

FALL / WINTER 2024

rivertime

CONSERVING OUR WILD & SCENIC RIVERS

WILDRIVERSCONSERVANCY.ORG



WILD RIVERS

ST. CROIX CONSERVANCY NAMEKAGON

Sunset Day Paddle, Lower St. Croix River
Photo: K. Schlicker

Photo: An osprey soars overhead during the Namekagon River Cleanup.

Pete Wintersteen, NPS



A Note From The Board Chair

RIVER REFLECTIONS

It's been said that no one ever sets foot in the same river twice, for it is not the same river, and they are not the same person. Change is an integral part of the river environment, and it's one of the forces that makes us connect with the river as much as we do. In that spirit, I write to reflect on some of the recent changes that have made their way through our beloved organization.

Longtime Executive Director and employee number one, Deb Ryun, retired this year after a brilliant career spent growing and leading the river community, and we celebrate and congratulate her and wish her many happy paddles in the years to come. This summer, the Board of Directors hired Matt Poppleton as our new Executive Director, and he has shown already that his own brand of leadership and ideas are ready to take on the many and varied challenges that face the river daily. It has been a pleasure to get to know Matt, and I have tremendous confidence in his ability to drive Wild Rivers Conservancy in pursuit of its mission and vision.

I also find myself reflecting on my own changes. The end of my term on the Board is fast approaching, and with it my passing of the role of Board Chair on to Loralee DiLorenzo. Her enthusiasm and experience make her a terrific person to take up this role, and I know she will continue to work diligently with the Board, staff, and organization partners. We're in very good hands.

Giving six years to serving Wild Rivers Conservancy, I look back on my time spent working for, as well as, on the river. As a fly fishing guide and outfitter for well over a decade, I've spent countless hours drifting and wading the Namekagon and St. Croix in all seasons - observing, learning, analyzing, connecting, and growing my love for this Riverway every day. All of that experience has only made it more and more clear to me how important it is for Wild Rivers Conservancy to continue to be the robust partner for this magical place, and our friends at the National Park Service. May we be able to show future generations the fruits of our hard work and dedication to such an inspiring Riverway.

Recently, I was lucky enough to find myself in another of our wonderful National Parks, Yellowstone, on a fishing trip. It's an astounding place, and its majesty and beauty are things to behold, but the whole time I was there, I couldn't keep myself from proudly gushing to anyone who would listen about my National Park, the Namekagon and St. Croix. We are lucky indeed to have a place like this to call home.

With gratitude,



Stu Neville
Board Chair

A COMMUNITY CONNECTED BY THE RIVER

Up and down the Riverway, new connections were made by our community engagement team, building a community connected by the River.



Photo: Wild Rivers Conservancy

Fly Fishing 101

Thanks to a grant from the National Park Foundation, we were able to host five events throughout the watershed to get participants hooked on fly fishing. By the end of our dry land workshops, anglers were taught new skills such as knot tying, fly casting, wading safety, fish species identification, local regulations, and fishing ethics.

Wild River Journey

Traveling down the St. Croix River on a historic riverboat, fourth graders experience the awe and wonder of our incredible National Park from the water. On board the boat, students rotate through three science and history learning stations that raise awareness of the cultural, historical, and natural importance of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway.



Photo: Wild Rivers Conservancy

Lac Courte Orielles - Namekagon River Kayaking

Supporting youth kayak outings with the LCO Boys and Girls Club is a highlight of our summer. Once a week, NPS Park Rangers and Conservancy staff provide extra support to give local youth a quality experience, building connections to the Namekagon River and confidence on the water.



Photo: Libby Sykes

Campfire Connections

Our Community Engagement Intern, Alex, launched a new series of programs this summer that connected communities to the St. Croix and Namekagon Rivers. Through activities like poetry, fly fishing, birding, climate phenology, and kayaking, Alex engaged participants at five unique locations along the Riverway.



Photo: Wild Rivers Conservancy

IPTF Paddles

Both interns and teens from the Indigenous People's Task Force in Minneapolis were able to join us for 2 days on the St. Croix River along with volunteer, Julie Kilpatrick. We focused on the healing power of water and provided a fun, positive experience while connecting to the river.

AHA Camping Paddle

A partnership with Advancement of Hmong Americans brought members of the Hmong American community together for an adventure on the upper St. Croix River. This fully supported 2-day paddle also included tent camping at St. Croix State Park.

Learn to Paddles

We collaborated with Washington County Parks to offer kayaking lessons for beginners from diverse backgrounds. These events were held at Square Lake Park and Cottage Grove Ravine Regional Park. Registration was prioritized for individuals who identified as BIPOC, low-income, 65+, LGBTQIA+, or with disabilities.



CLEAN WATERCRAFT, CLEAN WATERWAYS

The Conservancy, in partnership with the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway is bringing a new tool to the Riverway next year.

Invasive zebra mussels are a species of increased concern for the St. Croix River. Zebra mussels were first discovered in the St. Croix River in 1995 in the lower riverway. Today, they are found in the St. Croix River from Stillwater to the confluence with the Mississippi River. In recent years, multiple new populations have been discovered in nearby lakes in the watershed, indicating a need for increased education and prevention techniques.

This year, Wild Rivers Conservancy received funding from the National Park Service (NPS) to increase education and outreach surrounding zebra mussels in the St. Croix River watershed to enhance awareness and prevent further spread. With this funding and in collaboration with the NPS, the Conservancy intends to perform additional watercraft inspections at public launches along the St. Croix River, and utilize a newly acquired mobile high pressure and hot water decontamination unit with these inspections. Keep an eye out for this decontamination unit at a St. Croix River landing near you soon!



Photo top: Chisago County staff decontaminate a boat at Osceola Landing along the St. Croix River. Both local municipalities and the Minnesota DNR have been very helpful sharing knowledge as we get this program up to speed. Did you know that there are over 400 mobile decon units operating in Minnesota?
Photo by K. Sickmann

Photo above: Conservancy staff Kylee Westbrook and Maria Young demonstrate the functions of the new Mobile Decon Unit to National Park Service staff.
Photo: T. Stofferahn

Learn More about Clean In Clean Out:
dnr.state.mn.us/invasives/preventsread_watercraft.html



COMMUNITY, CONNECTIONS, & CLEANUP

Sierra Stukenholtz, Volunteer Coordinator

On September 7th, in collaboration with the National Park Service and Hayward Fly Fishing Co., the Conservancy hosted the annual Namekagon River Cleanup, with a record-breaking total of 83 volunteers and over 500 hours of service.

On a crisp yet sunny morning, volunteers traveled from places near and far, throughout the watershed and beyond, to gather at the Hayward Lake Boat Landing for our largest volunteer event of the year. Brought together by its wild and scenic nature, volunteers of all ages, backgrounds, and places are drawn here to give back to this invaluable resource.

This year volunteers collected 24 bags of trash, a folding chair, a canvas tarp, a PVC tube, and a life jacket. Although litter collection can feel a bit like a treasure hunt, the real gem is this river and the community that comes together to protect it.

As people become more aware of the river and its significance, we can see that the important message of stewardship is spreading across and through generations. The river gives a unique and priceless gift to each of its users, and volunteers value the opportunity to give something back. With more participants this year than ever, it's clear that many hands make light work. In fact, after several years of this event, we are noticing less trash in the Riverway.

We see more and more familiar faces each year, returning to do their part to make a difference for our pristine water system. We are also greeted by new faces as people spread the word, or bring friends and family, turning this service event into tradition. This annual event has created an opportunity for volunteers to meet new people, build new relationships with others and the Riverway, and bond with loved ones over a day of caring for this shared resource together.

If you'd like to be a part of the experience and have the Namekagon River Cleanup become a tradition for you or your friends and family, come make a splash with us next year on Saturday, September 6th, 2025.

Learn more about starting your Riverway Volunteering journey at: wilddriversconservancy.org/get-involved/volunteer/



**KEEPING THE
RIVER WILD
BRINGS US
TOGETHER.**



KNOWING A RIVER AND ITS COMMUNITY

It is a true honor to join Wild Rivers Conservancy as the second Executive Director in its history. I vividly remember my first meeting with Deb Ryun when she began her role as the Conservancy's inaugural Executive Director, back when it was the St. Croix River Association. At the time, I was managing local grants with REI, and it was clear from the start that Deb had an inspiring vision for the organization. Her leadership and passion were undeniable—she was a force of nature. Deb's impact has shaped the Conservancy into the leading conservation organization it is today, with a team of 13 dedicated staff and a strong, collaborative partnership with the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway. As many have reminded me, I certainly have big shoes to fill.

Since I began in early July, my onboarding has been an incredible introduction to both the work and the landscape. I've had the opportunity to experience the watershed firsthand: floating down the Namekagon in Board Chair Stu Neville's drift boat, paddling with the Conservancy team, joining pontoon tours with board members, walking along the Brown's Creek Trail, and participating in the Namekagon River Cleanup with over 80 dedicated volunteers. These experiences have allowed me to connect deeply with staff, board members, NPS partners, and watershed stakeholders. It's been a privilege to meet and learn from such a passionate and engaged community. Be sure to check out the next page for some highlights from this past summer!

My connection to nature began as a child, during trips to the Boundary Waters with my dad. Paddling and portaging through the Northwoods wilderness sparked a lifelong passion for conservation that has guided my career for over 20 years. I've been fortunate to serve in roles that not only connect people to the outdoors but also inspire them to become active stewards of our environment.

In my first few months, one thing has stood out above all—the deep commitment of those who have cared for and protected this remarkable place for generations. With profound respect for the Ojibwe and Dakota people, the original stewards of these lands and waters, and for all those who have followed in their footsteps, I am grateful for the dedication that continues to sustain this special place. From our partners at the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway to the extensive network of land agencies, nonprofits, businesses, municipalities, and individuals, the collective care for the watershed is truly inspiring.

As Executive Director, I bring my strengths of curiosity, a need for context, discipline, responsibility, and a commitment to strategic collaboration—along with a good dose of enthusiasm and humor. While we will undoubtedly face challenges, we also have incredible opportunities ahead as we work towards our vision of a thriving watershed that is forever accessible, scenic, and wild. I am deeply grateful to the board, staff, and all of you for your warm welcome and trust in me.

I'm excited for the journey ahead!



Matt Poppleton
Executive Director

MATT POPPLETON'S RIVERWAY FAVORITES OF THE SUMMER

Here are six memorable experiences from this summer, as I got up to speed with all that makes this Riverway, our staff, our partners, and our supporters so special.



1. Going on an impromptu paddle with the Conservancy team at Osceola Landing in my family's Seliga wood canvas canoe and then joining the Canoe & Paddle Crafts Show later that day in Marine on St. Croix.
2. Hearing from our summer interns as they presented to Conservancy and NPS staff on all that they learned and accomplished this season.
3. Joining the Conservancy team on our Aquatic Invasive Species Paddle on the upper St. Croix.
4. Joining over 80 volunteers on the Namekagon River Cleanup.
5. Connecting with all of our Riverway Stewards at our annual fundraiser, Forever Wild.



YOUR SUPPORT MAKES THIS WORK HAPPEN

Scan the QR code to give online, or use the provided mail-in envelope.

Your gift today goes directly toward our mission to inspire stewardship to forever ensure the rare ecological integrity of the St. Croix and Namekagon Riverway.



WILD RIVERS

ST. CROIX CONSERVANCY NAMEKAGON

PO Box 938
Osceola, WI 54020

Printed on sustainably produced paper

STAY CONNECTED

715-483-3300

wildriversconservancy.org

@wildriversconservancy



JOIN US AT THE WILD & SCENIC FILM FESTIVAL

Tuesday, November 12 | Surly Brewing Co.
Thursday, November 14 | 45th Parallel Distillery
Saturday, November 16 | The Park Center

Full details & tickets at wildriversconservancy.org/events