



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

STUDENT CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

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2023 Natural Resource Steward Program Report

PROGRAM DATES: MAY THROUGH OCTOBER



Photo credit: Micheal Heart – Moose River Plains 2023

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About the Natural Resource Steward Program

The Natural Resource Steward Program is a collaboration between the Student Conservation Association and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, which placed a cohort of stewards across many of the most scenic lands in the state. The program is funded by the Environmental Protection Fund, through a contract administered by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. This year the volunteers performed a wide range of stewardship duties and worked in environments ranging from high-visitation trailheads to remote backcountry wilderness.

Stewards enrolled in the program complete a field season of either 16 or 24 weeks. The season begins in late May during an orientation where they come together to network and train in preparation for the season ahead. Training this year was held at Pack Forest, in the Adirondacks. There, they learned about Leave No Trace™, First Aid, DEC Rules and Regulations, and radio/communications etiquette.

Throughout the season the members of this program interact with the rest of the conservation ecosystem in New York, as well as the public. The Stewards work alongside DEC program partners and staff, Forest Rangers, Assistant Forest Rangers, and other volunteers. The networks they build while in the field offer valuable takeaways such as friendship and career building.

The Natural Resource Steward Program is built on over a decade of success of the Backcountry Steward Program. All the members of the 2023 cohort are also NY AmeriCorps members and are part of a larger network of volunteers across our country that invest time and energy into our most precious natural resources. They perform integral tasks and gain invaluable real-world experience along the way.

About the SCA

The mission of SCA is to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of our environment and communities by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land.

SCA was founded in 1957 by Elizabeth Putnam. While at Vassar College, she developed her senior thesis around the concept that a commonsense solution to the abuse and under-maintenance of America's treasured public lands would be putting to good use the energy, talent, and hard work of a force of youthful volunteers.

Since 1957, the SCA has provided more than 100,000 young people with opportunities to protect the planet through service projects at national parks, state forests and community green spaces.



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By the Numbers

Service Work Outputs

Description of Work	Totals
Lands being stewarded	955,993-acres
Campsites monitored and maintained	308
Privies relocated	22
Picnic tables made	23
Bridges built/updated	5
Hours of tabling / outreach	1638 hours

Steward Information

Number of Stewards at the beginning of season	Sites	Members serving 16 weeks	Members serving 24 weeks
14	10	11	2

The 2023 Natural Resource Stewards



Description of Work

Each site offers different experiences to the stewards, though some tasks are ubiquitous. Often, visitor use dictates the stewards' tasks and schedules. Weekends and holidays are spent engaging with the public, while quiet weekdays are spent performing trail work or campsite maintenance.

Trail Maintenance

The DEC is responsible for over 4.5 million acres of public land¹. The Natural Resource Steward Program partners with Foresters who manage about 966,000 acres which is about a 5th of the acres managed by the DEC.

All the stewards performed trail maintenance. Some patrol a set area or set of trails frequently. They also break up their schedule by making trips to other trails throughout their region. Some trail maintenance projects including erosion control, hanging trail markers, raking trail tread, and trimming back vegetation to maintain trail corridors and parking areas. Because of the extensive number of trails in New York, DEC staff cannot go see all the trails every year. Monitoring or surveying is a critical function the stewards perform in all the regions.



To the upper right, you can see the Catskill Mountain Park Regions 3 and 4 stewards on trail with a trail marker behind them. Keeping the trails marked and clear is a critical function of all the stewards. The Region 4 steward, on the left, saw the most variety of trails. She logged over 188 miles of surveying and maintenance.

Campsite Maintenance and Monitoring

The DEC provides rustic campsites across New York to the people of this state. The stewards at most of the sites had at least some involvement with campsite monitoring, maintenance, or restoration. Many of them spent hours removing ash and trash from designated fire rings, dismantling illegal fire rings, and rehabilitating campsites that have been over loved.

Like his peers, the Steward in the St. Regis Canoe Area patrolled his assigned units, surveying and restoring campsites, installing privies, and brushing trails and parking areas. Pictured to the right is a vista overlooking a fire ring and campsite in the St. Regis Canoe Area.



Nearly every member of the program spent time hiking, canoeing, or driving to various campsites to clear them of debris, survey them, and improve it in some way. Frequently improvements included cleaning trash from the surrounding area, removing trash from fire rings, moving privies or picnic tables, and reporting any serious issues to their supervising Forester.

¹

<https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/7811.html#:~:text=DEC%20is%20responsible%20for%20over,land%20in%20New%20York%20State.>

Catskill Mountain Park R3	Sundown Wild Forest	12
St Regis Canoe Area	Throughout the Area	36
Salmon River	Throughout the Area	24
Independence River Wild Forest	The Assembly Area at Otter Creek Throughout the Forest Preserve	24 45

Structures Built or Maintained

Throughout the season the stewards were able to participate in a few special projects that involved building or maintaining structures for the DEC.

Specifically, the steward at Moose River Plains had the opportunity to do trail work with a trail crew and build an anti-beaver device at a culvert that is routinely clogged by beavers. The steward and his site partner are pictured to the right. The Moose River Plains steward teamed up with the stewards in Lake George to construct new picnic tables for the Cedar River Campground in the Moose River Plains.



Privies

Privies are an integral part of how the DEC and the NRS program keep our precious resources, and the folks who enjoy them, safe. Many of the stewards monitor and maintain existing privies, but others have had the honor of building and relocating numerous privies.

Some privies are enclosed, like the one pictured to the left. The Lake George stewards were taught by the Warrensburg Office carpentry staff how to put a privy together from the pre-constructed components. Not all privies are so luxurious. This region sees high visitor use, so privacy is a priority.

Position Location	Number of Privies Relocated
Central Adirondack Forest Preserve	12
St Regis Canoe Area	5
Lake George Wild Forest	4
Salmon River	1

Picnic Tables

Picnic tables represent a key piece of camping infrastructure. Though not as expansive as trails, picnic tables are where people gather to enjoy a meal in the outdoors. These structures require the stewards learn how to use hand tools and planning. The DEC Staff cuts the lumber and then the stewards paint the tables. They then carry it out to the sites that need them. Once there, the stewards construct the tables.

The Lake George stewards spent much of their last month in the field building and installing picnic tables at some of the highest use sites in the Lake George area.



Picnic tables were also constructed for the Moose River Plains camping area. The steward at this location built some on his own, but also coordinated a cooperative project with the Lake George stewards. Together, they built a total of 10 picnic tables.

Bridges

Over the course of the 2023 season various bridges were either built new or upgraded. The DEC maintains a wide variety of bridges in New York's public lands. These bridges connect all kinds of users whether they be on foot or on snow mobiles.

The Moose River Plains steward spent many days of his summer building bridges with a hired trail crew. To the right are pictures of one bridge under construction. Snowmobile bridges require a great deal of care when they're being built because they bear such a heavy load.

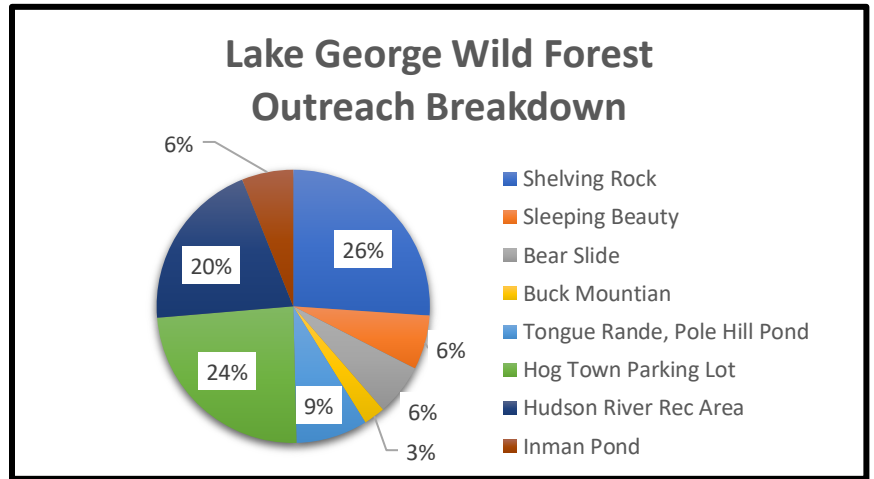


The stewards came together to perform a bridge build, hosted by the Salmon River site partner. Together the team was able to re-deck one bridge and build two new bridges in just two and a half days in the Chateaugay State Forest. Most of the program's members are seen to the left, sitting on the bridge they built with the help of other interns in the area and DEC Operations staff from the region.

Education and Outreach

All of this program’s sites have a predominant component of education and outreach to the public. The stewards work in a variety of environments, ranging from high use, recreation areas to remote wild forest. All of the stewards, regardless of where they are, are given awareness level education on Leave No Trace™ principles. They all use this skill set to engage with the public at camp sites, day use areas, along the trail, at boat launches, and horse stables.

The stewards serving in Lake George spent much of their time performing education and outreach in one of New Yorks most popular Wild Forests. The stewards split their time between the locations listed to the right. While at these various locations the stewards predominantly helped people with directions, educated them about the area, the principles of Leave No Trace™, and monitored for disturbances. At these locations they also provided critical maintenance support by cleaning up trash and monitoring for unauthorized activities.



The stewards serving in the Salmon River Area also spent much of their season engaging with visitors over the summer. As the seasons changed, so did their focus. During the fall, the two Stewards in this region helped with education and outreach at the Salmon River Fish Hatchery and along the popular fishing spots in the region. These two stewards also attended the New York State Fair and talked with thousands of visitors about the importance of the DEC’s work and the types of animals that call New York home.

The steward at the Lake Ontario Dunes site, on the Eastern most coast of Lake Ontario spent much of her time monitoring the delicate ecosystem of the Piping Plover. The Plovers chosen nesting ground is in a popular area for recreation. This steward spent much of her time monitoring the birds and educating visitors about how to keep them safe for dogs, children, or unaware adults looking to enjoy the sun and surf at the Lake View Wildlife Management Area. To the right you can see a nesting plover and two of its chicks behind a protective fencing.





The steward at Zoar Valley is pictured to the left, along a scenic path along the Valentine Flats trail down to a popular swimming area. She keeps visitors safe and informed about the best ways to get down to the area. She also talks with visitors about Leave No Trace™ principles and how to recreate safely. She serves alongside Assistant Forest Rangers. Zoar Valley is a Unique Area and although it has a smaller overall acreage, it sees high visitor use during peak season.

Site Locations

The Natural Resource Steward Program has sites throughout the state of New York (see map on next page). Below are the sites that were populated with members this year. Of our 24 positions half were filled, which is double the previous season. Despite being twice as many enrollments as 2022, these low recruiting numbers still posed stress on all systems involved. Improvements to housing accommodations, recruitment, and non-monetary compensation help the program to grow over the past year. With every season, improvements are made, and recruitment will hopefully continue to increase.

Even though many sites had to make do without stewardship this year, much good work happened at the sites that did have stewardship, which are listed below.

Title of Position	
Catskill Mountain Park R4	
This site had one steward who spent much of her time hiking through the region, monitoring and maintaining trails. The lands that comprise the Catskill Park in Region 4 have over 300 miles of foot trails, snowmobile trails and unpaved roads. This Steward has spent her summer hiking through the vast area to support the region by trimming trail corridors and removing obstacles. She also performed outreach to hikers, campers, and recreationalists.	
Catskill Mountain Park R3	
This site’s Steward predominantly monitored The Catskill Mountain Park, 700,000-acre forest preserve that serves many purposes. Not only does the region provide most of the drinking water for Down-State New York, it is also the closest source of rugged recreation available to most of the residents of New York City. The duties of this Steward include trail work, education, and outreach on Leave no Trace™ principles for campers. This steward provides a friendly presence at various camping and day-use sites. He also partnered with the R3 steward.	

Moose River Plains in the Central Adirondack Forest Preserve

Within nearly 80,000-acre region, an individual Steward patrolled the numerous campsites and backcountry roads, by car, to maintain and monitor the primitive campsites throughout the area. The Steward also worked with local DEC employees on numerous trail and facility projects.

St Regis Canoe Area

This 18,400-acre area is the only designated Canoe Area in New York and is patrolled, by canoe, by one steward this season. The steward patrols the waterways, checks on remote campsites, educates the public on Leave No Trace™, and maintains and monitors campsites.

Lake George Wild Forest

The Stewards of this 72,508-acre Wild Forest primary duties are monitoring, maintenance, and education and outreach at the following parking lots and day use areas: Shelving Rock Road, Hogtown, Dacy Clearing, and the Hudson River Recreational Area. In addition to collecting visitor use data in this very popular region, these stewards also do trail work, operate as summit stewards, and help with trail maintenance projects.

Salmon River

The Salmon River area has many units of land that this seasons two Stewards serve. This includes Wild Forest, Day-use, campsites, and Unique Areas. The area is known for its excellent hiking, fishing, and camping. The stewards patrol the most popular areas and maintain the campsites.

Independence River Wild Forest

This Wild Forest is made up of 78,600-acres. The individual Steward serving at this site spends much of her time patrolling the popular Otter Creek Assembly Area, which hosts multiple camping loops for equestrians. She also monitors and maintains the trails adjacent to the Assembly Area and throughout this beautiful region.

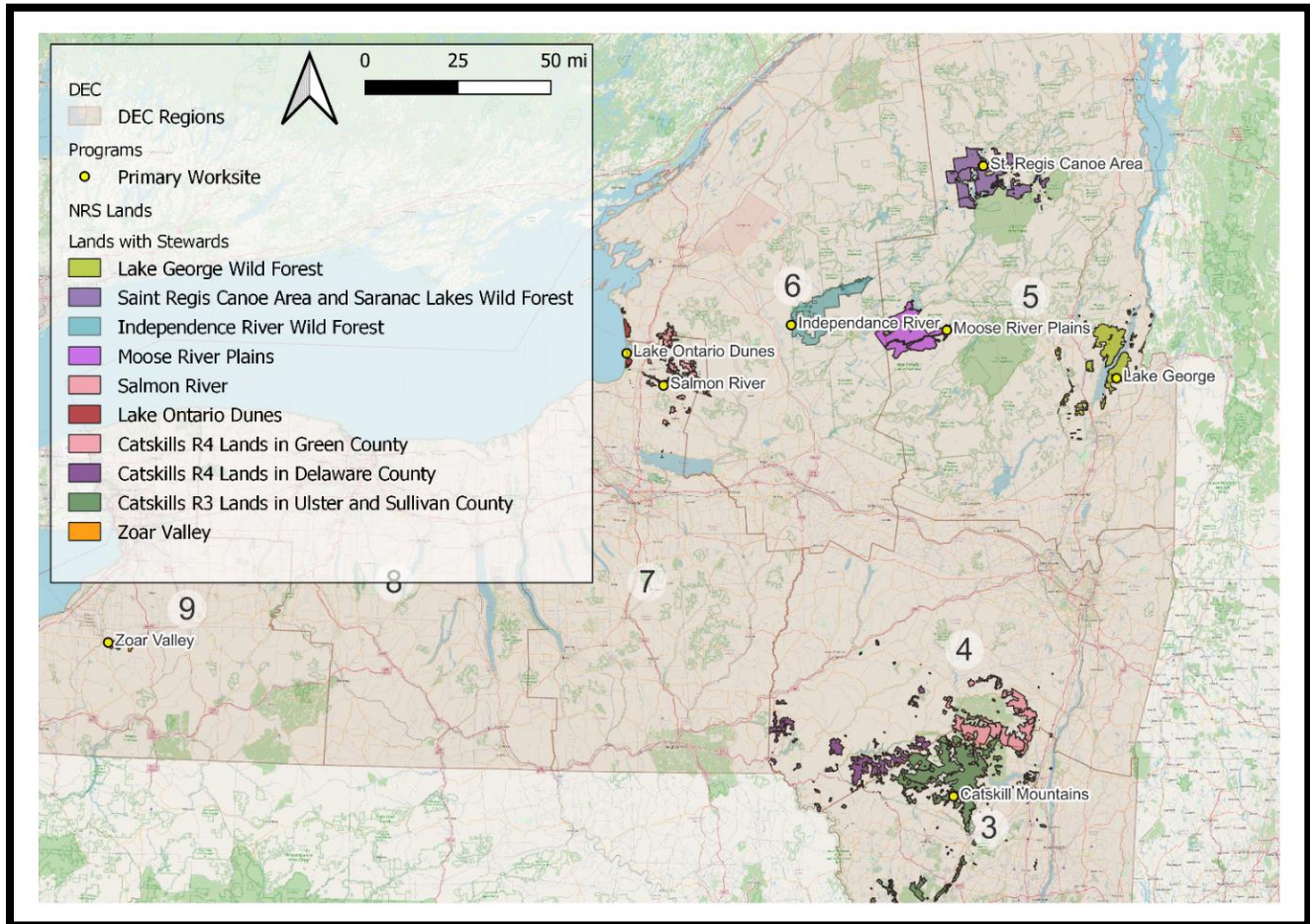
Lake Ontario Dunes

This 5,800-acre area is known for its sandy dunes and delightful, little Piping Plovers. It is a popular beach and recreation area. It is also a Significant Coastal Fish and Wildlife Habitat, as well as an Important Bird Area. As the charismatic Plover faces ongoing hardship, the Stewards at this site help patrol the beach for everything from raucous beach parties, to unleashed dogs to protect the delicate habitat and wildlife. These Stewards perform monitoring, education, and outreach related to the Plovers. They also do trail work to maintain the beaches, trails, and boardwalks in the area.

Zoar Valley Multiple Use Area & Unique Area

This area is one of the smaller sites the NRS program stewards, being only about 3,000-acres. It is none the less a popular and dangerous unit. The character of the land, namely the steep walls of the ravine that surrounds the Cattaraugus Creek, pose a danger to visitors. The main duties of the Steward at this site are to hike the areas trails and perform education and outreach to visitors. This Steward also maintains and monitors various campsites in the East Otto State Forest.

Below is a map of New York, with the 9 DEC regions, and the 9 land units that have volunteers performing stewardship on them. Data for this map was collected from the NYS GIS Clearing house, as well as from Open Street Map.



Special thanks go out to the vendors and partners who made this season possible and successful. Thank you to the Girl Scouts of America for partnering with both the DEC and the SCA to enter into agreements to provide secure housing at multiple sites. Thanks go out to the private homeowner in the Catskills who welcomed our stewards into his lovely property. Additional thanks go out to our first aid vendor, Stonehearth Open Learning Opportunities Inc. (SOLO) for providing a first aid training, as well as the kind folks at Pack Demonstration Forest for allowing us to host our orientation at their facility.

This program is a collaboration between many people in different places and positions. Its successes are in large part to the donation of time and effort put forth by the volunteer members who perform critical stewardship. Their activities provide much needed support to the Foresters of New York who work very hard to keep our most precious resources safe, sustainable, and available for the public to enjoy. This program would not operate without the dedicated management and leadership provided by our site partners. These Foresters and DEC staff work across the state to manage much of what goes into keeping our forests and special places safe and healthy. Thank you!

DEC Links:

Catskills <https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/120094.html>

Catskills Region 3 (Southern / Lower Hudson Valley) <https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7804.html>

Catskills Region 4 (Northern Region) <https://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/7801.html>

East Otto State Forest <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/67743.html>

East Otto State Forest Map https://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/lands_forests_pdf/eastottoweb.pdf

Eastern Lake Ontario (Lake Ontario Dunes) <https://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/38944.html>

Lake George Wild Forest <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/53165.html>

Moose River Plains in the Central Adirondack Forest Preserve <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/53596.html>

Salmon River Falls Unique Area <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/63578.html>

Salmon River State Forest <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/63552.html>

Zoar Valley <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/36931.html>