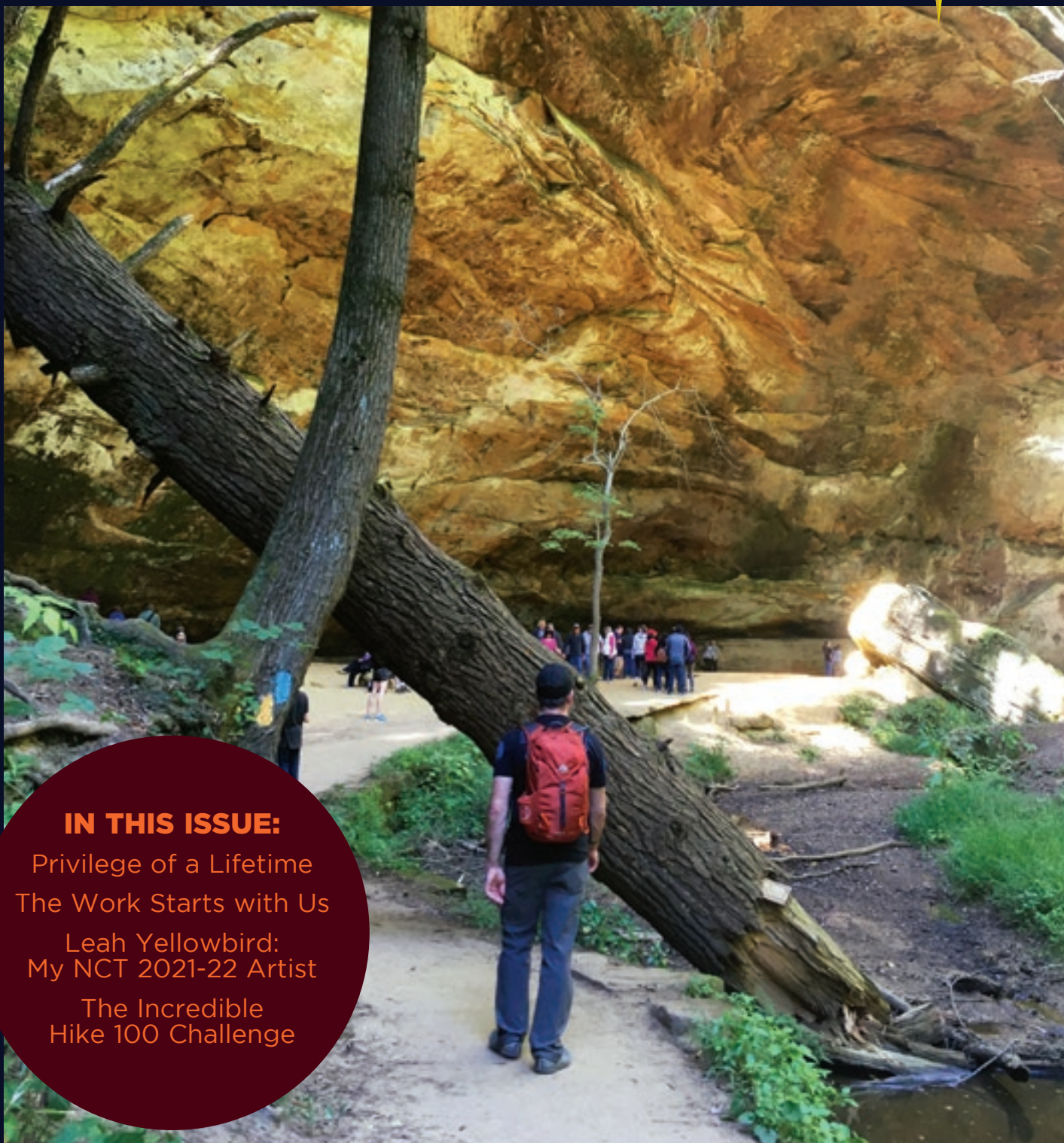


Summer 2021

The Magazine of the
North Country Trail Association

Volume 40, No. 3

north star



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Privilege of a Lifetime
The Work Starts with Us

Leah Yellowbird:
My NCT 2021-22 Artist

The Incredible
Hike 100 Challenge

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ABOUT THE COVER:

"We hiked in the Hocking Hills area of Ohio. It was an amazing section of the Trail." (Jason Gilbert)

Photo: Chris Sherman and Jason Gilbert

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TRAILHEAD

Jaron Nyhof,
President



Photo: Vicki Nyhof

(among other hats she's worn) for being the passionate, talented, fun, occasionally cantankerous, big-hearted trail lover that she is. I first met Irene at a board meeting, and it was immediately clear that she was a force to be reckoned with. She clearly had a lot of history with all aspects of the Trail and the Association, knew her stuff, and was both direct and forceful in expressing her opinions. Irene does not pull punches. I immediately and simultaneously loved and feared her. A year or two later at the Celebration in Clarion, Pennsylvania, she led a couple boys on a hike, one of which was my son, Andrew. He recounted the experience to me afterwards, telling me about her amazing knowledge of nature which she shared freely, her patience and her good humor, and how much he loved that hike because of her. Tenderness under toughness.

I find that pattern of a tough, get'r done exterior coupled with quiet depth and significant talents to be a frequent character set of the folks I meet in our Trail Community. We have a lot of unsung heroes in our midst, and a lot of them would probably like to keep it that way. I appreciate and admire humility, and definitely prefer it to the alternative, but as I ponder how to better energize and harness the immense power of

This is a day late (okay, a quarter late) and a dollar short, but I'd like to thank Irene Szabo, our former North Star Editor

our volunteers, donors, land owners, and other constituents, I fear it may be an obstacle. Who would know upon meeting Irene, for instance, that she had been our interim Executive Director for a time; that she has amazing editorial skills; that she had such a depth of knowledge about nature and history (and trains); that she used to travel around New York teaching trail management; and more? Well, only the people who really know Irene, or who take the time to get to know Irene, know those things about her. And therein lies the secret, I believe, to better understanding and engaging the many, many talents, skills, resources, and connections of our Trail Community - narning on one another.

I've talked in prior Trailhead articles about the vast array of talents, skills, resources, and connections that are needed to move the Trail forward. Things like obtaining easements, building trail, advocating at all levels, broadcasting our story, raising funds, building partnerships, reaching new populations, and all manner of other things that move our mission forward. I fully believe that we have all the resources at our fingertips to do all of those things at a world class level by and through the talents, skills, resources, and connections either already within our community or possessed by people personally known to those in our community. We just need to tap them! The first obstacle to tapping them, of course, is to know that they're there. Given

our propensity towards modesty, I would ask that if you hear of or see a need in any aspect of our mission or strategic plan (available on the About Us > Transparency page at northcountrytrail.org), and you know of someone that could help us with it, that you both tell us about them and ask that person to help with whatever it might be.

As one example of how this could happen, I'll note that we would like to broaden the use and relevance of the Trail to additional, more diverse populations. Toward that end, we'd like more board members and other leaders that are representative of those populations to be involved so that they can help us understand how to better reach those groups, make the Trail more relevant and accessible to them, and propel us into being a trail community that more

I find that pattern of a tough, get'r done exterior coupled with quiet depth and significant talents to be a frequent character set of the folks I meet in our Trail Community.

closely represents our entire country, which will ultimately make the Trail a more well-known and permanently secure national asset. We need your help, though, in finding the people that could make that happen and in inviting them to become part of us. So, if you know someone that could help in this area, or if you are such a person yourself, please let us know. And if you have a close

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

TRAILHEAD

Jaron Nyhof, President Continued

enough relationship with that person, you might also ask them if they'd be interested in getting more involved.

As former NCTA President Ruth Dorrough has often reminded me as a good friend and mentor, the point of the organization is the Trail. It's all about the Trail, stupid! (No, she doesn't actually tack on that last word, but in my case it would be appropriate.) So, as you read my call for help, please keep that focus in mind as well. I'm not asking for help with some personal or other agenda. I'm asking for help in any way that will allow the NCTA to better develop, maintain, protect, and promote the North Country National Scenic Trail as the premier hiking path across the northern tier of the United States through a trail-wide coalition of volunteers and partners working in partnership with the National Park Service. I am convinced we have the resources at our fingertips to make that mission a reality, that there are more Irene's waiting to be discovered or engaged. We just need your help finding and tapping into them.

Thank you for being part of building the NCNST and leaving a lasting legacy, whether by your direct involvement, by linking us to your network of resources, or both. Together we can do this! ✨

Andrea Ketchmark, Executive Director



Photo: Ted Bentley

that narrative, and to think big and long-term about what's needed to succeed. There is a price to pay if we don't invest in ourselves and our programs today in order to see a better return for the mission tomorrow.

The North Country National Scenic Trail is the longest in the National Trails System. We've accomplished a tremendous amount in the past 40 years but we have a long way to go. If we are to be the organization with the ability to complete the Trail and protect the corridor we've got to focus our time, efforts, and funding toward the priorities that will fulfill this vision. The NCTA's Strategic Plan charts a path forward, one that will help us grow and support the people and places we need to create a legacy we can all be proud of. Investment in these efforts means we want to see a payoff down the road and the time to start is now.

Our community sustains us! We must invest in training and resources for our volunteers, giving them the skills they need to be successful. We must focus on volunteer recruitment, mentoring new leaders, and planning for succession within our Chapters. We must value our staff by creating a work environment that attracts and retains great talent. We must bolster programs like the Hike 100 Challenge,

Nonprofits are often celebrated for doing more with less and for making it work without resources, but it's important to change

the Next Generation Coalition, and our justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) work that will get new people involved. They are the future.

We must also honor places. We must expand our Trail Protection program to be able to acquire rights of way and to protect landscapes that matter. We have to add staff capacity and build partnerships to do this work, and we need to strengthen the NCTA's Trail Protection Fund in order to meet the needs of completing and protecting a corridor for the Trail. We can't do this alone. Investing your time, talent, and money in our work are great ways to create the future you want to see.

● SUPPORT THE NCTA.

to ensure we continue to grow to meet the challenges ahead. There are many ways to give to fit your needs but each of them ensures a brighter tomorrow: northcountrytrail.org/membership.

● VOLUNTEER WITH US.

Give your time to build and maintain the Trail, or use other skills to advance our work. And if you already give back, take time to invite someone else to join you, or mentor a new volunteer as they are the leaders of tomorrow: northcountrytrail.org/volunteer.

The future of the Trail all depends on our ability to think ahead, to focus time and attention on what matters, and to fund the programs today that will sustain us tomorrow. We must invest in ourselves if we want the Trail to grow, for it to be protected and for it to impact the lives of people for years to come. You can make that possible.

Learn more about NCTA's Strategic Plan and the path ahead at northcountrytrail.org/transparency. ✨

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CORNER

Chris Loudenslager

Superintendent, North Country
National Scenic Trail



Photo: Mick Hawkins



After what was truly a long, difficult year for all of us, I am very grateful to welcome the summer season and embrace it in all its splendor as things slowly get back to normal, or whatever our new normal will now be. In all honesty, I'm not sure I've ever been so enamored with summer, and I've been enjoying every moment of it.

While the pandemic seriously hampered many of our plans and activities last season, it would be hard to notice that it had any impact on us at all, as we found new and innovative ways to do work, have fun, and continue moving forward safely. We have many miles of new Trail completed, many new projects started, and have made many improvements overall to how we approach our operations. And, on top of all this, the silver lining of the pandemic is that the importance and relevance of trails has taken on a whole new meaning, and is being appreciated by a much larger segment of our population. More and more people are discovering what we've known all along: Trails are awesome. If you are new to the North Country Trail Community and this is your first issue of the North Star, welcome! Thank you for finding us and thank you for joining us. We're so glad you're here!

As we forge ahead with great enthusiasm and momentum, please always keep your safety and the safety of those you are working with as your highest priority. I seem to recall suggesting at some point in the past that we will need to pace ourselves once the pandemic subsides and not try to catch up on everything all at once. I'm revisiting that notion now to remind myself of this as much as anyone else. I am chomping at the bit to get out, build stuff, fix stuff, and make things happen. But building and maintaining trail still has its risks. The summer heat and humidity are still factors to be especially mindful of, and random, unforeseen events or hazards that can't be planned for still need to be accounted for. As more and more new hikers find the Trail, the chance of you being at the right place at the right time to help someone in need makes your experience, skill, knowledge, and preparation increasingly valuable and important. Plan for what is expected, plan for the unexpected, and be sure always that you have a way to call for help if your plan—or someone else's plan—goes south. ✱

You're Invited

AMERICAN HIKING SOCIETY VOLUNTEER VACATION

Boundary Waters Canoe Area
Wilderness, Minn.
September 12-18, 2021

The Volunteer Vacation Crew will canoe into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) to clear a remote section of the Border Route Trail / North Country Trail using hand tools. Register online this summer at americanhiking.org/volunteer-vacations.



CAMPOUT AND BOARDWALK BUILD

Antrim County, Mich.
September 24-26, 2021

The Jordan Valley 45° Chapter invites you to join the rebuild of a 70-foot boardwalk bridge at O'Brien Pond. Puncheon and trail tread will be added, too. Camp out at the site starting Friday evening. The Chapter will provide food; bring your own sleeping accommodations. Contact Duane Lawton at delawton@torchlake.com for more information and to RSVP.





Photo: Leah Yellowbird

Leah Yellowbird: My NCT 2021-22 Artist

The North Country Trail Association launched the My NCT program in 2020 as a means to bring art and nature together in the telling of our story, and the connection our Trail Community has with it.

"We have been talking for years about the need for a more graphic representation of the Trail," explained Andrea Ketchmark, NCTA Executive Director.

My NCT incorporates the promotion of the North Country National Scenic Trail and the NCTA through an artist's visual interpretation of it. The piece selected is displayed through the



Photo: Pinnacle Marketing Group

NCTA for 16 months before it is retired. In this second year of the program, the NCTA is honored to collaborate with Minnesota artist Leah Yellowbird.

"I'm all about detail when I paint," explained Leah. "I'm a beader and I want to bead with the tiniest, smallest beads so I can get the most detail. And so when I paint, I do exactly the same thing. If you saw something interesting out here, you'd want

to touch it. And so that's exactly how I feel with the painting."

"I'm Anishinaabe, Ojibwe, Algonquin, and Métis," continued Leah. "What I do in the style I paint is nature, or my interpretation of nature, or the Ojibwe interpretation of nature. I wanted to do a butterfly because to me, it's just floating around - it's beautiful; it's here, it's there, that's the Trail. I decided to really take a look at the full Trail online, just the line of it. It's so weavy and wobbly. I decided I'd do the inside of the wings of the butterfly that exact trail."

The flowers featured within the butterfly are representative of each North Country Trail state, as well.

"Every time you look at it you pick up something new," noted Matt Davis, NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator.

Limited edition products featuring Leah's artwork will be made available starting this September. Visit northcountrytrail.org/mynct to learn more. ✨

Let's work together to grow membership. The **My NCT** membership drive is returning for a second year and is scheduled for this September. It's the perfect time to join or renew your membership, and receive a limited edition "thank you" gift in return. The NCTA is honored to have partnered with Minnesota artist Leah Yellowbird for this year's featured **My NCT** artwork. Read more about Leah at indigenousfirst.org/leah-yellowbird and visit northcountrytrail.org/mynct this September.

Two generous donors have offered a dollar-for-dollar match for every person who becomes a member on **September 25** (one day only!), up to the first \$5,000 worth of memberships. What a perfect way to grow membership while celebrating North Country National Scenic Trail Day and National Public Lands Day!

Go Where the Trail Leads You

By Nancy Brozek

A pioneer in craft beer, Bell's Brewery has grown to become so much more. This independent, family-owned, Michigan company has been dedicated to building communities and supporting the environment for more than three decades.

Bell's *Mini Kegs for Causes* program put the North Country Trail front and center in the spring of 2021. Through branded packaging featuring a map rendition of the Trail, the program has invited everyone to get involved, contribute, and become active where they live.

"We've always supported organizations and initiatives that protect and promote the outdoors," said Larry Bell, President and Founder of Bell's Brewery. "We want people to go out and use these valuable resources, and share their passion with others." Larry is currently working toward completing the North Country Trail Association's Hike 100 Challenge.

"Our National Scenic and Historic Trails each tell a story," added Larry. "To continue enjoying these treasures, we need to take care of them."

This fall, Bell's Brewery joins forces with the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) to show their support on a national scale. "Go Where the Trail Leads You," a promotional campaign designed to raise awareness and encourage people to get involved, will be seen in grocery stores across the country. Store displays will feature a QR code, inviting the public to learn more about the National Scenic and Historic Trails system. On this website, you will be able to pledge time or make a gift to a trail. For every hour pledged to the trails online between September 1 and October 31, 2021, Bell's will make a donation directly to PNTS. Those hours can include hiking on any trail, volunteering to clean up litter on a trail, learning more about the trails, and more. It's that easy. One hour equals \$5, up to \$15,000. Pledges can be made at bellsbeer.com/trails.

Bell's is also partnering with various Michigan- and Wisconsin-based retailers to give back specifically to the North Country Trail, which passes near the main Bell's brewery in Comstock, Mich. Features and specials will also be available at Bell's pub, the Eccentric Café, on September 25, 2021 to celebrate National Public Lands Day. Visit northcountrytrail.org/bells in late August to learn more. ✱

Membership Matters

By Nancy Brozek

When I think about what membership means, I think about the woman who fondly remembers her childhood spent on the North Country Trail. She doesn't get back to her home state as often as she would like but when she does, she always makes time for a hike.

I remember the stories I heard from one of the Association's founding members and am quickly overcome with gratitude. I am so thankful for their insight and vision for what the Trail could become with the help of everyday people.

I smile at the images a father sent, documenting his family's adventures while they work on their Hike 100 Challenge. His toddler, waddling his way down a well-loved path, discovering all the beauty nature has to offer.

For four decades, the North Country Trail Association community has shared countless reasons for belonging and what membership means to each. **Membership matters.**

Through membership we build a sense of community. We unite on matters that are important to us as individuals, while creating a future for those we will never meet. Membership is a belief in something bigger than ourselves.

For the Trail, membership is the lifeblood of its existence. It provides Chapters with vital financial support for local projects. It keeps maps updated and free. It funds maintenance for every mile of the Trail through the Field Grant program. It underwrites programs like the Hike 100 Challenge, Next Generation Coalition, Annual Celebration, and *My NCT*. It is our collective voice serving as advocates for the Trail's protection.

Membership is not a requirement to volunteer, to download maps, to participate in programs, or to hike. But membership makes those things possible. Membership makes the Association possible. Your membership matters, as we thank you.

northcountrytrail.org/membership

The Work Starts with Us

By Sr. Lyn Szymkiewicz

This is the second installment of an NCTA Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) series by Sr. Lyn Szymkiewicz and it includes references to the first installment. Read the first in the Spring 2021 issue of the North Star.

In April 2021, the four NCTA Chapters in Pennsylvania offered a second online session addressing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion with the hope to educate and raise consciousness of its trail community members. The national NCTA JEDI statement encourages all Chapters to work to implement these values locally, rooted in a belief that the North Country Trail has the potential to change lives. This transformation can occur by safe and obstacle-free access to the healing properties that nature possesses.

More than 25 participants returned to this second session, shortly after the court decision was made for the *George Floyd case. The media was filled with various narratives impacting all sides in the matter. As this group began raising their awareness to diversity and inclusion issues, some participants offered that they were now hearing these narratives from a different, heightened perspective. Meeting presenter Kimberly Refosco, of KEC Consultants and the Pittsburgh network for Outdoor Afro, had assigned some homework from the first session which she now reviewed with the group.

The first session addressed biases and reactions, vocabulary of JEDI, and personal stories and questions that helped give flesh to experiences many of us may never have had on a public trail. This second session focused on representation of and barriers for race, gender, ability and age, and looked at ways of welcoming and inviting transformation within a club or group, such as an NCTA Chapter.

An example of representation shortcomings that Kimberly offered was a simple story of her trying to create a Powerpoint presentation and wanting to include a photograph of black people whitewater rafting. She could not find one. As we may know from our own experiences, unless I can see or envision myself in an activity, job or a role, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to imagine myself doing it. It's the same data that research is finding on why less women are in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) positions: For the longest time women were thought not to be suited for those roles. Now juxtapose that into marketing and even some product areas. How long has it taken to see multicultural crayon colors on the store shelves? NCTA Chapters, how diverse is your trail use and your membership? Are you aware of what your web page photos reveal to people of color, or of various ages and abilities? Do you offer benches along the Trail, or designated spaces or programs so that children can enjoy hands-on experiences?

"To truly be inclusive, we have to address the inequities and injustices that have led to the trail community being a white community. The work starts with us."

— ANDREA KETCHMARK
NCTA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AND TIM
MOWBRAY, FORMER NCTA BOARD
PRESIDENT

Being outdoor enthusiasts, NCTA Chapter members know the impact of the outdoors on their health. Kimberly made this same point. Creating space in which everyone feels safe and invited to experience the Trail is an investment into our communities' physical and emotional health. Whether it's decreasing the challenges of heart disease, providing a safe sensory experience for people with autism, or being a simple start to relieving depression, hiking can offer more than nature for people to enjoy.

Looking at the equitable access to experiencing the North Country Trail, Kimberly posed some questions worth thinking about:

- Can we acknowledge that our perspective might be different from others? Who or what groups might we include in trail planning?
- How can you contribute to changes in people's experiences on the Trail? Find ways to engage groups to find out comfort and safety levels; join other groups in the community and build relationships with their members, and invite them to NCTA events. Add more subtle invitations along the Trail like benches, or signage indicating difficulty level for hiking.
- Have you created a strategic plan on how your Chapter is going to authentically engage the community?
- Book recommendation: Black Faces in White Spaces by Carolyn Finney

As always, the question-and-answer period at the end of the session was engaging. It's so helpful to listen to the stories of others who have either begun to work on inclusion and diversity issues, or who are aware of challenges. The more we can share across Chapters and among members,

the quicker we can begin to transform the North Country Trail into a truly welcoming and safe hiking experience for all. ✨

Visit outdoorafro.com to learn more about the organization, and pnts.org/new/resources/diversity-and-inclusion-resources for a robust diversity and inclusion resource library curated by the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS).

*George Floyd was a black man murdered by a white police officer in 2020 during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minn.

As part of the North Country Trail Association's commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) on the North Country Trail, the NCTA is thrilled to launch the new **JEDI Mini-Grant** program. These mini-grants of up to \$1,000 are awarded on a rolling basis, and are intended to support JEDI-focused affinity groups or individuals leading experiences on the North Country Trail. Learn more at northcountrytrail.org/grant-and-financial-management or contact jedigrants@northcountrytrail.org.

Share your adventures!

The Hike 100 Challenge completion form includes space to share your stories and photos, which could end up in a future *North Star* issue.

Learn more, sign up, and share your adventures at northcountrytrail.org/hike-100-challenge.

One More Round of Applause

By Ginny Shear



Photo: Unknown

Editor's Note: The Spring 2021 issue of the North Star featured a celebration of former North Star Editor Irene Szabo. Due to an email hiccup (for which the current editor takes responsibility and apologizes deeply!) one friend's celebration piece was left out of that article. It has since been recovered for publication here.

Having known Irene Szabo for well over 40 years, we have a lot to say about her. We all met in our 20s. Young pups, for sure. There are so many good times to remember. Many years of playing softball in the local county league has given us tons of memories and laughs. Irene got us involved in the Finger Lakes Trail and thus the North Country Trail by asking for our help with blaze touch ups. We got to help build a stairway to cross a gully and repair a

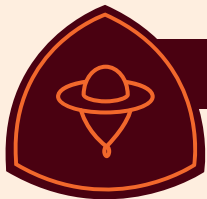
few signs along the trails.

What is important to note is that Irene is somewhat selfless in her work. Her love of the outdoors and desire to share that with others stands out. Many years ago, Irene invited our (then) 14-year-old son on a hiking trip. Just the two of them were going out for a few days on the Trail. It was a memorable time for Travis and he still tells tales from that event. He has now passed on his love of hiking and camping to his children.

What we have so enjoyed over the years is Irene's joy of sharing her passions with others. These include hiking, canoeing, bicycling, camping, trains, horses, and her dogs. Her wit and vocabulary are something to be admired. ✨



Photo: Tim Wilbur



Next Generation Coalition: Refreshed

By Felicia Hokenstad and Andrea Ketchmark

The NCTA's Next Generation Coalition welcomes its first official Cohort this summer. A limited number of participants were recruited from nearly every NCT state, creating opportunities for growth and deeper connections between the Cohort and the NCTA. Over the course of two years, Coalition members will:

- Receive a complimentary, one-year membership to the NCTA;
- Participate in advocacy and communications training to be effective advocates and leaders;
- Meet with elected officials at Hike the Hill in Washington D.C.;
- Volunteer with local Chapters on North Country National Scenic Trails Day; and
- Work together to inspire and mentor the next generation of outdoor leaders and volunteers.



FELICIA HOKENSTAD

Felicia Hokenstad, of Marquette, Mich. is the Next Generation Coalition Lead. She has been involved with the Coalition for several years and is a board member of the North Country Trail Hikers Chapter (Michigan). She is already involved in outreach, volunteerism, and advocacy for the NCTA (the Coalition's three "pillars"), and is a great fit to brainstorm ideas on how to connect more young people to NCTA's work at both the national and local level.

IN ADDITION TO FELICIA, THERE ARE 11 OTHER MEMBERS TO INTRODUCE:



COURTNEY SCHAFF

Near the western terminus of the Trail is **Courtney Schaff**, a lifelong North Dakotan who has deepened her relationship to the Trail in order to safely recreate and connect with nature. With her professional experience as an organizer, she is excited to give back what she can to the protection and promotion of the Trail in her state and beyond.

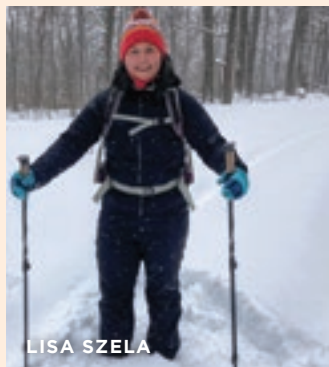


CHARLES SOQUI



DENNIS OLSON

In Minnesota are **Charles Soqui** and **Dennis Olson**. Charles (Charlie) is a California native who relocated to the Midwest after college. He has been an active volunteer in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, working with the Kekakabic Trail Chapter, and is a Trail Leader on the Border Route Trail. Dennis was born and raised in Detroit Lakes, Minn., and discovered the Trail at a very young age when he started doing overnight trips. Now backpacking and preserving the Trail are his passion, and all of his free time is spent in the woods.

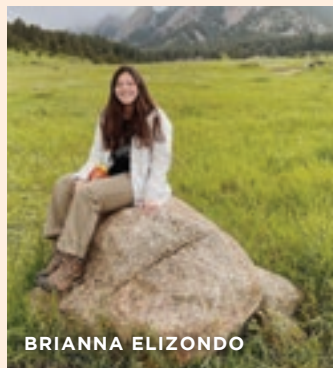


LISA SZELA

In Wisconsin, we welcome **Lisa Szela** to the team. Lisa is particularly passionate about increasing access to the outdoors, and creating strong and welcoming outdoor communities. In her free time, she leads a women's outdoor meetup and volunteers with a number of local organizations to help maintain parks, trails, and climbing areas in Wisconsin.



KATIE COTHAN



BRIANNA ELIZONDO



STEPHANIE SLEDA

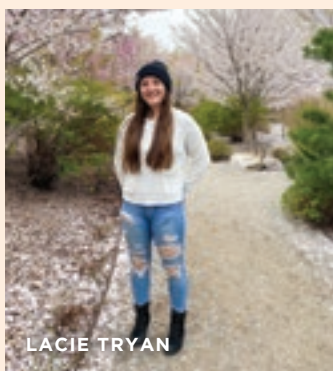
and advocacy, and is a passionate hiker. She hopes to educate more young people about the importance of preserving and protecting the Trail and the outdoors.

Michigan is the state with the most miles and the most Cohort members. In Marquette, along with Felicia, are **Katie Cothran** and **Brianna Elizondo**. Brianna is originally from the Lower Peninsula but moved to the UP in 2020 to attend Northern Michigan University (NMU) for a biology degree. Since moving to Marquette, she has fallen in love with all that the NCT has to offer and looks forward to learning how to more effectively preserve its beauty for future generations. As a Co-Leader of NMU's Conservation Crew, Katie has volunteered for the NCTA North Country Trail Hikers Chapter since 2018. Some of her favorite activities include mountain biking,

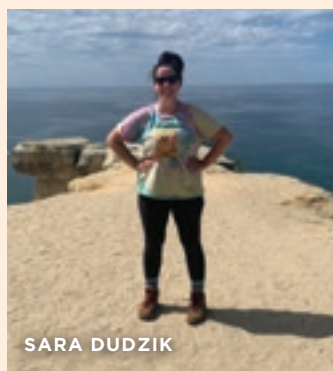


HEATHER JOHNSON

Heather Johnson is in Ohio, though she grew up in eastern Pennsylvania. She has volunteered for an impressive amount of summer trail work crews, which led to her passion for conservation and environmental stewardship. Heather is optimistic about joining the Coalition to be part of the voice that continuously advocates for environmental protection.

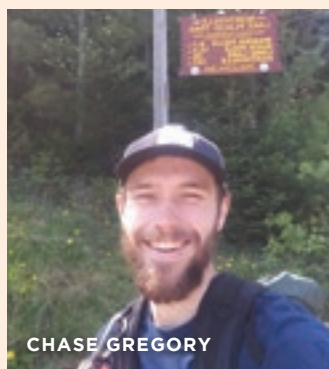


LACIE TRYAN



SARA DUDZIK

organizing community cleanups, and gardening. **Lacie Tryan** is in Bark River, and is a seasoned member of the Next Generation Coalition. She's a new Trail Adopter for the Western Michigan Chapter, and in her free time, you can find her backpacking or car camping, biking, hammocking, or catching a sunset. **Sara Dudzik** resides in Fort Gratiot, where she and the dogs are always out exploring all types of trails or the next trendy craft brewery. After living out West for a few years, she is excited to re-establish herself in Michigan and with the North Country Trail community. In Wayland is **Stephanie Sleda**, who helps manage her Chapter's social media in West Michigan. She has a background in volunteering



CHASE GREGORY

On the eastern side of the Trail, we welcome back **Chase Gregory** from Buffalo, New York. Chase is a hiker, software programmer, climber, business owner, cyclist, and volunteer. He has been a long-time member of the Coalition, and has attended Hike the Hill many times to represent the NCTA and Finger Lakes Trail Conference

We are so incredibly grateful for these up-and-coming leaders who have chosen to dedicate their spare time to advocate for the North Country Trail. Register for the 2021 Virtual Celebration (it's free!) at northcountrytrail.org/celebration and tune in on Monday, August 9 for a formal introduction of this Cohort, as well as a rundown of what's in store for them. ✨



NCT Long Distance Hiker Recognition and Essays

Compiled and edited by Joan Young



In 2012, a program was developed to provide a modest award and incentive to people who hike a large number of unique miles on the North Country Trail. Many hikers love patches, so a central patch and rockers were designed to give to those people who hike either [at least] one complete NCT state or 1,000 unique miles. In addition, those who complete the entire NCT under muscle power

are given a certificate, and an outer rocker. Those who hike (including snowshoeing or skiing) the entire Trail are said to complete an end-to-end (E2E) hike. If some portions are bicycled, an end-to-end trip rocker is awarded.

To see the complete list of NCT Long Distance Hikers and find out how to apply for recognition, visit explorenct.org.

info/NoCoLo. There are also links to essays, journals, and more by these hikers.

Below are the partial essays of three individuals who have recently been awarded patches, though not all of their accomplishments are recent.

To read their full essays, visit northcountrytrail.org/blog and stay tuned to @northcountrytrail social media.

Shari Sanderson, Harbor Springs, Mich.

Central patch + Michigan, Mackinac Bridge, and 1,000-Mile rockers



Photo: Judy Conrad

You can find beauty in everything if you have the right attitude. My dad instilled the love of hiking in me. (My mom refers to it as an obsession!) He made several hiking sticks and I was lucky enough to inherit the one he used when he hiked. I take his hiking stick on all my hikes,

and I feel he is hiking right alongside me.

I first discovered the North Country Trail while hiking along a two-track near my house. Months later in Michigan's upper peninsula, I went to the Porcupine Mountains to do some hiking with my kids. I saw a blue blaze and a North Country Trail sign and I thought, what kind of trail is this that reaches all the way up here? Time to investigate.

The NCT in Michigan is beautiful. You will find rugged trails and many challenges along the way. It is also a very rewarding journey in many ways. I have never felt stronger physically, mentally and spiritually while hiking this trail. I have grown as a person, finding strength in myself I didn't know was possible.

Bill Courtois, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Central patch + Mackinac Bridge and 1,000-Mile rockers



Photo: Merri Carol Wozniak

I "discovered" the NCT at Naomikong Overlook, on Lake Superior's Whitefish Bay, no later than the spring of 1999. I was hooked!

I have documents from 1999 when I was capturing GPS logs and merging them with maps. The Hutchins

Guidebook and National Forest Service maps were a big help. I did small solo-hikes each summer over the next few years. My first long-ish hike was around July 2005, between the Castle Rock trailhead and Brevort Lake Road. In July and August 2006, my brother Bob and I spotted cars for five days of car camping/hiking from Lake Michigan to Lake Superior.

Hiking a more intense number of unique miles began in 2018 and further intensified in 2020. One highlight was doing the Minnesota Kekekabic Trail with my brother and three women in August 2020. Our average hiking age was about 67 years old. I hiked with the Softies in Michigan that September, western Wisconsin in October, and collected a large number of miles in Michigan and Ohio between October 2020 and May 2021. I finished Michigan's lower peninsula on May 1, 2021, south of Fife Lake.

Judy Conrad, Pellston, Mich.
Central patch + Mackinac
Bridge and 1,000-Mile rockers



Photo: Shari Sanderson

In 2015
I was
hiking with
friends
when I
noticed blue
blazes on
the trees
and asked
what they

meant. I lived my whole life in Emmet
County (Mich.) yet had never heard
of the North Country Trail. Later that
year I told my son Chris about my
dream to hike the Upper Peninsula
when we got this harebrained idea:
I live near the Mackinac Bridge and
he lives in Ohio... Maybe we should
hike the lower peninsula of Michigan
together.

In 2019 we started hammock camping
along the Trail. 230 more miles in
2020. After four years + one day, on
April 18, 2021, Chris and I completed
Michigan and I reached my 1,000
unique miles goal on the same day!
We hoped to do a 20-mile day, but we
hiked 21. I did this all before I turned
80! Heck, I have eight more years for
new challenges - I have the final 150
miles of the Upper Peninsula in my
sights.

Thank you for all the work you do for
this Trail, this national treasure, it is a
blessing. It is also a blessing to be able
to hike it with my son.

North Star Reader Survey

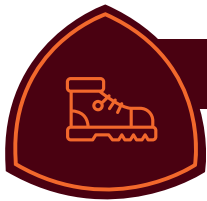
The NCTA is seeking to improve your North Star
experience. Complete this survey by October
1, and if you provide your contact information,
you'll be entered to win North Country Trail gear!
Take the survey at [surveymonkey.com/r/
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manually and return by mail to the NCTA at 229
E. Main Street, Lowell, MI 49331.



First and Last Name (Optional) _____

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 - ☐ Print
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2. How much content of each issue do you typically read?
 - ☐ All of it
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 - ☐ A couple articles
 - ☐ I skim or rarely read any
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 - ___ Trail use (e.g. hiker stories)
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 - ___ Trail projects
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4. If you could improve one thing about the design (the look and feel)
of the *North Star*, what would it be?
 - _____
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HIKES

2021 Allegheny 100 Hiking Challenge

By Tina Toole

The 11th annual Allegheny 100 Hiking Challenge (A-100) was held along the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) in the Allegheny National Forest of Pennsylvania, June 11-13. Participants could choose to challenge themselves to complete 100, 75, 50, or 25 miles in a 50-hour time period: 6:00 p.m. on Friday to 8:00 p.m. on Sunday. A total of 134 hikers participated, including some from as far away as California and Florida.

Nearly perfect weather and great trail conditions made for a record number of 100-mile finishers, including the first dog, Eppa!

25

MILES

11 PARTICIPANTS,
11 FINISHERS:
100% COMPLETION
RATE.

50

MILES

48 PARTICIPANTS,
22 FINISHERS:
46% COMPLETION
RATE.

75

MILES

13 PARTICIPANTS,
TWO FINISHERS:
15% COMPLETION
RATE.

100

MILES

62 PARTICIPANTS,
28 FINISHERS:
45% COMPLETION
RATE.

THE PREVIOUS RECORD OF 100-MILE FINISHERS WAS 23.

The format of the event changed this year to reduce contact between competitors. The biggest changes were an out-and-back hike instead of a point-to-point, and staggered starts from two trailheads, instead of all participants starting together from one trailhead. The changes were different but yielded many positive results. Hikers enjoyed the smoother registration process that allowed them to get out on the Trail sooner. They



Pennsylvania hikers Dave Salvatore and Scott Newton complete the 100-mile challenge.

Photo: Rich Glasgow



Kasia Dec celebrated the completion of her 100-mile challenge.

Photo: Rich Glasgow

appreciated the uncrowded first few miles. The chance to interact with hikers traveling the same distance was noted by many. Less hikers were stranded, since they could choose to turn around before they reached the halfway point of their hike.

Participants enjoyed being back in the Forest and meeting other hikers as they faced the challenge they had set for themselves. Thank you to all the participants for adapting to the changes with grace and smiles. A special thanks goes to our sponsors: United Refining, Betts, American

Refining Group, and Crescent Beer Distributors. We also appreciate the help we received from our volunteers, the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, and the North Country Trail Association. We couldn't have done this without all of you! ✨

For more information about the Allegheny 100 Hiking Challenge, visit northcountrytrail.org/a-100 or email NCTA Allegheny National Forest Chapter at anf@northcountrytrail.org. Next year's event (2022) will be held June 10-12.



This North Carolina trio was thrilled to complete their 50-mile challenge.

Photo: Jason Brown

A Tale of Two Lisbons

A North Country Trail Association (NCTA) Trail Town is a community through which the North Country National Scenic Trail passes that supports hikers with services, promotes the Trail to its citizens, and embraces the Trail to be protected and celebrated. They are built on a relationship between a town, the Trail, and local NCTA volunteers.

As of July 2021, six locations have been dedicated as NCTA Trail Towns: Lisbon (N.D.), Abercrombie (N.D.), Battle Creek (Mich.), Dayton (Ohio), Zoar (Ohio), and Lisbon (Ohio).

Lisbon, North Dakota

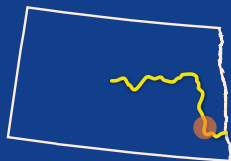
By Gerry Berg and Matt Davis

Lisbon, N.D. is located in the Sheyenne River Valley between two popular destinations along the North Country Trail (NCT) in North Dakota: the Sheyenne River State Forest and the Sheyenne National Grassland. The state forest is home to the popular “waterfall hike,” where the NCT leads hikers to the only waterfall in North Dakota. The National Grassland features the closest weekend backpacking NCT segment to Fargo-Moorhead.

This year, Lisbon became one of the first two NCTA Trail Towns in North Dakota. It's home to about 2,000 people, which may seem small, but as town sizes go in North Dakota, it's actually on the larger side! It hosts a thriving business district, the North Dakota Veterans Home, a hospital, a U.S. Forest Service office, and a state forest service office. (Yes, we do have trees, some hundreds of years old!)

The town is located in the prairie pothole and tall grass prairie region of North America. The Sheyenne River Valley offers an intriguing microclimate for many plants and animals that are not found in other parts of the state. The area has a rich Native American history with the remnants of an earth lodge village, burial mounds, pottery, and tool artifacts.

Visit bit.ly/3qjdJUx or northcountrytrail.org/trail-map-and-downloads to view the NCT route through Lisbon, N.D.



Lisbon, Ohio

By Tom Moutsos

If ever you find yourself wandering the quiet hills and farmlands of eastern Ohio near the border of Pennsylvania, stop by and visit the village of Lisbon. Lisbon, Ohio was settled in 1803 - the second oldest town in the state. Nearby is the site where Confederate raider John Hunt Morgan surrendered to the town's militia unit during the Civil War. Nowadays, Lisbon's 2,800 inhabitants are settled into life in Columbia County's seat that supports agriculture and some industry.



The town sits on one of the few Ohio sections of the North Country National Scenic Trail that does not share ground with the mighty Buckeye Trail. In fact, heading east from Zoar, Ohio (where the NCT parts ways with the Buckeye Trail) to the border with Pennsylvania, is about 80 miles of pure NCT. Aside from Lisbon itself, some highlights on this section of Trail include the aforementioned historic town of Zoar and, closer to Pennsylvania and just east of Lisbon, the delightful Beaver Creek State Park.

But everything about Lisbon as a Trail Town is not all oldest-town claims and glorious Civil War victories. Lisbon has the distinction of sitting along one of the longest road walks on the entire NCT. Again, heading east from Zoar, a hiker will have to crank out 60 miles of roadwalk to get to Lisbon, and then another eight miles past Lisbon to finally get off-road in Beaver Creek State Park!

The daunting task of closing this colossal roadwalk has been taken on by the NCTA Wampum Chapter. In this effort, the Chapter knows they have an ace up their sleeve: the support and goodwill from officials in and around Lisbon.

Visit northcountrytrail.org/trail-map-and-downloads to view the NCT route through Lisbon, Ohio.

Learn more about the NCTA Trail Towns program at northcountrytrail.org/trail-towns or by contacting your local NCTA Chapter.



All Photos: Tennant Family

An Incredible Hike 100 Challenge

By Benjamin Tennant

In 2021, the Tennants, a family of eight ranging in age from five to 42, completed their Hike 100 Challenge together. In 2019 when they met avid North Country Trail hiker “Trail Dale” Painter in Michigan’s upper peninsula, he gave the entire family the trail name, “the Incredibles.” This is an interview of their North Country Trail adventures.

NCTA: Please introduce yourselves!

SIMONE/MOM: I’m Simone, “the mom.” I was six months pregnant at this hike! This greatly influenced the experience, making the highs and lows much more dramatic! I took great measures all winter and spring to prepare my body for this hike - by doing stairs, hiking locally, wearing a belly support belt and belly-bind, and keeping very fit the last several months. I bought freeze-dried food in bulk and made massive meal packs based on some recipes from Andrew Skurka. We bought a few meals from Outdoor Herbivore, too. Only the first day had “fresh” food, and of course the two meals out to eat in Petoskey. We sent a couple resupply boxes with the grandparents who met us halfway, so we didn’t carry all nine days’ worth of food.

Benjamin, “the dad,” is our trail master. He knew about every stream, how far to go that day, and worked just about every waking minute to keep us healthy, strong, and trekking. He puts an incredible amount of thought put into every single piece of gear. He made us stop to filter when we just wanted to plod along; he kept a close eye on everyone’s experience and ability; kept an eye on the weather and terrain; even stopping when he knew the little kids needed to play - which is how you recharge kids 10 and under. (They don’t care to “rest”

by sitting down, but instead, play and scamper about! Benjamin leads with such zest and knowledge that he makes our experience smooth!

Our six kids are Cadence (19), Eli (17), Wyatt (13), Ezra (11), Nora, our only daughter (7), and Seth (5). We’re from Holland, Michigan and we support the NCTA Western Michigan Chapter.

NCTA: Do you have any connection with the NCTA? Are you former Hike 100 Challenge participants?

SIMONE/MOM: We met Trail Dale and Kathy Painter in 2019 in the UP on another Hike 100 Challenge trek. Trail Dale came upon us out of a swarm of mist and mosquitoes with a huge smile. We have kept in contact with him about our adventures. He and Kathy have both been so encouraging and my kids speak highly of them both, inspired by their expansive thru-hikes over many years.

Seven of us did the 2019 Hike 100 Challenge (Soldier’s Lake to Pictured Rocks) over 12 days, with one “zero-mileage day” and some time spent in actual campgrounds for the fun of it. Our longest day was 16 miles and our shortest was five (in order to enjoy a campground). Seth didn’t join us on this trip; Nora was five at the time.

For our 2020 Hike 100 Challenge, we did three all-family hikes in the spring: Nine, 21, and 33 miles (respectively) in the Manistee National Forest. Then in July, the oldest six of us hiked 62 miles through the Trap Hills, ending in Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. This was just five days. We knew this would be a huge challenge, and it was! There was lots of bushwhacking (due to the coronavirus, trail maintainers hadn’t been out), wet and overgrown trail soaked for a couple days straight (yes, Michigan has jungle), and of



course, hills upon hills, swamps and wetlands. We encouraged one another constantly and were thankful for the delicious food we prepped. The youngest two finished their hundred miles with day hikes.

In 2021, we did the Jordan River Valley Loop (plus some extra) as a warm up in April. Then for this particular trip [highlighted below] we started at the M-32 trailhead where we left off, and walked to Mackinaw City - the entire family this time! Upon finally arriving in Mackinaw City, the kids came out from under a bridge, saw our van parked a ways off, and sprinted, yelling, to reach it. Then everyone enjoyed an ice cream treat, of course!

NCTA: We hear you walked through the NCTA Harbor Springs Chapter's section of NCT. Was this the main goal or was it one piece of a larger objective?

SIMONE/MOM: Our goal was to continue from M-32 all the way to Mackinaw City, so we actually walked most of the Jordan Valley 45° Chapter's section, as well. It was very cool to walk through an entire Chapter! We were pleased with the well-maintained Trail, a much needed water cache, great signs,

helpful bridges, and beautiful countryside. This was a fantastic section to do with little kids. We even met up with Tim Calloway, trail maintainer extraordinaire, on the Trail. He was hard at work mowing near French Farm Lake. Benjamin had emailed with him a bit as he

researched for the trip and we saw his name on a number of signs, so we felt like we were meeting an old friend.

BENJAMIN/DAD: I plotted out exactly 100 miles: 648.5 to 548.5 from M-32 to the North Central Trailhead parking lot in Mackinaw City. We chose the end of May to limit our exposure to mosquitoes (there were none!), to enjoy cool day-hiking weather (perfect!), and because it was between when our oldest finished his college semester and would start a summer job. All the rest of the children are homeschooled so we had the flexibility to take that time off. We had already done 23 miles in the Jordan River Valley on a separate hike, about 10 of which are the NCT. We'll get some more in before the year is done, too!

NCTA: What were some of the highest and lowest points of this adventure for everyone?

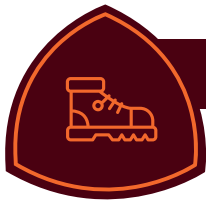
SIMONE/MOM: Highest points included the gorgeous walk around French Farm Lake, and seeing the kids work together to keep going. I watched them tell very long stories to one another, play silly race car games with Seth, sing silly songs, and

banter about anything. I enjoyed long conversations about hard topics with my oldest kids. Everyone plays a part and depends on one another in such a significant way. Especially with me getting exhausted or needing a break, the big kids stepped in to help where I normally would have taken over. Our first true trail magic happened when we found cookies in a trailhead register, left by hikers ahead of us.

A low was getting fatigued faster than my "normal" due to pregnancy, and not really wanting or able to hike more than 12 miles a day. I dealt with blisters on my baby toes for the last 75 miles... Just a constant pain. I had a few belly cramps too, but getting rest always helped that. I was grateful to soak my feet in cold streams, and Benjamin and the older boys were able to carry much more of our weight.



SETH (5): I really liked the hills because I could pretend I was a race car, and run up and down them in the forest! I liked the dinners we made, and I really liked all the stories my big brothers and Nora told. I liked the Jolly Ranchers and gummy bears mom gave me to keep me walking! I loved seeing Grandma and Grandpa (in Petoskey), and eating pizza and bagels. I loved sleeping in the tent with my four big brothers, and journaling and talking to them. I sleep right in the middle of all of them!



HIKES

An Incredible Hike 100 Challenge Continued



I love to just sing whatever is in my mind and I do that when I am walking for a long time. My “lows” were the roadwalks and walking in the city of Petoskey. It was hard to avoid the roots

on the Trail and I fell down a lot. It was hard to keep up sometimes, too.

NORA (7): We (Wyatt, Seth, and I) were so excited to get to the Skyline shelter, we ran right past the Trail to it and charged another quarter-mile. Wyatt said we should stop because it seemed further than it should have been; Ezra soon found us and called us back. It was incredible to have a blazing fire in the pit and to sleep inside the building, especially because it got down below 30 degrees that night. A big low and high was a time about six days in when I was feeling sad and didn't want to keep hiking. But just at that moment, Mom and I saw a porcupine waddling quickly away from us into the forest. I felt so happy I had noticed this and had come on this hike. That energized me to keep going; it gave me hope!

Cadence (19): I enjoyed using the Seek app to identify over 100 types of plants, trees, and flowers - we all learned the names of many. I always like trekking ahead of others and finding a place to sit to journal and pray and think. I like my alone time, but also good conversations with my parents. There is no rush or time limit to a conversation, as we have all day! Eli's stories were a high, especially as he told them on some long road walks! The great meals were a morale-booster every lunch and evening. The Mancino's [restaurant] and Mediterranean meals were highs, as well as seeing our grandparents to resupply us. It was a challenge to only walk nine to 15 miles a day at only a 1.5 mile/hour pace when I really could walk much faster and further. But we are a family and we stay together!

ELI (17): Some of my favorite times on our hike were when I was able to spend hours walking by myself or engaging in quality conversations with my parents. When you are in the wilderness for days on end and simply focusing on the bare necessities of survival, you are able to look at your life from a different, clearer perspective that can only be attained when you completely leave your busy daily life. A nine-day backpacking trip gives me a wonderful opportunity to think, pray, appreciate nature,

and enjoy simple silence that I would never have set aside time for if I remained at home. Aside from all that, one of the moments that I really enjoyed on the trip was the morning that we left the Skyline (NCT) shelter. It had been a cold night and we were still only at the beginning of our trip, but after a glorious breakfast of oatmeal the sun was shining and we set off at a good pace. There was energy and excitement in the air, plus it was really fun to be with the fast group (all the boys minus Seth). We absolutely booked it at top speed to catch up to Mom and the younger kids that had gone ahead. Many of my highlights on all backpacking trips include eating food. However, I will not recount them all because if I did, this would become a full-length chapter book about food. I will simply say this: On the trail everything tastes good. You have never truly tasted a meal if you haven't eaten it in a welcoming clearing after hiking 10 miles, and with a high probability of getting a little extra nutrition due to a



bug that crept into your bowl. My lowest point on the trip was when we had to hike miles through the Wilderness State Park campground to get to our reserved sight. We were all terribly tired and the little ones were moving at a crawl, but to make things worse, all of the walking along glistening hot roads seemed to suck our energy right through the soles of our boots. I must admit, in our desolation we became rather jealous of the exquisite, air-conditioned RVs and campers, and we may have muttered some dishonorable remarks about whether or not living in a steel shell with power and showers could really be called “camping.”

WYATT (13): I enjoyed getting Greek food our night in Petoskey! We went right through town and stayed at Petoskey State Park. I really enjoyed looking at the blooming nature and beautiful wildlife that abides within

it. At one section, I was so engrossed in the story I was telling Nora and Ezra, I missed a turn-off from the two-track we were on, back into the hilly woods. We were way ahead of the others. Then we got to a junction and didn't see any blue blazes anywhere. I had to stop my story.

(We soon found Mom.) Once I got far ahead of everyone, seeking to show my little sister she wasn't faster than me. After a while, I sat down on a log facing the Trail to enjoy my snack mix alone. Hearing a disturbance in the brush on a woody hill in front of me, I expected a chipmunk. However, a large black form sauntered down the slope! A black bear! It was over 20 yards away and moving to the next hill, away from me. Tentatively swallowing my last bit of food, I fearfully waited for the others to arrive. Meanwhile, the bear laid down behind a large pile of brush and fallen trees, still about 25 yards away. My family arrived, noisy as ever. They strained to see the bear until Dad said we ought to leave now! Lastly, I once thought a deer was chasing me: Before making camp, Dad, Ezra, and I went ahead to see if the river on the map existed when I happened upon a fawn sprawled on the dirt two-track! I stopped to stare when I heard loud snorts and a doe came out of the woods behind the fawn toward me! I assumed she'd defend her baby so I sprinted back to dad and Ezra, fearful of serious injury by this doe. We never found that stream either. It was just more road.



EZRA (11): A high was hiking alone for a bit in the Harbor Springs Chapter's section through a white pine and hemlock forest. I loved hearing the birds, looking at the different types and sizes of trees, seeing deer, and searching out new flowers and unique things in nature. It was difficult to walk on one six-mile road section. What helped everyone through that was listening to Eli's intriguing story (that took many hours to tell) about knights who had to defeat 10-foot praying mantises. Our meals are always memorable! I helped prep several of them at home with Mom, and put them into plastic gallon bags. We cooked in a 4.7L pot and would divvy it up into little bowls for everyone. We enjoyed tasty oatmeal most mornings. I really liked how we got to put M&Ms in our trail mix this time! Mom also surprised us with cookies for some snacks. It is important to us to have really good food because it boosts our morale and we often have fun conversations over meals. As a family, we make good, hearty food a priority. So even at eight people, we still make 10 servings and devour every bit of it!

BENJAMIN/DAD: I've always enjoyed being outside alone, lingering in the woods, so to share that with my

children is a great gift. These trips represent so many things that are important to me and priorities for our family: Hard work, appreciating nature, silence and solitude, simplicity, exercise, adventure, and accomplishing goals. There were tons of little highs along the way, like twice seeing a scarlet tanager, hearing the song of the rose breasted grosbeak, and sharing a golden sunrise over Wykamp Lake with my beautiful girl. These and so many other moments awaken deep prayers in me. The biggest high might be the memories and the family closeness that lingers for years after sharing such an adventure.

NCTA: Is there anything else you'd like to add about your experience(s) on the North Country Trail?

TENNANT FAMILY: The more we hike on the NCT, the more we appreciate its purpose and the work of the NCTA to move toward that. We get so much out of our times together on the Trail, we want others to have that same kind of experience. We hope to get involved in volunteering at some point.

The transformation that happens on the Trail is more than just a recreational experience. It has tremendous societal benefit. It beats back the harsh hurry that marks so much of our days and teaches us to enjoy the simple beautiful things. The Trail teaches us that we are strong and capable, and that we can notice the work of God among us. We return more at peace. More settled. And more able to see the beauty that's been around us the whole time. ✨

Plan your adventure today using resources at northcountrytrail.org. Sign up for the Hike 100 Challenge at northcountrytrail.org/hike-100-challenge.



Photo: Rob Schuitema

Adventure Time: Pandemic Milestones

By Rob Schuitema

This is the second installment of Adventure Time by Rob Schuitema and it includes references to the first installment. Read the first in the Spring 2021 issue of the North Star.

Saturday, May 16, 2020. We were a bit dumbfounded, in a good way, but dumbfounded nonetheless. On March 14, a ridiculous goal was set: Get our Hike 100 Challenge miles done during quarantine, kids included – ages 16, 15, 12, and 11! Whew, that was a big ask.

Yet there we were, two months and a day from that bold challenge, proudly submitting our miles. All of us were excitedly anticipating receiving our certificates, stickers and of course, patches. So cool! Now what?

We had such good momentum and didn't want to lose it, but could we use our Jedi Mind Tricks once again to convince the youngsters to go along with it? Things started to open back up and Faune went back to work. Our flexibility definitely was hindered. Would we have to stop? Luckily for us, the kids were thirsty for more and no trickery was needed. They - I repeat, they - dangled the new carrot: 200 miles by the end of the year. Challenge accepted!

We had to adjust our schedule a bit but luckily for us, Michigan days are incredibly long during the summer and early fall. We would meet Faune somewhere after work and hike, often watching the sunset on the Trail or in the car leaving the Trail. Hiking in the dark on one adventurous fall day after the time changed, we lost track of how the whole "end of Daylight

Savings Time" thing works. We figured it out and our sack lunches became sack dinners. We hiked for time instead of miles and just kept going. We were determined to reach this new goal and best of all, we added to our party.

Our friend Megan had been hearing the stories and seeing the pictures and wanted in. Megan is the mother of two kids who had been hiking with us so far. But Megan's interest was a big deal. A really big deal. Megan has dystonia, a neurological movement disorder that has resulted in two brain surgeries and the use of a mobility device to get around. She was using a walker and the thought of hiking seemed like a fantasy. She bought some trekking poles and started walking around the yard, determined to make it work. Slowly it did, and she was soon joined by Rigby and Bosco, her two fur babies. Seven people hiking with three dogs, and occasionally, our reluctant cat Nutmeg. We were quite the crew and quite the sight.

It was awesome but something wasn't quite right for Faune and me, the architects of this adventure. It dawned on us one day that with all the challenges, we didn't have any hikes for just the two of us. We had tricked ourselves out of Date Day. This was unacceptable! Our hikes were a big reason why we loved getting out on the trails in the first place. We had grown as a couple because of these times on the Trail with just us and the dog. In 2019, we had 65 miles of alone time - no teenaged and preteen kids with us. That is pure parent gold. We could talk smack about our kids! Or better yet, not talk about our kids at all. But since the pandemic started, we had hiked every mile with at least three children. This needed to change. We needed to sprinkle in some Date Days.

Of course we weren't abandoning our group, we were just starting a side hustle of alone time. We incorporated this with Chore Day for the kids and definitely made out like bandits. We would hike then come back to a clean home. Win!

We started taking off on a ton of fun summer hikes along the [Lake Michigan] lakeshore. Not the NCT, but still breathtaking and a little less sweltering and buggy. We would load up the pup, a cooler, our swimsuits, and go. It was so therapeutic. To have that time away from it all helped us get through a tough year. Better yet, it helped our dog get over her crippling fear of mighty Lake Michigan - she actually swam!

The other great part of getting out more, both alone and with everyone, was extending our drives and hiking new trails that seemed to get more spectacular each time. We live in Grant, Mich., south of Newaygo and the start of the Manistee National Forest. The area is an NCT mecca if you ask me. The Rogue River State Game is about 10 minutes away and one of our favorite hikes. The Manistee National Forest boasts some of the longest stretches of

Trail without following a road. It's amazing and all within 30 minutes of our house. But, there is so much more in this great state to explore.

We started going south and discovered what so many die-hards know and love: Yankee Springs Recreation Area. We went further north to the Fife Lake area along the Manistee River, and topped it off with a fall hike by Mesick, crossing the Harvey Bridge.

We were racking up good miles and the first of the crew started hitting milestones. And wouldn't you know it, Cora was the first to hit 200 miles: The person who went "ugh" every time hiking was mentioned and without exception asked, "How many miles are we going to hike today?" while getting out of the van. However, I have to state for the record that Cora was 11 for almost the entire adventure (she turned 12 in December) and I don't know how excited I would have been to hike with my family at 11. To top it off, she actually did 250 miles - the most of any of the children, including her older sister Cyanne. A very important detail!

She reached the goal in early October on a birthday hike for Faune on the brand new reroute off of Echo Drive in White Cloud. It appeared that Cora's highly competitive nature outweighed her disdain for hiking. She never missed a single family

hike. She was the only child to do that and yes, she continues to let all of them know today, along with the overall mileage thing. She may have even mentioned that she kind of enjoys hiking, sometimes.

From there, it was like dominos. Cyanne hit 200 - our rock who drove us almost everywhere because she needed the hours for driver's training and she's a pro. Raven hit 200 next. By mid-December, all of them had their 200 miles, with Blake bringing up the caboose like he had done all year long, protecting the crew as we went. We did it! Two for two on 2020 goals.

As for the adults, Megan pushed through, settled into the rhythm, and finished her 100 miles in October. That was with her starting in May! Needless to say we were all extremely impressed. Hiking poles were more than a success, they were a life changer. To add to the celebration, she reached 100 miles on the same hike that her daughter Raven reached her 200 miles, which came in front of the historic Fallasburg Bridge outside of Lowell, Mich.

For Faune and myself, a combined passion for hiking really ramped up in 2020. I was into it for a long time; my parents had introduced me to the Trail about 25 years ago. Faune was lukewarm, yet agreed to give it a go in 2019. In that brief time, she fell in love and was often the one leading the charge and setting the goals. This led to one of our greatest accomplishments that neither of us thought possible: We hiked 400 miles in one year! We finished on our anniversary, December 31, 2020. It was epic, though I have to admit we did way more hiking in December than we may want to ever do again



Photo: Rob Schuitema

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Photo: Rob Schuitema

- including our last hike of 2020 near the Bowman Bridge outside of Baldwin, Mich. in knee-high snow with no snowshoes and completely unbroken trail. It was the most grueling hike of the entire year. We figured it was poetic justice and the last hurdle we needed to get over in 2020.

2020 brought with it a lot of uncertainty and stress, but the pleasure of spending a ton of time with our kids, our family, and friends made it all bearable. We felt blessed to have that outlet. Not everyone did, and terrible things were occurring on a regular basis. But we made it through and a huge part of that was because of the NCT. We felt satisfied, grateful, and refreshed - in an exhausted, stressed, pandemic kind of a way.

2020 was an amazing hiking year. Which often seems surreal in the face of all that has occurred locally and globally. It is something that we will always remember. The drives, the snacks, the four seasons, the appreciation for the beautiful country we live in, and especially the sanctuary that is the North Country Trail. We didn't do all of our miles on it, but we certainly did the majority. Now we are into 2021 and we have new goals and plans to get out, enjoy the Trail, and keep exploring. Sounds like a plan. Challenge accepted! ✨

Reflections of Regional Trail Coordinators

The NCTA grew its Regional Trail Coordinator staff by two in 2020, "completing the team" to provide support to every one of the eight North Country Trail states. Tom Moutsos and Stephanie Campbell were introduced in the Fall 2020 North Star issue, but have since been asked to reflect on their time so far as employees of the NCTA.



Tom Moutsos,
NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator for
Ohio and Pennsylvania

There are some dedicated folks around here. I know it, I swear I know it, and yet I still find myself surprised and impressed by it. How can it be that so much work goes into creating and maintaining a simple path through woods and grasslands? Even more surprising is that the physical part of this work is often the easiest part. Though I began my position as the NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator for Ohio and Pennsylvania less than a year ago, I've been doing this sort of work for over 20 years now - and still I'm surprised at how much work a trail takes and impressed by the people who do the work.

Perhaps I'm slow on the uptake - a point that in some cases I won't argue, like why I'm still filled with optimism at the beginning of each Pittsburgh Pirates baseball season. However, my defense in this case is one of scale. I've certainly been involved in complicated trail projects and big trail systems before, all the way from acting as the human pack-mule on various trail crews to planning and executing large and complex trail projects. But nothing like this. The North Country Trail took nine years of study and planning before it was approved in the hallowed halls of congress, and instantly became the longest National Scenic Trail, by far, in the country. One trail that passes through four huge watersheds (Mississippi River, St. Lawrence River via the Great Lakes, Chesapeake Bay, Hudson River), parts of the Great Plains, through the heart of the upper Midwest, and over and through the ancient Appalachian and Adirondack Mountains, now with a terminus in the Green Mountains. The astounding variation of environments and geology along this route is just that: Astounding. And I won't even begin to mention the historically and culturally significant sites found along the way.

How in the world does an organization go about building and maintaining such a colossus? The answer is simple and always the same: Dedicated and selfless people. When I was asked to reflect on my early experience in this position, the people I've met and continue to work with came to mind immediately. The volunteers in the Chapters and Affiliates in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and the staff members in the NCTA and the National Park Service, all know the value of a trail like this to their communities, to their states and to their regions - even when, sometimes, those in their communities do not. The volunteers sacrifice an enormous amount of time

and energy to ensure that the trail is open and safe for all.

I can think of no greater example than this past, difficult year or so since the coronavirus pandemic started ravaging our country. It seemed for a time that anyone who was able to get out to the Trail did so, and trail use skyrocketed. I know there is a sometimes heated debate over whether this extra use is good or bad. My opinion is the more, the merrier. More people using the Trail generally leads to more support for the Trail, and more support tends to lead to more resources and, finally, merrier trail workers and a healthy and sustainable trail. The other side of the debate is real: More use can lead to the Trail being loved to death. Fortunately, the current cadre of NCTA volunteers is not descended from weak-hearted ancestors. Undaunted by the challenges, these volunteers created strategies to overcome the myriad issues presented by the pandemic, and continued to sacrifice their time and energy to keep the Trail open and in good shape. With dedicated and selfless people pitching in, this difficult situation was overcome.

Yes, trail work is hard: The planning, the paperwork, the scouting, securing funds and resources, finding volunteers, building the Trail, maintaining the Trail, protecting the Trail, the bugs, the heat, the rain, the cold. I'm still surprised by the amount of work it takes to create a simple path in the dirt. And I will always be impressed by those selfless, dedicated volunteers who put hour after hour of their time and effort into doing all aspects of this hard work on trails around the country. The North Country Trail though... The scale of it! After reflecting on the past 10 months, there aren't just some dedicated folks around here. There are a lot of dedicated folks around here.



Stephanie Campbell,
NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator for
New York and Vermont

Although the North Country National Scenic Trail passes through some of the upper Midwest's most stunning scenery, as the NCTA's Regional Trail Coordinator for New York and Vermont, I am most fond of the views along the Trail's two most eastern states.

In 2020, amidst the backdrop of a global pandemic, NCTA was lucky enough to be able to hire its first Regional Trail Coordinators (RTCs) for the Trail's four easternmost states, and I was lucky enough to join the team as the RTC to work in both New York State and Vermont. While centrally based out of Ithaca, New York, I am responsible for coordinating the construction, maintenance, promotion, and protection for the 700 or so miles of Trail traversing the two states. At its heart, my work is building relationships with volunteers, with land owners and managers, with politicians and bureaucrats - relationships which form the foundation of everything I accomplish as a coordinator for this longest of National Scenic Trails.

Depending on the day and how you count, there are between 600 and 700 miles of the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) traversing New York State. Broadly, this state's section of Trail can be described as three distinct regions of focus, running west to east, in my work as an RTC: the Finger Lakes Trail, Central New York, and the Adirondacks.

The Finger Lakes Trail is under the purview of the almost exclusively volunteer-run nonprofit, the Finger Lakes Trail Conference (FLTC). For over 400 miles, from the Allegany State Park at the Pennsylvania-New York border to the Tioghnioaga Wildlife Management Area not far from Syracuse, the famed Finger Lakes Trail graciously shares its route with the NCNST. Hikers on the Finger Lakes Trail have the opportunity to experience the glacially carved beauty of upstate New York's Finger Lakes Region. Across this portion of the NCNST, the FLTC's dedicated staff and volunteers build, protect, enhance, and promote New York State's premier footpath. My role with the FLTC is to support the good work they are already doing where the Finger Lakes Trail and NCNST are co-aligned. One of FLTC's newest organizational developments is the recent hiring of Michaela Aney as their new Director of Trail Development, who I have been pleased to get to know as she settles into her leadership role.

Moving eastward, Trail-related responsibilities change hands from the FLTC to the NCTA's only New York State Chapter. The Central New York (CNY) Chapter has been providing valuable leadership for the NCNST here for decades. They continue to do so as I work to provide support for their self-directed initiatives, such as rerouting some of the existing route off roads by focusing on opportunities to bring the Trail onto nearby state-owned public lands. I relish the opportunity to support an official NCTA Chapter in my region, as volunteer Chapters are crucial to the work NCTA does across almost 5,000 miles of Trail. With only one Chapter across both New York and Vermont, I have the fewest Chapters out of all four of NCTA's RTCs.

In New York State's most northeastern corner, leaving the CNY Chapter's

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Reflections of Regional Trail Coordinators Continued

purview and crossing over the “blue line,” the Adirondack Park, featuring brilliant blue lakes and lush green mountains, is the largest wilderness east of the Mississippi River. Across these wild and remote lands, the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) works closely with the NCTA to construct new Trail and maintain what already exists. The Adirondack Mountain Club, along with devoted volunteer Mary Coffin, have made significant progress over the past few years on the Jones Hill portion of the Hoffman Notch Wilderness on the Park’s east side. Unfortunately, due to recent litigation, involving a court ruling blocking tree removal for snowmobile trails on Adirondack Forest Preserve lands, current trail building projects which require tree cutting, such as creating new Trail, have been put on hold until the lawsuit is resolved.

Before the passage of the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act in 2019, the eastern terminus of the North Country Trail was at Crown Point State Historic Site on Lake Champlain. Once the Dingell Act was passed, Vermont became the eighth in the list of states to host the North Country Trail and the eastern terminus moved toward the rising sun to Vermont. Although still in the planning phases, when the Vermont portion of the NCT is completed it will run between 70 and 80 miles from Lake Champlain through the town of Middlebury and into the Green Mountain National Forest where the NCT will join the Long Trail and eventually connect to the Appalachian National Scenic Trail at Maine Junction.

Based out of beautiful Middlebury, Vermont, the Middlebury Area Land Trust (MALT) acts as a crucial on-the-ground partner for the NCTA

across the greater Middlebury area, from Snake Mountain Wildlife Management Area to where East Middlebury meets the Green Mountain National Forest. Prior to my presence in Vermont, MALT staff and volunteers, particularly the industrious John Derick, have worked tirelessly to protect parcels of land for the NCT to traverse while preserving scenic views, constructing great lengths of boardwalk, and building relationships with local landowners.

Within the verdant, rocky boundaries of the Green Mountain National Forest, the local U.S. Forest Service staff as well as the Green Mountain Club serve as NCTA’s key partners. The Green Mountain Club is the nonprofit dedicated to maintaining and protecting Vermont’s Long Trail, which is co-aligned with the NCNST for a portion of its length. This fall I have put together a series of meetings and field visits with key stakeholders across the Trail in Vermont to build relationships and momentum toward completing the Trail in its most eastern state. This partnership event will mark one year since I began my work as an RTC for the NCTA, a fitting cap to the year, which started with much uncertainty in the midst of the pandemic and will be ending with community and collaboration (in-person!) to further our goals for the North Country National Scenic Trail.

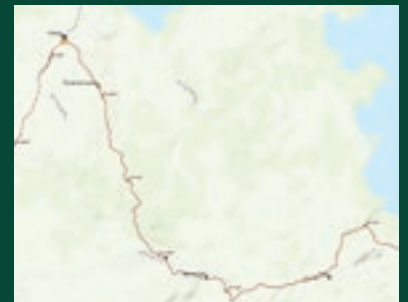
I am grateful to the folks who I have met through my work for the North Country Trail Association. It is their generosity, patience, and kindness that has given me strength on challenging days and joy on the brighter ones. In the years to come, I look forward to the countless adventures I will have on and off the Trail with the folks I’ve met along the way. ✨

Trail Preservation at the End of the Road

An NCNST/Kekekabic Trail Easement Story
By Derrick Passe

This is a story about an 83-year-old trail enduring in a seller’s market.

In November 2019, when the Minnesota Arrowhead Reroute was adopted for the North Country Trail, I set about finding a route for extending the Kekekabic Trail from Snowbank Lake Road to Ely. Taking the advice of experienced trail builders, I focused my efforts on routes that placed the Trail on public land. When I looked at the west end of the existing Kekekabic Trail, I noted there was a section on private property, so I wrote a letter to the owner (Sturgeon Family Trust), asking for their cooperation in maintaining the Trail on their property. In subsequent conversations with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), I was assured there was an easement for this trail corridor, and we didn’t need to look for other alternatives for





A view of the Trail through the private property parcel.

Photo: Bear Island Land Company

the existing Kekekabic Trail. I didn't hear back from the property owners until October 2020.

Eight to 10 months after the pandemic began in the U.S., property sales in remote areas of Minnesota began to boom with large demand from people trying to get off the grid. The owners of the Sturgeon Family Trust decided they wanted to sell their 160 acres of remote, near-wilderness land, and they informed the USFS of this desire. But before they sold, they would be requesting a driveway access easement across adjoining USFS property. They also asked the USFS for information about the easement for the Kekekabic Trail.

While reviewing the historic easement for the Trail, it became apparent that the original easement covered a trail that connected Lake One to Kekekabic Lake as it was constructed in 1938. It did not, however, cover the section of the Kekekabic Trail that was relocated in 1993. To move the trailhead away from a helicopter landing area and to consolidate the Kekekabic trailhead with the Snowbank Lake Trail trailhead, a reroute of the Kekekabic Trail was constructed. This reroute began on the Sturgeon Family Trust property and proceeded north to Snowbank Lake Road. Resolution of this "Trail Without an Easement" became an urgent matter for the NCTA Kekekabic Trail Chapter, USFS, and National Park Service (NPS). From the owner's perspective, they wanted their realtor to get the property on the market as quickly as possible.

The USFS, NPS, NCTA, and Kekekabic Trail Chapter held a Zoom meeting to discuss options for preserving the Kekekabic Trail. Moving it back to the original alignment was not an option, since the same reasons for rerouting the Trail originally (safety and consolidation of facilities) still applied.

From there, our choices were:

1. USFS OR NPS PURCHASE THE PROPERTY.

This was quickly discarded since the process for a federal entity to purchase property is extensive, time-consuming, and uncertain.

2. A "FRIENDLY" BUYER PURCHASE THE PROPERTY, AND ALLOW THE TRAIL TO REMAIN IN PLACE.

Entities such as the Minnesota Land Trust, Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, as well as local businesses, were contacted. Although there was a consensus that this property should be protected, there were other more pressing needs for property acquisition. We were unable to find a friendly buyer who would purchase it and leave it undeveloped, so we moved on.

3. ACQUIRE AN EASEMENT FROM THE PROPERTY OWNER BEFORE THE SALE OF THE PROPERTY.

For the same reasons that the USFS and NPS were unable to purchase the property in a timely manner, they were also unable to acquire an easement from the landowner. The NCTA contacted the landowner through their realtor, and in the interest of cleaning up the historic easement and proceeding with the sale of the property, they were willing to give a 30-foot-wide easement along the existing Trail corridor. The NCTA would be required to provide a survey of the Trail, prepare an easement agreement, and record that with the Lake County Recorder (approximately \$3,500). The cost of securing the easement was reimbursed to the Chapter by the USFS.

"Without this easement a large portion of the North Country Trail would have to be closed until a major reroute was completed and that process could take years to complete," wrote Leon LaVigne, USFS Forester.

"Given that the landowner was interested in putting the property up for sale in a hot real estate market, the partners definitely felt a sense of urgency," added Matt Davis, NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator. "Without permanent protection of this segment, the Kekekabic Trail Chapter and Superior National Forest partners were facing the need for a reroute around this private property. That would have taken years, and created the possibility of a break in the continuity in the Kekekabic Trail/NCNST. This was not a viable option - which led to the U.S. Forest Service stepping up to provide some resources to the NCTA, to help us seal the deal." ✨



Measuring the North Country Trail

By Matt Rowbotham

If you were to step onto the North Country Trail in North Dakota's Lake Sakakawea State Park today, follow the Trail east through open grassland into the northwoods, south through gentle midwestern forests and fields, northeast over rolling hills then more distinct mountains, and walk along Vermont's famed Long Trail, you would eventually come to the venerable Appalachian Trail at Maine Junction - the eastern terminus of the North Country Trail. You would have traveled about 4,783 miles on the North Country Trail - at least that's our current estimate.

Using computer software, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) maintains mileage records for the Trail as part of its mapping efforts. GIS is one part informational database and one part visual map. Data is fed into this system from volunteers or the NCTA's Regional Trail Coordinators. Ideally, this information comes in the form of GPS data, which has been collected in the field. However, we often use a variety of other resources to refine this information: satellite imagery and Google Street View being the most common.

4,783 miles is our most current end-to-end number for the North Country Trail, but don't run out and get a tattoo just yet. This number is ever-evolving. On one hand, it's more of a "model" of the actual Trail versus an exact measurement. On the other hand, there is a lot that remains unknown about the future development of the Trail. But one thing that is certain, this number will change and change often.

	OFF-ROAD MILES	ON-ROAD MILES
VERMONT	42.34	26.36
NEW YORK	430.80	242.57
PENNSYLVANIA	236.19	50.03
OHIO	504.14	556.39



	OFF-ROAD MILES	ON-ROAD MILES
MICHIGAN	862.60	299.89
WISCONSIN	140.32	74.24
MINNESOTA	693.96	160.87
NORTH DAKOTA	274.24	187.74

Even though GIS doesn't provide a perfectly exact measurement, this modeled information is pretty accurate. I'd be willing to wager that it's close to +/- 10 miles. Understanding this information's limitations and suspending all critiques that go along with that, we can use GIS to reveal some meaningful insights into the current state of the NCT.

Of the 4,783 miles, there are currently 3,185 miles of established NCT off-road. That's more than the total mileage of any other National Scenic Trail! (The Continental Divide Trail's 3,100 total miles being the next closest.) With the number of off-road miles, of course, comes the 1,598 miles still routed on roads. Fortunately, these on-road miles are split up over 700+ segments averaging only 2.2 miles each.

Although you won't find many significant roadless areas along the NCT like you might on the Pacific Crest Trail, segments on both the Kekekabic Trail and the Border Route Trail in northeastern Minnesota approach nearly 40 miles without crossing a road. The NCT has nearly a dozen other segments of continuous off-road Trail, ranging from 40 to 80 miles (though these do cross roads in places).

Conversely, the longest stretch of on-road Trail starts at the east end of North Dakota's New Rockford Canal and goes 81 miles to the start of the next off-road segment: the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' property at Lake Ashtabula.

Every NCT state except Pennsylvania has at least one on-road segment 10 miles or greater, with Pennsylvania's longest "truly on-road" segment being just over eight miles. That's in Armstrong County between two units of State Game Lands 95.

Having the advantage of two peninsulas, Michigan hosts the most miles of any NCT state with a total route mileage

of 1,162.5 miles. Michigan also has the most off-road miles of any state with a total of 863. Michigan's big miles carry over to the on-road side as well: It has the largest number of on-road miles at nearly 300. It's worth noting that the NCT's Michigan mileage alone is greater or nearly equivalent to the

individual mileages of six of the 11 other National Scenic Trails.

Pennsylvania and Minnesota are nearly tied for having the largest percentage of the off-road Trail, at just over 80% each. Michigan is third with just under 75% off-road. Most of the remaining states all sit in the ballpark of 60% off-road miles.

All eight states have some level of active planning efforts underway to move these remaining miles off-road. Much of this effort will involve putting the NCT on private lands through various trail access agreements. Currently the NCT has well over 400 miles of trail on private lands.

When you do access the Trail, there are over 780 parking access sites (across the entire length of the Trail) to choose from. If you decide to stay the night, the NCT passes through 612 designated campsites, campgrounds or shelters.

Mapping the North Country Trail and maintaining this information is a massive effort. As our Regional Trail Coordinator staff and volunteers work with the National Park Service and local land managers to establish new routes and improve existing Trail, we're regularly adding new data into GIS. Additionally, we are constantly inputting small improvements and corrections to our data that come from staff, volunteers and the trail-using public— thank you! ✱



Annual Celebration 2021

August 4-18

A recount of the 2021 Celebration events, along with a robust announcement of NCTA and National Park Service award winners, will be featured in the Fall 2021 issue of the *North Star*. Stay tuned!



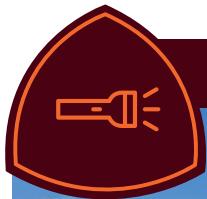
Our current map resources are utilized regularly by thousands of North Country Trail hikers in both hardcopy and on smartphones. One benefit of our PDF maps (digital or paper) is that they

utilize a custom base map that represents nearly 10 years of effort by NCTA volunteers and staff at ground-truthing and correcting features such as roads and rivers.

The NCT is often routed in areas that are not as significant from a national mapping perspective. Many of the key details we've included in our mapping resources would not show up in other systems. These

maps, combined with the Trail Alerts information found on the NCTA's the online map, represent the most complete and up-to-date information we have on the NCT at any given time.

Visit **northcountrytrail.org/trail-alerts** for detailed information on reroutes or closures. The online map includes these alerts, as well: **northcountrytrail.org/trail-map-and-downloads**.



Mine Lake overlook, Kekekabic Trail

Photo: Lucie Biddinger

Privilege of a Lifetime

By Lucie Biddinger

"Is everyone out of the way down there?" Rachel Jarvis called down from her precarious perch atop the granite rise that defined the inside boundary of Sea Horse Lake "narrows" along Minnesota's Kekekabic Trail. I glanced around to assure myself our other crew members, Deb Fleishman and Rachel's 13-year-old daughter Gracie, were well beyond reach of the large, gnarled log I anticipated would soon hurtle onto the Trail. I shouted, "All clear!"

A day earlier, the four of us, strangers really, had left our assigned bunkhouses at Gunflint Lodge in Grand Marais, Minn. and driven north along the Gunflint Trail to the eastern Kekekabic trailhead. Ready to volunteer for the NCTA Kekekabic Trail Chapter, we strapped on backpacks weighed down with food, clothing, shelter, and tools to clear overgrown brush, branches, and fallen logs impeding backpackers between Warclub and Chip Lakes. A month earlier, during a mid-April reconnaissance, I'd found the Trail mired in mud. The footbridge between Bingshick and Warclub Lakes was awash in spray from spring runoff and treacherously slick with the resultant mildew. Now with fishing opener still a week away, and Mother's Day having come and gone only two days earlier, I knew our trip fell into the post-snowmelt, pre-mosquito limbo Minnesotans refer to as "mud season." Daytime temperatures hover around 48 degrees with the certainty of chilly nights ahead.

Each of these ladies, although experienced hikers or backpackers, were novices to trail clearing. They were also my first trail clearing crew, and although all of us were NCTA Chapter volunteers, as their trip leader, I keenly felt the responsibility for their safety. Over the past several months I had allayed their doubts, fielding myriad questions: Do we need experience to do this? How many people will be on our crew? How will we know what to do?

Just three short years earlier, responding to an inner fascination with Minnesota's ubiquitous wilderness, I, myself, had been new to trail clearing. So theirs were all questions that made me smile, remembering the anxiety I'd brought to my own first experience: an American Hiking Society canoe-in volunteer vacation to clear an interior section of this same trail. Led by Matt Davis, NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator, that 13-portage, eight-day trek had challenged me both mentally and physically as nothing before. But I loved it. Nearly obliterated by fires and blowdowns, the Kekekabic Trail demanded physically taxing yet ultimately rewarding work, and that inspired me.

Investing even such a small effort in the Trail's revitalization had convinced me that passing on foot through unblemished wilderness is a privilege made possible in large part only through the sustained, grassroots efforts of volunteers with a shared passion for such pristine places. Prior to participating on Matt's crew, when out hiking I'd often naively grumble, "This trail is a mess. Trail crews really need to get out here!" After experiencing firsthand the tangible challenge of contributing to



Left to right: Lucie Biddinger, Rachel Jarvis, Grace Jarvis

Photo: Lucie Biddinger



the revival of a trail however, I now viewed trail maintenance as a shared responsibility resting with all who desire traversing such wild spaces. While it's not realistic to participate in clearing every trail hiked, there is a profound sense of satisfaction that accompanies the knowledge that in a small way, one has devoted time and effort to improving a footpath or two.

The end result of participating on Matt's crew? If I had been enthralled with the northern Minnesota wilderness before then, that experience only reinforced the attraction, igniting a curious, long-term commitment to the welfare of the Kekekabic Trail. All even more curious because my home state is Ohio. But in 2019, Congress approved a reroute to incorporate the Kekekabic Trail into the North Country National Scenic Trail - the same trail congruent with Ohio's 900-mile Buckeye Trail. With much of the Buckeye Trail located within a two-hour drive from my home, logistically, it would certainly make more sense to devote my trail clearing efforts there. For me though, the North Country Trail through Ohio simply lacks the raw, solitary allure that continually draws me back to Minnesota's boreal wilderness.

On this mid-May morning however, watching as Rachel grappled with an entangled tree trunk, finessing its position on the slope so gravity could take over and bring it crashing onto the Trail in front of us, I found myself running possible wilderness

rescue scenarios through my mind. In that moment, my crew couldn't have known any prior nervousness they'd experienced had paled in comparison to mine as I doubted the prudence of the task before us. I once again felt a weighty responsibility for their safety, hoping the perseverance required to triumph over the brawn lacking in our small crew of women would not lead to injury. Our original plans that morning had been to hike to the end of our route at Chip Lake and begin working backward to minimize the time spent hiking from camp to worksite on subsequent days. However, halfway there, checked by the encroaching bog of



A cleared section of Trail between Warclub and Seahorse Lakes.

Photo: Lucie Biddinger

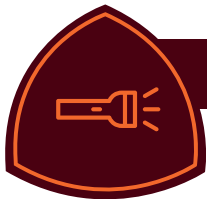
Seahorse Lake as it pinned the Trail up against the cliff wall where Rachel now struggled to loosen the fallen tree trunk, we'd encountered the knee-deep mud of the "narrows." There, Rachel had shrugged off her daypack, exclaiming, "I think we should start right here so we don't have to wade through this muck twice a day!"

Our plan to elevate the tread through a combination of makeshift planking and minor rerouting had made sense in theory, but the reality of its implementation challenged our decision. Then Rachel had noticed the heavy, dead logs strewn haphazardly on the cliff above us, and proposed climbing up to dislodge and roll them down onto the Trail so we could arrange them into a walkway, thus allowing hikers to avoid the knee-deep muck. Three days earlier, I had implemented a similar but much abbreviated strategy along a spur trail to the neighboring Border Route Trail. But the logs I'd used there had been both more manageable and more accessible. Comparatively, the behemoths Rachel struggled to roll over the cliff were tantamount to large dead tree trunks, dense and heavy.

Aside from hand saws and nippers, our route being a protected Wilderness area meant we had no power tools. "I had no idea that power tools could not be used in the Boundary Waters!" exclaimed Deb who had made the nine-hour drive from her home in Des Moines to volunteer on our crew. "I will never again walk by a cut tree without saying thanks to all the volunteers who improve trails everywhere!"

When Rachel finally succeeded in crashing the first dead trunk onto the Trail, I couldn't have agreed more, and after three more trunks followed the same trajectory, and one by one we

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TRAIL MAINTAINER'S SPOTLIGHT

Privilege of a Lifetime Continued

wrestled them all into place, it became evident we would not get as far as Chip Lake that day. After breaking nearby for lunch in a shady, forested spot of old growth trees, we cleared that area as well, deciding others might appreciate the cool respite before heading into full sun and the new planking now in place there.

As my companions moved on to clear another area on our way back to camp that first afternoon, I followed more slowly, bending to clip some inevitable stray brush or kneeling to saw away exposed roots that might pose tripping hazards. When I paused to look back, surveying the day's work, I experienced the familiar sense of pride and accomplishment I'd felt as part of Matt's crew three years earlier. Then, as now, at the end of each afternoon before turning to hike back to camp, I looked back down the length of cleared trail, enticingly passable now, and reveled in the proof of progress our crew made that day. There would be three more full days of clearing for Rachel, Grace, Deb and me, during which our small group of women would accomplish much, even if falling short of our two-mile goal. As always, at the end of each day I'd turn to assess with satisfaction the long expanse of passable trail we'd coaxed along.

Yet somehow this trip had been different. When we first headed down the Trail, four barely acquainted women whose ages spanned three generations, it had struck me that I'd never been part of an exclusively female trail crew, and something in me worried we wouldn't accomplish much. But on that first morning, watching Rachel climb that ridge, I began to suspect I'd been wrong. Women still encounter resistance when they venture into the wilderness, voices that reinforce fear, dread, and feelings of incompetence.

As a female backpacker who would rather spend time in the wilderness than anywhere else, I've

certainly encountered and resisted these voices. As Rachel later reflected, "The first time I was on the Kekekabic Trail was in 2001 when I planned a trip for my future husband and his family. The following year I planned a solo trip on the Snowbank Trail. I was met with great resistance. Other women in my life told me I was crazy, and that it was dangerous for a woman to hike alone in the wilderness. Ironically, at the same time my husband was backpacking for a month in Alaska, and no one had told him he was crazy and unsafe. I was very proud of all of us on this trip. I believe we did great work. I was most proud of the log bridge we built. Imagine! Four women with hand saws in the middle of the wilderness cutting up fallen trees to build a log walkway where there was previously knee-deep muck and water with no way around!"

Even so, alone in my tent the evening after we built that walkway, I couldn't help wondering whether my own silent doubts had been among those

When I encounter strong women in the field, women like Rachel, Grace, and Deb, these experiences make me stronger. Because of their example, I continue to progress along my wilderness journey, and the journey to become who I truly am. It is indeed the privilege of a lifetime.



Rachel Jarvis, in the process of laying tree trunk planks on the Trail next to Seahorse Lake.

Photo: Lucie Biddinger

naysaying voices and felt inside the bloom of grateful admiration for the three women whose can-do attitudes had proven me wrong that day. Carl Jung claimed, "The privilege of a lifetime is to become who you truly are." When I encounter strong women in the field, women like Rachel, Grace, and Deb, these experiences make me stronger. Because of their example, I continue to progress along my wilderness journey, and the journey to become who I truly am. It is indeed the privilege of a lifetime.

Six years ago, I was doing none of this. Challenging myself through outdoor activities began with day hiking, but quickly progressed to backpacking, precipitated by the counsel of my eldest daughter in response to the angst of her mother's empty nest syndrome. "What have you always wanted to do, Mom? You've raised your kids, and this is your time!" Trail clearing came later, perhaps beginning as a plan to desensitize myself to the novel, sometimes scary sights and sounds inherent in spending time

alone in the wilderness. However, it soon transitioned to a deeper commitment, helping others who preserve a precious wilderness space that provides such profound respite from the chaos of daily life. The trail clearing community has always been such a welcoming environment, and I am especially grateful to the Kekekabic Trail Chapter for their support and confidence in me. With certainty, I can assure anyone: You don't need to "know what you're doing" to get started! Just come out and join us. No one is going to laugh or roll their eyes at you. If you bring a positive attitude and are willing to learn and work hard, you'll be welcomed with open arms!

In that sense, for women desiring to get started exploring the outdoors, perhaps beginning with trail clearing, then progressing to hiking or backpacking may be a better pathway than the one I chose. You won't be alone out there, and you'll acquire outdoor skills while doing something positive for the environment and community.

It was Deb, herself not afraid to hike and explore new places, who made me realize this. With her customary witty positivity, she joked, "I used to say, 'There's nothing a credit card can't fix.' But on our trip, I quickly realized that motto wasn't going to help me. Then I told myself, 'You can do this!' The work was hard at times, hot at times, but each of us worked well together. It was always fun at camp at the end of the day, and to see how each person filters water, cooks their food. On the Trail I found beauty, calmness, solitude, me. I soon realized *I was doing this and actually enjoying it!* Sure, my family missed me, but I came back a better person and can prove to my grandkids you can do anything if you truly want. I did this for me." ✱

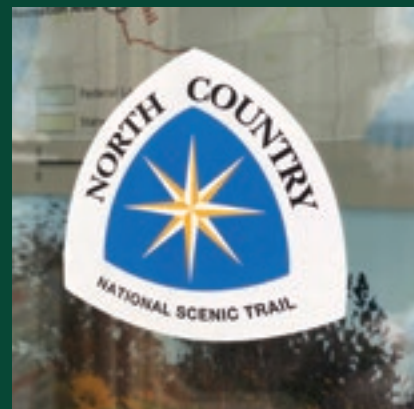
If you are interested in volunteer work like Lucie, submit a Volunteer Interest Form at northcountrytrail.org/volunteer. If you would like to get involved specifically in northern Minnesota, contact NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator Matt Davis at mdavis@northcountrytrail.org.

Trail Clearing in Northern Minnesota

By Matt Davis

Many of the trail clearing trips held on the Kekekabic Trail and Border Route Trail segments of the North Country National Scenic Trail are unique volunteer opportunities within our Trail Community. These segments are located in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and as the name implies, many of the clearing trips require a paddle to reach the Trail. I call them "Boundary Waters canoe trips with tools." Being located in a Wilderness area means that hand tools must replace the chainsaws and DR brush mowers. These trips are also longer term volunteer commitments because of the remote location. Trips last between three and eight days in length, depending on how far the group must travel by backpacking and/or paddling.

The NCTA would like to tip our Stormy Kromer caps to the volunteers of the NCTA Kekekabic Trail Chapter and the Border Route Trail Association for their fierce dedication to trail maintenance!



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"I thru-hiked Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore [in 2020], where I got to explore 52 miles of the coastline of Lake Superior. In three separate trips to the Porcupine Mountains, I explored an additional 48 miles of Trail there. To finish my Hike 100 Challenge, I visited Tahquamenon Falls in winter, which was stunning to see!"

Photo: Savannah Libassi



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The North Country Trail Association develops, maintains, protects and promotes the North Country National Scenic Trail as the premier hiking path across the northern tier of the United States through a trail-wide coalition of volunteers and partners.

Our vision for the North Country National Scenic Trail is that of the premier footpath of national significance, offering a superb experience for hikers and backpackers in a permanently protected corridor, traversing and interpreting the richly diverse environmental, cultural, and historic features of the northern United States.