The Nature Conservancy



# 2026

## Ohio impact report

# From the director

Inspiration for conservation may come from the immensity of a Great Lake, the quiet flow of a headwater stream or a delicate, tiny flower. From whitefish larvae to bison and bears, we protect connected ecosystems, restore land and waters and help endangered species recover.

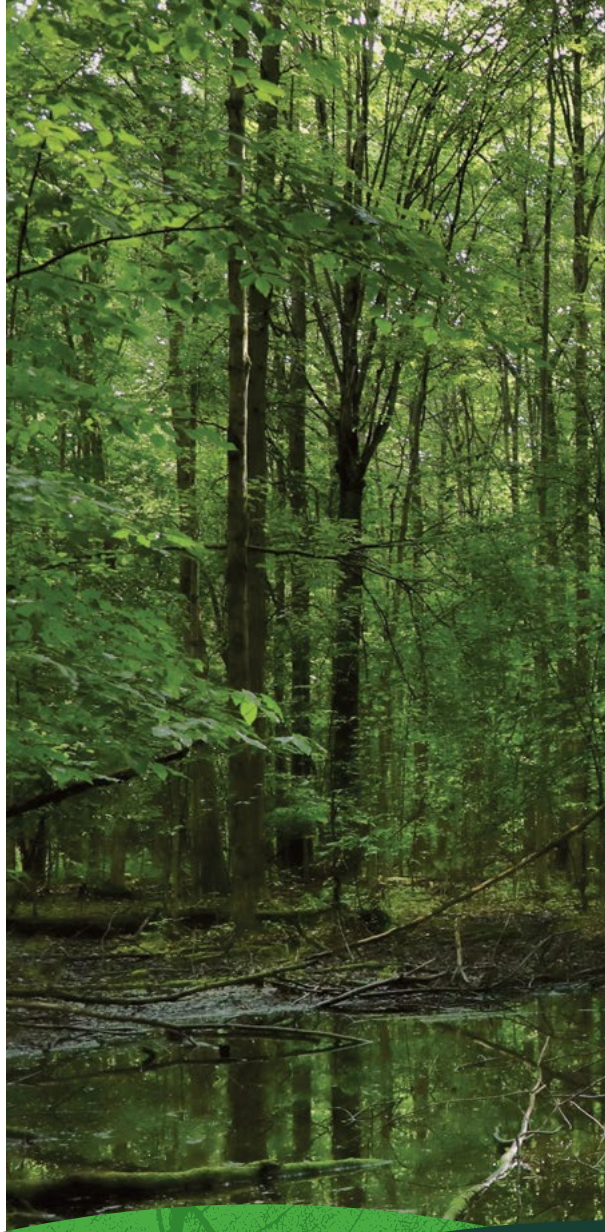
But the people behind this work inspire me just as deeply as the places and species. After all, conservation is ultimately also about people, as our well-being is inseparable from the health of nature. Our responsibility is to ensure that future generations inherit thriving forests, healthy rivers, sustainable farms and vibrant communities.

Across Ohio, farmers are adopting practices that strengthen their operations and the land. Communities are protecting clean water. Scientists, policymakers and conservationists are advancing practical climate solutions. Staff, volunteers, trustees, donors and partners keep showing what is possible when we lead with purpose, optimism and perseverance.

The challenges are real. Threats are growing, and broad support for the environment can shift. Yet positive change is not a distant hope. It is happening now, through voices, choices and actions made every day by people who care. Thank you for being among them and for helping turn shared vision into progress. Together, we are shaping an Ohio where people and nature can thrive for generations to come.



**Bill Stanley**
State Director



**COVER PHOTO** Prothonotary Warbler in the wetlands of Killbuck Marsh Wildlife Area in Ohio © Larry Martin/TNC Photo Contest 2022;
**THIS SPREAD** Bill Stanley © David Ike; Morgan Swamp Preserve © Rebecca Nieminen

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***"Together, we are shaping an Ohio where people and nature can thrive for generations to come."***

BILL STANLEY, STATE DIRECTOR



THE NATURE CONSERVANCY IN

# Ohio


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# FRESH WATER

## Saving the beloved Great Lakes fish that feeds millions

In a tragic turn, baby whitefish in many areas of the Great Lakes are starving before they reach adulthood. As a result, many populations of this emblematic freshwater fish are on the verge of collapse, creating a crisis for Indigenous and other commercial fishers.

To save whitefish, TNC is working alongside a broad array of partners to develop and scale innovative solutions.

**Tiny invaders unleash seismic changes**

Invasive quagga mussels are the primary reason for whitefish declines. Native to Eastern Europe, the mussels entered the Great Lakes via ballast waters of ships and now number in the quadrillions, covering sandy bottoms and rocky reefs of most Great Lakes.

As mussels filter water, they consume plankton and other nutrients that baby whitefish and other organisms need. The result: clearer, more beautiful waters that conceal a biological desert.

**Restoring river-spawning runs and more**

One way to reverse the decline is to help baby whitefish get enough plankton to eat until they are big enough to consume other food. Toward that end, TNC is partnering with Indigenous, state and federal agencies to encourage whitefish to spawn (reproduce) in rivers that feed into the Great Lakes. Whitefish used to spawn in these tributaries until logging in the 1800s destroyed the habitats. Today, many rivers have been restored—and the mouths of these rivers are full of plankton.

TNC and partners have stocked 400,000 whitefish eggs in northern river tributaries that flow into Lake Michigan and Lake Huron, improving our approaches every year as we learn more. "Thousands of these fish have successfully hatched, and young whitefish have been found in the lake at the river mouths weeks after drifting downstream—proving we can successfully rear whitefish eggs in rivers," says TNC's senior conservation scientist, Matt Herbert.

Now we are pinpointing additional river tributaries ideal for whitefish spawning. Plus, we have stocked over 300,000 juvenile whitefish in tributaries and the Great Lakes and have been experimenting with transferring adult whitefish into rivers to spawn, which is showing great promise. We are also working with Tribal, state and federal agencies on a more comprehensive Lake Whitefish Rescue Strategy to preserve genetic stocks of whitefish.

Learn how TNC and partners are giving whitefish a fighting chance in the documentary *All Too Clear* at **pbs.org/show/all-too-clear**.



# Treating water pollution with wetlands

Near Gifford State Forest in Sharpsburg, Ohio, a $4.9 million project is being accomplished through TNC's Ohio Mitigation Program (OMP). This 193-acre wetland and stream restoration project is the largest in the program's history. Construction began in September of 2025 and is expected to be finished by December 2027.

A major issue the project will address is a legacy of water pollution left from mining in the 1960s. This pollution is called acid mine drainage.

"Acid mine drainage happens when certain rocks exposed by mining react with air and water to form sulfuric acid. This acid dissolves heavy metals from the ground and results in toxic substances flowing into nearby streams, harming wildlife and degrading drinking water downstream," says Devin Schenk, director of the Ohio Mitigation Program.

One of the streams on the property has been contributing high levels of acid mine drainage and heavy metals to Opossum Creek. This creek connects to Sharps Fork, then Federal Creek, and eventually flows into the Hocking and Ohio Rivers.

"These streams are connected all the way down to the Gulf, so pollution entering even the smallest tributaries in watersheds in the Appalachian region can cause problems downstream," says Schenk.

This project will treat this pollution through installing treatment wetlands.

"The water coming out of the mines will go into specially designed wetlands. The polluted water will be retained and cleaned by native vegetation and limestone substrate, which reduces the acidity," says Schenk.

These wetlands will also be combined with over two miles of stream restoration, significant reforestation, and the re-establishment of another 6.5 acres of wetlands. This work will create habitat for fish, salamanders and other wildlife, while also absorbing floodwaters and improving the overall health of the watershed. Learn more about OMP at **nature.org/omp**.

## A CLOSER LOOK

TNC's Ohio Mitigation Program (OMP) team was founded on federal and state laws to restore wetlands and streams that have been damaged by land use activities. By combining funds from small permitted impacts, the team implements restoration projects with high chances of ecological success. Restoring Ohio's wetlands and streams is critical, as wetlands serve as vital habitats, provide flood control and improve water quality.

Since its beginning in 2014, OMP has:

- 28 restoration projects completed in 23 Ohio counties
- 49 miles of streams restored
- 392 acres of wetland restored
- 1028 acres of improved management achieved



**LEFT PAGE** Baby whitefish in the Great Lakes are in a fight for survival against invasive mussels © Inspired Planet Productions; **THIS PAGE** The stream located at the Gifford State Forest OMP site © Jennifer McDonald/TNC; Strait Creek OMP project under construction © Dana Ohman/TNC

# CLIMATE

## New tool aims to speed the Midwest's clean energy transition

Some of the best inventions are hatched when a critical need becomes apparent. That's how TNC's Sean Mobley, Indiana director of climate strategy, came to propose a mapping tool that promises to accelerate the renewable energy buildout and help mitigate global warming.

A few years ago, Mobley was asked whether a particular Midwest property would make a good solar site. "To answer that, I would need to drive out to the site with experts to conduct an in-depth analysis," he said. "Then an idea popped into my mind. How about we create a digital tool that can quickly identify promising clean energy sites by weighing a variety of variables, such as potential impacts on wildlife and farmland?"

Launched earlier this year, the Renewable Opportunity Explorer does just that. "We've been able to identify hundreds of thousands of acres in the Midwest—across Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin—with the potential for low-conflict, high-opportunity development of solar and wind projects," Mobley says.

### The science behind smart siting

A variety of concerns are considered when siting utility-scale renewable projects, such as preventing harm to native habitats and avoiding lands that matter to communities. Plus, there are technical issues, including a site's distance to transmission lines.

Also in play are potential community benefits. Renewable projects can bring jobs, increased tax revenues and grants to fund schools or roads.

The Renewable Opportunity Explorer reflects TNC's science-based "3C" approach, which aims to protect or maximize **climate**, **conservation** and **community** outcomes in the renewable energy build-out. A 3C approach can cut in half the amount of land needed while ensuring that projects are sited on low-impact lands, such as on abandoned mine sites and old croplands that are no longer producing.

"In the tool, we can draw a polygon around an area, and the tool will quickly provide a 10,000-foot analysis of how that site scores on the 3Cs as well as other factors," Mobley says. The tool can also zoom out to identify the best-scoring sites in a state or area. This information is proving invaluable as TNC collaborates with partners on launching potential solar and wind projects and talks with legislators about clean energy policies.

### Building community support

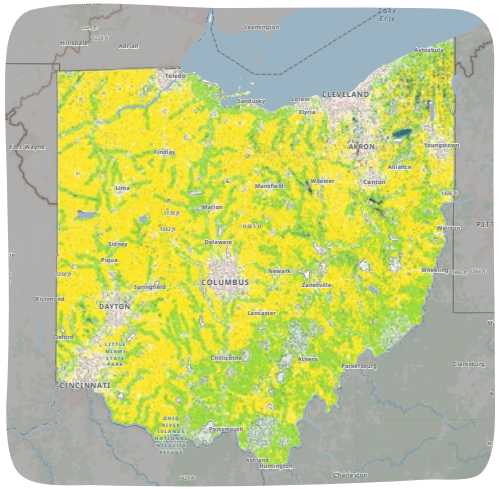
To date, unintended negative outcomes from wind and solar projects have led to some local opposition to the clean energy transition. A thoughtful buildout that considers the 3Cs can reduce opposition to renewable energy and speed up the energy transition.

"Not all clean energy projects have been good clean energy projects due to negative conservation or community outcomes," says Mobley. "TNC's Renewable Opportunity Explorer helps energy developers and other stakeholders do better—and ensure the clean energy transition is as low conflict as possible."



**Sean Mobley**
Indiana director of climate strategy, TNC

***"We've been able to identify hundreds of thousands of acres in the Midwest with the potential for low-conflict, high-opportunity development of solar and wind projects."***




In 2026, TNC released the Renewable Opportunity Explorer. Learn more at **nature.org/ohrenewexplore**.





**THIS SPREAD** Sean Mobley © Fauna Creative; A tree-lined walk at Chicago's Washington Park © Alex Garcia

# Ohio agricultural nature-based solutions that address the climate crisis

In 2026 and beyond, our Ohio agriculture team has helped farmers with a variety of agricultural nature-based solutions that address the climate crisis—including agroforestry, Feed in Focus, Farmers for Soil Health programs and more. Science shows that regenerative practices like cover crops, reduced tillage, vegetated buffers and agroforestry can restore ecosystems, strengthen farm resilience and deliver long-term benefits for communities and the planet. Each of these highlighted programs in Ohio support farmers in these soil, water and climate-friendly practices.

Agroforestry is the intentional integration of trees and shrubs into crop and livestock systems for environmental, economic and social benefits. TNC in Ohio's agroforestry program is a part of the larger TNC North American Agriculture Program, called the Expanding Agroforestry Project (EAP), which opened for applications in August 2026. Over three years, EAP aims to establish tens of thousands of acres of agroforestry plantings across 30 states. For this program, Ohio's agriculture team provides site visits and consultation calls—in addition to planning and leading resources for farmers across the state. Last year and this year, the Ohio agriculture team planned the Agroforestry Summit, which brought Ohio farmers together in-person to learn more about agroforestry practices and resources through speakers and workshops.

With support from Sam's Club, Michigan Milk Producers Association has collaborated with TNC to scale the adoption of 20 best management practices (BMPs) in forage production and feed efficiency on dairy farms. TNC has enrolled 14 farms with BMPs ranging from crop diversification to nutrient stewardship into its Feed in Focus program. The Feed in Focus program is designed in collaboration with the dairy industry to support farmers' commitments to responsible production and advance progress toward the dairy industry's 2050 Environmental Goals.

The Ohio team has also supported farmers in adopting regenerative practices with the Farmers for Soil Health program, which focuses on implementing cover crops. This year, Farmers for Soil Health experienced a large increase in enrollment. With over 200 farms applying this year, the Ohio agriculture team may exceed their original goal of 65,000 acres to 80,000 acres of cover crops due to this increased interest.

## A CLOSER LOOK

In 2026, the Ohio agriculture team:

- Enrolled over 14 farms in the Feed in Focus Program
- Impacted over 15,773 acres through the Feed in Focus Program
- Enrolled 200 farms in Farmers for Soil Health
- Helped with the applications of 220 farms for the North America Agriculture Expanding Agroforestry Project





# ICONIC PLACES

## Connecting iconic cities with iconic nature

Beyond the majestic Great Lakes, stunning Northwoods and vast Mississippi River Basin, the American Midwest is home to vast networks of forests, prairies, wetlands and other ecosystems vital for achieving TNC's 2030 goals. These iconic places support the people, communities, traditions and wildlife that make this region unique. While many of these landscapes have been shaped and altered by generations of human activity, they remain essential to our future.

TNC brings together the people who shape these landscapes every day, including farmers, fishers, scientists, Indigenous partners, community members and policymakers to develop shared science-based solutions that work for both people and nature. With over 70 years of experience in the Midwest, TNC is a leader in translating science into action to protect, restore and manage these vibrant natural systems that have sustained us for centuries.

Our work also includes protecting and restoring biodiversity throughout our iconic floodplain, forest, coastal and prairie ecosystems, which helps these vital ecosystems absorb stress, recover from disruption and continue to support life. Across wetlands and other freshwater systems, our work to restore natural processes has also brought the return of native plants and wildlife, proving that there's hope for recovery even when ecosystems were altered for a century or more.

In addition, we're connecting our conservation efforts in and around these iconic places for a larger-scale impact that protects biodiversity and improves the quality of life in our cities and neighborhoods. Our goal is to turn a patchwork of isolated places into a connected system that can endure.

By working together, we can protect the Midwest's iconic lands and waters that provide benefits to all.

## 2026 achievements

In collaboration with our partners, TNC protected and improved:

**765k** acres of lakes and wetlands

**17m** acres of land

**6k** miles of rivers

**THIS PAGE** The Midwest is home to iconic nature, like the Lake of the Clouds in Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. © Chong Q Wu/TNC Photo Contest 2023

# Protecting Appalachian forests and biodiversity: The Edge of Appalachia Preserve

The Richard and Lucile Durrell Edge of Appalachia Preserve System is one of the most biologically diverse natural systems in the midwestern U. S., encompassing rugged woodland, prairie openings, waterfalls, giant promontories and clear streams. Lovingly called "The Edge," the Edge of Appalachia Preserve is a collection of preserves in beautiful Adams County in Southern Ohio. These hills and forests are the foothills of the larger Appalachian Forest System. The Edge serves as a protected corridor for migratory birds and for wildlife moving in response to a changing climate.

TNC in Ohio is striving to bridge the gap between our 21,000-acre preserve and the 63,000-acre Shawnee State Forest to encourage plant and animal intermigration and build a forest more resilient to the effects of climate change. In addition to being a key habitat for black bear and bobcat, this forested area, known fondly as the Sunshine Corridor, is significant for the migration and nesting of many imperiled songbirds including the worm-eating warbler, Acadian flycatcher, Kentucky warbler and scarlet tanager. The rolling Ohio hills support nearly 50% of the cerulean warbler's global populations during the breeding season.

"Larger protected areas are going to be more resilient to invasive species and better support species that depend on large-scale habitat like various warblers, salamanders and black bear," says Terry Seidel, director of land protection for TNC in Ohio.

Protecting the Sunshine Corridor will also enhance popular recreational opportunities. TNC has partnered with the North Country National Scenic Trail (NST) and Buckeye Trail Association to route 15 miles of the Buckeye trail/NST through the Sunshine Corridor and the Edge of Appalachia Preserve System. These trails connect people to protected areas across the state and beyond, contributing to the economic, social and cultural benefits for surrounding communities.

## Martin McAllister and his tenure at the Edge of Appalachia

With a passion for the outdoors since childhood, Martin McAllister has worked in conservation for over 43 years. Currently working as the Edge of Appalachia community engagement specialist, McAllister previously served as the Appalachian Forest project manager for five years at the preserve. McAllister shares that his current role includes "anything at the preserve where our work and the public intersect." McAllister is from the area originally and loves sharing nature with the community.






**THIS PAGE** Buzzardroost Rock Trail at the Edge is a moderately difficult trail that weaves through woodlands and prairie remnants and then out to a breathtaking view of southern Ohio. © David Ike; Martin McAllister © David Ike



# POLICY

## Pioneering policy protects habitats, communities

Policy solutions are vital for protecting nature and the many benefits it provides to communities. That's why TNC has long been a leader in creating, implementing and defending policies related to conservation and climate action around the world. Our nonpartisan policy solutions are drawn from what we have learned from projects on the ground, guided by partners and backed by science.

From preserves and restoration projects to working farms, forests and waterways, we build solutions before scaling them through policy and partnerships. By bringing practical experience to decision-makers, we help advance policies that are informed by science, proven in practice and capable of delivering lasting results.

For example, TNC was instrumental in the creation of H2Ohio, which protects clean drinking water and more by funding nature-friendly farming practices, wetland restoration and conservation projects and water infrastructure repairs and improvements.

"H2Ohio has produced an outstanding return on investment for the people of Ohio, along with cleaner water for millions and real economic benefits for the state," said Mary Turocy, director of policy and government relations for TNC in Ohio.

Throughout the Midwest, local policy solutions like H2Ohio are helping TNC build a future where nature, communities and economies thrive.



### BY-THE-NUMBERS

**$330M**

Economic benefits generated by the wetland restoration program in 2024 alone

**~8.9M**

Ohioans benefit from improved water quality due to H2Ohio projects

**+180**

Wetland habitats have been constructed or restored by conservation partners

**2.2M**

Acres of cropland enrolled

**80%**

Of Ohioans support H2Ohio's projects



**THIS SPREAD** Emiquon Preserve in Illinois © Todd Winters; Leopard frog sitting among the clover at Great Egret Marsh Preserve in Ohio. © Kent Mason; Great Blue Heron wades in the marshes of Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, situated along the shoreline of Lake Erie in Ohio.© Mark Godfrey/TNC

# Clean water for all Ohioans: Working with partners to Secure H2Ohio funds

TNC in Ohio is working with partners across the state to secure long-term bond funding for the H2Ohio program through a constitutional resolution.

A bond will provide long-term, stable funding for the program, which can help with the problems H2Ohio addresses—removing Harmful Algal Blooms (HABs), lead service lines and pollution—so all Ohioans can access safe water.

The shared goal of the coalition's members is to secure substantial funding for H2Ohio investments statewide, including protecting ground and surface waters through wetland protection and restoration, expanding effective agricultural conservation practices and improving water infrastructure with a focus on ensuring that all Ohio communities see relevant benefits.

This coalition is led by TNC in Ohio, the Ohio Environmental Council, Ohio Farm Bureau and the Ohio Water Partnership. More than 20 businesses, agriculture groups and environmental organizations are members in the larger group as well.

Mary Turocy, director of policy and government relations for TNC in Ohio, who has been helping lead the coalition with state director Bill Stanley since 2023, shares the urgency for H2Ohio to continue.

"H2Ohio demonstrates the power of partnership. By bringing together state leaders, farmers, businesses and conservation organizations, it has delivered meaningful results for clean water in Ohio. TNC is proud to have helped to develop the original concept and supported H2Ohio from the beginning," says Turocy.

Ohio Farm Bureau, another key partner leading this coalition, also notes the importance of the program.

"Ohio farm families have a long history of caring for the land and natural resources they have been entrusted with, and that commitment continues to grow through conservation practices and strong partnerships, " says Adam Sharp, executive vice president for Ohio Farm Bureau. "Through H2Ohio, farmers have been able to make major investments in conservation and work alongside conservation groups, state leaders and communities to improve water quality here in the Buckeye State. Long-term funding will help build on that progress and continue the collaborative work that is moving Ohio toward its water quality goals."

Learn more about TNC's role in securing clean water across the state at **nature.org/ohiocleanwater**.



# **Ohio** in photos

## 1. The Wilds prescribed fire

On a chilly March morning, firefighters from TNC in Ohio and Michigan, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW) and the Ohio Division of Forestry geared up for a 905-acre prescribed fire among the rolling hills of The Wilds. This partnership was significant for fire management across the state.

© Grahm S. Jones, Columbus Zoo and Aquarium

## 2. Painted Trillium survey

In Ohio, Painted Trillium is state-endangered and can only be found in Ashtabula County. At our Morgan Swamp Preserve, a pocket of about 800 Painted Trillium plants thrive today. The population of flowering plants has at least doubled in the past five years. In this photo in May 2026, staff survey the plants by using flags to delineate whether the plants are flowering versus non-flowering.

© Marlee Stollar/TNC

## 3. Edge of Appalachia community fund winner radio show

This year's recipients of our Edge of Appalachia–Adams County Fund from Leadership Adams and Catholic Charities Southwest Ohio joined the "Wild Wednesday" radio show in March. Recipients also included Adams County Shelter for the Homeless, Village of West Union, Manchester Fire Department and Brush Creek Township Trustees—receiving a combined $51,685.

© Martin McAllister/TNC

## 4. Kitty Todd SOGL Grant

Over 1,700 acres of restoration work in Northwest Ohio has been completed thanks to the U.S. National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Sustain Our Great Lakes grant. Some of the management work completed through the grant—removing invasive plants with prescribed fire, mulching, mowing and brush cutting—can be seen across Kitty Todd preserve and at other private and partner locations.

© Marlee Stollar/TNC

## 5. Staff planting at Sandusky Bay Event

In July, TNC in Ohio staff visited our Natural Infrastructure Team's Sandusky Bay restoration projects. These projects are part of the Sandusky Bay Initiative, a large-scale vision in process to restore ecosystem function and habitat in the Bay. This visit included planting wetland plants at the Pickerell Creek West Nature-Based Barrier Wetland project as seen here.

© TNC

## 6. Volunteering at Edge of Appalachia

In August, volunteers installed a fence and a cable gate at the relocated Foster Cemetery near the Edge of Appalachia Preserve. This effort made a significant impact on the area by blending conservation and local priorities.

© Martin McAllister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## The Nature Conservancy in Ohio is grateful to the many individuals, corporations and foundations that have generously supported our conservation efforts, both locally and globally.

The following contributed $5,000 or more between July 2025 and June 2026. The list reflects gifts received during this time and does not include the full value of multi-year pledges. Although space does not allow us to list all gifts, each contribution has an impact on our critical work.

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*We regret any errors or omissions and ask that you bring them to the attention of the Development Department at 380.206.2172 or* ***ohio@tnc.org****.*

**DONOR HIGHLIGHT**



## Joan Steidl: Living her values

Counselor, podcaster, teacher, conservationist and public relations professional … These are just a few of the titles Joan Steidl has held. Yet what distinguishes her most is her infectious joy, enthusiasm for nature and unwavering optimism for the future of our planet.

Joan's love of nature stems from childhood visits to her grandparents' southern Illinois farm. Watching farms and forests give way to commercial and residential development sparked in her a passion for protecting nature.

She has since transformed that early passion into a way of life. A defining achievement of Joan's conservation journey has been the purchase of 137 acres in northeast Ohio and the permanent protection of 107 of those acres through a conservation easement. Her land has become a haven for native species, with 18,000 new trees and shrubs, a 12-acre wetland restoration, a six-acre pollinator field, vernal ponds and mature woods.

When it comes to philanthropy, Joan follows in the footsteps of her parents who were active in their community and church. Her dedication to conservation is reflected in her generous support of TNC, as well as her service on the Ohio Board of Trustees. Joan has chosen to focus her charitable giving on the arts and nature because, in her words, "they restore the human spirit."

Despite the challenges facing our planet today, Joan is intentional in holding hope. She says TNC's solutions-oriented mission is what attracted her to the organization. And like TNC, she plants seeds of hope wherever she goes.

**THIS PAGE** Joan Steidl © Nancy Logan



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Late summer and fall wildflower blooms attract a number of beautiful butterflies to the prairies at Lynx Prairie at the Edge of Appalachia Preserve. © Karen Taylor