

# Arkansas

2021 IMPACT REPORT

The Nature  
Conservancy



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## Thank You

As the end of 2021 draws near, I'm reminded that although some things in the world remain uncertain, nature and its gifts are as important as ever.

Because of you, in the north central Ozarks, Bluffton Preserve now offers seven miles of scenic trails across bluffs and river valley for those much-needed moments of escape and exploration. And in the Maumelle Pinnacles area of the Ouachitas, Blue Mountain—the last undeveloped pinnacle—is now conserved and will be a place for generations to enjoy.

In the Delta, a restoration project has come full circle and inspired other projects across the state. Across the Ozarks, our karst program is reaching new areas above and below ground. And prescribed fire in Arkansas is transforming with the addition of state-of-the-art drone technology.

By supporting The Nature Conservancy, you conserve these treasured lands and waters and connect more people to the world around them. Like volunteers who build trails at preserves for the benefit of others. Landowners and partners who improve habitat for pollinators. Kids who hone outdoor skills that will take them to new places. I am inspired by how, together, we are taking care of our natural world.

None of this is possible without you. As you read the stories ahead, I hope you feel uplifted by what you've helped accomplish. I couldn't be more grateful.

Thank you for your continued support of conservation.

**Hugh McDonald**  
Chair, Board of Trustees





## Nature on Two Wheels

Bike Club Puts New Spin on Kids in Nature



Sixth graders at Mann Magnet Middle School didn't have many options for outdoor, after-school activities. So Conservancy youth leader Devan Schlaudraff worked with Abram Bunting, the school's physical education teacher, to develop a program that paired student interest with outdoor recreation. And a bike club was born.

With your support—and a lot of practice—students learned mountain biking basics and honed new technical skills that open up new possibilities for them to explore the outdoors. One student even learned to ride a bike from scratch.

This is just one of dozens of youth programs Devan hosted this year across the state. Hundreds of young people connected with nature through a variety of activities, such as canoeing, fishing, archery, hiking, and even at-home art projects.

“Helping kids develop outdoor skills gives them confidence and makes the natural world feel safe and accessible,” Devan said, “which is often the spark for a life-long love of conservation.”



## Adventures Await at Bluffton Preserve

Thanks to you, seven miles of trails now wind through nearly 1,000 acres of field and forest at Bluffton Preserve, offering sweeping views of bluffs towering above a steep Ozark valley and the Little Red River's beautiful Archey Fork. For directions, visit [nature.org/bluffton](https://nature.org/bluffton).

And if a day trip isn't enough, spend the night at Bluffton Base Camp. This newly renovated, three-bedroom house sleeps seven comfortably and is the only home on the preserve. Check it out on AirBnB! [airbnb.com/rooms/49296163](https://airbnb.com/rooms/49296163).



The Kings River Preserve's airstrip now has a cozy pilot shelter, thanks to the Recreational Aviation Foundation ([theraf.org](https://theraf.org)). Prefer a float? Start planning at [nature.org/kings-river](https://nature.org/kings-river). It's a magical place any time of year!

## You Helped Conserve Blue Mountain for Future Generations

It's February 2021, the day after a storm dropped more than six inches of snow on Pulaski County. After an adventurous trek uphill, Dhu Thompson and his son, Wes, stand on the west side of Rattlesnake Ridge Natural Area looking across the Ouachita Mountains.



“This is one of the most incredible views in Central Arkansas, and it’s right at Little Rock’s doorstep,” said Dhu.

Their gaze comes to rest on a nearby peak—the last in the Maumelle Pinnacles chain not yet touched by development. A mountain that now, because of you, will remain wild.

In the year prior, PotlatchDeltic had contacted The Nature Conservancy about their intent to sell the 458-acre tract, known as Blue Mountain. They had seen the corridor of public conservation and recreation lands taking shape—from William Kirsch Preserve within Ranch North Woods, across Pinnacle Mountain State Park, to Rattlesnake Ridge Natural Area and Lake Maumelle. Would there be an interest in adding Blue Mountain to this landscape?

“This was a now or never opportunity” said Stacy Hurst, Secretary of the Arkansas Department of Parks, Heritage and Tourism. “The importance of the outdoors and the public’s desire for places to be in nature became even more apparent during the pandemic. Blue Mountain is also critical for



Blue Mountain rises in the distance from the western side of Rattlesnake Ridge Natural Area.



multiple rare species and helps protect the quality of Central Arkansas drinking water.”

Secretary Hurst quickly identified grant opportunities for Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission to fund most of the acquisition. The Nature Conservancy committed to raising the remaining acquisition funds and money to create a quality recreation destination. And PotlatchDeltic made it possible for the two partners to acquire the high-value tract.

Dhu and his family saw the possibilities immediately. Wes, an avid mountain biker, helped shape the trails at Rattlesnake Ridge. He and Dhu had taken in this view many times before.

“Blue Mountain is part of creating something really special for Central Arkansas. Where else can you live in the city and within half an hour be paddling in a bottomland forest or hiking a mountain like this?” Dhu said. “My wife, Mary Ellen, and I also believe strongly in supporting sustainability and conservation.”

Because of you, and thanks to many generous business and community leaders like the Thompsons, on June 21 Governor Asa Hutchinson made the

announcement that Blue Mountain was officially Arkansas’ newest natural area.

Now the Conservancy is working with neighbors and partners on a design for recreational use, including parking, a welcome area, and miles of low-impact hiking and biking trail that will connect with Rattlesnake Ridge.

Places like Blue Mountain—that shelter special plants and animals, protect water supplies, and provide space for people to roam—are here because of your commitment to their conservation. Thank you.





## A Dream Realized

### After 15 years, Benson Creek Restoration Completed

Just off a county road north of Brinkley, bright, shrub-lined Benson Creek meanders through retired farmland on its way to join the cypress-studded wetlands of Bayou DeView.

What's special about this stretch of creek is that it's manmade—or rather, unmade. Decades ago, the creek, like many others in the Delta, was straightened into an irrigation ditch. Water moved through quickly, taking soil, nutrients, and pesticides with it into the bayou and ultimately down into the Gulf of Mexico's notorious Dead Zone. Now, thanks to you, thousands of feet have been restored to mimic the original creek's form and function, and the design concepts used in the project are becoming more widely adopted.

The Conservancy restored the northern section in 2009, working out the process and using it as a

demonstration site to share what we learned. The Natural Resources Conservation Service finished the southern section in 2020 when the property's owners enrolled in a conservation easement program that allowed the ditch to be restored at no cost to them.

“This was unproductive farmland that flooded a lot. Now the owners can use it for hunting or other recreation,” said Jason Milks, Delta program director. “Plus, it's no longer washing soil and pesticides downstream, and it's providing healthy habitat for animals.”

Benson Creek was the Conservancy's first stream restoration in Arkansas using natural channel design concepts, and the project's influence reaches far beyond this site.

“Between the two phases, we held a dozen meetings on that county road to inspire other conservation partnerships,” Jason said. “It's an immersive way to illustrate a complex project and show that if you restore ditches back into functional streams, you can improve the health of major rivers they connect to, like the Cache and White.”

The Kings River, Archey Fork Little Red River, Rockhouse Creek and other streams across the state have in turn benefited from the pioneering work you made possible on Benson Creek.



## A New Partnership for the Buffalo

A new, five-year partnership in Searcy County between private landowners and the agricultural community, state and county agencies, and The Nature Conservancy is helping to conserve the Buffalo River, thanks to your support. Led by the local community and funded through a USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service program along with financial and technical assistance pledges from each project partner, the Buffalo River Enhancement Project gives landowners the opportunity to apply for assistance with land management projects—such as improving unpaved roads, stabilizing streambanks, and pasture management—that improve the quality of land and lead to cleaner water in the Buffalo River.

“Every landowner has unique needs,” said Clay Word, the Conservancy’s river conservation manager. “This program offers one-on-one solutions aimed at improving farm productivity and reducing land management costs while also improving water quality and wildlife habitat.”



For people and the Buffalo, it’s a win-win. Learn more at [uaex.uada.edu/environment-nature/water/buffalo-river-project.aspx](https://uaex.uada.edu/environment-nature/water/buffalo-river-project.aspx).

The Buffalo National River is also getting some special attention this year through the lens of Arkansas photographer Craig Underwood. This iconic photo of the Buffalo is featured in Conservancy materials across the country in celebration of the river’s 50th anniversary on March 1, 2022. Happy golden anniversary to USA’s first national river!

## Above-Ground Progress Made on Underground Landscape

Bats, like this tri-colored variety (*Perimyotis subflavus*) found in Arkansas, are susceptible to a variety of illnesses. So when COVID-19 emerged, Ozark Karst Project Manager Mike Slay and his colleagues held off on underground fieldwork to prevent spreading the virus to our native night fliers, whose populations are already under stress from the deadly white-nose syndrome.

But that didn’t halt progress on critical karst conservation work. Instead of wading through dark, underground passages, he waded through more than 280 scientific reports toward developing a

model that will guide karst work across the Arkansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma Ozarks and its more than 10,000 caves.

Once Mike and partners return underground, the data will tell them which places are most in need of attention to protect clean groundwater and habitat for bats and other rare species.





## Great Balls of Fire!

### Ignition Drone Transforms Prescribed Fire Program

Dragon eggs. Fire raining from the sky. Drones. This is no late-night science fiction show; it's the future of fire management in Arkansas.

The Nature Conservancy's burn crew has purchased and received certification to fly an ignition drone, the first of its kind in Arkansas.

The drone, which drops ping-pong sized balls (affectionately called "dragon eggs") of ignition chemicals with razor sharp accuracy, will help the crew and partners restore more habitat safely and efficiently through controlled burns.



"It's going to increase the number of acres we can burn in a day," said Clint Harris, Southwest Arkansas project manager. "It's much faster to send a drone to ignite the inside of a 500-acre property than to have six people hike through it starting fires by hand."

The drone also helps keep the crew safer.

"Now, we won't have to put crew members as close to the smoke and flames all the time," Clint said. "It'll help us breathe easier and conserve energy on those 100-degree days."

Most native landscapes in Arkansas depend on regular burning for healthy plant and animal life.

Controlled burns also keep nearby communities safer by reducing the buildup of dry leaf litter and fallen branches that can fuel destructive wildfires.

Bringing this cutting-edge technology to Arkansas was possible because of your support and thanks to special gifts from The Ross Foundation, Simmons First Foundation, and several generous individuals.

Now the burn crew is looking forward to restoring more habitat for quail, turkey, and other wildlife than they ever thought possible. "This is a fantastic innovation," Clint said. "I think in five years, we're not going to know how to burn without it."

Thanks for helping get the new drone off the ground!





## Major Milestone for Manacacias

Your Support Helps Pave Way for New National Park in Colombia

A six-year partnership between multiple Nature Conservancy chapters and Colombian ranchers and government reached a milestone this year—the declaration that Serrania de Manacacias will become Colombia’s 60th national park by the end of 2021.

It has come at an important time. Said Colombia Director Claudia Vasquez, “Colombia is at a pivotal point. The country is emerging from decades of violence to thrive in balance with nature.”

The 168,400-acre proposed park, located in the Orinoquia grasslands, is home to at least 182 species of mammals and 460 types of birds. Three-quarters of all migratory birds in the Orinoquia spend part of their lives in the central United States.

Integrating controlled burning into sustainable land management is a key element of conserving the Orinoquia. There’s just one catch—fire is illegal in Colombia.

McRee Anderson, Arkansas fire program director, has held workshops for ranchers and partners in Colombia since 2015, demonstrating the benefits of fire as a management tool, and hosted Colombian delegates in Arkansas as part of an International Fire Exchange Program. This collaboration helped establish the agreement between the Conservancy and Colombia’s national parks service toward the conservation and management of Serrania de Manacacias.

Now, McRee is on a multi-country Conservancy team helping guide a plan for science-based fire management that benefits nature and people in Colombia. “This is exactly the kind of wide-reaching impact we strive for with our work in Arkansas and beyond,” McRee said.



### Habitat Restoration Helps Colorful Lizard

Habitat restoration is underway at the Kings River Preserve for this colorful lizard!



The Conservancy is removing invasive cedars and restoring fire on 44 acres along Rockhouse Creek to improve glade habitat for the Eastern collared lizard (*Crotaphytus collaris*). These are the largest lizard species in Arkansas, reaching up to 10 inches long. They’re known for brilliant, breeding-season coloring that rivals many tropical fish.

Because the collared lizard is found in open, rocky areas—like Ozark and Ouachita glades—restoring fire and removing invasive trees give this threatened species the best chance for population growth.

Special thanks to Terry and Kathy Clark and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service for their support.



## A Well-Timed Effort

### Ditches, Timers Improve Water in Delta

Out with the old and in with the new! With your support, three irrigation ditches in the Cache River watershed have gotten makeovers that benefit farmers and the landscape.

Unlike traditional ditches, these new “two-stage ditches” include a wider second channel that acts as a mini-floodplain. With gentler slopes to slow down and spread out the water, and plenty of plants to filter out sediment and keep soil in place, this innovative design reduces the erosion that muddies river water and floods farmland.

The biggest perk: farmers save time and money.

“The benefit is that landowners get a ditch that works,” said Jason Milks, Delta program director. “They’re stopping soil loss and have a stable bank. Flooding is less likely. It’s much less maintenance and in the long term, more cost-effective.”

Because of you, the Conservancy is able to partner with farmers, drainage districts, and agriculture agencies to reduce flooding and improve water quality for Arkansans and our downstream neighbors.



And a successful project to conserve Delta ground-water using irrigation timers is moving into its third year. Arkansas farmers, Syngenta, Kellogg Company, and your gifts have made it possible for the Conservancy to install 37 more timers on five farms last year. In total, the 215 timers requested and installed so far will save 10 billion gallons of water each year!

The project also inspired support from Cargill and General Mills. In this new phase, part of the funding is earmarked for underserved, smaller farms in the Delta. The Conservancy is partnering with The KKAC Organization—which works with minority farmers, ranchers and landowners on agriculture-related needs—to connect these farmers with the timer program.

“What we’ve learned is that there’s an equity piece of conservation that we need to improve on,” Jason said. “I’m grateful for our generous supporters and excited to be working with KKAC and others to bridge that gap.”

## Donors Make All the Difference

### Audra and Tony Thomas

Audra and Tony Thomas of Little Rock moved to Arkansas in the late '90s and have been exploring ever since.

“What drew us was the Ouachita and Ozark foothills. We had never expected such beauty to become home,” they said.

Through the years, they fueled their passion for nature with hiking, waterfall hunting, and floating the Buffalo with their two children. It was a colleague of Tony’s at Windstream who introduced them to The Nature Conservancy a decade ago. The company had also been a longtime supporter. It was a perfect fit.

“We were impressed with the Conservancy’s partnership approach and outreach to the community,” the Thomases said. “We want our children and their children, and all Arkansans, to have an opportunity to experience the amazing beauty of the state.”

So when the Conservancy was looking to acquire Blue Mountain, they were all in with a generous lead gift.



“Having conservation and recreational space like this a short drive from Little Rock rivals anything the United States has to offer,” they said.

For the Thomases, conservation is a lifelong journey with daily reminders.

“Every day we drive down next to Shinall Mountain, see the rolling hills and know we are home. We stand as committed partners to Arkansas and The Nature Conservancy.”



### Deborah Dixon

The Buffalo River holds a central place in Deborah Dixon’s family—her father, Alta (pictured, sitting), was born near its headwaters, and Deb (left) grew up nearby in Harrison. Her mother, Ineva (right), was a lover of nature and history.

“Mom and her mother were teachers of nature,” she said. “A little walk became a lesson in identifying wildflowers or learning the history of a sunken square of ground thought to be a Civil War burial site. Dad took us on walks to family history sights, like the homestead plot where he was born.”

Deb has been a longtime member, and she recently designated the Conservancy as a beneficiary of her trust. She made the gift in memory of her parents for work in the Buffalo River area.

“Like many people lucky enough to grow up in this state, we did not know the magic of what we had until we were grown,” she said. “I want to keep the magic alive for future generations.”



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