



OUR OHIO NATURE

FALL/WINTER 2024

Forging a Future for Ohio's Forests

LOCAL LANDOWNERS ARE DOING THEIR PART

When David Funk started planting trees in the 1980s, his goal was simple: leave the land better than when he found it. A long history of agriculture and degradation left deep imprints across Athens County, but Funk wanted to begin a new legacy, one that would return the long-abandoned land back to oak-hickory forest and inspire the next generation of conservationists. The decades that followed saw his vision come to life, and thanks to the Family Forest Carbon Program (FFCP), those efforts will continue to live on for generations.

EMPOWERING LANDOWNERS

In a state where 84% of forests are privately owned, and nearly half of them exist in parcels of 50 acres or less, private landowners play a critical role in the conservation of Ohio's natural resources. The FFCP is an initiative that empowers private forest owners to enhance their land's health, mitigate climate change and earn income simultaneously by providing access to participation

in the voluntary carbon market, which was traditionally inaccessible to smaller forest owners.

Developed collaboratively by the American Forest Foundation and The Nature Conservancy (TNC), the program assists landowners in implementing sustainable forest management practices, leading to healthier woodlands, improved wildlife habitats and increased carbon sequestration. The program equips landowners with both financial and technical support, aiming to enhance the health, value and resilience of forests.

"For many years, I don't believe that people in the Appalachian region valued our woodlands for the ecological benefits they provide," says Funk. "The FFCP plants a stamp on the value of our forests in Central Appalachia, a value that extends far beyond just wildlife habitat and recreation and includes the global importance of our forest's ability to capture and store carbon."

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Director's Message



In this issue of *Our Ohio Nature*, three themes weave in and out of each other like braided river channels, gathering energy and changing the planet. These themes are diversity, service and reciprocity.

From our very beginning, diversity has been a core part of our mission at The Nature Conservancy. We work to protect the diversity of life on earth. And as we have pursued this mission over the last 65 years, the types of ecosystems that we work to protect, the strategies we use to protect them and the people that we engage as partners have become more diverse. Diversity has kept us grounded in our mission and allowed us to become

much more effective and to have greater impacts through strategic innovation. And these strategies, including programs like the Family Forest Carbon Program, are having great results.

The second theme is service. I always find the stories of our volunteers incredibly inspiring. While I believe that most of us are in this career to serve, it is our supporters and volunteers who, working from both the field and the office, really exemplify service. We are thankful for their partnership because it makes us stronger and amplifies our impact. And the idea of service transcends people's work to protect the planet. Ohio's diverse ecosystems also help us by providing clean air and water, sustainable timber, recreation, beauty, and homes to our cherished wildlife.

The third theme, reciprocity, illustrates the interaction between diversity and the service of people. By managing these ecosystems in ways that build their strength and resilience, we are giving to the earth. In return, the earth gives back to us. And, as you read testimony from our volunteers, you will find that protecting and restoring nature brings them happiness.

We are grateful to all who serve our mission and the earth by supporting The Nature Conservancy. And we hope that this service brings you joy.

Yours in conservation,

Bill Stanley
State Director
The Nature Conservancy in Ohio



CONTINUED FROM COVER

A VISION OF REFORESTATION

When Funk acquired the first plots of what is now the Funk Family Forest, he was met with a tangle of invasive species, like multiflora rose. Years of intensive agriculture followed by a period of abandonment had taken their toll on the land. It was not dissimilar from many areas of Ohio that were logged in the early 1900s to make way for farms. Unfortunately, as farms were later abandoned, much of this former farmland fell victim to the establishment of invasive plants, which stunted the natural process of succession by shading out the forest floor and preventing oaks and hickories from reestablishing. Forests need active management to thrive. And that's just what Funk and his family were able to provide.

“Sustainable forestry means intentionally managing the structure and composition of our woodlands,” says Tom Rooney, sustainable forestry director for TNC in Ohio. “We do this through a variety of practices, including invasive species control and selective thinning, both of which seek to remove harmful or less desirable species. This ensures that species of high economic and ecological value, like our native oaks and hickories, can regenerate.”

Historically, forests in Athens County were subject to high grading, a harvesting practice that took the largest, most economically valuable trees from the land without regard for the ecological impact to the forest. This left mostly beech and maple trees, which grow quickly and shade out the forest floor, suppressing the growth of traditional hardwoods like oaks and hickories.

A LONG-TERM VISION

Funk's connection to the land runs deep. His family's 1,800 acres of woodlands have witnessed generations of care and stewardship, and when asked about his decision to enroll in the FFCP, his eyes light up. “It is very exciting that through this program, we are bringing the next generation, and even the grandchildren, into conservation,” he shares. For Funk, this enrollment is a formal recognition that Southeastern Ohio's woods are to be treasured.

In many ways, Funk has been a thought leader in his efforts to restore southern Ohio's forests. After all, his vision to leave the land better than when he found it was ignited during a time when climate change was a mere whisper and when forestry was largely a passive practice. Today, Funk is proud to have

been the first Ohio enrollee in the FFCP program. But his participation is more than just emblematic of a lifetime spent stewarding the land.

“Enrolling in FFCP connected us to foresters that have provided tremendous insight into the nature of our woods,” Funk says. “They are helping bring an additional layer of sophistication to our forest management plans and we're able to use the provided stipend to enhance what we were already doing.”

Funk hopes that his story will inspire and influence other landowners to consider how they too can help bolster the ability of Ohio's forests to support people and wildlife for generations to come.

“When we started this work in the 1980s, people really weren't planting trees,” he shares. “It's affirming to see the increasing appreciation and interest in the Appalachian region.” After 40 years of reforestation efforts, Funk's excitement is palpable. “We're getting close to walking into our forest and seeing what might have been here 400 years ago,” he explains. “We've seen a return of species that were historically removed from the land, including turkey and bobcats, and we hope that one day we might even see the return of black bear to this area.”



TO LEARN MORE about the Family Forest Carbon Program and how to enroll, visit nature.org/familyforestcarbon.

Fire Ignites Healthy Ecosystems



Prescribed fire is once again being used for land management on The Nature Conservancy's lands in Ohio.

On March 12, 2024, the first burn in five years was conducted at Kitty Todd Nature Preserve in northwest Ohio. The purpose of this 33-acre prescribed fire was to improve the ecological integrity of oak woodlands and oak savanna habitat by reducing woody plant cover; increasing herbaceous, native perennial plant abundance and diversity; and reducing leaf litter and wildfire risk.

“By all accounts, the burn was a great success,” says Pete Blank, northwest Ohio restoration manager. “We successfully opened the savannas and woodlands and provided more room for herbaceous plants to grow. Among them are the wild blue lupine and dense blazing star, which are more abundant than they’ve been in years on those tracts. Other native flowering plants that are responding very well to the fire include sessile-leaf bellwort, colicroot, blue-eyed grass, yellow-eyed grass and grass pink orchids.”

Now that fire is back at Kitty Todd, there’s no time to rest. TNC staff are already working on several additional burn plans for this fire-dependent ecosystem, which they hope to implement this fall. With good planning and some luck, fire will be a persistent part of the Kitty Todd landscape once again.

Six weeks after the burn at Kitty Todd, TNC successfully burned 37 acres of warm season grassland at Edge of Appalachia Preserve, marking the first fire in more than six years at the preserve. In a true One Conservancy effort, the fire was fully managed by TNC staff from a five-state region, including Kentucky, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois and Ohio.

Around 10 acres of the burn unit were overgrown with vining honeysuckle, autumn olive, multiflora rose, sumac, black locust and other woody species. The timing of the prescribed fire, which was later than historical burns at the preserve, allowed for a slower, smokier burn that provided greater mortality to the intended woody species and cool season grasses, like fescue, that threaten native vegetation and preferred species.

“Having fire at both Kitty Todd and Edge of Appalachia this spring has been an incredible accomplishment,” says Mike Hall, TNC’s Appalachian Forest manager. “Prescribed fire is an essential ecological management tool in supporting more diverse, more resilient natural areas throughout North America. Our work here in Ohio is part of a national effort to restore and maintain healthy forests and grasslands with good fire, while protecting communities and ecosystems from harmful fire impacts. I anticipate this year’s fires being just the tip of the iceberg as we work to accomplish improved habitat management to meet our 2030 goals.”

FROM TOP LEFT A fire practitioner monitors a prescribed burn at Edge of Appalachia Preserve. © Alex Goetz/Running Wild Media; Orange fringed orchid © Ben Bomlitz/TNC; Prescribed fire will help to regenerate both forest and prairie habitats at Kitty Todd Nature Preserve and Edge of Appalachia Preserve. © Alex Goetz/Running Wild Media; Grasspink orchid © Ben Bomlitz/TNC; Blue-eyed grass © Ben Bomlitz/TNC





Local Input Leads to Strong Support and Lasting Outcomes

In a region of the state plagued with harmful algal blooms, hope for better water quality is blossoming. Thanks to \$437,000 in funding from H2Ohio and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) broke ground this past summer on a project that aims to restore 23 acres of floodplain habitat in the Village of Ottawa Hills, a suburb of Toledo. The project converted manicured turfgrass into a forested wetland that will capture and filter an estimated 33 million gallons of urban and residential stormwater before reaching the Ottawa River, a tributary that flows into Lake Erie.



Development in northwest Ohio has heavily impacted water quality and aquatic life in the Ottawa River. Impervious surfaces like roads, driveways, parking lots and buildings transport water quickly into waterways, taking with it contaminants such as salts, motor oils and heavy metals from the ground. This rapid discharge of large volumes of water into streams after rain events erodes stream banks and causes sediment and contaminants to enter the river.

Capturing and storing urban runoff is an important step to improving water quality in the Ottawa River and ultimately in Lake Erie. “Wetlands act as nature’s kidneys, filtering stormwater runoff before it reaches rivers and lakes,” says Ashlee Decker, TNC restoration ecologist and the project lead. “By restoring this floodplain habitat, we hope to mimic the natural processes that help clean water and reduce flooding for neighboring communities.” The project will also restore

habitat for the region’s rich biodiversity, like the many species of warblers and waterfowl that use the area as overwintering habitat or stop there to rest and refuel along their migratory journeys to more northern breeding grounds.

Funding has supported engineering and design, public outreach and project implementation. Design and restoration involved constructing shallow depressions in the landscape that will capture runoff from two drainage ditches and replanting the site with 5,000 native trees. In addition to stormwater capture, benefits from the project include removing pollutants such as phosphorus, nitrogen and coarse sediment from the water. The design aimed to preserve most of the mature, native trees, and plantings were consistent with the Oak Openings habitats found in the surrounding region.

As part of the project, passive recreation space and trails were also incorporated into the design, creating more opportunities for people to access nature and enjoy time outdoors. “We know the value that natural areas bring to our neighborhoods and communities, and it’s been very rewarding to work with The Village of Ottawa Hills,” continues Decker. “As part of planning and restoration, we hosted three public meetings, gave several presentations to community groups and conducted a survey to garner input from the local community. Residents have been generally very supportive and presented good ideas, and we plan to keep the community engaged as the site develops. The Village’s commitment to repairing and strengthening this land will benefit the community today and for generations to come.”

BY THE NUMBERS

In the past year, we've made remarkable strides in conservation that have safeguarded ecosystems, secured cleaner air and water, engaged diverse communities and partners and enhanced quality of life for people and wildlife alike. Discover some of our accomplishments from the past year.



70 →

ACRES OF LAND BURNED at Kitty Todd Nature Preserve and Edge of Appalachia Preserve to revitalize habitat for plants and wildlife



10 →

YEARS SINCE THE LAUNCH of the 4R Nutrient Stewardship Certification Program, which encourages agricultural practitioners to use the right source of nutrients at the right rate and right time in the right place



2,539 →

ACRES OF OHIO FOREST ENROLLED in the Family Forest Carbon Program, which invites private landowners to play an important role in protecting Ohio's woodlands



69,735 →

VISITORS TO TNC PRESERVES IN OHIO, underscoring the importance of natural areas in providing green space for communities



464 →

VOLUNTEERS CONTRIBUTED A COMBINED 3,214 HOURS toward efforts including guided hikes, tree planting, invasive plant management and species monitoring



6 →

NEW FARMER ADVOCATES FOR CONSERVATION TRAINED, for a total of 26 farmers certified to offer peer-to-peer mentoring in regenerative agriculture practices



6,547 →

PEOPLE REACHED through TNC programming



123K →

NATIVE TREES AND SHRUBS PLANTED across 250 acres, 9,578 linear feet of stream restored and 25.7 acres of wetland restored by the Ohio Mitigation Program



173 →

ACRES OF CLIMATE-RESILIENT AND BIODIVERSE LAND protected in Ohio

Celebrating Our Volunteers

As the sun sets on another year, we'd like to shine a spotlight on a few of our many dedicated volunteers, whose efforts have been instrumental in our progress. Join us in celebrating three volunteers, whose volunteerism and commitment to service has helped drive conservation success over many years.

CHUCK FLETCHER

A mainstay in The Nature Conservancy's (TNC's) volunteer program, Chuck Fletcher has been contributing to projects and programs in northeast Ohio for more than 20 years. To date, he has contributed more than 6000 hours across a variety of events and preserves, including hikes, trail maintenance, trash pickup, habitat stewardship and invasive species management. "Our work to remove invasive species has had a lasting impact on Ohio's preserves," says Fletcher about his volunteer work. "And I've met so many great people and had so many great experiences—missing it is unimaginable."

"The gifts of Chuck's time, energy, knowledge and dedication to conservation are immeasurable. He engages volunteers and cares for the land, which he knows like the back of his hand. We are grateful to know and work with Chuck!"

—MARCEL WEIGAND, northeast Ohio conservation coordinator

JAN DIXON

Jan Dixon has spent more than 17 years volunteering for TNC in northwest Ohio. Most notably, she has supported the yearly butterfly monitoring initiative at Kitty Todd with fellow volunteer Angie Cole. The program has helped draw attention to how the preserve supports a variety of rare and endangered species. "I have had the pleasure of meeting so many people who share my interest and love of nature through volunteering," says Dixon. "These relationships are part of the most important and meaningful relationships I have had over the years."

"Jan has been one of our most committed volunteers at the Kitty Todd Nature Preserve for nearly 20 years. Her countless hours of butterfly monitoring have provided invaluable insights that have informed management of the preserve. We're so lucky and grateful to have Jan as part of our volunteer family."

—PETE BLANK, northwest Ohio restoration manager

ANGIE COLE

Angie Cole has been volunteering for TNC for 15 years. Her work in butterfly monitoring at Kitty Todd Nature Preserve has been a part of a larger long-term project through Ohio Lepidopterists that helps show trends and patterns in butterfly populations. The data are also helping TNC better understand how restoration work impacts butterfly populations. "As a nature lover I wanted to do something to make a positive difference. The natural world is facing so many challenges, and I felt the need to be a part of the solution. TNC's mission was a good fit," says Cole about her volunteerism.

"Angie is the epitome of a committed volunteer. She helps us in all aspects of our work, from invasive plant control to native seed collection to butterfly monitoring. She's incredibly knowledgeable about the ecology of northwest Ohio. And most of all, she's always a pleasure to be around."

—PETE BLANK, northwest Ohio restoration manager



GET INVOLVED

Thank you to all our volunteers for your invaluable contributions to The Nature Conservancy. Whether volunteering at Bissell Nature Center, removing invasive species from preserves throughout the state or planting trees on our many work sites, we appreciate all you do to protect and restore nature in Ohio and beyond.

Looking for ways to get involved?

→ Visit [nature.org/ohiogetinvolved](https://www.nature.org/ohiogetinvolved) to learn more.

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Create Your Conservation Legacy.

What better legacy is there to leave than your commitment to protecting the Earth for future generations? Whether you are taking the first steps toward planning your estate or are in the process of updating your estate plan, The Nature Conservancy is here to help. Contact **Mary Beth McNamee** in Ohio today.

 (440) 539-6710

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Protecting Ohio's forests is as good for people as it is for wildlife. But we can't do it alone. Discover how we're working with private forest owners through the Family Forest Carbon Program to regenerate and protect these vital ecosystems.

David Funk, Ohio's first enrollee in the Family Forest Carbon Program
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