



Catskill Stewards Program 2022 End of Season Report

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Stewards cleaning up Middle Field at Peekamoose Blue Hole camping area.

“Conservation is a cause that has no end. There is no point at which we will say our work is finished.”

– Rachel Carson

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Locations

The Catskills are known for iconic landscapes, 3,500' peaks, rolling hillsides, waterfalls, and freshwater creeks and streams. Visitors come to the Catskills to experience a life in the trees, seek adventure, and find solace. Over the past decade or so, and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Catskills have become busier and more popular than ever.

The Catskill Stewards Program was able to cover three of its busiest locations – Peekamoose Blue Hole, Kaaterskill Falls, and the Devil's Path – despite hiring challenges, which other area organizations experienced as well. However, as more Stewards were hired toward the end of the season, they were able to staff Catskill Center's Platte Clove Preserve in addition to the other three sites.

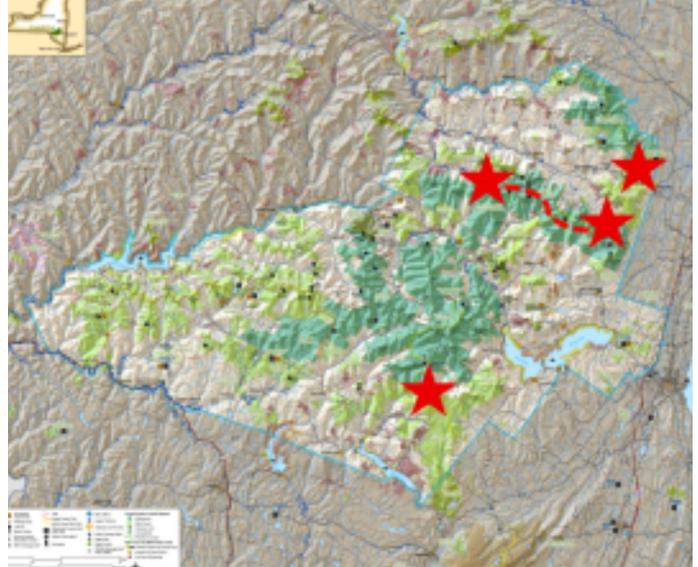


Fig2. The red stars indicate the primary locations of the Catskill Stewards Program with the dashed line representing the newest location, the Devil's Path

The Catskill Stewards Program ensured that visitors received quality education about recreating in the Catskill Park with minimal impact. To effect a meaningful difference on the ground, Stewards worked diligently to educate an influx of visitors about Leave No Trace Principles, cleaning up litter, and coordinating with land managers to complete projects such as trail maintenance. The Catskill Stewards perform this work to safeguard access to these Catskill Park gems for now, and for future generations.

In addition to their stewarding duties at the various Catskills locations, the Stewards took video and photos. These images, along with tips for responsible recreation, were posted on the Catskills Visitor Center's social media to share the important work of the program and minimum impact techniques for exploration in the Catskills.



Permit expansion includes all access to the Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor. Permit season dates: May 15th - September 15th

Peekamoose Blue Hole In 2022, the permit system, which was expanded in 2021 to seven days a week during peak season and covered additional locations, including the entire Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor, was once again in place. Popular sites in the corridor include the Blue Hole, Buttermilk Falls, Peekamoose/Table Mountains Trailhead, Bangle Hill Trailhead, Upper Field, Middle Field, and Lower Field. The permit expansion was an effort to include all camping in the Peekamoose Valley. Campers received a permit that is good for the entirety of their stay, at their specific campsite.

With their camping permits, visitors may access the Blue Hole and other trailheads in the corridor. The Blue Hole continues to draw visitors from around the globe.

Lined by shale ledges 3'-5' in height, the Peekamoose Blue Hole is a natural geologic formation and an exquisite frontcountry swimming hole in a remote Catskills location. Cool, 55°F, spring-fed water keeps the "hole" a stunning blue color. Social media fame has exponentially increased recent visitation and the resulting impact has been severe.

Before 2014, trash and litter were a rarity and easily picked up by local visitors. Since 2015, however, social media, news outlets, and internet guides have boasted about the pristine and picturesque beauty of the Blue Hole, and people have flocked to the narrow corridor. Summer 2022 was no different, especially because of unusual hot spells that had visitors traveling en masse to seek relief from the abnormally high temps. Littering continued to be a problem particularly on weekends and holidays.

As one of our seasonal stewards is a native Spanish speaker, we created an informational sheet on the Blue Hole permitting system and how to seek out alternative sites.

The path to a permitting system began as Blue Hole's internet fame necessitated new resource management strategies and investments. Blue Hole became the first day-use permit system in New York beginning in 2018. The same year, the Catskill Center's Peekamoose Blue Hole Stewardship Program (now the Catskill Stewards Program) was launched. The Peekamoose Blue Hole is the flagship location of the

Catskill Stewards Program and has enabled a foundation for the program to grow into the operation that it is today.

Kaaterskill Falls Kaaterskill Falls boasts a 260-foot relief from the top of the falls to the base of the second tier. Admired by locals and tourists alike, Kaaterskill Falls is estimated to host well over 150,000 visitors each year. This landmark has been the epicenter of Catskills tourism since the early 1800s, and is still the most popular and highly visited destination in the Catskill Forest Preserve.

With the expansion of the Catskill Stewards Program in the spring of 2019, Kaaterskill Falls has been a primary site for the stewards' efforts. To date, Catskill Stewards have interacted with 230,000 visitors and removed over 6,500 pounds of litter from Kaaterskill Falls and its surrounding trails.



Unlike the Blue Hole, Kaaterskill Falls has multiple points of entry. However, the most commonly used trailhead is at the Laurel House Parking Area, situated at the top of the falls. Catskill Center Stewards are at this trailhead full-time throughout the peak season. Stewards regularly help with area cleanups and rescues as directed by New York State Forest Rangers.



Devil's Path This is a stretch of 24.2 miles of steep and rugged Catskills Mountains. A number of hiking publications describe this trail as one of the toughest, most challenging, and sought after. The Devil's Path shares company with some of the world's most dangerous trails. This trail traverses some of the Catskills tallest peaks, with large climbs and many rock ledges. Without prior hiking and climbing experience, the Devil's Path can be treacherous. This reputation has made the trail (as well as sections of it) popular among visitors and hikers. Due to this increased

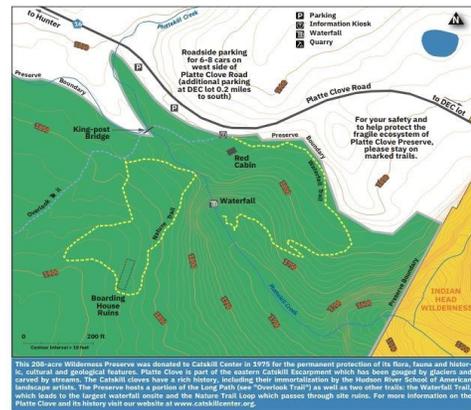
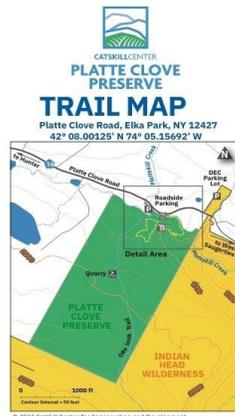
activity, the trail has seen increased recreational impacts.

The 'Hike for the Catskills (Center)' benefit hike, spearheaded by Moe Lemire of Hike On Guides, was the catalyst for the Catskill Stewards Program expanding to include the Devil's Path for the 2021 season. Our goal here was simple; provide high quality, minimum-impact education to all visitors and hikers of the Devil's Path while traversing the trail. This position adopted the title of Ridge Runner as our Steward was hiking along a different section of the path each day. The Ridge Runner educates hikers about responsible recreation but here, because of the toughness of the trail, the education includes a check, of sorts, to ensure visitors have enough water and proper attire and footwear.

Catskill Center's Platte Clove Preserve

A refuge and sanctuary for artists, Platte Clove has been an inspiration for Hudson River School painters dating back to the 19th century. Today, Platte Clove hosts a part-time Catskill Steward on weekends (Friday- Sunday) and holidays.

The natural beauty of Platte Clove is undoubtedly a Catskill Park gem. Fresh streams, waterfalls, and access to some of the most iconic hiking trails in the Catskills, Platte Clove is worth the visit to learn about the interplay of art, history, and nature. Our on-site steward educates people about the unique ecosystem, hiking trails, and best place to park.



The Catskill Center aims to protect Platte Clove for future generations. With a steward on site to greet our guests, we have witnessed a decrease in riparian erosion, as well as a reduction to the many social trails which once spiderwebbed the woods.

Catskill Stewards are on site to:

- Welcome all to the Catskills
- Provide information, such as where to explore and what to avoid
- Describe harmful impacts and inform people how to avoid contributing to these impacts
- Educate and inspire visitors to reduce their impacts and follow Leave No Trace principles both in the Catskills and in their lives
- Inform people of the most important rules and regulations

Season In Summary

The 2022 season began in May with one week of training for the incoming team. Each season we commit to in-depth training ensuring that the stewards are prepared to encounter most scenarios on the trail or at the trailhead. We cover many topics during this time including a Leave No Trace Trainer Course, Authority of the Resource Technique, Wilderness First Aid Course, wilderness preparations, radio protocols, wildlife encounter protocols, trail maintenance, and much more. All of this training helps to ensure that, regardless of the interaction while in the field, our stewards are prepared to provide a meaningful, kind, and welcoming experience for all visitors. In addition, our Stewards attended training with the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference and Catskill Mountainkeeper's Stewards hosted by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

For much of this season our stewards focused on the Peekamoose Blue Hole and Kaaterskill Falls. As more Stewards joined, we were able to provide coverage at Platte Clove. The Blue Hole saw a rise in numbers that we have not seen since 2020. It also saw a new set of visitors coming from not only New Jersey and New York City but also Connecticut. Over the course of the season, our Catskill Stewards were able to help lead hikes, work on trail maintenance, direct visitors to local businesses, and, most importantly, help visitors feel welcome and learn how to recreate responsibly.

In 2022:

- Visitor engagement reach of **more than 47,722 people**
- Over 162 bags of litter collected (~ 3,042 lbs.)
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated - 38
- Rock dams deconstructed - 44
- Rock stacks removed - 191
- Dogs greeted - 1,906
- Visitor parking citations avoided - 648 (minimum)

Metrics by Location

Peekamoose Blue Hole:

- Visitor engagement reach of over 21,314 people
- Number of permits used - 3,472
- Number of people on permits used* - 9,437
- Number of visitors turned away - 10,280
- Visitors who were hiking - 278
- Over 136 bags of litter collected
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated - 13
- Rock dams deconstructed - 41
- Rock stacks removed - 130

*Each permit allows up to six visitors

Kaaterskill Falls

- Visitor engagement reach of over 23,6981 people
- Over 14 bags of litter collected
- Rock stacks removed - 32
- Directions given - 243

Devil's Path

- Visitor engagement reach of over 904 people
- Over 5.5 bags of litter collected
- Rock stacks removed - 14
- Social trails Brushed in - 39
- Fire rings rehabbed - 10
- Directions given - 120

Platte Clove:

- Visitor engagement reach of over 1,806 people
- Over 6.5 bags of litter collected
- Rock stacks removed - 5
- Social trails Brushed in - 10
- Fire rings rehabbed - 10
- Directions given - 22

Stewards explain and demonstrate why responsible recreation is important - from the benefits of not littering to staying on the trails. While each location has its specific needs, the common thread is natural resource protection, public awareness, and education. Water bodies, riparian areas, trail systems, and flora and fauna are consistently in danger of being negatively impacted from an influx of visitors. When stewards are not on site (such as on their days off), they notice increased litter, rock dams and rock stacks, and user-created trails beginning to wind through pristine forest floors. Without the stewards, the Catskills' forever wild spaces are constantly in danger of being trampled or otherwise damaged because of the increasing number of visitors. Stewards help interpret the Catskill Park, provide information on alternative areas to visit, and offer directions to local businesses, which, in turn, helps the local economy.

Additional Programming

Every season, the Catskill Stewards Program brings the opportunity to share with others skills, ethics, and passion for the outdoors. Topics and activities include trail maintenance, getting rid of garbage, graffiti removal, brushing/filling in social trails, and breaking down illegal fire rings. Our stewards were responsible for the day-to-day care of their locations. As mud puddles formed or trash was left behind, the Catskill Stewards sprang into action to ensure a high quality experience for visitors and to educate them about how to walk muddy trails with the least impact and to carry out what they carried in, all with the intent of “leaving no trace”.

Stewards also were able to educate those who attended the Catskill Center’s Catskills Great Outdoor Expo, with a session on “Leave No Trace.”

Nature Walk and Leave No Trace

During this season, our Stewards lead several hikes at Kaaterskill Falls and Mt. Tremper. During these hikes, they were able to deliver more in-depth information on responsible recreation and the history of the Catskills all while highlighting local flora and fauna.

Funding

The Catskill Stewards Program is made possible with support from the following partners:

Thank you to the **New York State Department of Environmental Conservation**. In addition to DEC grant funding, the agency's Natural Resources staff works closely with the Stewards Program, enabling the stewards to achieve their goals each season through improved signage and resources. DEC staff help assist stewards to keep communication and safety a priority.



 Thank you to the **Rondout Neversink Stream Program** – a project of Sullivan County Soil & Water Conservation District in partnership with the Towns of Denning and Neversink funded by NYC Department of Environmental Protection. Their continued support keeps this program running at the Peekamoose Blue Hole location in the town of Denning.

A major partner of the Catskill Stewards Program since 2019, the **REI Co-op** is dedicated to helping preserve the Catskill Park. Thank you to the REI Co-op and its members for their assistance in growing this program to include Kaaterskill Falls. In addition to monetary support, REI has opened its doors to the stewards in the past to host informational displays in their NYC metropolitan stores. This has enabled the stewards to educate visitors before they even visit the Catskills. #OptOutside



 **Catskill Center** members and donors enable the continued success of this program by ensuring the proper administration of this program. A heartfelt “thank you” to all Catskill Center members. To become a Catskill Center member visit catskillcenter.org/support

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