Tennessee Citizens for Wilderness Planning

Taking Care of Wild Places Since 1966

TCWP JANUARY 2026 NEWSLETTER

January 2026
Newsletter No. 385

Inside TCWP

1. A Fond Farewell and a Warm Welcome

This month, we extend our heartfelt thanks to Larry Pounds, who is stepping off the TCWP Board of Directors after an extraordinary 20 years of service, beginning in 2005. Larry has brought deep knowledge, steady leadership, and a genuine love of the natural world to TCWP for two decades. A botanical consultant with a Ph.D. in plant ecology, Larry has shared his expertise through his work with TVA and ORNL, his service on our Program Committee, and his involvement with the Tennessee Native Plant Society.

While Larry's term on the board is coming to a close, we are happy to report that his beloved nature outings are not going anywhere. Larry will continue leading outings and sharing his wisdom, keen observations, and passion for native plants with TCWP members—something so many of us have come to treasure over the years. We are deeply grateful for Larry's long-standing commitment and look forward to many more walks in the woods with him.

At the same time, we are pleased to welcome Tim Partridge to the TCWP Board of Directors. Tim is a Certified Public Accountant and senior manager at PYA, P.C., where he provides audit and accounting services to a wide range of organizations, including governmental and nonprofit entities. He brings valuable financial expertise along with a strong appreciation for the outdoors.

Originally from the Southwest, Tim moved to East Tennessee in 2018 and quickly embraced the region's natural beauty. He enjoys hiking, camping, paddling, mountain biking, and horseback riding with his family, and is motivated by a desire to ensure that these landscapes and recreational opportunities remain protected for future generations. We are delighted to have Tim join the board and look forward to the perspective and skills he brings to TCWP.

Please join us in thanking Larry for his remarkable service and welcoming Tim as he begins his journey with TCWP.

2. Introducing TCWP's New Website

We are excited to officially welcome you to TCWP's brand new website: a fresh, modern space designed to better tell our story, reflect our mission, and invite more people into the work of protecting Tennessee's wild places and waters.

This new site would not have been possible without the tireless work of New Frame Creative, who partnered closely with TCWP to thoughtfully align the design, structure, and tone of the site with our vision and values. Their patience, creativity, and attention to detail helped translate decades of conservation work into a website that is clear, engaging, and welcoming.

We are also proud to highlight the evolution of our new logo. The original design was created by the talented Oak Ridge high school student, Anyah Ballard, who won TCWP's logo contest last year, and it was carefully refined and brought to life by TCWP board member Hans Christian, who transformed the concept into the distinctive and expressive logo you see today—one that reflects both the strength and complexity of the landscapes TCWP works to protect. Together, their work represents both the future and continuity of TCWP.

Be sure to spend some time exploring the site—especially the Get Involved section and our Volunteer Opportunities page. As the site reminds us, *"Every volunteer is part of something bigger: a community working together to safeguard Tennessee's natural treasures so they can be enjoyed today and preserved for tomorrow."* Opportunities range from stewardship workdays and education programs to advocacy efforts—and we also welcome volunteers interested in newsletter assembly, office support, and development assistance, all of which play a vital role in keeping TCWP moving forward.

We invite you to visit the website often—to learn more about our programs, follow our work, discover new opportunities, and watch TCWP continue to grow. This site is more than a redesign; it's a reflection of who we are and where we're headed.

3. Something New Is Coming This Spring

This spring, TCWP will launch something we've never done before—a month long, self-paced outdoor challenge designed to get people moving, exploring, and connecting with the landscapes we work to protect. Taking place in April, this new paddle, hike, and bike-a-thon will invite participants to enjoy their favorite outdoor activities while supporting TCWP's conservation, education, and advocacy work.

While we haven't officially named the event yet, the concept is simple and flexible: participants can paddle, hike / walk, bike—or combine all three—on their own schedule, at their own pace, and in the places they love most. Watch also for special 1-day events. Whether that's a family walk on a local trail, a weekend paddle, or a longer ride along a favorite greenway, every mile will help support the protection of Tennessee's wild places and waters.

We're especially excited about this event as a means of introducing new families, young adults, and children to TCWP. It's designed to be welcoming and accessible—an easy entry point for people who may be new to our organization but already love being outdoors. It's also a great way for longtime supporters to invite friends, neighbors, and coworkers to join them in something fun and meaningful.

A team of TCWP board members and volunteers will be meeting in early January to finalize details, including the event name, activities, and ways to participate. We encourage you to keep an eye on our Facebook page and e-blasts, where we'll be sharing updates, registration information, and creative ways to get involved as plans take shape.

This spring, we hope you'll paddle, hike, bike—and help us build a broader, more connected community around the places we all care about. More details are coming soon!

4. Rails-to-Trails: Where Things Stand

TCWP continues to work thoughtfully and collaboratively on the proposed Rails-to-Trails project, and we want to share a brief update on where things stand as the conversation moves forward.

On December 8, Noel Durant of the Trust for Public Land and TCWP Executive Director Nancy Manning, presented information about the project to the Anderson County Operations Committee of the Commission. Following that presentation, the committee agreed to delay any recommendation on a favorable resolution until at least January, allowing additional time for questions, discussion, and community input.

In the weeks ahead, TCWP is focusing on listening. Nancy is holding small, informal meetings with residents of the New River community to better understand concerns, clarify information, and answer questions about the project. These conversations are an important part of the process and reflect TCWP's commitment to transparency, respect for local voices, and finding solutions that balance conservation, recreation, and community interests.

Because these discussions are ongoing, this is very much a "stay tuned" moment. We will continue working with community members, partners, and local leaders, and we will share updates as there is more to report. Thank you for your patience and continued engagement as we navigate this complex and important project together.

5. Ridgeline Pipeline Water Monitoring has Begun

If you have driven through northwest Morgan County lately, particularly along highway 62, you no doubt have been passing lots of large trucks and you have seen vast swatches of a pipeline right-of-way under construction. The existing right-of-way is being temporarily increased in width by 50 feet, which means that there is a lot of dirt being moved and a lot of trees being cut.

TCWP and our partners Ridgeline Voices and others have established a water monitoring program at five locations where the pipeline construction will cross important tributaries to the Clear Creek and the Obed River. The construction will not occur in the Obed Wild and Scenic River boundaries but does come very close, and keeping an eye on potential construction impacts is one thing we can do to prevent harm to the Obed WSR resources.

As of the end of December, pipeline installation has not yet happened at the stream crossings, but earth moving has gone right to the stream banks and temporary wooden bridges have been built at some of the sites to allow heavy equipment to cross the streams without actually going into the water. The construction teams have installed miles of silt runoff fences, though not always as timely as we would like.

TCWP organizers have trained a handful of volunteers so far on the water testing procedures, and we have collected water samples and taken measurements to document baseline conditions at five sites. Specific locations have been identified both upstream and downstream of the pipeline crossing whenever possible. Based on our previous consultation with TDEC, our monitoring consists of taking real time turbidity measurements with a portable meter, collecting a 1-L water sample for laboratory analysis of Total Suspended Solids (TSS), and taking photos of the stream conditions and the construction activities.

Even though "instream construction" has not yet started, we are concerned that runoff from all the nearby construction could be problematic. So far, we have not noticed any obvious instream impacts during our few monitoring trips. However, some of our volunteers who live near the construction at White Creek, noticed equipment beside (and perhaps in the stream) and noticed a lack of required silt fencing. They reported the potential infractions to TDEC who promptly sent a representative to the site to investigate further.

We are grateful to our supporters who have made this monitoring possible. We are hopeful that our presence alone at the construction sites will contribute to the due diligence expected of the construction teams to prevent impacts to these critical tributaries to the Obed WSR. In addition, whenever we see potential issues in the data and photos we collect, we are grateful that we have contacts at TDEC and the Obed WSR NPS who can follow up with the appropriate regulatory muscle. – Mark Bevelhimer.

6. What the "16,000 Clean Acres" in Oak Ridge Really Means

Recent news coverage has generated a lot of conversation in Oak Ridge about more than 16,000 acres on the Oak Ridge Reservation being officially deemed "clean" and no longer subject to Superfund cleanup requirements. While this determination has been expected for years and confirms what many have long understood—that large portions of the Reservation were never contaminated—it raises important questions about what happens next. Much of the discussion at the December board meeting of Advocates for the Oak Ridge Reservation (AFORR)—a sister organization TCWP works closely with and whose monthly meetings TCWP regularly attends—focused on how this news is being interpreted.

One AFORR board member emphasized that while the determination should be viewed as positive, it is important to remember that the Oak Ridge Reservation remains public land belonging to the people of the United States, and that decisions about its future should be guided by more than the absence of Superfund contamination alone.

At that meeting, AFORR board members emphasized that the value of the Oak Ridge Reservation lies not just in individual parcels, but in the integrity of the landscape as a whole—its forests, waterways, wildlife habitat, and cultural history. With the City of Oak Ridge currently engaged in a land-use planning process, there is a timely opportunity for public input on how these lands should be evaluated, protected, or developed. AFORR also underscored the need for a clear, transparent process for any future land transfers or development decisions, one that considers ecological, recreational, and conservation values alongside economic interests.

TCWP shares these concerns and values. Our partnership with AFORR reflects a shared commitment to thoughtful stewardship of public lands, and both organizations are currently reviewing potential actions we could take to help inform the public and decision-makers as this conversation moves forward. As AFORR board members noted, “clean” does not mean “without consequence,” and the future of these lands deserves careful, informed consideration.

NEWS CAPSULES
OAK RIDGE

1. Why Land Decisions on the Oak Ridge Reservation Matter

Recent news out of Oak Ridge helps explain why TCWP and others are paying close attention to proposals involving the Oak Ridge Reservation. The U.S. Department of Energy has clarified that roughly half of the Reservation’s 33,000 acres were never impacted by past operations and do not require environmental cleanup. This determination simplifies the federal land-transfer process and opens the door for potential new uses of more than 16,000 acres previously considered part of a larger Superfund site.

In response, Oak Ridge city officials emphasized the community’s growing need for land to support industrial expansion—particularly for new nuclear-related businesses—as well as housing, recreation, and conservation. With existing industrial sites filling quickly and local employees facing limited housing options, the city has signaled strong interest in future land transfers from the federal government. This combination of newly reclassified “clean” land and mounting development pressure underscores why decisions about the Reservation’s future carry long-term implications for conservation, public input, and the balance between growth and protection of natural resources.

2. Draft Environmental Review Advances for Clinch River SMR Project

The Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers have completed a draft supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) for a proposed small modular reactor at the Tennessee Valley Authority’s Clinch River nuclear site in Oak Ridge. The draft, published in the Federal Register, evaluates TVA’s application to build a GE Vernova Hitachi BWRX-300—an advanced 300-megawatt reactor that would be the first utility-scale SMR to operate in the United States and the second in North America, following a similar project planned by Ontario Power Generation in Canada. Public comments on the draft SEIS were due by December 22. TVA has also applied for a $900 million grant from the Department of Energy, which it says could accelerate construction by two years and allow the reactor to begin commercial operation as early as 2033.

3. Airport Plans Shift as Nuclear Development Moves Forward in Oak Ridge

Oak Ridge City Council has voted to clear the way for a major nuclear development by approving a series of agreements that would transfer 247 acres at the former K-25 site to Oklo, a private nuclear company planning a $1.68 billion nuclear fuel recycling facility. The project, which is expected to create approximately 800 jobs, requires removing a deed restriction that limited a portion of the land to use as the city’s first airport. To accomplish this, the city will work with federal and state agencies to pay fair market value for the land—using state economic development funds—making the property available to Oklo at no cost to the city.

As part of the agreement, Blair Road will be realigned to accommodate the facility, with the Tennessee Department of Transportation managing the project and state funds covering local costs. City officials emphasized that Oak Ridge will not bear the financial burden of either the land transfer or the road realignment, while also committing to preserve the foundation of the historic Wheat Swamp School during construction. Meanwhile, the decision leaves the city once again searching for an alternative airport site, after earlier plans were moved to avoid conflicts with another proposed nuclear facility in west Oak Ridge. The shifting use of land originally set aside for aviation underscores how growing nuclear development continues to reshape long-term planning priorities for the Oak Ridge Reservation and surrounding community.

4. X-Energy Advances Nuclear Fuel Production in Oak Ridge

X-Energy has begun vertical construction on a $300 million nuclear fuel fabrication facility in Oak Ridge, marking a significant step forward in the region's expanding nuclear industry. The Maryland-based company, which has financial ties to Amazon, plans to manufacture TRISO fuel—small, coated fuel "pebbles" designed for use in small modular nuclear reactors. First announced in 2022, the project would make Oak Ridge home to the nation's first facility dedicated solely to producing fuel for SMRs, a technology being pursued by utilities including the Tennessee Valley Authority. If successful, the plant would play a key role in supporting the next generation of nuclear power while further cementing Oak Ridge's role in the nuclear energy supply chain.

5. ORNL Selected to Host Next-Generation AI Supercomputers

The U.S. Department of Energy has announced that Oak Ridge National Laboratory will host two new artificial intelligence–driven supercomputing systems—Discovery and Lux—developed in partnership with Advanced Micro Devices and Hewlett Packard Enterprise. The Lux AI Cluster is scheduled to come online in 2026, followed by Discovery in 2028, significantly expanding the nation's capacity for AI-powered scientific research. These systems are expected to accelerate breakthroughs across a wide range of fields, including nuclear energy safety, advanced manufacturing, aerospace design, medicine, and cybersecurity, while strengthening U.S. leadership in high-performance computing. Building on ORNL's long history as home to some of the world's fastest supercomputers, Discovery and Lux will allow researchers to analyze massive datasets at unprecedented speeds and integrate AI more deeply into scientific discovery, reinforcing the laboratory's central role in national research priorities.

6. ORNL Launches Hybrid AI-Quantum Computing Initiative with Industry Partners

Oak Ridge National Laboratory has announced a major collaboration with NVIDIA and Hewlett Packard Enterprise to advance the next generation of computing by tightly integrating artificial intelligence, high-performance computing, and quantum technologies. The effort will focus on developing hybrid quantum-classical systems within ORNL's Frontier exascale environment, using NVIDIA's NVQLink and CUDA-Q tools to improve the reliability and practical usefulness of quantum processors, which are prone to errors. Expected to mature by 2026, the initiative builds on long-standing partnerships behind earlier supercomputers such as Titan and Summit and reflects a broader national strategy to maintain U.S. leadership in advanced computing by bridging today's powerful AI systems with emerging quantum technologies.

7. ORNL Advances Nuclear Fuel Recycling to Strengthen Energy Security

Researchers at Oak Ridge National Laboratory are leading efforts to rethink how the United States manages used nuclear fuel, with the goal of improving efficiency, reducing waste, and strengthening long-term energy independence. Radiochemical engineer Katie Johnson and her team are working to move the nuclear industry away from its current "open" fuel cycle—where used fuel is treated solely as waste—toward a closed fuel cycle that incorporates recycling. By recovering usable fuel materials and valuable byproducts, this approach could reduce reliance on uranium mining while extracting more energy from existing resources.

Central to this work are advanced recycling technologies being studied and developed at ORNL, including aqueous processing methods such as PUREX and emerging pyrochemical techniques. These methods focus on safely separating and capturing reusable materials and radionuclides from spent fuel, with facilities like ORNL's Iodine Off-gas Testing and Abatement Laboratory playing a key role. Alongside technical challenges, the research also highlights the need for workforce development as private-sector involvement in nuclear fuel management grows. By modernizing decades-old technologies and training a new generation of scientists, ORNL aims to improve the safety, sustainability, and resilience of nuclear energy systems while helping address the nation's future energy demands.

STATE of TENNESSEE

1. A Costly Year of Extreme Weather for Tennessee

Tennessee endured an unusually intense stretch of extreme weather in the first half of 2025, with eight separate storms each causing more than $1 billion in damage realizing in just four months. According to data now maintained by Climate Central, the disasters—primarily severe thunderstorms producing tornadoes, flooding, high winds, or hail—included deadly February tornadoes, multiple destructive storms in March and May, and record-breaking rainfall and flooding in April that inundated parts of Middle Tennessee. These events are part of a broader national trend of escalating weather-related losses, driven by a warming climate, rising greenhouse gas emissions, and growing vulnerability in many communities due to population growth and outdated infrastructure. Tennessee, which has experienced more than 100 major weather disasters since 1980, remains especially exposed as severe storms become more frequent and more destructive across the Southeast.

2. TVA Signals Shift Toward Large-Scale Battery Storage

The Tennessee Valley Authority has announced plans to significantly expand battery storage on its power grid, targeting up to 1.5 gigawatts of capacity by the end of 2029—roughly equivalent to one of its largest new gas plants. TVA officials described the move as urgent, noting that energy storage plays a key role in strengthening grid reliability, especially as demand grows and generation sources fluctuate. While TVA has focused much of its recent expansion on natural gas, battery storage is increasingly seen as essential to building a more resilient and lower-carbon energy system. Storage currently makes up only a small share of TVA's more than 38 gigawatts of total capacity, but the planned expansion would mark the utility's first major step toward integrating storage at a scale long discussed in its planning documents.

3. Advisory Group Charts Conservation-First Path for the Duck River

A state-appointed advisory group has released its first recommendations to Gov. Bill Lee for protecting the Duck River while meeting growing water demands in Middle Tennessee. The 269-mile river, recognized as the most biodiverse freshwater river in North America, is under increasing strain from population growth and more frequent drought conditions. The Duck River Watershed Planning Partnership—a 19-member group of state and local officials, utilities, and conservation leaders—proposed a range of short- and long-term actions, including stronger drought preparedness, expanded monitoring, conservation incentives, and studies of future water supply options. Among the recommendations are evaluating a potential pipeline from the Tennessee River, raising winter water levels at TVA's Normandy Dam, and improving coordination among agencies to better respond to drought and flooding.

Notably, the advisory group did **not** recommend building a new dam on the Duck River near Columbia, despite advocacy from some local interests who argue it is necessary to support rapid growth. Environmental groups have opposed the dam proposal, citing ecological harm and feasibility concerns, and the advisory panel instead emphasized conservation, efficiency, and regional planning as more sustainable solutions. The recommendations also call for expanded public engagement, financial incentives for habitat protection, investments in wetlands and green infrastructure, and long-term strategies to reduce water loss and demand. Together, the proposals reflect a conservation-first approach aimed at safeguarding the Duck River's ecological integrity while planning carefully for the region's future water needs.

4. Tennessee Preserves Major Hatchie River Wetland for Wildlife and Public Access

Tennessee has permanently protected 7,400 acres of bottomland hardwood forest—often called "river swamp"—along the Hatchie River, safeguarding one of the state's most ecologically rich wetland systems. Acquired in partnership with The Nature Conservancy and the Conservation Fund, the property—known as Hatchie Bottom—will be managed by the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency and opened to the public as a Wildlife Management Area as early as next year. These wetlands play a critical role in flood control, water quality, and biodiversity, supporting hundreds of fish, mussel, and bird species, many of which depend exclusively on intact wetland habitat. The protection of Hatchie Bottom is especially significant as wetlands across Tennessee face increasing pressure from development and recent regulatory rollbacks, making large, unaltered floodplain forests like this one increasingly rare and vital for both people and wildlife.

5. Tennessee Plans Return of Long-Absent Woodpecker

Tennessee is preparing to reintroduce the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker, a species not seen in the state since 1994, through a collaborative effort involving Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The plan, endorsed by Gov. Bill Lee, will restore roughly 1,200 acres of suitable habitat in the Savage Gulf State Natural Area using a mix of state, federal, and private funding. Officials describe the effort as both a conservation milestone and an example of how coordinated habitat restoration can help recover native species and strengthen Tennessee's biodiversity.

6. Standing With Our Scott County Partners

Residents of Scott County—many of them friends and partners in TCWP's **Rails-to-Trails** work—recently gathered in Oneida to raise concerns with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation about landfill expansion in their community. The public meeting focused on Volunteer Landfill's request to add a leachate evaporator, a system used to remove water from contaminated liquid generated by landfill waste. While state officials explained the permitting and testing requirements for the equipment, residents emphasized broader worries about environmental impacts and the landfill's close proximity to neighborhoods, schools, apartments, and youth recreation facilities.

These concerns are closely tied to opposition against a proposed new landfill known as “Roberta II,” which would be built next to the existing Volunteer Landfill. Community members, organized under the group Cumberland Clear, say the evaporator proposal and the new landfill represent interconnected threats to public health, local businesses, and quality of life.

Scott County’s Solid Waste Board has already formally opposed Roberta II, and residents are pressing state officials for clearer answers and stronger engagement. TCWP previously highlighted these issues in a blog post, and we continue to stand with our Scott County partners as they work to protect their land, waters, and communities from unnecessary and harmful development.

NATIONAL PARKS & RECREATIONAL AREAS

1.From Community Alarm to National Park Advocacy in Scott County

Concerns over the proposed Roberta II landfill in Scott County have now reached the leadership of a neighboring national park. Niki Nicholas, Superintendent of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area, has formally asked the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) to provide greater transparency and clarification about the landfill application currently under review. In a December 1 letter, Nicholas emphasized that the proposed site lies close to waterways that flow directly into the Big South Fork and the Cumberland River—one of the last large free-flowing river systems in the southeastern United States and a stronghold for rare and federally protected aquatic species.

Nicholas raised specific questions about water quality monitoring, potential impacts to groundwater, and how contaminated landfill liquids would be handled, noting that the proposal differs substantially from an earlier permit issued in 2010. She stated that this information is essential for the National Park Service to determine whether the landfill could undermine the water-related values the park is legally required to protect. Her request echoes concerns voiced by Scott County residents and the Scott County Solid Waste Board, which has already opposed the landfill, citing sufficient existing capacity and the site’s close proximity to schools, neighborhoods, and sensitive natural resources. Together, these voices underscore growing concern that the proposed landfill could pose long-term risks not only to local communities, but to one of the region’s most important river and recreation systems.

2. Endangered Mussel Shows Signs of Recovery in Big South Fork

The endangered tan riffleshell mussel, a species found only in the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River and the upper Clinch River, is showing encouraging signs of growth and range expansion. Ongoing recovery efforts led by the National Park Service, in partnership with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, are helping protect and monitor this rare freshwater species. The progress highlights the importance of sustained conservation work within the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area to restore sensitive aquatic habitats.

3. New Endangered Mussel Found in the Obed Signals Healthy Waters

Biologists with the National Park Service have discovered a rare and endangered freshwater mussel species in the Obed Wild & Scenic River, marking the first time it has been documented in this part of the Tennessee River basin. During routine monitoring, scientists identified the slabside pearly mussel (*Pleuronaia dolabelloides*), a species previously known from only a handful of tributaries elsewhere in the region. The finding is significant because freshwater mussels are key indicators of clean, healthy rivers, filtering water and supporting aquatic ecosystems. Locating this species in the Obed provides an important new refuge that could aid in its long-term recovery and underscores the exceptional biological richness of the Obed and Emory river system, which is among the most diverse freshwater mussel habitats in the world.

NATIONAL

1.Lawmakers and Advocates Sound Alarm Over EPA PFAS Delays

Environmental groups and Democratic lawmakers are warning that delays at the Environmental Protection Agency are jeopardizing the safety of the nation’s drinking water by withholding key information about PFAS, often called “forever chemicals.” Rep. Chellie Pingree and other lawmakers say the EPA has stalled for months on releasing a report about PFNA, one of several PFAS compounds linked to serious health risks, including developmental issues and thyroid disorders.

While the agency cites ongoing litigation as the reason for the delay and says it remains committed to addressing PFAS, critics argue the inaction reflects growing industry influence and a broader slowdown in regulation and cleanup efforts, including at military bases. With PFAS contamination affecting every state, lawmakers and former EPA scientists warn that continued delays could leave communities exposed to harmful chemicals without clear guidance or protection.

2. TCWP Monitoring EPA Proposal That Would Weaken Wetlands Protections

TCWP is closely following a proposed rule by the Environmental Protection Agency that would significantly narrow which wetlands and waterways are protected under the Clean Water Act. The revised “Waters of the United States” definition would limit federal oversight to relatively permanent rivers, lakes, streams, and wetlands with a direct surface connection, reflecting a 2023 Supreme Court decision that curtailed federal authority. EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin says the proposal would provide clarity for landowners and industry, but it also represents one of many recent rollbacks of environmental regulations with far-reaching implications for water quality nationwide.

Along with conservation organizations across the country, TCWP is deeply concerned that these revisions would leave many wetlands and headwater streams unprotected—despite their critical role in filtering drinking water, reducing flooding, and sustaining wildlife. Weakening federal safeguards shifts responsibility to states that may lack strong protections or adequate resources, putting communities and ecosystems at greater risk. We share the view of environmental advocates who warn that rolling back wetlands protections undermines the Clean Water Act’s core purpose and threatens long-term water security. TCWP will continue to track this rulemaking closely, inform our members, and engage where possible to defend strong, science-based protections for the waters we all depend on.

3. Proposed ESA Changes Raise Alarms for Wildlife Protection

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has announced four proposed rule changes to the Endangered Species Act that conservation groups warn would weaken protections for imperiled plants and animals. The proposals would alter how critical habitat is designated and allow broader exceptions based on economic, national security, or other considerations. Environmental advocates, including the National Parks Conservation Association, caution that these changes could undermine the core purpose of the ESA. Public comments on the proposed rules are open through December 22.

4. Interior Department Cancels Environmental Grants Nationwide

The Department of the Interior has canceled 79 federal grants totaling $14 million, targeting projects it labeled as supporting “wasteful environmental groups.” According to reporting by High Country News, the cancellations largely affect work related to climate change and conservation, including native species restoration and research conducted with agencies such as the National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Geological Survey. The move has raised concerns among conservation organizations that essential science, habitat restoration, and biodiversity efforts are being curtailed for political reasons.

TCWP EVENTS

TCWP GUIDELINES FOR EVENTS

- We ask that you stay home when you are sick.
- We ask that you know what you’re capable of, and that you communicate that to the group leader.
- We recommend that you bring plenty of water and snacks.
- We ask that you not bring pets.

[NOTE: Times listed for all events are Eastern time unless specified otherwise.]

1.Upcoming Events

Whites Creek Workday – Saturday, January 10

TCWP will sponsor a day of trail maintenance work at Whites Creek Small Wild Area in Rhea County at 10 a.m. January 10 as part of our ongoing stewardship activities for this TVA Small Wild Area trail. The trail loops onto land that TCWP purchased from Bowater several years ago, thanks to the generous support of our members.

Participants should wear sturdy shoes or boots and bring work gloves, loppers, and small bow saws or folding saws. Some hand tools will be available at the event. Please be sure to bring clothing appropriate for weather conditions, as well as water, snacks, and/or a lunch.

Participants can meet for carpooling or caravanning in Oak Ridge at the Gold's Gym/Books-A-Million parking lot in Oak Ridge (at the end close to S. Illinois Avenue, near Salsarita's). We'll leave Oak Ridge at 9 a.m., or volunteers can join the crew at the trailhead at 10 a.m. We plan to spend three or four hours at the site, but volunteers may come and go as they wish. If the weather is uncooperative—excessive rain, or snow and ice—we will reschedule for the following Saturday.

If you RSVP it helps with planning and allows contacting in case of cancelation. Phone/email: Jimmy Groton, 865-805-9908, groton87@comcast.net.

To sign up, click here: https://forms.gle/3PFihugDkbNYNemu8

Invasive Species Removal at Haw Ridge – Saturday, January 31

Join us for a volunteer workday focused on removing invasive plant species—such as English ivy and privet—to help native wildflowers thrive at Haw Ridge. Environmental education instructor and author Kris Light, creator of the Haw Ridge Wildflower Guide (available for download at eastennesseewildflowers.com), will join us to help identify wildflower habitats found at Haw Ridge and explain how invasive species threaten these native plants. The event is co-organized between TCWP and the UT Arboretum Society. Participants may choose activities that match their comfort level, from simply enjoying time outdoors to digging vines or removing privet using weed wrenches.

We will meet at 10:00 am in the parking area on Edgemoor Rd. (near the Haw Ridge kiosk) and walk into the area of the peninsula on the west side of the park. The area is rocky in a few sections and could be muddy if there were recent rains, so sturdy shoes are necessary. We will have some tools for participants to use, but you are encouraged to bring your own clippers, loppers, and work gloves.

Please email Hans Christen at hans_christen@yahoo.com if you plan to attend. This helps with planning and allows us to notify participants of any change

To sign up, click here: https://forms.gle/Zs8MxcqBSpMaz2E9A

Cumberland Trail Alley Ford Workday – Saturday, February 14

On February 14 a day of trail work and hiking will take place on the 2.5-mile section of the Cumberland Trail at the Obed Wild and Scenic River between Nemo Picnic Area and Alley Ford adopted by TCWP in 1998. Participants should dress appropriately for winter weather, wear sturdy shoes or boots, and bring work gloves, loppers, small bow saws or folding saws, shovels and grubbing tools, as well as a lunch and plenty of water. Cumberland Trail State Park personnel will also make some tools available at the event.

Participants can meet for carpooling in Oak Ridge at the Gold's Gym/Books-A-Million parking lot (meet at the end close to S. Illinois Avenue, near Salsarita's) in time to leave Oak Ridge at 9 a.m. Eastern, or can join the crew at Nemo Picnic Area or Rock Creek Campground at 10 a.m. We expect to return to the trailhead by around 3 p.m. (NOTE: If the weather is uncooperative—excessive rain or snow and ice—we will reschedule for the following Saturday.)

Participants will need to sign a National Park Service volunteer form (parent's or guardian's signature required for minors). Forms can be requested in advance from TCWP, or NPS representatives will have forms available at the event.
If you RSVP it helps with planning and allows contacting in case of cancelation, Phone/email: Jimmy Groton, 865-805-9908, *groton87@comcast.net*.

To sign up, click here: https://forms.gle/s3JTerUfkuwaB2RQA

Spring Cedar Barrens Cleanup/Weed Wrangle® - Saturday, March 7

The Oak Ridge Cedar Barrens will again be the site of exotic invasive plant removal as we conduct our first official Weed Wrangle® of 2026. Located next to Jefferson Middle School in Oak Ridge, the barrens is a joint project of the City of Oak Ridge, Tennessee Division of Natural Areas, and TCWP. The area is one of just a few cedar barrens in East Tennessee, and provides habitat for three state-listed plants: Torrey's mountain mint, prairie goldenrod, and fewleaf sunflower. It is subject to invasion by bushy lespedeza, leatherleaf viburnum, privet, autumn olive, mimosa, Nepal grass, multiflora rose, and woody plants that threaten the system's prairie plants. Our efforts help to eliminate invasives and other shade-producing plants that prevent the prairie grasses from getting needed sunlight.

Volunteers should meet in the Jefferson Middle School Parking lot at 9 a.m., with sturdy shoes, loppers, gloves, and water. The work session will conclude at noon with a pizza lunch. For more information, contact Jimmy Groton at 865-805-9908 or *groton87@comcast.net*.

To sign up, click here: https://forms.gle/UXHQKq592MEWGDjXA

2.Recent Events

Fall Cedar Barrens Cleanup/Weed Wrangle® - Saturday, Nov. 1

On November 1, TCWP hosted our third Weed Wrangle® of the year at the Oak Ridge Barrens State Natural Area. At least 12 volunteers worked to remove bushy lespedeza, bush honeysuckle, and other native woody plants from the barrens. We had several new volunteers, including a good mix of young and older people. We took a break to walk with Larry Pounds and Margaret and Flora Cumberland to take volunteers on a short walk through the barrens to introduce them to the unique habitat and to identify various plants.

We were able to see all three rare plants at our barrens—white prairie goldenrod (State Endangered), Torrey's mountain mint (State Special Concern Species), and naked-stem sunflower (State Special Concern Species,) along with several other barrens plants. We were lucky to find several of the prairie goldenrods still in flower and doing well. Water bars on the trail near the triangle appear to be keeping erosion under control on the trail to the entrance. After the morning's work and wildflower walk, we had a nice lunch together by one of the Clinch River Environmental Studies Organization's (CRESO) wetlands. *Jimmy Groton*

Owl Ridge Raptor Center Program - Saturday, November 1

On Saturday, November 1, 115 people gathered at the UT Arboretum Auditorium to hear Lisa Thomison, co-founder of the Owl Ridge Raptor Center, and the Raptor Center staff provide an introduction to the work of this federal- and state-licensed raptor rehabilitation center, in a program cosponsored by TCWP the UT Arboretum Society, and the American Museum of Science and Energy. Owl Ridge staff also brought some very special winged "ambassadors" for attendees to meet.

The Owl Ridge Raptor center is a nonprofit organization that takes care of injured and orphaned birds of prey, including owls, hawks, falcons, vultures, and eagles. The goal with each bird is full recovery and re-release back into their native habitat whenever possible.

Norris Watershed Hike - Saturday, November 22

The weather was a little tricky this Saturday morning and rain had been called for at one point. But it turned out to be nice, and even sunny. Six of us walked through the road tunnel across the Norris commons and headed up to Observation Point. At the top there was a great view of the Clinch River, Norris Dam, and the Cumberland Plateau. With the leaves gone for the winter, the horseshoe in the river was visible. We hiked back high above the river before turning back toward Norris. The long climb back up was refreshing, and we were soon back to the start at Norris School. The trails were slick in some places, but we all made it back unscathed. Our journey was a little over four miles. *Joe Feeman*

TCWP extends its sincere thanks to HHM CPAs for their generous sponsorship of our Celebrate the Win event.

HHM's support helped make this special gathering possible—bringing together members, partners, and friends to recognize conservation successes, strengthen community, and recommit to the work ahead. Their investment in TCWP reflects a shared belief that protecting wild places and clean water is worth celebrating.

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Community partners like HHM CPAs make it possible for TCWP to pause, reflect, and celebrate progress—while continuing to move conservation forward.

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TCWP NEWSLETTER 385 January 2026

TENNESSEE CITIZENS FOR WILDERNESS PLANNING

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Calendar

- January 10 – Whites Creek Workday
- January 31 – Invasive Species Removal at Haw Ridge
- February 14 – Cumberland Trail Alley Ford Workday
- March 7 – Spring Cedar Barrens Cleanup/Weed Wrangle®

These events are subject to cancellation. Call ahead to verify the event will occur.

Tennessee Citizens of Wilderness Planning (TCWP)
The mission of TCWP is to: Preserve wild places and waters through protection, advocacy, stewardship, and education.

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