

SHAWANGUNK WATCH

Fall/Winter 2009 Preserving Open Space in the Shawangunks Volume 14 #2

Friends of the Shawangunks & The Shawangunk Conservancy

Ecology of a Rainy Ridge Nature of the Shawangunks in 2009

By Shanam Smiley

The best thing one can do when it's raining is to let it rain.....Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

There are very few days when studying the Shawangunk Mountains seems like work. But this summer, there were days that were more challenging than others. I came to be very appreciative of two things: my breathable rain jacket and "Rite in the Rain" paper—the most essential invention for a wet naturalist in the Northeast. Rain or shine we continued our schedule of daily weather/precipitation readings, Mohonk Lake samples, acid rain samples, natural history observations, weekly field trips to local springs or Minnewaska State Park Preserve to collect water samples and observe natural history along the route. The following are the most noteworthy observations by the Daniel Smiley Research Center in the Shawangunks this past summer.

WEATHER

Precipitation during June, July and August this year was an unfathomable 29.36 inches! This amount is 129% above the average of 12.81 inches. Records were broken, which isn't easy to do when you have over a century of weather data, but this was the wettest summer recorded at the National Weather Service's Mohonk Lake Cooperative Weather Station (est.1896).

Over 2 inches of rain fell in 24 hours on four days between June 15th and the end of August. For this same time period, we recorded five days that received between one and two inches of rain for the day. The entire month of June had five days that did not have any precipitation. July had only twelve "dry" days, and August had fifteen days without rain. The temperatures were below normal for both June and July, but above average in August. Astoundingly, the only time the thermometer hit 90°F this year was in April! To peruse some of the official weather records for Mohonk Lake, visit: <http://www.mohonkpreserve.org/index.php?id=146,162,0,0,1,0>.

As the summer unfolded, I kept wondering how nature would respond to this? It became pretty apparent that some changes were localized, while others were extensive. Was this because of the physical features of the Shawangunks? With orographic lift, the windward side of the mountain, as well as the top, got heavier rains in most cases than the leeward side. During our weekly travels on Mohonk Preserve, Mohonk Mountain House, Minnewaska and Awesting lands, what did we see out there as we were enduringly donned in our rain gear?



Ice or Glaze storms on the ridge can also impact the natural world Photo by Annie O'Neill.

BIRDS

The first thing I noticed in mid-June was that several of the nesting birds stopped singing in the immediate vicinity of Mohonk Lake. Did this mean that their nests failed, that they were no longer asserting their territories? I didn't hear many Ovenbirds, Great Crested Flycatchers or Baltimore Orioles. However, they were heard farther downslope. Was this a result of orographic lift and topography? This time period was the height of nesting for most Neotropical migrant songbirds. Several days in a row of heavy rains and cooler temperatures may have meant breeding disaster. Adults can't forage and feed chicks in heavy rain. Depending on the stage/size of the chicks, getting wet and cold with not enough food would mean nest mortality.

Some nests were likely more successful than others depending on construction. Most cavity nests were more sheltered, and seemed to fare better. Black-capped Chickadees and the woodpeckers seemed to come through the breeding season with relative success. The ground nesters like Ovenbirds and Black-and-White Warblers must have had a harder time keeping their nests in order. Even if nests had good shrub cover above, the ground got saturated, therefore soaking the nest from the bottom up. Cup and/or hanging nests in trees and shrubs were obviously more exposed than those built under an overhang, such as Barn and Cliff Swallows which were relatively productive this year.

Some species, like Robins and Chipping Sparrows, that had a first brood early got some fledglings out of the nest, but as the summer progressed we saw fewer and fewer fledglings. Birds that typically have several broods during the summer season, like Phoebe and Robins, did not seem to have success with more than one early brood. I pondered the continued survival of the fledglings. Yes, they made it out of the nest, but did they continue to thrive and reach maturity?

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Shawangunks at the Tipping Point	Page 2
Critique of Minnewaska Master Plan	Page 4
Spruce Glenn: A rare habitat to protect	Page 5
Save the Lakes at Critical Stage	Page 7
Sensible Wireless for Gardiner Victory	Page 8
Maureen Radl: Environmental Whiz	Page 10

continued on page 6

Friends Like Us: Deer, Fire, Weeds and Recreation

by Christopher Spatz

Half-measures availed us nothing. (*Alcoholics Anonymous*)

The Minnewaska State Park Preserve Master Plan has local conservationists up in arms. Are we becoming an endangering species?

vegetation on and around the crags—deliberately or unwittingly—are being scraped, plucked, and crushed to dust and bedrock, climbers might be less cavalier about their prospective traces. But the exchange foreshadowed a Cyclops of access entitlement two weeks later at the public hearing on October 22 for Minnewaska State Park Preserve's Draft Master Plan (DMP).

Sixty climbers, mountain bikers, hikers, cross-country skiers and swimmers extolled the virtues of Minnewaska's "crown jewel," recreation groups touting the preserve to Palisades Interstate Park Commission (PIPC) officials as both an unrealized source of passive, outdoor riches and engine for the local, "Green" economy. Nevermind that we've been reading for more than a year that the Shawangunks are dying, that chestnut oak forests aren't regenerating; that exotic and problem plants are invading the ridge; that ground-nesting songbird habitat is being lost and biodiversity is crashing. We've read in *The New Paltz Times* and in press releases from members of the Shawangunk Ridge Biodiversity Partnership (SRBP) that the greatest factor triggering all of this is the same plague killing forests up and down the East Coast: overabundant white-tailed deer. Bundled under Priority 1 components in the DMP—deer mitigation, invasive control, and habitat preservation—I had hoped recreation coalitions had gotten the point, poised to remind PIPC officials of their management imperatives.

After all, our gateway Shawangunk burg is New Paltz, where a national civil rights issue like gay marriage played out famously on Main Street; where Wal-Mart was stopped and Gardiner caught the sentiment, seizing the gates of the high ground, putting Awosting Reserve in the public domain; where locals a generation ago halted the Marriott Corporation, and Minnewaska State Park Preserve was born. Some call the Gunks, Boulder East: the progressive, outdoor capitol of the Appalachians. Grid after grid of look-alike Levittowns and box-stores—suburban monoculture—might be consuming everything else, but zoning initiatives and open space preservation haggled over bitterly in towns around the ridge say it ain't happening here.

The managers protecting the ridge's 43,000 acres of commons under the umbrella of the SRBP are doing so cooperatively, following protection and preservation guidelines established for the ridge in 2003. Operating with savvy independence from the respective state agency, the Department of Environmental Protection (DEC), the SRBP is attempting to arrest the deer siege with a three-year grant—to reduce the herd and stop attendant floral monocultures from suffocating the

ridge while the DEC keeps managing New York State as a vast farm for deer—to hell with biodiversity, ecosystems, and forest succession. Yep, the Shawangunk region is different.

But if recreation coalitions can't see beyond access, given the gravity of the crisis, are we getting the job done? Are recreationists and half-realized management initiatives even contributing to the Gunks' collapse? Is our generation failing to fulfill its stewardship commitment to Shawangunk generations past and future?



Tweaked by Gunks.com, perplexed after the Minnewaska hearing, I embarked on an amateur (capital A) flora survey of the crags, finding a plant called white snakeroot haloing degraded rappel stations and crag-bases, appearing on top-outs and rock climbs at the Trapps and the Near Trapps. Snakeroot turned up on a couple of climbing routes at reopened, restricted Skytop, where it was otherwise absent along the entire base of the crag. Lost City and Peterskill are faring better, but Peterskill, where the plant is abundant in the parking lot and the carriage road leading into the crag, is seeing snakeroot within striking distance of the base.

Why is the proliferation of a native plant like snakeroot a big deal? Toxic to deer, it acts and disperses like an invasive species. We may not imagine the crags as vertical ecosystems, but they are, with the thinnest of living skins. Like over-browsed forest understories, cliffs denuded of their resident flora invite hardier, opportunistic species such as snakeroot. Where snakeroot is, lichen and spleen-wort and pitch pines—and the critters dependent on them—aren't.

Because climbing activity is restricted primarily to the crags, distinguishing climbers' impact from other recreation groups was a simple exercise: not science. I'm not a botanist, not by a long shot, but Minnewaska's invasives specialist, Bob O'Brien, understood implicitly my snakeroot observations. If climbers are dispersing snakeroot on shoes, clothing and gear, then I'd bet the farm that the other 500,000 recreationists playing on the ridge every year are also vectors for problem flora. Conservation writer David Quammen calls them *weed species*: garlic mustard, goldenrod, hay-scented fern, Japanese barberry, Japanese knotweed, Japanese stilt grass, multiflora rose, phragmites, Queen Anne's lace, spotted knapweed, and swallow-wort. Concentrated at trailheads and parking lots, along the carriage roads and trails, killing weeds are hitching rides from us through the white tail-degraded forests into the deepest reaches of the ridge.

The first year of the SRBP's deer-mitigation hunt in 2008 fell far short of its harvest goal. What happens if it does so again this year? And next, when the grant runs out?

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Fire, another critical component of the SRBP's management plan, is being under-utilized—even wasted. Minnewaska failed to protect 2008's 4,000 acre burn area with a deer exclosure: a big fence. High on Minnewaska's flanks and plateaus, new chestnut oaks and pitch pines are appearing in parts of the burned area. But with the deer herd as yet unchecked, the SRBP's controlled burns aren't necessarily achieving their goal of renewing fields and forests at lower elevations with higher deer densities. Without exclosures to protect them, the burns are creating deer feed-lots from would-be nurseries. And when the deer are done with the seedlings, saplings and the native wildflowers, burn areas are susceptible to weed species. Pennsylvania protects thousands of acres of regenerating forests following state timber harvests with miles of deer exclosures. If fences are good for Pennsylvania, why aren't they good for the Gunks? Can funding be found to protect state commercial interests, but not critical habitat?

The controlled burns themselves—five to ten acre efforts—are a fraction of what's necessary. Rob Mecus, DEC Region 3 Incident Commander for the 2008 Minnewaska fire, has recommended controlled burns of 2,000 acres a year, and re-burned a second time to properly suppress mountain laurel (another smothering, deer-resistant native), rotated across the ridge in twenty to fifty year cycles mimicking natural, recurring fire processes. That's 2,000 acres a year—half of Minnewaska's fire—every year. To date, the SRBP has selectively burned about a hundred acres, and Minnewaska needs a second fire.

Since first getting schooled by one invasive weed driving down the canal, up the bank, and slam-dunking my yard, I've been watching Japanese stilt grass pick apart the lower and mid-elevations of the ridge. It is consuming the rail-trails, the D & H canal, road shoulders, carriage roads, stream corridors, parking lots, hiking and social trails. It lines the northern Coxing Kill and Clove Road all the way to Rosendale and High Falls. It has been found recently in Save the Ridge's primary protection target: the Palmaghatt Ravine. It has climbed past Awosting Falls, up the Peterskill into the heart of Minnewaska, where the big, unfenced burn area lies vulnerably in its path.

Stilt grass often arrives in teams with other weeds deer won't touch. In the dozen acres of neighbors' woods behind my Rosendale home, the understory is a lethal blanket of native ferns, snakeroot, and stilt grass devoid of seedlings and saplings: a standing graveyard of mature trees that will never reproduce—the shape of the Gunks to come.

The DEC is employing sheep and goats to control invasives. Minnewaska has received clearance to use these hoofed mowers, but is lacking final approval from one PIPC official: Tom Lyons, the gentleman who fielded those sixty comments and hours of testimony at the public hearing. Preservation jabs from constituents—not access demands—could have green-lighted that project.

Ideally, Minnewaska—the entire ridge—ought to be closed entirely to recreation: the deer herd reduced to an ecologically sustainable number; weeds removed and wiped out; fire wielded and burn areas enclosed to do their regenerating work; and the understory permitted to recover above the deer browse-line. A recreation dependent SRBP will never shut down the ridge, but how about rotating closures? Recreation overuse inflicts sores across the landscape (tour Dick Williams's years of crag-base recovery work), where weeds take and spread like pathogens down access corridors to colonize new areas, displacing native life. The best defense against invading species is a robust ecosystem braced with its full suite of flora and fauna. Weed proliferation is a siren for how critically degraded the ridge already is.

Minnewaska doesn't need expanded recreation access. We don't need pleas for padding our backyard economy. Recreation is secondary. Recreation can wait.

We need sacrifice. Harnessed to recreation, the SRBP needs to command its considerable resources, both private and state, and recommit unequivocally to habitat loss, now. There is no higher priority. We need every recreation coalition collaborating with the SRBP: organizing, educating, writing letters to officials and politicians and

the papers, finding funding, getting out in the field assisting field experts. Volunteering. We need a galvanizing campaign as motivated and mobilized as Save the Ridge.

Like Bill McKibben trying to reel the world in from 388 CO₂ emissions to 350, the opportunity to arrest the Gunks' ecological crisis is slipping away. It is more acute than each development threat, far more insidious because it's wearing our Keens and Stump Jumpers, unheralded by rallying elections, lawn signs, and dueling letters to the editor. It doesn't play to the theater spectacle of town meetings or black and white toques: we are all, every one of us who use and love the ridge, culpable. Stilt grass doesn't much sleep. And this is the crux.

What is the point of protecting thousands upon thousands of undeveloped ridge acres, investing tens of millions of acquisition dollars and ennobling the public's trust (not to mention their donations), if we can't preserve this land and recapture the Gunks' diversity? What's the point of beating back a gated community of trophy homes from a Palmaghatt forest of regal, 500 year-old grandmothers, succeeded not by lithe grandchildren, but by a pestilence of assassin weeds?

The point means every difference between the Shawangunk Ridge and Central Park, Ulster County. 📧

As a former director of the Gunks Climbers' Coalition and president of the Eastern Cougar Foundation, Christopher Spatz has organized a dozen ridge recreation, mitigation and wildlife projects. His *Shawangunk Ridge Ecology Blog: Funeral for a Friend*, is in development.



Bird peregrinations!

by Tom Sarro

This past year proved to be another exciting one for those who enjoy documenting the mating behavior of our resident peregrines. I am pleased to report that our cliffs successfully reared two broods of chicks. It is believed that two pairs of chicks fledged from each of the sites. Two eyries were studied, one on Millbrook and the second on the Trapps in the vicinity of last year's rock fall. Observations typically begin late January or early February when the adult falcons begin their nuptial antics. Loud vocalizations accompanied by dramatic aerial displays are not uncommon. As the season progresses and the adults are tending the nest, one gets to observe numerous air defenses against nearly anything that flies by (i.e. Turkey Vultures, Black Vultures or Raven, along with the occasional intruding peregrine). Once the chicks hatch, things start to become very active. Adults are frequently observed returning to the cliff with prey, plucking it to either dine on or deliver to the anxious chicks or hungry spouse. Once the chicks are big enough they begin to move about; first exposing their "puff-ball" heads and then actively moving about the cliff. Words cannot describe watching the metamorphosis of a clumsy, awkward chick into the elegant hunter we know as an adult. This never ceases to amaze me.

Observations will begin again this year late January into February. I will most likely be going out on Tuesdays and Thursdays as weather and behavior dictates. If anyone is interested in participating with these observations you can contact me at sarro@msmc.edu. I administer an active listserv where observers post when and where they will be going out along with their observations for the day. If you would like to receive these listserv postings just let me know and I can add you to the list. In addition, the Mohonk Preserve will be hosting their annual workshop for peregrine watch volunteers on March 27th. It is free of charge and anyone wishing to attend should contact either me or John Thompson at the Mohonk Preserve DSRC at 255-5969.

A Naturalist's Environmental Critique of the Minnewaska Master Plan

By Jamie Deppen

Minnewaska State Park Preserve (MSPP) is home to an abundance of rare species and habitats. Imagine that part of the second largest chestnut oak forest in the state is within the park preserve! As beneficiaries of this ecologically unique landscape, we need to aspire to a higher ideal of what a Park Preserve could be—something beyond our own desires. We must protect nature and be stewards of it, as it cannot defend itself from all of our demands and pressures. Unfortunately, Minnewaska's draft Master Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) falls quite short of this mission. In general, the plan is disproportionately more accommodating to the visitor experience and perceived aesthetics in the Preserve, than towards its biodiversity and ecological functions. Although the plan states the importance of biodiversity conservation, many of the plan's proposed actions greatly contradict this priority, and fail to acknowledge many of the ecological impacts, even though it is *also* an EIS.

All recreation has some negative effect on biodiversity. It can be a direct effect such as flushing a bird while going for a walk. While this may seem benign, the bird is using energy to flee that could be used to build a nest or feed its young. Ecological effects can be indirect. For example, an invasive plant seed picked up somewhere else could fall off a person's clothing, germinate, and spread along the trail, out-competing native vegetation. Cumulative negative impacts from disturbances of multiple visitors can result, which could cause a bird not to forage for food or nest near a trail because it is repeatedly scared away. In this case, a zone of habitat along the trail becomes undesirable to the bird and its habitat area is reduced (in some cases this zone of disturbed habitat reaches tens to hundreds of feet from a trail). These types of effects, and there are many, are not sufficiently addressed in the Master Plan, or not at all, even though they are clearly environmental impacts.

It is painful to think that something as simple as going for a walk can cause such a disturbance, but the more we educate ourselves about these impacts, the more we can do to mitigate them. This mitigation should include building as few new trails as possible to reduce habitat fragmentation; limiting the intensity of recreation that occurs on them; and keeping a narrow trail corridor footprint. New trails should not be considered through sensitive habitats like wetlands or thin soils prone to erosion. They should not pass near known disturbance-sensitive species. To include ecological aspects in the trails plan, the Park Preserve should make an inventory of trail sensitivity so it can determine which trails can handle more intense recreational activities and which may need more ecological mitigation.

The plan often dismisses environmental impacts of a proposed activity as "minor." Even if these impacts are considered "minor" they should be spelled out in the Environmental Impacts section. The cumulative ecological effects of these "minor" impacts may become major impacts. As mentioned in the plan, the Natural Heritage Program identified recreational overuse as one of greatest threats to the biodiversity of the Preserve. Considering the significance of this threat, particular attention should be given to this issue and the MSPP should err on the side of caution when making decisions about the number of people allowed access. There was no mention of a study done on the ecological carrying capacity of MSPP. The proposed plan will increase total parking by 50%, and by 70% around Minnewaska Lake alone! How can the MSPP know these ecological resources are able to handle such a high number of visitors without determining the carrying capacity of these natural resources? Performing an ecological resource carrying capacity analysis should be priority one! The wildlife/plant surveys conducted by the Natural Heritage program combined with other organizations' observations would provide MSPP with the information to complete a comprehensive natural history inventory and ecological carrying capacity study. This will give MSPP the information needed to protect the ecosystems of the ridge while allowing recreation.

All of these impacts and others should be included as considerations in the alternatives and preferred alternatives in Chapter 5. These ecological communities must already cope with stresses from pests such as hemlock woolly adelgid, elongate hemlock scale, gypsy moth defoliation, a scale that introduces a fungus to beech trees, and the rhabdovirus that is affecting frogs on the ridge. The health of the chestnut oak forest is affected by deer over-browsing, lack of fire, and established invasive species. And it is hard to predict the effects of a changing climate on this ecosystem. The cumulative impact of all environmental impacts needs serious consideration—especially around Minnewaska Lake. The lake should not continue to be developed in a way that brings more disturbances and people into the mix just because Minnewaska Lake is considered a "high use area." At the same time, any increase in development and visitors in areas that are not high use will begin to degrade habitat.

The plan needs much more emphasis and detail on how the MSPP will work to protect its ecosystems while allowing a satisfying recreational experience, and it should be thoroughly reviewed by several ecologists. The final Master Plan should be of the caliber and scientific integrity expected from a State Park *Preserve*. The plan should give a much more comprehensive overview of its natural history, and incorporate as much data as available. It must make the best land-use decisions based on the needs and interconnected relationships of wildlife and ecological communities.

Jamie Deppen is a biologist at Hudsonia Ltd. The opinions presented here are those of the author. Jamie received her Bachelor's degree in biology at SUNY New Paltz and volunteers at the Daniel Smiley Research Center.

OTHER NATURALIST'S CONCERNS

Excerpted from the John Burroughs Society comments

The Plan states that "the Palmaghatt Kill Ravine is the only officially documented example of old growth in southeastern New York State." It fails to mention that it is also important to recognize and protect the hemlock-hardwood swamps of Spruce Glen and Murray Hill Swamp. Spruce Glen supports some of the oldest trees in the state, many of these trees grow close to the historic carriage road [P. C. Huth, 1989. *The Natural History of an Old Growth Forest in Spruce Glen Swamp, Minnewaska State Park, Shawangunk Mountains, NY. Mohonk Preserve*] Dendrochronology data for Spruce Glen trees can be found on the NOAA Tree Ring Data Search website: hurricane.ncdc.noaa.gov/pls/paleo/ftpsearch.treering (if you go to this link and search "Spruce Glen," then click on one of the trees and the birth date of that tree will come up, e.g. 1511 or 1515). The black gum of Murray Hill Swamp is suspected to be very old, and other wetlands at the base of the same cliff line may support old trees and deserve further investigation. These areas should be included as sensitive old growth forest. These sites are especially important to protect from disturbance because they provide reference sites to study and understand forest ecology. The proposed single-track trail Awosting Loop passes along the edge of Spruce Glen, and Mud Pond Trail passes close to Murray Hill Swamp and would bring recreationists into the area. It is recommended that those trails not be incorporated into the trail system. The historic shale mines closest to Spruce Glen, Murray Hill, and other nearby swamps south and east of Awosting Lake should not be reactivated.

Marc Abrams and David Orwig documented a 320-year-old pitch pine community (in an article published in *Oecologia* volume 101 page 353-360 in 1995) in the Preserve. "Old Growth" and all pitch pine-oak-heath rocky summit communities occur on thin soils and are sensitive to trampling.

————— Please see Marc B. Fried's article about Spruce Glen on next page

Spruce Glen and the new Minnewaska Master Plan

By Marc B. Fried

South of Lake Awosting and east of Mud Pond, the front cliff line of the Shawangunks zigzags back and forth, in turn running Southeast-erly and Northeasterly. Between the exposed, rocky summits of Murray Hill and Margaret Cliff is a sheltered glen of aged hemlock trees known as Spruce Glen.

I shall always remember my introduction to this section of the escarpment. In early April of 1961, still in my mid teens, I climbed directly up from the Wallkill Valley, through a break in the rocks, to the top of Margaret Cliff. It had been a cold and very snowy winter, but spring had begun to show itself in the valley, where the ground was thawed, the sun shining and the temperature well into the forties when I started up the mountain. Up on top, it was quite a different world: the sky unleashed a barrage of snow flurries, while the wind howled at gale force over a forbidding landscape still covered with six inches of winter's snow. Awosting was frozen fast, springtime yet a distant dream. Seeking refuge, I descended into the deep, shady hemlocks of Spruce Glen, only to find myself wading through knee-deep snow till I was able to make my way out of the glen and onto the south-facing slope, where the bare branches of deciduous trees had allowed the sun to do its work.

Spruce Glen is now placed in jeopardy by one element of the Draft Master Plan for Minnewaska: a new, single-track biking trail is proposed for the former Awosting Reserve parcel, and would include a spur to extend up into and through Spruce Glen. Not only would it represent an intrusion into this secluded spot, but it would substantially increase bike traffic throughout Minnewaska by linking up with existing carriage roads in the Lake Awosting area.

There is a real question whether the bike trail proposed for the Awosting Reserve tract even belongs in Minnewaska State Park Preserve. But if it is built, at very least the proposed Spruce Glen spur should be eliminated in the Final Master Plan.

Marc B. Fried is a well known local historian and expert on the Shawangunks and local history. He is the author of many books including Shawangunk, Shawangunk Place Names, and The Huckleberry Pickers.



Fisher photographed at outback slabs by one of Chris Spatz's remote cameras

FISHER: FEISTY, FURTIVE, AND NOT SO FINICKY

by Jamie Deppen

The fisher is a true curiosity of the Shawangunks. To many it may look like a cat, but it is actually a large, bushy-tailed member of the weasel family, reaching lengths of up to forty inches and weighing up to sixteen pounds. Mainly a predator and scavenger of the ridge, the fisher manages to elude most of us who look for it, but this was a good year for observations. The Mohonk Preserve's Daniel Smiley Research Center has recorded at least eight sightings of the elusive animal this year—twice as many as last year. We are lucky to get quick glimpses of these creatures—or their tails for that matter! At least one hundred forty years ago, the fisher had been extirpated from the area due to intense trapping and loss of its forested habitat from logging. In 1976, as part of a restocking program, the Department of Environmental Conservation and Daniel Smiley reintroduced the first fisher to the Shawangunks, releasing it at Rhododendron Swamp at the Mohonk Preserve. Nine others followed, and today we have an established population on the Ridge.

Daniel Smiley believed that the Shawangunks would be the perfect habitat for reintroduced fisher. Hemlock forests were recovering from logging. Abundant prey, especially the preferred porcupine, was available. With the porcupine population unchecked since 1930, there were plenty of prickly pickings. To avoid the sharp quills, the fisher's tactic is to badger the porcupine until it exposes its face. The fisher then attacks and weakens the porcupine until it is able to access its unprotected belly. It will eat everything except the bones, skin, and feet. Because of their taste for porcupines, fisher were reintroduced to the Catskills to control the exploding porcupine population.

Fisher are omnivorous and will also eat other small animals. They are often found hunting their prey in coniferous forests by walking in a zig-zag fashion, poking their noses into places where snowshoe hares or mice may hide. Although the fisher has speed on its side, it is not a distance runner and does not go on long chases after prey. Fisher will feed on the carcasses of larger animals and may take the opportunity to snatch a scavenging blue jay or two that land upon the same carcass. They will also forage for berries and nuts during the summer months, dispersing seeds throughout the forest. Other scavengers and predators of small mammals like coyotes, bobcat, fox, and weasels compete with the fisher for food.

With home ranges varying from 5 square miles to 49 square miles, fisher traditionally avoided open areas and were only found in large, undisturbed forests. Their behavior, however, is changing. Roland Kays, curator of mammals at the New York State Museum, studies fishers in the suburbs of Albany. It is believed that as fisher are becoming more abundant in forests they are moving into these suburban environments to take advantage of the food supply there. Of particular interest is the squirrel. Despite their size, fisher are touted as the fastest tree climbers, so this means abundant chunky city squirrels have something to fear! Fisher around the Ridge are also pushing their boundaries into backyards, and have been known to raid chicken coops.

This adaptable species has benefited from forest recovery of the twentieth century and has been successfully reintroduced in parts of its historical range through out the United States. What will happen as it adapts to environmental changes in the twenty-first century? Will it become commonplace to see fisher in our backyards? If so, let's hope that its return from extirpation will help keep abundant species, like squirrels, in check and not expose fisher to problematic encounters with humans. This species is a reminder that if we allow natural habitats to return, with careful management, species can recover to find a place in this changing world. 🐾

INSECTS

After the large storms, and the seemingly unending continuum of showers, we noted that there were very few flying insects. We didn't have the usual numbers of mosquitoes and midges, gnats and flies. Mosquito and midge larvae require relatively calm water. They spend most of their time at the water surface to feed and breathe, only diving if disturbed. The progression from egg to adult takes a little over a week. With the continued rain, few made it through to adulthood in late June.

So, most flying insect numbers were down, but how about the caterpillars? The wet, cool weather is perfect for fungi, bacteria and viruses, which can infect and decimate the Gypsy Moth population. This was the case again this year. Are other caterpillars also at risk?



Early in the season we did see many birds with caterpillars, but in general we didn't see many butterflies this summer. We missed seeing many Tiger Swallowtails and Red-spotted Purples. However, we did see the typical numbers of Great Spangled Fritillaries and Spicebush Swallowtails. Both of these species reach maturity by June, so success may have been in the timing. However, they both had another common denominator: shelter. Spicebush Swallowtail larvae feed on Sassafras or Spicebush, and can construct leaf shelters. Fritillaries are nocturnal and ground-dwelling caterpillars, emerging to feed on violets.

It was noted that many other ground-dwelling larvae did not endure to adulthood. There were very few grasshoppers, Japanese Beetles, or field crickets. However, we heard the typical chorus of the tree-dwelling species like Katydid, Cicadas and Snowy Tree Crickets this year.

PLANTS

With fewer insects around and an abundance of moisture, how was the flora of the ridge affected? Purple Loosestrife was found in new locations this year. Did the profuse amount of water awaken the dormant seed bank?

The extraordinary plants that cling to life on the rock slabs flourished with all the moisture. Appalachian Sandwort, a Threatened species in New York State, had a prolific bloom this summer, rather than blooming briefly then drying up. The uncommon Rock Spikemoss (*Selaginella rupestris*), whose patches were smaller in numbers and size on June 3rd before the rains started, grew and thrived in the continuous moisture.

The Red Oaks exhibited an obvious positive reaction. With not many of the Gypsy Moth caterpillars surviving to pupation, the oaks got a break again this year and were defoliated only in small patches. This fall we've seen a large Red Oak mast crop. The forest floor is covered so heavily with acorns in some places it is almost like trying to walk on a floor covered with marbles. This was also a fruitful year for Pignut and Shagbark Hickory. Nuts and acorns are a coveted food source for many birds and mammals in autumn and into the winter season.

MAMMALS

This season seemed to be the year of the rabbit and woodchuck. In the six years I have been in the Shawangunks, I had never seen a Cottontail alive. I had seen roadkill, but none foraging or retreating from my presence in the woods. This year was totally different. Gardens, yards and the woods were riddled with them. I regretfully learned that my cat was quite capable of taking the population "problem" into her own paws. Meanwhile, the local domestic dogs seemed to be taking on another population, woodchucks. Several mothers were seen with four or five young in tow. With such lush vegetation from the plethora of precipitation, both of these herbivorous mammals had no shortage of food. It will be interesting to see if the natural predators: fox, coyotes, bobcat, and fisher, increase in number next year as a result of an increased prey population.

HERPTILES and FISH

Amphibian reproduction in the vernal pools benefited from all the rain. Most vernal pools did not dry up, enabling the tadpoles to fully develop and emerge from the pools as adults. We have seen several Wood Frog young-of-the-year hopping around the forest.

Changes in several lake dwelling amphibian populations were also noted by scuba divers at Minnewaska Lake. One diver reported that numbers of Northern Two-lined Salamanders and the Northern Red Salamanders have become greatly reduced. In areas where he usually



saw good numbers of both species in years past, he only saw one adult of each. Conversely, the population of Red-spotted Newts in Minnewaska Lake has exploded. Thousands were seen.

How are the fish doing in Minnewaska Lake? Well, there are now an estimated "hundreds of thousands" of small Golden Shiners swimming in large schools. There are very few that reach as large as three inches, which is puzzling. The Watersnakes appear to be making the most of the new fishy food source, while they also feed on adult salamanders.



Lynda Keyes

What is the reason for the decline in the salamander populations? It is too early to tell, but let's study the bionetwork of the lake: fish and newts eat salamander eggs and larvae. Newts/Red Efts and Red Salamanders both produce noxious secretions to protect themselves against predators. A Northern Two-lined Salamander's best defense, on the other hand, is its impressive speed.

Are the newts thriving because the larval stage (the Red Eft) escapes from the lake for a few years, and returns as the much larger adult? More monitoring is needed to assess the populations and any changes that are occurring.

My thirst for knowledge of the natural world was not quenched, in spite of all that was "raining" down on me this summer. Daily observations and comparisons of historic records only raised more questions, continuing my quest for understanding. Everything on this ridge is intertwined. Are we connecting relationships accurately? What are we not yet seeing or understanding? This is the motivation that gets me out there and makes me hypervigilant. What can I see, hear, smell, taste or feel today in nature? What will I learn today or tomorrow?

When you did get the chance to get outside this summer, what did you observe?

Shanan Smiley is a research and curatorial assistant at the Daniel Smiley Research Center of the Mohonk Preserve. She has her bachelor of science in biology from Montana State University.

SPOTLIGHT ON SUPPORTERS

Friends of the Shawangunks recently learned that a longtime supporter of our causes has died. John Yang, architect and photographer, died at his Manhattan home at age 76. His wife, Linda Yang, notified us that she has requested contributions in his memory be sent to Friends. Educated as an architect and successful in that field, John always dreamed of being a photographer and he relentlessly pursued that craft. His website is www.JohnYangPhoto.com

SAVE THE LAKES BEGINS A CRUCIAL FUND DRIVE TO SAVE WILLIAMS LAKE

by Tim Trompeter

Save the Lakes, a member of the Shawangunk Ridge Coalition, is currently fighting a major development similar in scope to what was proposed for Awosting Reserve in Gardiner. They expect Hudson River Valley Resorts to submit its Draft Environmental Impact Statement to the DEC by the end of this year, finally describing how it intends to mitigate the raft of impacts brought on by its extensive gated community/resort development at Williams Lake in Rosendale.

A public hearing will follow soon thereafter, and Save the Lakes is setting out to raise \$10,000 to hire expert environmental and legal help to defend water resources, community character, recreational open space, wildlife and the integrity of the landscape. At this crucial stage, the process takes precedence; SEQR (the State Environmental Quality Review) must follow its course. The developer will come armed with paid expert opinion to support its goals, and the public must answer in kind with expert opinion of its own. Expert testimony has proven decisive in situations as complex as the Williams Lake case.

Focus in the local press—and in the minds of many—has fixed on the promised hotel-spa business while the real point has been cleverly downplayed by the developer: the establishment of a self-governing, private enclave of 160 luxury estates, homes and townhouses. This closed, wealthy enclave will have financial resources dwarfing those of the surrounding towns and hamlets, with a political and social agenda that will change the nature of our community.

Far-reaching implications for the preservation of the entire Ridge lurk in the background. Should the developer's plan succeed, it will set in motion economic and social forces that value profit over preservation, privatization over public use, security gates over open space.

For example, completion of the Wallkill Valley Rail Trail Project will be compromised. Recently, the Open Space Institute was pleased to announce the acquisition of the trellis bridge over the Rondout Creek in Rosendale, as well as the rail bed up to the point of the Williams Lake property line. The Williams Lake section of the rail-trail is the “missing link”—the last section needed to complete a recreational corridor running from New Paltz through Rosendale to Kingston. This is the lynchpin of an exciting vision for the region, an ongoing initiative to increase tourism while protecting both the Ridge and regional character. Williams Lake and Fourth Lake, along with the trails and caves spread throughout the beautiful Binnewater aquifer—are situated at the very midpoint of the corridor.

The area is cited for preservation by The New York State Open Space Conservation Plan, The Ulster County Open Space Plan and the Rosendale Comprehensive Plan of 2007. Williams Lake and its surroundings teem with wildlife, including the endangered Indiana Bat, whose hibernacula caves dot the rugged terrain. Sensitive wetland habitats shelter the endangered Northern Cricket Frog. The lakes, wetlands, rock outcroppings, trails and caves are of inestimable value not only geologically and as wildlife habitat, but as recreational open space—a role they have filled in local life for generations as private property open to the paying public.

A viable, sustainable economic future is at stake: instead of hikers, bikers, swimmers and skiers visiting the area in greater numbers and supporting all manner of local business, the developer's plan isolates Williams Lake and Fourth Lake behind security gates, and re-routes the rail-trail far from its historic rail bed.



A host of wonderful recreational sports activities will be lost, with regional implications. The property boasts some of the most challenging and entertaining mountain-biking in the East. There is increasing pressure on Minnewaska State Park Preserve to sanction mountain-biking off the carriage roads and some of this pressure could be alleviated if Williams Lake's trails were open and available. Day-use amenities at Williams Lake have traditionally included swimming, fishing, hiking, caving, sports-training, picnics, sauna and cross-country skiing. Available recreational open space is an essential asset for communities competing to lure new business to their locale.

There are very real alternatives to the gated over-development of Williams Lake should this unfortunate plan fail. There are a variety of possible public-private partnerships that would preserve Williams Lake as a regional asset rather than an off-limits island onto itself, just as other such partnerships have succeeded elsewhere in the Hudson Valley. Rather than allow profit to be siphoned away from the area into the pockets of absent investors, efforts can and do succeed in keeping the economic benefit of local assets circulating in the local economy.

Real estate sales are the profit-engine of the business model being imposed on Williams Lake. Plans like this offer either a spa, a beach, a ski slope or a golf course as a “destination” around which “vacation” homes are placed. Hudson River Valley Resorts' plans includes a 130-room high-end spa hotel and related amenities—for which there is currently no operator—and 160 for-sale homes and estates that will surround the lake and be scattered amidst the trails, caves, sinkholes and wetlands. All in all, they will comprise a gated community defined by private governance, private roads, private water, security gates and landscape buffers that will shield the area from view and prevent unwanted public access. The development could increase Rosendale's population by as much as 10%. Similar development schemes in the American West have proven nearly toxic to the quality of local life.

The developer predicts a 160,000 gallon increase per day in water consumption and treatment—933% above historic levels of use. Critical water reserves will be tapped. Treated effluent will be released into a state-protected wetland habitat of the endangered Northern Cricket Frog. This sensitive wetland drains into Fourth Lake, which itself is fragile. The FDA does not regulate the ingredients in “personal care” products that a large spa must dispose of—844 such products contain chemicals and oils that have been identified as toxic, and many are known carcinogens. There will be blasting and earth-moving near the hibernacula caves of the endangered Indiana Bat, which is already suffering steep population declines due to the mysterious “white-nose” syndrome. Further disturbance could push the bats—essential to local agriculture and insect control—closer to area extinction. The developer talks “green,” but such talk is frankly absurd.

So much is at stake. Your contribution to Save the Lakes can insure that major public concerns are upheld by expert scientific and legal testimony during the State Environmental Quality Review process.

Make your check payable to Friends of the Shawangunks and mail it to: Save the Lakes P.O. Box 153 Rosendale, N.Y. 12472-0153 PLEASE NOTE Save the Lakes as a memo on your check.

Visit www.savethelakes.us for more information on the gated over-development of Williams Lake.

Sensible Wireless for Gardiner Successfully Challenges Town's Approval of 160 Foot Cell Tower in Walkkill River-Shawangunk Ridge Viewshed

An important court decision in October granted a petition by Sensible Wireless for Gardiner, one of the Open Space Institute's Citizen Action groups, to annul the Town of Gardiner's plans to build a cell tower in the scenic town. In a strongly worded opinion, state Supreme Court Justice Henry Zwack found the Town's review of the tower's environmental impact deficient and rejected its attempt to exempt the project from the local zoning law.

Unlike most cell towers, the proposed Gardiner tower was to be owned by the Town, based on a contract between the Town and JNS Towers, a company which facilitates development of municipal towers. Pursuant to a contract between the Town of Gardiner and JNS Towers, JNS conducted basic background studies, including visual impact studies, and was to have designed and built the tower, while the Town was responsible for managing the approval process. The contract provided that both parties would realize profits from tower revenues.

However, the contract restricted potential tower locations to municipally owned parcels and locking in a specific tower proposal, instead of allowing for consideration of alternative sites and heights. The contract also subjected the Town to substantial monetary penalties if it abandoned the project, further reducing its options.

These constraints were particularly problematic in Gardiner, which combines the bucolic landscapes characteristic of the Hudson Valley with the majestic beauty of the Shawangunk Ridge. The Town had recently reauthorized a law closely regulating cell towers to protect the unique scenery of the Ridge.

The law restricted tower height to 80 feet, or potentially 120 feet if there was no added impact and also required the use of camouflage and screening. In contrast, the Town-JNS proposal called for a 160 foot tower (164 feet counting the topmost antenna), in an exposed area adjacent to the scenic Walkkill River corridor. It would literally tower over the River valley landscape and would interfere with certain views of the Ridge.

As a result, the proposal ran into roadblocks in the zoning process. It was criticized by the town planning board's consultants and by the county planning board. The Zoning Board of Appeals denied the height variance needed for the 160 foot tower. The Town Board nevertheless pursued the project by attempting to exempt itself from the zoning law, to remove the height constraints as well as the review by the other agencies. In its resolution, the board made clear its intent to apply a different set of standards for its project than to other prospective tower developers.

Sensible Wireless sued to challenge the exemption and the environmental review of the project under the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA). The town had found that the tower would not have any significant adverse impact and had issued a SEQRA "negative declaration" as a prerequisite to construction. The Court, however, agreed with Sensible Wireless' objections, citing the Town's failures to follow the law's height limitation and its requirement to consider the impacts on local parks, preserves and waterways, including the Minnewaska State Park Preserve, other locations on the Ridge, and the Walkkill River.

The Court found it "striking how many provisions in the Town's own Zoning Law were not followed or violated, and without sufficient or any explanation." While courts usually defer to an agency's SEQRA determination if it is competently performed, the noncompliance with applicable standards, the errors in the town's review process and the potential impact on local and statewide scenic resources were sufficient for the New York Supreme Court to overturn the approval.

That the Court granted the homeowners standing to bring the suit was also a significant victory. The Court also dismissed Gardiner's attempt to exempt itself from Town zoning laws. The test used by state courts to determine if local zoning laws should apply is a balancing of public interest. Justice Zwack weighed the benefit of the cell tower against the potential for impact on the scenery, as well as shortcomings in the Town's review process, specifically its incomplete visual assessment and its failure to consider alternative sites, and concluded that its decision was without reasonable basis. In many cases, citizens have been denied the right to challenge zoning decisions on the grounds that their interests are the same as the general public. Because Sensible Wireless' petitioners live across the Walkkill River from the tower and offered evidence that the scenic views from their properties would be adversely affected, the Court concluded that they would suffer harm from the construction of the tower different from that of the public at large. The Court found these interests sufficiently unique to grant standing and allow the lawsuit to proceed. This ruling presaged a decision by the State's high court a few weeks later which also allowed standing based on the petitioners' specialized interests and preservation efforts.

The Town Board must now determine whether or not to appeal the decision. At stake is the town law's vision to favor shorter, less visible towers. Even if the higher, more obtrusive towers favored by industry were used, more than one would be needed to cover the town, given its size and hilly topography. It remains to be seen whether industry can modify its approach and become a partner in preserving the area's outstanding scenery while providing the telecommunications services the public desires.

Open Space Institute Continues Preservation

The Open Space Institute and Walkkill Valley Land Trust have extended the Walkkill Valley Rail Trail by 11.5 miles, roughly doubling its length. This addition will provide a nearly continuous recreational trail that runs through the towns of Gardiner, New Paltz, Rosendale (with a break at Williams Lake in Rosendale) and Ulster, and on to Kingston. The trail will run almost continuously for 23.7 miles allowing hikers and bikers to go from Kingston to Gardiner. With future connections to other rail trails the hope is to eventually have the preeminent rail trail network in the Hudson River Valley.

OSI and WVLT purchased the railroad bed from the county, which acquired the lands through tax foreclosure in April. The trail includes the 940-foot-long railroad trestle over the Rondout Creek in the hamlet of Rosendale.

In May OSI purchased a residence adjacent to the Mohonk Preserve Visitors Center. This newly-named Undercliff House will eventually serve administrative and educational functions, and will protect the Preserve headquarters from inconsistent development.

In August OSI transferred 143 acres underneath Verkeerderkill Falls to Minnewaska State Park Preserve, extending the eastern boundary of the Park Preserve to Upper Mountain Road in Gardiner, and protecting an important part of the Eastern escarpment of the Shawangunks.

Environmental Shaker . . . Radl and Role

After being on the Friends of the Shawangunks board for eighteen years Maureen Radl is stepping down. There are few people as committed to environmental concerns as this Cragmoor resident. A former reading specialist in the Valley Central School District in Montgomery, N.Y., and assistant professor of English, at SUNY Orange, Maureen has been tireless in her efforts to effect positive change in our area—the Shawangunk ridge, the skies above, and the valleys below!

Maureen grew up in Fort Lee, NJ, just south of the George Washington Bridge with a “backyard” of undeveloped land about ¼ mile wide and 1 mile long on the edge of the Palisades. This playground was complete with its own waterfall, skating pond, climbing cliffs, and spectacular views of the Hudson river and New York City. The seeds of environmental awareness were first planted and nourished when this land was rezoned to accommodate high-rise apartments. Maureen’s grandfather was one of many who spoke against the rezoning, but to no effect. And so their family moved farther north. The loss of that treasured land and view has often inspired her to get involved in protecting other threatened open spaces.

When she discovered the Shawangunks in 1970 on a Sunday drive west from Newburgh on Route 52, she and her husband were awestruck by the spectacular views as they crested the Ridge and started downhill towards Ellenville. They knew this was where they wanted to live. Two years later they purchased an old, unwinterized house in Cragmoor, the only residential community on the Ridge. Here Maureen found a welcoming community of creative and environmentally-conscious neighbors along with a “playground” of numerous waterfalls, streams, lakes, cliffs, crevices, breathtaking views, and the nearby Basha Kill Wetland for canoeing and kayaking. What an extraordinary place to raise two children. It wasn’t long, however, before it became very clear that this unique landscape also faced serious threats to its existence as an open, unspoiled, natural resource. This time it was her turn to become active protecting a place that she loved. Thus began her “avocation” as an environmentalist,

Looking back on battles that she participated in gives a clear picture of area environmental history. Some of the issues Maureen worked on with others in her community who shared her concerns and encouraged and inspired her were:

- uProtection of Bear Hill in Cragmoor from development and formation of the Cragmoor Association to manage it.
- uExclusion of commercial zoning from the Hamlet of Cragmoor.
- uOpposition to erection of additional microwave and telecommunication towers on the Ridge.
- uPrevention of the construction of a wind farm with 500 turbines on the Ridge,
- uCollaboration with Ella Stedner in the formation of the Cragmoor Historic District and listing it on the National Register of Historic Places, including historic landscapes such as Bear Hill under the auspices of the Cragmoor Free Library.
- uOrganization of ten annual exhibitions of a century of Cragmoor artists—which drew attention to the Shawangunks extraordinary landscape—sponsored by the Cragmoor Free Library and circulated to museums on the East Coast.

- uPreservation of the sound space over the Shawangunks as Co-Chair with Susan Staples of Ulsterites Fight Overflight Noise, formation of the Citizens Advisory Panel for Stewart International Airport, and recommendations on the FAA Air Space Redesign Project

Paula Medley recommended that Maureen be on the Board of the Friends of the Shawangunks to represent the Town of Wawarsing and the Southern Shawangunks. She has been on the board since 1991 and worked on many Northern Shawangunk projects:

- uSupported the acquisition of the Ellenville Tract by OSI (acquisition completed in October 1997 after 9 years of negotiations.
- uRecommended modifications on the Mahamudra Hermitage
- uRepresented FOS on the Sam’s Point Advisory Council
- uOriginal Master Plan for Sam’s Point
- uSouth Gully trail design

Maureen collaborated with the Basha Kill Area Association, FOS’s partner in the Southern Shawangunks, and took part in many efforts to protect open space and other natural resources in that area:

- uYukiguni Maitake Mushroom Plant (seven year battle)
- uBasher Kill subdivision
- uWurtsboro Airport Development
- uRedesign of Exit 14 on the new Interstate 86
- uResort development at Shawanga Lodge site

Maureen modestly says “As is true for my fellow activists, every spare minute of an already busy life seemed to be taken up with countless meetings, statements at public hearings, phone calls, articles, and letters to

editors, government representatives, and various agencies. My efforts were minimal, however, in comparison to many of the people with whom I worked. It has been extremely rewarding to be part of a community of like-minded individuals, passionately united in an effort to protect and preserve the cultural, historic, and natural resources of this area. Over the course of my involvement in this movement I have been extremely fortunate to witness the preservation of thousands of acres of open space through collaboration with the Open Space Institute and other environmental groups. Now a good part of this rare treasure will be protected for future generations—and nothing could please me more.”

Eighteen Years and Counting

It was back in 1992 that Dava Weinstein (former Friends board member) and Dorothy Calvani held their first annual Hikathon to raise money for The Shawangunk Conservancy. They set a goal of raising at least \$1,000 a year, and have never failed to do so. Some years it was much more; this year the total was \$1,294. They invite their friends to join them in a hike in the Gunks, and those who contribute at least \$50 are provided with a great lunch. Some friends show up every year, so it has become an event not to be missed. We plan to announce next year’s Hikathon on our web site, in hopes that more members can support the Conservancy while enjoying a day in the Shawangunks.

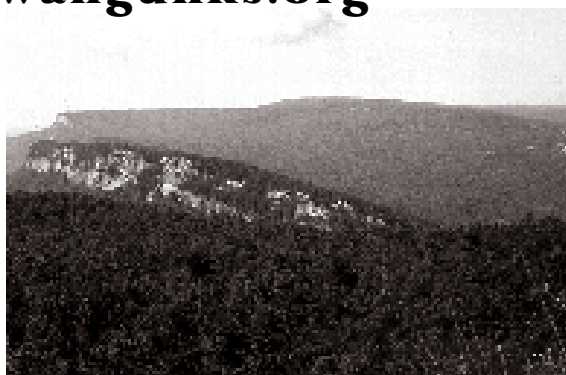


Friends Goes Online

www.Shawangunks.org

Check out Friends of the Shawangunks website at www.Shawangunks.org

It has a back issues of our newsletter *Shawangunk Watch*, links to dozens of Shawangunk sites, updates on ridge projects and threats, and more than 80 photos showing natural features of the ridge. The site also provides an easy way to join Friends, contact us, or send a donation using a credit card.



FRIENDS of the SHAWANGUNKS
Preserving Open Space Since 1963

Friends of the Shawangunks, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization working to preserve open space in the Shawangunks.

The Shawangunk Conservancy, Inc. is a not-for-profit land conservancy.
Friends of the Shawangunks
P.O. Box 270
Accord, NY 12404

e-mail: info@shawangunks.org

Friends Tee Shirt Sale - Save 30%

From now until the end of 2009 our new tee shirts will be \$15, and that includes shipping.

Our new shirt is 100% cotton, and features a portion of the NY/NJ Trail map so you can never be lost if you hike in that area! Go to our website: shawangunks.org to get an order form.



PLEASE CONSIDER A YEAR END CONTRIBUTION

There is still work to be done
protecting Open Space
and it is critical to be able to do it now!

THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT

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A copy of FOS and The Shawangunk Conservancy's latest financial report may be obtained by writing to the Office of the Attorney General, Charities Bureau, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271, or by writing to The Shawangunk Conservancy.

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