Natural Heritage Conservation Program
2023–2024

Conservation Impact Through Partnership

NATURE CONSERVANCY CANADA

Ducks Unlimited Canada

WILDLIFE HABITAT CANADA
HABITAT FAUNIQUE

Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts
Alliance canadienne des organismes de conservation

Contents

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ABOUT THE PARTNERSHIP

Launched in 2007*, this unique partnership with the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC), Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC), Wildlife Habitat Canada (WHC) and the Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts (ACLT), representing regional and local land trusts, mobilizes Canadians to conserve and care for the places they cherish; places that support resilient communities in the face of climate change.

The program contributes directly to Canada's ambitious goal of conserving 30 per cent of its lands and waters by 2030.

The partners are proud to produce the Natural Heritage Conservation Program (NHCP) Impact Report (2023–2024), highlighting how the partnership has mobilized Canadians to conserve nature in the past year.

NCC, DUC, WHC and ACLT respectfully acknowledge that the work we do across the country takes place on the traditional territories of many Indigenous Peoples, past, present and future. We thank and honour these caretakers and acknowledge the ongoing work and presence of Indigenous Peoples in Canada on the land today.

ABOUT THE PARTNERS

Nature Conservancy of Canada

As Canada's largest environmental charity, the Nature Conservancy of Canada (NCC) has worked with partners to conserve natural landscapes since 1962. Together, we deliver solutions to address the dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change through large-scale and long-term conservation. We create lasting change for the planet and its people by partnering around shared interests with Indigenous Nations and communities, governments and businesses. Nature makes it possible. To learn more, visit **natureconservancy.ca**.

Wildlife Habitat Canada

Founded in 1984, Wildlife Habitat Canada (WHC) is a national, non-profit, charitable conservation organization that envisions a future where Canadians share a conservation ethic that recognizes the fundamental importance of wildlife habitats that are abundant, rich and support biodiversity. WHC conserves wildlife habitat in Canada through lasting partnerships and wise conservation investments. The grant programs administered by WHC support the conservation of important wildlife habitat, the securement of ecologically sensitive lands, engaging Canadians in nature. For more information, visit **whc.org**.

Ducks Unlimited Canada

Ducks Unlimited Canada (DUC) is a leader in wetland conservation and is dedicated to conserving habitat that waterfowl, migratory birds and countless other species across Canada and North America depend on for their survival. A registered charity, DUC is guided by science and traditional knowledge in its work and partners with communities, Indigenous Peoples, government, industry, non-profit organizations and landowners to conserve habitat for the benefit of waterfowl, plants, animals and people. To learn more, visit **ducks.ca**.

Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts

The Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts (ACLT) is a collaborative network committed to conserving and stewarding Canada's diverse natural landscapes. By partnering with regional alliances, and over 150 local land trusts across the country, ACLT fosters cooperation, shares best practices and strengthens the capacity of these organizations to protect vital ecosystems. Through its efforts, ACLT promotes biodiversity, supports sustainable land use and ensures that future generations can appreciate Canada's rich natural heritage. Learn more at **aclt-acoc.ca**.

*The partnership was launched in 2007 as the Natural Areas Conservation Program. It became the Natural Heritage Conservation Program in 2019.

Partnering for nature and Canadians

CANADA'S BEAUTIFUL landscapes inspire pride and underscore the importance of protecting our natural environment as we work to halt and reverse the loss of biodiversity across the country. Preserving nature safeguards our flora and fauna, stores carbon and conserves our natural heritage.

In December 2022, Canada led the way internationally by hosting the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP15) and helped broker a new Global Biodiversity Framework, which aims to protect at least 30 per cent of global land and water by 2030. To implement this Framework, Environment and Climate Change Canada is leading Canada's 2030 Nature Strategy. It establishes a vision for halting and reversing biodiversity loss, reflecting Canada's domestic priorities for conservation.

Our government launched the largest conservation campaign in Canada's history, with a goal of protecting 30 per cent of land and water here at home. We are making steady progress in achieving our "30 by 30" goal, in collaboration with individuals, Indigenous Peoples and environmental organizations.

The Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Wildlife Habitat Canada, and local/regional land trusts are key partners who, as of June 2024, have protected more than 800,000 hectares across Canada. This effort is further complemented by the Ecological Gifts Program, which offers tax incentives to those who donate ecologically sensitive land to conservation organizations.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I extend thanks and congratulations to the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada, Wildlife Habitat Canada and land trusts for their achievements. Together, we are creating a natural legacy for future generations. I look forward to continuing our collaboration to benefit our natural environment.

The Honourable Steven Guilbeault, PC, MP
Minister of Environment and Climate Change
Government of Canada

THIS PAST YEAR WAS ONE OF MILESTONES AND HISTORY-MAKING for the Natural Heritage Conservation Program. We leveraged one of the largest ever Ecological Gifts, we established Canada's largest conservation agreement, and we supported the proposal for Canada's largest Indigenous Protected and Conserved Area. We've created history by rallying governments, industries, landowners and other donors to reach $1 billion in matching funds over the 17 years of the NHCP.

But superlatives and big dollars mask the even greater achievements that we've created together. Across the more than 800,000 hectares of landscapes conserved through the NHCP, nature is working hard to enrich and protect the lives of millions of people.

These areas boast hundreds of kilometres of trails, rivers and shorelines that offer recreational opportunities. They protect intact ecosystems that store and filter water, buffering communities from the brunt of floods and droughts, and bolster food security for millions, through the hundreds of species of pollinators protected and the many partnerships with producers we have forged.

Behind each NHCP success story — every new landscape protected, every endangered species recovered, every wetland restored — are teams of passionate people mobilizing partners around cutting-edge technologies, robust research and deep, local knowledge to find solutions to the challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change, while deepening Canadians' connection to nature.

We thank our fellow NHCP partners in conservation — NCC, DUC and WHC, with the Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts — and the many donors, landowners and collaborators whose passion, stewardship, generosity and expertise have made Canada a conservation leader. And we are grateful to Minister Steven Guilbeault and Environment and Climate Change Canada for this vital investment in conservation, part of the Government of Canada's Nature Fund.

From coast to coast, the NHCP is helping Canada build stronger, more resilient communities and landscapes, all while contributing to Canada's 2030 National Biodiversity Strategy. The NHCP's delivery partners have proven we can accelerate the pace of conservation to meet these needs by delivering local conservation solutions at a landscape level. We know we can do this. We know we must. Because nature conservation is the key to a resilient future for us all.

Catherine Grenier
President & CEO
Nature Conservancy of Canada

Michael Nadler
CEO
Ducks Unlimited Canada

Cameron Mack
Executive Director
Wildlife Habitat Canada

Indigenous-led conservation

The NHCP supported history-making strides in Indigenous-led conservation from coast to coast in 2023–2024

In August 2023, W̱SÁNEĆ communities came together to celebrate the return of almost 20 hectares in the heart of a once-abundant wetland network at T̓IKEL (Maber Flats), on the Saanich Peninsula of Vancouver Island.

The Natural Heritage Conservation Program facilitated this history-making moment — the first donation of land under the Ecological Gifts Program to an Indigenous organization — when a local family donated the land value of the 20-hectares back into W̱SÁNEĆ stewardship through the W̱SÁNEĆ Lands Trust Society. The NHCP's Land Trusts Conservation Fund covered the costs of the land transfer and supported initial planning work for the land's restoration.

Despite its degraded farmland that has been drained and largely covered over by invasive species like reed canarygrass, Himalayan blackberry and purple loosestrife, T̓IKEL continues to support over 175 bird species, including species at risk like great blue heron (*fannini* subspecies), lesser yellowlegs, peregrine falcon, short-eared owl and barn swallow. With a plan to restore it in development, W̱SÁNEĆ hope to see even more species return.

Prior to colonization, the once vast peat bog and abundant wetland network was cultivated and managed by W̱SÁNEĆ people as a place to grow and collect food, medicines and other materials central to W̱SÁNEĆ culture, economies and identity. Traditionally, W̱SÁNEĆ made reef nets made from SX̱ELE,IŁĆ (pacific willow) harvested at T̓IKEL, enabling them to fish at sea, a fundamental part of both the W̱SÁNEĆ economy and identity. While the land's conversion separated W̱SÁNEĆ people from this food source and important gathering place, its return and restoration are starting to rebuild the relationship between W̱SÁNEĆ and this sacred place.

The W̱SÁNEĆ-led wetland restoration of this place will also improve many ecological services for the region, including filtering water, mitigating erosion, maintaining stream flows and sequestering carbon. Restoring T̓IKEL and its high-water table will be essential

to the attenuation of winter storms that hit the peninsula, reducing flood-related damage to nearby communities. It will also help filter water that flows into the Saanich Inlet, a significant W̱SÁNEĆ harvesting site that has been closed due to pollution.

W̱SÁNEĆ is now working with collaborators and looking for funders to support them in restoring the wetland at T̓IKEL. Beyond providing habitat for native plants, migratory birds and other wildlife, restoring these wetlands will provide a place where W̱SÁNEĆ can reinvigorate traditional harvesting practices, build connections to culture and pass important teachings down to the next generation.

Beyond these program year highlights, the NHCP is enabling partners to embed collaboration with Indigenous Nations and communities into their ways of working, offering technical support to unlock opportunities that help accelerate Indigenous-led conservation.

Top to Bottom: Wabano Aki, MB.; mallard; caribou.

DIVING INTO DATA

In January 2024, four First Nations, united as the Seal River Watershed Alliance (SRWA), agreed with the Government of Canada and the Province of Manitoba to pursue the establishment of what would be one of the world's largest Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas (IPCAs). Spanning an area nearly the size of Nova Scotia, the Seal River Watershed stretches across northern Manitoba, from close to the Saskatchewan border and across to Hudson's Bay. Its conservation would protect vast carbon stores, habitat for hundreds of species, and the lives, livelihoods and cultures of many communities.

"The Seal River Watershed Alliance is proud to reach this major milestone in the journey to establish an Indigenous protected area," said SRWA executive director Stephanie Thorassie in a press release about the watershed. "Our four First Nations are asserting our inherent right to care for these lands and waters, and, in the process, we are strengthening our cultures, our languages, habitat for the caribou, the regional economy and the commitments made by the province and the federal government. This agreement shows that Nation-to-Nation-to-Nation partnerships generate benefits for all."

With the help of the NHCP, Ducks Unlimited Canada supported the SRWA's case for conservation by analyzing areas of high conservation value within the watershed and identifying diverse habitats for species like caribou and waterfowl. DUC also highlighted carbon hotspots across the watershed, which altogether holds over 1.7 billion tonnes of carbon in its soils, wetlands and peatlands — the equivalent to eight years of Canada's total annual greenhouse gas emissions, and nearly 70 times the annual emissions of Canada's passenger vehicles and light trucks.

"Our overarching aim is to support Indigenous-led conservation and provide science-based advice and solutions from a Western perspective to braid knowledge systems, facilitate informed decision-making, and strengthen strategic planning by the SRWA," says Lindsay McBlane, DUC's manager of boreal operations.

As the last undeveloped watershed in Manitoba, the Seal River watershed offers an opportunity to conserve a vast carbon store and help push back against the impacts of climate change, while supporting local economies and livelihoods.

NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS

In Cape Breton, the Nature Conservancy of Canada is working with a newly formed land trust, the Sespite'tmnej Kmitkinu Conservancy (SKC), to steward ecologically and culturally significant lands. Representing the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia, the SKC is working with NCC to conserve land that will be protected by the conservancy once it is established. With the help of the NHCP, NCC is working with the Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia in a Two-Eyed Seeing approach to learn about and care for the forest and riparian areas on the property, near SKC's proposed Kluskap's Cave IPCA. This approach places equal value on Western and Indigenous science, research and knowledge.

New tech helps inform conservation decisions

How can we help rebalance our relationships with the land? Technology is helping point the way

Satellite views, long-term studies and local and Indigenous Knowledge have shown we're losing or drastically altering nature at an alarming rate — over 80 per cent of native Prairie grasslands across Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba have been lost, as have over 70 per cent of southern Canada's wetlands, for example — humans have had significant impacts on the nature around us. That's why the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada and land trusts across the country are asking themselves: How can we help rebalance our relationships with the land? How do we conserve species, lands and waters, while ensuring people have the space, food and resources they need? Technology is helping point the way.

PINPOINTING SUPPORT FOR POLLINATORS

This year, researchers from NCC and the University of British Columbia teamed up to discover how protecting native pollinator habitat adjacent to farmland in Canada can actually increase yields, resulting in net benefits for people and nature. These are just some of the practical discoveries the NHCP is helping scientists reveal about our world.

Technology is helping conservation planners make highly informed decisions, for the benefit of people and nature.

Wild pollinators in Canada help sustain the nutritional needs of the equivalent of 24.4 million people annually and generate nearly $2.8 billion in income for Canadian farmers. These numbers could increase substantially with greater conservation.

"We wanted to showcase the work we're doing in metrics people can relate to," says Gabriela Duarte, an ecosystem services specialist with NCC. "If we can show how native pollinators are supporting food production and creating income for farmers, then communities may see more reasons to support conservation."

The results were astounding. Duarte and her colleagues found that wild pollinators in Canada help sustain the nutritional needs of the equivalent of 24.4 million people annually and generate nearly $2.8 billion in income for Canadian farmers. They also found that these numbers could increase substantially with greater conservation.

"There's a lot of potential to increase the productivity and stability of agricultural production," Duarte explains. "This research helps show that well-planned conservation actions can offer benefits that will be bigger than the sum of their parts."

Because pollinators need to have habitat relatively close to the crops they support, such as canola (one of Canada's largest crops), conserving, restoring or creating habitat for them between fields can have great impacts on whole communities. Beyond the bugs, such habitats would help offer clean water, carbon storage, climate regulating and soil quality services, as well as possible recreation benefits, Duarte says.

Duarte's research can help conservationists, decision makers and producers work together to find and implement conservation solutions that help bolster regional food security, support native species and create economic opportunities.

REVEALING SPECIES' RANGES

The NHCP has also helped advance the partners' ability to conserve habitats most suitable for species at risk. New data-mapping technology developed by NCC and Carleton University allows users to highlight a given at-risk species' predicted habitat range at the click of a button. It goes further, too. The open-access tool also allows users to layer in elements such as other at-risk species' ranges, carbon sinks, drinking water sources and human development maps. Seeing where all these elements might overlap, users can then provide the tool with a budget and ask it how to most effectively deploy conservation resources.

Similarly, the NHCP has helped researchers from DUC's Institute for Wetland and Waterfowl Research create and update models that reveal how land-use change and conservation work in the Prairie Pothole Region of Canada impact waterfowl populations. The region, which stretches from the Rocky Mountain foothills to south-central Manitoba, has long been subject to intense conversion.

DUC's models form the basis of important planning tools that help conservation organizations, communities and landowners work toward mutually beneficial conservation outcomes. By understanding how waterfowl populations interact with various prairie land uses, including agriculture, the tools allow DUC and others to identify cost-effective ways to work with local communities to meet nature's needs while supporting local economies.

DUC is leveraging the models' insights to shape Prairie Habitat Joint Venture target landscapes that guide the implementation of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. The organization has already worked with partners to deliver tangible, NHCP-supported results, including the McIntyre Ranch conservation agreement, which supports more than 3,600 wetlands, and other prairie conservation agreements.

NHCP partners are using their tools in tandem with local and Indigenous Knowledge to make deeply informed conservation decisions. When taken together, these types of knowledge allow users — governments, conservationists, communities and landowners — to model and better understand how actions like restoration or human development will impact them and the landscape, all through the lens of a changing climate. This way, communities can make informed and transparent choices about their relationships with the lands and waters around them, with the future in mind, and can deploy solutions that offer compounding benefits to nature and people.

How partnerships are powering conservation

The NHCP's power to rally partners around nature is a key part of Canada's conservation success

The story of habitat conservation across Canada's nearly 10-million-square-kilometre landscape is as much about partnerships among people as it is about wildlife. In fact, Canada would not have its current conservation success without the partnerships fostered over many decades by organizations like the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada and numerous regional and local land trusts.

So, when the Government of Canada launched the Natural Heritage Conservation Program in 2007*, NCC, DUC and regional and local land trusts leveraged the program's matching power to do what they do best: rallying their extensive networks of governments, non-governmental organizations, Indigenous Peoples and communities, industry and individual supporters to accelerate conservation. Since then, the NHCP has forged deep relationships and achieved great results for nature and people. By providing habitat for Canada's iconic species, supporting local economies and protecting landscapes that support communities, the NHCP is helping the country become more resilient to the impacts of climate change, one project at a time. Seventeen years later, the NHCP is marking its latest milestone: NCC, DUC and regional and local land trusts have raised $1 billion in matching funds for conservation in Canada.

Each of these recent accomplishments, along with the hundreds that have come before, are a direct result of the NHCP's power to rally partners around nature. The Van De Velde project in Manitoba might never have happened without DUC's ability to partner with landowners across working landscapes to make their conservation vision for their property a reality. The Roussel-Steffler Memorial Sanctuary in Ontario was the outcome of years of researching the best options for the family's land before donating it to the Kawartha Land Trust. NCC's Cascades peatland project in Quebec represents a 60-year professional milestone for a local business and a way to continue its trusted relationship with NCC.

The scientific expertise, innovative funding mechanisms and community-based approaches of NCC, DUC, and regional and local land trusts, paired with the skills to tap into new markets and resources, means that the conservation of Canada's high-priority landscapes is happening at an unprecedented scale. Across the country and across sectors, experts agree: letting nature do its job as a protector of biodiversity and a nature-based solution to climate change is one of the best investments we can make for the future of Canada and all Canadians. Thanks to the NHCP, Canada is conserving more natural areas than ever before, and it is paying dividends. Nature is being set up to succeed.

*The partnership was launched in 2007 as the Natural Areas Conservation Program. It became the Natural Heritage Conservation Program in 2019.

The NHCP has raised $1B in matching funds since 2007

The Saint-Sylvère bog offers habitat to many species at risk, including Canada warbler.

NCC regional vice-president in Quebec Claire Ducharme and Cascades president and CEO Mario Plourde announce the conservation of the Saint-Sylvère bog at an event in March 2024.

Conservation by example

Once fairly abundant in southern Quebec, few peat bogs now remain in a region dominated by agricultural landscapes. So, when members of the Lemaire family, owners of Cascades, a global paper company, contacted NCC to see if they would accept an ecological donation of a 116-hectare peat bog and forested area on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, the response was a resounding "Oui!"

"It's extraordinary to think that this all started because the Lemaire family called us up one day and said, 'We've got this bog, maybe you would be interested?'", says Claire Ducharme, NCC's regional vice-president in Quebec. "Cascades made a huge donation, to be sure, but it takes many other partners to make this conservation area a success. That's the really extraordinary part: the NHCP brings a variety of partners to the table, united by a shared goal."

The Saint-Sylvère peat bog plays a primary role in the community's ecosystem services like water filtration and regulation, and carbon storage. It's also rich in biodiversity and is home to many species at risk, like Canada warbler, eastern wood-pewee and bank swallow. The adjacent forest is home to moose, white-tailed deer, ruffed grouse, snowshoe hare and wild turkey. Because the region is fragmented, the project builds on an existing network of wildlife habitat.

When NCC and Cascades brought the community together to celebrate the bog's protection, Ducharme says, the response was heartening. "All of a sudden, people's perspectives shifted from seeing the land as just a swamp, to understanding its value — it built pride among the community."

The bog is located on the traditional territory of the W8banaki Nation, known as Ndakina. After touring the land with NCC, the Nation named the site Moz8depek Bog, or Moosehead Bog. Together, the Nation and NCC will develop a management plan that will consider how the Nation will use the land for traditional pursuits while stewarding it long into the future.

As for Cascades and the Lemaire family, conserving the peat bog was the first of 60 acts planned for 2024 to celebrate the company's 60th anniversary.

"This donation reflects the strong values of respect for the environment and the communities that were passed on to us by the Lemaire family and that continue to be perpetuated by our employees," said Mario Plourde, president and CEO of Cascades. Cascades is leading by example by showing how businesses can meet environmental and social governance goals while contributing to the communities where they operate.

Nature: Good for wildlife, great for well-being

For Marlene Roussel and her son, Dan, donating the land across the road from where they live about 25 kilometres east of Peterborough, Ontario, is deeply personal. You could say that they know that land like the back of their hands: they've been exploring and planting trees on it for decades, which is why, when it came time to figure out what to do with it for the long term, they thought long and hard before reaching a decision.

In 2023, the Roussel family donated their 41 hectares of mature forest and provincially significant wetlands to the Kawartha Land Trust in honour of Marlene's late husband and Dan's father, Paul. According to Dan, they based their heartfelt decision on other landowner stories from the Kawartha Land Trust's website. It was something that they could relate to and wanted to be part of, and they hoped it might inspire others to do the same.

Nearly 90 per cent of the Roussel-Steffler Memorial Sanctuary is located within the Kawarthas Naturally Connected Preferred Scenario — areas of the landscapes designated for protection by the region. The wetland is mostly treed, but it also features small areas of open water where spring peepers, wood frogs and at-risk western chorus frogs can be heard calling in the spring. Local birders have tallied 68 species of birds on the property, and the land trust has already planted hundreds of different trees, adding to the ones that Dan and his dad had planted.

One of our goals for the property is to share it with others. So, to already see so many volunteers out there planting trees or studying western chorus frogs is incredibly rewarding," says Dan Roussel. "My mom is really enjoying meeting everyone from the land trust. Knowing that this is going to continue every year brings a lot of meaning to our lives. I guess you could say it's become part of our healing process."

The Roussel-Steffler Memorial Sanctuary will also be home to a memorial forest to honour deceased loved ones. The family's donation exemplifies how conservation can connect people with treasured ecosystems, while also strengthening human connections.

Turning back the hands of time on the Prairies

The Prairie Pothole Region (PPR) of southern Manitoba is so important for breeding waterfowl that it is often referred to as "Canada's duck factory." The same region, most of it privately owned, is also an area of concentrated agricultural production, meaning that lands that could be suitable for wildlife habitat can be difficult to conserve in such a sought-after landscape.

While much of the PPR has been converted for agricultural use, Ducks Unlimited Canada is

More than 800,000 hectares conserved since 2007

The NHCP's impact in 2023–2024

	Matching funds raised	Projects completed	Hectares conserved
NCC	$59M	33	22,490
DUC	$17.9M	35	10,760
Land trusts	$31M	31	5,740
Total	**$107.9M**	**99**	**38,990**

turning back time on an important piece of the larger — and increasingly fragmented — habitat puzzle.

When the Van De Velde family, a large property owner in the area, decided to sell some of their less productive land, DUC took the opportunity to negotiate the purchase of the 65-hectare property to conserve a rare parcel of habitat now known as the Van De Velde project.

Located about six kilometres southwest of Shoal Lake, Manitoba, in the heart of the PPR, the project has an impressive 27 intact wetland basins. Protecting these wetlands will help to ensure that the many ecological goods and services, like water regulation and filtering, will benefit the area by reducing floods and droughts. The wetlands also provide prime waterfowl breeding habitat.

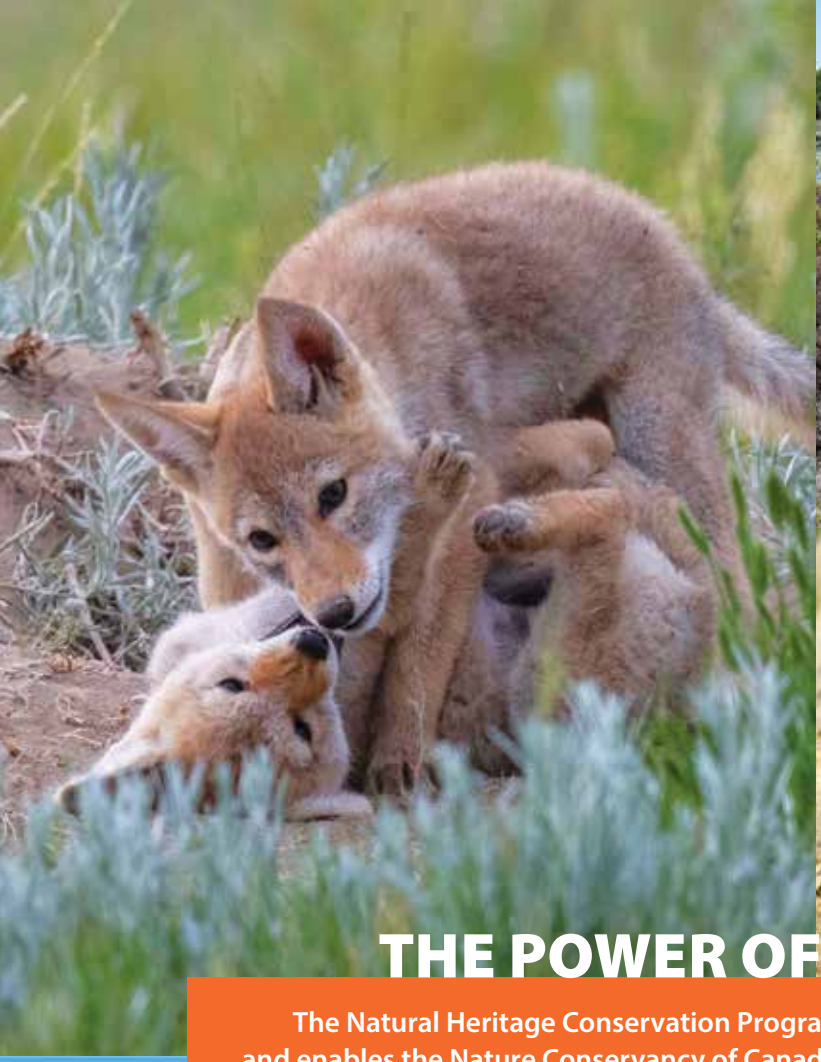
DUC has started to bring the land back to its former natural glory by re-seeding 27 cultivated hectares with perennial forage species to create suitable waterfowl nesting habitat. Once restored, the newly established grasslands will provide ample habitat for upland nesting waterfowl and other bird species, like canvasback and northern pintail, as well as many other grassland-dependent birds and other wildlife species. In addition, the project builds on existing wildlife corridors in the area, as it is located within an eight-kilometre radius of other DUC projects, including five conservation agreements, where DUC is working with landowners to steward habitats that support species and people.

This project complements other DUC projects in the area by creating a large, connected landscape effect. "In Manitoba, remaining habitat tends to be fragmented," says Lena Vanden Elsen, conservation program specialist with DUC. "Relationships with landowners are important to DUC's work, and a prior relationship with the Van De Veldes led to the purchase of the property."

With grassland restoration on the Van De Velde project well underway, Vanden Elsen and her colleagues are looking forward to spring 2025 to see what birds start returning to nest on the revitalized property.

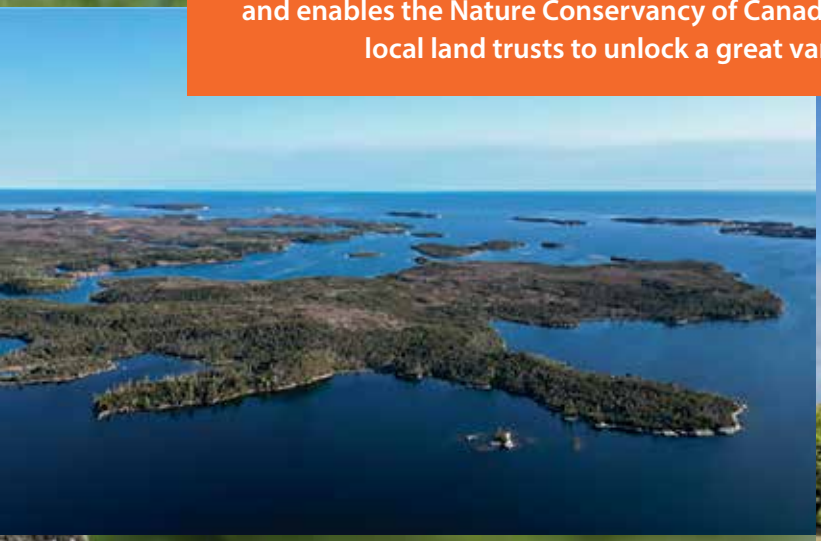
BEYOND ONE BILLION

Conservation in Canada is about partnerships: people coming together to protect wildlife and wild spaces. The Lemaires, Roussels and Van De Veldes are among the thousands who have teamed up with organizations like NCC, DUC, and regional and local land trusts through the NHCP to help conserve species' habitats and the natural areas that support life in Canada, by raising $1 billion in matching funds for conservation. For Canada, for all Canadians and for the wildlife that depend on natural spaces, the resounding effects are priceless.



THE POWER OF PARTNERSHIP

The Natural Heritage Conservation Program supports the diversity of life in Canada and enables the Nature Conservancy of Canada, Ducks Unlimited Canada, and regional and local land trusts to unlock a great variety of conservation opportunities.




YUKON
NORTHWEST TERRITORIES
NUNAVUT
BRITISH COLUMBIA
ALBERTA
SASKATCHEWAN
MANITOBA
McIntyre Ranch
Van De Velde
Denman Island Coastal Rainforest 1 & 2
Zen-Ridge
Lost Bay Nature Reserve

Natural Heritage Conservation Program

Impact from coast to coast and in communities
NCC, DUC and land trust projects in 2023–2024

- Nature Conservancy of Canada project
- Ducks Unlimited Canada project
- Land Trusts Conservation Fund project
- ✳ Completed between April 1, 2023 and March 31, 2024

Making history takes time

The story of Canada's largest conservation agreement was written over the course of more than a century

Ride alongside Ralph Thrall III as he drives across the rolling hills of McIntyre Ranch and you risk getting dizzy from all the head swivelling you'll be doing. His arm swings across the dash as he points out the many natural features and at-risk species that make up this southern Alberta landscape, which has been in his family for over 70 years. He knows its knolls, cliffs, ravines and inhabitants well.

Bought by his grandfather from the McIntyre family in 1948, the ranch stretches far beyond the Prairie horizon. McIntyre Ranching Co. Ltd.'s cattle share the 250 square kilometres of grasslands and wetlands with at-risk species like ferruginous hawk, chestnut-collared longspur, American badger and more than 350 species of plants, 130 species of birds and 25 species of mammals and reptiles. Their coexistence demonstrates how a ranching economy and conservation needs can — and must — thrive together, because here and everywhere, grasslands are losing ground.

While grasslands like the ones that Thrall is so familiar with once covered much of southern Canada, between the Rocky Mountains and the Great Lakes, over 80 per cent have been lost, altered or otherwise damaged by development, making this habitat among the most endangered and least protected on Earth. The view from the sky makes this clear. McIntyre Ranch and its adjacent protected areas stand out in satellite imagery. Their swirling mixture of greens, browns and blues, sculpted by glaciers and time, slam in stark contrast against the precisely cut quarter-sections of agricultural fields that make the rest of the Prairies look like a patchwork quilt.

Over decades, in the face of economic and industry pressures, the Thrall family has worked to conserve this contrast, striving to strike balance in the grasslands, between their lives in the Prairies and the life of the Prairies. This is the legacy the NHCP helps protect; this is the future the partnership helps secure.

"Being out on the land — hearing and seeing the raw, natural beauty that this land offered — helped me understand, on the one hand, how insignificant I am in the grand scheme of

McIntyre Ranch. Opposite: Western meadowlark; NCC regional vice-president Tom Lynch-Staunton and Ralph Thrall III (on right).

things, and it helped me realize I play a role in preserving it," says Thrall, the CEO of McIntyre Ranching Co. Ltd., which he co-owns with his three siblings.

In 2023, the Nature Conservancy of Canada and Ducks Unlimited Canada partnered with the Thrall family to make conservation history. By leveraging the matching power of the NHCP, the partners worked together to establish a conservation agreement across 225 square kilometres of the ranch: the largest conservation agreement in Canadian history. Through McIntyre Ranching Co. Ltd., the family donated more than half the conservation agreement's value, making it one of the largest ever donations under the federal Ecological Gifts Program. The NHCP enabled NCC and DUC to raise the remainder needed to conserve and steward this magnificent ranch.

"The family's long-time stewardship of this landscape and their desire to collaborate with NCC and DUC is what has given all of us this conservation opportunity," says Catherine Grenier, the Nature Conservancy of Canada's president and CEO.

A LEGACY OF STEWARDSHIP

When the McIntyre family arrived in southern Alberta with their cattle in the late 1800s, they recognized that conserving the health of the land would help their business survive as well. This meant that when the Thrall family purchased the ranch several decades later, they didn't just purchase a cattle-raising operation, they also bought into a ranching practice that prioritized the health of the grasslands.

"When our grandfather Ralph Thrall purchased the property from William McIntyre's son, he adopted that 'balance with nature' philosophy," says Thrall. "That legacy has continued through four generations of my family."

Today, the evidence of these decades of devotion is clear.

Golden eagles, prairie falcons and threatened ferruginous hawks patrol the skies from their perches atop the ranch's iconic sandstone hoodoo formations. At-risk American badgers burrow beneath the grasses and wildflowers that Weidemeyer's admiral butterflies help pollinate. And every year, breeding pairs of waterfowl and shorebirds like threatened lesser yellowlegs, horned grebes and western grebes flock to the ranch's many wetlands, joining at-risk grassland songbirds like Baird's sparrow and Brewer's sparrow in a springtime chorus that carries across the water on the Prairie winds.

"Our grassland species are declining at an alarming rate — they're simply losing their home," says Megan Jensen, NCC's local natural

Grassland bird populations have declined by nearly 60 per cent since 1970.

McIntyre Ranch stores 3.8 million tonnes of carbon in its plants and soil, equivalent to the annual emissions of 1.5 million passenger vehicles.

Land holders who enter into conservation agreements with NCC and DUC agree to keep the natural values of their land intact. Conservation agreements like the one struck with McIntyre Ranching Co. Ltd. provide compensation and offer tax incentives for landowners, acknowledging that, in entering into the agreement, the landowner is potentially forgoing more profitable land-use options in favour of conservation outcomes.

area manager. "There aren't many large, intact landscapes like McIntyre Ranch left in Canada, so conserving this special place is vital to ensuring these at-risk species have a future here."

GRAZING AND GRASSLANDS GO HAND IN HAND

"A lot of times, people think that we can have just these little remnant postage stamps of habitat and species will be okay," says Tracy Scott, Ducks Unlimited Canada's head of industry and government relations in Alberta. "That's not true. A lot of them depend on large, contiguous blocks of that ecosystem to be able to survive."

That's why it's so critical that McIntyre Ranch, alongside the adjacent conserved lands of Ross Lake Natural Area and Sandstone Ranch, is stewarded together, in an integrated way that prioritizes the health of these grasslands that for so long were shaped by thousands of roaming bison.

Today, NCC and DUC are working with producers like the Thralls to mimic the imprints left by the bison across the Prairies, ensuring that cattle grazing practices across conservation agreements let the land rest and recover between herd visits. Together, conservationists and producers are supporting sustainable management practices on these lands to help protect biodiversity and the Earth's life-support systems.

"We need this habitat — it's life-sustaining," says Jensen.

IMPACTS BEYOND THE FENCELINE

Eighty to 90 per cent of the organic carbon found in the Great Plains is stored underhoof within the soil. The native plants' driving roots lock sequestered carbon deep below the surface, which in turn helps store and filter water during spring melts and summer droughts. Conserving grasslands here in southern Alberta means protecting much-needed water stores for communities downstream in the Milk River Watershed. Given two-thirds of natural wetlands in the Prairies have been lost since settlement, the 3,600 that saturate McIntyre Ranch become that much more important to conserve.

"The Thrall family deserves a lot of credit for their stewardship of this land," says Scott. "They've done an excellent job, and now we can help them continue that, through this conservation agreement."

Throughout the year, McIntyre Ranch provides for the families that help steward it and for the species that live here. It does this not just through the economic opportunities it offers the Thralls, but for the ecosystem services that help secure healthy lives for many people in southern Alberta.

"The enormous scale and impact of this project is hard to comprehend if you haven't seen or walked on the land," says Michael Nadler, Ducks Unlimited Canada's CEO.

"Grasslands are every bit as important to the sustainability of this planet as our oceans and our rainforests," says Thrall. "Understanding this is why we have chosen to preserve the grasslands of the McIntyre Ranch."

IMPORTANCE IN A CHANGING WORLD

The McIntyre Ranch represents the largest private land conservation project achieved in the Canadian Prairies and the largest conservation agreement in Canadian history

McIntyre Ranch. Swainson's hawk.

— to date. Nature needs more opportunities like the ones the Thralls have provided.

Conserving McIntyre Ranch demonstrates that large-scale Prairie grassland conservation projects are not only possible but also achievable through collaboration, community engagement and a shared commitment to protecting Canada's natural heritage.

Canada's iconic grasslands continue to disappear due to land conversion, with nearly 68,000 hectares — three McIntyre Ranches' worth — lost every year. With them go carbon stores, pollinator factories, water filters, drought protection services and the sheer vibrancy that biodiversity offers to our lives. But projects like McIntyre Ranch push back against this loss. The Thralls' vision proves that conservation and ranching can benefit one another, for the good of everyone.

"Our hope," says Tom Lynch-Staunton, NCC's vice-president in Alberta, "is that this milestone spurs future achievements, made possible by our collective efforts to safeguard one of our planet's most endangered ecosystems, while ensuring a sustainable ranching future."

SNAPSHOTS OF SUCCESS

From the most delicate of lichens to the most adventurous migratory birds, Canada's iconic species are thriving in places conserved through the Natural Heritage Conservation Program.

Forging connections in the Frontenac Arch

It's not just the number of hectares conserved that count; it's how they connect

High in the canopy of the deciduous forest northeast of Kingston, Ontario, flits of blue and white leap from branch to branch, trailed by trilled, high-pitch calls. Here at the northern extent of the Carolinian forest, cerulean warblers nest, mate and build up their strength for their fall flights back to South America's Andes Mountains.

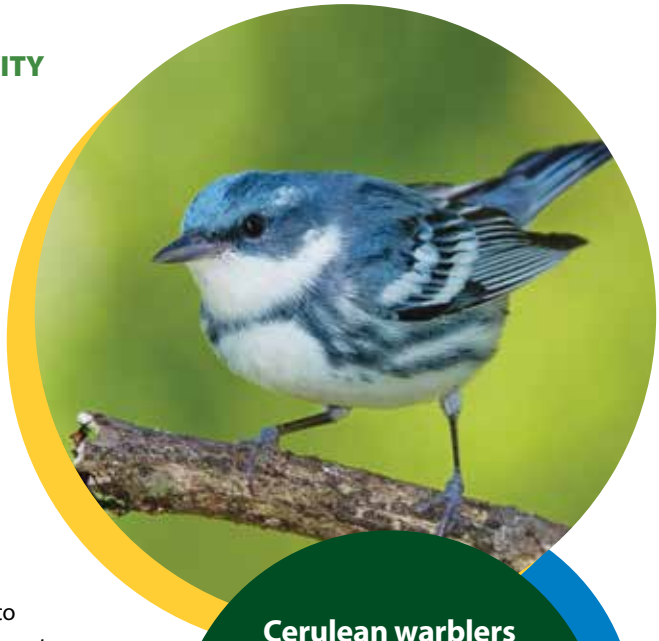
These warblers are among the 25 per cent of Canada's at-risk species that find habitat in the Frontenac Arch, a critical band of forests, exposed rock and wetlands that connect Algonquin Park to New York's Adirondack Mountains. This corridor forms part of an important north-south habitat linkage between the forests of the Canadian Shield and the Carolinian forest of the United States, which fosters a diversity of plant, insect and animal species. But the movement of species along the linkage is at risk of being disrupted by habitat fragmentation and a climate that is growing increasingly warmer, wetter and more variable, with extreme weather events that will change habitats in the region.

"Here in the Frontenac Arch Natural Area, there's more and more fragmentation from development and increasingly busier roads," says Rob McRae, NCC's program director for eastern Ontario. "That's why we need to work together now to reverse biodiversity loss and lessen the impact of climate change on this region."

Given the mounting pressures on this area, NCC and Ontario Nature are making great strides to protect contiguous habitat for the many species that can be found in these forests and wetlands. Because it's not just the number of hectares protected that count; it's how they connect to support the species that rely on them and the natural systems that flow through them.

NHCP BUILDS CONNECTIVITY FOR BIODIVERSITY

In 2023–2024, NCC leveraged the Natural Heritage Conservation Program to conserve two new conservation areas that protect forest, wetlands and shoreline in the Frontenac Arch. The newly established Blue Lake Nature Reserve, near Frontenac Provincial Park, features thriving intact forests and 1.4 kilometres of shoreline on Blue and Gould lakes. The Hawkridge Nature Reserve expansion northeast of Kingston adds an additional 73 hectares of significant wetlands to existing conservation lands that support numerous species.



Cerulean warblers are designated as an endangered species in Canada, with an estimated population of fewer than 1,000 birds.

Together, the 111 hectares across these two conservation areas feature intact deciduous forests, wetlands and pristine lake shorelines, creating a rich mosaic of habitats that support at-risk species like cerulean warbler, several species of snake and turtle, as well as excellent conditions for beaver and waterfowl, such as great blue heron, wood duck, common loon, hooded and common merganser and others.

> **80 per cent of Canada's Carolinian forest has been altered, developed or damaged**

In addition to providing important wildlife habitat, the waters of Blue Lake and nearby Gould Lake are the source of clean drinking water for the downstream community of Sydenham.

Nearby, Ontario Nature also deployed the NHCP in 2023–2024 to expand its Lost Bay Nature Reserve by securing an additional 23 hectares of upland forest and treed swamp that support more than 20 species at risk.

"When we learned that this critical habitat was up for sale, we jumped at it," says Caroline Schultz, executive director of Ontario Nature. "Not only does this increase the resilience of the existing nature reserve, but it is also advancing the key goal of creating a contiguous, connected protected habitat corridor."

Located within three kilometres of four Provincially Significant Wetlands, the latest addition to the Lost Bay Nature Reserve not only safeguards an important connection for wildlife to move and migrate between these wetlands, it also enhances landscape resilience to many anticipated impacts of climate change, including flooding and drought.

Together, NCC and Ontario Nature's efforts in the Frontenac Arch fit into a vast network of connected and protected areas throughout this corridor, which supports the survival and resiliency of many plants and animals. By expanding on the existing network of lands conserved by NCC, Ontario Nature and other conservation partners, projects like these help protect large expanses of habitat, so the species that live there can continue to move, feed, breed, nest and thrive.

Within the hectares

How the NHCP addresses nature's needs through strategic conservation of the habitats that matter most to species and people

Whooping crane.

While the success of the NHCP may be measured first and foremost in the hectares and dollars, its true impacts are felt far more acutely: they resonate deep within dens, ripple across wetlands and rustle through forest canopies across the country. It's in these landscapes, conserved through the NHCP, where the thousands of species that bring our world to life find suitable and secure habitat to live their lives. That's the hopeful power of the NHCP.

As the world sets course toward a nature-positive future, as prescribed by the Kunming-Montreal Agreement signed by Canada at COP15, the NHCP's ability to enable strategic conservation of the habitats that matter most to species and communities is paving the way. The partnership is pivotal to Canada's ability to achieve its nature needs, and it has already proved successful in helping stave of biodiversity loss.

In 2023–2024, NHCP partners conserved habitat for many species at risk. Here are some of their stories:

AMERICAN BADGER

Where the jagged slopes of the Rocky Mountains meet the grasslands and wetlands of BC's Rocky Mountain Trench, migratory and resident waterfowl abound. So, too, do Columbia ground squirrels, a favoured meal of the endangered American badger.

The Nature Conservancy of Canada began working in the area 20 year ago, at Thunder Hill Ranch, south of Canal Flats. It has since expanded the complex of NCC-supported conservation areas in the region to 9,100 hectares, including the nearly 270-hectare Skookumchuck Prairie project, conserved in 2023 through the NHCP.

TARGETED, NATIONAL ACTION FOR NATURE

From the Columbia Valley to the alvars of central Ontario and the Maritime marshes, the NHCP is helping partners conserve places that provide habitat to more than 250 species at risk, and secure ecosystem services like carbon storage, water filtration and recreational opportunities for communities. The partnership powers Canada's ability to address nature's needs.

Evidence of American badgers dot the landscape of the newly conserved grasslands and Ponderosa pine forest of Skookumchuck Prairie, their trademark dirt mounds and burrows signalling their presence and reliance on this habitat.

The endangered mammal shares the land in this Key Biodiversity Area with a host of other species. At-risk long-billed curlews forage and breed in the endangered grasslands, which support herds of hungry elk in the winter. Meanwhile, threatened Lewis' woodpeckers nest in the trunks and snags of dead Ponderosa pine.

EASTERN RIBBONSNAKE

Southern Ontario has lost more than 70 per cent of its naturally occurring wetlands and, with them, the ecosystem services that protect communities' water quality and the species that rely on them, like the threatened Eastern ribbonsnake. This elusive wetland predator can be most often found slithering or swimming close to the water's edge, looking for amphibians to ambush and warm surfaces to rest and bask on. But wetlands aren't necessarily enough for this species, either; in fact, it is rarely spotted in areas with little to no forest cover, which it needs for overwintering and breeding.

This is what makes the Couchiching Conservancy's Deverell-Morton Nature Reserve so special. At 169 hectares, this newly conserved area fits into a complex of alvar, wetland and forest conservation lands that help connect a 16-kilometre corridor of nature reserves between Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands Provincial Park and Canal Lake.

The land, which was donated by a family who has stewarded it for more than a century, also offers habitat for at-risk species like Blanding's turtle, least bittern and yellow rail.

LESSER YELLOWLEGS

Saltwater marshes meet freshwater wetlands in Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia; so, too, do thousands of birds journeying between northern breeding grounds and winter habitats every year. That's why Ducks Unlimited Canada conserved an additional 104 hectares of saltmarsh and peatbog three kilometres from Yarmouth, through the NHCP in 2023–2024.

While lesser yellowlegs' migration range stretches from Haida Gwaii, off BC's north coast, to Newfoundland and Labrador, fall migration surveys suggest that their populations across the continent have fallen dramatically since the 1970s. And as Canada boasts roughly 80 per cent of the bird's breeding population, conservation efforts like DUC's Beveridge Road Purchase is vital to their survival.

Many other bird species also converge at this meeting point of fresh and saltwater, including endangered red knots and barn swallows, threatened bobolinks, and 29 other species of special concern.

Top to bottom: American badger; eastern ribbonsnake; whooping crane stopover habitat.

In the 1940s, fewer than 30 individual whooping cranes could be found in Canada. Fast-forward nearly a century and their numbers have multiplied to around 600 individuals. This massive bird's ongoing recovery would not have been possible without conservation.

Whooping cranes spend their springs and summers nesting in Wood Buffalo National Park, in the Northwest Territories, and their winters in the wetlands of the American south. Conservation areas supported through the NHCP, such as DUC's 130-hectare conservation agreement near Humboldt, Saskatchewan, provide important stopover habitat along the iconic and endangered birds' migration route, where they can rest and refuel for their journeys.

A growing number of other conserved areas along their flyway are also helping ensure the birds can continue to breed and flourish.

Land Trusts Conservation Fund

Through the Land Trusts Conservation Fund (LTCF), the Natural Heritage Conservation Program provides important matching support that helps communities come together to conserve habitat for species and protect ecosystem services.

The LTCF provides over $5 million annually to land trusts and conservation organizations to work in their communities. NHCP partner Wildlife Habitat Canada administers the funding program, with the support of the Alliance of Canadian Land Trusts, which works closely with its regional alliance parters and represents local and regional land trusts. In the past year, the NHCP's support resulted in successful conservation projects with 20 land trusts from seven provinces. These organizations completed 31 projects, resulting in the protection of just over 5,700 hectares. These important projects protect natural spaces for wildlife while offering nature-based solutions to support healthy and prosperous communities.

The LTCF also provides capacity-building funding to the ACLT and regional alliances, including the Alliance of British Columbia, the Ontario Land Trust Alliance, and Réseau de milieux naturels protégés, to support local and regional land trusts in enhancing their governance and operational capabilities.

Here are three great examples of LTCF projects that illustrate what can be accomplished when neighbours come together to create lasting conservation impact.

ISLAND NATURE TRUST

SAVING SALT MARSHES AND FORESTED BOG IN PEI

The coastal salt marsh at the Island Nature Trust's MapleCross – Nebraska Creek Natural Area is working overtime to help buffer Prince Edward Island against the impacts of storm surges, alongside forested wetlands that support many at-risk species.

Provincially rare balsam poplar, black ash and highbush cranberry grow within the natural area's black spruce, speckled alder, red maple and eastern white cedar forest. This ecosystem supports ideal conditions for federally listed species like Canada warbler, eastern wood-pewee and wrinkled shingle lichen.

In a province where over 86 per cent of land is privately held, the LTCF is helping keep habitats connected across property boundaries to support these vulnerable species.

NATURE TRUST
BRITISH COLUMBIA

CONNECTING HABITATS FOR RESILIENCY ON DENMAN ISLAND

While the brown, orange and white wings of Taylor's checkerspot butterfly once flitted in meadows from California to Vancouver Island, today, the endangered pollinator is known to live only in two concentrated locations in British Columbia, and a handful of others in Washington and Oregon. The Nature Trust of British Columbia's (NTBC) latest conservation area on Denman Island is helping ensure these resilient insects have the meadow and wetland habitat they need to thrive.

NTBC's 20.5-hectare conservation area fits into an existing complex of over 140 hectares of provincially and privately protected lands, increasing the connectivity and resiliency of sensitive ecosystems like coastal Douglas fir forest, seasonal wetlands, and an important salmon spawning stream on the island.

CONNEXION NATURE

AN UNCOMMON FOREST IN SOUTHERN QUEBEC

Famous for its farming and orchards, the Mont Saint-Hilaire Biosphere Region was the first UNESCO-designated biosphere region in Canada, and today it is home to the largest concentration of ancient forests in Quebec, as well as over 60 at-risk species.

From the top of Montreal's Mount Royal, Mont Saint-Hilaire can be seen as a bump on the eastern horizon. From there, draw a line eastward over a 30-kilometre ribbon of forest to Connexion Nature's first forested conservation area in the municipality of Saint-Jude, at the far reaches of the biosphere region. Having long been stewarded by a private landowner, the seven-hectare conservation area, which is made up of white pine, red maple, balsam fir and American beech, supports warblers, woodpeckers, raptors and at-risk species like eastern wood-pewee and wood thrush. Airborne mammals live here, too, including flying squirrels and several species of endangered bats, which have been identified with ultrasonic detectors.

The NHCP partners gratefully acknowledge the work of Canadian land trusts through the Land Trusts Conservation Fund:

- Algoma Highlands Conservancy
- Bruce Peninsula Biosphere Association
- Capitale Nature
- Connexion Nature
- Conservation Lakefield
- Couchiching Conservancy
- Georgian Bay Land Trust
- Island Nature Trust
- Kawartha Land Trust
- Long Point Basin Land Trust
- Magnetawan Watershed Land Trust
- Nature Trust of British Columbia
- Nature Trust of New Brunswick
- Nova Scotia Nature Trust
- Ontario Farmland Trust
- Ontario Nature
- Regroupement pour la pérennité de l'île Verte
- Southern Alberta Land Trust Society
- Thunder Bay Field Naturalists Club
- W̱SÁNEĆ Lands Trust Society

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