

# THE SOUTH'S LANDLOCKED PUBLIC LANDS

Untapped Hunting and  
Fishing Opportunities in  
Florida, North Carolina,  
Arkansas, and Tennessee



A New Collaborative Analysis by onX and TRCP

The American South is home to some of our nation's richest hunting and fishing traditions.

And the future of those pastimes depends on access to lands held in public ownership. These unique landscapes provide the opportunities that allow all of us—regardless of our income, connections, or property ownership—to participate in outdoor pursuits.

But in Florida, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee, sportsmen and women are losing out on more than 174,000 acres of public land where there is no permanent, legal access.

These local, state, and federal public lands are, as a general rule, legally open to public hunting and fishing, but they are surrounded by private land with no public roads or trails to reach them.\* Landlocked parcels range in size from just a single acre to many hundreds of acres and guarantee access to no one except the neighboring landowners and those with permission to cross private lands.

Today, when time in the outdoors is more valuable than ever, unlocking public lands represents one of the most obvious and actionable ways to provide more opportunities for more people to enjoy the woods and waters of our country.



Gavin Griffin

## Public Lands in the South

Although the vast majority of federally managed lands are located in the Intermountain and Pacific West, every U.S. region has a unique array of public land hunting and fishing opportunities that play a critical role in our ability to recruit, retain, and reactivate license-buying sportsmen and women. The South is no exception.

Places like the Ozark-St. Francis National Forest in Arkansas and the Pisgah National Forest in North Carolina can provide as much of a backcountry adventure as any public lands in states farther west. And there are also millions of acres of state, county, and municipally managed lands that provide critical access for outdoor enthusiasts close to home.

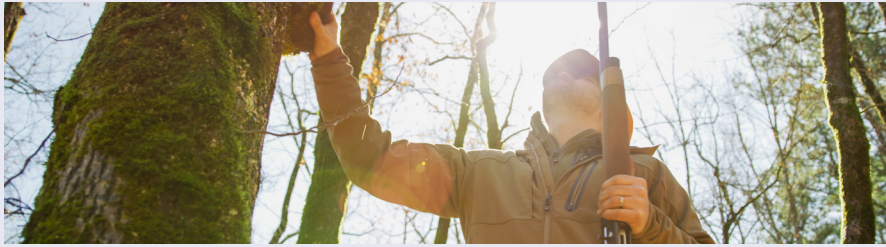
These days, anyone with a smartphone can take advantage of the opportunities offered by smaller public tracts. For a hunter looking to call in a limit of ducks, work a pond for largemouth bass, or run their dogs for all sorts of game, access to an overlooked public parcel could be a difference-maker. And easy access

to a lakeshore, riverbank, or coastal inlet might give a parent the only place where they'll be able to teach their kids to fish for catfish, bluegills, or speckled trout. As more and more Americans reside in urban or suburban areas, families and individuals need nearby opportunities to share outdoor pastimes with the next generation of sportsmen and women.

Strategically unlocking as little as a few dozen inaccessible acres at a time could mean the difference between someone having a place to explore the outdoors or not. A lifelong passion for hunting or fishing—and the conservation funding generated by those license purchases—could hang in the balance.

Florida	North Carolina	Arkansas	Tennessee
<b>75 K</b>	<b>49 K</b>	<b>28 K</b>	<b>22 K</b>
Total Landlocked Acres	Total Landlocked Acres	Total Landlocked Acres	Total Landlocked Acres
<b>Total in Four States: 174 K Acres</b>			

\* Properties enrolled in state walk-in access programs, though hugely valuable—can change hands and/or decline to renew and thus were not factored into this analysis. Conversely, permanent recorded easements do provide the public with access in perpetuity and, as a result, were incorporated into the analysis using the best-available data.



Jordan Riley

## Landlocked by History

The diverse history of the southeastern United States has significant implications for the way that public lands are organized—and in some cases isolated by private lands—today.

States such as North Carolina, which had been among the original 13, and Tennessee, part of which had been a territorial claim of North Carolina until it was ceded to the federal government, used an older survey system known as “metes and bounds” to create property lines following geographic features and other landmarks.

Other states were acquired through treaties with foreign powers, such as the Louisiana Purchase, and so their lands were organized according to the survey system used across the West and Midwest to divide the federal government’s acquisitions into a grid-like pattern of ranges, townships, and sections. These states—Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Louisiana, and Mississippi—are known as the South’s “public land states.”

But over time, as in other parts of the country, many public lands in the South were sold off. Particularly in the areas between the Appalachian Mountains and Mississippi River, where demand for cotton, the region’s primary cash crop, produced a westward land rush. During the first half of the 19th century, large speculative purchases resulted in the massive transfer of public lands into private hands.

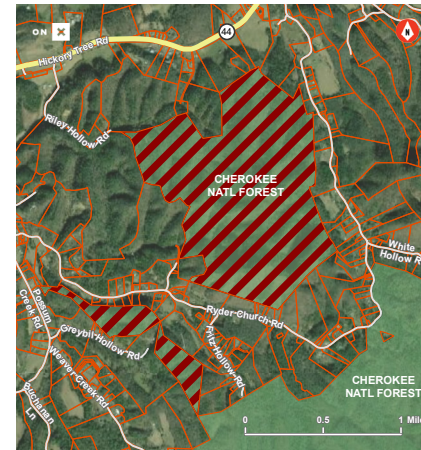
Following the Civil War, Congress enacted the Southern Homestead Act to reduce speculation and encourage land ownership among

formerly enslaved people and, later, white people loyal to the Union, but there were a number of barriers to the full implementation of the law and it was repealed in 1876 as the Reconstruction Era came to an end. As a result, the remaining federal estate in the South was subject to massive land sales in which timber and mineral interests accumulated huge swaths of forests.

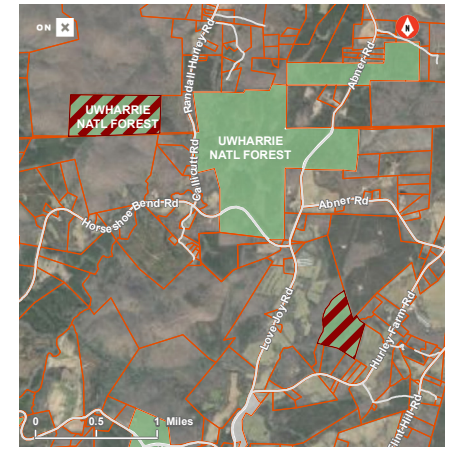
In the early 20th century, however, the region’s public-land legacy was reborn, beginning with the passage of the Weeks Act in 1911. The law empowered the federal government to acquire lands for national forests in the eastern United States. The intention of the law was to restore cut-over and eroded lands, thereby conserving timber resources and important watersheds.

The 1930s saw the establishment of state forests and parks, in part with the help of Civilian Conservation Corps workers who built facilities and infrastructure. States also began to acquire Wildlife Management Areas to conserve important habitat for game species, as well as to provide hunting and fishing opportunities for the public.

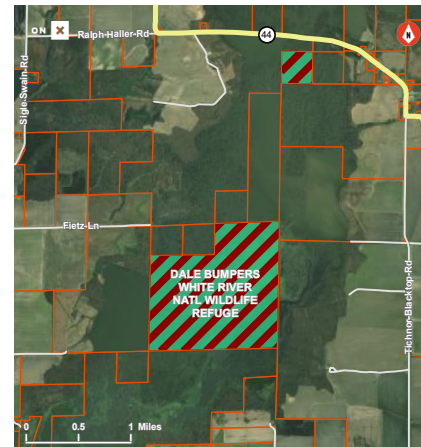
The result of all of this is today’s unique system of county, state, and federal land holdings and, unfortunately, a remnant patchwork of landlocked public lands.



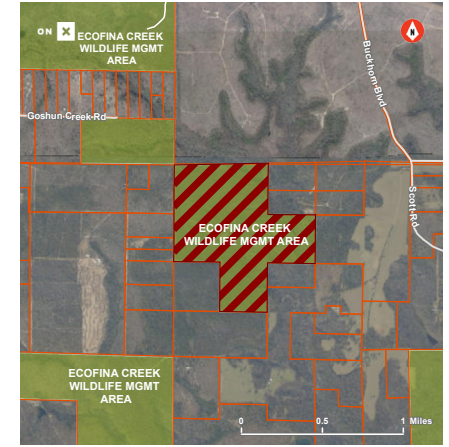
**Tennessee:** These three isolated parcels of the Cherokee National Forest fall along the western slope of Holston Mountain. Totalling more than 550 acres, they are managed cooperatively by the Forest Service and the state as part of the North Cherokee Wildlife Management Area.



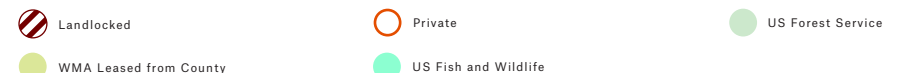
**North Carolina:** Located central to many of the state’s major metropolitan areas, North Carolina’s Uwharrie National Forest contains a number of landlocked tracts of public land. These two parcels add up to 150 acres straddling Wysner Mountain.



**Arkansas:** Northwest of the confluence of the White and Arkansas Rivers, nearly 575 acres of the Dale Bumpers White River National Wildlife Refuge are surrounded by private lands with no public access.



**Florida:** At the headwaters of its namesake waterway, the Econfina Creek Wildlife Management Area contains this 250-acre parcel with no legal public access.



## Solutions

Landlocked public lands are best made accessible through cooperative agreements with private landowners that result in land exchanges, acquisitions, and easements, but this critical work cannot be undertaken without funding. When it comes to opening inaccessible public lands, even small projects can offer big benefits. Here are key programs in each state that support these efforts:

### Tennessee

In 1987, Tennessee created the state Wetland Fund to acquire and protect wetlands, primarily on the Mississippi River Alluvial Plain. The program has since been expanded to protect uplands and other habitats across the state, and public access is a priority with all new land acquisitions. Funded at between \$12 million and \$19 million each year, the Wetland Fund is an effective tool that could be applied to unlock inaccessible public lands that offer important habitats and hunting and fishing opportunities.

### Arkansas

The Arkansas Natural and Cultural Resources Council was established by the Arkansas Legislature in 1987 to oversee grants and a trust fund for the acquisition, management, and stewardship of state-owned properties. These grants are funded through the state's real estate transfer tax to protect and maintain natural areas, historic sites, and outdoor recreation access points. Funded at more than \$20 million annually in recent years, a portion of ANCRC funds can be used for state land acquisition—including natural areas, state parks, and state forests—and these dollars are frequently leveraged with federal matching grants, including those from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

### North Carolina

The North Carolina Land and Water Fund—formerly known as the Clean Water Management Trust Fund—was established in 1996 to protect the state's drinking water sources. Since that time, the program's purpose has expanded to include other conservation and recreation needs such as boosting public access, and the fund has conserved more than half a million acres and protected or restored 3,000 miles of streams and rivers. The Land and Water Fund is an important tool for opening new recreation opportunities, and \$11 million was appropriated for land acquisition in 2020.

### Florida

Florida Forever is a major conservation and recreational lands acquisition program used by the state to open 818,000 acres to the public with \$3.1 billion in funding since 2001. The list of crucial habitats and recreation opportunities protected through the Florida Forever program is immense, with funding being spread across 10 different agencies. With a goal of increasing public recreation opportunities, Florida Forever is a powerful tool that can be used to open existing landlocked public lands.

**The Land and Water Conservation Fund remains the most powerful tool available for establishing and expanding access to public lands and waters. And it just got more powerful with the recent passage of the Great American Outdoors Act, which fully funds the program at \$900 million annually for wildlife conservation and outdoor recreation, including \$27 million dedicated to public access.**

**Between 2018 and 2020, onX and the TRCP identified 16.43 million acres of landlocked public lands in 22 states.**

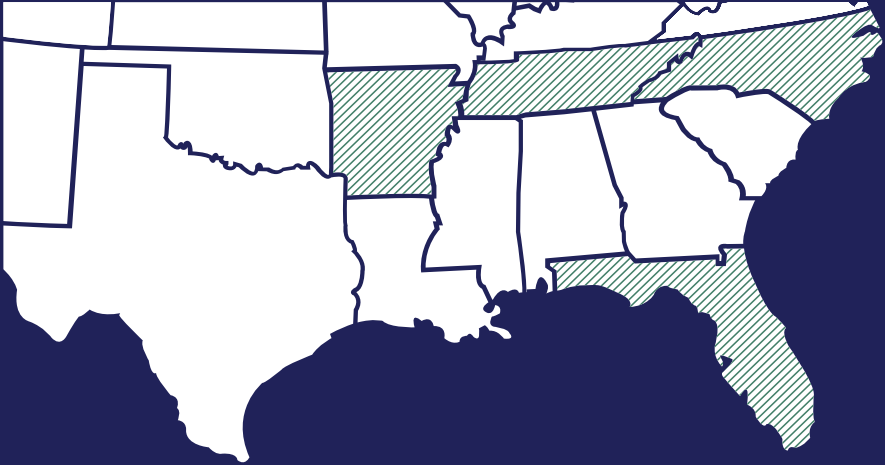
**To learn more about this issue and what you can do to help, visit [UnlockingPublicLands.org](https://UnlockingPublicLands.org)**

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Photo Mike Massey  
Cover photo 24.7 Hunt

# By the Numbers

Inaccessible Public Lands in Florida, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee



## Florida

# 75 K

Total Landlocked Federal, State, County & Municipal Acres

Of those, **27 K** acres are adjacent to water.\*

## North Carolina

# 49 K

Total Landlocked Federal, State, County & Municipal Acres

Of those, **26 K** acres are adjacent to water.\*

## Arkansas

# 28 K

Total Landlocked Federal, State, County & Municipal Acres

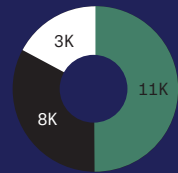
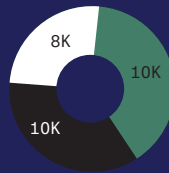
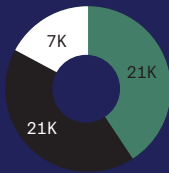
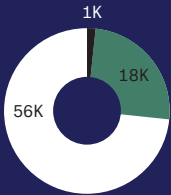
Of those, **10 K** acres are adjacent to water.\*

## Tennessee

# 22 K

Total Landlocked Federal, State, County & Municipal Acres

Of those, **15 K** acres are adjacent to water.\*



Landlocked Federal Acres

Landlocked County & Municipal Acres

Landlocked State Acres

\* While not all water adjacent lands are accessible by watercraft because they might be swamplands or otherwise not suitable for boat access, some are.

To learn more about these figures, visit [unlockingpubliclands.org](http://unlockingpubliclands.org)