

Garrison Diversion a Major Supporter of North Country Trail

By Kimberly Cook

Recreational opportunities are abundant throughout North Dakota, though there are many people who are not aware of what can be found across the state. Little known gems like the North Country National Scenic Trail are hidden throughout North Dakota and can provide hours, or even days of recreational enjoyment. The Garrison Diversion Conservancy District (Garrison Diversion) is committed to assisting with and providing recreational opportunities such as this to benefit residents and visitors in North Dakota. This summer, explore North Dakota's natural beauty while hiking the North Country Trail, a national scenic trail traversing North Dakota's backcountry. The North Country Trail begins in New York and spans 4,600 miles across the country to North Dakota, connecting seven northern states: North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York.



History and Development

The North Country Trail was designated by Congress in 1980 and its route determined over the next few years by identifying existing trails and public lands throughout the seven northern states. When existing trails or public lands were not available, the best possible option to connect portions of the trail was identified, most often through private lands. Upon completion, the North Country Trail will be the longest scenic trail in the nation. Currently, more than 2,500 miles of the trail have been completed, mostly through the hard work and dedication of volunteers.

About half of the trail in North Dakota is on public land and half on private land. An estimated 46 percent of the trail is completed, mostly on public lands. According to Bobby Koeplin, president of the North Country Trail Association's national board of directors, developing the trail on private land is a challenge, as easements must be obtained in order to develop trail in those areas.

To develop the trail, volunteers must flag and determine a final route, clear rock and debris from the area, mow the grass, and install fence crossings. The two-foot-wide trail is then sloped to a comfortable grade for walking, and if necessary, water crossings are installed, and appropriate signage is put into place.

"The trail is built entirely by volunteers for the North Country Trail Association. It really is a labor of love," says Koeplin. "Everybody involved really works hard to provide the opportunity for others to enjoy the trail."

About the Trail

In North Dakota, approximately 475 miles of North Country Trail pass through several wildlife management areas, state parks, a national forest, and private lands. Of

those, 230 miles are completed and certified, which means the trail meets the standards of the National Park Service, including that it is maintained and signed. Once certified, volunteers place an official trail emblem along that trail segment.

North Dakota's trail route begins at the Red River of the North in Wahpeton and runs north towards Fort Abercrombie, a state historic site. The trail then heads west into the Sheyenne National Grasslands, the largest remaining remnant of tallgrass prairie in public ownership. The North Country Trail meets the Sheyenne River in the grasslands and follows the river closely for most of its path across North Dakota. The trail then meanders through Valley City and along Lake Ashtabula.

The trail traverses Garrison Diversion Unit federal lands as it runs along the New Rockford Canal, through the Lonetree Wildlife Management Area, and follows the McClusky Canal to the Lake Audubon National Wildlife Refuge. It then continues along Lake Sakakawea, across the Garrison Dam, and ends on the west side of Lake Sakakawea State Park.

Certified trail segments include the Sheyenne State Forest, Fort Ransom State Park, the city of Kathryn to Clausen Springs Recreation Area, and the Valley City and Lake Ashtabula segments. Work is underway by the Sheyenne River Valley Chapter of the North Country Trail Association to develop additional trail to connect the existing segments. This summer, the Sheyenne River Valley Chapter plans to develop another 16 miles of trail, from north of Clausen Springs to Valley City.

The North Country Trail is administered by the National Park Service, which provides services such as management oversight, planning and decisions on trail routing, trail tools, supplies and signage for volunteers,



The North Country Trail in the Sheyenne National Grasslands.



Hikers on the North Country Trail as it passes under the Hi-Line bridge along Lake Ashtabula.



and trail certification guidelines. The National Park Service also provides the majority of the funding for the trail. Additional funds from grants and membership dues also support the trail.

Trail maintenance is completed mostly by volunteers; however, public agencies such as the North Dakota Game and Fish Department, North Dakota Parks and Recreation, North Dakota Forest Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Forest Service have also provided assistance along certain segments of the trail, including Lonetree Wildlife Management Area and Fort Ransom State Park.

Hiking the North Country Trail

The North Country Trail is open year-round for non-motorized uses. Hiking and horseback riding are popular activities during mild weather, while the winter months bring opportunities for cross country skiing and snowshoeing. North Dakota's portion of the trail is unique in that horses are still allowed through public land areas on the majority of the trail. In areas where horses are prohibited due to unsuitable equine conditions, detour routes are usually identified. In other states, horses are typically not allowed on the trail.

Hikers are able to come and go on the trail as they wish. There is no fee to use the trail, and registration is not required.

Along the trail, hikers may encounter backcountry campsites, campgrounds, public recreation areas, tourist information sites, and supply stores. A number of natural, historic, and cultural attractions can also be found along North Dakota's trail. Scenic landscapes are abundant and can be observed at just about any point on the trail. Wildlife sightings may consist of pheasants, grouse, waterfowl, whitetail deer, coyote, grassland native bird species, and even moose, especially where the trail winds through wildlife management areas.

"Each segment of the trail is beautiful and unique," says Koeplin. "One of the most popular hikes in North Dakota includes the Sheyenne State Forest segment, because hikers can view the only registered waterfall in North Dakota." Other premiere segments include the Lonetree Wildlife Management Area to Lake Sakakawea, the trail segment from Clausen Springs to the city of Kathryn, and the Lake Ashtabula area.

A key initiative for Garrison Diversion is the enhancement of North Dakota's recreational opportunities, one of North Dakota's most treasured resources. Access has been granted to the North Country Trail to use Garrison Diversion Unit lands, allowing those who use the trail to experience the benefits of Garrison Diversion's recreation component. Approximately 150 miles of trail runs through Garrison Diversion Unit lands. On this portion of the trail, hikers will travel through several Garrison Diversion recreational facilities on the Garrison Diversion segment of the North Country Trail including Lake Brekken-Holmes, Hoffer Lake, and the Lonetree Wildlife Management Area. They will also experience more than a dozen other wildlife refuges and management areas scattered along the McClusky and New Rockford canals.

Garrison Diversion's assistance to the North Country Trail has proven its dedication to providing recreational opportunities within the state. The investment in the promotion, development, and preservation of North Dakota's natural resources is essential to ensuring the continued and future use of these areas.

To learn more about the North Country Trail, visit <http://northcountrytrail.org>.

In order for segments of the trail to be certified, they must be maintained and signed.