



# AmeriCorps crews power Root River SWCD's streambank stabilizations



Workers gain experience installing cedar revetments while improving trout streams on tributaries of the Root River in Houston County

BLACK HAMMER TOWNSHIP — A trout stream bank stabilization project that started as an experiment on a Root River tributary has become a tested conservation practice in Houston County's bluff country.

This summer, for the sixth consecutive season, a Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa crew will harvest invasive cedar trees from nearby bluffs, and then anchor them to eroding streambanks. Root River Soil & Water Conservation District staff oversees the work, designed to fit small streams high in the watershed where the banks are less than 7 feet tall.

Both stream and bluff habitats benefit. The SWCD gains a labor force. The CCMi crew, whose membership changes each season, gains job experience.

"If it wasn't the Conservation Corps doing it, I don't know that we would get this kind of work done," said Bob Scanlan, Root River SWCD assistant manager.

The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources' annual appropriation of \$500,000 in Clean Water Funds pays for CCMi crews' labor costs. Local government units submit applications for work projects, and often provide matching funds. A \$20,000 grant from

*Cole Wentworth, 25, of Preston, Iowa, and Lakota Kirst, 23, of Osage, Iowa, angled a cut cedar into position on the bank of Riceford Creek in Houston County in August 2018 while Alexis Schwanz, 18, of Polk City, Iowa, left, and Andrea Dormer, 19, of Owatonna, on the bank, wait to hand over tools. Photos: Ann Wessel, BWSR*





**Left:** Solimar Garcia led the AmeriCorps crew working on a Root River Soil & Water Conservation District project on Riceford Creek in August 2018 in Houston County. **Middle:** Andrea Dormer of Owatonna worked on the Rochester-based AmeriCorps crew. **Right:** Ashley Hayden of Virginia state worked on a different Midwestern crew the year before she joined the Rochester-based AmeriCorps crew in 2018.

the Minnesota Corn Growers Association covered the cost of materials for the Root River SWCD project.

This year in Minnesota, about 500 CCMI crew members — including 300 AmeriCorps crew members ages 18 to 25 — are slated to work with about 50 agencies on 150 conservation projects.

Set in cool trout streams surrounded by scenic bluffs, the Root River SWCD assignment is among the most coveted in the state.

Since 2014, CCMI crews have worked on segments of Riceford Creek totaling about 2 miles — about half on cedar revetment, half on boxelder removal and related work.

It's slow, difficult manual labor that requires chain saws and chest waders. It's the sort of job that tends not to attract contractors.

The revetment cuts velocity and catches sediment, creating a stable slope where plants can take root. Gentler slopes thick with vegetation mark past years' work sites. The project benefits the turbidity-impaired Root River.

In August 2018, a Rochester-based CCMI crew dragged cut cedars to the stream, where they secured the trees snug against a 500-foot stretch of bank. Using mauls, crew members drove each duckbill



anchor 3 or 4 feet into the bank, tightened the attached cable, wrapped it around the trunk and crimped it — while standing waist- to chest-deep in rushing water.

Previously, landowner Walt Nigon, 67, had cut and hauled the cedars from his bluff across the stream. Walt, a retired Rochester area tool and die machinist, and his wife, Barb, president of the nonprofit prairie restoration group Prairie Smoke, bought the 29-acre weekend getaway property in 1999.

“They’re trying to put in some of these cedar trees and hopefully save some of these banks from eroding away,” Nigon said

This spring, Nigon said the revetment held up well to severe flooding. Work he’d done upstream likely helped.

The cedar revetments in Houston County were new to the Root River SWCD in 2014. Staff partnered with a Winona State University geologist who helped assess the streams.

The Riceford Creek project has withstood a few tests.

Most cedar revetments held up to the September 2016 flood that decimated parts of the creek.

Additional revetment areas saw some damage over

time. But Scanlan said the revetment seems to be working overall, as stability has improved in most of the original streambank treatment areas. Those results mesh with Winona State University’s follow-up research.

Cedar is strong, rot-resistant wood. In neighboring Winona County, Scanlan said similar, 20-year-old projects remain intact.

“We’ve gained a lot of confidence in this kind of work,” Scanlan said. “Those trees are still in place. As the years go by, those banks start to stabilize themselves ... and you end up with a more stable streambank and less sediment.”

This season, Root River SWCD staff was slated to oversee work on Bridge Creek, another small South Branch Root River tributary a few miles from Riceford Creek.



Teamwork was especially important for the Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa crew working along a section of Riceford Creek with steeper banks. Brennen Reyscak, 24, of Ankeny, Iowa, handed down tools to fellow crew members on Aug. 15, 2018, in Houston County.



The Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources’ mission: Improve and protect Minnesota’s water and soil resources, working in partnership with local organizations and private landowners. [www.bwsr.state.mn.us](http://www.bwsr.state.mn.us).

# Conservation Corps member-turned-manager talks snakes, work sites, successful approaches

Dustin Looman didn't major in timber rattlesnakes.

The Paynesville native signed up for a Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa stint after interning at Frontenac State Park and earning a recreation and tourism management degree from Winona State University. He didn't plan to stick around.

But he liked the work. He liked the people. Eventually, he became the South Region assistant district manager for CCMI. During a drive from his Rochester office to an AmeriCorps work site overseen by the Root River Soil & Water Conservation District in Houston County, Looman talked about who signs up, who sticks with it — and how timber rattlesnakes fit in.

Edited excerpts follow.

## What have you gained from working with the Corps?

I gained a whole new respect for nature in itself, and I've seen myself grow tenfold as a leader, as a manager, as a dad. It's not just the fieldwork that I thought I would be doing, but it's the mentorship and giving guidance for folks that are 18 to 25 and trying to figure out what they want to do next. Maybe even discussing with them that this may not be the job they thought it was going to be, and helping them find a different direction in life.

## What's the common thread for those who stick with it?

They have this passion. The ones that maybe realize that it's not for them, by no means do I think that this isn't the right avenue. But maybe



*Dustin Looman, assistant district manager for Conservation Corps Minnesota & Iowa's South Region, explained cedar revetment work on Riceford Creek in Houston County.*

## Meet the Crew

**Solimar "Soli" Garcia**, 24, of Madison, Wisconsin, graduated in 2017 from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, where she studied forest and ecosystem restoration and management. She worked with a Bureau of Land Management crew in Idaho immediately after graduation. Last summer, she was considering graduate school. In mid-August, she was on Day 2 as a crew leader.

**Alexis Schwanz**, 18, of Polk City, Iowa, had just graduated from high school.

**Lakota Kirst**, 23, of Osage, Iowa, studied environmental

science at Iowa State. This season Kirst is a crew leader based in Ames, Iowa.

**Cole Wentworth**, 25, of Preston, Iowa, earned an environmental science degree from the University of Dubuque in December 2016.

**Andrea Dormer**, 19, of Owatonna, was considering college options.

**Ashley Hayden**, 25, of Virginia state, had worked on a different AmeriCorps crew, and came here for more wilderness experience. She worked a second job in summer 2018.

(they should pursue) more of a research type of position within natural resources. They come to realize that fairly quickly.

## What about those snakes?

I didn't go to school for

working with timber rattlesnakes. In certain areas where crews are at work doing restoration, they're here and there. I didn't go to school for that. I personally don't care for snakes. But over the years, I've had to learn that if I want to keep up

with how things are changing, I have to adapt. I can't turn my back to them like I wanted to. (CCMI crews) are doing some surveying in the spring and fall. They're trying to find out where certain populations are.

We tell them that there may be a possibility (of seeing snakes). But the flexibility of having 20 or 30 people in a location is if certain crew members don't want to deal with snakes, they can switch out to a different crew.

## What do you wish crew members knew before they started?

Your views or perceptions on certain resource-related things may change when you see different practices or learn what the true issue is vs. what you're told. A majority of people have an idea of how to do something, and that's maybe not the correct way. The people that we're working for are doing everything in their power to do what's right.

## What are some misconceptions?

People have this idea that fire is bad and that you're killing everything. You're (actually) setting back the plants or woody vegetation that doesn't belong there. By doing more prescribed fire, you're decreasing the opportunity for wildfire.

(Some landowners) want the work done overnight and they want things to look like it did pre-settlement. Some of these projects take five to seven years to see the end result. Things just don't occur overnight.