

The Nature Conservancy acquires 1,700 acres in EKY

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Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Nature Conservancy, a U.S.-based nonprofit environmental protection group focused on conservation efforts around the world, has acquired more than 1,700 acres in the Appalachian Mountains of Eastern Kentucky, according to a news release.

The new property, known as the Thacker property, is situated between the 1,075-acre Mountain River Farms and the 253,000-acre Cumberland Forest property, representing “a critical link in the growing corridor of protected land,” the release states.

Part of the greater 2,000-mile Appalachian mountain range, the property sits at the Tennessee boarder in Whitley County, just south of the Kentucky Ridge State Forest. According to TNC, the acquisition will further its goal of creating a more connected Appalachian landscape to preserve its forests and waterways.

“When you talk about connectivity and expanding protected lands, it doesn’t get any better than this,” TNC Central Appalachians program director Chris Garland said in the release. “This project provided an excellent opportunity to bridge a key natural corridor like this.”

The ownership comes one year after TNC’s acquisition of Mountain River Farms, which they subsequently transferred to the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. In 2023, the department also obtained a 55,000-acre permanent conservation and public access easement on the Kentucky section of Cumberland Forest.

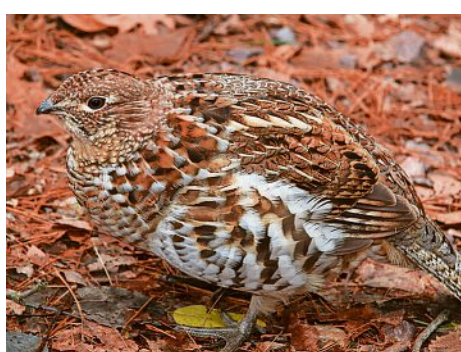
TNC officials said they are considering also transferring the Thacker property to the KDFWR.

“The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources is excited to once again be in discussions with TNC regarding a key land acquisition in Eastern Kentucky,” KDFWR Wildlife Division director Ben Robinson said. “The connectivity that this parcel provides to other key properties will allow us to better manage the resources and provide greater access for hunters and outdoor enthusiasts.”

If the three properties do fall under



Ownership of the Thacker property allows The Nature Conservancy to protect more than 1,700-acres in the Cumberland-Pine Mountain area of eastern Kentucky. WILKINSON VISUAL/THE NATURE CONSERVANCY



Iconic wildlife including the ruffed grouse depend on healthy, connected Southern Appalachian forests.

STEVE S. MEYER/THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

state management, TNC officials said they would be able to further some of their conservation goals, like improving habitats for native wildlife, removing invasive species and reforesting land formerly used for mining. The Ruffed

Grouse Society & American Woodcock Society has also partnered with TNC to form a growing network of forests habitable for wildlife species like ruffed grouse.

TNC Kentucky director David Phemister said while Cumberland Forest is owned by multiple stakeholders, TNC will be the outright owner of the Thacker property until it is able to transfer full ownership to a state partner agency. Under TNC ownership, the core elements of the property will remain protected from housing and commercial development.

Phemister said it is still difficult for TNC to protect key ecology on the Thacker property, as the organization has less than 20 staff members in Kentucky. Transferring ownership to KDFWR would use the state agency’s 400 in-state staff members to more efficiently manage the land.

“They’re more set up to be the long-

term owners and managers, whereas TNC can move quickly and nimbly to acquire property and then work to transfer it to those public agency partners,” Phemister said.

If transferred, Phemister and Garland said the property, like other public land under the state’s umbrella, would be open for public use for low-impact activities, such as fishing, hunting, bird-watching, camping, hiking and mountain biking.

“We certainly don’t think conservation is a silver bullet, but we do think it can be part of a diverse suite of different economic opportunities for the region,” Phemister said. “Conservation jobs, jobs in outdoor tourism, outdoor recreation, they’re built around resources that aren’t transferable, can’t be moved. You don’t offshore a state park. And so we do believe that conservation can be a part of a more positive story that’s emerging in these mountains.”

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