

# The Wolfe Tree: Our Own Natural Wonder

*Stewardship Manager Dennis Briede contributed this guest article about an ancient and amazing tree preserved by The Land Conservancy right in our own backyard.*

When one thinks of huge trees, the ones that first come to mind are the mighty redwood trees or the giant sequoias, but New Jersey has some colossal trees of its own. Back in 1978, I noticed a very large tree in a field near Route 46 and Wolfe Road in Mount Olive. I had to investigate, and it turned out to be a huge white ash tree. Years later, I started working as the Stewardship Manager at The Land Conservancy of New Jersey, which had purchased the property on which the huge ash tree stood. I had to measure the tree—at the time, it measured about 19 feet around.

Recently I called Joe Bennett, the regional NJ state forester. I met him at the tree, and we measured it at almost 21 feet around at 4.5 feet above the ground (the official measuring height). This tree is 76 feet tall with a crown spread of 99 feet! This monster is only 6 inches shy of the record-holding white ash tree in New Jersey. It is the second largest white ash tree in Morris County and the third largest in the state. But the most amazing thing about the Wolfe Tree is this: it's about 400 years old!

The history of this tree goes back to about 1624, before New Jersey was a state. This tree began growing when only the native Lenni Lenape lived in the area. The land now known as New Jersey has been inhabited by Indigenous peoples for over 10,000 years. The ancestors of the Lenape, often referred to as the Delaware, were a network of individual nations whose traditional homelands once covered a vast area along the eastern seaboard, including parts of present-day New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New York.



*The Wolfe Tree, with stewardship intern Brandon for scale.*

The birth of this tree goes back 71 years before the first European settlement in the area, known as Morris County. This tree's birth goes back before the flagship of the Massachusetts Bay Company arrived in Salem. Before Galileo published his final book on physics. Back when Rembrandt was 18 years old.

Based on our findings, the Wolfe Tree is large enough to be included in the official New Jersey Big and

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## Community Garden at South Branch Preserve Thrives for 15 Years

Are you looking forward to spring as much as we are? Our popular Community Garden at South Branch Preserve is gearing up for its 15th season! It was built for the benefit of the local residents so that they would have a place to grow their own organic vegetables and flowers. Gardeners not only grow food for their own families, but also donate produce to the local food pantries for others in their community. Members can enjoy a slate of gardening events and programs throughout the season. We are pleased to say that all 145 plots are sold out once again this year!



# FROM MY PERSPECTIVE



Despite living in a big, busy world with more avenues of connection than ever before, it's easy to feel isolated. Spending time in nature is widely known to help us feel more grounded, peaceful, and connected—to each other and to the land we occupy. This is why I feel so privileged to be a part of the small but mighty team at the Land Conservancy of New Jersey. As the membership manager, it is my job to oversee all the wonderful ways that we are able to connect our supporters with the Garden State's green spaces—preserved or yet to be.

Whether that means digging holes for 100 saplings on a crisp spring Saturday morning, or processing dozens of scholarship applications from future environmental leaders, I know that my work will always be impactful and never dull!

I started with TLCNJ almost four years ago, stepping out of an outreach role in a county library system and into the conservation world for the first time. On my third day, I was already out

planting pollinator seedlings at South Branch Preserve alongside a group of longtime members. As I patted the dirt around the new roots, I thought of time spent as a child following behind my mother, watering the petunias and snapdragons she'd plant in the early days of summer. I feel incredibly lucky to have grown up on a family farm in Warren County surrounded by hay fields and dense woodland, forging a deep connection to and appreciation for our natural world. The Land Conservancy plays a crucial role in safeguarding those spaces so that future generations can experience and cherish the natural world in the same way.

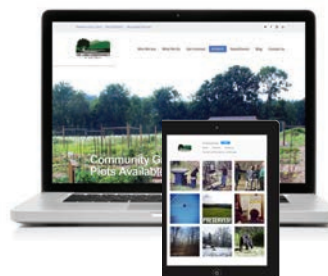
In the few years I've been here, we've grown and adapted so much as an organization, taking on new ventures like the Outdoor Ambassador Program, hosting large-scale community events, and expanding our preservation work into new corners of the state. My goal is to have each and every member feel connected to our organization, our work, and to the land beneath their feet. Your shared passion and support make it possible for us to have preserved nearly 30,000 acres across the state. We're in this together!

Please reach out any time with questions, concerns or just to chat about what conservation work means to you. You can reach me at [bdurkin@tlcnj.org](mailto:bdurkin@tlcnj.org) or (973) 957-2683.

*Breanna Durkin*  
Membership Manager

## GET MORE FROM THE LAND CONSERVANCY

If you enjoy this newsletter, follow us on social media and sign up for our mailing list. You'll receive occasional dispatches from the field and learn about conservation issues, our preserves and programs, the people and organizations we partner with, and what we're working on in your area. You can also visit [tlcnj.org](http://tlcnj.org) to read our blog.



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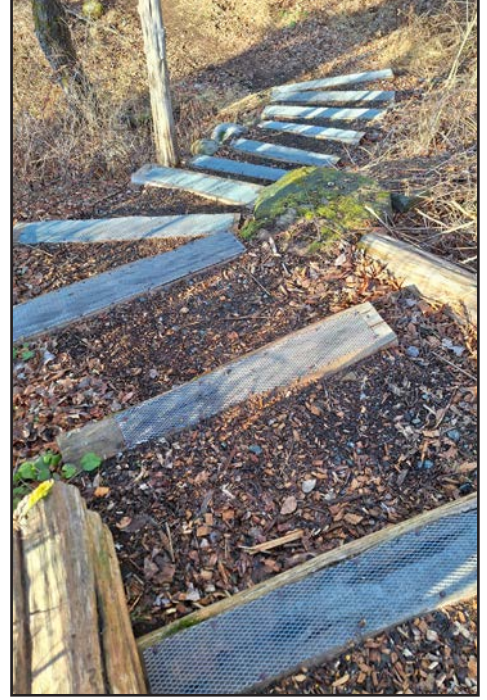
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# Take a Peek at the Wildlife Blind

Even in winter, the wildlife blind at South Branch Preserve is a hotbed of activity, especially for wild birds. This swampy area, just across Route 46 from Budd Lake, constitutes the headwaters of the South Branch of the Raritan River. It's easily accessible from the parking area, and there's a good chance you'll be rewarded with a view of a great blue heron, or a wood turtle, or a mallard. We recently repaired the blind and boardwalk, and also placed metal mesh on the wooden stairs going down from the field so they remain passable even when there's ice and snow. Come see for yourself!



## You Can Make New Jersey's Future Greener

Have you ever considered how the investments you've made in The Land Conservancy of New Jersey have helped create a brighter future for our state?

Take, for example, Split Rock Mountain. Not long ago, the mountain seemed destined to be lost to the ever-reaching development that

sprawls out from Manhattan. Today, the sacred ancestral site of the Ramapo Munsee Nation stands as a beacon of hope for the preservation of land and those who protect it. That's thanks to supporters like you.



Now, we invite you to take the next step in helping to build a greater, greener tomorrow by becoming a member of our Legacy Giving Circle. This extraordinary group of supporters have named The Land Conservancy of New Jersey in their estate plans, knowing that their generosity and forethought will help protect natural resources in the Garden State long into the future. Legacy Giving Circle members are the game-changers who solidify a strong financial future that ensures our vital work will continue.

For a limited time, The Land Conservancy will receive \$1,000 for every pledge form we receive. This challenge match only applies to the first 13 forms, so act now! Find the form at [www.tlc-nj.org/become-a-member](http://www.tlc-nj.org/become-a-member). If you are interested in learning more about the Legacy Giving Circle or have questions, please contact Amber Ray at (973) 957-7195 or [aray@tlc-nj.org](mailto:aray@tlc-nj.org).



# Forest Acquired on Jacksonburg Creek

The Land Conservancy of New Jersey recently acquired 24 acres of forested land along Jacksonburg Creek in Hardwick Township, a critical new piece in our Yards Creek Preserve. Slowly but surely, The Land Conservancy and our partners are connecting significant amounts of green forested habitat along the slopes of the Kittatinny Ridge in the Delaware River Watershed, creating a resilient ecosystem that will better adapt to climate change while supporting diverse populations of native plants and animals. Yards Creek Preserve now totals 346 acres.

The newly acquired property is adjacent to nonprofit land, YMCA Camp Ralph Mason. Jacksonburg Creek, a Category 1 waterway, runs along the eastern boundary. The Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area is one lot away, just beyond the western boundary. The addition of this property will continue an important forested greenway in Hardwick Township and is a critical piece in the corridor that has come to be known as Bobcat Alley.

This acquisition—the eighth one for Yards Creek Preserve—was made possible with the help of NJDEP Green Acres as well as grant funding provided by OSI through the William Penn Foundation DRWI and The Nature Conservancy, organizations that have targeted the Delaware River Watershed as a critical region for protecting climate resilient land and water resources.

Why is protecting this area so important? Yards Creek Preserve is near the Appalachian Trail and adjacent to more than 76,000 acres of public land in the Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area. The preserve acts as a carbon sink using native vegetation, mature forests of oak and hickory, and healthy soils. Conservation of this ecologically sensitive land is creating a resilient ecosystem that will better adapt to climate change while supporting diverse populations of native plants and animals. The Land Conservancy's efforts are connecting significant amounts of green forested habitat along the slopes of the Kittatinny Ridge to enable the movement of wildlife without interference by human activity.



Yards Creek Preserve was established in 2019 as an ambitious conservation project that will help protect drinking water for millions of the region's inhabitants and curb encroaching development. TLCNJ has identified over 1,000 acres of particularly vulnerable and richly diverse land to preserve in the Delaware River Basin, one of the most important watersheds on the East Coast. Fifteen million people rely on the basin for clean drinking water—including the cities of Trenton, Philadelphia, Wilmington, and New York City.

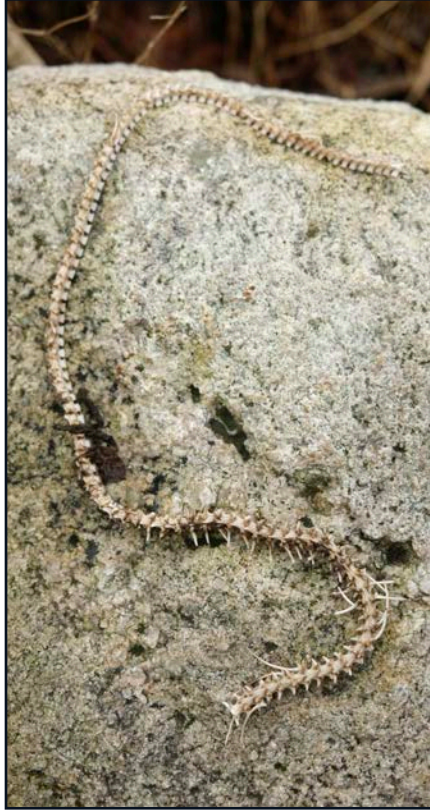
Our Vice President of Land Preservation and Stewardship, Sandy Uργο says, "This property is one of only a few locations where wild corridor connections remain relatively uninterrupted by house lots. This land contains tremendous water resources, including a beautiful stretch of Jacksonburg Creek. Substantial biodiversity remains intact, with a very wide array of native wildflowers. It is critical that we continue to preserve the remaining connective land, especially the parcels that sit this high in the landscape and are so integral to Bobcat Alley and the natural greenway we have been working to secure. We are indebted to our partners at Green Acres, OSI and The Nature Conservancy for their support and financial contributions to this preservation project."

# Starting the Year Right

For the third year in a row we continued our tradition of hosting a hike at one of our preserves on New Year's Day. First Day Hikes is a nationwide initiative that encourages people to spend time outdoors and start the new year with some fun, healthy physical activity. First

Day Hikes are usually family friendly and not too challenging, focused more on quality time with nature.

In 2025, over 68,000 people all over the country participated in First Day Hikes. Ours took place at Nancy Conger West Brook Preserve in West Milford, where we got to check out the ongoing results of our 2020 restoration at the headwaters of the West Brook, which feeds the important Wanaque Reservoir. We saw how well the beaver dam analogs are holding water through the dry months of the winter, and we found neat artifacts like a perfectly intact snake skeleton.



## The Wolfe Tree: Our Own Natural Wonder

Heritage Tree Registry. The registry has been kept since the 1930s and helps document big, heritage, and noteworthy trees in the state, and it also documents the changes these big trees have undergone over almost a century of time. Joe has entered the Wolfe Tree's statistics, photographs, and location into their database. It has now been classified as a Signature Tree, which is characterized by unique features and aesthetics. Trees of this caliber are rare and should be maintained and protected as often as possible. Trees of this size are mega resources and perform 600 times the environmental benefits of your average tree.

Over the past decade, ash trees have been attacked by the ash borer insects, which are slowly decimating

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these beautiful and important trees. As a labor of love, Brian O'Neill of Weeds Inc. (located in Bethlehem, PA) has been inoculating the Wolfe Tree for several years in order to protect it. Hopefully it will continue to live and be enjoyed by all long into the future.

The next time you drive east on Route 46 in Mount Olive between Naughtright Road and Wolfe Road, look to the right at the edge of the field and gaze at this natural wonder, which is located in the northern section of our South Branch Preserve.



# Farewell and Thank You, Kathleen!

After 17 years with The Land Conservancy of New Jersey, Kathleen Caccavale is retiring as our Planning Consultant.

Kathi started with us in June 2007, helping develop farm and open space plans. She created our first environmental resource inventory, and to this day we still use her project template for crafting and researching these reports. She became the project guru for reporting on our annual grants from the William Penn Foundation. When working on trail plans, like the ones we planned in Montville, she not only did the research, but she would take her bicycle out to test ride the routes and hike all the trails we proposed.



*Kathleen Caccavale hiking in Alaska.*

Kathi is dedicated, smart, creative, detailed, and passionate. She never said no to an idea, was always eager to help, and loved projects that were especially challenging. Our partnership has been a great one, and we will miss working with her. Thank you, Kathi!

## Brandon Zabriskie Named Sargent Intern

Each year we give the Richard M. Sargent Award to recognize one outstanding intern for the significant work they have done for the organization. This year we're honoring Brandon Zabriskie, a Montclair State biology student whose hard work, caring, and curiosity delights everyone he works with. Brandon is the kind of guy who doesn't hesitate to put on a pair of waders and scoop macroinvertebrates out of the river for kids to examine up close.



to learn more about the natural world.” We certainly found that to be true in talking and working with Brandon.

He says, “When many people think about protecting the environment, they focus on rainforests or coral reefs. At TLCNJ I’ve learned that the world in our backyard is just as beautiful and important as any of these other places.”

The Land Conservancy established the Richard M. Sargent, Jr. Internship in 2007 as a sustainable, on-going internship to hire students to work with our staff, which benefits both the students and The Land Conservancy. This fund was established in honor of Dick Sargent, a dedicated conservationist who served on The Land Conservancy of New Jersey’s board of trustees for more than a decade. Congratulations, Brandon, for carrying on Dick’s legacy!

Brandon’s manager, Dennis Briede, describes him as “a hardworking, caring person who is always eager

## Scholarships Help NJ Students Take Flight

We are currently reviewing applications to award SEVEN scholarships totaling \$70,000 to New Jersey college students this year! 2024 winner Nikki Morley is exactly the kind of student we're looking for—achieving academic excellence while demonstrating leadership and a passion for protecting our natural resources. After getting an animal science degree, Nikki was a planning intern with TLCNJ, then went on to a master's in ecology and ecosystems at the University of Vienna.

Nikki says, “If you can get people interested in the local land they have ties to, you can get them interested in saving it and the animals that live there. That skill has been indispensable to my work and research. I am so grateful to put the scholarship towards furthering my education and, ultimately, spreading the message of conservation.”

