

# CONSERVATION LANDS MANAGER

By Jeanne Harmor, NCFA Director of Communications



**T**here are many career paths individuals can pursue in forestry, and they're all vital to our industry's success. In this issue of *TreeLine*, we sat down with Katie Stovall, Conservation Lands Manager at Three Rivers Land Trust, to learn more about her career journey and the way she gives back to North Carolina's land and forests.

*Katie Stovall, conservation lands manager at Three Rivers Land Trust, manages the organization's 10,000 acres and the land of private landowners through the Habitat Enhancement Lands Program. Stovall is standing in a clover food plot planted with the objective to increase deer forage.*

## The Disappearing Mayberry

Katie Stovall grew up in rural Mount Airy, North Carolina, an area affectionately referred to as “Mayberry.” She developed an early love for the outdoors, spending her childhood catching crawdads and salamanders. This passion allowed Stovall to truly observe and memorize her environment, gaining a deep appreciation for the way it provides for the community.

Over time, Stovall noticed the land was slowly changing. Consistent population growth in North Carolina led to rapid development, and to Stovall, every acre developed was an acre lost for wildlife.

“I remember noticing these land changes in high school and thinking, if we want these wildlife communities to persist, we have to do something about it,” said Stovall. “At the time, I wasn't sure of my career path, but I was sure that I wanted to be a part of the solution.”

## Dual Degrees, One Goal

Stovall began her education at Surry Community College, where she earned her associate degree in science. This allowed her to work part-time at Pilot Mountain State Park, affording her an early understanding of wildlife management. Inspired to pursue a hands-on career in natural resources, she enrolled at Western Carolina University to earn an undergraduate degree in natural resource conservation and management.

with a concentration in forestry. This led to her “third act”: earning a master’s in wildlife science at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

“Over time, I figured out exactly what kind of career I wanted,” said Stovall. “At first, I loved forestry because of my love for trees — but then I discovered I didn’t fully understand the whole ecosystem. I broadened my studies to wildlife habitat management and soon learned that I loved it all!”

Today, Stovall serves as both a forester and a wildlife biologist at Three Rivers Land Trust. Her background positions her to make holistic management decisions for the organization and its partners.

“Professors in my early wildlife classes described the land as a canvas — you can paint it how you want,” said Stovall. “That has always stuck with me.”

## Active Management: The Land Trust Difference

Three Rivers Land Trust (TRLT) is on a mission to conserve the natural areas, rural landscapes, family farms, scenic rivers, and historic places in the central Piedmont and Sandhills of North Carolina. As a nonprofit, TRLT depends on donations and grants to facilitate public access and provide everyone with the opportunity to experience nature.

The organization manages 10,000 acres of its own land while working with private landowners to carry out management plans. Stovall manages the Habitat Enhancement Lands Program (HELP), which assists private landowners who want to improve wildlife habitat quality. According to Stovall, the primary difference between TRLT and a traditional consulting forester is the specialized wildlife expertise woven into every management plan.

“Right now, we are in the heart of controlled burn season,” said Stovall. “I spend about 80% of my time managing our organization’s land, and the rest is dedicated to HELP. We start with a landowner’s objectives, create an individualized plan, and then we implement.”

## Living for the “Aha!” Moments

For Stovall, the work is deeply rewarding. Seeing plant and wildlife communities respond to her strategies reinforces her passion. While the outcome of an intentional management prescription can never be guaranteed, the moments

when everything comes together are the most fulfilling. Stovall especially enjoys watching landowners witness this success for the first time.

“If we want to make a difference in North Carolina, it starts on private land,” said Stovall. “We are cultivating stewards of the land by getting people invested in the future of their own acreage.”

Stovall recalls a landowner experiencing his first “aha!” moment: “We had a landowner interested in deer habitat who didn’t have much prior management knowledge. We created a plan that he researched and followed meticulously. He was happy as could be after finding larger-than-average deer antler sheds on his property. Now, he’s continuously improving his land with timber stand improvement and herd management. We even worked with him to convert hay fields to native early succession, creating brooding cover for turkeys and fawning cover for deer. He is now heavily invested in the process.”

## The Challenge: Fighting the Clock and the Screen

Because North Carolina is one of the fastest-growing states in the nation, Stovall often feels she is fighting the clock. Between species loss and land-use changes, the pressure is constant. It’s important to have a passion for today’s natural resources and fully stand behind the work you are doing every day to improve the land.

Beyond the physical changes to the landscape, Stovall notes that technological advances can sometimes dull the passion for physical observation in the newer generation.

“There are experienced experts in the field today with a vast array of institutional knowledge, often documented in handwritten notes,” said Stovall. “Modern technology can sometimes take away from that ‘fire’ and passion. You must take the time to get outside, listen to the birds, and physically observe the nature that surrounds you.”

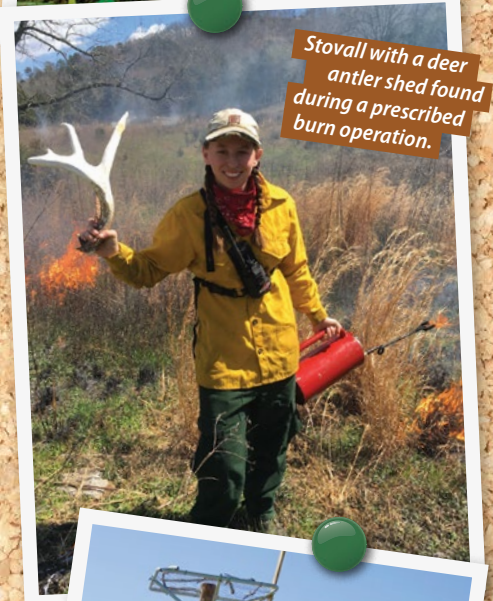
## Advice: Just Do It

Stovall isn’t just managing acres; she is cultivating the next generation of stewards. She encourages young people to dive headfirst into the field.

“Just do it,” said Stovall. “Network and say yes to every opportunity. If you have the chance to meet professionals out in the field, do it! Direct experience can take you much further than traditional networking methods.” ■



Stovall with a handful of delectable pawpaws.



Stovall with a deer antler shed found during a prescribed burn operation.



Pictured left to right: Matthew Williams (TRLT Habitat Enhancement Lands Coordinator), Jim Blythe (TRLT volunteer), and Katie Stovall (TRLT Conservation Lands Manager) stand proudly in front of an osprey nesting platform installed in Cabarrus County.