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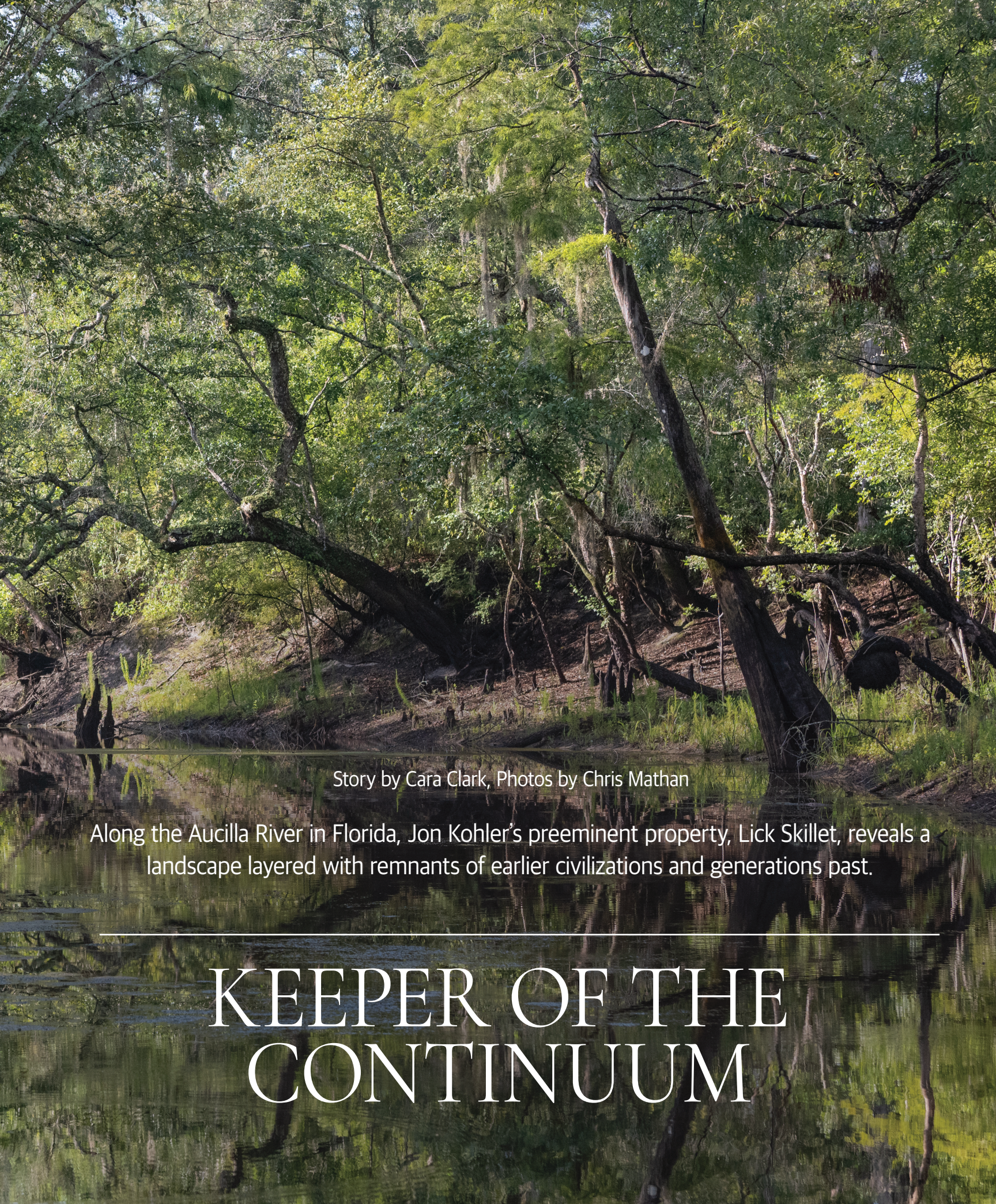
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Story by Cara Clark, Photos by Chris Mathan

Along the Aucilla River in Florida, Jon Kohler's preeminent property, Lick Skillet, reveals a landscape layered with remnants of earlier civilizations and generations past.

KEEPER OF THE CONTINUUM

We never owned this ground anyway — we're only keepers, the land lent to us for a little while. And, when the true Landowner walks His garden and finds it dressed, and kept, and full of life, may He say to a tired man in the Red Hills the two best words any steward could ever hope to hear: 'Well done.'"

— Jon Kohler

Long before conservation became a modern movement, fire was part of the rhythm of the land. Lightning strikes, seasonal burns, and generations of Indigenous stewardship shaped ecosystems that depended on regular renewal. The open pine forests that once stretched across millions of acres were not accidental wilderness. They were living systems maintained by a relationship between people, plants, wildlife, and flame.

Beneath the surface of the Aucilla River and along its banks are traces of those who came before: evidence of ancient human life, remnants of earlier civilizations, and the enduring marks of generations who depended on these waters and the surrounding lands. It is a place where archaeology, ecology, and family history meet.

For those fortunate enough to care for land along the Aucilla, ownership is less about possession than stewardship. Trees planted today may belong to another generation. Habitat restored now may shelter wildlife for decades to come. A river protected today may continue carrying stories long after those who walked its banks are gone.

It was along this remarkable stretch of Florida wilderness that Jon Kohler, attorney, leading land broker, and head of Jon Kohler & Associates, found his place in the world and began a lifetime of understanding the true value of wild places.

To own sporting land is to become part of that continuum: each generation a temporary caretaker, responsible for preserving what was entrusted to it and improving it for those who follow. For Jon, a property is never simply acreage on a map. It is habitat, history, beauty, and experience.

That philosophy would eventually shape the way he approached his own property, Lick Skillet. When he first saw the land, he did not see only what had been lost. He saw what could return.

THE LAND THAT RAISED HIM

There is a particular kind of silence that exists only in wild country. It settles over backwater rivers before sunrise, beneath towering longleaf pines, and beside forgotten creeks, where alligators slip from muddy banks without disturbing the stillness.

Jon learned to recognize that beauty long before he became an attorney and one of the country's foremost authorities on sporting properties, hunting plantations, and recreational land.

His connection to the outdoors began with his father, Dr. William Kohler, who came south from New Jersey to attend the University of Florida Medical School and found paradise.

"Somehow — and I still don't know how — he found 160 acres that he could afford as a medical student on the Gulf of Mexico, with a private freshwater river running through the middle of it, with islands and longleaf pine and 2,000-year-old cypress trees," Jon says. "The locals thought he was the crazy doctor because they didn't want any of that. You couldn't farm it. The timber had been cut over. Development restrictions had just passed, where you couldn't carve it up or dredge canals through the marsh like people were doing everywhere else. They looked at it and wondered, 'Who in the world would buy this?' The answer was this crazy doctor.

"We couldn't understand it because this was the best land in Taylor County. But everybody thought it was the worst. Looking back, I realize that it shaped the way I see everything. It taught me to stop and ask, 'What if everybody else is looking at this the wrong way?'"

The family called the property Blue Creek. With its hidden islands and ancient cypress, it became a world unto itself and the setting for Jon's childhood.

His father had not grown up hunting or fishing. As a neurologist, he understood science and discipline, but he also understood what he could not teach his son himself. So, he entrusted Jon to people who had spent their lives reading Florida's rivers and woods.







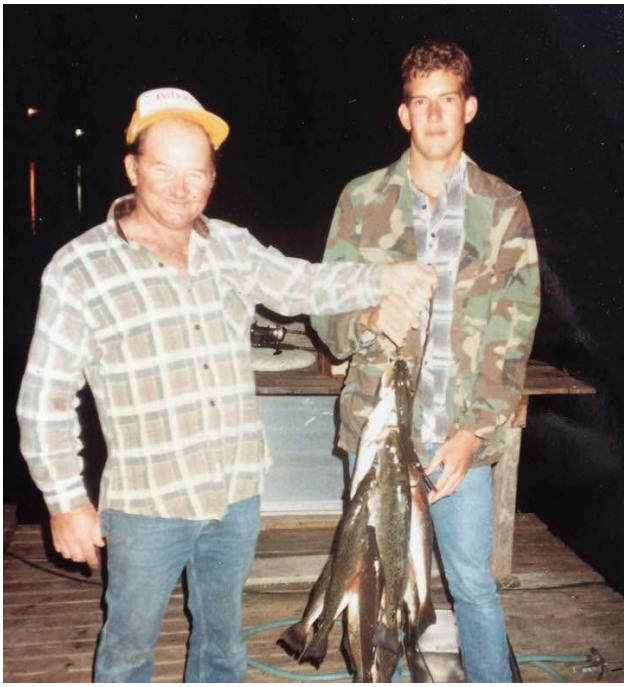
"My dad loved exploring the land, but he wasn't a hunter," says Jon, a self-described "Florida Cracker, a description he embraces with pride. "But what he did — and I give him tremendous credit for this — is that he made sure I learned from people who could teach me what he couldn't.

"He'd drop me off every summer and almost every weekend with a retired judge and mullet fisherman, Judge Ben Lindsay. They were true Florida 'Crackers.' They taught me how to shoot rifles, fish, hunt, work in the woods, and just be practical. My dad built a little cabin for me on one of the islands. By the time I was about fourteen, I'd stay there by myself or with friends. We'd take a Jon Boat, eat what we caught, and live off the land."

Judge Lindsay taught him to read the weather, tides, and the river, and introduced him to western big-game hunting. Together with his father, they shaped Jon's understanding of the outdoors.

"Whatever your mentors think is important when you're twelve, thirteen, fourteen years old — becomes part of your DNA. I wanted all three of them to respect me. I wanted my dad to respect me intellectually, and I wanted those old Florida Crackers to respect me in the woods. Looking back, I realize I was raised by three fathers."





Above: Jon Kohler (at right) spent his formative years on his father's property on the Aucilla, learning from two "Florida Crackers" what it meant to be an outdoorsman. Left, Erica Kohler tempts Lick Skillet's breeding trophy buck with a snack.

FROM PASSION TO PROFESSION

At one point, Jon considered medical school, but his relationship with the outdoors ultimately pulled him in another direction. He loved places where people were visitors rather than owners. But there was no obvious profession for someone who wanted to dedicate his life to recreational land, a term that did not yet exist in the vernacular.

His mother and grandfather were real estate brokers, a career that did not carry the professional recognition as medicine or law. Jon decided to change that.

He earned a law degree, giving him a foundation in contracts, valuation, and negotiation, while allowing him to approach sporting properties with the seriousness he believed they deserved.

At the time, the idea that recreational value could make a property more valuable than its timber or agricultural potential was almost heretical.

“I remember getting into a big argument with an appraiser for Farm Credit,” he recalls. “He was just indignant. He said, 'Jon, you're telling me this property is valuable because people want to hunt deer, turkey, and quail? It doesn't have enough timber. It can't grow crops. It doesn't produce anything.'

“He thought that was crazy.”

Jon believed those qualities were not secondary benefits. They were the asset. The beauty of ancient trees, the sound of a covey rising, the experience of a river winding through untouched woods — all of it had intrinsic value. His work would help establish recreational properties as a distinct and increasingly sophisticated asset class.

That perspective also shaped his relationship with the conservation giant, Tall Timbers, and his valuation of properties managed for wildlife. Jon meticulously curated a collection of land maps outlining valuable properties across the country — particularly in the South — revealing how individual parcels connect to form an even more significant, unified whole.

“We have plantation maps that show the landowners using prescribed fire,” Jon explained. “Those properties become a separate asset class. You can have one property next door with industrial timber, and another property with much less timber, but incredible ground cover because it has been burned correctly. The second property can be worth more because it has been managed for wildlife and recreation.”

The maps became a part of that work.





“I have plantation maps that were really my private collection. They came from decades of learning about the landowners, the properties, the boundaries, and what made these places special. We kept them very private for a long time. Some of the wealthiest people in the country would ask for them. We gave only a few to our clients. But eventually we realized this information was too important to keep to ourselves. The world knew these properties existed, but people couldn't see how they connected. When they saw the maps, they could finally understand. They could look at it and say, 'I get it now.'”

Sharing that knowledge meant giving up something Jon had carefully collected over decades, — and even sharing that knowledge with competition in the land sales arena — but it allowed others to see the larger landscape and understand why those recreational properties warranted higher values.

LICK SKILLET — RESTORING WHAT WAS LOST

Lick Skillet brought those lessons full circle. The property along the Aucilla River was a clear-cut tract, stripped of much of its original character. But Jon had spent his career learning that damaged landscapes could recover. Land, he believed, could remember what it was meant to be, if given the right conditions.

Private property along the Aucilla is rare. The river is protected, much of the surrounding landscape is already preserved, and opportunities to acquire significant frontage seldom arise.

The property Jon learned about through a family friend was only fifty-six acres, but it included half a mile of river frontage. His father recognized the opportunity and gifted him an early inheritance.

“That was the beginning,” he recalls. “I had to restore the property from the ground up. I had to create a place. Then I kept buying adjoining properties until we had what we have today.”

The original property eventually grew to over eight hundred acres and more than two miles of Aucilla River frontage. Today, it is among the largest privately held tracts along the river. But acreage is not the most meaningful measure of what has been created.

Quail move through restored habitat. Wood ducks find carefully created wetlands. A fire regimen with switch grass and longleaf pines renews the land. American chestnuts — once nearly erased from the landscape — are being planted in hopes



that future generations will know trees that earlier generations lost. Bass and catfish ponds support both recreation and habitat, while genetically improved trophy whitetails move through the high fence.

The property has also become a laboratory for restoration.

"We use it as our testing ground," Jon explains. "We have the best advisors at our fingertips through Tall Timbers, Quail Forever, Tecomate, and other organizations. I see everything happening on the properties I advise, and then I go home and try to do it myself with my budget. We raise our own quail and pheasants. We hatch thousands of quail chicks. We developed our own pre-season release program. We're always trying new things with native grasses and restoration. We have every kind of habitat you can imagine."

The work is now being passed to the next generation. Jon's sons, Greyson and Ashton, are twelve and fifteen — the same ages Jon identifies as his formative years.

"They've definitely inherited it," Jon says. "Every time we talk about burning, they think we should only burn on weekends when they can be there. One of them even has his own custom drip torch."

The family's relationship with wild places extends beyond restoration and land management. It is also about experience.

For Jon, quail hunting is less about the act of hunting than the moment when people, wildlife, landscape, and generations converge.

"I half-jokingly say quail hunters are drug addicts," Jon says. "When a covey flushes, you get that hit of dopamine and adrenaline. It's a drug — but it's really God's drug. The more you experience it, the more you want it. That's what draws people back."

THE REAL FLORIDA

That instinct — to seek the authentic rather than the manufactured — goes back to Jon's childhood.

Like many Florida families, the Kohlers visited Disney World when he was young. The Jungle Cruise had not been open long. The anticipation was strong.

"When I rode the Disney Jungle Cruise, I was shocked," he says. "I was confused. We had a real river. If you weren't paying attention, an alligator could jump off the bank into your boat. We didn't have actors pretending to be natives — we had real Florida Crackers and poachers out there. If your boat hit a rock, you were actually stranded. One time, we forgot the paddle, and we really were up the creek without one.

"What amazed me wasn't the ride. It was seeing people stand in line for hours to experience an imitation, while the real thing sat empty. We never saw anybody on our river. It was just wilderness.

"I remember thinking, 'Someday I'm going to give people tours and prove that the real Florida is better than this fake one.'"

He never outgrew that idea. Over the following decades, it became the work of his life: introducing people to landscapes they might otherwise never understand, and helping them see value in wildness.

More important than what Jon has taught his clients is what he is teaching his sons.

At Lick Skillet, Greyson and Ashton are growing up with the same education their father received at Blue Creek. They are learning the river, the woods, the wildlife, and the fire. They are learning that a landscape is not simply something to possess, but something to understand. Restoration takes patience, and wild places require work. The best measure of what you leave behind may be what continues.

The river still moves through Lick Skillet, and ancient cypress trees still stand along the Aucilla. The difference is that the habitat is in a lot better shape now. The wild places remain because someone cares enough to carry them forward.

