

LOCAL

# Conservationists mend fragmented habitat in Cannon River area of Minnesota

Fishing, hiking, habitat protection are aims of conservation purchase.

By Jennifer Bjorhus (<https://www.startribune.com/jennifer-bjorhus/6370514/>) Star Tribune |

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Minnesotans will soon be able to hike and fish on more than 200 acres in the Cannon River watershed thanks to a major conservation purchase by the Trust for Public Land.

The purchase includes a wooded area on the Little Cannon River — a cold-water designated trout stream that flows to the Cannon River that lacked public access save for some bridges.

"Now anglers will have access to fish this beautiful trout stream," said DJ Forbes, a Trust for Public Land project manager in St. Paul.

The Cannon River flows more than 100 miles to the Mississippi River, just a 45-minute drive south of the Twin Cities. Less than one-quarter of the watershed's landscape remains as prairie, forest or wetland, according to the national nonprofit.

"High quality habitat in the Cannon River Watershed continues to be degraded by invasive species or converted to rural residential development and to agricultural production," Forbes said.

Still, the Cannon River holds on to its bluffs, gentle waterfalls and sandstone outcroppings. It's a state Wild & Scenic River with a popular paddling route, and is home to the rare dwarf trout lily that grows only in that area.

"It still has a lot of great natural areas that are worthy of protection," Forbes said.

The [Trust for Public Land](http://www.tpl.org/our-work/minnesota) (<http://www.tpl.org/our-work/minnesota>) works to protect Minnesota's major rivers and their tributaries. It targets land with good biodiversity next to land that is already being protected in an effort to build up larger swaths of natural habitat for plants, animals, birds, insects and people.

The goal, Forbes said, is to protect natural habitat — and create access so people can connect with it. Improving water quality by helping filter out pollutants and prevent erosion is "definitely a rollover benefit."

The trust bought two sections from private landowners for an undisclosed price that Forbes said was fair market value based on an appraisal. It's turning over both to the state Department of Natural Resources to manage. There will be small gravel parking lots but no buildings, camping or formal trails.

One section is 137 acres in Rice County at the headwaters of the Cannon River at Shields Lake. The land abuts the Boyd Sartell Wildlife Management Area on the lake and is home to a creek, bald eagles, nesting colonies of water birds and Blanding's turtles.

Although conventional wisdom holds that Lake Tetonka is the headwaters of the Cannon River, it is not, according to the Cannon River Watershed Partnership.

The river starts in Shields Lake, where an unnamed creek flows out and "feathers its way" to a series of lakes that include Tetonka, said Alan Kraus, who manages the partnership's conservation program.



BRIAN PETERSON • BRIAN.PETERSON@STARTRIBUNE.COM

Minnesotans will soon have access to new public lands along the Cannon River, including a section that's a designated trout stream, thanks

The second part of the purchase is 77 acres of woods and farmland in Goodhue County, around the Little Cannon River in the Sogn Valley area. The DNR plans to convert the farmland back to natural habitat and is adding the land to its Aquatic Management Area program for protecting critical shoreland habitat.

The DNR stocks the Little Cannon with trout. It recently stocked it with 500 pounds of adult rainbow trout for the April 17 stream trout opener.

Kristi Pursell, executive director of the [Cannon River Watershed Partnership](http://crwp.net/) (<http://crwp.net/>), said her group is "thrilled" with the new additions.

"We could all use some more wins," Pursell said.

This latest acquisition follows last year's purchase of more than 200 acres to add to the Cannon River Turtle Preserve Scientific and Natural Area, and to the Cannon Valley Trail between Cannon Falls and Red Wing.

The Cannon River got its name not from artillery, Pursell said, but from people misunderstanding French for "the river of canoes."

The Dakota people called the river "[Inyan bosndata](http://collections.mnhs.org/mnhistorymagazine/articles/65/v65i06p207.pdf)" (<http://collections.mnhs.org/mnhistorymagazine/articles/65/v65i06p207.pdf>), or standing rock, for the sandstone formation in Dakota County that once stood 45 feet high and could be seen from the river, according to the Minnesota Historical Society. The formation was later dubbed Castle Rock.

The recent land purchases were made with a grant from Minnesota's sales tax-funded Outdoor Heritage Fund. The fund is a dedicated lifeline for protecting wildlife habitat — an "absolute godsend," Forbes said.

Conservationists elsewhere are stunned when they learn about the flow of money Minnesota has created to protect natural spaces, he said.

"What a story of the voters of Minnesota, voting to increase their own taxes to fund these things that are so important to all of Minnesota," Forbes said. "It speaks volumes for what people prioritize in our state."

The Trust for Public Land has acquired more than 13,000 acres around the state over the past decade.

Jennifer Bjorhus • 612-673-4683

BRIAN PETERSON • BRIAN.PETERSON@STARTRIBUNE.COM

An area along the Little Cannon River in Holden Township, with a designated trout stream, now lies in public hands.

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**Jennifer Bjorhus** is a reporter covering the environment for the Star Tribune. She was a business reporter for much of her career but in recent years focused on criminal justice issues, including police use of force and responses to sexual assault.

jennifer.bjorhus@startribune.com    612-673-4683    jbjorhus