The Nature Conservancy

TENNESSEE

2025 Year in Review

A YEAR OF CONSERVATION RESULTS

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY IN TENNESSEE

2024 – 2025

Cover image: Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain © Terry Cook

This page: Southern Cumberland Plateau, Tennessee © Stephen Alvarez

Dear Friends,

2025 was a remarkable year for conservation in Tennessee. I'm deeply grateful for the dedication of our staff, trustees, partners and supporters who helped accelerate our work across land, water and climate to advance The Nature Conservancy's global 2030 goals. Tennessee's landscapes are globally significant.

From the southern Appalachians—one of the planet's most resilient and biodiverse regions—to the rivers and forests that sustain communities and wildlife, our work here extends far beyond state lines. And this year, that work gained powerful momentum.

We ended the year working with partners to protect a 7,418-acre tract, Hatchie Bottoms, which will become a new wildlife management area and safeguard more than 10 miles of riverfront along Tennessee's only undammed major river. It's a powerful example of state-led success and a model for scaling conservation through partnership.

We also played a key role in the establishment and expansion of several new state parks. Head of the Crow in Franklin County was officially designated a state park in October. Fiery Gizzard, spanning Marion and Grundy counties, gained state park status, securing permanent protection for a long-prioritized conservation area. And in May, Scott's Gulf Wilderness State Park was dedicated in White County, creating new public access to this stunning region. We're excited to welcome this new park as a neighbor to the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain, which represents the largest land donation in our chapter's history.

We completed the decade-long revision of the State Wildlife Action Plan, a foundational blueprint for conserving Tennessee's native species and habitats. Led by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, this science-based strategy positions the state to secure federal funding, support local efforts and respond to emerging threats to biodiversity.

Two dam removal projects advanced this year, restoring natural flow and reconnecting aquatic habitats. In the Cherokee National Forest, the Lower Citico Creek Dam was removed, reopening stream passage for endangered species like the smoky madtom and Citico darter. On the Elk River, the removal of Harms Mill Dam reconnected more than 1,100 miles of habitat and improved safety and recreation opportunities.

In June, Tennessee proudly hosted The Nature Conservancy's global Board of Directors, Executive Leadership Team and Trustee Council—a rare opportunity to showcase our conservation leadership on a national stage. From a storytelling-themed dinner in Nashville to a field trip exploring the biodiversity of Couchville Cedar Glade, the visit highlighted Tennessee's ecological significance and the deep connections between nature, culture and community.

Laurel Creech, State Director
The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee

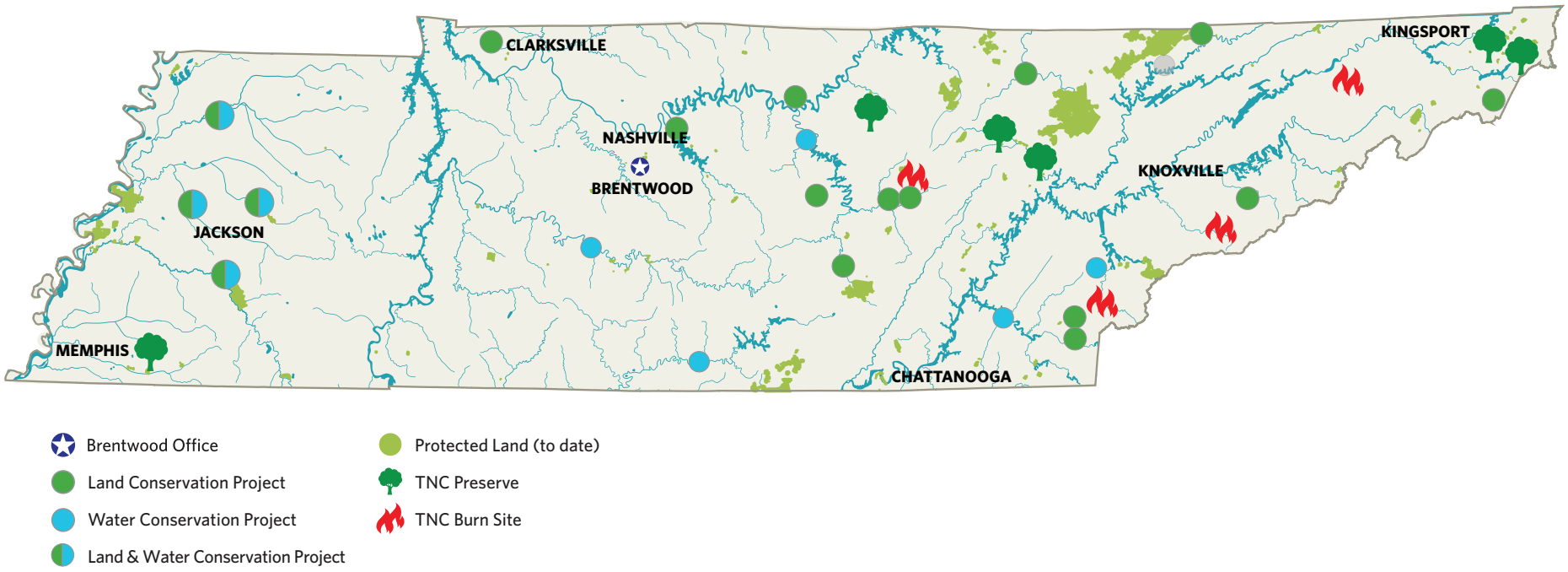
These milestones and what you will read about on the following pages are just a few examples of our conservation successes in 2025. Each reflects the strength of our team and the power of collaboration. With your support, we're building a future in Tennessee where nature and people thrive together.

Thank you for choosing to prioritize nature in Tennessee. Your support makes our work possible.

To a Healthier Today and Tomorrow,

Laurel Creech

Where We Work



By the Numbers

11,933
acres
protected by TNC and partners in 2025

2,228
acres
conveyed to the state of Tennessee by TNC and partners in 2025

469,300
acres
protected since 1978

LANDS

From Plans to Protection: A Hatchie River Success Story

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY'S 2030 GOAL:

Conserve 1.6 billion acres of land globally.

Bald cypress trees grow along the Hatchie River © Byron Jorjorian

Restoring Rivers, Planning for the Future

A Landmark Win for the Wild Hatchie

This fall, The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee completed the acquisition of the Hatchie Bottom property—a 7,418-acre expanse of old-growth bottomland hardwood forest along the Hatchie River. It was the largest land acquisition the organization has been a part of in West Tennessee in the past 25 years. The acquisition spans Haywood, Madison and Hardeman counties.

Supported by The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund, the newly protected property—now owned by the State of Tennessee and managed through its Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA)—lies within the Mississippi River Basin and plays a vital role in restoring floodplain function, filtering water and providing habitat for migratory birds and native wildlife.

Gov. Bill Lee called the Hatchie Bottom acquisition "a powerful example of what we can achieve when conservation partners come together with a shared vision." The property, one of the largest remaining bottomland hardwood forests under single ownership in Tennessee, is now owned and managed by TWRA as a new wildlife management area.

Laurel Creech, The Nature Conservancy's state director in Tennessee, described the project as "a defining moment for conservation in Tennessee," while The Conservation Fund's Zachary Lesch-Huie praised it as a "visionary project" with lasting impact. Public access improvements are underway, with TWRA set to announce an official opening date soon.

The Hatchie River is the last free-flowing river in West Tennessee and a designated state scenic river. The newly protected property adds more than 10 miles of riverfront to a growing corridor of conserved lands, now totaling more than 30,000 acres. It will eventually offer expanded public access for hunting, fishing, birding and outdoor recreation.

This landscape is a biological treasure. It supports more than 100 fish species, 11 types of catfish, 35 mussel species, and more than 250 bird species, including Swainson's and cerulean warblers. It is also a key site for alligator gar restoration and home to river otters, beavers and eastern box turtles. The forest itself contains rare old-growth stands and intact floodplain ecosystems that are increasingly rare across the Southeast.

Gabby Lynch, director of land for The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee, underscored the significance of the effort, saying, "This project is a cornerstone for conservation in West Tennessee. It protects one of the highest priority areas in the state and fulfills long-standing goals across federal, state and local plans. It's a generational investment in our natural heritage and a powerful step forward for the Hatchie River and its vast floodplain forest. We're especially grateful to our partners, particularly the state of Tennessee, for their leadership and commitment to protecting nature for future generations."

The Hatchie Bottom acquisition advances The Nature Conservancy's 2030 goals for healthy lands and freshwater systems, protecting 69 miles of river and tributaries and thousands of acres of wetlands. It also strengthens work in the Mississippi River Basin, where conservation partners are addressing nutrient runoff, flood risk and habitat loss across state lines.

Paddlers enjoying the Hatchie River © Hatchie River Conservancy

Fire

Restoring Fire to the Appalachians

Fire has long shaped the Appalachian Mountain landscape, and The Nature Conservancy is working to bring this natural force back to Tennessee's forests. As part of an 18-state initiative to improve fire management across nearly four million acres by 2030, TNC and partners are building capacity and fostering collaboration across the region.

In 2025, TNC helped implement prescribed burns on 9,419 acres in partnership with the Cherokee National Forest, Great Smoky Mountains National Park and TNC's North Carolina and Kentucky fire programs. These burns support long-term efforts to restore fire-adapted ecosystems and reduce wildfire risk.

Burns focused on the Cherokee National Forest and Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain, where fire helped maintain shortleaf pine-oak woodlands and savanna habitats. In the Cherokee, fire cleared the way for native grasses and wildflowers like little bluestem and wild yellow indigo. At Chestnut Mountain, it preserved open-canopy conditions vital for biodiversity.

Prescribed fire reduces hazardous fuels and curbs fire-intolerant species, allowing oak, hickory, shortleaf pine and native wildflowers to thrive.

This year's efforts included:

- 3 burns at Bridgestone Nature Reserve (235 acres)
- 6 burns in Great Smoky Mountains National Park (1,249 acres)
- 2 burns in Cherokee National Forest (8,170 acres)

9,419 acres **of prescribed burns in partnership with Cherokee National Forest, Great Smokey Mountains National Park and TNC's North Carolina and Kentucky's fire programs**

Head of the Crow State Park Opening © TDEC

Partnership in Action

New State Parks Leverage Conservation Efforts

In 2025, Tennessee dedicated four new or expanded state parks, offering more opportunities for hiking, camping, paddling and connecting with nature. The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee played a role in protecting several of these areas, continuing its work to connect people with nature through strategic conservation and partnerships.

Highlights include:

- Head of the Crow in Franklin County, officially established in October, is a remote, scenic landscape that TNC helped protect years ago. It's now open for public recreation.
- Fiery Gizzard, spanning Marion and Grundy counties, also became a state park in October. Known for its dramatic terrain and popular trails, this long-prioritized conservation area is now permanently protected and publicly accessible.
- Scott's Gulf Wilderness State Park in White County, dedicated in May, is a neighbor to the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain, TNC's largest land donation in Tennessee history, and provides new opportunities for public access and recreation in the region.

WATER

Safeguarding Freshwater Resources

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY'S 2030 GOAL:

Conserve more than 620,000 miles of rivers globally.

Dry Creek Falls at Chestnut Mountain © Terry Cook/TNC


EXIT

Science and Strategy: Revitalizing the Duck River Through Collaboration

The Duck River, widely recognized as one of the most biodiverse and at-risk rivers in North America, was thrust into the national spotlight when American Rivers named it on their 2024 list of "America's Most Endangered Rivers." Home to 60 species of mussels, including 19 federally listed as threatened or endangered, the Duck River's ecological richness is under increasing pressure from drought, development and water withdrawals.

The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee has worked to protect the Duck River since 1999. In 2024, our commitment deepened as we joined Gov. Bill Lee's Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership, a collaborative effort to safeguard the river's future. Through this partnership, TNC is helping shape regional water management strategies that balance ecological integrity with community needs. TNC is represented in this partnership by Mark Thurman, our director of conservation collaboration.

A major milestone this year was the launch of a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the Duck River watershed, developed in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Under the Endangered Species Act, an HCP enables proactive planning to avoid or minimize harm to imperiled species. The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) initiated this effort after recognizing that future water withdrawals could violate federal protections if endangered species were negatively impacted.

TNC is engaged in all committees for the HCP development, contributing our expertise in conservation planning to help shape strategies that protect aquatic life and ensure sustainable water use for decades to come.

Science continues to drive our work. With support from Ascend Federal Credit Union, TNC funded two U.S. Geological Survey studies:

- One mapped the historic distribution of mussel species throughout the Duck River watershed.
- The other reviewed current knowledge and identified research needs to better understand how water withdrawals affect mussel populations.

These studies are undergoing peer review and the findings will inform both the Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership and the Habitat Conservation Plan in the coming year.

Together, these efforts represent a revitalization of TNC's Duck River program—grounded in science, strengthened by collaboration and focused on securing a future where people and nature can thrive together.

1170 miles

Five barrier removal projects reconnected 1170 miles of stream network

Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership meeting © TDEC

Lower Citico Creek Dam removal © Lucas Curry/TNC

A Watershed Year: Removing Barriers to Restore Tennessee's Rivers

In 2025, The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee and its partners achieved two major milestones in river restoration: the removal of Harms Mill Dam on the Elk River and Lower Citico Creek Dam in the Cherokee National Forest. These high-priority projects are reconnecting aquatic habitats, improving public safety and restoring the natural flow of water across some of the state's most ecologically significant rivers.

The Harms Mill Dam, built in the 1920s, was the final major barrier to restoring the natural flow of the Elk River. Its removal reconnected more than 1,100 stream miles, opening habitat for 46 species of greatest conservation need, including the endangered boulder darter. Funding support for the project came from Mr. Jim Gerding, the Maddox Foundation, Tennessee Valley Authority, the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, and the National Fish Passage Program.

"The removal of Harms Mill Dam is a landmark moment for river restoration in Tennessee," said Rob Bullard, Director of Water for The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee. "This project has been years in the making and represents the largest dam removal in our state's history. It's a powerful example of how science, partnership and persistence can reconnect rivers, restore habitat and make our waterways safer and more accessible for everyone."

In the Cherokee National Forest, the final dam on Citico Creek was removed, reconnecting 38+ miles of stream and restoring habitat for 67 fish and mussel species, including the federally endangered Smoky madtom, the Citico darter and the Yellowfin madtom.

"We're incredibly grateful to our partners at the U.S. Forest Service, the University of Tennessee and others who helped make this project possible," said Lucas Curry, watershed restoration engineer for The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee. "Removing the Lower Citico Creek Dam is a major step forward in restoring the health and function of this watershed."

CLIMATE

Growing Tennessee's Climate Resilience

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY'S 2030 GOAL:

Reduce or store 3 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions each year.

Hemlocks at Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain
© Terry Cook/TNC

Growing Climate Solutions Across Tennessee

In 2025, The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee advanced efforts that provide layered, lasting benefits—for people, wildlife, and the landscapes we all depend on. From restoring floodplains that reduce flood risk and improve water quality, to supporting carbon sequestration through landowner engagement, to removing dams that reconnect rivers and enhance ecological resilience, each action contributes to a stronger, more sustainable future. These efforts not only address today's challenges but also build the capacity of natural systems to adapt to future change. This cross-cutting approach is also reflected in our forest strategies, including the implementation of Tennessee's Forest Action Plan (FAP).

Implementing the Forest Action Plan: Building Resilience from the Ground Up

The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee played a key role in advancing the implementation of Tennessee's FAP in 2025. Working with partners across the state, TNC helped lead the Five-Year Review of the 2020–2030 FAP—a comprehensive assessment of progress toward the Plan's goals and strategies. This review not only measures impact but also identifies ongoing challenges, ensuring the Plan remains a dynamic, responsive tool for forest conservation.

To support this effort, TNC gathered impact data and success stories from agencies, organizations and community partners. These insights will help refine Tennessee's forestry priorities and guide strategic direction for the next five years, making the FAP a valuable resource for decision-makers and practitioners alike.

Forest Action Plan Wildfire Mitigation Event © Annelise Mucci

TNC is also developing a Post-Wildfire Restoration Manual to support landowners navigating the full cycle of wildland fire management: readiness, response and recovery. Designed as a practical, step-by-step guide, the manual covers everything from damage assessment and erosion control to reforestation, habitat restoration and wildfire mitigation. Many of its strategies, such as soil stabilization and water resource protection, are also applicable to other natural disasters, including floods, ice storms and tornadoes.

Together, these efforts reflect TNC's commitment to building resilience at every level, from individual landowners to statewide forest systems, ensuring Tennessee's landscapes are prepared for the challenges of today and tomorrow.

Appalachian clouds © Cameron Davidson

Policy Progress in a Changing Landscape

Policy makes conservation possible, however in 2025 we saw key federal and state policies and programs related to conservation come under threat. The Nature Conservancy rose to meet these challenges, for example, coordinating a nationwide campaign to defend public resources and urging Congress to oppose the sale of public land. Nature Conservancy members in Tennessee and nationwide sent 100,000 letters to Congress, and we won! Policy is a powerful tool for conservation, and we advocated for strong investments in our forests, wildlife, water and climate. In this Year-in-Review we are highlighting a few key wins and signs of success that will shape the future of our lands and waters.

Wetlands Protection

After the 2023 Sackett v. EPA decision removed federal protections for isolated wetlands, Tennessee faced critical questions about how to regulate these ecosystems. Early proposals threatened to eliminate all state-level protections, putting more than 300,000 acres of vital habitat at risk. Through collaboration with conservation and sportsmen's organizations, The Nature Conservancy helped educate lawmakers on the ecological and economic benefits wetlands provide, from wildlife habitat to natural flood control. The final legislation retained protections for high-quality wetlands and reduced impacts to medium and low-quality wetlands from the original proposed bill, a compromise that safeguards thousands of acres while balancing development needs.

Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership

Governor Bill Lee's Executive Order 108, issued in fall 2024, set the stage for a comprehensive water resource management plan for the Duck River, the drinking water source for nearly 250,000 Tennesseans. In late 2025, the Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership, which includes The Nature Conservancy, released its recommendations, marking a major milestone. These recommendations will not only guide the Duck River plan but also serve as a model for other watersheds across the state, a win for long-term water security and ecological health. Legislative support was strong, with nearly $90 million allocated for planning and regional water infrastructure, ensuring this effort has the resources to succeed.

These achievements underscore the power of policy and partnerships to protect nature and people. While challenges remain, 2025 proved that collaboration and persistence can drive real progress for Tennessee's lands and waters—and build momentum for the years ahead.

At left: TNC's Tennessee staff and trustees Lisa Calfee, Virginia Dale, and Tracy Frist with Global Board Chair Senator Bill Frist and Global Head of Culture and Engagement James Page at the U.S. Capitol © TNC

At right: Bales of hay harvested @ Chris Helzer

Cave & Karst Program Update: Conserving Tennessee's Hidden Worlds

Tennessee's underground ecosystems are among the most biologically and culturally rich in the country. The Nature Conservancy's Cave and Karst Program works to protect these fragile environments and the bat species that depend on them. In 2025, our team visited 47 caves during winter bat surveys, documenting a 38% increase in tri-colored bat counts across 26 sites—an encouraging sign for a species previously down by over 90%. We also identified new Indiana bat roosts, expanding known habitat for this endangered species.

Our research uses the MOTUS Wildlife Tracking System and Bluetooth transmitters to study bat migration and landscape use. In September, we set a record by tagging 120 bats in two nights with partners the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). One tagged gray bat traveled more than 165 miles, offering new insights into movement patterns and conservation needs. In addition to leading our own tagging efforts, we also support and collaborate on partner-led bat research events across the state, helping expand the reach and impact of this work.

Restoration efforts continue at Piper Cave, where more than 320 cubic yards of trash have been removed since The Nature Conservancy took ownership in 2021. At that time, bat counts were 14,461. By 2024, we recorded a record high of 28,262 bats—a nearly 50% increase and clear proof that strategic restoration can yield dramatic results. This year, we focused on stabilizing a key sinkhole entrance and improving water quality in the cave's watershed.

To safeguard sensitive sites, we installed bat-friendly gates at Cripps Mill and Mud Glyph caves. These gates protect endangered gray bats and preserve irreplaceable cultural resources, including prehistoric petroglyphs. We also deployed cameras to deter vandalism at Rose Cave in Scott's Gulf Wilderness State Park.

Education and outreach remain a central focus of our program. We hosted bat house workshops and participated in the Tennessee Bat Working Group's annual blitz, where 267 bats were captured and studied by students and researchers from across the country.

From habitat restoration to cutting-edge research, TNC's cave and karst work reflects a deep commitment to protecting Tennessee's subterranean biodiversity—for bats, for people and for future generations.

145+
bats tagged by TNC and assisting partners for research

75+
bat houses built during three bat house building workshops

At left: Bat tagging event © Terry Cook

At right: Cave gate install © Cory Holliday/TNC

The Nature Conservancy
Protecting nature. Preserving life.

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

(615) 383-9909
nature.org/Tennessee

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The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee is dedicated to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends.

We are grateful for the support of our generous donors and partners.

To make a gift to Tennessee, please visit nature.org/tngiving or use the QR code.

1.6m+
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across all social media platforms

3,800+
people
reached through over 55 conservation events

315
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