Supporting Professionals
Who Study, Protect, and Manage
North America's Rivers

Summer 2026
Volume 39 Issue 2

RMS Journal

Bridge Before Collapse: *Bridge on Nolichucky River in Unicoi County, Tennessee, washed away during Hurricane Helene in 2024. Photo: Trey Moore*

Nolichucky Renewal: BluewaysTN Offers Enhanced River Access and Stewardship on Tennessee Rivers

by Jeffrey R. Duncan and Ben C. West

At 11:15 a.m. on Friday, September 27, 2024, the stream gauge near Erwin, Tennessee, washed away. Torrential rains from the remnants of Hurricane Helene continued to drive the river higher for hours. By mid-afternoon, news outlets broadcast scenes of helicopters evacuating patients from a hospital rooftop while entire homes broke loose and drifted away. Floodwaters on the Nolichucky River ultimately exceeded the previous record, set in 1901, by more than 10 feet.

When the waters receded, devastation stretched throughout the mountains of western North Carolina, northeast Tennessee, and southwest Virginia. Nineteen Tennesseans lost their lives. Hundreds of families lost homes or faced severe property damage. At least five state-maintained bridges failed. Davy Crockett Birthplace State Park, a regionally important landmark with a mile of river frontage, was virtually wiped off the map. Together, flood-related impacts across Tennessee alone approached $2 billion. More than 100 miles of the Nolichucky River changed forever in a matter of hours.

But adversity spawns opportunity, and loss creates space for renewal. Today, life along the Nolichucky—long celebrated for rugged beauty and world-class whitewater—moves forward again. This summer, for the first time since the storm, commercial

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River Management Society

Editorial Policy

All contributions submitted for publication should be original, or reprinted with approval. Authorship implies responsibilities that can only be attributed to and performed by humans, rather than generative AI.

Articles are not edited for content and may not reflect the position, endorsement, or mission of RMS. The purpose of this policy is to encourage the free exchange of ideas concerning river management issues in an open forum of communication among the RMS membership.

Executive Director's Eddy

Risa Shimoda, RMS Executive Director

RMS is in a slightly daunting, yet exciting place as the profile of our membership shifts to reflect the profile of members' river management responsibilities. Today, a river manager's title may not even include the word 'river!' An executive or board president for a watershed-based group may lead an organization that stewards and leads its programs. Agency 'recreation planners' may be responsible for ATV use and river patrols. In the wake of a flood event that has dramatically altered a river bed, or a fire that has left a river corridor vulnerable to landslides, planners and tacticians are developing restoration initiatives.

We are doing our best to encourage and support colleagues we have met recently as we acknowledge long time members for their river work. If you have thought of ways RMS can serve you and your peers, consider attending an event so you can share your ideas! In early July, the Northeast Chapter will host a trip on the Deerfield River highlighting the accomplishments of members whose efforts established hydropower releases in the 1980s. On the same day, on the other side of the country, the Northwest Chapter will host a float and set up a table supporting the Flathead River Alliance as they celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Flathead's National Wild and Scenic River designation. Find more info online here: https://www.flatheadrivers.org/events/50th-anniversary-flathead-wild-scenic-river-fest.

Find American Whitewater's announcement about the Deerfield River: https://www.americanwhitewater.org/project/deerfield-river-ma/

As another effort to applaud history and welcome the future, the 'Longtimers' Gates of Lodore trip on the Green River, will give a few of our earliest members an opportunity to both reunite and meet next year's Symposium leads.

Member engagement continues to evolve, particularly with young professionals, so we need to evolve the context for seeing and encouraging members to utilize our network. A surprisingly fun example of this recently was at the North Fork Championship XI, a downriver race held June 9-11 on the North Fork Payette, today's most exciting whitewater race in the world. I was invited to attend by Aaron Pruzan, owner of Rendezvous River Sports in Jackson, Wyoming, and speak to the crowd of racers with a one time co-worker, long-time friend, and earliest North Fork paddler who led the fight to dam the river in 1977-78, Rob Lesser. While volunteering, I ran into Virginia Commonwealth University's RSLC graduate Thomas Franco and member Cody Anderson, and encouraged a Western Washington University student to consider their RSLC program!

We invite you to help us lead in one of the chapters for which officers' terms have ended: Alaska, Midwest and Northeast. We will do our best to provide a clear and encouraging onboarding process for you to understand your role and 'assigning' one or more mentors to help you build confidence with the resources we can offer.

I hope those reading this will, similarly, take pride in articles you read here and future *RMS Journal* issues written by those whose work is interesting and important, even if you've not met them. They are following in your footsteps, and their stories hopefully reinforce the importance of what you do or have accomplished in your two, ten, or forty years working on or for rivers. We thank you who have created our track record, trajectory, and bright prospects and need your assistance as much, or more, than ever. Please support us as your time, expertise, and attention allow. ❖

Risa Shimoda
Executive Director

President's Corner

Kristina Rylands, RMS President

Last week we finished up the most recent in a series of Chapter Chats, conversations with members across RMS about upcoming gatherings and ways to make each chapter stronger. Several chapters—like mine in the Pacific—are pulling together slates of officers. Being an officer is one way to deepen your involvement in RMS and engagement in our field. Personally, I credit much of my own professional growth with time spent shoulder-to-shoulder as an officer with my chapter colleagues. And yet we have openings that have gone unfilled.

It got me thinking about things I wish everyone at RMS knew about serving as an officer:

Time well spent! The time commitment of being a chapter officer varies greatly. With the exception of chapter presidents who also serve on the national board, typically it's no more than a couple of hours per month. And that time means so much to the organization. Thank you to all who have taken on a role.

Bring people together. RMS is about members, and chapter officers are the great rallying force that makes much of RMS work possible. Whether it's planning trips, lunchtime meet-ups, the River Ranger Rendezvous, or a book club, chapter officers help bring people together. And how fun is that?!

Professional growth. Serving as a chapter officer is a way to learn more about the field and advance our own professional skills. Board service is a resume building opportunity. What a great way to give back to RMS while advancing your professional capacity!

If you haven't done so yet—and if there's an opening in your chapter or on the national board—I encourage you to throw your hat in the ring. ❖

Kristina Rylands
RMS President

Southeast by Sera Janson Zegre

Although not chapter leadership, I offer this issue's introduction as a chapter member with a perspective of a transplant to the area. In the Southeast, summer is when the rivers I have come to know beckon me to don a mask and place my face in the water. In comparison to my home state of Colorado, the rivers here are warmer in the summer and the sunshine helps the leaves on the abundant trees to "drink" up heavy rains so that the rivers flow mostly clear at levels enjoyable for recreation both on and under the water.

I hope this journal issue offers you a taste of rivers with warm summer waters, as well as a regional perspective on river management. The southeast region shares common issues like flooding, but we also share similar solutions in science, community, remediation, and designation for future generations to enjoy. I hope you are left feeling more connected with this region and the people involved.

The Southeast Chapter trip, scheduled for August 21–23 on the New River in West Virginia, will be hosted by National Park Service employee and RMS member Kathy Zerkle and her team. I trust a late summer event will appeal to professionals and students alike. Hope to see you there or hear of connections at other river gatherings. ❖

***Where the Rivers Flow**: Rivers of the Southeast Chapter mentioned in this issue. Map: James Major*

***Alabama's Cahaba River:** Last year's Southeast Chapter Trip was on Alabama's Cahaba River October 2025. To read an article about the trip, see page 8. Photo: Jack Henderson*

***Nolichucky Renewal**, continued from page 1)*
rafting operations are taking place in the Nolichucky Gorge. As recovery advances, renewed focus on the river has emerged, with new river access opportunities taking shape, welcoming a broader range of users.

Recovery and restoration of the Nolichucky and neighboring Appalachian rivers, like the French Broad, demands a sustained effort by federal and state agencies, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and volunteers, who thus far have invested thousands of hours clearing debris, stabilizing banks, repairing infrastructure, and re-visioning how people interact with these waterways. That work now connects with a broader statewide effort—one that builds on both recovery and opportunity—to expand the way people can connect with rivers across the state.

***Damaged Bridge:** Corby Bridge on the Nolichucky River, severely damaged by Hurricane Helene, is slated for replacement and will include new river access. Photo: Jeffrey Duncan*

BluewaysTN

The BluewaysTN initiative, a cornerstone of Tennessee Governor Bill Lee's Conservation Legacy, establishes a forward-looking commitment to river-based conservation, recreation, and economic vitality across the state. Backed by a one-time $15 million investment by the Tennessee legislature, BluewaysTN focuses on creating practical, community-driven river plans enhancing recreation while protecting Tennessee's extraordinary aquatic resources.

"COVID made outside cool again," said Jamison Sliger, Blueways Coordinator for the state Office of Outdoor Recreation. "More and more people want to get out there and experience our state's beautiful and diverse rivers. BluewaysTN will enhance their ability to do so while also gaining appreciation for conservation needs."

BluewaysTN builds on a simple but powerful idea: conservation and recreation work best together. When thoughtfully planned, access fosters stewardship. When communities connect with rivers, they invest in their protection. This principle—often described as "conservation through recreation"—guides the initiative's design and implementation. Although the initiative does not directly address emerging threats such as water withdrawals for data centers and other uses, or water quality impacts such as "forever contaminants" (e.g., PFAS), the initiative seeks to raise awareness and foster community-driven awareness and stewardship for the state's aquatic treasures.

Enhanced Access

Rather than treating rivers as isolated recreation corridors, BluewaysTN approaches them as living systems—economic engines, ecological treasures, and cultural touchstones connected to surrounding local communities. The initiative emphasizes "enhanced access," a deliberate shift from simply adding more access points. In some locations, that means improving existing sites with safer and more accessible launches, better parking, or clearer signage. In others, it means reducing pressure on sensitive habitats or redistributing use to more appropriate locations.

A first of its kind effort in the state, BluewaysTN targets a subset of rivers that span Tennessee's diverse landscapes—from rivers like the Nolichucky in east Tennessee to the meandering waterways of west Tennessee like the Wolf River near Memphis. A statewide blueway master plan completed in 2024 identified 15 rivers for designation as the first official state-designated system of blueways. We are part of a team developing river-specific plans for each river, identifying priority segments for recreation, evaluating existing conditions, and recommending actionable improvements.

Part of our team, Ecological Design Group, an Arkansas-based firm, spearheads the development of conceptual designs for several sites. According to architect Danny Collins, "BluewaysTN is ultimately about creating experiences, not just infrastructure, helping more people build personal connections to Tennessee's rivers through moments of adventure, reflection, family, and time spent outdoors."

Stakeholder Engagement

Local input drives the success and long-term sustainability of the initiative. BluewaysTN places stakeholder engagement at the center of the process by actively engaging people and organizations across every level of the effort. Our team is gathering statewide input from agencies, conservation organizations, recreation groups, industry partners, and other key interests, while river-specific outreach connects directly with local governments, landowners, outfitters, anglers, paddlers, hunters,

community leaders, and other river users. Outreach efforts include online user surveys, one-on-one interviews, partner paddles, and direct community engagement designed to ensure the plans reflect both local knowledge and statewide priorities.

Facilitated discussions help identify shared goals and workable compromises. In some cases, that leads to creative solutions: separating use types across different access points, improving signage to reduce conflict, or enhancing infrastructure to handle increased visitation safely. In others, it leads to restraint, like choosing not to develop access in particularly sensitive areas.

On rivers like the Nolichucky, recovery from Hurricane Helene creates a rare opportunity to rethink access entirely. Rebuilt bridges, restored corridors, and renewed public interest allow planners to integrate safer, more inclusive access points. In the upper reaches, whitewater enthusiasts retain challenging runs. Downstream, calmer sections invite beginners, families, and anglers.

Other rivers present different dynamics. Some corridors, such as the Hiwassee, already support heavy recreational use and require improvements to manage crowding and reduce user conflict. Others lack formal access entirely, limiting opportunities for local communities and visitors alike. BluewaysTN tailors its approach accordingly, balancing recreation demand with ecological sensitivity, and promoting access to a broader array of the public where appropriate.

***Assessing Access:** BluewaysTN's Jeff Duncan and Danny Collins of Ecological Design Group discuss access needs with long-time area paddler and resident Jerry Griffin. Photo: Bekah Price, RMS*

Looking Ahead

Post-disaster recovery, growing interest in outdoor recreation, and renewed emphasis on conservation are converging across the state. The Governor's Conservation Legacy provides both the vision and resources to turn that convergence into lasting progress.

On the Nolichucky, recovery continues, but so does transformation. What once existed will not return exactly as before. Instead, a new river corridor is emerging, shaped by both natural forces and deliberate planning. Enhanced access will invite more people to experience the river while guiding use in ways that protect its ecological integrity. According to longtime Nolichucky paddler Jerry Griffin, thanks in part to BluewaysTN, the river "will be better than ever. It just takes time."

The combined story of the Nolichucky and BluewaysTN reflects something larger than recovery or recreation. It reflects a commitment to resilience and conservation. Tennessee's rivers have always shaped the state's landscape and culture. Through thoughtful planning and shared stewardship, they will continue to do so well into the future—more accessible than ever. ❖

For more info or to provide input, visit www.bluewaystn.com.

Dr. Jeff Duncan is a former National Park Service aquatic ecologist and river manager. He retired last year after a long career as the Southeast Region's Wild and Scenic Rivers Lead, and founded Long Man Ecological Solutions, LLC, a river-focused consulting firm. He currently serves as the East Region Project Manager for BluewaysTN.

Dr. Ben West is a conservation and agricultural professional with more than 30 years experience spanning higher education, industry, and non-profits. He is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Risora Consulting, LLC, and BluewaysTN Statewide Project Leader.

2025 Southeast Chapter Trip: Alabama's Cahaba River

by Wil Rainer

Each fall, the Cahaba River Coalition (CRC) offers an overnight canoe trip. This time on the water offers ample opportunity to release some of the anxiety of day-to-day life and to learn about the natural world in a uniquely intimate way. For me, it can take several days for that anxious feeling to truly melt away—to finally feel like I'm living in the given moment—so this past year, we added a three day expedition with our friends at River Management Society (RMS).

Leading recreational trips and stewardship programs, I meet some of the Cahaba's thousands of annual visitors. In the last few years, the Cahaba's current has carried writers from Maine, adventurers from California, and journalists from as far as England to see the stunning flora and fauna that our relatively small river supports. While the Cahaba is home to fish, snails, and flowers found nowhere else in the world, it also carries PCBs, PFAs, and SSOs.

CRC's mission is to preserve and protect the integrity of the Cahaba River and its watershed, and RMS's Southeast Chapter trip in October 2025 was an opportunity to do just that. What started as a side thought at the Southeast chapter gathering ended with a small group of folks paddling river stretches and oxbow lakes, learning from local professors and professionals and experiencing intentional time away in community.

The trip was planned down to the minute with speakers and guests, wonderful campfire meals, all your favorite icebreaker games, and so many s'mores. Then came the weather forecast. October is generally a dry month. And October 2025 was no different… except for the two weekends with CRC programming on the books. Mother Nature reminded us to be flexible, and the retreat on the Cahaba, Living River, obliged.

Instead of getting our three straight days on the water, we stayed at camp, invited speakers to us, and ran day trips on the water. We still got our s'mores, but they roasted over a silver, cylindrical firepit, elevated from the elements, rather than a circle of rocks.

Looking back, staying at Living River was an absolute blessing. Our weekend included topics like guided stargazing and star map lessons, Dark Sky Places and bird-safe communities, biodiversity and freshwater mussels, paddle instruction and safety, natural history and human impacts and fluvial geomorphology and wildlife adaptations. Sounds like a lot to pack into a weekend, right? It was. After taking in the passion and knowledge shared by each group member, I walked away energized and inspired to approach the work that CRC and our partner organizations are faced with daily.

Faced with the feelings of insignificance and awe from working on a river older than Pangaea itself, the true work lies in the timeless community that is built by organizations as local as CRC and as far-reaching as RMS. I was so happy to share a small corner of our world with the wonderful people at RMS, and I'm still inspired by time spent in intentional community now months gone by. ❖

MountainTrue Removes 100 Tons of Debris from Whitewater Stretch of French Broad River

Reprinted with permission. Originally published March 25, 2026 on the MountainTrue website.

by Liz McGuirl, MountainTrue River Cleanup Story Collector

Since early 2025, river stewards have worked to move more than 100 tons of trash from the French Broad River's most rugged whitewater stretches, with the hopes that the debris would be removed from the banks before the next storm. This month, the job was finally completed.

MountainTrue's Madison County river cleanup crew and French Broad Riverkeeper staff teamed up with RJ Corman, a railroad services contractor, to complete the largest storm debris removal operation since the Army Corps of Engineers left WNC. Working under access agreements from Norfolk Southern, crews were able to remove 203,728 lbs of flood debris that had been collected and staged along the French Broad River between Redmon Dam and Stackhouse Boat Launch over the last 16 months. That amounts to the weight of around 50 average-sized elephants spread over about 10 whitewater river miles in an area with little river access.

"It has been a long and challenging ride for this old warhorse. Certainly many tough days and nights when it seemed we would be looking at the debris for the rest of our lives." —Jay Hawthorne (French Broad Crossing)

Jumping into action

The town of Marshall is situated right alongside the French Broad River, with railroad tracks as the sole dividing barrier between the residences, small businesses, outdoor outfitters and rafting companies that lined the streets and the river itself. During Hurricane Helene, the river crested over 27 feet downtown, far beyond the railroad tracks. Many shops were washed downstream, leaving many residents unemployed with a massive mess to clean up. Significant debris from Buncombe County, including thousands of pounds of PVC, was also among the mangled wreckage in the river.

In November 2024, two months after the storm, Fritz Johnson from Blue Heron Outfitters took the first step to cleanup. Armed simply with ambition and a vision, Fritz sent out a call to action to the Madison County French Broad River community. In hopes of keeping heavy machinery out of this beautiful and economically critical section of whitewater, Fritz raised funds to employ local paddlers and raft guides to clean up some of the harder-to-reach sections of river.

For more than 6 months, Fritz's cleanup crew—led by paddlers Kiana Crosby and Jordan Clark-Brown—worked diligently to dismantle debris piles with their bare hands. Several days per week, they paddled Sections 8 and 9 of the French Broad and separated flood debris from natural (woody) debris, bagged up the trash, and sorted remaining debris into two piles—metal and PVC.

MountainTrue joins the effort

There was far more debris for any one crew to handle alone. By March of 2025, MountainTrue—with funding through the Land of Sky Regional Council and support from NCWorks — hired a small crew to clean up the French Broad full-time. Three of the crew members hired—Matt Cook and Jemima Filiss-Cook and Kiana Crosby—had been part of Fritz's crew, and continue to play essential roles in the on-going river cleanup mission today.

Matt captained a jet boat, allowing the crew to ferry piles previously collected by Fritz's crew across the river, leaving it near the train tracks for future pick-up.

In September 2025, MountainTrue, now funded by NCDEQ, was able to assign one team to focus on the Madison County section of the French Broad River, led by team leader Jemima Fliss-Cook.

"I feel like I lost a part of myself in the flood, but am proud to be able to take part in moving forward in advocacy for my rivers and my neighbors." —Jemima Filiss-Cook (Madison County Crew Leader)

For sixteen long months, while they worked to remove, pile, and sort through debris, Matt, Jemima, Jordan, and Kiana shared the fear that any future rainstorm could cause the river to rise again, rendering all their hard work over the past year obsolete.

"This whole process with Blue Heron and then with MountainTrue has had a strange sense of anxiety (attached to it)." —Jordan Clark-Brown, who has been part of both cleanup efforts.

Thankfully, RJ Corman swooped in to save the day. Over the course of two weeks, RJ Corman's railroad crew made river miracles come true—finally alleviating the "rain-xiety" of not just the Madison County crew members, but residents like Jay Hawthorne who lives along the river near Sandy Bottoms rapid.

Here's how they did it:

Utilizing Barnard Park as the designated "dumping zone" (due to its central location between Redmon and Stackhouse), RJ Corman mobilized two large railroad trucks—each with an excavator arm—collecting dozens of debris piles up and down the river. They would fill to capacity, ride the tracks back to Barnard, and dump the debris for the MountainTrue crew to sort.

Recyclables like metal and PVC pipe were set aside from the rest of the debris to reduce the project's impact on the landfill. Tires were also sorted, then hauled away by On Time Tire Removal.

After 16 months of handling dozens of piles, the project removed:

- 34 dumpsters of debris
- 4 truck loads of tires
- One 11,000-pound gas tank

This project is a shining example of just how much we can accomplish, how strong and resilient we can truly be when we work together with, and for, our community.

"If you get a group of highly competent people [together], give them the resources they need and let them loose, great things will happen." —Hartwell Carson (Clean Waters Director)

Thank you! The impact of the project has already made a noticeable difference for local outfitters.

"I've worked two commercial trips this (past) weekend, and it was so liberating to not have to explain debris piles again." —Jordan Clark-Brown (Madison County Crew)

We couldn't have done this without the help of our French Broad River community, and most notably: Fritz Johnson of Blue Heron Whitewater, French Broad Paddle Trail Manager Jack Henderson, RJ Corman Railroad Services, MT's Madison County Crew, Trevor of Big Daddy Dumpz, and Rusty of On Time Tire Removal.

"I think it is pretty special that as a team, most of us had at least seen each other across the water before. Most of us have lived here for a long time. It's a tight community and everybody's just been working so hard. Working together on this thing that we all really love is pretty special." —Kiana Crosby (Madison County Crew) ❖

Photos: Jack Henderson

Apex Predator and Ecosystem Engineer of the Myakka River: *American alligators are vital to the health of the Myakka River's wetland habitats and are abundant throughout the river corridor, especially at Deep Hole, where the sinkhole functions as a fish trap during times of low water.*

From *Local Passion* to *Federal Designation:* Sarasota County's Commitment to the Myakka River

Words and photos by Miri Hardy

You'll find one of my favorite spots on the Myakka River deep within a wilderness preserve, accessible only by foot, in an area seemingly frozen in time. A 131 pre-historic sinkhole aptly known as Deep Hole, which is very popular with American alligators, adds intrigue and wonder. Artifacts found in this area illustrate that, like me, humans have cherished this remarkable area back to prehistoric times!

Pronounced "my-ACK-a" and located in southwest Florida, 34 miles of this rain-fed blackwater river meander through Sarasota County, eventually flowing into Charlotte Harbor and the Gulf. Sarasota County is a rapidly growing area renowned for its recreation. Annual population growth in the county, as in Florida in general, is double that of the national average.

The Myakka River in Sarasota County has remained an exceptional river, recently deemed by the National Park Service as eligible and suitable for the Partnership Wild and Scenic River program, thanks to the foresight of legislators past and present, who appreciated the river's importance for our community. Indeed, recently, with a proclamation from our Sarasota County Commissioners, we celebrated 50 years of our county's commitment to the river and the anniversary of its first attempt to seek Wild and Scenic designation.

A lot has happened in the past 50 years. As a result of those early legislative efforts, the Myakka River in Sarasota County was designated as Florida's only State-designated Wild and Scenic River. The designation resulted in an important infrastructure of local state and county regulations to protect the river. To further ensure the preservation of this vital natural resource for future generations, the county and state has since conserved thousands of acres in the watershed.

To restore the free-flowing nature of the Myakka River, a key feature of wild and scenic rivers, two dams have been removed over the past four years. Extensive restoration efforts to restore plant and wildlife habitats while improving recreational opportunities are ongoing.

After years of building the necessary regulatory infrastructure and partner relationships, Sarasota County is ready and eager to join the exclusive group of our nation's greatest rivers. To that end, when enacted, U.S. Representative Greg Steube's H.R. 642, the Myakka Wild and Scenic River Act, will amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to designate the 34 miles of the Myakka River within Sarasota County, Florida, as a Partnership Wild and Scenic river.

Importantly, in addition to prestige and technical support, this highest level of river protection comes with a foundational mandate to enhance but not degrade the river's free-flowing nature, unique values, and water quality through strategic management. Rigorous designation requirements and accountability, including the creation of a comprehensive river management plan and a cooperative agreement, empower local river stakeholders to best manage their community's exceptional wild and scenic rivers, to the benefit of generations to come.

A Free-Flowing River Rich in Recreation and Biodiversity: *The Myakka River within Sarasota County meets National Wild and Scenic River eligibility requirements because this section is free-flowing and hosts a high concentration of outstanding natural, recreational, and cultural values, including canoeing, kayaking, fishing, and habitat for rare and endangered plants and animal species.*

This exciting designation will empower us to support and enhance the river's key recreational values—which are also key economic drivers in Sarasota County—such as fishing, boating, and kayaking; improve critical habitat for native wildlife, including imperiled species such as Florida manatees; and enhance the watershed's ability to provide critical ecological services such as water filtering and flood control.

Working closely with U.S. Representative Greg Steube (FL-17) and his legislative staff has been key to supporting the legislative process to illustrating how this impactful bill will be a game changer for the community and the river. Meetings with non-governmental river partners, such as private land and ranch owners, highlight their buy-in and excitement about the bill. Site visits to areas that illustrate key features of Myakka River's unique ecosystems and ongoing protection efforts, allow staff members to gain unique insights helpful to the legislative process.

Throughout the process, our new river partners nationwide have been instrumental in helping us successfully navigate this complex process and program. I'm beyond grateful to all who shared their experience and expertise and look forward to continuing to work together, to the benefit of our rivers nationwide! ❖

Miri Hardy, PhD, is the founder of Myakka River Partnership, a new nonprofit organization formed to provide an independent voice for the Myakka River Watershed, unifying support for a healthy ecosystem and stewarding its wild and scenic value for generations to come. She is currently spearheading Sarasota County community efforts to help enact U.S. Representative Steube's Myakka Wild and Scenic River Act.

Experiencing the Myakka River's Natural Values in Person: *During a recent visit to Myakka River State Park's Wilderness Preserve, U.S. Representative Greg Steube (pictured with Park Manager Stephen Giguere) experienced firsthand many of the river's remarkably outstanding values that his Myakka Wild and Scenic River Act will help protect and enhance.*

High Definition Stream Survey (HDSS): From Data Collection to Decision Prioritization

by Brett Connell

Note: This article serves as a continuation and evolution of the original publication from the Fall 2019 issue of the *RMS Journal*, which introduced the stream survey methodology. Since that publication, water resource professionals have faced increasing pressure to make defensible decisions despite limited funding, growing restoration needs, and more frequent storm impacts. As a result, the stream survey methodology has evolved through real-world application across a wide range of river systems and management challenges. This article highlights that evolution and the lessons learned along the way.

The High Definition Stream Survey (HDSS) originated from a simple question during graduate research at the University of Tennessee: ***how can stream and watershed conditions be documented continuously downriver instead of through isolated field observations?*** Entering the biosystems engineering program with a background in fisheries and stream restoration, my research focused on implementing the Bank Erosion Hazard Index (BEHI) using geographic information system (GIS)-based stream bank video mapping. That work, later published in the *Journal of Spatial Hydrology*, demonstrated the value of linking continuous video imagery to spatially referenced river data and laid the foundation for what would eventually become HDSS.

As interest in the approach grew, Trutta Consulting was formed in 2012, and early projects were completed throughout Tennessee and Alabama. In 2017, following a partnership with Dr. James Parham and Emy Parham, Trutta Environmental Solutions was established and projects expanded nationwide.

At its core, HDSS remains a relatively simple concept: a small survey platform equipped with advanced geospatial and environmental sensors capable of rapidly documenting river conditions. Often operating from a modest kayak platform, HDSS integrates multiple video cameras, underwater imagery, side scan sonar, water quality sensors, depth sounders, and high accuracy Geographic Positioning System (GPS) equipment into a single mobile system.

Since its introduction, HDSS has evolved significantly. Improvements in video, sonar, GPS, and water quality sensors have increased efficiency and reliability, while advances in processing and application have expanded its use. HDSS is now routinely applied to large river systems, often covering 25 miles per day, and has been used across more than 2,000 miles of streams and rivers. Applications now extend beyond traditional habitat assessments to include stormwater management, flood recovery, submerged aquatic vegetation mapping, recreation planning, abandoned mine reclamation, hydropower operations, and watershed scale prioritization. As HDSS has evolved, so have the questions being asked by managers and stakeholders.

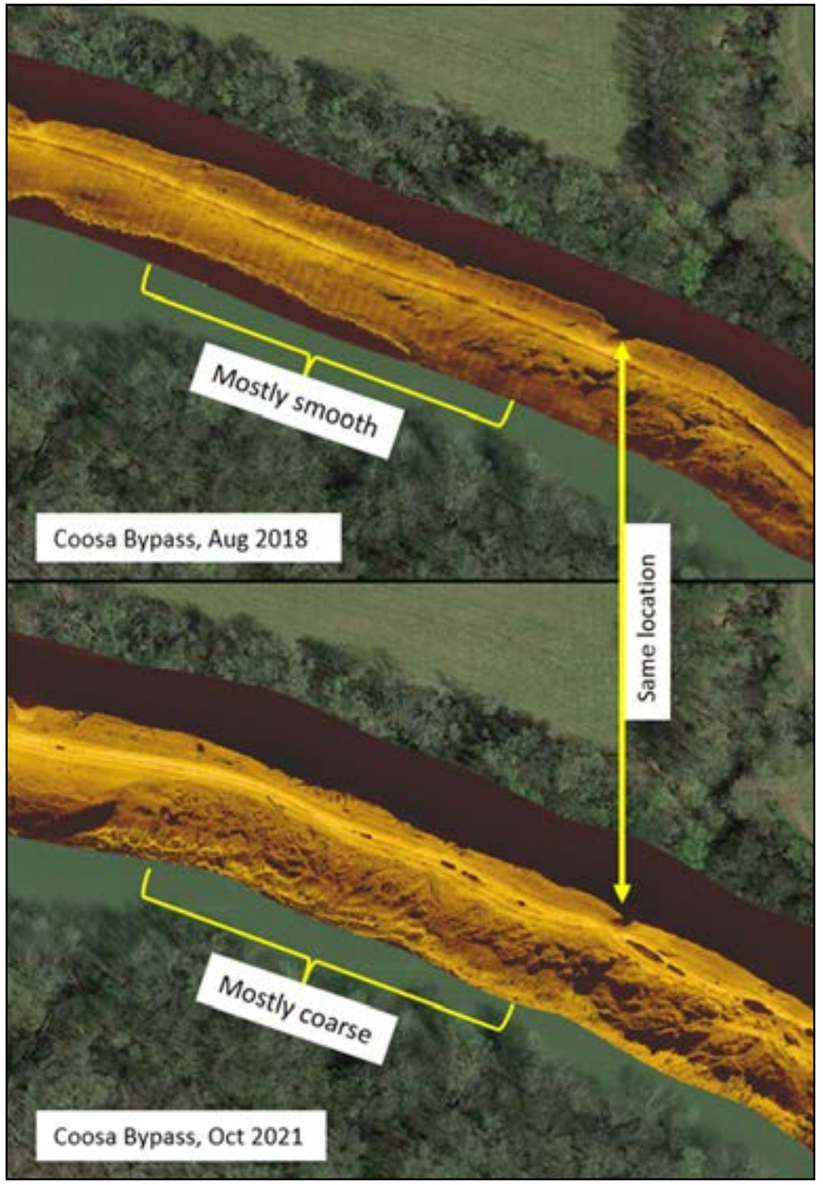
How do we prioritize restoration with limited funding?
A common challenge across watersheds is determining where limited restoration dollars will have the greatest impact. Traditional approaches often rely on isolated project sites or visible problem areas, leading to decisions driven more by optics than system-wide need. HDSS provides spatially-continuous, meter-resolution data across entire river corridors, allowing managers to match restoration type to actual conditions. Not all problems require the same level of intervention. Some areas may benefit from low-cost approaches such as riparian plantings, while others require more intensive actions like floodplain reconnection or infrastructure protection. Without comprehensive data, there is a tendency to over-engineer solutions, increasing cost without proportional benefit.

On Hurricane Creek in Alabama, HDSS was applied across the entire watershed to evaluate acid mine drainage impacts associated with legacy coal mining. Funded through the Abandoned Mine Lands Economic Revitalization Grant Program administered by the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, the project combined continuous stream corridor mapping with water quality sampling at tributary confluences throughout approximately 250 miles of stream. HDSS documented acidic conditions, iron precipitate, and channel instability. The data helped managers identify which tributaries contributed the greatest impairment and where limited reclamation funds could provide the greatest watershed scale benefit. The data also helped distinguish where lower cost restoration approaches may be effective versus locations requiring more intensive reclamation efforts.

Similarly, along the Upper Delaware River in New York, HDSS data is being used to support trout habitat restoration and invasive species management across a large river corridor used by multiple agencies and organizations. The survey documented channel morphology, substrate conditions, habitat complexity, infrastructure, and the distribution of invasive Japanese knotweed. By collecting continuous data throughout the system, managers are able to evaluate where lighter touch restoration approaches may be sufficient and where more engineered stabilization may eventually be necessary. The resulting dataset supports coordination among agencies while helping balance fisheries habitat goals, invasive species management, recreation, and long term river stability.

By linking restoration type to site specific conditions, HDSS allows managers to maximize return on investment. Resources can be allocated strategically, ensuring that each dollar spent delivers the greatest ecological and functional benefit.

Where should we focus recovery efforts after a major storm?
Following Hurricane Helene, 160 miles of the New River in Virginia were surveyed using HDSS to document post-storm conditions, including debris accumulation, damaged infrastructure, channel alterations, and areas vulnerable to future flooding. The project created one of the first continuous, watershed-scale assessments of the river following the storm and provided agencies and stakeholders with a shared dataset to support recovery planning. A key lesson from this effort is the importance of timing. Without a pre-storm dataset, it is difficult to understand what was lost, and without an immediate post-storm assessment, it becomes challenging to prioritize response actions effectively. By rapidly documenting conditions throughout the river corridor, HDSS helped identify immediate hazards, infrastructure concerns, and areas where natural recovery processes may be sufficient.



Quantifying Physical Habitat Change and Evaluating Restoration Outcomes: *Comparison of side scan sonar imagery collected during the Coosa Bypass High Definition Stream Survey before and after implementation of environmental flow releases associated with Alabama Power Company's Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) relicensing. Figure: Brett Connell / Trutta Consulting*

***Before**: The 2018 imagery shows a smooth streambed dominated by fine sediment accumulation under low flow conditions.*

***After**: The 2021 imagery documents substantially increased substrate diversity following implementation of 200 ft³/s (cubic feet per second) environmental flows to flush fine sediments and expose coarser bottom habitats.*

Recovery efforts often begin quickly out of necessity, but decisions made with limited information can lead to unintended consequences. In some cases, debris removal also removed stable riparian vegetation, increasing bank instability and creating additional long-term restoration needs and costs. These outcomes highlight the risks of acting without a clear, system-wide understanding of conditions.

HDSS provides a framework for more informed recovery by continuously documenting conditions throughout the river corridor and organizing that information into actionable outputs.

Rapid reporting workflows identify what the problem is, where it is located within the stream corridor, and how severe or hazardous it may be. This allows managers to prioritize actions based on risk, impact, and accessibility rather than reacting to isolated observations. On the New River, this approach helped distinguish between immediate hazards, infrastructure risks, and areas where natural recovery processes may be sufficient. The result is a more efficient recovery strategy that helps ensure restoration and recovery funds are spent where they deliver the greatest benefit.

How do we measure the success of restoration efforts?
Significant resources are invested in restoration, yet post-project evaluation and monitoring are often limited or absent. Without measurable outcomes, it is difficult to assess success, understand changes, or guide future investments. HDSS addresses this gap by providing a repeatable, spatially-continuous framework for measuring change across entire river systems, allowing future surveys to quantify improvements or declines with meter-level precision and evaluate restoration outcomes at the scale of the full watershed.

Within the Hurricane Creek watershed in Alabama, HDSS is being used to evaluate abandoned mine land reclamation by comparing pre- and post-project datasets throughout the watershed. By using stream corridor scores, water quality indicators, and habitat suitability modeling, managers can identify where conditions have improved and where additional work is needed. This approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of watershed response and helps determine whether reclamation efforts are producing meaningful ecological improvements over time.

On Florida's Wekiva River, HDSS is tracking changes in eelgrass (*Vallisneria americana*) throughout the river system. By mapping eelgrass distribution at meter-scale resolution, managers can determine whether patches are expanding or declining and evaluate how factors such as water depth, light availability, and recreational pressure influence those changes. Repeated surveys will also help identify areas where suitable habitat exists but eelgrass remains absent, providing additional insight for future restoration and management efforts.

On larger systems such as Virginia's New River, HDSS has established baseline conditions for monitoring geomorphic processes, infrastructure recovery, habitat response, and watershed change following major disturbances. By collecting continuous data throughout the river corridor, future surveys can document how channels adjust over time, evaluate how restoration activities influence river conditions, and identify where additional recovery efforts may still be needed. This type of long-term monitoring provides managers with a more complete understanding of watershed response across the entire river system rather than isolated project sites. By shifting from site-based monitoring to continuous assessment, HDSS provides a practical way to measure return on investment and ensure restoration efforts produce meaningful results.

How do we align multiple organizations around a dataset?
Watershed scale projects often involve multiple stakeholders with different priorities, jurisdictions, and funding sources. Coordinating these efforts can be difficult when data collection is conducted independently, resulting in overlapping studies, inconsistent methodologies, and redundant spending. In many watersheds, agencies and organizations are working toward similar goals but lack a common dataset to allow decisions to be made from the same understanding of river conditions.

HDSS promotes collaboration by providing a single, robust dataset that supports multiple objectives across the same river system. While Friends of Southwest Virginia funded the New River survey following Hurricane Helene, multiple state and regional organizations are already using the data for water quality planning, recreation management, infrastructure assessment, hazard mitigation, and habitat restoration. Because the information is georeferenced and spatially continuous, each organization can apply the dataset to its own priorities without needing to independently repeat field efforts.

Similar approaches are being explored in other watersheds, including the Choctawhatchee, where federal, state, local, and non-profit organizations are discussing how to pool resources to support a watershed scale survey. In systems such as these, a shared dataset can support fisheries management, invasive species monitoring, storm recovery, recreation planning, and restoration prioritization simultaneously. By sharing the cost of a single survey, each partner gains access to comprehensive data while reducing redundant data collection and improving coordination across the watershed.

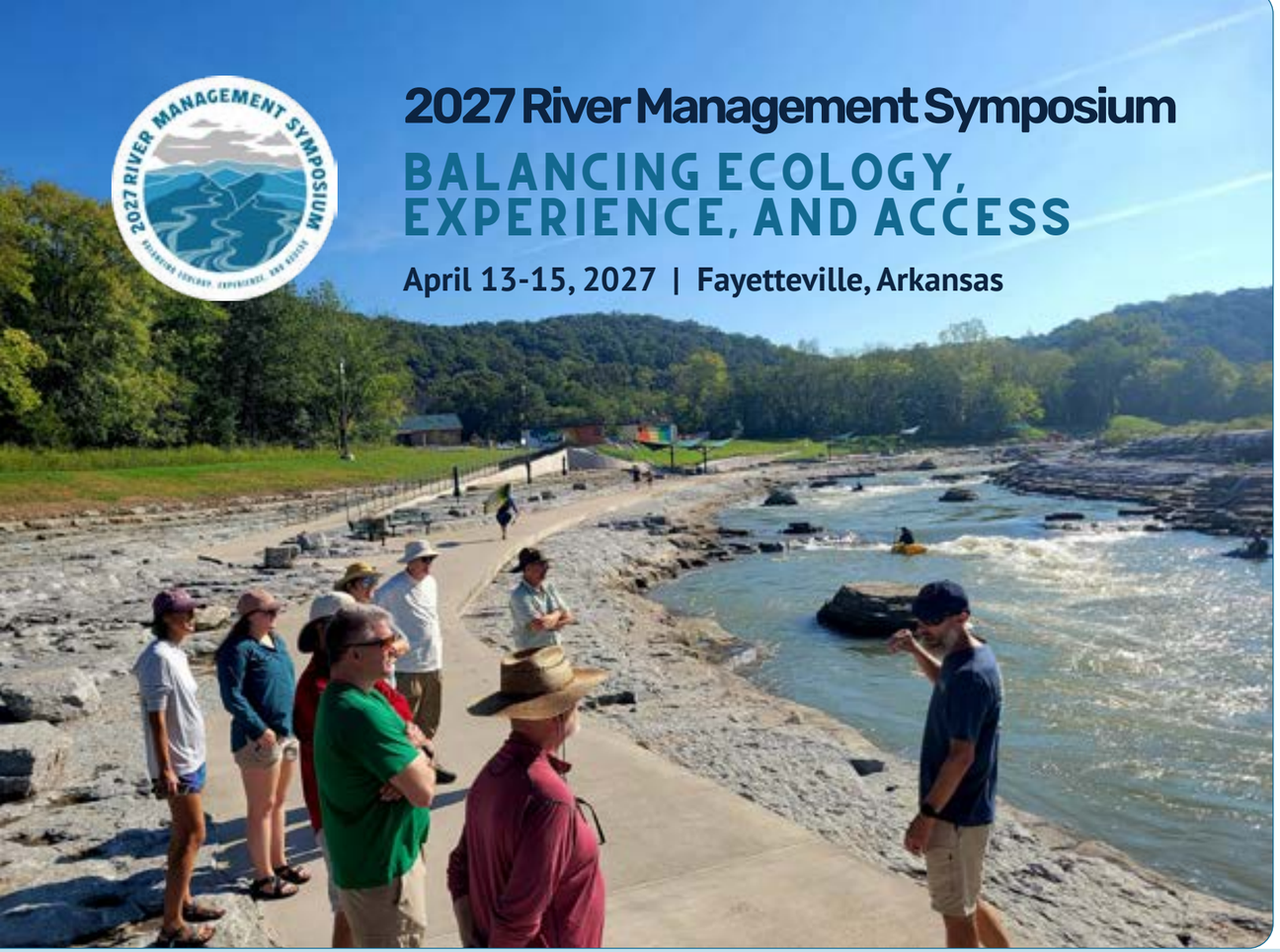
Looking Ahead
Watershed management is increasingly moving toward larger, more integrated efforts that require coordination across entire river systems. Rivers do not follow jurisdictional boundaries, yet funding and decision-making structures often do. As a result, agencies and organizations are frequently forced to make important management decisions with incomplete or disconnected information. The need for shared, watershed scale datasets will continue to grow as watershed restoration, hazard mitigation, infrastructure protection, river recreation, and ecological management become more interconnected.

At the same time, new pressures are emerging. Data centers are being constructed across the United States and require significant energy and water resources for cooling. These demands highlight the importance of understanding river system capacity before development occurs and ensuring that water resources are not pushed beyond sustainable limits. Similar pressures are occurring in rapidly developing watersheds where increasing demands for water supply, recreation, and infrastructure place additional stress on river systems already impacted by flooding, erosion, and habitat degradation.

HDSS provides a foundation for addressing these challenges by delivering continuous, high resolution data that supports permitting, feasibility studies, restoration planning, hazard mitigation, and long term monitoring. A simple concept continues to emerge from these projects: if multiple organizations within a watershed each contribute a portion of the cost, all benefit from a shared dataset that supports their individual goals. This approach reduces redundant data collection, improves efficiency, strengthens partnerships, and helps ensure that future river management decisions are made using the best available information. The future of watershed management will depend on making informed decisions at the scale of the system, and with the right data, those decisions become clearer, more defensible, and more effective. ❖

Brett Connell, M.S., B.S., is a key developer of the HDSS methodology and was the founder of Trutta Consulting, which merged with Parham and Associates Environmental Consulting in 2017. He has 20 years of professional experience in water resources, stream ecology, and fisheries biology with project experience throughout the United States.

Below and opposite: Mapping Watersheds With High-Tech Boats. *The High Definition Stream Survey (HDSS) utilizes multiple survey platforms to efficiently document stream corridors across a wide range of conditions. Wadeable streams are surveyed using a backpack system equipped with georeferenced video and water quality monitoring equipment, while kayaks and inflatable rafts support data collection in deeper waters. Together, these platforms allow HDSS to collect continuous georeferenced video, bathymetry, side scan sonar, and water quality data from headwater streams to large river systems, creating a consistent baseline dataset across the entire watershed. Photos: Brett Connell/Trutta Consulting*



Attendees will have the opportunity to visit and learn about the development and operations of WOKA Whitewater Park on the Illinois River. Photo: Leif Kindberg

The Buffalo National River provides opportunities to learn about both river protection and recreation management. Photo: Leif Kindberg

Fish sampling on Spring Creek, Illinois River: Sessions will highlight strategies to balance ecological and recreational needs on rivers. Photo: Leif Kindberg

Speaking opportunities include keynotes, concurrent sessions, panels, roundtables, and posters. Photo: Bekah Price

The River Management Society is excited to announce the 2027 River Management Symposium: Balancing Ecology, Experience, and Access, taking place April 13–15, 2027 in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Every two years the River Management Symposium brings together river professionals, watershed leaders, recreation managers, researchers, outdoor industry partners, and students from across the country to share ideas, build partnerships, and advance the field of river management.

Set in the Ozark and Ouachita region—known for its forested hills, clear streams, and vibrant river communities—the 2027 Symposium will provide an inspiring backdrop for conversations about stewardship, restoration, and equitable access to rivers and water trails.

Attendees can expect a dynamic program that includes:

- Engaging keynote speakers and concurrent sessions
- Field sessions focused on management of the Buffalo National River, the first National River, the Illinois River, one of six state of Oklahoma designated scenic rivers, WOKA Whitewater Park, and more
- A poster reception and networking opportunities
- Social events including awards luncheon closing banquet

Whether you are a seasoned professional or new to the field, the Symposium offers a unique opportunity to learn from peers, discover innovative approaches, and help shape the future of river management.

Event information is published and regularly updated at www.river-management.org/2027-symposium.

Call for Abstracts:
Oral & Poster Presentations

The Symposium program will feature a diverse range of sessions aligned with the theme "*Balancing Ecology, Experience, and Access*." We encourage anyone who studies, manages, or protects rivers to consider sharing their work. Formats include plenary or concurrent sessions, panels, roundtables, and posters. Presentations should align with one or more of the following tracks:

- **Balance**: Navigating tradeoffs and decision-making where ecological protection, recreation, and public access intersect.
- **Ecology**: Implementing restoration and research for long-term ecosystem health.
- **Experience**: Enhancing how people engage with, understand, and value rivers.
- **Access**: Expanding equitable and physical access to rivers.

Interested speakers should refer to the detailed Call for Speakers, which outlines potential topics for each track, as well as presentation formats and timing. Learn more and submit your proposal at www.river-management.org/2027-symposium. Submissions are due by October 1, 2026.

Sponsorship Opportunities
(Includes Nonprofit Level!)

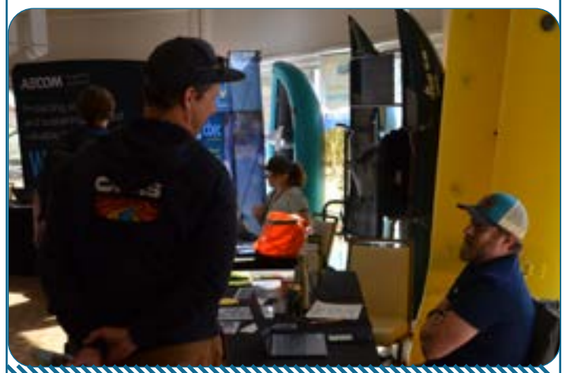
Sponsorship of the River Management Symposium helps make the event possible, supports current and aspiring river professionals, and provides visibility among a national audience of professionals who study, manage, and protect rivers.

Organizations can get involved in two ways:

- **Event sponsorship packages** that include benefits such as event registration, exhibitor space, logo placement, logo placement in digital and print materials, and River Management Society membership
- **Auction item donations** that support the Symposium while showcasing your organization's products, services, or experiences to attendees

Sponsorship starts at $1,000 (or $750 for nonprofits) and offers meaningful exposure before and during the event, along with opportunities to connect directly with professionals across agencies, nonprofits, and industry.

To explore options, view the Sponsor Information Packet or contact us to discuss partnership opportunities.



Sponsorship is an excellent opportunity to get to know and support river professionals nationwide who rely on your products and services in their day-to-day work. Photos: Bekah Price

Inaugural Float: *Sara Alvey (front) and Sydney Bowman with the Illinois River Watershed Partnership led a group of paddlers in the inaugural float of the Upper Illinois River Water Trail. Photo: Mike Wintroath / AGFC*

First Water Trail in Northwest Arkansas Dedicated

by Randy Zellers

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) gathered with its conservation partners in Siloam Springs in May to celebrate the official opening of the Upper Illinois River Water Trail, the first Arkansas Water Trail in Northwest Arkansas.

In addition to being the first Arkansas Water Trail in this corner of the state, the Upper Illinois River Water Trail is the first in the AGFC's list to span two states. It begins at Chamber Springs Access near Pedro, and continues through Siloam Springs Kayak Park, eventually ending at WOKA Whitewater Park in Oklahoma. The entire trail is 15.5 miles long, but is split near its midpoint at the kayak park, where the dedication took place.

"The trail features two separate sets of rapids at the whitewater parks, but floaters shouldn't be intimidated," Kirsten Bartlow, AGFC Watchable Wildlife Program coordinator, said. "You can easily carry your canoe or kayak around the Siloam Springs Kayak Park, and you can take out before you get to the whitewater park in Oklahoma. With those two exceptions, it's a fairly gentle Ozark stream with pools and riffles."

Although this is the first official Arkansas Water Trail in the area, paddling and canoe floats are nothing new to Arkansans, as many people make the journey to the Ozarks each year to enjoy destinations such as Kings River, Crooked Creek and America's first national river, the Buffalo River.

"This section of the Upper Illinois is really an overlooked gem by a lot of paddlers," Bartlow said. "Some of our streams get loved to death, and this is an excellent option for people who are looking for something a little different or want to escape some of the more crowded streams during peak floating season."

Bartlow said another endearing aspect of the Illinois is its consistent nature for floating.

"A lot of our other streams become too low to float during late summer or drought conditions, but the Upper Illinois generally has a constant flow, so it's a great option for people when some of the other streams are running dry."

Kayak Park Dedication: *Arkansas Game and Fish Commission (AGFC) Director Doug Schoenrock highlighted the AGFC's increased effort to expand its programs in Northwest Arkansas, the fastest-growing portion of the state, during the dedication at the Siloam Springs Kayak Park. Photo: Mike Wintroath / AGFC*

Upper Illinois River Water Trail: *Two whitewater sections exist on the new trail, but paddlers can portage around them if they want to simply enjoy a leisurely float. Photo: Mike Wintroath / AGFC*

Although this is the first Arkansas Water Trail in Northwest Arkansas, it's not the first time the AGFC has worked with many of the partners involved in the project.

"The Illinois River Watershed Partnership has been a fantastic partner for years," Bartlow said. "They've put in a lot of hard work on developing the Illinois River Conservation-Based Recreation Management Plan to ensure people recreate responsibly on our waters and have the opportunity to fall in love with the outdoors. They were also the ones driving the bus on this project and putting in a lot of hours to see this trail come to fruition. The City of Siloam Springs has also been great with this effort, and the Grand River Dam Authority has been really helpful, as has the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation."

AGFC Recreation and Access Coordinator Darrell Bowman was one of many excited attendees of Friday's celebration.

"This was a great day due to all the partners' dedication to pull the new trail designation together," Bowman said. "It was energizing for all of us to continue the work to enhance conservation and recreation on northwest Arkansas streams."

The Arkansas Water Trail Program has come a long way since its inaugural float on Wattensaw Bayou in 2009. Arkansans now have 21 designated water trails to choose from, ranging from flat-water floats to streams with moderate current and a few challenging sections of rapids.

"That's not including Arkansas's more notable paddling destinations like the Buffalo and Spring rivers," Bartlow said. "AWT is about helping people in all areas of the state find a canoe or kayaking destination in their own backyard. Some are in remote areas, and others meander right through a few of Arkansas's larger cities."

To learn more about the Upper Illinois River Water Trail, including a map and GPS coordinates for the three access points along its length, visit www.agfc.com/things-to-do/water-trails/upper-illinois-river-water-trail. Information on the two whitewater parks and two outfitters operating along its length are also available.

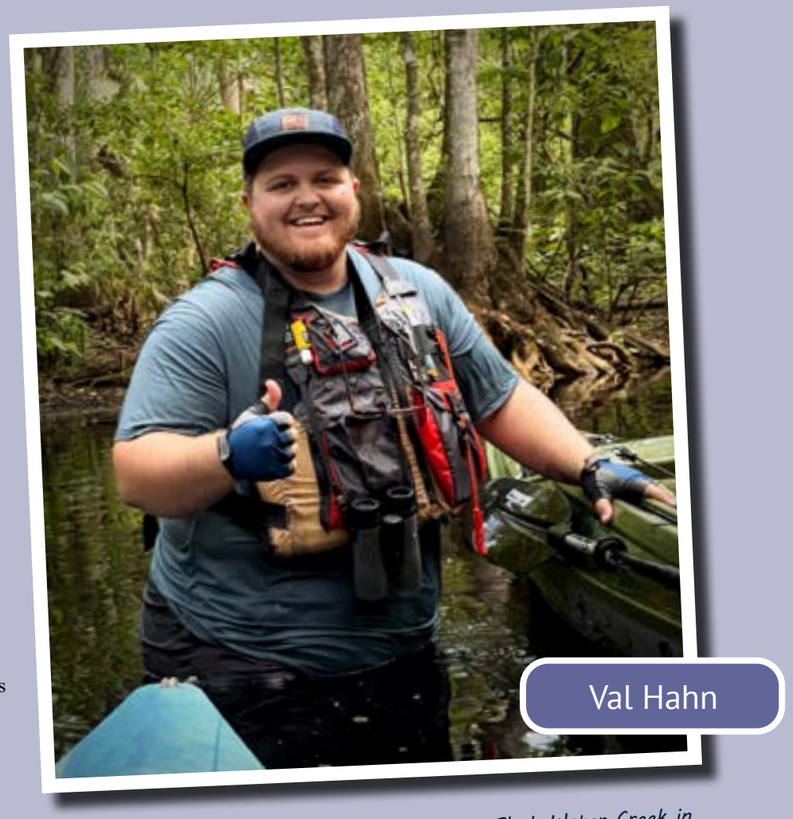
For more information on the Arkansas Water Trails Program, visit www.agfc.com/watertrails. ❖

Randy Zellers is the Assistant Chief of Communications for the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission.

River professionals are just as diverse as the rivers they manage. There are countless ways to channel a passion for rivers into a career.

Source to Steward celebrates the unique paths that river professionals have followed to study, protect, and manage rivers.

RMS Q&A with Val Hahn



River Ambassador Val Hahn on Black Water Creek in the Wekiva Wild and Scenic River System. Photo: Missy St Pierre Sands

What is your (upstream) story?

I grew up in Michigan, the Great Lakes State, never living more than a few blocks from a Great Lake. Rivers, streams, and lakes were always part of my life, providing places to reflect and connect with the natural world.

After graduating from college, I moved to Florida because I wanted to contribute, in whatever way I could, to conserving one of the fastest-growing regions in the country. With an estimated 1,000 people moving to Florida daily, development continues to place increasing pressure on habitats and water resources.

As a park ranger, I had the opportunity to work across the state and learn from Florida's diverse landscapes and communities. Later, while working for The Nature Conservancy, I helped share the story of a successful hydrological restoration project. The people behind that work, especially Pat Harden, inspired me. Through her dedication to protecting Florida's natural resources, Pat showed me the impact one person can have over time.

For the past several years, I have also volunteered on the Wekiva National Wild and Scenic River near my home. Spending time on the river has given me a sense of peace and purpose. When the opportunity to serve as the River Ambassador became available, it felt like a natural fit. Looking back, many of the experiences that shaped me seemed to come together in a meaningful way through this role.

What river has shaped you most and why?

The Wekiva Wild and Scenic River System has had the greatest influence on my professional growth. Before working to protect this river, I saw myself as a conservation professional with experience across many different areas. This role gave me the opportunity to bring those experiences together and apply them toward a shared purpose, while continuing to learn and grow.

What makes this river especially unique is its designation as a Partnership Wild and Scenic River. I work closely with the regional water management district and the land management agencies that help protect the river system, and my previous experiences have given me a greater appreciation for the responsibilities and challenges of their work. That perspective has helped me build strong partnerships and contribute more effectively to our shared conservation goals.

How did you spot the opportunities that propelled you forward?

I have always tried to say yes to opportunities that allow me to learn and grow. Over the years, I have taken on diverse roles, including volunteer management, public speaking, prescribed fire, plant and wildlife surveys, invasive plant management, and shorebird and sea turtle monitoring. Some of my most valuable experiences came outside of work, where conversations around campfires and gatherings introduced me to new perspectives, ideas, and approaches to problem solving.

Who are the mentors along the way that helped illuminate paths you may not have thought possible?

First, I want to recognize my grandmother, who sparked my connection to the natural world at an early age. When I was young, she would walk me to a nearby creek where we would drop sticks from one side of a bridge and race to the other to see whose stick emerged first. She also built tree blinds with me in the nearby forest and taught me the value of being quiet and still enough to truly notice the world around me.

In 2014, I met Cam Sanders at my university's career fair, dressed in green and khaki and representing a path I had never fully considered before. That summer, I worked with him during my first internship as a visitor information specialist, serving in an interagency role with the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service. That experience solidified my passion for conservation, and I have not looked back since.

I am deeply grateful to every person who has crossed my path and taken the time to share their story, perspective, and culture with me. More people have shaped my journey and values than I could ever fully count.

What advice would you give to aspiring river professionals?

My advice to those aspiring to become river professionals is to learn from the people who fought to protect these waterways before you. Seek out those who successfully challenged harmful development and connect with members of advocacy and friends' groups whose commitment goes far beyond a paycheck. Their experience provides a blueprint for the action, resilience, and persistence needed to protect our waters when the inevitable future challenges arise.

I would also encourage people to spend time volunteering on a river or with surrounding land management agencies. Get to know your river firsthand, understand its value, and treat it as the essential part of the community that it is.

Finally... what do you love?

I care deeply about protecting nature and promoting the idea that it belongs to ALL of us. I believe everyone should have the opportunity to enjoy the outdoors while also sharing the responsibility of preserving it for future generations. ❖

Val Hahn is the River Ambassador for the Wekiva Wild and Scenic River System in Central Florida.

Val snorkeling Rock Springs Run in the Wekiva Wild and Scenic River System. Photo: Revecca Ponce

River Trip Launched RSLC *Student* Journey to RMS Community

Words and photos by Ava Money

I was made aware of the River Management Society (RMS) as a new transfer student at Northeastern State University (NSU) in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. While pursuing a Fish and Wildlife degree, Dr. Elizabeth Waring, professor and RMS member, asked if I would be interested in a class she was offering. The class would involve a three-day float down the Scenic Buffalo River, and begin my journey towards the community that is RMS.

In preparation for the trip, I was introduced to RMS and the River Studies and Leadership Certificate Program (RSLC). Though not a member, I benefited from hearing from those involved, and became interested in the organization. I discovered that RMS was a complex and multidisciplinary network of individuals joined by a shared passion for river systems and their stewardship.

While on the Buffalo River, there was a fantastic sense of excitement and camaraderie. I walked away having made connections with other students from the University of Tennessee Chattanooga, as well as Virginia Commonwealth University. Additionally, I had the chance to speak with professionals from these schools and other facets of river management. Notably, Ed Fite and Dr. Elise Chapman, whom I must thank for spending two days patiently teaching me how to steer a canoe. Moreover, we were gaining hands-on experience in the field. Students were given the independence to conduct personalized projects while also having access to amazing advisors in the field. Once I returned to NSU after the river trip, I spoke again with Dr. Waring and decided to change my major to Freshwater Sciences. The next step was to enroll in the RSLC. I was excited for this new adventure, but was unaware of the impact that it would ultimately have on me as both a student and individual.

Buffalo River Spring 2025 RMS River Rendezvous: *Participants pause to add extra layers of clothing to adjust for the wind and chilly waters during the less-than-ideal conditions marked by heavy rain and cold temperatures. While the weather could have easily dampened spirits, everyone remained enthusiastic and approached the float with excitement and a willingness to step outside their comfort zones.*

In joining the RSLC program, my community expanded tremendously. The resources that RMS has to offer widened my understanding of what it means to be involved in river sciences and management. The passion and commitment of members across the country fosters a sense of belonging and motivates collaboration toward a greater goal of sustainable river stewardship. Beyond this digital connection though, I also contacted local members. One such member being Jared Skaggs, the supervisor of Scenic Rivers and Public Access Areas for the Grand River Dam Authority (GRDA). After meeting him at the Buffalo River Rendezvous the previous spring, I spent the summer working for him in the GRDA Scenic Rivers office. My duties included permitting river floaters, monitoring river conditions, and participating in public outreach and education events. I gained a new perspective on my home river, the State-designated Scenic Illinois River, and found a space where I was able to grow professionally while also forming meaningful personal connections.

I sat down with Jared Skaggs to ask what he thought was the biggest benefit of the RSLC program. He spoke passionately about his experience, explaining, “There is so much as a student that you don’t know or get exposed to outside of RMS. As far as the connections and symposiums, the roundtables, the human resources, as far as learning and job opportunities. Having a professional program like this is definitely beneficial as a student.” He also added that being surrounded by a diverse group of like-minded people “helps deepen the passion for the field.” I can confidently say that RMS and the RSLC program have deepened my passion for the field and for the rivers that inspire it.

While my time as a student is nearing its end, I have been asked to consider the question “Is a river alive?” from the book *Is a River Alive?* by Robert Macfarlane.

I have discovered that the answer to this question lies not in rivers themselves, but within the individuals and communities that surround them. These communities can be so vibrant and whole that they feed something wonderfully close to life into our beloved waters. There has been no better example of this for me than my time in the RSLC program. ❖

Ava Money graduated this spring from NSU’s RSLC program, where she also earned her bachelor’s degree in freshwater sciences. Before attending NSU, she earned her associate degree from Tulsa Community College. After graduating, Ava is considering graduate programs, and plans to do seasonal field work in the meantime.

Author’s Favorite Vantage Point of Home River: *The State-designated Scenic Illinois River viewed from Sparrowhawk Wildlife Management Area near Tahlequah. While attending Northeastern State University, Money spent many Saturdays hiking the steep karst hillsides to observe the river below.*

RSLC Student Organizes Irrigation Ditch Education and Service Day in Historic Colorado Town

Debris-Free Drainage: *A well-maintained irrigation ditch carries irrigation water through the town of Gunnison.*

Words and photos by Elisa Elsberry

Before the irrigation ditch system was established, Gunnison, Colorado, was a dry and dusty town consisting of sagebrush and little tree cover. During this time, access to water was scarce and growth was limited, but the implementation of the irrigation ditches changed that. In the 1880s, settlers began reshaping the landscape by digging 26 miles of open irrigation ditches by hand. The narrow channels carried water into town from the Gunnison River, a major tributary of the Colorado River. The irrigation ditches changed the town: the water not only brought trees for shade, greened lawns for play, and promoted gardens for beauty and sustenance, but also refilled an underground aquifer supplying the town's drinking water. The sound of water running through the ditches is familiar and comforting to residents. Each spring, the water is turned back on, symbolizing the beginning of summer.

However, the water cannot flow without help. During the winter months, the ditches become filled with dead leaves, branches, and trash, blocking the flow of the ditches when the water returns. If this debris is not cleared, the streets flood, neighborhoods are disrupted, and our most precious water is wasted.

With changing climates and less available water, sensitive and important infrastructure systems like these can become threatened. These systems require proper management and maintenance to remain functional in the face of climate change. If they are ineffectively maintained, they fall risk to being turned off, resulting in harmful impacts to the community that has relied on them for so long.

Western Colorado University (Western), where I am a student, holds an annual service event to give back to the Gunnison community. Through an independent study course, I organized a day of service event centered around education and cleaning of a portion of the irrigation ditches.

This project brought awareness of the important cultural and community resilience components the ditch system supplies. On April 19, 2026, a group of 24 students, professors, and two city representatives showed up to work on cleaning the ditches. Upon first glance, it seemed like it would be an easy job. It quickly became a full day of work. We removed mats of leaves, lodged branches, and trash. Bag by bag, we removed any debris that had made its way into the ditch. At the end of the 3 hours, we removed 32 bags of organic waste and 4 bags of inorganic waste.

The day proved to be successful; the ditches were cleared and ready for water. It was a great experience to make an impactful change for a system that often goes unnoticed, but that is central for the town, both historically and culturally. These systems are not just a relic of Gunnison's past, but a system that will require care as water in the west becomes more uncertain.

In continuation of stewarding this sentiment, I was involved in planning the second annual City Picnic and Ditch Blessing event. This free picnic brings the community together to celebrate and reflect upon the water system that shaped Gunnison and to impart a shared responsibility in maintenance. Families and members of the community gather to enjoy children's artwork and a blessing for the water by local faith groups over a shared meal.

Together, these ditch-centered events help Gunnison residents take a moment to recognize the special qualities the irrigation ditch system provides, and not only what they provide today, but what they will provide into the future. ❖

Elisa Elsberry is a senior at Western pursuing a bachelor's degree in environmental sustainability with an emphasis in water conservation and minors in biology and geology. She spent her summers working with Colorado Parks and Wildlife's Aquatic Nuisance Species Program. After graduating, she plans to remain at Western to complete her master's degree in environmental management.

Irrigation Ditch Cleaning Service Day: *First annual ditch cleaning day of service event created in partnership with Western Colorado University and the City of Gunnison.*

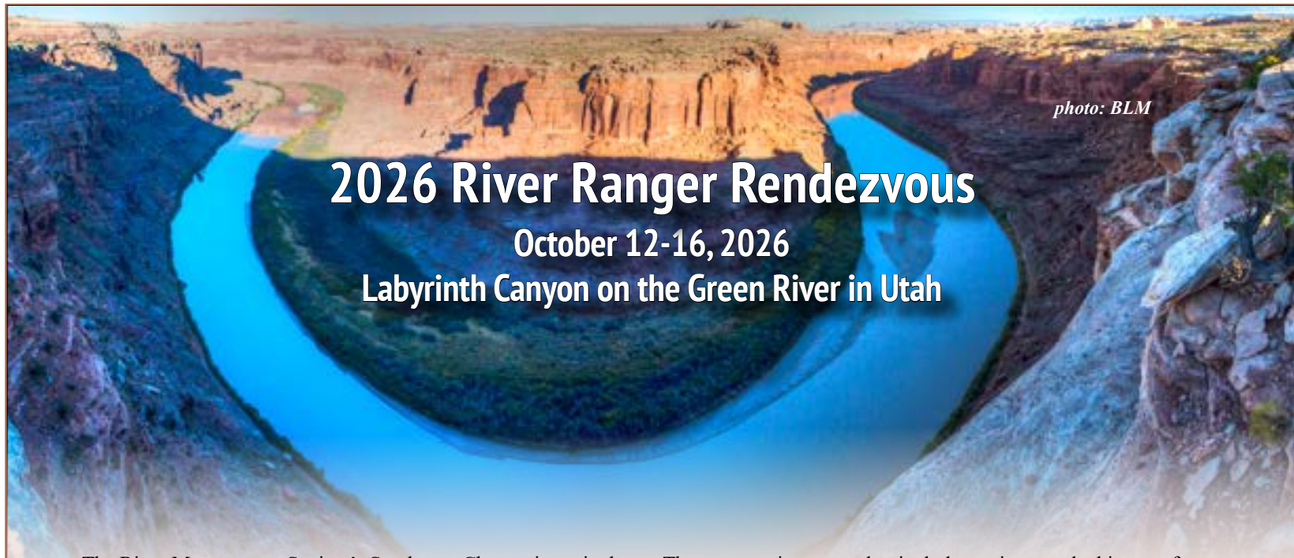


photo: BLM

2026 River Ranger Rendezvous

October 12-16, 2026

Labyrinth Canyon on the Green River in Utah

The River Management Society's Southwest Chapter is excited to host the annual River Ranger Rendezvous on Labyrinth Canyon National Scenic River on Utah's stunning Green River!

For decades, the River Ranger Rendezvous has brought together professionals responsible for the day-to-day management of our nation's rivers to share practical ideas, build leadership and technical skills, and learn from one another in the field. Open to all river and resource professionals, not just those with the title "river ranger," the Rendezvous provides participants with new skills, fresh perspectives, and a network of colleagues on whom they can rely long after the trip ends.

The program is expected to include sessions on the history of stream access in the United States, inflatable boat field repair, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act designation process as it relates to Labyrinth Canyon, and stream restoration theory for Southwestern rivers.

The registration fee for this trip is $250, or $200 for RMS members. Non-members are invited to join RMS and save! The deadline to register is August 28, 2026. Registrants will have the option to pay by card or by mailing a check.

For more information and to register, visit the RMS website.

Great Partnerships: University Students & Nonprofit Organizations

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by Madison Ball and Nicolas Zegre

This year, Friends of the Cheat (FOC) would like to highlight a project partner that has gone above and beyond to lift local voices in the conversations, planning, and response around flooding in West Virginia, and specifically the Cheat River Watershed—our partner of the year are West Virginia University (WVU) Mountain Hydrology Lab and Center for Resilient Communities.

FOC collaborated with researchers from the WVU Mountain Hydrology Lab and Center for Resilient Communities on two projects funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). These projects aim to reduce vulnerability and enhance community resilience to flooding by co-producing the knowledge, data, tools, technology, and approaches that are necessary to adapt to increasing flood risks across the Appalachian Mountains.

The Science to Advance Freshwater Ecosystem and Community Resilience in the Appalachians (SAFER) project (NSF Award No. 2434972) brings together conservation organizations, government officials, planners, and researchers from Vermont, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia to understand community needs with respect to data and tools for flood hazard mapping and prediction in rural mountain communities. An important part of the project is knowledge exchanges where participants visit one another's watersheds to identify synergies and to build capacity for flood planning across Appalachian communities. In July 2025, members of the West Virginia team, including FOC staff, visited the Winooski River watershed to learn how catastrophic flooding in 2023 and 2024 impacted communities in Vermont. In September, FOC hosted a field tour in the Cheat that shared the rebirth of the Cheat story and explored flood risks along the mainstem of the Cheat and Saltlick Creek.

Pointing to the High Water Mark:
Rachel Hovel, Associate Professor of Biology and advisor to the River Studies and Leadership Certificate program at University of Maine at Farmington, points to a high-water mark on the Martin Covered Bridge spanning the Winooski River in Vermont. Catastrophic flooding in 2023 and 2024 caused extensive damage to riverine communities throughout the Winooski River basin. Photo: Nicolas Zegre

The Flooding in Appalachian Streams and Headwaters (FLASH) initiative (NSF Award No. 2418790) is a collaboration between residents, community groups, and researchers from Kentucky and West Virginia that aims to understand how flash floods work, how extreme rain interacts with land use, and what makes Appalachian communities disproportionately vulnerable to flash flooding. This work is being used to develop better flood prediction and early warning systems tools and to inform how communities can better prepare for flash flooding. FOC and WVU are working specifically to develop a blueprint for flood resilience planning based on the needs, lessons, lived experiences, and vision of residents in the Cheat watershed that will then be shared with other communities to better prepare for the increases in heavy rainfall that Appalachian communities are experiencing. ❖

> "With deep knowledge of the watershed, technical acumen for solving complex problems, and trusted relationships with the community, Friends of Cheat is an indispensable partner for moving the needle on hope, progress, and opportunity in the Cheat. The projects highlighted show the leadership and deep commitment of Friends of Cheat for helping to create safe, healthy, prosperous, and resilient river communities throughout the region."
>
> —Dr. Nicolas Zegre, WVU Mountain Hydrology Lab

Madison Ball is Conservation Program Director with Friends of the Cheat in Kingwood, West Virginia. Learn more at https://cheat.org.

Nicolas Zegre, PhD, is a professor of forest hydrology at West Virginia University and an advisor for RMS River Studies and Leadership Certificate. He advised recent graduate Samuel Bayne, who wrote about this work in the Spring 2026 issue of this journal.

Celebrating 60 Years of TSRA

Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association

by Dave Pelren and Stephanie Sullivan

Sixty years! The Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association (TSRA) has been enjoying rivers and leading conservation efforts for six decades. For members of the River Management Society (RMS) who may not know us, TSRA is Tennessee's statewide paddling and river conservation nonprofit, bringing together recreational paddlers, educators, conservation advocates, and river stewards who share a love of waterways and public access.

Throughout 2026, TSRA is celebrating its history, culminating in a 60th anniversary event on October 10 at Shelby Bottoms Greenway and Nature Park in Nashville.

TSRA has always been powered by volunteers who believe Tennessee's rivers are worth protecting and sharing. Today, that work continues with support from a small staff coordinating programs, outreach, and conservation initiatives.

TSRA hosts a variety of paddling trips, training programs, and community events throughout the year. On the first Saturday of each month, members organize whitewater paddling trips across many of Tennessee's scenic rivers, while additional outings focus on flatwater and recreational paddling opportunities. This spring included *Roll School* and our annual "Rendezvous" paddling event and conservation fundraiser. "Kayaking 101" classes were offered at several Tennessee state parks in May, and swiftwater rescue training will be held later this month. *Canoe and Kayak School*, one of TSRA's signature educational programs, returns in late June along the Hiwassee River in eastern Tennessee.

Like many RMS members and partner organizations, TSRA balances recreation with stewardship. This year, TSRA supported Conservation Day on the Hill, advocating for river protections across Tennessee, including efforts to protect scenic rivers from landfill impacts. We continue to collaborate with TennGreen Land Conservancy around conservation opportunities and improved public access to the French Broad River at Del Rio.

TSRA has also begun working with the Southern Environmental Law Center to address wastewater treatment failures in middle Tennessee neighborhoods. In Nashville, TSRA recently adopted Whites Creek in partnership with the Cumberland River Compact, expanding local water quality monitoring and stewardship efforts.

Since 1966, TSRA's Conservation Committee and Access Committee have helped protect rivers and improve access across the state, including the installation of dozens of river access structures. Monthly paddling trips remain central to the organization, from scenic rivers in west and middle Tennessee to whitewater runs on the Cumberland Plateau and in east Tennessee.

Through the *River Kids* program, TSRA introduces youth to paddling, water quality education, and outdoor stewardship. Another longtime tradition is the Lost Loon "triathlon," a fun, family-oriented event combining biking, canoeing, and running that has supported TSRA for more than two decades. More recently, TSRA has added whitewater film screenings for members and the public as both outreach and fundraising events.

Photos: Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association

As always, TSRA emphasizes safety, fun, continued learning, and conservation at the heart of everything we do. Check us out at TSRA website (paddlersra.org) or on social media. We value partnerships with river advocates across the region and appreciate the shared energy and perspectives they bring.

If you are interested in stories from TSRA's history, check out our eNewsletters—there's a button at the bottom of our homepage. Recent anniversary features have included reflections from Mack Prichard, Tennessee's first state naturalist and longtime TSRA supporter, and Jack Lyle, former TSRA president, kayak instructor, and whitewater mentor. ❖

Dave Pelren is President and Stephanie Sullivan is Operations Manager of the Tennessee Scenic Rivers Association, based in Nashville, Tennessee.

Twenty-two in '26: RMS Celebrates River Studies and Leadership Certificate Recipients

The River Management Society (RMS) has proudly awarded the River Studies and Leadership Certificate (RSLC) to the greatest number of recipients since the program's inception in 2015. This year, 22 RSLC recipients celebrate the completion of interdisciplinary coursework and hands-on field experiences, deepening their understanding of river science, policy, recreation, and education.

"They represent the future of river management," says Risa Shimoda, Executive Director of the River Management Society. "What gives me confidence is seeing students enter the field with both the knowledge and practical experience needed to meet the complex challenges facing rivers today."

2026 RSLC Recipients:

- **Fort Lewis College:** Hailey Chanler, Lydia Joyce
- **Northeastern State University:** Ava Money
- **Northern Arizona University:** Jacey Beery, Kennedy Gilmore, Kendrick Estes, Trey Kettering, Jack Lootens
- **University of Northern Colorado:** Lorayne Aguinald, Jayde Cummings, Colbi Heineman, Madelyn Hill
- **West Virginia University:** Samuel Bayne, Cameron Layne
- **Western Colorado University:** Eva Anderson, Garret Christie, Elisa Elsberry
- **Western Washington University:** Caleb Barville, Paetra Cooke, Sage Hagopian, Lily Howard, Cora Murphy

Western Colorado University students are the first cohort at their institution to complete the program, and RMS congratulates them and their RSLC advisor, Susan Washko, on this milestone achievement.

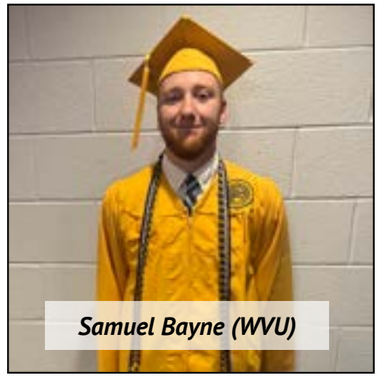
"RMS was an opportunity I didn't know I needed," says Paetra Cooke, a WWU certificate recipient. "It opened up a world of experiences in the environmental science field I wouldn't have found on my own. Without RMS I am not sure I would have realized my immense love for working with and protecting our waterways."

Now, recipients begin careers in fisheries, hydrology, GIS, environmental consulting, recreation management, invasive species prevention, and watershed conservation. ❖

River Management Society established the River Studies and Leadership Certificate in 2015 to prepare students for careers in river management through interdisciplinary study and professional experience.

For more information, contact Bekah Price at bekah@river-management.org.


Caleb Barville (WWU)


Samuel Bayne (WVU)


Lorayne H. Aguinaldo (UNCO)


Hailey Chanler (FLC)


Eva Anderson (WCU)


Garret Christie (WCU)


Paetra Cooke (WWU)

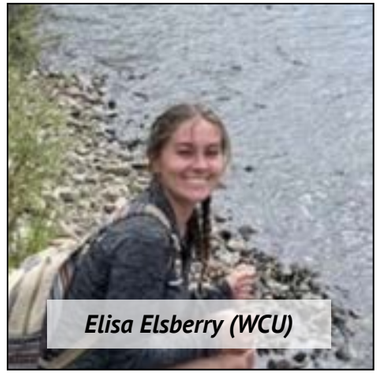

Kennedy Gilmore (NAU)


Lily Howard (WWU)

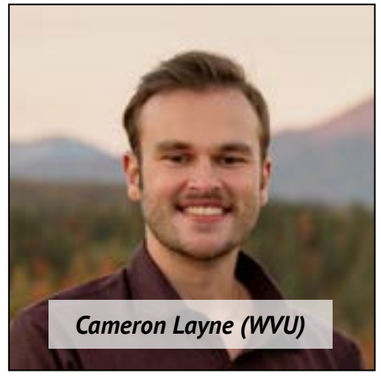

Jayde Cummings (UNCO)


Sage Hagopian (WWU)


Trey Kettering (NAU)


Elisa Elsberry (WCU)


Colbi Heineman (UNCO)


Cameron Layne (WVU)


Kendrick Estes (NAU)


Madelyn Hill (UNCO)


Cora Murphy (WWU)

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Wilderness/Wild & Scenic
Rivers Specialist
Madras, OR

Organization

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Pequea, PA

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Piers Rasmussen, River Ranger
Lindsey Grace Scott, River Ranger
Hood River, OR

Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission
Tanyan Carnes, Administrative Officer
Harrisburg, PA

Taunton River Watershed Alliance
Gloria Bancroft, Stewardship Council Coordinator
Abby Abrahamson, Program Manager
Melissa Benjamin, TRWA Coordinator
Monica Bentley, River Access Committee Chair
Taunton, MA

Student

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University of Northern Colorado
Granby, CO

Maddy Painter
West Virginia University
Cumberland, MD

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Kendrick Estes
Jack Lootens
Gabriel Morales
Northern Arizona University
Flagstaff, AZ

Analyn Hoffner
Lydia Joyce
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Durango, CO

Ronan Annee
Lily Howard
Cora Murphy
Nadia Slavec
Western Washington University
Bellingham, WA

Associate

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Myakka River Partnership
Venice, FL

Chuck Kirk, Owner
Rekayak-Where the River Meets the Stars
Marietta, GA

Thomas Kuntz
Portland, OR

Chris Smith, President
Sacramento Area Creeks Council
Sacramento, CA

Individual

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Verde WSR/Fossil Creek Work Coordinator,
USDA Forest Service
Sedona, AZ

Brandon Mitchell,
Recreation Specialist, USDA Forest Service
Fort Collins, CO

Victor Aguirre Orozco,
Hydropower Coordinator, USDA Forest Service
Arcadia, CA

Russ Talmo
Missoula, MT

"I took all four of Rosgen's short courses on fluvial geomorphology and stream restoration but did not really understand the concepts until I took Dr. Field's three day course."

—Scott Wixom, USDA Forest Service

Using Fluvial Geomorphology to Improve Stream Restoration and Watershed Management

November 16-18, 2026 Virtual Short Course
November 19, 2026 Optional Virtual Field Trip

The course is designed for government officials, environmental and engineering consultants, non-profit watershed groups, construction contractors, educators and students, and others trying to sustainably address flooding, erosion, habitat, and sediment and nutrient loading issues along rivers and streams. Participants will explore the principles of fluvial geomorphology, stream restoration, and watershed management.

Early registration closes October 16, and RMS members, students, and tribal members enjoy additional savings. Group rates are available.

Credits: 10 SER Continuing Education Credits

Learn more and register: https://bit.ly/rms-fluv-geo-2026

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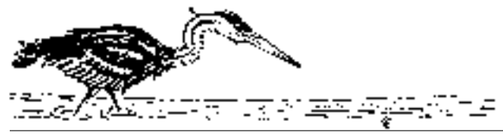
RMS Membership Auto-Renewal Now Available

Whether you're renewing your membership or joining for the first time, you can now opt in to auto-renewal. Save yourself time and avoid any lapse in benefits by enrolling. It's a simple way to stay connected and continue supporting the River Management Society without interruption.

We appreciate your membership, the time and expertise you contribute to our community, and everything you do for our rivers.

Give the gift of membership
to a colleague, student, retiree or friend!

RMS is a nonprofit organization.
All contributions are tax-deductible.



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Duties/Interests _____

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Rivers you manage _____

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- ❒ Individual $60/yr ($240 for 5 years - save $60!)
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- ❒ Student $30/yr
- ❒ Lifetime $750 (for individuals only)
- ❒ Organizational (1-2 people) $75/yr
- ❒ Organizational (3-4 people) $150/yr
- ❒ Organizational (5-8 people) $300/yr

Membership benefits are described online:
www.river-management.org/membership

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The New River in West Virginia hosts various forms of recreation on its waters, rocks, and bridges. Photo: Kathy Zerkle / NPS

Southeast Chapter Focus

RMS Journal Submission Deadlines

Fall 2026	Vol. 39, No. 3	Midwest	Aug
Winter 2026	Vol. 39, No. 4	Southwest	Nov
Spring 2027	Vol. 40, No. 1	Northwest	Feb
Summer 2027	Vol. 40, No. 2	Northeast	May
Fall 2027	Vol. 40, No. 3	Pacific	Aug
Winter 2027	Vol. 40, No. 4	Alaska	Nov
Spring 2028	Vol. 41, No. 1	Southeast	Feb