

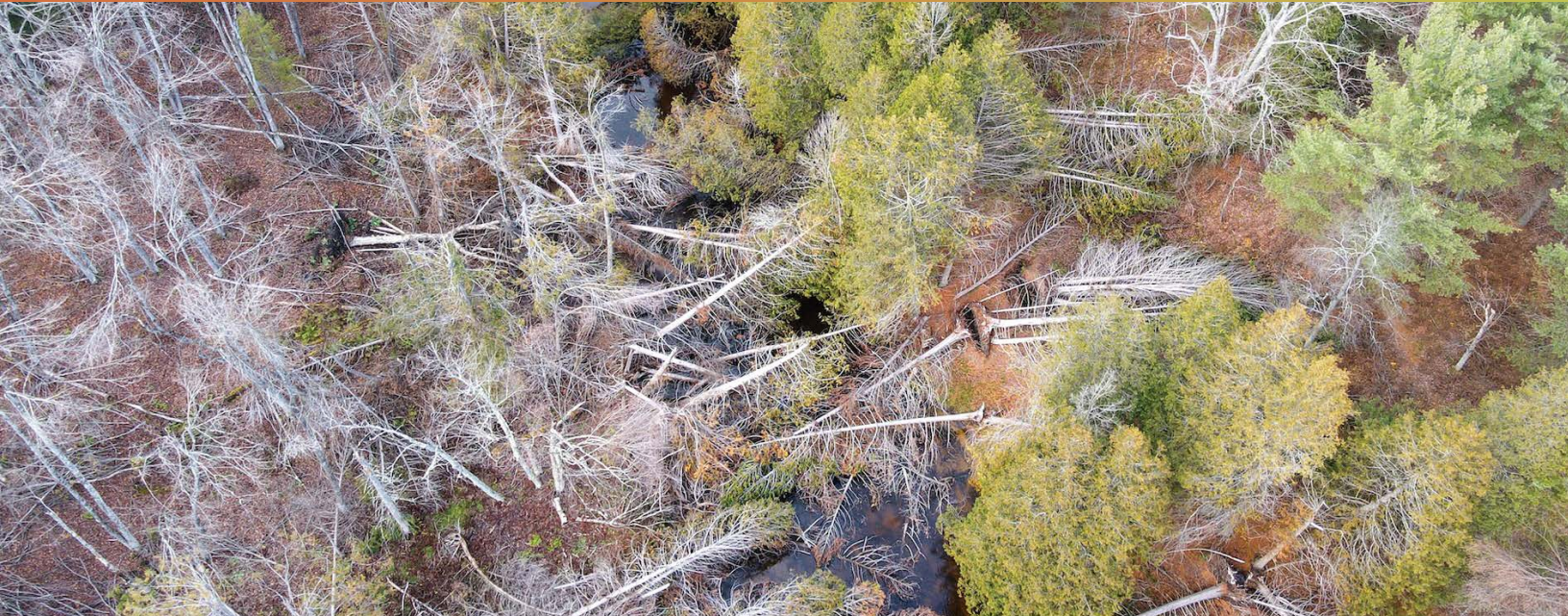


Conservation Resource Alliance



CATALYST

FALL 2026



With Your Help: From Devastation to Restoration

It's unconventional for CRA to launch a private fundraising campaign for a specific project. But the circumstances facing the Maple River are anything but conventional.

Following the devastating ice storm of March 2025, millions of trees fell across Northern Michigan, with the Maple River Valley among the hardest-hit areas. Then, in April 2026, flooding intensified conditions along the river corridor. Large debris jams redirected water into adjacent cedar lowlands, carved new flow paths, and accelerated erosion along vulnerable riverbanks and floodplains.

After drone flyovers and extensive field reconnaissance, CRA and project partners documented more than 50 major log jams fully spanning the Maple River between Woodland Road and Brutus Road. In some areas, these log jams have made stretches of river long enjoyed by paddlers, anglers, and nearby residents nearly impossible to navigate.

But what initially looked like devastation also presented an extraordinary restoration opportunity.

Rather than simply removing the fallen trees, CRA and its partners plan to strategically reposition select downed trees and reorganize debris accumulations to recreate the woody habitat once common in Northern Michigan rivers. Properly placed wood can stabilize eroding banks, redirect flows

away from vulnerable areas, create pools and riffles, improve aquatic habitat, and help the river better withstand future flooding.

The approximately \$400,000 effort builds upon decades of CRA-led restoration throughout the Maple River watershed. Now, we're asking our community to help us take the next step.

CRA has launched a campaign to raise \$100,000 in community support for the project—and thanks to a generous commitment from the Pat & Gill Clements Foundation, every individual contribution will be matched, dollar for dollar, up to \$50,000.

The Foundation has also committed an additional \$100,000 directly to the project, bringing the total Foundation commitment to \$150,000 and providing tremendous momentum toward making this restoration possible.

For CRA, a project-specific fundraising campaign may be unusual. Then again, so is the opportunity before us: to take the aftermath of historic storms and use what nature left behind to build a healthier, more resilient Maple River.

With your help, we can turn devastation into restoration.



To donate, learn more, and view a complete list of partners and funders, scan the QR code or visit:
<https://www.rivercare.org/project/maple-river/restoration/>

About CRA

Founded in 1968, Conservation Resource Alliance (CRA) restores and revitalizes Michigan's streams and habitats through innovative, sustainable solutions and strong community partnerships.

Through its River Care™ and Wild Roots programs, CRA works to protect and restore more than 700 miles of rivers, 5,000 miles of tributaries, and nearly 4 million acres of forests across Northern Michigan.

We've been able to care for this region's natural resources because our partners and supporters continue to be the backbone of our organization.

Thank you to all of our donors for supporting hands-on, feet-wet conservation. If you haven't donated, please join us. Your commitment is critical to keep this important work moving forward.

Suzie Knoll

Executive Director

Kimberly Balke

Biologist/Program Director

Sue Antaya

Finance & Administration Director

DJ Shook

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Nate Winkler

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Development Coordinator

Tori Wolever

Engagement Specialist

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A New Course for Mitchell Creek

Once home to a golf course, Mitchell Creek Meadows: The Don and Jerry Oleson Nature Preserve is now a thriving natural area. But the transformation of this landscape isn't finished. Fairways, greens, cart paths, drainage systems, and stream crossings shaped how water moved across the property. Streams were straightened and constrained, wetlands altered, and undersized crossings resulted in fragmented habitat.

Now, attention is turning to the small streams and wetlands woven throughout the preserve. In partnership with the Grand Traverse Regional Land Conservancy, the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, The Watershed Center Grand Traverse Bay, and numerous local contractors, CRA is working to restore and reconnect these waterways, improving habitat and allowing them to function more naturally across the landscape.

And while some of these streams may be small, their ecological value is anything but. The Mitchell Creek Watershed is the third-largest tributary watershed flowing into Grand Traverse Bay and plays a vital role in one of Northern Michigan's most ecologically significant freshwater systems. Small, cold-water tributaries provide important refuge, spawning areas, food, and shelter for fish and other aquatic organisms while connecting wetlands, forests, and larger waterways.

This summer, years of planning began taking shape on the ground. Most of the project's planned woody debris structures were installed throughout the stream system, adding complexity and creating valuable habitat for fish and other aquatic life. The project's crossing removals are also on track to be completed before the first snow falls.

When complete, the broader restoration will improve more than 4,400 feet of stream habitat with strategically placed wood, re-meander more than 600 feet of straightened stream, remove eight undersized or abandoned crossings, restore riparian wetlands, and reconnect 6.5 miles of habitat.



To view a complete list of partners and funders, scan the QR code or visit:
<https://www.rivercare.org/project/mitchell-creek/a-new-chapter-for-mitchell-creek/>



One of eight undersized or abandoned stream crossings gets a closer look.



Natural-looking wood structures now protect vulnerable streambanks and enhance habitat.

You Probably Didn't Notice, But We Did.

Just off the shores of Platte Lake, an unnamed cold-water tributary passes beneath Bixler Road. If you drove over it a few months ago, you probably didn't notice it. But we did.

For years, this small stream flowed through two aging dams and stagnant impoundments before being funneled beneath Bixler Road through undersized culverts. Behind the dams, as much as 4.7 feet of organic sediment had accumulated. During high-water events, the deteriorating infrastructure posed a growing risk to Bixler Road, neighboring property, and Platte Lake itself.

This summer, CRA and its partners changed that.

The two dams and their infrastructure were removed, the undersized culverts beneath Bixler Road were replaced with a much larger stream-spanning structure, and a natural, meandering stream channel was restored through the former impoundments.

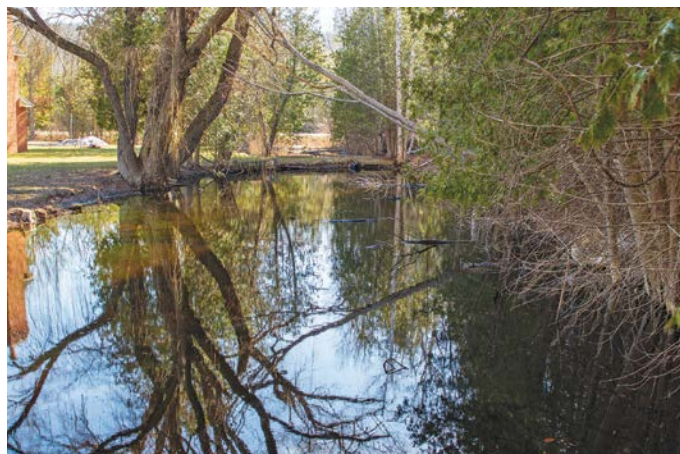
It may be an easy stream to overlook, but its role in the watershed is significant. Before construction, CRA staff found young Coho salmon, sculpin, central mudminnow, and brook stickleback downstream of the barriers. Even on an 80-degree summer day, the stream stays cool at 61.5

degrees—evidence of the cold groundwater inputs that make small tributaries like this valuable habitat and refuge for fish.

With the barriers gone, aquatic organisms can now access up to two miles of upstream habitat previously disconnected from Platte Lake. The project also restores natural sediment and debris movement, reduces flood risk, and protects the nearshore waters of Platte Lake from the threat of future infrastructure failure.

Today, drive over Bixler Road and you probably still won't notice much. The stagnant impoundments are gone, replaced by a free-flowing stream that looks like it belongs there. And that's exactly the point. The best restoration doesn't always call attention to itself. Sometimes, it simply gives a stream the chance to look and function like it was always meant to.

This project was made possible with generous support from the Brookby Foundation, Oleson Foundation, Adams Chapter of Trout Unlimited, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Sustain Our Great Lakes program, Benzie County Road Commission, John & Sherry Mack, Tom & Rena Gilmore, and other generous CRA River Care funders.



Before: A stagnant impoundment sits between the two Bixler dams.



After: Nature reclaims a small stream as it flows freely toward Platte Lake once again.



Crews dismantle one of the two dams in June 2026.

Groundwork for a Homecoming

The Upper Manistee River watershed is one of Michigan's premier coldwater river systems—a sprawling network of rivers and tributaries supporting world-class fisheries, diverse wildlife, and generations of recreation.

This summer, work is underway to make 46 miles of it flow a little more freely.

Across the watershed, six aging road-stream crossings are being replaced through a collaborative effort involving the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Conservation Resource Alliance, Trout Unlimited, the Kalkaska, Grand Traverse, and Wexford County Road Commissions, and other key project partners.

CRA is leading four of the six projects, with three sites set for completion this field season—on Maple Creek, Fife Lake Creek, and a tributary to the North Branch Manistee River. Trout Unlimited is leading the remaining two crossings on Big Cannon Creek.

Some of these crossings are modest in size; others are substantial structures. Together, their replacement will reconnect approximately 46 miles of coldwater habitat across the Upper Manistee watershed—giving fish and wildlife greater access to the network of headwaters, tributaries, and mainstem habitat they depend on.

Among those that may benefit is one particularly exciting species: Arctic grayling.

Once abundant in Northern Michigan, Arctic grayling disappeared from the state by 1936. Today, the Michigan Arctic Grayling Initiative, a foundational partnership between the Michigan DNR the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, the Little Traverse Bay Bands of Odawa Indians, and the Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, is working to establish self-sustaining populations in Michigan.

In 2025, the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians received more than 170,000 Arctic grayling eggs for reintroduction into the North Branch Manistee River, marking a major step toward returning the species to waters it once called home.

CRA is not directly involved in the reintroduction. Our role is one we know well: restoring the healthy, connected rivers that native fish and wildlife need to thrive. The same work benefits brook trout, salmon, steelhead, freshwater mussels, wood and spotted turtles, and countless other aquatic species.

Six crossings may be scattered across three counties, but rivers don't recognize those boundaries. Every barrier removed strengthens the connections between headwaters, tributaries, and mainstem habitat.



Before: A dilapidated bridge slated for replacement at Fife Lake Creek and Ramsay Road.



Construction unfolds in late summer 2026 at the North Branch Manistee tributary and Grass Lake Road.



A towering new full-span crossing awaits installation at Maple Creek and Sharon Road.

Thank You for Your Support!

The following individuals and organizations made a contribution to CRA since the release of our last Newsletter.

Contributors

20Fathoms
Henry Alder
Paul Alt
Lynn Amato
Edwin Anderson
Anonymous
Bill & Sue Arnold
Steve & Jackie Baase
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Victor & Nila Withee
Yoga for Health Education: Michael & Libby Robold

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In honor of Doug Conover from PayPal Giving Fund
In memory of Frank Fraquelli from Wayne Andersen
In memory of Frank Fraquelli from Matthew VanHoef
In honor of Mary Horensky and Marcia Freeby from John & Beth Freeby
In memory of Rennie E. Hughes from Ms. Christine Hughes
In memory of Janice Kook from the CRA Board & Staff
In memory of Chris Loyet from Timothy & Liz Halpin
In honor of Manitou Candle Co. from Gabriella Sullivan
In memory of Gary Marek from Ted & Sandy Borgeld
In honor of Gary Marek from Fred Dorsett
In memory of Gary Marek from Ann George
In memory of Doug Niemi from Wayne Andersen
In memory of Frank Redmond from Wayne Andersen
In memory of Don Reynolds, Fisheries Biologist from Bill Deephouse
In honor of Karen Rothenhauser and Barbara Anderson from William & Paula Anderson
In memory of Thomas J. Rozich from Michelle Rozich & Ryan Molitor
In memory of Kristin Sak from John Sak
In memory of Lawrence Swantek from Joseph Swantek
In honor of John Trimberger - Luther, MI from Bill Deephouse
In honor of Nate Winkler & Jenna Scheub from William Derossset

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Dan & Barb Hubbell
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Suzie & Wade Knoll
Michelle Rozich & Ryan Molitor
Lee & Jane Schwocho
Nate Winkler & Jenna Scheub



Happy Anniversary

This fall, we're celebrating an extraordinary milestone: Kimberly Balke's 30th anniversary with Conservation Resource Alliance! Kim brings a rare combination of expertise, passion, humor, and a calm, grounding presence to her work. She's a quiet but strong leader and an excellent problem-solver, with the experience and determination to move complex projects from vision to reality.

Over the past three decades, Kimberly has had a hand in nearly every accomplishment we've proudly celebrated at CRA. Her fingerprints are on rivers, streams, partnerships, and restoration efforts across Northern Michigan. It makes perfect sense that, somewhere along the way, she earned her unofficial title: **the River Goddess**.



Our cherished River Care funders propel multi-year and tremendously impactful projects. A special thanks to these funders for their unwavering support: Packaging Corporation of America, Serra Family Foundation, Andrew R. and Janet F. Miller Foundation, Walters Family Foundation, The George Fund, The Grand Traverse Band of Ottawa and Chippewa Indians, Bell's Brewery, and The Brookby Foundation.

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Great Things Grow from Small Acts

No matter where Wild Roots plantings lie within our service area, they each play a key role in maintaining ecological balance for the broader Great Lakes watershed. Plantings along our streams provide shade to maintain cool waters, establish habitat for a variety of species, and help to prevent soil erosion. Further upland, these species naturally filter water as it moves through soil, to aquifers, then creeks, tributaries, and rivers as they make their way to the Great Lakes.

CRA's Wild Roots program is comprehensive in its reach. This year, we've planted trees and shrubs in various properties within our service region. CRA worked with partners to plant 1,477 trees & 1,976 shrubs for a total of 3,453 plantings in four counties.

However, the job is not done once these plants are in the ground. What follows the planting itself is years of monitoring and maintenance. This can include protecting trees with fencing or tubes, keeping vegetation cleared where planted, and watering when necessary to ensure that these plantings have a viable chance of reaching maturity.

Whether at a river restoration site or on protected land, planting is only the beginning. The monitoring and maintenance that follow are just as important to a project's success, helping ensure these plantings become established,

thrive, and deliver lasting benefits for the surrounding ecosystem. This long-term stewardship is essential to improving ecosystem health for current and future generations.



Wild Roots Project Manager, Michael Seefried, transports a bundle of tree tubes after a maintenance day at the Buffalo Ridge Trail planting site.