

Catskill Park Advisory Committee Agenda

Wednesday, March 27, 2024 -- 2:00pm

Via Zoom

2:00pm Welcome and Introductions

2:05pm Presentation - NYNJTC Trailless Peaks Work

2:25pm New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation Updates

- FPAC Updates
- CAG Final Report Implementation Update
- Catskill Park Coordinator Update
- Division of Lands and Forest Central Office Update
- Regions 3 and 4 Update
- Forest Rangers Update

3:00pm New York City Department of Environmental Protection Updates

3:15pm New York State Department of Transportation Updates

3:30pm Member Updates & Items

- Catskill Area Tourism Services (CATS) / Regional TPAs
- Catskill Center:
- Catskill Fire Tower Project
- Catskill Mountain Club
- Catskill Mountainkeeper
- Catskill Park Coalition / Catskill Park Day
- Catskill Regional Invasive Species Partnership (CRISP)
- Catskill Scenic Byways (Mountain Cloves & Catskill Mountains SBs)
- Catskill Science Collaborative
- Catskill Watershed Corporation
- Catskill 3500 Club
- Catskills Lark in the Park
- Catskills Visitor Center
- Friends of Bramley Mountain Fire Tower
- Forest Preserve Coalition
- Hunter Area Trails Coalition
- New York-New Jersey Trail Conference (NYNJTC)
- New York State Chapter - Forest Fire Lookout Association (NYSFFLA)
- New York State Outdoor Guide Association (NYSOGA)
- Trout Unlimited
- Ulster County
- Ulster, Greene, Delaware, and Sullivan Sportsmen
- WARF
- Water Discovery Center
- Woodstock Land Conservancy

3:55pm New Business

4:00pm Adjourn



Catskill Center for Conservation and Development

Catskill Park Advisory Committee Update For March 2024 Meeting

Catskill Stewards Program: See attached 2023 Annual Report. Work for the 2024 season begins in May.

Catskills Visitor Center: The Catskill Center switches from winter hours to summer hours (open 7 days a week from 9:30-4 between) beginning in April. There is a new rack card available for the CVC and we're happy to provide them to folks who would like to distribute.

Catskill Park Coalition: 2024-25 State budget included Coalition priorities including \$250k for Catskills Visitor Center, \$200k for Catskill Science Collaborative, and \$10m for the Forest Preserve (both Catskills and Adirondacks). Final budget should be developed soon.

Forest Preserve Coalition: Governor included \$8m in funding for Forest Preserve in her budget, which was a significant win compared to past years. Waiting on final budget negotiations.

Catskill Fire Tower Project: The Catskill Center is supporting the NYSDEC at the Balsam Lake Mountain Fire Tower, as they work to determine the best steps forward to repair the observer's cabin and replace the broken window in the tower cab. This work is the responsibility of DEC and we stand ready to assist. There is a new brochure for the Fire Tower Project, which will be distributed at the meeting.



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CATSKILL STEWARDS PROGRAM

2023 END OF SEASON REPORT



“The idea of wilderness needs no defense, it only needs defenders.” – Edward Abbey

Prepared by Finn Parnell
Community Relations Specialist & Steward Coordinator

PREPARER'S NOTE

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. The Catskills have become busier and more popular than ever. Hence the need for our Catskill Stewards.

Established in 2018 as a response to issues caused by overuse at the Peekamoose Blue Hole, the Catskill Stewards program has continued to grow. Now located at four high-use sites throughout the Catskills, and six Catskill fire towers, our stewards work to help visitors understand the importance of responsible recreation in the outdoors. Each of our stewards are trained Leave No Trace educators and certified in Wilderness First Aid. They are the friendly faces visitors first encounter when they hit the trails.

In 2023, the Catskill Stewards Program covered four of its busiest locations: Peekamoose Blue Hole, Kaaterskill Falls, the Devil's Path, and fire tower locations. As more Stewards were hired toward the end of the season, they were able to staff Catskill Center's Platte Clove Preserve in both September and October, in addition to the other four sites. 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 suggesting alternative recreation locations. The Catskill Stewards perform this work to safeguard access to these Catskill Park gems now, and for future generations.

In addition to their stewarding duties at the various Catskills locations, the Stewards took videos and photos to document their experiences. 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.



Tim Paull

**Community Relations Specialist
& Steward Coordinator**

SEASON IN SUMMARY

The 2023 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 preparedness, radio protocols, wildlife encounter protocols, trail maintenance, plant identification, 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. 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.



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**CATSKILL STEWARDS
PROGRAM**

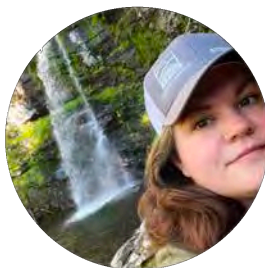
MEET THE CREW



HEAD CATSKILL STEWARD
Jillian Pouliat



CATSKILL STEWARD
Joe Jordan



CATSKILL STEWARD
Kristy Manicchio



RIDGE RUNNER STEWARD
Matthew Maloney



CATSKILL STEWARD
Milo Langlios



CATSKILL STEWARD
Patrick Fitzgerald



CATSKILL STEWARD
Samantha Delaney



CATSKILL STEWARD
Tina Turner

Catskill Steward Vincent Castellitto (not pictured) joined us for a partial season.

Catskill Stewards were on site to:

- Welcome visitors 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 beyond.
- Inform people of the most important rules and regulations.



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METRICS BY LOCATION



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. Waterbodies, 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.

In 2023:

- Visitor engagement reach of more than **100,188 people**.
- Nearly **300 bags of litter** collected.
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated: **22**
- Rock dams deconstructed: **12**
- Rock stacks removed: **112**
- Dogs greeted: **3,144**
- Visitor parking citations avoided: **190** (minimum)



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PEEKAMOOSE BLUE HOLE



The Peekamoose Blue Hole, renowned for its clear, blue, spring-fed waters, has gained immense popularity globally, primarily due to social media exposure. Precipitated by a recent surge in visitation, this frontcountry swimming hole has seen myriad environmental impacts, prompting the implementation of a day-use permit system in 2018, the first of its kind in New York state. This system, expanded in 2021, now includes the entire Peekamoose Valley Riparian Corridor, covering popular sites like Buttermilk Falls and the Peekamoose/Table Mountain Trailhead. Efforts to manage increased traffic and environmental concerns have led to the adoption of a management plan for the Sundown Wild Forest, which includes building an 80-car parking lot, a connector trail, accessible campsites, and a footbridge to enhance safety and visitor experience. Catskill Center Stewards are at this location full-time throughout the peak season. Stewards regularly help with area cleanups and rescues as directed by New York State Forest Rangers.

- Total visitation and engagement reach of over **31,976 people**
- Number of permits used: **3,617**
- Number of people on permits used: **15,288**
- Number of visitors turned away: **5,770**
- Visitors who were hiking: **459**
- Over **152 bags** of litter collected
- Number of dogs greeted: **599**
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated: **6**
- Rock dams deconstructed: **12**
- Rock stacks removed: **67**
- Parking citations avoided: **190**



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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. 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. During peak season, public transportation options were implemented to allow visitors access to Kaaterskill Falls even when the parking lots were at full-capacity. 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.

- Total visitation and engagement reach of over **63,711 people**
- Visitors who were hiking: **5,014**
- Visitors who were swimming: **8,427**
- Over **68 bags** of litter collected
- Number of dogs greeted: **2,378**
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated: **2**
- Rock stacks removed: **21**
- Directions given: **1,718**
- Parking citations avoided: **11**



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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. With cold-running 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.

- Total visitation and engagement reach of over **491 people**
- Over **4 bags** of litter collected
- Number of backpackers: **20**
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated: **1**
- Rock stacks removed: **1**
- Number of dogs greeted: **31**



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THE 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.

- Total visitation and engagement reach of over **1,973 people**
- Over **33.5 bags** of litter collected
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated: **8**
- Rock stacks removed: **18**
- Social trails Brushed in: **135**



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FIRE TOWERS



Six Fire Tower locations were covered by our Catskill Stewards: Balsam Lake Mountain, Red Hill, Mount Tremper, Hunter Mountain, Overlook Mountain, and the Upper Esopus Fire Tower. Stewards educated visitors on the origin and history of the fire towers, led Leave No Trace hikes, and assisted in trash removal at each location. Stewards also educated and encouraged visitors to take part in the The Catskills Fire Tower Challenge.

- Total visitation and engagement reach of over **2,037 people**
- Nearly **41 bags** of litter collected
- Number of hikers: **1,110**
- Number of backpackers: **225**
- Number of dogs greeted: **136**
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated: **5**
- Rock stacks removed: **5**
- Social trails brushed in: **18**
- Number of directions given: **37**



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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, garbage removal, 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”.



During this season, our Stewards offered several hikes at Kaaterskill Falls and the various fire towers, as well as hikes for the annual Hike for the Catskills event and Catskills Lark in the Park. 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.



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FUNDING

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



**Department of
Environmental
Conservation**



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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Catskill Park Advisory Committee Report

Catskill 3500 Club

Prepared by President, Michael Bongar

- The club became a non-profit 501c3 in 2022.
- Club membership is above 4,400 regular members and 1,610 winter members.
- Current up-to-date dues Paying and voting members are above 2,000.
- We have 25 active hike leaders who are leading hikes for members and nonmembers.
- We are starting our fourth year of Trailhead Stewards on weekends in the Summer at the Slide Parking Area and Woodland Valley Trailheads.
- Our Trail Maintenance Crew maintains the Table-Peekamoose Trail between Peekamoose Rd. and Denning Rd. **We had some problems accessing Peekamoose Rd. (due to Blue Hole permitting) last year and felt we might get some assistance with this for the trail crew.**
- Highway Cleanup Rt. 214 near Devil's Tombstone State Park. Two times a year.
- Catskill Mountain SAR is active and does SAR in the Catskills and outside of the Catskills.
- CMSAR offers Wilderness First Aid two times per year. Free for hike leaders who have led at least four hikes per year for the Club. But open to everyone.
- Winter Weekend took place at the Frost Valley Y, the third weekend of January 2024.
- The Annual Dinner takes place on Sat., July 27, 2024 at the Ashokan Center.

Recent Changes in Hiking Policies

- Dogs are no longer permitted on Club hikes due to insurance.
- During Fledgling Season, June 1 – July 15, hike size is limited to 8 total on non-trailed hikes in the boreal forest.

New Grant Making Policy

- An application process has been instituted to award grants.



New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

CATSKILL PARK ADVISORY COMMITTEE UPDATE REPORT

March 11, 2024

Regional Organization Updates

Catskills Trail-less Peaks Project:

The Trail Conference is finalizing materials for data collection, management recommendations, and Leave No Trace "Authority of the Resource" messaging as part of the Visitor Use Management Plan (VUM) being conducted by DEC for the trail-less peaks of the Catskill Park. All materials will be available for further reading and watching when released to the public this Spring.

Conservation Corps Trail Stewards:

The 2023 Summit Steward report for the Catskills Conservation Corps Trail Steward Program is attached to the bottom of this report.

Volunteer Activity Updates

In addition to routine maintenance across the Catskill Forest Preserve, New York-New Jersey Trail Conference volunteers have completed the following projects with support from staff and the DEC since our last report:

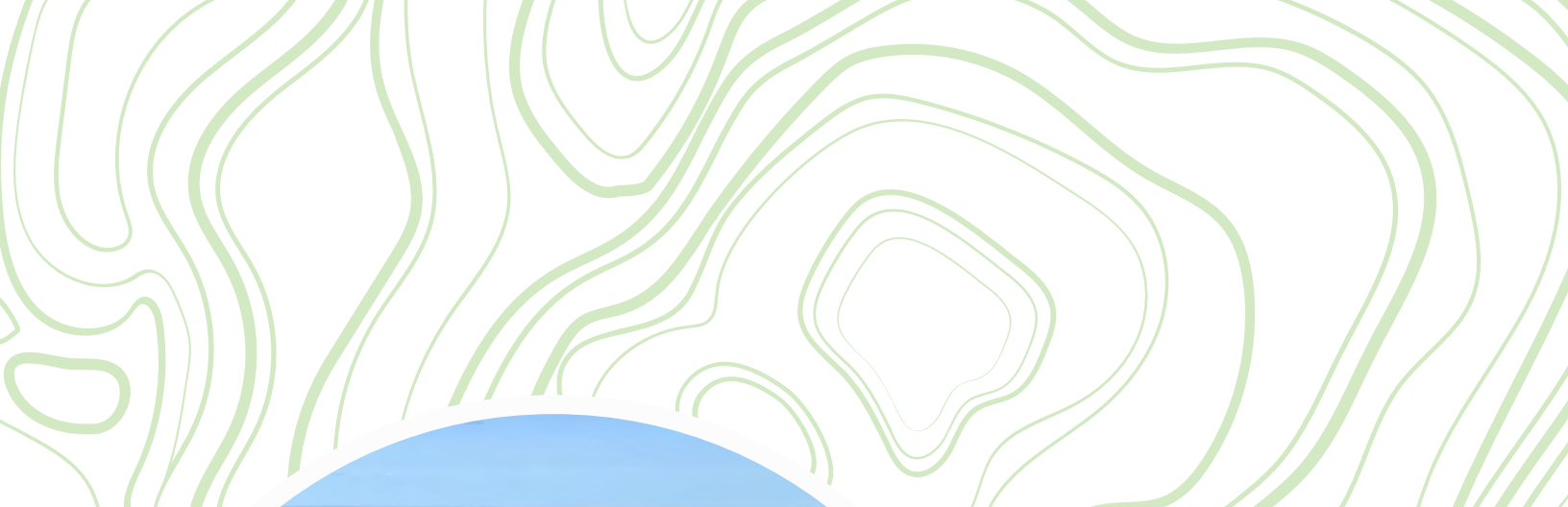
Catskills Lean-to Crew:

- Volunteer Leader Eric Freidman led a work trip to the Quick Lake Lean-to in October of 2023 to install a new roof, remove old roofing material, stain the lean-to exterior, and install a privy.
- The crew held their last work trip of 2024 at the Kelly Hollow Lean-to where they relocated and replaced the privy. They hope to return in 2024 to replace the roof of the lean-to.
- The crew is currently exploring projects for the 2024 season with DEC.

Catskills Trail Crew:

- The Catskills Trail Crew completed work in late fall on the Huckleberry Loop Trail. They cleared blowdowns from the entirety of the trail and addressed maintenance concerns.
- The crew is currently planning work for the 2024 season with DEC.

Please direct any interest in volunteering with the initiatives listed above to volunteer@nynjtc.org.



2023 Summit Steward Report

CATSKILL FOREST PRESERVE MAY - OCTOBER 2023

A PROGRAM OF THE
New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

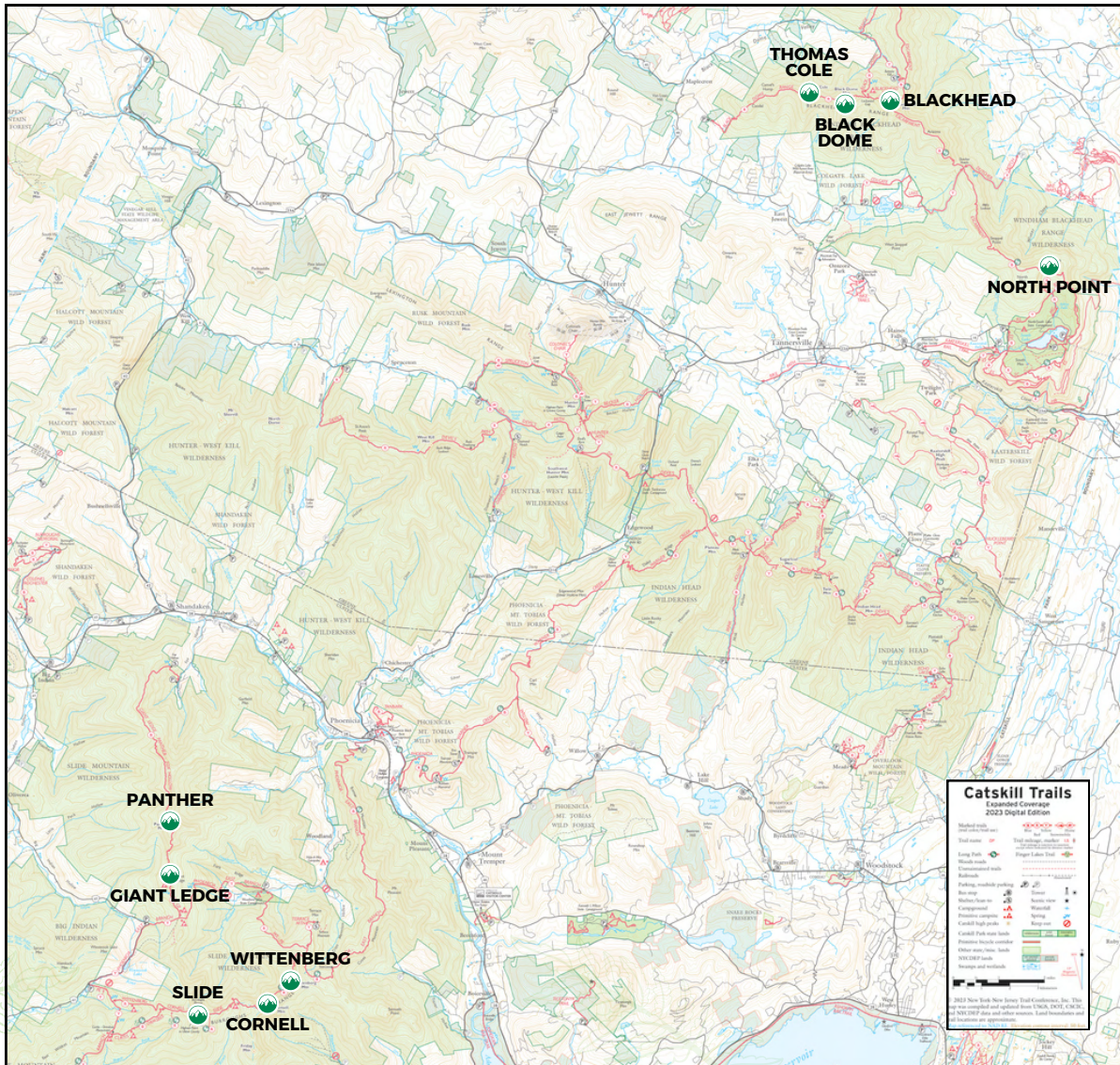


Catskill Forest Preserve - Summit Stewards 2023 Season Report

Prepared by

Myra Romano
Vanessa Mangual

Trail Steward Program Coordinator
Trail Steward Crew Leader



The above map represents the locations covered by the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference Conservation Corps Catskill Summit Stewards. This program is a partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. Funding was provided from the Environmental Protection Fund as administered by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.



Introduction

The Trail Conference is taking a leadership role in coordinating stewardship efforts to keep up with growing threats to natural spaces and outdoor recreation areas. To educate users and help mitigate the negative impacts from increased use, the Trail Conference has partnered with land managers to begin a multi-phased approach in the Catskill Forest Preserve. We believe the most effective way to advance change is through user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions. Our Summit Steward program is integral to our response to these threats. When used responsibly, trails protect the people who use them and the surrounding environment. But without education, trail lands are subject to mistreatment and misuse. Summit Stewards provide outreach and information about park regulations, hiker safety, preparedness, and other best practices. In addition to readying hikers, Summit Stewards help discourage and mitigate the misuse of trails and the surrounding lands through education and public relations work.



Meet the Summit Stewards



Vanessa Mangual
Crew Leader



James Jaster
Crew Member



Colleen Stevens
Crew Member



Matthew Moran
Crew Member



Maddison White
Crew Member



Jay Porcelli
Crew Member

TRAINING

Over the first few weeks of the 2023 season, the Catskill Summit Stewards received onsite training at each stewarding location from Trail Steward Program Coordinator Myra Romano and Trail Steward Leader Vanessa Mangual. This training focused on educating the stewards on the history and ecological features of the Catskill Park, current issues affecting the ecosystem health of the Catskills, basic ecology and plant identification, trail maintenance and improvement techniques, common talking points for each location, removal and renaturalization methods for illegal fire rings and social trails, and how to care for designated campsites, lean-tos, and fire rings.

Wilderness First Aid with CPR / AED

In the beginning of June, all stewards earned their Wilderness First Aid and CPR/AED certifications from Mid-Atlantic Outdoor Recreation Education. With these skills, our stewards are better prepared to respond to emergencies in both frontcountry and remote wilderness areas.

Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics

On June 15-16, the stewards came to Welch Education Center to complete their Leave No Trace Level 1 Instructor training. With this certification, they can teach others about Leave No Trace principles and help preserve the beauty of our outdoor spaces.

New York State DEC Training

On June 22, the stewards met with leaders from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to learn the rules and regulations they would be educating park visitors on. This training also provided a chance to interact with other steward groups within the Catskills.



Catskill Forest Preserve



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

11,920

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

3,396

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

1,007

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

434

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

179

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

19

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

16

FIRERINGS REMOVED

50

LOST HIKERS HELPED

44

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

4

DAYS WITH RAIN

18

The Catskill Summit Steward program, initiated by the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference in 2015, stands as an indispensable resource for adventurers exploring the renowned hiking spots within the Catskill Forest Preserve. In collaboration with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and supported by the Environmental Protection Fund, the Summit Steward program's primary objective is to engage with hikers, ensuring their preparedness, responsibility, and safety for their intended hiking or backpacking venture.

This ambitious initiative focuses on conveying DEC rules and regulations regarding camping and campfires, instilling general Leave No Trace principles and wilderness ethics, and safeguarding the delicate summit ecosystems above 3,500 feet. Stewards actively worked to eliminate unauthorized social paths, cleared away illegal fire rings and campsites, and assisted DEC and first responders in handling unforeseen emergencies.

Beyond disseminating crucial regulations, the stewards played a pivotal role in providing visitors with comprehensive information, including trail conditions, route recommendations, weather alerts, historical insights, identification of flora and fauna, and suggestions for noteworthy towns and attractions to explore within the area. In 2023, six stewards were stationed at various summits, including Slide, Cornell, Wittenberg, Giant Ledge, Panther, North Point, and the Blackhead Range.

Collaborating with Trail Conference volunteers, stewards also engaged in trail maintenance, gaining valuable insights into how small acts can have significant impacts. This experience also facilitated meaningful connections with hikers, emphasizing the importance of hiking conscientiously. Despite frequent rainy weather and unprecedented wildfire smoke, our intrepid stewards fearlessly undertook 48 days of stewarding over 22 weekends. They encountered almost 12,000 hikers throughout the season, with 28% of these being meaningful interactions. Stewards also directed 434 hikers to other park locations and recommended 179 hikers to points of interest in local towns.



The stewards at the North Point lookout



Stewards leading a guided hike along the Escarpment Trail near North-South Lake



The stewards at the summit of Wittenberg

Burroughs Range

Slide, Cornell, and Wittenberg



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

4,683

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

1,349

BUSIEST DAY

Sept 3: 187 hikers

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

314

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

188

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

72

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

8

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

7

FIRERINGS REMOVED

20

LOST HIKERS HELPED

29

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

1

AVG HIGH

72°

AVG LOW

58°

Dedicated to John Burroughs, a renowned nature essayist celebrated for his keen observations of the natural world, this range of mountains in the Slide Mountain Wilderness area contains the Catskill Mountain's highest peak, Slide Mountain (4,190'), as well as two other peaks above 3500 feet, Cornell Mountain (3,860'), and Wittenberg Mountain (3,780'). Recognized for its stunning vistas, challenging passages, and proximity to the Woodland Valley Campground, which attracts many visitors, the Burroughs Range stood out as the most frequented site for the Summit Stewards in 2023.

Across the season, the stewards encountered an impressive 4,683 hikers, extending their wisdom and support to 1,349 of those trailblazers. Many discussions at these sites revolved around various subjects, including local plant and animal life, particularly focusing on Bicknell's thrush and the first-growth balsam fir forests. The stewards extended their outreach beyond the ordinary informed discussions and covered essential topics like trail lengths, difficulty levels, hiker preparedness, weather forecasts, and optimal viewpoints. They also delved into historical narratives, such as the notable landslide of the early 1800s, which lent its name to the formidable Slide.

This location witnessed a higher frequency of unlawful camping, instances of fire rings, lost hikers, and injuries compared to other stewarding sites, thus providing an opportunity for the stewards to apply their training in the Authority of the Resource technique. In July, two Adirondack chairs crafted by a woodshop student were left at the summit of Slide Mountain. Man-made structures are not allowed in wilderness areas, but the family refused to hike back up to retrieve their chairs. Steward Matt Moran and Forest Ranger Martin hiked up to carry the chairs out, thus sparking a conversation on the downsides of leaving personal items in wilderness areas. This incident highlighted the need to preserve the wilderness for future generations, maintaining the escape it provides from the stresses of daily life.



Before and after photos of a downed tree removed from the Phoenicia East Branch Trail



Chairs abandoned by hikers at the summit of Slide, carried down by Steward Matt and Ranger Martin

Giant Ledge & Panther

Slide Mountain Wilderness



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

2,428

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

672

BUSIEST DAY

Oct 8: 377 hikers

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

273

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

87

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

35

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

7

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

6

FIRERINGS REMOVED

10

LOST HIKERS HELPED

5

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

0

AVG HIGH

69°

AVG LOW

56°

Boasting a mere 1.5-mile distance to the summit and some of the best viewpoints in the entirety of the Catskill Park, Giant Ledge is a popular choice with hikers of all ages and abilities, especially given its proximity to the Slide Mountain trailhead. This makes it an ideal and approachable alternative for those seeking a less strenuous yet equally awe-inspiring hike with breathtaking vistas. If hikers were prepared to take on an additional challenge, the Summit Stewards informed them that the trail continues on to the summit of Panther Mountain, standing at 3,720'.

In 2023, the stewards achieved significant success in education and outreach at Giant Ledge and Panther Mountain. Out of 2,428 hikers, 672 received the guidance and support of the stewards, marking this location as the third-highest in terms of educational impact. The stewards strategically promoted sustainable camping practices, emphasizing adherence to the seven Leave No Trace principles. This focus was particularly crucial in addressing the challenges posed by the second-highest volume of backpackers among all stewarding locations.

Each weekend, the stewards took charge and swiftly eliminated illegal fire rings, cleaned and rebuilt the fire rings at designated campsites, and provided educational guidance to park visitors on responsible waste disposal methods, such as pack-in-pack-out, using available privies, or how to dig a cat-hole when necessary. They also extended approachable assistance to those navigating the trail and enjoying the views, demonstrating their proactive approach and commitment to maintaining a responsible outdoor environment. This approach also cultivated a supportive demeanor that encouraged inquiries from visitors, contributing to an atmosphere of openness and education.

Additionally, some common problems that have been tended to by the stewards over the past four years have shown significant improvement. Only 10 illegal fire rings were found and dismantled by the stewards this year, compared to 27 in 2020 and 19 in 2021. The severity of social trails between the three designated campsites atop Giant Ledge has also decreased dramatically.



Steward Matt enjoying the views at Giant Ledge



Steward Maddie, along with Invasives Strike Force members Emily & Joe, removing an illegal fire ring



The stewards cleaning up and rebuilding a designated fire ring at one of the Giant Ledge campsites

North Point

Windham-Blackhead Range Wilderness



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

2,163

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

718

BUSIEST DAY

July 30: 197 hikers

**total includes people counted during the Escarpment Trail Run*

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

214

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER PARK LOCATIONS

86

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

34

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

3

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

3

FIRERINGS REMOVED

10

LOST HIKERS HELPED

5

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

1

AVG HIGH

69°

AVG LOW

56°

Nestled next to the North-South Lake Campground in Haines Falls, NY, and tracing the thrilling Escarpment Trail, North Point emerged as one of the Summit Stewards' most invigorating locations of 2023. This location promises more than just stunning vistas - it's a gateway to adventure. It offers hikers unique, panoramic views of the valley below from the eastern edge of the Catskills escarpment and a surprise opportunity to gaze across four states: New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Vermont. The trails are a treasure trove of vantage points, each revealing a different facet of this breathtaking panorama.

Thanks to its prime location near the campground and Kaaterskill Falls, North Point buzzes with activity, drawing adventure seekers from all walks of life. During the 2023 season, the stewards didn't just steward; they served as guides to the wonders of North Point. They recommended must-visit spots like the North Point summit, Stoppel Point (home to well-preserved airplane wreckage from 1983, just a 2-mile hike away), Badmans Cave, Newmans Ledge, and Artists Rock.

Beyond its natural allure, North Point's rich history and popularity made it an ideal location for the stewards to lead a guided hike during Catskills Lark in the Park. They took patrons on a historical adventure by delving into the Escarpment Trail's history. They recounted tales of nineteenth-century artists Thomas Cole and Frederick Church, who drew inspiration for masterpieces now displayed in some of the world's leading museums. The discussion extended to the renowned Catskill Mountain House, a distinguished hotel overlooking the Hudson River Valley that sadly burned down in 1963.

Amidst this adventure, the stewards wove in lessons on Leave No Trace principles, instilling a sense of responsibility. They encouraged participants to actively contribute to preserving the beloved Kaaterskill Falls by collecting any garbage they passed. In all its historical and natural glory, North Point served as the canvas for an exhilarating exploration where every step echoed with the spirit of adventure and conservation.



Before and after photos of an illegal fire ring removed near the Escarpment Trail



Steward Jay at North Point

Blackhead Range

Blackhead, Black Dome, Thomas Cole



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

2,646

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

657

BUSIEST DAY

July 30: 229 hikers

**total includes people counted during
the Escarpment Trail Run*

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

206

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

73

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

38

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

1

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

0

FIRERINGS REMOVED

10

LOST HIKERS HELPED

5

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

2

AVG HIGH

69°

AVG LOW

56°

During the 2023 season, the Summit Stewards ventured to the northernmost point of their stewarding locations - the Blackhead Range, which lies within the Windham-Blackhead Wilderness. It comprises three notable summits - Blackhead, Black Dome, and Thomas Cole - all towering above 3,500 feet, with Black Dome claiming the title of the Catskills' third-highest peak at 3,980 feet. For avid hikers seeking a challenge, this range offers the chance to conquer any combination of these impressive peaks.

Throughout the season, the stewards pointed hikers towards many diverse destinations within the surrounding trail network, such as Acra Point, the Batavia Kill lean-to, Lockwood Gap, and others. Suggestions from the stewards often had the impact of elevating the 4.4-mile loop into an enticing adventure for adept hikers.

Along the trail, a natural spring provides water, and two designated camping zones cater to those seeking an overnight stay in the wild. Stewards frequently visited these designated campsites and the area around the lean-to, performing crucial maintenance such as trash pick-ups, fire ring removal and rehabilitation, and observing the availability of reliable water sources. They also frequently removed any evidence of wilderness tampering and wildlife disturbance, such as the building of rock stacks in the Batavia Kill.

Blackhead witnessed its highest daily visitor count of 229 during the July 30th Escarpment Trail Run, a combination of hikers and trail runners. This posed an uncommon challenge for the steward on duty that day, who now had the task of counting, educating, and assisting individuals who weren't necessarily seasoned backcountry enthusiasts. Nevertheless, this presented a unique opportunity for the steward to passionately advocate for the environment and educate the general public on the best practices for Leave No Trace. In the face of the bustling activity, the steward embraced this novel challenge, turning a busy day on Blackhead into an opportunity to spread the message of responsible and mindful outdoor exploration to all.



Before and after photos of a cleaned and rebuilt fire ring at the Batavia Kill lean-to



Stewards enjoying the view during their initial training hike at Blackhead Mountain

Trail Improvement Projects



STATISTICS

BLOWDOWN REMOVED
83

CORRIDOR CLEARING
3 miles

DRAINAGE (STRUCTURES)
48

DRAINAGE (FEET)
254 ft

TURNPIKING
17 ft

In addition to their regular stewarding shifts, the Catskill Summit Stewards frequently joined active Trail Conference volunteers and other groups on trail improvement projects throughout the Catskill Forest Preserve and surrounding regions.

The stewards were thrilled to team up with the Catskill Trail Crew and other Trail Conference volunteers for two exciting projects this year. On July 7th, led by Catskill Trail Crew member Charles Gadol, they tackled the Wittenberg-Cornell-Slide trail from Slide Mountain trailhead. Due to the trail's steep and steady incline, the water bars had become clogged with debris over the years, causing water to cascade over them and down the trail rather than along them and off the trail. This led to increased erosion and set the stage for more debris and loose rocks to cascade into the water bars down the trail. Undaunted by the challenge, the stewards and volunteers embarked on a mission to transform this 1.1-mile stretch. With precision and determination, they cleaned and re-dug a remarkable 40 water bars, effectively rerouting the flow and mitigating erosion risks. But the trailblazing efforts didn't stop there - they also removed loose rocks and stones, guaranteeing a smoother and safer treadway for hikers.

On August 31st and September 1st, led by Charles Gadol again, the stewards embarked on a transformative project along the Long Path between Vernoooy Falls and Trails End Road in the Sundown Wild Forest. They installed eight drainage structures over an impressive 254 linear feet, effectively addressing the water accumulation issues on the trail. Additionally, the crews effectively erased a troublesome mudhole from the trail by turnpiking 17 linear feet of trail. This process involved the collection of rocks, which were then crushed into smaller pieces and placed on the trail. This strategic placement raised the trail to a height unaffected by heavy rains, and then the rocks were capped with dirt to create a smooth, walkable surface. The rocks serve as both structural support and drainage, ensuring the newly constructed tread remains free of water.





Stewards digging drainage in Sundown Wild Forest



One of the water bars being cleared on Slide Mtn



Stewards and volunteers who assisted with the water bar clearing project on Slide Mountain

Trail Improvement Projects



Over the course of the season, the stewards teamed up with Trail Conference volunteer Andy Garrison. Alongside this incredible trailblazer, the crew went out four times for corridor clearing and blowdown removal. On August 4th, they ventured out to the Willoemoc Wild Forest to remove eight large blowdowns. The largest was 20" in diameter. Being the first time the stewards had seen a sawyer at work, it was inspiring to see how a significant obstacle could be removed from the trail with one tool and a lot of teamwork.

On October 20th, the stewards and Andy started at the Woodland Valley Campground in the Slide Mountain Wilderness. They split up to tackle blowdowns and corridor clearing on the Wittenberg-Cornell-Slide and Phoenicia-East Branch Trails. Half the crew snipped back overgrown vegetation and roots encroaching into the Phoenicia-East Branch Trail towards Giant Ledge and Panther. They managed to clear almost two miles of trail. The other half took on the challenge of removing nine blowdowns along the Wittenberg-Cornell-Slide and Phoenicia-East Branch Trails towards the Terrace Mountain lean-to.

In November, before wrapping up the season, the dynamic duo of Andy, sawyer extraordinaire, and Crew Leader Vanessa, the swamper supreme, ventured into the Big Indian Wilderness, clearing an impressive amount of blowdowns. Traversing the Mine Hollow Trail to Pine Hill-West Branch Trail with a vague report of "blowdowns on the trail," they came upon 31 blowdowns to be cut and removed. Working diligently and with impressive teamwork, they put in a full day's work. But the work didn't end there. The following week, undeterred, they embarked on an 8.8-mile loop, ascending the Seager-Big Indian Trail to the Pine Hill-West Branch, triumphantly clearing an additional 34 blowdowns.





Before and after photos of blowdown removed in the Slide Mountain Wilderness



Steward Colleen removing blowdown in the Willowemoc Wild Forest



Thank you!

Thank you to our partners and volunteers for all of your support. We would not be able to do it without you.

Please email Myra Romano (mromano@nynjtc.org), Trail Steward Program Coordinator, with any questions or comments on how we can continue to improve the program.



**Forest Fire Lookout Association
New York State Chapter
CPAC Meeting Report
March 27, 2024 2pm to 4pm via Zoom**

Bramley: Site preparation has been completed by the NYCDEP and everything is on schedule for restoration work to begin in May of 2024. Fund raising has been robust.

Rock Rift: Work is underway or may be complete by the time this meeting convenes to provide a route for restoration materials to get to the site. This will of course be weather dependent. We thank the Town of Tompkins and NYCDEP for completing this important step.

Utsayantha: Though not yet scheduled, we anticipate school field trips to this fire tower again in 2024.

Leonard Hill: We continue to await the engineers report that was requested in September of 2018. A response to an any updates query in March, garnered this response - "DEC Engineers have begun work on determining what needs to be done to rehab the Leonard Hill fire tower. They anticipate having a scope of work completed in May." It sounds like they anticipate this long awaited report soon. If this should fall through, there is interest at Gilbert Lake State Park to return the fire tower to its original location.

Major Litter Problem: The FFLA and the Volunteer Coordinators at Balsam Lake, Hunter, Overlook and Red Hill programs were alarmed to read the Catskill Center Catskills Stewards Program 2023 End of Year Report* regarding Fire Towers. The report states that nearly 41 bags of litter was collected at fire towers. These 4 coordinators have not seen 41 bags of litter along the trails or on the summits in the last 10 or 15 years all together! We would very much like to see the details of this report, specifically the dates and locations where this occurred so that this major problem can be addressed immediately! None of the Coordinators have seen any problems with litter in 2023 and all report perhaps a gallon zip lock bag of litter over the course of the season at their summits and along the trail on weekends and holidays when the volunteers are present.

Catskill Fire Tower Project in 2024: No VSA in place at this time. Likely the most successful volunteer program in the Catskills, covering 5 towers for the first several years, now only 4 towers. Tens of thousands of hikers have been reached since the inception of this very successful all volunteer program. We would hate to see this come to an end. Due to a lack of resources, Volunteerism is essential to the Stewardship of the Catskills and we must support those who are willing to engage in this important volunteer work. The sooner these volunteers know there will be a program, the more robust it will be in 2024.

Balsam Lake Fire Tower: Many thanks to the NYSDEC Operations Crew who installed the new fire tower cab windows sometime in November of 2023! We are so grateful that visitors can now see out the windows, they won't fall apart in their hands and now we can reinstall the map when volunteers are present! Additionally, due to the historical nature of the building and the entire facility, the Observer's cabin was added to the National Historic Listing** for Balsam Lake Mountain Fire Tower in November.

The Observer's cabin has been closed. There are still no plans in place to address the safety violations noted at the cabin in 2019, which are primarily the floor supports. There have still not been any emergency repairs made here. There are sufficient resources in the Catskill Fire Tower Project account to hire an engineer and a contractor to make the repairs, as well as to purchase materials. We have provided DEC with options for engineers who are capable of the hike and the inspection. Meanwhile, the visitor experience here is greatly reduced as the visitors no longer have access to the museum and the historical displays there. There are no ground views at Balsam Lake Mountain, thus visitors who are not comfortable climbing the tower have had their visit enhanced by the exhibits on display in the Observer's cabin. Historically, numerous children's experiences greet youngsters visiting the cabin where there are opportunities to interact with a touch board, to see and handle the wildland fire fighting tools, to use the rotary dial phone, to learn about leave not trace, Smokey Bear and more.

We are concerned that our experienced volunteers have no place to get out of the weather should a rain storm, snowstorm, or thunder storm roll through during the stewarding day or if temperatures, wind, and fog are such that hypothermic conditions are created. Will stewards abandon the program? Their safety is very important to us. The cabin is the only storage area for all of the facilities.



Mount Tremper: More and more visitors are commenting on the lack of visibility from this fire tower. The trees have grown so tall that the views are only visible from within the cab in certain directions when the leaves are on. A review of the UMP for this area notes that on page 18 “As with other forest preserve lands; the Phoenicia-Mount Tobias Wild Forest is an important part of the view shed which makes the Catskill Park a unique area. The fire tower on the summit of Tremper Mountain provides a spectacular 360° view of the unit as well as the entire Catskills. It provides views in all directions, including parts of the Ashokan Reservoir and the distant Shawangunk Ridge, Cooper Lake in Woodstock, and the back of Hunter Mountain, making it one of the premier fire tower views in the Catskills.” On page 38: “ The steel tower on Tremper Mountain is one of several fire towers with especially panoramic views of the Catskills. DEC staff discussions with visitors confirm that it adds substantially to the enjoyment of the Catskills by providing an impressive 360° view. The Department has received unanimous support for retaining the fire tower and maintaining/enhancing existing views.” The tower has in the past been useful in fire detection and while no longer used, could still be helpful under certain conditions. A seasonal interpreter or summit steward could be considered.” Please note the UMP is dated 1994.

Respectfully submitted,

Laurie Rankin, Director
New York State Chapter
Forest Fire Lookout Association
www.nysffla.org

***FIRE TOWERS**

Prepared by Finn Parnell, Community Relations Specialist & Steward Coordinator.

Six Fire Tower locations were covered by our Catskill Stewards: Balsam Lake Mountain, Red Hill, Mount Tremper, Hunter Mountain, Overlook Mountain, and the Upper Esopus Fire Tower. Stewards educated visitors on the origin and history of the fire towers, led Leave No Trace hikes, and assisted in trash removal at each location. Stewards also educated and encouraged visitors to take part in the The Catskills Fire Tower Challenge.

- Total visitation and engagement reach of over 2,037 people
- Nearly 41 bags of litter collected
- Number of hikers: 1,110
- Number of backpackers: 225
- Number of dogs greeted: 136
- Fire rings deconstructed and sites rehabilitated: 5
- Rock stacks removed: 5
- Social trails brushed in: 18
- Number of directions given: 37

****NEW YORK, ULSTER COUNTY,**

Balsam Lake Mountain Fire Observation Station (Additional Documentation),

Balsam Lake Mountain,

Hardenburgh, AD01001038,

ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION APPROVED, 11/28/2023

(Fire Observation Stations of New York State Forest Preserve MPS)