



## Landowners Recognized for Protecting Creek Habitat in Winona County

Meet 'Outstanding Conservationists' Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun

By [Abbi Hoffman, Winona County SWCD](#), January 12, 2026



*This healthy stretch of Trout Run Creek, which flows south to the Root River, shows significant improvements thanks to streambank restoration and conservation efforts implemented by its landowners together with regional conservation professionals. (Photo from NRCS video, Trout Stream Restoration in Southeastern Minnesota)*

SARATOGA TOWNSHIP, WINONA COUNTY—East of Chatfield and south of St. Charles, in the extreme southwest corner of Winona County, is a stretch of land and water receiving much attention in recent years – topped off by the recent announcement that its landowners have been named the MN Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists.

The award, given to Winona County landowners Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun, distinguishes their long-term dedication to protecting soil, water, wildlife and natural resources along Trout Run Creek in the upper reaches of the Root River watershed.

Claire and Sue were previously recognized as the 2025 Winona County Outstanding Conservationists by the Winona County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), and more recently awarded the MN Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists by the Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation Districts (MASWCD).

The award honors landowners who demonstrate exceptional leadership in conservation.

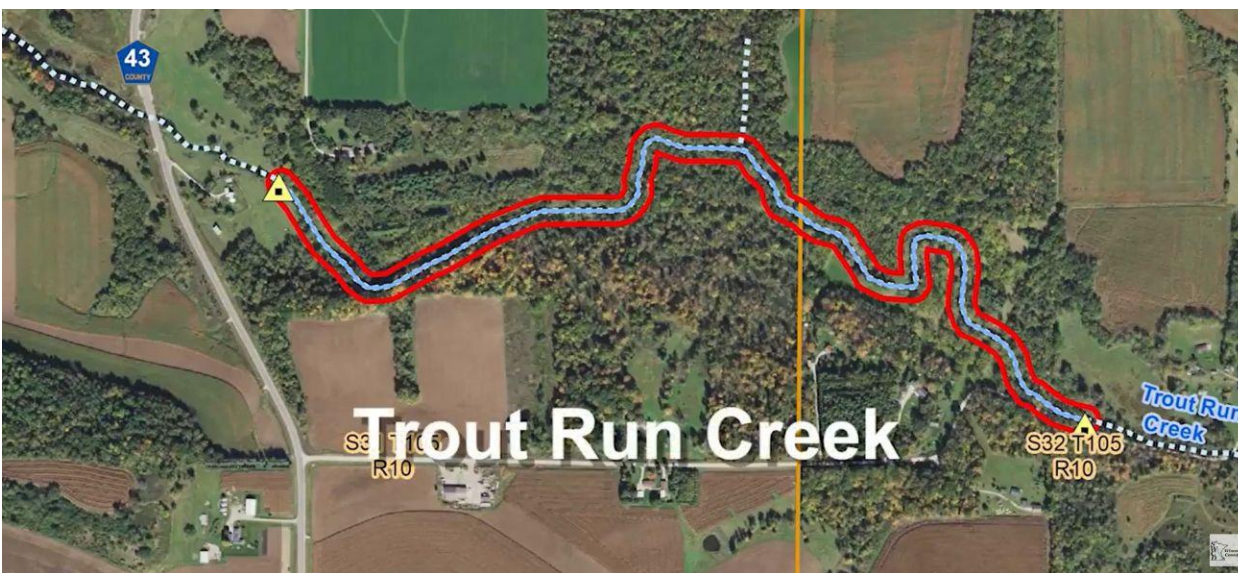
Claire and Sue's property includes a diverse mix of prairie, woodland, cropland, and a cold-water trout stream, all managed with a strong focus on long-term stewardship and ecological health.



*Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun standing near Trout Run with their 2025 Winona County Outstanding Conservationist sign. (Photo courtesy Winona SWCD)*

### **Conservation through partnership**

Since purchasing the property, Claire and Sue have worked closely with the Winona County SWCD, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Trout Unlimited, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and other partners to implement conservation practices that reduce erosion, improve water quality, and enhance wildlife habitat in the Root River watershed.



*Trout Run Creek project map. (Graphic from NRCS video, Trout Stream Restoration in Southeastern Minnesota)*

One of the most significant projects on the property is a one-mile streambank restoration along Trout Run, a two-mile cold-water trout stream.

Prior to restoration, severe erosion caused streambanks to become deeply incised, sending sediment downstream during major rain events.

Through a collaborative, multi-agency effort the streambanks were stabilized, invasive vegetation was removed, and in-stream habitat features such as root wads, tree trunks and boulders were installed to support all life stages of trout. The project removed tons of sediment, reduced phosphorus runoff and preserved the long-term health of the stream.



*A stretch of Trout Run Creek before restoration work began. (Photo from NRCS video, Trout Stream Restoration in Southeastern Minnesota)*

### **Protecting soil and water on the landscape**

Claire and Sue also addressed erosion on highly erodible cropland by enrolling acres into the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) with technical assistance from Winona County SWCD. Formerly planted in continuous corn and soybeans, these fields were converted to diverse native prairie plantings designed to improve rainwater infiltration and stabilize soils.

When heavy rainfall created gullies during prairie establishment, Claire and Sue worked with SWCD and NRCS staff to adaptively manage the site.

Conservation practices including grassed waterways and grade stabilization ponds were installed, providing long-term protection for Trout Run and reducing sediment loss from the surrounding landscape.

### **Forestry, pollinators and wildlife habitat**

Since 2011, Claire and Sue have partnered with foresters to assess woodland health, manage invasive species, and improve forest resilience.

Beginning in 2020, they worked with a professional service to systematically treat invasive species such as buckthorn, garlic mustard, wild parsnip, honeysuckle, bull thistle and black locust across the property.



*A collage of photos by Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun showing a few snapshots-in-time during their conservation projects. (Submitted photo)*

They also participate in the annual Winona County SWCD tree sale, planting tree and shrub seedlings to restore storm-damaged areas and increase species diversity. Recent efforts include planting tamarack seedlings in wetland areas along the stream.

Native plantings and pollinator gardens throughout the property support honey bees, native bees, butterflies, birds and other wildlife. Trail cameras have documented regular visits from deer, eagles, hawks, foxes, coyotes and many additional species, highlighting the habitat benefits created through their conservation work.

### **Sharing conservation with the community**

Claire and Sue’s commitment to conservation extends beyond their own land. In June 2024, they partnered with Winona County SWCD and the Basin Alliance for the Lower Mississippi in Minnesota (BALMM) to host a Trout Stream Field Day on their property. The event brought together landowners, agency staff, and community members to learn about conservation programs, karst geology, trout stream buffers and streambank restoration practices.

They also collaborated with NRCS on an educational video, *Trout Stream Restoration in Southeastern Minnesota*, filmed on their property. The video highlights best practices for erosion control and habitat enhancement and serves as a real-world example of successful conservation partnerships in Winona County.

### **Outstanding Conservation Leadership**

Claire Bender and Sue Ramthun were selected as MN Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists for their proactive approach, willingness to learn, and dedication to implementing and maintaining conservation practices over the long term.

Their strong partnerships with Winona County SWCD and other organizations continue to protect water quality, support wildlife habitat, and strengthen conservation efforts throughout southeastern Minnesota for future generations.

### **2025 Minnesota Association of Soil and Water Conservation District (MASWCD) Annual Convention**

Each year this event draws more than 700 conservation leaders from across the state of Minnesota – Soil & Water Conservation District (SWCD) officials, resource professionals, landowners, conservation leaders, industry professionals and agency representatives – to network and discuss conservation policies and implementation, to learn the newest technologies affecting natural resource management, and to recognize outstanding projects throughout the state. (Learn more on the [MASWCD website](#).)



*Winona SWCD representatives were present at the December 2025 MASWCD Convention as MN Southeast Area 7 Outstanding Conservationists Sue Ramthun and Claire Bender received their award. Pictured, left to right, are Andy Kronebusch (Winona County SWCD Board Supervisor), Ramthun and Bender, Amanda Gentry (Winona County SWCD Resource Conservationist) and Abbi Hoffman (Winona County SWCD Ecological Conservationist and Outreach Coordinator). (Photo courtesy Winona SWCD)*

This story was edited for *Root River Current* by John Gaddo.

**Contributor**

**[Abbi Hoffman, Winona County SWCD](#)**

*Abbi Hoffman is the Ecological Conservationist and Outreach Coordinator with the Winona County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD). She works with landowners to implement conservation projects on their land and provides ecological education to the local community.*

