



North Star

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL ASSOCIATION

FALL 2023

Protecting the NCNST: the Long Game

Collaborative trail
protection strategy and
planning

Page 10

The 30th Chapter

The NCTA welcomes
and celebrates its 30th
volunteer Chapter

Page 14

Knowing Our Boundaries

How evolving GIS tech-
nology helps map the
NCNST

Page 26



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Contents

FEATURES



On the Cover

Pre-Celebration activities in Ely, Minn. with the NCTA Kekekabic Trail Chapter in October 2022.

Photo by Matt Davis

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Trailhead

MIKE CHAPPLE, PRESIDENT, NCTA BOARD OF DIRECTORS



We all have our favorite portions of the Trail. Whether it's a spot close to home or via a favorite road trip, each of us has a section that we hike over and over again. While hiking often involves the adventure of exploring new areas, there's also tremendous joy to be found in retracing our steps, season after season, year after year. For me, it's the 23-mile

Manistee River Loop in the northern part of Michigan's lower peninsula.

I've been hiking this section of trail since I moved to the area almost 20 years ago, and I'd estimate that I've done the full loop at least 50 times. Sometimes those are overnight trips. Sometimes they involve an early morning start to fit in the entire loop before dark. Sometimes they're solo trips, sometimes they're with hiking buddies, and sometimes they're with people that I'm introducing to backpacking for the first time.

As I look back on the many miles I've logged on the Manistee River Loop, I can see the journey of my life. As a young father, I took my three boys on their first overnight backpacking trip on that trail. I've traveled those 20-some miles with my closest friends and shared stories around late-night campfires. I've also walked the trail alone as I pondered the big and small decisions in life. The loop is typically my first hike of every season and often the last hike I fit in before the snow gets too deep.

The Manistee River Loop, with its ever-changing canvas of nature, serves as a living testament to the transformative power of trails. It's not just a pathway carved through the woods - it's a repository of countless memories, a witness to the evolving narratives of every hiker who has graced its paths. This trail, like many others that stitch together the North Country Trail, holds a unique place in the hearts of those who wander.

The beauty and tranquility that we witness today are not mere products of nature, but the result of years of meticulous planning and steadfast protection. Our association, with its countless volunteers, has been the guardian of these trails, ensuring that they remain pristine and accessible for generations to come. As we tread softly on these paths, we carry not only our backpacks, but the responsibility of safeguarding this natural heritage.

Different sections of the Trail resonate differently with each individual. For some, it might be a serene meadow that

Continued on page 5

TRAILHEAD

- 3 Mike Chapple
- 4 Andrea Ketchmark
- 4 Chris Loudenslager

DEVELOPMENT

- 6 Our Why
- 6 The Power of End-of-Year Giving

PARTNERSHIP

- 8 Partnership in Central New York

TRAIL PROTECTION

- 12 Environmental Protection on the North Country National Scenic Trail

VOLUNTEERS

- 16 Preserving Our Stories
- 17 Remembrances of Lois and John
- 18 Trail Adopter Spotlight: the Kirbys
- 19 The Ballad

TRAIL USE

- 20 My Relationship with the North Country Trail: Part 1
- 22 FLTC County Hike Series 2023
- 24 Odessa and Nana's Excellent Adventure

TRAIL PLANNING

- 27 National Park Service Preliminary Project Planning
- 29 Accessibility on the NCNST

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Trailhead

ANDREA KETCHMARK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Photo by
Andrea Ketchmark

In a world often defined by the pursuit of personal success and material gain, it's easy to forget the profound impact we can have on others and our environment through selfless acts of giving. Leaving a legacy isn't solely about accumulating wealth or fame. It's about making a positive mark on the world and ensuring

that future generations can enjoy it. By supporting the vision of the North Country National Scenic Trail, you are making the world a better place, for those who walk its path now and for generations to come.

Volunteers are our lifeblood and there are reasons our volunteers stay with us for decades. Volunteering with the NCTA is an enriching experience that allows you to get up close and personal with nature while contributing to the expansion and protection of a national treasure. Whether you're an avid hiker, a passionate environmentalist, or simply someone who appreciates the great outdoors, there's a role for you in this organization. Volunteers help repair and build new sections of the Trail, ensuring that it remains accessible and safe for all. They participate in outreach efforts and community engagement, promoting the importance of getting outside, and protecting special places. Contributing your time and skills will ignite a passion in others, creating a ripple effect that can last for decades. That's a powerful legacy.

While volunteering your time is invaluable, financial contributions are equally essential to achieving the vision for the Trail. Becoming a member or making a donation provides the organization with the resources needed to maintain and expand the Trail, support our volunteers, and build initiatives to protect the Trail long-term. Even modest contributions can add up to create significant improvements along the Trail. Consider setting up a recurring donation to provide ongoing support, or making a one-time donation in honor of a loved one who shares your passion for the outdoors. Legacy gifts, such as bequests and charitable trusts, ensure that your commitment to preserving the North Country Trail lives on even after you're gone. Your contribution, no matter how small, can help protect this natural treasure for generations to come.

As we look to the work ahead, protecting the corridor of the Trail is one of the best legacies we can leave. As the NCTA ramps up our trail protection work, you too have a role to play. Volunteers can build relationships with landowners, landowners can donate easements, and anyone can donate to support the work that will protect the trail experience for the next generation.

Leaving a legacy isn't confined to the pages of history books or the grandeur of statues. It's found in the smiles of hikers who find solace on the North Country National Scenic Trail, in the rustling leaves and babbling brooks that continue to captivate wanderers, and in the sense of community fostered by those who share a passion for nature.

Supporting the North Country Trail Association can offer you the opportunity to build a legacy rooted in love for the environment and a desire to protect it. Your actions today can shape the experiences of countless individuals in the future, ensuring that the North Country Trail remains a beacon of natural beauty and a source of inspiration for generations to come.

CHRIS LOUDENSLAGER, NCNST
SUPERINTENDENT, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Photo by Kate Lemon

I am very excited that within this issue of the *North Star*, we have the opportunity to highlight and share the critically important progress our collective organization is making toward the future of the North Country National Scenic Trail.

Permanent protection for the longest National Scenic Trail in the United States is an incredibly complex and daunting challenge, and I encourage everyone to appreciate that this will require a sustained effort that will be passed on to our future generation of leaders, volunteers, and partners to achieve on our behalf. But that effort is already underway. We are succeeding in protecting trail a little bit at a time, and the National Park Service (NPS) and the NCTA are working together to build the framework that will carry us forward with a much more robust and active trail protection strategy and program.

As a part of developing the strategy, the need for increased trail planning has become evident: To identify our protection needs and priorities, we must

first have a solid understanding of the routes we will take to not only close our existing gaps, but to do so in a way that assures the exceptional experience the North Country National Scenic Trail is intended to provide. In the coming months, the NPS will be hiring a permanent Trail Planner, whose primary role will be to work closely with NCTA Regional Trail Coordinators and volunteers to achieve this end. A second need will be to grow our resources and capabilities, and create new programs. As more trail is permanently protected through easements or land ownership, our responsibilities will also increase over time. As an example, if we protect the Trail through easements, we will need to monitor the property to ensure the conditions of the easement are maintained, and that the rights we have acquired are protected. As another example, if the Trail is protected via NPS purchase of lands, the land and all its associated natural, cultural, and historic resources must be protected and cared for on behalf of the American public, and our responsibilities shall extend far beyond caring for the Trail itself.

The NPS and the NCTA are working together to develop solutions and explore how our existing structure and capabilities can evolve to meet these needs. Paul Gagnon, NCTA Director of Trail Protection, represents fantastic progress in this direction. At the same time, the NPS is currently working collaboratively with the NCTA and our regional [NPS] office to develop a Land Protection Strategy to guide our direction. And in addition to the new Trail Planner, the NPS will also be bringing on additional new temporary staff to help define our next steps and put things in motion.

This is a very important and exciting time for the Trail as we create the opportunity to grow and mature as an organization, to work toward offering a variety of new and rewarding experiences for our community, and to begin building an even greater and more diverse partnership with new groups and organizations who share our goals, passion, and values for protecting the whole suite of resources that define the North Country National Scenic Trail.

It is said that nothing good comes easy, and there will be nothing easy or quick about achieving permanent protection of the nation's longest National Scenic Trail. But I have all the confidence in the world that together, we possess the vision, skills, commitment, and enduring passion to meet our challenges head-on and that with every day, we will be one step closer to completing this incredible journey.

MIKE CHAPPLE (CONTINUED)

offers a glimpse of rare wildflowers each spring. For others, it might be a rugged cliff that challenges their endurance and offers exhilarating views. Our trail is a tapestry woven with stories, echoing with the laughter of children on their first hike, whispering tales of friendships forged, and echoing the silent contemplations of solitary wanderers.

As we stand at the cusp of another fall, witnessing the foliage transform into a vibrant mosaic of colors, we are reminded of the cyclical nature of life and the constant change that governs it. The trails are evolving too, shaped by the elements and the footsteps of the hikers. It is our duty to ensure that this evolution is nurtured - that the trails continue to be a source of joy, learning, and reflection for the generations that follow.

Trail planning and protection is not just about preserving the physical paths, but also about safeguarding the experiences and memories that are intertwined with them. It is about fostering a community that respects nature, that understands the value of conservation, and that is committed to passing on this legacy to future generations.

As you venture out this season to revisit your favorite sections or to explore new ones, I invite you to reflect on the value of our trails. To recognize that the trails are not just a personal haven, but a collective heritage. A place where every individual can find solace, inspiration, and a deep connection with the natural world. Together, we are the custodians of a story that unfolds with each new step.



DEVELOPMENT

Our Why

BY JAN ULFERTS STEWART



Jim Stewart and Jan Ulferts Stewart hiking near Ely, Minn.

Photo by Jan Ulferts Stewart

“Why?” she asked.

In my professional life, as a director of a community foundation, I met with people who gave millions of dollars to charitable organizations. I always asked them why. The answers were honorable, heartfelt, sometimes funny, and oftentimes sad. Logically, the beneficial tax consequences may have been a part of the

answer, but it was never, ever, their sole impetus for making a gift.

So, when the NCTA asked “why” my husband and I supported the North Country National Scenic Trail, we were speechless. Jim and I are not “major donors.” We are quiet, ordinary people who live a simple life. And like many of you, we have always loved the outdoor life, reaping countless benefits and immeasurable joy from nature.

We are humbled by the passion of the tremendous volunteers who build and maintain the Trail. We are in awe of the skills and dedication of the staff team whose deep knowledge permeates the organization. We are overwhelmed by the wisdom of the board and committee members, past and present, who bring expertise to governing. We are grateful to the National Park Service for sponsoring this Trail. We are fascinated by the people exploring the Trail.

Basically, we are humbled, awed, overwhelmed, grateful, and fascinated by the North Country National Scenic Trail, and its users and leaders. We feel very lucky to be a part of the organization which has the success of the Trail as their number one mission.

So why do we give to NCTA? We give to support the progress of this nationally significant trail. We give because we want to be a part of the legacy of this premier footpath. We give because we care about the unique and spectacular landscapes along these eight northern states. We give because we believe the future of the Trail is promising. We give to enjoy the Trail today and to protect the Trail for tomorrow.

We both agree. We feel good about making a donation to the NCTA.

The Power of End-of-Year Giving

Making a Lasting Impact for the North Country National Scenic Trail

BY NANCY BROZEK, NCTA DIRECTOR OF DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

As the year draws to a close, it's the perfect time to reflect on the importance of giving back and supporting the causes that resonate with you. End-of-year giving to the North Country Trail Association strengthens the organization and holds the potential to create a significant and lasting impact on the lives we touch. Join us as we explore why it matters now more than ever.

1. **Amplifying the Positive Change.** End-of-year giving allows us to harness and amplify the collective power of generosity. We rely on members and donors to continue our vital work, and your contribution makes a genuine difference. By supporting the Association during this crucial time, you become an integral part of our mission, enabling us to empower volunteers, build, maintain, and protect more miles of the Trail, and provide trail users with a positive experience.
2. **Maximizing Tax Benefits.** Year-end giving provides an excellent opportunity to maximize tax benefits while making a meaningful impact. Your gift or membership may make you eligible for tax deductions or other financial benefits. Consult with a tax professional or financial advisor to explore the potential advantages of your charitable contributions and how they can positively impact your financial situation.



Minnesota

Photo by Matt Davis



New York

Photo by Steve Kinne

3. **Inspiring Hope and Encouraging Others.** The end of the year often coincides with a time of reflection and gratitude. Contributing to the Association this season inspires hope and encourages others to join you in making a difference. Your generosity can create a ripple effect, motivating friends, family, and even strangers to engage in acts of kindness and support causes close to their hearts. Together, we can create a compassionate and caring society. Join us on November 28 for #GivingTuesday, and help us meet a match challenge to grow our trail community within those 24 hours.
4. **Addressing Critical Needs.** The North Country Trail Association works tirelessly to address critical needs along our Trail. End-of-year giving ensures we have the necessary resources to address urgent challenges and create sustainable solutions.
5. **Leaving a Legacy.** By choosing to give at the end of the year by supporting causes that align with your values, you actively become a catalyst for change and a testament to your compassion and commitment.

You can make a tangible difference for positive change through end-of-year giving and create a legacy of kindness and compassion. Embrace the spirit of generosity and together, let's make the Trail a better place.

GIVINGTUESDAY

Picture this: It's November 27. Thanksgiving has passed. Leftovers are jammed into your garage fridge. Family members' text messages about forgotten jackets and recipe sharing reminders are starting to wane. You chose to #OptOutside last Friday to decompress from the holiday hustle and logged two more miles on the North Country Trail. And best of all: Tomorrow is **#GivingTuesday**.

On **Tuesday, November 28**, for 24 hours only, there's a \$27,000 (and growing!) match challenge on the line and your help is needed to meet it. A group of generous NCTA supporters is matching all donations and memberships. This means when you donate \$20 on #GivingTuesday, it will make \$40 of a difference for the North Country Trail. When you renew your membership at \$40, you'll make \$80 worth of impact. This is huge. We need you, and #GivingTuesday is the time to act.

The end of the year can be an exhausting season, but also so fulfilling. The beauty of #GivingTuesday is that there's no need to leave the tranquility of your couch to get involved. Simply set a reminder on your phone or mark your calendar for November 28, then hop online to northcountrytrail.org anytime that day. Within minutes, you'll have strengthened your trail community - and maybe even checked a gift off your list.

Treat yourself to some warm, fuzzy feelings on #GivingTuesday by making a gift to support your trail community at northcountrytrail.org/donate.



Photo by Kevin Russell

Creating a Legacy to Build a Sustainable Future

"Although I don't have a lot to leave to the NCTA via a legacy gift, it's really important to me that I be included in the group of people who are making a point to say, 'The North Country Trail is something special, and I would like to be a part of the effort to sustain it even after I am gone.' Twenty years ago, it was little more than a hope to call the North Country National Scenic Trail a premier hiking trail. Now, that hope is being realized and hikers are becoming aware that this trail has treasures to discover. I want to be remembered as a helpful character in the effort to make every mile of the NCNST a premier experience." (Joan Young)

- Recommend the North Country Trail Association through your Donor Advised Fund;
- Name the NCTA as a beneficiary on a retirement or life insurance policy;
- Donate stock or give through your IRA; or
- Name the NCTA in your will or estate.

For more information, or if you've already included the NCTA in your planning and you'd like to be added to the Legacy Society, contact Nancy Brozek, NCTA Director of Development and Communications, at nbrozek@northcountrytrail.org or 231-685-0711.



PARTNERSHIP



Partnership in Central New York

BY MICHAEL DALY, NCTA CENTRAL
NEW YORK CHAPTER



This summer, our NCTA Central New York Chapter hosted a couple of visitors from the National Park Service (NPS) in Michigan: Chris Loudenslager, North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) Superintendent, and Nic Loiseau, Volunteers Program Manager. What

was on the agenda? Hiking, of course.

Hosting Chris and Nic were Chapter volunteers Steve Kinne, Mark Wadopian, and myself, as well as the invaluable Stephanie Campbell, NCTA Regional Coordinator for New York. (Volunteers Jeff and Sally Steele joined us the next day.) The party carpooled from Syracuse, first to the Fort Stanwix National Monument in downtown Rome, New York. On the pleasant veranda of the Fort Stanwix visitor center, we met with its (NPS) Superintendent Kevin Wyrick, for a fruitful discussion of publicity, signage, and the rerouting of the urban portion of the Trail that runs through Rome.

From Rome, it was another 18 miles northeast toward the Adirondacks to Pixley Falls State Park: a 375-acre state park with one major waterfall, numerous smaller falls, and a web of hiking trails, is centered around Lansing Kill, a scenic tributary of the Mohawk River. Steve Kinne led a hike along creekside and hillside portions of NCNST presently undergoing remediation or construction by our Chapter. These segments are part of an eight-mile reroute through both Pixley Falls State Park and Clark Hill State Forest that will replace part of the current 18-mile road walk on NY Route 46.

This is the second season of construction for Steve and his volunteer crews. At Pixley Falls, staff of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) have also put in construction hours. At Clark Hill, a professional trail crew under contract with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) is scheduled to construct trail on the steep, deep banks of the Stringer Brook ravine. Our Chapter plans to have most of the Pixley Falls section finished and open to hikers this fall, and the entire eight-mile woodland reroute open in the fall of 2024.

After lunch, the group hiked a short portion of the new trail at Clark Hill, then traveled (both by car and on foot) over Trail segments nearer Rome and the former Griffiss Air Force Base, where an additional part of the Route 46 roadwalk will be replaced - if not by woodland paths, at least by quieter roads and walkways.

On Friday, we hiked in to inspect a woodland section of the Trail south of Canastota, where Chapter volunteers have finished replacing a long, 100-step staircase with a switchback path down the hillside.

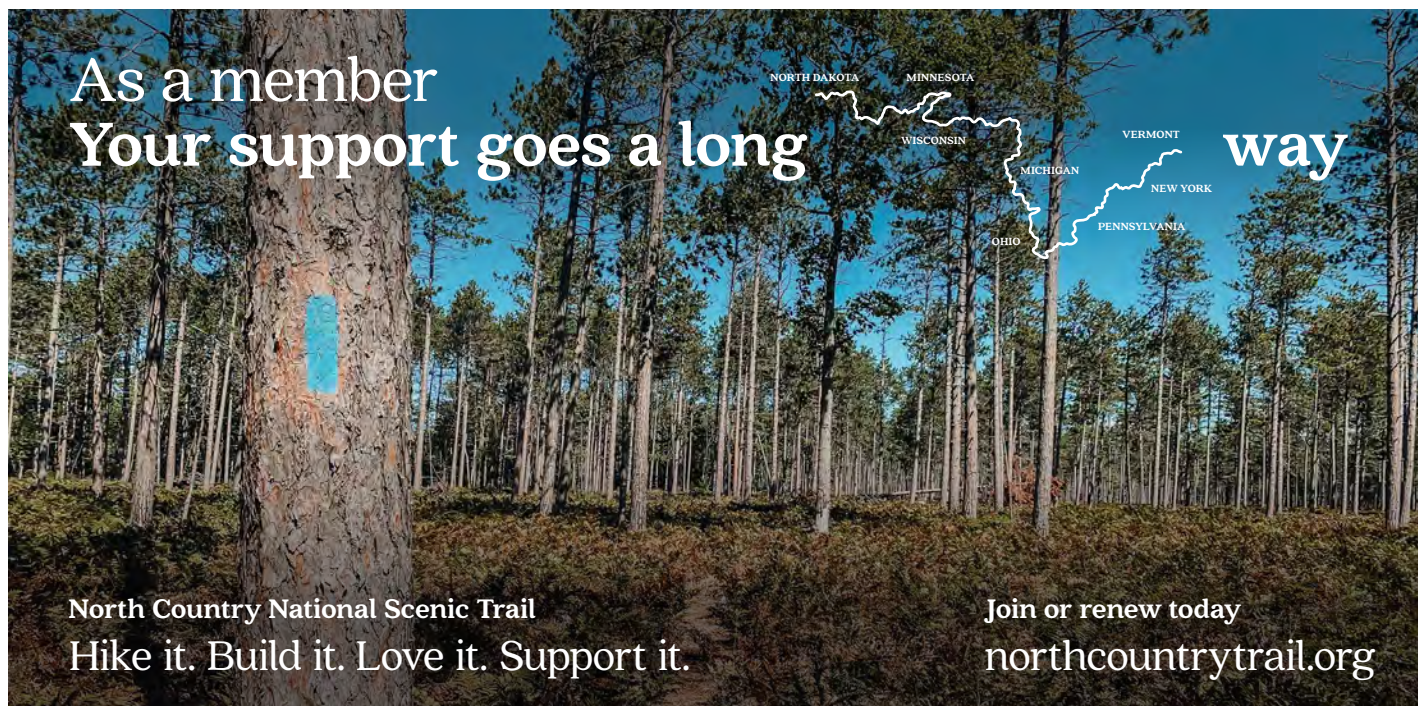
"The staircase had become hazardous in bad weather, and the shifting channel of the creek down below had created unstable walking conditions along the creek," said Mark Wadopian, who was the Chapter's demolition boss. "The demolition was no picnic. We learned that the Chapter volunteers who built this staircase 20 or more years ago, on this steep hillside, had built an extremely solid and well-anchored structure - not easy to take down!"

The travel in shared cars, the hikes, and the meals together were a great opportunity to all get to know each other. We gained perspective on shared objectives and opportunities to be of mutual assistance, and our guests got to hike through some of the beautiful woodland country with which we are blessed in Central New York.



Left to right: Nic Loiseau, Steve Kinne, Sally and Jeff Steele, Chris Loudenslager, Mark Wadopian, and Stephanie Campbell.

Photos by Michael Daly



“Our recent visit to the Central New York Chapter represented three considerations,” explained Chris Loudenslager, NCNST Superintendent. “To see some of the projects that the Chapter is working on; to give each of us a chance to get to know each other better; and, truth be told, to give myself and Nic a chance to get away from the office, put away the computer, and enjoy a part of the Trail that neither of us have been to in person. Steve, Mike, and Mark were wonderful hosts and guides, and I greatly appreciate the time and extra effort they carved out of their lives to arrange our site visits, orchestrate our evening dinner with additional Chapter members, and to make Nic and I feel genuinely welcome. It was a great experience to get to build on our relationships, to share in the Chapter’s pride in the projects they have underway, and learn all about the history, insider stories, challenges, and solutions associated with the different features along the way. Computers can be a great tool to say hello and share information, but nothing can take the place of spending time with others on the trail itself to make it real.”

Learn more about the NCTA Central New York Chapter and reach out to get involved at northcountrytrail.org/cny.

Partnership Reflections

BY CHRIS LOUDENSLAGER,
NCNST SUPERINTENDENT, NATIONAL
PARK SERVICE

The value and importance of North Country Trail staff and leaders getting out on the Trail and spending time with the local volunteers where they live and work cannot be overstated. My staff and I recognize that there is much to know and understand about the Trail that we cannot appreciate without seeing it for ourselves. Similarly, there is much to learn about each person who invests so much of their time and energy to make the Trail a success - and that requires a personal connection.

But what is also very important to recognize is the fact that my staff and I share the love for the Trail along with the rest of our community. We are not here because this was the job that we were assigned; each of us chose to come to the North Country National Scenic Trail and worked very hard to get here. While we have a lot of work and responsibilities that require us to be sitting behind a computer, any day we can get out of the office and get on the Trail is a dream come true.



TRAIL
PROTECTION

Protecting the NCNST: the Long Game

BY PAUL GAGNON, NCTA DIRECTOR OF TRAIL PROTECTION

Volunteers with the Frazee Community Development Corporation (FCDC) stand on the Wannigan Park property near Frazee, Minn. The NCTA provided matching funds to help the FCDC acquire the property, which will ultimately be transferred to the City of Frazee, who will own this regional park. The City will be granting to the NCTA a permanent easement for the NCNST across the park.

Photo by
Matt Davis

Paul Bofinger, a former, long-time president of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (a previous employer of mine), had a well-known penchant for ending debates about proposed land conservation projects by pounding his fist on the table and exclaiming, “Get the land!” Or in other words, “Get the land now, worry about how to care for it later.” He wasn’t exactly right: a deficit of planning for land management or conservation easement stewardship is like robbing Peter to pay Paul (no pun intended). But he also wasn’t wrong: failing to get the land could well mean that the land gets developed, foreclosing on future conservation or public recreational outcomes.

Roughly 3,250 miles of the 4,800-mile North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) are established off-road. Of these, 450 miles are on private land and an additional 430 miles are on municipal or county land. In both the case of private and county or municipal land, many of these segments exist without any long-term mechanism to protect the trail

or hiking experience. Additionally, there are roughly 1,550 miles routed on roads, where the NCNST has yet to be established.

“Getting the land” [from willing sellers], or getting permanent access to land falls to North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and National Park Service (NPS) staff and volunteers - and whoever else we can convince to help us. Our tools include trail easements, conservation easements, and acquisition of land itself. Increasingly so, it is necessary to purchase these rights.

This is easier said than done. Land is expensive and, as they say (unless you live in Iceland), they’re not making any more of it. The post-Covid real estate market has been a bear. In record numbers, people are moving to and building in the same rural areas that we’re trying to route the NCNST through. And the more a parcel of land gets resold and subdivided, the more landowners we need to negotiate with to get across the same square mile of turf.

We have had a lot of trail protection successes, evidenced by the growing miles



The NCTA Brule-St. Croix Chapter's new sign on Enbridge-owned land near Douglas County, Wisc., just east of the Minnesota-Wisconsin state line. The NCTA worked with Enbridge to develop a license agreement for the NCNST to cross their pipeline property, as well as working with Pheasants Forever and Carlton County to acquire the property south of County 4, to the west side of the state line.

Photo by
Peter Nordgren

of Trail permanently located off-road each year. But sometimes it doesn't work out for us. We get an (revocable) agreement to cross land, only to have it rescinded, requiring us to reroute the trail down a roadway. We secure a permanent trail easement through a wooded area, only to see wall-to-wall development spring up around the Trail. We start working with a landowner toward the goal of conserving their land for the NCNST and halfway through the process, they get cold feet and back out. These setbacks can feel disproportionately discouraging.

But to help us reduce this, we've been busy setting up some good foundations for future trail protection efforts that will help us be more effective and operate more nimbly, including:

- On a policy level, the NCTA's Board of Directors and Trail Protection Committee are discussing how, and under what circumstances, the NCTA could own land or hold conservation easements on land (when our Affiliates are unable to).
- To better understand the scope of our work, we're acquiring critical geospatial data, and applying it to

see exactly what is protected, what isn't, and where our opportunities and challenges are.

- We're taking a closer look at our trail route planning process and will be integrating real estate acquisition planning into that process.
- We're expanding our outreach to partner organizations that can help us fundraise, manage real estate projects, and acquire land.
- We're working with experienced NPS planning staff to improve how the NPS and the NCTA collaborate on trail protection strategy and actions. (See Ken Hendrickson's *P3* article.)

But even as the fruits of that foundational work bear out, we're not going to always succeed. We still need private landowners willing to work with us. We still need to do the hard work of "getting the land" - identifying, connecting, and negotiating with landowners, working with our partners, raising money, applying for grants, and of course, building trail. Some projects will take years to negotiate and complete, while others we'll seem to sail through. Some projects will fail now, but suddenly jump back on the table years later. (As of this September, I have close to 50 prospective trail protection projects in various stages of development on my own agenda - and this doesn't include other initiatives that NCTA Regional Trail Coordinators and Chapter volunteers are exploring that I haven't become involved with yet.)

Most projects are going to move forward more slowly than we'd like. But as we move through this work, it's very important to not get discouraged. Each win provides future hikers inestimable enjoyment that will extend beyond any of our lifetimes - much of that will never be known or reported to us. Each loss forces us to find more creative solutions, and become better and more efficient at what we do. Even where it seems that development has foreclosed on the possibility of getting a section of trail off-road, there are still options: Future municipal infrastructure projects that we can piggyback on to create parkways along roads and highways; the possibility of purchasing house lots and carving off bits of trail from them; or remediating/reclaiming industrial or commercial land.

As Ken Hendrickson points out in his *P3* article, our work of "getting the land" is indeed akin to the labor of planting forests.

Learn more about the NCTA's trail protection work and find resources, such as communicating with landowners, at northcountrytrail.org/volunteer-resource-center (then select Trail Protection from the list).



TRAIL
PROTECTION



Foster Falls,
Wisconsin

Photo by
Steph Liguori

Environmental Protection on the North Country National Scenic Trail

BY STEPH LIGUORI, NCNST COMPLIANCE
SPECIALIST, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

I review proposed trail projects for their environmental impacts and ensure the work is in compliance with environmental protection laws, regulations, and permit requirements. As part of this work, I consider how the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) can avoid or greatly minimize its environmental impact, and best protect and conserve the natural and cultural resources that are integral to the Trail's integrity, scenery, and enjoyment. On any given day, I might be consulting with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), State Historic Preservation Offices (SHPO), or Tribal Nations; coordinating an archeological survey of a proposed Trail route; or researching wetland mapping and water crossing permitting needs.

The level of impact and resource protection for any one Trail project depends on the site conditions, present resources, and the scope and size of a project. Between 2022 and 2023:

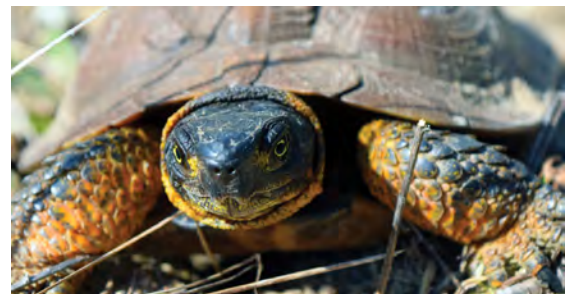
- 15 compliance projects included conservation measures that avoided or significantly reduced impacts to threatened and endangered species;
- Six included archeological surveys for cultural resources' avoidance or protection; and
- 12 considered the impacts to wetlands and waterways in the project area.

One of these projects is 8.5 miles of new NCNST along the Potato River in Iron County, Wisconsin. Once constructed, the new Trail will remove six miles of roadwalk, greatly improving hiker safety and scenic quality.

But before on-the-ground Trail construction begins, I needed to complete compliance reviews, which revealed interesting and valuable natural and cultural resources along the new Trail route.

Protecting Wood Turtle Nesting Habitat

National Park Service (NPS) queries with the USFWS and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR) revealed that there are wood turtles at the Potato River. The wood turtle is a state threatened species under review for inclusion on the federal endangered species list. The wood turtle is an aquatic and terrestrial turtle that has been facing substantial population decline in the last century due to habitat loss and fragmentation, habitat degradation from invasive plants and water quality declines, road crossing mortality, and illegal animal collection and trade. They prefer habitat at forested rivers and streams, often



A wood turtle

Photo by
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



This conservation measure ensures wood turtles are not disturbed during their sensitive nesting season, and it preserves the quality of their preferred nesting areas for present and future use.”

from the Wisconsin DNR, construction of the new Trail route includes a conservation measure to avoid potential wood turtle nesting habitat during the four months of their nesting season. This conservation measure ensures wood turtles are not disturbed during their sensitive nesting season, and it preserves the quality of their preferred nesting areas for present and future use. The local volunteer Chapter and project proponents confirmed that this conservation measure would be easy to incorporate into the trail construction, as there were minimal locations along the route that this conservation measure might apply.

A Historic Logging Cabin

Because this project includes new trail with new ground disturbance, the NPS completed historical research and an archeological survey of the new route. NPS and NPS-contracted archeologists and historians researched the history of the area, as well as completed an exploratory site visit and shovel tests to investigate if there are any cultural materials or features along the route. Through this research and observation, the NPS learned that the general area was historically used for logging, including railroad lines and camps, throughout the early 20th century. The NPS also learned more about an old cabin adjacent to the Trail route. The probable use of the cabin was dated to sometime between 1900-1930, when a nearby logging railroad was operational. As part of their site investigation, archeologists found that the cabin and its features are generally lacking in cultural materials and historic significance.

While not found to be “significant,” the cabin is “historic.” The NPS recommended a 15-foot buffer be maintained around the cabin during trail tread work to protect potential undiscovered artifacts or for potential future interpretation opportunities. The NPS consulted with the Wisconsin SHPO (the experts on the state’s historic and

hibernating under the frozen water in the winter, and breeding and nesting on the banks in the spring and summer. Through consultation with the Wisconsin DNR, the NPS learned that wood turtles have certain preferred nesting locations and habitat requirements at the Potato River. Using this knowledge and recommendations

archeological sites) to confirm that the cabin is not historically significant and that the new Trail work would not have an effect on historic properties with the recommended buffer. The SHPO agreed.

With this historical knowledge, survey results, recommendations, and the SHPO’s concurrence, we have confidence that this new Trail section will not impact a cultural resource, preserving it for future hikers’ enjoyment and education.

Potato River Water Quality

The Potato River is a scenic, forested river with tannin water and waterfalls. This includes Foster Falls: a small, rocky waterfall adjacent to the new Trail route. While wetlands were avoided during route planning and design, the route will cross some small tributary streams and areas of wet ground. Several federal and state laws require permitting for certain structures that are built in or over water and wetlands. Water permits include recommendations and requirements for water quality conservation and protection. In accordance with these laws and requirements, the new NCNST will have permits for new footbridges and puncheon where needed, adhering to specific requirements in the permits as applicable.

Since the new Trail will be close to the Potato River in some locations, the NPS also considered how disturbed soil and loose vegetation runoff could impact the Potato River water quality. The NPS recommended to the Chapter volunteers and project proponents to plan their workdays so that soil would not be disturbed during rain events, and to avoid placing loose materials and vegetation in or next to the river. These are examples of conservation measures that are often already implemented by NCNST volunteers regardless, perhaps without realizing that it protects the water’s quality.

If you’d like to learn more about my work and other environmental protection and compliance topics, I invite you to view some educational webinars we’ve recorded. They are featured at youtube.com/northcountrytrail.

When available, the NPS uploads compliance documents that are available for public review on the National Park Service’s Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website: parkplanning.nps.gov.



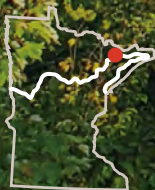
VOLUNTEERS

In late August, a group of volunteers hiked to scout a new NCNST segment between Lookout and Glipe Roads. This will eliminate a roadwalk on a 55 mph highway.

Photo by
Matt Davis

The 30th Chapter

BY MATT DAVIS, NCTA REGIONAL TRAIL
COORDINATOR FOR MINNESOTA



As of September 2023, the North Country Trail Association officially has 30 volunteer Chapters across its eight states. Join us in welcoming the newest: the **Ely Northwoods Chapter** in Minnesota.

The Ely Northwoods Chapter will be responsible for a portion of the North Country National Scenic Trail's (NCNST) Arrowhead Reroute, between Bear Head Lake State Park and Kawishiwi Falls near Ely. This is between two existing NCTA Chapter segments: the Arrowhead Chapter is to the west and the Kekekabic Trail Chapter is to the east. The Ely Northwoods Chapter's segment includes about 25 miles of current NCNST located temporarily along the Mesabi Trail (a paved, multi-use trail from Grand Rapids to Ely), as well as on city sidewalks in downtown Ely and a roadwalk along US-169 / Fernberg Road. Most of the Mesabi Trail miles and roadwalk along Fernberg Road will be replaced over time with new, off-road Trail. The city sidewalk down Sheridan Street in Ely will remain.

This region is quintessential Northwoods, starting northeast of the Mesabi Iron Range and extending to the edge of the million-acre Boundary

Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). It features rolling hills covered with boreal forest, numerous lakes and wetlands, and islands of Canadian Shield bedrock popping up to the surface.

Bear Head Lake State Park was awarded *America's Favorite Park* in 2010 in a national, online vote via Coca Cola and the National Park Foundation, besting Great Smoky Mountains National Park with over 1.6 million votes. Despite attracting less than 100,000 visitors annually, the park became nationally famous as the location for a live webcam inside a black bear's den.

A former iron mining city whose population peaked at 6,000 people in 1930, Ely is now widely known as the small-town gateway to the BWCAW. It now has a population of about 2,300 and most likely has the highest density of canoe outfitters of any place on Earth. It was the home of Boundary Waters champion Sigurd Olson, is the current home of famed nature photographer Jim Brandenburg, and it features the International Wolf Center and North American Bear Center.

"Most residents are transplants from all over the U.S. who found their way for a number of reasons, from the arts to the Boundary Waters to the winter



Matt Davis, NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator for Minnesota (far right) poses with a group of new and long-time NCTA members and volunteers. Creating this new Chapter has been a wonderfully collaborative experience.

Photo by
Matt Davis

season,” explained Cecilia Quattromani, one of the founding members of the NCTA Ely Northwoods Chapter. “Elyites’ are people who care about the community and the wilderness and their own footprint. You’ll find most everyone finds a way to give back.”

The Ely Northwoods Chapter formed from volunteers of the existing NCTA Kekekabic Trail Chapter, which has long operated in Ely - one of its two community bases for working on “the Kek.” Additional volunteers were recruited via events starting in October 2022, during a pre-NCTA Celebration event held in Ely. But the Kekekabic Trail Chapter volunteers have their hands full with maintaining the Kek and building new NCNST miles halfway to Ely. The Ely Northwoods Chapter volunteers will pick up there, building new Trail into Ely and beyond, to Bear Head Lake State Park. Despite now being two independent NCTA Chapters, these volunteers will absolutely continue working closely together.

Visit northcountrytrail.org/ely for more information about the Chapter and how you can get involved.

Meet the Chapter Leaders

As of September 2023



Photo provided by
Ozzie Reif

Ozzie Reif

Ozzie has not yet done any long-distance hiking, but has a passion for making and maintaining both portage trails and hiking trails. He has spent brief periods of time on the Pacific Crest Trail and the Appalachian Trail, having grown up in both California and Delaware. Through his work with

Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, he is excited to be helping spread the good news of the NCNST in the Ely area, and is thrilled at the outpouring of support the new Chapter has been receiving. He sees the NCNST as another way to help share the best of what the people of Ely and the Northwoods have to offer.

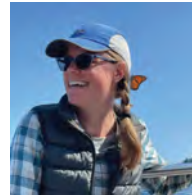
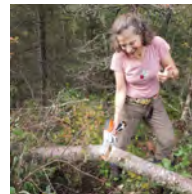


Photo provided by
Sarah Kahle

Sarah Kahle

Sarah earned the trail name Poppins while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail (AT) in 2013 because she carried an umbrella and hiked in a skirt. Originally from Minneapolis, she moved to Ely after her AT thru-hike.

She wanted to live in a small town close to a wilderness setting, and Ely fit the bill - she loves its proximity to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and the North Shore [of Lake Superior]. She looks forward to serving NCNST hikers who come through Ely.



Cecilia using her very own (and very tiny) chainsaw at one of her cabin properties. She notes that her contribution to the Chapter is not about trail work, but “I am a beast with that little guy, as well as my clippers.”

Photo provided by
Cecilia Quattromani

Cecilia Quattromani

Cecilia is co-owner of Log Cabin Hideaways, a remote log cabin business located near the Kekekabic trailhead off of Snowbank Road in Ely. Responsible for customer service on a part-time basis and employee communications for Red Wing Shoe Company, Cecilia enjoys getting outside whenever possible. Hiking, snowshoeing, and paddling are her favorite activities. She’s excited to be a founding member of the NCTA Ely Northwoods Chapter and to help make Ely an official NCTA Trail Town. Ely is an important thread for the NCTA, connecting Lake Superior and the Arrowhead Region, steeped in a rich mining and wilderness history.



Preserving Our Stories

BY KATE LEMON, NCTA MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR



StoryCorps Studios recorded and produced a conversation between Tom and Mary Moberg of North Dakota.

Illustration by
StoryCorps Studios

Last year, we announced our collaboration with StoryCorps Studios to begin collecting conversations between the remarkable people who help develop, maintain, protect, promote, and use the North Country National Scenic Trail. From volunteers to thru-hikers, staff and partners, we've heard so many beautiful perspectives and reflections. Now, we are eager to begin sharing these conversations with you.

Visit northcountrytrail.org/storycorps or utilize the QR code below to access our online collection. As of September 2023, there are five conversations available, ranging from about three to five minutes in length. Two stories were produced by StoryCorps Studios in partnership with the NCTA, and include visual components, as well.

1. Spouses **Tom and Mary Moberg** reflect on their experiences hiking and volunteering along the North Country National Scenic Trail and their commitment to preserving the Trail for future generations. Tom and Mary helped found the NCTA Dakota Prairie Chapter, and Tom served as an NCTA board member.
2. Spouses **Ruth and Dan Dorrough** reminisce on their journey walking the entire North Country National Scenic Trail, and how the experience impacted their lives.
3. Dedicated volunteer leaders and generous philanthropists **Lorana Jinkerson and Jerry Fennell** reflect on meaningful experiences, their friendship, and the legacy they wish for this trail community.
4. Colleagues and friends **Tom Gilbert and Bill Menke** discuss their shared experience planning the original route of the North Country National Scenic Trail.
5. New friends and fellow volunteers **Madeline Blyveis and Tessa Fenstermaker** share how they discovered the North Country National Scenic Trail, and how they got involved in volunteer service.

This webpage will be populated with more content throughout late 2023 and into 2024, as between July and October 2022, over two dozen conversations were collected.



You are invited to share your story, too. The NCTA will continue to listen. Record via the StoryCorps App (mobile device) or StoryCorps Connect (web-based), and find wonderful guidance resources for this process at storycorps.org/participate.

StoryCorps is an independent nonprofit whose mission is to preserve and share humanity's stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world. Since 2003, StoryCorps has recorded and archived more than 70,000 conversations from more than 600,000 participants. The conversations are preserved at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress, the largest single collection of human voices ever gathered. Stories from the North Country Trail community are included in this collection. Learn more at storycorps.org.

Hike It. Build It. Love It.



When you buy gear from the North Country Trail Association Trail Shop, you are making a direct and positive impact on the development, maintenance, protection, and promotion of the North Country National Scenic Trail. Thank you!

shop.northcountrytrail.org



John and Lois pose at Alligator Hill in Leelanau County, Mich.

Photo by
George Hermachs

Remembrances of Lois and John

BY BRUCE MATTHEWS

John Heiam and Lois Goldstein of Traverse City, Mich. passed away suddenly in late August 2023. They were dedicated volunteers with the NCTA Grand Traverse Hiking Club Chapter for many years, and beloved friends to many within this trail community.

I remember John and Lois graciously opening their home to this brand new Executive Director, hot out of Washington D.C., as they gently and patiently demonstrated how critically important was the link between the North Country Trail Association headquarters (HQ) and local volunteer Chapters. By inviting me to speak in person to the NCTA Grand Traverse Hiking Club Chapter within mere weeks of my hiring, I began to better understand how unique this relationship is and how essential it is for HQ to develop partnerships rather than view it as a “top down” relationship. I spent the night with them as their guest, spoke with the club/Chapter, and started to get an inkling of the quality of the NCTA’s volunteers and how HQ could better support them.

John and Lois said “yes!” a lot - mainly to serving in leadership roles with their Chapter and many other outdoor groups in the Traverse City area. Others are better qualified to name them all, but if it had to do with the outdoors, Lois and John were likely engaged.

Hardly a weekend would go by without them leading a hike or local river trip, including cleanups like the one they were returning from when the fatal car accident occurred. The number of folks in the Grand Traverse region who benefited from their efforts is incalculable.

I was always impressed with Lois’s volunteering at the Traverse City High School. She mentored students in math, after having taught high school math in the Chicago area for many years. She clearly loved those kids.

John served on the NCTA Board of Directors for many years, and was particularly effective with helping to move the organization’s administrative and financial functions into the computer age. When needed, John stepped up to serve on the NCTA’s Advocacy Committee, attending a number of Hike the Hill events in D.C., where he joined others in building relationships with members of Congress and their staffs. John was highly effective in this work, and never hesitated to call Michigan’s legislators to ask for their support.

As the NCTA started to grow its fundraising efforts, John and Lois were among the first to embrace it, asking local volunteers to reach out to potential local supporters and hosting fundraising events in their homes. John and Lois were instrumental and very effective in this work, in addition to themselves offering significant gifts to the NCTA.

And yet, they never sought any recognition or attention. They just quietly did what they did because it was the right thing to do - to give back, to pay it forward, to leave this earth all the better for their having passed through.

John and Lois loved music, and frequently attended musical events in the area. I well remember the night I was playing at Traverse City’s Acoustic Cafe, and who should walk in but John! We started telling stories and I almost missed my curtain time.

For me, I can’t imagine the Valley of the Giants section of the NCNST without thinking of them. I imagine the snow lightly falling, the creek gently gurgling, the wind sloughing through those giant hemlocks, and I’ll ski around a bend and there’ll be Lois and John, sitting together on a log with their backs to me, quietly sharing something with each other only they understand.



John and Lois enjoy a scenic view in the Valley of the Giants, Mich.

Photo by
Mike Terrell



VOLUNTEERS

This content was first featured in the September 2023 NCTA Western Michigan Chapter's e-newsletter. Kent County Trail Adopters Neil and Melissa Kirby are from Grand Rapids, Michigan. Neil (sawyer) and Melissa (swamper) have invested several years volunteering due to their love of outdoor activity and adventure. The NCTA Western Michigan Chapter appreciates their service to the NCST and Neil's willingness to share their story.

Trail Adopter Spotlight: the Kirbys

BY NEIL KIRBY, NCTA WESTERN
MICHIGAN CHAPTER

You've probably heard this before, but I don't want to understate how cool it is to be a part of the longest National Scenic Trail in the National Trails System, stretching 4,800 miles across eight states from North Dakota to Vermont, traversing forests and farmlands, remote terrain and nearby communities. The "nearby communities" part is where Melissa and my story begins.

Early on, I was a dog owner and I found myself frequenting the NCNST near the Boy Scout Cabin along the Flat River (in Lowell, Mich.). I loved seeing the Trail change throughout the seasons, so it made sense to jump at the opportunity to become a Trail Adopter when it presented itself. I started my volunteer work in 2010 when my friend Chuck Hayden introduced the opportunity. Chuck explained I could volunteer and adopt a portion of the Trail to look after. He mentioned adoption was typically allocated in three-mile increments, but there happened to be two back-to-back sections available from downtown Lowell to east of Fallasburg Park. I contemplated the offer for a few days and eagerly accepted the full six miles to maintain. Within days of volunteering, West Michigan had a series of powerful storms with gusts pushing 70 mph. Over 20 trees were down along my brand new section that needed clearing. And that was that. I was off to the races.

Training to become a federally certified sawyer was a fascinating and very educational process. The trail system has many online and in-person resources to ensure all volunteers are properly trained on how to engage (or disengage), depending on many different scenarios volunteers may encounter.

Through the NCTA Trail Adopter program, I quickly became First Aid



Photos provided by
Neil Kirby



and CPR certified. Next, I was able to become certified to use a chainsaw on the Trail by the National Park System and U.S. Forest Service. These certifications need to be renewed every three years, so we stay up to speed on the latest and greatest tactics. Because it can be dangerous work, the education provided some of the highlights of my volunteering. The courses are held at varying locations throughout the state, and I enjoyed visiting different parts of the Trail in both the upper and lower peninsulas.

Melissa, who spent 30 years as a dental hygienist in Lowell, recently transitioned to open up her own insurance agency with Farm Bureau. She became interested in becoming an Adopter too, after several hikes together. We started dating and the Trail soon became part of our togetherness. Back then, her Brittany Terrier plus my two Boston Terriers made quite a gang coming down the Trail together. It turned out that her dog Freckles was much more suited for trail life than my Bostons - so much so, Freckles earned her Hike 100 Challenge dog tag in 2019 for accompanying us on our trail maintenance and hiking adventures.

We celebrate our five-year wedding anniversary this October, and the NCNST is still a part of our extracurricular activities. I like to think the Trail was a key part in strengthening our relationship. Working together built trust and communication skills, and setting Hike 50/Hike 100 goals kept us focused and fit. Besides that, it was fun to partner as sawyer and swamper! We also enjoyed sharing our Trail tales with our friends as our experiences grew.

Melissa and I have appreciated the NCTA Trail Adopter program and the opportunities provided to be immersed in nature together. We found it very relaxing and it was a fun date night activity. Both of us have always been into photography, so we were usually toting some kind of camera along. Rainbows, storm clouds, the Trail coming to life with blooms in the spring and, of course, the amazing fall colors. If you are lucky and frequent the trail enough, you may get treated to nature's best displays. One winter while maintaining our Trail section, we came across hoar frost on the trees in a meadow. It was an amazing site in the crisp air!

We also enjoyed the seasonality of the Trail via different means of access, including snowshoeing or cross-country skiing after a fresh snowfall. Additionally, we enjoyed watching the wildlife throughout our section. Lowell has an abundance of Pileated woodpeckers. They are large (18" tall) and fun to watch in action. Of course, we've seen many other types of birds, including eagles, warblers, hummingbirds, owls, and waterfowl. Some animals we have encountered are fox, deer, skunks, porcupines, coyotes, and flying squirrels.

We are both "techies" and enjoy using our phones to look up plants, fungi, birds, etc. We especially enjoy the downloadable Avenza maps from the NCTA website. Although our adopted section was near Lowell, we got the bug and hiked many other parts of the Trail throughout Michigan and neighboring states.

I'm thinking about someone reading this article who may be interested in becoming a Trail Adopter. "Yeah, this all sounds cool, but what is it exactly we would do?" Some of the tasks we participated in are:

- Ensure your section has the proper signing and blazing
- Storm cleanup: Clear the trail of blow downs, fallen branches, and debris
- Buck and limb trees in order to open up the trail for safe use
- Rebuild trail areas that have eroded
- Reroute trails around dangerous areas
- Weed whip growth encroaching on the Trail
- Attend educational and planning session with your Chapter
- Accomplish the Hike 100 Challenge as you log your Adopter hours and miles

Ultimately, we are sharing our story to inspire you to investigate the great outdoors near you, and perhaps start giving back. Thousands of volunteers like Melissa and I build, maintain, protect, and promote the North Country Trail every day! The NCTA strives

to provide the best resources to us as volunteers. The NCTA Chapters and Affiliate organizations are established across the eight trail states. They aren't kidding when they say, "Your adventure starts here."

Learn more about volunteering at northcountrytrail.org/volunteer, and submit a Volunteer Interest Form today.

The Ballad

NORTH COUNTRY NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL

BY CHARLIE MAGUIRE



Charlie Maguire

Photo by

Cheryl Walsh Bellville

Over 16 years ago, volunteer Florence Hedeon spent an evening in Frazee, Minn. with a group of friends. Here, they listened to the music of Minnesota folk singer Charlie Maguire. Florence connected with him soon after, inquiring if he would be interested in writing a song about the North Country National Scenic Trail and performing it at the North Country Trail Association's 2007 Conference (now called Celebration) in Bemidji. He responded with interest and was thus commissioned by the NCTA Itasca Moraine Chapter.

Beth Trout and her Conference planning committee met with Charlie twice as he developed the ballad. Below are the lyrics. Hiker and volunteer Joan Young wrote an additional verse (the last one), which was first spoken in 2019.

Continued on page 21



TRAIL
USE

Part I My Relationship with the North Country Trail

BY TERRY CATHCART, NCTA MARQUETTE AREA CHAPTER

This is the first installment of a longer piece that will be featured in multiple North Star issues.

I see the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) as a wonderful example of people who are caring for creation, and I want to share with you a bit of my own experience walking it. From 2018 to 2020, I covered 560 miles. What I also hope to convey to you is how the Trail has cared for me. Like all of you, I love this trail, and I talk about it with joy and gratitude.

Before I met the NCNST, there was another relationship, a lifelong one, with the magnificent Lake Superior. I was born in Duluth, Minnesota in 1948. My parents brought me home to the little house my dad built about 50 feet from the Lake Superior shoreline in Grand Marais, Minnesota. Although the house was technically within the city limits of this small town, it was surrounded by woods with trails and a creek that flowed into the lake. I remember this location of my childhood home as a kind of wonderland for me from the very beginning. Those trails, picnics on the beach, moonrises over Lake Superior, and watching our neighbor Eddie Anderson pulling herring out of the lake in his nets that he set in front of our house. There was the summer of the bear that knocked over our garbage can every night, and the lights of the ore boats that passed closer to the north shore of the lake in the fall.

When I graduated from high school in 1966, I received a gift of \$40. I took that to Duluth and bought a three-speed bike, with the goal of riding it around Lake Superior. I had two weeks before starting my job as an assistant cook at one of the two hotel restaurants in Grand Marais. I headed north into Canada on my new bike and got up to Nipigon, Ontario, about 150 miles out, when I realized that two weeks would not be time for me to complete the bike trip around the lake. So, I headed back to Grand Marais.

My wife Sue and I moved to Ishpeming, Michigan from southern Minnesota in 1992 with our three children. I lived here for over 20 years without knowing that there was a North Country Trail. You know how people sometimes use that phrase “best kept secrets” to describe something good that lots of people don’t know about? That’s how I feel about the North Country Trail.

I saw a promotional piece in the *Mining Journal* that mentioned a local [volunteer] Chapter meeting that coincided with my reading of Cheryl Strayed’s [book] *Wild*, so I decided to attend. That was the beginning of my relationship with the NCNST. I think it was enhanced by the presidential election of 2016. Something in me wanted to reach for an alternative world. There was also the 2017 NCTA Celebration here in Marquette. I attended a workshop on long-distance hiking that was offered by a fellow who had hiked the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, and the North Country National Scenic Trail. His stories planted something of a seed in me. One month later, Sue dropped me off at the Mackinac Bridge where

Above: Lake Superior

Photo by
Steve L’Italian

I began walking the Upper Peninsula portion of the Trail. I was 69 years old. The words of the Chinese philosopher Lao Tse were on my mind: “The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step.”

This was not my first hiking experience. I have always loved trails. I’ve hiked in Banff, New Mexico, Big Bend (Texas), Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Mexico. I worked in Glacier National Park three summers of my college years. I backpacked Isle Royale. I’ve also canoed from International Falls, Minnesota down to Lake Superior - twice. But this was my first long-distance backpacking adventure.

Some backpackers do what is called thru-hiking: They start at one end of a trail and walk to the other. I walked in sections. My first goal was to walk the NCNST from Lake Michigan to Lake Superior, about 100 miles. But I didn’t quite make it. I had the wrong kind of shoes for me; my feet got very wet, sore, and covered in blisters. I ended up about 17 miles from Lake Superior when I decided to head back home.

When Sue dropped me off at the Mackinac Bridge, we had left my truck at the Brevort Lake Campground near Lake Michigan. The plan was for me to hitchhike back to it. After a couple of hours, someone finally stopped. He was a Native American commercial fisherman who drove 40 miles out of his way to bring me back to my truck. Transportation is an ongoing challenge that requires planning and help from others for anyone who tries to hike alone like I did. I couldn’t have done this hike without generosity like that, and endless support from Sue.

When my friends would ask me about that first section of my hike, I would find myself in tears. I don’t really know why, but I would say things like, “I feel like I’ve been to the moon. I feel like I’ve visited another world.” Something big was happening to me because of this experience of immersion in silence and solitude in the woods. I found myself overwhelmed with gratitude for the people that had gone before me and cared for this land. The Trail was caring for me by teaching me about the presence of an alternative world, a world that lives apart from the daily news of nationalistic wars, racial battles, technological updates, so-called progress, and political power plays. There is another world that doesn’t tend to make the news stories of the day.

On my second day of hiking, I ran into a young woman from Marquette who was backpacking the NCNST alone from Marquette to the Mackinac Bridge - not in sections like I was doing but in one, long thru-hike. Apart from Pictured Rocks [National Lakeshore], she would be the only other backpacker I would meet for about 400 miles, until I got to the western end of my walk around Bergland, Michigan, near the Porcupine Mountains.

Read the second installment of Terry’s story in an upcoming North Star issue.

The Ballad Continued

<i>North Country</i>	<i>A seven-state welcome,</i>
<i>National Scenic Trail</i>	<i>each with a story to tell</i>
<i>New York to North</i>	<i>you</i>
<i>Dakota it goes</i>	<i>The North Country</i>
<i>Putting history’s</i>	<i>National Scenic Trail</i>
<i>footsteps</i>	
<i>Under your boot heels</i>	<i>Refrain</i>
<i>You’re walking with</i>	
<i>heroes</i>	<i>With every mile and turn</i>
<i>And restoring your soul</i>	<i>of the North Country</i>
	<i>“Blue”</i>
<i>The North Country Trail</i>	<i>From the beginning until</i>
<i>Brings you closer to</i>	<i>today</i>
<i>knowing</i>	<i>Beats the heart of a</i>
<i>The spirit inside you</i>	<i>volunteer wishing you well</i>
<i>That grows and grows</i>	<i>Along with the signs</i>
<i>Saying what to take with</i>	<i>Guiding you on your way</i>
<i>you</i>	
<i>What to leave behind</i>	<i>New York, Pennsylvania</i>
<i>And if you’re willing,</i>	<i>Ohio and Michigan</i>
<i>what you’re</i>	<i>All fitting together so</i>
<i>likely to find</i>	<i>grand</i>
	<i>Wisconsin, Minnesota, and</i>
<i>Forty-six hundred miles</i>	<i>North Dakota</i>
<i>Out to the west</i>	<i>The past, present, and</i>
<i>The premiere trail of them</i>	<i>future</i>
<i>all</i>	<i>Of this American land</i>
<i>From Lake Champlain to</i>	
<i>Sakakawea</i>	<i>Refrain</i>
<i>Adventure in winter,</i>	
<i>spring, summer, and fall</i>	<i>Small sister Vermont has</i>
	<i>joined us to say</i>
<i>Refrain</i>	<i>“I’m small but I’m mighty</i>
	<i>and high</i>
<i>Hiking mountains and</i>	<i>From Champlain’s Bridge</i>
<i>cities</i>	<i>to the Peak of Gillespie</i>
<i>And tall prairie grasses</i>	<i>3,000 feet plus you must</i>
<i>Swinging up forests and</i>	<i>climb”</i>
<i>dale</i>	

Following the 2007 Conference, Maguire included the ballad in several of his albums. It is still sung today at NCTA gatherings. Now that you know the words, you’re invited to sing along, too.



Words and music by Charlie Maguire. Copyright 2007 Mello-Jamin Music, All Rights Reserved. Hear the ballad via YouTube using this QR code.



TRAIL
USE



FLTC County Hike Series 2023

BY EVA CAPOBIANCO, FINGER LAKES TRAIL
END-TO-ENDER #530

Hikers in Schuyler County,
New York

Photo by
Joanne Facci

Each summer, the Finger Lakes Trail Conference (FLTC) organizes a County Hike Series. Group hikes are offered on the third Saturday of each month from April or May through September. This year, we've crossed Schuyler County, New York. The hikes ranged from six to 11 miles in length.

It is a logistical challenge for the coordinator to lay out the hike plots. (This year it was Deb Nero, FLTC Acting Executive Director.) First, the goal is to divide the total number of hiking miles to cross the county into five or six roughly even hikes. With only 45 miles to cover, Schuyler County is fairly short, so we only planned hikes for five months. (Most years, we do it in six.) The second challenge is ensuring the meeting place has ample parking space for 80-90 cars, and is accessible for three or four school buses.

The hikers meet early these Saturday mornings and everyone is excited for a day in the woods. When hikers register for the series, they choose the speed at which they prefer to hike. Most months we have a few trail runners, with other groups ranging from fast, medium-fast, medium, etc., with the last group designated as Nature Appreciators. (Full disclosure: Though I did not participate this year, when I do hike, I am always proud to be included with the Nature Appreciators!) Groups are kept at 12 people or less to comply with New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) guidelines, so there are always several groups of medium-paced hikers. After a pep talk and instructions from Deb, hikers board the buses to be transported to the trailhead. There, the groups congregate, each

with their own volunteer leader and sweep. Deb sends them off with a bit of space and time between each group.

The third challenge is finding a good spot for the "SAG Wagon." SAG is a bicycling acronym for "supplies and gear," but our SAGs are all about refreshment and replenishment. In Schuyler County, this is where I entered the picture in my volunteer role as SAG Coordinator. The SAG must be located near a road crossing as close to the midpoint of the hike as is feasible. Along with four or five other volunteers, we set up tables and a few camp chairs, and put out snacks, extra water, electrolyte mix, and fresh fruit. Watermelon is always a big hit, especially on hot days! We bring canopies in case of rain, as these hikes go on rain or shine. (With 100+ hikers signed up and buses that can't be rescheduled, it's too complicated to make changes at the last minute.)

The trail runners are first to arrive at the SAG. They refill their water bottles and grab some food, chat a bit and, usually all smiles, continue on their way. As the morning continues, groups arrive and stay a bit longer, sitting for a rest, getting food and water, chatting about the hike so far, and asking about what the rest of the hike holds in store: Hills?



“Hiking with friends during the day and hanging out with the family in the evening was a fantastic treat for a week.”

— RANDALL ROBERTS
COUNTY HIKE SERIES PARTICIPANT

How steep? How many miles to go? In the middle, we may have three or four groups congregating together. Each group leader checks in with one of the volunteers, confirming how many hikers are in the group. Records are kept to be sure no one gets lost, and a group photo is taken before they continue. If anyone is too tired to go on, they can “sag out,” and one of the volunteers will drive them back to their car. There’s no shame or blame - safety is the highest priority.

As hikers arrive at the SAG, everyone is so thankful to find us there. They are often hot and sweaty, and ready for a break, snacks, and conversation. The food and buses are paid for with the hikers’ registration fees, but many leave additional donations in our “Where’s Waldo” bucket - strategically placed on the trail shortly before the SAG, for hikers to [optionally] drop in a few coins or bills to support the FLTC. I thought for a while that it was named for Wally Wood, one of the founders of the Finger Lakes Trail (FLT), but I’ve been told it is actually named for the children’s book character. As SAG Coordinator, one of my last jobs is to count those donations. Often, the paper bills are damp with

sweat or sometimes wet with rain, but it warms my heart month after month to see how generous people are.

“Things fell into place for me,” wrote Randall Roberts, who participated in this County Hike Series in his pursuit of completing the entire Finger Lakes Trail. He explained that friends and fellow NCNST hikers Cheryl Kreindler and Matt Patterson scheduled some hikes in the area, and invited other friends to join.

“Some of those hikes were not part of the County Hike Series, so I had to schedule additional hikes in place of those,” continued Randall. “The plan stayed fluid for the group and last-minute changes were made to our hikes from June 30 to July 4. This allowed me and Sarah Lane-Ayers to finish the county, and the others to fill their NCNST gaps and maximize the miles hiked. My family and I stayed at an AirBnB in Watkins Glen - the 4th of July was my 60th birthday. Hiking with friends during the day and hanging out with the family in the evening was a fantastic treat for a week.”

“Having the option to hike the County Hike Series independently was appealing, noting life’s busy schedules, especially during warmer months,” wrote hiker Sarah Lane-Ayers. The FLTC offers a participation option of hiking the county without joining a large group on the scheduled Saturdays.

“I was able to complete the Schuyler County miles over five consecutive days at a pace that worked for me and a few others,” explained Sarah. “We quickly became a team, working together for our mutual goal.”

In 2024 we’ll cover Steuben County. If you’d like to join us, or if you’re interested in volunteering, look for details this winter on our website: fingerlakestrail.org.

Left: Schuyler County, New York

Photo by
Beth Renzetti

Above: Matt Patterson (left) snaps a photo with fellow County Hike Series participants (left to right) Sarah Lane-Ayers, Randall Roberts, Susanne Klein, Ronnie Stewart, and Cheryl Kreindler (far right)

Photo by
Matt Patterson



TRAIL
USE

Odessa and Nana's Excellent Adventure

BY GLEE MAYER, NCTA CENTRAL FLYWAY CHAPTER, NORTH DAKOTA

"I'm going to go hiking with my nana and we are going to climb North Mountain." These are the words I heard from my granddaughter Odessa all last year.

Odessa was just three years old at the time, but was so determined and so excited about hiking. She is a very inquisitive young girl and loves to be outside riding her bike, swinging, snowshoeing, and fishing (in winter or summer). She lives out in the country; her family's land abuts a wildlife management area where she and her dad watch for wildlife all the time. She loves to watch her bird and squirrel feeders, and often, will just sit and look at the pictures in her bird book. It didn't surprise me that she would love walking and hiking outdoors.

We started out with short little walks and hikes, and sometimes included geocaching with it. I pointed out different trail signs and what they meant, and then soon she was calling out as she spotted them. Her interest grew from there. I'm not sure when the decision was made to take this North Mountain adventure, but once it did there was no turning back.

Throughout last year and until she turned four this past spring, I started getting her some basic hiking equipment for her birthday and holidays, and explaining why it was important to be prepared on the trail. Her first piece of equipment was her backpack. She would wear it around



Photos by
Glee Mayer

outside at home, especially when we added the water bladder so she could practice drinking from it as she hiked. The hat, walking stick, and clothes, including hiking boots, came later. She would not let her mom put any of the clothing on her except the boots, because they were meant just for her big hike with Nana.

My biggest concern was finding a "North Mountain." The only one I could find was part of the South Mountains in Arizona, and for the time we had planned in July, that wasn't going to work. Finally we decided on the North Shore area in northeastern Minnesota, hiking on the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) and Superior Hiking Trail (SHT).

Once this spring arrived she started walking longer stretches with her mom at their home. My daughter soon recognized Odessa's increased endurance and determination to be ready.

We arrived in Duluth and she loved everything about the area, and was very excited for her hike the next day. She was up early and had all her gear on before the rest of us even thought about getting ready.

We readied her backpack with the important things such as water, snacks, and a few very basic supplies including bug wipes and bandaids. We arrived at the trailhead, took some photos, and were off. Our group included her mom, her aunt, and cousin Franklin (11 months old) in a child carrier, and me.



The trail was perfect. There was some easy elevation gain, wooden stairs, little bridges for water crossings, and wonderful scenery, including a waterfall at the end. She took a tumble early on from an exposed root on the trail, but from then on, made sure we saw any future ones. She was always looking for the trail signs and made sure we took the right turns.

It was an amazing day for me to watch her grow her confidence on the trail and to see the sheer enjoyment she was experiencing from our little adventure. We spent a week on the North Shore hiking on other trails, including some at Gooseberry Falls State Park, Tettegouche State Park, and Split Rock Lighthouse State Park. She also loved the ferry ride to Madeline Island and our cruise along the Sea Caves.

My daughters and I have done summer trips together since they were Odessa's age, and we have traveled all over the country. I am so appreciative of my good health so I can continue this now with my grandchildren, and ensure they too love and appreciate the outdoors as much as their moms and I do. I am sure there are many nanas reading this who have experienced this same satisfaction being out with their grandchildren. I feel it is so important for this new generation to develop a love for our tremendous trail system in America, and to help with its continued maintenance and promotion.

Find inspiration and motivation to spend more time on the trail with your family by signing up for the Hike 100 Challenge. Learn more at northcountrytrail.org/hike-100-challenge.

Solar Eclipse on the NCNST

On April 8, 2024, a total solar eclipse will cross North America. The moon will pass between the sun and Earth, completely blocking the face of the sun, significantly darkening the sky. Plan to be on the eastern end of the North Country National Scenic Trail during this time, and you'll be in the prime viewing path.

Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Vermont will be the best NCNST states to view it from. According to NASA, the partial eclipse begins at 2:04 p.m. (Eastern) in Buffalo, New York, and at 2:14 p.m. in Burlington, Vermont. The entire event will last about two and a half hours.

The next total solar eclipse viewable from the contiguous U.S. will be in August 2044. Visit solarsystem.nasa.gov/eclipses/2024 to learn more, and please remember to utilize safe viewing practices to prevent eye injuries.

HIKE 100 CHALLENGE

Share your adventures like Sue!



"Continuing my adventures, getting healthier every step. Hiking makes wonderful family time with my sisters and my mom. Hike on!"

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



TRAIL
PLANNING

Knowing Our Boundaries

BY MATT ROWBOTHAM, NCTA GIS PROGRAM MANAGER

The North Country Trail Association (NCTA) relies on Geographic Information Systems (GIS), to help us understand the boundaries that define our natural and built environments. The strategy the NCTA has used to map properties that host the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) has evolved over many years.

When I graduated college in 2003, the field of GIS was rapidly growing. GIS software had transitioned from text-based and exclusive to researchers and programmers, to more visually oriented and accessible to a broader audience. This transformation, driven in part by ESRI's ArcView software, opened up new possibilities for organizations and agencies working with geographic information.

Local governments, including counties and municipalities, saw the potential in GIS and began establishing their own GIS programs. To fund these initiatives, some charged fees for access to what had traditionally been freely available public information. For instance, Michigan's *Enhanced Access To Public Records Act Of 1996* allowed counties to charge fees to the public for

Renee Penny and Ed Morse scout for a [Michigan] state forest boundary marker, and Renee locates it!

Photo by
Matt Rowbotham

providing tax parcel data in a GIS file format.

While the NCTA had been actively involved in GIS since the late 1990s, the cost associated with accessing private property data through county-level GIS programs was a barrier. To work around this, the NCTA often relied on scanned platt books, hard-copy tax maps, or pleas for free or reduced-cost data from county assessor's offices. This left us with a very incomplete property data set in our GIS.

Eventually, several states recognized that the fee structure for GIS data was hampering economic development. Moreover, the data's format and structure varied significantly from county to county, making it difficult to harness the full potential of GIS tools for planning and development. In 2015, Wisconsin took a pioneering step by releasing its first Statewide Parcel Map Database. (Today, we also have statewide parcel data sets in North Dakota and Vermont.) As of this fall, most counties along the Trail now make this information available at no cost.

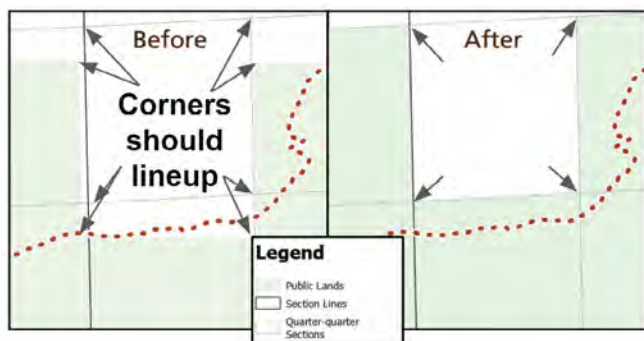
This development has been a game changer for the NCTA. We now have direct, no-cost access to a high-quality parcel database that covers nearly the entire Trail. This data empowers us to make informed decisions about trail development, conservation efforts, and much more.

The growth of online mapping platforms has further enhanced our ability to work with private property information in near real time. Many counties now publish tax parcel maps as part of their online mapping systems. This information is invaluable for NCTA staff when producing project maps and engaging in other planning processes.

The release of onX maps has been a significant boost to our mapping capabilities. This app allows us to work with property data and other useful layers through a mobile device or internet browser. These seamless, statewide data sets are particularly useful when examining multi-property regions along the Trail, and often include information we are unable to get directly from counties or states.

While GIS software has advanced significantly, data accuracy hasn't always kept pace, especially at very detailed scales. Think of GIS data like any other measurements - it has its limitations. In the past, most GIS data could provide reasonably accurate information at scales like 1:100,000 or 1:24,000, based on USGS map quad standards.

Regarding the Trail and property boundaries, we often need to get much closer, sometimes even a



1:1,000 scale, and that's where a challenge arises. The property lines we encounter in county data and data from our partners such as the U.S. Forest Service may not be accurate enough for these purposes.

Considering that the NCNST often runs alongside property edges, having high-quality data becomes even more crucial. In cases where we need a high level of accuracy, NCTA staff will attempt to "ground truth" by looking for property markers in the field or, if needed, hire certified surveyors to ensure the utmost accuracy in our mapping effort.

The NCTA's ability to map property boundaries along the North Country Trail has come a long way, thanks to advancements in GIS technology and the commitment of our dedicated team of staff and volunteers. Access to accurate and up-to-date geographic information is vital for our trail protection efforts and our larger mission to preserve, promote, and protect the Trail for future generations to enjoy.

See what NCNST navigational resources are available to you, for free, at northcountrytrail.org/the-trail/trail-map-and-downloads.

National Park Service Preliminary Project Planning (P3)

BY KEN HENDRICKSON, NCNST TRAIL MANAGER, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Over the next several months to years, you are likely to hear more about trail protection from the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and the National Park Service (NPS). However, it is important to note that protecting the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) is not really a new idea. Alongside many volunteers, staff from both the

NCTA and the NPS have been focused on this task since the Trail's authorizing legislation in 1980. Our volunteers, in particular, have been the front line of trail protection efforts. They build relationships with landowners, secure easements and trail use agreements, and resolve access issues as they emerge.

Much has been accomplished to date. Outside of our three major Affiliate areas, the NCTA has varying degrees of trail protection in place on over 140 different private properties. Additionally, the NCNST is routed on a number of other private properties with only verbal permission from the landowner in place. These early efforts by volunteers are greatly appreciated and the lessons learned from their work are invaluable.

Yet the realities of protecting the NCNST are changing. We have new authorities and new protection tools to use. Trail protection is also challenged by external changes, including a rise in development in rural areas, subdivision of land into smaller parcels, and sharply rising property values. The NCTA and NPS have come to the realization that successfully protecting the NCNST under these conditions will require an increase in technical expertise and a well-developed strategic plan to guide our decisions. We must support volunteers as best we can, handle complex land transactions and negotiations, and build our partnership network. We must strategically integrate the realities of land access acquisition, route planning, and trail layout. We must fine tune roles and responsibilities to most efficiently make use of the varied skills across our trail community.

In short, we need a solid framework that can apply to and guide the trail protection work of our community. This will help ensure that we can respond to trail protection needs quickly and efficiently, apply the most effective resources where they are most needed, prioritize effectively, keep us focused on outcomes, and avoid stepping on each other's toes in the process. To get that ball rolling, the NCTA and NPS embarked on an exploratory, trail protection pre-planning process in 2023. The NPS has a program and funding through which parks, including National Scenic Trails, can apply for planning assistance to better understand and develop management plans around challenging issues, such as those we face in protecting the NCNST. Unlocking those funds and program resources begins with a request for Preliminary Project Planning assistance, or "P3."

You can think of the P3 as a way of setting the stage for successful planning. It's easy to say, "We need a plan." The difficult part is identifying the issues that the plan will address; defining common terminology to make sure that we're all speaking the same language; identifying the resources and limitations of each partner; and clarifying the intended outcome of the plan. The P3 phase is

Continued on page 28



National Park Service Preliminary Project Planning (P3) Continued

designed to ensure that the resulting plan will provide the needed guidance and work well for all partners involved.

In early 2022, the NPS submitted a request for P3 assistance. It was approved, and a team of planners from the NPS Midwest Regional Office was designated to help us develop our P3. We formed a team that included myself and Chris Loudenslager, NCNST Superintendent (NPS); Andrea Ketchmark, NCTA Executive Director; Valerie Bader, NCTA Director of Trail Operations; Paul Gagnon, NCTA Director of Trail Protection; Steph Liguori, NCNST Compliance Specialist (NPS); Matt Rowbotham, NCTA GIS Program Manager; and planning staff from the NPS Midwest Regional Office. In 2023, this team began holding virtual meetings to start developing our P3.

Part of planning is building a shared vision of the future. To make sure that vision is truly shared, we had to define the terms that we use to describe the vision. What do we mean when we say trail protection? This is what we agreed on:

Trail protection means securing permanent access to land, or acquiring land itself, for the purposes of ensuring the North Country National Scenic Trail is conserved for the benefit of the hiking public today and into the future. Trail protection includes reducing threats to loss of connectivity, as well as limiting threats to the intended purpose of the Trail, ensuring the continuity and preservation of the immersive hiking experience. Trail protection mechanisms include the acquisition of land, conservation easements, trail easements, trail use agreements, and other legally defensible mechanisms to protect both the physical connectivity of the Trail and the experience it is intended to provide.

We soon realized we had a longer list of terms to define than we initially anticipated. As our P3 team continued to meet, our appreciation for the value of these discussions increased. NPS Planners Aleks Pitt and Travis Lundell acted as facilitators, helping us stay focused. They also served as active listeners with outside perspectives. While they are generally familiar with the larger policies guiding National Scenic Trails, they weren't familiar with the history and operational details specific to the NCNST. This positioned them

to ask critical questions, thus guiding us through discussions to get to the root of some of our issues and challenges. Why have things been done in a certain way? How have trail protection activities changed? As we explored and discussed, Aleks and Travis took notes. Between our meetings, they identified conclusions we had reached, highlighted issues that needed further discussion, and began to refine our planning approach.

Most of our meetings were virtual, but we met twice in-person this year: The first was in Omaha, Nebraska in April at the NPS Midwest Regional Office, which was paired with the National Trails Open House and scheduled meetings with Regional NPS leadership. The second time was in August in Lowell, Michigan.

So, what does all this mean? Where are we headed with trail protection for the North Country National Scenic Trail? We are nearing the end of our P3 phase, though we will continue to meet throughout the fall. Aleks and Travis have begun developing our final P3 document, which provides a refined list of trail protection planning needs, further clarifies the planning assistance needed, and identifies next steps.

Coming together as a collaborative group has provided us with an opportunity for valuable facilitated and focused discussion. And the P3 process brought the additional benefit of support from the Planners, who can distill our discussions and provide us with a clearly articulated list of issues and actionable steps. The final P3 document will have value on its own, but it will also be used to pursue additional funding to support our next phase of trail protection planning.

It's important to note that this P3 process will not replace current and ongoing trail protection work and strategy. Rather, it will help refine that process and make us better at it as we move forward. It will help unlock funding that can be used to assist with trail protection planning and outcomes, and it will strengthen the relationship between the NCTA and NPS.

We will continue to take near-term actions that will protect the Trail. We will continue to build on the love

“
The P3 phase is designed to ensure that the resulting plan will provide the needed guidance and work well for all partners involved.”

and labors of all the volunteers and staff that have come before us. We will continue to lay the groundwork for legacy protection that may not be fully realized during our time with the NCNST. Chris Loudenslager's email signature block includes a quote that is a very appropriate description of the dedication that goes into building, maintaining, and protecting a National Scenic Trail: "The one who plants trees, knowing that he will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life." (Rabindranath Tagore)

Learn more about the NCTA's trail protection work at northcountrytrail.org/trail-protection.



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The Davis family on the NCNST a few years ago.

Photo by
Matt Davis

Accessibility on the NCNST

BY MATT DAVIS, NCTA REGIONAL TRAIL COORDINATOR FOR NORTH DAKOTA, MINNESOTA, AND WISCONSIN

My wife Stacy and I love hiking on the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) with our four kids. We are also volunteer Trail Adopters for a 2.5-mile segment of it within Itasca State Park here in our home state of Minnesota. Our kids, two of whom have cognitive disabilities, have been hiking the NCNST since they were toddlers. Our youngest, Teddy, experienced it before he could even walk - kid carrier backpacks are great for parents with very young kids!

Having kids with special needs helps parents to see the world and its common challenges a bit differently.

Continued on page 30



TRAIL PLANNING



Above: A Section 508 compliant trail sign.

Left: The Davis family on their adopted section of NCNST more than a few years ago.

Photo by
Matt Davis

After our oldest, William, grew too big for the kid carrier backpack, we needed a jogging stroller on hikes because he was still learning to walk. Getting this bulky stroller down a hiking trail often presented some physical challenges, and rough rides for William. Later, when he could walk on his own (well, mostly run), he had to wear a harness backpack with a tether. While we fully appreciate beautiful vistas and cool bridges over streams while hiking, we needed to keep William close for his safety, as he could have easily tripped and fallen over an edge.

We were willing to adapt how we hiked because we could and the effort was worth it, but there are many who cannot. A trail like the NCNST should, where possible, be designed and built differently for it to be more usable and enjoyable for everyone.

When we see or hear the term accessible, we usually think of people using wheelchairs and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). But accessibility goes way beyond that; it can affect everyone at some point in their life. There are mobility issues that don't necessarily require a wheelchair, children with special needs, and hikers with vision or hearing impairments, to name a few examples. We must also remember the family and friends who travel with them. I was amazed to learn during a recent webinar put on by the Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation that altogether, this is 75% of Americans - and that percentage increases each year.

The simplest answer as to why accessibility is important is because it's law, and the Trail's federal administering agency, the National Park Service (NPS), takes it seriously. NPS Director's Order #42 states:

"It is the goal of the NPS to ensure that all people, including the estimated 54 million citizens with disabilities, have the highest level of accessibility that is reasonable to our programs, facilities and services in conformance with applicable regulations and standards. Accordingly, the NPS will seek to provide that level in the planning, construction, and renovation of buildings and facilities and in the provision of programs and services to the public and to our employees. ... The procedures in this Director's Order give detailed guidance based on the minimum requirements set forth in laws, rules, and regulations. However, one fundamental principle of this Director's Order is that the NPS will seek to provide the highest level of accessibility that is reasonable, and not simply provide the minimum level that is required by law."

You may have heard a related term, *universal design*. This means that the facility (or in our case, the Trail) is usable for everyone, no matter their abilities. It addresses personal conditions like autism, and most often manifests itself in modern playgrounds and other recreational facilities (e.g. boat launches). We can learn much from universal design principles to improve one's experience on the NCNST. On a recent accessibility webinar, NPS staff characterized universal design as "the design of programs and facilities to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible, without separate or segregated access." This boils down to more mellow grades, less structures and obstacles, and updated signage at trailheads. They encouraged trail managers to "consider the wide range of experiences that people will bring to the trail, including a variety of disabilities: walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, and thinking."

Accessible Segments on the NCNST

The following segments are great examples of accessible trail:

- The Audubon National Wildlife Refuge visitors center in Coleharbor, North Dakota offers a one-mile, concrete, interpretive loop trail through the prairie, part of which is also the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST).
- The Lakewalk section of the Superior Hiking Trail / NCNST in downtown Duluth, Minnesota is paved, passes by numerous cultural highlights, and offers great views of the aerial lift bridge, downtown Duluth, and Lake Superior.
- The Doughboys Trail / NCNST in Copper Falls State Park (Wisc.) features a crushed granite trail segment that leads hikers to overlooks of Copper Falls.
- An eight-mile segment of the Fred Meijer White Pine Trail [State Park], a paved rail-trail, hosts the NCNST between Rockford and Cedar Springs, Michigan.
- A 2.5-mile segment of the NCNST following the Gorge Trail in Cazenovia, New York, is a paved, old railroad grade.

In that Wisconsin Office of Outdoor Recreation webinar, I learned of modern technology that is allowing paralyzed individuals to enjoy backcountry hiking trails, even in wilderness, using four-wheel, adaptive wheelchairs. They look like fancy four-wheel mountain bikes but legally, these aren't bikes or motorized vehicles. Some forward-thinking state and metro park systems, such as one of our partners in Ohio, Metroparks Toledo, are starting to offer their visitors motorized track wheelchairs that are capable of navigating dirt trails like the NCNST.

Through the NCTA's diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work, we are embracing diversity when it comes to all people using and appreciating the NCNST. It only makes sense to include people with accessibility and cognitive challenges, as well as people of various ages, races, genders, sexual preferences, and so on.

When building or updating NCNST segments, volunteers should consider if accessibility is an option on that site. If there's uncertainty, invite an expert to help walk and talk you through it. Regardless if the Trail is accessible, we should be building all of our trail structures to avoid potential obstacles. This means 36-inch-wide puncheon, bridges, and boardwalks with ramps. It would be a shame if a trail user was successfully navigating the NCNST using their wheelchair, but made to turn around at a structure because it was built too narrow for them to cross.

We also need to provide the relevant information that trail users with mobility issues need to determine if a particular trail segment can accommodate them. This information includes length of a trail segment; surface type; typical and minimum tread width; typical and maximum running slope; and typical and maximum cross slope. Signs should also be Section 508 compliant, meaning they can be easily used by all trail users.

As you can probably tell, this issue is important to me personally because of my kids' disabilities. Unfortunately, I ignored opportunities to learn more about accessible trails professionally for too long. I was waiting for someone to explain to me what exactly the law said we needed to do, and when and where on the NCNST. Fortunately, a potential project to build a new, accessible trail segment has inspired me to learn more and do more. The goal is that more people will be able to find segments of the NCNST that accommodate them, and thus help them fall in love with our country's longest National Scenic Trail.

Learn more about the NPS and accessibility at nps.gov/accessibility.



North Star

**NORTH COUNTRY
TRAIL ASSOCIATION**

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Reach Out!

The NCTA headquarters office and Trail Shop are located at **229 E. Main St. in Lowell, Mich.** Find more information at northcountrytrail.org/contact.
(866) HikeNCT • (616) 897-5987

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.

North Creek, New York is a newly minted NCTA Trail Town. It's located about 20 miles from Chestertown, New York: the location of 2023 Celebration. Ruth and Dan Dorrough and Katherine and Kurt McCandless take a break from hiking the NCNST in the North Creek area with a railbike adventure on Revolution Rail.

Photo Taken by the Revolution Rail guide, provided by the Dorroughs