

2025 Volunteer Recognition - Recipients

Thank you for joining us for our first banquet and awards presentation. We have created a nomination awards program and this year, we have what I expect will be the largest list of recipients for these awards, as we have some catching up to do to recognize some of our very deserving volunteers who have served Michigan's trail riders selflessly over the years. We also had the natural disaster ice storm that required heroic efforts of many to make sure trails were cleared and ready to ride. And this year had a unique event that brought riders from all over the nation and Canada to Michigan. Please help me in taking this time to recognize these trail advocates' outstanding efforts.

Please join me when I say your name if you are here with us tonight. Kenneth Vandervest, Marsha Putnam, Steve Keim, Chad Simpson, Raymond Balzer and Cindy Kesler.

6 awards

WAYNE MEARS LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD - Wayne encouraged trail volunteers in the 90's to form non-profit associations which greatly led to the preservation of Michigan's Horse Trails. He is credited with saving Michigan's Horse Trails, thank you to all who heeded his warning and took action to form the associations we have today, we have some of you here with us tonight. And you are the reason that we have our horse trails today. This award is given to those who served a lifetime of exceptional service, advocacy, and leadership in support of Michigan's equestrian trails, embodying the dedication and legacy of Wayne Mears.

1. Kenneth Vandervest - Ken was one of the original founding members of Fort Custer, in 1998; and one of only three that remain. He has been a director on the board, or an officer, most of this time. He was treasurer for at least 5-years, and also recorded the volunteer hours for several years. All this while being the association's "major" trail mower and clearer. He has been involved helping on every equestrian project and development at Fort Custer, even recruiting his son's help at times. Ken is a jack of all trades! He is their number one sawyer and has cleared major blockages, some just last year. Ken can be depended upon to do what needs to be done from keeping coffee pots filled at campouts, bringing his special cake concoctions to pot lucks, promoting the club and park at every opportunity, giving advice on horses based on a lifetime of experience and just being a solid, steady influence at all times. Since 2015, Ken has volunteered an average of 250 hours each year leading to a 10-year accumulation of 2500+ hours! This remarkable record is all the more impressive as Ken is 87yrs old. FC

relies heavily on Ken's wisdom to make good decisions on the club's behalf. He has devoted a large portion of his life to FCHFA and he is absolutely irreplaceable!

2. **Marsha Putnam** - Marsha is one of the founding members of Sleepy Hollow Trail Riders Association which was formed in 1997. She served as their membership chair and then stepped into the role as president since 1999 and has been the motivation behind all of the amenities that currently exist. Her grandparents and great grandparents were owners of a portion of the land that we now enjoy as the Sleepy Hollow State Park equestrian trails and this only adds to her passion for the area. When SHTRA was formed, they immediately went to work building the gravel road leading to the staging area AND the staging area (hand pump well, picket posts, staging area clearing and gravel) with only the vault toilet being provided by the DNR. AND then they built the trail system. Marsha is ever consistent in her ambitions and has managed to also organize the pavilion construction, the many high line poles, annual trail maintenance, the annual banquet and 4 camping events each year. Volunteers like Marsha are who we have to thank for making sure Michigan even has horse trails.
3. **Steve Keim** - Steve Keim has spent a large portion of his time serving the Michigan horse trail riding community. He joined Ortonville Recreation Equestrian Association's board in 2002 and became president in 2003. He served in that role for over 10 years. He currently serves as OREA's treasurer. Steve and his wife Vera both also serve on the MHTA Elba Equestrian Friends Committee as Secretary and Chair and together they donated 1400 hours of volunteer time to the efforts of Michigan's horse trails in 2025. Steve's unique communication style and skills have brought smiles and joy to all who have had the pleasure of reading his articles and facebook posts. He has raised thousands of dollars for OREA's trails, campground, and the day use area improvements through his creative facebook fund raisers. Steve is a member of many Michigan Trail Associations and supports them with donations, attending events and participation at work bees throughout the state. We greatly thank Stever for ALL the time and effort he has spent and continues to spend supporting and promoting the Michigan Horse Trail Riding community.
4. **Chad Simpson** - Chad served on as president of WHA for 11 years and just recently retired. During that time, Chad continually went above and beyond for the equestrian experience at Waterloo. He was one of Michigan horse trails' most ardent supporters, always putting a plug in for riders to come experience what we have to offer. His partnership with the DNR at Waterloo Recreation Area always put the equestrian community's needs at the forefront. The current Waterloo Park Supervisor, Matt Schweda, is here with us tonight receiving his own award. Please realize much of what we're talking about here was only made possible because of Matt and Chad's combined efforts. Beyond the many physical improvements to the park, Chad's legacy is defined

by his emphasis on the importance of building the WHA community. He understood that a strong trail system needs a community to support it. Chad established and championed annual traditions that became the heartbeat of the season, specifically the **Green Lake** and the **Portage Lake Parlor Rides** that both allowed riders access to areas not usually open to equestrians. Chad oversaw Horseman's camp improvements such as the construction of the beautiful pavilion, earthwork and installation of corrals at the campsites and a solar well. Chad and his son, Cody, spent many hours bringing the trail leaving Horseman's Camp above grade ensuring it will remain usable and sustainable. Another notable trail improvement was the work done to the switchback to ensure its future presence on the trails. The Maute Road Staging Area was a massive joint effort between the WHA and the DNR. This staging area gives riders crucial access to the "other side" of the trail system. As a complete staging area, it includes a restroom, pavilion, and well. There is not enough thanks to be given to someone who made as much of an impact as Chad has at Waterloo, thank you!

5. **Raymond Balzer** - Ray Balzer served on the Board of Directors of the Michigan Trail Riders Association from 1992-2004 and he was president from 1995-2004. He also served as the trail boss from 2003-2007. During Ray's time as president, he developed the North Spur trail system of the Shore to Shore. He had a hand in helping to create Cadillac, Walsh Rd, Johnson's Crossing, Stoney Creek, Mullet Lake, Mackinaw City, and River Road Trail Camps. And he helped expand the Rapid River and Luzerne Trail Camps. Ray led many work bees for new bridges and trail improvements throughout the Shore to Shore trail system. With this, Ray has left a lasting legacy and has had a HUGE impact on the horseback trail riding experience in Michigan. Ray passed away in October 2025, but his contributions will always remain.
6. **Cindy Kesler** - Cindy joined the Proud Lake Trail Riders Association board in 2008. She served as Treasurer and then became President in 2019 and retired when she moved north in 2025. Cindy is directly responsible for the clearing of the Proud Lake Rec Trails. If you rode Proud Lake before Cindy joined and became passionate about trail maintenance there, you will remember that many of the trails were not even passable. During her time with Proud Lake Trail Riders Association, Cindy managed to clear the entire trail system which is a wild one that overgrows quickly. Under her leadership, they built a pavilion, added an additional vault toilet, and built an extensive obstacle course that is enjoyed by many and is a great attraction to the trail system. One of Cindy's most important achievements, over concern for the safety of trail riders, she contended that the horse and mountain bike trails needed to be separated and even though it took 6 tense and at times, incredibly frustrating years, the trail systems are now separate for the two user groups. And the mountain bikers have a new, much more desirable course for their enjoyment. I cannot express how much of an uphill battle this was, but Cindy never gave up and for that we all owe her a great debt of gratitude. Cindy,

best wishes in your retirement and we're looking forward to seeing what you get involved with with the up north trail riding community now!

Please join me when I say your name if you are here with us tonight, Amanda Still, Jennifer Shooshanian, Michele Jones, Scott Vorachek, Barbara Kurti, Melissa DeWitt, Jenny Cook and myself.

8 awards - TRAIL HERO AWARD for Advocacy For going above and beyond in support of our riding community. Your countless hours, unwavering enthusiasm, and love for Michigan's trails make a lasting difference for all who ride them. With deepest gratitude, we honor your trailblazing spirit.

1. **Amanda Still** - Amanda has been a great addition to the MTRA board of directors. She has a go-getter attitude and we can count on her for anything. Amanda has worked endlessly for the Michigan trail riders association clearing trails for the shore to shore system after the ice storm. She spent 10 hour days clearing trails to only make 500 yards and answered last minute pleas for help so the rides could make it through. She is committed to finding a solution to the Mayhem Swamp and she jumped right in to help organize the efforts with the AuSable resident. She will help the MTRA do great things in the future.
2. **Jennifer Shooshanian** - Jennifer has stepped up to volunteer her time and knowledge for GLDRA by becoming the Secretary for GLDRA and volunteering with 3 different Endurance Rides in 2025 alone. One of those was the week-long and HUGE undertaking of the Shore to Shore Endurance Ride which brought riders from 28 states plus Canada to experience Michigan's Shore to Shore trail. She was also the ride manager/secretary/trail marker for the Detroit Horse Power's endurance ride as well as the secretary at Oak Leaf Run. She does all of this with a positive attitude and smile for all.
3. **Michele Jones** - During the Luzerne Boardwalk work bee in May 2025, Mel Jones, who is local to the area, worked on removing thousands of screws from the old planks from the boardwalk so the new planks could be set. Mel started this work prior to the work bee AND she worked all day in the rain when the rest of the volunteers took a break. It's estimated that Mel removed over 3500 screws alone. And it was not easy work. There is no doubt that we would not have been able to complete the boardwalk in our time allowance if she had not done this because it came down to the last minute.
4. **Scott Vorachek** - Scott shows up! He has helped clean many miles of the Shore-to-Shore Trail and this year stepped up in a big way to help with the ice storm damage. He

answered the call to help clear a section of trail the day before riders were going through. He and others worked until dark to make sure it was open. Thank you, Scott, for your efforts on behalf of all trail riders.

5. **Barbara Kurti** - In 2025, Barb managed the HUGE undertaking of the 7-day Shore-to-Shore Distance Ride which brought riders from 28 states AND Canada to Michigan's Shore-to-Shore Trail, promoting the trail, far and wide. Barb has served as president of the Great Lakes Distance Riding Association, on the ride manager committee with AERC and is on the board of MHTA. Barb is passionate about educating new riders to the distance riding sport and horse camping. She has recently accepted the Equine Trails Subcommittee Southwest Representative position. Barb is key in maintaining horse trails and relationships with land managers at Silver Creek, Bass River and beyond. In 2025, she took the lead in demanding that an AuSable resident who had been harassing riders for years, be held accountable for her actions. She has an eye for the big picture and the determination it takes to get there and Michigan is lucky to have her.
6. **Melissa Dewitt** - Melissa has recently become the MHC vice president and is certainly MHC's trail champion. Since coming on the trails scene, her enthusiasm has been contagious. She is full of creative ideas for events and has made glow rides a popular addition. She has managed the MHC Statewide Trail Ride and the camping events that accompany, holding these events in conjunction with different trail associations around Michigan to promote their efforts and riding areas. Mel has been active in creating relationships with trail associations and land managers throughout the state to protect and promote the future of our horse trails. She has a passion and love for people and horses and has been a true trail hero for Michigan's Horse Trails.
7. **Jenny Cook** - Jenny served as the Michigan Trails Advisory Council Equestrian Representative (MTAC) and the SW Michigan Equine Trails Subcommittee Representative (ETS) for 8 years and just stepped down this year from both roles. She serves as Vice President of MHTA. Jenny advocated for years to have horseback riding on the Great Lakes shoreline and the culmination of her continued efforts has been the DNR's Horseback Shoreline Riding Season held during November at Silver Lake State Park. This season has made dreams come true for thousands of riders from across the United States, Canada and the world to enjoy Michigan's shoreline by horseback. Always passionate about education and trail safety messaging, Jenny also helped to develop the national Trails Safe Passing Plan (TSPP) in efforts to bring awareness to trail rider safety and increase access opportunities.
8. **Amy Scharmen** - Amy serves as the Chair and Southeast Michigan representative of the Equine Trails Subcommittee to the DNR and on the Michigan Trails Advisory Council

to the DNR as an equestrian representative to advocate at a statewide level for Michigan's trail riders. Seeing a need for organized information about Michigan's horse trails, Amy created the Michigan Horse Trails Directory which highlights the horse trail riding, camping and volunteer organizations who advocate for the horse trails in Michigan. In doing so, Amy set out to form direct relationships with all the horse trail associations around the state to discover more about the areas they represent and the volunteers' needs. Amy has served on the board of various trail associations in Michigan and volunteers her time helping others. Recently, all of this work culminated into the creation of the Michigan Horse Trails Association so that trail riders and volunteers of Michigan can be even better served and represented.

Kenneth Whittaker, please join me here.

1 award TRAIL HERO AWARD for Emergency Response For exceptional courage, quick thinking, and dedication during an emergency on the trail. *"True heroes rise when the trail gets tough."*

1. Kenneth Whittaker - On November 6th, 2022, the DNR and emergency responders received a call regarding a horse stuck in a swamp at the Ortonville Recreation Equestrian riding area. Kenny responded on behalf of the DNR and was the key to a successful rescue of the horse Stan which Kenny quickly nicknamed, "Stan the Man". Stan was stuck up to his belly, unable to move his legs, with hope waning fast. It was Kenny who had the idea to use large wheelchair accessibility mats used for beaches to hopefully give Stan the footing he needed to make it out of the bog. Several mats were brought out to the site and used to allow him to stand and eventually get to solid ground after two attempts. Kenny's passion for horses has since led him to attend a Large Animal Rescue Training class, create a list of equipment and materials necessary to create a large animal rescue trailer, and become the DNR representative for MHTA's LAER committee. His horse rescue experience didn't stop with Stan, in 2025, he also assisted with a downed horse in a trailer. Kenny has shown true leadership and hero qualities in the face of life and death situations.

Please join me here, Ortonville Recreation Equestrian Association and Waterloo Horseman's Association.

2 awards - OUTSTANDING TRAIL ASSOCIATION AWARD In recognition of exceptional leadership, dedicated stewardship, and unwavering commitment to protecting, maintaining, and enhancing Michigan's horse trail systems.

1. Ortonville Recreation Equestrian Association - OREA has gone above and beyond with their commitment to making trail & campground enhancements at Ortonville Rec Area. They have built great relationships with the DNR and brought new life and energy to their group and their facilities. Both the trail organization & DNR held one of the first events of its kind that mentored new horse campers. This unique event was a brilliant idea and a huge success. Their efforts will get more trail riders camping confidently and safely at their wonderful park — and throughout Michigan. Their core members not only work tirelessly on their own trails but they also volunteer at several other parks, attending work bees and helping out whenever asked. Dawn and Scott Cope are the definition of “going the extra mile” — not once, not during one project, but every single day they are involved with the Ortonville Recreation Equestrian Area (OREA) trails and campground. Their consistent dedication, leadership through action, and genuine pride in the equestrian community have directly elevated the quality, safety, and enjoyment of our trail system and camp. OREA’s impact is both wide and deep. They have taken on projects that many would consider overwhelming — clearing brush, repairing corral structures, hauling gravel and rock, reinforcing retaining walls, mowing and maintaining trail edges, improving line-of-sight and safety points along riding routes, and organizing group work efforts. Their work has directly resulted in increased trail accessibility, rider safety, and overall usability of both the campground and trail system. OREA is special not only because of the amount of work they do — but how they do it. They are positive, encouraging, welcoming, and community-centered. They lift others up. They inspire involvement. They foster unity between riders, volunteers, and park staff. They help build the culture that makes OREA not just a place to ride, but a place people feel proud to belong to. They don’t just improve trails. They strengthen the community that cares for them.
2. Waterloo Horsemen’s Association - The Waterloo Horsemen's Association has long understood that trails do not maintain or improve themselves. They require dedication, hands in the dirt, tools in the truck, and hearts committed to preserving access for generations to come. Year after year, members of this association answer that call. From clearing overgrowth on the trails to the many trail, staging area and campground improvements, WHA is one of our most prolific trail associations who also manages to organize some of the best attended and most successful riding events and fundraisers around the state. Riders look forward to their events and return time after time to ride the trails at Waterloo Rec. WHA works hard to have great relationships with the DNR and it’s telling that both of our outstanding trail associations award recipients have also nominated their DNR Supervisor or Ranger for the Friends of the Trails Award. The WHA board does a wonderful job at building trust, relationships and community with their membership and has the second largest membership of a trail association in Michigan. They represent one of our TOP 3 most beloved trail systems in Michigan and

their work is visible both on the land and felt in the spirit of every rider who passes through.

Please join me here, Matthew Schweda, Kenneth Whittaker, Sage Hegdal

3 awards FRIEND OF THE TRAILS AWARD In recognition of your outstanding dedication, service, and unwavering commitment to preserving, improving, and promoting Michigan's horse trails. Your efforts have made a lasting impact on the trails for the equestrian community.

1. **Matthew Schweda** - Matt is the current Park Supervisor of Waterloo Recreation Area and is a favorite supervisor among the trail associations due to his continuous support for the equestrian community and beyond. Despite managing the largest park in the lower peninsula, Matt always has time to prioritize equestrian access at Waterloo whether that be with camp and trail projects, special permits, or assisting the board of WHA. Matt and Chad worked together on the many projects I described during Chad's award with the singular goal of improving the already amazing Waterloo equestrian trail system. Matt's collaboration with the WHA board is a perfect example of what can be achieved when the DNR and the equestrian community work hand-in-hand. Another project that was not yet mentioned is currently moving from the planning phase to reality is the renovation of the South Fork cabin access to include equestrians. In the works is construction of a new driveway that will be specifically designed to provide access for trucks and trailers. We have more campground improvements at Horseman's Camp to look forward to under his leadership including investigation of electrical hook ups at camp. And a proposed new section of red trail which will traverse through the newly renovated gravel pit area past the water feature. Thank you, Matt for your cooperative spirit, we are all very lucky to have you at the helm of the Waterloo Rec Area.
2. **Kenneth Whittaker** - OREA has been blessed with the opportunity to develop an outstanding partnership with the DNR which has enabled significant improvements to the trails, campground and day use area. This partnership took a great leap forward when Kenny was assigned as the lead ranger at the Ortonville Equestrian Campground, Day Use and Riding Area. Over the last three years Kenny has been instrumental in moving projects forward. He created and led the "Ride Into Camping" and "Fall Harvest Festival" events and activities. Kenny built the solar well, creek stair steps and he has helped with bridge repair, high line poles, hitching rails, manure bunker, concrete walk to toilet, installing picnic tables on the trail system, a new door on the toilet in the campground, corrals, and the confidence course. Kenny has volunteered his own time

to work on and complete many of the projects noted above. AND maybe the best news of all, Kenny has joined our club of trail riders by becoming a horse owner this winter. We look forward to riding with Kenny and Scout all over the state of Michigan and thank him for all his efforts on behalf of trail riders!

3. Sage Hegdal - Sage is our Southeast Trails Specialist and the DNR's Equestrian Representative, we work closely with her on ETS and some of you have worked with her on your trail systems. In her short time with the DNR, Sage has made a lasting impact for equestrians. Her drive for justice and equity lends well to a trail rider's struggle with accessibility and safety on the trails. Sage proves always ready to tackle the hard work and conversations it takes to be a great public land manager. She has taken the lead on non-motorized maintenance surveys distributed to collect statewide information about the needs of our trail systems with the goal of developing a maintenance program that works better for everyone. She is leading the way on our subcommittee that is working with MDOT to advise on the inclusion of equestrians on transportation alternative parallel trails and these recommendations may be considered at a federal level. Sage has distributed funding to Southeast Parks to complete horse trail improvement projects at Waterloo, Ortonville, Brighton and more. Sage has a passion for bringing safe and inclusive public land access to all and we are incredibly lucky to have her as our EQ rep and on our side. Thank you so much for all you have already done for equestrians and we look very much forward to your future work to come.

VOLUNTEER CUMULATIVE HOURS Recognition Program:

The second volunteer recognition program that we have is cumulative volunteer hours program. Our goal with this program is to increase volunteerism and awareness of the efforts our volunteers put forth on behalf of the equestrian trails and camps in Michigan. We aim to encourage involvement and to recognize the efforts of those who do get involved. Volunteers will be recognized for their efforts on this webpage. Please join this program to help us spread the word about volunteer efforts.

Please join me here for your decal and thank you so much for your volunteer efforts on behalf of Michigan's Horse Trails:

Angella Sherman	53hrs
Brandy Miller	112hrs
Amy Scharmen	1400hrs
Wayland Funk	250hrs

Barb Funk	190hrs
Steve Keim & Vera Kraft	1213hrs
Jan Gould	74hrs
Michelle Wiegand	151hrs