

SPECIAL EDITION

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WEST VIRGINIA
LANDTRUST



Snap Shots



Special Thanks

Protecting land is a team effort. While one person might be a key contact, many others are in the background digging in county courthouses, checking deeds, assessing mineral rights, or a host of other activities. The West Virginia Land Trust thanks the staff and students from the West Virginia University's Land Use and Sustainable Development Law Clinic for their tireless efforts and devotion to detail in the acquisition of the Marie Hall Jones Preserve and of the Ohio River islands, as well as other land protection projects.



In addition, we offer our thanks to the West Virginia Geological and Economic Survey for detailed reports about the Jones Preserve. Also, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's staff at the Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge played an invaluable role in helping to secure two islands in the Ohio River.

Of course, neither of these projects would be possible without generous donors, the City of Gallipolis, OH (Gallipolis Island), Michael Hoeft (Upper Twin Island and Gallipolis Island), and Allen Jones (Marie Hall Jones Preserve), who had a vision for conserving and protecting these properties for future generations.

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*"We never know
the worth of water
till the well is dry."*

- Thomas Fuller

Join us in our efforts to protect
water and land in West Virginia.

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Conservation and Community: *Plenty to Celebrate*

From ancient forests to river islands, WVLT protects spaces with public benefits in mind

I'm sure it's true that "good things come to those who wait." Indeed, patience is certainly a big part of our work in preserving land and working with landowners. But often, great things come from a sense of purpose, shared goals, and collaboration. After more than a year of planning and discussion, the West Virginia Land Trust (WVLT) is pleased to have acquired two new preserves, donated by three generous donors.

Allen Jones, a native son of West Virginia whose professional life has been spent in California, finalized a donation of an ancient forest to WVLT in honor of his mother, Marie Hall Jones. Allen's story was indelibly etched in his memory 44 years ago, as he stood alongside her, bidding for a unique tract of forest in the Doddridge County Courthouse. Marie's passion, his role in helping her realize a dream, and his lifelong connection to the Mountain State, led him to seek a way to memorialize her vision. He found it with WVLT, and we are both grateful and proud to become stewards of this nature preserve.

Michael Hoeft of Cabell County has a passion for aquatic habitats. As a retired fisheries biologist, he has seen the decrease in habitats for reproduction of aquatic species and water birds. His gift to WVLT of Upper Twin Island in Ohio County, and of his half interest in Gallipolis Island, speaks to his commitment to protecting important and often unseen habitats where the health and reproduction of many species is determined.

Similarly, the City of Gallipolis, partial owner of Gallipolis Island, saw the WVLT as a viable recipient for their property, supporting our goal to see the island restored. The Gallipolis City Commission supports the idea that this island could become part of the federally-protected National Wildlife Refuge that includes a chain of islands in the Ohio River and crosses four states.

These gifts were not casually offered, and our commitment to having them provide public benefits is strong. As we approach Thanksgiving, we're grateful for the generosity of these landowners, and the opportunities that these conservation successes offer to current and future generations.



Best!

Brent Bailey Ph.D.
WV Land Trust Executive Director



Old-growth Forest in Doddridge County Protected for Public



A 44-year journey for a California resident with West Virginia roots has come to “a happy ending as my mother wished,” and entered its next phase with perpetual protection for an ancient forest in the care of the West Virginia Land Trust.

Marie Hall Jones, born in Ritchie County in 1907, was an ardent conservationist and nature lover. Returning home with her husband after living around the United States and in Southeast Asia, they settled in Fairmont, where they raised four children. An interest in majestic old forests evolved into a near-obsessive search for one to protect, as she realized that many of the patches of ancient forests in West Virginia had already fallen to the axe. “Alas, I was too late,” she later wrote in a journal, about her search for the right tract in Ritchie County in the 1960s and 1970s.

In the United States, some estimates suggest that only 7 percent remains of the original forests that towered the countryside in the 1600s, the vast majority of which is west of the Mississippi. In West Virginia, it is widely documented that only a few small forest ‘patches’ escaped the intense logging of the 19th and early 20th centuries. This fact alone makes the state’s remaining stands so much more valuable, for ecological, scenic, and scientific purposes.

Despite their name, old-growth forests typically have trees of many ages and maintain the physical and biological conditions favorable for trees to reach their natural longevity. The age of old-growth varies widely, influenced to great extent by species. White oak and hemlock can live for more than 500 years, while red spruce rarely exceeds 300 years.

A tip from a professor friend at Fairmont State College (now University) that a Doddridge County property with an impressive stand of ancient trees was going to be auctioned in a sale, forced by a family’s joint owners with differing views on what to do with the land, led her with her youngest child, Allen, to the courthouse in 1972.



“It’s one of those lifetime events that made a lasting impression,” said Allen, then 24 years old, and the donor of the property to the West Virginia Land Trust. “I can still remember exactly what happened. I was visiting at home, in the process of moving to California after graduate school. When we got to the courthouse, it was jam-packed full of people. It was sort of a community event, with people wanting to see how the bidding went.”

“Mother asked me to do the bidding. Lots of people were bidding at the start, but dropped out as the bidding got into more serious money. There I am, a young man with a business degree from Wharton (at U. of Pennsylvania), bidding against timber companies. We hadn’t really talked about a maximum price. I kept looking at Mother, to see if she was happy. She kept saying, ‘go on, go on!’”

The price for the 190-acre tract rose to \$39,000. Sensing the timber companies were losing interest, Allen bid \$39,100... “And that’s what it sold for.”

Protected ever since, the Jones tract is an exceptional Appalachian mixed hardwood forest and includes black walnut, a variety of oaks, maples, hickories, birch, basswood, and yellow poplar, among others, typical of the diversity of the central Appalachian deciduous forest. The property includes a flat floodplain meadow, slopes with mature mixed hardwood forests, and near the top of the ridge, on steep slopes, between 15 and 20 acres of impressive ancient trees.

“This is how we find old-growth,” said Ashton Berdine, WVLT’s Land Programs Manager. “The bigger patches of old-growth forest in West Virginia are mostly known and the smaller pockets are getting increasingly harder to find—it might be that when you do find these stands they exist as just a few trees, or just a few acres of trees,” Berdine said.

“Because of age, wind and storms, and diseases caused by insects, such as the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid and Emerald Ash Borer, old growth stands that were spared from logging in the last century in West Virginia are still under pressure, and becoming increasingly rare,” said Dr. Rick Landenberger, WVLT’s Science and Management Specialist. “WVLT will monitor the property and its ecological health, as it envisions a public preserve that will allow visitors to appreciate the history and tenacity of this impressive stand.”

“Mother wanted to protect a watershed,” added Allen Jones, “and this property goes ridgeline to ridgeline.” Jones made a gift of the property to the West Virginia Land Trust in honor of his mother and her commitment to preserving nature.

“We are thrilled to be able to preserve this property for all West Virginians and ensure that it is forever protected as a nature preserve, so that these types of exceptional ecosystems exist for future generations to see,” said Brent Bailey, WVLT Executive Director. “We are extremely grateful for this donation and honored to help the Jones family see their dream to protect this property come to fruition.”

Ohio River Donations to Play Role in Restoring "Big River" Habitat

Two islands in the Ohio River recently donated to the West Virginia Land Trust (WVLT) will be protected by the organization as essential habitat for fish, mussels, birds, and other animals for years to come.

"The acquisition of islands in the Ohio River is an exciting opportunity from not only the perspective of protecting critical habitats of a big river system, but also for the people and communities along one of the major waterways of the country,"

said Brent Bailey, WVLT's executive director. "We're grateful to the donors of these properties for their interest in ensuring that the public will benefit from these unique tracts."

Gallipolis Island, situated along the shoreline of Gallipolis, OH, across from Mason County, W.Va., and Upper Twin Island, located near Wheeling, Ohio County, W.Va. are among a total of 40 islands that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) says remain in the Upper Ohio River Basin. This area that stretches approximately 400 river miles and includes four states (Pennsylvania, Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky).

Twenty-one of these islands are part of the Ohio River Islands National Wildlife Refuge (ORINWR), which was established in 1990, as West Virginia's first national refuge. The refuge consists of 3,300 acres of valuable fish and wildlife habitat, including islands, as well as wetlands, back channels, and underwater habitat.

Although the two islands acquired by WVLT will not immediately become part of the refuge system, they will remain public and be restored in a way that provides similar benefits.

"Islands along the Ohio River— whether they are part of the refuge, or not, are part of a healthy river system that provides benefits beyond fish and wildlife habitat— people all along the Ohio River recreate in these areas, whether hunting, fishing, or boating," said Ashton Berdine, WVLT's Lands Program Manager.



Gallipolis Island in Mason County, WV was donated by the City of Gallipolis, OH and Michael Hoeft, a private landowner from Milton, WV. Mr. Hoeft also donated Upper Twin Island in Ohio County, WV. Both are now protected alongside the Ohio River Islands NWR.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Land Use and Sustainable Development Clinic at West Virginia University's School of Law, also played pivotal roles in the acquisition.

A Looming Threat

The Ohio River and its habitats are under continual pressure from human-caused impacts, such as pollution, dredging, and erosion caused by commercial boat traffic.

Many islands are considerably smaller than what they were 125 years ago, before the river was developed into one of the busiest commercial waterways in the nation, according to refuge biologist, Patty Morrison.

Morrison, who marvels at the Ohio River's "big river" ecosystem, says that many islands are gone from the river or have shrunk in size due to impoundment and erosion, but the habitats that islands provide are just as unique and important as they were a century ago.

"What you see above the water is less than half of the full story," Morrison said. "When the shoreline disappears and descends into the river, there is a variety of structure and habitat there."

Submerged logs and stumps, aquatic vegetation, occasional boulders, gravel and sand with scattered cobble— these underwater features all provide habitat for an amazing diversity of native fish and mussels,” she said.

Dredging and bank erosion from commercial activity, have accelerated the amount of shoreline loss into the river beyond natural levels. Large trees that normally stabilize the river banks are falling into the river and washing away due to erosion. These trees provide habitat for insects, birds, fish, and other animals. When they fall into the river and wash away, the depletion of island ecosystems as a whole is a greater concern.

According to Morrison, island habitats can be conserved, and even restored and rebuilt, so that they continue to support healthy and diverse aquatic communities.

A Boon to Big River Habitat

USFWS Ohio River Islands conservation plan states that island habitats still contain “near natural assemblages” of plants and animals endemic to the river. So, the race to protect these remaining habitats and species is of utmost importance.

The distribution of bottomland and riparian habitats, and deep and shallow water aquatic habitats make islands extremely beneficial to native fish and wildlife species. According to USFWS, a huge diversity of bird species— waterfowl, shore and wading birds, neotropical migratory birds, small mammals, fish and insects, and freshwater mussels, utilize these areas for resting, feeding, nesting, spawning, and other life-sustaining functions. The often undisturbed island shorelines, especially the heads and backchannels, are favored sport fishing and waterfowl hunting areas.

Over 200 bird species (76 of which breed along the Upper Ohio), 42 mollusk species, 15 species of reptiles and amphibians, 101 species of fish, 25 mammals, and 500 species of plants have been identified so far within the Ohio River Islands NWR.

Gallipolis Island, which is mostly above water and Upper Twin Island, which is mostly underwater offer a diversity of habitat in which big river species thrive.

Michael Hoeft, who donated these islands and spent nearly 30 years as a fisheries biologist with the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, is convinced that protecting these habitats is critical for fish and water fowl to thrive.

“I hope my donation sets a precedent for other landowners to donate riparian and underwater habitat to the WVLT and USFWS,” Hoeft said.

The shallow waters of the river can provide quality habitat for freshwater mussels, including endangered species, such as the pink mucket and fanshell. Bald eagles, peregrine falcons and Indiana bats also use islands along the river as habitat.

A Coordinated Effort

The USFWS has been attempting to bring more island and big river habitats into the refuge system for many years. In the City of Gallipolis, Ohio, locals talk about how Gallipolis Island has shrunk due to erosion over the years, and that is one of the motivations that led the City to donate their interest in the island to WVLT.

“The City is glad that conservation efforts will protect Gallipolis Island for the public and we hope that more effort can prevent additional erosion of the island,” said Eugene Greene, Gallipolis City Manager.

Both Gallipolis and Upper Twin Island are within a target area in which USFWS aimed to protect additional habitat. Gallipolis Island, according to an assessment by the agency, was considered a high priority for protection.

WVLT will work with USFWS and other partners in upcoming years to stabilize stream banks and restore habitat. In addition to the long-term benefits to fish, wildlife, and their habitats, this land protection effort will also help improve water quality and maintain the ecosystems that offer public recreational opportunities for people in the Ohio River Valley.

“It has been a privilege to work with WVLT on the Ohio River islands conservation project. The Land Trust’s commitment to the conservation and protection of the Ohio River islands will provide long lasting benefits to both terrestrial and aquatic species,” said Rebecca Young, refuge manager at Ohio River Islands NWR.



Photo: Kent Mason



Photo: Kent Mason

Land Protection Special

Land Trust Staff



From ancient forests to river islands, WVLT protects spaces with public benefits in mind.

Learn more about our efforts in land protection inside!

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