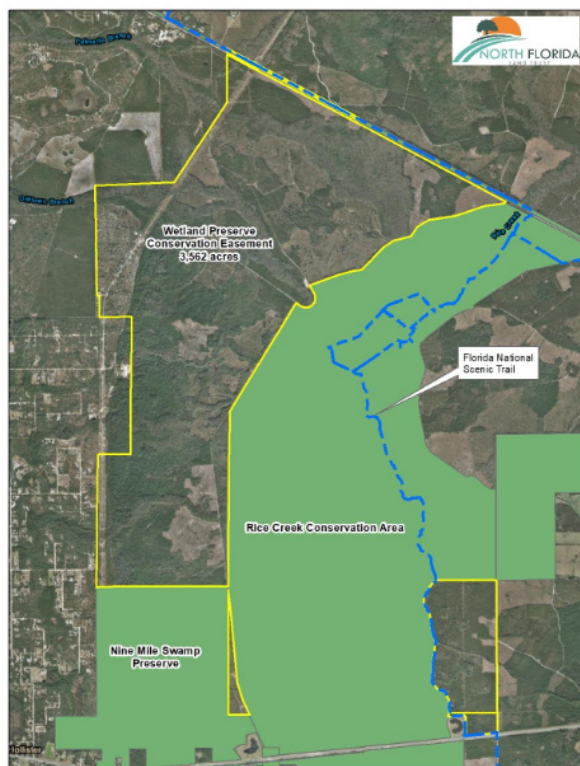


## Through the Maze of Creating Public Lands: An Interview with Ben Williams



As north-bound hikers along the Florida Trail pass Rice Creek Preserve, west of Palatka, they enter an easement parcel protected by the family of Ben and Louann Williams. Since 2008, they have owned and managed [Wetland Preserve](#), a 3725-acre tract in Putnam County. The Williams family first became interested in forestry while working as commercial fishermen on the nearby St. Johns River where they came to understand just as their livelihoods and the culture depended on clean water, clean water depends upon healthy land. Their silviculture operations follow Florida's Best

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Management Practices and combine long-term viability with their goals of enhancing the land's—and ultimately the water's—ecological conditions. In 2019 the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission recognized Ben and Louann Williams as [Land Steward Landowners of the Year](#). The Williams family practices environmental outreach by leading tours for private groups. For more about the Williams family check out the Florida Trail's podcast episode from [The Orange Blaze](#). The following interview with Ben Williams, conducted online by Thomas Hallock, has been condensed and edited.

**JFS:** Thank you for talking with us, Ben. Could you tell us a little about yourself, your family, and the Wetland Preserve?

**Williams:** Louann and I have been married forty years. We started out commercial fishing in the St. Johns River, more than forty years ago, hauling crab traps and setting gill nets (back when they were legal), and when you do that for a living, it's very difficult not to pick up quickly that you need to protect the underlying resources. From that point forward, we were onboard protecting the St. Johns. I was one of the founding members of [St. Johns Riverkeeper](#), and I spent twelve years on their board. We also donated all the seafood and oysters for the first sixteen years of their Oyster Roast—and the labor for all the shucking and steaming too. It was the biggest party in Jacksonville. We would go through 2500 pounds of oysters in about two hours.

Spending time on water issues, it very quickly occurred to us that if you don't do something about the uplands, you can't fix the water. You can't just deal with point discharges, with your immediate issues. And when it came time to get out of the seafood business after 35 years, we were prepared. We had already bought the 3200 acre parcel five or six years before that. One of the reasons we chose this piece of land was that it was adjacent to state land with significant diversity—and ultimately long term value for protection.

One of the instigators was a young woman with the Fish and Wildlife Commission named Courtney Hooker—and she was a motivator. She and Annie Dziergowski at US Fish and Wildlife Service gave us some initial pointers on things to do, and from that point, with positive experiences with them and with their recommendations—and with our basic goals of having

conservation and preservation both as part of what we did as we ran the timber operations—we just ran forward with it. We were very fortunate that Leonard Wood has been our forester from the beginning and he has always been into saving the woods—it is pretty hard to be a forester if you don't love the woods.

**JFS:** Thank you. Could you describe your particular parcel? Is it in your possession?

**Williams:** Yes. The initial parcel started out as 3200 acres and it is immediately adjacent to the Rice Creek Conservation area—south of SR 100, running almost all the way to SR 20. Subsequently we bought another 325 acres on the southeast side that is immediately adjacent to the [Rice Reek Conservation Area](#). Through that parcel runs a mile of the Florida Trail, and with some of the easement money we have purchased another couple of parcels within the [O2O Corridor](#), and we are working through the process of getting those lands protected also.

**JFS:** You touched on the relevance to the Florida Trail. Could you talk a little about the maze of bureaucracy one goes through to create a public easement?

**Williams:** We initially talked to someone with the St. Johns Water Management District, even as we were still purchasing the property, and he started walking us through the process. And I must tell you, when you first look at these processes and these procedures, and read the the rules and regulations, it is an opaque maze—to say the least. I would think that if I was not a particularly persistent person, and Louann was not particularly persistent in wanting this done, it would not have happened. And that's not a good thing. There are are many other landowners like us. We are not that unique. But other landowners look at the process, and say “I can't do that,” so they drop it.

**JFS:** So if the state could provide some kind of liaison office to help landowners negotiate the maze, would that benefit the process?

**Williams:** A few years ago, I would have answered that question with a resounding yes. But in our case, the huge help and value of the North Florida

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Land Trust in navigating the maze was invaluable. We'd never have gotten where we are without them. And it was not just the technical aspects, but also the moral support and encouragement. Plus the fact that when an issue or impediment was encountered, having them deal with it kept both us and the state folks from getting frustrated. I can not emphasize enough how indispensable they were—and how such groups can assist others working through the process.

**JFS:** Could you talk about the relevance of this parcel to the Florida Trail?

**Williams:** A mile of the Florida Trail passes through our southeast parcel. It is actually on our property. A few years ago while going down State Road 20, we noticed some folks from the Florida Trail moving one of their gates. I turned around and asked them why, and they said: there's a new land owner and they made the Florida Trail move the trail. And I thought that's crazy because there's statutory protection for land owners. And so when we did the easement, the [North Florida Land Trust](#) knew how to make it all work; we managed to get language in the easement so that future land owners could not force the Florida Trail to be moved.

**JFS:** I can't imagine someone impeding the route of a backpacker! It's hard to think of a more passive, non-harmful activity.

**Williams:** We live in a very litigious society. Louann and I have been self-employed all our lives, and we spend much of our time making sure we're not going to expose ourselves to a liability. But landowners overestimate the potential liability of an easement, and that's a sad thing.

**JFS:** What are your hopes for the Wetland Preserve?

**Williams:** Our goal is to continue and expand the areas we are working on. We've kicked a 160 acres outside the forestry envelope, and that section needs to be transitioned into longleaf. On the rest of the property, as the trees get to the point when it can be done, we want to transition more from loblolly to slash pine and long leaf where we can. Even though there was some native loblolly, we want to get the land to a more natural condition. We also will reinstitute prescribed fire. Fire is absolutely necessary for protecting the

Florida environment. I know that sounds crazy, but everything has evolved with fire. Things cannot survive without fire in the ecosystem. It's very important to the physical structure and food availability.

**JFS:** Thank you. As someone who has been much more of a taker than a giver, enjoying these woods, I really appreciate everything you've done. In closing, is there anything you would like to add?

**Williams:** We are not unique. There are a whole lot of landowners out there who have the same thoughts/goals/desires for their land as we do. All those working in agencies and NGOs focused on conservation should be apprised of this and be encouraged by it. But if the focus here is on the Florida Trail, and the focus is protecting land, I would pass along to readers these two things. First, protect the trail. It's an economic asset; people come into rural communities to use the trail, and that's sustainable, repeatable economic activity. And second, for land owners, it is not the liability they think it is. Land owners should reach out to land trusts. [Alachua Conservation Trust](#) is another good trust. Their mission is to protect Florida's land for public use. They want to help. And if you're not a landowner, support the land trusts with your dollar, so that when the time comes, they have the resources and staff to make things happen. This is a joint effort.