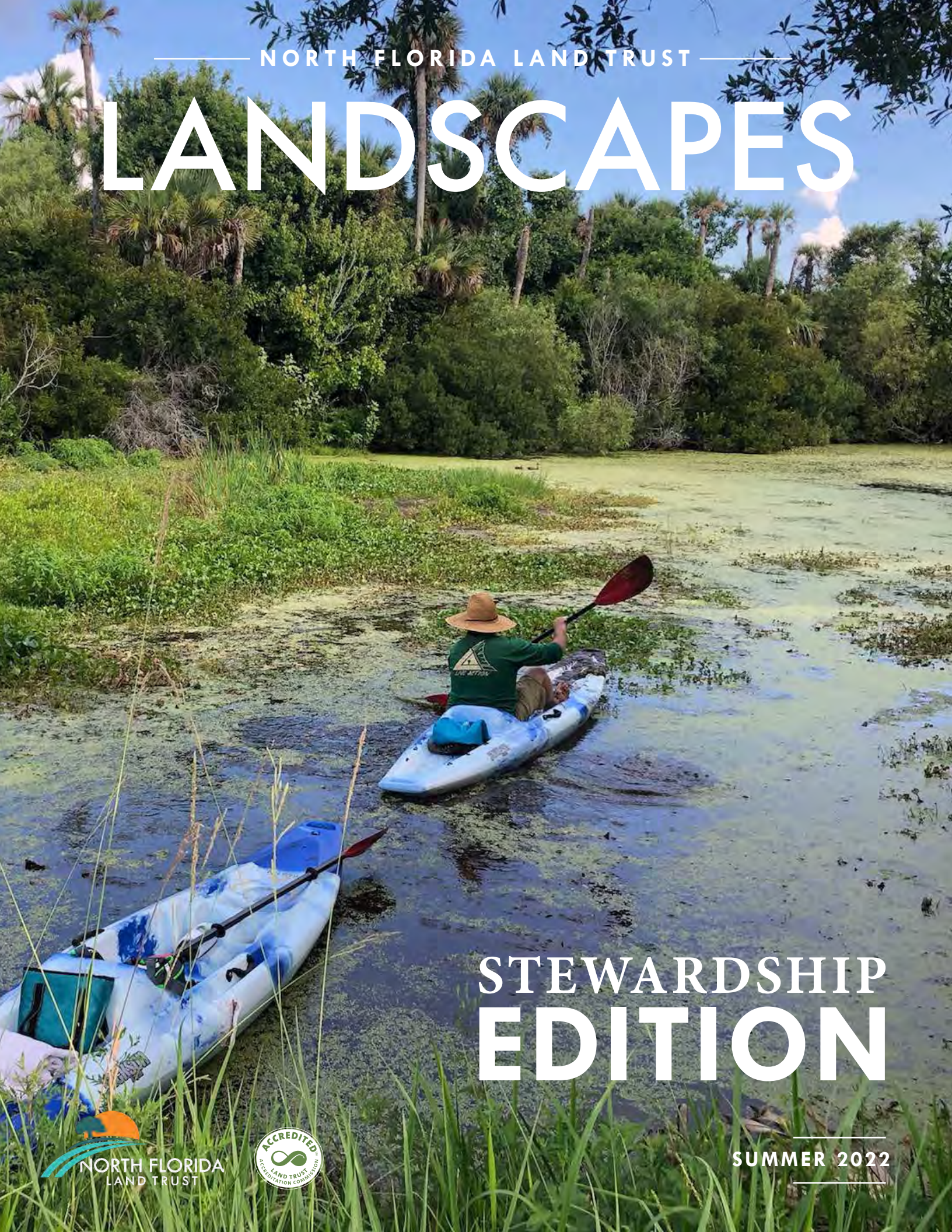
NORTH FLORIDA LAND TRUST

LANDSCAPES



STEWARDSHIP EDITION

NORTH FLORIDA LAND TRUST

ACCREDITED LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

SUMMER 2022

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Friends and Supporters,

The North Florida Land Trust is a uniquely remarkable organization. There are four groups of people who make this organization special. We have our partners, landowners, donors, and staff.

Our partners provide the advice, guidance, training, tools, and funding needed to ensure that our knowledgeable staff successfully acquires environmentally significant properties and easements. Without them, we could not accomplish our mission.

Our landowners sell, donate, or allow conservation easements on their property to protect it in perpetuity. We only work with those who are willing participants in the process. It is that willingness, and perhaps their love of their land and the desire to protect it, that provides us with the natural resources we need.

Our donors are critically important. They provide the funds for our operations and, frequently, the funding needed to acquire a particular property or an easement. Without their donations and the staff to do the work, we would not exist. Hence, our need for unrestricted funds.

Our staff are incredibly dedicated to our mission. The hours they put into acquiring land, and conservation easements, stewarding the land we own and enforcing our easements, raising funds needed for our activities, and supporting our operations are exceptionally valuable. Without them, we do not exist. Over the past eight years that I have served as executive director/president, we have had two dedicated teams, one pre-pandemic and one post-pandemic. Both have served our mission well and allowed us to exceed our goals and meet our mission.

The North Florida Land Trust has accomplished a great deal as we have grown. The leadership team we have in place now is incredible. Our need for willing landowners, partners' support, and donors continues to grow as we work to preserve and enhance our quality of life by protecting North Florida's irreplaceable natural environment.

I hope you enjoy reading and learning more about our Stewardship efforts inside this newsletter and recognize the value you contribute to making a difference in what future generations will experience in Florida's landscape.

Sincerely,

Jim McCarthy

NORTH FLORIDA LAND TRUST

ACCREDITED LAND TRUST ACCREDITATION COMMISSION

CONTACT
843 W Monroe St | Jacksonville, FL 32202
(904) 479-1967 | info@nflt.org | www.nflt.org

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NFLT is an accredited land trust. The mission of the North Florida Land Trust to preserve and enhance our quality of life by protecting North Florida's irreplaceable natural environment.

What is STEWARDSHIP?

The Land Stewardship Department at North Florida Land Trust plays a crucial role in achieving the organization's conservation goals. There are several ways properties are protected in perpetuity, such as through conservation easements or the purchasing of lands to hold as preserves under our ownership. Once the land is protected, then what? That's where stewardship comes in.

Management with Fire

Supporting Native Wildlife

Keeping Trespassers Out

Planting Native Species

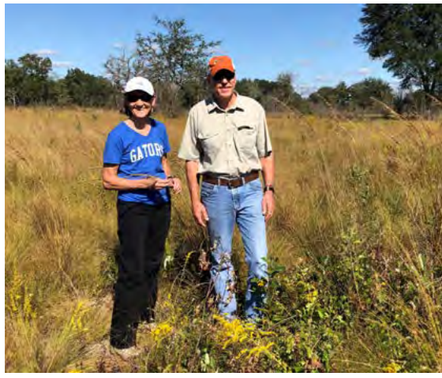
Working NFLT Lands

If North Florida Land Trust purchases a property to hold as a preserve, a slightly different approach is taken. Once under the purview of the stewardship team, a land management plan is created. The plan identifies not only what the land is in its current state, but what it historically was and where we would like it to be in the future.

We do this by identifying not only the natural communities of the property but what wildlife inhabit it. Once the needs of the land are established, as well as potential challenges in addressing those needs, then a strategy is developed that will serve as the road map to restoration of the property. This strategy is detailed in what's called a Land Management Plan. For example, a property may have exotic or invasive species and need prescribed fire to reduce the fuel loads and allow seed production on the native grasses and trees. A property's Land Management Plan is constantly reevaluated to ensure the measures outlined are still needed and the plans are updated every five years.

Working with Landowners

If a landowner chooses to place their property under a conservation easement, we work with them to ensure the property is not only safe for posterity, but also that the landowner gets to enjoy its natural beauty. We visit each property on an annual basis to ensure everything is being done in accordance with the agreement and to answer any questions or offer guidance to the landowner. It is a wonderful relationship we foster with individuals who care about saving our lands for generations to come.



Gopher Tortoise

SMITH LAKE PRESERVE
NEW HOME FOR STEWARDSHIP

By: Rianna Elliott, NFLT Director of Land Stewardship

Aerial view of Smith Lake

Buttonbush

Sky Blue Lupine

Anhinga

View of Smith Lake.

White-tailed Deer

Juvenile Ibis

Through a joint venture with the Army Compatible Use Buffer Program, North Florida Land Trust acquired a special piece of land in late 2019. It was not until April 2022 that NFLT could fully access the property and make it home for the Stewardship Department. This 600-acre property in Clay County, now known as Smith Lake Preserve, is home to several natural communities.

Beautiful sandhills, scrub, and wet prairie span the acreage. This combination gives Smith Lake Preserve a wonderful array of wildlife diversity, and there is something new to see almost every day.

One of the primary projects we are focusing on is restoring the sandhill habitat at Smith Lake Preserve. It is known for its majestic longleaf pine, turkey oaks, and wiregrass. The gopher tortoise, turkey, white-tail deer, and eastern indigo snake are just a few animals that call this ecosystem home. A couple hundred years ago the southeastern United States was primarily made up of sandhill pine habitat. Industry and development have endangered this ecosystem, and thus, the longleaf pine. Its diminishing density and strength, as well as rapid depletion of supply to naval stores, puts the longleaf pine in direct danger. Due to its slow growth (some up to five hundred years), it is disappearing from our landscape on lands not in conservation. Through management techniques such as prescribed fire and replanting, we hope to provide viable habitat for the species that depend on it to thrive.

Barn at Smith Lake that now serves as the new home for the stewardship department.

Monarch Buttlerfly perched on a blazing star bloom.

Fetterbush bloom

All around the preserve a visitor will see a project. A priority project is removing cross-fencing from previous pasture use that is causing habitat fragmentation to the wildlife. This cross-fencing is especially prevalent down by the Smith Lake Preserve edge in the wet prairie. By removing this barrier, all species will be able to move freely around without the hazard of making their way over, under, or through the fences. An Anhinga perched atop a fence post or a soft-shell turtle making his way along the shallows will signify a harmonious and safe environment.

North Florida Land Trust is also excited to partner with the Florida Trail to include a two-mile section that will run through the Smith Lake Preserve for hikers to enjoy. Currently, the trail runs along a road to the north of the preserve, a path not pleasing in terms of scenery, but also not always safe for hikers. The new trail plan routes hikers into the preserve's serenity and respite and carefully limits the visual impact of neighbors and development. Year-round, hikers will experience all that makes this preserve unique, like seeing a fetterbush in the scrub blooming in the spring or a blazing star in its lavender glory dotting the landscape under the longleaf pines in the fall. Smith Lake Preserve is filled with wonder.

While having Smith Lake Preserve in conservation is a huge win for NFLT, we are even more excited about what the future holds for the habitat and wildlife that call it home.

GET TO KNOW OUR STEWARDSHIP DEPARTMENT

RIANNA ELLIOTT
DIRECTOR OF LAND STEWARDSHIP

What drew you to this line of work?
Being outdoors has always been an integral part of my life. Growing up on a farm in rural Suwannee County and enjoying the freedom to play outside is something that most children today will never get the opportunity to experience. Seeing our natural habitats shrinking before our eyes led me to want to do whatever I could to preserve our landscapes and restore them.

What brought you to NFLT?
I have a long history in habitat restoration, and when I learned of the conservation efforts at NFLT, I knew I could make an impact within the organization. Habitat restoration is just as important in what we do as the initial protection from development when NFLT acquires a property.

What's the coolest thing you have witnessed or discovered while in the field?
I am blessed to see so many amazing things that it is hard to pick just one. One does stick out in my mind, though. NFLT has a property in Lawtey called Trail Ridge Preserve. While there, one morning after it rained, I was walking on a sandy road near a pond. On the freshly washed sand were the tracks of bear, turkey, deer, and raccoon, all overlapping each other. Like people use roads to get to places for food and water, so do wildlife. They all manage to coexist and seeing those tracks brought that home to me.

What is your favorite land stewardship activity?
My favorite tool in the stewardship handbag is prescribed fire. Florida's landscape revolved around using fire for natural habitat management for thousands of years. Through development and habitat fragmentation, the practice of fire suppression has impacted many species that depend on it for survival. By reintroducing fire in a safe and measured way, flora and fauna will flourish while also reducing the threat to Florida wildfire communities.

Why is stewardship important to you?
As many of us are already aware, our natural Florida is rapidly disappearing through climate change and development. I cannot sit back and wait for someone else to take on the challenge of trying to protect for future generations what was so freely available to me as a child.

Who is your conservation hero and why?
There are so many people that are in my life that have helped me get to where I am today. If I had to pick one, it would be Jeff DiMaggio. He was the Fire Management Officer in my district office during my time with the Florida Park Service. He guided me in my training and field application of those lessons. He also led by example in the teaching techniques to guide landscapes back into desired conditions. He never would just give you the answer to a question but would help you work your way through the problem. Over his 40+ year tenure, he helped create the Florida Park Service fire program into what it is today by guiding and mentoring hundreds of people along the way.

What do you see as the most important issue in conservation today? How would you address it?
I think the most crucial issue in conservation today is a lack of sense of urgency. No one seems to believe what "they" do will make a difference one way or the other. We are at a crossroads NOW. Urban sprawl, climate change, and habitat fragmentation and degradation are issues that have us on the precipice of disaster. Education is critical; it is making it relatable on an individual level that will create change—teaching a person that their role does make a difference in what generations to come will experience in Florida's landscape.

MARK MANNING
LAND MANAGER

Why did you decide to get into this line of work?
It's what I was always meant to do. My love and curiosity for nature and the opportunity to volunteer have pointed me in this direction and have served me well. I couldn't be happier working in Florida's wild places, learning about how to better care for its habitats, and overall seeing the results of hard work in the form of happier plants and wildlife.

What's the coolest thing you have witnessed or discovered while in the field?
It's always amazing to see plants and wildlife in the field; however, seeing firsthand the behaviors, patterns, and characteristics of individual species is exhilarating. For instance, it's a unique experience to be in the woods and see a fox squirrel, but did you know that fox squirrels during a rainstorm will cover the whole length of their bodies with their big bushy tails to use as an umbrella? Its field observations like these that I never learned from reading or watching nature documentaries. Having the opportunity to have these unique experiences in the woods is why it is so special to me.

What is your favorite outdoor activity?
My family and I spend a lot of time camping, hiking, and kayaking. A good friend of mine likes to say, "The indoors are for sleeping," and I couldn't agree more. So out of all those activities, kayaking is the most fun for me.

Why is stewardship important to you?
Stewardship is essential because it is like quality control. We secure the property to take it off the market from development and continue to keep a wildlife corridor. This is important, but what else can you do for the property besides occupy it? How can you enhance it to get it back to how it may have looked before fire suppression, surrounding communities, and other developments began encroaching on the land? The habitat is surviving, but is it thriving? These are the things we address within the stewardship department, and it's the difference between the story of "this used to be a forest" and "this forest wasn't always this healthy" that we would like to tell someday. Protecting and enhancing wildlife habitats is the name of the game.

CALEB GARNER
LAND MANAGEMENT SPECIALIST

What brought you to NFLT?
I was drawn to NFLT by the passion for preserving Florida's native lands and being able to restore a functioning ecosystem.

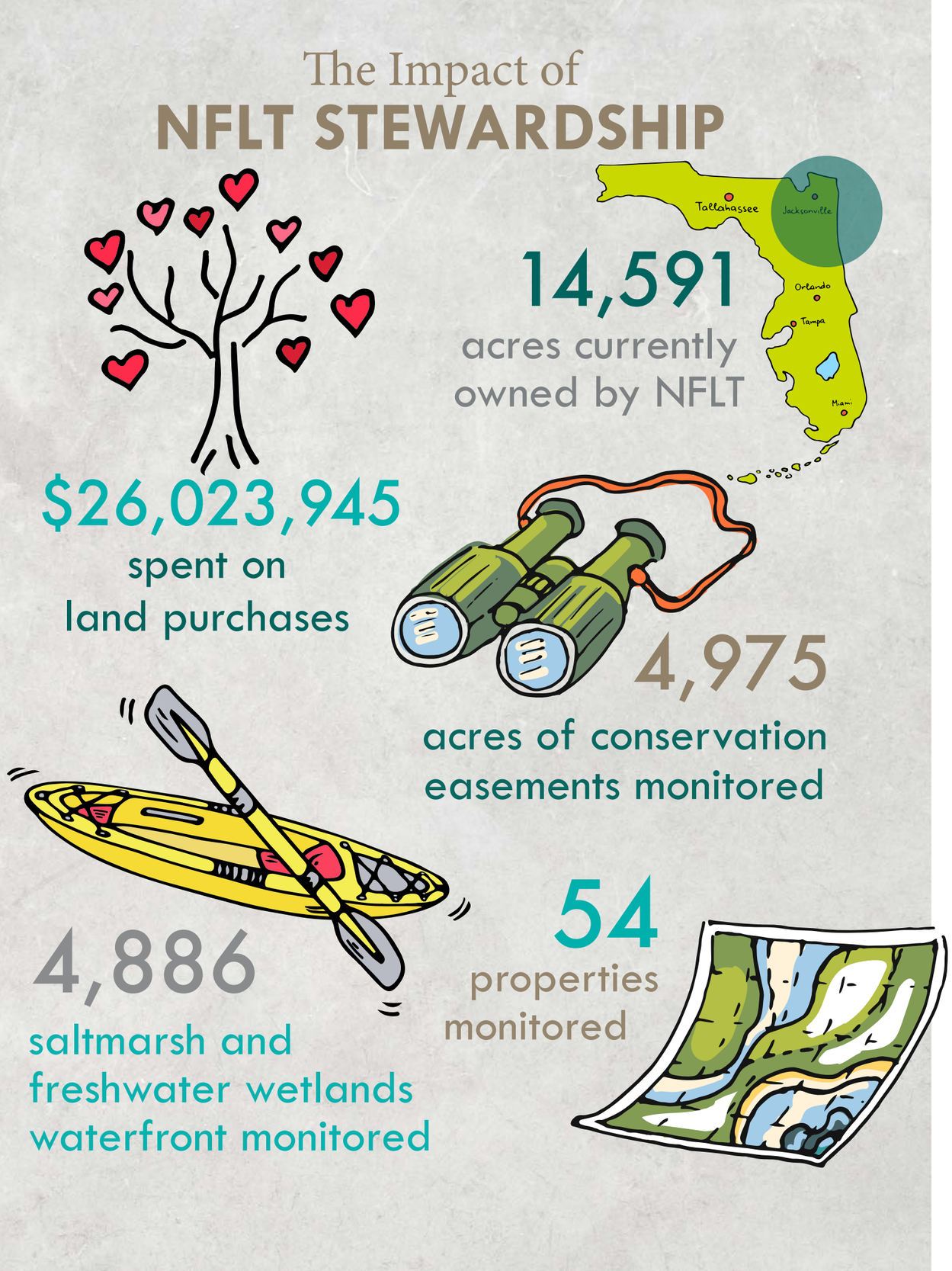
What's the coolest thing you have witnessed or discovered while in the field?
One of my favorite things to find is old man-made "cat faces" in an old-growth pine. Extra points if the metal is still there. "Cat-faces" or scrapes appear on two sides of longleaf pine where turpentine was collected. The US was once the world leader in naval supplies, tar, pitch, and turpentine until the mid-20th century, thanks to the longleaf pine.

What is your favorite preserve in Northeast Florida?
My favorite preserve in Northeast Florida is Pumpkin Hill Creek Preserve State Park. I have a good amount of experience burning there and I like the ecosystems.

Why is stewardship important to you?
Stewardship is important to me because it makes natural areas even more beautiful and creates better habitats for existing and new species.

Who is your conservation hero and why?
John Muir has always been someone I try and look up to in my conservation efforts. He had great ideologies and was productive while also being civil. He also would leave for weeks in the woods with just a loaf of bread and I'd say that is amazing.

What do you see as the most important issue in conservation today? How would you address it?
One of the most pressing issues concerning conservation nowadays is urban sprawl. New buildings are popping up all over the place and if it is already developed, they put a new and bigger building up. Instead of new buildings all the time, we need to try Adaptive reuse. This is the practice of repurposing old structures for new purposes.



NFLT Receives Large Grant FOR STEWARDSHIP

By: Kelly White

North Florida Land Trust has received a $305,000 grant from an anonymous donor that is dedicated to building NFLT's land stewardship and management infrastructure. This is the largest grant NFLT has ever received in support of stewardship. The money will be used to purchase equipment needed to execute its land management plan on the nearly 15,000 acres in its current portfolio. NFLT's land portfolio has grown significantly and this funding will help maintain and improve the ecological processes and functions of the landscape.

Specific strategies to manage the conserved landscapes include restoring tidal wetlands, managing forests for wildlife, planting native trees and shrubs, and managing vegetation to reduce and control invasive weeds and species. Through these strategies NFLT will be able to recreate lost habitats for endangered species and return the land to its original and natural state. The grant will also allow the nonprofit to realize significant cost savings and be more efficient since NFLT will no longer be dependent on external service providers and equipment rental companies.

The properties in the seven counties NFLT serves-Baker, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam, and St. Johns-include a variety of ecosystems such as coastal salt marshes, pine forests, cypress swamps, and beaches. These ecosystems are all very important to the region's ecological health and directly affect Florida's quality of life. Preserving these lands provides ecosystem benefits including serving as a natural buffer against flooding, helping to protect aquifer recharge areas, and providing recreational opportunities.

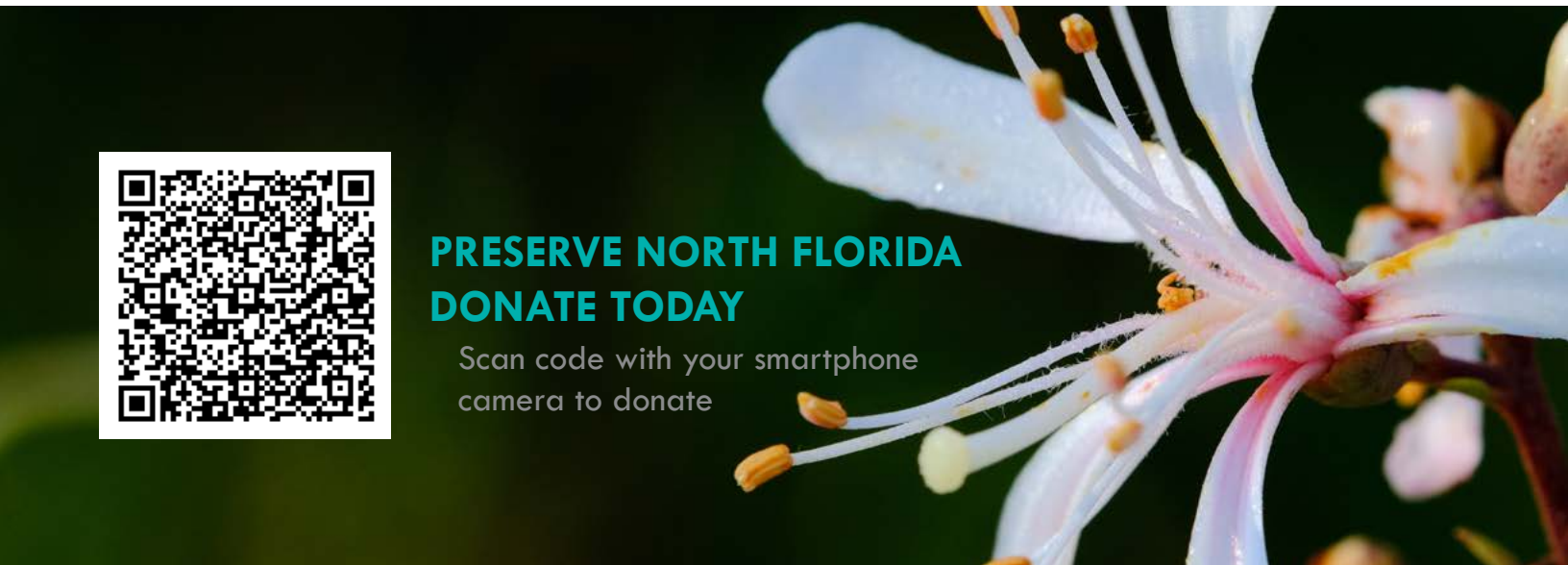
Volunteer **SPOTLIGHT**

SEAN KILEY
BOGEY CREEK PRESERVE STEWARD

Volunteers are the driving force that make NFLT's mission attainable. It's hardworking preserve stewards, like Sean Kiley, push progress forward.

Affectionately called "The Bogeyman" by NFLT staff, Sean Kiley serves as Bogey Creek Preserve's steward and is critical in preserve projects, trail maintenance, groundskeeping and monitoring. Sean reached out to us in February of 2022 to participate in the land trust's mission and has done outstanding work to keep Bogey a great spot for all. Whether you're hiking, exercising, exploring, birding, or just looking for a quiet spot to have a picnic, Bogey Creek Preserve has a lot to offer, and it's great people like Sean working behind the scenes who make it all happen.

Thank you, Sean
from all of us at NFLT!



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