

# RIDGELINE

A PUBLICATION OF THE SUPERIOR HIKING TRAIL ASSOCIATION

FALL 2020



## THE BEST KIND OF MEDICINE

**U**NPRECEDENTED TIMES,” a phrase uttered all too commonly these days. This statement holds more weight than you know to a new executive director and a newly appointed Board chair. The last six months have been a whirlwind for the SHTA as we’ve adjusted to a new norm and kept up with the popular demand of the Trail. You can’t strategically plan or annually budget a once-in-a-lifetime pandemic. It just sort of lands in your lap like a rogue ember from your evening campfire. What do you do?

One of the unintended consequences of the pandemic has been a return to the simple pleasures and complex offerings of time spent outdoors. That’s good news for a trail association.

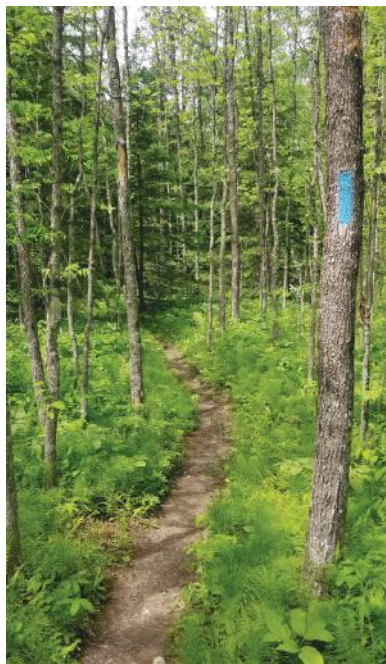
(Continued on page 2)



## The Best Medicine (continued from cover)

### A MUCH-NEED DOSE OF TRAIL THERAPY

“What would we do if we couldn’t be outside?” This is a rhetorical question we’ve heard repeatedly during the time of COVID-19. The importance of the Superior Hiking Trail has grown during these unprecedented times. COVID could have been the Grinch that stole summer—all things that bring Midwesterners joy—fireworks, town festivals, overnight camp, 5ks and trail races—all cancelled. Summer could have just stood still for many of us. But much like the people of Whoville, ingenious, opportunistic trail users looked out the window and decided to use this time to better know places closer to home. Seasoned hikers and newcomers alike found themselves exploring the Superior Hiking Trail together. We heard tales of



▲ Whether you seek immersive “forest bathing” or the simple pleasures of a walk in the woods, the Trail affords a space to heal and reflect.



▲ New pandemic safety protocols, like wearing masks and sanitizing tools, were developed to help prevent the spread of the virus during our volunteer activities. Photo: Willie Bittner

lots of cars at trailheads, tents at campsites, people at overlooks, and you-know-what at latrines, and we’ve understood the urge to escape to the northwoods.

Through it all, the Trail has been a safe place for people to unplug from the compounding stressors of society. Watching our footing on a rooty section of trail or catching our breath on top of a panoramic peak has helped rejuvenate us. While there are moments that jar us back to reality, the Trail has afforded us a chance to connect to something greater than ourselves.

After a long day, weekend or week on the Trail, with tired muscles and a peaceful mind, we’ve returned to our daily lives reinvigorated and ready to take on the next set of challenges ahead.

### LEADING THROUGH IT ALL

The SHTA never anticipated the critical role our organiza-

tion would play for the recreation community during a pandemic. SHTA quickly adjusted volunteer training, events, and maintenance projects to assure public safety and a basic level of maintenance. The Board nimbly assessed the financial wellness of the organization to weather the unknown future. (At the time of writing, we’re still waiting on the legislature to appropriate funds for a \$450,000 grant from the state’s Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund that was set to arrive this past July.) We closed our Trail Information Center and beefed up our offerings in our online store. Staff and volunteers worked together to determine which projects could safely move forward and what needed to be postponed or contracted out. Uniquely, SHTA has done this all while also experiencing a huge influx of users and wear and tear of the Trail.

We also began to reckon with the racism that still exists in our country and in our state. The killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed made clear that we must play an active role in making positive change. We’ve recognized that racial inequity and injustice have served as barriers, preventing communities of color from enjoying the Trail and the outdoors generally. But we also know the core of the SHT experience is connection—with people, history, nature, and one’s self. The Trail has provided a spiritual recharge that keeps people coming back year after year; it has enriched the lives of tens of thousands of visitors over several decades. We have committed ourselves to take mean-



▲ Like the signs, blazes, and maps we've provided to navigate the SHT, we've committed our organization to lead the way for a more inclusive and welcoming experience on the Trail.


ingful action—to listen, learn, and strive for inclusion—to ensure everybody feels welcome to enjoy the SHT and find the connection that is so healing.

## EMBRACING CHANGE IS WHAT WE MUST DO

As the SHTA moves through uncharted territory of sustaining a healthy nonprofit and well-maintained Trail through a pandemic, we will rely on the leadership of our Board, staff and seasoned volunteers to work together to identify creative solutions. But more than ever we will rely on you, dear SHT user, to simply be kind—the best kind of medicine to help us all recover from the challenges of this year.

This moment calls for empathy—for others on the Trail, for our agency partners, and for our devoted staff and volunteers. Our office doors are closed to the public, but know that our staff are working harder than ever to connect with you and other trail users through other plat-

forms. Our volunteers may not be able to gather in large groups, but they continue to care for the Trail independently or in small teams to lop and whip and beat back the boreal brush. We will continue to do our best with all of the tools and energy we have to give the Trail the love it needs and deserves.

People refer to “the before times.” This sentiment rings true, as we’ve all been catapulted into a new reality. We can try to get back to where we were, or look ahead to where we want to go from here. The SHTA has already learned and grown significantly during the last six months. There are things we miss, like our volunteer events, that we can’t wait to bring back when it’s safe to do so. But this year has offered us a moment to reflect and be more mindful of every step we take on the path ahead. We’re grateful to have you with us on this long journey. 

— By LISA LUOKKALA and BECKY LORAAS ZRIMSEK

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



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PEOPLE.  
NATURE.  
FOOTPATH.

### COVID-19 AND THE SHT: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Since the first days of the pandemic, we've worked to protect the health and well-being of our trail users, volunteers, staff, and the broader SHT community. Find updates, safety tips, and more resources on our COVID-19 page: [superiorhiking.org/covid-19](http://superiorhiking.org/covid-19)



# FROM THE OVERLOOK



## CHARLIE AND THE AEDs

**W**hile many volunteers will report working to build and maintain the SHT is by and large a healthy and rewarding activity, there are inevitable risks associated with strenuous exercise in the outdoors. We've continued to make progress to ensure volunteering with SHTA is as safe as possible. Our latest safety improvement: an automatic defibrillator (AED) program.

With guidance from the SHTA, volunteer Charlie Gallet, a nationally-recognized paramedic from Duluth, offered his expertise to identify a lightweight, portable, and battery-powered AED that would work well out on the Trail and train staff and contractors to use them safely. We purchased three AEDs this spring—two to be deployed with trail maintenance crews and one for other sponsored activities—and joined the Arrowhead EMS Association to gain further assistance with training and medical direction. We hope to never use them, but we're grateful to have them with us on the Trail.

► **The new AEDs (the yellow device pictured) have been deployed to trail work projects this year alongside first aid and sanitation supplies.** Photo: Charlie Gallet



## NO MORE "HOKEY-POKEY FRANKENSTEIN" AT SAWMILL CREEK

**I**f you crossed over the Sawmill Creek Pond in the last few years, you know what one trail user meant when they described the structure there as "Hokey-Pokey Frankenstein." That long, narrow boardwalk over a beaver dam had fallen into a state of disrepair, striking fear into the hearts of trail users attempting to cross without going for a swim.

With grant funding from the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund, we hired trail building contractor Trail Source to remove the failed walkway and replace it with a Wickcraft Boardwalk which features a galvanized steel frame guaranteed to last 100 years. Nearby, Trail Source also installed elevated boardwalk across perpetually muddy areas to help make the route even more sustainable. While the boardwalk over the pond was still being finished at the time of writing—and thus, no ribbon cutting pictures to share—we wanted to let you know you'll never again have to do the Hokey-Pokey on a Frankenstein-y structure to avoid falling into Sawmill Creek Pond.

## TRAIL INFORMATION CENTER MOVES ONLINE

**W**here can I get a guidebook and map? Are the SHT shared backcountry campsites open? How can I support the Trail?

In a normal year, you could have questions like these answered during a visit to our Trail Information Center (TIC) in Two Harbors. But to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, the SHTA decided to keep the TIC closed to the public for the duration of the 2020 trail season and move our entire retail selection online. You can visit [shop.superiorhiking.org](https://shop.superiorhiking.org) to order guidebooks, maps, and gear to support the Trail and begin to plan your next adventure on the SHT.

We also know how important it is to connect with and learn from other trail users. This summer, we hosted two virtual webinars with expert SHT users Annie Nelson and Mike Ward to educate trail users on topics like thru-hiking and backpacking gear. Find recordings of these webinars on our website blog, and watch for more virtual events to come!

## Recreate Responsibly on the SHT

**A**s more visitors discover the SHT, it's more important than ever to recreate responsibly and be mindful of your impact on the Trail, the surrounding environment, and fellow trail users. You can help!

- Practice Leave No Trace.
- Plan ahead to follow guidelines to protect your health amid the pandemic.
- Check Trail Conditions before you go at [superiorhiking.org/trail-conditions](https://superiorhiking.org/trail-conditions).

■ Be welcoming and kind to everyone you encounter on the Trail.

These simple steps can make a huge difference to keep the SHT in great shape for all to enjoy.

# SOLVING SOGGY SHT




**Tim Nix and Mike Ward observe how water moves across different slopes to better understand how it'll move across the Trail.**

**W**ith new pandemic safety protocols in place for SHTA volunteer events, we hosted two small-group skill building workshops for our trail crews that resulted in a more resilient, enjoyable SHT.

In July, Tim “Trail Eyes” Malzhan led an extended workshop on “trail plumbing”—that is, effective devices and techniques to keep people on and water off the Trail—at a few problematic spots on the beloved and beleaguered Bean and Bear Lakes Loop. (See

our crew in action: scenes from the workshop are highlighted on the SHTA’s YouTube channel.)

Willie Bittner of Great Lakes Trailbuilders led another training in August focused on best practices to shape, cut, move, and set stones on the Trail. The small group of SHTA staff, volunteers, and partners from the Superior National Forest constructed three new staircases on the aging spur trail to Britton Peak, all three built for decades of use by those climbing to the awe-inspiring peak.

Just as important as the impact these learning-by-working sessions had on the Trail is the depth of knowledge, improved skill set, and confidence gained by participants. Effective water management techniques and resilient stonework are sure to feature prominently in our trail renewal efforts for years to come. 



▲ “Trail Plumbing” workshop participants installed several new water management devices like this drain.



▲ Willie Bittner shared his stonework wisdom with Volunteer Crew Leaders Steph Hoff and Michael Loscheider as they constructed new steps.



PHOTO BY STEPH HOFF

◀ Finding local stone on the SHT is easy; breaking, shaping, and installing it takes focus, skill, and the right tools.



PHOTO BY WILLIE BITTNER

▲ Putting new skills to work, our trail crew built three staircases like this to reinforce the spur to Britton Peak.




# TRAIL STEWARDSHIP TEAMS BEAT BACK THE BRUSH

This year, SHTA launched an exciting new volunteer effort we've titled Trail Stewardship Teams (TSTs) to provide additional support for our trail adopters (and their friends) to give the SHT the love it deserves. These teams have stepped up to complete lopping and trail clearing duties, but we hope to train and support them to do

other critical work, such as trail plumbing, tread maintenance, and latrine digging.

Two inaugural teams have been formed: the *Beaver Bay Lopping Task Force* and the *Primo Lutsen Group*. Both TSTs ventured out for multiple work weekends through the spring and summer to clear downed trees, expose trail temporarily lost to overgrown brush, and evaluate

problem spots to make a game plan for next year's work.

We aim to bring on additional TSTs in the coming years to welcome new volunteers into the fold, provide long-time contributors with more training and support, and make sure the Trail gets the care it needs and deserves. 



▲ **Beaver Bay Lopping Task Force.**  
Photo: Mike Ward



▲ **Primo Lutsen Group.** Photo: Scott Lagaard



▲ **Certified sawyer and TST leader Scott Lagaard took care of downed trees during their work weekends.**  
Photo: Scott Lagaard



◀ **Adopter Jeff Miller cleared trail with the Beaver Bay TST to help trail users avoid getting lost in the weeds.**  
Photo: Jeff Miller

## CARES ACT HELPS YOU GIVE BACK

The CARES Act that Congress passed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic allows folks like you to deduct donations to a charity like the SHTA up to \$300 (or \$600 if you're married-filing-jointly) on your 2020 federal tax return—even if you take the standard deduction. It's yet another tax-wise incentive to support the Trail!

# WELCOMING NEW EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR **LISA LUOKKALA**




**Lisa and her furry friend Fern on the SHT in Duluth.**

**T**he SHTA is excited to introduce you to our new executive director, Lisa Luukkala! Lisa joined the SHTA staff in late July 2020 after serving as Senior Parks Planner for the City of Duluth since 2015. Prior to her work at the City, Lisa led a health policy coalition that focused on creating health equity in Duluth.

She holds her Master's in Advocacy and Political Leadership from the University of Minnesota-Duluth and her Bachelor's in Travel and Tourism from Eastern Michigan University.

"As a resident of Duluth for nearly 15 years and an outdoor recreation professional, the Superior Hiking Trail has been an integral part of the landscape I live in, recreate on, and steward," said Lisa. "I look forward to assuring the sustainability of the Trail for future generations to experience its profound benefits."


The SHTA Board of Directors reviewed more than 50 competitive applications from all over the country for the executive director position.

"We're delighted that Lisa has joined us, and know that she will build on the successes of past leaders, volunteers, and staff," said Becky Loraas Zrimsek, chair of the SHTA's Board. "Lisa brings her own skills and strategic vision to the important work to protect, renew, and enhance the Superior Hiking Trail." 

## ANNUAL TRAIL CLOSURES COMING SOON

**E**ACH YEAR, much of the SHT north of Duluth is closed for firearm deer season in November, as well as a special hunting closure in Jay Cooke State Park in December. Other hunting seasons begin along the Trail in September; we recommend wearing blaze orange or other brightly colored clothing for your fall color hikes.

The SHT inside the City of Duluth (between Martin Road and 131st Ave W trailheads) is also closed by the city for a short period each fall during the freeze/thaw cycle to protect the SHT and other natural surface trails from damage.

Please respect the wishes of our public and private landowners! Watch for Trail alerts and signage to stay off the Trail during these closures. 

## NEW TRAIL MAPS POINT TO YOUR NEXT SHT ADVENTURE



▲ The *Trail Atlas*, which is unbound and packed in a resealable waterproof bag, is the perfect companion to our guidebook and databook.

### TRAIL USERS REJOICE!

Highly-detailed, full-color topographic trail maps for the SHT are now available in print and in a digital format via the Avenza Maps mobile app.

The new maps, offered as a comprehensive *Trail Atlas of the Superior Hiking Trail* or smaller *SHT Map Series* sets, provide essential information for trip planning and navigation to make it easier than ever before to access and enjoy the SHT. Whether you carry a paper copy, rely on Avenza Maps, or use both, features like a "zoomed-in" scale, mile markers, and hundreds of points of interest will help you understand where you are and where you're going on the SHT.

The *Trail Atlas* and *SHT Map Series* sets are available now at [shop.superiorhiking.org](http://shop.superiorhiking.org).





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▼ Photo of Bean Lake by Aaron Wernimont



## A SHOWCASE FOR SUSTAINABLE SHT

**F**or decades the SHT had been co-located on ski trails at Pincushion Mountain, leaving hikers with a less-than-optimal route in the summer and skiers with boot tracks on groomed trails in the winter. Thankfully, that story now belongs to the SHT archive—the new foot-travel only route at Pincushion Mountain is now open for year-round use!

Local trailbuilders Dirt Candy LLC. helped build the roughly 2.5-mile route that features sturdy stone steps, well-designed drainage features, and some of

the most beautiful boardwalks on the entire SHT. The project stands as an excellent example of collaboration among partners; the US Forest Service and North Superior Ski and Run Club both played major roles, while a Federal Recreational Trails Program grant helped make this dream a reality. The best part: the path is constructed so well that you won't need to watch every single step to avoid tripping. Instead, you'll take in the sights and sounds of the forest on your way to the stunning Pincushion Mountain Overlook. 