



Conservation Corps

# TRAIL STEWARD REPORT

*Catskill Forest Preserve, May - October 2021*



A PROGRAM OF THE  
*New York-New Jersey Trail Conference*

REPORT PREPARED BY CREW LEADER  
*Myra Romano*

# 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 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.



photo by Myra Romano

# CATSKILL FOREST PRESERVE

## STATISTICS

### STEWADING LOCATIONS:

4

### TOTAL STEWADING DAYS (ACROSS ALL 4 LOCATIONS):

173

### TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED:

14,968

### HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED:

8,742

### BACKPACKERS COUNTED:

1,143

### HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER PARK LOCATIONS:

1,844

### HIKERS DIRECTED TO LOCAL TOWNS:

1,200

### ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED:

25

### ILLEGAL CAMPERS CONFRONTED:

19

### ILLEGAL FIRE RINGS AND CAMPSITES REMOVED:

62

### LOST HIKERS HELPED:

315

### INJURED HIKERS HELPED:

13

### AVG HIGH:

71 F

### AVG LOW:

59 F

The Catskill Forest Preserve possesses a vast beauty with an abundance of trails - a natural attraction for people wishing to experience the outdoors. But some visitors are arriving at trailheads and summits in the Catskills, uninformed about trail ruggedness, park regulations, and hiking preparedness.

The Catskill Trail Steward program, launched in 2015, is an invaluable resource for these visitors. Partnering with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), and partially funded by the Environmental Protection Fund, the goal of a Trail Steward is to interact with every hiker to ensure that they are safely, responsibly, and appropriately prepared for the hiking or backpacking trip they intend to take. Our efforts focus on communicating DEC regulations on camping and campfires, general Leave No Trace principles and wilderness ethics, and protecting the fragile summit ecosystems above 3,500 feet. Stewards attempt to eliminate unofficial social paths, clear illegal fire rings and campsites, and assist DEC with any emergencies that may arise.

In addition to communicating these essential regulations, Catskill Trail Stewards provide a wealth of information to visitors about current trail conditions, alternate route suggestions based on fitness level and time constraints, local weather forecasts, historical facts, flora/fauna identification, and recommended hikes and attractions to visit in the region. At the beginning of the season, Stewards received training in Wilderness First Aid (WFA) and a Red Cross CPR/AED certification from Mid-Atlantic Outdoor Recreation Education. This training enabled us to assist injured hikers or provide preliminary care for more severe injuries that might require EMS and other first responders.

In 2021, five Catskill Trail Stewards received onsite training from Trail Steward Crew Leader Myra Romano, as well as insights from Trail Conference staff on how to provide education and support to front and backcountry visitors to the Catskill Park. This team of six Catskill Stewards was stationed at the summits of Slide, Cornell and Wittenberg; Giant Ledge and Panther; North Point; and the Blackhead Range on weekends and holidays, Memorial Day Weekend through October 17th, for a total of 45 days. Over these 45 days, we collected various data points to determine how hikers and backpackers utilize these wilderness areas.



*Trail Steward Andrew Fenwick at Giant Ledge, photo by Steve Aaron*

# BURROUGHS RANGE

*Slide, Cornell, and Wittenberg*

## STATISTICS

**TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS:**

44

**TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED:**

4,180

**HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED:**

2,376

**BUSIEST DAY:**

October 17<sup>th</sup> - 213 hikers

**BACKPACKERS COUNTED:**

582

**HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER  
PARK LOCATIONS:**

505

**HIKERS DIRECTED TO LOCAL TOWNS:**

336

**ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED:**

12

**ILLEGAL CAMPERS CONFRONTED:**

9

**ILLEGAL FIRE RINGS AND  
CAMPSITES REMOVED:**

18

**LOST HIKERS HELPED:**

109

**INJURED HIKERS HELPED:**

5

**AVG HIGH:           AVG LOW:**

68 F

56 F

**DAYS WITH RAIN:**

16

Named after John Burroughs, an American naturalist and nature essayist who grew up in the Catskills, the Burroughs Range is one of the most popular hiking destinations in the Catskill Forest Preserve. Located within the Slide Mountain Wilderness, this range contains three Catskill high peaks over 3,500 feet - Slide, Cornell, and Wittenberg. Slide Mountain is the highest in the Catskills, standing at 4,180 feet. The achievement of climbing these mountains, awe-inspiring views, first-growth and subalpine forests, abundant biodiversity, varied hiking or backpacking opportunities, and stunning primitive campsites attract a wide range of outdoor enthusiasts who come out to explore this vast wilderness. For some, it is their first introduction to the Catskills and its rugged rocky terrain, while others are seasoned adventurers who have summited every high peak in the Catskills and Adirondacks.

Over 44 stewarding days in 2021, we counted 4,180 hikers (coincidentally the same height as the summit!) and were able to provide education and assistance to 2,376 of those visitors. Many conversations at this location focused on the topics of local flora and fauna (especially Bicknell's thrush and the first-growth balsam fir forests), the landslide in the early 1800s that gave Slide its name, mileage and difficulty of the surrounding trails, hiker preparedness, weather forecasts, best viewpoints, location and availability of primitive campsites and water sources, and the importance of responsible and sustainable hiking and camping practices.

Visitors were also encouraged to visit notable points of interest: the Burroughs Plaque on the summit rock of Slide, the Cornell Crack (a steep and challenging rock scramble on the east side of Cornell), and the Curtis-Ormsbee Monument at the junction of the Curtis-Ormsbee and Phoenicia East Branch trails.

We provided an additional Trail Steward at the summit of Wittenberg for 17 of the 44 days (on holidays and busy weekends), increasing our coverage in the range and establishing a sense of safety and security for hikers and backpackers who were doing a longer day-hike or backpacking trip. Because of the diversity of trails and hikes available in this wilderness, we carefully gauged each person's experience and preparedness before giving them our recommendations. These conversations were typically just as insightful for us as they were for the hikers we engaged with.



Stewarding at Slide Mountain with DEC Forest Ranger Mark Brand, photo by Myra Romano



Before and after of brushing over a social trail on Wittenberg Mountain, photos by Dani White

# GIANT LEDGE & PANTHER MOUNTAIN

## STATISTICS

**TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS:**

45

**TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED:**

5,885

**HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED:**

3,488

**BUSIEST DAY:**

October 9<sup>th</sup> - 449 hikers

**BACKPACKERS COUNTED:**

346

**HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER  
PARK LOCATIONS:**

694

**HIKERS DIRECTED TO LOCAL TOWNS:**

282

**ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED:**

11

**ILLEGAL CAMPERS CONFRONTED:**

8

**ILLEGAL FIRE RINGS AND  
CAMPSITES REMOVED:**

19

**LOST HIKERS HELPED:**

63

**INJURED HIKERS HELPED:**

6

**AVG HIGH:           AVG LOW:**

72 F

61 F

**DAYS WITH RAIN:**

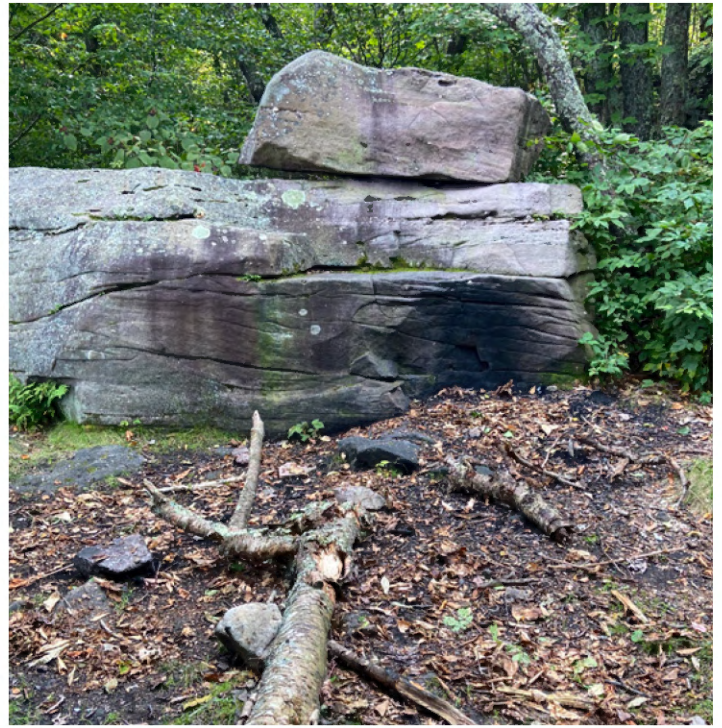
12

Another popular hike within the Slide Mountain Wilderness is Giant Ledge and Panther Mountain. Giant Ledge draws massive crowds on weekends due to its multiple expansive panoramic viewpoints that require a minimum amount of effort (for the Catskills). The hike up is short, only 1.6 miles one way, making it a 3.2-mile roundtrip journey. A few steep rock scramble sections can be treacherous in wet conditions, but they make up a minor fraction of the hike. Those only interested in the views usually turn back after Giant Ledge. But when visitors were interested in summiting another 3,500+ foot peak, adding more mileage to their day, or finding some solace from the crowds, we suggested a trip to Panther Mountain.

While the views from Giant Ledge are breathtaking, some of the scenery we encountered along the trail was less than desirable. The Catskill Stewards have been working for several years to help one specific area recover from excessive use. Just behind one of the ledges, this area has seen repeated tramping of vegetation, chopping down of trees, illegal camping, and campfires outside of a designated fire ring. Because the plateau of Giant Ledge stands at 3,214 feet (just under the 3,500-foot restriction for camping and fires), camping is allowed, and there are three designated campsites up there that we encouraged visitors to use. Whether it's due to campsite overflow during busy weekends, or visitors wanting to camp out on the ledges, we constantly battled the misuse and overuse of this area. Social trails appeared just as quickly as we brushed over them. Multiple fire rings were removed in one day, seemingly emerging in the exact locations a few weekends later.

Leave No Trace education was crucial at this location because of the number of first-time hikers and campers we engaged with. The Trail Stewards constantly practiced how to deliver those messages effectively with each conversation they had. It is without a doubt the location that benefits most from the Authority of the Resource technique. While some visitors were stubborn and seemed initially aloof, we witnessed attitudes shifting after a few moments of friendly dialogue about what effects their actions might have on the natural surroundings they came out to enjoy.

While 2021 was generally slower than 2020, numbers rose and the parking lot overflowed once peak leaf season arrived. October alone saw 2,030 visitors, accounting for 35% of the total season count.



*Before and after re-naturalizing a popular spot for illegal fires at Giant Ledge, photos by Rachael Freundlich*



*Standing on top of Panther Mountain, photo by Iona Hennessy*

# NORTH POINT

## STATISTICS

TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS:

45

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED:

3,295

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED:

2,047

BUSIEST DAY:

July 24<sup>th</sup> - 197 hikers

BACKPACKERS COUNTED:

103

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER  
PARK LOCATIONS:

294

HIKERS DIRECTED TO LOCAL TOWNS:

247

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED:

2

ILLEGAL CAMPERS CONFRONTED:

2

ILLEGAL FIRE RINGS AND  
CAMPSITES REMOVED:

8

LOST HIKERS HELPED:

86

INJURED HIKERS HELPED:

1

AVG HIGH:      AVG LOW:

73 F

61 F

DAYS WITH RAIN:

12

One of our returning stewarding locations for 2021, North Point, proved to be a delightful addition. It begins with a moderate 2.1-mile walk over narrow boardwalks and rolling terrain, through a forest studded with moss-covered rocks, past a peaceful and secluded waterfall. The last 0.25-miles is a more challenging climb, delivering visitors to one of the most iconic Catskill Mountain views. From this large and flat exposed bedrock ledge in the Windham-Blackhead Range Wilderness, one can gaze out over North-South Lake and the escarpment, with the Hudson River valley in the background.

Because this is a relatively simple hike with such a rewarding payoff at the end, we met many first-time hikers and visitors to the Catskills. Some of them were staying at the nearby North-South Lake Campground, the biggest and most popular state campground in the Catskill Forest Preserve. Others took a detour up here after discovering Kaaterskill Falls was too busy. Seeing their joy and awe upon reaching this viewpoint was inspiring and certainly one of the moments we enjoyed observing from the outside as Trail Stewards.

Various topics came up when hikers found themselves face-to-face with a Trail Steward at this location. Since North Point is along the 24-mile Escarpment Trail, there are many other points of interest in the area. Badman Cave, Newmans Ledge, Lookout Rock, Sunset Rock, Artists Rock, and the former site of the Catskill Mountain House are all easily accessed from this trail. Ashley Falls is a smaller and less-visited waterfall than Kaaterskill Falls. If hikers wanted to extend their trip, we recommended heading out to Stoppel Point on the Escarpment Trail, about 2.0-miles one way from North Point. Here they could witness the remains of a plane crash that occurred in 1983 and is in excellent condition, especially considering how long it's been there.

The nearby trails follow the boundary line between North-South Lake Campground and the Wilderness area, and the Escarpment Trail is a popular backpacking route. Therefore, we needed to know the exact rules and regulations about where camping is allowed. Camping near North Point is a popular option since camping is permitted, as long as you are 150+ feet from the trail. We occasionally found fire rings too close to the trail, which we removed, and then re-naturalized the area, so future visitors weren't under the impression they could camp there.



Stewarding at North Point, photo by Rachael Freundlich



Before and after brushing a social trail at North Point, photos by Dani White

# BLACKHEAD RANGE

*Blackhead, Black Dome, and Thomas Cole*

## STATISTICS

TOTAL STEWARDING DAYS:

39

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED:

1,608

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED:

831

BUSIEST DAY:

June 26<sup>th</sup> - 144 hikers\*

BACKPACKERS COUNTED:

112

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER  
PARK LOCATIONS:

351

HIKERS DIRECTED TO LOCAL TOWNS:

335

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED:

0

ILLEGAL CAMPERS CONFRONTED:

0

ILLEGAL FIRE RINGS AND  
CAMPSITES REMOVED:

17

LOST HIKERS HELPED:

57

INJURED HIKERS HELPED:

1

AVG HIGH:      AVG LOW:

70 F

59 F

DAYS WITH RAIN:

12

In the North-East corner of the Catskills, the Blackhead Range was another stewarding location for us in 2021. Part of the Windham-Blackhead Range Wilderness, these mountains are the third, fourth, and fifth-highest peaks in the Catskills: Black Dome (3,980'), Blackhead (3,940'), and Thomas Cole (3,940'). The range forms a prominent rooster comb feature that can be seen from many viewpoints in the Catskills and as far away as Albany. The most popular way to access these peaks is from a small parking area at the Big Hollow Road Trailhead. Other routes include coming in from the north on the Escarpment Trail or from the west at Elmer Barnum Road Trailhead.

While in the Blackhead Range, we frequently stationed ourselves at the summit of Blackhead, at the junction of the Escarpment and Black Dome Range Trails. This intersection can be confusing for some less-experienced visitors, as the signage and lack of a viewpoint do not indicate that they have reached the summit. We also spent time traversing the trails to Black Dome and Thomas Cole. Lockwood Gap (a feature between Blackhead and Black Dome) was another high visibility area for us because it's a major junction and was an excellent spot to interact with numerous backcountry visitors. Because this is a strenuous and challenging hike, most of the hikers we interacted with came prepared and generally understood Leave No Trace principles.

There are many primitive campsites in this Wilderness area, as well as the Batavia Kill lean-to. We gave special attention to these areas, ensuring that guests were practicing low-impact techniques and abiding by the regulations dictating the placement of and the building of fires. Although we found and removed many fire rings, we never encountered any illegal campers.

While this mountain range was less popular than the other three locations we were stationed at in the Catskills, it offered ample opportunities for us to have deep and extended conversations with hikers that crossed our path.

*\*98 of the people counted this day were trail runners in the Manitou's Revenge race*



*Before and after of an illegal fire ring found 10 feet from the Batavia Kill Trail, photos by Myra Romano*



*Inspection of the Batavia Kill Shelter, photo by Justin McCarthy*

# TRAIL MAINTENANCE

## STATISTICS

**TOTAL MAINTENANCE DAYS:**

*18*

**CREW WORK HOURS:**

*539.5*

**BLOWDOWN REMOVED:**

*57*

**SOCIAL TRAILS BRUSHED:**

*8*

**TRAILS BLAZED:**

*2.5 miles*

**TRAILS CLEARED:**

*16.8 miles*

**TOTAL DISTANCE COVERED:**

*87.9 miles*

Throughout the 2021 season, the Trail Stewards participated in various trail maintenance projects across the Catskill Forest Preserve. Most of these projects took place on sections of the Long Path, led by Andy Garrison.

In June, we cleared a section of trail past the Tremper Mountain fire tower, cleared areas of the Willow and Warner Creek trails, hauled water up to the Mink Hollow aid station for the Manitou's Revenge race, and carried tools in to a worksite at Slide Mountain.

In July, we scouted for GPS coordinates and took photos of blowdown on the Phoenicia - East Branch trail on Romer Mountain, cleared a large section of nettles from the Giant Ledge - Panther - Fox Hollow trail, and hauled tools in to a worksite in Warner Creek.

In August, Trail Stewards Justin McCarthy and Andrew Fenwick cleared a trail to a new campsite on the Slide - Cornell - Wittenberg trail. This project required removing trees and outlining the path with rocks and logs. The entire crew also spent multiple days crushing rock, moving dirt, and completing trail improvements on a section of the Warner Creek trail.

In September, after Tropical Storm Ida, the entire Trail Steward crew went on a scouting mission to take photos and record GPS coordinates of all the flooded areas on the Long Path between the Platte Cove / Huckleberry Point trail junction and the snowmobile trail turnoff. We spent two days with Matt Smith, clearing and uncovering 100 stone steps on the Devil's Path heading up to Plateau Mountain. We also cleared and repaired 7 water management sites (water bars, diversion trenches, etc), and made a larger, new diversion trench on a section of the trail that was under water, effectively diverting almost all the running water off the trail.

In October, we blazed and cleared several sections of reroutes of the Long Path.

Our trail maintenance days were unique because they provided a chance for the entire Catskill Trail Steward crew to work in person together. These projects strengthened the team's camaraderie and encouraged us to learn not just from the Trail Conference volunteers but also from each other.





Trail improvements on the Warner Creek Trail, photo by Myra Romano



Before and after uncovering the stone steps on the Devil's Path, photos by Myra Romano



Removing blowdown from a trail, photo by Iona Hennessy



Clearing a trail to a new campsite, photo by Justin McCarthy



Resting after carrying water to an aid station for Manitou's Revenge race, photo by Iona Hennessy