



CATSKILLCENTER

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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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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