



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

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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.