# SAVING LAND

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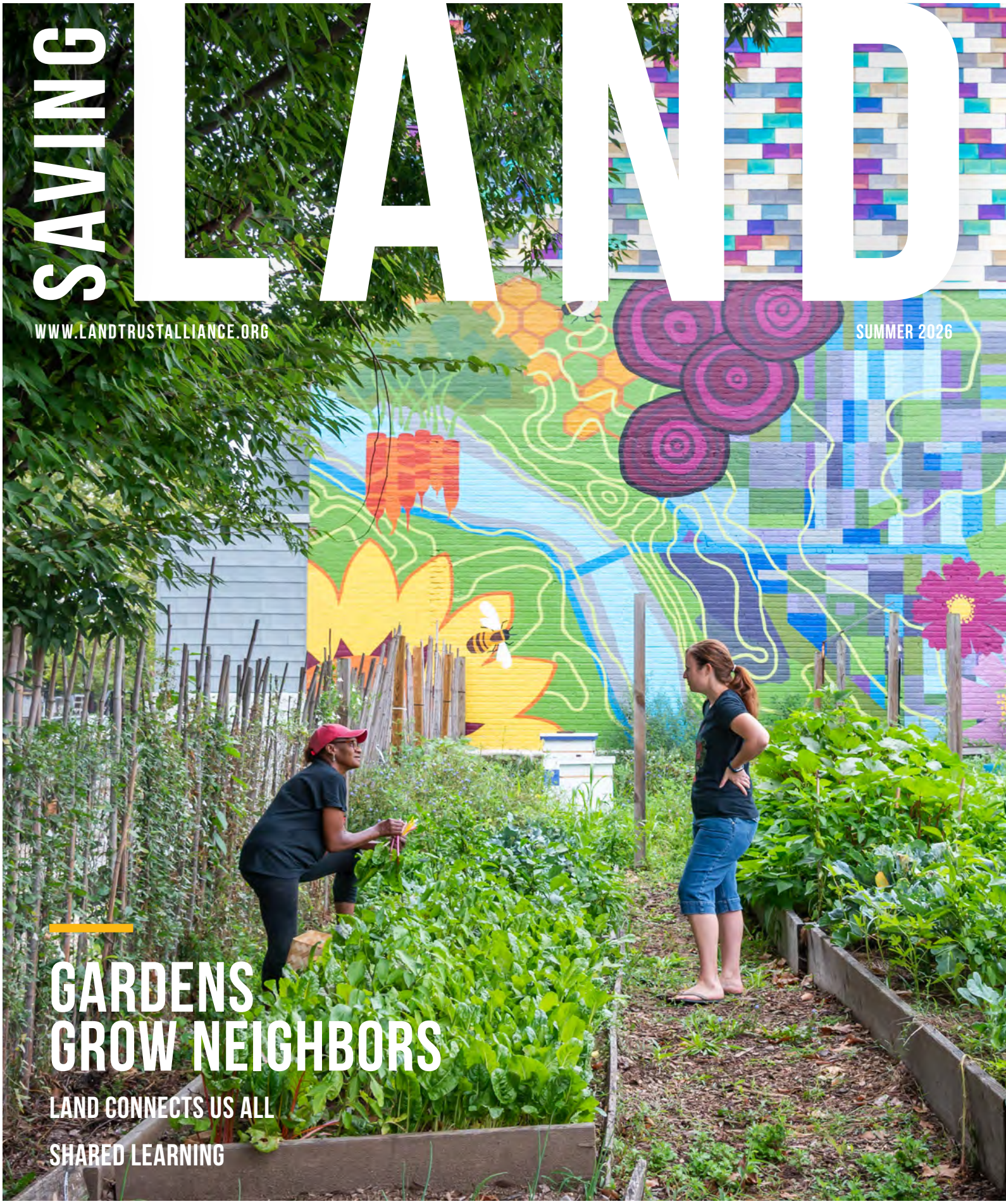
SUMMER 2026



## GARDENS GROW NEIGHBORS

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Land Trust Alliance
Together, conserving the places you love

MAC STONE

## "This project is of incomparable scale and extraordinary impact."

**—MARIA WHITEHEAD** of the accredited Open Space Institute

Last fall, Whitehead led a partnership that protected 62,000 acres in South Carolina's Pee Dee Basin, marking the largest conservation easement in state history. Featuring working forestland, bottomland hardwoods, wildlife habitat and more than 20 miles of river frontage, the project is a sweeping conservation success that will keep forests standing, rivers protected and people connected to the land for generations to come.

JOHN FINNELL

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An Idaho community protected a special place with the help of Wood River Land Trust—read more on p. 20.

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ON THE COVER:
**Neighborhood Gardens Trust has permanently preserved 53 community gardens in Philadelphia, including Brewerytown Garden.**
ROB CARDILLO

SAVING LAND

**OUR MISSION** To save the places people need and love by strengthening land conservation across America.



Land Trust Alliance
Together, conserving the places you love

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# LEAVING A LEGACY IN LAND

THOMAS FUHRMANN

After years of working to save endangered species as a wildlife biologist, Peggy Horner had a "lightbulb moment" when she realized that the most effective way to help wildlife was to protect the ground beneath them. She pivoted her career to land conservation, recently retiring as the executive director of Ozark Land Trust.

**"Land is here forever, and when land is gone, it's gone forever."**

—Peggy Horner

By including the Land Trust Alliance in her will, Peggy is ensuring that the umbrella of support, advocacy and training we provide to land trusts will endure.

**Talk to your financial and legal advisors about leaving a legacy gift to the Alliance today.**

**GET STARTED at lta.org/legacy.**

# LAND CONNECTS US ALL

THOMAS ROWELL

**Ashley Demosthenes walks with fellow conservationists in Asheville, North Carolina.**

**IF I HAVE LEARNED ANYTHING** over my 25-year career in this field, it is that land and water connect generations of people across time and space, holding vivid memories of love, beauty, pain and loss. It took me years to fully appreciate the profound, layered and transformative results that only nature, and its protection, provides to people.

The Alliance's strategic planning journey this past year has been deeply reflective of the connection between land and people. We have been listening to the land trust community, and with those insights we have drafted our 10-year vision, mission and value proposition. Here's a little glimpse: We want to see more people caring for and standing up for land, water and wildlife; we are positioning land trusts at the forefront of land and water conservation; and we are recommitting and deepening our role as convener, advocate, defender and standard-bearer of a national land conservation movement.

What is emerging from our intentional listening and engaging is that a strong and steady national leader is paramount. Even with a maturing land conservation movement and deep local experience, a resilient Alliance is fundamental to the durability and success of land conservation. Cultivating land trust leadership at all levels is vital for transfer of knowledge and skill-building for the next generation of practitioners. Advancing a future-ready movement is critical for preserving the gains that have been made while charting the course for innovation and evolution of the movement. And elevating land and water conservation as a priority worth investing in—for the general public, at all levels of government and in the private sector—through powerful data and heart-centered storytelling is imperative.

We can't wait to share more with you over the next several months and reveal the final elements of the plan at Rally 2026 in Denver!

In the meantime, enjoy the stories of community and connections in this issue of Saving Land, and have a wonderful summer outside, connecting to the places you cherish.

**ASHLEY DEMOSTHENES**
Land Trust Alliance CEO

*By* **KIRSTEN FERGUSON**

PHOTO COURTESY OF LANCASTER FARMLAND TRUST

↑ **Farmland protected by Lancaster Farmland Trust supports research to advance restoration of the American chestnut to landscapes where it once thrived.**

# PRESERVED FARM SUPPORTS AMERICAN CHESTNUT RESEARCH

On a Lancaster Farmland Trust-preserved farm in Pennsylvania, farmer John Dougherty is helping advance research that could one day support restoration of the American chestnut to landscapes where it once thrived.

Dougherty manages Gil-lad Farms LLC, a research farm working with the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) to develop blight-resistant American chestnut trees. Once common in Pennsylvania, American chestnuts were devastated after Chinese and Japanese chestnuts imported in the late 1800s introduced chestnut blight, killing millions of trees.

The loss reshaped forests and eliminated a tree valued for its rot-resistant, lightweight but strong wood, as well as its importance to wildlife and biodiversity.

For decades, ESF researchers have been using biotechnology to develop a blight-resistant American chestnut variety. Their approach involves inserting a wheat gene, oxalate oxidase, into the American chestnut genome to help the tree tolerate the disease. ESF and collaborators, including Dougherty, are crossing those trees, known as Darlings, with a diverse set of surviving American chestnuts over multiple generations in hopes of creating a resilient population suitable for potential large-scale restoration.

As of 2024, ESF had harvested 700 seeds from pollen collected from Darling fields and is continuing to study the offspring. Pending federal signoffs, ESF hopes to provide Darlings to off-campus farms, establish demonstration farms and move closer to restoring the American chestnut.

The project highlights how preserved farmland can support not only productive soil, scenic landscapes and fresh food, but also long-term agricultural and ecological research.

# Land Trust Helps Protect Site of Historic Boxing Match

Before Muhammad Ali, Sugar Ray Robinson and Joe Louis, there was Joe "The Old Master" Gans. In 1902, Gans became the first African American to win a professional athletic world title of any kind, reigning as world lightweight champion from 1902 to 1908 and becoming one of the most influential fighters in American sports history.

Now, the accredited Nevada Land Trust is working with Our Story, Inc., a nonprofit dedicated to preserving underrepresented stories in Northern Nevada history, to protect the original site of Gans' pivotal 1906 championship fight against Oscar "Battling" Nelson in Goldfield, Nevada.

Promoted at the time as a "battle of the races," the fight stretched 42 rounds in 100-degree heat and lasted two hours and 48 minutes, making it one of the longest and most significant boxing matches of the 20th century. The property also includes the old Las Vegas & Tonopah railroad depot and sits within a National Historic District.

The partners, alongside the Goldfield Historical Society and other members of the local community, intend to create a permanent educational landmark recognizing Gans' legacy, Goldfield's history and the broader cultural stories rooted in the site, including the African American community that once flourished near the depot.

The effort coincides with development of "The Longest Fight," a documentary from Maryland Public Television, PBS Reno and 214 Films, in association with Gold Creek Films, based on the book by the late Washington Post sportswriter William Gildea. The film is expected to premiere in fall 2027.

NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

↑ **The site of the historic match between Joe Gans (right) and Oscar Nelson (left) in 1906 for World Lightweight Champion has been protected by Nevada Land Trust.**

# PUBLIC ART INSTALLATION BRINGS CONSERVATION TO THE CITY

CONNIE WILSON

"Nature's Algorithm" is an interactive mural and public art installation in downtown Des Moines, Iowa, that showcases landscapes protected by Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.

A wall of vintage television sets in Des Moines, Iowa, display not talking heads but colorful video footage of flowers, flowing creeks and wildlife in action. Artist Leon Keer created the interactive mural and public art installation, "Nature's Algorithm," to showcase sensitive landscapes, including some that the accredited Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation has worked to protect or that are still in need of protection.

The more than 8,000-square-foot mural is painted on the side of a parking garage at 901 Grand Avenue and will be on display for six years. Using a free app from the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation, visitors can point their phones at the mural to activate its augmented reality features. On screen, the painted televisions appear to come alive with moving scenes from across Iowa, adding a digital layer of video, motion and storytelling to the physical artwork.

Created by the internationally recognized Dutch artist in partnership with the Greater Des Moines Public Art Foundation and Principal Financial Group, the installation is part of a broader effort to bring interactive public art to central Iowa.

Scenes included in the artwork were curated with several Iowa partners, including the city of Des Moines, Pella Historical Museums & Tulip Time, Madison County Tourism, Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge and Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. Together, they highlight both the state's natural beauty and the cultural history rooted in its landscapes.

For Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, the project offers an unusual public platform for conservation storytelling, bringing rivers, prairies, wildlife and natural areas into the middle of the city.

# Forest Corridor Safeguarded Near Hawk Ridge

A newly protected forest corridor in Duluth, Minnesota, will help safeguard one of the region's best-known bird migration areas while connecting parks, trout streams and wild ridges along Lake Superior.

The accredited Minnesota Land Trust and partners have helped protect the new Lester-Amity-Hawk Ridge Natural Area, 1,100 forested acres that link existing city parks and habitat near Hawk Ridge. Each fall, more than 200,000 migrating birds pass through the area, including hawks, eagles, falcons, songbirds and waterfowl.

The natural area provides an important bird migration stopover and breeding habitat that supports 59 species in Greatest Conservation Need, rare native plants including endangered hemlock and one of Duluth's best cold-water trout streams. It also creates a continuous corridor connecting forest, water and wildlife habitat in a highly visible landscape used by both wildlife and people.

The project brought together Minnesota Land Trust, Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory, South St. Louis Soil and Water Conservation District, Minnesota Trout Unlimited, the city of Duluth and other partners. Together, they have secured provisional protection for the area and are now developing a management plan, mapping native plant communities and advancing restoration work on Amity Creek.

The protected corridor also supports recreation and nature-based tourism. The area includes trails used by hikers, mountain bikers, Nordic skiers, equestrians and snowmobilers, as well as a stretch of the Superior Hiking Trail. Hawk Ridge draws about 80,000 visitors each fall, generating an estimated $22 million in economic benefit for Duluth.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HAWK RIDGE

An American kestrel at Hawk Ridge.

# EXPANDING ACCESS TO CONSERVED LANDS

MOUNT GRACE LAND CONSERVATION TRUST

↑ **Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust celebrated the opening of a new accessible trail at Alderbrook Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary in Massachusetts.**

For some people, a good trail is not much use if they don't know whether they can safely walk it, rest along it or bring family members with different mobility needs.

The accredited Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust, based in Athol, Massachusetts, is working to make conserved lands more welcoming by pairing accessible trail improvements with clearer information about trail conditions and age-friendly design.

"As many of us in the North Quabbin region grow older, our land stewardship practices must evolve to reflect and support the communities we serve," says Emma Ellsworth, executive director at Mount Grace. "Creating trails that are welcoming and accessible to people of all abilities is an essential part of that commitment."

The work includes accessible trails at Alderbrook Meadows Wildlife Sanctuary and Eagle Reserve, two conservation areas with stable, wide and mostly flat trail surfaces. To guide its approach, Mount Grace partnered with graduate students from the Yale School of the Environment, who researched how land trusts in the eastern United States and Upper Midwest approach trail accessibility and developed recommendations for Mount Grace.

The land trust also worked with Columbia University's Applied Practice Experience Program to better understand barriers that can keep people from using conserved lands. Early findings pointed to the importance of land near population centers; clear parking and trail information; outreach to nearby communities; and outdoor experiences that work for older adults, people with mobility challenges, families and intergenerational visitors.

With support from a LifePath Age & Dementia Friendly Community Grant, Mount Grace is improving signage at Alderbrook Meadows and adding age-friendly benches along the trail. Volunteers recently gathered at LaunchSpace, a nonprofit makerspace, to assemble three cedar benches. The benches sit higher off the ground and include armrests and taller backs, making it easier and safer for older adults to sit, rest and stand.

Additional regrading and resurfacing work is planned at Alderbrook Meadows as part of Mount Grace's effort to make conserved lands places more people can experience, not just admire from a distance.

# Land Transfer Expands Outdoor Education Camp

More than 1,000 acres of forest, meadow and wildlife habitat in California's Plumas County are now permanently protected and will expand outdoor science education opportunities for tens of thousands of students.

The accredited Feather River Land Trust acquired the 1,025-acre property, valued at $2.5 million, and transferred it to Sierra Nevada Journeys, an outdoor science education nonprofit serving youth across Northern California and Northern Nevada. Feather River Land Trust will continue to hold a conservation easement on the land.

The newly conserved acreage more than doubles Sierra Nevada Journeys' existing Outdoor Education Camp near Portola, creating a 1,494-acre youth-centered outdoor learning landscape. Each year, Sierra Nevada Journeys hosts more than 10,000 students and families for hands-on science education, including fifth- and sixth-grade students who travel to camp from throughout California and northern Nevada.

The property includes springs, tributaries and habitat for more than 100 bird and wildlife species, including mule deer, owls, bald eagles, river otters, bobcats, black bears and the California-listed endangered willow flycatcher.

"Conserving ecologically important lands in the Feather River region and connecting kids to nature is core to our mission," says Corey Pargee, executive director of Feather River Land Trust.

Sierra Nevada Journeys will manage the property for forest health and wildfire resilience while expanding opportunities for students to learn directly from the Sierra landscape.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TAOS LAND TRUST

↑ **Goats are part of Taos Land Trust's new livestock program at Rio Fernando Community Farm, where they help restore soil health, manage weeds and support local agriculture.**

# Goats and Turkeys Join Stewardship Team

At Rio Fernando Park in Taos, New Mexico, the newest land stewards have hooves, feathers and very practical jobs to do.

The accredited Taos Land Trust has introduced a livestock program at Rio Fernando Community Farm, bringing goats and turkeys into its work to restore soil health, manage weeds and support local agriculture. The program began with Coconut, a Nigerian Dwarf goat kid who was rejected by his mother and spent his early days at the park before going home each night with a staff member.

The goats will graze noxious weeds while naturally fertilizing the soil, complementing the land trust's cover cropping work. The turkeys will be housed in movable enclosures, sometimes called turkey tractors, and used as part of an integrated pest management strategy to help address grasshoppers, which have damaged crops at the farm in past years.

The program builds on the land trust's Working Lands Resiliency Initiative, which shares conservation and agricultural equipment, knowledge and labor to strengthen local agriculture and sustainable land use. Beginning this summer, the goats are expected to be available for community weed management and soil regeneration projects, with the land trust first referring residents to local grazing businesses before offering its own sliding-scale service.

Students from Taos High School's Career and Educational Opportunities program have helped shape the project, researching livestock needs and building equipment for the animals. The result is a stewardship program rooted in restoration, education and Taos' agricultural history.

# EXPEDITION DOWN ONE OF AMERICA'S OLDEST RIVERS

A team of paddlers is spending the summer on one of America's oldest rivers, traveling more than 300 miles by canoe along the New River from Todd Island on the South Fork of the New in North Carolina through Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains to the New River Gorge National Park & Preserve in West Virginia.

Hosted by the accredited New River Conservancy, the New River Expedition is part adventure, part field assessment and part love letter to a river that winds through some of the most iconic landscapes in the southern Appalachians. Launching in early June and continuing through August, the expedition is supporting the development of the New River Water Trail, a three-state paddling route designed to connect people with the river's scenic beauty, wildlife, cultural history and Appalachian communities.

The crew includes four paddlers, with Ann Rose, "The River Warrior," serving as an integral support team member. In 2024, Rose traveled the entire New River from her home in Lansing, North Carolina, to the Gulf of Mexico and will paddle sections of the route while assisting with shuttling, resupply and logistics.

As they move downstream, the team is documenting gaps in recreation infrastructure, identifying places that may need stronger protection and noting locations requiring attention from New River Conservancy cleanup crews. They are also engaging with river communities along the way.

The expedition is being shared with the public through New River Conservancy's social media channels, including daily posts on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, X and TikTok; weekly videos on YouTube; monthly newsletter updates; and journal entries on Substack. Follow along at newriverconservancy.org/new-river-expedition.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEW RIVER CONSERVANCY

↑ **Expedition member Ann Rose, pictured at Eggleston Cliffs in the New River Valley, Virginia. In 2024, Rose paddled 1,895 miles from the New River to the Gulf of Mexico, an epic journey featured in the documentary "River Warrior."**

DJ GLISSON, II/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

# TAKING CONSERVATION TO CONGRESS

*By* **MATTHEW BAUN, NIDHI KALLUR** *and* **DAVIS MARKS**

From forests and farmlands to coastlines and plains, land trust leaders from across the country know how to make their voices heard in Washington, D.C. From April 13-16, over 150 advocates joined us for the Land Trust Alliance's 15th annual Advocacy Days. They were united by a shared mission to elevate land conservation issues and share strategies to advance common goals with policymakers. Through 226 meetings with congressional offices—the most in Advocacy Days' history—land trust leaders educated legislators on the importance of voluntary private land conservation while advancing policy priorities on behalf of the land trust community.

Like previous years, this year's Advocacy Days took place both in-person and virtually. An online issue briefing and training held two weeks prior to Advocacy Days provided attendees with an overview of several policy priorities, detailing key legislation the community would be advocating for and role-playing potential meeting scenarios with congressional offices.

Advocacy Days officially opened with land trust leaders hearing from a series of distinguished speakers including the Deputy Chief of the United States Forest Service John Crockett, who spoke about the Forest Service's planned reorganization;

DJ GLISSON, II/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

↑ **The Alliance's 2026 government relations interns Davis Marks (left), Nidhi Kallur (center) and Matthew Baun (right).**

← **Conservationists from New Hampshire traveled to Washington, D.C., for Advocacy Days. Pictured (left to right) are: Ryan Owens, New England Forestry Foundation; Matt Leahy and Jack Savage, both with the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests; and Ashley Demosthenes, CEO of the Land Trust Alliance.**

Rep. Paul Tonko, who touched on conservation legislation that Congress is planning to take on in the coming months, as well as the importance of wise infrastructure siting; and Colton Buckley of the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NCRS), who used his remarks to discuss the agency's priority of conserving working lands by utilizing perpetual conservation easements, and additional details about key NRCS programs including the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).

## ADVOCACY IN ACTION

While the 90-degree weather on Capitol Hill was blazing, so were attendees. In meetings with elected officials and their staff, land trust leaders advocated for shared policy priorities such as additional funding for conservation, a robust new Farm Bill, and a balanced approach to permitting and wise siting of energy infrastructure. Participants also pushed back against efforts to spread disinformation about conservation easements and landowner private property rights while voicing support for other policy priorities and regional conservation measures.

Land trust leaders also highlighted the progress being made in their districts.

"Advocacy Days is a meaningful opportunity to talk with elected officials and their staff about the impact their work has on conservation in their districts," said Susan LaCroix, land protection director at the accredited Legacy Land Conservancy in Michigan. "It can be extra meaningful when a congressperson takes time out of their busy schedules to hear it directly from us and let us thank them for their hard work."

Several meetings ended with invitations for elected officials to attend land trust events when back in their districts, or to just stop by with their family for an afternoon in nature.

Attendees also met with staff from the House and Senate Committees on Agriculture to get a better understanding of this year's Farm Bill negotiations and to advocate for the inclusion of the Alliance's Farm Bill recommendations. In the meeting with the House Committee on Agriculture, land trust leaders took time to thank committee staff for including the majority of the Alliance's Farm Bill recommendations, such as "retaining historic investments in ACEP and RCPP and adding a standalone Forest Conservation Easement Program with mandatory funding," said Lori Faeth, the Alliance's senior director for government relations.

But it was not just all meetings all the time. In between conversations with congressional offices, participants connected with fellow land trust members.

"The best moments of the week often happen between the meetings, where conversations can start with people who are all doing the same work," noted Samantha Mango of the accredited Delaware Highlands Conservancy. "In these small moments, we trade stories, share ideas and laugh about the challenges that come with conservation work."

Jacqueline Sailer, also from Delaware Highlands Conservancy, agreed: "These connections are what make Advocacy Days so special, and also make this work feel less isolated and more inspiring."

## CELEBRATING CONSERVATION AND STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS

After a busy first day of advocacy on Capitol Hill, land trust leaders and Alliance staff gathered for an evening reception in the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Joined by elected officials and their staff, agency partners, and partners in conservation, the event celebrated the accomplishments of the private land conservation community and the critical tools and programs that have made these accomplishments possible. Several officials addressed the crowd, including former NRCS Chief Aubrey Bettencourt, Sen. Martin Heinrich, and Reps. Maggie Goodlander, Melanie Stansbury and Celeste Maloy. In addition, folks heard a rousing address from the Alliance's CEO, Ashley Demosthenes.

Although these speakers come from different backgrounds, their remarks shared a common theme: the importance of strong bipartisan support for private land conservation and for conservation easement programs within the Farm Bill, which have helped conserve millions of acres of working lands nationwide. Set against the backdrop of the next Farm Bill moving through Congress, the evening highlighted the importance of continued advocacy and served as a powerful reminder of the partnerships and programs that have driven conservation progress over the years.

Advocacy Days concluded with Agency Days, where members of the land trust community met with key officials from NRCS, Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Energy and the Forest Service. In each of these meetings, land trust leaders discussed their individual priorities alongside broader national goals, heard updates directly from agency leaders on current initiatives, and expressed appreciation for the continued partnership and support that make conservation programs possible.

**MATTHEW BAUN**, **NIDHI KALLUR** and **DAVIS MARKS** served as government relations interns with the Land Trust Alliance in the spring of 2026.

## IRS ISSUES SETTLEMENT OFFER

**ON MAY 13,** the IRS announced the terms of a time-limited settlement opportunity for individuals who engaged in abusive syndicated conservation transactions. Eligible partnerships will receive an individualized correspondence setting forth their specific settlement terms. The Alliance believes this to be a firm but fair way forward for taxpayers that invested in these transactions. We applaud the IRS for its continued work to hold syndicators accountable and protect those who work tirelessly and ethically to conserve our country's irreplaceable working and natural lands.

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To learn more, visit **IRS.gov**.

PHOTO COURTESY OF J. DREW LANHAM

↑ J. Drew Lanham.

# ‘LET YOUR PASSION LEAD THE WAY’

*By* **HANNAH OVERTON**

**Ornithologist J. Drew Lanham** grew up on a large family farm in South Carolina. An accomplished writer, wildlife biologist and a 2025 recipient of a MacArthur “genius grant,” Lanham recently spoke at the Alliance’s Southeast conference.

**Q: When did you first start noticing birds?**

I was maybe 6 years old. I would watch my grandmother feed grits to sparrows—she said she wanted to keep her eye on the sparrows because God was keeping his eye on them. That was my first exposure to ornithology, so I call it my “grandmother’s ornithology.” And I never looked back from that point of wanting to know more about the birds she was feeding and that I could hear singing.

**Q: What landscapes inspire your writing?**

I draw inspiration from my home landscapes of the Upper Piedmont, the Lowcountry, the salt marsh and the landscapes that have been altered by my enslaved ancestors—the ecopsychology of who we are and how we think of nature. If I had to choose globally, I love subalpine tundra and Alaska, where I’ve spent a good bit of time. But traveling is the experiment and home is the control. Wherever I go, I always end up comparing it with home, and I always look forward to coming home to the familiar clay and loam that I sit my boots in every day. I love the far away, but coming home is a blessing.

**Q: How did you get involved with the land trust community?**

I met Ashley [Demosthenes, Alliance CEO] at an event for the ACE Basin, a place that means a lot to people in South Carolina. Its protection is an exemplar of what we can accomplish when we lay down political weapons and work together for the greater good. I learned from Ashley about what it took to bring together federal, state and private lands into that conservation nexus. It’s not just about the federal or state government protecting things; ultimately we have to rely on the goodness of individuals to see the value of protecting land—not just for themselves, but because we all benefit. I love this idea, of people working for the greater good.

**Q: Why was it important for you to come talk to the land trust community?**

Land trusts are at the vanguard of protecting what’s left of nature—the less trammeled, the unpaved, the opportunities for wild things to be wild, for water to be cleaner, for trees to help us breathe. Land conservancies are thinking about land and thinking about the stories that are connected to land through people. It’s an art and a science, and a hard thing—especially these days—to help people see the value of their land, not just in dollars but in ecology and how it stitches us to something greater than ourselves. Talking about that with a group like this is very special to me.

**Q: What advice would you give to aspiring naturalists, writers, conservationists, those who love the land?**

The advice I would give to kindred spirits who live in awe and wonder of wildness and of wanting to protect it is: Let your passion lead the way. Don’t ever lose the ability to stop and gawk, stare, smile or cry at a sunset, or the beautiful bird that just flew in from Central America, or the view you’ve never seen before—it all feeds us. Be available for that passion to run through you, and keep your heart and mind open to possibilities. If you do that, anything can happen.

**HANNAH OVERTON** is the Alliance’s social media manager.

# AN EMERGING VISION

ISTOCK.COM/TIMAIKEN

The Land Trust Alliance is at an exciting moment in our strategic planning process: We are developing the strategies that will underpin our 10-year vision, mission and priorities.

## What You Told Us

Land trust members, partners, donors and staff collectively shared their input on our strategic plan—we received 1,600+ responses to community-wide surveys and heard from 100+ participants in focus groups, listening sessions and interviews.

You articulated what the Alliance means to land trusts: We are the convener, advocate, defender and standard-bearer of a national conservation movement.

You also shared the most important ways the Alliance can support the movement going forward:

- Cultivate land trust leadership and the next generation of practitioners.
- Advance a future-ready movement to preserve our collective work and innovate for the future.
- Amplify and activate collective impact by elevating conservation as a priority nationally.
- Strengthen Alliance resilience to ensure we can better meet the needs of the community.

The depth and breadth of your involvement has been astounding and will make the Alliance's strategic plan stronger—thank you!

"I'm excited to see how comprehensive [the emerging plan] is. It hits all the marks."

—ANONYMOUS RESPONDENT

Learn more about our strategic planning process at **lta.org/about/strategic-plan**.

Land Trust Alliance
Together, conserving the places you love

Neighborhood Gardens Trust's Brewerytown Garden in Philadelphia.

# FROM GOJI BERRIES TO GRANNY SMITHS

## Gardens Grow Crops and Community

*By* **TOM SPRINGER**

ABOVE: ROB CARDILLO. CENTER INSET: ISTOCK.COM/PHOTOGRAPHY BY TONELSO

ROB CARDILLO

ISTOCK.COM/XPHOTOZ

NEIGHBORSPACE

**NeighborSpace's Hermitage Street Community Garden in Chicago.**

The only plan that Angela Goldsmith had for her 50-by-50 parking lot in Portland, Oregon, was to create more living space—for human beings, not Asian pears or persimmons.

"Then my friend asked if he could 'depave' it. I said, 'I want to build a triplex there and don't need more grass to mow.' But you need to be careful who your friends are!" laughs Goldsmith.

A photo from 2008 shows what the power of positive persuasion can achieve. A volunteer crew wields pry bars and shovels from Depave, a Portland, Oregon, nonprofit whose name serves as a one-word mission statement. Volunteers break the asphalt into flat chunks so that trucks can haul it away. Together, they liberate an entombed patch of earth, free at last to absorb fresh air, rain and sunshine.

Today, that once lifeless rectangle has been replaced by a permaculture garden called Fargo Forest Garden. With multistory growth that mimics a forest, the garden contains multitudes to gladden the eye, heart and palate. As Goldsmith recites what grows there, she sounds part grocer, part proud plant-parent.

"Are you taking notes?" she asks. "We have two almond trees, five apples, two pears, Asian pears, persimmons, apricots, cherries, blueberries, strawberries, goji berries, sunflowers, tomatoes, artichokes, asparagus, herbs, flowering shrubs …" There's more, but the notetaker can't keep up.

Yet, in this pocket garden at 10 NE Fargo Street, the volunteers do keep up. Along with planting and pruning, they welcome visitors who come to sit, read, paint or watch yellow-rumped warblers flit about in the fruit trees. For each hour they serve, the volunteers earn "Barter Bucks" they can redeem for produce at the local Barter Market that runs from June through October.

The work of land trusts has historically taken place outside of urban neighborhoods like Goldsmith's. But a growing interest in community-centered conservation is changing where and how land trusts work. Today's land trusts are engaged in a variety of conservation work in cities and towns that provides both conservation and community benefits.

"Meeting people where they're at as neighbors can help to build a more relevant, lasting and community-centered conservation movement," says Forrest King-Cortes, senior director of community-centered conservation for the Land Trust Alliance.

## Garden Gems

In Portland, the Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Land Trust (OSALT) owns eight garden properties, five of which it rents under the auspices of its Urban Farm Collective. The gardens range in size from Fargo's 2,500 square feet to a 2-acre urban parcel that includes two rental houses for low-income families. In Fargo's case, Goldsmith still owns the property but relies on OSALT for administrative and technical support.

"Each garden has its own personality and community," says Drake James, OSALT's development coordinator and manager at

the Yamane-Bose Food Forest. "We don't impose any certain type of garden or how it should operate."

Instead, OSALT serves as a backbone organization—a common role for land trusts that either specialize in gardens or include them in their conservation portfolios. A key land trust function here is to serve as a garden's fiscal agent; this allows them to oversee budgets and pursue grants, since few gardens have 501(c)(3) status.

And—no small feat—land trusts will work with city officials to apply for permits, arrange for water and electric service, and navigate other bureaucratic speed bumps along the way.

For land trusts new to community gardens, James says it's crucial to begin with sound planning.

"Start small and figure out the systems and processes ahead of time for things such as insurance, liability and leadership development. It's harder to do all that retroactively," says James. "Then, once you've established a sound foundation, go start one or two gardens that are gems for all the world to see."

## Join the Garden Party

While community gardens are nothing new, their guiding philosophy and practical impact makes them more relevant than ever. On the macro level, research shows that city gardens sequester the carbon dioxide that drives climate change. As leafy oases, they temper the heat island effect, which turns buildings and roads into heat sinks that can raise air temperatures to lethal levels. Collectively, gardens also provide a network of refuges for birds and pollinators that find scant habitat in monolith hardscapes.

On the micro level, gardens provide green, convivial meeting places for a society where loneliness and division too often prevail. In 2023, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy issued a rare advisory on the toll of loneliness and isolation, noting that 67% of U.S. adults aren't part of a meaningful group or community. "Lacking social connection," Murthy said, "is as dangerous as smoking 15 cigarettes a day."

A review of 50 studies that analyzed the impact of community gardens in the journal Current Opinion in Psychology found social connections aplenty. The studies found that time spent in a community garden is "consistently associated with enhanced well-being across diverse populations." Authors refer to a "gardening triad" that consists of caretaking, sense of accomplishments and connection to nature.

The disarming appeal of a garden can lure neighbors from behind locked doors and drawn curtains to build trust and friendship over plots of beets, okra and snap beans. Community gardens offer free or low-cost produce in places where retail stores provide little in the way of fresh, local foods. While some gardens make food production a bigger priority than others, all manage to blend agriculture with aesthetics. Paths and labyrinths wind past beds of salad greens; grapevine-draped arbors offer shady nooks alongside sculptures and water features.

Such beloved spaces promote conservation and community in equal measure. And for enterprising land trusts, now is a good time to join the garden party.

"There is a growing understanding across land trusts and funders that our impact extends beyond just the number of acres we conserve," says the Alliance's King-Cortes. "Most community gardens are small in acreage but mighty in their impact."

A view of NeighborSpace's Kenneth Street Farm in Chicago.

NEIGHBORSPACE

## 'Community Cohesion Centers'

In Chicago, NeighborSpace has proven how lasting such movements can be. Founded in 1996, NeighborSpace describes itself as "the only land trust in Chicago that preserves and sustains gardens on behalf of community groups." They own or preserve 150-plus gardens that range from one lot to 30. A standard Chicago lot is 25 feet wide and 125 feet deep. NeighborSpace holds deed restrictions on the gardens to protect their use in perpetuity.

"People come to us with an idea for the garden, and we walk them through the application process," says Robin Cline, assistant director of NeighborSpace. "We'll ensure the land is safe and clean, get support letters from their alderman [Chicago's version of a city council member] and help raise funds for a permanent water supply, fencing, soil remediation, or a pavilion or nature playground."

Under the NeighborSpace partnership agreement, every garden requires a three-person leadership team and at least 10 dedicated volunteers. The leaders ensure that gardeners follow site guidelines and organize stewardship activities. The agreement also requires a community organization partner, whose presence makes the garden's governance more resilient. While garden leaders come and go, the partner works with NeighborSpace to ensure that the garden persists. On a practical level, partners also offer amenities such as bathroom access and indoor meeting space.

Once the support structure checks out, NeighborSpace enlists

NEIGHBORSPACE

"Most community gardens are small in acreage but mighty in their impact."

—**FORREST KING-CORTES,** senior director of community-centered conservation at the Land Trust Alliance

ISTOCK.COM/ALICIA G. MONEDERO

ANGELA GOLDSMITH

**Top: NeighborSpace hosts community groups for music and art performances in their gardens. Left: In Portland, Oregon, Fargo Forest Garden was once a paved parking area.**

CARRA GARZA/GSA

**Above: A family plants Gregg's mistflower at the SAY Sí tiny forest, run by Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas. Right top: A gardener proudly displays long beans ready for harvest at International Community Garden of San Antonio, run by Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas. Right, bottom: A queen butterfly enjoys a patch of Gregg's mistflower at Beacon Hill Community Garden in Texas.**

a landscape architect who works with the community to design a garden plan that requires city council approval. From ideation to first planting can take one to four years. During that time a nucleus of leadership, cooperation and self-governance must grow apace. As much as irrigation and compost, that's the make-or-break resource behind a successful garden.

"Gardens are beautiful and wonderful, and serve our human need to be with neighbors," Cline says. "But some people will work harder than others. Some people will pick the vegetables that were grown by another person. Some people will have different ideas of what 'messy' looks like. Yet these conflicts and challenges are indicators that show you're doing the hard work of democratic decision-making. Those skills are crucial for running a garden or a community."

That's why Cline sees gardens as "community cohesion centers" as much as places to grow tomatoes.

"We support and fiscally sponsor gardens who want to write grants, such as from Chicago's Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities. They bring in food and music, and the chat that happens builds social and civic infrastructure. Having kids play in the garden is itself a form of stewardship."

## Prepare the Soil

Land trusts of all stripes need some degree of real estate savvy to procure land. Small lots in high-density urban areas are no exception.

"To get a new garden started, we'll request access to a vacant lot from the city," says Sylvin Ashbrook, land stewardship coordinator with Grassroots Gardens WNY in Buffalo, New York. "If the city agrees, then they'll add that new property to our long-term lease with the city. But if an existing garden wants to co-steward with us, then we'll buy the land fee simple."

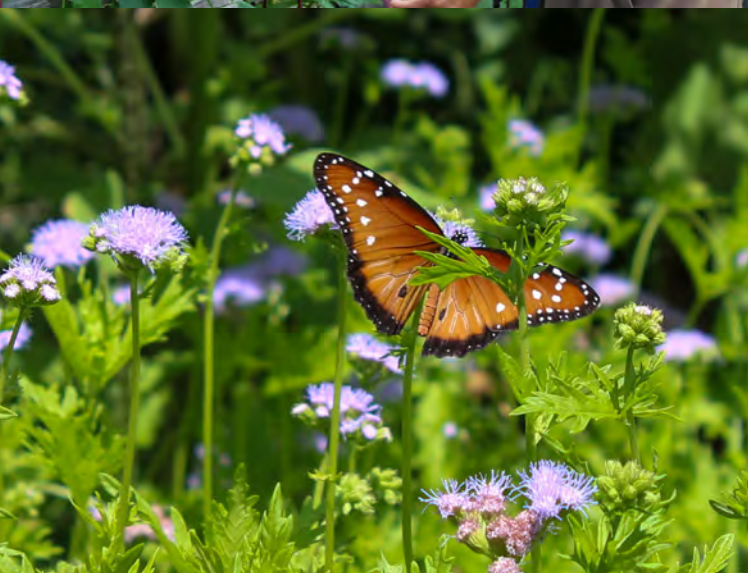
While securing land is a crucial first step, urban gardeners can't plant their kohlrabi just yet. In rust belt cities like Buffalo, a legacy of industrial and household toxins makes it unsafe to raise crops directly in the soil. Since soil remediation is tedious and costly, the group relies on a practical alternative.

"We require all our gardens to grow their food in raised beds," Ashbrook says. "Any house demolished on a vacant lot usually had lead pipes and lead paint. So, we bring in soil and compost to create raised beds that sit about 1 foot above ground."

To spread the safe soil message among incoming residents with a tradition of growing their own food, Grassroots Gardens

FROM
# GOJI BERRIES TO GRANNY SMITHS

SARA ELLIS/GSA



ARA ELLIS/GSA

WNY offers guides translated into 10 languages, including Arabic, Spanish and Bangladeshi.

And, more so than many community garden groups, Grassroots Gardens WNY also targets the next generation. They have designated staff who support 37 school gardens across the city.

"We design the gardens as outdoor classrooms," Ashbrook says. In other words, they're not just nice-to-have edible scenery. "When I teach seed starting to a class, I gear it toward the Next Generation Science Standards."

Grassroots Gardens WNY also addresses an inherent dilemma that's long bedeviled school gardens: Who tends them in summer? Unlike laptops and bookbags, you can't store a garden in the closet until September rolls around.

"We have an agreement that school maintenance staff will keep them watered and tended while school's out," Ashbrook says. "No one wants the kids to come back to a dead garden."

Because living gardens are the whole point: the kind that thrum with human endorphins and soil nutrients alike. But continuity of care and maintenance is a common problem for community gardens.

"It's one of our biggest challenges," says Grace Carlin, director of urban land and water for Green Spaces Alliance of South Texas in San Antonio. "A lot of our garden stewards are aging out. We need an influx of fresh energy to keep it going."

One growth strategy is to entice people who aren't gardeners to visit for something other than gardening. "Hold events in your space that are totally unrelated to gardening," Carlin says. "It could be yoga, watercolor painting, anything that helps people to connect, enjoy themselves and say, 'This is a cool space that I didn't know was here.'"

Newcomers can connect around multinational gardens and alfresco meals that offer tastes of different cultures. Gardens can also host kids' days—with adults in tow who may be potential gardeners—and offer activities like rock painting, garden journaling and making tiny fairy houses. (Per Etsy and Instagram, a cottage industry unto itself.)

## Gardening for the Future

Another consideration: Given the impacts of climate change, gardens themselves need to adapt. Carlin has seen those changes in San Antonio, which is now in the grips of a four-year drought.

"With hotter and dryer summers, we're moving toward water-wise native gardens and away from those that require exorbitant amounts of water. We're seeing more pollinator gardens and drought resistant crops like rosemary and native fruit trees."

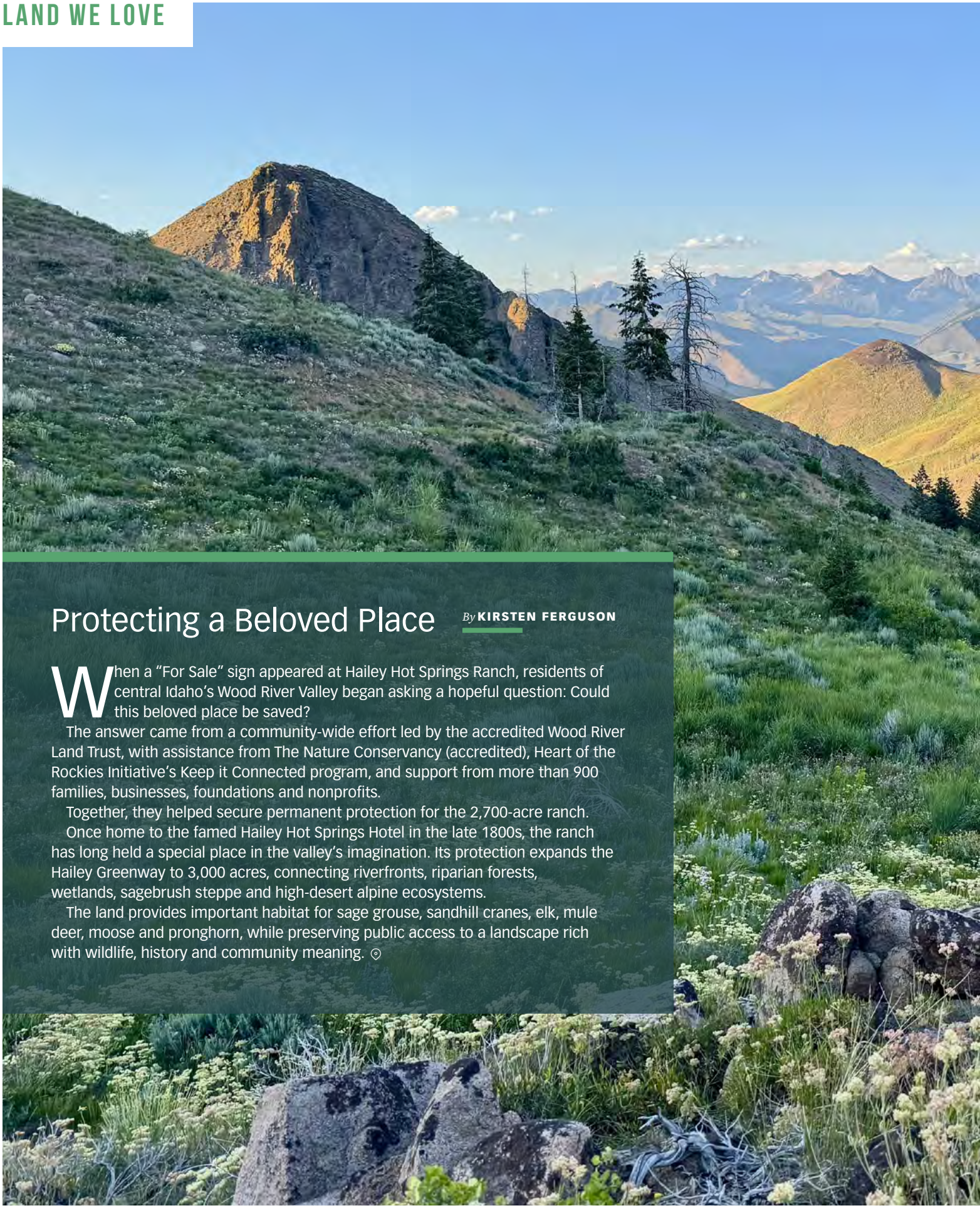
Another climate-resistant innovation has been mini-forests, a concept developed by Japanese forester Akira Miyawaki. Dense stands of native trees and shrubs—up to five per square yard—form a fast-growing forest that can mature in 10 years instead of 100.

"The ones we've planted take up the equivalent of 30 parking spaces," Carlin says. "They're in a mixed residential and industrial zone, and in a schoolyard with few trees. Mini forests create the benefit of larger forests by absorbing runoff and creating cool microclimates. Just like in our gardens, tiny forests have the power to cultivate healthy, vibrant communities and drive grassroots stewardship of our natural environment."

Whatever the future holds, every garden or mini forest starts with a dream. And as long as there are vacant lots and a few inches of topsoil, new dreams of what's possible remain.

"One day, all of our city's garden plots will come in contact with each other, and we'll be back in the Garden of Eden," says Pete Leki, a volunteer in a video produced by NeighborSpace. "You'll walk all day and still be in a beautiful space."

**TOM SPRINGER** has served in several roles for the accredited Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy, including board member, volunteer and writer.



# Protecting a Beloved Place

*By* **KIRSTEN FERGUSON**

When a "For Sale" sign appeared at Hailey Hot Springs Ranch, residents of central Idaho's Wood River Valley began asking a hopeful question: Could this beloved place be saved?

The answer came from a community-wide effort led by the accredited Wood River Land Trust, with assistance from The Nature Conservancy (accredited), Heart of the Rockies Initiative's Keep it Connected program, and support from more than 900 families, businesses, foundations and nonprofits.

Together, they helped secure permanent protection for the 2,700-acre ranch.

Once home to the famed Hailey Hot Springs Hotel in the late 1800s, the ranch has long held a special place in the valley's imagination. Its protection expands the Hailey Greenway to 3,000 acres, connecting riverfronts, riparian forests, wetlands, sagebrush steppe and high-desert alpine ecosystems.

The land provides important habitat for sage grouse, sandhill cranes, elk, mule deer, moose and pronghorn, while preserving public access to a landscape rich with wildlife, history and community meaning.

MEG PULLIAM

# SHARED LEARNING

## The Benefits of Hosting Research on Land Trust Properties

*By* **MADELINE BODIN**

Biologists survey Sycamore Land Trust property for Kirtland's snake. The work includes developing a system to identify individual snakes using detailed photographs and the unique pattern of scales on each snake's head. Right: A researcher working with Sycamore Land Trust holds a Kirtland's snake.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SYCAMORE LAND TRUST

When a university professor, a state biologist or representative of a wildlife group asks your land trust for permission to do scientific research on a conserved property, it may seem kind and community-minded to agree. But land trusts that partner with scientific researchers get more than good vibes in return.

Land trusts across the country have found that the research done on their properties, or potential properties, can help secure funding for land acquisition, inspire donations, guide stewardship plans, improve their ability to protect at-risk wildlife and train a new generation of conservationists.

Academic researchers crave stability for their long-term projects. This makes properties conserved by land trusts particularly appealing to them, especially when the land trust owns the property in fee simple. This appeal can work the other way, too, making universities or other organizations that own research sites enthusiastic partners in conservation easements.

Research conducted on land trust-conserved properties tends to be scientific research, but it's certainly not limited to that. Land trusts are hosting anthropology, archeology and history research as well. The benefits provided by research and the relationship with researchers can help fulfill a land trust's mission in many ways—even some that are unexpected, such as helping to recruit and train future employees.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SYCAMORE LAND TRUST

## Tools for Science-Based Stewardship

Sycamore Land Trust is an accredited land trust that manages 11,809 acres on more than 150 protected properties, including 13 public nature preserves, in southern Indiana. Sycamore's preserves are home to several imperiled or locally rare species, including Kirtland's snake, which is state listed as an endangered species; the rough greensnake, which is an Indiana species of special concern; and the newly discovered cypress firefly, which finds its northernmost known home on a Sycamore Land Trust property.

Scientific research on land conserved by the land trust provides both a valuable resource to scientists studying these rare species and a scientific basis for the stewardship of the properties, says Chris Fox, Sycamore Land Trust's land stewardship director.

For example, when a visitor submitted a photograph of a rough greensnake at one preserve, Fox and land trust interns, who are mostly from nearby Indiana University, surveyed the property and confirmed there is a population of the species there.

That meant that instead of removing invasive honeysuckle and autumn olive at the site and letting native plants return on their own time, they planted container-grown native species immediately. It was a slower process, and more expensive, but one that provided the rough greensnake with the habitat it needed throughout the restoration process.

Interns have helped Sycamore Land Trust grow its in-house research capabilities, while it still collaborates with a wide range of outside research partners.

Some years ago, Fox invited Indiana Department of Natural Resources biologists to survey and observe Kirtland's snakes on a newly acquired property where the land trust planned to restore former agricultural fields.

"I thought it would be good to get data on how the number of each species increased before the restoration and after," Fox says.

Today, tracking the snake's population trends means developing a system to identify individual snakes using detailed photographs and the unique pattern of scales on each snake's head. This work is often done by interns. Fox has used a similar system with shell patterns to identify box turtles.

"When you can tell people about Aldo the box turtle, not just that you have box turtles on a property, it can inspire donations," he notes.

Sycamore Land Trust first learned that the cypress firefly, a species that has been known to science for less than 10 years, might exist in its flagship Beanblossom Bottoms Nature Preserve when a local biologist asked permission to visit the preserve at night to search for it. He found it.

The scientist who discovered the firefly species traveled to the nature preserve and confirmed the species' presence the day before a tornado struck the area, destroying part of the preserve's boardwalk. Fox climbed over fallen trees in the wetland in the dark to confirm the fireflies had survived. Far from complaining about the ordeal, Fox considers that evening one of the highlights of his time at Sycamore Land Trust.

"Seeing all the fireflies," he says, "was just magical."

## Help Securing Acquisition Funding

At 7 Lakes Alliance, an accredited land trust in Maine, science has been part of the organization's vision since its founding in 2017. That vision became formalized in 2022 through a memorandum of understanding with nearby Colby College, a small private liberal arts college known for its environmental and lake science research. Today, the land trust provides the college with a water quality research laboratory, field station, conference space and a willing, stable landowner for long-term research projects.

As part of its work conserving the Belgrade Lakes watershed, 7 Lakes Alliance holds conservation easements on 23 privately owned parcels and owns 23 conservation areas, totaling 5,572 conserved acres, with an additional 6,734 acres conserved by a predecessor organization.

Protecting and improving water quality in the Belgrade Lakes region is central to 7 Lakes Alliance's mission. Monitoring water quality across seven lakes could be a tedious stewardship chore for the land trust, but thanks to the college partnership, it has instead become a meaningful, hands-on learning experience for science undergraduates.

"As an organization, we value growing the next generation of conservation leaders," says Noah Pollock, land conservation director at 7 Lakes Alliance.

This summer, 7 Lakes Alliance is working with seven college interns—six focused on water quality monitoring and original research, and one on land conservation work, says Pollock. The organization not only provides an outdoor classroom for Colby College students and research sites for professors, but also educational experiences for local high schools and summer camps.

As happened for Sycamore Land Trust, sometimes these research partnerships lead to new discoveries. In 2024, Pollock spotted some "suspiciously old trees" on a property the land trust hoped to acquire. Maine is 90% forested, but because of the state's long history of timber harvesting, less than half a percent of those forests have never been cut. Bess Koffman, an associate professor of earth science at Colby, and students in her climate course took core samples from 10 trees and counted the rings to determine their ages. Every tree sampled was more than 150 years old, and one was estimated to be about 250 years old.

Discovery of this old-growth forest "was eye-opening for the students and humbling for me," Pollock says. It also helped the land trust protect the trees: Confirmation of the forest's old-growth status helped 7 Lakes Alliance secure a state grant from the Land for Maine's Future program to support the property's acquisition.

When students are involved, as they are in many college- and university-based research projects, there can be another benefit as well, Pollock notes. "It can lead to summer staff or future staff, which is always a nice way to cultivate those relationships."

Pollock did similar work as an undergraduate and sees college partnerships like the one 7 Lakes Alliance has with Colby as a valuable resource for any land trust. "It helps land trusts fulfill their missions when you are working with expert professors and excited students who are eager to get out there," he says.

## A Strategic Easement

Capitol Land Trust, an accredited land trust headquartered just outside of Washington state's capital of Olympia, has conserved over 100 properties covering 7,054.6 acres in southern Puget Sound.

"Since the organization's inception, it has had a focus of protecting the shorelines and watersheds in the South Sound," says Capitol Land Trust's Conservation Director Alexandra James.

Located in southern Puget Sound, Washington State University's

MIKE MELTON

Protected by an easement with Capitol Land Trust, the Meyer's Point Environmental Field Station in southern Puget Sound hosts both university scientists and local education partners for environmental research, education and outreach activities.

## "It helps land trusts fulfill their missions when you are working with expert professors and excited students who are eager to get out there."

**—NOAH POLLOCK,** land conservation director at 7 Lakes Alliance

SYCAMORE LAND TRUST

An intern measures a box turtle as part of a research project with Sycamore Land Trust.

ASHLEY L. CONTI/COLBY COLLEGE

Colby College student De'Naiza Watson pulls a core sample from a tree as professor Bess Koffman watches.

Researchers conduct a fish study using seine nets at Indian River Land Trust's Coastal Oaks Preserve in Vero Beach, Florida. Below left: A graduate student holds a tarpon fish caught as part of a research project at Indian River Land Trust's Bee Gum Point Preserve. Students captured and tagged juvenile tarpon to track their movements.

PHOTO COURTESY OF INDIAN RIVER LAND TRUST

PHOTO COURTESY OF INDIAN RIVER LAND TRUST

Meyer's Point Environmental Field Station came into being after 95 acres of undeveloped land with 2,100 feet of Puget Sound shoreline was bequeathed to the university in 1990.

The field station is not only a research site for the university's undergraduates, graduate students and faculty, says field station director Stephen Bollens, it also hosts non-university research and education partners, including Tribal communities, state natural resource agencies, a county public school system and others.

While the university always intended to continue to use the Meyer's Point property as a research station, Bollens says, it was zoned for development. A state-protected conservation area protects the land directly to the west of the field station, while another Capitol Land Trust property—Inspiring Kids Preserve—lies directly across the inlet. The field station was the missing piece in a larger conservation picture.

The idea of placing a conservation easement on the property was first brought up in 2018, when Bollens was new to the field station director position. After years of fundraising, the land trust was able to pay $1.5 million to secure a permanent conservation easement on the property in 2022.

"The site has an incredible shoreline and has helped us achieve one of our major strategic goals of preserving intact shoreline," says James.

The easement fee doubled the field station's endowment, says Bollens. This not only allowed for some improvement in the facilities, such as a new roof for a laboratory office building and school bus access, but also expanded faculty and student research projects.

Bollens is looking forward to five research projects that are newly underway thanks in part to the funding from the conservation easement. The projects include anthropology research using high-tech methods such as drone-based LIDAR mapping to document climate-based shoreline changes, acoustic monitoring of bird biodiversity and habitat use, the expansion of two gardens where Tribal schoolchildren will help grow camas and biscuit root—which are Indigenous first foods—and a historical study of Indigenous knowledge and labor in the oyster industry.

"I think it has been a classic win-win," says Bollens. "I'd love to see other land trusts and university field stations consider a similar approach."

## A Meaningful Scientific Partnership

Indian River Land Trust (IRLT), based in Vero Beach, Florida, with a staff of eight, has protected over 1,300 acres, including 12 miles of shoreline on the Indian River Lagoon. It protects the land that protects the Indian River Lagoon. In spite of its name, the Indian River Lagoon is an estuary, where ocean and fresh water meet and mix, that is 156 miles long and supports thousands of plant and animal species.

From the beginning, explains Dave Fuss, IRLT's director of land stewardship, "the Indian River Land Trust board deliberately acquired lands in fee simple so that we had complete control over the lands' restoration and management."

IRLT Executive Director Ken Grudens says that owning so much land along the estuary meant that scientists just organically came to the land trust asking to conduct research on its properties.

The very first scientist to approach was with the Florida Institute of Technology and was interested in the effect of mosquito impoundments—which flood salt marshes to control mosquito populations—on the health of two popular sport-fish species, tarpon and snook.

When that scientist became an adjunct professor at Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute (HBOI) about 13 years ago, a long and deep research relationship between the two organizations began.

Since then, HBOI scientists have researched a natural nursery for a type of seagrass appropriate for restoring damaged seagrass meadows in the estuary; nesting diamondback terrapins, a kind of aquatic turtle; "sea vegetables" that grow in salty water and nutrient-poor soils; and more on or nearby IRLT preserves. IRLT also works with researchers at other institutions, including a scientist from Bethune-Cookman University in Daytona Beach who is collecting seagrass seeds at one property to study their propagation in a laboratory.

IRLT and HBOI partner to mentor local public high school juniors and seniors—this year there were 16 Junior Scientist Fellows—who conduct scientific research at IRLT's Coastal Oaks Preserve. The students work in teams to research topics like the regrowth of native species after the removal of the invasive Brazilian pepper tree, and the diversity and abundance of seagrass.

Earlier this year, IRLT began the construction of a research pavilion at the Coastal Oaks Preserve, which will include a teaching space, a wet lab and bathrooms. Grudens says that the pavilion, while significant, is still only an entry point to the vast educational space that the entire preserve provides. The diverse ecosystems found at the 226-acre preserve include freshwater wetlands, oak-palm hammocks, pine flatwoods, mangrove forests with saltwater ponds, salt marsh and seagrass meadows.

"We're a small staff," says Fuss, "so having research scientists gather information that helps us manage these resources has been tremendous. I think it's a potential avenue for other land trusts to pursue."

## The Benefits of Community

Neither the benefits of hosting scientific or other research on land trust property nor conducting some in-house research are out of reach for land trusts, no matter what their size. Like so much of what land trusts do, being a good partner in a research project means making connections and building community.

"It takes a bit of planning, but that's good for everybody. Then, you need to be open to this kind of shared learning," says 7 Lakes Alliance's Pollock. "It's worth pursuing."

**MADELINE BODIN** is a freelance science and environmental writer.

PHOTO COURTESY OF INDIAN RIVER LAND TRUST

High school students receive mentorship and participate in research through the Junior Science Fellows program, part of a partnership between Indian River Land Trust and Florida Atlantic University's Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute.

# BRING YOUR BOARD MEMBERS TO RALLY

By **DAVID CALLE**

**If you know me at all, you've heard me say it over and over again: Strong boards make strong land trusts. In fact, 86% of land trusts have more board members than staff. So it makes good sense to focus on building strong boards. But how best to do that? Start with Alliance resources.**

← Bear Run Nature Reserve, a flagship property of Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and the setting of Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural masterpiece Fallingwater.

I say this from direct experience. When I first joined the board of my local land trust, Northeast Wisconsin Land Trust, after a successful 25-year corporate career, I brought a lot of experience in things like finance, marketing, dashboards and strategy. But I didn't know much at all about land trusts or nonprofits. And, to be honest, I was overwhelmed. Private land conservation is complex. How did it work? How could my non-conservation business experience help the organization in my role as a board member? What were similar land trusts doing across the country? What key trends did I have to keep my eyes on as a board member? How could I get in touch with other board members to learn from their experience?

Luckily, help was not far away.

My land trust's executive director, Deb Nett, introduced me to the Alliance immediately. Of course, I learned a lot by working with the land trust staff, but that's also not fair to put the burden of getting me up to speed exclusively on them. So I logged into the Alliance's Resource Center, connected with the Midwest program manager, MaryKay O'Donnell (read more about her on p. 34), and attended my first Rally in Minneapolis.

With the Alliance's help, I learned "enough" about Standards and Practices, picked up board governance best practices, got to see what others were doing, and successfully adapted my corporate skills to the nuances of land trust work. Best of all, through the Alliance I connected with a set of board peers that I still work with today.

DJ GLISSON, II/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

↑ "I would encourage all board members of land trusts to attend Rally and seek out sessions that are designed for board members only," says longtime Alliance board member Judith Stockdale. Pictured are land trust board members at Rally 2024 in Providence, Rhode Island.

## SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

One of those peers is Joel Russell, a longtime figure in the land trust world who currently serves on the board of the accredited Kestrel Land Trust in Massachusetts.

"The board members I know who have turned to the Alliance for assistance have found it incredibly helpful and valuable," says Russell. "The challenge is getting board members to know about what the Alliance offers."

He's right. The vast majority of land trust board members are not aware of the Alliance or think that it's just for staff. This couldn't be further from the truth—the Alliance supports land trust staff and board members alike with leadership training, peer groups, learning opportunities, technical assistance and more.

With more than 2,000 resources, the Alliance's Resource Center has something for everyone, including online courses, guidance and sample documents to help improve one's understanding of private land conservation work. Board members can explore key resources such as Land Trust Standards and Practices alongside important reports like the biannual Salary and Benefits Survey, or webinars about the basics on topics like stewardship, acquisition or fundraising.

Many land trust board members come to the role without much previous knowledge or experience in conservation, like I did. This is wonderful! Land trust boards are increasingly made up of community leaders with varied life experiences and skillsets, bringing new partnerships and enriching the work of land trusts.

"Conservation boards are strengthened by a diversity of directors and their opinions," says Carolyn Hendricks, who serves on the Alliance's board. She shares advice for board members who are new to conservation work: "Listen to your fellow directors with intention. And remember that you were selected because your voice and your experience matter to your organization, so share your views and insights at committee and full board meetings."

## SPREAD THE WORD

Staff and tenured board members play a key role in orienting new board members and pointing them to Alliance resources and peer learning opportunities available. Russell highlights specific resources such as Practical Pointers on technical issues and updates on legislation and legal matters as particularly valuable,

DJ GLISSON, II/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

**86%**

**of land trusts have more board members than staff.**

**14K+**

**board members serve on land trusts nationwide.**

and targeted offerings that help people in specific roles, such as board president.

"One of our newer members who became treasurer found Alliance finance materials really helpful," says Russell.

He also notes that it's important to meet people where they are and integrate resources relevant to specific issues at your organization.

"At my land trust board meetings, we'll have an hour business meeting and then a 'power hour' where we dive into a topic of concern. We often use Alliance materials as resources for that," says Russell.

Hendricks highlights how the Alliance's national expertise helps strengthen local land trusts through efforts such as accreditation, Advocacy Days and Rally.

"The resources, support and access to advocacy for land conservation at the state and national level, especially through Advocacy Days, were invaluable when I served on the board of Western Pennsylvania Conservancy," says Hendricks.

Of course, if you are reading this, you probably already know about the benefits of engaging with the Alliance. But as I said, the reality is that most board members are either unaware or think that the Alliance is just for staff. So, please spread the word! Let's not keep these resources a secret. The more we share and learn, the stronger we'll be as a movement and the more impact we can have.

## THE OPPORTUNITY

There are about 14,000 board members serving on local land trusts across the country—that's a lot of people!

Board members are the jet fuel for the land trust movement. They provide a game-changing amount of resources, talent, time and connections, in addition to their oversight role that ensures an organization's nonprofit status. A strong board accelerates local conservation impact by understanding the work and applying their skills constructively.

But let's also recognize that this isn't easy. Board members are volunteers juggling multiple commitments, and many have full-time jobs, so they don't have a lot of extra time. Knowing where to start can be a challenge—check out the resource box in this article for some tips and pointers.

At the end of the day, serving as a board member on a land trust can be, for many of us, the best role of our careers.

"Being a land trust board member has been very rewarding. It's a wonderful experience and a great way to serve the community and connect with people who share your passions," says Russell. "And there's no substitute for going to Rally, where you meet so many peers and learn so much in one place."

I couldn't agree more.

I look forward to seeing more board members at Rally 2026 in Denver. And bring a friend!

**DAVID CALLE** is chair of the Land Trust Alliance's board of directors.

## HOW TO GET STARTED

**The Alliance has created a Board Member Learning Path** that includes different types of resources to help you understand all aspects of your role and responsibilities as a board member, from finances to board development to human resources to stewardship. You can also use the website search function to find specific types of content, or ask a question in the Ask an Expert online community. The Alliance also offers specific networking opportunities for board members, such as curated workshops for board members at Rally.

**Here are some insider tips:**

- Select a webinar to attend together and then discuss it at a board meeting—the Alliance offers 40+ webinars a year.
- Attend Rally—along with 1,600+ other conservationists from around the country—or a regional conference closer to home.
- Integrate Alliance board self-paced learning into your orientation.
- Engage in peer-to-peer networking opportunities.
- Update board member profiles on the Alliance's Resource Center and make sure everyone is subscribed to receive Saving Land magazine, quarterly board member emails and more—log in at lta.org/resources.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KRYSTAL BALANOFF

← Krystal Balanoff loves exploring swamps, foraging wild edibles and observing nature, all skills that likely helped her detect a "skunk" during a recent land transaction that proved fraudulent.

# GUARD AGAINST TITLE PIRATES

*By* **LESLIE RATLEY-BEACH**

**"We felt like something was off,"** says Krystal Balanoff, executive director of the accredited Bear-Paw Regional Greenways in New Hampshire.

It was. An impersonator was attempting to sell one of the land trust's conserved properties by listing it with a local realtor. Balanoff discovered the situation just in time.

"We were able to connect with the actual landowner and alert the agent before the transaction progressed any further," she explains.

You don't think about piracy in land conservation but, unfortunately, fraud attempts like this are increasing.

In 2023, over half of U.S. real estate professionals reported experiencing a seller impersonation fraud attempt primarily using wire fraud and title fraud. Wire fraud is a criminal offense using electronic communications to intentionally deceive and defraud someone of money, property or services. Title fraud is identity theft where a scammer pretends to be the legal landowner, transfers the property deed to a purchaser, and takes the money. Technology makes identity theft and fraud more convincing and easier—deep fakes, AI image manipulation, remote and virtual closings, and more have escalated the pace and success of title fraud.

Be alert to reduce land trust risks. For instance, schedule multiple in-person meetings to negotiate a conservation easement—if the entire transaction is remote and you never see the grantor, that's a huge red flag. Watch out for someone attempting to sell land you already own, too. Take Balanoff's advice: If the transaction "feels off," take immediate action! The trick is to catch fraud before it's too late.

Other warning signs to look for include: vacant properties offered for significantly less than market value; communication only through email and text, avoiding phone or video conversations; spelling and grammar mistakes; insistence on using a remote notary to close the sale; last-minute changes to wiring instructions; and properties that aren't listed on internet real estate sites, such as Zillow.

**What can a land trust do?** Here are some risk reduction pointers:

1. Title insurance can protect you from certain title-related issues.
2. Some land registries have fraud alert systems, so check if yours does.
3. Review and update your policies and procedures to prevent fraud and impersonation.
4. Use a settlement agent with a verified, documented fraud detection protocol, including a process for verbal verification of wire instructions using a known phone number and verification of parties through photo identification.
5. Insist on at least one in-person meeting and obtain photographic identification.
6. Annually check your online title records for the land you own, but preferably for all holdings, for any fraudulent transfers.
7. Re-record your conservation easement or record a notice of the conservation easement within the lookback period. Ask your attorney if you are in a marketable title act state or not, then record an appropriate notice.
8. Check realtor listings, drive by the property frequently, and make sure your area realtors and listing services know what properties you own.
9. Carefully manage your digital profile including limiting and correcting any use of notetakers, AI tools and other unsecure, hackable electronic tools.

People will understand your caution in this current environment—communicate your expectations and take prudent steps to ensure that your record title is current and secure. Pirates beware of alert and proactive conservationists, yar har har!

**LESLIE RATLEY-BEACH** is conservation defense director for the Land Trust Alliance.

# WHO WILL GIVE $5,000 NEXT YEAR?

By DAVID ALLEN

↑ Hikers atop Mount Chocorua in New Hampshire.

***Editor's note:*** *The below article is reprinted with permission from David Allen's blog, "First Thing Tuesday," where he explores trends and ideas to help conservation organizations and land trusts pursue excellence in all aspects of their work. Read the blog at developmentforconservation.com/first-thing-tuesday.*

Donor trends indicate more money is being given away philanthropically than ever before, but the number of donors doing the giving is decreasing. That means fundraisers need to focus their efforts on attracting the attention of donors who can give those bigger donations.

Consider these statements:

1. We need a strategy for reaching $5,000 prospects. Let's focus our new marketing campaign on recruiting $5,000 prospects!
2. We need to recruit $5,000 donors on our board. Let's focus our recruiting work on attracting donors who can give $5,000 or more!

If those aren't ideas your fundraising team is saying, maybe they should be.

But before I go on, let me make two quick points about $5,000. The first is that I am avoiding using the term "major donor" because in my opinion, the word "major" should never be used to describe a person. It's a major "decision," not a major donor, and decisions become major

We need to put a bigger vision on the table—one that will **touch, move and inspire donors at all levels**, including the $5,000 level.

because of how difficult they are to make, not how large the value of the gift is.

The second is that I am not necessarily talking about "rich" people. Think about the number of $5,000 decisions regular Americans make every year—starting with cars. Rich people aren't the only ones who have cars. I use $5,000 because that number implies both a capacity to give that crosses into the "substantial" realm and a deep interest in the organization or project being supported.

Now back to the statements above. How many of us—how many land trusts—start out strategic discussions with either one of those two statements? How many even include $5,000 in our proposed giving strings? Answer: very few.

We don't have a problem at the other economic extreme. We offer student, senior and introductory memberships at amounts less than $35 and worry that even that amount might be a barrier to participation. We recruit economically squeezed Millennials and Gen-Zers onto our boards. (Please don't get me wrong here. There is immense non-monetary value of having diverse perspectives on our boards.)

We should be doing these things, but we should also be working at the other end of the economic spectrum.

The reality right now is that low-dollar philanthropic constituencies are contracting. According to numbers aggregated by Nonprofit Quarterly, the nonprofit sector saw a 3.5% increase in fundraising dollars and a 4.5% decrease in the number of donors giving in 2024 compared to 2023.

That's not our fault. It's our world.

And according to Nonprofit Atlas, the wealthiest 0.3% of donors accounted for 45% of all donations from 2015 to 2022, while smaller donors—those giving under $100—accounted for less than 3%. (The $5,000 donors were somewhere in between!) My guess is that the same is true for your land trust.

The amount of money given away is increasing. The average gift is increasing. But the number of donors is staying the same or decreasing, and the median gift—the gift in the middle—is decreasing as well.

But at the very moment when we should be focusing on strengthening relationships with people giving more than $250 or $1,000 and who have the capacity to give $5,000 and more, we are focusing on digital marketing, outreach events and Giving Tuesday. We're focused on small-ball fundraising.

For example: Many of us offer four or five options less than $100 in our ask strings. We fail to put big visions on the table—visions that might attract big money. We reach for digital because it's cheaper and more efficient. We talk a lot about what we have done instead of things that need to be done. And we do so without ever clearly showing how would-be donors might make a difference.

When we fail to put out a bigger vision and ask for money to help make it real—when we list five options less than $100 or leave the decision completely up to the donor—we send the message that the dollar amount they decide on doesn't really matter. Buried in our messaging that no gift is too small, we send the message that we don't actually need money.

And when we do that, the $5,000-capacity donors hear that message as well. The hospital, the library, the children's museum and the food bank get $5,000. We get $100 instead.

## SO, WHAT CAN WE DO?

We need to keep spreading the word, but we need to get better at converting event participants into donors.

We need to put a bigger vision on the table—one that will touch, move and inspire donors at all levels, including the $5,000 level.

We need a bigger vision that will touch, move and inspire potential $5,000 board members, too. Because we need board members who lead, and that includes leading by giving.

## WE NEED TO ASK.

We need to communicate clearly that donors are an important part of an important mission. That their gifts are making a difference.

And we need a strategy for reaching $5,000 prospects. Let's focus our new marketing campaign on recruiting $5,000 prospects! Here's how:

- Identify, build relationships with, solicit and steward potential $5,000 donors. Start small. Start now. Just start. In all likelihood, your best $5,000 prospects are already giving money to the organization. Start with them.
- Put a long-term vision on the table and practice articulating it. You want to double the number of protected acres in the county? Say so. You want every fifth grader to have native plant restoration in their curriculum? Say so. And learn to talk about the kind of organization you need to be to bring that future about.
- Institute board term limits and use them to diversify the board. And diversity includes economic diversity.
- Focus some direct communication on your donor audience instead of to the world at large. Learn to talk about the opportunities donors have to make a difference instead of just the organization's accomplishments.
- Limit the "by the numbers" approach in favor of a more personal "story-based" approach.

The amount of money being given away is increasing. The number of donors giving it is decreasing. That means the amount of attention we spend on attracting attention from $5,000 (and more!) donors needs to increase.

**DAVID ALLEN** helps land trust staff and board members become better leaders, advocates and fundraisers through his consulting work at Development for Conservation.

ISTOCK.COM/CHRISTOPHER R. MAZZA

DJ GLISSON, II/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

MaryKay O'Donnell.

# Wishing Happy and Accessible Trails to MaryKay O'Donnell

*By* **LAURA FAGEN**

PHOTO COURTESY OF O'DONNELL FAMILY

MaryKay O'Donnell and her son Jack enjoy a trail.

If you work with Midwest land trusts, chances are you've met MaryKay O'Donnell, or have at least heard her name. And even if you haven't, you've almost certainly felt the impact of her work. For more than 30 years, she helped shape and strengthen the land trust community through her leadership, guidance and lasting commitment to conservation. In June, she retired from the Land Trust Alliance.

O'Donnell joined the Alliance in 2007 after nearly two decades in land acquisition work with The Conservation Fund in Colorado and local land trusts in Michigan. As the Alliance's Midwest senior program manager, she became the primary point of contact for more than 130 land trusts, supporting and guiding executive directors, board members, staff and volunteers through everything from everyday questions to complex organizational challenges.

Those who know O'Donnell have seen her passion, wisdom and dedication to land trusts.

"I first met MaryKay during the Wentworth Leadership Program in 2015. It struck me then, and still does today, how much joy and wisdom she brings to her work and to the community," says Ashley Demosthenes, CEO of the Alliance. "Her passion for the Great Lakes watershed, her advocacy for inclusive conservation, her calm demeanor, Midwest sensibility and beaming smile are hallmarks I will always remember."

## Building Stronger Land Trusts

O'Donnell joined the Alliance as the Land Trust Accreditation Commission was being formed, and quickly became a leader in helping land trusts pursue excellence and accreditation (read about the Commission's 20th anniversary on p. 38).

She led the Michigan Advancing Conservancy Excellence program and the Wisconsin Land Trust Excellence and Advancement Program, partnering with state associations to help land trusts conduct organizational assessments and develop improvement plans. Along the way, she became a trusted mentor to countless staff and board members.

Her expertise also contributed to the national effort in 2017 to update Land Trust Standards and Practices, the foundational guidelines that help ensure excellence, accountability and long-term sustainability throughout the land trust community.

## Making Land Accessible to All

Beyond her work in the Midwest, O'Donnell leaves a lasting legacy through her advocacy for accessibility and inclusion in the outdoors.

O'Donnell's commitment is deeply personal. As a parent of a child with disabilities, she notes: "It wasn't until my son Jack was a teenager, when he was no longer able to be lifted over boulders or carried on our backs, that it hit home for me: Barriers to accessibility don't just affect the person with a disability. If they can't go, neither can their families, friends, classmates or caregivers."

O'Donnell went on to lead the creation of "Open to All: A Disability Inclusion Guide for Land Trusts," which she describes as the proudest work of her career. The guide not only helps land trusts better understand accessibility and inclusion, but also offers practical strategies for removing barriers to participation and access.

Her work helped move the land trust community toward a broader understanding that everyone deserves access to the healing power of nature—and that conservation is strongest when all communities are welcomed and served.

## 'Drink the Damn Coffee'

One story perfectly captures O'Donnell's lasting influence on the land trust community. While on a field trip in Wisconsin in 2025, O'Donnell was chatting with two land trust staff members when one shared that, while training new staff on land protection, he always shares a piece of advice he learned from her: "Drink the damn coffee."

The phrase came from a training O'Donnell developed on landowner relationships and is a shortcut to remind us: This work is about people. When a landowner invites you into their kitchen, they open a door to a relationship with your land trust. So you show up with care, respect and your best Midwest manners. Even if you're a tea drinker, when offered, you drink the damn coffee. (And always eat the pie!)

> ***"Her work helped move the land trust community toward a broader understanding that everyone deserves access to the healing power of nature."***

Hearing this, the second staffer turned to O'Donnell and said, half-laughing, "Wait—that was YOU?" He had received the same advice years earlier from his mentor, who had heard it from O'Donnell.

That small piece of wisdom traveled across time, people and states and is an unexpected and enduring reflection of the impact O'Donnell has had on the land trust community. As she begins her retirement, her legacy will live on not only in stronger land trusts and more accessible outdoor spaces, but in the countless relationships she helped to build along the way.

# Updates to the Alliance's Leadership Team

In March, Ashley Demosthenes celebrated one year as the Land Trust Alliance's CEO! Demosthenes and Jennifer Miller Herzog, the Alliance's chief program officer, have recently been joined by two new chief officer positions, who will round out the team to lead the Alliance's staff and board members through our new strategic plan, coming later this year.

## Kristie Malley

### Chief Operating Officer

Kristie Malley joined the Land Trust Alliance as chief operating officer in April 2026. In this role, she brings a people-centered approach to operations, strengthening the systems, culture and organizational alignment that support the Alliance's work on behalf of land trusts across the country. Malley brings more than 20 years of experience in the nonprofit sector across conservation, education and social impact. Prior to joining the Alliance, she served as senior vice president of strategic operations at the National Park Foundation, where she helped lead enterprise-wide operational and systems initiatives during a period of significant organizational growth and transformation. She also held leadership roles with The Wilderness Society, where she advanced conservation and philanthropy initiatives in partnership with executive leadership.

## Monica Poveda

### Chief Financial Officer

Monica Poveda was promoted to chief financial officer of the Land Trust Alliance in August 2025, after serving as vice president of finance since 2021. Poveda possesses a unique blend of experience in finance, compliance and organizational leadership. Before joining the Alliance, Poveda worked as vice president for finance and administration for the American Forest Foundation and as a global deputy and finance director for The Nature Conservancy.

# THE HEAD AND HEART

By TRISTEN POLENSKY

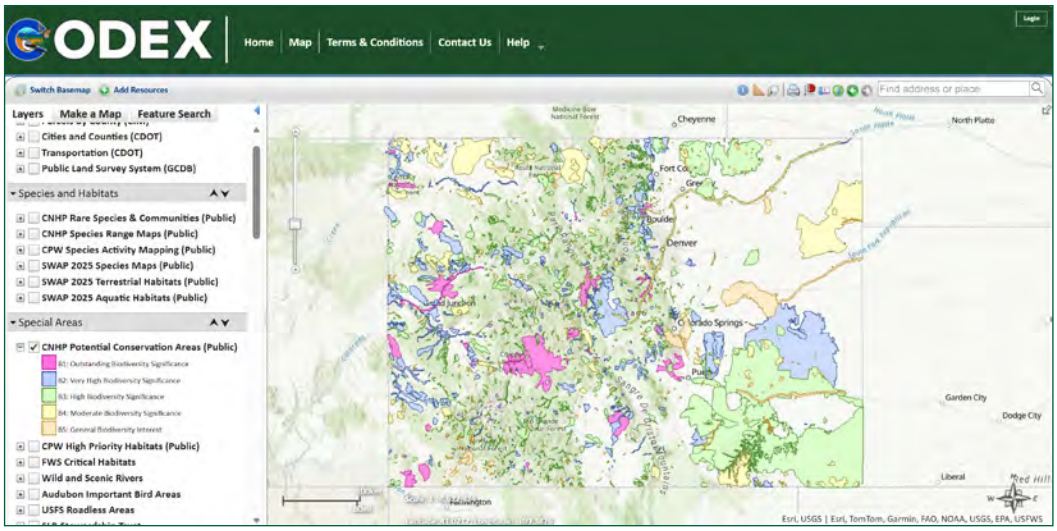
## Data shows conservation is good for the economy

DJ GLISSON, II/FIREFLY IMAGEWORKS

↑ Knott Ranch in northwest Colorado.

**Land trusts** have always found support from those who love the land and understand the intrinsic value that nature provides. But land trusts also know that the value of conservation extends beyond the heart to benefits such as clean water, natural disaster resilience, biodiverse ecosystems and more. Appealing to the head in addition to the heart with conservation efforts has grown more challenging in the face of real estate, energy infrastructure and AI data center development.

To make those connections and communicate all the benefits of conservation, a few tools offer solid data and shareable takeaways on the economic returns of protected land. A return on investment (ROI) report or economic valuation can positively impact a land trust's work, including acquisition and stewardship projects, community engagement and advocacy efforts. Such data can provide land trusts with the foundation to confidently share the inarguable: Protecting land is good for people, communities and the economy.




CODEX

← A new tool within Colorado's Conservation Data Explorer, or CODEX, calculates the value of ecosystem services provided by private land conservation projects such as land trust easements.

## Colorado's Return on Conservation Investments

About 60% of land is privately owned in Colorado, which is similar to the average in the United States at large. To better understand the value of those private lands within the state, a partnership between the Colorado Natural Heritage Program at Colorado State University (CSU), Keep It Colorado and Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CCALT) created a tool within Colorado's Conservation Data Explorer, or CODEX, that values the ecosystem services provided by private lands.

One historic challenge facing land trusts has been calculating and communicating the monetary value of ecosystem services (the benefits provided by the environment that contribute to human and societal well-being) of any given project. CODEX is a robust program that layers intricately detailed conservation data—like climate-resilient lands and potential conservation areas estimated to best support long-term species survival—to formulate ROI reports, maps and more.

"The CODEX developed by the Colorado Natural Heritage Program has been an invaluable tool for communicating the full value of conservation investments," says Erik Glenn, chief executive officer at CCALT. "The return on investment data, in particular, helps translate the outcomes of conserving working lands into clear, quantifiable economic benefits for local communities and the people of Colorado."

Students in CSU's Ecosystem Science and Sustainability Program used CODEX to evaluate the ROI of easements held by CCALT. The report found that, in 2025, CCALT easements on 817,047 acres provided:

- $1-$1.6 billion in critical ecosystem services.
- $174-$274 in benefits per Colorado resident.

"Data-driven insights about how conservation supports jobs, sustains agricultural economies and preserves the natural resources that underpin rural livelihoods are critical for ensuring that decision-makers, stakeholders and the public recognize conservation as a smart investment in Colorado's future," says Glenn.

It's not difficult to imagine how these numbers could be eye-catching to someone who has never heard of a land trust, or doesn't know how conservation benefits them. The contributing factors in the value of conserved lands often include natural disaster mitigation (think floods and wildfires), carbon storage, natural filtration for drinking water, air quality impacts, public health and so much more.

The tool can also be utilized by developers to determine potential conflicts when siting new projects.

"A public utility can use CODEX to determine what [conservation] easements could be impacted by a potential transmission line development as they start their planning. If the utilities use the program, we believe that the program could significantly reduce conflicts with easements and other resource issues by allowing for better up-front planning," notes Glenn. "CODEX also integrates cultural resource information and other resource-related information."

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Explore CODEX at: **https://codex.cnhp.colostate.edu**.

## Nature's Dividends

Beyond the borders of Colorado, The Nature Conservancy's report, "Nature's Dividends: The Economic, Health and Safety Benefits of Investing in Nature," compiles nearly 1,500 studies to formulate some astounding conservation benefits on both U.S. and local economies. The takeaways provide powerful statistics that can be woven into how land trusts talk about their work.

- **For every $1 the federal government invests in conservation, the average return is $4.** You don't have to be an avid investor to know a 300% return on an investment is a financially smart choice.
- **Water from unprotected watersheds can cost 10 times as much as water from protected ones.** Protected and pristine parks, open spaces, wetlands and forests help filter rainfall and runoff, reducing the treatment costs of drinking water.
- **Urban trees provide $3.8 billion in air pollution removal services each year.** Forests overall provide $6.8 billion in air pollution removal.
- **Every $1 invested in forest restoration and wetland protection can save up to $7 in wildfire and flooding costs.** Flooding is the most expensive natural disaster throughout the U.S., but healthy wetlands and floodplains are the most cost-effective protections. Likewise, good forest and grassland management reduces the risk of catastrophic fires.

There is one of nature's dividends that is difficult to value: mental and physical health. However, the report details the avoided health care costs of living near green spaces, which is linked to lower rates of 15 diseases, including heart disease (15% lower), diabetes (20% lower) and depression (25% lower).

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Find the report at: **nature.org/en-us/about-us/who-we-are/how-we-work/policy/natures-dividends**.

## LAND & WATER SUMMIT

Clean drinking water, access to it, and the price of it is a growing concern among Americans, especially in the West. The Colorado River provides water for 35 to 40 million citizens in seven states but is experiencing historic lows. Land trusts are doing their part to protect important rivers and watersheds to help mitigate the impacts of drought, pollution and other threats to water.

**On Thursday, Sept.17, in conjunction with Rally: The National Land Conservation Conference**, the Alliance will host the second annual Land & Water Summit. This gathering strengthens the strategy, voice and effort of land trusts working for water conservation across the country. Space is limited, so register today.

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Learn more at **lta.org/rally**.

# TWO DECADES OF EXCELLENCE, TRUST AND PERMANENCE

*By* **LEANNA ROBINSON**

Twenty years ago, the Land Trust Accreditation Commission was incorporated in Washington, D.C., as an independent program of the Land Trust Alliance. Its founding marked the beginning of a bold step forward in accountability, excellence and public trust for the land conservation community.

When the Commission was formed in 2006, its purpose was clear: strengthen land trusts, uphold the public trust and help ensure that conserved lands remain protected forever.

"It came at a time when the community was under legislative and regulatory threat," says Executive Director Melissa Kalvestrand. "The community stood up and said, 'We can self-regulate.'"

From the beginning, accreditation was designed to be rigorous. The process is an independent, in-depth review of governance, finances, transaction and stewardship practices, and organizational operations. It asks land trusts to take a hard look at their systems and demonstrate that they are operating according to quality standards.

In 2008, the Commission accredited the first 39 land trusts. In 2012, it published the first Requirements Manual, creating a more formalized framework for applicants and reviewers alike.

As the land trust community continued to grow and adapt, so did accreditation. The Commission launched an online renewal system in 2013, significantly updated its Requirements Manual and application materials in 2018 to reflect the 2017 Land Trust Standards and Practices, and transitioned to a completely paperless first-time application process in 2020.

Most recently, in 2024, the Commission introduced extended accreditation terms for land trusts successfully completing their third renewal cycle, recognizing the hard work and commitment of land trusts that have achieved accreditation for 15 consecutive years or longer while maintaining the high standards of the accreditation process.

Over the past two decades, the Commission's work has helped strengthen organizations of every size, from all-volunteer land trusts to large regional and national organizations. Through accreditation, land trusts have improved policies and procedures, strengthened stewardship practices, increased transparency and reinforced the permanence of conserved lands.

"Thanks to accreditation's focus on governance, finance, transactions and stewardship, land trusts are able to chart a path to permanence and receive public recognition of their achievement. Accreditation provides land trusts with a road map for professionalism and success," says Tammara Van Ryn, founder and former executive director of the Commission.

These impacts extend beyond individual organizations. Accreditation increases public confidence in private land conservation at a time when trust and accountability matter more than ever. This success is driven by accredited land trusts, and also by the extraordinary commitment of volunteer commissioners and staff. Since its founding, 50 volunteer commissioners have served the Commission, contributing thousands of hours annually in service to the conservation community.

"Each team member, day in and day out, personifies the accreditation seal: excellence, trust and permanence," says Kalvestrand.

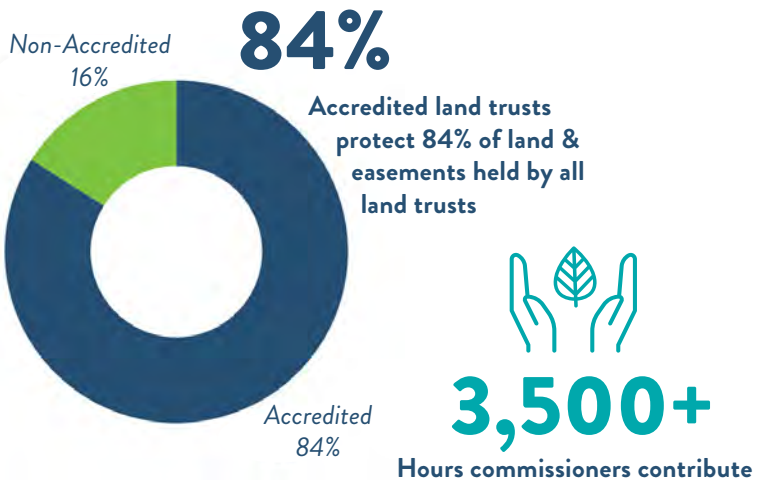
As conservation faces increasingly complex pressures, accreditation continues to provide a strong foundation for the future. What began as a response to uncertainty has become one of the conservation community's greatest collective successes.

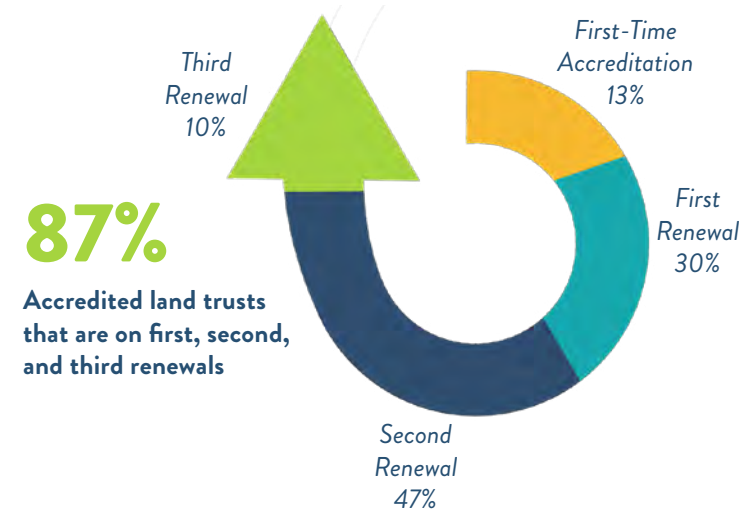
Twenty years later, the mission remains the same: ensuring that land trusts are strong, accountable and prepared to protect the places people need and love forever.

**LEANNA ROBINSON** is the communications specialist for the Land Trust Accreditation Commission.

## NEW LOOK

The Commission is thrilled to announce the launch of its redesigned website! The new site features a fresh look, better organization, the ability to link to Alliance resources and more. Check it out at landtrustaccreditation.org.


## LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

An independent program of the Land Trust Alliance

landtrustaccreditation.org

# ACCREDITATION ANNOUNCEMENTS

Congratulations to Spartanburg Area Conservancy in South Carolina for achieving first-time accreditation! And congratulations to the 31 land trusts that earned accreditation renewal for the first, second or third time.

Accreditation renewals:

- Ashby Land Trust (MA) ♦
- Athens Land Trust (GA) ★
- Bangor Land Trust (ME) ♦
- Catawba Lands Conservancy (NC) ★
- Coastal Mountains Land Trust (ME) ★
- Colchester Land Trust (CT) ♦
- Colorado Cattlemen's Agricultural Land Trust (CO) ★
- Colorado West Land Trust (CO) ★
- Forest Society of Maine (ME) ★
- Freshwater Land Trust (AL) ★
- Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy (MI) ★
- Hawai'i Land Trust (HI) ★
- Jefferson Land Trust (WA) ★
- Lake Champlain Land Trust (VT) ★
- Lake Forest Open Lands Association and its affiliate, Lake Forest Land Foundation (IL) ★
- Land Trust for Santa Barbara County (CA) ★
- Land Trust for Tennessee (TN) ★
- Legacy Land Conservancy (MI) ★
- Lyme Land Conservation Trust (CT) ♦
- Minnesota Land Trust (MN) ★
- Peninsula Open Space Trust (CA) ★
- Presumpscot Regional Land Trust (ME) ●
- Salem Land Trust (CT) ★
- Saratoga PLAN (NY) ♦
- Skagit Land Trust (WA) ★
- Tall Pines Conservancy (WI) ♦
- Thousand Islands Land Trust (NY) ★
- Three Rivers Land Trust (NC) ♦
- Utah Open Lands (UT) ♦
- Westchester Land Trust (NY) ★
- Wilderness Land Trust (MT) ★

List as of March 2026

● Denotes land trusts that have achieved first renewal
♦ Denotes land trusts that have achieved second renewal
★ Denotes land trusts that have achieved third renewal

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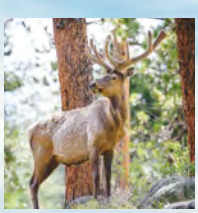
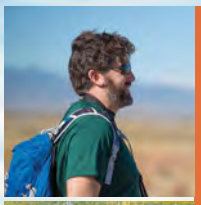

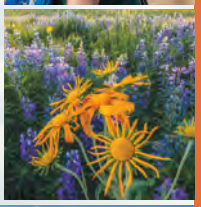


REGISTRATION IS OPEN

# RALLY 2026

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Join us at Rally 2026 in Denver, Colorado, where you will be re-energized and inspired. Share new ideas and network with a robust conservation community representing land trusts and partners across the nation.

Rally has all the resources you need to take your conservation career further. There's no better way to invest in your future.

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