



Connecting People with Nature since 1920

# New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

## Better Outdoor Opportunities Through Stewardship (BOOTS)

### Trail Steward Program 2017 End of Season Summary

- Appalachian Trail
- Breakneck Ridge
- Catskill Forest Preserve



Prepared by:  
Hank Osborn, Senior Program Coordinator  
Sona Mason, West Hudson Program Coordinator  
Sabina Cardenas, Head Catskill Steward



## Overuse and misuse of the region's most popular outdoor destinations are threatening the ecological integrity of these special places.



Peekamoose Blue Hole in the Catskills is a victim of its own popularity. (Photo credit: NYS DEC)

The New York metropolitan area is the most densely populated region in the country. With nearly 20 million people in the tri-state area, the most widely known hiking destinations are being overwhelmed with traffic, year after year. Popular trails like the Appalachian Trail at Bear Mountain were not originally designed or built to handle the enormous number of visitors.

Other destinations, like Giant Ledge and Slide Mountain in the Catskills, feature fragile summit ecologies that are in danger of irreparable damage from the increasing volume of users and illegal overnight camping.

Meanwhile, at popular front-country destinations such as Peekamoose Blue Hole, thousands of people are overwhelming this unique feature and negatively impacting the landscape. Visitors demonstrate a lack of understanding of Leave No Trace principles, which has led to a significant amount of litter and environmental damage. It has gotten so bad that the Blue Hole was identified as a Leave No Trace Hot Spot in 2017. A Hot Spot is a “natural area that is being negatively impacted by recreational use” and is “facing the threat of irreversible environmental damage.” In other words, the Blue Hole has now been nationally recognized as a place in danger of being loved to death.

In the Hudson Highlands, Breakneck Ridge—named a 2018 Hot Spot—is another location facing the threat of erosion and ecological damage from a tremendous amount of use. Not only do an estimated 100,000 hikers arrive each year looking to challenge themselves on the rocky scramble to the summit, but Breakneck has also been voted the most popular hike in North America.



**The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference is responding to this problem by working to create better outdoor experiences through user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions.**

The Trail Conference is taking a leadership role in coordinating stewardship efforts to keep up with growing threats. To help mitigate the negative impacts from overuse and educate users, the Trail Conference has partnered with land managers to begin a multi-phased approach on the Appalachian Trail, at Breakneck Ridge, and in the Catskills. It is our belief that the most effective way to advance change is through user education, public participation, and sustainable, on-the-ground solutions. **Our Trail Steward program is an integral part of our response to these threats.**

When used responsibly, trails protect both the people who use them and the environment that surrounds them—but without education, trail lands are subject to mistreatment and misuse. With lead support from REI and generous contributions from the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Catskill 3500 Club, Catskill Mountain Club, Hunter Foundation, Mountain Tops, Dutchess County Tourism, Michelle Smith, and Seamus Carroll, **the Trail Conference’s Trail Steward Program educated and assisted nearly 88,400 trail users about safe, responsible, and enjoyable use of trails during 2017.**

From spring to fall, Trail Stewards were deployed at four parks in New York State: in Hudson Highlands State Park at Breakneck Ridge; in the Catskill Forest Preserve on the summits of Slide, Giant Ledge, North Point, and Blackhead, and at the popular Peekamoose Blue Hole; at Bear Mountain State Park on the Appalachian Trail; and at the Reeves Meadow trailhead in Harriman State Park. **Stewards provided outreach and information about park regulations, hiker safety, preparedness, and other best practices. In addition to readying hikers, Stewards helped discourage and mitigate misuse of trails and the surrounding lands through their education and public relations work.**

In partnership with each land manager, we were also able to leverage our presence at these popular locations to conduct a Trail User Survey. Stewards collected 303 survey responses in September and October. A Trail Conference volunteer with a doctorate in global affairs—sociological concentration offered her expertise to analyze the data collected and identify unique aspects of the hiking experience in the Hudson Valley. We found that roughly half of the respondents were first-time visitors to their respective parks. Gender had nearly equal representation, and two-thirds said they were between the ages of 18-45. **Understanding more about trail users, their expectations, interests, and other key data enables the Trail Conference and its partners to be better prepared to support and educate the public.**

**STEWARD PROGRAM:  
BY THE NUMBERS**

**IN 2017**

**88,329**  
VISITORS EDUCATED & ASSISTED BY THE STEWARDS IN ALL LOCATIONS

**50,288**  
VISITORS COUNTED AT BREAKNECK RIDGE

**28,556**  
VISITORS COUNTED AT BEAR MOUNTAIN

**9,485**  
VISITORS COUNTED IN THE CATSKILLS



## In Harriman-Bear Mountain state parks, the presence of Trail Conference Stewards reinforces the outreach and education efforts of the Bear Mountain Trails Project.

Harriman and Bear Mountain state parks, straddling Orange and Rockland counties in New York, receive millions of visitors each year from an extremely diverse array of cultures and backgrounds. Due to the high volume of hikers, some of the popular trails and destinations they connect with have been negatively impacted. The Appalachian Trail at Bear Mountain was an eroded, washed-out, 10-foot-wide scar on the side of the mountain. Hikers were getting lost, creating social trails, and littering the mountain with trash. These conditions came to a head in 2004, and the Trail Conference and its partners—the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, National Park Service, New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and Palisades Interstate Park Commission—initiated the Bear Mountain Trails Project: a multifaceted approach to providing an on-the-ground solution for a high-use destination that requires educational components to better inform and prepare visitors.

The Bear Mountain Trails Project includes the most ambitious trail restoration project ever conducted on the Appalachian Trail. The Trail Conference is in the final year of designing and building a hardened trail all the way up the mountain—one constructed to handle the more than 100,000 visitors who make this climb annually. To complement our work on the tread itself, the Trail Conference designed and built the *Trails for People* exhibit at the foot of Bear Mountain. *Trails for People* is the first outdoor interpretive exhibit aimed at teaching park visitors how trails are made. Visitors learn about the history of the Appalachian Trail, the park, and the Trail Conference’s nearly 100-year legacy of empowering volunteers to improve the outdoor experience for everyone. In 2018, the planning phase for additional indoor exhibits celebrating Bear Mountain as the birthplace of the Appalachian Trail will commence.

To help reinforce the messaging of the *Trails for People* exhibit, seasonal Trail Stewards have been stationed at the junction of the Appalachian, Major Welch, and Suffern-Bear Mountain trails, located at the foot of Bear Mountain, since 2016.

Appalachian Trail & Reeves Meadow  
Harriman-Bear Mountain State Parks  
Orange & Rockland Counties, N.Y.



To solve overuse and misuse issues on trails at Bear Mountain, the Trail Conference has rebuilt and restored the Appalachian Trail—including the construction of an accessible section of the Trail—and built an interpretive trailside exhibit, both part of the multifaceted Bear Mountain Trails Project. (Photo credit: Jeremy Apgar; Amber Ray)



Trail Conference Stewards familiarize Bear Mountain visitors to the concepts of safe and responsible hiking and front-country wilderness stewardship. Stewards evaluate hikers' preparedness and recommend nearby hiking opportunities and routes. They also encourage the use of trails in areas of the park that are not as heavily used. They teach Leave No Trace principles and hand trash bags to groups carrying disposable containers.

The Stewards work at recruiting these visitors as trail stewards in their own right. The Trail Conference builds, maintains, and protects more than 2,150 miles of trails, which are cared for by a volunteer force of over 2,400 outdoor-loving people. Our Stewards aim to plant the seed of responsibility—everyone who enjoys these trails has a role to play in caring for them—and work to cultivate volunteers who are motivated to give back.

The 2017 Steward program in Harriman-Bear Mountain state parks ran from May 27 through Oct. 29. Seven Stewards were selected and trained, with two on duty each Saturday, Sunday, and holiday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., (9 a.m. to 5 p.m. later in the season), for a total of 48 days.

At the park's request, we reassigned two Stewards for two weekends to another site of concern, Reeves Meadow, which had been highlighted in the media as a problem area. Two Stewards greeted visitors to Reeves Meadow at the trailhead parking area on Seven Lakes Drive in Harriman State Park on July 15-16 and Aug. 5-6. They interacted with the public to address heightened concerns about illegal swimming, camping, and trash dumping.

In September and October, 87 visitors responded to the Trail User Survey administered by the Stewards at Bear Mountain. One-third of the visitors were 46 or older, and the majority of respondents said they went to Bear Mountain to enjoy family time. Litter was named as the biggest issue.

**Making a Difference:  
Trail Conference  
Stewards on the  
Appalachian Trail**

**IN 2017**

**28,556**  
VISITORS COUNTED  
ASCENDING THE A.T.

**23,839**  
VISITORS ASSISTED

**1,502**  
MOST VISITORS  
COUNTED IN ONE DAY

**542**  
AVERAGE NUMBER OF  
VISITORS ASSISTED  
PER DAY

**210**  
PEOPLE SENT TO  
ALTERNATIVE  
DESTINATIONS

**6**  
DAYS WITH MORE  
THAN 1,000 HIKERS  
COUNTED



## At Breakneck Ridge—named the most popular hiking destination in the country—Trail Conference Stewards have delivered much-needed services that would not otherwise be available to the public.

Breakneck Ridge in Putnam and Dutchess counties' Hudson Highlands State Park may be the most popular hiking destination in North America. In a survey among hikers on Trails.com, it received more than 10 million votes—more than hikes in Acadia or Yosemite national parks. As a consequence of its popularity, however, rugged and beautiful Breakneck Ridge is at risk of being damaged beyond repair.

Over the past 5 years, the number of visitors at Breakneck Ridge has increased at an alarming rate—it is estimated that more than 100,000 people climb this mountain each year. Factors including social media, word of mouth, easy public transit access, and population density in the greater New York metropolitan region have created a perfect storm for trail overuse and environmental degradation.

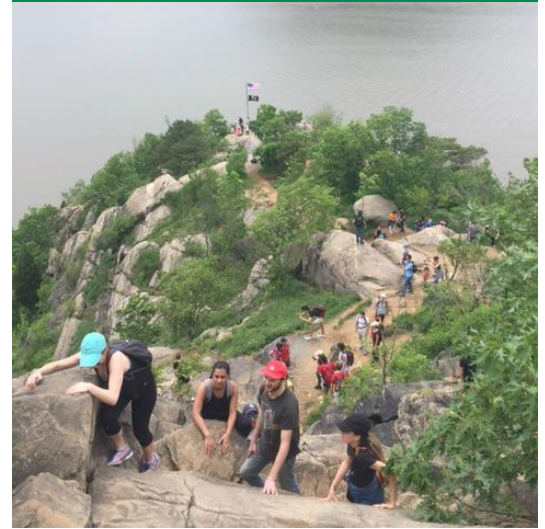
There is no one solution to mitigating the effects of such remarkable popularity. The Trail Conference is in a unique position to understand these challenges and provide assistance. Since 1920, we have been committed to educating and assisting the public in the safe, enjoyable, and responsible use of trails.

In spring 2013, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation asked the Trail Conference for help. Our response was a 1-month pilot called the Breakneck Ridge Trail Stewards Program. It was so successful that the Trail Conference has continued the program weekends and holidays from Memorial Day through Thanksgiving every year since, with strong support from nearby communities. Trail Stewards deliver much-needed services that would not otherwise be available to these visitors.

The Trail Conference is a member of the alliance spearheading the creation of the Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail, which includes the Breakneck Connector—a project that will dramatically improve visitor safety while accessing Breakneck Ridge from Metro-North and NYS Route 9D. It is the first major undertaking by the coalition that has been working for years to plan how best to manage concerns along the portion of Route 9D between Cold Spring and Beacon. Once complete, Trail Conference Stewards plan to be stationed at a new welcome center at the Breakneck Ridge trailhead.

The Trail Conference also anticipates playing an integral role in assisting the public this fall, when the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics spends a week at Breakneck Ridge, which has been identified as a 2018 Hot Spot.

Breakneck Ridge  
Hudson Highlands State Park  
Putnam & Dutchess Counties, N.Y.



For many Breakneck Ridge visitors, this challenging mountain is their first hiking experience. Trail Conference Stewards help assess their preparedness and direct unready hikers to other opportunities. (Photo credit: Luis Maldonado; Hank Osborn)



Trail Conference Stewards are providing people with an orientation to the outdoors. Many visitors come to Breakneck Ridge unprepared for the challenging rock scramble ahead of them. For thousands of people, Breakneck is one of their very first hiking experiences—so it's understandable that so many people arrive without the proper footwear, water, or knowledge of what's in store for them on the trail. They very rarely know what trails to hike to get back to the train or their car.

Stewards greet visitors and evaluate hikers' preparedness. They recommend routes and alternative hikes that may be more suitable for unprepared hikers. We want to educate visitors that there are other great places, such as nearby Fahnestock State Park, to hike. Stewards also act as ambassadors for local towns, offering suggestions for nearby amenities and other tourism spots.

Trail Stewards are a resource for information. They provide maps and educate visitors in Leave No Trace principles and other best practices. They supply water in reusable bottles, which has led to a huge reduction in the amount of disposable bottles left along the trail. Stewards also hand out trash bags to interested hikers, encouraging them to pick up garbage along their route.

Stewards receive phones to respond to emergencies and calls for help from lost or injured hikers. They are trained in Wilderness First Aid and have CPR certification. In most cases, when hikers call Stewards for help first, they eliminate the need for other rescue agencies to get involved.

This year, eight Stewards were selected and trained, with three onsite each Saturday, Sunday, and holiday from Memorial Day Weekend through Thanksgiving. The Stewards were onsite from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. for a total of 57 days on the mountain.

Three new visitation records were broken this season at Breakneck: We counted 50,288 hikers total; 2,087 hikers in a single day; and 525 hikers in a single hour. Appendix A (page 10) shows the increase in visitation that our Stewards have counted from 2014 through 2017. Significant to note is that our Steward presence has played an important role in decreasing the number of lost and injured hikers reported over that period of time.

The official trails on Breakneck Ridge are all very heavily traveled, with an unofficial network of social trails creating unnecessary ecological damage and visitor confusion. The Breakneck Ridge and White trails are being severely impacted by excessive use and have become very eroded in some places; they need repair, maintenance, and rebuilding. The Trail Conference manages the care of these trails through the work of volunteers and members of our Conservation Corps. Many visitors, when learning they can play a role in helping to restore the mountain, are interested in stewardship opportunities. Our Stewards recruit these people to give back to the trails and parks they enjoy.

In September and October, the Breakneck Stewards collected 78 survey responses from trail users. Many answered that they were returning visitors who found out about the hike through word of mouth. They primarily hike Breakneck for exercise. The biggest issue mentioned by these users was too many people.

Making a Difference:  
Trail Conference  
Stewards on  
Breakneck Ridge

IN 2017

**50,288**

VISITORS COUNTED  
AT BREAKNECK RIDGE

**2,087**

MOST VISITORS  
COUNTED IN ONE DAY

**699**

UNPREPARED HIKERS  
TURNED AWAY

**525**

MOST VISITORS  
COUNTED IN ONE  
HOUR

**49**

LOST HIKERS  
REPORTED/ASSISTED

**39**

INJURIES REPORTED/  
ASSISTED

**34**

DAYS WITH OVER  
1,000 VISITORS



## In the Catskills, excellent training and flexibility allow Trail Conference Stewards to respond to the critical and urgent needs of our partners.

Catskill Park possesses a vast beauty with an abundance of trails—a natural attraction for people wishing to experience the outdoors. But some visitors are arriving to the Catskills uninformed about trails, park regulations, and hiking preparedness.

The Catskill Steward program, launched in 2015, is an invaluable resource for these visitors. Partnering with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), the Stewards' goal is to interact with every hiker they come across to ensure that they are prepared for the trail ahead. Our efforts are focused on communicating DEC regulations on camping and camp fires, general Leave No Trace principles and wilderness ethics, and protection of the fragile summit ecosystems above 3,500 feet. Stewards attempt to eliminate unofficial social paths that have been created, clear illegal fire rings and campsites, and assist DEC in emergency situations.

Stewards' personal interactions with visitors help to spark the awareness that when we recreate outdoors, the protection of the environment is a shared responsibility. When Peekamoose Blue Hole was identified as a 2017 Leave No Trace Hot Spot, the Trail Conference—through our management of the Catskill Conservation Corps—enlisted a volunteer force to participate in a litter clean-up at the Blue Hole and surrounding area. The event was part of an intensive, week-long review of the site to find solutions to the issues of overuse and misuse. To build on this positive momentum, for the remaining weekends in the season, DEC staff and the Trail Conference's Head Steward set up an information table at the Blue Hole trailhead to greet and educate visitors on regulations and Leave No Trace principles.

For decades, the Trail Conference has been promoting the stewardship of Catskill Park and encouraging everyone who loves these protected parklands to do their part in keeping them Forever Wild. On DEC land, Trail Conference volunteers maintain 390 miles of trail, repair and build trails, and care for the park's lean-tos. Through the Catskill Conservation Corps, a collaboration with DEC and other regional partners, we provide even further volunteer opportunities to protect natural resources and enhance outdoor recreation in the Catskill Park.

Slide, Giant Ledge, North Point & Blackhead Summits; Peekamoose Blue Hole  
Catskill Forest Preserve  
Ulster & Greene Counties, N.Y.



Trail Conference Stewards educate visitors to Catskill Park about regulations and best practices. Keeping the Catskills beautiful is a shared responsibility! (Photo credit: Marlee Goska; Isabel Zayas)





In 2017, six Catskill Stewards were hired and received onsite training from the Region Forest Ranger, as well as insights from Trail Conference staff on how to provide education and support to front and back country visitors to Catskill Park. The Catskill program was fortunate in that four Stewards returned to continue last year's efforts, helping to establish and bring more awareness to the program while creating a feeling of familiarity and reliability within the community.

Catskill Stewards were initially requested by the DEC to be stationed at the summits of Slide, Giant Ledge, North Point, and Blackhead mountains on weekends and holidays, Memorial Day Weekend through Columbus Day, for a total of 42 days.

A Steward was stationed at Slide and Giant Ledge every weekend and holiday, while Stewards were stationed at the summits of North Point and Blackhead on alternating weekends. Due to weather and needs in other locations, Stewards had the training and flexibility to be shifted off of Blackhead when requested. This included moving to Peekamoose Blue Hole in August and September to respond to the DEC's urgent need to assist the public at this critical Hot Spot.

At the Blue Hole, our Steward was able to communicate with visitors in both in English and Spanish about DEC regulations and Leave No Trace principles. The adoption by local agencies of the Leave No Trace outreach program affected visitors' receptiveness and participation in maintenance efforts at the Blue Hole, and in the weeks that this program was implemented, a decrease in garbage was visible, and fewer violations were issued.

Another goal of the Steward program is to establish a sense of safety and security for hikers. Catskill Stewards receive radios for communication with DEC Rangers. They respond to emergencies and calls for help from lost or injured hikers. They are trained in Wilderness First Aid and receive CPR certification.

On July 3, one of the Stewards assisted in a DEC emergency helicopter rescue. Due to her presence at the summit, she was able to relay the emergency from a passing hiker to DEC Rangers. She then went to locate the injured hiker, ensure his safety, and hike back to the summit to meet with Rangers, who were arriving to take over. The DEC was very appreciative of the information and her assistance.

In September and October, the Catskill Stewards collected 138 Trail User Survey responses. We learned that the Catskill destinations where the survey was administered draw a lot of first-time visitors, and that they find out about these places mostly from word of mouth. Trail users come to these locations primarily to experience nature and relax.

**Making a Difference:  
Trail Conference  
Stewards in  
Catskill Park**

**IN 2017**

**9,485**

**VISITORS COUNTED  
ON ALL SUMMITS**

**7,165**

**VISITORS ENGAGED  
ON ALL SUMMITS**

**702**

**ILLEGAL CAMPERS  
ENGAGED AND  
DIRECTED TO  
DESIGNATED SITES**

**178**

**PEOPLE SENT TO  
LOCAL TOWNS**

**65**

**BAGS OF GARBAGE  
REMOVED**

**61**

**ILLEGAL FIRE  
RINGS/CAMPSITES  
OBSERVED**



## Trail Steward Program 2017 at a Glance

### Program Purpose

The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference’s Trail Steward Program educates and assists the public in the safe, responsible, and enjoyable use of trails and parks. Our Stewards provide helpful outreach and information about park regulations, hiker safety, preparedness, and other best practices. In addition to readying hikers, Stewards help discourage and mitigate misuse of trails and the surrounding lands through their education and public relations work.

Stewards field questions from visitors, promote pre-hike planning, and teach Leave No Trace principles. Stewards are intimately familiar with the trail system, as well as local towns, in an effort to help promote tourism. They share trail information and are trained in Wilderness First Aid. Stewards promote volunteer opportunities to encourage further engagement in protecting trails and the land they traverse. Their work helps to attract and inform a diverse audience in outdoor recreation and stewardship.

### Program Locations

Appalachian Trail and Reeves Meadow Trailhead  
Harriman-Bear Mountain State Parks, Orange and Rockland Counties, N.Y.

Breakneck Ridge  
Hudson Highlands State Park, Putnam and Dutchess Counties, N.Y.

Slide, Giant Ledge, North Point, and Blackhead Summits; Peekamoose Blue Hole  
Catskill Forest Preserve, Ulster and Greene Counties, N.Y.

### Program Duration

Weekends and holidays, May through November

### About the New York-New Jersey Trail Conference

The New York-New Jersey Trail Conference is the region’s leading nonprofit organization dedicated to building, maintaining, and protecting trails and the lands they traverse. Powered by volunteers, the Trail Conference connects outdoor-loving people with stewardship opportunities to preserve the integrity of trails and natural areas and inspire a deeper appreciation for the care that open space requires.

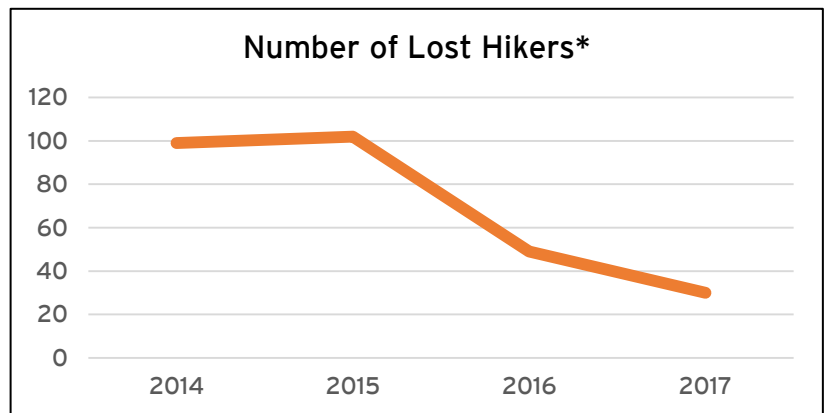
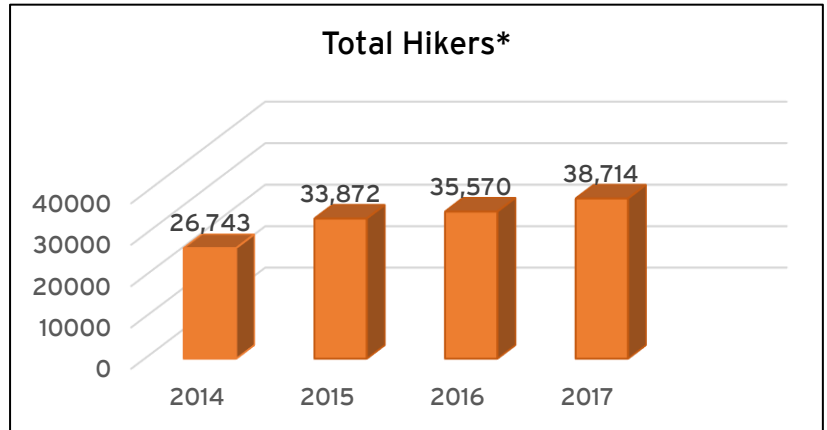
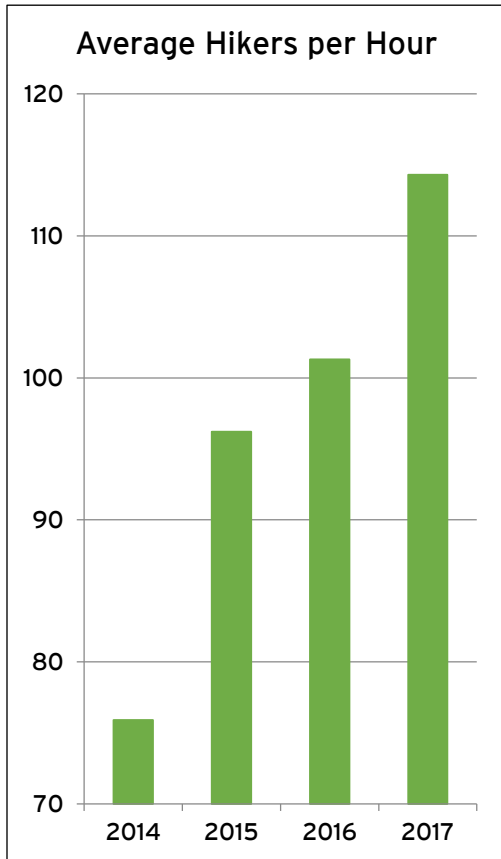
Since 1920, the Trail Conference has been partnering with land managers and mobilizing volunteers and advocates to care for the trails and parks that belong to us all. Every person who hikes, rides, or walks on a trail has an important role in keeping them safe and accessible. The Trail Conference educates and assists the public in upholding this shared responsibility.

More than 2,150 miles of trails in 140 parks across the region are cared for by Trail Conference volunteers. Over 2,400 Trail Conference volunteers donate more than 104,000 service hours annually. Approximately 9,000 Trail Conference members join their voices to speak up for issues affecting the protection of our parklands. The Trail Conference is a vigilant force in ensuring that the trails and natural areas we share are sustainable and accessible for all to enjoy for generations to come.

<b>Contact Us</b>	<b>New York-New Jersey Trail Conference</b>	<b>T 201.512.9348</b>
	<b>600 Ramapo Valley Road</b>	<b>F 201.512.9012</b>
	<b>Mahwah, NJ 07430</b>	<b>W nynjtc.org</b>



## Appendix A: Making a Difference at Breakneck Ridge



	2014	2015	2016	2017
Total Hikers Counted	26,743	33,872	35,570	38,714
Most Hikers in One Day	1,426	1,755	1,522	1,697
Days with Over 1,000 hikers	2	14	22	28
Lost Hikers	99	102	49	30
Turned Away	392	470	528	512
Sent to Cold Spring	961	1,111	1,521	1,722
Sent to Beacon	472	652	992	1009
Injuries	25	25	24	31

\*The hiker counts listed above are for a 45-day season from Memorial Day Weekend through Columbus Day. However, during the 2016 and 2017 seasons, we continued the program an additional six weeks. In 2016, 47,010 total hikers were counted in the extended season, with 60 lost hikers reported. In 2017, 50,288 total hikers were counted in the extended season, with 49 lost hikers reported.