

WINTER 2025

Tennessee field notes

In this issue, discover how the removal of the last remaining dam on Citico Creek is restoring natural flow in the Cherokee National Forest. Meet new faces on our team and board, look at what's next for Tennessee's SWAP and see how we're advocating for nature in Washington, D.C. Plus: a rare orchid comeback, a Legacy Club spotlight and more.

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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



A Season of Progress and Partnership in Tennessee

As winter settles across Tennessee’s forests, rivers and ridgelines, I am reminded of the power of persistence, partnership and shared purpose. In this season, The Nature Conservancy has made meaningful strides thanks to your support and the dedication of our team and partners across the state.

One of the most inspiring milestones was the removal of the Lower Citico Creek Dam in the Cherokee National Forest. This long-planned project reconnected more than 38 miles of freshwater habitat, restoring natural flow and creating new opportunities for native aquatic life to thrive. It is a powerful example of what is possible when science, collaboration and commitment come together right here in Tennessee.

We are working hard to ensure that Tennessee’s wildlife has a future. The State Wildlife Action Plan, or SWAP, is our roadmap for protecting at-risk species and the habitats they depend on. But plans like this need more than good intentions—they need support. That is why we are advocating for a dedicated and sustainable funding source for the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, a critical investment to enable the agency to conserve our state’s fish, wildlife, natural heritage and outdoor recreation economy.

These efforts are part of a broader story that includes conversations with decision-makers, community partnerships and a growing network of Tennesseans who believe in the power of nature to connect and inspire.

As we reflect on these wins, I want to express my deepest gratitude. Whether you have supported our work financially, helped spread awareness or simply shared your love for Tennessee’s lands and waters, you are part of this progress. Your belief in our mission fuels everything we do.

Thank you for standing with us as we work to conserve the lands and waters of Tennessee and beyond for the benefit of future generations.

To a healthy today and tomorrow,

Laurel Creech

Laurel Creech
Tennessee State Director

P.S. Want to learn more about leaving a legacy that benefits our planet? You can learn more about the Legacy Club on Page 7 of this newsletter.

Our Newest Faces

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



Courtesy/Brian Scales
Brian Scales
Director of Philanthropy



Courtesy/Casey Davis
Casey Davis
Associate Director of Philanthropy



Courtesy/Hannah Swain-Menzel
Hannah Swain-Menzel
Cherokee National Forest
South Zone Watershed
Restoration Specialist



Courtesy/Mark Rine
Mark Rine
Cherokee National Forest
North Zone Watershed
Restoration Specialist



Courtesy/Douglas Swink
Douglas Swink
Member, Board of Trustees



Courtesy/David Long
David Long
Member, Board of Trustees



Courtesy/Rafael Calderon
Rafael Calderon
Member, Board of Trustees

To learn more about our new staff and board members, check-out our **Conservation Newsroom:**





A Creek Reconnected: Citico’s Last Dam Comes Down

Deep in the Cherokee National Forest, nestled in the heart of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, a powerful transformation is underway. By the time this issue of Field Notes reaches your mailbox, the Lower Citico Creek Dam will be entirely removed, reconnecting 67 miles of stream habitat, (or 175 miles of blueline streams).

This moment marks the culmination of a multi-year effort that began in 2021. Since then, The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee has worked alongside partners, including the U.S. Forest Service, Trout Unlimited, Conservation Fisheries, the University of Tennessee and the Tennessee Valley Authority, to remove outdated culverts, improve stream crossings and eliminate barriers that once fragmented one of the most biologically rich watersheds in the region.

Citico Creek, a major tributary of the Little Tennessee River, supports more than 60 aquatic species, including the federally endangered Citico darter and smoky madtom and the federally threatened yellowfin madtom. Restoring flow here is about more than removing a dam; it’s about giving life a chance to move freely again.

The benefits go beyond biodiversity. Restoring natural flow improves water quality, reduces sedimentation and enhances flood resilience. It also makes the area safer and more accessible for hikers, anglers and backcountry campers who cherish this wild landscape.

“Removing the last remaining Citico Creek Dam was an extraordinary event with several partners gathering to watch the dam being broken apart,” said

Lucas Curry, a watershed restoration engineer with The Nature Conservancy in Tennessee. “As the water started rushing through the new cracks, the ponded water immediately began lowering, and within a couple of hours, a new channel was already forming. It was impressive to watch nature repair itself so quickly.”

These efforts are part of TNC’s larger goal to protect freshwater systems across Tennessee and the Southeast, setting a model for similar work in Georgia, North Carolina and Virginia.

As Citico Creek returns to its natural course, we’re reminded that restoration is not just about short-term wins, it’s about shaping a future where nature thrives.



A Plan for Tennessee’s Wildlife, A Call for Support

From the Mississippi River to the Blue Ridge Mountains, Tennessee’s natural diversity is extraordinary and increasingly at risk. According to the State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAP), 1,605 species in Tennessee are listed as Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN) and are in need of protection and/or restoration due to low or declining populations and/or vulnerability to direct threats, including degradation and loss of essential habitat. Without conservation action, SGCN are those species that may become listed in the foreseeable future.

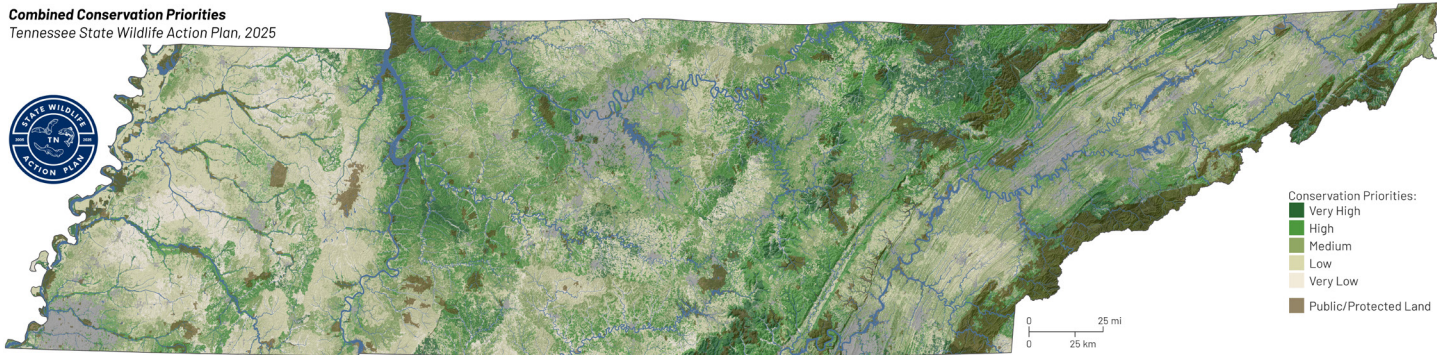
Led by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA), the SWAP is Tennessee’s roadmap for conserving its most vulnerable species and the habitats they rely on. For nearly two decades, SWAP has brought together scientists, agencies and conservation partners to shape a shared vision for wildlife in our state.

The Nature Conservancy has been a committed partner in this work for more than 20 years. Most recently, TNC worked alongside TWRA and more than 25 organizations to help revise and strengthen the latest SWAP update (available in fall 2025). Together, partners are restoring grasslands and forests, protecting water quality and exploring Tennessee’s unique cave systems. They’re also developing tools to track conservation progress, share species data and guide future action.

These efforts are only possible with continuous leadership and the resources to guide and coordinate collaborative on-the-ground actions, and ongoing monitoring of our progress—all of which require reliable funding. Despite its critical role, TWRA lacks a stable, recurring source of dedicated funding for non-game species and habitat conservation. Without it, Tennessee risks falling behind in protecting the ecosystems that support our economy, health and way of life.

The Nature Conservancy joins other conservation partners in urging the Tennessee General Assembly to establish dedicated funding for TWRA’s conservation work. Investing in TWRA means investing in clean water, resilient landscapes and the future of Tennessee’s wildlife.

To learn more about the SWAP and how you can support conservation efforts, visit tn.gov/twra/wildlife/action-plan.html.



Fox kit near the Smoky Mountains © Anna Grob; SWAP Combined Conservation Priorities © Joey Wisby/TNC



Where Fire Brings Flowers

At Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain, a quiet resurgence is unfolding across the landscape. This 5,700-acre preserve—one of the largest privately protected areas in Tennessee—is a living laboratory for forest restoration. Known as Chestnut Mountain, the site is managed by The Nature Conservancy using tools guided by our Forest Stewardship Council® certification. These include forest thinning, pest management, sustainable harvesting and prescribed fire—all applied in accordance with ecological, economic and social standards.

Today, fire is helping bring rare beauty back to the land. A few summers ago, our Director of Forest Resiliency, Britt Townsend, spotted a single, yellow-fringed orchid blooming in a restored shortleaf pine and oak savanna. This summer? We counted more than 100.



“Seeing more than a hundred yellow-fringed orchids bloom where we once saw just one is a powerful reminder of what fire can do when used thoughtfully,” Britt says. “At Chestnut Mountain, we’re not just restoring forests—we’re restoring the conditions that allow rare species to thrive.”

Native to the southeastern U.S., the yellow-fringed orchid thrives in open, sunlit habitats—conditions that fire helps create. When fire is absent, these savannas grow dense and shaded, crowding out rare plants. But when fire returns, so does the light. And with it, the orchids.

This is the power of science-based restoration. At Chestnut Mountain, fire is helping us revive native plant communities, improve wildlife habitat and demonstrate innovative forest management strategies that support long-term conservation. The return of the orchids is more than a beautiful sight to behold—it’s a sign that the land is healing.

2025 Advocacy Day in Washington, D.C.

The Nature Conservancy hosted their biennial Volunteer Leadership Summit in Washington, D.C., from October 6–8, with Advocacy Day taking place on October 8. The event brought together trustees from across the country and around the world to meet with elected officials and elevate conservation issues that matter to people and communities. Tennessee trustees Virginia Dale, Tracy Frist and Lisa Calfee, alongside TNC Global Board Chair and Former Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, connected with six members of Tennessee’s congressional delegation. They shared highlights and policy needs from the Mississippi River to Appalachia—emphasizing how conservation supports people, nature and the economy. Discussions included protecting lands for public access and recreation, sustaining farming and forestry, and safeguarding freshwater ecosystems vital to fish habitat, drinking water and community health.



TOP: Prescribed Fire at Bridgestone Nature Reserve at Chestnut Mountain; Savannah and Yellow-Fringed Orchid © Britt Townsend/TNC
BOTTOM: Advocacy Day 2025 © Laurel Creech/TNC

Spotlight on Virginia Dale

A Legacy Rooted in Science and Stewardship

Virginia Dale’s decision to include The Nature Conservancy in her estate plans reflects her ongoing commitment to science-based conservation and protecting nature for future generations.

Raised in Nashville, Dale earned degrees in mathematics and ecology from the University of Tennessee and a doctorate in mathematical ecology from the University of Washington. Her ongoing research on ecosystem recovery after the 1980 eruption of Mount St. Helens helped shape how scientists understand resilience. Over the years, she has focused on sustainability and ecosystem management in the context of large disturbances and climate change — issues central to conservation today.

Dale spent 34 years at Oak Ridge National Laboratory, where she became a corporate fellow in the Environmental Sciences Division. She continues her ecological investigations as a research professor at the University of Tennessee. With 11 books and more than 290 published articles, her work continues to influence scientists, conservationists, and resource managers.

Her introduction to The Nature Conservancy began with her mother’s interest in the organization and continued through collaborations with TNC scientists and research grant opportunities, eventually leading to her recruitment to a global committee evaluating the organization’s scientific rigor. She joined the Tennessee chapter board of trustees in 2021 and began her second term in 2024. She recognizes that “The Nature Conservancy is a leading organization in implementing resource protection based on sound scientific principles.”

In 2025, Dale became a member of the Legacy Club — a community of supporters who have made a lasting commitment to conservation by including The Nature Conservancy in their estate plans. Her decision reflects a strong alignment with the organization’s values: science-driven action, bipartisan collaboration and the ability to bring together ecologists, policymakers, and industry leaders to protect nature. She especially appreciates the Conservancy’s focus on land protection and forest management — issues that connect directly to her research and personal values.

Dale also supports a wide range of charitable organizations, including TennGreen Land Conservancy, Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning, the ALDEA Foundation in Guatemala, the Sierra Club in Tennessee, Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation, Planned Parenthood, and the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Her support of The Nature Conservancy is one more way she’s helping shape a future where people and nature thrive — through science, stewardship, and lasting impact.



“The Nature Conservancy is a leading organization in implementing resource protection based on sound scientific principles.”

– VIRGINIA DALE



To learn more about how you can leave a legacy for future generations

Please contact Director of Philanthropy Brian Scales at brian.Scales@tnc.org or (404) 309-7928.

Additional information is available on the back of this newsletter.

TOP: Courtesy/Virginia Dale; BOTTOM: Sunrise over Powell Valley © Byron Jorjorian



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for donating paper for
this publication.**



Osprey © Donna Bourdon/TNC Photo Contest 2019

A lasting legacy

Leaving a gift to The Nature Conservancy through your will or estate plans can make a lasting impact for Tennessee's lands and waters tomorrow while meeting your financial goals and personal values today.

Visit nature.org/tngiving for more information.