



CATAWBA
LANDS CONSERVANCY
LAND | WATER | PLANTS | NATURE



CAROLINA
THREAD TRAIL

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

STEWARDSHIP

THE FOREVER WORK OF CONSERVATION

Land trusts offer an ambitious promise: conservation forever. That promise begins with acquiring land or conservation easements to permanently protect important places. But it doesn't end there. Stewardship—the ongoing work of defending, managing, and caring for protected land—ensures those conservation commitments endure long after the documents are signed.

With a time horizon measured in centuries, Catawba Lands Conservancy's thirty-plus years represent only the beginning of that responsibility. As development pressure, legal complexity, and environmental change increase, one truth remains. Acquisition protects land today; stewardship protects it forever.

MANAGING RISK AND RELATIONSHIPS

Recently, our friends at a peer land trust in NC found themselves in a legal battle with the new owners of a conserved property. During routine monitoring visits, stewardship staff documented major alterations to the land, including extensive clear-cutting and unauthorized road construction. Despite good-faith efforts to resolve the issues, the situation escalated until Triangle staff had little choice. Their legal duty to uphold the easement required them to file suit.

The outcome of the case remains uncertain, but legal fees are only part of the cost of defending conservation. The greater, often invisible cost lies in the extensive staff time

required for site visits, documentation, research, correspondence, and negotiation. That work falls largely to stewardship teams.

Across the land trust community, conservation challenges are increasing. TerraFirma, the national insurance program used by most land trusts, reports that conservation-related legal cases have increased 105 percent over the last decade, while tax controversy cases have risen 114 percent in just the past three years. Unauthorized clearing and construction are the most common violations, mirroring those in the Triangle case. Each claim can cost tens of thousands of dollars, and financial risk is only part of the concern. Poorly defended easements by any land trust can weaken the legal strength of every easement that other land trusts hold.

Most conservation challenges are first discovered during annual monitoring visits, when stewardship staff walk properties, meet with landowners, and document changes on the land. The work requires a rare blend of skills, including ecological knowledge, legal interpretation, careful documentation, and the social awareness needed to navigate sensitive conversations. In practical terms, stewardship is a risk-management system for conservation. In human terms, it is a relationship-building effort.

Relationships with landowners are often the most powerful protection a conservation easement can have. Good stewardship ensures those relationships are built early and maintained over time. At the Conservancy, three

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Photos by Conservancy staff

STEWARDSHIP CONTINUED

stewardship staff are responsible for 80 preserves, 144 conservation easements and more than 100 landowners. That means a lot of time in the field, crawling through brush, crossing fences and listening as landowners share knowledge about their farms and forests. Every property has a story, and every landowner has a reason they chose conservation. Acquisition is where those stories become partnerships; stewardship is where partnerships deepen and endure.

AN INVESTMENT IN OUR FUTURE

Stewardship isn't just preventing violations. It is also about maintaining and improving the health of the land. As extreme weather and development pressure increase across the Southeast, land management practices such as invasive species control, prescribed fire, forest thinning, soil health practices and stream restoration help protected properties adapt and ensure that clean water, wildlife habitat and working farmland remain viable for generations.

Despite its importance, stewardship is often misunderstood. While acquisition projects often get the spotlight as conservation wins, stewardship happens quietly afterward, year after year.

Protecting land forever requires sustained attention, expertise and resources.



LETTER FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

BART LANDESS

Spring is a wonderful time. The natural world renews itself on an annual basis and every time it seems like a miracle. Though nature can rejuvenate itself, there are ways in which we can assist, healing old wounds faster and better with human help.

There is very little in our region that has not been amended in the last 200 years. Farming, timbering, roads, homes and businesses have dramatically changed our landscape. Little Sugar Creek at Kings Drive in Charlotte was a parking lot until 2002. Now it's a beautiful and lively park with a healthy, thriving ecosystem. We are working on similar transformations around our region. At Forney Creek in eastern Lincoln County, we are restoring the stream and floodplain. At several other preserves, we are re-establishing flourishing grasslands that once were prevalent.

As Spring reminds us, nature constantly renews. With your help, we can bring back a world that has been absent for generations. Thank you for being a part of our efforts!

It requires investment not only in new conservation projects, but also in the long-term care of the lands already protected. For donors and supporters, this presents an opportunity. While project-specific gifts are essential to acquiring new conservation lands, investments in stewardship ensure that every acre already protected remains protected for generations.

In short, stewardship is the fulfillment of the promise conservation makes to landowners, communities, and the future. And for those of us lucky enough to do the work, it might just be the coolest job in conservation.

Written by Sophie Harrington, Land Stewardship Manager

PROPERTIES CONSERVED IN 2025:	Davis Brand CE 17 acres Union	Caldwell Creek Addition 31 acres Mecklenburg	Larchmont Circle 17 acres Mecklenburg	Teeter Estate Preserve 136 acres Mecklenburg	Bigleaf Bluff 46 acres Gaston
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TRAIL FORUM

HONORS DEDICATED SUPPORTERS

At the 18th annual Trail Forum, the Thread Trail proudly recognized three outstanding individuals who have made an impact for trails in our region. Duane Harrelson was named the 2025 Saxby Chaplin Volunteer of the Year, recognizing his dedication to the Girl Scouts Hornets' Nest Trail in Statesville, NC. In less than two years, Duane logged over 850 volunteer hours, the highest total of any volunteer since staff began tracking hours.

Shirley Brutko was awarded the 2025 Trail Champion award, honoring her 20+ years of commitment to Kings Mountain Gateway Trail in Cleveland County, NC. Thanks to her leadership, the trail has become a recreation destination, even beyond county lines.

Staff also honored Bill Carstarphen with the Carolina Thread Trail Legacy Award, recognizing his decades of work to improve communities and trails along what is now the Matthews-Belk South Fork River Corridor.



Trail Forum keynote speaker Susan K. Trautman

Trail Forum attendees enjoyed a dynamic lineup of educational sessions, including a keynote by Susan K. Trautman, longtime CEO of Great Rivers Greenway. Trautman offered an inspiring look at what is possible when partnerships thrive and trails become catalysts for regional vibrancy.

TRAIL FORUM IS
PRESENTED BY

LandDesign
CREATING PLACES
THAT MATTER.

2025 BY THE NUMBERS



TRAILS
OPENED
IN 2025:

Rock Springs Nature Preserve: 0.5 mi
Dye Creek Extension: 2.25 mi
McDowell Creek Greenway: 1 mi

Long Creek Greenway at Oakdale/485: 2.1 mi
McAlpine Creek Greenway, Johnson Road to NC 51: 0.75 mi
Little Sugar Creek Greenway at Atrium Health: 0.5 mi

FIELD NOTES

Pollinator habitat installation at ImaginOn: The Joe & Joan Martin Center

SPENCER MOUNTAIN TRAILS NOW UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Construction is underway on the new Spencer Mountain Trails located at George Poston Park in Gaston County. Staff celebrated with a groundbreaking ceremony with partners in February. This project is the culmination of over 25 years of effort to protect and bring public access to Spencer Mountain, and is only possible thanks to the support of many generous partners, including CaroMont Health. Trails are anticipated to open at the end of 2026 or early 2027.



Groundbreaking for Spencer Mountain Trails. Photo by Allison Hester

CITIZEN SCIENCE PARTNERSHIP BUILDS POLLINATOR HABITATS

Conservancy staff partnered with ImaginOn: The Joe & Joan Martin Center and University Park Creative Arts School to construct pollinator habitats with the helping hands of local children, as part of the Jenner Wood V Citizen Science Program. The habitats provide an educational opportunity for children and microhabitats for native species.

CONSERVANCY STAFF GROW TECH EXPERTISE FOR MONITORING

Land Stewardship Associate Gracie Bartel recently received her drone pilot certification, building capacity for the Stewardship team to use aerial drone technology during field efforts.

Like what you're reading? Scan the QR code to read more stories on our blog.



TRAIL MASTER PLAN UPDATES UNDERWAY

Thread Trail staff are collaborating with partners and stakeholders over the next year to determine if realignments or additional alignments are needed in each of the county-specific master plans. In the approximately 15 years since the plans' adoption, there has been significant growth across the region, necessitating a refresh. After concluding this planning process, the Thread Trail will request each County Commission to adopt their updated master plan.

GASTON COUNTY PROPERTY CONSERVED

Land Acquisition staff recently finalized protections for Bigleaf Bluff, a conservation project in Gaston County that conserves land adjacent to Hoffman-Pharr Preserve. This project was funded in part by the North Carolina Land and Water Fund.

TRAILS OPENED IN 2025: Stewart Creek Greenway, Yellowstone to State Street: 0.5 mi
Paw Creek Greenway: 1.5 mi
South Fork Ridge Trail: 0.8 mi

Mountainside Trail: 1.0 mi
Duke Kimbrell Trail Extension: 0.5 mi
Stowe Connector Trail: 1.2 mi

SAVING LAND

HISTORY: THE LAST KNOWN SLAVE DWELLING IN MECKLENBURG

Against a Carolina-blue sky, the bright hues of newly worked oak starkly contrast wood worn dark by 150 years of exposure, but the axe marks on both are real. Led by Austin Kirkland, the craftsmen of Spotted Dog Timber Frames have hand-hewed replacement logs using historically accurate tools, echoing the work of a small but historically significant cabin's original builders.

Built of hand-hewn red and white oak, the cabin began its life in the mid-to-late 1800s as a dwelling for the enslaved people of the Stafford-Holcombe Farm. It is the last known structure of its kind in Mecklenburg County, and like so many buildings tied to enslaved lives, it could have disappeared entirely to neglect, time, or development.

In 1860, enslaved people made up roughly 40% of Mecklenburg County's population, forming a foundational yet often underrepresented part of its history. The physical spaces where enslaved people lived, however, have largely vanished. Small, undervalued, and rarely maintained, these structures disappeared alongside the land itself.

That didn't happen to this cabin because of the care and conviction of the landowner, Leslie Freeman. Having inherited the property from close family friends, she recognized its significance and stewarded it with quiet dedication. In 2022 she decided to partner



Historic slave dwelling, under reconstruction at Latta Place, Mecklenburg County

with the Conservancy to place the land under conservation easement. Later she collaborated with Mecklenburg County to relocate and restore the cabin at Latta Place, ensuring that the cabin and its layered history would endure.

Once the conservation paperwork was finalized, the craftsmen began their work. Kirkland and his team deconstructed the cabin log by log, like an archaeological dig, then relocated it from the property. Roughly half the logs, too deteriorated to reuse, were replaced with locally sourced oak. Daubing made from clay, sand, and lime putty fills the gaps, just as it did over a century ago. Even a curved-handled broad axe from the 1860s was used to shape the new wood.

Reconstructed at Latta Place, this cabin now stands ready to tell its story publicly, honestly, and with care. It reminds us that land and history are inseparable, and that preservation begins with individuals who choose to care, to act, and to ensure that stories like this one are not lost. **Conservation made this possible, but people make conservation possible.**

BECOME A NATURE SUSTAINER

Help protect the places you love with a monthly gift of just \$10 or more. You'll provide reliable support to protect local lands and water while helping expand the Carolina Thread Trail and increase access to nature for everyone. As a Nature Sustainer, you're investing in clean air and water, outdoor experiences close to home, and a healthier, more connected region.

Sign up today at catawbalands.org/monthly



Catawba Creek Greenway Extension: 0.8 mi
Stagecoach Greenway and Park: 0.25 mi
Lake Whelchel Trail, Paul's Peninsula: 2.5 mi

Lindsay Pettus Greenway Extension: 0.8 mi
Dutchman's Creek Blueway: 5 mi

2025 DONORS

Our donors' generous support each year enables us to pursue our mission of saving land and connecting lives to nature. This list reflects combined gifts of \$500 or more that were made during the 2024 calendar year. View the full donor list in the online digital edition.

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CORPORATE, FOUNDATION & GOVERNMENT

\$100,000+
Charlotte Steeplechase Association
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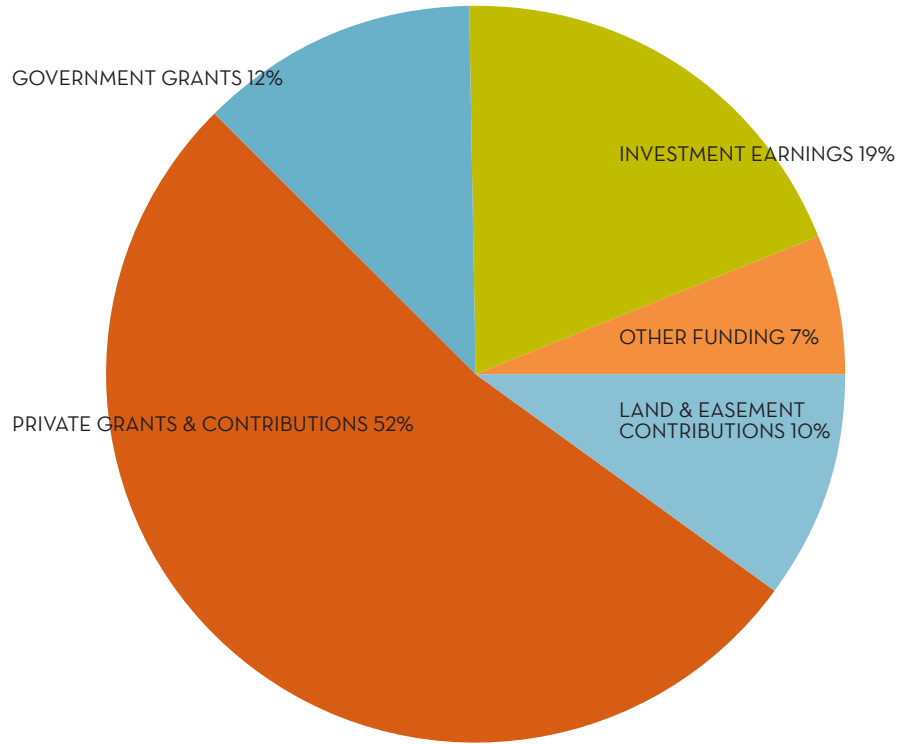
\$50,000
Catawba Wateree Habitat Enhancement Program
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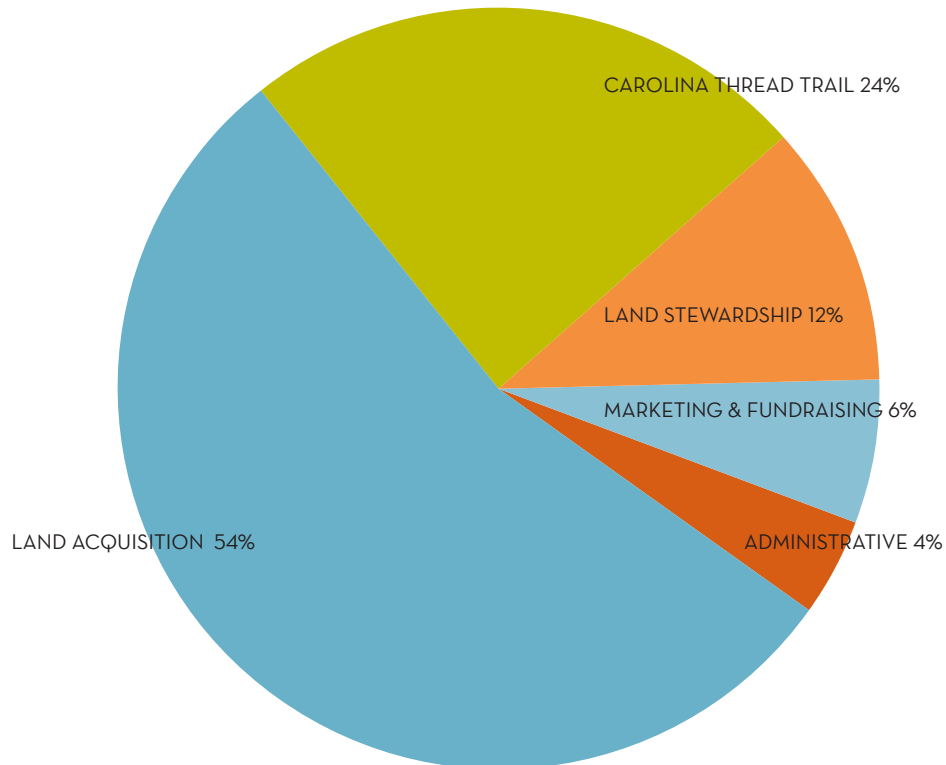
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2025 FINANCIAL REPORT

SOURCE OF FUNDS



USE OF FUNDS



2025 FINANCIAL REPORT

FINANCIAL SUMMARY

(January 1, 2025-December 31, 2025, shown in thousands)

	2024	2025
ASSETS		
CASH - OPERATING	\$3,160	\$3,091
CASH - RESTRICTED	\$13,699	\$16,546
RECEIVABLES	\$ 892	\$3,850
FIXED ASSETS (NET)	\$521	\$547
PRESERVES	\$33,940	\$30,937
OTHER ASSETS	\$677	\$603
TOTAL ASSETS	\$52,889	\$55,574
LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS		
ACCOUNTS PAYABLE	\$121	\$37
GRANTS AWARDED	\$470	\$577
LEASES PAYABLE	\$662	\$593
NET ASSETS	\$51,636	\$54,367
TOTAL LIABILITIES & NET ASSETS	\$52,889	\$55,574

ENDOWMENT & RESERVE FUNDS

(As of December 31, 2025, shown in thousands)

	RESTRICTED	UNRESTRICTED	BOARD DESIGNATED	TOTAL
THREAD TRAIL ENDOWMENT	\$3,955	\$-	\$-	\$4,955
PRESERVE MANAGEMENT FUND	\$-	\$-	\$604	\$604
GRANTS TO COMMUNITIES FUND	\$2,479	\$-	\$919	\$3,398
LAND ACQUISITION FUND	\$85	\$-	\$2,381	\$2,466
STEWARDSHIP & LEGAL DEFENSE FUND	\$1,633	\$-	\$3,141	\$4,774
PROJECT FUNDS	\$511	\$-	\$25	\$536
OPERATING RESERVES		\$773	\$813	\$1,586
TOTAL ASSETS	\$8,663	\$773	\$7,883	\$17,319

- CATAWBA -
LANDS CONSERVANCY

CAROLINA
THREAD TRAIL

2400 Park Road, Suite 1
Charlotte, NC 28203

MAILING AREA

ANNUAL REPORT



- CATAWBA -
LANDS CONSERVANCY
LAND | WATER | FARMS | NATURE



CAROLINA
THREAD TRAIL

JOIN US OUTDOORS FOR A PROGRAM THIS SPRING!

Photos from
previous National
Trails Day
programs.



THURSDAY, MAY 14

**Moth Night at Eastover
Ridge Preserve**

Enjoy an evening outdoors
observing and learning
about native moths from
local expert Lenny Lampel.



SATURDAY, JUNE 6

National Trails Day

Join us at one of the
numerous programs our
team is hosting across the
region!

**Register for these programs
and more on our website.**

