

FALL / WINTER 2025

rivertime

CONSERVING OUR WILD & SCENIC RIVERS



WILDRIVERSCONSERVANCY.ORG



WILD RIVERS

ST. CROIX CONSERVANCY NAMEKAGON

Photo Tanner Stofferahn

A SHARED RIVER STORY

One of the best parts of my job is hearing river stories from others. They might come from longtime supporters who have a lifetime of memories to share, or from someone experiencing the Riverway for the very first time. We all have a story—and these stories matter. They shape how we understand the past and guide where we go next.

Another great part of my job is creating new river stories of my own. This past summer, my wife Kristen and I spent a day paddling the St. Croix with our daughter Rachel, just after her summer camp counselor job and before she left for a semester abroad. Kristen planned a “paddle and pedal” day: we put in at Norway Point, paddled to Highway 70, and then biked back to our car.

It was one of those early September days that feels like summer’s encore—bright, breezy, and full of possibility. None of us had paddled that stretch before, so there was a healthy dose of adventure: reading the river, finding where the Kettle River joins in, scouting a lunch spot, and keeping my father-in-law’s canoe from collecting too many new scratches.

When we pulled out at Highway 70, we stashed the canoe and hopped on our bikes for the ride back through Crex Meadows, a place I’d heard about but never seen. Crossing that vast expanse of wetland was an unexpected highlight, full of wonder and quiet beauty. By the time we reached the car, we were happily tired and more than ready for ice cream.

There wasn’t anything extraordinary about the day, yet it was perfect. It’s now one of our stories, one that deepens our connection to the St. Croix and to one another. That’s what stories do. They create meaning, build connections, and remind us why this Riverway matters.

In this newsletter, we share more river stories through the many ways people connect with and care for this watershed. You’ll read about land protection efforts with our partners at the Minnesota Land Trust and Trust for Public Land; reflections from Deb Ryun, Tim Tougas, and Carol Dahl on the long history of our paddling trips (and the many untold stories still to come); and volunteer opportunities that can create new stories of stewardship.

As we wrap up 2025, we do so after a year that reminds us how much can change, and how vital our work remains in times of uncertainty. With the challenges that have affected our partners at the National Park Service, we’ve seen how essential it is for Wild Rivers Conservancy to stay adaptable, responsive, and deeply engaged.

That’s why, together with our board and staff, we’re launching a comprehensive strategic planning process to guide our next chapter. This is our opportunity to strengthen partnerships, engage communities in new ways, and ensure the Riverway continues to be protected, celebrated, and accessible for all.

Like any good story, the one ahead will hold moments of uncertainty, discovery, and renewal—but also the chance to forge ahead for these wild & scenic Rivers together. I look forward to hearing your river stories, making new ones, and writing the next chapter for Wild Rivers Conservancy—with you as part of it.



Matt Poppleton

Executive Director

LAND PROTECTION FOR A HEALTHY WATERSHED

Wild Rivers Conservancy works with partners throughout the watershed, linking forestry to water quality. Forests act as natural filters for water running off the land, and are essentially our best defense against water quality degradation.

Permanent Protection Program

This multi-year program is dedicated to promoting resilience within the St. Croix Watershed by permanently protecting high-quality private lands to increase biodiversity, enhance habitat connectivity, sequester carbon, improve water quality, create climate refugia, and defend against development in rapidly developing areas.

Since 2019, this program has helped landowners on the Minnesota side of the St. Croix Watershed enroll their land in conservation easements and fee-title acquisition permanent land protection programs.

Conservation Easement:

Voluntary agreements through which landowners agree to limit the future use and development of their property to permanently preserve its natural features. Landowners keep ownership of land and receive a one-time payment for the sale of development rights on the property. Public access is not required.

Fee-title Acquisition:

Landowners donate or sell their land to the Trust for Public Land who will manage and restore the land until it is transferred to the county or a conservation agency (ex. the DNR). Land protected through fee-title acquisition is protected as a natural area and opened for public access for the community to enjoy in perpetuity.



Keystone Woods Acquisition- 1833 acres
Photo: TPL/Hansi Johnson



Accomplishments to Date

- 5,919 ACRES PROTECTED
- 27.14 MILES OF SHORELINE
- 18 ACRES OF HABITAT RESTORED
- ~38 MILLION IN FUNDING TO DATE
- HABITAT FOR ~195 SPECIES OF GREATEST CONCERN

We are here to help

If you own 40 acres or more within the Minnesota side of the St. Croix Watershed you may qualify for our programs. Please Contact:



Alexis Monti

Climate Resiliency Specialist

amonti@wildriversconservancy.org

Program Partners



PADDLING THROUGH THE YEARS

CELEBRATING THE LEGACY OF THE CONSERVANCY'S RIVER ADVENTURES

For more than a decade, Wild Rivers Conservancy's multi-day paddle trips have brought together people who share a love for adventure, community, and the wild beauty of the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers. What began as a way to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Wild Rivers Conservancy in 2011 has grown into a beloved annual tradition that connects hearts to the river with every stroke.

A Legacy of Leadership and Connection

These paddle trips first launched under the leadership of Deb Ryun, former Executive Director of Wild Rivers Conservancy, who led them until her retirement in 2024. For Deb, the paddles were always more than a trip; they were a way to build community while deepening participants' relationship with the rivers.

"Each paddle strengthened my abilities and my friendships," Deb reflected. "Most important to each trip were the rich connections with the river and with each other. Every day brought moments of joy, laughter, and gratitude for the beauty that surrounds us."

Throughout the years, the paddles have moved from allowing up to 80 people on 6-day camping trips, to now more lovingly referred to as luxury paddles, with a much smaller group staying at local venues such as Lenroot Lodge and Holiday Inn.

"The purpose has always been the same: to celebrate the Riverway, bring new people to enjoy it, and help others build a relationship with the Riverway and the Conservancy." Deb states, "People protect what they love, and the more people who experience it, the more people are committed to its long-term health."

From evening programs that highlight river ecology and history to the camaraderie forged along the journey, the paddles remain a living expression of the Conservancy's goal to inspire and empower people to protect the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers.

Faces of the Paddle: Carol Dahl and Tim Tougas

Among the many people who have shaped the spirit of the paddles, Carol Dahl and Tim Tougas stand out as longtime supporters and participants whose dedication has helped these trips thrive year after year.

For Carol, who first joined a Conservancy paddle in 2015, the experience was transformative.

"I was brand new to kayaking and nervous," she shared. "But the team and other paddlers taught me what I needed to know and lifted my spirits when I was insecure. Despite the challenges of rain, wind, and wet camping, I kept coming back year after year."

What keeps her returning? "Fun! Fun! Fun!" Carol shares. "And the friendships. The spirit of the paddle trips is the quietness of the river and the connection with other nature lovers. I hope new paddlers come away with a spiritual connection to the river and a joy that stays with them."

Carol's stories of hailstorms, harmonica serenades, and hard-earned miles capture the essence of the paddle experience: a blend of adventure, reflection, and community.

Another steady presence on our paddle trips has been Tim Tougas. Often seen gliding along behind the group as our river sweep, Tim ensured that every participant reached their destination safely and with a smile.

"Tim has been an anchor of support for our paddle trips over the years. His calm pres-

ence, generosity, and love for the river have helped create the sense of community that makes these paddles so special,” shares Wendy Tremblay, Community Engagement Manager.

Tim’s generosity flows well beyond the river. He’s also been a trusted hand and mentor in maintaining our fleet of kayaks and trailers, helping keep our paddles running smoothly year after year.

A heartfelt thank you to Carol and Tim for their years of support, leadership, and friendship—both on and off the river.

Carrying the Tradition Forward

As the Conservancy looks ahead to the 2026 paddles, staff are excited to continue building on this incredible legacy. Each year brings new faces, new stories, and new memories that deepen our collective connection to these Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Even though our current 3-day Namekagon trips have taken on a drier approach than Carol’s days of wet camping, they still have the same sense of community.

Owen Anderson, Outdoor Program Coordinator, shares, “Participants will leave their 3-day paddle feeling a strengthened connection to the Riverway, their newfound community, and themselves. Traveling as a group along the Namekagon for three days provides a meaningful and unique opportunity to build these connections and carry them into your everyday life.”

Whether you’ve been paddling with us for years or are thinking about joining for the first time, we invite you to be part of this ongoing journey.

Next year’s 3-day Namekagon River Paddles promise to carry on that spirit. Registration opens January 1, 2026, and spots fill fast.

Learn more:
www.wilddriversconservancy.org/learn-explore/

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Photo: T. Stofferahn

Photo: T. Stofferahn

June 2024
Namekagon River

TIM T.
WILD DRIVERS

June 2024
Namekagon River

CAROL
WILD DRIVERS

FINDING YOUR VOLUNTEERING FIT

Due to the current federal government shutdown, our Joint Volunteer Program is paused. To make the best of this unfortunate situation, this can be a great time to find a role that fits your schedule, or think about pursuing a new volunteer role. Your time as a Riverway Volunteer helps us expand capacity across programs and events.

Volunteer activities can be physical such as scientific monitoring or materials maintenance, creative like contributing photography or art, or organizational like leading activities or assisting with office work.



"ONGOING" ROLES

We offer a variety of ongoing volunteer opportunities supporting our work in conservation, education, and recreation along the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. Roles include field work like Watershed Waste Warriors cleaning up litter, Riverway Ambassadors engaging visitors, and Beetle Parents raising beetles to control invasive species. Volunteers can also assist with programs as Discovery Aides, Kayak Krew, or Adventure Assistants, helping connect people to the river. Office and visitor center roles provide behind-the-scenes or public service support. These roles are great for volunteers looking for a regular schedule, and a building a sense of belonging and community.

"DONE IN A DAY"

Drop in style events such as the Namekagon Clean Up (pictured right) and weekend clean ups, are a great way to make an impact, even with a busy schedule. Drop in volunteer events are perfect for families, or introducing a friend to the Riverway.



Learn more about volunteer opportunities at www.wildridersconservancy.org/get-involved/volunteer/



Will Jenkins
Director of Development

TOGETHER, A RIVERWAY COMMUNITY

As we move closer to the end of a year that has presented various challenges, many of which have been labeled unprecedented, I'd like to offer a message of hope. While there are many novel aspects to the challenges we've been facing, we've persevered through many challenges in our organization's 114 year history. We've succeeded in continuing to protect this Riverway through various trials, threats, and shutdowns and it's through your support that we've pushed forward and made it through. That's why we need you now.

There's a common phrase that nonprofit partners provide a margin of excellence for our National Park Service sites and partners. In times like these, we provide a much needed buffer to ensure that our Park, our Riverway, is protected when our passionate NPS partners are prevented from doing so.

While past success doesn't guarantee future results, it gives hope that we, as a Riverway Community, can come together to support our rare and beautiful St. Croix National Scenic Riverway.

We have challenges. We have opportunities. We have each other.

Donate - Your financial gift directly ensures the Conservancy can sustain its vital work.

Volunteer - Your time supports our efforts to keep our Riverway wild, scenic, and accessible.

Be Heard - Make sure your elected representatives know how important our natural resources and our public lands and waterways are.

The Riverway community's passion and purpose are strong. While we've made amazing progress over the last century, now is the time to dig in and keep pushing forward to meet the challenges of today.

Will Jenkins

Make a gift today with the enclosed envelope or scan the QR code to give through our easy to use, secure, online donation platform.





WILD RIVERS

ST. CROIX CONSERVANCY NAMEKAGON

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STAY CONNECTED

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Photo: T. Stofferahn



Namekagon Three-Day Paddle Trip Registration Opens Jan. 1st at 12 PM

May 17-19, 2026

June 7-9, 2026

Learn more:
www.wildriversconservancy.org/learn-explore/