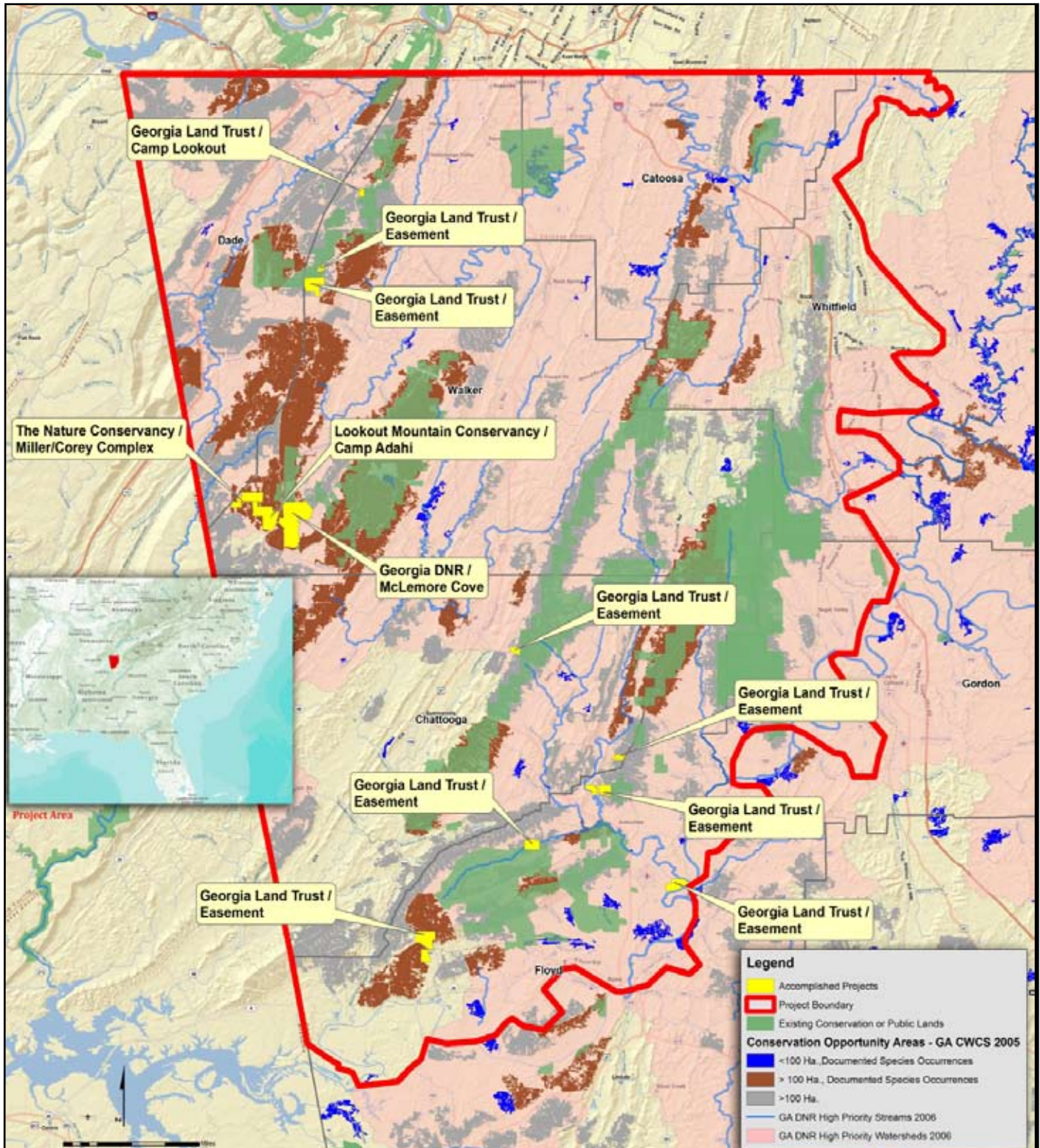


# Open Space Institute

## Protecting the Best: Wildlife Habitat Conservation in Northwest Georgia



## Northwest Georgia Focus Region and Completed Projects




## Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund

Over the last decade, the Open Space Institute has launched loan and grant funds in selected regions along the eastern seaboard of the United States. Working closely with foundations, OSI has helped to protect large working forests of New England, the small historic farms of New Jersey, and the rich flora and fauna of the southern Appalachians.

The Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund, created in 2007 in part with capital contributions from the Lyndhurst and Benwood Foundations, provided grants and loans to local land conservation groups to protect ecologically significant landscapes in a million-acre region wedged between Atlanta and Chattanooga, a center of biodiversity in the southern Appalachians. Targeting projects identified on Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan, the fund disbursed \$1.7 million in grants and \$408,000 in loan funds to protect 5,300 acres, increasing by almost 10% the amount of conserved priority wildlife habitat identified in the state plan. Every dollar invested by the Fund was matched by 12 additional dollars.

The Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund illustrates how philanthropy can be effective through focus and leverage. It also highlights what it takes to achieve success on the ground and how much more there is to accomplish – not just in northwest Georgia, but elsewhere in the southern Appalachians. In an era of diminished resources, even greater focus and discipline will be required to safeguard the lands that matter most. The Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund provides a proven and replicable model, and the vision and perseverance of conservation groups – including those profiled in the following pages – inspire hope that success will not be confined to northwest Georgia alone. Indeed, the rich ecological heritage of the Southern Appalachians depends on it.



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## A Living Laboratory for Conservation

The 70-million-acre expanse of the Southern Appalachian Mountains contains some of the richest biodiversity, purest waters and most important wildlife habitat on the continent. Passage of the Weeks Act, almost a century ago, led to the establishment of a large network of national forestland in the region. This served as a counter to rapacious logging, mining and agricultural practices and the resulting degradation of soils, watersheds, forests and wildlife. Conservation efforts in the region have been hampered in recent decades by the lack of both funding and organizational capacity, in spite of myriad threats and extensive unplanned development.

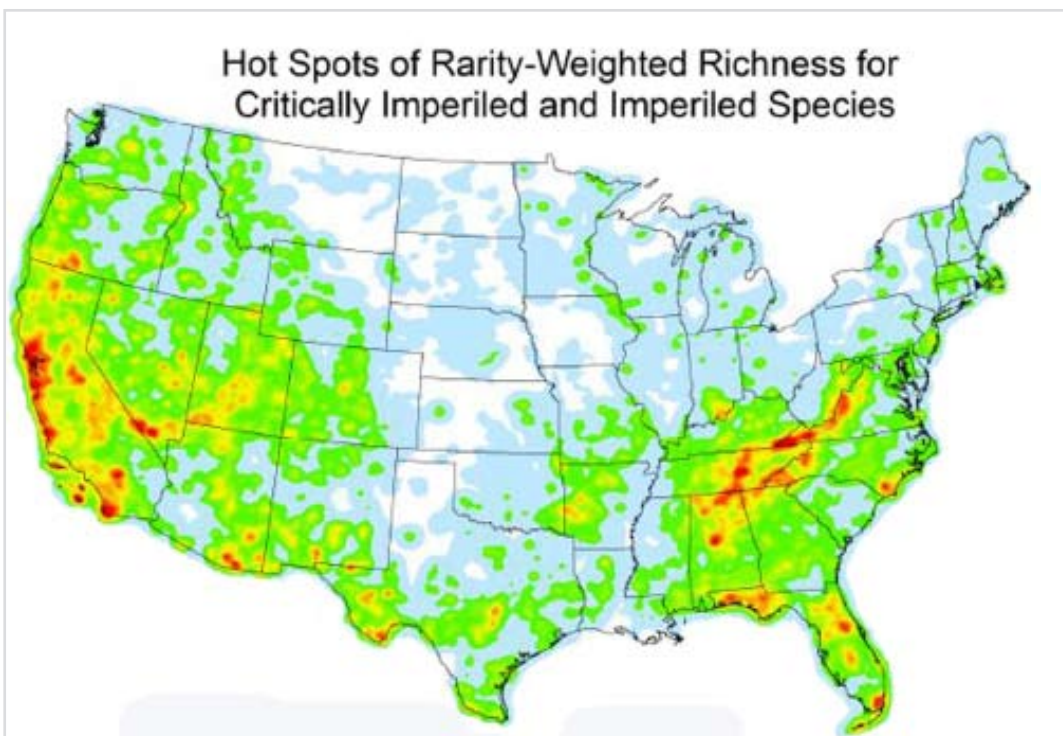
In 2004, the Open Space Institute (OSI), a New York-based organization with forty years of conservation expertise in the Northeast, expanded its geographic focus to selected regions in the Southeast. Our first step in the Southern Appalachians was to conduct a comprehensive land conservation assessment.

We discovered enormous potential to build upon the existing mosaic of conserved areas, and to assist a small but committed network of organizations in like-minded goals.



++-Nate Thomas

Blackbelly Salamander, Walker County, Georgia



NatureServe Rarity Map 2008

In 2005, OSI launched the Southern Appalachian Land Protection Fund to help attract national attention to the area; two years later, we stepped-up our commitment with the launch of the more focused Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund.

Targeting a million acres in the biodiverse-rich corner of the state where the Cumberland Plateau meets the Ridge and Valley region, OSI teamed up with the Lyndhurst and Benwood Foundations of Chattanooga to capitalize the \$2.25 million fund. The Merck Family Fund and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation provided additional support.

### Why Northwest Georgia?

In 1988, UNESCO designated the mountainous northwest corner of Georgia as part of the Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere Reserve.

Much of the focus area includes portions of the Cumberland Plateau zone, part of an area that NatureServe recognized as a hot spot of biodiversity, created by the region's long and complex geologic history. The area is characterized by ripples of ridges and plateaus with a north-south orientation, allowing numerous rare and endemic species to adapt through the ages. Xeric plant species cling to exposed south-facing shale slopes while in nearby sheltered coves, tropical ferns and mosses surround natural springs. The region contains terrestrial and aquatic species found nowhere else on earth.

Historically, large-scale logging and mining activities have posed the greatest threats to the region, yet large unfragmented patches of forest containing abundant biodiversity still remain in northwest Georgia. Today, residential real estate development and road building are the main causes of further fragmentation, driven by the popularity of this Sun Belt getaway that is in close proximity to Atlanta, Chattanooga, Birmingham, and Nashville. The future of the landscape depends on what conservationists can accomplish today.

*“OSI was crucial in the effort to protect McLemore Cove and Camp Adahi. The potential to link all these lands was there, but the state funding was too limited, until OSI came along.”*

*- Don Oliver  
Attorney,  
Walker County, Georgia*

## Plan and Preserve

Applying lessons learned from a decade of conservation work in the Northern Forest, OSI worked with partners to design a competitive land protection fund in northwest Georgia with specific, achievable goals and clear criteria for eligible projects. To focus on the most worthwhile projects, the Fund turned to *Georgia's State Wildlife Action Plan* (SWAP), which had already identified specific target areas of greatest conservation value.

OSI recruited an advisory committee that includes Georgia's wildlife action plan author, the director of the River Basin Center at University of Georgia, and the regional head of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation. The committee played a critical role in designing the Fund and evaluating potential projects.

The *State Wildlife Action Plan* provided an ideal starting point for land protection. With help from its advisors and a mapping consultant, OSI refined and amplified Georgia's habitat data within the target region, created a series of maps that showed the location of critical habitat at the parcel level, and helped to focus and attract land trust partners and public and private funders.

The plan identified 270,000 acres of high-priority habitat in the million-acre region of northwest Georgia. Of that amount, 204,000 acres were unprotected; nearly 40% of these lands were of highest priority. OSI initially set out to protect between 3,000 and 5,000 acres, and to make matching grants that were leveraged by a ratio of at least 3:1.



Alan Cressler

Fall colors on Lookout Mountain, Walker County, Georgia



Alan Cressler

Lookout Mountain from Chattanooga, TN

The funding project surpassed its goals. As of mid 2010, the Fund had disbursed \$1.7 million to permanently protect nearly 5,300 acres over 23 different parcels valued at over \$23 million. The Fund utilized sophisticated GIS mapping to target high priority landscapes and employed a variety of land protection tools, including loans, to achieve impact. Over a short time span, the Fund protected places like the forested plateau of Lookout Mountain and the slopes and karsts of McLemore Cove; the headwaters of the Little River and buffer lands around Cloudland Canyon State Park; and parcels adjacent to the Chattahoochee National Forest. For every dollar the Fund invested in projects, another twelve dollars in public and private funds were secured: Additionally:

- The average grant award per acre of protected lands is \$323, making the project a highly effective investment for our funding partners.
- Projects filled critical gaps in the conservation landscape, creating corridors of connectivity that are fundamental for successful wildlife habitat protection, especially in an age of climate change.
- Through technical assistance, the Fund helped to strengthen the capacity of regional land conservation organizations, such as the Georgia Land Trust and Lookout Mountain Conservancy, and also inspired these groups to focus their conservation goals on protection of biodiversity and wildlife using scientific data as the guidepost.
- By bringing attention to the conservation values and threats within the focus area, the fund helped attract renewed interest from: The Nature Conservancy, which historically had not concentrated on the region but completed an important project there; the State of Georgia, which injected over \$7 million in acquisition funds into a key project; and a local county government, which, for the first time ever, committed \$3 million of bond financing to a land conservation project.
- Early, collaborative involvement with other funders and land trusts improved the structure of many deals by bringing bargaining power to the negotiating table.
- Public awareness of the importance of habitat preservation, especially among private landowners in priority areas, has increased.



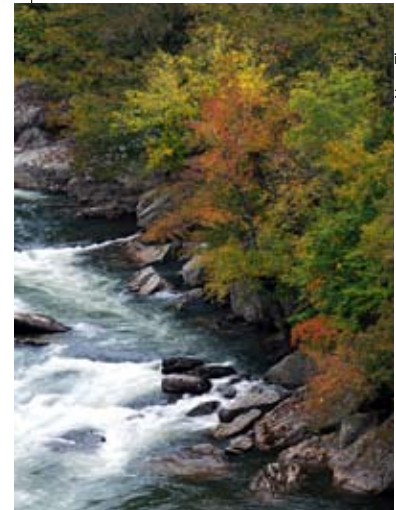
Nate Thomas

Cherokee Rock Village, Walker County, Georgia

*“Without the money that OSI brought to the table, we’d still be trying to get places like McLemore Cove protected in a shotgun approach. It’s much more effective to be strategic and do landscape-scale conservation.”*

*-Jon Ambrose  
Georgia Department of  
Natural Resources*

By using a strategic blueprint to focus scarce philanthropic dollars, the fund helped to translate the vision of the *State Wildlife Action Plan* into permanent on-the-ground protections. The end-product has become a living laboratory of land conservation, but we believe that the process is in its infancy.



Nate Thomas

Little River Canyon, Georgia

### Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund Grants Committed

Partner	Project Name	Location	Acres	Grants Committed	Total Project Cost
Georgia Land Trust	Various Easements - 2007	Floyd, Gordon, Walker, Dade Chattooga	526	\$112,000	\$3,700,000
Georgia Land Trust	Various Easements - 2008	Floyd, Gordon, Walker, Dade Chattooga	1,477	\$110,000	\$5,422,000
Georgia Land Trust	Camp Lookout*	Walker County	80	\$21,000	\$607,000
GA Dept. of Natural Resources	McLemore Cove	Walker County	1,800	\$750,000	\$11,000,000
Lookout Mountain Conservancy	Camp Adahi	Lookout Mountain, Walker County	800	\$275,000	\$1,100,000
The Nature Conservancy	Miller / Corey	Walker and Dade Counties	572	\$430,000	\$1,494,000
<b>Totals</b>			<b>5,255</b>	<b>\$1,698,000</b>	<b>\$23,323,000</b>

\*Georgia Land Trust also received a loan of \$408,000 for Camp Lookout project



## What's next?

While some funding remains, the program in northwest Georgia has exceeded its initial goals. OSI believes the Fund's work has demonstrated the need to attract greater visibility and financial resources to the region. Few places in the country contain such rich biodiversity, or face as many threats. The challenge is to build upon the success of the northwest Georgia pilot fund and increase the scale and effectiveness of conservation efforts in the Southern Appalachians. This effort will necessitate the::

- Unification of wildlife priorities across state borders in the region.
- Identification of key landscape-scale corridors where biodiversity is greatest, land is relatively affordable, and threats are imminent.
- Incorporation of climate science into smarter land acquisition strategies.

Fortunately, through the work of the initial OSI fund, there is already a solid base of conservation planning in place and an effort underway to sharpen priorities and focus of both public and land trust leaders as we fill in conservation gaps across the landscape.

OSI, working with its partners, is now engaged in research and planning to create a second, larger fund focused on land protection in the region. As we enter an era of climate change, linking and expanding protected lands is a strategic way to facilitate current and future species adaptation. With speculative real estate development momentarily stalled, conservationists have the time to regroup and determine which lands are the most important to protect. The Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund is a model that can provide focus and leverage for future efforts to protect habitat, clean water, and public access to recreation areas.



Alan Cressler

Cloudland Canyon waterfall, Walker County, Georgia

## Case in Point: Connecting 20,000 Acres

In 2008 and 2009 OSI's Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund provided funding for the protection of more than 2,500 acres of open space in Walker County, Georgia, helping state and county officials achieve a long-time vision of linking conserved lands.

The 1,839-acre McLemore Cove and the adjacent 740-acre Camp Adahi parcel, as well as several privately owned tracts totaling 1,500 acres, together fill lacunas that now connect the nearby Zahnd State Natural Area and the Crockford Pigeon Mountain Wildlife Management Area. The protections create a contiguous, 20,000-acre swath of conserved land that provides habitat for diverse wildlife, expanded public access for hunting and fishing, and preserves recreational space for children to explore and connect with the natural world.

McLemore Cove is considered one of the southeast's most picturesque land forms, providing habitat for rare species such as the green salamander, Barksdale trillium and Georgian cave beetle. The biological diversity is a result of the site's location at the transition zone between the Cumberland Plateau and the Ridge & Valley physiographic provinces. OSI granted the Georgia Department of Natural Resources \$750,000 toward the \$11 million McLemore Cove acquisition. Part of the cove is managed by DNR as an extension to Zahnd State Natural Area, while Walker County protects another portion through a conservation easement.



Alan Cressler

Trillium flexipes, Crockford-Pigeon Mountain Wildlife Management Area, Walker County, Georgia

*“Adahi is a wonderful camp on Lookout Mountain that has been home to thousands of Girl Scouts over its 44-year existence. The preservation of this property is so important to the thousands more who will come to hike, canoe, ride horses and learn to appreciate the beauty of nature.”*

*~ Linda Rath, CEO of the Girl Scouts of Moccasin Bend Council.*



Camp Lake Adahi, Walker County, Georgia

## Case in Point: Girl Scouts Sold Cookies to Save Camp Adahi

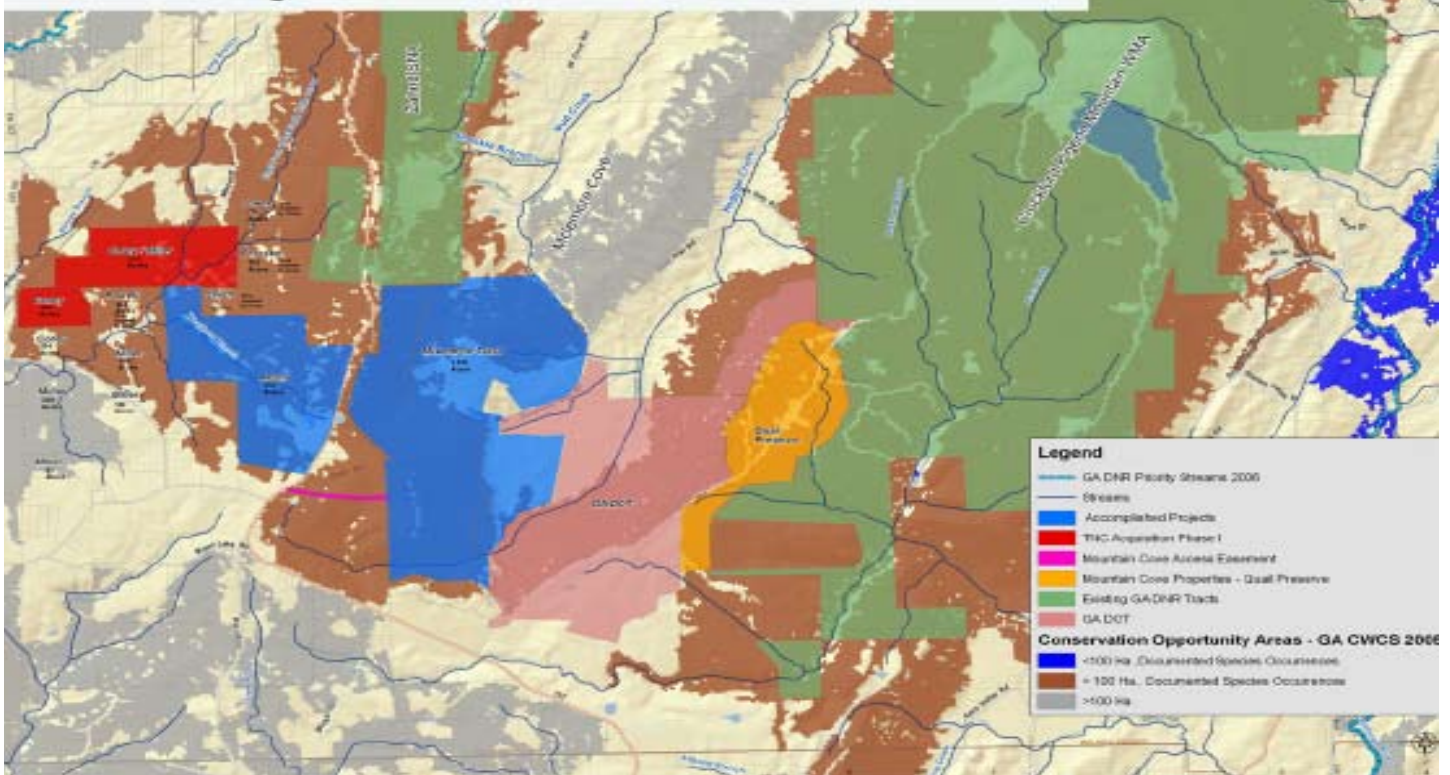
The Girl Scout Council of Moccasin Bend purchased Camp Adahi in 1964 using proceeds from their famous cookie sales. The 800-acre tract is now permanently protected by a conservation easement that Lookout Mountain Conservancy purchased for \$2.85 million with the help of a \$275,000 grant from OSI. The Girl Scouts will continue to operate the camp, with facilities limited to a 100-acre footprint. The remaining forestland will be maintained as a wild preserve. Camp Adahi contains the headwaters of the pristine Little River and diverse habitats including caves, underground streams, and hardwood forests that provide a home for several varieties of salamanders, cave beetles, Southern Appalachian woodrats and many other plant and animal species.

The Georgia Chapter of The Nature Conservancy joined the corridor-protection effort when it negotiated an agreement with private landowners Allen Corey and Mickey Miller to purchase a permanent conservation easement, totaling approximately 572 acres immediately to the west of Camp Adahi. These tracts, managed primarily for hunting and other recreational purposes, contain extensive mixed hardwood forests and additional tributaries of the Little River.



Girl Scouts on Lake Adahi, Walker County, GA

### Northwest Georgia Land Protection Fund Conservation Corridor



## Open Space Institute



The Open Space Institute protects scenic, natural, and historic landscapes to ensure public enjoyment, conserve habitats, and sustain community character.

OSI achieves its goals through land acquisition, conservation easements, regional finance programs, fiscal sponsorship, creative partnerships, and analytical research. OSI has protected more than 100,000 acres in New York State.

Through loan and regrant funds provided by six different private funders, OSI has assisted in the protection of an additional 1.7 million acres in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina and Georgia.

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