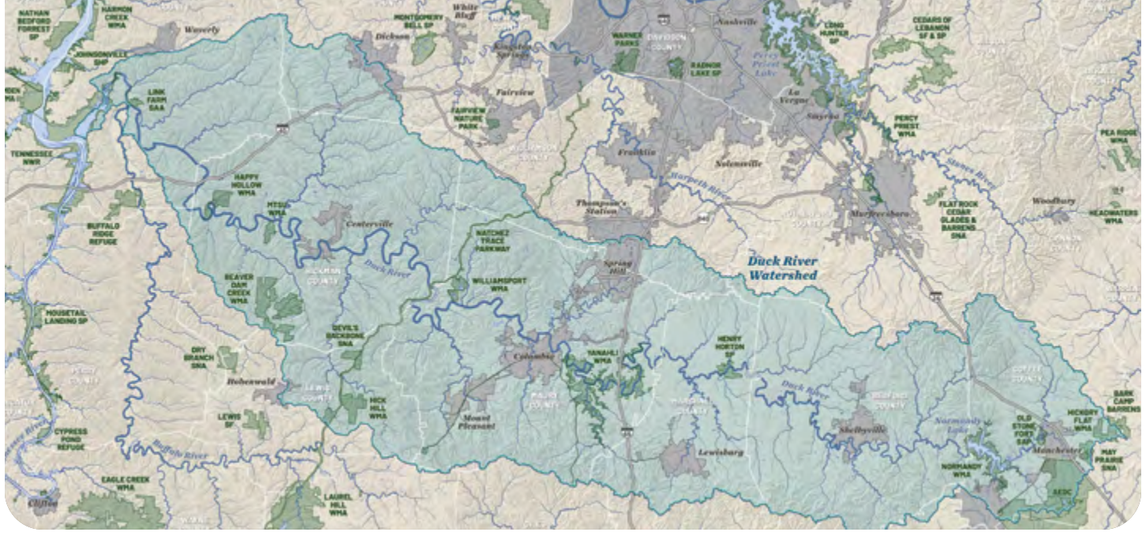
Spring Fire Season

This spring, The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee continued its work to strengthen the health and resilience of the landscapes that define our state. Through carefully planned prescribed burns totaling over 6,400 acres, TNC supported forest and savannas ecosystems in and near the Cherokee National Forest and at the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain.

At the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain, fire is a key tool for maintaining and restoring shortleaf pine-oak woodlands and savanna habitats. By preserving open-canopy conditions, prescribed fire helps sustain the diverse native plants and wildlife that depend on these living landscapes. In the Cherokee National Forest, fire helped clear the way for native grasses, reduce closed canopy forests and improve wildlife habitat.

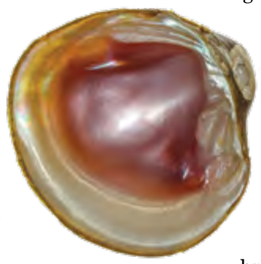
This work was carried out by a dedicated team that included a full-time seasonal fire crew supporting efforts on the Cherokee National Forest, Tellico Ranger District and a part-time crew at TNC's Shady Valley Preserve. With support from people like you, prescribed fire remains an essential part of caring for Tennessee's forests, helping ensure they remain resilient, connected and full of life.

ALL PHOTOS: Spring Fire Season, Bridgestone Nature Preserve at Chestnut Mountain © TNC



A River Like No Other

Stretching 269 miles through nine Middle Tennessee counties, the Duck River stands as North America's most biologically diverse freshwater river. It is home to 151 fish species, 56 freshwater mussels and 22 aquatic snails. Many of these species are rare, highly sensitive or disappearing from rivers elsewhere. The Duck also shelters federally endangered mussels such as the cracking pearlymussel, golden riffleshell and birgwing pearlymussel. These mussels filter the water and help keep the river healthy, which makes their survival essential for wildlife and for the people and communities who depend on the Duck every day.



More than 250,000 Tennesseans rely on the Duck River as their only source of drinking water. This rapidly growing region includes Manchester, Columbia, Shelbyville and Centerville. As these communities expand, the need to keep the river clean, healthy and flowing becomes even more urgent.

For more than 25 years, The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee has worked with communities, farmers, businesses and government partners to protect and restore the Duck River. Since 1999, we have conserved land, restored habitat, supported scientific research and built strong partnerships across the watershed. Our work includes helping farmers adopt conservation practices, securing riparian corridors through conservation easements, leading restoration projects that reduce sedimentation and expanding greenways and public access along the river.

We have also supported municipalities in using the best available science to guide water management decisions. This long standing and collaborative approach has earned TNC a trusted seat at the table, especially now as rapid growth in the upper watershed increases the need for long term regional water supply and drought planning.

In November 2024, Governor Bill Lee established the Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership, a 19-member group charged with shaping a sustainable future for the river. The Partnership brings together state agencies, conservation organizations, utilities and community leaders to develop strategies that balance economic growth, water use and environmental protection. Its work focuses on improving drought resilience, reducing water loss, protecting habitat, including habitat for endangered freshwater mussels, and strengthening coordination among water systems.

Public engagement has guided the Partnership from the beginning. Community members shared their perspectives at meetings across the watershed, through written comments and in a watershed wide survey launched in summer 2025. The survey received 824 responses, more than 92 percent from full time residents representing every county in the watershed. Nearly 90 percent of respondents said they were supportive or very supportive of wildlife and habitat conservation. River health rose to the top of their priorities, followed by water supply and recreation. Their feedback reflects a shared understanding across the region that thoughtful planning is essential to protect the Duck River's future.

Duck River Watershed Map © Joey Wisby/TNC; Round hickorynut © Todd Amacker

Planning Today for Tomorrow's Water

The Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership was created as a focused two year effort to turn the goals of Executive Order 108 into practical action. Although the Partnership concludes at the end of 2026, its strategies are designed to guide water management decisions well into the future.

To set a clear path forward, the Partnership organized its recommendations by time frame. Over the next two years, the work centers on strengthening preparedness, improving information and easing immediate pressure on the river. A key priority is updating the Duck River Regional Drought Management Plan so it reflects current conditions in the river and Normandy Reservoir. The revised plan will include clearer public communication, water use measures tied to drought stages, improved monitoring of flows and withdrawals and stronger coordination across the watershed. A draft is expected for public comment by late 2026.

During this same period, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation will complete two major studies by August 2026. One will assess current and future water needs across the watershed. The other will evaluate opportunities for greater coordination among water and wastewater utilities. These studies will provide consistent data to support informed decisions. Efforts to reduce water loss through audits, technical assistance and incentives will also help protect supplies while longer term solutions are considered.

Over the next three to five years, the recommendations shift toward broader system improvements. These include strengthening statewide drought management requirements, expanding monitoring of river flows and groundwater and investing in strategies that protect habitat and improve water quality. Incentives for land conservation, wetland restoration and smart growth planning could help safeguard the river while supporting communities. This phase may also include early implementation of projects identified through the feasibility studies.

Looking beyond six years, the long range vision focuses on lasting water security and ecological health. Strategies include reducing overall water demand through efficient fixtures, smart irrigation, industrial reuse and green infrastructure. Additional options such as off stream storage or reuse of treated water during drought could help maintain river flows while ensuring reliable supplies. Depending on earlier findings, long term infrastructure solutions may also be considered.

Together, these recommendations reflect a shared commitment to balance growth with stewardship. For The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee, this work builds on decades of conservation across the Duck River watershed. With your support, we are helping ensure this globally significant river continues to provide clean water, thriving wildlife and a legacy that endures for generations.

"I've always been a "river person" with a lifelong love of paddling that continues today on Tennessee's waterways. The Duck River holds particular meaning for me, both as a place of personal connection and as the most biodiverse river in the temperate world. I'm proud to support The Nature Conservancy's work to protect and restore this extraordinary ecosystem for generations to come."

ELIZABETH P. "LISA" MCCARTER, TNC DONOR AND LEGACY CLUB MEMBER, ENVIRONMENTAL LAWYER

Tennessee Logperch © Todd Amacker; Duck River © Byron Jorjorian

The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee
2 Maryland Farms
Suite 150
Brentwood, TN 37027

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Eastern Newt Cherokee National Forest © Lucas Curry/TNC

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