



Accessible Recreation on New York State Lands

BY LEAH AKINS



The new viewing platform at Carpenter Falls features a clear panel that allows children, wheelchair users, and people of short stature to get a better view of the stunning 90-foot cascade of water.

In spring 2020, I had the first of several “Aha!” moments that continue to inspire my work to create recreation opportunities on New York State lands that are accessible to people of all ages and abilities. At the beginning of 2020, I was hired by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) to be the Statewide ADA Accessibility Coordinator. Then, COVID-19 forced everyone to shelter in place and stay at home.

One bright Saturday morning, when people were just starting to feel comfortable gathering outdoors after the shutdown, I went to Looking Glass Pond in Schoharie County and came across several multi-generational families enjoying the sunshine and fresh air. These families presumably sought out this relatively remote forest retreat because they knew it had a picnic area, trails, and fishing and viewing platforms that every member of their family could enjoy together.

This outing was the first time I was able to get out to see one of the many accessible recreation features DEC built during the past few decades. After several winter months of sheltering in place indoors, studying how to make the outdoors more inclusive, it clicked: creating places where families can recreate together, across all ages and abilities, is good for all of us and the environment.

Looking Glass Pond includes one of the more than 50 trails that DEC built to federal accessibility standards, the design requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Architectural Barriers Act. The ADA Standards of 1991 mandated the basic accessible building elements that we are familiar with today, such as accessible parking spots, wheelchair ramps and lifts, toilet stalls, sinks, and showers. However, the standards for making outdoor developed areas accessible, including trails and camping, picnic, and viewing areas,

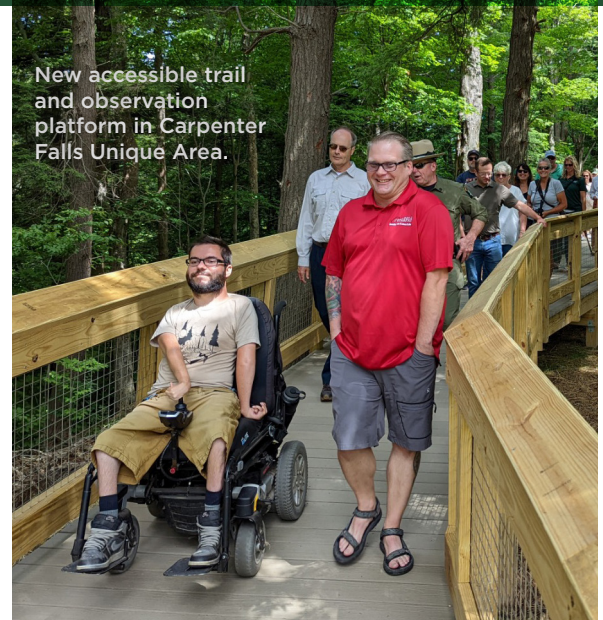
Discounts for New York State Residents with Disabilities

The following passes provide free day-use entrance and camping discounts at most sites managed by DEC and New York State Parks, and are available for people with qualifying disabilities:

- **ACCESS PASS**- people with permanent disabilities, go to: parks.ny.gov/admission/access-pass/
- **LIFETIME LIBERTY PASS**- veterans with disabilities, go to: parks.ny.gov/admission/lifetime-liberty-pass.aspx

Free and discounted fishing and hunting licenses for people with qualifying disabilities are available where New York State sporting licenses are sold, including:

- **Free fishing licenses** for people who are blind; and
- **A \$5 sporting license** for veterans with a qualifying disability



New accessible trail and observation platform in Carpenter Falls Unique Area.

were not finalized until 2013. So, it's not surprising that most Americans are less familiar with what it means for a trail or campsite to be accessible for people with mobility impairments.

If you are among those less familiar with what it means for a trail to be wheelchair accessible, you may at first envision a level, paved path in your local park or along a river walkway that you visited. These developed trails are certainly important for getting us all outside and recreating in our communities, but it's equally important to create trails in more natural areas for people of all ages and abilities to get further afield from pavement and buildings, and provide choices appropriate with their hiking abilities and interests.

Fortunately, the trail accessibility standards provide us with a guide on how to achieve a broad variety of accessible trails, ranging from developed urban parks to forest outings in wilderness areas. Trails designed to be accessible have firm surfaces and gradual slopes interspersed with resting intervals where hikers can catch their breath. Often, these resting spots have a bench or interpretive signage to provide a place where someone can take a break, while others in their family or group hike farther.

Accessible trails allow families to get outdoors together, fostering a strong connection with nature that is important for our health and well-being, as well as inspiring future conservationists.

Public involvement is critical to determining the specific needs for and interests in accessible outdoor recreation across New York's diverse landscapes. To ensure that we are hearing from target user groups, DEC has a public advisory group composed of people with disabilities and community organizations interested in advancing the accessibility of outdoor recreation in New York State. This citizen

The Albany County Nature Bus provides free wheelchair accessible transportation to the DEC Five Rivers Environmental Education Center and other natural areas in the county.



committee is named the Accessibility Advisory Committee (AAC). It is an active and essential part of planning for and creating accessible camping, hiking, fishing, and boating facilities on public lands, and serves as an official advisory body to both DEC and the Adirondack Park Agency.

Envisioning outdoor facilities that are truly accessible to people with differing abilities, including wheelchair users and people with limited vision and/or mobility, can't be done in a meeting room alone. That is why the AAC hits the road several times a year to visit DEC campgrounds, state forests, wildlife management areas, and wilderness areas to identify how the State can provide more equitable access to all New Yorkers.

Spreading the word about new and existing accessible features on DEC lands is an important component of the AAC's role. Last Fall, Kathryn Carroll, AAC Vice-Chair and Disability and Program Director for the Association on Aging in New York, helped lead the opening of the Fisher Trail, a new accessible trail at Five Rivers Environmental Education Center (Five Rivers) in the Capital Region. (For more info, see Briefly in the February/March 2023 issue of the *Conservationist*).

Carroll, who is visually impaired and uses a cane, knows firsthand how important trails like the Fisher Trail are to people with challenges in navigating outdoors. In 2022, DEC also completed an accessible trail to a new viewing platform of Carpenter Falls on the shores of Skaneateles Lake. Peyton Sefick, with the Fitness Inclusion Network, and Jason Page, a professor at SUNY Cortland and Director of their Inclusive Recreation Resource Center, participated in the ribbon-cutting of the Carpenter Falls project and publicized its opening in local media.

In addition to building accessible trails, camping areas, fishing piers, and boat launches, DEC has been adding adaptive equipment to our facilities. This equipment includes power mobility scooters available for public use at three of DEC's Environmental Education Centers- Five Rivers (Albany County), Reinstein

AAC Member Lisa Tarricone of Taconic Resources for Independent Living demonstrates adaptive campfire cooking at Outdoor Accessibility Day at John Dillon Park.



Beach boardwalks and mobility mats are provided at a number of DEC Campgrounds and Day Use Areas to help people with limited mobility access the beach and water.

Woods (Erie County), and Rogers Environmental Education Center (Chenango County). Five Rivers also has a wheelchair charging station, allowing visitors to charge their power wheelchair or mobility scooter, and explore farther afield on the center's many miles of nature trails.

Eight beaches at DEC Campgrounds and Day Use Areas currently offer beach access mats or boardwalks to help people using mobility devices get to the water's edge. These are located at Lake George Beach, Scaroon Manor, Rogers Rock, Ausable Point, Lewey Lake, Lake Eaton, Cranberry Lake, and North-South Lake. In addition, Lake George Beach has a beach wheelchair that is available for visitors on a first-come, first-served basis.

DEC provides the public with information about the range of these offerings on our Accessible Recreation web page, www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/34035.html. The DEC Accessible Recreation Destinations web page is a county-by-county guide to DEC lands with recreation features designed to be accessible to people with disabilities.

Scanning this page for icons of activities that you are interested in will help you identify where you can find accessible hiking, camping, fishing, or boating amenities.

For those interested in going camping at one of DEC's 52 campgrounds in the Catskill and Adirondack Parks, visit: www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/123041.html.

DEC accessible campsites are intended for use by people with mobility impairments and offer an accessible picnic table and fireplace, along with a firm, graded surface suitable for navigation of a mobility device. To reserve a site, go to: newyorkstateparks.reserveamerica.com. This webpage identifies which campgrounds have ADA-compliant restroom and shower facilities, and accessible boating, fishing, picnicking, and hiking opportunities.

DEC is always looking for partners to promote accessible outdoor recreation in New York State. Please write to accessibility@dec.ny.gov with questions or comments. Together, we can ensure that as many people as possible are able to enjoy the wonderful natural adventures New York has to offer. And when more people experience New York's nature, new generations of advocates and conservationists are born.

Leah Akins is the DEC Statewide ADA Accessibility Coordinator.

Trails for All

Trails for All are sustainably constructed and accessible hiking trails that provide a diversity of opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts of all ages and abilities to get out in nature. These trails have gentle grades and a firm surface, combined with resting places along the trail, making them enjoyable for seniors, people using mobility devices or are visually impaired, and everyone who loves to explore the outdoors.