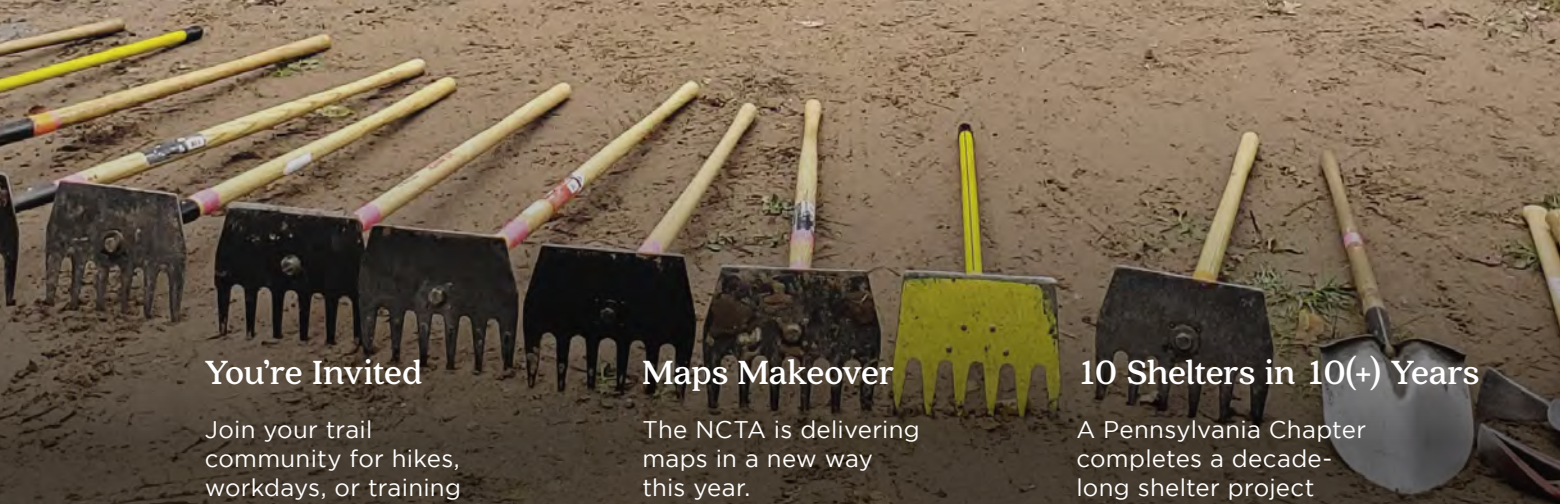




North Star

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL ASSOCIATION

SPRING 2024



You're Invited

Join your trail community for hikes, workdays, or training

Page 6

Maps Makeover

The NCTA is delivering maps in a new way this year.

Page 9

10 Shelters in 10(+) Years

A Pennsylvania Chapter completes a decade-long shelter project

Page 16



NCTA STAFF

Andrea Ketchmark
Executive Director

Valerie Bader
Director of Trail Operations

Nancy Brozek
Director of Development and Communications

Stephanie Campbell
Regional Trail Coordinator: New York and Vermont

Matt Davis
Regional Trail Coordinator: North Dakota, Minnesota and Wisconsin

Heather Ertle
Database and Membership Administrator

Paul Gagnon
Director of Trail Protection

Lauren Kennedy-Little
Regional Trail Coordinator: Ohio and Pennsylvania

Kate Lemon
Marketing and Communications Coordinator

Karen Raab
Finance and Operations Manager

Matt Rowbotham
GIS Program Manager

Alison Sanchez
Administrative Assistant

Becky VanDyke
Data Entry Specialist

Kenny Wawsczyk
Regional Trail Coordinator: Michigan

Abby Whittington
Annual Events Coordinator

NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Mike Chapple
President

Jan Ulferts Stewart
Vice President

Brad Slagle
Treasurer

Jeff VanWinkle
Secretary

Jaron Nyhof
Immediate Past President

Mel Baughman
Wisconsin

Josh Berlo
Colorado

Sue Harvey Brown
Michigan

Dennis Garrett
Pennsylvania

Max Heitner
New York

Yvette Jester
Ohio

Cheryl Kreindler
Ohio

Duane Lawton
Michigan

Jane Norton
Michigan

Derrick Passe
Minnesota

Sharon Ray
New York

Kevin Russell
Vermont

Tina Toole
Pennsylvania

Steve Walker
Ohio

Chris Whitsel
North Dakota

Visit northcountrytrail.org/staff to message NCTA staff members directly. Email hq@northcountrytrail.org or call 866-445-3628 with general inquiries.

Contents

FEATURES



On the Cover
Crew leader training in Wisconsin

Photo by Matt Davis

Trailhead

MIKE CHAPPLE, PRESIDENT, NCTA BOARD OF DIRECTORS



As the snow melts and the first green shoots of spring emerge along the North Country Trail, we're reminded of the cycle of renewal and growth that defines not only nature, but the vibrant community that supports our trail. When we think of trail work, our minds automatically turn to the vital, on-the-ground work of building and maintaining our

footpath. That work is crucial to our mission, but it's not the only way that so many NCTA members and supporters work to advance the trail. I am so appreciative when I think of the dedication and passion of countless individuals who contribute in various, invaluable ways.

Building New Paths

The creation of new trail segments is a monumental task, one that involves not just physical labor, but a deep commitment to environmental and cultural stewardship and a vision for future generations. The hands that clear brush, smooth the path, and paint blazes are building more than just a trail; they're crafting a legacy. These volunteer trailblazers dedicate countless hours to putting this trail on the best possible route through our nation's North Country.

Maintaining Our Legacy

We all know the work doesn't end once the trail is built. Maintaining the existing trail is a constant endeavor, requiring a vigilant eye and a caring hand to address the wear and tear inflicted by time and the elements. From clearing fallen trees after a storm to rebuilding eroded paths, maintainers keep the trail safe and navigable year in and year out. Their dedication ensures the beauty and accessibility of the trail endure year after year.

Leading Grassroots Efforts

Our Chapters form the backbone of our trail community and they are only successful thanks to the tireless work of their leaders. These individuals go above and beyond to organize work days, coordinate hiking events, and inspire others to get involved. Their leadership is a beacon that guides the efforts of volunteers, ensuring that the collective work is cohesive, effective, and aligned with the mission of preserving the North Country Trail.

Continued on page 7

TRAILHEAD

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

VOLUNTEERS

- 8 Listen: Building the North Country Trail
- 10 A Tree for Doug
- 10 Your Adventure Starts Here

TRAIL USE

- 12 Funky Fungi
- 14 My Relationship with the North Country Trail Part II

TRAIL WORK

- 18 Trail Structures
- 20 Northern vs Southern Trail Maintenance
- 22 Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew Leadership Update
- 24 Saw Reconditioning 101
- 26 Field Grants

NORTH STAR STAFF

Kate Lemon
Editor
northstar@northcountrytrail.org

Kelly O'Hara
Graphic Designer

Duane Lawton, Eileen Fairbrother, Tom Gilbert, Becky Heise, Lorana Jinkerson, Kate Lemon, Howard Meyerson, Irene Szabo, Jeff Van Winkle, and Joan Young
Editorial Advisory Committee

The North Star, Spring issue, Vol. 43, Issue 2, is published by the North Country Trail Association, a private, not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization, 229 East Main Street, Lowell, MI 49331. The North Star is published quarterly for promotional and educational purposes and as a benefit of membership in the Association. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission of the North Country Trail Association.

Trailhead

ANDREA KETCHMARK, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



Photo by
Andrea Ketchmark

When the NCTA developed its current strategic plan in the winter of 2019, we had no idea of the challenges that lay ahead that would define the next few years. A few months after adopting our plan, the world plunged into a global pandemic that changed how we show up, how we interact and communicate, and what priorities we

consider in our everyday lives. The next few years proved to test us, but some of the storm clouds had silver linings. More people turned to the outdoors than ever before and we focused on making sure the trail was there for them. With in-person meetings no longer possible, we improved communication across our eight states with practices that continue today. Although our work looked different than we originally imagined, we were able to adapt and bring our strategic plan to life.

Four years later, we celebrate having Regional Trail Coordinators to cover every state, an effective marketing strategy, and an events calendar to drive more people to get involved. We achieved unit status for the trail. We hired our first-ever Director of Trail Protection to focus on securing access for the trail while protecting landscapes for generations to come. As the current plan sunsets, the NCTA is ready to embark on a new journey to chart the course for our future.

To effectively navigate the complex and far-reaching landscape we operate in, we must have a strategic framework that not only sets ambitious goals but also empowers our stakeholders, volunteers, and staff to contribute meaningfully to their achievement.

By strategically focusing our efforts, we can come together as an entire community. This new process holds the promise of transformative change for the NCTA and the North Country Trail. As we embark on this strategic journey, we invite you as stakeholders to join us in shaping the future of the Association. Together, we will navigate the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, ensuring that the trail remains a treasured resource for generations to come.

Hoshin Planning, originating from Japanese management principles, is a strategic planning methodology that aligns organizational goals and objectives with tactical actions. Unlike traditional planning methods, Hoshin emphasizes the importance of cross-functional collaboration, continual improvement, and adaptability in achieving long-term objectives.

- **Visionary Leadership:** Hoshin Planning starts at the top. Our leadership team has embraced this methodology, driving the vision of a more interconnected, accessible, and sustainable NCNST.
- **Engagement and Collaboration:** A strategic plan is only as strong as the input it receives. A collaborative approach involving volunteers and partners ensures that our strategic priorities reflect the diverse perspectives and needs of those invested in the NCNST.
- **Clear Objectives and Key Results:** Hoshin Planning relies on establishing clear, measurable objectives and key results. This clarity guides decision-making and enables us to track progress effectively.
- **Continuous Improvement:** The journey towards our strategic goals is not linear. Hoshin Planning encourages a culture of continuous improvement, where we learn from both successes and setbacks, adapting our strategies as needed to stay aligned with our overarching vision.

CHRIS LOUDENSLAGER, NCNST
SUPERINTENDENT, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Photo by Kate Lemon

With an early spring upon us, I am thrilled and anxious to trade out my winter boots for work boots, switch from down jackets to Gortex, and wipe out my hard hat that's been accumulating dust for the last several months. All those projects I've been dreaming about for the last several months are beckoning to me and with

great vigor and enthusiasm, I'm up with the morning sun to get out and make great things happen.

But alas, midway through the day, my shoulders, legs, and back remind me in concert that several months have indeed passed and maybe it's time to take a break. And if there was any doubt that I might have lost a little of my edge over the winter, the whole of my body affirms it the next day. Is it just me or is this a phenomenon I share with others? I do say that with something of a smile, because I'm pretty sure I already know the answer to that question. I also say with a little wink that if you don't know what I'm talking about well, just wait - you will.

My point is that I know the trail is calling to us all, but we need to be conscious and accountable. Give yourself some time to ease into things and get back into field shape before going all-in, overdoing things, and landing yourself on the injured reserve list with tendonitis or worse. Slow and steady wins the race, as they say. Of course, by the time this issue goes to print, most of us will have worked through those start-of-season aches and pains and gotten back into the swing of things. The same concept holds true once the summer heat is upon us, though. This too will take time to get conditioned to and it might come sooner this year than it should. But by all means, don't let me spoil the party. Get out and have a blast! Just don't dive in expecting to pick up where you left off last season. Give yourself some time and grace to get reconditioned. I say this as a reminder for my own benefit as much as anyone. I, too, am excited and want to get to it.

Us trail workers have performed many of our trail tasks for years and our skills come back quickly through simple muscle memory. But some tasks aren't so common, and when it comes to trying out some new "field hack," there's value in taking a little time to review

what's involved. Refresh your memory and discuss the project with your crew. Ensure everyone is on the same sheet of music, knows how to get it done safely, and understands their roles in helping it turn out as planned.

While I keep referring to trail work in the context of "we," I recognize that my and the rest of my team's role is to provide you with the support, information, and assistance you need to succeed. Without question, we share your love for the trail. The best day at the office is when we can get out of the office and join you on a project. But we know that we can do more for you and the trail by tending to the work we do in the office. Ours is not often a dirty job.

We work in partnership with the NCTA, so sometimes you'll work directly with my team and other times, indirectly. You'll likely communicate with us while planning a route or learning about protecting endangered species. In other instances, our assistance is indirect and you may not see our connection, like when we're crafting an agreement with a new partner, taking actions to prevent a proposed project that would adversely affect the trail, or crunching the numbers to figure out how we can afford to make dreams become reality next year. But whether our work is readily apparent or not, what I hope to convey to you is that the entirety of your National Park Service staff greatly admire, value, and respect what you do to bring the North Country National Scenic Trail to life. Every day, we are working hard for you because we know you are giving so much to the trail and to those whose lives are made better by its existence. Thank you for your commitment and dedication to the trail and our partnership, to the public we serve, and the resources we love, honor, and cherish that combined, make the North Country Trail everything it is meant to be.



EVENTS

You're Invited

This is a sampling of events you are welcome to participate in across the North Country National Scenic Trail. Find a full, searchable list at northcountrytrail.org/events. NCTA Chapters, Affiliate organizations, and partners are encouraged to submit their events to be featured on this online calendar.

HIKE

National Trails Day

Trailwide
June 1

Taking place on the first Saturday in June, National Trails Day® is a day of public events aimed at advocacy and trail service. Thousands of trail users, builders, and supporters come together in partnership to enjoy, advocate for, maintain, and clean up public lands and trails. Whether you're interested in a hike, volunteer opportunities, or support via membership, there is an NCTA Chapter nearby that welcomes you: northcountrytrail.org/events.

TRAINING

Chainsaw Training, National Park Service (NPS)

Wisconsin, Michigan, and Ohio
June and September

These trainings are open to volunteers who are committed to being an NPS-certified sawyer along the NCNST. If a swamper is interested (a sawyer's right-hand person) in attending to observe and learn, they are more than welcome. Contact Nic Loiseau, NPS Volunteer Program Manager, at nicole_loiseau@nps.gov for additional information. The trainings have limited attendance.

- June 1-2 in Copper Falls State Park, Wisconsin
- June 8-10 in Munising, Michigan
- September 7-8 in South Bloomingville, Ohio

TRAIL WORK

Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew Work Weeks

Gurney, Wisconsin
June through November



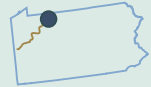
The NCTA Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew, "the Rovers," is a group of volunteers from a variety of NCTA Chapters. This year, the group is working on opening the Foster Falls / Potato River corridor (8+ miles), building trail tread, constructing bridges throughout, and possibly building some stone stairs. Swimming in the falls (both Foster and/or Wren) as water temperatures allow will be a highlight. This work area falls within the NCTA Heritage Chapter area. Volunteers can join the crew for a day, a couple of days, the whole week, or the whole season. Overnight camp spots fill quickly, but there are opportunities to join the crew for the day. If interested, email Brad at rovers@northcountrytrail.org.

- June 3-7
- July 8-12
- August 5-9
- September 30 - October 4
- November 4-8

HIKE + VOLUNTEER

Allegheny 100 Hiking Challenge,

Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania
June 7-9



The NCTA Allegheny National Forest Chapter is hosting its annual Allegheny 100 Hiking Challenge, or the A-100: An adventure covering a 100-mile stretch of the NCNST in Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest. Participants can choose to traverse 100, 75, 50, or 25 miles, but everyone has 50 hours to complete their goal. While the official registration for participants has since closed, walk-ins will be accepted and event volunteers would be greatly appreciated. Learn more at northcountrytrail.org/a-100 or contact the Chapter at anf@northcountrytrail.org.

TRAIL WORK

The Wilderness Chapter Work Party, Buckeye Trail Association (BTA)

Little Muskingum Watershed Association, Ohio
July 13-17



The NCNST shares over 900 miles of its corridor with the Buckeye Trail in Ohio. Join the Buckeye Trail Crew and the Wilderness Chapter in rebuilding trail that was rerouted in 2005. Once open, the Road Form Section will be rerouted and concurrent with the NCNST. The crew will also be moving a

severely degraded portion of trail slightly upslope to stabilize the trail tread. And don't forget about the trusty DR Mower; there will be plenty of brush maintenance available so bring your weed eaters. Camping and the Chuck Wagon will be available. There are showers in a building at the campsite, but participants should pack their own drinking water. Register at buckeyetrail.org/events and contact whipple@buckeyetrail.org with questions.

TRAIL WORK

Adirondack Work Week, Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) + NCTA



Hoffman Notch Wilderness August 12-16

Join us as we construct new NCNST in New York's Adirondack Mountains. We will focus on the Jones Hill section, putting finishing touches on this new section. The plan is for the ADK Pro Crew to complete the trail down from the summit on the east side. Our volunteer group will finish benching, post markers, and check and improve drainage. No prior skills or experience are needed. Skills training and tools will be provided. Come for all five days, or just one or two. Volunteers are to provide their own food and lodging. (Schroon Lake Village offers many options nearby, or complimentary camping is available on a first come, first served basis.) Space is limited. For additional details or to apply, contact Mary Coffin at maryccoffin@gmail.com or visit adk.org/volunteer and scroll down to the Jones Hill project.

HIKE

2024 Celebration, NCTA

St. Ignace, Michigan August 21-25



Come celebrate the North Country Trail, and all those who care for it and are interested in getting involved in the trail community. The NCTA coordinates this annual event that this year will be in St. Ignace, Michigan. This particularly scenic section in Michigan's eastern upper peninsula is well cared for by the dedicated volunteers of the NCTA Hiawatha Shore-to-Shore Chapter. A wide variety of activities are offered to Celebration participants, including many guided hiking opportunities, skills workshops, engaging presentations, and much more. See the full schedule and register at northcountrytrail.org/celebration. Registration is open until August 1. Late registration prices begin July 15.

MIKE CHAPPLE (CONTINUED)

Mapping and Communicating About the Trail

Not all trail work happens on the ground. A vast amount of behind-the-scenes effort is crucial to the trail's success. From the meticulous work of mapping to the essential tasks of communication, these activities ensure that the trail is not only well-planned but also well-known. The individuals who dedicate their time to mapping, promoting, and communicating about our trail play a critical role in the trail's development and in fostering a connected community.

Advocating for Our Common Interests

Advocacy work ensures that the interests of both the trail and the Association are represented and protected in Washington DC, state capitals, and with our many partner agencies. We saw the power of advocacy in December when the National Park Service granted the North Country Trail official unit status, fulfilling what had been the major goal of our advocacy work for decades. Today, advocacy work remains extremely important as we work to ensure continued federal and state support for our work.

Governing the NCTA

The governance provided by those who serve on committees and the board is vital to the strategic direction and sustainability of the trail. These leaders make decisions that shape the future, ensuring that the trail remains a priority in the public eye and that resources are allocated wisely. This work isn't glamorous. My colleagues on the board graciously give countless hours of their time to meet with each other and develop a shared vision for the organization.

Providing Generous Support

Last but not least, the financial contributions from members of our community are the lifeblood that fuels much of the trail's development and maintenance. Every donation, big or small, supports the physical work on the trail, the advocacy efforts, and the countless projects that keep the trail alive and growing. These generous acts of giving underscore the deep love and commitment our community has for the North Country Trail.

Thank You!

To each and every one of you who has contributed to the North Country Trail, whether by action, word, or donation, thank you. Your engagement and support are what make the trail not just a path through the wilderness but a vibrant, living community. Here's to the journeys we've shared and those yet to come, as we continue to build, maintain, and cherish this remarkable trail together.



VOLUNTEERS

Listen: Building the North Country Trail

BY KATE LEMON, NCTA MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Stay tuned to northcountrytrail.org/storycorps for additional recordings. More will be added throughout 2024 and beyond as they are recorded and produced. No apps or downloads are required to listen to these recordings. They stream (for free) right from the website. You can also listen to these recordings and others unrelated to the NCTA at storycorps.org.



For the past two years, thanks to guidance from and collaboration with StoryCorps Studios, we've been collecting conversations between the remarkable people who help develop, maintain, protect, promote, and use the North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST). From volunteers to thru-hikers, staff and partners, we've heard so many beautiful perspectives and reflections.

In the spirit of this Spring *North Star's* theme, *trail work*, here are a couple conversations worth listening to. They're sure to inspire you, or at least grow your appreciation for those who keep the North Country Trail in its best condition for you to enjoy.



Bill and Bob Courtois

Photo by Kate Lemon

Twin brothers **Bill and Bob Courtois** of Michigan discuss their pathways of involvement with the NCTA, from hikers to supporters to volunteer leaders.



Mary Coffin and Stephanie Campbell

Photo by Kate Lemon

NCTA staff member **Stephanie Campbell** interviews **Mary Coffin**, a volunteer based in the Adirondack Mountains. Mary explains why she has chosen to dedicate so much of her time and knowledge to the trail with both the NCTA and the Adirondack Mountain Club.



Bill Menke and Tom Gilbert

Photo by StoryCorps Studios

Tom Gilbert was the first National Park Service Superintendent of the NCNST. **Bill Menke** worked for both the U.S. Forest Service and the NCTA for many years. The two discuss their shared experience planning the original route of the NCNST.

NCTA Legacy Society

Your annual membership is so important. Did you know that you can leave an estate gift of any size to the North Country Trail Association? Consider leaving an estate plan that ensures your support in perpetuity.

For 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.

State of the Trail 2023 Correction

In the previous issue, the Sheyenne River Valley Chapter's 2022 State of the Trail report was printed instead of their 2023 report. This was an editor's error - many apologies! Below is the correct (2023) report.



Volunteers install one of two 25-foot boardwalks in pouring rain at Lake Ashtabula.

Photo by
Becky Heise

Sheyenne River Valley Chapter

We finally received a landowner's permission for the trail to cross his land, eliminating a seven-mile roadwalk segment near Lake Ashtabula. We maintained 65 miles of trail, constructed and repaired boardwalks, and installed registration boxes. We met with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the North Dakota Forest Service (NDFS) about the Sheyenne River State Forest, our most popular segment, to discuss plans for easements, projects, and more. The Corps installed a new concrete privy at the Baldhill Dam Trailhead, and the NDFS has almost completed a new privy, a gravel parking lot, a beautiful archway leading to the trail, and a very nice kiosk. Our Chapter offered several group hikes, including our first ever night hike at Fort Ransom State Park. We acquired six new members through these hikes and events! Doosan Days of Community Service volunteers installed five water bars and gravel-armored 700 yards of trail - we appreciate all their support! We've also been working on building a more permanent relationship with local horsemen in the Fort Ransom area. They are allowed on the trail in the Sheyenne State Forest and have helped with some improvement projects in the past.

Maps Makeover

BY MATT ROWBOTHAM AND KATE LEMON,
NCTA STAFF

Last year, we adjusted the publication schedule of updated NCTA map data to twice a year*: Once in March and once in September. Now, this spring, as you access these recently updated maps to begin planning your hikes, you'll notice some changes to how they're being presented to you.

1. We have transitioned from dividing the maps up by region (e.g. Northwest Minnesota, North Central Minnesota), in favor of single sets for each trail state - with one exception being a separate set for each of Michigan's peninsulas. This will be replicated within Avenza, as well.

This change is intended to simplify our map offerings. Formerly, the amount of regions we offered and how we described them could be overwhelming to a new trail user, creating a barrier to them using our maps or even the trail. For example, it could be difficult for someone unfamiliar with the trail to know exactly what or where we meant by Northwest Minnesota versus North Central Minnesota. Being able to download one map for the entire state allows you to customize your experience and build your own hike.

"What will happen to any tracks or points a user has saved in the Avenza Maps app when the maps are updated?" is a question we occasionally hear. Avenza support staff shared that you don't lose map layers you've added, though you may need to relink them to a specific map. See the full article here or reach out to the Avenza support desk directly at support.avenzamaps.com.

2. The *Trail Maps and Downloads* webpage at northcountrytrail.org has been redesigned to deliver our map options first based on location, rather than data type. Formerly, when landing on this webpage, you had the choice of Printable Maps, Mobile Maps, or Map Data. But again, consider a new trail user: They may not yet know what type of map they need, but they do know where they want to go. This reorganization allows you to first choose your destination, then see what map options are available.

It's important to note that no mapping resources are being eliminated. North Country Trail maps created with NCTA data are still available via the online interactive map, free and printable PDFs, the Avenza app, and the FarOut app. Advanced users can still download GPS data for free, too.



Explore the trail and plan your next adventure at northcountrytrail.org/trail-map.

*Note: All mapping products, including the FarOut app, will be updated at roughly the same time.



VOLUNTEERS

A Tree for Doug

BY CONNIE JULIEN, NCTA PETER WOLFE CHAPTER

Doug Welker, the first then long-term President of the Peter Wolfe Chapter (Mich.), passed away unexpectedly in 2021. A memorial piece was featured in the Fall 2021 issue of the North Star. Read it at northcountrytrail.org/north-star.



Last fall, the Peter Wolfe Chapter coordinated a tree planting in remembrance of Doug. It was moving to witness this celebration of life extend well beyond the NCTA family. Friends attended from a variety of other groups that Doug was involved in, including the Upper Peninsula Environmental Coalition, Friends of the Land of Keweenaw, the Michigan Nature Association, and Save the Wild UP Coalition. It was an impressive reminder of Doug’s service and dedication to improving the environment of the Western Upper Peninsula for future generations.

With permission from the state, a northern red oak tree was planted in his memory at the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) trailhead for the popular Canyon Falls Trail, which is also North Country Trail. The Chapter extends sincere gratitude to the Michigan Nature Association for purchasing the tree.

The last boardwalk Doug built is on the Ottawa National Forest, and it will be dedicated to him. Contact the Peter Wolfe Chapter if you’d like to get involved: pwc@northcountrytrail.org.

Above: Marjory Johnston waters the newly planted memorial tree in honor of her late husband.

Photo provided by Connie Julien

Your Adventure Starts Here

BY KATE LEMON, NCTA MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Over the past decade, marketing research has consistently proven that involvement [with the NCTA] begins with a hike. People must first be given opportunities to experience the trail and fall in love with it. When those invitations come from local trail experts, they are more personal and credible. Once one feels welcome on the trail and part of the community, they are more likely to be motivated to engage deeper: becoming a Chapter member, volunteer, donor, or advocate. But it all begins with a hike.

So, last summer, we launched an experimental awareness campaign to promote trail use. By showcasing the trail in a variety of ways, we aimed to increase website traffic and engagement, particularly with the online events calendar (northcountrytrail.org/events). We then hoped to see an increase in Chapter-led hike participation and new Chapter membership. Spoiler alert: All of this was achieved with a limited budget and a lot of incredible volunteerism.

Paid Social Media Advertising

Throughout September and October 2023, and for two weeks in December, we ran paid advertising on Facebook and Instagram. The visuals were designed to showcase the beauty and uniqueness of the trail in each of its eight states, and to drive viewers to the online events calendar to find their next hike. Ads were distributed trailwide with additional targeting to ensure delivery to the most likely interested. For example, if your Facebook profile includes keywords like *backpacking* or *trail running*, or that you live in a North Country Trail state, you were more likely to see the ad while scrolling through Facebook.

“The campaign achieved significant success,” said Andrew Kovatch, the professional digital strategist who voluntarily managed the tech side of this ad campaign. “It resulted in over 4,000 new page follows or likes, over 4,400 landing page views (events calendar webpage), and reached over 1.1 million unique users.”



The front and back of a bookmark for general trail awareness. Posters and table tents were also designed to match.

Pilot Project

Between June and October 2023, we tested this awareness campaign on a local level. Eight NCTA Chapters representing a variety of locations and sizes were invited to participate in this *promotional pilot project*. Chapters were asked to host hikes in the same time frame the social media ads were running, so when

people clicked the ads and landed on the events calendar, they had options. Chapters were given outreach materials to distribute in their communities, messaging recommendations, marketing best practices, and collaboration opportunities via Zoom meetings. Chapters reported their monthly outreach efforts to monitor results and identify challenges. NCTA staff were available to brainstorm and celebrate accomplishments on a Chapter-by-Chapter basis.

By the end of the project, all pilot Chapters grew in new or returning memberships compared to the fall of 2022. Five Chapters reported a higher-than-average hike in attendance, and pilot Chapters accounted for 79% of NCTA's new memberships during the (Fall 2023) *My NCT* Membership Drive. Many chapters utilized this platform to form new partnerships or strengthen existing ones with local businesses and organizations, and they were featured in local media. This strategy introduced new populations outside the NCTA trail community to the trail and local Chapter efforts.

StoryCorps

Over the past two years, more than 50 individuals have participated in our StoryCorps initiative, allowing us to capture 27 conversations. To date, 11 audio recordings have been produced and can be streamed for free directly from northcountrytrail.org/storycorps. (No additional app or download is needed! If you have internet access and can navigate to the webpage, you can listen.) Audio content is organic, sentimental, and impactful. Participants connected with and learned from each other, shed tears, and shared laughs. Having audio as an offering for media sources provides us with the potential to reach new audiences and for individuals to learn about the NCTA while on the go.

Media Relations

The NCTA has long relied on its Chapters to distribute local-level news. This has worked well, but it limits the media's recognition of the trail and NCTA on state, regional, and national scopes. Being the longest National Scenic Trail in the National Trails System and crossing eight states, broader recognition is crucial to growing its use and support. The National Park Service's declaration of unit status for the trail revitalized our national presence in the media, and provided great motivation to revisit and refresh NCTA media relations. More than 50 publications covered the unit status news, including national coverage via *Backpacker* magazine, CNN, and *National Parks Traveler*, and statewide NPR stations in four trail states. Many media personnel requested to be added to the NCTA media contact list, too. Now is a fantastic time to continue presenting stories to a larger audience.

Moving Forward

The return on investment of social media advertising was stellar, so as part of our ongoing marketing strategy, NCTA will continue running ads in 2024 and beyond. As the NCTA advertising budget grows, more dollars will be invested in this medium and others to offer a broader reach and stronger results. We have plans to increase collaboration with like-minded organizations and businesses to reach additional audiences and gain and grow influencer support.

Local efforts are equally important as the NCTA continues to strengthen awareness on a trail-wide scale. Our 30 Chapters are the core of the Association, and we have a united vision for the trail. For many, Chapter-led hikes are the first introduction to the NCTA and the trail. Because these volunteers are crucial in this engagement pathway, we will continue the successful practices identified during the 2023 Pilot Project and increase collaboration between NCTA staff and volunteers. We will continue to work together to craft unique messages that resonate with everyone.

StoryCorps conversations will continue to be produced and available, and a media relations strategy will be refreshed. This will include more press releases from NCTA Headquarters, increased collaboration with partners, and communications training for staff and volunteers.

And perhaps most importantly, we remind you how important you are to the success of the North Country Trail and the NCTA. Your stories and experiences are what make the NCTA great. We'll ensure you keep sharing them, that you're informed on trail news and hiking opportunities, and that you know this trail community is better because of your support and presence. Thank you.



TRAIL
USE

Funky Fungi

Foraging Adventures on the North Country Trail in Michigan

BY JAY SENKEVICH

Jay is a scientist with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has a background in chemistry, physics, and materials science. He has also undertaken fungi research, and advised on investment opportunities with fungi. He has been foraging mushrooms since 2000, and takes mushroom supplements daily.

Fungi can kill you or save your life. It is imperative to eat them wisely.

Many common, modern-day maladies can be prevented or lessened by consuming fungi. Plus, they are tasty, amazing, and funky. Trees wouldn't exist without them. Fungi have been around for more than one billion years, whereas trees have existed for less than 400 million. Our species is only 300,000 years old. Hug a tree and you can feel its energy. Sit in a redwood grove and you can feel nature's spirit. Eat a mushroom and you can consume a billion years' worth of evolution and wisdom.

We, *Homo sapiens*, share 50% of our DNA with the kingdom fungi. Humans have a decentralized nervous system and fungi have a similar setup: mycelium. Fungi have the ability

to communicate and they have a stomach of sorts, which is also decentralized. To survive a billion years, fungi need to be wise, and that is the very reason they can prevent or lessen maladies that plague us: Heart disease [1,2], dementia [3], Alzheimer's, neuropathy, cancer [4], arthritis [5], diabetes, obesity, and more. By eating them, we become both healthy and wise.

There are roughly 10,000 different types of mushrooms or "fruiting bodies," but most American grocery stores carry limited fresh varieties - mainly white buttons, *Agaricus bisporus*. You would be fortunate to find oysters, shiitakes, or portobellos. You would be lucky to find Maitake, Pioppino, Beech, and Lion's Mane.

Most of these mushrooms are wood decomposers: They break down the cellulose and lignin in wood. The other types of fungi are mycorrhizal: They have a relationship with nearby trees and plants. Basically, these fungi benefit from the trees' ability to produce carbon via photosynthesis, and the trees benefit from the fungi providing them with other nutrients they need. For example, mycorrhizal fungi

“ We share 50% of our DNA with the kingdom fungi”

excrete oxalic acid, which dissolves limestone to liberate calcium that the tree (or plant) needs for structural growth.

Mycorrhizal fungi are difficult to grow in a controlled environment, unlike the wood decomposers. Why? They

have a symbiotic relationship with the trees. Simply trying to grow mushrooms on a substrate is not easy. Some mysteries have been unlocked but most have not. The Chinese are the kings of mushrooms, producing approximately 90% of the world's supply. The Koreans and the Japanese are also mushroom lovers, and fungi is currently a hot discussion topic in the U.S. around both physical and mental health.

Part of the reason why I like to do 1,000-mile hikes every year is to forage and eat wild mushrooms, berries, flowers, and plants. Many long-distance hikers no longer carry stoves because they weigh too much, but they are missing out on the delights of nature. Although morels are very popular, they fruit in the spring, which is not the ideal mushroom season. Think of trees: How many bear fruit in the springtime? The best mushroom season is late summer to early fall.

I wait all year for mushroom season. I have a plethora in my fridge as I write this article, including maitakes, witch's butter, amber jelly rolls, white coral, wood blewits, hollow boletes, chicken of the woods, and shrimp of the woods. They are individually interesting in color, taste, and texture, and they each have a story.

As I was walking north into Michigan from the Ohio border, on my way to Wisconsin, I was mostly

eating berries and only a few mushrooms. A Michigan summer is full of berries. I saw many families picking blueberries together. I found and ate red raspberries, thimbleberries, many different species of blackberries, mulberries, and huckleberries - though my favorites are blueberries and black raspberries. I stayed with more than a few trail angels who fed me blueberries. I was gorging on them along with the bears (I had a full-grown one run across my path just outside Mesick, Michigan; it was beautiful).

Every year I try to eat new mushrooms to learn and grow intellectually. One I really wanted to find was the gypsy mushroom, *Cortinarius caperatus*. It has strong antiviral properties against corona viruses, herpes, HIV... [6]. For the last five years, I have been buying both dried ones and tinctures from foragers in the farthest northern reaches of Michigan. (Tinctures, in my humble opinion, taste horrible!) But the elusive fresh gypsy mushroom had been evading me for quite some time.

Shortly after crossing the Mackinac Bridge, I found one. While I was sure it was a gypsy, I still felt unsettled - I always feel unsettled the first time I eat a new mushroom. The window of toxicity is approximately four hours and after that, the coast is clear. Fortunately, it was nutty and delicious, and I ended up finding more on my journey through the Upper Peninsula. I accomplished my mission with a smile!

[1] S.-J. Yoon, M.-A. Yu, Y.-R. Pyun, J.-K. Hwang, D.-C. Chu, L. Juneja, P. Mourão *Thromb Res* 112(3) (2003) 151. [2] S.P. Wasser In: Coates PM (ed) *Shiitake (Lentinus edodes)*. Encyclopedia of dietary supplements. Marcel Dekker, New York, (2003) 653. [3] H. Kawagishi, C. Zhuang, E. Shnidman *Townsend Letter for Doctors and Patients (Issue 249)* (2004). [4] D. Morales, R. Rutckeviski, M. Villalva, H. Abreu, C. Soler-Rivas, S. Santoyo, M. Iacomini, F. Ribeiro *Smiderle Carbohydrate Polymers* 229 (2020) 115521. [5] F. Motta, M. Gershwin, C. Selmi *Journal of Autoimmunity* 117 (2021) 102576. [6] F. Piraino, C. Brandt *Antiviral Research* 43 (1999) 67.

“These are mushrooms I foraged from the NCT in Michigan, then ate or made hot water infusions with.”

Jay Senkevich



Hen of the Woods, Maitake, or *Griofola frondosa*



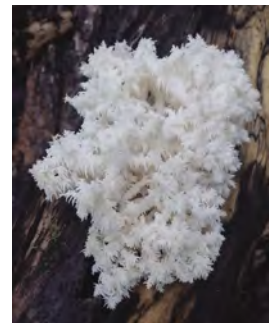
Turkey Tails or *Trametes versicolor*



Painted Suillus or *Suillus spraguei*



Amber Jelly Rolls or *Excidia recisa*



White Tooth Coral or *Hericium coralloides*



TRAIL
USE

Part II

My Relationship with the North Country Trail

BY TERRY CATHCART, NCTA MARQUETTE AREA CHAPTER

This is the second installment of a longer piece that was first featured in the Fall 2023 issue of the North Star. Find that issue at northcountrytrail.org/north-star.



I mostly walked alone. There were a few exceptions: My son Patrick, my son-in-law Lukas, and my college friend Ezra Goldstein, flew in from Brooklyn to spend a couple of days walking the beautiful section from Marquette up to [County Road] 510. Dr. Jim Hayward and Pastor Dave Van Kley did some day hikes on the trail with me. I recently listened to an interview with U.S. Surgeon General Vivak Murthy, in which he stated that more than half of Americans feel lonely. I mostly walked alone and yet I don't remember ever having a feeling of loneliness while walking the North Country Trail. I've had many experiences of loneliness in a crowd over the years.

I am trying to point out how one can have a relationship with a trail. Did you ever imagine trees as companions? Douglas Wood. In his book, *The Things Trees Know*, author Douglas Wood describes trees as teachers and sources of inspiration. The 12

lessons that trees offer us reflect my own experience of trees as both companions and teachers.

Trees reach down as well as up; if they didn't grow roots, they wouldn't have branches.

Trees stand tall but bend when they need to.

Trees can be a shelter to someone and they have often been that to me.

Trees grow from the bottom up and the inside out.

Trees welcome rainy days.

Trees know that being beautiful is the same as being yourself.

Trees reach for the light.

Trees respect their elders.

Trees are okay with woodpeckers pecking holes into them.

Trees luxuriate in moonlight.

Trees are not selfish with their fruits. Just ask the squirrels.

All trees fall, but life doesn't end. It only changes. The fallen trees keep giving, and to all that grows around them, and in that sense fallen trees rise again.

In my walk across the Upper Peninsula, I found myself immersed in the wonder of trees. Sometimes I was even talking to trees and basically telling them how much I admired them. I started taking photographs of pairs of trees that reminded me of marriage and the miracle of two becoming one. Some tree pairs are obviously like that. These conversations with trees are certainly part of what I experience as a relationship with the North Country Trail.

I want to highlight one cedar couple that lives where the trail crosses the Laughing Whitefish River, because it is just magnificent. When I first met them, they leaned gracefully across the trail but you could still walk under them. They had a little cedarling growing at their base. I was so enthralled by this couple that I took a bunch of photos and made them into a wedding card for Patrick when he got married. A couple of years later, I was

Photo by
Nick Meekhof

working on a trail maintenance crew and was excited to learn we were returning to the spot where the cedar couple lived.. But sadly, their increasing weight and age, along with strong winds had resulted in their falling across the trail. They were still alive, but so big that the trail crew leader felt they had to be cut for the sake of the hikers. So, he cut notches into the trunks of this beautiful cedar couple. It happens that cedars are a very hearty tree, so I'm hoping this 100- or maybe 200-year-old marriage will somehow have survived the notching of their beautiful tree trunks.

I never feel alone when I am walking in their world. The great poet Mary Oliver, a fellow tree hugger, expresses in ways I never could, the relationship I experience when I am with trees.

*When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks, and the pines,
they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say they save me, daily.
I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.
Around me the trees stir their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.
And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."*

My friend of over 40 years gave me a plaque that said, "God respects you when you work, but God loves you when you play." I am a religious man, I am a God-seeking man, and I believe in a God who is love and who loves us all the time, whether we are working or playing. Yet there is something in the saying of this plaque that speaks to me. I think it has to do with the difference between doing, as in working hard to perhaps justify your existence, and simply being without any effort to produce something of value.

I've not been a person who plays a lot. I like to work. I'm inclined to make a to-do list for a day around how much work I can get done. But walking the North Country Trail at this season of my life has been much more play than work. It has been like playing in the woods as a child, like going to an art museum; something about it feels like a connection to what is

transcendent.. It has something to do with Mary Oliver's idea of paying attention, walking slowly, and bowing often.

I'm wondering if playing in the woods isn't somehow connected to the Christian concept of grace and the idea of growing in grace. Or the Jewish idea of keeping a Sabbath holy by setting aside time to refrain from work - and not just as individuals but as a community of people. Maybe that's why I have sometimes described this experience of walking this trail as a prayer. Prayer can be about paying attention to the present moment and place. It can be an experience of awe and wonder that seems to happen more often for me when I am alone and undistracted by conversations, or the need to engage and attend to others. It can be a kind of transcendent connection - an interaction even, with the natural world that is around me and within me. The North Country Trail has been a holy place, a sacred sanctuary where I have communed with things eternal and with the glory and the beauty of the creator of this sacred place.

Walking this trail has felt like something of a calling from outside myself. Maybe a bit like Kevin Kostner creating that baseball diamond in the movie *Field of Dreams*. I feel called to this walk, but I sometimes feel like I should somehow justify what I'm doing in terms of what benefit my walking might have to others. Maybe there's something in me that feels a need to justify my existence by what I do for other people. I don't know. I just know that this relationship has been fantastic for my soul.

In August 2020, my wife picked me at the bridge that crosses the Montreal River near Ironwood, Michigan. I was 72. I had reached my goal of walking across the UP on the North Country Trail, but I knew that day that I wasn't done walking. We talk about caring for creation, but I have a very strong conviction that the creation has been caring for me. I've learned some valuable lessons spending days walking in the world of the trees. I've learned that trees can communicate with each other. I've learned the value of days without checking email or trying to keep up with the latest bad news. I've learned that there is indeed an alternative world that also has stories to tell. And I've learned that spending time in that alternative world is really good for my head. As I walked on that last day toward the Montreal River, it was very clear to me that I wasn't ready to conclude that relationship.

Read the third and final installment of Terry's story in an upcoming North Star issue.



TRAIL
WORK



10 Shelters in 10+ Years

BY TINA TOOLE AND SHAWN WEISHAAR,
NCTA ALLEGHENY NATIONAL FOREST CHAPTER

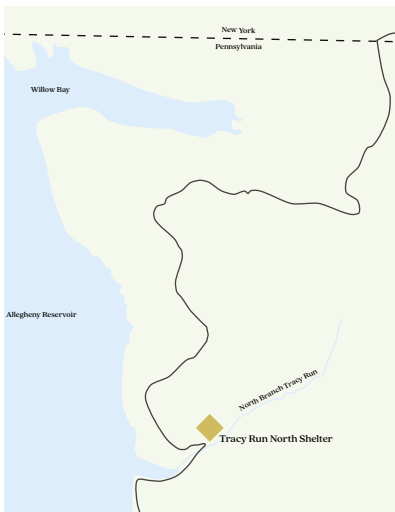
For over a decade, our Chapter has aimed to build an Adirondack-style shelter about every 10 miles along our 100-mile stretch of North Country Trail in the Allegheny National Forest. Last October (2023), with the completion of the Tracy Run North Shelter and the Big Boulders Shelter south of Kellettsville, we did it.

Both of these shelters are on National Forest land, so the first step was to get the building sites approved by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). That process involved over a year of collaborating with the USFS and getting National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) studies completed. In the end, appropriate sites were found and approved.

The Tracy Run North Shelter presented a significant challenge. It was sited almost four miles from the nearest road access, and it had to be set back 1,500 feet from the Allegheny Reservoir shoreline. Materials had to be brought in by boat from across the reservoir, then carried over a third of a mile uphill. It took volunteers seven trips ferrying

boatloads of supplies, five days of hard work, and countless miles of hiking tools and materials to the site.

Over the first two workdays, five volunteers cached four boatloads of building materials on the lakeshore about one-third of a mile from the shelter site. Then they carried some of the foundation blocks uphill, laid out the footprint of the shelter, and began setting the foundation.





The third day was a scheduled Chapter workday, but the weather was not conducive to boating. Eleven volunteers had to hike four miles into the site with their tools, significantly cutting into build time, but a great amount of work was still accomplished. They carried those aforementioned four boatloads of cached materials one-third of a mile uphill to the site, and they built the foundation and floor of the shelter. A side trail to the shelter and another down to the water source were also laid out and blazed. At the end of all that, they still had to hike that four miles back out while carrying tools.

On the fourth workday, four volunteers floated in two more boatloads of materials. After hiking the materials and tools to the site, they constructed the walls and main roof of the shelter, installed most of

the siding, and built a fire ring. These same volunteers returned the next day with the final boatload of materials, including a picnic table. By the end of this fifth day, the shelter was complete. It was the perfect end to this project.

Our Chapter is deeply appreciative of all the volunteers who helped with this build and who donated the use of their boats. We also extend many thanks to the U.S. Forest Service for their assistance in site selection and approval, and to the United Refining Company of Warren, Pennsylvania, who donated funds for shelter materials.

Join the Chapter for a hike to explore the North Country Trail in the Allegheny National Forest or get involved in their next project: anf@northcountrytrail.org

HIKE 100 CHALLENGE



SHARE YOUR ADVENTURES LIKE CYNTHIA!

“The trail never gets old or loses its appeal! This is my fourth time finishing the Hike 100 Challenge. The blue blaze fever runs in my veins, fueled by the camaraderie of the people who hike it and the Chapters who work so tirelessly to build and maintain it. You always get back more love from this trail than you give.”

–Cynthia Clemens, Michigan

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



TRAIL
WORK

Trail Structures

BY NCTA REGIONAL TRAIL COORDINATORS

Building and maintaining a trail isn't always digging in the dirt. Trail planners and builders also design and construct structures to improve trail user safety, protect natural resources, and enhance the trail user experience. Although structures can be challenging and costly to build and require long term maintenance, they're sometimes the best solution - especially where a reroute isn't possible or a simpler fix doesn't solve the problem. When built correctly, these structures become part of the landscape, lasting for decades and blending seamlessly into their surroundings.

As you hike along the North Country Trail, you'll come across a variety of structures, each adding its own charm to your journey. Here's a peek into some of the more common ones you might encounter, and what makes them special.



Boardwalk and Puncheon

BY KENNY WAWSCZYK
(MICHIGAN)

We tend to use these two terms interchangeably because they are so similar in the trail world. Plus, when you say "boardwalk," people tend to know what you mean. If you say "puncheon," you often have to explain yourself. There is a difference, but both serve a similar purpose: elevating the trail over wet areas.

Boardwalks typically cross areas where the water levels are deeper. They're supported by posts that are driven into the ground or anchored to the bottom of the wetland. They are almost always constructed using treated lumber or some other non-native material like metal or fiberglass. Puncheons are usually used where the water table is lower (less than one foot) and are supported on sills. These sills or "sleepers" lay directly on the ground, perpendicular to the trail. Puncheon can be made of treated lumber, or native material such as cedar or black locust, which are naturally rot-resistant tree species.

Fence Stiles

BY MATT DAVIS (NORTH DAKOTA,
MINNESOTA, AND WISCONSIN)

Fence stiles are used where the trail crosses areas with livestock grazing. They're designed to help hikers safely cross over or through narrow gaps in fences. Stiles are found very regularly in North Dakota, but may be seen on any section of the trail where animal agriculture is found. Unlike gates, stiles do not permit livestock to escape from their fenced confinement.

There are many different designs but the goal remains the same: Create a safe separation for hikers from a barbed wire or electric fence line. Whatever design is used, it should be sized to be comfortably used by hikers of varying sizes and ability levels. There are even designs that are accessible for wheelchair users!

Right: A fence stile near Fargo, North Dakota.

Photo by
Dove Day

Far right: Building the O'Brien Pond boardwalk in Northwest Lower Michigan.

Photo provided by
Duane Lawton



Far Left: A covered bridge in the Enon Valley, Pennsylvania.

Photo provided by the NCTA Wampum Chapter

Left: Building a rock wall at the Jennings Environmental Education Center in Pennsylvania.

Photo provided by Lauren Kennedy-Little

Bridges

BY LAUREN KENNEDY-LITTLE (OHIO AND PENNSYLVANIA)

Bridges appear in a variety of designs to provide permanent and safe passages for trail users across streams, seasonal wet areas, or ravines. They are found across the entire North Country Trail, but you will encounter them often while hiking through Pennsylvania. This state boasts over 86,000 miles* of streams and rivers!

Bridges are one of the most technical and time-consuming projects in trail building. Deciding whether or not to build one requires careful consideration. Thinking about user safety, feasibility, access, and design are just some of the factors. In fact, North Country Trail bridges spanning lengths of 25 feet or more should involve an engineered design. Many NCTA Chapters work in collaboration with agency partners to ensure these structures are safe and meet local regulations. Next time you enjoy passage across a creek, take a moment to consider all the work it took to get that structure to exist!

*Source: Pennsylvania Watersheds

Rock Retaining Walls

BY STEPHANIE CAMPBELL (NEW YORK AND VERMONT)

Retaining walls are structures built to reinforce trail tread where soil instability and erosion need to be actively managed. Rock is a preferred material due to its durability and natural beauty. Trail builders in areas of the country like the Northeast, which boasts an abundance of rock, will utilize this natural and local material source when a retaining wall is necessary.

When selecting stones for a retaining wall project, angular rocks are ideal, as they are more stable than rounded rocks when stacked on top of one another. The largest rocks should comprise the retaining wall's foundation, and should be set in an excavated footing of mineral soil for the greatest stability. Each rock should have three points of contact with the rock below it, and multiple-tier walls should have the rocks staggered similar to how brick facades on buildings are staggered for maximum strength. Tie rocks or "deadmen" extend back into the hillside at strategic points for added stability. The entire structure is then backfilled with rock crush to ensure dead space is filled underneath the tread surface. Rock retaining walls can last a very long time if built correctly, making them one of the more maintenance friendly structures found in trail building.

Want to learn more about trail structures? Visit northcountrytrail.org/trail-management for plenty of resources, from videos to handbooks and beyond.





TRAIL
WORK

Northern vs Southern Trail Maintenance

BY DUANE LAWTON, NCTA JORDAN VALLEY
45° CHAPTER

I find it interesting to see how trail maintenance can be affected by geography. The physical nature of the trail, the daily schedule, and the organization can all be different. I've had the opportunity to participate in annual trail maintenance on the Florida National Scenic Trail and have experienced this.

The 1,500-mile Florida Trail runs from the Big Cypress National Preserve in the Everglades to the Gulf Islands National Seashore near the Alabama state line. It is administered by the U.S. Forest Service, and maintained by members and chapters of the Florida Trail Association (FTA). I have worked several times with the Tropical Trekkers Chapter, who maintain the trail in Okeechobee County just north of Lake Okeechobee and along the Kissimmee River. Years ago, the trail followed the west bank of the Kissimmee, but was relocated to the east bank about 10 years ago. (The water got too deep and it passed through the Avon Park Air Force Range, where bombing training interrupted trail access.)

Through the North Country Trail Association, we have trail **adopters** who monitor sections of the trail and address maintenance needs. The Florida Trail chapters have trail **stewards**, who monitor larger sections than our adopters but are not responsible for actual maintenance. An annual, weeklong trail maintenance event for the Tropical Trekkers Chapter occurs in early December to prepare for the long-distance hikers who typically pass through early in the next year, when the weather is cooler and the water is lower. Many of these maintenance volunteers camp for the week at the nearby Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park. FTA staff are always represented and they provide some equipment, cooking facilities, shelters, and food funding. The volunteers cook.

Each work day, we gather at The Shed, a South Florida Water Management District compound near Basinger, where the Tropical Trekkers store their equipment. In December 2023, there were about 28 participants and eight mowers, many from other chapters. Tropical Trekkers Rich and Barb Quinn are the organizers and they make sure everyone is busy. This process most reminds me of the NCTA Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew.

Things grow like crazy in the Kissimmee basin and trail clearing can be brutal. If it happens to be wet, there will be a lot of wading. In prior years, I helped build puncheon and was told its purpose was not to keep hikers' feet dry, but so the mowers can get through. In a few short months, vegetation can completely conceal puncheons. Then there is the invasive Caesar's weed (*Urena lobata*), which produces copious burrs that are quite tedious to pick off your clothes. In an attempt to thwart the spread, there are numerous containers mounted along the trail, accompanied by signs asking hikers to put the burrs/seeds in them to avoid carrying them elsewhere.

Several groups set out to trail access points, usually over private rangeland that we have permission to cross. This time I'm a lowly lopper, working up the trail led by a mower and a sawyer. There is also a painter, refreshing the orange blazes. As on the North Country Trail, where the trail is shaded



Above: Grass had consumed this puncheon.

Opposite page: Passing through palmettos and live oak.

Photos by
Duane Lawton



in the woods, overgrowth is minimized - though here in Florida, the palmettos need to be cut back from overhanging the trail. Out in the open, it's different - no vegetation is that tall, but it's dense. It's hot and humid.

We typically finish by mid-afternoon. In the cooler evenings, we have campfires and compare experiences. The trail volunteers here are gregarious and enthusiastic, like we are. I'm looking forward to participating again.

Learn more about the Florida National Scenic Trail and the Florida Trail Association at floridatrail.org.

Florida Trail Maintenance Reflections

BY ABE CHRISTIAN, OPERATIONS MANAGER,
FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Craving a challenge after joining the Florida Trail Association in 2015, I bypassed my local chapter's easy tasks. The Black Bear Chapter's work in Juniper Springs [Recreation Area] pushed my limits, but nothing compared to the Tropical Trekkers' domain: Micco Bluff to Micco Landing.

This wasn't just hard work, it was a glorious battle against nature's toughest elements. Towering Caesar's weed, once mere plants, mocked our efforts. The ground transformed into boot-sucking mud, offering no escape. The relentless sun beat down on miles of exposed fence lines, and mischievous cows added their "contributions" to the chaos.

Yet, amidst the sweat and grime, a strange beauty emerged. The challenge itself became a badge of honor, a testament to the grit and camaraderie forged in the wild. After conquering nearly 800 miles of the Florida Trail, tool in hand, I can confidently declare this was the absolute pinnacle of hard work on the entire trail.

As a member your support goes a long way.



Join or renew today
northcountrytrail.org





TRAIL
WORK

Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew Leadership Update



Brad blazing trail.

Photo by
Bill Menke

In 1997, Bill Menke organized and started serving as the crew leader for the Brule-St. Croix Roving Trail Crew. This group is now called the *Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew*, and it serves the full stretch of North Country Trail across the state.

“The Rovers have changed the landscape in Wisconsin,” said Nancy Brozek, NCTA Director of Development and Communications. “Their ability to engage volunteers from various states truly builds a sense of unity for the trail. Seeing Athletic Brewing’s *Two for the Trails* program recognize their efforts is so rewarding.”

In 27 years, the crew has cumulatively logged more than 44,500 hours building and maintaining trail. They have constructed bridges, boardwalks, and puncheons; they have sawed, hammered, mowed, painted, planned, and repaired. As of this January, while Bill plans to continue participating in crew outings, he has officially handed over leadership of this incredible effort to Brad Stewart.

“If you want to talk about big shoes to fill, there may be no bigger boots than those worn by Bill Menke when it comes to building the North Country Trail in Wisconsin,” stated Matt Davis, NCTA Regional Trail Coordinator. “The NCTA is very, very fortunate that Brad is taking on the challenge of leading the Rovers into the future, while still working alongside Bill both this year and last. I am so grateful to both of them for all their work on this

“

The Rovers have changed the landscape in Wisconsin. Their ability to engage volunteers from various states truly builds a sense of unity for the trail.”

— NANCY BROZEK,
NCTA DIRECTOR OF
DEVELOPMENT AND
COMMUNICATIONS

leadership transition. The Rovers will remain in very capable hands well into the future.”

Brad first joined the crew in 2019. He has since picked up many trail skills and attended a variety of training sessions. He also has an extensive background in leadership and project management through his tenure with the U.S. Army, from which he recently retired after more than 35 years of service.

“Brad has a vast amount of people management background, and has managed many large and complicated projects throughout his career,” explained Bill Menke. “I feel very confident that he will do a great job as crew leader. Additionally, we have a



Brad and Ricky
the Trail Dog

Photo by
Bill Menke



Ricky assisting Brad with trail clearing.

Photo by Bill Menke

nice infusion of new people participating in crew outings. The time is right for turning crew leadership over to a new person, and I am very comfortable with this new phase.”

“I am honored and humbled that Bill and Matt asked me to be the crew leader,” Brad wrote. “It is a privilege to work with such a great team. Fortunately, Bill has agreed to remain as Assistant Crew Leader and Technical Advisor. We have a lot more to learn under his mentorship. As for my vision for the Rovers, I simply plan to continue using the processes and procedures that Bill and his predecessors put in place.”

“Since I started working with the Rovers in 2019,” Brad continued, “I have witnessed the completion of a tremendous amount of trail and am continuously amazed at what a group of volunteers can accomplish during each work week. This summer, we will open more than eight miles of trail in the Heritage Chapter’s section to reduce roadwalk on Highway 169. This will be a great project as we parallel the Potato River and take opportunities to go swimming on hot days.”

To amplify Brad’s dedication to the Rovers, he lives in Michigan - over four hours from this summer’s main project site. He is helping to coordinate a joint Crew Leader training in Wisconsin that will serve volunteers from seven NCTA Chapters in Minnesota and Wisconsin. His dog Ricky Bobby, a young terrier mix, often accompanies him for trail work, too.

“He loves the trail,” said Brad. “He’s always willing to lend a paw and mouth, pulling roots. He likes to cuddle around the campfire after a hard day of trail building. If you get a chance to come hang out with us on one of our work weeks, you’ll meet him.”



Want to get involved with the Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew this summer? Find work week dates at northcountrytrail.org/events or email rovers@northcountrytrail.org.

National Trails Day: June 1

“You don’t have to go it alone. National Trails Day® provides the perfect opportunity to set off on a local trail with others in your community. Join the nationwide movement to give back to trails and build a world where everyone feels welcome and has access to enjoy the great outdoors.”

–AMERICAN HIKING SOCIETY

- Find an event near you at northcountrytrail.org/events, or reach out to your local Chapter to see if you can help plan one.
- Share your experiences by tagging [#nationaltrailsday](https://twitter.com/nationaltrailsday), [@americanhiking](https://twitter.com/americanhiking), and [@northcountrytrail](https://twitter.com/northcountrytrail) on social media.
- Can’t make it to any of these events? Support your trail community with a gift to the NCTA or by renewing your membership at northcountrytrail.org/ways-to-give.



TRAIL
WORK

Saw Reconditioning 101

BY DAN DUEWEKE, NCTA JORDAN
VALLEY 45° CHAPTER

Dan Dueweke has been a saw filer and trail maintainer for over 25 years.

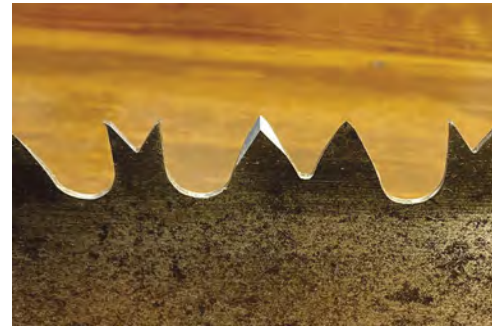
When someone says “crosscut saw,” the first image that comes to mind is usually a rusty tool on the wall of a restaurant or in a museum display. But as someone who still finds a good use for these tools, my first thoughts are: Clean it, sharpen it, put it in a log, and make it sing. So when a two-person crosscut was donated to the NCTA, Regional Trail Coordinator Kenny Wawsczyk asked me if I could restore it.

The handles were cracked and rusted tightly to the blade, which was covered in a thick patina of rust, dust, and grit from storage in a barn or basement. But there was no obvious damage and it had good potential for recovery.

The first step was to apply WD-40 to the handle hardware and remove them. The old loop-style handles were common during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Fortunately, these had been kept out of the weather and were simply in need of a little TLC and some linseed oil.

Next, I applied WD-40 to the saw itself, and ran a sanding block back and forth over the length of the blade. Soon, the rust was gone and I was down to clean metal, revealing the original factory etching from 100 years ago: *Henry Disston & Sons Spring Steel Tuttle Tooth Saw*. This type of saw was intended to cut hard or frozen wood, and was typical of those used during Michigan’s lumber boom.

Now for the actual filing. First was *jointing*: running a file across all the teeth, cutting them to the same length so that no high teeth would snag



and no low teeth would be kept out of the cut. Then with a hammer and anvil, I set each tooth, bending it out a little wider than the blade to keep the saw from binding in the cut. Again with the hammer, I *swaged* (bent) the tips of the raker teeth, which are M-shaped and clear, the wood chips made by the cutter teeth. I used a gauge to cut them to their final height, about 12 thousandths of an inch lower than the cutter teeth. My final step was to file points on the teeth and coat the blade with oil to prevent future rusting.

This was about six hours of work and a solid reminder to take good care of it for the next hundred years. All that was left to do was to find it a home. Michigan has very little federally designated wilderness where chainsaws are forbidden and crosscut saws are the primary trail clearing tool, but most of that wilderness exists in the Upper Peninsula, so that’s where it will be headed this summer.



To get involved with trail projects, see upcoming opportunities at northcountrytrail.org/events and submit a Volunteer Interest Form to get in touch: northcountrytrail.org/volunteer-interest-form.

The refurbished saw is ready for the woods.

Photos by
Dan Dueweke



Spring Walkthroughs

Want to hike and volunteer at the same time? Great news, you can! And it's incredibly helpful to get reports from people who are out on the trail. As you can imagine, no one person can hike the entire trail every year, so Chapters rely on these reports to know where their efforts are most needed. Springtime is the best time to get out on the trail and gather information about the effects of winter on the trail, new muddy spots that may have emerged due to the spring rains, and new vegetation growing along the trail.

First, connect with your local Chapter about their needs. Then, walk the section(s) of trail they recommend. While you're out, note and report back any issues, such as downed trees, muddy or flooded spots, winter logging damage, or motorized use impacts. Noting the GPS coordinates and snapping photos is also appreciated.

Depending on your comfort level and skill set, as well as the plans of the Chapter, you can

remedy some issues on the spot: Pick up small sticks from the trail and toss them into the woods. Lop a few thin branches hanging across the corridor. Refill the brochure box at a trailhead kiosk.

There are some maintenance tasks best handled by trained volunteers, though. For example, utilizing a saw to remove large trees from the trail requires certification. To ensure your safety and compliance with land managers, the best action you can take is to report the issue to the NCTA.

The online *Report Trail Conditions* form is an excellent tool for those performing spring walkthroughs: northcountrytrail.org/report-trail-conditions.

NCTA Regional Trail Coordinators receive these form submissions, then collaborate with volunteers to coordinate remedies.

Together, we can ensure the trail is in its best condition for your next hike.



Teresa Nelson maintains trail in Wisconsin.

Photos by
Bill Menke



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



TRAIL
WORK



A new riding mower is delivered to volunteers of the Central Flyway and Dakota Prairie Chapters.

Photo by
Matt Davis

Field Grants

BY VALERIE BADER, NCTA DIRECTOR OF TRAIL OPERATIONS

The North Country Trail Association (NCTA) offers Field Grants ranging from \$200 to \$5,000 to Chapters, Affiliates, Regional Trail Coordinators, and trail councils to help fund trail work. These grants are often matched with local grants, Chapter funds, and volunteer time, meaning the investment for the trail is huge.

Since 1998, this Field Grants program has funded close to 500 projects across the trail. In 2023 alone, over \$27,000 was awarded for projects in seven of the eight North Country Trail states. These grants helped improve campsites and signage; purchase trailers, tools, and materials; expand outreach; and more.

Using a Field Grant to purchase a new riding mower may not sound terribly exciting, especially if you don't maintain trail, but consider North Dakota's stretch of North Country Trail: For the trail to be visible and usable, many miles of prairie grass must be mowed multiple times a year - in

the summer, no less, when there is little to no shade. A riding mower enables volunteers to maintain the trail twice as fast as using walk-behind mowers, improving efficiency and volunteer safety. Upon receiving their new one, Central Flyway Chapter President Mark Zimmerman proclaimed, "This is a game changer!" Your membership helped fund that - thank you.

“

This is a game changer!" Your membership helped fund that – thank you.

– MARK ZIMMERMAN,
CENTRAL FLYWAY
CHAPTER PRESIDENT



Learn more about the Field Grant program or access the application at northcountrytrail.org/field-grants.

2024 AUGUST 21-25 ST. IGNACE, MICHIGAN CELEBRATION

The Eastern Upper Peninsula of Michigan offers superb outdoor experiences and during Celebration, you can be guided through a variety of them. Hike the Hiawatha National Forest and the Lake Superior State Forest, cross the Little Two Hearted River, and stroll along the shores of three different Great Lakes. Wander through the spectacular Tahquamenon Falls State Park and see the iconic, five-mile-long Mackinac Bridge. The NCTA Hiawatha Shore-to-Shore Chapter volunteers are the hosts this year, and they're eager to show you around their neck of the woods.

Join your trail community for one day or the entire weekend. Registration is open at northcountrytrail.org/celebration until August 1, with late registration pricing beginning July 15.



NORTHCOUNTRYTRAIL.ORG/CELEBRATION



North Star

**NORTH COUNTRY
TRAIL ASSOCIATION**

229 East Main Street
Lowell, Michigan 49331

NONPROFIT
U. S. POSTAGE

PAID

Grand Rapids, MI
Permit 340



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.

Gerry Berg of the Dakota Prairie Chapter created this tool for constructing sidehill. It has all the pertinent angles and distance embedded into it. Can you tell he was an engineer?

Photo by Matt Davis