

TILT conserves 15,000 acres of land during its 40th anniversary year

Clayton – In 2025, the Thousand Islands Land Trust (TILT) continued its work to protect the lands and waters that define the 1000 Islands, building on 40 years of conservation while advancing new projects across the region. The past year reflected progress in land protection, hands-on stewardship, education and community engagement, and local partnership, guided by a shared commitment to keeping the 1000 Islands thriving and accessible for future generations. TILT's work was guided by the newly adopted 2024-2028 Strategic Plan, which prioritized conserving connected landscapes, protecting critical habitat and water resources and expanding opportunities for people to engage with the outdoors. These priorities shaped conservation efforts across the region.

TILT achieved a major milestone with 15,000 acres conserved, protecting wetlands, forests, grasslands and shorelines that support wildlife, safeguard water quality and provide places for people to enjoy and connect with the outdoors. Several conservation projects that

contributed to the milestone represented the culmination of sustained efforts carried out over multiple years, reflecting the long-term nature of land protection work. On Grindstone Island, the Lange Property expanded both the Rusho Preserve and the Howard-Smith Preserve, strengthening habitat connectivity across a long-standing focus area for important conservation work. In Hammond, the Chapman Point Property was protected for its rare habitats and its role in the Adirondack Wildlife Corridor, helping maintain continuous forest and wetland systems that support biodiversity, improve water quality, increase climate resilience and give wildlife space to move and rest safely across the landscape. Located just upstream of the Iroquois Control Dam in the town of Waddington, Windsong Bay, one of the most productive muskellunge spawning areas in the upper St. Lawrence, came under TILT's protection through a partnership with the town of Waddington, with support from the New York Power Authority and collaboration with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

via the Fish Enhancement, Mitigation and Research Fund. Its wetlands filter water, buffer floods and sustain biodiversity, providing benefits that extend far beyond the bay itself.

Additional projects reinforced the broader network of conserved lands across the region, creating stronger habitat connections, supporting wildlife movement and sustaining the health of local ecosystems. At the Turcotte Farm in Clayton, conserved land complemented the neighboring Zenda Farms Preserve, strengthening habitat linkages across a working agricultural landscape. Robinson Group's Big Island, though modest in size, held significant ecological value for its natural shoreline and importance as a resting and feeding habitat for migratory birds, such as loons, long-tailed ducks and canvasbacks. In Eel Bay, the Buxton Tract strengthened water quality protection and forest-dwelling songbird habitat, while along Jewett Creek near Redwood, the Hoover Property added another vital link to the Evans Property, improving forest and stream corridor connectivity for birds, amphibians and other wildlife.

Year-end brought two final major conservation victories, with the completion of the conservation of Cherry Island in Chaumont Bay, and Carrier Ridge in Clayton. Once farmland and now a naturally regenerating forest, Cherry Island, known as the Cosgrove Nature Preserve, provides habitat for wildlife, including an active bald eagle nest, and serves as a vital stopover for migratory birds along the Atlantic Flyway. Its protection also supports water quality and the recreational fishing economy of Chaumont and Guffin bays while preserving a prominent scenic landmark on the Lake Ontario horizon. Partnership with Ontario Bays Initiative Land Trust was instrumental in bringing the project to fruition. At Carrier Ridge, rolling open fields were protected to preserve rare grassland habitat for birds of prey and declining grassland bird species while strengthening connections to TILT's Rivergate Trail part of the S. Gerald Ingerson Preserve.

Stewardship remained central to the TILT's mission, with a strong focus on restoring and maintaining conserved lands. At the new Edward & Marlene Schmeer Preserve in Cape Vincent, visitors will be able to enjoy sweeping views of Lake Ontario, Wilson Bay, restored grasslands, wetlands and the historic Tibbetts Point Lighthouse. Pictured at the tower is Ken Nims, TILT stewardship director, pointing toward the restored grasslands which highlight the ongoing habitat restoration. The preserve is not yet open to the public.

public in summer 2026. On Grindstone Island, where the organization's conservation story began in 1985, the stewardship team also completed much-needed road repairs, ditch work and culvert improvements. Together, the projects reduced erosion and runoff, protected sensitive habitats and ensured the long-term ecological health of both the land and surrounding waters.

Education and community engagement also continued to grow. TILTreks, KidsTreks and Conservation Connections brought families and students onto the land for guided hikes, farm programs, science-based activities and seasonal events. A major milestone this year was the opening of the Discovery Center: The Gateway to the Outdoors – an interactive space designed to spark curiosity about the region's natural and cultural heritage. With hands-on exhibits focused on local ecology, science and history, the Discovery Center now serves as a hub for learning and exploration, showing how conservation and outdoor recreation contribute to the region's local economy and quality of life.

Collaborative partnerships continued to play an important role in this work. Through its long-standing collaboration with the Adirondack Center for Loon Conservation, TILT helped coordinate the New York Annual Loon Census for its almost 20th year. Loons serve as an important indicator of water quality and overall ecosystem health, making the program a valuable tool for conservation research. In 2025, volunteers recorded more than 1000 loons statewide – the highest count in 24 years – demonstrating the value of community involvement in long-term monitoring efforts.

Community involvement extended beyond fieldwork and education programs. In 2025, TILT celebrated its 40th anniversary, marking four decades of conservation in the 1000 Islands. The milestone was recognized by New York state leaders, including a letter from Gov. Kathy Hochul and the presentation of the Empire Award on behalf of Sen. Mark Walczyk. The land trust was also named 2025 Conservationist of the Year by Ducks Unlimited. Together, the honors reflect the impact of long-term conservation work and the support of partners, volunteers and community members who make it possible.

As TILT looks ahead, the momentum of 2025 sets a strong foundation for the future. By continuing to protect connected landscapes, restore and care for conserved lands, and engage people of all ages in meaningful outdoor learning, TILT will carry its mission forward into the next decade. The work accomplished in 2025, alongside the organization's 40-year history, highlights how consistent, local action can lead to lasting conservation results, ensuring the 1000 Islands remain healthy and valued for generations to come. These achievements would not have been possible without donors, volunteers, business sponsors, conservation partners and the community, whose shared commitment continues to make a lasting impact across the region.

TILT's office is located at 135 John Street, Clayton.

For information, call 315-686-5345 or visit <https://www.tilandtrust.org>.



Two young explorers use binoculars from an observation tower along TILT's Rivergate Trail, taking in the sights of the S. Gerald Ingerson Preserve, Clayton, during TILT's 2025 Conservation Connections program.



The Carrier Ridge property showcases nearly 200 acres of protected open grassland that expand a growing conservation complex connected to TILT's Rivergate Trail and the S. Gerald Ingerson Preserve.



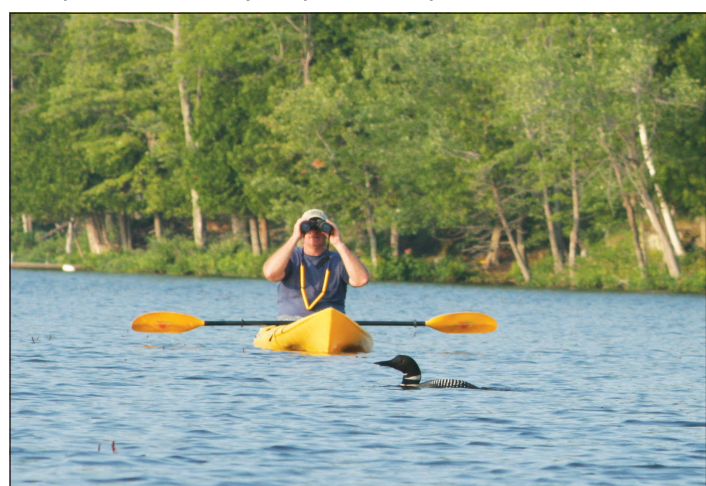
Pictured from left are TILT Executive Director Jake Tibbles and Associate Director Spencer Busler, with a letter from Gov. Kathy Hochul recognizing TILT's 40 years of conservation in the 1000 Islands and celebrating its lasting impact on the region's lands and waters.



The Discovery Center at TILT's office, 135 John St., opened in 2025 in perfect timing with the TILT's 40th anniversary. The interactive space serves as a hub for environmental education and community engagement, inspiring curiosity about the 1000 Islands' natural and cultural heritage.



From the observation tower at the new Edward & Marlene Schmeer Preserve in Cape Vincent, visitors will be able to enjoy sweeping views of Lake Ontario, Wilson Bay, restored grasslands, wetlands and the historic Tibbetts Point Lighthouse. Pictured at the tower is Ken Nims, TILT stewardship director, pointing toward the restored grasslands which highlight the ongoing habitat restoration. The preserve is not yet open to the public.



Volunteers count loons as part of TILT's long-standing partnership with the Adirondack Center for Loon Conservation, contributing to nearly 20 years of citizen science monitoring. In 2025, more than 1,000 loons were recorded statewide, highlighting the impact of community engagement. To participate in the Annual Loon Census, scheduled Saturday, July 18, visit the TILT website.



An aerial view of Cherry Island in Eastern Lake Ontario, recently conserved by TILT in partnership with the Ontario Bays Initiative Land Trust to protect critical shoreline, wildlife habitat and water quality.



Eel Bay is a vital stopover for monarch butterflies and other wildlife, helping protect water quality and provide habitat in an important ecological corridor.



Chapman Point is pictured from above, showcasing diverse wetlands and forest habitats that support rare species. Situated at the intersection of the Adirondack Wildlife Corridor and the Atlantic Flyway, the critical landscape provides safe passage for migrating birds and helps wildlife adapt to a changing climate.