

20
23



WILD RIVERS

ST. CROIX CONSERVANCY NAMEKAGON

ANNUAL REPORT





Wild Rivers Conservancy is the official non-profit partner of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway

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Our Vision

A thriving watershed, forever accessible, scenic and wild.

Our Mission

Inspire stewardship to forever ensure the rare ecological integrity of the St. Croix and Namekagon Riverway.

Staff

2024, Current

Deb Ryun, Executive Director
Alex Bouthilet, Seed Farm Manager
Bethany Cox, Director of Development
Jennifer Hutchins Farrell, Business Manager
Hanna Mierow, Development Associate
Alexis Monti, Climate Resiliency Specialist
Katrina Schlicker, Environmental Education Coordinator
Tanner Stofferahn, Communications & Marketing Coordinator
Sierra Stukenholtz, Volunteer Coordinator
Wendy Tremblay, Community Engagement Manager
Marc White, Natural Resources Manager
October Yates, Outdoor Program Support, Seasonal
Maria Young, Invasive Species Coordinator

Photo: Craig Blacklock



WE BUILD TOGETHER

Deb Ryun, Stuart Neville, and Craig Hansen

Wild Rivers Conservancy of the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers is steered by several guiding principles, one of which states that we will collaborate with and empower other organizations and individuals rather than work alone. Nowhere is this commitment of collaboration more evident than in how we've built and continue to grow the thriving partnership with the National Park Service at the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway (Riverway).

This annual report features highlights that we have achieved at the Riverway and throughout the watershed. We hope you enjoy reading more about these select efforts achieved in 2023 in the pages that follow. What's on the horizon for 2024? New and expanding partnership efforts have us excited for an energetic and collaborative year ahead.

A new internship opportunity has created an inspiring and engaging StoryMap to tell the story of our joint internship program with the NPS, highlighting where it started in 2014 and how it has grown to its current status. The StoryMap features former interns, showing where they are now and how their experience at the Riverway impacted their career or life trajectory. We can't wait to share it with you.

We are fully committed to being climate friendly. In fact, the NPS started the process to become a Climate Friendly Park in 2023 and expect to finalize that plan in 2024. The Climate Friendly Parks Program provides national parks with the tools and resources to address climate change and ensure the most sustainable operations across the agency. The Conservancy has been engaged in this process, and we have a project in the works that we are excited to share with you soon.

In partnership with the NPS, the Conservancy will hire additional aquatic invasive species (AIS) staff and interns, purchase a mobile decontamination unit, and further expand our established outreach and education efforts related to AIS. Our enhanced efforts here are just beginning, and we look forward to sharing more in 2024.

Wild Rivers Conservancy has received funding to update the expiring Lake St. Croix Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) Implementation Plan for Wisconsin. We will bring water quality partners together to produce an updated plan to be reviewed and finalized by DNR and EPA. The effort will explore what phosphorous reductions have occurred in the watershed since the TMDL was established and update the implementation plan for 2025 to 2035.

Working together we accomplish so much more. We hope you enjoy and are inspired by the stories shared in this annual report. Continued collaboration is vital to ensuring that this national park remains intact forever. We hope you'll be part of the journey into the future for the Riverway. We need you.

Ever Forward,



Deb Ryun
Executive Director
Wild Rivers Conservancy



Stuart Neville
Board Chair
Wild Rivers Conservancy



Craig Hansen
Superintendent
St. Croix National
Scenic Riverway

Riverway Volunteers

THE VALUE OF RIVERWAY VOLUNTEERS

Did you know that volunteer hours are a source of funding?

Your time volunteering not only makes a direct impact through the project or activity you are involved with, the hours that you serve as a volunteer also impact the work that we can collectively do through Riverway Volunteers. Each volunteer hour that is reported helps to bring in various funding resources that can help provide additional tools and supplies, cover training costs, and so much more.

In 2023, our joint volunteer program impact increased thanks the dedication from staff and our Riverway Volunteers. As the volunteer program grows, we want to create more opportunities for volunteers to give back to the Riverway.



Photo: S. Stukenholtz



Photo: S. Stukenholtz

“Your time is so valuable to our program, and we cannot say enough how much we truly appreciate it. Thank you!

To start your volunteering journey, email me at volunteer@wildriversconservancy.org”

-Sierra Stukenholtz, Volunteer Coordinator

319 Riverway Volunteers in 2023

\$179,153 Dollar value of volunteer service in 2023

5,634 Volunteer hours in 2023



Xcel employees collecting native prairie seed with seed farm Manager Alex Bouthilet. Photo S. Stukenholtz



Scan to read about the positive volunteering experience of Riverway Volunteer Jayne Ann Valley

Invasive Species

THE STRENGTH IN NUMBERS OF OUR COMMUNITY SCIENCE BIOCONTROL PROJECT



Photos: S. Stukenholtz

The solution to invasive species control starts in your backyard. In 2023, 30 Riverway Volunteers became volunteer scientists and raised, reared, and released biocontrol beetles in areas of heavy purple loosestrife populations.

The goal of the Purple Loosestrife Biocontrol Project is to help create a more vigorous native plant community within the St. Croix River watershed, protect the natural areas, and help restore healthy native habitats.

These 30 volunteers dedicated 233 hours to raising and releasing over 2,000 beetles across eight high-priority sites throughout the St. Croix River watershed in Minnesota. Funding for this project was provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources.

What is Purple Loosestrife?



Purple loosestrife is an invasive wetland plant native to Europe and Asia that is known for its bright purple flowers. Despite its beauty, purple loosestrife is known to drastically change the surroundings by out-competing native vegetation and decreasing native habitat.

The Hungry Galerucella Beetle

Galerucella is a genus of beetle native to Eurasia that is known to consume only purple loosestrife. Because of this selective diet and the fact that the beetles cause no threat to native plants in North America, two species of Galerucella beetle have been used as a biological control to diminish the damaging effects of purple loosestrife in Minnesota and Wisconsin since the mid to late 1990's.



"Leading the Purple Loosestrife Biocontrol Project is one of my favorite aspects of my job, and it is all because of the volunteers who make it possible! Every volunteer I meet who is a part of this project truly inspires me with their passion for protecting the St. Croix river and its natural resources."
- Maria Young | Invasive Species Coordinator

2023 Purple Loosestrife Biocontrol Program Successes

30 VOLUNTEERS


233 VOLUNTEER HOURS


2,000 + BEETLES RAISED & RELEASED




Community Engagement

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY CONNECTION TO THE ST. CROIX & NAMEKAGON RIVERWAY

The Hmong community is a large user of the St. Croix and Namekagon rivers due to their natural connection to nature and participation in outdoor activities like fishing and hunting. We've collaborated with passionate local Hmong outdoor leaders to continue to increase access and create opportunities for the Hmong community to experience and establish a positive relationship with the rivers. We launched the Hmong Ambassadors Program to facilitate activities along the river for and led by Hmong community members that will foster a deeper love and care for the rivers and land and enhance environmental education around water quality, land conservation, and watershed stewardship. Through strengthening and uplifting our relationship with the Hmong community, we're supporting the next generation of diverse river users to be caretakers of the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers.



Ambassador Led Programming

In 2023, ten Riverway activities were created through collaboration with Hmong community members, whose backgrounds ranged from multidisciplinary artists, K-12 Hmong immersion teachers, environmental educators, Hmong LGBTQ+ youth advocates, and more.

These Hmong Ambassadors co-created, planned, promoted, and led recreation programs throughout the summer and fall, bringing Hmong youth, families, elders, and community members together.

Together with NPS Park Rangers and Wild Rivers Conservancy staff, we engaged participants in kayak adventures on the St. Croix, overnight tent camping, learning about Monarch butterflies, and creating mixed-media nature art using embroidery and natural materials. Programs utilized Hmong translators whenever possible, and organically increased representation in the outdoors.

NPS Ranger Daniel Peterson holds a completed mixed media embroidery art piece, from Kazua Melissa Vang's mixed media event. (Art pictured above)

(L to R) Wendy Tremblay, Wild Rivers Conservancy Community Engagement Manager, and Hmong Ambassadors Kaja Vang, Pang Bee Xiong, Kazua Melissa Vang, & Lee Vue pose in front of the Wild Rivers Conservancy office after a planning meeting.



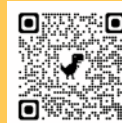
This partnership allows me to continue to dream and connect people to important resources. The Conservancy shares similar values that I do, and gives me the agency to plan and facilitate programming that MY community sees as important. There is more than just connecting my community to the river, the partnership provides resources that allow further exploration and learning about the river and the importance of nurturing this relationship on an individual level.”

Photo: H. Mierow

-Kaja Vang | 2023 PRIDE Paddle Ambassador



Our vision of a thriving watershed, forever accessible, scenic, and wild, simply will not happen without the support of a diverse community of riverway supporters.



Learn more about each of the Hmong ambassadors and the 2023 events:

wildriversconservancy.org/about/hmong-ambassadors/

(Left) Hmong Educator Paddle
Taylors Falls, MN | August 2023
Photo: Wild Rivers Conservancy

Making Strides With Our Park Partner

Photo: Craig Blacklock

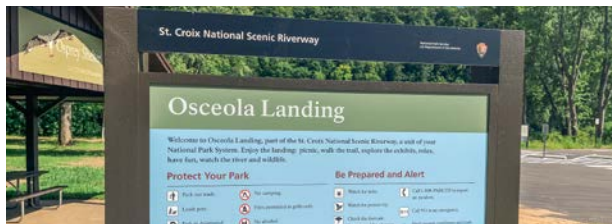


NATIONAL SCENIC RIVERWAY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Comprehensive River Management Planning Process Started in 2023

The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, in partnership with the Conservancy, held five listening sessions at several locations throughout the Riverway in 2023 to inform the public about the comprehensive river management planning process. At each session, NPS staff gave a short presentation about the river management plan and the planning process. After the presentation, NPS staff engaged in conversation with the public, gathered feedback, and answered questions.

The plan, once complete, will guide NPS actions and decisions regarding the St. Croix and Namekagon rivers for the foreseeable future. Input and engagement from stakeholders, partners, and the public will help the NPS develop and build this plan.



Osceola Landing Phase 1 Rehabilitation Complete

Osceola Landing is one of the busiest river landings and visitor access points along the St. Croix River. It has been a long-time goal of the National Park Service to improve the landing and associated day use area to enhance user safety and implement site improvements.

After a two-year planning process, construction began in the fall of 2021 and the day use area of the peninsula was closed throughout 2022 for the rehabilitation. Phase one was completed in the summer of 2023. The project was split into two phases to support the wise investment of federal funding and ensure newly built elements are not impacted by the future Highway 243 Bridge replacement project.

Collaborating on Climate Resiliency Initiatives

NPS hosted a Climate Scenario Planning Workshop in May 2023. National Park Service staff were joined by partners from Wild Rivers Conservancy, the Wisconsin and Minnesota Departments of Natural Resources, the University of Minnesota, the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, and the Midwest Climate Adaptation Science Center.

Participants discussed several scenarios — descriptions of different conditions that the Riverway might face—and identified actions that the Riverway and partners could take now to prepare for a future that looks different than today.

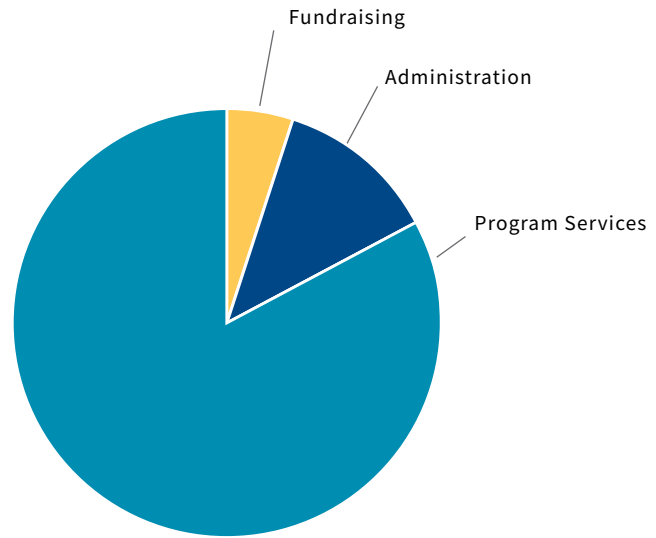
The St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is striving to become a Climate Friendly Park (CFP). As a CFP, the Riverway will join a network of more than 140 parks nationwide that put climate friendly behavior at the forefront of park operations and resource management. A Climate Friendly Parks workshop was held in 2023 and a plan for the Riverway was formulated (coming soon!).

2023 FISCAL YEAR FINANCIAL REPORT

Expenses

- 83% Program Services
- 12% Administration
- 5% Fundraising

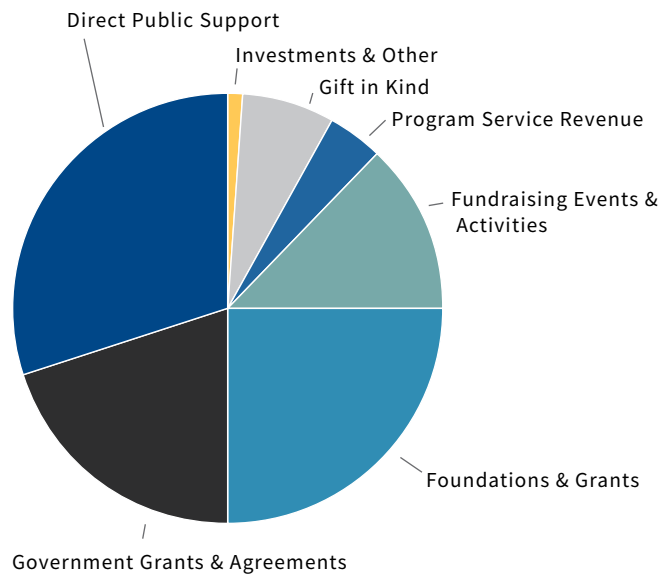
\$1,325,274 Total Expenses



Income

- 30% Direct Public Support
- 20% Government Grants and Agreements
- 25% Foundations and Grants
- 13% Fundraising Events & Activities
- 7% Gift in Kind
- 4% Program Service Revenue
- 1% Investments & Other

\$1,235,741 Total Income



Assets

- \$523,706 Current Assets
- \$241,425 Other Assets
- \$14,805 Property & Equipment

\$779,936 Total Assets

Liability And Equity

- \$15,415 Accounts Payable
- \$422,498 Other Current Liabilities
- \$437,913 Total Current Liabilities
- \$342,023 Net Assets

\$779,936 Total Liabilities and Equity

2023 FINANCIAL SUPPORTERS

Your support matters to us. This list represents gifts given from January 1, 2023 through December 31, 2023, and includes in-kind and memorial gifts. Every attempt was made to ensure the accuracy of this list. We sincerely regret any errors or omissions. You may call our Development office at 715-483-3300 with questions or corrections.

\$10,000 +

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Erik and Vicki Bergstedt
Colleen and Patrick Bollom
Microsoft
Sam and Angela Schillace
Strobel & Hanson, P.A.
Merry Vinette
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\$9,999 - 5,000

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 Washburn County Lakes and Rivers Association
 Watershed Cafe

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Elizabeth Welty
Barb Wetzel
Nancy and James Whipkey
Linda White
Steve and Terri Wilcox
Sandra and Charles Wilkinson
Jeremy Willius
Warren and Beth Wood
Michael Woolsey
Marianna Young
Kava Zabawa and John Bischoff
Kirstin and Rusty Zaspel
Greg Zick

\$99 - 50

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Emilie Anderson
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Christina and Duane Arndt
Sarah Atkins Hoggatt
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Donate today with the provided envelope or by scanning the QR code for our secure online donation platform.



Photo: Craig Blacklock

A LEGACY STARTS WITH US

Deb Ryun | Wild Rivers Conservancy's First Executive Director Retiring June 2024

What's my legacy? With retirement looming, I have spent a good deal of time lately thinking about what I've accomplished after 15 years of leading Wild Rivers Conservancy, and what my legacy to the Riverway will be. What will live on well beyond my time serving you and the Riverway?

First and foremost, it has been great to see the growth in membership and expanded programs and services. An internship program has been created in the Riverway. I'm proud we have given so many young people the opportunity to launch a career in the environmental field. It's been a joy introducing more people to the river and the natural splendor that makes this place special through what has become the Explore Wild Rivers program. The rewards of bringing people together to work toward the common goal of protecting the St. Croix and its watershed have been so much more than I ever dreamed possible.

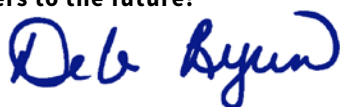
I also think about the financial stability of Wild Rivers Conservancy. People give in many different ways. Several people have joined the Nelson-Mondale Legacy Society with a pledge to give through their will or trust. Others joyously give larger gifts while they can still see the results, through appreciated stock, their donor advised fund, or donate a portion of their retirement plans required minimum distribution. Many of these options have tax benefits for the donor.

Personally, I have planned a fairly straightforward legacy gift to Wild Rivers Conservancy. Forty percent of my retirement plan has been designated to the Wild Rivers Conservancy. An original oil painting of the St. Croix River near Taylors Falls created by Mary Pettis is also a planned gift to the organization. Giving this painting to Wild Rivers to use as needed is another way to give. After I've enjoyed it for so many years, the painting could grace someone else's wall and help protect the Riverway.

For me, it is always a joy to learn how the river has touched people's lives. As I've said in the past, that is one of the best parts of my job. Thankfully, I am not immune to the Riverway's charms and magic. The Riverway has brought me comfort, peace, joy, companionship, laughter, and new discoveries. It requires me to live in the moment, forcing me to slow down and pay close attention to the surroundings. I am beholden to it, and I'm compelled to do what I can to give back to it.

Everyone creates and tells their own life story, it is what makes you unique. Do you know what your riverway legacy will be? Are you building a Riverway legacy, through gift or deed? Are you one of the many Riverway Champions? Leaving a legacy gift to Wild Rivers Conservancy of the St. Croix & Namekagon honors those that stood up to protect the Riverway in the past, present, and future. Join me in making a plan to help protect the Riverway forever.

Cheers to the future!





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FOREVER WILD

Our Fall Fundraiser, Forever Wild, is returning to Rustic Roots on **Thursday, September 12th, 2024**

Don't miss out on this special night of giving for the Riverway. Purchase your tickets or sponsorship now: fundraiser.support/wildrivers2024