

celebrating 40 years RIDGELINE

A PUBLICATION OF THE SUPERIOR HIKING TRAIL ASSOCIATION

FALL 2026



Protecting the Place We Love

The thick June fog has long since lifted from Lake Superior, giving way to crisp autumn air scented with fallen leaves. Somewhere overhead, a peregrine falcon swoops toward the shoreline while hawks ride the thermals south. A hiker pauses at an overlook, watching light dance across the world's largest freshwater lake before continuing along a ribbon of trail that feels as permanent as the bedrock beneath it.

Yet this timeless scene on the Superior Hiking Trail has never been a guarantee.

Photo by John Steitz

Forty Years of Stewardship And the Next Chapter of the Superior Hiking Trail

Today, 300 miles of footpath stretches across northeastern Minnesota, connecting people to waterfalls, lush forests, inland lakes, and some of the Midwest's most breathtaking overlooks. Every bridge, campsite, and carefully placed stone step exists because generations of people believed the North Shore's beauty should be shared.

As we celebrate the Superior Hiking Trail

A Trail Worth Building

The Superior Hiking Trail was born at just the right moment. By the mid-1980s, long-distance hiking was gaining popularity, and many believed Minnesota deserved a world-class trail of its own. A feasibility study led by Superior National Forest Tofte District Ranger Lee Scharr brought the Superior National Forest, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, North Shore communities, businesses, and residents around a shared idea: create a footpath tracing the North Shore ridgeline.

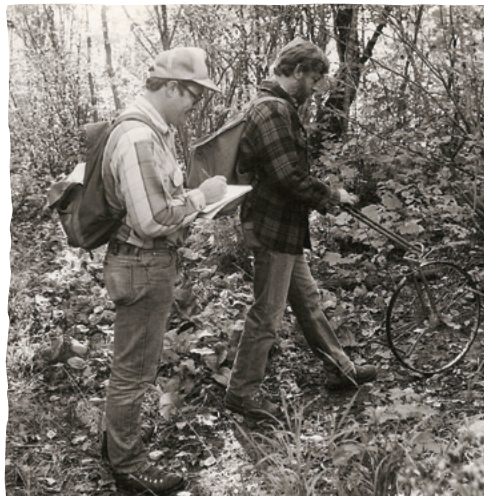
"In January 1986, we held our first meeting with interested community members to see if there was support for pursuing funding," Scharr later wrote. "The response was overwhelmingly positive." Soon after, the Superior Hiking Trail Association was formed.

"It was kind of an experiment," remembers Tricia Ryan, the Association's first staff member and executive director. "The state would help build the Trail, and the nonprofit organization

Association's 40th Anniversary, we asked four people whose perspectives span the Trail's history to reflect on what it took to get here—and what it will take to carry the Trail forward. Their stories tell how countless people continue to come together to build, steward, and protect this treasure so future generations can experience the same moments of awe and wonder that first inspired them.

would maintain it. And it really, really worked."

A 1987 Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCMR) grant and support from founding members launched major construction. Armed with little more than a topographic map, compass, and pencil, Trail Coordinator Tom Peterson bushwhacked through bug-filled forests searching for rocky outcrops, waterfalls, and the next unforgettable view.



Early Trail Coordinator Tom Peterson and Mark Wester scout a route through the North Shore woods.

Securing that route, however, required more than enthusiasm. "The greatest challenge was private [land] ownership," recalls longtime volunteer and trail scout John Green. "It's always a delicate situation." Many landowners welcomed the Trail; others did not. "In those cases, we simply had to change the route and find another way around."

Where permission was granted, agreements varied.

Some formal, others built on trust and a handshake. As a web of relationships were built, the Trail began to take shape.

A Growing Community

As the Trail grew through the 1990s, so did the community that had formed around it. The Association's first office occupied a corner of Ryan's home before moving above a Two Harbors dental office. Members and volunteers brought their voices, skills, and resources. "There was just so much volunteering," Ryan remembers,

"so many things that people were willing to share." Green echoes that legacy: "Volunteers have been the heart of the organization from the very beginning. They've always been important, and they'll continue to be important."

Annual member meetings became part business meeting, part hiking weekend, and part

reunion. Early *Ridgeline* stories celebrated not only the landscape, but the friendships formed through caring for it. As one contributor reflected, "Something else this hike has given to each of us (besides blisters) is a sense of community."

That growing community included the landowners whose generosity and partnership have been essential to the Trail's success. By welcoming the Trail across their properties, they helped make its growth possible. Ryan reflects that landowners "hold the key to whether your trail is continuous or there's gaps." Building and maintaining those relationships required trust, communication, and care. Keeping the Trail intact meant "making sure that relationship was strong



Longtime volunteer John Green, center, speaks at the 1992 SHTA Annual Member Meeting at Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center.

and addressing access challenges as quickly, diplomatically, and as carefully as you could."



By 2016, the SHT community had plenty of history (and Trail gear) to celebrate. Members and volunteers show off decades of SHT

style during a fun-filled fashion show, reflecting the friendships and sense of community that grew alongside the Trail.

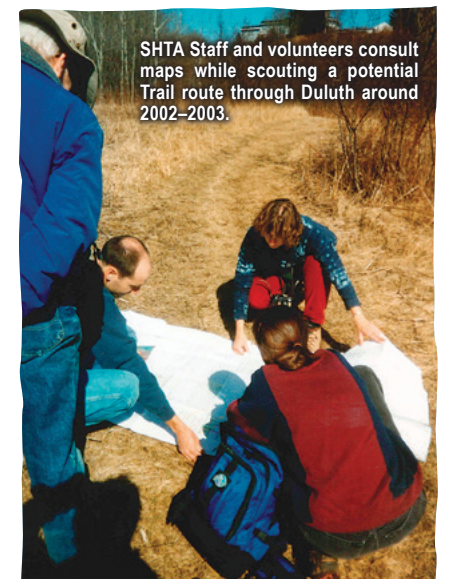
Caring for What Was Built

Throughout the 2000s, the Superior Hiking Trail continued pushing south through Duluth, bringing the vision of a continuous footpath closer to reality. At first, then Executive Director Gayle Coyer wasn't convinced it could be done.

"I was really dubious about the whole idea," she recalls. "Then Andrew Slade wrote an op-ed saying, 'Wouldn't it be amazing to have the Superior Hiking Trail run through the city of Duluth?' I remember thinking, 'That's the guy with the vision.'"

Coyer insisted the entire corridor be identified and permissions secured before construction began. It became a years-long, "stepwise process." Looking back, she reflects, "Somehow it all worked out."

As the final sections were connected, the work shifted toward caring for what existed. Aging infrastructure, growing use, and the 2009 ice storm and 2012 flood reinforced that a trail is never truly finished and prompted stronger, more resilient design. That philosophy continues through the Trail Renewal Program, with major projects rebuilding heavily used sections for a changing climate.



SHTA Staff and volunteers consult maps while scouting a potential Trail route through Duluth around 2002-2003.

Extending the SHT through the city required years of careful route planning, landowner relationships, and securing permission before construction could begin.

Forging Forward into the Future

For forty years, the Superior Hiking Trail has invited us to slow down: to trade busy schedules for birdsong, hear rivers beneath spring ice, and watch maples set the Sawtooth Mountains ablaze. Along the way, it has offered perspective, belonging, healing, and a lasting relationship with the natural world. From the beginning, the Trail has depended on the generosity of private landowners, partnerships with public agencies, and support from thousands of volunteers and members. As Coyer reflects, “You think you have your trail corridor secured, and then something changes.” Land ownership evolves.

Forests change. Development pressures grow.

Stewardship is an ongoing promise to the landscape and to one another.

Today, that promise asks us to protect not only the footpath, but the corridor of land surrounding it—the forests, ridgelines, views, and sense of wildness that define the Trail experience. It means strengthening land access, securing permanent easements, building infrastructure to be resilient in the case of extreme weather, and continuing to grow the community that will care for it.

Current Executive Director Lisa Luukkala

hopes that forty years from now, hikers will still find the Trail much as generations before them have: welcoming, scenic, challenging, and wild enough to offer solitude and adventure. She hopes more people from every background see themselves here, because everyone deserves the chance to discover a place where they belong.

Luukkala describes the Association as entering

its “middle age.” The excitement of building something new has matured into the privilege of caring for something deeply loved. “Every volunteer, every advocate, every staff person, we’ve all just kind of handed this baton down the Trail,” she says. Each generation has played a part in the Trail’s

story, while inviting the next to discover what this place means to them and how they might help care for it.

When asked what role members and volunteers play in that future, her answer is simple: “They are the future.” The Association is not separate from the people who support it. “We’re simply an association of people who care deeply about this Trail. Our success, and honestly our existence, is only possible because of our members, donors, volunteers, and advocates.”



Fall colors stretch toward Lake Superior from Pincushion Mountain, capturing the forests, ridgelines, views, and sense of wildness that protecting the Trail corridor helps preserve.

Dan Dorland - D2 Photographic



Volunteers with the All-Femme Trail Crew work together near Bean and Bear Lakes in 2025, helping care for a Trail where everyone can feel welcome, find belonging, and have a role in its future.



The Trail is a living link between people, place, and purpose, inspiring generations of explorers, and continues to be sustained by those who love it.

Photo by CeCe Boyle

A special thank you to our ‘*Forty Years of Stewardship*’ interviewees: **Tricia Ryan, John Green, Gayle Coyer, and Lisa Luukkala**. Your contributions to the Trail are appreciated! Furthermore, thanks to **Alyssa Johnson** for conducting the interviews and supporting our 40th Anniversary storytelling efforts. We are grateful to you all for sharing the story of the Superior Hiking Trail from the past 40 years!

Today, the Superior Hiking Trail has become part of people’s lives. Families and friends gather here. People get married on the Trail, celebrate milestones, heal from loss, challenge themselves, and return again and again because this place has become part of who they are.

The Trail, as Lisa describes it, is “alive”—a living, breathing thing sustained by everyone who loves it. The next chapter has already begun. As we look toward the next 40 years, each of us can carry this legacy forward and protect the Trail we love.

What’s Next: Increasing our Capacity for Trail Protection

Throughout the year of festivities and merriment celebrating 40 years of the Superior Hiking Trail, the question remains, “What is the focus of the next 40 years for the SHT?” While we can’t predict every need that may arise, we’re confident in our decision to put protecting the trail alignment and experience into perpetuity at the top of our list.

The SHT is vulnerable to losing critical sections of our trail alignment due to changing land use, development, and ownership. The SHTA has laid the framework to address these challenges over the last five years. In 2021, we restructured the Association to include a full-time Trail Stewardship Director to focus on land use needs and address long-range planning for trail protection. In 2022 we completed the title reviews on 145 parcels, creating an official vulnerable parcels list in 2024.

But the critical next step was finding a partner who could help the SHTA expedite this critical work, and we found that with the Minnesota Land Trust.



Our organizations have committed to a multi-year partnership to develop and launch a comprehensive Trail Protection Plan and systems for the Superior Hiking Trail, meeting both our organizations’ goals along the North Shore. This project will build a Trail Protection Program that not only addresses the current issues, but takes

the long view and creates proactive, future-forward strategies to protect the Trail and conserve important lands on the North Shore.

Trail Protection means ensuring the continuity and immersive hiking experience of the Superior Hiking Trail is conserved for the benefit of the hiking public today and into the future. By strategically partnering with Minnesota Land Trust we can proactively coordinate conservation activities along the North Shore, not just between our two entities, but with many other potential partners that will be engaged in the process.

Much like the SHT’s origin story, our next 40 years will rely on strong relationships, shared vision, and the hard work of people in partnership along the North Shore and beyond!

Hunting Season Notification

There are multiple opportunities to hunt in Minnesota each fall—be aware that fellow outdoor enthusiasts may be hunting on or near the SHT. For your safety, please educate yourself on hunting seasons and wear blaze orange while on Trail. If you intend to use the SHT during firearms deer season (November 7-22, 2026), plan ahead because parts of the Trail close. For the full list of closures, visit our Trail Conditions page:

superiorhiking.org/trail-conditions



SUPERIOR HIKING TRAIL (SHT)

Connecting people to nature since 1986



407K
TRAIL USER
VISITS
ANNUALLY

64
TRAILHEADS



94
BACKCOUNTRY
CAMPSITES

300 MILES OF TRAIL
along Minnesota's North Shore

LOWEST POINT:
Lake Superior Shoreline
602 feet

HIGHEST POINT:
Rosebush Ridge
1,829 feet

NORTHERN TERMINUS
270 Degree Overlook
MN/Canada border



SOUTHERN TERMINUS:
Wild Valley Rd Trailhead
MN/WI border

of Lives Changed
IN 40 YEARS?

YOU TELL US!
Share your Trail story!



600
Volunteers

VOLUNTEER-
POWERED
MEMBER-
SUPPORTED

10,000
Volunteer
hours per year

4,000
Members

250
Land Owners
and Managers

SHT
Traverses
8
STATE PARKS
2
STATE FORESTS
1
NATIONAL FOREST

How do you travel the Trail?



40 years of
Blazing Trail

1986
Superior Hiking Trail
Association Established

1993
First Guidebook
Published

1995
First Known Thru-Hiker

2011
25th Anniversary
282 miles, 86 campsites,
3,500 members, and
300 volunteers

2017
Final section built!
SHT Border-to-Border
Vision Achieved

2018
Trail Renewal Program
Launched

2019
SHT Becomes Part of North
Country National Scenic
Trail (NCT)

2024
First-Ever Trail Master Plan
Completed

2026
40 Years to Celebrate!



superiorhiking.org



Built, managed, maintained, promoted, and protected by the Superior Hiking Trail Association (SHTA)

Celebrating Four Decades with Story and Connection

We have been celebrating forty years by sharing stories and bringing our incredible Trail community together to mark this milestone.

SHT's Ultimate Birthday Celebration

On National Trails Day, June 6, hundreds of hikers hit the Trail and afterward gathered at four birthday parties along the Trail corridor to celebrate the Trail's 40th. It was an unforgettable

day where generations of enthusiasts got together to share joy and love for the SHT. Don't miss the celebration video on our 40th webpage!



During the Ultimate Birthday Celebration, Elise Radaj and friends hiked to the Southern Terminus while Kathleen Neshek shared a photo of the Northern Terminus.



Hundreds of Trail enthusiasts including members and volunteers, Senator Klobuchar, and mascot Birchy Beaver celebrated 40 years together—High five to that!

Blazing Trail Podcast

In our eight-episode series, we heard from a couple who fell in love while volunteering with the SHTA, a North Shore grandmother who established a family tradition of taking each of her grandchildren on a SHT hike when they turned five, hikers who celebrated the SHT's 40th Birthday on June 6, and more. Listen to Blazing Trail on WTIP's website or subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.



Blazing Trail podcast producer Staci Drouillard interviews section adopter, former board member, and thru-hiker, Mike Ward, about his experience celebrating the Trail's 40th Birthday.



Photo by Rudi Hargesheimer

In 1990 at Gooseberry Falls State Park, the Trail community celebrated half of the Trail being completed. Of course, there was cake!

From the Overlook

How did the Superior Hiking Trail become the trail it is today? This series of short stories trace the Trail's journey from a bold idea to the current 300-mile footpath. This chronologically shows how the collective efforts of visionaries in the 60s slowly grew into a Trail that today is a beloved Minnesota household name with international recognition. Catch the final few chapters in the SHTA monthly e-newsletter, *Trail Mix*.

The special 2026 Hike 40 Challenge patch is inspired by an old photo of a volunteer painting a blue blaze on the SHT, one of the many trail blazers who made the Trail possible. If you traveled 40 miles on the SHT in 2026, submit completion form to receive your certificate and patch. AND, if you finished

Hike 40 Challenge



Visit our 40th Anniversary webpage at: superiorhiking.org/40th-anniversary or scan the QR code.

every mile of the SHT in 2026, submit the End-2-Ender competition form to be recognized for your accomplishment. Submit the form online, which can be found on our 40th Anniversary webpage.



Two SHTA Volunteers Win NCTA Awards

Since the beginning, the Superior Hiking Trail has been volunteer powered. That legacy continues today with two SHTA volunteers receiving Trail Maintainer awards from the North Country Trail Association.



Jerome Lemke

Since moving back to Minnesota four years ago, Jerome Lemke has become one of SHTA's most relied upon and experienced volunteers. He is a section adopter, certified chainsaw instructor, crew leader, and go-to "whatever needs to be done" person.

His intentionality in creating constructive environments for new volunteers truly makes Jerome's contributions

stand out. His leadership and willingness to take on various responsibilities is deeply appreciated.

"What can I do to help?" are the words often asked by Kit Grasyon. Kit has adopted two sections of the SHT, and often goes above and beyond responding to needs like major blow-down events, washed out boardwalks, and overfull latrines. Kit recently became an instructor and certifier of sawyers. His positive attitude and mentorship of fellow volunteers makes him a valued member of our Trail community.



Kit Grasyon

Thank you to Jerome and Kit for your dedicated service to the SHT!

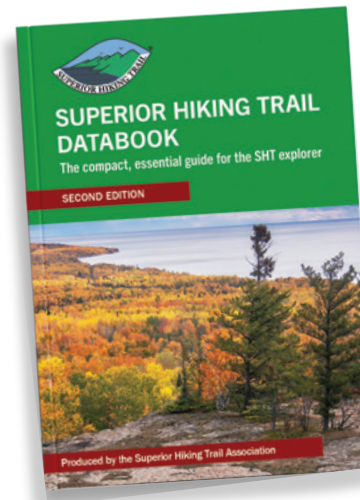


Business Member Thru-Hiker Support

Thank you to Rocksteady Running for supporting the Trail as a business member at the thru-hiker level. As the race organizer of one of the oldest 100-mile trail ultras in the country, as well as races of a variety of distances on the SHT, we are delighted that runners can experience the challenge and awe of the northern Minnesota landscape that the SHT traverses. Your contribution keeps the Trail in great shape for all Trail users, from ultramarathoners to casual saunterers.

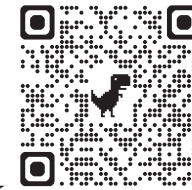
We appreciate your generosity! www.superiorfalltrailrace.com

Databook 2.0 Available Now



We are excited to officially release version 2.0 of the Superior Hiking Trail Databook. Version 1.0 sold out this summer, and version 2.0 is ready to go with updated information. Our Databook is the cliff notes version of the Guidebook. It is smaller in size and contains only the most vital information on the SHT. Ideal for backpackers and thru-hikers, this compact, essentials-only publication features

elevation profiles, point-to-point mileage, and key information about the SHT (e.g. campsites and trailheads). It is available as a physical book or e-book in our Trail Store.



Scan to shop the online Trail Store

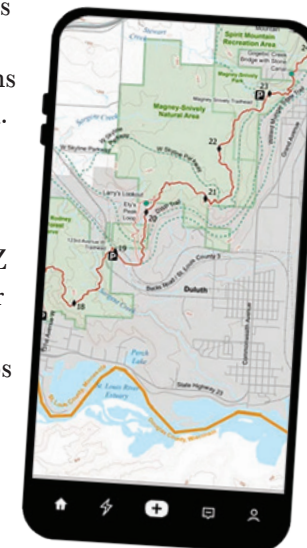
Digital Maps Update

We previously used Avenza to offer digital maps of the SHT. However, this past spring Avenza was purchased by another company and ended their Map Store offering. As a result, SHTA staff conducted an analysis of the current digital map product landscape to provide recommendations to the SHTA board for a path forward.

We are excited to announce that we are moving to a free data model. Soon all 41 geo-referenced PDF Trail Atlas maps along with GPX and KMZ data will be available to download for free through the SHTA website. Our official printed Atlas and section maps will continue to be maintained and sold in our online and physical Trail Store.

Furthermore, a partnership agreement is currently underway with FarOut, the premiere digital trail guide and offline mapping tool designed for long-distance hikers, backpackers, and outdoor explorers.

We look forward to continuing to deliver accurate, high quality digital map resources to the SHT community.



FarOut's GPS navigation apps and website are designed for long-distance hikers, backpackers, bikers, and paddlers.

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



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Front cover: Jay Cooke by John Steitz

Back cover: 270 Degree Overlook by Dan Dorland - D2 Photographic

VOLUME 41, ISSUE 2

PEOPLE.
NATURE.
FOOT PATH.

2026 Trail Renewal Program Updates

Multi-year project wrap up, bridge builds, and maintenance

After the border-to-border vision for the SHT was accomplished, focus turned to maintaining what had been created. Assessments in 2017 revealed muddy tread due to inadequate drainage, serious erosion issues, and aging infrastructure. As a result, the SHTA launched the Trail Renewal

Program, and has been leading ambitious Trail restoration projects with volunteers and contractors ever since. Our 40th year was no exception as numerous multi-year renewal projects wrapped up and our “bridging” theme began to take center stage.

Split Rock River Loop

In July the much-awaited Split Rock River Loop renewal was completed. This project started in 2024 with the closure of the east side followed by the renewal of the west side in 2025. In 2026, the project finished with:

- Reshaped tread.
- Drainage installed on the wayside spur.
- 1,000' of puncheon and boardwalk replaced.

In order to complete the project, and remove the “Big Bad Five” status from the section, eyes are set on a new bridge.

Cascade River Loop

Damaged by flooding in 2022, the multi-year Cascade River Loop renewal is now done. The project wrapped up with:

- 3 new staircases.
- Drainage installed on the wayside spur.
- 1,000' of puncheon and boardwalk replaced.

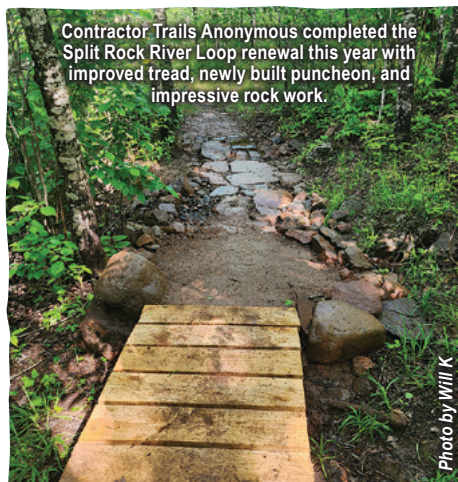
Additionally, volunteer crews performed maintenance on 1,000' of Trail, constructed two rock ford crossings, built two trail relocations (about 100' total), and brushed 500' of Trail.

Trailhead Improvements and Relocation

Multiple trailheads have been identified for rehabilitation. In 2026, maintenance at Fors Road and Kimball Creek included:

- Cleared trees and brush.
- Improved signage.
- Increased space by grading, ditching, and adding gravel.

Plans and permitting are also underway to relocate the Arrowhead Trailhead near Hovland to a larger location.



Thank you Project Funders!

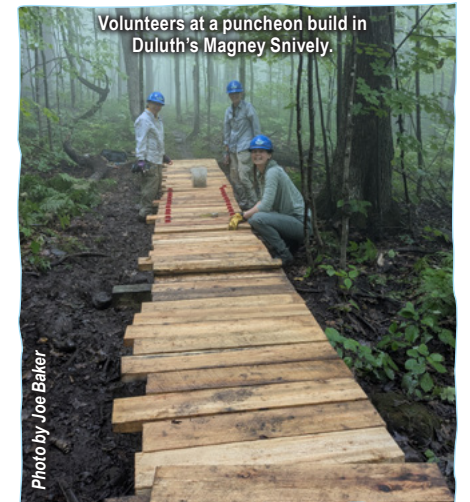
Funding for 2026 Trail projects is provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources, U.S. Forest Service, Federal Recreation Trails Program, and our generous members and donors.

Puncheon Builds

All along the Trail corridor volunteers built and replaced puncheon including:

- 400' replaced near County Road 6 (Finland).
- 500' constructed in Magney-Snively (Duluth) with contractor Joe Baker and Conservation Corps of Minnesota and Iowa.
- 72' added or fixed near Miller Creek (Duluth) by Larry Sampson and volunteers.
- 60' built at Wild Valley (Jay Cooke) by an all-femme crew.

We like to say that volunteers were puncheon above their weight!



Duluth Trail Maintenance

Our new southern contractor, Joe Baker, and Larry Sampson (retired but volunteering), led volunteers in Trail improvement projects throughout the Duluth area. Including:

- 11 cribbed steps, an 8' water bar, and a 7-step stone crossing built near Skyline.
- 250' reroute in Hartley Park.

Onion River Bridge

There is a new 55-foot fiber reinforced polymer bridge spanning the banks of the Onion River. The former bridge had a weight restriction of one-person crossing at a time and was removed to make way for the new bridge. SHTA staff lead volunteers in site prep and abutment construction, allowing Contractor Willie Bittner of Great Lakes Trailbuilders to lead volunteers in the installation of the new Onion River Bridge.



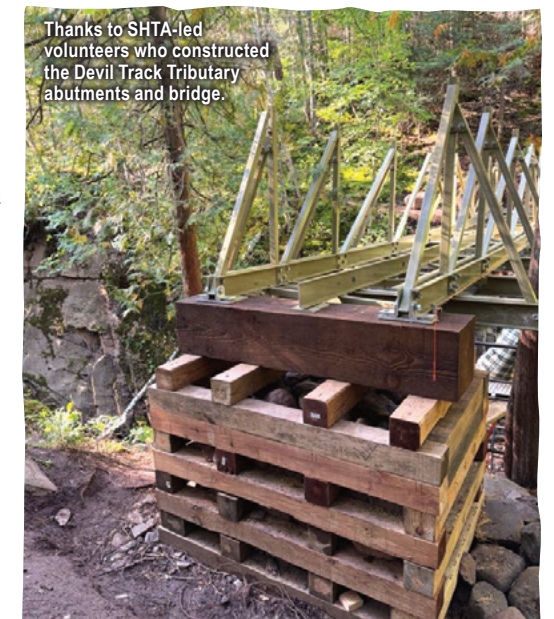
Contractor North Country Trailbuilding led volunteers in projects around Skyline including building these cribbed steps.

Devil Track Tributary Bridge

In 2025 the former Devil Track Tributary Bridge was removed due to structural concerns resulting in a 5-mile reroute including 3 miles on the road. This priority replacement project is now complete with a new 37-foot fiber reinforced polymer bridge.

Bean and Bear Lakes Loop Ribbon Cutting

The Bean and Bear Lakes Loop and Bear Lake Campsite multi-year renewal initiative is done thanks to volunteer teams putting the finishing touches on the project and updating signage. The SHTA held a ribbon cutting ceremony on September 25, 2026 to celebrate this achievement alongside elected officials, volunteers, and funders.





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Sunrise Raven



St. Louis
River
Sturgeon



Superior
Beaver



An Update from the Trail Store Manager

Thank you to everyone who stopped into the Trail Store during my first season as Trail Store Manager. I loved hearing the stories of your adventures on the Trail, as well as your appreciation for what we do here at the SHTA.—*Jill*

A special thank you to 2026 SHTA Artist of the Year Sam Zimmerman for sharing his SHT-inspired art: *St. Louis River Sturgeon*, *Sunrise Raven*, and *Superior Beaver*. You can shop apparel, totes, stickers, and more at shop.superiorhiking.org.

The Trail Store in downtown Two Harbors is closed for the season, but our online store is open 24/7. With the holidays just around the corner, consider a gift for the hiker on your list. All purchases support the maintenance and management of the Trail!

270 Degree Overlook by
Dan Dorland - D2 Photography