



2024 Summit Steward Report

CATSKILL FOREST PRESERVE MAY - OCTOBER 2024

A PROGRAM OF THE
New York-New Jersey Trail Conference



Catskill Forest Preserve - Summit Stewards 2024 Season Report

Prepared by

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Trail Steward Crew Leader



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 leading the way in coordinating stewardship efforts to address the growing threats to natural spaces and outdoor recreation areas. Increased visitor numbers and more frequent severe weather events over the past several years have added significant pressure on these treasured landscapes. To address these challenges, the Trail Conference has partnered with land managers to implement a multi-phased approach in the Catskill Forest Preserve, prioritizing user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions. Our Catskill Summit Steward program is integral to this response. When used responsibly, trails not only protect hikers but also safeguard the surrounding environment. However, without proper education, our public lands are at risk of misuse and mistreatment. Summit Stewards play a vital role in providing outreach and information on park regulations, hiker safety, preparedness, and other best practices. By engaging directly with hikers, the Summit Stewards help discourage misuse of trails and the surrounding lands, ensuring that these areas remain safe and accessible for generations to come.



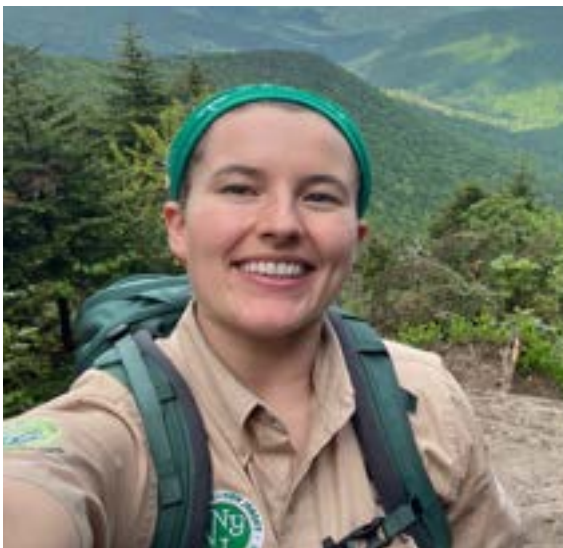
Meet the Summit Stewards



Anthony Torres
Crew Leader



Sav Wartenbach
Crew Member



Tori Woznick
Crew Member



Anna Suske
Crew Member



TRAINING

Over the first few weeks of the 2024 season, the Catskill Summit Stewards received onsite training at each location from Trail Steward Program Coordinator Myra Romano and Trail Steward Crew Leader Anthony Torres. 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 May, all stewards earned their Wilderness First Aid and CPR/AED certifications from Trailbound Project. 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 5-6, 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 May 13, the stewards met with leaders from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation to learn the rules and regulations they would be educating visitors on. This training also provided a chance to interact with other steward groups within the Catskills.



Catskill Forest Preserve



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

14,877

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

5,940

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

1,054

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

317

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

88

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

7

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

5

FIRE RINGS REMOVED

33

LOST HIKERS HELPED

64

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

7

The Catskill Summit Steward program, initiated by the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference in 2015, has become a key resource for outdoor enthusiasts venturing into the Catskill Forest Preserve's popular hiking areas. Developed in partnership with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and supported by the Environmental Protection Fund, the program's primary focus is to educate hikers, promoting safe, responsible, and well-prepared outdoor experiences.

The program raises awareness of DEC camping and campfire regulations, reinforces Leave No Trace principles, and protects sensitive high-elevation ecosystems above 3,500 feet, fostering responsible behavior through the Authority of the Resource technique. Stewards restore unauthorized social paths, dismantle illegal fire rings and campsites, support DEC and first responders in emergencies, and provide information on trail conditions, routes, weather, and local ecology. In 2024, four stewards were stationed at high-traffic summits across DEC Regions 3 and 4, covering Slide, Cornell, Wittenberg, Giant Ledge, Panther, North Point, Blackhead, Black Dome, and Thomas Cole.

The stewards completed 48 days of stewarding across 22 weekends, encountering 14,877 hikers throughout the season. Of those interactions, 40% were meaningful educational exchanges—an increase from 28% the previous year. In addition to providing educational outreach, the stewards played a vital role in ensuring hiker safety. This year, they assisted 64 lost hikers and helped 7 injured hikers, demonstrating their proactive engagement and readiness to respond to unexpected situations.

Stewards also collaborated with Trail Conference staff and volunteers to develop trail maintenance skills, addressing significant blowdowns caused by early spring storms, including a snowstorm, an earthquake, and high-wind rainstorms. Their efforts helped clear paths and improve trail conditions in preparation for the busy summer season, ensuring safer and more sustainable routes for hikers.

As the 2024 season ends, the Catskill Summit Stewards celebrate their positive impact on trails, ecosystems, and the hiking community. Their great work sets the stage for future conservation efforts, ensuring the Catskills remain a protected natural haven for generations of hikers to come. By modeling responsible recreation and environmental stewardship, they set a positive example for others. Their direct engagement with hikers helps spread the message of stewardship, inspiring others to actively preserve the beauty and integrity of the Catskill Forest Preserve.



Steward Anna at Blackhead Mountain



Stewards Tori and Sav show off the newly restored fire ring at the Batavia Kill lean-to



Steward Sav, Steward Tori, and Crew Leader Anthony at Blackhead Mountain

Burroughs Range

Slide, Cornell, and Wittenberg



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

4,026

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

1,721

BUSIEST DAY

Oct 12: 260 hikers

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

423

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

103

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

12

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

3

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

2

FIRE RINGS REMOVED

12

LOST HIKERS HELPED

11

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

1

AVG HIGH

72°

AVG LOW

55°

The Burroughs Range, named in honor of John Burroughs, the celebrated naturalist and writer known for his evocative essays on nature, encompasses some of the Catskill Mountains' most iconic and highest peaks. Located within the Slide Mountain Wilderness, this range includes the tallest peak in the Catskills, Slide Mountain (4,190 feet), as well as Cornell Mountain (3,860 feet) and Wittenberg Mountain (3,780 feet). Renowned for its sweeping vistas, challenging trails, and proximity to Woodland Valley Campground, the Burroughs Range is a popular destination for hikers in search of both adventure and natural beauty.

Over the 2024 season, stewards encountered over 4,000 hikers in the Burroughs Range and had over 1,700 meaningful interactions with visitors. These discussions covered route recommendations, camping regulations, and insights into the area's unique ecology, including information on the Bicknell's thrush—a rare, vulnerable bird found mainly in high-elevation forests and sensitive to habitat loss and climate change. By explaining the importance of balsam fir forests where the thrush nests, stewards helped hikers understand the need to protect these ecosystems. In addition to promoting responsible recreation, stewards shared valuable advice on hiker safety, navigating rapid weather changes, and highlighting must-see viewpoints. The summits of Slide and Wittenberg, which overlook the Ashokan Reservoir, provided ideal settings for stewards to educate hikers on the history of the Catskill Park, the complexities of land acquisition, and the impact of reservoir projects that supply New York City with approximately 30 percent of its clean drinking water.

While the Burroughs Range offered many educational opportunities, it also presented frequent stewardship challenges. Stewards encountered numerous unpermitted campsites on summits and often found smoldering, unattended campfires. Illegal camping and campfire violations—often occurring overnight—required stewards to dismantle fire rings, extinguish any remaining flames, and re-naturalize the area to prevent further impact. In cases where violations were evident, stewards worked closely with DEC Forest Rangers to address these issues.

During the dry months of September and October, when wildfire risks were elevated due to prolonged drought, stewards demonstrated adaptability and proactive fire prevention. Without significant rainfall for several weeks, stewards took additional precautions by carrying extra water to extinguish unattended campfires found along the trails. This practical response played an essential role in protecting the forest and enhancing visitor safety during a season of heightened wildfire danger.



Steward Anna at the Slide Mountain summit



Illegal fire ring found and removed at the summit of Slide Mountain



Steward Tori at the viewpoint on Slide Mountain

Giant Ledge & Panther

Slide Mountain Wilderness



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

5,977

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

2,049

BUSIEST DAY

Oct 12: 756 hikers

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

379

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

81

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

47

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

1

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

1

FIRE RINGS REMOVED

14

LOST HIKERS HELPED

21

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

4

AVG HIGH

72°

AVG LOW

55°

Giant Ledge remains one of the most popular and important sites for Summit Stewards in the Catskill Park, offering a short, 1.5-mile hike to breathtaking vistas that attract large numbers of visitors annually, especially during the peak fall foliage season. Its accessibility makes it a prime destination for those seeking stunning scenery without the demands of a long climb. For those who venture further, the trail leads to the summit of Panther Mountain at 3,720 feet, providing an additional reward for the climb.

In 2024, the Summit Stewards achieved significant results in educating visitors at Giant Ledge and Panther Mountain. Of the nearly 6,000 hikers on these trails, stewards engaged directly with 2,049 visitors, making it the site with the highest educational outreach. Stewards emphasized sustainable practices and Leave No Trace principles to mitigate the impacts on this high-traffic area. Giant Ledge also had the second-highest number of backpackers among the stewarding sites, creating a constant need for stewardship interventions. Every weekend, stewards dismantled illegal fire rings, rehabilitated fire rings at designated campsites, and offered practical advice on responsible waste disposal. They explained the importance of packing out trash, using privies, or, when necessary, digging cat-holes to minimize environmental impact.

During peak days, stewards stationed themselves at the trailhead in the morning to engage with hikers before they began their hikes to Giant Ledge or Panther Mountain. This proactive approach allowed stewards to provide crucial information and educational tips at the start of the hike, preparing visitors for the challenging trail ahead. By greeting hikers early, stewards could share guidance on trail conditions, safety measures, and responsible hiking practices, fostering a more mindful and informed outdoor experience.

However, the popularity of the trail to Giant Ledge, much like the Burroughs Range, continues to challenge conservation efforts. Despite the stewards' hard work, issues like cutting live trees and improperly extinguished campfires remained common throughout the season. The high volume of visitors places immense strain on the area's natural resources, particularly at the designated campsites. This ongoing influx of hikers highlights the need for continuous education and potentially a broader discussion on managing visitor numbers to protect these fragile ecosystems for future generations.



Before and after photos of a fire ring restored at the Giant Ledge campsites



Stewards Sav and Tori practice map reading and navigation skills during their orientation hike

North Point

Windham-Blackhead Range Wilderness



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

3,358

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

1,333

BUSIEST DAY

Aug 31: 222 hikers

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

115

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

90

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

21

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

2

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

2

FIRE RINGS REMOVED

4

LOST HIKERS HELPED

16

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

1

AVG HIGH

74°

AVG LOW

57°

Located near North-South Lake Campground, one of the most popular campgrounds in the Catskills, North Point quickly became a standout site for the Catskill Summit Stewards in 2024. Situated along the iconic 23 mile Escarpment Trail, this challenging yet rewarding route attracts hikers seeking both adventure and stunning vistas. The ascent to North Point involves a few rugged scrambles over steep rocky ledges and constantly varied terrain, offering an exciting challenge for experienced hikers and newcomers alike. Reaching the summit provides hikers with a sweeping view of the Hudson River Valley, the Catskill High Peaks, and the Taconics in the distance—and a breathtaking bird's-eye view of North-South Lake below.

Throughout the season, stewards provided guidance on safely navigating the scrambles and emphasized Leave No Trace principles to protect this popular hiking destination. They also directed visitors to other must-see spots along the Escarpment Trail, such as Badman's Cave, Artists Rock, Newman's Ledge, and Stoppel Point, home to an old airplane wreck from 1983. At the Scutt Road Trailhead, stewards helped orient many first-time visitors and provided them with directions to nearby Kaaterskill Falls, a renowned Catskill landmark.

Stewards played a key role at this location in educating campers and backpackers about responsible camping practices, especially since much of the trail network skirts the boundaries of both the North-South Lake Campground and the Windham-Blackhead Wilderness. With the campground requiring reservations to stay overnight on their land, stewards guided backpackers to designated, primitive campsites in the wilderness area, emphasizing the importance of camping at least 150 feet from the trail to minimize the impact on sensitive areas.

North Point's rugged terrain and stunning views made it an ideal setting for a guided hike during the Catskills Lark in the Park event in October. Stewards led a group of Catskill 3500 Club members up the trail, focusing on tree identification and educating participants about common native, non-native, and invasive species found in the Catskills. This hands-on experience empowered participants to become more knowledgeable stewards, passing on their environmental awareness to future hikers. Interpretive hikes like these are a great way to spread the stewardship message, teaching not only about the Catskills' beauty but also about how to protect its ecosystems, fostering responsible recreation and conservation practices that extend beyond the trail.



Before and after photos of a fire ring restored at a primitive campsite along the Escarpment Trail



Stewards Sav, Anna, and Tori remove blowdown on their first hike to North Point

Blackhead Range

Blackhead, Black Dome, Thomas Cole



STATISTICS

TOTAL HIKERS COUNTED

1,516

HIKERS EDUCATED/ASSISTED

837

BUSIEST DAY

Oct 19: 145 hikers

BACKPACKERS COUNTED

137

HIKERS DIRECTED TO OTHER
PARK LOCATIONS

43

HIKERS DIRECTED TO TOWNS

8

ILLEGAL CAMPERS OBSERVED

1

ILLEGAL CAMPERS EDUCATED

0

FIRE RINGS REMOVED

3

LOST HIKERS HELPED

11

INJURED HIKERS HELPED

1

AVG HIGH

71°

AVG LOW

58°

In 2024, the Blackhead Range became a deeply cherished location for the Catskill Summit Stewards. As the most remote and least trafficked of their stewarding locations, this wilderness offered a rare, untouched beauty that contrasted sharply with the busier, more popular trails. The range, which encompasses the impressive summits of Blackhead (3,940 feet), Black Dome (3,980 feet), and Thomas Cole (3,950 feet), provided a serene environment that allowed stewards to engage more intimately with hikers and backpackers, fostering deep and meaningful connections amidst the solitude of the Windham-Blackhead Wilderness.

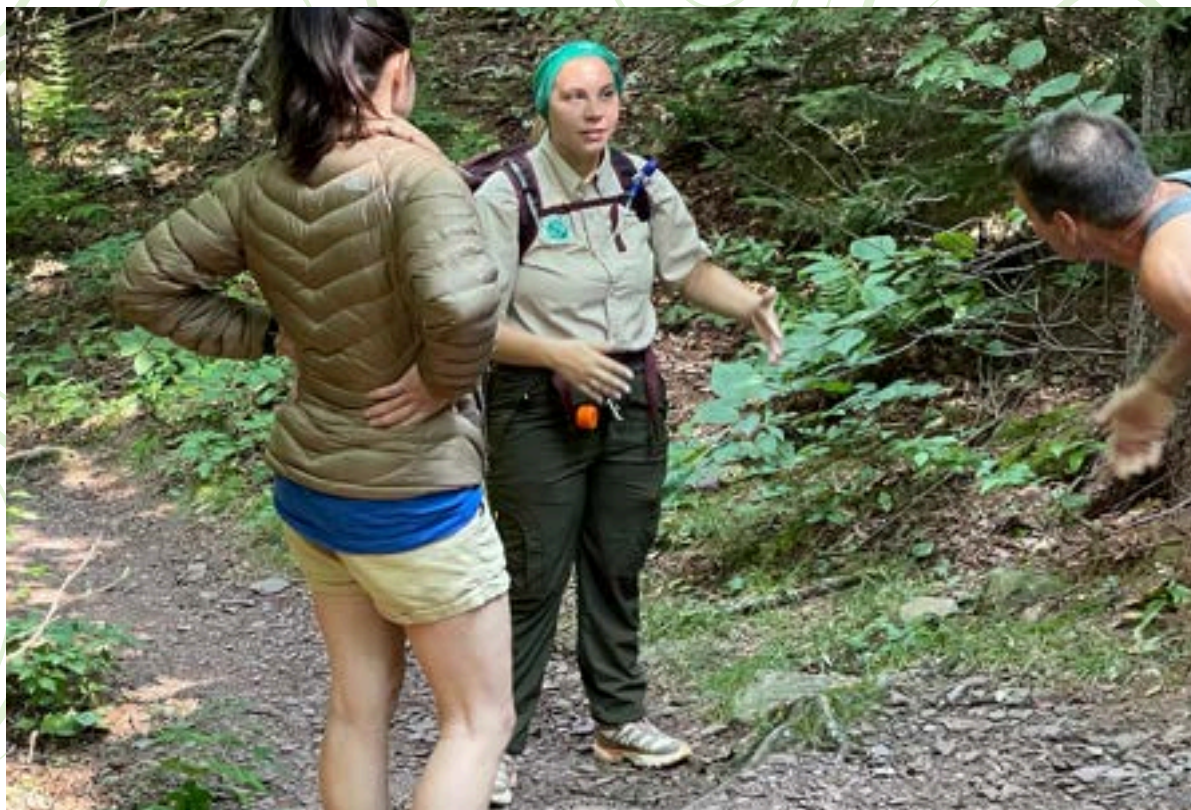
A key highlight of the range was the Batavia Kill, a creek that meanders alongside much of the trail. The crystal-clear waters of the creek not only enhanced the scenic experience but also hid a surprising treasure—a small pool where wild brook trout, New York's only native trout species, thrived. The vibrant colors and delicate patterns of these fish were a welcome sight for the stewards, who considered it a privilege to witness the beauty of this pristine natural habitat. The presence of the brook trout underscored the unspoiled nature of the Blackhead Range, reinforcing its reputation as a truly unique and wild corner of the Catskills.

The stewards eagerly shared recommendations with hikers, pointing them toward destinations like Acra Point, the Batavia Kill lean-to, and Lockwood Gap, encouraging others to experience the same quiet beauty they loved. At the designated campsites, they took on essential maintenance tasks, including removing trash, dismantling illegal fire rings, and ensuring access to clean water. They also worked to preserve the area's natural integrity by removing rock stacks and other human-made intrusions. The opportunity to observe wild brook trout and explore these secluded trails reaffirmed the stewards' deep affection for the Blackhead Range, which truly embodied the unspoiled heart of the Catskills.

The Blackhead Range is not only a haven for hikers but also a challenging terrain for endurance athletes, hosting two of the Catskills' most demanding trail races: Manitou's Revenge and the Escarpment Trail Run. Manitou's Revenge spans a grueling 53-mile course from Windham to Phoenicia, while the Escarpment Trail Run challenges with an 18-mile route full of boulders, roots, and steep slopes. Throughout both races, stewards stationed at Blackhead Summit cheered on participants, offering support and encouragement amid the demanding course while performing their regular stewardship duties. These races reflect the rugged, untamed spirit of the Catskills, as athletes navigated the same challenging paths the stewards are dedicated to preserving and protecting.



Before and after photos of a blowdown removed on the Black Dome Range Trail



Steward Anna educating trail runners at Blackhead Mountain during the Escarpment Trail Race in July

Trail Improvement Projects



STATISTICS

BLOWDOWN REMOVED
190

CORRIDOR CLEARING
21 miles

WATERBARS CLEANED
80

STONE STEPS CLEANED
165

TRAIL RESTORATION
20' linear x 15' deep

In addition to their two days of weekend stewarding, the Conservation Corps members who serve as Catskill Summit Stewards also dedicate two days to trail maintenance each week, ensuring that trails in the Catskill Forest Preserve remain accessible and well-preserved throughout the hiking season. May marked the start of the 2024 season, setting the stage for meaningful conservation work as the Catskills prepared for an influx of summer hikers and backpackers. A notable achievement was the special permitting granted to Trail Conference volunteer leader Andy Garrison, allowing for chainsaw operations in the Slide Mountain Wilderness, an area typically off-limits to mechanized equipment. With this rare opportunity, Crew Leader Anthony Torres, alongside dedicated volunteers Andy Garrison and Charlie Gadol, successfully cleared 41 blowdowns on the Giant Ledge-Panther Trail. Removing these obstacles improves trail accessibility for hikers and prevents trail widening and the formation of walkarounds, which can lead to further environmental degradation.

The team's work continued in the Slide Mountain Wilderness, where they removed 72 additional blowdowns along the Slide-Cornell-Wittenberg Trail, one of the busiest and most heavily trafficked routes in the Catskills. Clearing these blowdowns was vital not just for safety and accessibility, but also as a measure to keep hikers on the designated trails, reducing the risk of off-trail wandering and helping to preserve delicate ecosystems. By maintaining clear trails, the stewards and volunteers played a key role in preventing erosion and ensuring safer hiking conditions for all.

In June, the stewards turned their attention to critical restoration projects aimed at enhancing some of the Catskills' most beloved trails and structures. One highlight was the restoration of the Elm Ridge lean-to and privy along the Escarpment Trail in the Windham-Blackhead Wilderness. Over time, the shelter had deteriorated. Its roof became moss-covered as the shingles retained moisture, the rafters rotted from continuous exposure to rain, and the foundation had settled into the wet ground. The privy was also in need of repair, with a damaged roof.

Working alongside skilled volunteers led by Eric Friedman, the stewards tackled these issues with care and precision. The first step was to carefully lift the shelter using a fulcrum (a large rock) and a lever (a log from a fallen tree). This allowed the team to raise the structure off the damp ground. A new, sturdy rock foundation was then built to provide lasting support, ensuring the shelter would remain dry and stable. After securing the base, the team restored the roof and rafters, ensuring the shelter would be durable and safe for hikers in the years to come.



Trail Improvement Projects



All old shingles and underlayments were carefully removed, and the damaged rafters and boards were either trimmed or replaced entirely. New materials were used to patch the rotted sections, and fresh shingles and underlayment were installed, creating a durable, weather-resistant finish. A final coat of stain gave the shelter a revitalized appearance, making it look like new and ensuring it would stand strong against the elements for years to come.

The privy also received a new roof, improving its functionality and ensuring it would continue to meet the needs of hikers. Additionally, the team focused on enhancing the accessibility and flow of the spring-fed water source along the Elm Ridge Trail. Through strategic stone gathering and detailed stonework, they increased the water flow of the spring while also beautifying the structure and providing a sustainable system for hikers to collect water. These efforts showcased the stewards' commitment to maintaining essential infrastructure, and ensuring safe, responsible, and comfortable access to the wilderness. The restoration of the lean-to, privy, and water source marked a significant step forward in the long-term stewardship of the Catskills.

July was a month of intensive work and tangible results for the stewards, who focused on trail maintenance projects that directly impacted the safety and sustainability of the Catskill trail system. One key accomplishment was the cleaning and clearing of 140 steps and 22 water bars along the Devil's Path Trail, stretching from Devil's Campground to Orchard Point. Led by Trail Conference volunteer Charlie Gadol, this project helped maintain the trail's structural integrity and prevent further erosion. By stabilizing this rugged, high-traffic trail, the team ensured that hikers could safely navigate one of the Catskills' most challenging paths.





Steward Sav prepping some lumber for the lean-to



Steward Anna removing the old roof shingles



The new and improved roof on the Elm Ridge lean-to

Trail Improvement Projects

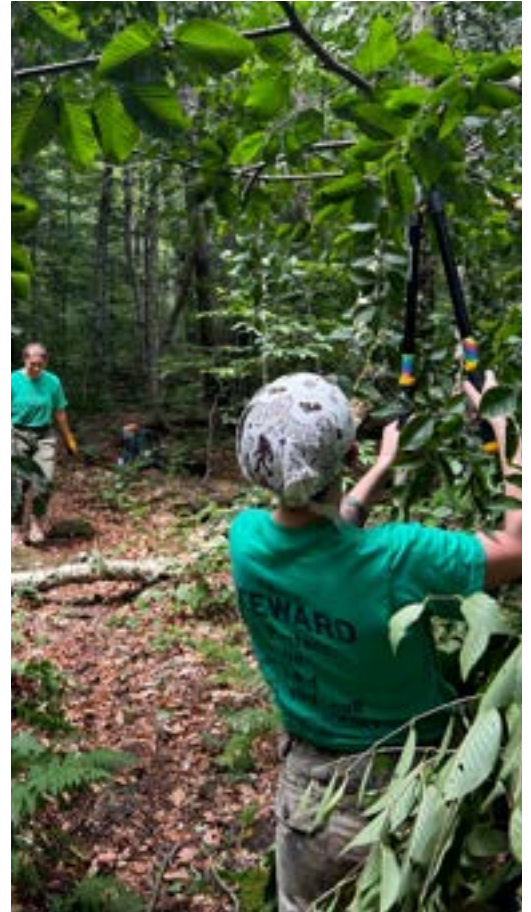


One of the stewards' largest and most impactful projects began in July with special permission from the DEC for emergency repairs to address severe trail washout along the Phoenicia-East Branch Trail, approximately 1.7 miles from the Giant Ledge Trailhead. This section of the trail is prone to erosion due to a step-notch cross-section where groundwater flows year-round, rapidly draining in heavy rain. Together with Trail Conference volunteer Andy Garrison, the stewards set out to rebuild over 20 linear feet of trail, with depths reaching up to 15 feet. To create a stable foundation for the new trail, they constructed layered rock platforms that would support large boulders, effectively raising the trail's elevation. A large boulder, already moving down the channel due to erosion, was positioned as the base of the structure.

Using rock bars, rock straps, and a ratchet hoist, the team carefully selected and moved boulders to build five stacked tiers, each filled with medium-sized rocks crushed and shaped with an 8-pound sledgehammer. The rebuilt trail was then leveled, with crushed stone and dirt poured into the structure to lock it in place, followed by a final layer of crushed stone to prevent mud buildup. Thanks to these efforts, the trail was fully restored and reinforced, ensuring safe passage for hikers on the heavily trafficked Burroughs Loop.

August was dedicated to extensive trail maintenance across four sections of the Long Path, a 358-mile trail that stretches from New York City to Albany. Since some sections of the Long Path pass through less-visited parts of the Catskills, they are prone to overgrowth. The stewards spent the first two days of the month clearing the 8-mile stretch from Peekamoose Road to Vernooey Kill Falls. They utilized proper pruning techniques to trim branches and clear blowdowns from the trail corridor. Additionally, three campsites were rehabilitated through fire ring rebuilding and trash removal. As one of New York's prominent long-distance hiking trails, the Long Path provides critical access to the natural beauty of the Catskills and serves as an important route for both casual hikers and thru-hikers, making its maintenance vital to preserving its accessibility and sustainability.

The stewards continued clearing trail corridors into the next week, this time focusing on the Phoenicia-East Branch Trail. Accompanied by Trail Conference volunteer Charlie Gadol, they began at the Slide Mountain Trailhead, heading south toward Denning. Despite starting in light rain, the team successfully cleared three miles of trail before the weather became too severe to continue.





Before and after photos of the severe washout on the Phoenicia-East Branch Trail



Stewards and Andy Garrison move a large rock on the Phoenicia-East Branch Trail

Trail Improvement Projects



The hard work for the month didn't stop there. The stewards joined forces once again with Andy Garrison and Charlie Gadol to create a powerhouse sawyer crew. Over two days, they tackled approximately 10.75 miles of trail, from Woodland Valley Campground to the Romer Mountain Trailhead, clearing an impressive 40 blowdowns along the way. This crucial effort would ensure safe passage for the Catstail Marathoners, who would be traversing this section of the trail at the end of their race in late September.

In September, the stewards continued to refine skills and build strength with ongoing blowdown clearing and water bar maintenance. Charlie Gadol was their primary volunteer partner, working alongside them on three of the five trail work days during the month. On September 5th, the team returned to the Phoenicia-East Branch Trail, armed with a two-person crosscut saw. They focused on the 3.5-mile stretch from the Giant Ledge Trailhead to Woodland Valley Campground, clearing 17 large blowdowns. The satisfaction of seeing the trail clear and open was made even sweeter by the hikers they interacted with, including a large family with young children, who passed through and expressed their gratitude for the cleared path ahead.

The following day, the team traveled to the Windham-Blackhead Wilderness with Charlie Gadol and their crosscut saw. They began at the north end of the Escarpment Trail at Route 23 and hiked up to Windham High Peak, taking in the beauty of the trail as they worked. They continued on, covering over 7 miles of trail and reaching the Big Hollow Trailhead, where they removed 21 more blowdowns.



The next week, the stewards ventured to the Balsam Lake Wild Forest, where new views and terrain kept them motivated as they worked in the landscapes they cherish. Over the course of two days, the crew, alongside Charlie, cleared 43 water bars on the path to the Balsam Lake Fire Tower and back down the other side. These days of work required carrying much heavier tools than usual, including 8+ pound pick mattocks, hoes, shovels, and rakes. The added weight of these tools provided a physically demanding challenge as they navigated over 6 miles of trail. Despite the tough work, the stewards found fulfillment in improving the area, reducing erosion, and taking in the stunning views from the top of the Balsam Lake Fire Tower.

Trail Improvement Projects



October marked the final month of the Catskill Summit Stewards' season, and although it was shorter than other months, it was filled with dedicated trail work and enthusiasm. The first week took the stewards to familiar locations to continue vital maintenance and improvements. Starting from the Woodland Valley Campground, the team, along with Andy Garrison, headed toward Cross Mountain and the Grand Staircase. Here, they performed crucial upkeep on the 25 stone steps, removing dirt and leaf litter to prevent vegetation from overtaking the steps. The following day, the stewards and Andy traveled to Romer Mountain from the Lane Street Trailhead, where they addressed two sections impacted by heavy water flow. Armed with pick mattocks and shovels, the crew carefully dug trenches parallel to the trail to redirect water, guiding it to existing waterbars and preventing erosion and trail damage.

The following week, the stewards joined forces with Charlie Gadol and Julie McGuire, as well as over 30 volunteers from Longwood Preparatory Academy in the South Bronx, including high school students and their teachers. Starting from Denning Road, the group split into two smaller crews to tackle different sections: one crew cleared water bars on the Phoenicia-East Branch, while the other cleared the trail corridor leading toward Table Mountain. While the primary goal was to provide the students with hands-on experience in conservation work and exposure to the wilderness, the day was also highly productive, with the two groups clearing 15 water bars and clipping back 3 miles of trail. The week wrapped up with the stewards and Andy focusing on corridor clearing along the Neversink-Hardenburgh Trail from the Balsam Lake Mountain Trailhead. The need for maintenance was immediately apparent, as many fallen branches blocked the trail and a social path walk-around had been created by hikers. The crew successfully cleared over 3 miles of trail during this outing.

The final week of the season focused on clearing corridors in the first 2 miles from the Diamond Notch Trailhead to Diamond Notch Falls in the Hunter-West Kill Wilderness, followed by another 3 miles from the Biscuit Brook Trailhead to 1 mile past the Biscuit Brook lean-to in the Big Indian Wilderness. Over the course of the 2024 season, the Catskill Summit Stewards cleared an impressive 21 miles of trail corridor and removed nearly 200 blowdowns. Although the season was brief, the significant work accomplished by the stewards underscores the vital importance of their efforts, highlighting the ongoing need for dedicated trail maintenance crews to ensure the continued accessibility and preservation of these treasured wilderness areas for years to come.





Before and after photos of a blowdown removed in the Slide Mountain Wilderness Area



Julie McGuire and the high school students from Longwood Preparatory Academy



Thank you!

We extend our sincere gratitude to our partners and volunteers for their invaluable support. Our accomplishments this season would not have been possible without you.

Please email Myra Romano (mromano@nynjtc.org),
Trail Steward Program Coordinator, with any questions or comments.