

SUMMER 2025 Tennessee field notes

In this issue, embark on a journey through the annual Mississippi River Basin Program meeting in Memphis. Meet our new staff and trustee, explore groundbreaking land protection efforts in West Tennessee and get the latest scoop on the spring fire season. Plus, learn how wetland-breeding amphibians play a crucial role in the health and resilience of our natural landscapes and so much more!

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 2** From the Director
- 3** Faces of Conservation
- 4** A Conservation Victory on the Hatchie Spring Fire Season
- 5** Middle Fork Bottoms Tennessee Policymaking
- 6** TVA's IRP Working Group Protecting the Mississippi
- 7** Tennessee Wetland Guardians

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

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From The Director



As we find ourselves halfway through 2025, I am immensely proud of our Tennessee team for their dedication to advancing The Nature Conservancy toward our 2030 goals. The work you've helped support has been a testament to our shared commitment and passion for protecting and restoring our natural landscapes.

In February, the Mississippi River Basin Program held its annual meeting in Memphis, where TNC staff and board members came together to exchange ideas and strategies aimed at safeguarding the Mississippi River Basin—a vital resource that supports diverse wildlife, local communities and the global economy.

This spring, we partnered with The Conservation Fund and TennGreen Land Conservancy to acquire a 1,261-acre tract along the Hatchie River, a high-priority watershed for habitat and rare species. The acquisition is part of our broader goal to protect land and water at a significant pace and scale. We also led prescribed burns to maintain and restore our landscapes, successfully burning more than 7,000 acres at the Bridgestone Nature Reserve and within the Cherokee National Forest.

In 2018, TNC worked alongside our partners to transform Middle Fork Bottoms into one of Tennessee's newest state parks. This 860-acre park is a model for restoring Mississippi River ecosystems, reducing flooding, building natural resilience and benefiting wildlife and people. The park features a diverse landscape, including lakes, wetlands, a river and grassland prairies that support a variety of wildlife and provide numerous recreational opportunities for visitors.

Thank you for supporting our work to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. Together, we are making a lasting impact on the future of Tennessee's natural heritage.

To a healthy today and tomorrow,

Laurel Creech
Tennessee State Director



New Trustee Member

We are excited to welcome **Tyler Congleton** to The Nature Conservancy's Board of Trustees in Tennessee.

We are pleased to welcome **Sandy Martin** as our new Board Legacy Club Ambassador. A Legacy Club Member, Sandy has been serving on the board since 2021. She succeeds former trustee Carol Kirshner in this role.

Our Newest Faces

Welcome to the following new members of our staff and Board.



© Courtesy/Attie Marshall

Attie Marshall

Philanthropy Program Specialist for Tennessee and North America Fire



© Courtesy/Sandy Martin

Sandy Martin

New Board Legacy Club Ambassador



Tyler Congleton

Member, Board of Trustees

We are excited to welcome Tyler Congleton to The Nature Conservancy's Board of Trustees in Tennessee. Tyler's extensive experience in conservation-based land development and sustainable community planning makes him a valuable addition. As managing partner of Blackberry Development Company and Blackberry Farm Real Estate, Tyler has overseen residential development while preserving thousands of acres through permanent conservation easements.

Tyler is actively involved in various organizations, including the Tennessee Wildlife Federation and the Great Smoky Mountains Conservation Association. He holds a B.S. in commerce from the University of Virginia and an MBA from UNC-Chapel Hill. An outdoors enthusiast, Tyler enjoys spending time outside with his family.

© Courtesy/Tyler Congleton



A Conservation Victory on the Hatchie

The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee recently joined forces with The Conservation Fund and TennGreen Land Conservancy to secure a 1,273-acre tract along the Hatchie River. This acquisition supports our work to protect land and water at a significant pace and scale under TNC's 2030 goals. In North America, one of our priority strategies is Conserving Resilient Lands and Waters, which focuses on protecting networks of resilient lands and waters to help nature adapt to climate change.

Recognized for its high-priority habitat and rare species, this wetland area also ranks as highly valuable in the Southeast Conservation Blueprint 2023 and is characterized as resilient and connected by TNC's Land Resiliency Tool. Additionally, the Hatchie region holds historical and cultural significance as an important transport route for Native American communities.

Successfully acquiring this land enables TNC to increase the pace and scale of protection within the Hatchie River

Watershed, contributing to our broader goal of protecting 17.5 million acres of resilient lands and waters. And the benefits extend far beyond Tennessee. As part of our Mississippi River Basin Program, this project helps reduce nutrient runoff and flood risk while enhancing biodiversity from the river's headwaters to the Gulf.

With your support, TNC is protecting high-priority wetlands and habitats along the Hatchie. Thank you for making this conservation success story possible.



Spring Fire Season

The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee used prescribed burns this spring to ensure the health and resilience of the state's natural landscapes. Approximately 7,385 acres were successfully burned from February through April at TNC's Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain and within the Cherokee National Forest in the Tellico and Ocoee Ranger districts. This effort was supported by experienced TNC staff, dedicated seasonal fire crews and a supplemental short-term crew.

The burns at Chestnut Mountain targeted shortleaf pine-oak woodlands and savannah restoration sites, sparking a resurgence of wildlife throughout the area. Reintroducing fire into the Cherokee National Forest and Chestnut Mountain allows native grasses like little bluestem and wildflower perennials such as wild yellow indigo to flourish and provides essential habitats for pollinators and endangered species.

Thanks to your support for TNC, prescribed fire continues to play a crucial role in protecting our environment and fostering a vibrant and diverse ecosystem.

Middle Fork Bottoms

A Model for Conservation and Resilience

In 2015, The Nature Conservancy began purchasing 860 acres of eroded floodplain in West Tennessee that is now Middle Fork Bottoms State Park. What began as a restoration project has evolved into a thriving ecosystem that demonstrates how to rebuild Mississippi River landscapes while reducing flood risks and creating spaces that benefit wildlife and human communities.

This diverse park now features six lakes, extensive wetlands, river access and prairie habitats. The restoration included planting 250,000 hardwood trees, revitalizing more than 200 acres of wetlands and restoring two miles of streams. These improvements have created essential habitats for fish, birds and numerous other species.

One key benefit of Middle Fork Bottoms is its role in flood mitigation. By restoring

the natural floodplain, the park helps to absorb and manage floodwaters, reducing the risk of flooding in nearby communities. Additionally, the park has helped improve fish passage, allowing aquatic species to move freely through the restored waterways. This enhancement supports the health and diversity of fish populations, contributing to a more balanced ecosystem.

TNC's ongoing work at Middle Fork Bottoms serves as a blueprint for future conservation projects in West Tennessee. The project's success demonstrates the importance of collaboration with federal and state government partners, nonprofit organizations and local communities. By working together, we are replicating this model in other parts of Tennessee, ensuring that our natural landscapes are protected and resilient for generations to come.



Tennessee Policymaking for Nature

Each year, TNC engages with lawmakers during the General Assembly's legislative session to support land and water conservation. Several notable outcomes from the 2025 session will impact conservation in Tennessee:

- Since the 2023 Supreme Court decision in *Sackett vs. EPA* removed federal protections for isolated wetlands, Tennessee legislators have debated state regulations. House Bill 541 / Senate Bill 670 initially proposed removing all state-level protections, but over the past two years, the conservation and wildlife community worked with the General Assembly to amend the bill, retaining protections for high-quality wetlands and reducing the impact from over 300,000 acres to an estimated 70,000 acres. However, the bill still makes it easier to develop and destroy low- and medium-quality wetlands. Looking ahead, TNC remains committed to defending wetlands as a core policy priority.
- House Bill 1325/Senate Bill 207 passed, creating the Tennessee Farm and Forestland Preservation Fund, a new grant program for farmers and foresters to place their land in permanent conservation easements. \$25 million was appropriated to start the program, recognizing the benefits of farm and forest land for future generations.
- Last fall, Governor Bill Lee signed Executive Order 108 to conserve the Duck River watershed and create a Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership. TNC is an appointed member of the partnership and celebrates the General Assembly's approval of \$24.5 million for planning and \$65 million for water infrastructure. The Duck River provides drinking water for nearly 250,000 people, and these funds will help ensure a sustainable water supply to support the region's growth.

The Nature Conservancy Participates in 2025 TVA's IRP Working Group

The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) provides power to 10 million people in seven states across the Tennessee Valley. Approximately every five years, the TVA embarks on an Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) process to assess future energy needs, make recommendations for their future power supply portfolio and issue an Environmental Impact Statement to evaluate the impacts of the IRP.

For the 2025 IRP, The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee was invited to be one of 24 members of an IRP Working Group tasked with representing a range of broad perspectives and providing comprehensive feedback over 20 months on the IRP.

Having a seat at this table is an opportunity to advocate for a clean energy transition that benefits nature, our climate and local communities in Tennessee and across the seven-state TVA territory. This is the first time TNC has served in this type of role in a U.S. energy utility planning process, an experience that will serve as a model for broader engagement with the industry nationwide.

"The Nature Conservancy is committed to accelerating a clean and equitable energy transition. We're pleased to offer our expertise and help utilities like TVA identify opportunities to quickly build a nature-positive renewable energy infrastructure."

– LINDSAY HANNA
DIRECTOR OF GOVERNMENT
RELATIONS & CLIMATE POLICY, THE
NATURE CONSERVANCY IN TENNESSEE

PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION



Beyond Borders: Protecting the Mississippi River

In February, the Mississippi River Basin Program (MsB) staff and colleagues from The Nature Conservancy converged in Memphis, Tennessee, for the much-anticipated MsB Annual Meeting. This gathering included a vibrant exchange of ideas and strategies aimed at safeguarding the Mississippi River Basin—a vital resource that supports diverse wildlife, local communities and the global economy.

Attendees took a riverboat ride with Memphis Riverboats to the mouth of the Hatchie River, the location of a recently authorized Army Corps project. Once funded, the Hatchie-Loosahatchie Mississippi River Ecosystem Restoration project would be the largest restoration project to date in the lower Mississippi River and would serve as a model for future floodplain and habitat restoration.

Encompassing 1,245 million square miles across 31 U.S. states and two Canadian provinces, the Mississippi River and its tributaries nourish crops, transport goods, provide recreational opportunities and sustain robust fisheries. The river system brings food, fresh water, jobs and economic security to millions of people.

The energy generated at the MsB Annual Meeting will fuel TNC's ongoing conservation efforts throughout the basin. With renewed commitment and collaborative strategies, we are poised to advance crucial restoration and protection work on a watershed scale, ensuring this magnificent river system remains healthy, resilient and productive for communities and ecosystems across North America.

Mississippi River Basin Program Annual Meeting © TNC



The Tiny Guardians of Tennessee's Wetlands

Across Tennessee, wetland-breeding amphibians play a crucial role in the health and resilience of our natural landscapes. These small but mighty creatures are found at many of The Nature Conservancy's preserves throughout the state. From the Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain on the Cumberland Plateau, a global hotspot for amphibians, to the Clear Creek Preserve, their presence is essential to the thriving ecosystems we strive to protect.

Ecosystems are complex and composed of interdependent parts. When one part begins to disappear, it can trigger a cascade of changes, potentially leading to the collapse of entire ecosystems. Amphibians, such as chorus frogs and spring peepers, are vital components of these systems. Their calls, which echo through Tennessee's wetlands each spring, are not just a seasonal soundtrack but a sign of the overall health of their environment. Because they are particularly sensitive to environmental stressors, amphibians are important indicator species.

Some wetland-breeding amphibians, including marbled and spotted salamanders, have unique habitat requirements. They rely on seasonal drying of their habitats to prevent fish from establishing themselves. Fish can deter amphibians from using ponds, making seasonal drying crucial for their survival. In more permanent wetland sites, these amphibians contribute to the rich tapestry of sounds and life that define our natural world.

One notable species is the streamside salamander (*Ambystoma barbouri*), which is found in some of Tennessee's streams and wetlands. This medium-sized mole salamander is characterized by its chunky body, broad, flat head and short legs. Streamside salamanders require seasonal streams without fish for breeding, laying their eggs under rocks and debris. Their presence is a testament to the health of our aquatic ecosystems and their role in maintaining biodiversity.

"Many of these species are considered common today, but without protection and management of their habitats, that could all change."

– MARK THURMAN
DIRECTOR OF CONSERVATION
COLLABORATION, THE NATURE
CONSERVANCY IN TENNESSEE



TNC is dedicated to protecting amphibians and the wetlands they call home. Your contributions will help conserve these critical habitats, restore damaged areas and conduct research to maintain vital amphibian populations. Together, we can protect our state's connected ecosystem and the myriad of wildlife it supports.



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