

Western Reserve Land Conservancy

land • people • community

Summer 2026

Landline

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Letter From Our President and CEO

As we welcome the Summer Edition of Landline, I am filled with gratitude for the extraordinary community that makes our work possible. To our donors, partners, and friends, thank you. Your commitment, trust, and shared belief in our mission continue to fuel meaningful conservation across Ohio and beyond.



Western Reserve Land Conservancy enters its fourth decade as a nationally recognized leader in land conservation. In 2025, we were honored at The Land Trust Alliance Rally with the National Land Trust Excellence Award—an acknowledgment of what we have built together. With more than 80,000 acres of protected land, 254 parks and preserves, more than 18,000 trees planted, and a role in catalyzing billions of dollars in conservation investment, our impact is both deep and growing.

As we begin a new fiscal year, we do so with a clear and ambitious vision for the future. Our new strategic plan charts a course for the next three to five years, grounded in three mission-driven goals and a foundational commitment to organizational excellence.

We will expand conservation efforts across the State of Ohio, filling critical market gaps, increasing impact, and generating sustainable program revenue. We will take our urban agenda to scale, leveraging a landmark $10 million grant from a national foundation to transform 600 vacant parcels in Cleveland into vibrant green spaces, plant more than 2,400 trees, and build a replicable national model.

And we will elevate our impact nationally by formalizing a consulting and education program to share our expertise with peer organizations across the country.

Equally important, we are unapologetically and enthusiastically investing in our people, our systems, and our operations. This commitment ensures that the Land Conservancy will continue to deliver exceptional results today, and that we will evolve into an enduring enterprise, one that is built to stand the test of time.

This plan does not simply build on past success; it positions us for transformational impact now and in perpetuity. And importantly, as we grow, we remain steadfast in our commitment to Northeast Ohio. Our progress will complement and strengthen our core work, never replace it.

Thank you for being part of this journey. Together, we are conserving land, transforming communities, and creating a healthier, more vibrant future for generations to come.

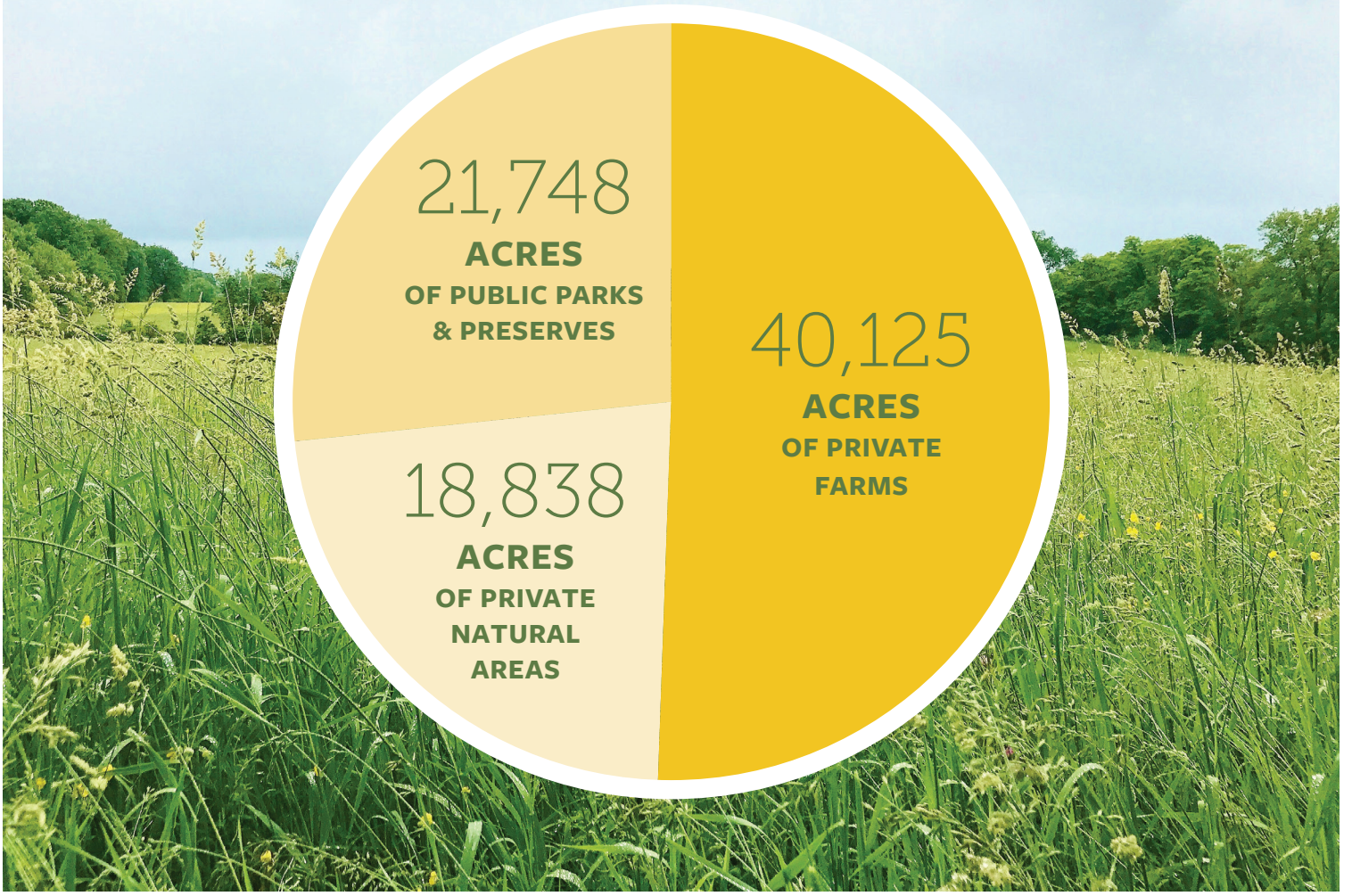
With gratitude,



Rich Cochran
PRESIDENT & CEO

Acre by Acre

This March, Western Reserve Land Conservancy officially surpassed the remarkable milestone of protecting 80,000 acres of public and private land throughout Ohio.



As of the end of June 2026, we have conserved 80,918 acres across 996 properties in 28 counties—land where old-growth forests, prime farmland soils, important wildlife habitat, headwater streams and rivers, scenic hiking trails, vital community spaces, and more will be protected, now and for future generations.

This is a conservation milestone and a major accomplishment for our organization, but the protected acreage is an even greater asset for the people of Ohio. These conserved lands help safeguard clean water, strengthen local economies, preserve Ohio's agricultural heritage, expand access to outdoor recreation, and provide critical habitat for wildlife across the state. They ensure that communities throughout the region will continue to benefit from the natural beauty, ecological health, and regional landscapes that make Ohio special.

This is the result of our staff, trustees, donors, partners, and landowners working together for many years to create a shared vision of communities nourished by vibrant natural lands, working family farms, and healthy cities. We are sincerely grateful to everyone who has helped us achieve this milestone.

Mature Woods Preserved in the West

We're working hard to protect the forests that span our western region. Thanks to two recent forest conservation projects, significant stretches of woodland will remain protected from development and commercial timber harvest for generations to come. This preservation effort not only safeguards important wildlife habitat but also helps ensure these forests continue providing clean air, healthy watersheds, and natural spaces for their communities.

In southern Lorain County, the Land Conservancy helped protect the 34-acre Huntington Woods Preserve, which contains mature forest habitat that may otherwise have been commercially harvested. With the protection of a conservation easement, the forest will now continue to mature and will eventually attain old-growth characteristics—a rarity in Lorain County and throughout much of Northeast Ohio. The property serves as a key connector in a 1,700-acre conservation corridor, which includes Findley State Park, Lorain County Metro Parks' Wellington Reservation, Wellington Wildlife Area, and two private properties also protected with Land Conservancy conservation easements. Its forested wetlands provide habitat for 158 different bird species—including 31 priority and state-listed species—as well as four state-listed bat species and over 150 tree and plant species.

The Huntington Woods Preserve property saw a change in ownership during our time working on the project, and we're thankful to both owners for their commitment to working with our staff to realize the goal of conserving the land. Funding for the project was made possible through support from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative via the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Oberlin College Green Edge Fund, Black River Audubon Society, and generous private donors. The Land Conservancy will own and manage Huntington Woods Preserve long-term to ensure the protection of its natural resources.

Further west in Huron County, we worked with brothers Tom, Stuart, and Morris Michles to acquire and conserve their 17-acre Norwalk Township property. Located adjacent to the Land Conservancy's 37-acre Reynoldswoods Wildlife Area and the 75-acre Hawks Meadow Preserve, the three brothers were referred to the Land Conservancy by their forester. Almost entirely forested, the parcel contains steep ravines, six acres of wetlands, and approximately 1,300 linear feet of tributaries to the Huron River. These forests will be managed in conjunction with the adjacent properties and will soon become part of the Land Conservancy's network of Signature Preserves.





Partners in Conservation: Ashland County

We're always grateful for the opportunity to partner with local park districts to expand publicly accessible green space. This May, we acquired and protected a 38-acre property in Weller Township, Richland County and transferred ownership to our valued partners at the Ashland County Park District to ensure its long-term conservation, and subsequent public enjoyment.

This stunning tract of land expands the existing 63-acre Carpenter Nature Preserve which is used as a public park, including a trail system and river access for fishing and paddle sports. The property contains open meadows, upland forest and lowland floodplain forest, and high-quality wetlands. The property also adds to a growing 4,600-acre conservation corridor within the Black Fork of the Mohican River (which includes the Land Conservancy's 540-acre Black Fork Forest Preserve).

This project was possible thanks to funding from Clean Ohio Conservation Fund and the Muskingum Watershed Conservancy District's Partners in Watershed Management grant program.





Girl Scouts at Prairie Township Property, David Ike Photography

Partnership With Prairie Township Leads to a First in Franklin County

While Western Reserve Land Conservancy's service area spans Northeast Ohio, exceptional conservation opportunities can sometimes be found beyond our traditional boundaries. That was the case with a 57-acre property in Prairie Township, which the Land Conservancy protected in February—our first project completed in Franklin County. Located adjacent to Prairie Township's 110-acre sports complex, this newly conserved natural area helps create a 157-acre conservation corridor that is now protected forever.

The property, now owned and managed by Prairie Township, contains 450 linear feet of Hellbranch Run, as well as five acres of floodplain and 15 acres of stream-side forest. Its location within a priority conservation area, identified by the Big Darby Accord, contributes to broader efforts to protect high-quality aquatic and terrestrial resources within a watershed experiencing rapid development.

Restoration efforts are already underway and include native tree plantings and the conversion of former agricultural fields into prairie pollinator habitat using native seed provided by Columbus Metro Parks. In April, local Girl Scouts volunteered to plant 1,200 native tree plugs, which will grow to provide shade and critical habitat for wildlife. Remaining restoration activities will focus on controlling invasive species and supporting the long-term health of the site.

Public access is top of mind for Prairie Township; a new segment of the Hellbranch Trail is planned to connect nearby neighborhoods with the adjacent sports complex, adding to the community's walkability.

This acquisition was made possible through funding from the Clean Ohio Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), secured through grant applications submitted by the Land Conservancy on behalf of Prairie Township. Restoration work is being supported by H2Ohio funds, in coordination with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program.

Conservation Corridor on Ashtabula River Grows

Creating large tracts of conserved land is essential to our region, providing expansive habitat for animals and plants to thrive with minimal human disruption. We recently acquired and protected a 228-acre property in Ashtabula County, known as the Ashtabula River Preserve Extension, strategically located between two protected areas owned and managed by the Cleveland Museum of Natural History. The completion of this project now comprises a 641-acre conservation corridor including land owned by the Museum and other private landowners.

This largely forested land—consisting of red and sugar maples, tuliptrees, eastern hemlocks, black oaks, and black cherry trees—safeguards over 17,000 linear feet of the Ashtabula River. This plays a vital role in maintaining the river's health by providing shade for temperature regulation, preventing erosion, retaining nutrients, and enhancing groundwater infiltration. The property also contains eight wetland areas—five of which are classified as Category 3, indicating they are Ohio's highest quality due to high species diversity, proportions of native species, and functionality. Naturalists have observed salamanders in the wetlands, as well as many species of dragonflies and 41 species of birds, including Ohio Species of Special Interest.

Protecting high quality habitat is critically important to our region and our Great Lake and we are grateful to our conservation partners for making projects like this possible: Clean Ohio Conservation Fund, H2Ohio Rivers Program, Atira Conservation, and the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, which is now the proud owner of the land.



Sisters Protect Family Farm

As new construction continues to sprawl into rural areas, farm families are feeling increased pressure to protect the land that provides for them in so many ways. Sisters Marie and Linda Stritzel are acutely aware of the way their community has changed over the years—and made the decision to protect their 290-acre Eaton Township farm with a conservation easement through Western Reserve Land Conservancy, ensuring that it will be safeguarded no matter what the future may bring.

The farm is currently used for grain farming and a small herd of Angus cattle, but it has transitioned operations many times since the Stritzel family bought it in 1938. Of its 290 acres, 235 acres are in active agricultural use for row crops and pasture. The remaining acreage consists of stunning natural areas, including over 28 acres of old field, wet meadow, and grass waterways, in addition to 18 acres of forested land containing wetlands and vernal pools. Located in the Black River Watershed, the farm has over a mile of tributaries, with the largest being the Hill Spaulding Ditch.

Several other properties that have been protected by the Land Conservancy are also in the area—like the former 250-plus-acre Dorlon Golf Course, which has become the publicly accessible Dorlon Reservation managed by Lorain County Metro Parks.

By working with passionate landowners like the Stritzel sisters, we're able to guarantee that farm families can continue providing locally grown food for our region the same way that they have for generations.



Rainbow Trout Stocking
at Blue Heron Preserve

Since formalizing our Signature Parks program about six years ago, Western Reserve Land Conservancy's stewardship team helps provide and manage unique experiences at our public parks. This March, the team welcomed anglers and outdoor enthusiasts to our annual rainbow trout stocking event at Blue Heron Preserve in Memory of Janet Franklin Foster. Approximately 1,000 Rainbow Trout were stocked into the preserve's waters, providing a unique recreational fishing opportunity for the community throughout the spring and summer months.

Stocking the trout is made possible through the support and partnership of the Ohio Division of Wildlife, whose efforts help provide quality fishing opportunities across Ohio.

The stocked trout measure approximately 12–18 inches in length, offering anglers the chance to catch quality-sized fish in a scenic natural setting. Fishing at Blue Heron Preserve is open to any angler who possesses a valid Ohio fishing license. The daily harvest limit for Rainbow Trout is five fish per licensed angler. Due to the lake's depth of approximately 30 feet, anglers can continue targeting trout throughout much of the summer season as the fish seek cooler, deeper water temperatures. To help protect the preserve's aquatic ecosystem and native fish populations, all other fish species are catch and release only.

The Land Conservancy encourages visitors to practice responsible fishing techniques and enjoy this unique outdoor recreation opportunity responsibly.



New Woodland Trail
Completed at Oberlin Preserve



Western Reserve Land Conservancy's stewardship of Oberlin Preserve continues to improve the park. We recently completed construction of a new 5,303-foot trail at Oberlin Preserve, expanding recreational access and connecting visitors to some of the preserve's most unique natural features.

The approximately one-mile trail begins near the preserve parking lot and winds through prairie habitat before entering the upland forest. Visitors can experience a variety of landscapes while accessing the preserve's boardwalk, passing through forested wetlands, a wetland overlook, the Ramsay Right-of-Way Trail, and the existing accessible trail system.

In addition to the new woodland trail, improvements were also completed on the preserve's accessible trail. Permeable pavers were extended to the prairie bench area, enhancing accessibility and improving the overall visitor experience.

Funding for the project was provided primarily through the Ohio Department of Natural Resources Recreational Trails Program, along with support from generous donors and the Oberlin College Green Edge Fund.

The Land Conservancy is committed to connecting people with nature—and by making these improvements, we're able to provide the community with opportunities for everyone to enjoy accessible outdoor recreation.

Nature Notes

GRASSLAND BIRD HABITAT

The Land Conservancy's stewardship team manages native habitats for many different species—and one of our focus areas is managing grassland and early-successional habitat for birds. A variety of birds thrive in these habitats, including Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Henslow Sparrow, Field Sparrow, Red-Wing Blackbird, and American Kestrel. Four major habitat requirements are most important for sustaining grassland and early successional habitat bird populations:



Bobolink, Aimee Pierson



1. Large expanses of connected grasslands

Studies show that some grassland birds, like Bobolinks and Meadowlarks, can thrive on grassland habitats as small as 10 acres, but many grassland birds prefer much larger grassland landscapes, doing best with at least 40 acres of contiguous grassland habitats. The Land Conservancy maintains large meadows on properties we own, including Oberlin Preserve in Lorain County, and high-quality hay fields on the upland areas of Waite Hill Preserve in Lake County.

2. Suitable grassland vegetation

The ideal habitat for grassland birds is a variety of native grasses (big and little bluestem, broomsedge, switchgrass, and wild rye) with native pollinator wildflowers and forbs scattered throughout. For early successional habitats, shrubs and trees should account for 5% or less of the total land cover. A healthy pollinator meadow or hay field should be mowed at least once a year to control invasive species, and an early successional habitat needs to be brush hogged about every two to three years to cut down on woody and invasive species. To achieve this, the Land Conservancy has maintained the traditional hay fields in the upland areas of Waite Hill Preserve while converting the scrubby lowland areas into early successional habitat by clearing large areas of woody species and replanting the areas with pollinator-friendly wildflowers. We have restored similar areas at Oberlin Preserve, Ashcroft Woods Conservation Area, and Grand Valley Ranch.

3. Safe nesting areas in the summer

Grassland birds typically begin identifying places to nest in May. By June, the birds are building their nests and laying eggs. Throughout July, the fledgling baby birds require constant feeding so that they are healthy and strong enough to learn how to fly. And by mid-August, most grassland birds have successfully fledged. To protect ground nests, we do not mow, brush hog, or harvest hay on any of our grassland and early successional habitat areas between April and August. Prescribed burns are another good method for restoring and maintaining grassland areas. Our staff often helps local park districts like Geauga Park District and Portage Park District burn some of their fields in the early spring before the nesting birds arrive.

4. Suitable winter habitat for wintering

While most grassland birds are long gone by our first snowfall, there are still some grassland hunters that take advantage of the harsher winter weather, including the Northern Harrier and the Short-eared Owl. You may see them hover above a field before diving down into a snowy mound to snag a scurrying morsel below. Hunting in the winter takes lots of energy to stay warm, so conserving energy is essential for survival. To help, we keep human disturbances to a minimum by prohibiting activities such as ATV and snowmobile use across the fields.

Amplifying Resident Perspectives on Public Land

Western Reserve Land Conservancy recently launched a transformational partnership with researchers from the MetroHealth System, Cleveland Clinic, and Case Western Reserve University to study how greening urban environments impacts residents' well-being, with particular focus on cardiovascular health. Funded by a $2.4 million grant award from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, the project concentrates efforts in four low income, majority-Black Cleveland neighborhoods: Hough, St. Clair-Superior, Glenville, and Buckeye-Woodhill.

To examine residents' unique perspectives on how vacant land and its improvement matter to health, our research partners are conducting in-depth, place-based interviews in each target neighborhood. These conversations, which include walk-along formats and driving interviews, record residents' unfolding narratives as they walk or ride through meaningful spaces in their neighborhoods with researchers. By aligning residents' insights with geolocated data, our team hopes to identify ways to enhance green development.

Moving street to street across the City of Cleveland often uncovers both stark differences and unique assets. This hyper local information is fundamental to how people think and feel about the place they live and can also inspire community stewardship.

"There are so many insights that bubble up when you move through the neighborhood alongside a resident—things that just cannot surface in an office or over the phone," said Kristen Berg, PhD, Assistant Professor at MetroHealth's Population Health Research Institute. "People point out lots or structures to us, reacting to what's in front of them but also telling us stories about what a space used to look like or what they wish it could become. What comes through every time is what all of us want for our neighborhoods: safety, connection, beauty, and a sense that someone cares about the place where we're building our lives. That's what we're trying to support through this project."

Initial results indicate that residents don't just want problem lots cleaned up but restored into land that gives back to the neighborhood—like community gardens growing fresh vegetables; parks, playgrounds, basketball courts, and walking paths; temporary housing for families getting back on their feet; or a beautiful flower garden. Equally important as to what happens to public land is who gets to decide its future. Residents are very clear that the neighborhood needs to have genuine decision-making power over what happens in their community.

Finally, residents recognize the power of city land to promote health. Many describe their yards, gardens, and parks as places where they recharge, decompress, and find peace. Other characteristics of the neighborhood matter, too: residents noted that when a neighborhood has places worth walking to (like a park, library, grocery store, or coffee shop), people connect with each other more often. When those destinations disappear, replaced by empty lots and boarded-up buildings, people stay inside. Neighborhood amenities are critical for making activities like exercise and socializing feel possible.

This feedback drives the Land Conservancy's goal to spur reinvestment in essential services for urban neighborhoods, creating healthy communities for existing residents. We will continue to gather resident perspectives and incorporate our partners' research into improving our urban programs for Cleveland's future.



Kendrick Chittock Photography



Kendrick Chittock Photography

Dense Canopy, Strong Partnerships:

Reforest Our City in St. Clair-Superior



Over the past ten years, we've learned a thing or two about trees while growing our Reforest Our City program. We know best practices for making sure trees survive—like a consistent watering schedule through summer months and avoiding mulch volcanoes when planting. But we've also learned the importance of creating a dense canopy whenever possible to maximize impact.

Our work planting trees in Cleveland's St. Clair-Superior neighborhood is an excellent example of what it looks like when we prioritize canopy density—and it all starts with neighborhood engagement. Not everyone likes trees, especially if those trees aren't properly maintained. A dying, diseased tree can be an eyesore, if not outright dangerous. Our Reforest Our City program builds trust through consistency above all else. We establish ourselves as approachable faces in the neighborhood, not just through tree plantings, litter cleanups, and watering days, but through community events and time spent connecting with people to answer questions and address concerns. As a result, we're able to form the relationships we need to plant the trees that the community needs.

Because our presence in the neighborhood is always rooted in invitation and partnership—not imposition—we work alongside trusted local organizations to ensure our efforts reflect the community's priorities rather than our own.

We follow the lead of partner organizations in the community, including St. Clair Superior Development Corporation, the Mandel Foundation, St. Casimir Church, City of Cleveland, UMADAOP, Mary's House, Africa House, and True Faith Apostolic Church. These partners have been pivotal in shaping how we provide mindful service in the neighborhood. They are our first contacts when we plan tree plantings, and we often plant trees on sites they own.

We couldn't do this reforestation work without the support of residents. Since we started working in the neighborhood, we've held more than 25 volunteer events, allowing people to get involved in revitalizing their own community. And through our groundbreaking Office of Minority Health grant, we've created the Forest City Crew, a new program where community members become neighborhood ambassadors for trees while improving health outcomes for the community. Forest City Crew members visit their assigned sites weekly to take images, record rainfall, and submit reports to the Reforest Our City program, receiving a stipend for their work.

In total, we've grown 469 new trees in St. Clair-Superior at more than 25 sites—including two schools, one rec center, and two city parks. Over 250 of those trees are street trees, which will grow to provide ample shade for walkers to enjoy. We care for these trees for three years post-planting, providing necessary watering, mulching, and pruning to ensure they establish successfully. Tree giveaways are also a significant part of our programming, and we're proud to say that we've distributed over 100 free trees to residents of this community to plant in their own private yards.

When we plant trees densely, we're able to create a thriving canopy that not only shades the city, but provides ecosystem benefits like lower temperatures, cleaner air, better health outcomes, energy savings, and reduced stormwater runoff. As an added bonus, we can better maintain the trees we plant—leading to better outcomes for the trees and the community at large.



Reforest Our City Volunteers





CleveLawn and Home

Groundwork Goes Further: A Partnership with CleveLawn and Home

Our Groundwork program improves the environmental conditions of Cleveland's neighborhoods as a foundation for better public health.

We fill the gap between the city's basic maintenance and the deep stewardship of community groups to prepare city-owned land for the next phase of investment, including tree planting through our Reforest Our City program. This spring, Groundwork took a meaningful step forward through a new partnership with CleveLawn & Home, a local non-profit whose model is as much about people as it is about place.

CleveLawn & Home is dedicated to reducing violence and intergenerational poverty by providing paid training and employment in property maintenance and renovation for hard-to-hire individuals—including justice-impacted adults, people in active recovery, military veterans, and those transitioning from homelessness. Their 10-week Workforce Training and Self-Development Program pairs hands-on field experience with industry-recognized credentials like OSHA-10 and EPA Lead-Safe, alongside training in financial literacy, digital skills, and the workplace habits that support long-term stability.

This spring, CleveLawn & Home participants brought those skills to Groundwork sites in the Buckeye-Woodhill neighborhood, pulling down old fences, regrading sunken ground, hauling out debris, and restoring sidewalks. Many of their crew members are Cleveland residents themselves, and the work deepens their connection to these places. They care more about their city and encourage their neighbors to do the same.

CleveLawn & Home exemplifies what stewardship can look like when it's tied to workforce development: healthier neighborhoods, empowered residents, and a model that treats people and place as inseparable parts of the same work. The Land Conservancy is proud to partner with this incredible organization to continue improving vacant land across Cleveland through our Groundwork program.

CONVERSATIONS ON THE JOB: Property Surveyors



A property inventory is a way that we're able to help communities collect important information about every parcel within city limits—like structure condition of buildings, vacancy rates, and overall infrastructure, all while flagging other factors such as illegal dumping. Through Western Reserve Land Conservancy's property inventory program, we deliver raw data to the city or neighborhood group that ordered the survey before analyzing and cleaning the dataset to create an interactive StoryMap presentation.

But what does a property inventory survey really entail? Learn more about this innovative program from Adrian Marti, Urban Field Specialist at Western Reserve Land Conservancy.

What are your essentials for any property inventory survey?

ADRIAN: Good boots and good socks are very important. We often hit over 10,000 steps every day we're out surveying parcels, so we definitely need to take good care of our feet! Plus, any gear to dress for the weather is a must—from warm layers and raincoats to baseball caps, or even sunscreen on sunny days.

Can't forget our tablet! We use that to track data as we go on a customized, digital map through Regrid, a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) company. Since we rely on tablets, we always need to keep them charged and carry a charger on us while surveying, just in case.

What do you look for when surveying a parcel?

ADRIAN: We assess every parcel on an A through F scale, thinking about different factors like chipped paint, lawn maintenance, missing siding, or signs of dumping. An "A" parcel is in excellent condition, while an "F" parcel is a building that has deteriorated to the point of being a hazard to the community.

For example, if I see a building with missing shingles and chipped paint, I'd probably rate it a "B"—it's not structurally unsound but needs a little TLC. On the other hand, if I see a building that is vacant and falling apart, that would be flagged as a "D" or an "F."

What role do community members play in a survey?

ADRIAN: Community members are vital to the work we do in any city. They can be a wealth of information, which we rely on as we assess parcels. And community members often go above and beyond in taking care of their own street. We've been told before that "A" or "B" rated houses are actually vacant—they've just been cared for by longtime neighbors who want the best for their street.

Aside from how helpful they are for the survey itself, community members are awesome for local recommendations! They've helped me discover gems across the cities we've surveyed, including the best Cuban sandwich I've ever had.

In return, we're always happy to share more information about a property inventory project with anyone who has questions about it. In the end, this work is all about collecting information that helps cities make informed decisions going forward.

CONSERVATION EXPLORATION: Red Hills

In March, the Land Conservancy hosted its second weeklong field trip exploring regional conservation through a travel program designed to connect participants with land trusts across the United States. This year, a group of 12 participants traveled to the Karst and Red Hills regions of Florida and Georgia—areas known for their unique geology, diverse habitats, and strong conservation partnerships.



The program offers participants the unique opportunity to see how land trusts operate in different ecoregions and to better understand conservation work on the ground. Early in the trip, the group visited Leon Sinks Geological Area, where the region's limestone terrain and sinkhole systems provided an introduction to the landscape and its influence on local ecosystems.



Bachman's Sparrow, Jeff Hadley

At Wakulla Springs, the group explored both on foot and by boat, observing manatees, alligators, and a wide variety of bird species. The clear spring water offered a direct view into one of the largest and deepest freshwater spring systems in the world.

As the trip continued, participants visited Tate's Hell State Forest, where they encountered rare Dwarf Cypress habitat along with Brown-headed Nuthatches, dragonflies, and water snakes. Along the Gulf Coast, shorebirds such as American Oystercatchers and Ruddy Turnstones were active along the shoreline, and the group also had the exciting opportunity to observe a Florida Softshell Turtle.



Florida Softshell Turtle, Judy Semroc

Midweek included a visit to Tall Timbers Research Station, where participants took part in a wagon tour and observed an active prescribed burn, providing a clear example of how fire is used to maintain healthy long leaf pine ecosystems. The group also visited nearby properties protected and managed by Tall Timbers, including Sinkola Plantation and Greenwood, where they observed Red-cockaded Woodpeckers and witnessed a Bachman's Sparrow being banded.

The final portion of the trip brought the group to the Red Hills of Georgia, where they spent time with the Georgia-Alabama Land Trust. Participants toured a 450-acre protected property north of Thomasville and learned about local conservation efforts. The visit also included a discussion of the Cleveland–Thomasville connection with a local historian, as well as opportunities to see a Native American trail marker tree and a Gopher Tortoise burrow.



A visit to the Thomasville Big Oak provided a memorable closing stop. Overall, the trip highlighted the importance of regional conservation work and offered participants a valuable opportunity to learn from land trusts and partners working to protect these beautiful landscapes.



Women in the Outdoors: Beagling at the Ranch

On a crisp morning at Grand Valley Ranch, a group gathered for a unique outdoor experience—beagling with the Chagrin Valley Beagles. This traditional sport is less about the chase and more about connection: to nature, to the landscape, and to one another.

As the beagles were released into the thickets, we followed behind, listening for their distinctive calls as they worked to pick up a rabbit's scent. It took several minutes for the pack to lock onto the trail—by then, the rabbit was long gone, far ahead of the dogs. Participants carefully avoided crossing the rabbit's path so as not to disrupt the scent, making the experience more about observation than pursuit.

Guided by experienced handlers and monitored with GPS collars, the beagles moved safely through the landscape while we walked, talked, and took in the surroundings. Much like birdwatching, beagling is a social and immersive way to spend time outdoors.

This outing also marked the first of several opportunities offered through the Land Conservancy's new *Women in the Outdoors* group—an extension of the longstanding Sporting Circle program. Designed to create a welcoming space for women to learn, explore, and build confidence in outdoor pursuits, the group will offer a range of experiences, from fly fishing and archery to shooting instruction, wild game dinners, and access to conserved lands.

Rooted in the same spirit as the Sporting Circle—bringing people together through shared outdoor experiences—*Women in the Outdoors* invites participants of all skill levels to try something new, connect with others, and deepen their relationship with the natural world.

The morning concluded back at the lodge, where conversations continued around the fireplace. For many, the experience was a reminder that time in nature shared with others and rooted in tradition can be both simple and deeply rewarding—and that new opportunities like this are opening the door for even more people to feel at home in the outdoors.

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