

RIDGELINE

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What the “Trail Eyes” Pros Taught Us About the SHT

TIM MALZHAN IS THE trail operations director for our sister trail organization the Ice Age Trail Alliance in Wisconsin. Doing business as “Trail Eyes,” Tim was one of four entities the SHTA hired in the fall of 2018 to evaluate and recommend renewal strategies for what we have dubbed “The Big Bad Five,” those sections of the SHT most damaged from heavy use and old age (or both).

Though all four evaluators—Malzhan, Critical Connections Ecological Services (Jason and Amy Husveth), the North Country Trail Association, and

(Continued on page 2)

PHOTO BY FRESH TRACKS MEDIA



What the “Trail Eyes” Taught Us About the SHT (continued from cover)

Great Lakes Trail Builders (Willie Bittner)—did what we asked (provide specific prescriptions for the Big Bad Five), their expert observations gave us much more: they shed light on the entire Superior Hiking Trail. In other words, what they saw on the Split Rock River loop, or the sections from Britton Peak to Oberg Mountain and Oberg to the Lutsen ski complex, or the proposed reroute of the SHT north of Gooseberry Falls State Park, were microcosms of bigger, more systemic issues with the SHT.

■ **“Keep people on the Trail and water off of it.”** This succinct wisdom comes from Matt Davis of the North Country Trail Association, whose evaluation crew noted a serious lack of simple but effective devices to shunt water off the Trail, and failed or poorly designed structures (i.e. boardwalks) to keep people on the Trail.

■ **“The Trail here [Split Rock River loop] appeared to be ‘walked-in,’ rather than intentionally built.”** This observation from Tim Malzhan extends to the entire SHT. He noted that while a natural surface path was scratched out on the landscape, it was not built to modern hiking trail standards to withstand the heavy use it is getting.

■ **“The Trail in some areas is simply in the wrong place.”** Jason Husveth pointed to several places where the SHT is routed through a wetland or the bottom of a slope—both wet places that will eventually end up muddy.

■ **“The use of local stone makes so much sense,”** found Willie Bittner, an expert in using stone in trail settings. We like this



➤ **No bridge is not the only problem at the Split Rock River loop. The Trail itself is in bad condition; evaluators recommend relocating it in several places.**

suggestion, as there is no issue finding stone around the SHT with which to build stairways.

Having these critically important evaluations (supported by a grant from Minnesota’s Environmental and Natural Resources Trust Fund) in hand will guide and advise the SHTA staff and board in the coming years about what needs to be done to renew the SHT. Following are the priorities we’ve set for each of the Big Bad Five, rooted in evaluators’ suggestions:

SPLIT ROCK RIVER LOOP

This is the most complicated one. Evaluators suggested, and even mapped, significant reroutes to avoid worsening the insidious erosion that is endemic to that loop. Then there is the bridge over the Split Rock River: we cannot repeat the same mistakes there that led to the demise of four bridges SHTA built (lasting



➤ **Evaluators had lots of ideas for building trail on hillsides, including getting rid of this particular construction style. As most trail users know, these steps don’t last.**

an average of 6.4 years). We estimate that loop trail renewal and building a durable bridge could cost upwards of \$250,000. Given that the loop is largely within the boundaries of the state park and

that it is heavily used by wayside visitors, we have reached out to the Minnesota DNR parks and trails unit to more formally collaborate on this project.

GOOSEBERRY REROUTE

The SHT has been disconnected north of Gooseberry Falls State Park since 2015, when a private landowner forbade continued access through his property. A new route was nearly built, but it was apparent that without over a mile of boardwalk, there would be another long, linear mudhole. Two evaluation teams suggested routing the Trail along Skunk Creek, well west of the old route and the proposed 2017 reroute. Going farther west, SHTA staff has identified more public land that, at first glance, appears to be ideal terrain for a hiking trail. While permits and permissions must come before the first swing of the hoe, we have permission from the Voyageur Snowmobile Club to use their solid bridges over Skunk Creek and the Gooseberry River.

BRITTON PEAK TO OBERG MOUNTAIN

The evaluators noted the obvious—the trails leading to these peaks that bookend this section are tattered and need rebuilding. In addition, this venerable section (and Oberg-Lutsen) are “proto-SHT” in that they were existing national forest trails the SHT was routed onto in the late 1980s. Rerouting the Trail onto higher ground in places is the suggested solution for pieces of this section.

OBERG MOUNTAIN TO LUTSEN MOUNTAINS

This section, like its kin to the west, is plagued by heavy use and old age. There are several



“The Trail in some areas is simply in the wrong place,” suggested Jason Husveth (right) in his evaluation, completed with assistance from John Storkamp (left).

reroutes suggested by the evaluators, but complicating decisions here is the Lutsen Mountains’ ski slope expansion. First priority will be to reroute the messy segment between the Lutsen trailhead and Mystery Mountain campsite. As long-time trail user and adviser John Storkamp (who assisted Jason Husveth’s evaluations) put it, “This does more PR damage to the Association than most any other part of the Trail. It is all that some people ever see, and it’s not good.”

BEAN AND BEAR LAKES LOOP

We like to call this one “renewal by a thousand cuts,” because just about all the issues the SHT faces can be found in these six miles. There is no obvious place to start renewal work on this section, but we will build on the renewal process with trainings providing by evaluators Malzhan and Bittner this summer in this section—on trail building and building with stone, respectively. 

— By DENNY CANEFF

The Superior Hiking Trail Association is dedicated to building, managing, renewing and promoting the Superior Hiking Trail.



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VOLUME 34, ISSUE 2

PEOPLE.
NATURE.
FOOTPATH.

FROM THE OVERLOOK



THE ONLY PLACE(S) TO LEAVE A TRACE

If you hiked to the SHT's southern terminus last year, you surely noticed the first prototype of our new trail register design. Did you sign the log book? Volunteer extraordinaire Charlie Gallet created this spiffy new, very blue model, and we recently engaged several other vol-



Next time you visit the world's cutest little waterfall at McCarthy Creek, be sure to sign in! Photo (and register installation) by Kirk Rodysill.

unteers to build and install registers at scenic locations along the 100 or so miles between that terminus and the Split Rock River. As for those neglected registers up the Shore? Many are scheduled to be replaced soon.

WELCOME NEW SHTA BOARD MEMBERS

BY KATHY KELLY, BOARD VICE CHAIR

We are delighted to announce three new Board members: Alex Elizabeth (Minneapolis), Karen Ketchmark (Inver Grove Heights), and Mike Ward (Duluth). They joined the Board in May, serving three-year terms, and will jump right in to work with our committees this summer. Please welcome and

thank them for their desire to give back to the Trail and Association through serving on the Board.

We also revamped the Board member recruitment process this year. The changes were telling, as we heard from more than a dozen people interested in the three open positions. Some of the improvements included:

- Notifying SHTA supporters and the general public of the three openings online and in the most recent *Ridgeline* newsletter.
- Requesting each candidate submit a formal "letter of interest."
- Meeting with each candidate in person.

Not only did we find three talented, passionate new board members, but it was also gratifying to meet so many engaged, committed, friendly, trail-loving people interested in giving back to the SHT. Several of the remaining candidates also expressed interest in volunteering in other ways. This is all good news for the SHTA!

TRACK YOUR HIKES ON "MY SHT MAP"

Have you ever wanted a single map of the entire SHT to track your progress on the Trail? We are developing a new map so



Now you can document your own "Superior Views" along the Trail. Painting by Adam Swanson (adamswanson.com).

you can do just that. We're excited to announce **My SHT Map** will be available later this summer to help you document your experiences on the Trail as you hike from Wisconsin to Canada.

The coming map (it is in paper, not digital, form) will be designed both to capture your time on the SHT and serve as a wonderful piece of art worthy of a spot on your wall. We've enlisted local artists—cartographer Matt Kania and painter Adam Swanson—to contribute their expertise to this unique project. Look for more details soon at shop.superiorhiking.org or in the Trail Information Center in Two Harbors.



Superior Experiences, a new series of guided adventures

on the SHT that benefit the Trail, will debut on June 22 with a birding expedition in Beaver Bay, led by North Shore birders Jim and Sharon Lind.

In this *Experience*, the Linds will guide you and a small group to hear and see several species of warblers, flycatchers, thrushes, sparrows, and woodpeckers as you meander on the SHT through the boreal forest. Back in town after the hike, you'll be treated to a delicious lunch served by the Camp 61 Restaurant.

More *Experiences* like this are on the way. Get your tickets today at superiorhiking.org/superiorexperiences.

FINE SIGNS

Signs matter: they tell you where you are, of course, but they also project the image or “brand” of the SHT and the organization that manages it. We’ve been committed to improving signage on the SHT (and just off of it). There’s more to do, but here’s a sampler.



➡ GET YOUR TRAILHEAD SIGN ON ROUTE 61

We replaced 19 of those washed-out green metal signs along Hwy. 61 between Castle Danger and Grand Marais. They’re a snappy state park brown color now.

NO OVERLOOKING THE OVERLOOKS ➡

Volunteer Rebecca Nara installs a new sign for the Hellacious Overlook, way up there between Arrowhead Trail and Jackson Lake Road. Anticipating the one and only Unimpressive Overlook on the SHT is volunteer Amy Carrison. You’ll soon see new signs for some campsites too.



➡ ALL COMING TO A (TRAIL) HEAD

Coming out of the SHTA’s “classical era” of the late 1980s and early 90s, most of our trailhead signs are aging gracefully. But many of them were littered with extraneous stuff over the years, which will get tidied up. See the difference?

NO MORE BEING OUT OF THE LOOP ➡

Look soon for new loop trail maps on Ely’s Peak and Brewer Park (after the upcoming reroute) in Duluth, and on the Leveaux Mountain loop and Bean and Bear Lakes loop.

Many thanks to the Minnesota DNR’s Coastal Program for making the Hwy. 61 signs and loop trail signs possible. And sincere thanks to volunteer Michael Loscheider, whose routing tool and skill is making new wood signs possible again.





TRAIL CLEARING VOLUNTEERS

A historic windstorm in fall of 2018 brought down hundreds of trees on the northern end of the SHT. This spring, an equally-historic response by SHTA volunteers sought to clear them from the Trail for the benefit of you and thousands of other hikers and runners. In this Superior Hero Tale, we're pleased to recognize our Trail Clearing Volunteers.

This past April and May, SHTA hosted four trail clearing events that covered almost the entire Trail east of Duluth. During these events, over 1,200 volunteer hours went into clearing the Superior Hiking Trail—by far the highest total on record.

Steadfast trail clearing volunteers came from all over the state—and even a couple from out of state—to help out. Without them, the SHT would be challenging, nigh impossible, to navigate. Volunteers negotiated a nest of downed trees near Duluth, trudged through knee-deep snow near Schroeder, moved through mud puddles in Finland, and worked through windstorm-damaged sections

near Hovland. The work was more difficult than most years, but morale was high and laughter harmonized with the roar of chainsaws. Importantly, safety of our volunteers was our top priority; this challenging work was completed without any serious injuries.

At the heart of trail clearing are our certified sawyers. These dedicated volunteers attend chainsaw trainings and maintain first aid/CPR certifications in addition to supplying their own equipment and fuel. Many certified sawyers lead teams of “swampers,” critical helpers who clear debris, during these trail clearing weekends; but many other certified sawyers adopt a section of the Trail and diligently

clear it outside of SHTA’s scheduled events.

So it’s all done now, right? Not quite. Our lively, unrelenting boreal forests ensure trail clearing never really ends. And we’re still battling the damage of that windstorm in Hovland, so expect to find downed trees, especially on the far eastern end of the SHT. In the meantime, the majority of the SHT is ready for hiking season.

We want to send a special thank you to all who make a cleared trail possible: our long-time contractor Han Taylor, section adopters, diligent kitchen helpers, adventurous swampers, and our dedicated sawyers. The Trail is better because of you.



Nobody said trail clearing wasn't fun.

PHOTO BY ROBERTA LAIDLAW



Dedicated sawyer Dave Miller and crew cleared a 40 yard mess of trees near the Caribou campsite.



SHTA Board member Joseph Altendahl cleared quite a few board feet of timber.

PHOTO BY ERIC HADRATH



26 helpers, one goal: safe times on the Trail.

PHOTO BY ROBERTA LAIDLAW



Chainsaws aren't the only thing that need quality fuel.

PHOTO BY ROBERTA LAIDLAW

THE LITTLE NOT-SO-BAD HALF-DOZEN



Earlier this winter, a crew of volunteers moved a big pile of heavy building materials by sled to the project site for the Diving Board Mud Pit.

There are hundreds of discrete projects to take on with the SHT. Priority in almost all cases goes to projects that make our built structures safer, that protect the land and water the SHT passes through, and that a landowner wants done. Here is a list of a few projects we aim to conquer this summer and fall:

■ Pincushion Mountain Re-route: 2.5 miles of new trail to remove the SHT from a ski trail. Completion date: October 2019.

■ Diving Board Mud Pit: This project got its name from the slab of board sitting on top of a long and wide tract of almost pure mud, between Crosby-Manitou State Park and the

Caribou River. Led by Volunteer Crew Leader Todd Rowe, work on a new boardwalk there starts in early June.

■ Sugarloaf Reroute: A private landowner requested that we reroute the Trail away from their new home. That reroute, with about 1,000 feet of new trail and led by Volunteer Crew Leader Stephanie Hoff, should be completed by the end of June.

■ Duluth SHT Projects: Improving the Trail on either end of the Spirit Mountain Recreation Area (trail hardening, eliminating a sketchy stairway) and developing a new route in the Brewer Park area are happening this summer, led by long-time SHTA trail renewal consultant



A new route to Brewer Park from Haines Road will move the SHT away from this wet hillside and onto much drier ground.

Larry Sampson.

■ Lismore Road Trailhead: The SHT lost a trailhead when tax-forfeited land was sold to a new private owner, but planning is underway to install a new parking area nearby. We plan to get this done quickly once we have permission to build.

A few of these projects will be led and completed by trail building contractors, but most will benefit from the support of our amazing volunteers. Learn how you can get involved at: superiorhiking.org/volunteer. 

AN ALE FOR THE TRAIL

There's nothing quite like an ice-cold ferment after a long hike on the SHT. Our friends at Bent Paddle Brewing Company agree—and later this summer, they will donate proceeds from an upcoming Valve Jockey series brew, titled Nature Moment Blonde Ale. BPBC brewer Sam Bartels, who is leading this project, put it simply, “The SHT is my outdoor lifeblood, and I want it to benefit from this Trail Ale.” Bent Paddle plans to host us in their Duluth taproom for a release party August 16 (and you're invited), and their brew crew will spend a day with us working to improve the Trail.  Fine ferment indeed!

Each year, the Superior Hiking Trail attracts thousands of visitors from all over the world. Support from SHTA members, donors and volunteers like you keeps the Trail one of the finest hiking and running destinations in the country.



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flip to page 5 to
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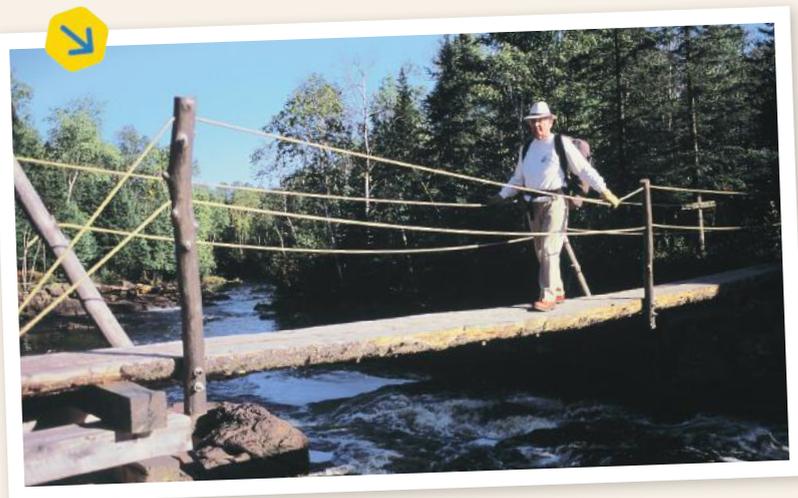
THANK YOU FOR GATHERING WITH US

Earlier this year, SHTA hosted three Winter Gatherings to engage new members of our community and further our relationships with long-time volunteers. Over 175 attendees deepened their knowledge on our Trail Renewal Program and got up to speed on improvements to our Volunteer Program. Missed the Gatherings, but want to get involved? Learn more at: superiorhiking.org/volunteer

THE FIRST (WE THINK) SPLIT ROCK BRIDGE

Ah, for the days when building an SHT bridge was a matter of dropping a couple of trees over the river and pounding some decks boards onto them—a weekend of fun work for volunteers. This is the first of four bridges over the Split Rock River, built (we believe) in 1991. But rivers have a way of winning whenever humans try to manage them, and this river leads 4-0 over the Association.

Building another bridge over that river is complicated: see Page 2. (And if that's you in this photo, or you know who this hiker is, let us know.)



PITCH IN ON THE SHT

BLUE BLAZE BLITZ: Join the Superior Hiking Trail Association's effort to re-blaze the Trail. (Blazes are those blue marks you see along the Trail to mark it.) We're hosting two Blitz weekends on July 13-14 and October 5-6. Sign up at: bit.ly/BlueBlazeBlitz.

SHT TRAIL USER SURVEY: This summer, SHTA is conducting a survey of trail users, with support from the University of Minnesota-Duluth, to get a better sense of who uses the Trail, why, how, and their perceptions and understanding of the SHT. We need your help conducting the survey at SHT trailheads between June and September. Learn more and get registered at: bit.ly/SHTusersurvey.

Find more opportunities to get involved at superiorhiking.org/calendar or Facebook (@supt hike).