



Passing the torch through three generations.

CONSERVATION CHRONICLES

Sandhills Area Land Trust Connects Owners with Conservation Opportunities

Written and photographed by Stephanie Wagner, Sandhills Area Land Trust

In today's fast-paced world, it seems that most communities are not as tight knit as they have been in the past. Once common gatherings such as corn shuckings and barn raisings have been lost in most of North Carolina and the Southeast. However, there is a new type of gathering going on in the Sandhills. Neighbors here are not coming together to raise a barn destroyed by fire but are using fire to rebuild an ecosystem.

Over the last couple of years, local landowners have been coming together to help conduct prescribed burns in each other's longleaf pine forests. This is not a new concept: In years past, Sandhills neighbors used to cooperate to make sure the woods were regularly burned. These controlled burns would prevent wildfires, protect homesteads and regenerate the ecosystem. However, this fire culture has been muted by the well-intentioned but misguided efforts of Smokey Bear, urban development and the fragmentation of longleaf on the landscape.

In 2015, the Sandhills Area Land Trust, along with partners, created North Carolina's first Prescribed Burn Association (PBA) to bring this fire culture back to our longleaf pine communities. The unique longleaf pine forest ecosystem is important for the economic, cultural and environmental future of the Sandhills region. The historic longleaf pine ecosystem once spanned over a range of 90 million acres, from Virginia to Texas. Today, less than 5 percent remains, and many of these acres are suffering from poor management.

A Southeastern-wide conservation effort is underway to restore this once-great forest back to its historic range, and the Sandhills is a critical part of this effort. There have been major successes in restoring the longleaf ecosystem on public lands as evidenced by some of our game lands and state parks. However, over half of the longleaf acreage in the United States is on private lands.

Privately-held lands represent both the greatest challenge and greatest opportunity in restoring this valued ecosystem.



Focusing On Private Property

Private landowners have the potential to bring back the longleaf forest, and we need to equip them with the right tool: prescribed fire. Longleaf pine trees have evolved to not only tolerate fire, but depend on it. Throughout history, the longleaf forest was maintained by lightning-initiated fires as well as Native Americans and settlers who relied on fire to keep forests open for hunting, turpentine production and cattle grazing. Forest ecologists and public land managers promote and utilize prescribed burning for forest health, but private landowners have been less inclined.

Most private landowners have excluded the use of prescribed fires on their land because of many valid concerns, including potential liability, lack of experience and assistance, and limited equipment availability. Additionally, landowners must adhere to smoke management guidelines to limit negative impacts to their neighbors and community.



The N.C. Sandhills Prescribed Burn Association (PBA) was created to address these barriers and encourage private landowners to strengthen their longleaf pine woodlands for a higher return on conservation, wildlife, and production value. The PBA is a precedent-setting effort that educates landowners to strengthen relationships and increase comfort, capacity and confidence to safely conduct prescribed burns on private lands. Over the last two years of this initiative, the PBA has served as the catalyst for hundreds of private landowners to attend field days, take part in workshops and participate in prescribed burns.

The PBA has also strengthened collaboration among conservation partners. Staff from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, who provide technical advice to landowners across the state, often develop prescribed burning into habitat management plans for private landowners in the Sandhills. The National Wild Turkey Federation donated a burn trailer filled with equipment for landowners to use. The North Carolina Forest Service has scheduled additional Certified Burner Courses to meet increased demand from private landowners. The PBA has provided opportunities for course attendees to conduct the required certification burns. To date, the PBA has assisted 12 private landowners with prescribed burns, and 10 of these landowners have become certified burners.

North Carolina's population is one of the fastest growing in the nation according to the most recent Census Bureau estimates, and the PBA is one initiative that can address threats to private woodlands. Whether a landowner wishes to enhance economic production from their forests or develop a traditional longleaf ecosystem, the PBA is available to help landowners pursue longleaf land stewardship for future wealth generation, family heritage and unique plant communities/wildlife habitat.

Landowner Spotlight: The Dean Family

Most of the private landowners in North Carolina meet a similar profile: they are in their 50s, juggling jobs and family, own less than 100 acres of land, and do not pursue forestry for full-time employment. The N.C. Sandhills PBA is designed to connect these landowners with the resources they can use to achieve their longleaf management goals. This strategy includes short, evening workshops,

a retired forester mentorship program and providing ample opportunities for landowners to participate in prescribed burns. The Dean family is a three-generation family that has been involved with the PBA since its inception. Leslie Thiel, daughter of Thomas Dean, volunteered to be on the steering committee. Here she provides an overview of how this initiative has helped her family:

My dad grew up here in Moore County and bought the portions of land being passed on to other heirs. My dad was lucky to retire at 55 and come back to the home place which had been in agricultural use for many years. He got started in longleaf based on recommendations from timber consultants. However, he also wanted to get the land back to its original state of longleaf habitat. He raked pine straw annually and did the occasional burn, but that is not what restores an ecosystem.

As my parents aged and my husband was due to retire, I wanted to come and help with the land they owned. I have always been a gardener, and an aptitude test I took many years ago said I should be a farmer. So, tree farmer fit the bill. After moving here, my concern was the annual raking which damaged native groundcover, removed critical nutrients and stressed the longleaf themselves. After taking a couple of tree farm/longleaf seminars and hearing about the rotational recommendation for raking every third year and burning during the resting period, I tried burning on my own a couple of times, unsuccessfully.

I then took the NC Prescribed Burner class and learned quite a bit, but hands-on is the real lesson. This is where the PBA comes into play: getting that hands-on experience and certification. The PBA has been an essential program for local Sandhills landowners to access experts and peers when needed. Recently, we were introduced to a new pine straw raking technique over wiregrass. We continue to strengthen our longleaf stewardship and learn new ways to balance production and conservation.

If you are interested in becoming involved in the Sandhills PBA, or are interested in starting a PBA in your community, please contact program coordinator Jesse Wimberly at jesse@sandhillslandtrust.org or (910) 603-1052. For more information on managing your property to enhance wildlife habitat, please contact the appropriate NCWRC Private Lands staff directory on page 64. 🌲

220 acres are being managed with the help of the Forest Landbird Legacy Program funding. Their forests are being managed for oak regeneration in a way that considers bird conservation and includes prescribed fire and high canopy retention. To the credit of their forester who experimented with canopy retention levels, the oak regeneration is higher here than other sites with higher ground-level light exposure.

Back at On the Windfall, the introduction of 20 new snags was the prescription. Awaiting the end of summer's nesting season, it was a crisp, clear autumn morning when five of us loaded the gear we needed to enhance the bird conservation components of their forest. As we worked, the Carolina chickadees, white-breasted nuthatches and downy woodpeckers seemed to sing songs of approval. By spring, there will be new places for birds to nest and find food on Carole and George's mountain farm.

Cost-share provided directly through Audubon North Carolina eliminates the headaches frequently involved in federal and state funding options. Assistance may cover prescribed fire (by certified burner),

herbicide application and chainsaw or heavy equipment operation. Landowners stand to gain better birdwatching on their land, recognition by management professionals and neighbors (a sign is gifted to display to agreement holders), as well the priceless investment to family land legacy for generations to come.

Foresters and land managers looking for an opportunity to be trained in bird-friendly forestry are in luck. Audubon offers regular training sessions. Nearly 200 foresters to date have been trained in forest bird conservation. If you are hiring a consulting forester, ask if they have been trained as a "Forester for the Birds."

The Forest Landbird Legacy Program and associated funding assistance require a 10-year commitment to an agreement enlisting at least 50 acres of mature hardwoods (50 years old or older). Join with your neighbors to elevate your impact. Check out nc.audubon.org for ideas or contact Aimee Tomcho at 828-419-0890 or atomcho@audubon.org. Your participation in this program can help ensure that there will always be "A Place for Birds." 🌿

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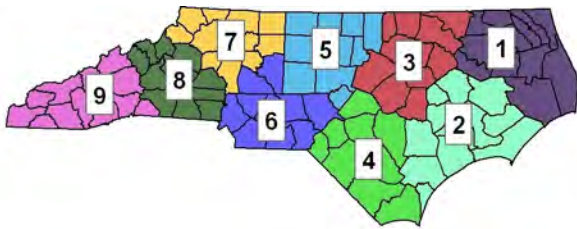
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