

BY Rose Jenkins

Guided Tours

How land trusts are using apps to deepen people's connection to place



The land you protect is probably a great backdrop for a scenic drive, but there's so much to appreciate about it beyond what travelers see. What if you could tell people, as they pass through, more about what makes this place special—the local history, the unique wildlife, the ongoing conservation work? But you can't ride in everyone's car giving guided tours.

Now there's an app for that.

In Wyoming, conservation finance consultant Story Clark teamed with **Jackson Hole Land Trust** and **Grand Teton National Park Foundation** to create the pilot project for *TravelStorysGPS*—a mobile app that uses GPS to link audio narration with the sights along two routes through the Rocky Mountains. Clark says, "I'm trying, through stories, to reconnect the public to land and do it in real time, so they're seeing what they're hearing."

The app gives people facts, she says, but it relates them through "exciting stories about people or climate change or the Beatles or how the river flows or how elk sound like French horns when they bugle." People can choose

from several channels, including Wildlife & Landscapes, Local History or Just for Kids. There's also an option for them to share their own stories. And there's a "donate" button suggesting a gift of \$5 or more to support the conservation groups that make it all possible.

Clark sees the app as a way to raise money for conservation from a mostly untapped source, the traveling public. She developed it as a resource for numerous conservation groups to use, creating their own "story routes" at far less cost than developing an app from scratch.

Here are other examples of apps for people making their way to or through protected land:

Little Traverse Conservancy in Michigan created an app called *LTC Explorer* directing visitors to the more than 50 nature preserves the conservancy has helped to protect and open to the public. People who want to get outside can search for a preserve by county or by activity—such as hiking, skiing, canoeing or horseback riding. They can also check a calendar of events, and find maps and directions. The app includes a "wall" where visitors post updates and photos of their experience.

In North Carolina, **Triangle Land Conservancy** put out a guide to its six publicly accessible nature preserves as part of the *GPTrex Adventures* app. The app provides information about each preserve, along with photos, maps and quizzes about the history and natural

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Has your land trust created an app?

Do you use other apps?

What do you use them for?

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Swift Creek Bluffs Nature Preserve
An Outdoor Nature Exploration for All Ages!

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community at each site. The app also offers more in-depth tours of two preserves, using GPS to lead visitors to highlights like an overlook, an old mill and a vernal pool.

Civil War Trust offers 11 different *Battle Apps* as interpretive guides for visitors at battlefields from Bull Run to Gettysburg to Appomattox. The apps offer GPS-enabled maps so visitors can pinpoint their exact location on a battlefield. Visitors can also access Virtual Signs in which battlefield experts interpret the scene before them; audio recordings give accounts by Civil War soldiers; and an “augmented reality viewer” superimposes Civil War era landmarks onto the modern landscape.

And perhaps marking a coming trend, **Colorado Cattlemen’s Agricultural Land Trust** has started using mobile apps for more efficient easement monitoring. The switch from paper forms to electronic forms (which can be accessed without a wireless connection) saves as much as 10 hours of staff time per week and reduces errors since the forms don’t need to be transcribed. The group has used two existing apps—*Canvas* and *Adobe Reader*—and it’s interested in developing a custom app that will integrate directly with its database. 🍃

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