

## Land to be preserved as wildlife habitat, buffer between training and development

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HUBERT | Nearly 1,800 acres of undeveloped land in Onslow County will be preserved in its natural state, protecting wildlife habitat and creating a natural buffer between military training at Camp Lejeune and surrounding development.

The Nature Conservancy has acquired a 1,050-acre tract of land in the Hubert area, closing out the second phase of a project known as the Horse Swamp Preserve. The acquisition of 738 acres was announced in January, bringing the total project to 1,788 acres.



“Onslow County is the 10th most populous county in the state and Jacksonville is the 13th largest city. If we don’t act now to protect the incredible area, safe places for wildlife to move between these large natural lands will be lost to development,” said Hervey McIver of the Nature Conservancy North Carolina Chapter.

Ensuring the land remains in its natural state was the reason that property owners James and Mary Ann Kellum Sharpe say they agreed to the sale to the Conservancy.

Sharpe said the land has been in her family for generations, and protecting the large undeveloped tracts that remain in the county is important for multiple reasons: It protects habitat for wildlife, helps improve water quality and the water table, and acts as a buffer between Camp Lejeune and encroaching development.

“We need Hofmann Forest and areas like (Horse Swamp); we need the land,” she said.

Camp Lejeune officials did not have a statement on the acquisition to release at deadline.

McIver said the Horse Swamp Preserve acquisition helps to strengthen a valuable wildlife corridor in the area and will provide future habitat for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker.

“We would like to build this corridor connecting Camp Lejeune, Croatan Forest and Hofmann Forest,” McIver said.

The red-cockaded woodpecker is currently located in the Camp Lejeune and Croatan areas. With the Horse Swamp area preserved, they plan to do some restoration work that will allow for the growth of the mature long leaf pine pines the woodpeckers need as habitat.

Also notable McIver said is the benefit on conservation lands to the military, with the buffer they provide helping to protect training efforts in the area.

The buffer reduces noise levels for surrounding residents and provide for low-level flight training.

McIver said they've been involved with protecting more than 45,000 acres around the base or beneath important airspace.

The total \$1.2 million Horse Swamp Preserve acquisition has been a conservation project between the Nature Conservancy with the Sharpe family and funding partners, the U.S. Navy and the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund, McIver said.

The U.S. Navy contributed one-third of the cost in both phase one and phase two. The Clean Water Management Trust fund approved grants to fund half of the cost of the phase one purchase and one-third of the phase two purchase.

The Sharpe family donated a portion of the land value during the phase one purchase and sold phase two at less than the appraised value, according to the Nature Conservancy.

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