

# High Peaks Summit Stewards: Protecting and preserving an irreplaceable alpine heritage

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HIGH PEAKS - There are fewer than 85 acres of alpine habitat in New York State, and it is all located in the Adirondacks. In part because of this fact, it has been the goal of the High Peaks Summit Stewards for the past 15 summers to instill an "Alpine Land Ethic" in hikers.

The stewards, who have talked to 191,000 people in the program's 15 years of existence, are responsible for educating hikers about the rare alpine vegetation in the High Peaks - so far, the program has been successful.

The late 1960s brought a hiking boom to the summits of the Adirondack peaks, and with it, thousands of people who were unaware of the fragile nature of the peaks' ecosystems as they walked and camped in the tundra meadows. The ignorance continued through the 70s, 80s and early 90s until a joint effort between the Adirondack Nature Conservancy, Adirondack Mountain Club and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation formed the High Peaks Summit Steward Program in 1990. Its purpose was to better inform the public of the fragility of the alpine vegetation on the peaks.

Dr. Edwin "Ketch" Ketchledge founded the High Peaks Summit Stewardship Program. The idea came from an experimental restoration project in 1968 in which Ketchledge treated damaged soils with fertilizer and Kentucky bluegrass seed in an attempt to stabilize the soil. He realized though, that however successful his experiment was it was limited without redirecting hikers and improving trail delineation. It was education that was really needed, so under Ketchledge's guide and expertise, the High Peaks Summit Stewardship Program was initiated in 1990 with two stewards.

"The foundation of the program has not changed for 15 years," the program's chief summit steward Matt Diskin said. "We don't want to just point at someone and say 'stay off the grass.' We want to educate people. Once they learn, they are happy to stay on the bedrock."

Looking at pictures from fifteen summers ago to the present, one can see the remarkable recovery in the tiny plants. With less hiker traffic on the areas where the vegetation is able to grow, colonizing plants can now be seen starting the process of restoration.

Diskin credits the recovery to more stringent regulations, such as allowing no tents and fires above the tree line and leashing dogs, in addition to the increase in education. He added that signage is posted when entering the tree line and brochures are available at trailheads.

"People see they are making a difference," said Connie Prickett, communications manager of the ANC. "[The stewards] help people see the uniqueness of the habitat. This is the only place [alpine vegetation] exists in the state. They've been here 10,000 years. They are part of our natural heritage."

During the peak hiking season, from June to August, the summit stewards, four paid and one volunteer, provide daily coverage on Mount Marcy and Algonquin and periodically visit other peaks, such as Colden, Haystack, Skylight, Wright, Boundary and Iroquois. Algonquin, Prickett said, is the highest ranking in alpine habitat diversity of species and lack of threat.

"The stewards primary purpose is to talk to hikers," Prickett said, adding they also update records, such as where the plants are, and do trail maintenance.

She notes that the stewards also ask hikers to carry rocks to the summit, so the stewards can delineate trails when they are not clear, and that hikers have carried at least four tons of rocks to the summits of

The High Peaks in the past four years.

"There is a limited amount of this type of ecosystem," said Nancy Bernstein, a Vermontville resident who was a steward in the program's first year. "As opposed to keeping the area off-limits, education is the next best thing. The program is working."

The ANC's Web site outlines the importance of the stewards' message: "Alpine plants are incredibly sensitive to footsteps because of the environment they live in. Over a growing season, a plant is able to produce only enough energy to carry out its basic life cycle. They can not compensate for root damages caused by trampling, and are therefore easily killed by it. When the plants die and their roots are lost, soil that took more than ten thousand years to accumulate is easily eroded by wind and water. It can take centuries for a damaged alpine meadow to recover."

Mountain sandwort (*Minuartia groenlandica*) and three-toothed cinquefoil (*Potentilla tridentata*) are two of the alpine plants of formerly-disturbed sites making a comeback. The plants, both with white flowers, are able to grow in the most impoverished and unlikely spots, according to the ANC.

"It's not obvious," Prickett said. "There's nothing about these plants that scream 'I'm rare.' They are tiny plants that have adapted to the harsh climate."

The harsh climate includes cold temperatures, strong winds and a short growing season, in addition to nutrient poor soil, according to Diskin. The plants have been able to adapt to these conditions by growing close to the ground, in order to inhabit warmer microclimates and protect the plants from the wind, and by being perennial because annuals must grow from new seed each season. Many also have hair on the underside of their leaves and are waxy so they don't dry out and are able to photosynthesize at low temperatures.

"These plants are really well adapted to harsh conditions," Diskin said, "but to be stepped on is really dangerous for these plants."

Diskin explained that 13,000 years ago the whole area was covered with ice. Twelve thousand years ago the glacier had receded and was replaced with a tundra climate. Slowly, soil accumulated and plants started to return. As the climate warmed, the arctic plants moved to the top of the Adirondack mountains - where they can still be found today.

"You go 2,000 miles north and you find the same plants in the Arctic," Diskin said.

In 1997, one of the stewards discovered a patch of dwarf willow (*Salix herbacea*), a rare plant that botanists believed was extirpated from the Adirondacks, Prickett said. Last summer, one of the stewards found purple comandra (*Geocaulon lividum*) on Mount Marcy, another rare plant, which the New York Natural Heritage Program has not confirmed a sighting of since 1990.

Another aspect of the stewardship program is the photo-point monitoring. Matt Scott established this component, where using Ketchledge's old photograph collections from the 1960s, 70s and 80s, he returned to the mountain and found the exact place where Ketch took his photographs, Diskin said. Scott was able to document the changes in vegetation through 60 photo comparisons.

This year the stewards will be revisiting approximately 20 sites where photographs of the alpine vegetation were taken in 1980 and 1990, Prickett said. The three photo comparisons should prove that the summit stewards' education message really does help on the peaks.

Bernstein points out that 40 years ago people would leave their trash behind lean-tos, then the saying "carry it in, carry it out" became popular. She said she believes that today the general population knows there is "something significant about going up high" and hopes the new common saying will be something to the effect of "stay on the rocks."

"Over time there has been a growing awareness," she said. "I think even small awareness grows to greater general awareness."

Since the program's inception, the number of contacts between hikers and stewards has steadily increased. As this trend continues, good stewardship and responsible use will increase also. After all, these plants survived the Ice Age, it would be wonderful if they survived the onslaught of humans also.

Box:

Being a High Peaks Summit Steward entails a lot of responsibility, as well as a challenge. The stewards are constantly working to protect the rarest part of the Adirondacks but in a way that still welcomes and educates hikers from around the world to some of the most popular peaks. This summer's stewards are Chief summit Steward Matt Diskin, Kyle Shenk, Mark Atkinson, Krista Nelson and volunteer Frank Kreuger.

A summit steward spends three to five days in the wilderness, although Diskin points out that much of a steward's free time is spent preparing for being out in the woods.

On an average day, a steward leaves for the summit of Marcy at around 7:30 a.m., on the way they might stop to talk to hikers or do some trail work such as fix a scree wall. By 11 a.m. they are on the summit.

"I'll talk to someone as short as they want me too or as long," Diskin said, adding some hikers only want basic information, such as that the vegetation is rare and fragile and are asked to please walk on the rocks, while other hikers want to learn about the botany and history of the area.

A steward on Marcy talks to between 100 and 150 hikers on a weekend day, according to Diskin. On a nice day, Diskin will sit down next to the hikers and start a general conversation before shifting into his message about alpine vegetation. He said he's found that visualization works best for the hikers so he brings before and after pictures and points out to people where they should walk. He adds that 99.9 percent of people are at least receptive enough to listen to the stewards.

Not every day is a nice one though as the stewards contend with rain, wind, hail and other harsh conditions.

"On a Tuesday with bad weather we may only talk to eight people," Diskin said. "It's really difficult when the weather is bad - for all of us. It's difficult to be out there all by yourself in the pouring rain."

He noted that his first day was spent leaning into the wind all day because it was so strong.

The stewards spent six to seven hours on the mountain and then return to their camp, located somewhere between the summit and the Adirondak Loj, at 4:30 p.m., depending on how busy the summit is. Then it's to bed early to start the day anew with another hike to the top of the mountain in the morning.

"It's hard work but it's satisfying too," Diskin said. "I'm giving back to a place I love."

***High Peaks Summit Stewards encourage hikers to:***

- Walk on the trail and solid rock surfaces
- Leave the endangered plants in place, do not pick them
- Avoid walking on bare dirt or gravel where plants can grow
- Keep dogs leashed above timberline
- Share the summit steward message with others