

## North Florida Land Trust marks record conservation year

By Teresa Stepzinski

Posted Feb 10, 2019 at 12:16 PM

Updated Feb 12, 2019 at 6:54 PM

The nonprofit North Florida Land Trust celebrated a record year for land conservation — spending about \$18 million to preserve more than 6,100 acres of natural land essential to wildlife and watershed throughout the region.

Jim McCarthy, land trust president, said money from donors and at the local, state and federal level helped the conservation organization reach some historic acquisitions in 2018 — both the largest conservation easements and the largest uplands acquisition to date.

“We were also able to acquire two square miles of the Floridan aquifer recharge area, which is beneficial to everyone because the Floridan aquifer provides fresh water to more than 90 percent of Floridians,” McCarthy said.

Saying the organization is lucky, McCarthy praised its ongoing partnership with Camp Blanding Joint Training Center in southern Clay County and the U.S. Army National Guard, which provided more than \$15 million in 2018 for land conservation surrounding Camp Blanding and within the Ocala to Osceola (O2O) wildlife corridor.

The land trust in 2018 focused on preserving land in the corridor, which stretches from the Ocala National Forest to the Osceola National Forest, which is considered essential natural habitat and critical to the region’s watershed.

The corridor provides important habitat for the Florida black bear as well as many endangered species including the red-cockaded woodpecker, indigo snake and gopher tortoises.

The land trust currently leads two conservation programs within the O2O: the Regional Conservation Partnership Program with the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Army Compatible Use Buffer partnership with the Florida National Guard which operate Camp Blanding. Encompassing 80,000 acres, Camp Blanding is central to the O2O landscape and partnership.

The organization earned the 2018 Environmental Stewardship Award from the Northeast Florida Regional Council for its work within the O2O. The award recognizes an organization that focuses on long-term protection, conservation and enhancement of Northeast Florida's natural resources.

"The work we did within the O2O will keep the land free from development, provides a buffer for military training and also provides economic benefits for the state because it protects those natural resources that we could otherwise lose to development," McCarthy said. "One of the most important things about what we do is protecting our green space. Our state is attractive because of all the natural resources that we have, and it is big business. Protecting the land allows us to continue to offer those green spaces for people to enjoy, explore and learn."

Also last year, the trust was accredited by the Land Trust Accreditation Commission — an independent program by the Land Trust Alliance. The national recognition placed the land trust within a nationwide network of 398 accredited land trusts that have demonstrated a commitment to professional excellence and to maintaining the public's trust in their work.

In addition, the organization was recognized last year for the work it did to protect and preserve the 1898 Spanish American War Fort. The trust officially handed over the historic military battery in Jacksonville to the National Park Service in December. Subsequently, the land trust received the Historic Preservation Award from the Jacksonville Historic Preservation Commission and the 2018 Florida Preservation Organizational Achievement Award from the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation.

This year, 2019 the trust will continue its focus on preserving natural lands for future generations, McCarthy said.

The organization currently is in talks with the owners of Fish Island in St. Augustine to acquire that land. The organization also will continue working to acquire land identified in its Preservation Portfolio, which lists the most environmentally sensitive lands for preservation within a seven-county North Florida focus area.

This spring, the land trust plans to open Bogey Creek Preserve — the land trust's first public park. The preserve is located near Pumpkin Hill Creek Preserve State Park and the Timucuan Ecological and Historic Preserve. It will have public walking trails and a picnic area. Signs are being positioned throughout the property to explain the ecosystems and unique parts of the land.

The land trust champions environmental protection primarily in Baker, Bradford, Clay, Duval, Flagler, Nassau, Putnam, St. Johns, Union and Volusia counties.

Founded in 1999, the organization has protected thousands of acres of environmentally significant land, including property at Big Talbot Island, the River Branch Preserve, Pumpkin Hill, Moccasin Slough, along the St. Marys River and other valued natural areas predominantly in Northeast Florida.

The organization is funded largely by private and corporate contributions. It works with private landowners and other public agencies at all levels of government, not-for-profit partners and foundations. For more information, go to [www.northfloridalandtrust.org](http://www.northfloridalandtrust.org).

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