



2023 Trail Steward Report

BREAKNECK RIDGE MAY - OCTOBER 2023

A PROGRAM OF THE
New York-New Jersey
Trail Conference

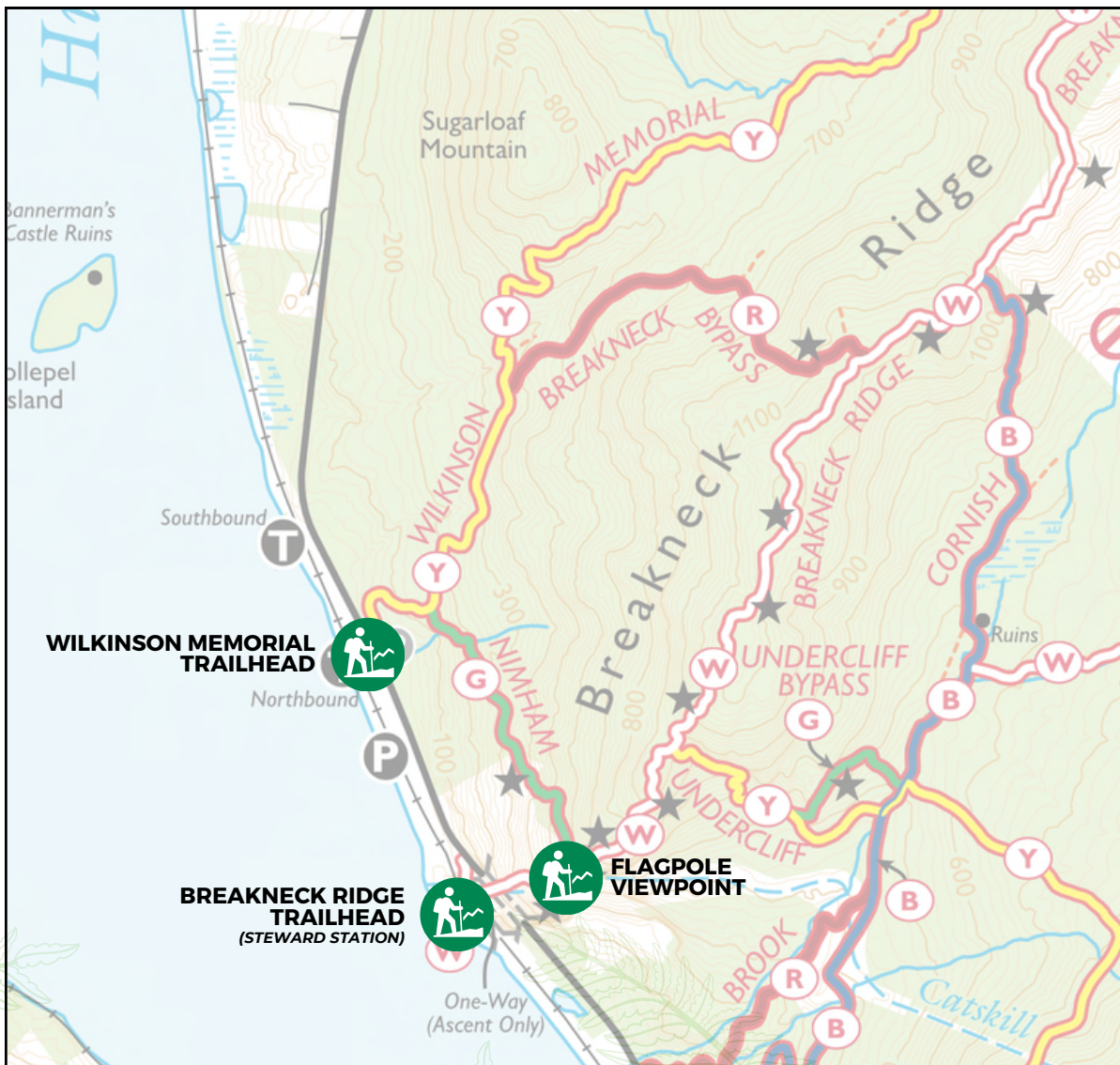


Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve - Breakneck Ridge 2023 Trail Steward Report

Prepared by

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Trail Steward Program Coordinator
Trail Steward Crew Leader



The above map represents key locations covered by the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference Conservation Corps Breakneck Ridge Trail Stewards. This program is a partnership with the Hudson Highlands Land Trust.



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 Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve. We believe the most effective way to advance change is through user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions. Our Trail Steward program is an integral part of our response to these threats. When used responsibly, trails protect both the people who use them and the environment that surrounds them. But without education, trail lands are subject to mistreatment and misuse. Trail Stewards provide outreach and information about park regulations, hiker safety, preparedness, and other best practices. In addition to readying hikers, Trail Stewards help discourage and mitigate the misuse of trails and the surrounding lands through education and public relations work.



Meet the Trail Stewards



Ryan McClean
Crew Leader



Phoenix Pliskin
Crew Member



Declan Urffer
Crew Member



Christina Ufland
Crew Member



Eleanor Dunlevy
Crew Member



Sydney Veitinger
Crew Member



**Sarah Spencer-
Piszczek**
Crew Member



**Benjamin
Straebler**
Crew Member



**Kathrine
Ledermann**
Crew Member

TRAINING

During the beginning of the 2023 Conservation Corps season, the stewards received onsite training at Breakneck Ridge and Wilkinson Memorial Trailhead from Trail Steward Program Coordinator Myra Romano, Trail Steward Leader Ryan McClean, Hudson Highlands Land Trust, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail. This training focused on familiarizing stewards with the most popular routes in the park's vast network of trails, the history and ecological significance of the trails and surrounding areas, collaborative efforts between stewards and park staff, Fjord Trail talking points, commonly asked questions, and emergency protocols.

Wilderness First Aid / CPR / AED

In the beginning of June, all stewards earned Wilderness First Aid, CPR, and 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 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.



Breakneck Ridge

Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve



STATISTICS

TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS

43

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

19,651

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

14,001

BUSIEST DAY

October 8
1,077 hikers

BUSIEST HOUR OF THE DAY

10-11am

86 hikers on average

HIKERS DIRECTED TO BEACON

420

HIKERS DIRECTED TO COLD SPRING

2,038

LOST HIKERS HELPED

53

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

17

DAYS WITH RAIN

17

AVG HIGH

76°

AVG LOW

58°

The well-known, heavily trafficked Breakneck Ridge hike within the Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve was the catalyst for the Trail Conference's Trail Steward program in 2013. This trail and the surrounding park are popular destinations for new and seasoned hikers in the NYC metro area. Stewarding in the Hudson Highlands throughout 2023 occurred in three distinct phases, as stewards reacted to different realities based on the needs of hikers, the accessibility of various trails, and the number of stewards available each weekend.

Phase 1: Wilkinson Memorial Trailhead Stewarding (May-June)

From Memorial Day Weekend through the end of June, stewards set up a base camp at the Wilkinson Memorial Trailhead, directly across the road from the Metro-North station, with trains arriving and departing multiple times each weekend. From this location, stewards had to inform (and sometimes intercept) hikers who came intending to hike Breakneck Ridge that the rock scramble was temporarily closed. Instead, they would provide the best alternate routes to access viewpoints in the park. Many of these initial interactions focused on educating visitors before their hike. Stewards ensured that hikers were as well-prepared as possible for their chosen route, reminded them of the rules and regulations, and provided them with a map and insight on what to do if something went awry. Because of their familiarity with the trails and surrounding areas, stewards could also provide personal insight to visitors looking for a less challenging hike or things to do in the nearby towns of Beacon and Cold Spring.

Phase 2: Breakneck Ridge Trailhead Stewarding (July-Sept)

On Saturday, July 1, stewards set up at their new station about 100 steps up from the Breakneck Ridge Trailhead. The weekend of July 4th and the grand re-opening of the Breakneck Ridge Trail was expected to be particularly busy. However, the weekend numbers were lower than expected due to poor air quality from Canadian wildfires. The stewards used the weekend to workshop strategies to reach as many hikers as possible, as effectively as possible.

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Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve



This often meant splitting a team of 4 stewards to cover locations where their presence could be most effective. Two stewards would stay at the steward station, while one steward would walk to the Breakneck Ridge Train Station each hour to speak with hikers arriving by rail. Another would generally stand at the trailhead, which was often the area where engaging with hikers was easiest. At other times, stewards would post up at the flagpole, the Wilkinson Memorial Trailhead, or hike one of the popular loops, engaging with hikers and collecting litter along the way.

The late summer months of July through September saw the majority of the incidents stewards dealt with this season. These included aiding lost, injured, and mentally ill hikers. Below, some of the more dramatic incidents are laid out (please note many minor incidents, such as routine calls, treated cuts and scrapes, and simple directions offered are omitted).

In early August, a lost couple was discovered about seventy-five feet from the Breakneck Ridge Trail, about a quarter mile from the Ninham Trail. They had gone up Wilkinson Memorial to the Breakneck Bypass and then became lost and confused on the Breakneck Ridge Trail. They walked back and forth along the Breakneck Ridge Trail, between the Breakneck Bypass and Ninham Trails, for about two and a half hours. Steward Leader Ryan McClean found them, shared some water with them, and helped them back to the trail and down Breakneck, Ninham, and Wilkinson to their car. They had been too embarrassed to ask other hikers for directions.

Throughout these months, multiple hikers were found on different days between Ninham and Undercliff off of the Breakneck Ridge Trail. Most of these people seemingly wandered off trail intentionally or followed social paths before becoming turned around and unaware of which direction to proceed in. None reported being lost for long, but some were in dangerous areas when the stewards found them.



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On July 22, along the rock scramble, a woman tumbled approximately 20 feet, hitting her head multiple times. Steward Sarah Spencer-Piszczek had been roving the trail and came upon the woman and her family. Shortly after she discovered them, the stewards at the trailhead were notified of a 911 call. Stewards Ben Straebler and Declan Urffer took the med kit up the rock scramble, coordinating with Spencer-Piszczek as they did so. They also contacted the park's staff to inform them of the situation and location of the injured woman. Upon beginning wilderness first aid, Spencer-Piszczek was able to determine that the wounded woman was conscious, responsive, and lucid, but also deemed a possible traumatic brain injury to be likely. Multiple medical professionals happened to be hiking nearby and offered their assistance. Soon, park staff, park police, and EMTs arrived and took over. The three stewards at the scene began focusing on directing hikers already on the scramble away from the incident site. Meanwhile, Steward Kathrine Ledermann and visiting Trail Crew member Joseph Saffioti stayed at the trailhead and informed hikers that they could only enter once the injured person had been evacuated. Previously, these two had coordinated with first responders arriving on the scene. With assistance, the woman could walk up the rest of the rock scramble, and back down to the trailhead, at which point the stewards reopened the trail.



Almost an hour apart, at 12:08 pm and 1:07 pm on September 3, people came down to the stewarding table saying their companion was injured. The first woman was with a group; she had heavily blurred vision and felt faint. She was given water with electrolytes and an ice pack. Stewards assisted her back down to the trailhead after waiting about 15 minutes. 911 was called initially, but they decided not to send someone as she recovered quickly. Stewards Ben Straebler and Ryan McClean responded to this call. The second person who felt ill was a man, and his friend left him alone on the trail to go seek help. He was not far, and by the time stewards got to him, he was already feeling slightly better. He said he had felt dizzy and sat down, fainted, and then woke up before fainting again. His friend said he was "out" for two seconds or less. He was also given electrolytes and then assisted back down to his car. Steward Ryan McClean responded to this second call. Both injured people were on the rock earlier section of the rock scramble, especially the man.

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On July 22, along the rock scramble at Breakneck Ridge, a woman experienced a panic attack and was unable to continue hiking on her own. Stewards Declan Urffer and Ben Straebler offered her guidance and support and were able to help her complete the Short Loop. In late August, Steward Ryan McClean stayed with a woman who got separated from her family and who was having a panic attack until they were reunited.

Phase 3: Breakneck Ridge Trailhead Stewarding (October)

By the start of October, all stewards except the leader had finished their 450- or 675-hour terms. This once again led to a reimagining of stewarding at Breakneck Ridge. With a crew of only one steward, the general pattern of the day was to set up at the trailhead rather than the stewarding station, as this was the point on the trail that most easily allowed for engagement with hikers. Steward Leader Ryan would sometimes remain here for the entire day, and sometimes he would pack up around 2 pm, take a first aid kit, the emergency phone, and a garbage bag, and hike the short or moderate loop, engaging with hikers along the way. To increase effectiveness and reduce risk, he interacted with park staff more frequently, and was joined on two occasions by members of the NYNJTC's Invasive Strike Force, and on multiple occasions by Trail Steward Program Coordinator Myra Romano. Weather and bad luck once again drove down turnout in October. Multiple storms dissuaded hikers from coming out, and on a particularly lovely day, the train did not run as far north as Breakneck Ridge from the city due to issues further down the line from a mudslide. That said, the season's busiest day took place on October 8, with 1,077 hikers visiting Breakneck Ridge between 8 am and 4:30 pm.





Before and after photos of broken glass pick-up at the overlook near the steward station



Trail Stewards Sydney, Ryan, Declan, and Phoenix at Wilkinson Memorial trailhead

Vernal Pool Stewards

Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve



STATISTICS

TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS

8

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

516

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

311

DOGS ON LEASH

42

DOGS OFF LEASH

10

In the preseason months of April and May, when only the Steward Leaders' terms had begun, these stewards were stationed at vernal pools within Hudson Highlands State Park. These seasonal pools are crucial for the native ecosystem and are susceptible to impacts from off-leash dogs and other disturbances. Native salamanders and frogs lay their eggs in the seasonal ponds, which generally do not contain fish because they dry up during the summer in most years. This reduced predation risk allows a higher population of frogs and salamanders to reach adulthood.

After receiving training from Carmela Buono and Cory Tiger from the Hudson Highlands Land Trust, the Hudson Valley Steward Leader Ryan McClean and Catskill Steward Leader Vanessa Mangual were stationed at the two vernal pools along the Washburn Trail. Over eight days on weekends in April and May, the stewards were able to educate 311 people on the significance of vernal pools.

One of these pools was situated directly on the trail, with a small land bridge allowing hikers to cross it; the other was about 15 feet off the trail. Steward Leaders Ryan and Vanessa were stationed here on weekends in April and early May to collect data and educate hikers on the significance of these delicate ecosystems.

The stewards were able to engage with and educate many hikers, with and without dogs, on the importance and vulnerabilities of the vernal pools. Both vernal pools had multiple salamander egg clumps that were easily visible.

Hikers seemed to enjoy seeing the pools, and people with dogs were, for the most part, quite willing to leash their dogs after seeing this tangible reason for doing so. One hiker arrived with his off-leash dog each weekend, whom he was consistently hesitant to leash. He was always further behind on the trail when his dog would run up and jump into the lower vernal pool. The stewards became skilled at distracting the dog with play to keep the developing eggs in the vernal pools safe from harm.





Steward Leaders Ryan and Vanessa looking for egg masses in the upper vernal pool



A close-up view of one of the clusters of eggs



Hudson Highlands Land Trust and NYNJTC staff provided training for the vernal pool steward program

Trail Improvement Projects



In June, five stewards performed maintenance on the relatively overgrown Fishkill Ridge Trail, up to Dozer Junction. Stewards removed fallen trees with handsaws and clipped back the vegetation that had overtaken the trail. Some areas had become so overgrown that walking without hitting branches on both sides of the trail was difficult. These areas were relatively few and far between, but the work required was sizeable.

On July 9, a massive storm hit the Hudson Highlands, bringing torrential downpours and severe damage to roads, trails, and homes. Just a few miles south of Breakneck Ridge lies Bear Mountain and Highland Falls, two of the most affected areas hit by the storm. While the northern part of Hudson Highlands State Park was spared the worst, the area was still severely damaged. All nine stewards went out three days after the flood to assess and remedy the damage to the park. Stewards split into four groups to mark and report downed trees they could not move and to clip back and make passable what they could. Stewards were able to maintain the Fishkill Ridge Trail up to Dozer Junction, the entirety of the Notch, Casino, and Dry Book Trails, Breakneck Ridge from the Casino Trail to the Fire Tower, and the Wilkinson Memorial Trail from the Notch Trail south to the first scenic viewpoint. Each showed signs of water damage and erosion from the rain, but nothing too extreme or urgent. Park staff removed two trees reported by stewards to be too large for removal by handsaw.



Trail Improvement Projects



Stewards also performed trail maintenance on days while they were stewarding at Hudson Highlands State Park. While traversing the trails, stewards often brought garbage bags to collect litter. A significant amount of broken glass was collected in the area surrounding the flagpole on Breakneck Ridge and along the scenic viewpoint near the steward station and Breakneck Trailhead. Stewards would dismantle illegal fire rings and renaturalize the area whenever they found them - including a particularly egregious one discovered by Stewards Ryan McClean and Declan Urffer just below the flagpole. Stewards also often hiked with loppers, removing overhanging branches as they patrolled the trails, and would report any issues too large for removal with the hand tools they carried.

The stewards also focused on invasive species outreach, education, and management whenever possible. On one of the tables at the stewarding station, there is an informational poster on invasive species. The stewards also kept a boot brush next to the table for hikers to use as they started their hike. These visual cues and questions about the Trail Conference's top priorities were conversation starters on invasive species awareness, identification, and management. Stewards educated hikers on the basics of invasive species. This often included distinguishing between non-native, invasive, widespread, and emerging species. Some visitors with more knowledge of the subject asked specific questions about the plants, insects, and regions the Trail Conference targeted. Because invasive species are so prevalent in the Hudson Highlands, stewards often pointed out plants like invasive barberry and tree-of-heaven as examples of invasive species that could be found along the trails surrounding Breakneck Ridge. Arguably, the most memorable conversation on invasive species came in October when Steward Ryan McClean spoke to a girl who was around nine years old about some of the invasive species featured on the informational signage. During this conversation, her younger brother, who could not have been more than seven, was silent until he interjected, saying, "This tree is a bit of a misnomer then; it should be the opposite of heaven."





Before and after photos of a downed tree removed from the Fishkill Ridge Trail



Stewards Sarah, Sydney, and Christina taking a break from trail maintenance at the Beacon Fire Tower



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.