



# 2023 Trail Steward Report

## CROTON GORGE UNIQUE AREA MAY - OCTOBER 2023

A PROGRAM OF THE  
New York-New Jersey  
Trail Conference



Friends of the  
Old Croton Aqueduct

# Croton Gorge Unique Area and Old Croton Aqueduct Trail 2023 Trail Steward Report

Prepared by

Myra Romano  
Ryan McClean

Trail Steward Program Coordinator  
Trail Steward Crew Leader



The above map represents the location covered by the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference Conservation Corps Croton Gorge Unique Area Trail Stewards. This program is a partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.





# Introduction

The Trail Conference is leading the coordination of stewardship efforts to keep up with growing challenges to natural spaces and outdoor recreation areas. To educate visitors and help mitigate the impacts of increased or inappropriate use, the Trail Conference has partnered with land managers to begin a multi-phased approach at the Croton Gorge Unique Area. We believe the most effective way to advance change is through user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions. When enjoyed responsibly, trails protect the people who use them and the surrounding environment. But without education, these 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

Over several weeks in May and June, the stewards received onsite training at Croton Gorge Unique Area and the Old Croton Aqueduct from Trail Steward Program Coordinator Myra Romano, Trail Steward Leader Ryan McClean, and DEC Volunteer Steward Diane Alden. Tom Tarnowsky, Sara Kelsey, and Daria Gregg provided additional training and guidance.

## 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.



# Croton Gorge Unique Area

## and the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail



### STATISTICS

TOTAL VISITORS ON THE OCA

**2,146**

VISITORS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

**453**

BUSIEST DAY ON THE OCA

**July 30: 179 visitors**

TOTAL BIKERS ON THE OCA

**638**

ENGAGEMENTS WITH VISITORS  
REGARDING UNIQUE AREA CLOSURE,  
RULES, AND/OR REGULATIONS

**123**

VISITORS SUCCESSFULLY  
DIVERTED FROM GOING TO  
THE RIVERSIDE

**93**

VISITORS WHO WERE NOT  
DIVERTED FROM VISITING  
THE RIVERSIDE

**18**

LOST VISITORS HELPED

**8**

INJURED VISITORS HELPED

**0**

AVG HIGH

**81°**

AVG LOW

**61°**

The steward program at Croton Gorge Unique Area was launched in 2020 and operates on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays from Memorial Day Weekend through mid-October. Since the trail to access the riverside remained closed in 2023, the steward station was located near the old entrance to the Croton Gorge Unique Area in order to dissuade people from trespassing through private property to access the riverside. The stewards expanded their role to include working as Aqueduct Trail Ambassadors and also focused on trail maintenance and ecological management along the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail. When the weather began getting cooler in late August, the stewards shifted their focus to key weekday coverage instead.

In the four years of the steward program at Croton Gorge Unique Area, many factors have complicated the general public's ability to access the area. In 2020, the Unique Area was closed due to COVID-19 and the need for habitat restoration. In 2021, the Unique Area was reopened to the public, and the stewards' focus was on encouraging visitors to engage with the site safely, responsibly, and sustainably. This meant a significant focus on Leave No Trace principles. In 2022, the Unique Area was unfortunately closed again, this time because the significantly eroded trail previously used to access the riverside was not only found to be unsafe but discovered to have cut across private property. All other ways of traversing down were also deemed unsafe.

Therefore, since the trail to access the riverside at the Unique Area continued to be closed in 2023, the stewards informed people arriving at the entrance of the Unique Area of this unfortunate development and empathized with the disappointment visitors expressed at not being permitted to access the riverside. Stewards provided information about alternative places, thus providing options for visitors who arrived at the site looking to swim, picnic, or experience the solitude and beauty that the Unique Area traditionally offered. A bi-lingual sign with a link to information posted on the Trail Conference's website provided detailed information about amenities to be found at other parks.



# Croton Gorge Unique Area and the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail



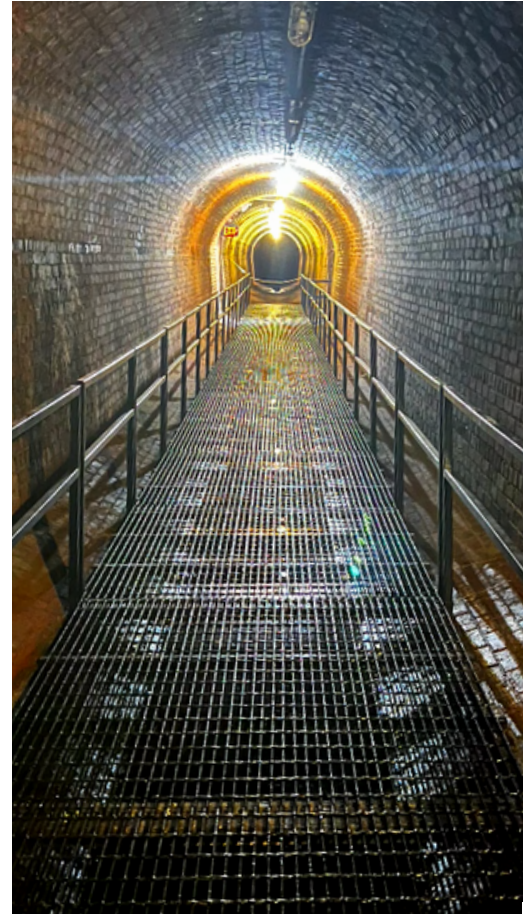
Since the steward station was situated alongside the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail, the stewards had the opportunity to function as Aqueduct Trail Ambassadors, providing visitors with directions and describing what sights they may discover along the trail. With this in mind, local historians and Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct members generously offered training to the stewards so they would be well-versed and ready to share information and facts on the local history. These training sessions covered the Croton Dam, the Old Croton Aqueduct, the Ossining Weir, The Keeper's House Visitor and Education Center, and the various industries that formerly operated at the riverside to take advantage of the available water power.

## Habitat Restoration

Since 2020, the stewards have worked collaboratively to assist in tending the northernmost section of the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail and, when possible, in the Croton Gorge Unique Area. Each year, stewards have removed trash, reported trail obstacles, and spent significant time and energy removing invasive species. Thanks to the cooperative efforts of the trail stewards, volunteers, and leadership from Diane Alden (local resident and Board Member of the Friends of the Old Croton Aqueduct), many native species now flourish along the trail, where invasive species had previously grown in high concentrations.

The primary goal of invasive species projects along the Old Croton Aqueduct trail is to remove widespread invasives that had crowded out native plants, allowing native plants that had existed in the area in smaller numbers to flourish. In many sections of the trail, this has allowed less common native plants to thrive.

This section of trail is an excellent long-term management site as it abuts several engaged volunteers' properties, and thus, the projects can continue sustainably into the future. The pool of potentially engaged, capable, and knowledgeable volunteers to draw from is significant.





# Croton Gorge Unique Area and the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail



Another reason for this being an excellent management site is that the trail is linear, flat, and runs through densely populated areas. As a result, it gets considerable use from people often traveling great distances on foot or bikes. The trail is a highway for plants, and we can help tip the scales back towards native species by limiting the presence of invasives.

From the first management project on May 6 to the last one on October 18, over 5,000 invasive plants were removed by the stewards alone, with additional plants being removed by volunteers. The main targets were Japanese Barberry, Japanese Stilt grass<sup>[1]</sup>, Wineberry, Winged Euonymus, Tree of Heaven, and Japanese Honeysuckle.

This season, stewards took their support of native plants to the next level. They partnered with the Wild Woods Restoration Project to plant 658 native plants along the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail in three target areas. The Wild Woods Restoration Project gathers seeds of local native plants, grows them in safe conditions, and then plants them back in the same or neighboring parks they initially collected from. This allows for an increase in native plant populations as well as a preservation of the regional genetic diversity of these plants. All the plants that were planted that day were collected from the Old Croton Aqueduct trail's seedbank.



<sup>[1]</sup> Japanese Stilt grass is not counted towards the total number of plants pulled. As it is quite small and grows in dense patches, counting it alongside larger and more difficult-to-remove invasives would create an inaccurate picture of the work done.



# Croton Gorge Unique Area and the Old Croton Aqueduct Trail



One native planting site was located at an aster patch that stewards have been doing remediation work on for the last two years. In early 2022, Diane Alden discovered a few purple asters growing in an often-mowed section of the trail that was primarily covered in the invasive Japanese Stilt Grass. She partnered with the Parks Department to obtain approval to have logs brought in to protect the patch from mowing, and then the stewards began removing the invasive plants while carefully avoiding the asters. The project proved to be a significant success, as many asters spread to take over the space that had been primarily stilt grass. Stewards continued their efforts on invasive plant removal in that area this year, but the task was a much smaller one than it had been last year. At the height of the aster's bloom, the area was filled with important native pollinators. This year, we introduced golden rod and other native plants to the aster patch to avoid the area remaining a monoculture and to enhance pollination.



Stewards at work in the aster patch in 2022. This image features Ryan McClean and Declan Urffer, both of whom returned to the program in 2023.



Stewards Ben Straebler and Ryan McClean at work in the aster patch in 2023, along with many volunteers. Pictured on the far left is Linda Rohleder, founder of the Wild Woods Restoration Project.

## Looking to the Future

The stewards ended their weekend stewardship program at Croton at the end of August when the weather began getting cooler, shifting their focus to key weekday coverage instead. Though the Unique Area is not an expansive state park or preserve, the visitors' enthusiasm for the area illustrates the benefit of providing public access to natural lands. We hope that progress will be made in the near future that allows the public to access this beautiful place once again with the support and education provided by the stewards.





Steward Kathrine working on the OCA



Steward Ben working on the OCA



Stewards pulling Japanese Stiltgrass on the OCA, alongside Diane Alden and volunteers





# 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](mailto:mromano@nynjtc.org)), Trail Steward Program Coordinator, with any questions or comments on how we can continue to improve the program.