

# North Florida Land Trust makes huge investment in Clay

Land at Trail Ridge Preserve, Camp Blanding acquired for conservation

# CLAY TODAY

Posted Wednesday, December 11, 2019 12:00 pm

## For Clay Today

**CAMP BLANDING** – The North Florida Land Trust acquired 20 acres in Clay County that extends the Trail Ridge Preserve within the critical Ocala to Osceola, or O2O, wildlife corridor surrounding Camp Blanding, along with a 463-acre plot near Camp Blanding.

The 463-acre purchase is located within the Ocala to Osceola (O2O) Wildlife Corridor, a 1.6 million-acre network of public and private lands that connect the Ocala and Osceola National Forests.

The newly-acquired property provides habitat for imperiled and other wildlife species and helps buffer the military installation. The property connects Mike Roess Gold Head Branch State Park to NFLT's Robert R. Milam Jr. Preserve which was acquired in 2018 in collaboration with Camp Blanding.

"This land is a wonderful natural space that is now protected from development and provides opportunities for hiking, bird watching, and other outdoor activities," said Jim McCarthy, president of NFLT. "Now that we have taken ownership of the property, we will begin working with the Florida Trail Association to reroute over two miles of the Florida National Scenic Trail from roadway medians through this new preserve."

The property contains significant areas of longleaf pine sandhills, which have declined in Florida because of development and land conversion. These uplands provide habitat for the Gopher tortoise, a state-threatened species and a candidate species for possible listing as federally-threatened. Other inhabitants of the sandhills include the wild turkey, southern fox squirrel, and Eastern indigo snake. The property encompasses part of Smith Lake which provides habitat for numerous wading birds such as state-threatened sandhill cranes and federally-threatened wood storks.

"This is a big win for the Florida Trail and Florida hikers," said David Waldrop, president of the Florida Trail Association. "We will be working with our partner, North Florida Land Trust, to re-route the Trail through the newly acquired conservation lands, and bring people closer to Florida's beautiful natural areas. We thank NFLT and the funders who made this acquisition happen. It is through great partnerships like this that the Florida Trail will be completed one day."

NFLT will manage the new preserve to improve the natural areas and habitats and will work with the FTA on the new trail route. This will help further FTA's mission to build a 1,300 mile-long trail across Florida's most iconic and scenic natural landscapes. The acquisition was made possible by funding from the Army National Guard through a program designed to secure buffers around military installations and the Clay County Development Authority which was awarded funds by the Florida Defense Task Force to buffer the installation. NFLT also recently acquired 20 acres adjacent to Camp Blanding that expands the Trail Ridge

The land at Trail Ridge Preserve is an important piece of land to acquire as it is both a prime candidate for conservation and eliminates the chance of any development on the land near the military installation.

"We have been working closely with Camp Blanding for a number of years to conserve land surrounding their property for not only purposes of serving as a buffer for them but for the important ecosystem benefits that these lands provide," McCarthy said. "The upland areas of this property provide crucial habitat for gopher tortoises which are considered threatened in Florida and a candidate for federal protection."

The property is also important for its location between Camp Blanding lands and NFLT's Trail Ridge Preserve. Adding this land to NFLT's holdings in the area will allow easier use of land management techniques like prescribed burns.

This acquisition was made possible by funding from the Army National Guard. It is part of the Department of Defense's Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration program which funds lands identified for conservation through the Army Compatible Use Buffer program designed to secure buffers around military installations. It allows soldiers at Camp Blanding to train up to the fence line without fear of disturbing the quality of life for neighbors.

This 20-acre parcel of land is part of the O2O wildlife corridor, a 1.6-million-acre network of public and private lands that connect the Ocala and Osceola National Forests. NFLT is leading efforts to accelerate land conservation in the O2O, and leads the O2O Wildlife Corridor Partnership, which is comprised of public and private organizations focused on this purpose. The 80,000-acre Camp Blanding Joint Training Center is central to the O2O landscape and partnership.