

# The HIGHLANDS Current

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Page 16



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Part 

## TRAILS (TOO) WELL TRAVELED

*The outdoors is getting crowded.  
Do we need to ration recreation?*

By Brian PJ Cronin

The waterfall at Indian Brook has never been a secret. Washington Irving showed the cascade off to friends back in 1834. William Rickarby Miller of the Hudson River School of painting, America's first art movement, painted the falls in 1850. That painting, "Indian Falls, Indian Brook, Cold Springs, New York," is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By the early 20th century, the falls

were appearing on postcards. But with the rise of social media and location tagging in the 2010s, Indian Brook Falls was in front of a global audience, one that could quickly find its exact location after seeing the picturesque falls wash up on their screens. The falls aren't unique in this regard. The one-two punch of social media followed by the pandemic, in which being  
*(Continued on Page 18)*



The state began requiring reservations in 2018 at the Blue Hole swimming spot after it began seeing as many as 1,000 visitors per day.

DEC

## Panel: West Point Needs Update

*Recommends removing  
Confederate officer names*

By Chip Rowe

A commission appointed by Congress recommended on Monday (Aug. 29) that the U.S. Military Academy at West Point remove nearly all references to Confederate military leaders, as well as a panel that commemorates the Ku Klux Klan. The eight-member Naming Commis-

sion was created in 2020 to review monuments and building and street names at U.S. military bases and recommend those that should be changed or removed. In the report, the commissioners dismissed charges that they were "erasing history," noting that "the facts of the past remain" and that cadets would continue to be taught the details and complexities of the Civil War. Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, a member of the West Point Board of Visitors whose  
*(Continued on Page 7)*

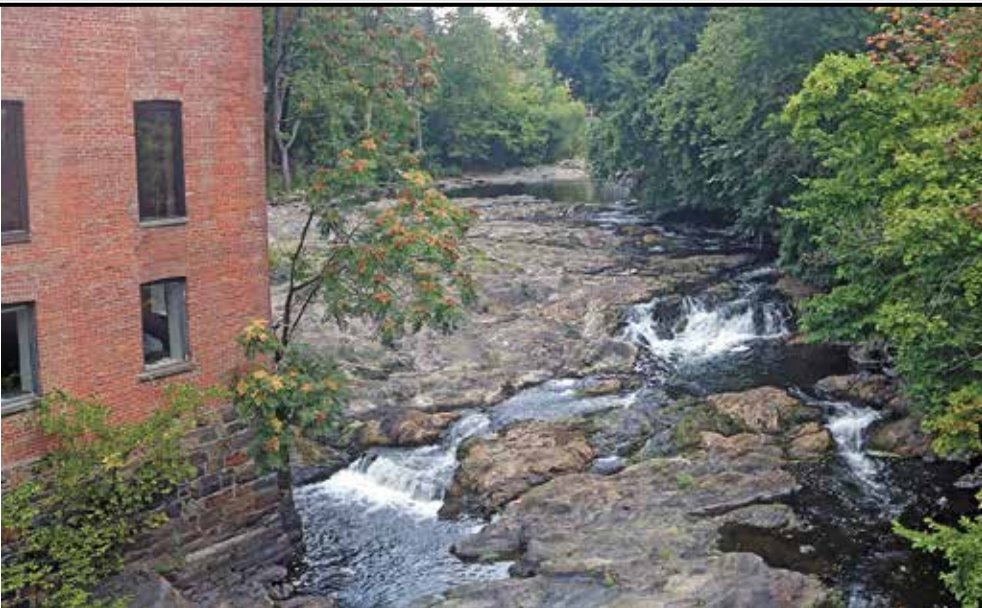
## Putnam Man's Costly Detention

*Mother sues to gain  
release from county jail*

By Leonard Sparks

Matthew Pecchia is diagnosed with severe autism, Lyme's disease and pediatric-acute onset neuropsychiatric syndrome, a condition characterized by sudden obsessive and compulsive behaviors. One alleged outburst landed the Brews-

ter man in the Putnam County Jail. But his four-month stay, beginning with his arrest on April 27 on a burglary charge, not only cost the county more than \$100,000 but highlighted the closure of group homes for people with developmental disabilities because of longstanding staffing shortages that worsened during the pandemic. The state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) took custody of Pecchia, 26, on Monday (Aug. 29), follow-  
*(Continued on Page 8)*



**HITTING BOTTOM** — Drought conditions have lowered the level of Fishkill Creek considerably, as seen in photos taken in 2019 and last week. Beacon City Administrator Chris White says the city's reservoirs have fallen below 60 percent capacity, triggering restrictions on water usage. (See Page 3.) Cold Spring renewed its state of emergency on Aug. 25 when its reservoirs fell to 45 percent capacity. (See Page 10.)

Photos by Jeff Simms and Michael Turton



## TRAILS *(from Page 1)*

outdoors was one of the few safe activities available, has led to record numbers at Breakneck Ridge and Mount Taurus, as well, not to mention outdoor recreation and wilderness areas throughout the world.

Although close to Philipstown and Beacon, Breakneck Ridge and Mount Taurus are not right in the middle of a historic residential district the way Indian Brook Falls is. The lines of cars along Route 9D at Breakneck aren't blocking anyone's driveway. The lot at Mount Taurus has room for more than eight cars, unlike the tiny parking area near Indian Brook Falls that is actually the lot for the Constitution Marsh Audubon Center & Sanctuary. Indian Brook flows through the marsh on its way to the Hudson.

People thronged to Indian Brook Falls in hopes of spending time in a quiet, calm oasis only to discover a site that was no longer quiet or calm. Indian Brook Road was lined with cars on weekends, many parked illegally or idling while waiting for a spot to free up. Litter piled up. Visitors went swimming which, as signs along the trail note, is not allowed.

Feeling besieged, neighbors lodged complaints with the Town of Philipstown, which in turn urged the state Department of Parks to shut down the trail leading to the falls. When the state declined, the town threatened to sue. It was an extraordinary step: The public demanding the state shut down public lands.

Then, things got uglier.

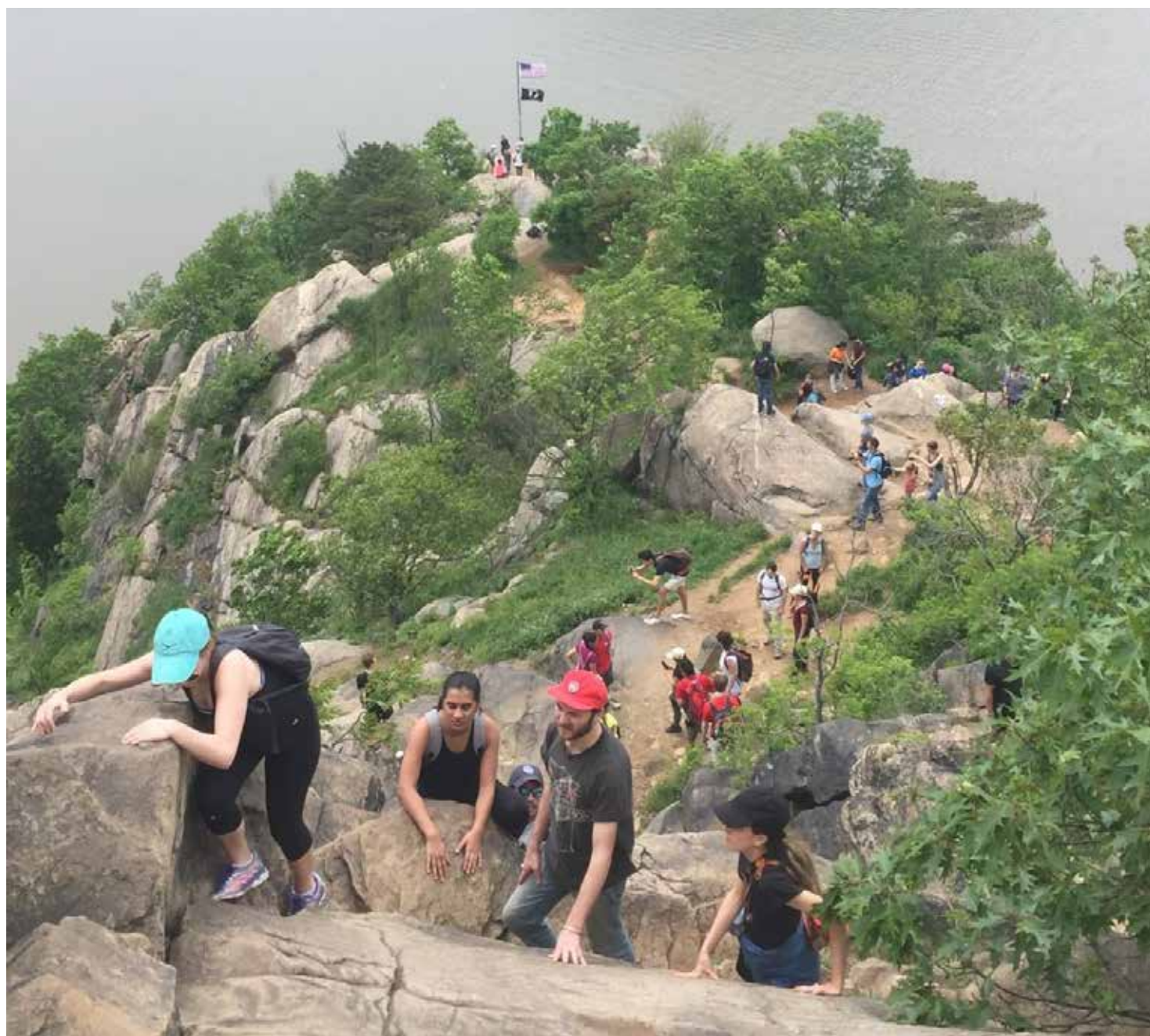
On Aug. 21, 2020, a bus from The Felix Organization, a Long Island-based nonprofit that works with children in the foster-care system, dropped off six teenage girls and four adult staff members for a visit to Constitution Marsh. The 10 people who got off the bus were all Black.

A subsequent report from the Putnam County Sheriff's Department did not identify who called the police. A representative from The Felix Organization said the deputy who arrived on the scene didn't see what the issue was and allowed them to continue with their hike. But before that, the group claims that they were subjected to racial, sexual and xenophobic epithets from a few residents — including the N-word — and that they were told to “go back where you came from.” One of the teens, writing about the incident later, said, “We were told to leave, that ‘we’ did not belong there.”

Philipstown responded by blocking off the lot, as well as another informal parking area where Indian Brook Road meets Route 9.

It was not lost on some that the closing of the lot resulted in the falls and the marsh becoming essentially private amenities for residents of the high-priced homes on Indian Brook Road — including whom-

ever accosted the



Hikers at Breakneck Ridge in 2017

Photo by Luis Maldonado/NYNJTC

teenagers — because both were now accessible only by foot and there is no other parking anywhere nearby. Accusations of classism and racism followed.

The collateral damage in all of this was Constitution Marsh, which lost its only parking lot. Entrance to the marsh is free, but it can now only be reached if one is willing to pay \$14 a head (\$7 each for children) to park at Boscobel House & Gardens and hike three-quarters of a mile from there.

“That’s \$21 right there for a mom and her 6-year-old who’s driving her nuts,” said Sean Camillieri, the president of the Putnam Highlands Audubon Society, who is spearheading an effort to get the lot reopened. He pointed out that Boscobel encourages visitors to reserve, and pay for, a parking spot online but only offers one-hour slots. One PHAS member told Camillieri that she tried visiting the marsh that way, but found that one hour wasn’t long enough for her to hike to the marsh and back. “How many other people has that happened to?” Camillieri wondered.

## LOVED TO DEATH

Last year, 44 national parks set visitation records. In one sense, this is good news. The emotional, physical, mental and spiritual benefits of spending time outside have been exhaustively documented. Hiking is still relatively cheap even when you factor in transportation and gear. And as the pace of climate change accelerates, more advocates are needed in order to protect threatened areas and species.

The hope is that many of the new pandemic hikers will become stewards of the places they visit.

“It’s a good thing that people are discovering nature,” said Hank Osborn, a Philipstown native who is director of programs for the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. “But now that they’ve discovered it, I don’t think they’re going to say, ‘Oh, the pandemic is over now, I can stay inside for the rest of my life.’ They’re going to keep hiking.”

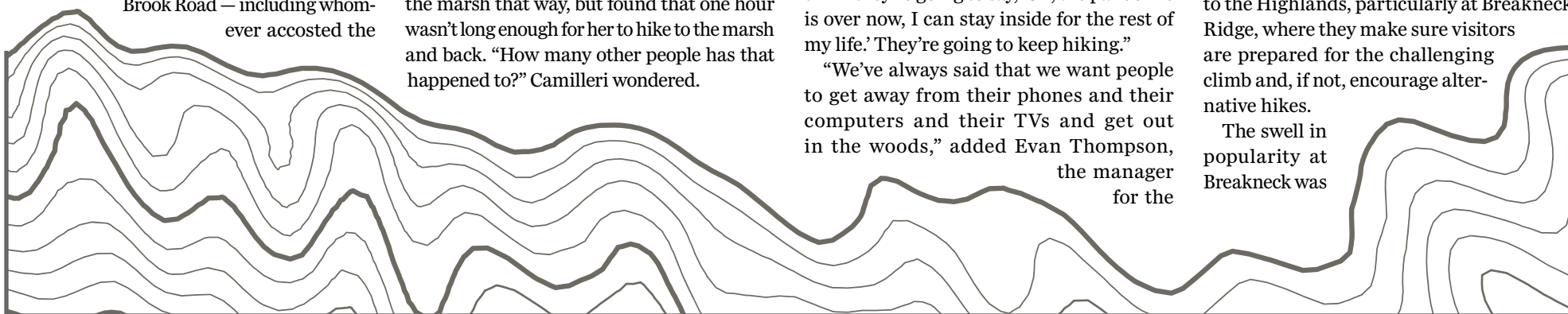
“We’ve always said that we want people to get away from their phones and their computers and their TVs and get out in the woods,” added Evan Thompson, the manager for the

Hudson Highlands and Fahnestock state parks. “So it’s great for people to have that experience of being out in the woods and enjoying themselves. But we also found during COVID that we weren’t prepared to handle that number of people.”

As a result, many communities, nonprofits and government agencies are having to turn to outdoor recreation management practices more than ever before. Muir Woods National Monument in California requires either a parking reservation or a reservation on a shuttle bus. Acadia National Park in Maine has started requiring summer reservations for Cadillac Summit Road, where many people park. The Blue Hole swimming hole in the Catskills requires reservations and trail stewards are on-hand to redirect those who arrive without.

The trail stewards program has spread to the Highlands, particularly at Breakneck Ridge, where they make sure visitors are prepared for the challenging climb and, if not, encourage alternative hikes.

The swell in popularity at Breakneck was





## OUT OF POCKET

The travails at Indian Brook Road in Garrison may sound familiar to many residents of Beacon.

Last year, the city closed a small, informal parking area near the Pocket Road trail on Mount Beacon because too many visitors tried to wedge in their cars, often blocking driveways. Chris White, the city administrator, said that within the next two years, Beacon will replace a water tank at the trailhead, freeing up space.

“I hope to be able to create a small public parking area below the new tank that can provide at least a small number of spots for hikers,” he said. “As that project goes through engineering design, we’ll evaluate my conceptual proposal more fully, but I will make every effort to carve out a small parking area.”

the driving force in a redesign of the Fjord Trail project, slated to begin construction this fall. Envisioned as a simple path connecting Beacon and Cold Spring, the project now includes off-street parking at Breakneck Ridge and other amenities to spread people out in the Highlands rather than have them clump in one or two locations.

“It’s about visitor management and a sense of equitable access to space,” explained Amy Kacala, executive director of the Fjord Trail. “This is not just about hikers anymore. It’s about managing those hikers, but also hopefully providing more benefits to locals who have to deal with the inconveniences of the tourist traffic.”

Preservation, Osborn points out, is not just about preserving nature.

“A trail can be built to accommodate high use,” he said. “Parking can be designed to accommodate vehicles more safely. But do local communities have the ability to absorb large numbers of visitors every time there’s good weather on a weekend?”

Recreation management raises some difficult questions. How to best balance preservation with access? Can we make sure, in providing access, that we don’t destroy what makes the site special? Is there such a thing as a mutually beneficial relationship between hikers and the outdoors? How much “wild” do people want in their wilderness experiences? Are humans separate from the natural experience, or an integral part of it?

There are no universal solutions. But it’s too late to do nothing.

“One of the things that I’ve learned is that you can’t open a trail and then say, ‘OK, we’ve done our job,’ and walk away,” said Scott Silver, the recently retired head of Constitution Marsh. “It’s unfair to the neighbors, and it’s unfair to the wildlife.”

## NATURE GETS THE LAST WORD

After two years, the debate about whether to close Indian Brook Falls has been settled. It wasn’t shut down by the town, the state or the



Philipstown closed the small parking lot at Constitution Marsh in 2020. File photo by Chip Rowe



Traffic is precarious on Route 9D between Cold Spring and Beacon on summer weekends because of the thousands of hikers who visit Breakneck Ridge.

File photo by Michael Turton

residents of Indian Brook Road, but by nature. This past winter, heavy rains washed away the trail.

“It’s gone,” said Thompson. “And it’s not so simple to just build a new trail.”

The steep slopes leading down to the brook — now even steeper — mean that a trail would have to be more than a dirt path. It would probably involve an elevated boardwalk, perhaps leading to a platform that would not only provide space to view the falls but make it harder for visitors to go for an unauthorized swim.

Such a trail would involve a major capital investment “and it might not even be permitted, because it’s so close to the stream,” Thompson said.

In July, the state erected a barricade at the entrance to the trail from the road with signs noting the area is closed for “wildlife/habitat recovery.” Thompson said that the state parks department considers the closure to be indefinite.

There is hope that, with the trail closed, the nearby parking lot can be reopened for visitors to Constitution Marsh. “I always felt that that part of our role is to try to build a constituency for wildlife in general,” said Silver.

“And the best way to do that is to have people experience it, especially Constitution Marsh.”

In the meantime, its interim executive director, Rebecca Schultz, said Audubon has been promoting three of its other sanctuaries: Buttercup Farm south of Pine Plains, RamsHorn-Livingston in Catskill and Rheinstrom Hill in Hillsdale.

“Those are less visited, but just as beautiful,” she said. “We’ve been trying to get people to appreciate the less-navigated trails.”

In an email, Philipstown Supervisor John Van Tassel said discussions are planned about the lot. “My priority is the quality of life for the residents of that area,” he said.

One obstacle may be the New York and Connecticut chapters of the Audubon Society. In a recent meeting by Zoom with members of the Putnam Highlands Audubon Society, representatives advocated the continued closure of the lot, suggesting those wishing to visit take an Uber or the Cold Spring Trolley.

Camillieri noted that the Cold Spring Trolley only runs on weekends, and only for a few



“Indian Falls, Indian Brook, Cold Springs, New York,” by William Rickarby Miller

months of the year, and Uber is often unreliable in rural Putnam. “I can’t imagine anyone local trying to get an Uber in order to go for a walk in the woods,” he said.

PHAS responded to the Zoom meeting with a letter, signed by representatives from a dozen other local Audubon chapters and Hudson Valley birding groups, urging the New York and Connecticut chapters to reconsider their stance.

“This small parking area has unfortunately become a lightning rod of controversy and great disappointment over the past two years, but for decades prior it enabled tens of thousands of families, nature-loving people and bird watchers from the local community and beyond to enjoy all the marsh has to offer,” the letter said.

Camillieri suggested a few things that can be done to allow the lot to reopen, such as well-defined spaces, signs that suggest alternatives if the lot is full and security cameras.

A camera system may be needed sooner rather than later. A quick search on Instagram after the trail was closed revealed many photos of people visiting the falls and swimming there. One account belongs to a fitness influencer with thousands of followers. “Soulful Sundays” reads the caption, followed by a tree emoji.

### Next week:

### WHEN IS A TRAIL NOT A TRAIL?

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# The HIGHLANDS Current




Does the Man Owe You Money?  
Page 8

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The view from atop Breakneck in the Hudson Highlands State Park Photo by B. Cronin

Part 

## TRAILS (TOO) WELL TRAVELED

*The outdoors is getting crowded.  
Do we need to ration recreation?*

By Brian PJ Cronin

First-time visitors to the 8,000-acre Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve might look around at the towering trees and rocky cliffs and marvel at the unspoiled wilderness, free from human interference. That's before they run into a stone wall, or the ruins of a dairy farm.

The land that draws hikers and outdoor enthusiasts to the Highlands has long been worked by hands and indus-

try. Before Europeans arrived, Lenape, Wappinger and other Indigenous tribes shaped the land through controlled burns. These fires helped thin out underbrush to make the woods more favorable for hunting, as well as for the growth of favored plants such as blueberry bushes and trees that provided edible nuts such as oak, chestnut and hickories.

Clearings were created to chase prey

*(Continued on Page 18)*

## Three Grads, Three Paths

By Michael Turton

As a new academic year begins, we caught up with three Philipstown residents who took different paths after graduating from high school in June.

**Higher education**

April Ransom is settling in at SUNY Binghamton, where she will study biology and environmental science.

The Haldane graduate had considered a number of careers, from hairdressing to criminal justice to architecture. But it might have been her infatuation with fairies that tipped the scales.

"I was super into fairies as a kid," she said. "They love nature, they love animals. I was also a huge nature kid; I had my own notebook and would draw the animal and plant life just outside my house."

Ransom, who finished with a 4.0 GPA, gives credit to a criminal justice course she took in the ninth grade. "That class helped me become comfortable with public speaking," she said. "It made so many other classes easier going forward."

Her list of prospective colleges didn't include Binghamton, but at her parents' insistence, she visited. "After seeing it, I knew I had to go there," she said.

"I remember walking through the food court and the tour guide saying students had created it," she said. "It wasn't just a bunch of teachers lording over them; they have the freedom to create their own school environment."

She hopes to find a career that involves fighting climate change. "I'm debating between research and developing technology," she said. "There's a lot of carbon-capture technology that is interesting."

She knows she will miss Cold Spring, but the feeling is tempered by a sense of adventure. "This has been my home for a

*(Continued on Page 7)*

## Beacon Fire Station Rehab On Track

*Tompkins Hose will be rebuilt, modernized*

By Jeff Simms

The design of a centralized Beacon fire station is on schedule to be completed this year, with construction to begin early in 2023. If the removal

of rock and hazardous materials goes as planned, the new station could open by the spring of 2024.

The project is expected to cost about \$11.7 million, City Administrator Chris White told the City Council on Tuesday (Sept. 6).

The city announced plans in April to rehab the 40-year-old Lewis Tompkins Hose Co. station at 13 South Ave. The Fire Department, once a mix of paid firefighters and volunteers spread across three companies, is now comprised primarily of paid "career" staff, and will be based out of the rebuilt station, a structure that architect Bob Mitchell assured the council "should last many generations."

Once complete, Beacon will close the Mase Hook and Ladder station, which was built on Main Street in the 1920s. The project will cap nearly two decades and, by Mitchell's estimate, more than 2,000 hours of study and debate, around Beacon's firehouses. A third station, the 130-year-old Beacon Engine on East Main Street, was closed in 2020.

The most visible change will be reorienting Tompkins Hose to face City Hall, with three bays opening onto Route 9D. The South Avenue side of the station will be downsized from three to two bays, one for an ambulance and the other for a smaller fire apparatus.

A 6,500-square-foot addition will be constructed on the north end of the station, in the direction of Polhill Park, while the interior renovation will address glaring safety omissions, chief among them a system to redirect exhaust from the engine bays and

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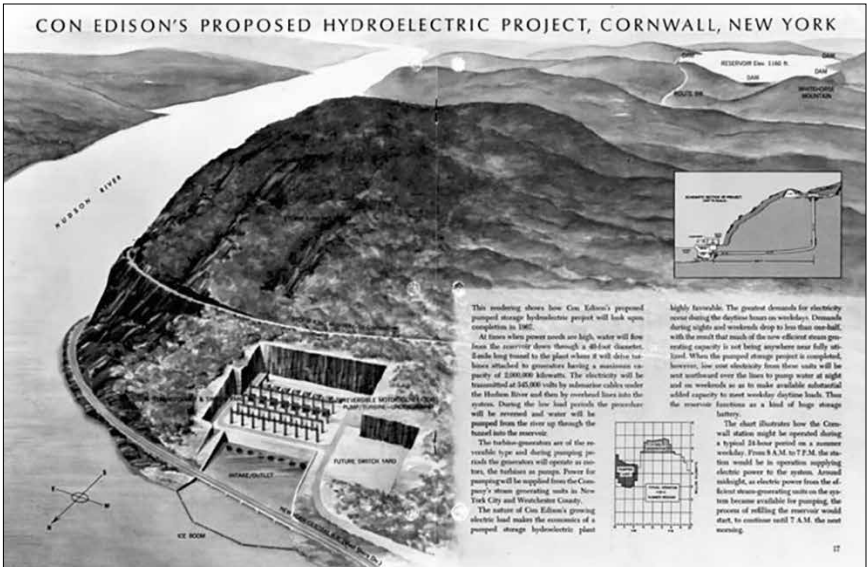
**SWEET!** — The weather was perfect on Saturday (Sept. 3) for Community Day in Cold Spring. Two blocks of Main Street were blocked off for four hours for children's games, a DJ, dancing, hula-hoops, balloon animals, face painting, food trucks, a pie-baking contest and free cotton candy and popcorn, followed by a performance at the bandstand by the Slambovian Circus of Dreams. For more photos, see Page 20.

Photo by Michael Turton





Photo by Robert Rodriguez Jr./Scenic Hudson



Marist Environmental History Project

Consolidated Edison's 1962 proposal (right) to build a power plant in Storm King Mountain (left) was abandoned in 1979.



☞ Storm King is a mountain which should be left alone. It rises like a brown bear out of the river, a dome of living granite, swelling with animal power. It is not picturesque in the softer sense of the word, but awesome, a primitive embodiment of the energies of the earth. It makes the character of wild nature physically visible in monumental form ... It can still make the city dweller emotionally aware of what he most needs to know: that nature still exists, with its own laws, rhythms and powers, separate from human desires."

~ VINCENT SCULLY

A professor of art history at Yale, testifying in 1967 against Con Ed's plans for Storm King

TRAILS (from Page 1)

into. Trees were felled to create fields to plant. When the soil was depleted from farming, the fields would be abandoned to regrow for several decades into forests before being cleared again. When the Europeans arrived in the Highlands, so did foundries, mines, quarries, farms, livestock and a chemical factory near Anthony's Nose.

But by the beginning of the 20th century, many of these industries had shut down, human populations fell and nature began to reclaim the Highlands. In 1907, William Thompson Howell noted that "the picturesque, quaint and all-together delightful village of Cold Spring had no industry of any importance, and is in fact the deadest town on the lower Hudson." Hikers — both locals and restless inhabitants of New York City — began exploring the abandoned roads and trails.

The way we thought of "wilderness" was changing. After hundreds of years of colonizing, settling, chopping and clearing, Americans were looking at the changed landscape and romanticizing what was once there. Hudson River School artists spent a century producing idealized landscapes of lost Edens. With the Highlands rewilding, many people saw an opportunity to reclaim paradise.

Inspired by the conservation of the Palisades overlooking the western shore of the Hudson, and a successful campaign to stop a prison from being built at Bear Mountain, a proposal began circulating for a Hudson Highlands National Park.

To understand why the park and local trails are so popular, and sometimes overrun, it helps to look back at how and why they were created — and what might have been there instead.



Howell

PEOPLE POWER

The idea of a national park in the Highlands found little support in the nation's capital, so activists turned their attention to creating a state park. In the 1930s, newly formed conservation groups bought land to preserve, most notably parts of Breakneck Ridge and Anthony's Nose. But not much progress was made until a new threat arose that was bigger than a quarry or foundry.

Sixty years ago this month, in 1962, The Nature Conservancy began investigating how it could acquire private tracts stretching from Mount Beacon to Breakneck Ridge to Mount Taurus. It did not consider Storm King, across the river, as a candidate for preservation — the idea that anyone would touch such a majestic landmark was too outrageous.

Four days later, a headline on the front page of *The New York Times* proved them naive. "Huge Power Plant Planned on Hudson," it read. Con Edison had announced its intention to construct a hydroelectric plant in a cavity carved into Storm King.

That began a nearly 20-year fight to save the mountain — a battle that helped form a canon of environmental law and established the concept that scenic beauty can be as important, legally, as industry.

What's often forgotten about the Storm King saga is that there were *two* power plants in development: Central Hudson also wanted to build at Breakneck Ridge. In addition, Georgia Pacific wanted a wall-board factory at Little Stony Point, which it had just purchased. Locals believed that, if the plant was built at Storm King, it would set off a chain of dominoes.

The Storm King plant was seen by the state as a foregone conclusion; in a bid to appease the angry residents of the Highlands, it bought the land at Breakneck and Little Stony Point, and the Hudson Highlands State Park was born. The state, with the assistance of nonprofits such as Scenic Hudson and the Open Space Institute that purchase additional tracts and donate them,

continue to expand the boundaries of the

park, which has more than 70 miles of trails.

For a park that was created mainly to serve as a consolation prize, Hudson Highlands State Park has exceeded all expectations. Over the past 10 years, it has drawn more than 3 million visitors, with attendance increasing sharply around 2015. That was when Breakneck Ridge, aided by photos taken atop its lookout spots and posted to social media, became one the busiest trails in the country.

The park's popularity vindicates the conservationists of the early 20th century who fought for the land to be preserved, although one of them — if he were alive — would probably not be happy about what it has become.



Howell, the man who delighted in Cold Spring being the deadest town on the lower Hudson, hoped that any park in the Highlands would contain no infrastructure: no parking lots, no places nearby to stay, no trails. "There is a wild charm and isolation about the Highlands that will fly forever when the 'improvements' begin to come in," he wrote.

The Hudson Highlands State Park has grown both in acreage and popularity, but the improvements have struggled to keep up, as the past few years of overcrowding





Summit canisters in the Catskills contain notebooks that hikers can sign to prove their ascents.



A view from Huckleberry Point in the Catskills

Photos by B. Cronin

has shown. Now the park is about to undertake its biggest change: the Fjord Trail along the eastern bank of the river that aims to ease overcrowding and congestion, keep hikers off busy roads and from overwhelming the streets of Cold Spring, and provide alternate trailheads and attractions instead of funneling every hiker who comes to the area to Breakneck.

The project has already received pushback from locals who fear that it will make the problem worse by drawing more people to the village and Breakneck, and would prefer to follow Howell's maxim to leave "improvements" out of the Highlands before the park is improved to death.

## UNTRAILED TRAILS

Fifty miles north, another outdoor hotspot elevated by the sentimental Hudson River School is finding the only way to improve on nature is to take the extraordinary step of keeping every human out.

The Catskills 3500' Club was created in 1962. Inspired by the Adirondacks' 46er Club, membership is contingent upon summiting the peaks in the Catskills above 3,500 feet, an elevation at which the vegetation transitions to evergreens such as the balsam fir that serve as the home for the rare Bicknell's Thrush. There were 35 such peaks; four had to then be climbed a second time in the winter.

Even in the early 1960s, there were concerns that the challenge might bring too many people to the mountains. So the fledgling club went over the prospective list with the state Department of Environmental Conservation and decided that about half of the peaks would remain "untrailed": no marks, no blazes.

The idea was to leave these peaks alone so hikers could experience the "wild" and rely on their own navigational skills. The only sign of civilization would be canisters that the club attached to trees at the summits containing notebooks that hikers would sign to prove that they had arrived.

The only access to two untrailed peaks — Graham and Doubletop — was through private land, but the club arranged with the owners to allow hikers to call and ask for the OK to pass through.

Aside from the occasional misadventure or social faux pas, things went relatively smoothly for 58 years. Then came the pandemic, and people found themselves languishing, and in need of a project.

The trailed peaks of the Catskills saw the same crowds that so many outdoor spots did during early COVID: full trails and cars parked where they didn't belong. But the untrailed peaks took a particular beating. When you're not on the trail, every footfall crushes something. That wasn't much of an issue with limited numbers and everyone taking a different route. But when inexperienced hikers show up and all follow the same path, the effects are quickly visible.

The onslaught was particularly devastating at Graham and Doubletop, which now have trails because hikers tied ribbons to trees to create blazes. This led the landowners to ask themselves: Can a mountain be "wild" if there are people on it? Is there value in having places in the Catskills that are free of humans?

After discussions with the DEC, the Catskill 3500' Club and The Catskill Center, the landowners announced that their property was off limits. The 35 high peaks became 33. With crowdsourced trails now showing up elsewhere, the conversation has continued: Do the unmanaged Catskills need to be managed?

## MORE THAN A LIST

Even before the pandemic, the number of hikers in the Catskills had been steadily increasing for years. "We felt it was important, before it went any further, to start thinking about solutions," said Maria Bedo-Calhoun, a past president of the 3500' Club.

The DEC is conducting field research to determine if the untrailed peaks need a visitor management plan. By examining the canister notebooks, noting where informal trails have sprung up, and examining public GPS data that hikers had posted using apps such as All Trails and Strava, the DEC was able to establish a baseline of activity. While the study isn't complete, Pine Roehrs of the DEC, who is leading it, said it shows a significant increase in negative impacts on the peaks since an initial study was completed in 2019.

When planning trails, designers consider which routes will cause the least amount of erosion. They look at fragile, rare plants and nesting grounds for endangered species. They consider whether a rocky scramble is challenging but doable, or flat-out dangerous.

An inexperienced bushwhacker on a high peak is not going to take any of those things into consideration. Many simply make a beeline to the top, which tends to therefore be steep, leading to increased erosion as rainwater always finds the easiest route down. Roehrs said impacted areas are also seeing an increase in noxious, non-native species such as Japanese barberry and garlic mustard, which thrive in impacted soil, and the hemlock woolly adelgid, which may be hitching a ride on unsuspecting hikers.

Many rare and endangered mountain birds also build their nests on or close to the ground, making them vulnerable to hikers who aren't using a trail. In a cruel irony, Bicknell's Thrush, the bird that inspired the Catskill 3500' Club, is having one of its few habitats threatened by hikers attempting to qualify for

membership. Roehrs said that the DEC is planning a study in 2023 that will focus on the effect of encroachment on endangered and threatened bird species in the Catskills.

The DEC's report-in-progress will likely have recommendations for each of the untrailed peaks. For some, it's likely that no action will be taken. But on others, Bedo-Calhoun believes the agency will recommend a practice that is already being undertaken in the Adirondacks on its untrailed peaks: managed "herd" paths.

A herd path typically refers to an unplanned trail created by people and/or animals walking the same route. But if the DEC determines that, on peaks where multiple paths have formed, one path has less environmental impact, it may be designated as a "preferred informal trail" and hikers encouraged to use it. Meanwhile, the problematic informal trails can grow over.

Bedo-Calhoun says a nuclear option — closing the Catskills 3500' Club — would not be so simple. Members of other clubs pursue extreme challenges such as hiking all the high peaks in a month. Roehrs said two untrailed peaks that weren't part of any club challenge until the last few years have seen the most damage.

Perhaps, Bedo-Calhoun suggested, hikers have lost sight of what made completing a list of high peaks special in the first place: It requires you to spend a lot of time in a beloved place that has mystified and enchanted people for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Over the course of 39 (now 37) hikes, you come to know a place a little bit better, and learn how the peaks change throughout the seasons. You learn how to snowshoe and use a map, and what to do when you see a bear. You learn how to get yourself out of trouble, a lesson you can't learn unless you make mistakes that lead to trouble.

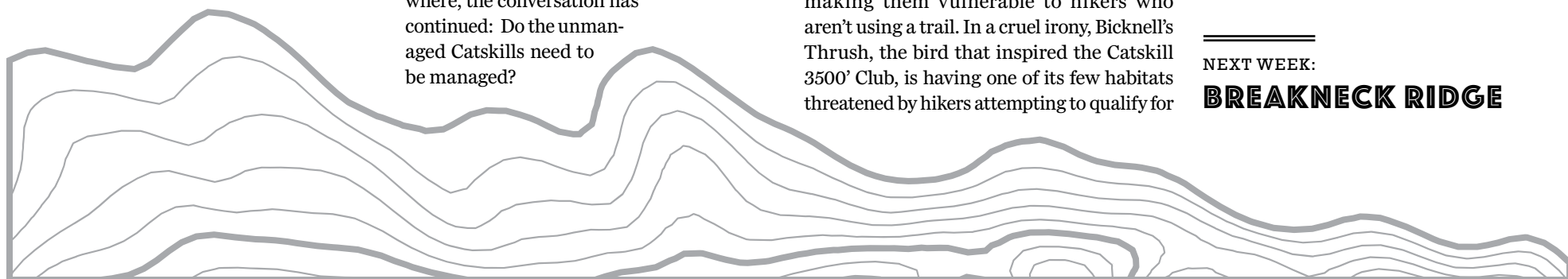
"You see such amazing transformations in people who have little experience hiking and gain confidence," Bedo-Calhoun said. "It's a love for nature, it's a love for the mountains, it's community, it's friendships. It is so much more than a list."

It's also a stark contrast to "peak-bagging" — the term usually used for mountain-climbing challenges — that suggests that summits are prey to be hunted, eliminated and bragged about.

If the untrailed high peaks of the Catskills have to be trailed, there will be benefits for wildlife, rare plants and safety. But many hikers will mourn the passing of, in Howell's words, the "wild charm and isolation" of nature without improvements.

NEXT WEEK:

**BREAKNECK RIDGE**





# The HIGHLANDS Current



Custom Scents  
Page 16

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## Electricity, Gas Rates Spike

Utilities forecast an expensive winter

By Leonard Sparks

Beacon and Philipstown residents will pay 57 percent more for electricity this month and both Central Hudson and the agency that oversees New York's grid warned that prices will likely remain high into the winter.

As of Tuesday (Sept. 13), local homeowners and renters are paying 13.06 cents per kilowatt-hour, up from 8.32 cents in August, and gas prices that took effect Sept. 1 rose by 12 percent, to 97.8 cents per hundred-cubic-feet.

Compared to September 2021, the rates are 65 percent higher for electricity and 154 percent higher for gas.

The pandemic shutdown in 2020 led to a 4 percent reduction in electricity use and record-low prices. But the average whole-

(Continued on Page 6)

### Central Hudson Rates

Electric*			
	2020	2021	2022
JAN.	5.9	5.8	10.5
MAY	4.4	4.4	6.1
SEPT.	5.1	7.9	13.0
DEC.	4.3	7.7	-

Gas**			
	2020	2021	2022
JAN.	42.6	36.2	55.7
MAY	31.0	41.7	64.2
SEPT.	20.7	38.5	97.8
DEC.	35.1	58.2	-

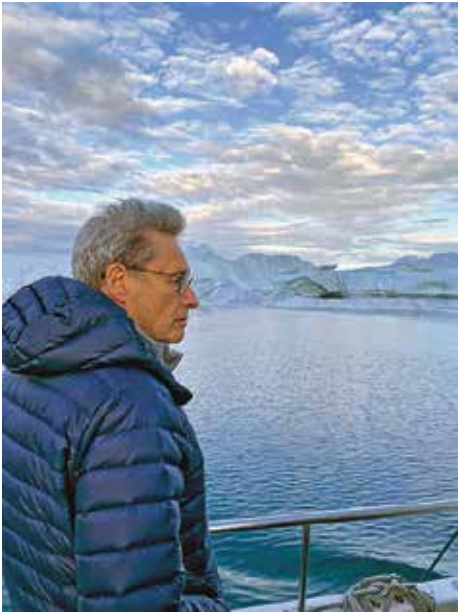
\*Price = cents per kilowatt hour  
\*\* Price = cents per hundred cubic feet

## Eight Days in Greenland

The effects of global warming, up close

By David Gelber

Editor's note: David Gelber, a Garrison resident and former 60 Minutes producer who now makes documentaries about climate change, arrived home on Sept. 7 after spending eight days in Greenland. While he was there, a spike in temperatures caused the first significant September melting event in recorded history, creating rushing rivers of runoff with enough water to flood Manhattan to the top of the Empire State Building. His report on the rapidly disappearing ice sheet will air on CBS News in November. In the meantime, he kept a journal for *The Current*.



Gelber in Greenland earlier this month  
Photo by Conny Fridh

**WEDNESDAY:** Landed in Nuuk, the capital (population 18,000), where the airport terminal was nearly deserted. I shared a cab with the cameraman (from Sweden), sound technician (from Greece) and a Danish nurse; she'd been coming here several times a year for two months at a time for more than 30 years to care for Inuit people in remote villages. I asked if any young Greenlanders travel to Denmark to study medicine. "Yes," she said, "but they don't come back to Greenland."

**THURSDAY:** There's a building boom in Nuuk, with construction cranes swiveling to and fro. Royal Arctic cargo ships in the harbor are packed with more cranes. I'm told the construction is mainly for Greenlanders who are leaving their villages because life is hard and the ice is soft, making it too dangerous to hunt with dog sleds. At the same time, farming has

(Continued on Page 9)

## Part 1 TRAILS (TOO) WELL TRAVELED

The outdoors is getting crowded.  
Do we need to ration recreation?

By Brian PJ Cronin

People have been drawn to Breakneck Ridge for as long as there have been people in the Hudson Highlands. The Native Americans referred to it as Matumpseck, which loosely translates as "bad rocks to climb." People have been breaking their necks for quite some time. To European settlers, and later the first Americans, Breakneck and Storm King Mountain were hailed as the "Wind Gate," the northern entrance to the High-

lands. When New York City's population swelled in the 19th century, its denizens looked for outdoor havens accessible by train. They explored Breakneck as part of organized hiking clubs, and in the 1920s and '30s were spurred by "The Long Brown Path," a daily column by Raymond Torrey in *The New York Evening Post*. Visitors (and locals) were lured by the climb and the view.

(Continued on Page 20)



A new trail and better signage at Breakneck has helped those who arrive unprepared get down the ridge.

Photo by B. Cronin

## Clerk Seeks Rights for Partners

Dutchess proposal has faced resistance in past

By Leonard Sparks

The Dutchess clerk would like to see the county allow residents and its employees to register as domestic partners if they have been living together for at least a year.

County Clerk Brad Kendall proposed legislation that was introduced in the Legislature on Monday (Sept. 12) that would give unmarried partners, including same-sex couples, the same rights as

spouses if they can show they are in a "close and continuous" relationship. The law would also cover Dutchess County employees, regardless of where they live, and mirror registries in nearby counties such as Putnam, which approved a domestic partner registry in 2008. Kendall, a Republican who has been county clerk since 2006, issued a statement on Sept. 9 calling attention to the legislation, which he had proposed to County Executive Marc Molinaro and Legislative Chair Gregg Pulver in May, sending along a draft of a Dutchess law based on one

(Continued on Page 6)



TRAILS (from Page 1)

Standing at the bottom of the ridge and looking up, the sheer, rocky climb seems impossible. But with sturdy footwear, comfortable clothing, two free hands, a clear head and patience, the impossible can be achieved. What awaits atop the three summits is even more empowering: stunning views of the Wind Gate, West Point, Bannerman’s Island and the Hudson River.

In the last decade, social media spread that view across the world, enticing increasing number of hikers. It has been less successful in conveying the risk. Hikers began arriving in flip-flops, intoxicated, in constrictive clothing, or without a backpack to keep hands free for the scramble.

Some, upon reaching the first summit, opted to climb down, ignoring a sign that said it was safer to keep going. Rescue crews made regular appearances. Instead of a printed map, many hikers relied on sites such as alltrails.com, which have been a major cause of the increase of unofficial “social” trails created when hikers who get lost or go off-trail upload their GPS data, leading others to think that the paths are the trail, rather than bushwhacks.

On summer weekends, Route 9D is lined with cars on both sides, along with crowds of hikers, much to the mounting frustration of residents, who take to social media to proclaim that the state should start limiting access to the trail, or close it altogether. One resident this year created a website at breakneckridge.org that tries to convince

people to hike elsewhere.

But conditions at Breakneck have been improving, in ways that aren’t immediately obvious from the road.

**“DISNEYLAND IN THE WOODS”**

Chris Morris started developing a visitor management plan for Breakneck Ridge shortly after he joined the state parks department in 2015. Usually, such a plan would conclude with recommended steps. But Morris says with growing crowds at Breakneck, the state paused the planning and took immediate action.

The most notable change has been the Ninham Trail, which opened last year. Named for the last leader of the Wappinger tribe, the trail is aimed at hikers who decide to bail. It starts at the first summit and gently winds back to Route 9D. It also provides an easier hike up.

While it’s not part of Breakneck, the report also found that the Mount Taurus trail that winds past the quarry had eroded to a sliver and went so close to the edge that some hikers were tempted to inch closer for a better look and ended up having to be rescued while clinging to the quarry wall. Recent work rerouted, stabilized and widened that trail. Improved signage, blazes and posted maps also have led to fewer lost hikers along Mount Taurus and Breakneck.

Then there’s the human infrastructure: trail stewards from the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference who hang out at Breakneck and other busy trailheads on weekends. The stewards chat up every hiker to figure

out if they know what they’re getting into. Evan Thompson, the manager for Hudson Highlands State Park, said that some of the people showing up at Breakneck in 2020 and 2021 had never hiked before — they just needed to get out of the house during the pandemic and Breakneck was the only hike they had ever heard of. Inexperienced hikers are gently directed to a less challenging trail.

Breakneck had days during the pandemic when more than 1,000 hikers showed up. Yet, with stewards directing foot traffic, rescues are down so far this year, and the number of hikers in 2021 was the lowest since counts began in 2013. Part of that, Thompson said, may be due to months of unusually high temperatures and high gas prices. But it could also be that many people have decided that the pandemic is over. “People are traveling more,” Thompson said. “Instead of going hiking, they’re going shopping or going to the movies or whatever they used to do.”

One advantage of Breakneck being the most popular trail on the East Coast is that its rocky geology can withstand the traffic. “It’s not going to erode,” said Thompson. “You’re walking on granite.”

But that doesn’t mean the experience is ideal.

“It’s like Disneyland in the woods,” said Hank Osborn, a Philipstown native who is director of programs for the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. “The trail can handle it. But being mobbed with hundreds of other people right around you for your entire experience is not what most people are looking for.”

Osborn said he prefers to discuss “increased use” of local trails rather than “overuse,” since the latter usually is defined by trail erosion. But other factors have to be taken into consideration, such as parking, if there’s room on the trail for hikers to spread out and the ability of nearby communities to handle the influx. There’s also the fact that not every hiker has the same impact. “One hundred hikers who are less educated in responsible recreation will do more damage than 100 who are,” said Morris.

While trail stewards at Breakneck have decreased the number of inexperienced hikers who get lost or injured, the long-term goal isn’t to turn them away. “Providing the right information to visitors is the solution to combating the threats from increased use,” said Osborn. “Threats to local communities, threats to nature and threats to themselves.”

Efforts to ease crowding and accidents at Breakneck may have been occurring “behind the scenes” over the past few years, but a project intended to continue that progress is ready to break ground and will be harder to miss.



The Ninham Trail offers a gentler descent from the first summit of Breakneck Ridge.  
Photo by B. Cronin



Erik Kulleseid (left), the commissioner of state parks, examines stone steps on the Ninham Trail built by the volunteer Jolly Rovers trail crew.  
NYS Parks

time, the growing crowds at Breakneck had outpaced the plan’s goals. Route 9D was clogged with hikers, as were the streets of Cold Spring as hikers arrived by train. Some hikers went beyond Breakneck to get a better view of Bannerman’s Castle and ended up on private property (and in some cases, porches). And despite the state’s insistence that no swimming is allowed at Little Stony Point, people continue to enter the water, leading to occasional drownings because of the unexpected current and a sudden drop-off. What if the Fjord Trail could address all of these problems?

In April 2020, during the early weeks of the pandemic shutdown, the Fjord Trail was reintroduced as a more robust project with its own nonprofit under the wing of Scenic Hudson, and input from such groups as the Lenape Center, the Little Stony Point Citizens

BREAKNECK VISITORS

	Total Hikers	Most in One Day	Days w/ 1,000+	Turned Away
2013	26,172 (1)	711	0	300
2014	26,743	1,426	2	392
2015	33,872	1,755	14	470
2016	35,570	1,522	22	528
2017	38,714	1,697	28	512
2018	33,700	1,469	13	539
2019	44,312	2,091	18	564
2020	47,161 (2)	2,095	20	628
2021	23,428	1,033	1	94

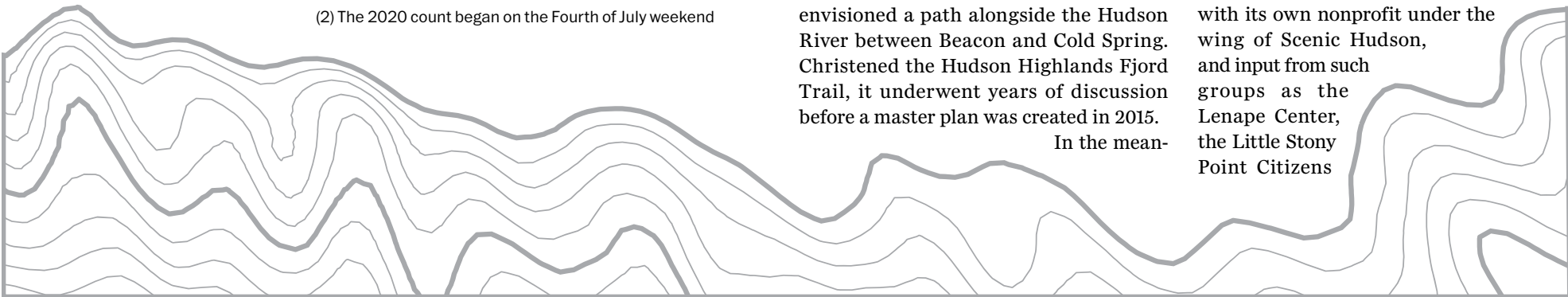
Source: New York-New Jersey Trail Conference steward counts from Memorial Day weekend through Columbus Day

(1) The 2013 figure is extrapolated from a 7-day count  
(2) The 2020 count began on the Fourth of July weekend

**NOT JUST FOR TOURISTS**

Fifteen years ago, a group of residents envisioned a path alongside the Hudson River between Beacon and Cold Spring. Christened the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail, it underwent years of discussion before a master plan was created in 2015.

In the mean-





Association, state parks and the Hudson Highlands Land Trust. Among other provisions, the trail plans to lead hikers out of the Cold Spring train station to Little Stony Point, largely bypassing the village while providing the bathrooms and trash collection by Dockside that the village sorely lacks.

Organizers say the trail will offer better views of Bannerman's Castle and provide attractions that spread out foot traffic. A sanctioned swimming area will be constructed at Little Stony Point in an area currently overrun with invasive species.

The largest part is the one due to break ground soon: the Breakneck Connector, which will include two parking lots between Route 9D and the river and a pedestrian bridge over the tracks that will be accessible to hikers with disabilities. "That is going to be a huge improvement for that trailhead," said Morris. "For the major issues that we've seen, the parking and safety along the corridor with hikers arriving, that's just going to be phenomenal."

Morris thinks the Fjord Trail will probably pull people off Breakneck who would prefer a "front country" — rather than back country — experience. But some Highlands residents are asking: Could the trail prove to be so popular that it ends up making the overcrowding problem worse?

### "THIS IS NOT YANKEE STADIUM"

Pete Salmansohn is an outdoor educator who, among other volunteer positions, has served as a trail steward at Breakneck and elsewhere. After seeing the crowds up close, he said he is not convinced that the Fjord Trail, as envisioned, will help.

"I just don't think that Cold Spring can handle more people," he said. "You don't have to be a genius to see what happens to other regional tourist attractions, like Walkway Over the Hudson [in Poughkeepsie], or the Highline [in New York City], to know that Cold Spring is too small for this. It will radically upset the small, rural town that we have."

He points to the emphasis on hikers using the Metro-North station lot, which is free on weekends. "There would be a continual flow of cars up and down Main Street," he said. "This is not Yankee Stadium."

Salmansohn thinks that eliminating the portion of the trail between Cold Spring and Breakneck would solve the majority of the problems, as would a permit system at Breakneck. (Both Thompson and Morris said a permit system would be impractical because the ridge has too many access points.) And despite the plan for new parking lots, the proposal would still allow visitors to park along Route 9D.

"For a multi-gazillion-dollar project to allow parking on 9D is nuts," Salmansohn said. "It's dangerous, ludicrous and self-sabotaging."



A rendering of the proposed Fjord Trail bridge at Breakneck

HHFT



Joined by elected officials, about 125 residents gathered at Chalet on the Hudson in October 2014 to review a route map for the Fjord Trail.

File photo

Amy Kacala, the executive director of the Fjord Trail, said that parking on 9D will be limited to parallel spots on the east side of the highway and will include a crosswalk and reserved spaces for emergency responders. The strategy is to allow the state Department of Transportation to lower the speed limit near Breakneck from 55 mph to 40 mph, she said.



Kacala

The critiques from residents are not new to Kacala, as the Fjord Trail has been making presentations this year to the public and elected officials. "We can't say that this isn't going to draw more people," she said. "However, they're already here. To do nothing doesn't seem

like a reasonable answer. I haven't heard an alternate scenario for how visitation will be managed without the Fjord Trail."

The trail, she said, fits into Cold Spring's comprehensive plan and will help solve issues that the village and the state parks department don't have the resources to deal with, such as trash collection, restrooms and swimming at Little Stony Point. "This project is implementing the vision the community had for itself," she said.

The trail will ultimately serve locals more than tourists, as the locals will be able to easily access the trail every day, she said. And it will add amenities such as public swimming and outdoor activities suitable for older residents and provide access points for paddlers, she said. "It's just another way people are interacting with the space," she said. "One of the key goals of the trail is to reconnect people with the river. From the land side, you're physically and visually being connected to the river

## WHY THIS SERIES

Over the past two years, many state and national parks have set visitation records. In one sense, this is good news. The emotional, physical, mental and spiritual benefits of spending time outside have been exhaustively documented. But many parks found out the hard way that they were not ready to handle the crowds and are asking themselves some difficult questions such as:

How to best balance preservation with access? Can we make sure, in providing access, that we don't destroy what makes the site special? Is there such a thing as a mutually beneficial relationship between hikers and the outdoors? How much "wild" do people want in their wilderness experiences? Are humans separate from the natural experience, or an integral part of it?

In Part 1 (Sept. 2), we looked at the problem of Indian Brook Falls in Garrison, and the collateral damage that occurs when a once-secluded spot becomes internet-famous.

In Part 2 (Sept. 9), we looked at how and why trails in the Highlands were created — and what might have been instead — as well as what happens when unmanaged wilderness suddenly needs to be managed.

Both stories are posted at [highlandscurrent.org](http://highlandscurrent.org).

through the project. From the water, you're able to touch the lands a bit."

Kacala said the concern about even larger crowds is based on a belief that the visitors will bunch up in Cold Spring. "I don't see that as how it will play out," she said, in part because the trail will be 7.5 miles long.

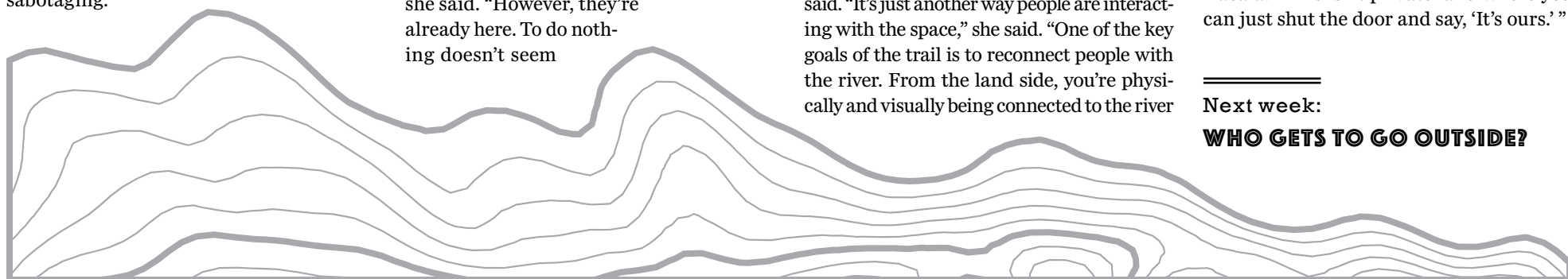
Osborn, who has been involved with the trail planning since its earliest days, thinks the completed project will win over skeptics. "Through traffic and parking management, to intelligent and sustainable trail design, the local communities will soon realize the tremendous benefits of all the years of careful planning," he said.

"We're all lucky to live in this area," said Thompson. "Does it create some problems? Yes. But that's why we're trying to work on the problem so that everybody can be happy."

Even if any project that draws people to the Highlands will make somebody who lives here unhappy, "this is a matter of equity and the value of public space," said Kacala. "This isn't private land where you can just shut the door and say, 'It's ours.'"

Next week:

**WHO GETS TO GO OUTSIDE?**





# The HIGHLANDS Current

Cabaret  
at the  
Depot  
Page 11



SEPTEMBER 23, 2022

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Groups such as Latino Outdoors work to get more people of color, such as these hikers in Fahnestock State Park, into the outdoors. Photo provided

Part 

## TRAILS (TOO) WELL TRAVELED

*The outdoors is getting crowded.  
Do we need to ration recreation?*

By Brian PJ Cronin

Alma Padilla grew up in West Texas. Her family didn't go camping or hiking. "The perception was that out there it's the desert, it's dangerous, there's scorpions and black widows," she said. But she was still drawn to nature and spent as much time as possible outside, even if it was just her backyard. In college, she followed her passions by studying ecology and biology, as well as exploring the outdoor activities

she didn't get to do as a kid. "It's very peaceful, and even if you sit still in one place you can see so much," she said. She prefers to take her hikes slowly. "I don't mind if we don't travel far, as long as I can stop and look at everything and see what it is. It stimulates your brain in a healthy way. It's not overstimulating, the way digital screens can be." Today, Padilla is a field biologist at the (Continued on Page 18)

## Haldane Ponders Next Big Project

*Board hears ideas for campus master plan*

By Joey Asher

What capital improvements does Haldane need to improve the student experience and be competitive with nearby schools? That was the question being asked at the Tuesday (Sept. 20) meeting of the school board. For example, should the district build a performing arts auditorium? Haldane is one of the few schools in the area without a dedicated space, the board was told by representatives from CSArch, a Newburgh architecture firm it hired to prepare a campus master plan. Or should it build a center with a cafeteria and space for students to socialize and collaborate? Or how about faculty bathrooms? And where can they put these buildings without conflict with residents whose

(Continued on Page 3)



**ORANGE RUSH** — The pumpkins have arrived at Vera's Marketplace & Garden Center on Route 9 in Philipstown, although co-owner Dominic Giordano says it's a challenge to know when to bring them in. "People start asking, but you can't get them too early because they don't hold up as well in warm weather," he says. "With all the plants we lost in the drought, they do add some color." Photo by Joanne Giordano

## Shopping for Health Care

*Hospital prices can be hard to access and decipher*

By Leonard Sparks

Need a colonoscopy? Whether someone is insured or uninsured, Montefiore St. Luke's Cornwall in Newburgh will cost the least and Putnam Hospital Center in Carmel the most. NewYork-Presbyterian Hudson Valley Hospital in Cortlandt Manor is a relative bargain, although the price negotiated for patients covered by United Health is more than twice the standard charge. Local hospitals are generally complying with a federal mandate to publicize prices for procedures and services, although patients will sometimes be confronted with incomplete or mind-numbing amounts of data. The Hospital Price Transparency Rule, which went into effect in January 2021, requires hospitals to post a "machine-readable" file of standard charges, as well

(Continued on Page 8)



**NewburghOPENstudios.org**  
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# NO BARRIERS

The predominant feature of the Breakneck Connector project, which is scheduled to break ground soon as part of the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail, is a bridge that will lead people from the parking lots to Breakneck and the trail.

While the Metropolitan Transportation Authority has a pedestrian bridge over the tracks, it isn't compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Amy Kacala, the executive director of the Fjord Trail, said that the new bridge will reflect the ethos of opening the outdoors to everyone, including the elderly and the disabled.

The trail's original design was much less inclusive, she said. "It was aimed at a young, fit hiker, who you were funneling safely from point A to point B," she said. "This is about looking at the larger landscape, including aging in place. Age, or ability, shouldn't be a limitation to people's ability to be outside."

The proposed bridge has drawn criticism from some residents, who wonder how many physically disabled

people will need access to Breakneck. Avi Golden, who leads a group called NYC Outdoors Disability with nearly 2,000 members, says they may be surprised.



Golden

Golden was working as a paramedic and attending medical school when he had a stroke while undergoing surgery. It left him with aphasia, a disorder that makes it difficult to communicate, and hemiparesis, which made it hard to move the right side of his body. It took months of physical therapy until he could walk with a cane, and many more months until he could move his right arm.

Aphasia has its variations. But for Golden, it means that while he can understand what others are saying, and knows what he would like to say in return, getting the right words out is difficult. For example, his speech therapist might ask him to say "dog," but when Golden responds it comes out as "cat."

Today, Golden gives talks to medical professionals about aphasia and how to best help people suffering from strokes, while volunteering as an EMT. As a leader of NYC Outdoors Disability, he helps people with disabilities ranging from amputation to sensory



The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference maintains a 1.3-mile loop at Bear Mountain that includes a 0.4-mile section that is handicapped-accessible and extends to a scenic viewpoint.

Photo by Jeremy Apgar/NYNJTC

disorders get outside and accomplish things that they never thought possible, including skydiving, skiing, scuba diving, surfing and rock climbing.

While the group still gets a few quizzical stares from onlookers who don't understand why, for example, someone in a wheelchair would be attempting to golf, Golden said that 95 percent of the people they encounter are helpful. "They say 'I'm sorry. I did not know that you are disabled.' And then we'll walk together."

A speech disorder such as aphasia

may not seem like a barrier to getting outdoors, but Golden remembers how hard that first year was for him, and how getting back outside helped. Speaking may still be tough, but when he meets someone with a disability such as his, he knows what to say.

"People who have aphasia, a lot of people are scared or crying a lot," he said. "I say, 'Look, I know it's sad and lonely. But don't worry. No. 1, work with a speech therapist every day. No. 2, how about we go do disability sports and have a good time?'"

## TRAILS *(from Page 1)*

Teatown Reservation in Ossining, where she lives after 10 years in the Bronx. She's knowledgeable about the outdoors from a professional and recreational standpoint and jokes that she's usually "in the uniform": Chaco hiking sandals, a Camelbak backpack and other outdoor brands. But she still often sticks out when outside, because she is always the only Latina on her field crew. She said other hikers stared at her when they heard her speaking Spanish, in ways that made her uncomfortable.

"Safety is a legitimate concern," she said. "If you're outside, and you're the only person of color, there are places where you won't feel safe. And places where you won't be safe."

Those in charge of parks and other outdoor recreation areas, locally and nationally, are tasked with finding a balance between providing access to nature and making sure those areas don't get so overwhelmed with visitors that they end up "loved to death," full of eroded trails, litter and lost hikers.

But they also have started to look at who is in the crowds, which tend to be largely white. How can they overcome barriers that keep Black and Hispanic people, as well as the elderly and disabled, out of the outdoors? If access has to be limited to protect an environment, is everyone's access equally limited?

### MOVE ALONG

The National Parks have been called "America's best idea," a hallmark of an egalitarian society in which access to the outdoors was available for all, not just wealthy landowners. Figures such as John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt are hailed as heroes of conservation for helping to create the park system.

But Muir and Roosevelt also expressed disdain for the people who were already living on what became America's parks. The first white people to see the Yosemite Valley were members of an armed militia that drove out the Miwok peoples. The area of Central Park in Manhattan near the West 80s was once Seneca Village, a community of predominantly Black landowners. The

city took their land via eminent domain, dispersing the former owners.

U.S. history is rife with similar examples of times when, under the pretense of conservation, people of color have been removed. In recent years, the environmental movement has begun to grapple with this legacy. In 2020 The Sierra Club, which was founded by Muir, distanced itself from some of his beliefs, including that the American West was an untouched, pristine wilderness, ignoring the Indigenous civilizations that had lived there for thousands of years. (Muir urged Roosevelt to move them along.)

"There is a dark underside here that will not be erased by just saying Muir was a racist," Richard White, a historian at Stanford University, has observed. "It is not just Muir who was racist. The way we created the wilderness areas we now rightly prize was racist."

The resistance to "outsiders" can be subtle.

Breakneck Ridge, the busiest trail on the East Coast, owes part of its popularity to the Metro-North stop across the road. Chris Morris of the state parks department, who has been working on a visitor management plan for Breakneck, noted that is unusual. "It's a diverse place because of that," said Morris. "It draws a lot of people from different backgrounds and different ethnicities to come there and recreate. I love it for that reason."

The Village of Cold Spring and the Town of Philipstown have been less enthusiastic. The Metropolitan Transportation Authority closed the station when ridership plunged during the pandemic shutdown, and elected officials in both locales urged the agency to keep it closed indefinitely. But outdoor managers point out that mass transit, in addition to being a more climate-friendly option than driving, disproportionately affects Black and Hispanic people

*(Continued on Page 19)*

**GG** Safety is a legitimate concern. If you're outside, and you're the only person of color, there are places where you won't feel safe. And places where you won't be safe.

~ ALMA PADILLA





The SHRED Foundation, founded in Beacon, takes teenagers snowboarding who may not otherwise have access to outdoor recreation.

*Photos provided*

when it's closed, since they are statistically more likely to be poor and less likely to have access to vehicles.

With the station open, visitors to Breakneck are "more reflective of the makeup of our region and the area where we live," said Hank Osborn, a Philipstown native who is director of programs for the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference. "We're reaching out to groups that may have traditionally been underrepresented in the outdoor experience and then providing information for how to get them into the woods, into nature and onto the trail."

Many outdoor recreation groups hope that if they can provide new hikers with the information they need to enjoy themselves in a safe and sustainable way, they will fall in love with the places they visit and want to care for them.

"I'm a strong believer that if you get people outdoors, and you get them to enjoy nature, and you can educate them, that they then develop a recreational ethic," said Morris. "They're more passionate and they're more respectful of nature."

"It leads to stewardship, which is what we want, right?" said Padilla. "We want as many people taking care of these public lands as we can, like 'This is my park, I'm going to help keep it clean, I'm going to help fight invasive species.'"



Danny Harriston

*Photo by Matt Petricone*

She pointed to a 2019 study by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication that found that Latinos and Blacks are more likely to be alarmed or concerned about global warming than whites. That same survey found Latinos ranking global warming as important an issue as immigration, and ranking environmental protection more important than both.

As the climate crisis intensifies, public

lands and the environment both need all the help they can get, which is why Alma Padilla knew she had to make sure she was no longer the only Latino person she saw when she went outdoors.

"I knew that my community was out there," she said. "I just didn't know where."

### CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Danny Harriston was working for a youth development nonprofit in Brooklyn when a co-worker asked him to chaperone some teenagers on a snowboarding trip.

"I said, 'I'm a Black guy from Ohio, I don't know anything about snowboarding,'" he recalled.

He decided to go, he said, because he was dating a woman who grew up in Vermont and if he learned how to snowboard they could do it as a couple.

The trip changed the trajectory of his life. First, Harriston married the Vermont snowboarder. (The couple lives in Beacon.) Second, watching the transformation that the teens underwent on the mountain that day changed how he thought about youth development.

"When you're dealing with kids from inner-city communities, a lot of them don't get a chance to just be kids," he said. "A lot of them live in single-parent households where their mother is working one or two jobs. They have to grow up quick."

Snowboarding, he said, gave them a chance to have fun with something new. But snowboarding is hard, especially at first. You fall down a lot. But with instruction and

## WHY THIS SERIES

Over the past two years, many state and national parks have set visitation records. In one sense, this is good news. The emotional, physical, mental and spiritual benefits of spending time outside have been exhaustively documented. But many parks found out the hard way that they were not ready to handle the crowds and are asking themselves some difficult questions such as:

How to best balance preservation with access? Can we make sure, in providing access, that we don't destroy what makes the site special? Is there such a thing as a mutually beneficial relationship between hikers and the outdoors? How much "wild" do people want in their wilderness experiences? Are humans separate from the natural experience, or an integral part of it?

In Part 1 (Sept. 2), we looked at the problem of Indian Brook Falls in Garrison, and the collateral damage that occurs when a once-secluded spot becomes internet-famous.

In Part 2 (Sept. 9), we looked at how and why trails in the Highlands were created — and what might have been instead — as well as what happens when unmanaged wilderness suddenly needs to be managed.

In Part 3 (Sept. 16), we looked at how recent changes at Breakneck Ridge have led to fewer visitors and rescues, and what the Fjord Trail could mean for the future of the Highlands.

All three stories are posted at [highlandscurrent.org](https://highlandscurrent.org).

practice, it can be mastered, just as other challenges can be overcome. "I told the kids, 'We took you outside of your comfort zone. You've never seen anything outside of your community. But you were able to do this. So let's think about some of the other things that you don't think you can do and help you put the same sort of effort into that.'"

In 2015, while working at a Poughkeepsie middle school, Harriston took eight teens to Vermont and maxed out his credit card to give them a day on the slopes. The SHRED Foundation was born.

An acronym for Snowboarders & Skaters Helping Reimagine Education, SHRED has become Harriston's full-time job. Every year he takes dozens of students from the Hudson Valley and Albany to the slopes.

Without SHRED, it's likely the kids would never get to experience snowboarding. For one, the slopes are far away and unreachable by public transportation. There's the prohibitive cost of equipment rentals and lift tickets. And many of the teens assume, as Harriston did, that snowboarding isn't for them.

"We're not seeing too much representation in the outdoor industry, especially

*(Continued on Page 20)*



**TRAILS** (from Page 19)

snowboarding,” he said. “Snowboarding is a homogenous industry. Mostly white, mostly male. When you don’t see representation in that space, the community seems like something that isn’t for us.”

“Even when I go and I promote the program, there’s been several individuals within agencies who say: ‘Well, we’re Black folks, we don’t snowboard, that’s not something that we do.’”

Harriston pointed out that tennis and golf were seen the same way until Arthur Ashe, Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters came along.

He said that while few if any of the teens he mentors will become professional snowboarders, their time on the slopes may inspire them to pursue a career where they can be outside.

“The kids realize, ‘I might be interested in being a park ranger or an outdoor educator,’” he said. “Or, ‘Maybe I could work for a company like Patagonia or Potter Brothers.’ As you start seeing some diversity in the workforce, what happens is that those individuals are able to articulate what the outdoors can mean and look like for individuals of color. That’s what changes the narrative in those communities that ‘this type of activity isn’t for us.’”

Harriston suggested that the next time someone white hits the slopes or the trails, that person invite a friend who isn’t white. Without more Black and Hispanic faces on

the trails or in the woods, he said, people “look around at who’s out there and who’s not and think, ‘Well, maybe they just don’t like doing it.’”

**REDEFINING NATURE**

Alma Padilla found her community the same way many people do: She went online.

In 2013, José González started a blog called Latino Outdoors. At first, it was a way to connect Latinos in California interested in outdoor recreation. Today, Latino Outdoors has chapters all over the country.

Padilla leads the chapter in the Hudson Valley. It’s the second one she’s helped create after she reached out to González in 2017 when she was living in the Bronx and launched a chapter there. The group ran into familiar challenges in New York City: lack of access to parks and transportation. So she started with birdwatching, community gardening and writing workshops.

“We tried to show people that there’s nature in the city, too,” she said. “People think, ‘Oh I have to go to a grandiose place to have a great nature experience.’” Eventually they added camping and hiking, activities she continued with the Hudson Valley chapter.

Among the barriers the group has encountered: Signage at trailheads is often only in English. During the pandemic, the parking at Teatown Reservation overflowed and the police were often called. The reservation responded by doubling its parking rates. That led to a further lack in the diversity among visitors to the site



Alma Padilla

Photo provided

which, she says, was already far less diverse than the population in the surrounding community of Ossining.

On the other hand, Padilla understands the need to address overcrowding. “Land managers are already stressed,” she said. “They don’t have enough staff or resources. So how do you balance it? People are going to keep coming, and illegal use of the lands is even more damaging.”

To help with overcrowding, her chapter has been following “Trails Less Traveled” recommendations issued by the state Department of Environmental Conservation that encourage hikers to visit spots that aren’t as popular as Breakneck Ridge or Rockefeller State Park Preserve in Westchester County.

The chapter has also partnered with organizations such as The Nature Conservancy to provide free bus and van transportation and identify trails that hikers can reach without a car. She said she is excited about what the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail, which will connect Beacon and Cold Spring, will bring to members of underserved communities who otherwise don’t have access to the outdoors.

By bringing more people outdoors, teaching them how to recreate responsibly, and getting them involved with conservation, she’s hoping that Latino Outdoors can demonstrate that a more diverse outdoor community creates a stronger outdoor community for everyone.

“We can’t afford to say, ‘No, we’re not going to engage this community, it’s too much effort,’” she said. “We need everybody on board. There’s no time to waste in addressing all these environmental problems.”

This series was funded by readers who contribute to our Special Projects Fund ([highlandscurrent.org/donate](https://highlandscurrent.org/donate)).

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