



North Star

THE MAGAZINE OF THE NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL ASSOCIATION

SPRING 2026

Hike the Hill

The biggest advocacy event of the year for the NCTA.

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A Bridge, Finally

A long-awaited project in Southern Michigan.

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Trail Protection at Mulligan Pines

Generous landowners plan for the future.

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Three-year-old Niko is the right-hand helper of his grandfather, Jim. Together, they hike and maintain the NCT in Western Pennsylvania. Niko walks up to two miles at a time and wants to help with everything his Pa does!

Photo by Jim Nocera

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The content theme of the Spring issue is **Trail Work**. You'll see what our trail community has built, maintained, and planned for you to have the best North Country Trail experience possible.

JAN ULFERTS STEWART, PRESIDENT, NCTA BOARD OF DIRECTORS



Spring arrives with a quiet kind of magic on the trail - warmer days and longer light, the steady rhythm of boots on the warm ground, and the unmistakable sense that something is beginning again. This season, that feeling is more than symbolic. Across our NCTA community, energy is building around our shared

vision, one that invites more people to the trail, protects the landscape we love, and brings us closer to closing the gaps that make the trail whole.

At the heart of this momentum are the partnerships that turn ideas into action. In the next pages you will read about these, and meet the volunteers and agencies who are working side by side, each bringing their expertise and passion for the forever route. Behind every mile of trail, there is a dedicated network of volunteers who focus on implementing this vision: an advocacy team that speaks up, our board's strong committees who provide steady leadership, and the strength of our local Chapters. All are providing a sound foundation for the future.

I am continually impressed by the energy of these volunteers, and deeply grateful for the team of staff and governmental agencies who are working together to analyze and close the gaps in the trail. You strengthen our organization. As spring unfolds, so does the work on the trail. It will take all of us to make this happen, one step, one partnership at a time with a focus on implementing the vision of the forever trail.

Thank you for being a part of this team and for believing in what lies ahead.

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Trailhead

CHERYL KREINDLER,
INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



This issue of the *North Star* offers a moment to celebrate and thank everyone for your dedication to our trail. Without your passion and focus on building, maintaining, blazing, and protecting trail, we wouldn't be able to find this path that connects us across eight states.

As a hiker, I am always impressed by the pride our Chapter folks take in their sections of trail. While you may not hear me thank you as I hike, please know that all your efforts are appreciated. I'm certain that I speak for all the hikers that pass through your areas.

I count myself lucky because I've been able to work more closely with our NCTA staff this year. They are AMAZING people! We volunteers wouldn't be able to accomplish all that we do without them. For example, we are working with our National Park Service partners to find a more efficient way to get trail tools into your hands. (Details will be shared later this spring!) We want to make it easier for you to fuel your passion.

For any of you looking to grow your Chapter membership and share your passion for the trail, I encourage you to promote the trail as a place of community. Referring to the trail as a third space can be inviting to those who want to unplug from the digital world - people who appreciate getting outdoors, and who are seeking companionship and conversation without a screen. Working side by side with friends and new acquaintances in this third space that we call the North Country Trail offers a place to expand personal wellbeing and satisfaction. It makes us all smile.

I've built friendships with the most interesting people over the years because I've been involved with the NCTA. I bet you have too. I'm looking forward to more opportunities to share my passion for the trail, to invite others to join me in this third space, and to build more lasting friendships. Happy trails to all of you!

CHRIS LOUDENSLAGER, NCNST
SUPERINTENDENT, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



My greetings to you all and my happy wishes to you all that you are enjoying a glorious spring.

I would like to take a moment to share an excerpt from a gift I received a few years ago titled *Advice from a Trail*. The advice includes the following constructs: "Walk into beauty; stay on your

path; and find inspiration around every turn."

This is a sage and powerful translation of what the North Country National Scenic Trail whispers to each of us, though I will acknowledge that the noise and distractions that define daily life sometimes drown out this message and make it hard to hear. And this is one of the reasons why the trail is so important: It is the place and the opportunity to step into nature while stepping away from the cacophony that surrounds us. As we walk further into beauty, we distance ourselves from the discord and turmoil that is far too present in our normal routines, and we begin to find peace, hear the subtle whispers, and heal.

As stewards and supporters of the North Country Trail, our path is clear: the trail and the public it serves are reliant on our shared efforts to plan, build, and maintain the trail, and to be committed stewards to all the resources that make the North Country Trail what it is and what it always should be. Inspiration surrounds us and truly does wait around every turn - whether that means hiking that last mile, painting a blaze to exacting standards, scouting the perfect route for the future trail, hearing the wind rushing through the pines, finding meditative tranquility in the ripples of a forest stream, or watching the setting sun illuminate a prairie. Or how about this for inspiration: Knowing that your time, effort, and love for the trail makes all this (and more) possible for countless others, and protects it into the future. I, for one, find that incredibly inspiring.

Absolutely, the trail offers us great advice, so let's get even closer to hear what else it may have to tell us. Thank you all for being an important part of our community and for all the good that you do.

Legislation Explanation

“Trails aren’t just recreation corridors. They’re conservation projects, economic drivers, and spaces where people build lifelong connections to the outdoors. When we advocate for trail funding, we’re advocating for all of those benefits at once.” –Jess Bedtka, NCTA Next Generation Coalition

The bipartisan *Great American Outdoors Act* was enacted in 2020 and provided much-needed maintenance funding to our nation’s public lands. This Act permanently funded the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and established and funded the Legacy Restoration Fund - both critical to our National Trails System. The *America the Beautiful Act* was designed in 2025 to succeed the Great American Outdoors Act. It will still include both these funds.

The **Legacy Restoration Fund (LRF)** collects \$1.9 billion in on-and off-shore energy production receipts and distributes them among five federal agencies to support heavily used facility assets. Since 2020, more than 6,300 miles of roads and trails have been improved.

The LRF expired at the end of fiscal year 2025, leaving our National Parks, Trails, Forests, Bureau of Land Management lands, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sites with deferred maintenance needs.

The bipartisan **Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF)** was established by Congress in 1964 to safeguard natural areas, water resources, and cultural heritage sites, and to provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. Primarily funded by revenues the federal government earns from oil and gas leases on off-shore federal lands, the LWCF does not use taxpayer dollars. This fund not only provides funding to the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, but also to state and local governments. Since 1964, \$20 billion has been invested in communities across all 50 states and 99% of funding has been used for recreation access.

In 2025, thanks to the LWCF, the NCTA, Trust for Public Land, National Park Service, and Douglas County (Wisconsin) were able to protect 317 acres of land to secure a vital segment of the trail. This also created the opportunity to relocate more than 30 miles of trail off-road and into the forest.

Last June, the current administration attempted to redirect a large portion of LWCF funds to an unknown “maintenance” category. The request was denied, but Secretary of the Interior Doug Burgum issued an order restricting how LWCF dollars are spent.

During Hike the Hill 2026, trail representatives urged congressional leaders to reauthorize the LRF to extend this critical funding source for another eight years. It will provide \$16 billion to address decaying and outdated trails and other infrastructure. They also encouraged congressional leaders to push back against the proposed restrictions to the LWCF.

Blazing a Trail for your future has never been easier.

Do you have a plan for the future? Just like maps guide you on your adventure, we can help you navigate your legacy plan.



“Over the past 17 years, we have invested thousands of hours of volunteer time helping build and maintain the North Country Trail. So leaving a financial legacy for the future when we won’t be around in person seemed like a logical extension of our commitment to this great public resource. We hope our legacy contribution will help support the NCTA’s critically important trail protection program.”

— TOM AND MARY MOBERG



LEGACY SOCIETY
NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL ASSOCIATION

northcountrytrail.org/support



Hike the Hill

“Trail building offers immediate feedback - you see the water flowing where it’s supposed to, you watch the corridor take shape behind you. Advocacy requires patience and trust. The results are less visible, but just as tangible in the long run. The miles we build on the NCT depend, in part, on the conversations happening in rooms like these.

Trails connect people across landscapes. Advocacy connects people across perspectives. Both require showing up. Both require care. And both are essential to ensuring that when someone steps onto the North Country Trail — whether ankle-deep in mud or crunching across fresh snow — that path is there because people showed up for it, in the woods and in the halls of Congress.

I used to imagine advocacy as something loud or confrontational, but the reality is much more collaborative. Many of the meetings were thoughtful conversations about how trails support communities, conservation, and outdoor recreation. It reminded me that advocacy is really about building relationships.”

—Jess Bedtka, NCTA Next Generation Coalition



(Left to right) Melissa Pierick (Ice Age Trail Alliance), Jess Bedtka, legislative aide of Rep. Van Orden (Wisc.), and IATA volunteers.

Photo by
Jess Bedtka

Hike the Hill is an annual advocacy event hosted by the American Hiking Society and the Partnership for the National Trails System. This year was the 29th gathering of the national trails community in Washington D.C. to advance shared trail priorities with congressional and federal agency leaders.

The NCTA has been a participant in this event for years, and it's a critical component of the Association's advocacy efforts to build relationships and elevate the needs and priorities of the trail to federal decision-makers.

Does this really make a difference? Absolutely. This year, six more Senators signed on as co-sponsors on the *America the Beautiful Act* (bringing the total to 50) during and immediately after Hike the Hill. This bill will reauthorize the Legacy Restoration Fund, through which the North Country Trail has \$2.5 million in potential projects in queue. Additionally, a significant number of bipartisan House Representatives signed the Dear Colleague letter supporting trail funding in the budget.

The North Country Trail's addition as an official unit of the National Park System in 2023 was also a direct result of years of advocacy work and relationship building with National Park Service leadership, lawmakers at Hike the Hill, and beyond.

This year, the NCTA sent 10 people - more than any other trail organization. The group had more than 50 scheduled and drop-in meetings on Capitol Hill, and attended several other agency and Congressional Committee meetings.

- **Valerie Bader**,
NCTA Director of
Trail Operations
- **Jess Bedtka**,
Next Generation
Coalition
(Wisconsin)
- **Felicia Hokenstad**,
Next Generation
Coalition
(Minnesota)
- **Kate Lemon**,
NCTA Marketing and
Communications
Manager
- **Gunnar Lundberg**,
Next Generation
Coalition
(Minnesota)
- **Brad Slagle**,
NCTA Board
of Directors
and Advocacy
Committee Chair
(Michigan)
- **Mike Toole**,
NCTA volunteer
(Pennsylvania)
- **Tina Toole**, NCTA
Board of Directors
and Advocacy
Committee member
(Pennsylvania)
- **Jeff Van Winkle**,
NCTA volunteer
and Advocacy
Committee member
(Michigan)
- **Mark Wadopian**,
NCTA volunteer
and Advocacy
Committee member
(New York)

While traveling to Washington is not possible or practical for all who wish to advocate for the trail, there is so much impact you can make at a local level.

"I advocate locally by staying in touch with district staffers, looking for in-district opportunities to get elected officials on the trail, and by attending local events where there are opportunities to network with the district staff and elected officials," explained Brad Slagle.

REFLECTIONS

"The last time I was on the Hill, the overall vibe of Rep. Stauber's office (Minn.) was that they were not prioritizing anything to do with national trails or public lands. He then introduced a bill to repeal a 20-year mining ban on the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. I was feeling anxious for this year's meeting, and I went into it with a lot of bias and animosity. I was flabbergasted when the legislative aide said they were ready to sign onto the House bill to restore the Legacy Restoration Fund. After a very positive discussion, I learned a huge lesson: the importance of setting aside my personal bias during these meetings. I'm learning to focus more on what we have in common, especially when I'm asking for support."

—**Felicia Hokenstad**



(Left to right) Brad Slagle, Sen. Gary Peters (Mich.), Kate Lemon, and JT Horn (Trust for Public Land).

Photo by
Sen. Peters' office



(Left to right) Mark Wadopian, Jess Bedtka, and Felicia Hokenstad at the office of Sen. Chuck Schumer (New York).

Photo by
Felicia Hokenstad

"As someone who usually spends their days coordinating trail crews or hiking long distances, it felt surreal to step into this policy space. But the more I listened, the more I realized that stewardship happens in many forms. Sometimes it's digging tread, and sometimes it's telling the story of why that tread matters. The decisions being made about public lands will shape the outdoor experiences of my entire generation. That's why it's so important for younger voices to be part of these conversations."

—**Jess Bedtka**

"This was my seventh Hike the Hill, including the Covid-era virtual events. I really enjoyed having Kate, Gunnar, and Jessica join us for their first time. New (and younger) people add excitement and new perspectives. My favorite meetings were with Senators Peters and Slotkin - real people who listen and care about the trail. That includes Representative Moolenaar, as well - it was great that he met with us in person!"

—**Brad Slagle**

"The 2026 Hike the Hill event was the third I have attended. Meeting with and forming personal relationships with legislative aides, representatives, and senators gives you the opportunity to influence Congressional actions. This year I especially enjoyed meeting with young, enthusiastic congressional aides, and teaching them about the North Country National Scenic Trail - and how Congress' actions can affect this special place. They are the future and can carry this knowledge forward."

—**Tina Toole**



Gunnar Lundberg at the Capitol.

Photo by
Gunnar Lundberg

"During my first meeting at a representative's office, I had a sneaking suspicion it would go well when I spotted a pair of custom Chaco sandals on a shelf. Sure enough, the legislative aide reassured us that the congresswoman was a big fan of the trail and had hiked on it before with her family. I then listened

and observed how advocacy worked, which turned out to be an engaging balance of personal testimony, important statistics, legislative asks, and a lot of casual banter between. The next evening, I overheard that the most important task in advocating here is to *steal people's hearts* - to show them that all our national parks, forests, and trails have to offer in the way of beauty and recreation."

—**Gunnar Lundberg**



Tina and Mike Toole in the Hart Senate building.

Photo by
Tina Toole

"Hike The Hill has been a great way for me to give back to the trail on a different level than trail maintenance. I have attended for three years in a row now, but have only been active walking the halls of the congressional buildings the last two years. I started going to support my wife Tina in her advocacy



(Left to right) Felicia Hokenstad, Kate Lemon, Valerie Bader, and Gunnar Lundberg at the office of Sen. Amy Klobuchar (Minn.).

Photo by
Felicia Hokenstad

work, and quickly saw what a great experience it would be to help. Being part of this makes me more confident in the public's ability to have an impact on the way our congressional members vote. A great aside to going to D.C. is to also take in some of the sights and museums in between meetings."

—Mike Toole



One of the many information packets dropped off at the offices of senators and representatives.

Photo by
Jess Bedtka

"I've been reporting on the NCTA's involvement in Hike the Hill for years, but this was my first time actually attending. It was a fantastic peek behind the curtain into our advocacy efforts, and I look forward to staying involved. This event allowed me to flex different communications muscles that I don't often use in my day-to-day work. I found myself swelling with pride as I listened to my colleagues speak so confidently and eloquently about the trail and its needs, and the importance of our relationships with federal agencies. We are so fortunate to have some truly excellent people in our corner who are incredibly capable of making a tremendous difference."

—Kate Lemon

2025 CONTRIBUTIONS OF NATIONAL SCENIC TRAILS

Compiled by the Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS)

Trail Organization	Active Volunteers	Volunteer Hours	Value of Volunteer Hours
Appalachian Trail Conservancy	4,592	155,256	\$5,401,356
Arizona Trail Association	2,200	2,140	\$74,451
Continental Divide Trail Coalition and partners	500	29,519	\$1,026,966
Florida Trail Association	525	23,322	\$811,372
Ice Age Trail Alliance	1,904	114,735	\$3,991,631
North Country Trail Association	1,267	80,405	\$2,797,290
Pacific Crest Trail Association	1,011	56,626	\$1,970,019
Pacific Northwest Trail Association	300	8,300	\$288,757
Potomac Heritage Trail Association	8	5,614	\$195,311



Scan this QR code to view the full 2025 Contributions sheet, which includes all National Scenic and Historic Trail partner organizations who reported contributions to PNTS

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 6

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.

TRAIL WORK

Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew Work Weeks

Gurney, Wisconsin
May through November



The NCTA Wisconsin Roving Trail Crew, "the Rovers," is a group of volunteers from a variety of NCTA Chapters. This season, the focus is new trail construction on the Nemadji River, just north of the ultra-scenic Pattison State Park. Contact Crew Leader Brad Stewart at rovers@northcountrytrail.org for more information or questions.

- June 8-12 → September 21-25
- July 13-17 → October 19-23
- August 17-21

HIKE

Buckeye TrailFest

Salt Fork State Park, Ohio
September 10-13



The Buckeye Trail Association, in partnership with the NCTA and the Outdoor Recreation Council of Appalachia, invites you to the 2026 TrailFest. Similar to past NCTA Celebration events, activities include guided hikes, engaging presentations, and insightful workshops. Registration information will be organized by the Buckeye Trail Association. Find event information at buckeyetrail.org/trailfest.

TRAIL WORK

Upper Midwest Blue Blaze Academy Volunteer Training

Solon Springs, Wisconsin
September 17-20



Hosted by the NCTA, Border Route Trail Association, and Superior Hiking Trail Association, this combined crew leadership and trail skills training is for volunteers seeking to strengthen their abilities. Meet daily at the Solon Springs Community Center; free camping will be available nearby. Featured instructors include Willie Bittner of Great Lakes Trail Builders (rock work), Kim Frederick of Chinook Associates, LLC (crew leadership), and Tim Malzhan of Trail Eyes, LLC (trail analysis). Registration will open in July; stay tuned to northcountrytrail.org/events. There are also two additional (optional) training extensions: the Rovers work week September 21-25 and/or a crosscut saw maintenance training September 21-22.

TRAIL WORK

Kekekabic Trail Work Weeks

Superior National Forest, Minnesota
June through October



This June, the NCTA Kekekabic Trail Chapter is starting construction of a long-awaited Fernberg Road to Glipe Road project in the Superior National Forest. They'll host multi-day work projects this summer and fall to clear the new 14-mile trail corridor. Contact Eric Campbell at kek@northcountrytrail.org if interested in joining the effort.

TRAIL WORK

Star of the North Section Trail Work

Chippewa National Forest
June and October

The NCTA Star of the North and Arrowhead Chapters began construction last fall on a new 11-mile segment of NCT in the Chippewa National Forest near Remer, Minnesota. Star of the North volunteers will continue building this year. If interested, contact stn@northcountrytrail.org.

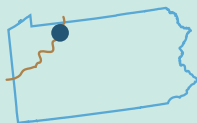


HIKE

Allegheny 100 Hiking Challenge

Allegheny National Forest, Pennsylvania
June 12-14

The A-100 challenges individuals to hike their choice of 25, 50, 75, or 100 miles in 50 hours. While registration has closed, walk-ins are accepted and volunteers are always welcome. Contact anf@northcountrytrail.org if interested.

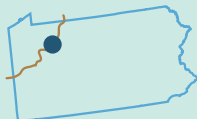


HIKE

Clarion Slackpack

Cook Forest State Park, Pennsylvania
June 12-14

Join the Keystone Trails Association and NCTA for the Clarion Slackpack: a three-day, fully supported event featuring some of the most scenic trails in Western Pennsylvania, including the North Country Trail. Hike, paddle, and adventure. Scan the QR code or visit kta-hike.org/events for details and registration.



TRAIL WORK

Hiawatha Shore-to-Shore Chapter Work and Camp Weekends

May through August

Chapter volunteers will be hiking while clearing trail, mowing, and lopping over multiple weekends this spring and summer across their NCT segment in the Eastern Upper Peninsula. Camp with us or stay for the day(s) only. If interested in joining, contact hss@northcountrytrail.org.



- May 28-30 → July 23-25
- June 19-21 → July 30 - August 1
- June 25-27 → August 6-8
- July 9-11

OTHER

Annual Volunteer Awards Ceremony

Virtual
August 4

Join us for the annual volunteer awards ceremony on August 4 from 6 to 7:30 p.m. (EST). It's virtual so there's no shortage of seats! The National Park Service will also recognize volunteers who have reached cumulative hour milestones. This is an excellent reminder that all you really need is dedication to make a big difference for the North Country Trail. Registration will be available at northcountrytrail.org/events in early July.

TRAIL WORK

Jordan Valley Work Weekend

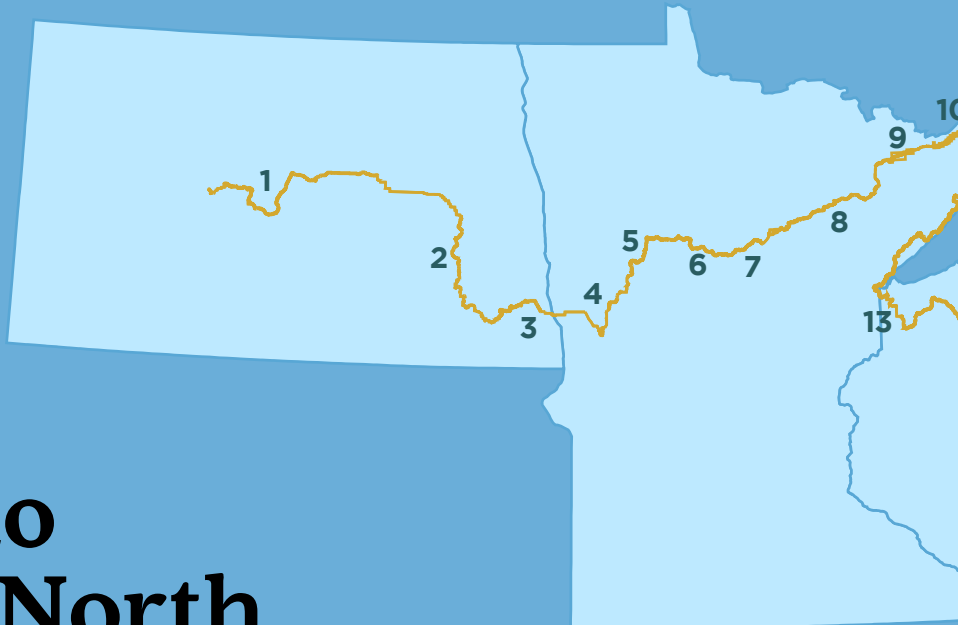
Elmira, Michigan
July 17-20

The NCTA Jordan Valley 45° Chapter invites you to a weekend of trail maintenance and fellowship in the Jordan Valley. Camping area and meals provided. Arrive Friday or Saturday, leave Sunday or Monday. We'll repair and replace puncheon, bridges, route signs, and more. We may install a small reroute. Some projects will require carrying building materials to the work sites. Contact Duane Lawton at delawton@torchlake.com with questions or to RSVP.





TRAIL
WORK



Who's Who Along the North Country National Scenic Trail

The North Country National Scenic Trail (NCNST) is built, maintained, and promoted by volunteer Chapters, and independent Affiliate and partner organizations. Thirty NCTA Chapters are established across the eight trail states, offering you membership, hikes, trail workdays, and other events. Each group is responsible for maintaining a segment of the trail, and promoting it at a local level. Connect directly to get involved!

Guided by a board of directors, NCTA staff provide direct support to Chapters so they can work safely and effectively. Staff also collaborate with Affiliate and partner organizations to ensure trail management and operations are aligned, and goals are accomplished together.

The National Park Service (NPS) administers the NCNST, providing management to the entire trail by working with other federal agencies, state and local governments, private organizations, and landowners, and by providing guidance to the NCTA as a partner. The NPS provides funding for trail projects, planning and decisions on trail routing, trail tools, supplies and signage for volunteers, trail certification guidelines, and volunteer support through the Volunteers-In-Parks (VIP) program.

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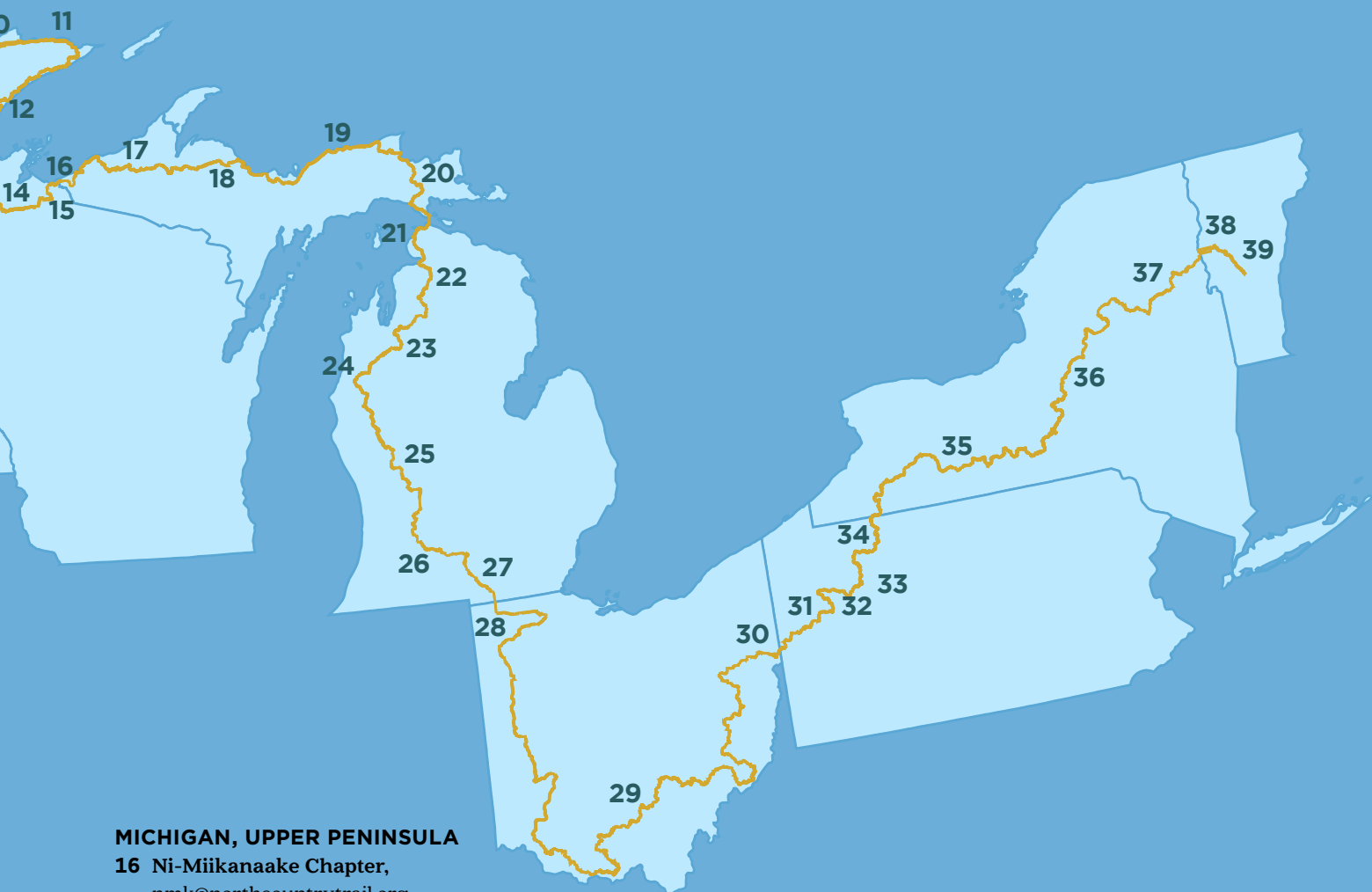
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- 35 Finger Lakes Trail Conference (Affiliate),** info@fingerlakestrail.org
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- 38 Middlebury Area Land Trust (Affiliate),** info@maltvt.org
- 39 Green Mountain Club (Partner),**
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TRAIL
WORK

A Bridge, Finally

BY KENNY WAWSCZYK, NCTA REGIONAL
TRAIL COORDINATOR



Patience and perseverance paid off as NCTA Chief Baw Beese Chapter volunteers recently put the finishing touches on a boardwalk and bridge over the East Branch of the St. Joseph River in Southern Michigan.

This particular water crossing in the Lost Nation State Game Area has long been on the Chapter's upgrade list. For years, shuffling across a downed log was the only option. While a fun challenge for some, it wasn't exactly a welcoming or viable option for every trail user.

The Chapter and I had many discussions over the years with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR), who manages this state game area. Because a bridge here would be longer than 25 feet, engineering is required and the design needs to be approved by the DNR. Adhering to regulations like this is critical for trail (and partnership) integrity, but the process is time consuming.

In the meantime, the Chapter sought ways to make any progress they could.

Most of the route into the site was wide enough for machinery to haul in the long and heavy bridge beams, but one section was a bit too narrow. So last summer, volunteers got to work widening the trail. This not only assisted the incoming bridge crew, but created a more accessible path to the bridge that now meets Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.

Finally, in December 2025, all necessary permits were in-hand.

Construction began on a Monday in early March, with the temperature comfortably in the 60s. The plan was to get as much accomplished and staged as possible, as we knew these conditions wouldn't last long. Spring weather in Michigan is nothing short of precarious.

Thanks to Custom Manufacturing, our bridge contractors from Wisconsin, a skid steer was used to transport all materials within 150 yards of the site. And thanks to the Chapter's trail widening efforts, nearly



Above: The "bridge" in need of an upgrade.

Photo by
Kenny Wawsczyk

Top of page: Chief Baw Beese Chapter volunteers on their brand-new bridge.

Photo by
Rich Katuzin

everything could be hauled the remaining distance using a mini-track loader. Hauling in the 8-foot lumber was done the old-fashioned way.

After bolting 19-foot steel beams together, now rendering them about 800 pounds, the mystery remained of how to get them across the river. Turns out, a mini-track loader plus six people in waders was the answer.

By Wednesday afternoon, there sat a 38-foot, steel-beamed bridge over the East Branch, which had risen at least a foot after the previous night's rainstorm. A rain like that showed why a new bridge was needed, as the water level reached the bottom of the old log bridge and any more would have washed it away - which has happened in the past.

The Chapter held two additional workdays to assemble boardwalks on either side of the bridge, and to finish the railings.

What took us over a decade of asking and planning was fully completed in one week.

This bridge is a tremendous improvement for trail users in regards to both safety and comfort. Many, many thanks go to Chief Baw Beese Chapter President, Bruce Dziadzio, as well as every volunteer who played a role in completing this project and the Michigan DNR.

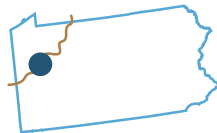
This project could not have been accomplished without an airtight partnership. It's another excellent example of how far your membership goes: When you support the NCTA, you enable staff like me to act as a necessary liaison between state agencies, contractors, and our boots-on-the-ground volunteers. Together, we ensured the work was done safely and effectively. And now, our trail users have a brand new bridge to help them enjoy the trail here so much more.



Working Vacation

BY EDDIE TRIZZINO, BUTLER EAGLE COMMUNITY EDITOR

Editor's Note: This piece originally appeared in the Butler Eagle, a local newspaper in Western Pennsylvania, under the title Clay Township man spends vacation time working on North Country Trail. It is published here with permission from the author and has been edited minimally for NCTA style guidelines.



Over the course of a week, Brian Loutzenhiser pushed a lawnmower over 13 miles of trail - and back - followed by more half-marathon-length treks where he cut down felled trees and branches with an ax and shears in the June heat.

Believe it or not, this was his vacation.

Brian's day job is at Penn United Technologies, where he said he sits most of his time in the office. His hobbies include hiking and exploring the outdoors, and the physical labor involved in volunteering with the North Country Trail Association doesn't feel like work to him.

Plus, if he didn't take a week off from work to make sure the West Sunbury portion of the North Country Trail was clear of brush and debris, it would be a lot harder for him to walk his dog there.

"We mow the grass down. You can't even find the trail if it wasn't mowed," said Brian, North Country Trail maintenance coordinator for West Sunbury. "Some of it would grow in. You wouldn't even be able to see it. Some of it you wouldn't be able to see in a year."

Brian said he has taken a week off from work every June for about seven years so he can prepare the section of the North Country Trail for the summer. Even though he usually takes shears with him on his walks on the trail throughout the year, Brian said the week of work allows him and his wife, Suzan, to really hone in on its maintenance.

The Loutzenhisers' work was nearly done on Saturday, June 7, but the two still chopped some branches that were hanging a little too low and snipped quite a few others that were encroaching onto the dirt trail.



TRAIL WORK

Photos by
Eddie Trizzino,
Butler Eagle

“Right now, everything is growing in at its maximum, so we hit it now so we take the greatest growth off,” Brian said. “I usually wait until early June and then hit it pretty hard. You’ve got to take the big trees down with the chainsaw, because you can’t get through with that mower.”

The North Country Trail Association has Chapters, each helping manage parts of the trail across its nearly 5,000 miles. The 57-mile Butler County Chapter segment begins at Alpha Pass in McConnells Mill State Park and ends crossing the Parker Bridge over the Allegheny River in Parker. The trail in Butler County winds through the forested hills of the Allegheny Plateau in Western Pennsylvania.

Jan Genaway, former President of the NCTA Butler County Chapter, said removing any trees from the trail is organized by volunteers.

“They coordinate trail maintenance work days, oversee their section of the trail,” Genaway said.

The Butler County Chapter provides guidance for anyone performing trail maintenance, but it mostly boils down to making sure the trail itself is visible and clear of obstructions, and ensuring there are blazes painted on trees to guide hikers. According to Brian, the trail should be four feet wide and eight feet tall, and hikers should be able to see a blaze from the trail at all times.

Additionally, the state parks in Butler County help coordinate maintenance on the trail when it goes through their land.

“Things that we do within the parks or state game lands have to have approval and we do have a good relationship with the state parks and game lands,” Genaway said. “We work together to help maintain the trail.”

Brian said he first got involved with the North Country Trail around the year 2000, when he and his family moved into a house near the Sutton Farms trailhead. He was first taking regular hikes with the Butler Outdoors Club, and started volunteering on the North Country Trail because “it’s just something that we need to have.”

“It’s something people needed so they could get outside,” Brian said. “You don’t need any special equipment, you don’t need admission fees. It’s good entertainment. It’s good for you physically. It’s good for you mentally.”

With a week’s worth of trimming, mowing and chopping behind Brian, the trail on June 7 was relatively clear, albeit muddy from a recent storm.



The trailhead the Loutzenhisers take care of is near 1401 West Sunbury Road, and is partially located on a property owned by Wayne and Joanne Dallos, which is noted on the nearby sign that points to the trail.

Many parts of the North Country Trail go through private property, but Wayne Dallos said he was happy to let the trail go through his because the Association promotes nature and environmental stewardship.

“I have a nephew who is really into hiking,” he said, “and I think it’s something people need to do.”

Brian said he seldom sees other hikers during his walks on the trail, but his section is off a state road with the only amenity within about a half-mile being a vehicle repair garage. The first mile or so of the section is also built atop a strip mine, and there is a landfill visible from atop a hill on the trail, so it might not be the first point of entry most hikers think of.

The forest is relatively young, populated by small trees and man-made ponds, because it was classified as wooded wetland habitat after the mine closed. Brian said invasive species like knot weed, barberry, and autumn olive have also put down roots on the trail. He pays particular attention to these plants because they grow quickly and sometimes have sharp thorns.

The woods near the trail is ideal habitat for certain wildlife. Wayne Dallos pointed out a box turtle poking out from the brush during a hike June 7, and Suzan jumped after spotting a blacksnake burrowing into the ground.

The Loutzenhisers have also spotted eagles’ nests and beaver dams on their hikes.

“We see eagles pretty often,” Brian said. “You see all kinds of things out here.”

Although the Loutzenhisers each spend a good amount of their vacation time working on the trail near their home, they do take some actual vacations - ones that usually do still involve hiking and outdoor activity.

Brian joked that he can never escape his maintenance mindset.

"We do a lot of hiking on vacations. Then I get there and I critique their trail maintenance," Brian said.

But he can't complain about any trail too much. He knows as well as anyone that making sure trails are clear and optimal for hiking can be rigorous work, which is why he and his wife are always promoting the trail and the association through events and organized hikes.

Suzan said there are a few "fireworks hikes" planned for the trail - one on the evening of July 3 on the Sutton Farms Trail.

"We're looking for people to kind of adopt one-mile or two-mile sections," Suzan said. "So instead of Brian doing 13, if everybody took one, it would be a lot more manageable, and it would get the community involved."

Genaway said that people don't have to become trail maintenance coordinators; they can become volunteers by simply hiking the trail on a regular basis to report any areas that might need some TLC.

"They hike it every so often to let us know how the trail is, if there are any trees down or if there are any boards that need to be replaced on a bridge," Genaway said of trail volunteers.

Even though he often ends up with a "raging case of poison ivy" each year, Brian said he still enjoys the trail, the week's-worth of work he puts into it each summer.

Even though it currently feels like a haven for he and his wife, Brian said he hopes more people learn about the North Country Trail, and the 13-mile stretch that he cares for.

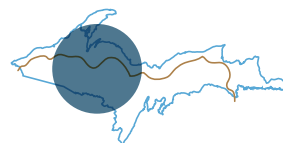
"Check yourself really good for ticks when you get home," Brian said. "Definitely bring your water. Let somebody know where you're going to be just in case you get lost or hurt on the trail, so someone can come looking for you."



Reach out to the Butler County Chapter - or one more local to you - to get involved by submitting a Volunteer Interest Form today at northcountrytrail.org/volunteer-interest-form.

Road Data Revamp

BY KENNY WAWSCZYK, NCTA REGIONAL TRAIL COORDINATOR



We're always trying to make our free, downloadable maps better. Twice a year we do trail updates, mainly in regards to trail line corrections from reroutes, point data changes

like parking, or attribute changes to the data itself. But with our PDF maps, we also control the baselayer data. This is all the stuff you see in the background, such as rivers, lakes, topography, wetlands, and roads.

Unlike the basemaps on our online map, we have the ability to alter this data. While we're probably not going to map and change topography lines, data for our road layer can and should be edited. Hikers rely on these maps not only for when they're following the trail, but also getting to it. So if a road doesn't exist, is a dead end, or isn't even shown, then we should try to fix those issues.

"Some folks may find this surprising, but this is a good example of something we run into quite a bit," explained Matt Rowbotham, NCTA GIS Program Manager. "GIS data doesn't always reflect what's actually on the ground, especially in the more remote corners of the country where the NCT is routed. We see this most often with roads, but we find this in other types of data, too. One extreme example I recall was having to remove a large lake that satellite imagery showed didn't exist - and our local volunteers were pretty confident it never had."

Our road layer data has come from many sources, and for most of the state of Michigan, it's pretty accurate. But after taking a deeper dive into this data recently, it was clear that the data in the central and western Upper Peninsula was off.

Knowing that the Marquette Area Chapter meticulously created a Trail Segment Guide for their section, I reached out to see if they'd help clarify the road situation in their area. In doing so I learned so much. We deleted roads, added points of interest, indicated gates, and added other parking areas or points that weren't previously identified. It became more than a road data cleanup - it was an extensive review of their trail section and what was shown on our maps.

The Peter Wolfe Chapter's road data was my biggest fear, and it proved to be a large task: We spent four hours reviewing it.



Scan to view the Marquette Area Chapter Trail Segment Guide

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



TRAIL WORK

Our data showed every road that has ever been within the Ottawa National Forest. Having driven these woods enough myself, I knew some of these roads didn't exist - or if they did, they definitely weren't made to drive on anymore. So why were we showing them? The Chapter offered suggestions beyond simply deleting old roads, which is exactly what we wanted. These maps need to work for our volunteers, too.

While those have been the only two Michigan Chapters that I've reviewed with, we made several other road data changes across the state - and we're sure that there are plenty more out there. So besides trail line or point data updates, remember we can change other data on our maps like roads. Please send your comments to gis@northcountrytrail.org if you happen to notice something is off, or let us know if you'd like to share a computer screen to review. Together, let's make our maps the best that we can.

"I often hear from volunteers that they don't understand how I do all of the NCTA mapping on my own," said Matt. "The reality is I don't, and this is a great example of that. This work depends on a tremendous amount of input from our staff and volunteers, and it's that kind of detailed, local knowledge that allows us to make the maps better."

Thanks to your membership, the mapping resources at northcountrytrail.org/trail-maps remain free for the public to access and download.



Photo by
Aaron Kania

Working Hard for Wilderness

BY AARON KANIA, FORMER KAWISHIWI DISTRICT RANGER, U.S. FOREST SERVICE

Editor's Note: The Kekekabic Trail shares nearly the entirety of its 39-mile path with the North Country National Scenic Trail in the Border Region of Northern Minnesota.



Last November, I took advantage of a perfect fall weather window to check out Minnesota's Kekekabic Trail from east to west. It was an amazing experience. We are so fortunate to have this fantastic trail on public lands that have been protected for these very types of adventures by very forward-thinking people who made tough decisions.

The NCTA Kekekabic Trail Chapter has risen to the challenge, and with a lot of grit and determination, its volunteers have come together to maintain this trail. It is really obvious that there is no such thing as a simple task on the Kek. In other places, brushing out a mile of trail would be an easy day. Here, it's a major undertaking - including getting there and back out - but it's been done with the highest focus on safety, for both the volunteers and the public. It is truly commendable.

The east side is very rocky and the west side is heavily forested, where blowdowns are frequent. Beaver activity is a blessing when it comes to crossing wet areas - their dams make perfect crossing points - but a curse when they fell trees on the trail. Because of all of the work the volunteers do, people like me are able (and willing) to access this trail. I saw 15 people on my first day alone!

When I tell people of my adventure, they are surprised - their initial reaction is they think the trail is impassible. They are excited to hear the truth, and you can see the gears turning as they start imagining their own trek.

Thanks to all this hard work and persistence of NCTA members, the Kek can be well-used and well cared for. It is so encouraging to know that hard decisions made in the past were not forgotten, and the trail will continue to be loved and maintained so many future generations can share the joy of this magical place.

Kekekabic Snapshot

BY MATT DAVIS, NCTA REGIONAL TRAIL COORDINATOR



Photo by
Matt Davis

Ten years ago, we used the difficulty, remoteness, and tough trail conditions in marketing the Kekekabic Trail (e.g. “Are you tough enough for the Kek?”). But under the excellent leadership of Eric Campbell, President of the Kekekabic Trail Chapter, a renewed focus was placed on crew leadership training and volunteer recruitment. This resulted in a five-year effort to maintain the entire trail and tackle a couple much-needed reroutes.

Following that, the trail was in decent shape and definitely usable for experienced hikers. Yet, about five years ago, the Chapter realized that the Kek’s reputation for being ultra-challenging was probably scaring away potential hikers - they were perceiving it as impassable.

The new message, as you can see in Aaron Kania’s article, is that it’s actually very hikeable - though it might not be the best choice for

first-time backpackers. Hiking the Kek is still very challenging, as there will definitely be trees down, sections flooded by beaver dams, and some confusing spots where conferring with your map will be necessary. But maybe for the first time ever, there is a visible trail tread that has been worn down by hikers’ boots.

Clearing the Kek is not easy. It often requires a full day’s paddle or backpack into the interior of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, and multiple day trips are needed to clear a 3-5 mile segment. Because of the Wilderness regulations, only hand tools can be used, which makes it extremely difficult to clear miles of brush that can quickly crowd the trail. While crosscut saws are equal to chainsaws for the task of clearing trees, loppers are definitely no match for a DR Brush Mower!

Partner Spotlight: U.S. Forest Service

BY VALERIE BADER, NCTA
DIRECTOR OF TRAIL
OPERATIONS

The North Country National Scenic Trail is built and cared for through partnerships. This approach isn’t accidental: It’s rooted in the National Trails System Act, which established a nationwide system of trails (including the North Country Trail) and a collaborative model for managing them. From the beginning, the idea was that National Scenic Trails would be sustained through the shared responsibility of federal agencies, local partners, volunteers, and nonprofit organizations.

For the North Country Trail, that means that while the National Park Service serves as the trail’s federal administrator, much of the day-to-day work happens in close collaboration with the 160+ federal, state, and local land managers across the trail. This includes the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), one of our trail’s most important partners on the ground. Nearly 800 miles of the North Country Trail cross lands managed by the USFS.

The NCTA works with USFS staff at every level, from the local forest units highlighted here to the Regional and National Offices, as well as the USFS National Trails Program team. These relationships help keep projects on the trail moving, connect volunteers with resources, and ensure the North Country Trail is well cared for.

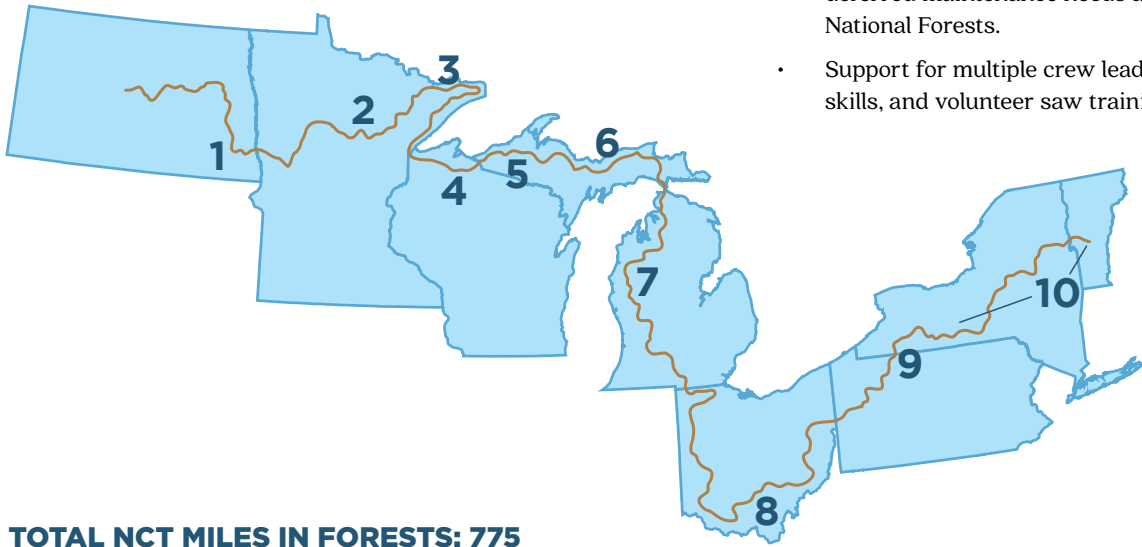
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TRAIL PROTECTION

In 2026, collaborative work between the NCTA and USFS will result in key projects including:

- Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa crews in the Superior National Forest supporting repair and maintenance activities within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.
- Completion of a trail resurfacing project in North Dakota's Sheyenne National Grassland.
- Installation of the NCT Eastern Terminus sign in Vermont's Green Mountain National Forest.
- Planning for more than 250 miles of deferred maintenance needs across 10 National Forests.
- Support for multiple crew leadership, trail skills, and volunteer saw training events.



TOTAL NCT MILES IN FORESTS: 775

2025 VOLUNTEER HOURS IN FORESTS: 15,469

1. Sheyenne National Grassland

NCNST Miles: 31.5
Volunteer Hours: 400

2. Chippewa National Forest

NCNST Miles: 62.4
Volunteer Hours: 1,384

3. Superior National Forest

NCNST Miles: 120
Volunteer Hours: 1,626*

4. Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest

NCNST Miles: 61.7
Volunteer Hours: 980

5. Ottawa National Forest

NCNST Miles: 100
Volunteer Hours: 1,183

6. Hiawatha National Forest

NCNST Miles: 94.7
Volunteer Hours: 1,702

7. Manistee National Forest

NCNST Miles: 117.5
Volunteer Hours: 2,610

8. Wayne National Forest

NCNST Miles: 57
Volunteer Hours: 153*

9. Allegheny National Forest

NCNST Miles: 90.3
Volunteer Hours: 5,790

10. Green Mountain-Finger Lakes National Forest

NCNST Miles: 31.2
Volunteer Hours: NA, tracked by Affiliates

**Does not include hours from Superior Hiking Trail Association and Buckeye Trail Association volunteers.*

As a member, your support goes a long way.



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northcountrytrail.org



Closing the Gaps

BY VALERIE BADER, NCTA DIRECTOR OF TRAIL OPERATIONS

While you can utilize the NCT route to hike nearly 5,000 miles from North Dakota to Vermont, not all of those miles will be on an actual trail, as many miles are along roads - 1,495 road miles across 369 gaps, to be precise. Closing these gaps is a complex, long-term effort requiring coordinated planning, partnership development, land protection, and trail design and construction. It touches nearly every aspect of our collective work as an Association.

Over the past year, the NCTA and National Park Service (NPS) have collaborated to inventory each gap and assess its characteristics. Using input from staff and volunteers, we developed a comprehensive dataset capturing key factors such as safety, connectivity, landscape context, parcel size, and local capacity. This analysis provides a shared framework for prioritizing gap closure efforts across the trail.

Not all gaps are equal in urgency or complexity. Some present immediate safety or connectivity concerns, while others such as short road crossings or low-traffic roadwalks may serve as interim routes for the foreseeable future. Certain gaps will require a formal NPS planning process, known as an *Optimal Location Review*, to identify the most suitable trail alignment. Others may be advanced more efficiently at the Chapter level.

In the coming months, the NCTA and NPS will begin coordinating with Chapters to define next steps and align resources for priority projects. Visit northcountrytrail.org/chapters to contact your local NCTA Chapter today and see how you can help.

HIKE 100 CHALLENGE

As of April, more than **1,300** trail users have signed up for the 2026 Hike 100 Challenge. **Have you?**



"I enjoy spending time with my mom. We plan our days according to my schedule, since I still work. We hike many days before I go to work, weaving my other appointments in between. My dad is our driver, dropping us off and meeting us whenever he can! He is our cheerleader, urging us to just hike a few more miles. He is a great help and I'm thankful he enjoys being the driver."

- KARINE CARLS, MICHIGAN

northcountrytrail.org/hike-100-challenge



TRAIL
PROTECTION

Trail Protection at Mulligan Pines

BY CLARE FASTIGGI, UPPER PENINSULA
LAND CONSERVANCY (UPLC)



What began as Jon and Christine Saari's vision for their land and family camp, affectionately known as "fish camp," evolved into a multi-partner conservation success story. Through our conservancy's collaboration with

the North Country Trail Association (NCTA) and Lyme Great Lakes Timberlands LLC, the Saaris' cherished property and surrounding landscape are now preserved in perpetuity.

Now called the Mulligan Pines Preserve, this 80 acres in Michigan's central Upper Peninsula is a place where unique wetland ecology, cultural history, and shared stewardship come together along the banks of Mulligan Creek. This is the second UPLC preserve protecting land along the North Country Trail, joining the Dempsey Memorial Preserve near Ontonagon.

The Saaris' desire to donate and preserve the remnant old-growth and irreplaceable Finnish cabin on their 40-acre property sparked a broader conservation vision. Recognizing the importance of contiguous land protection, UPLC collaborated with partners to carry out a carefully crafted acre-for-acre land

exchange, adding an adjoining 40-acre parcel to the north. Brett Matuszak, Lyme Timberland's Senior Real Estate Manager, worked closely alongside UPLC throughout this multi-year project, approaching the opportunity with a shared purpose for meaningful conservation and a dedication to finalizing the deal, ensuring the protection of the broader Mulligan wetlands. UPLC's ability to complete this exchange was made possible through the legacy of Fred Prince, whose 2015 donation to the UPLC provided critical flexibility.

"Budding from the Saaris' generosity, UPLC, the NCTA, and Lyme were able to deepen our partnerships with each other through this project," said Emily Leach, UPLC Executive Director. "It took dedication from all parties; we were all centered on the Saaris' vision, and I'm so grateful for each group's contribution to see that this incredible conservation vision was realized."

The preserve is home to a mosaic of old-growth forests and rich conifer swamps that store carbon, filter water, and keep wildlife corridors intact. Mulligan Creek and its tributaries carry cold, clear water that provides habitat for trout, and flows to the Dead River, connecting the preserve to other UPLC-protected lands in the watershed.

At the heart of the property stands a restored dovetail log cabin, originally built as a sauna on a Finnish farm in the Keweenaw Peninsula. The Saaris rescued the deteriorating structure - carefully dismantling, transporting, and reassembling it by hand - and found its permanent home along the Mulligan Creek. Today the cabin still stands proudly, commemorating the Saaris' and Upper Peninsula's Scandinavian heritage.

Looking ahead, UPLC is grateful to partner with the NCTA and its Marquette Area Chapter volunteers, who will steward a spur trail leading to the old-growth pine stand. Plans also include collective stewardship of the cabin as a simple overnight option for North Country Trail thru-hikers.

"This partnership represents exactly the kind of creative thinking and cooperative spirit needed to enhance and further the mission of the NCTA," said Paul Gagnon, NCTA Director of Trail Protection. "It also supports conservation and outdoor recreation opportunities important to local communities and the people who live in, work in, and visit those places. The NCTA is excited to be a part of a conservation project that will protect wildlife habitat, old-growth trees, pristine watersheds, and peaceful backcountry settings, and make those resources available and accessible for the wonder and enjoyment of everyone for years to come."



Mulligan Pines Preserve.

Photos by
Michael Sekely

“For years, we met over coffee and had many phone conversations to brainstorm possibilities for conservation,” reflected Michael Sekely, NCTA Marquette Area Chapter Trail Crew Leader. “NCTA staff visited the property as well, to help us decide if this was feasible. Fast forward five years and with assistance from many, here we are. It’s a dream come true!”

The Saaris desire to share their feeling of gratitude serves as a simple and sweet reminder that land protection often begins here - in awe of nature and in want of giving something back. Now, others will be able to cultivate their own relationship with this place thanks to their generosity.

To learn more about the Mulligan Pines Preserve and other protected land, please visit uplandconservancy.org. A note to trail users: Though the property is immediately open to the public for non-motorized activities such as snowshoeing, skiing, and hiking, volunteer workdays are in the works to provide great opportunities to see the land. In the meantime, we ask you to respect the infrastructure and land as UPLC and the NCTA work on initial establishment needs such as signage, access route improvements, trail markers, and maintenance to set the cabin up for reservations.

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

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

Urban hiking in Washington D.C. for this year's Hike the Hill advocacy event! Our team of 10 NCTA representatives logged well over 100 miles across the city during the five days we spent seeking congressional support for the National Trails System.

Photo by Valerie Bader