

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

PLANTING HOPE



DEAR FRIEND,

It was only days after wildfires burned our preserves in Polk County that our team was out in the charred woods, planting white oak saplings. We had already planned to introduce some young oaks, and we knew that the fire — which was damaging in some ways — would also be good for oak regeneration.

Our whole year was like that — planting hope in times that felt like one disaster after another. We came into the year reeling from Hurricane Helene, which devastated our communities, closed our trails, and cost us a building. In the spring came the wildfires. Then, federal funding was slashed for AmeriCorps Project Conserve. In the summer, much-needed debris removal brought its own emergency. When handled poorly, this process caused more harm to our rivers than the storm itself.

And yet — thanks to you — even through extreme challenges, we achieved conservation successes that will bear fruit for generations to come. Want to see how you are planting hope? In this report, we share stories of the ways that you are helping to bring a brighter future:

- At the Fairview Community Forest, students will discover how they come alive in nature, engaging in new ways with learning and career paths.
- In the Joel Ridge Nature Preserve, rare salamanders and many other animals will find a much-needed

haven among thousands of acres of protected forests.

- On the Ecusta Trail and Saluda Grade Trail, many people will get more exercise and time outdoors, improving health and easing stress.
- At the three places that opened to the public and the six places that we bought for parks and trails in 2025, people will experience awe, curiosity, and joy.
- Where we are restoring nature along rivers, you will see a resurgence of life — bringing more fish, ducks, beavers, frogs, turtles, songbirds, and more.
- As we offer opportunities to protect and restore nature, people will move toward healing our relationship with the living world, so we can be worthy caretakers.

We have faith that when you plant something good, goodness will grow.

In the forests that burned last spring, almost a year later, tiny oak trees are getting ready to open leaves, getting ready to grow taller and support hundreds of other species in the forest, and getting ready to shade a path for someone taking a walk that helps them grow into their best self.

Thank you for planting hope with us.

Sincerely,

Kieran Roe
Executive Director



Lia Waldrum (cover) and Cassidy Wilson (this page) plant white oaks in Norman Wilder Forest after a wildfire. By Kiko Salazar.

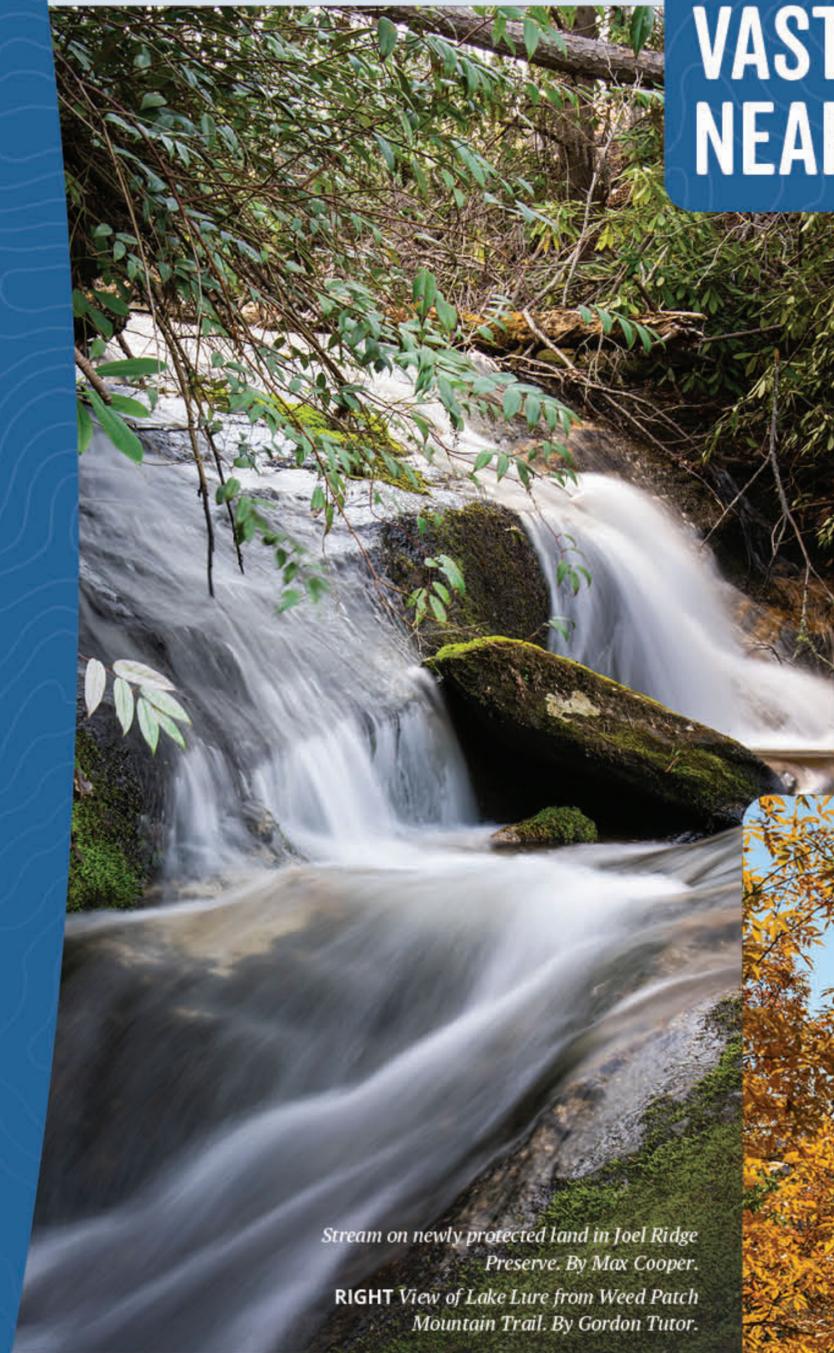
51,000 ACRES PROTECTED

Here are some of the Conserving Carolina projects you made possible in 2025, helping us reach a total of over 51,000 acres!

- 1 Conservation easement on Morton Creek
- 2 Brevard greenway section purchased for park
- 3 Green River Preserve addition
- 4 Kings Bridge restoration opens to public
- 5 First 6 miles of Ecusta Trail open
- 6 Land next to Youngblood Farms Preserve
- 7 Land for Fairview Community Forest
- 8 Major addition to Joel Ridge Nature Preserve
- 9 Anchor for trails near Lake Lure
- 10 Connecting conservation land by Green River
- 11 Bringing back trails near Polk County hospital
- 12 Nature preserve next to Green River Game Lands
- 13 Conservation easement near Saluda
- 14 31-mile Saluda Grade corridor purchased

- LANDS CONSERVING CAROLINA HELPED PROTECT
- OTHER PROTECTED LANDS
- NEWLY PROTECTED IN 2025
- RAIL TRAIL PROJECTS





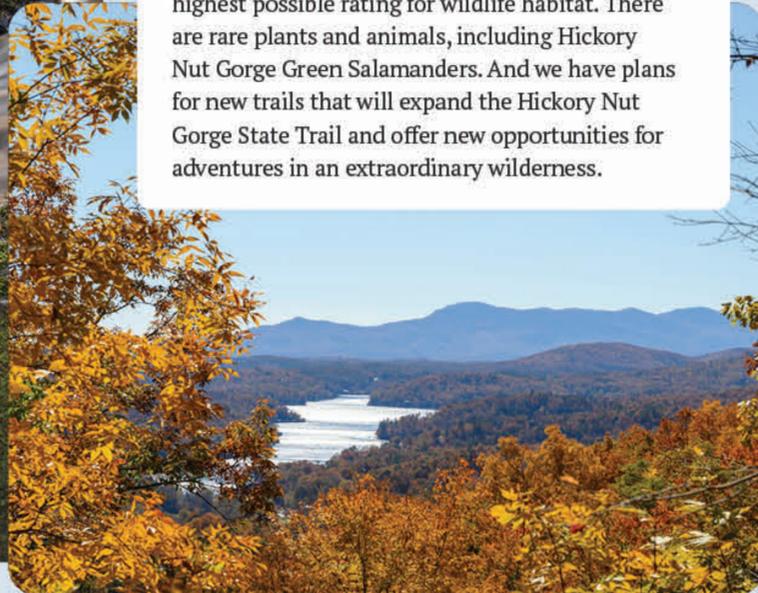
Stream on newly protected land in Joel Ridge Preserve. By Max Cooper.

RIGHT View of Lake Lure from Weed Patch Mountain Trail. By Gordon Tutor.

VAST NATURE PRESERVE NEAR LAKE LURE

We purchased the last major piece of an epic conservation project that we've been working toward for 16 years! Totalling nearly 2,700 acres in all, this project connects to Chimney Rock State Park. It includes Buffalo Creek Park and our award-winning Weed Patch Mountain Trail. It also includes the Joel Ridge Nature Preserve, owned by Conserving Carolina.

In 2025, we purchased the last big piece — conserving another 483 acres of gorgeous mountain land that was once slated for a large development and is now protected forever! In all, there are 38 miles of mountain streams, sending clean water flowing into Lake Lure and the Broad River. There are unbroken forests that have earned the state's highest possible rating for wildlife habitat. There are rare plants and animals, including Hickory Nut Gorge Green Salamanders. And we have plans for new trails that will expand the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail and offer new opportunities for adventures in an extraordinary wilderness.



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT DUNCAN BLAIR

Duncan's connection to the outdoors began at an early age, camping and fishing with his family. After living overseas for eight years, he chose to settle in Western North Carolina, close to family and the landscapes he loves. His career reflects his deep sense of stewardship. He worked first with Trout Unlimited and now with the Mills River Partnership. As the Outreach and Education Coordinator, he leads volunteer workdays and he brings students out to rivers to learn where Hendersonville's drinking water comes from.

Duncan's support of Conserving Carolina grew through the White Squirrel Hiking Challenge, which has taken him across the region to places like Bearwallow Mountain, Rumbling Bald, and the Ecusta Trail. Inspired by landscape-level projects such as the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail, he also finds hope in how quickly land and water can recover when given care. As Duncan puts it, "I believe in leaving things better than I found them."

FAIRVIEW COMMUNITY FOREST



Middle schoolers Savannah and Quiciyah at the WORX Project. By Kiko Salazar.

BELOW WORX Project director Sara Jarrell and Leila Husain biking on Fairview Community Forest trails. By Kiko Salazar.



A former summer camp in Fairview is becoming something very special. At the heart of the property is the campus of the WORX Project, an outdoor education program for local students. At WORX, the kids explore career paths including jobs in WNC's outdoor economy. The program opens up opportunities for the students — and it's also a free summer camp for anyone who wants to go.

In 2025, we bought 253 acres, including the WORX campus and the surrounding land, which will become the Fairview Community Forest. This land encompasses the entire watershed for a creek that flows into the Broad River. Its streams and seeps offer rich habitat for unique plants and animals. In keeping with its history as a camp, this forest will be a place for people to connect with nature, with 11 miles of hiking and biking trails for the local community.

MOVING TOWARD 50+ MILES OF RAIL TRAILS

Saluda Grade Purchased for Rail Trail

It was a huge leap forward for the Saluda Grade Trail when Conserving Carolina and our partners bought the historic 31-mile rail line. This planned rail trail will travel from picturesque countryside in Upstate South Carolina into the mountain scenery of Western North Carolina, passing through Inman, Campobello, Landrum, Tryon, Saluda and Zirconia. We also hope to connect the Saluda Grade Trail with the Ecusta Trail for more than 50 miles of continuous rail trails!

The purchase was celebrated with fanfare at small towns along the route. Now that we have the land, we are working with local communities on planning and design, to make sure that we create the best possible version of the trail.



Biking the Ecusta Trail. By Chelsea Gillespie.
 LEFT Celebrating the Saluda Grade purchase. By Kiko Salazar.



Ecusta Trail Opens from Hendersonville to Horse Shoe

As soon as it opened, the first section of the Ecusta Trail was a hit, running for six miles from Hendersonville to Horse Shoe. Now, people of all ages and abilities can get outdoors on foot or on wheels — and the trail is a boon to local businesses along the way.

Conserving Carolina helped raise millions of dollars to buy the rail corridor and fund construction — and it's wonderful to see so many people starting to enjoy the trail! Now, design and engineering are underway for the rest of the trail. The full 19-mile Ecusta Trail will link Hendersonville and Brevard.

MORE LAND FOR TRAILS

Extending the Oklawaha Greenway

We bought 23.6 acres just south of Jackson Park to extend the Oklawaha Greenway. This purchase also protects a bird-rich wetland and offers potential to restore more wetlands, right in the City of Hendersonville!



By Rose Lane.

Brevard Greenway with Creek and Birding Area

We now own 11.5 acres in Brevard with a section of the Estatooe Greenway where it crosses over Lamb's Creek. This land is near the hospital, schools, ballfields, and businesses, and it's part of a popular birding area called Hospital Fields. The plan is to make it a local park.



By Larry Pellegrini.



By Rose Lane.

Anchor for Trails Encircling Lake Lure

Our vision for the Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail includes a loop all the way around Lake Lure — and we took an important step by buying 49 acres east of the lake, right on the proposed route. Conserving this land protects important wildlife habitat, including homes for rare species.



By Rose Lane.

Bringing Back Trails Near Hospital in Polk County

There used to be trails on 56 acres of private conservation land in Polk County until the land changed hands and the new owner closed access. Now, Conserving Carolina owns the land, with mature forests and a creek, and we plan to reopen the trails.

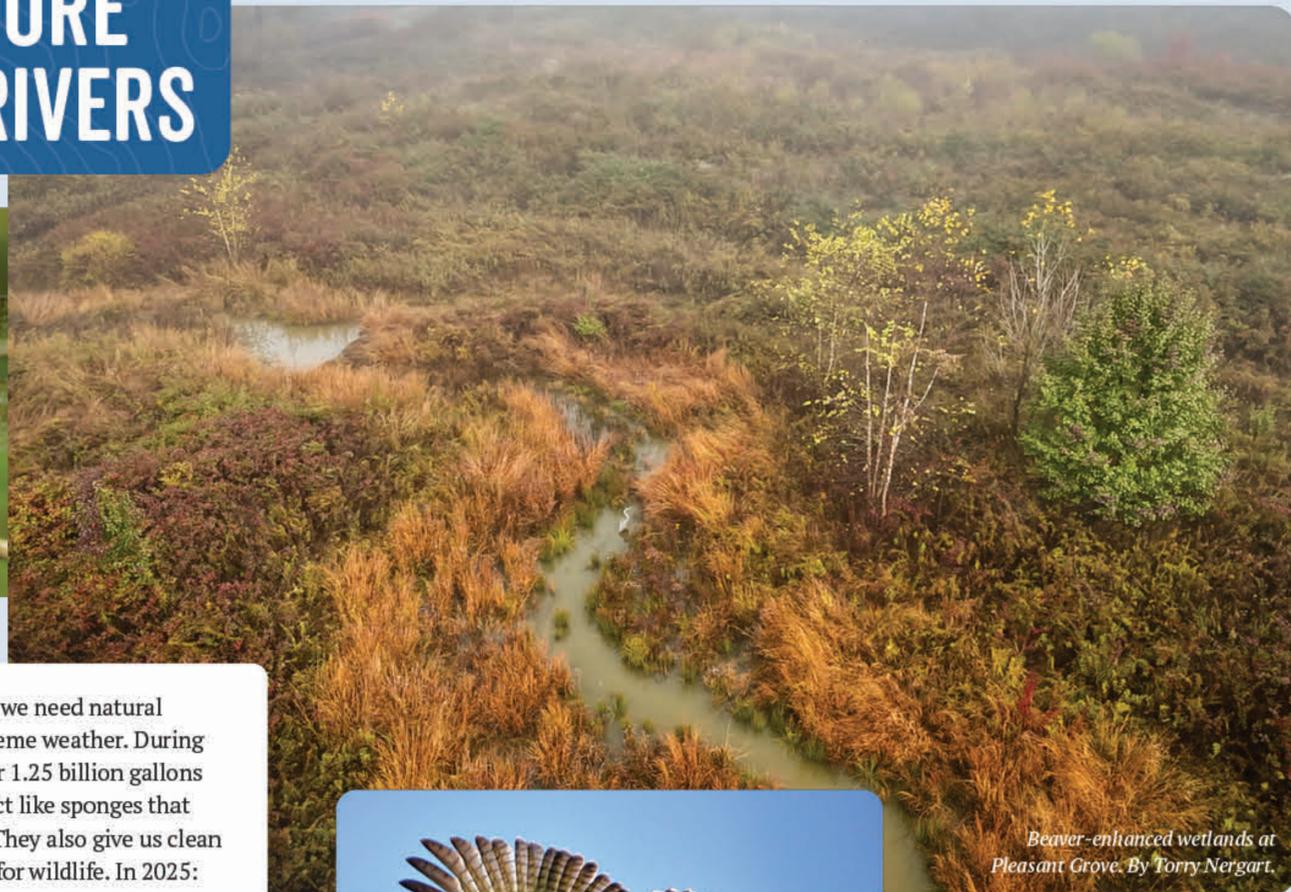
BRINGING NATURE BACK ALONG RIVERS



By Sharon Mammoser.

Hurricane Helene demonstrated how much we need natural floodplains, especially as we face more extreme weather. During the flood, just three restorations stored over 1.25 billion gallons of water! These natural areas along rivers act like sponges that reduce the risks from floods and droughts. They also give us clean water and bring back much needed habitat for wildlife. In 2025:

- Kings Bridge Wildlife Conservation Area became the **first of our restoration projects to open to the public**. It is now a popular birding hotspot.
- We moved forward on **six new restoration projects** — which will bring back more wetlands, sloughs, forests, meadows, and rivercane.
- We secured funding to do **watershed planning** for the Green River, Pacolet River, and Mud Creek—crafting a conservation vision for the health of these waterways.
- **PBS made an illuminating film** about the benefits of our restorations during Helene.
- We were delighted to find **beavers helping us expand the wetlands** at Pleasant Grove!



Beaver-enhanced wetlands at Pleasant Grove. By Torry Nergart.



By Sharon Mammoser.



By Sharon Mammoser.



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT EHROW SHANNON & TIM DRAEGEN

As the founders of a tech company, dmarcian, Ehrow Shannon and Tim Draegen had the freedom to choose where to work and live. They chose Brevard for its beautiful landscapes, sense of community, and protected lands — an ideal place to raise a family and build a values-driven business.

As a B Corp and member of 1% for the Planet, dmarcian is committed to its community, employees, and environment. That commitment became personal for Ehrow and Tim during a hike at Bearalloway, where they saw Conserving Carolina's mission brought to life. They have followed projects such as the Ecusta Trail and have been inspired by the conservancy's leadership in hurricane recovery and long-term restoration.

Originally from California, Ehrow watched open land give way to development — which shaped her belief that progress should not come at nature's expense. Through dmarcian's support of Conserving Carolina, Erhow and Tim are helping ensure this region's natural landscapes are protected for generations to come

COMING BACK AFTER DISASTER

By Kiko Salazar.



2025 was an unprecedented year as we faced the devastation from Hurricane Helene and its aftermath, as well as wildfires at some of our preserves.

- Our Hickory Nut Gorge trails are located in some of the areas hardest hit by Helene. By the end of 2025, we had **reopened most of our trails** after clearing over a thousand downed trees, repairing gaping holes in trails, and addressing landslides. A few trails remained closed due to major landslides or restricted roads.
- We **stood up for our rivers** when we saw that some debris removal contractors were causing damage that was worse than the storm! We worked with landowners to advocate for clean water, trout habitat, and aquatic wildlife, while supporting necessary debris removal. On our preserves, we worked with contractors to remove debris while minimizing impacts to natural resources.
- We advised owners of private conservation land on **how to restore or even improve** impacted areas.
- We salvaged what we could from our planned Polk County office on the North Pacolet River — **a total loss from the flood** — while preparing for demolition.
- We **responded to wildfires** on some of our Polk County preserves, which heightened invasive plant problems but also created opportunities for oak regeneration.
- We built momentum for natural floodplain restorations to **make our landscape more resilient**.

Growing a Love for Nature

Our best hope for protecting nature is to make sure that people of all ages and backgrounds feel their deep connection to our living world and are passionate about protecting it. To nurture this love for nature, Conserving Carolina held 311 **community engagement events** in 2025!

- We sparked kids' love for the outdoors through field trips, school gardens, outdoor education, and after-school programs. We're also helping to create outdoor spaces near schools, like the new trails at Little White Oak Mountain beside Polk County Middle School.
- We held six **speaker series** throughout our region, exploring environmental topics.
- Other **community engagement** events included guided hikes, bird walks, films, forest bathing, festivals, and gatherings for our members and volunteers.
- We held more than 150 **volunteer workdays** in 2025. We are so grateful to all of our volunteers! They offered hands-on support to maintain trails, control invasive plants, restore wild places, tend pollinator gardens, clean up trash, hold events, and connect with the community.



Riverfest in Rosman, NC
By Kiko Salazar



AmeriCorps Project Conserve members supporting Manna FoodBank.

AmeriCorps Project Conserve: Celebrations and Challenges

AmeriCorps Project Conserve celebrated its 20-year anniversary in 2025. Over two decades, more than 500 AmeriCorps members provided **nearly a million hours of service** to Western North Carolina communities — a major investment in our land and water!

2025 was also an extremely challenging year. In the spring, the program was targeted for federal funding cuts. It survived, but the disruption paused or even ended AmeriCorps roles at some organizations. Going into the 2025-26 AmeriCorps term, the program was downsized by almost half, and its future remains uncertain.

At Conserving Carolina, with your support, we kept our AmeriCorps members active throughout this turbulent time. Conserving Carolina leads AmeriCorps Project Conserve for all of Western North Carolina. **We are proud that during the 2024-25 term, 25 AmeriCorps members supported 14 conservation organizations and provided over 36,500 hours of service.**



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Weed Patch Mountain Trail.
 By Gordon Tutor

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New trails opened at Little White Oak Mountain in Columbus, NC, in 2025.
 Photo courtesy of Community Trail Designs.



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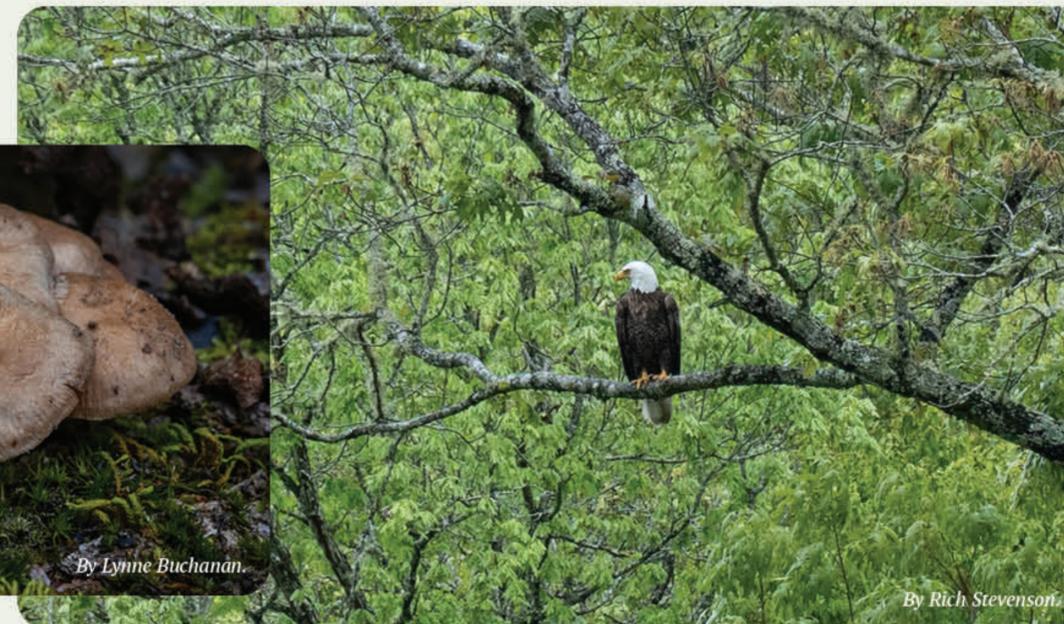
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MEMBER SPOTLIGHT DALE HENDERSON

Dale's love for the outdoors began early as the daughter of a forester, spending countless hours exploring the woods in Virginia. Birds, in particular, drew her in. After many years in Florida — where she experienced hurricanes and the growing impacts of climate change firsthand — Dale was ready for a new chapter. A road trip led her to Flat Rock where she found a slower pace, less traffic, and a deep connection to the surrounding landscapes.

Dale's support as a Summits Society member reflects her deeply held conservation values. She has witnessed forests disappear almost overnight, and she believes protecting our remaining open space is more urgent than ever. Through Conserving Carolina's work, she sees hope. She sees projects that save land and inspire people to get outside and, ultimately, protect what they love. For Dale, this support is her way of giving back to the birds and ensuring wildlife will always have a place to go.

LAND LEGACY LEAGUE

One of the most profound ways that you can support conservation is by planning a legacy gift. We honor the members of our Land Legacy League for including Conserving Carolina in their last will and testament or other estate plans. Please let us know if you are planning a legacy gift so we can thank you during your lifetime.

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We also want to thank the 37 legacy families and donors who choose to remain anonymous.



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT APRILL & CHUCK JONES

Aprill and Chuck's journey to this region began long before they called Flat Rock home. Originally from Tennessee and later living in Charlotte, they would often visit the region, drawn by wild places, hiking, wildlife, and a welcoming community. A love of the outdoors has long shaped their values. Aprill's father introduced her to hiking, canoeing, camping, and adventure, while scouting fostered a lifelong respect for nature for both of them.

As Land Legacy League members, Aprill and Chuck have included Conserving Carolina in their estate plans as a reflection of their belief in taking the long view. They have seen our impact firsthand, particularly during Hurricane Helene, when restored wetlands helped reduce flooding and protect surrounding communities. Inspired by projects like the Ecusta and Saluda Grade Trails, they share, "To preserve now means to preserve forever, and to make the areas we love as available to future generations as they are to us today. If we don't, who will?"

CONSERVATION LANDOWNERS

We are deeply grateful to the landowners who worked with us to protect land in 2025. Thank you for acting on your ethic of good stewardship to pass on these special places for generations to come.

Charlie and Susie Ellis
Victor and Mary Galef
GreyRock Community Association, Inc
Norfolk Southern Railway Company
Scott and Mary McAbee
Tom and Susan McHugh
Leslie Muse
Keith and Michelle Paris
Karen-Eve Pfozter
Pisgah Health Foundation, LLC
The Presbytery of Western North Carolina, Inc.
Schenck Family Conservancy, LLC
Michael Simpson
Robert Stearns
Christel Walter and the late Manfred Walter



Torry Nergart collects seeds from a rare azalea.
By Kiko Salazar.

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Cassidy Wilson
Land Protection Assistant

AmeriCorps Project Conserve Members

Camille Alexander
Community Engagement & Education Associate

Sara Branagan
Community Engagement & Education Associate

THANK YOU FOR BEING A MEMBER!

You can be proud of your impact in 2025:

51,000+ TOTAL ACRES PROTECTED

- 1,857 acres of new conservation land
- 31 miles purchased for Saluda Grade Trail
- 6 miles of Ecusta Trail opened
- 3 new places opened to public
- 6 restoration projects underway
- 228 conservation easements monitored
- 311 community engagement events
- 1,230 kids on Bearwallow Mountain field trips
- 36,589 hours of AmeriCorps service
- 1,659 individuals and families who donated

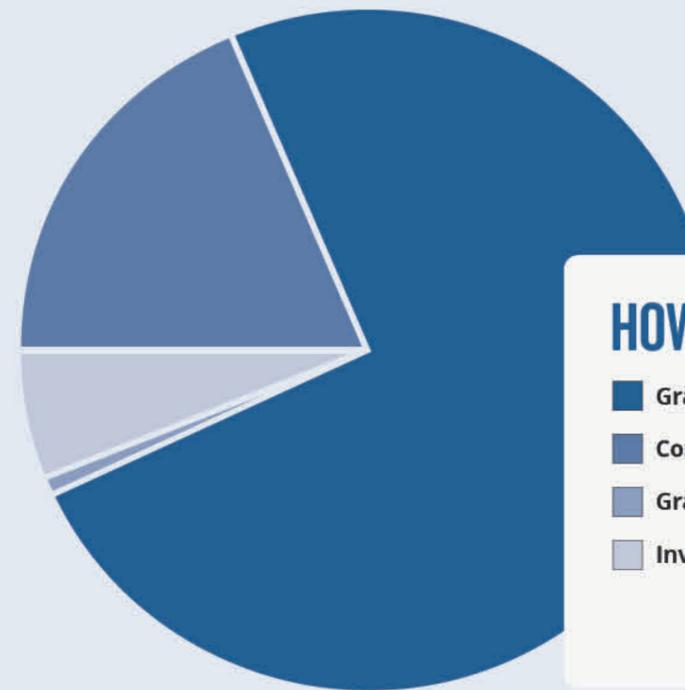
6 PLACES PURCHASED FOR FUTURE TRAILS

60 NATURE PRESERVES MANAGED

2,309 VOLUNTEER HOURS

FINANCIAL STATEMENT

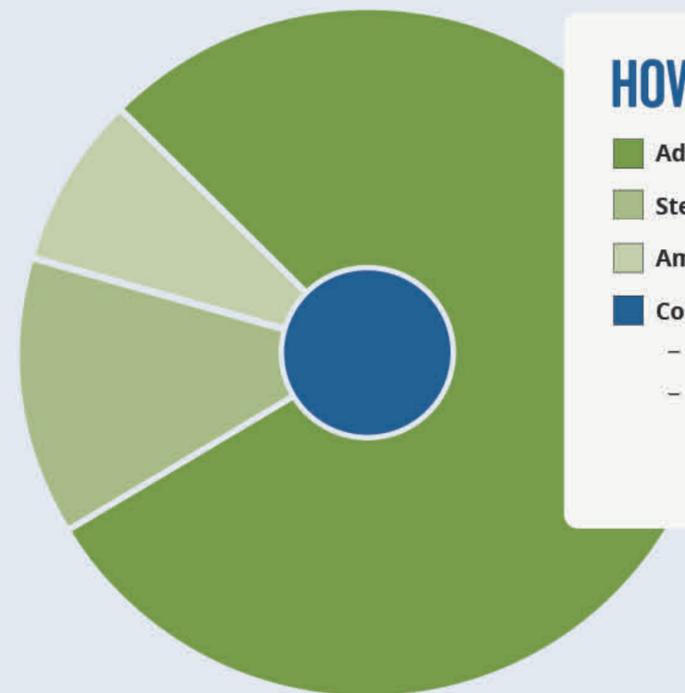
JULY 1, 2024 - JUNE 30, 2025



HOW WE ARE FUNDED

- Grants from Public Sources 75% \$16,653,431
- Contributions from Members & Donors 19% \$4,113,199
- Grants from Foundations & Organizations 1% \$137,290
- Investment Returns & Other Income 6% \$1,311,320

TOTAL \$22,215,240



HOW WE USE THOSE FUNDS

- Adding Land to Conservation* 77% \$13,907,565
- Stewardship, Restoration & Trails 11% \$2,018,179
- AmeriCorps & Education Programs 6% \$1,146,699
- Core Operations 6%
 - Management & General Needs 3% \$492,126
 - Fundraising 3% \$491,548

TOTAL \$18,056,116

Net Assets, Beginning of Fiscal Year (July 1, 2024)
\$44,521,380

Net Assets, End of Fiscal Year (June 30, 2025)
\$48,683,544

Total Change in Net Assets
\$4,162,164

Value of Conservation Land Owned (June 30, 2025)
\$32,686,282

Net Assets Less Conservation Land Owned
\$15,997,262

*Includes value of conservation lands acquired



By Ken Weitzen.

CONTACT US

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 828.697.5777

 info@conservingcarolina.org

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