

# Shawangunk WATCH

Friends of the Shawangunks and The Shawangunk Conservancy

DECEMBER 2016

Volume 21 Number 3

**THE  
SAM'S  
POINT  
FIRE**

**OUR  
SKINK**

**DRAGON  
SPRINGS**

**THE  
LONGEST  
CAVE  
IN ULSTER  
COUNTY**

**Entrance to  
Pompey's  
Cave**

**Preserving Open Space in the Shawangunks since 1963**

## OUR LIZARD

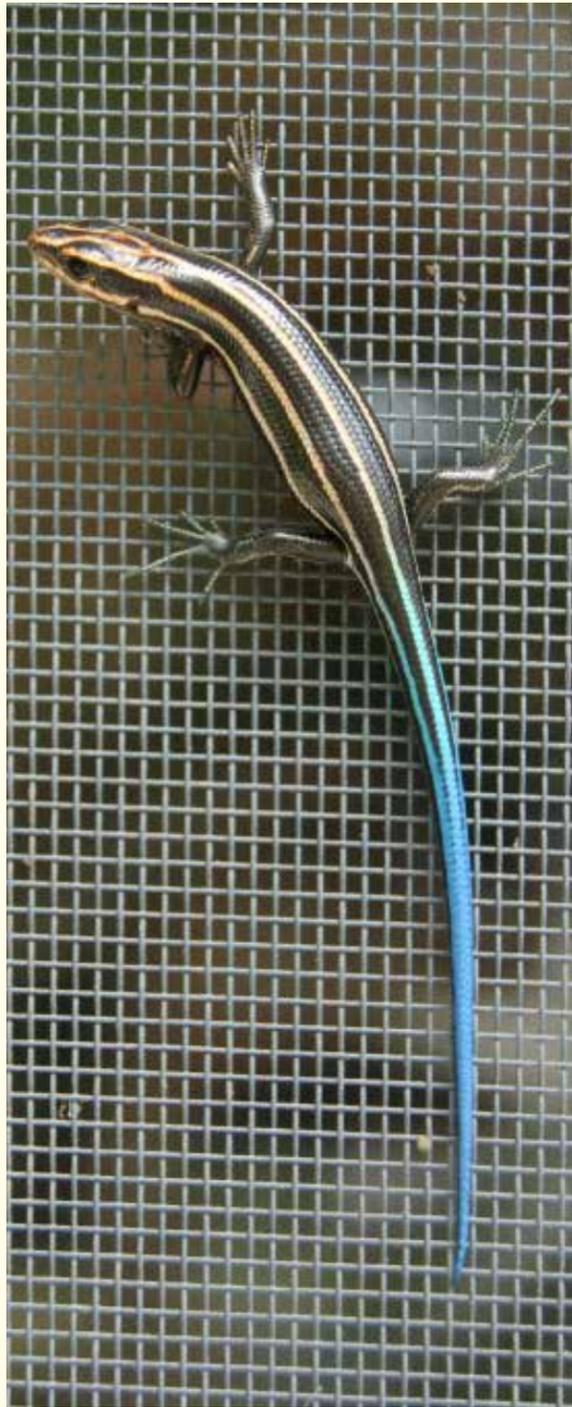
### HERPS ON THE GUNKS, PART III:

Bill Cutler and Susan Erny

**DID you know** that New York State has lizards? In the Shawangunks, the five-lined skink is the native lizard. These are found in the more western parts of the Gunks on outcrops of rocks where there are talus slopes, the piles of rocks which were left behind thousands of years ago by glaciers as they melted. Talus provides perfect hiding places for the skinks. Where there's pitch pine cover, you might also find skinks under pieces of bark. They grow to about five inches long. Juvenile skinks have a fluorescent bluish or purplish tail and five yellow lines on their backs. Adult male skinks have ruby-red throats. These bright colors diminish over time until they are a dull brown, providing them perfect camouflage. They are very fast and make jerky movements. You might hear them before you see them as they dart about. Unlike other lizards, skinks' skin is smooth and soft to the touch.

The diet of skinks includes ants, cockroaches, beetles, and larvae. They breed every year or every other year. Females lay up to six eggs in a protected, moist location in leaf litter in June. By August, the hatchlings are about one to one-and-a-half inches long. Predators of the five-lined skink include rodents, birds and large beetles. Skinks, like snakes, retreat underground in winter to avoid freezing. They move to dens below the frost line and group together with other skinks.

*Bill Cutler has a degree in biology from Binghamton University with concentrations in environmental science and geology. He has worked as the Sullivan County Recycling Coordinator for 25 years. Bill leads "herp" walks for the Basha Kill Area Association as well as the Sullivan County Audubon Society. Susan Erny is a Friends board member.*



PHOTOGRAPH: VIRGINIA STATE PARK STAFF

## Shawangunk WATCH

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Steve MacDonald, Thomas Nozkowski  
and Pril Smiley*

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The latest financial report of  
Friends of the Shawangunks  
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may be obtained by writing to the  
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## NOTES FROM THE SOUTHERN SHAWANGUNKS

### MORE ON DEERPARC COMMONS by Susan Erny



THE MAIN DRAGON SPRINGS COMPLEX FROM THE AIR.  
ABOVE: an overview. BELOW: the massive new dormitory

**GOOD NEWS FIRST:** Seven Peaks has not been on the radar for two years. Nor has Deerpark Commons (DC) produced its promised revisions for the enormous commercial project it proposed, though DC's developer and attorney did attend a nonpublic meeting with town officials. No outcome has been disclosed.

Da Tang Development (aka Alan Adler of DC) has built a music store on Galley Hill Road, where DC owns 190 acres. The store will support Dragon Springs' music academy. Ten days after the store received its certificate of occupancy it applied for an addition to the store and submitted incomplete plans. Approval of such an addition, known as segmentation, would appear to violate state law. According to the New York Department of Environmental Conservation, segmentation occurs when "a project sponsor attempts to avoid a thorough environmental review (often an Environmental Impact Statement) of a whole action by splitting a project into two or more smaller projects."

Dragon Springs (DS) is the Chinese group that built a major complex of schools and a performing arts center on nearly 400 acres on the western ridge. In July and August Deerpark's Zoning Board of Appeals held public hearings to discuss five variances DS sought involving driveway grades and widths, a bridge, and a security fence. Because the fence would be erected along and over the Basha Kill and the Neversink River, the Basha Kill Area Association engaged a professional engineer, Andrew Willingham, to review the variances. He found that none met the New York Town Law criteria necessary to grant variances. Many residents spoke out against the variances, as did a representative of FOS. It was hoped that the ZBA would rule on the variances at an October meeting

but no such meeting was scheduled. DS has already built the driveways and the bridge and has an internal fence around its religious sites. This appears to be DS standard procedure: build without a permit then seek a variance.

In May DS presented a revised site plan for its facility, including an additional 100,000 gallons-per-day of sewage which will be treated and then discharged into a tributary of the Basha Kill which feeds into the Neversink River. The new proposals include work in previously undisturbed areas. Major construction has been observed that appears to be a seven-story dormitory. DEC deemed the application incomplete. The Nature Conservancy and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are monitoring the quality of and potential threats to the Neversink River. Among other reasons for the study is that one of the last populations of the federally endangered Dwarf Wedge Mussel inhabits the river. As filter-feeders, the mussels are vital to the health of a stream's ecosystem.

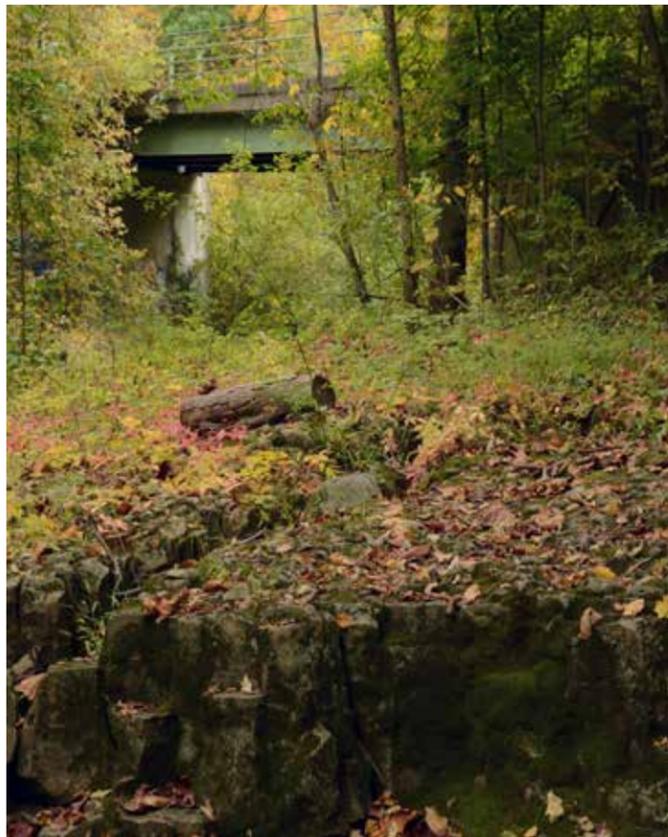
Another DS misstep was a proposal last year to build a mountaintop solar farm on 28.8 acres in the Town of Mount Hope. Besides local opposition, New York State Supreme Court Justice Elaine Slobod nixed the idea: DS had applied for an accessory use permit, which applies to existing structures, but no such structure existed. The Mount Hope property is zoned for agriculture or limited housing.

Deerpark Rural Alliance (DRA) has been keeping current by using the Freedom of Information Law to collect documents. Because of the Hamlet Mixed Use zoning issue—in which the town rezoned thousands of acres to encourage commercial development— and the Town of Deerpark's blind eye toward developers' flagrant violations, the watchdog group is considering filing an Article 78 suit against the town. FOS made a contribution to DRA's cause.

*Susan Erny is a Friends board member.*



# THE FACTS AND FOLKLORE OF POMPEY'S CAVE



BY GARY KITCHEN PHOTOS BY JOHN HAYES

## POMPEY'S CAVE AND KRIPPLEBUSH CREEK

**FROM THE LEFT:** The Lucas Avenue Bridge crossing the dry bed of Kripplebush Creek. In the next photo, John Hayes lowers himself into the main entrance of Pompey's Cave. The third photo shows the ladder and the entrance from inside the cave.

**ABOVE:** The dramatic broken rock "paving" of Kripplebush Creek above Pompey's Cave.

ledges there were many peculiar lizards, snakes and curious plants that today constitute a great deal of the legend and beauty of the spot. A great snake seemed to be guarding the entrance to the cave. The mammoth reptile is named Big Pompey because of his seeming protection of the cave. This legend lives on. The trees and grass on the ledge provide homes for the numerous grass and tree snakes and various lizard types. A lynx, a very rare animal, is supposed to have some fantastic connection with the weirdness of the cave.

Scenically, the cave proper is unsurpassable, often providing advertising material for Kyserike. The picnic spot just above it resembles a well-furnished room. Along one side is a row of aged spruce trees. The section under them is carpeted by a soft covering of beautiful green moss. At the end of the "room," just above the cave, is a natural fireplace worn out of solid rock by floodwaters. The area surrounding the mouth of the cave is as beautiful as the cave itself.

For many years after the discovery of the cave it was not penetrated nor was it carefully explored. It was not until 1919 that the proprietor realized that it could be a profitable landmark. Accordingly, he turned his home into a summer resort and prepared the cave for scouting and sightseers. A ladder was placed in the entrance and lanterns were provided to light the interior. Visitors enjoyed the short, interesting journey through the cave immensely.

Entrance is possible, to this day, through only one of the two mouths which are very close together. The stream flowing through the cave makes passage impossible in the annual spring flood season. In the bottom of the stream are many beautifully colored and curiously shaped pebbles. Their almost luminous qualities are fascinating and are quite parallel to those found in the Grand Canyon in Colorado. The floor itself is the bed of the various fossils which serve as an introductory study in the paleontology, also to a certain extent in the geology of the region. The walls of the cave are covered with moss. From the cracks in the walls trickles a constant stream of water which forms icicles in the fall and late spring.

The next time you drive down Lucas Turnpike and see several cars pulled off the roadside across from Benton Bar Cemetery, you know the occupants are probably wading knee deep through history in the subterranean waters of the Kripplebush Creek.

Recently retired from the Law Dept. at Merck & Co., Gary volunteers at the Mohonk Preserve as a Cultural Researcher and is a member of the Mohonk Mountain House Safety & Security staff.

## THE FACTS

The cave, which was discovered in the 1850s, is the longest in Ulster County at 3,788 feet. It runs east-west in Kyserike, a small "populated place" in the Town of Rochester. The historical main entrance is about 100 yards west of Lucas Turnpike. The cave entrance is on private property belonging to the Neff family. Park along Lucas Turnpike directly across from the Benton Bar Cemetery. Walk west along the dry Kripplebush Creek stream bed. The opening has a ladder to the cave floor, which is usually covered with at least shin-deep water. There are no less than five entrances to the cave; the historical main entrance is the most often used and possibly the only one passable.

Kripplebush Creek, which flows from the Rondout Creek, makes a brief loop through the Town of Rochester, flowing from Marletown and then back again. Roughly where it leaves Rochester it flows underground through the limestone Pompey's Cave. The cave is submerged during heavy flows and then floods the normally dry stream bed. Because the cave fills with water during heavy rains there is no evidence of bats.

In 1987 five enterprising spelunkers surveyed the entire length of Pompey's Cave and identified notable features: Cricket Crawl, Coffin Crawl, Kilroy Room, Snake Hole, Wigger's Way, Candle Falls, and Catfish Junction among others. On historical maps, including Brink (1853), and Tillson (1854), only the French (1858) map shows the word "Cave" in the area.

## THE FOLKLORE

Was Pompey's Cave part of the Underground Railroad? Probably not, as there is no evidence indicating this. Was it named for a black farmhand named Pompey who discovered it in the 1850s? Possibly, but the commonly accepted derivation is from the Indian Munsee word "pomp-ey-lay-oo," which means "it is in a dry stream bed."

In 1948 the Stephen Daye Press published *Underground Empire: Wonders and Tales of New York Caves* by Clay Perry, a novelist and journalist who is credited with coining the term "spelunker." In the chapter entitled "Some Shawangunk Hideouts" Perry describes the origin of Pompey's Cave.

"Pompey's Cave was discovered by a Black farm hand, in the 1850's," Perry wrote. "It served the dramatic purpose, later, of sheltering a woman and child and this escaped slave from raiding Confederates in the Civil War.

"The story is little known and, in fact, never has been published, but it has been preserved in a manuscript that was written by Miss Margaret Atkins, while a student at New York State College for Teachers, in Albany. Professor Louis C. Jones, her instructor and editor of *New York Folklore*, handed the manuscript to me on my first visit to him. Miss Atkins got the story of Pompey's Cave from her grandfather, Henry Neff, who owned the estate on which the cavern is located and who was the first to examine the history and scientific features of the cave."

Miss Atkins' account continues:  
*John Green beamed as he gazed at his wife, knitting in the peaceful light of the fireplace. "Her graceful movements are symbolic of our future life," he thought. "Easy, comfortable and care free." Pompey, the [Black] farm hand whom he had hired that very morning would do the work and keep this, his farm, in shipshape condition and he (Green) could spend the re-*

*mainder of his life in rest and quietude. This was in 1848 and Green's life continued as he had planned. His huge farm flourished under Pompey's hand. Though Pompey was working very hard, he enjoyed life, immensely, and extended his work into the further end of the estate that had not thus far been cultivated. Green didn't know what lay beyond the north pasture, himself.*

*One day as Pompey was taking the cows to pasture, they stopped to drink at the brook that ran through the field. The sound of a turbulent rush of water came to Pompey's ears. He was terribly frightened for he never had waned this far on the vast estate before nor had he, on the other hand, seen anything particularly odd about the behavior of the brook, nearer the house, even though he had visited it every day. But as he stood there, waiting for the cows to finish drinking, he pondered on the strangeness of the noise. His fright was overcome by his curiosity and he ventured further along the bank. About six feet in front of him he saw the brook disappear with a thunderous splashing into a huge pit in the rocks composing the bank.*

*Pompey was not satisfied that the brook ended there. "It couldn't," he decided, and intelligently enough, "just go no where."*

*Pompey decided that this must have been meant to be his own, personal secret, and accordingly he told Green nothing of the incident.*

*Sunday morning found Pompey exploring that part of the farm which lay beyond the pasture lands. He found that the brook's disappearance was the cause of the excessive moisture in the cave and on the rocks that lay before him. A rock floor containing a cave with two mouths and one exit presented itself in the very center of the extreme end of the grazing fields. Where the brook seemed to drop into infinity, the level ground and the banks met with an extensive rock floor and steep rock ledges. On these*

# THE SAM'S POINT FIRE OF 2016

BY **Hank Alicandri**  
AND **Keith LaBudde**

## SATURDAY, APRIL 23

The Sam's Point fire was small when it was called in to the 911 center at 2:18 pm. A hiker had come across it in a hardwood grove along the trail to Verkeerderkill Falls. The Cragsmoor Fire Department arrived on scene at 2:22. The Minnewaska State Park Preserve was immediately closed. Visitors in the Lake Maratanza area were picked up and told to leave.

When Drew Polinsky, Sam's Point Ranger/Steward for New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, got to the scene the fire was estimated to cover 100 square feet. By 2:40 he found the ignition point and estimated that the fire had grown to an acre with flames as high as three feet. The wind was estimated at five miles per hour out of the north. The relative humidity was 29 percent.

At 2:54 Polinsky went to the east side of the grove of hardwood trees to divert hikers returning from the falls. (They were directed back to the High Point Trail, where they faced a long hike back to the parking lot, but a shuttle was provided at the junction of the trail and the High Point Road.) By this time the fire had already spread to the pitch pines north of the grove.

At 2:55 hand crews from the Crag-smoor fire department started down the

Verkeerderkill Falls Trail from the Ice Caves Road. At 3:15 these crews withdrew because shifting and increasing winds had made fire-fighting unsafe in a blaze that now covered 10 acres.

By 3:50 the wind was driving the fire south and downhill toward Walker Valley. The Cragsmoor crews returned to the fire and began cutting back vegetation along the Verkeerderkill trail to establish a fire control line.

By 4:20 New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Forest Rangers had arrived.

At 5:45 back burns (fires purposely set in areas toward which the fire was moving with the goal of using up flammable materials) were started at the intersection of the Ice Caves Road and the trail. Two firefighters created back burns on both sides of the trail, and Sam's Point Director Hank Alicandri and a DEC forest ranger burned south of the road.

At 6:10 Alicandri saw 30-foot-tall flames moving rapidly to the northeast in the crowns of pitch pines.

At 7:15 the back-burned control lines appeared to be holding, and the first of three helicopters arrived. Three helicopters were used, two to fill large buckets of water from Lake Maratanza and drop them on the fire and one to spot problem areas and help move personnel and equipment.

### STATISTICS

ACRES BURNED: 2,028  
PERIMETER OF BURN AREA: 16 miles  
BULLDOZER TRACKS: 9.17 miles  
MILES OF FIRE LINE WORKED BY HAND: 7  
ESTIMATED NUMBER OF HELICOPTER DROPS: 750  
APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF GALLONS IN EACH DROP: 200  
TOTAL NUMBER OF GALLONS DROPPED: 150,000  
FIREFIGHTER INJURIES: 3  
STRUCTURES DAMAGED: 0

At 8:30 the first planning meeting was held at the visitor center, and the fire was named "Verkeerderkill." The fire area was divided into four divisions, each with its own boss and crew.

## SUNDAY, APRIL 24

In the morning the fire covered 400 acres. The wind was from the north at five miles per hour, gusting to 20. The relative humidity had dropped to 19 percent! The fire had jumped over the trail overnight, and hand crews were working on the High Point Trail and High Point Road. Because the fire was spreading generally south and east, bulldozers worked to create a control line and keep the fire away from residences adjacent to the park preserve in Walker Valley. The fire continued to move south, but by the end of the day the wind had reversed direction and the fire started to move north into thick, highly flammable pitch pine fuels.

During the day a team from the state Office of Emergency Management joined DEC personnel in planning containment of the fire. At the evening session it became clear that spelling and pronouncing "Verkeerderkill" was a bit of a problem, so the fire was renamed the "Sam's Point Fire."

## MONDAY, APRIL 25

Winds in the morning were southwesterly at six to nine miles per hour and relative humidity was 26 percent. More back burns were lit east of Lake Maratanza. By mid-morning the fire had begun to move quickly north and workers in the northern divisions were evacuated. The fire jumped the High Point Road and started moving toward the communication towers near Lake Maratanza. It would eventually spread beyond Indian Rock. A bulldozer line to the west was started to protect homes in the Cragsmoor area and the towers. The dozer line eventually extended to the Smiley Road.

The bulldozers on the southeast side of the fire completed their line protecting Walker Valley, and at around 4 pm burnout crews started at both ends of the line, finishing their burnout operation at 2 the next morning.

The fire covered an estimated to be 800 acres at 5 pm. There were 113 people fighting the fire that day.

## TUESDAY, APRIL 26

The size estimated size was more than doubled to 1,780 acres, and 280 people were fighting it.

Fortunately, the day brought a heavy blanket of fog and high humidity. A hard rain late in the day essentially put out the fire, but crews continued to patrol and "cold trail"—feeling the ground near fire areas to be sure the fire was out.

## WEDNESDAY, APRIL 27

The rain had stopped. Two helicopters were used heavily in interior areas, hitting burning snags with buckets of water. Bulldozers continued to work in the tower area. Three hundred people were on the job.

## APRIL 28-30

The fire was over, and the cleanup began. Rehabilitation work was undertaken on the bulldozer lines and carriage roads. Patrols continued to check for hot spots. Excess equipment was removed. A 0.4 inch rain on the evening of the 29th supplied the finishing touch.

## NEXT STEPS

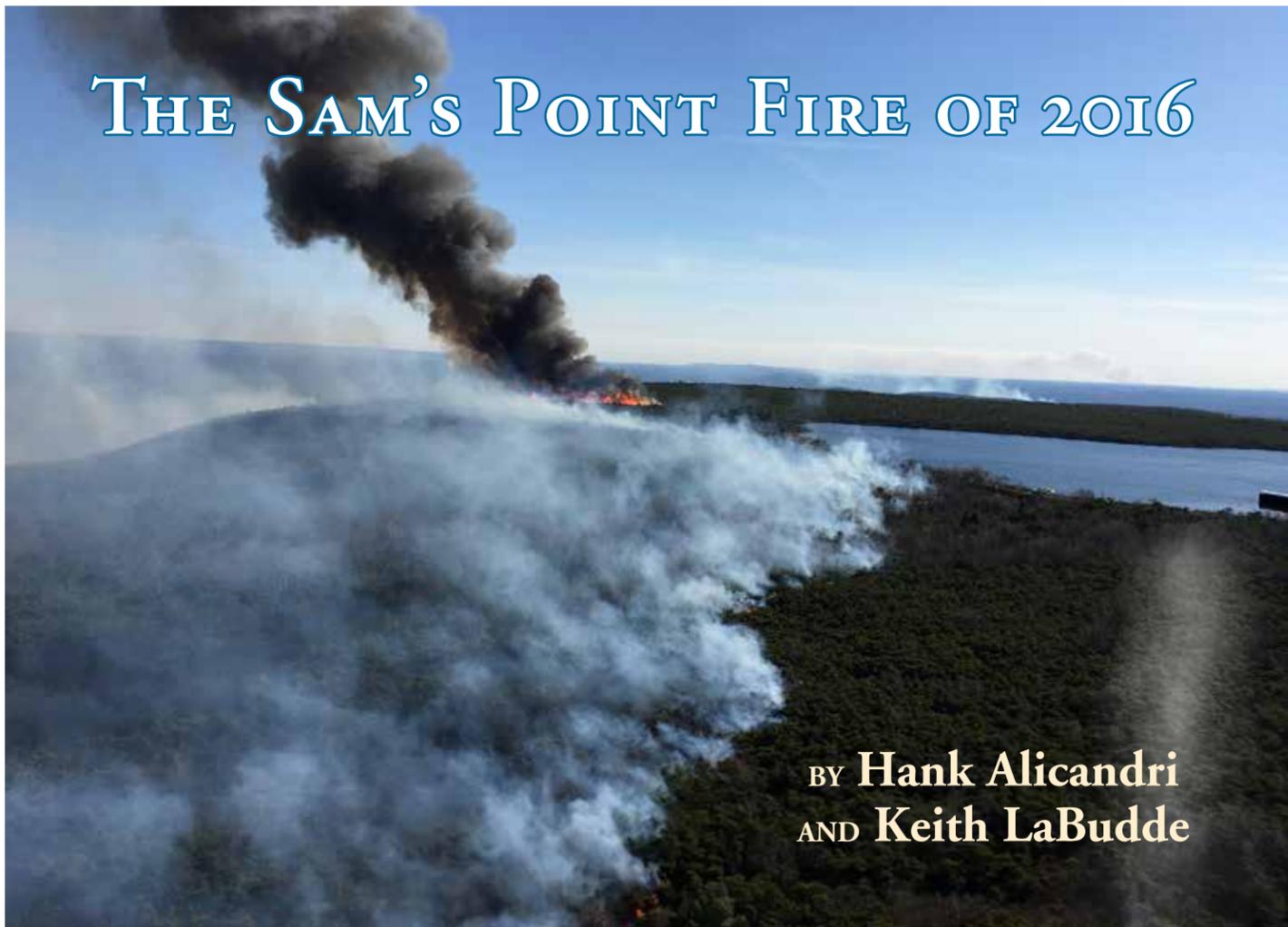
Mitigation work will continue along the bulldozer lines and the fire lines worked by hand. There will be a focused effort to prevent erosion and siltation of streams.

Fire experts decided that the fire had likely been started by a hiker

on the Verkeerderkill Falls Trail but couldn't say by accident or arson. The large size of this fire and other recent wildfires in the Shawangunks can be traced in part to fewer fires. Until the mid 1940s there was about one significant fire every 12 years in the Gunks, reducing available fuel. The last large fire at Sam's Point was 70 years ago, so a large fuel load had accumulated.

*Hank is Sam's Point Director for the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation. Keith is a Friends board member.*

PHOTOGRAPH: NYSDEC



ABOVE: Ignition on Maratanza Loop Road, April 24  
BELOW: Saw crew on the High Point Trail, April 26



PHOTOGRAPH: TYLER BRIGGS

## SOME LATE-BREAKING FROG NEWS

In the article on reptiles in a previous newsletter, it was said that frogs could not survive in Lake Minnewaska. That is no longer true. According to Jorge Gomes of Minnewaska State Park Preserve, the pH of Lake Minnewaska has increased over the last 15 – 20 years, reducing its acidity to the level where some animal life can exist. The pH has increased in most Northeast water bodies due to the successes of more stringent EPA air quality regulations. What is unusual about Lake Minnewaska's pH increase is that it is not proportional to the increase of the pH of rainfall, and the rate at which it has increased has been much more rapid in the last decade.

Lake Minnewaska has experienced an approximate two point increase on the pH scale, whereas nearby Lake Awosting has ex-

perienced a much smaller increase, corresponding more directly to the change in the pH of rain. The pH of Minnewaska is currently in the neutral range (pH = 7), whereas it had been consistently acidic since pH records have been maintained. The questions of why there is such a difference between the two lakes, and why Lake Minnewaska's increase is greater, are still being researched by State Parks Environmental Management Bureau. The Department of Environmental Conservation, the Daniel Smiley Research Center of Mohonk Preserve, the SUNY New Paltz Biology Department and a host of other subject matter experts have all collaborated to study the lakes and will continue their efforts this year. At this point, the verdict is still out on why Lake Minnewaska's pH increase is so much greater.

## The Sam's Point Barrens, Christmas 2015, four months before the April fire.



PHOTOGRAPH: CASIMIR NOZKOWSKI

CUT OUT ALONG DOTTED LINE

## We need you to join us in saving the Shawangunks. Please help us any way you can.

### I WOULD LIKE TO JOIN OR RENEW MY MEMBERSHIP.

**BENEFACTOR** \$250.     **PATRON** \$100.    NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
 **FAMILY** \$25.     **INDIVIDUAL** \$15.    STREET \_\_\_\_\_  
 **OTHER** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to make an additional contribution to The Shawangunk Conservancy for land acquisition.    CITY \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

AMOUNT \$ \_\_\_\_\_    EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_     THIS IS A CHANGE OF ADDRESS OR EMAIL

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