Shawangunk WATCH

Friends of the Shawangunks and
The Shawangunk Conservancy

Spring at Brooks Parcel

Brooks Parcel History

What's in the Muck?

Tillson Lake Dam

Spring/Summer 2020
Volume 25 Number 1

PROTECTING OPEN SPACE IN THE SHAWANGUNKS SINCE 1963

Letter from FOS President John Hayes

Dear Members and Friends:

As we begin a new season, the Board of Directors wishes to extend a warm thank you to our members, donors and benefactors. It is imperative, however, that we also acknowledge the extraordinary circumstances of the changed and challenged world environment where we pursue our mission.

It is my hope that humanity's response to the Covid-19 crisis includes consciousness of how we are interconnected: respect for the role every individual plays in the functioning of civilization, and awareness that protection of the natural environment is essential to life itself. We extend condolences to those who have lost friends, colleagues or family members to the coronavirus, and profound gratitude to warriors on the frontline facing its dangers in service to others.

The year 2019 was another strong year for Friends of the Shawangunks (FOS) and for The Shawangunks Conservancy (TSC), our partner organization focused on acquisition of small but vulnerable parcels on the precious Shawangunk Ridge. We protected yet another strategic tract, the Brooks parcel, at the summit of Rock Hill. Many of us hiked to Brooks following the fall member meeting last October at Clove Chapel. The acquisition of the Brooks parcel was a spur to our goal of assembling the Rock Hill Preserve, an effort in which we have been engaged for over two decades.

The past year wasn't all work. Our members enjoyed a mixer at the Anderberg farm, coupled with a hike to the adjoining Fox Hollow Preserve.

Our website, Shawangunks.org, received a new and crisper look, with news, features, and an archive of *Shawangunk Watch* going back to 2004.

TSC is now looking at several more key parcels on the Ridge, to ensure they are permanently protected. We are grateful for the opportunity and ability to do so. We are made aware of these potential acquisitions by vigilant members and friends who alert us to the availability of parcels contiguous to preserved areas. Our ability to purchase desirable land is made possible by the generosity of donors to FOS and TSC, who share our strategic vision and dedication to preserving the Shawangunks. Thank you, member and friends, for helping us to fulfill our mission.

See you soon at one of our events, or on the trail.

—John

TSC GETS GENEROUS DONATION FROM UFO NOISE

by John Hayes

Next time you're hiking out on the Ridge, stop for a moment and listen…. It's not what you will hear, but what you will not hear: low flying commercial aircraft heading to one of the major airports to the south. This was not the case in the late 1980's and 1990's when there was a massive rerouting of aircraft flying into Newark and LaGuardia airports. The result was the creation of new airway intersections of low flying jets directly over the Shawangunk and Catskill mountains of Ulster County. It seemed the FAA never took into consideration the effects these changes would have on the soundscape of Ulster County and its treasured parklands.

To the rescue came UFO (Ulsterites Fight Overflight) Noise. At the helm were longtime FOS member Susan Staples, Pat Peters, and former FOS Board member Maureen Radl, who formed the executive committee. The mission was to make the FAA aware of the noise impact these aircraft route changes were having on the noise sensitive areas of Ulster county, particularly the precious parklands, which people sought out to enjoy peace and quiet. With the help of such environmental minded advocates as Maurice Hinchey, our then representative in Congress, they were able to get a new EIS (Environmental Impact Study) and seek a solution.

After years of tenacious effort, UFO Noise was successful: Flight plans were again rerouted, this time to use Interstate corridors (i.e. I 87) and thus avoid our noise sensitive areas; and the planes were also made to fly at higher altitudes.

In her letter that accompanied the donation to FOS, Susan Staples wrote:

> *"…We fondly remember Keith (LaBudde), always there at the meetings with FAA reps, putting the Gunks on the map as a 'noise sensitive' place. If possible we would like the money to go toward small parcel acquisition or other projects that have the effect of reducing noise impacts."*

Susan explained that UFO Noise has been inactive for over ten years and was closing out its bank account.

We wholeheartedly thank Susan and UFO Noise for their successful effort that has impacted everyone that seeks the quiet ambiance of the Shawangunk Ridge.

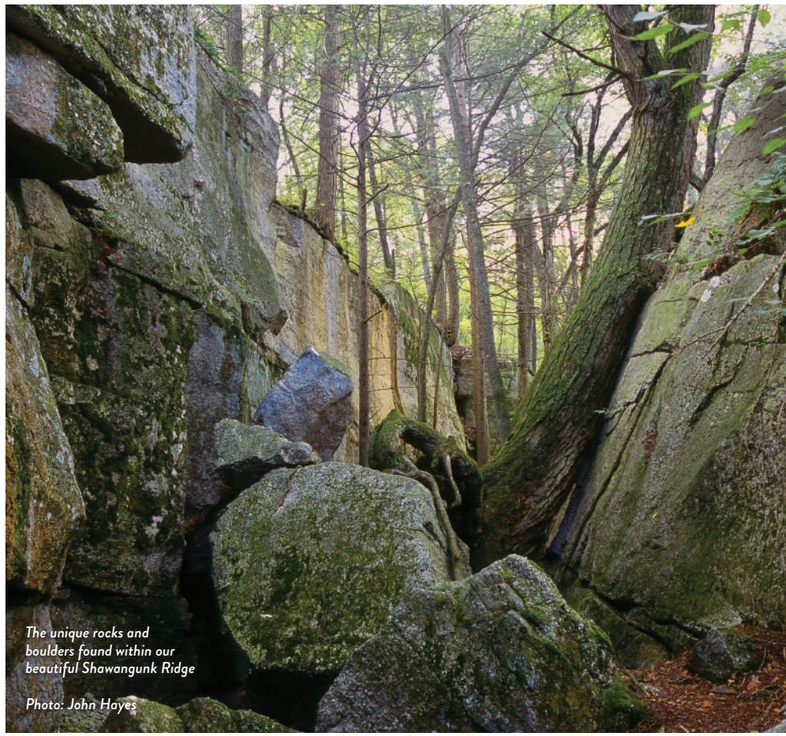
We also greatly appreciate their generous gift!

OVERFLIGHTS
ULSTERITES FIGHT OVERFLIGHT NOISE INC.

The Small Parcel Acquisition Program, A Look Back

The Shawangunk Conservancy completed its first acquisition of ridgetop land in the Shawangunks in August of 1989 – a 25-acre tract located on Rock Hill, a rocky summit on the "Lost City" Ridge. Thirty years later, TSC continues to buy land as part of its Small Parcel Acquisition Program. While the name of the program changed over the years, its inspiration and purpose remain the same – to preserve small but significant tracts of land in the Shawangunks that are not contemplated for ownership by the larger land preservation groups.

TSC has purchased a number of parcels on Rock Hill, most recently the Brooks parcel. Rock Hill is one of the three summits on the Lost City Ridge, the other two being Dickie Barre and Ronde Barre. Combined, they form a still pristine escarpment in the northern Shawangunk Mountains bordered by Clove Road on the east and by the Peters Kill on the west. The ridge lies directly across the Clove from Lake Mohonk and forms much of the view shed from vantage points such as Skytop, Copes Lookout, Eagle Cliff and Millbrook. Thanks to conservation minded folks such as the Brooks and generous members, TSC will continue to protect small parcels for the next 30 years. All donations to this effort – of whatever size – are needed in order for us to continue our work and are greatly appreciated.



The unique rocks and boulders found within our beautiful Shawangunk Ridge

Photo: John Hayes

BIRDS OF MINNEWASKA CAMPAIGN

Open Space Institute is providing an opportunity to put your name on the new visitor center that is under construction at Minnewaska State Park Preserve. This building will provide some badly needed facilities: drinking water, heated restrooms with flush toilets, a warm space for winter visitors, office space for the park staff, and many educational exhibits that will tell the story of the Park. To help pay for the center OSI is offering donors a personalized, etched window tile featuring a local songbird or raptor with a personalized inscription. Each sponsored tile will be part of a larger prominent window exhibit. This lasting tribute will help educate visitors about some of the most popular and colorful birds that can be seen in the park. To get your very own tile go to www.openspaceinstitute.org/minnewaska-birds. But don't delay: donations must be received by July 15 in order to be installed for the slated October opening of the center. If you miss the deadline you will still get your tile, but it might not be installed in time for the opening.

What the Muck Tells Us

by Dorothy M. Peteet,
with research colleagues Kirsten Menking (Vassar) and MS student Elizabeth Sage Margraf (Columbia)

William Morris once wrote "The true secret of happiness lies in taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life." Maybe that is true in the time of this pandemic, as we are forced to slow way down. We can appreciate the warmth of sunlight, the cooling shade, the refreshing breeze, the musical thrush, the revealing bud break, the moist earth aroma, the gurgling stream, the dawn and the dusk.

Our group is studying the history of the last ice age glacial retreat (Laurentide ice sheet) and tree migration from south to north, so we select sites at high elevations (Shawangunk Ridge, NJ-NY) as well as those in valleys. We are interested in how climate and people have changed our landscapes, and how those lessons can help us as we face a changing climate now. How rapidly does climate shift, what was the timing of the ice retreat, how many droughts have we had in the last few thousand years, how severe were they and how have people changed our environment?

For some of us, the tiny preserved fossils that have been hidden for 13,000 years under water in lakes such as Mohonk or Minnewaska or a wetland such as Rhododendron Swamp, in the Mohonk Preserve, give great pleasure because they conjure up past environments that early people observed, smelled, tasted, and touched. Artifacts from the Mohonk Rockshelter indicate human presence from 11,500 years ago up to 400 years ago. The fossils also reveal past changes in the climate that have relevance today, as they expand our understanding of the ways in which our environments shift - their magnitude and rapidity. The past gives us clues as to how our surroundings will look in the future; we know that over the last 125 years the average annual temperature on the Ridge has increased by at least 2° F, as documented at the Mohonk Lake Cooperative Weather Station.

Coring with students

A core showing color changes

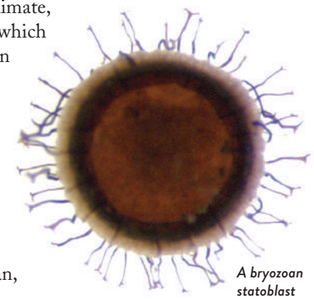
To discover the secrets and the stories that the buried fossils tell us, we wait for cold weather and walk out on the frozen lake surface when the ice is at least 5 inches thick. In the summer, we can walk right out on the swamp and with a group of three or four set up our equipment, or sometimes we inflate zodiacs or use a wooden platform for coring under deeper water. The coring device is a steel tube with extension rods, which we manually push into the ground to extract meter lengths of mud, in sequence, to the bottom of the lake or swamp. We wrap these "sausages" in plastic wrap and aluminum foil, and store them under refrigeration until we take samples from them for analysis back in the lab.

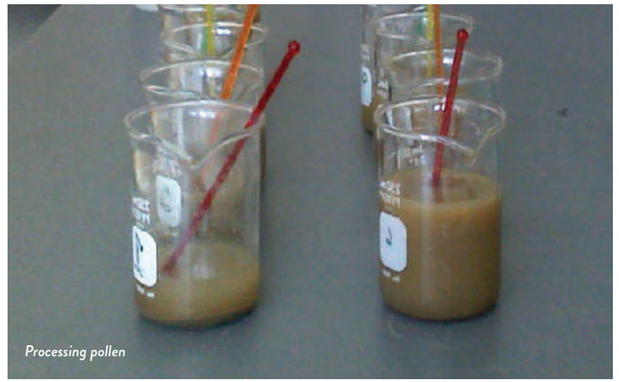
The historic secrets of the past Shawangunk Ridge lie in the sediment, both the mineral matter (sand, silt, and clay) and the organic matter (anything that once lived). The organic matter is the brown part of the mud that contains both the pollen and the macrofossils that lived thousands of years ago. Processing the teaspoon-sized samples of sediment for pollen in the lab is a laborious and time-consuming procedure with chemical digestions, and after five days work a mere 25 samples are prepared representing the top meter, which spans the most recent 7000 years in the Swamp. We have three more meters to process below this. Then comes the counting. From each sample residue we take a single drop of concentrated pollen on a microscope slide and move the slide from left to right, count 300 grains, and then tally percentages of each plant type through time. In contrast to processing for pollen, the screening of a ½ cup of mud for macrofossils at each level only takes some brass screens, running water, and a dissecting microscope. We pick out identifiable plant parts with a tweezer, match to a collection of living specimens, and then tally for understanding the sequence downcore.

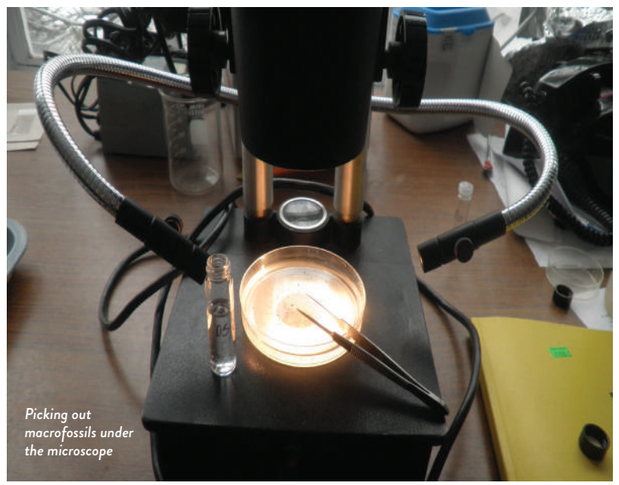
While the pollen we count tells us about the regional vegetation and how the landscape at a larger scale is changing, the macrofossils indicate the local environment…what has happened right at the locale. The macrofossils are also important because they can be identified to the species level - the seed of each species has distinguishing characteristics, while pollen can often only be identified to the genus. Another advantage is that the macrofossils can be dated…a single birch cone scale or spruce needle can be radiocarbon dated.

Our results for Lake Minnewaska, Lake Mohonk, and Rhododendron Swamp show us that the history of the region included large shifts in climate, from cold, boreal forest that moved in after the glacier melted, to warmer, drier climates that included major droughts. The droughts are interpreted from the increase in shallow lake aquatic plants, charcoal from the resulting frequent fires that was washed in as the landscape eroded, and the decline in trees such as hemlock. In the lakes, we find large numbers of hemlock needles, which washed in as the forest was decimated, not just on the Ridge but throughout New England around 5000 years ago. (That drought lasted for around 1500 years!) We then find needles of drought-resistant species such as pitch pine which expand in the drier climate, along with chestnut, which favored the more open canopy. And we see aquatic seeds from shallow water plants such as waternymph and bryozoan statoblasts…amazing plant-animals that function sort of like corals in the ocean, filtering the water.

Hemlock pollen and needles


A bryozoan statoblast


Processing pollen


Picking out macrofossils under the microscope

The years since the arrival of Europeans show in the upper 25 cm of the Swamp record, where we note the ragweed that arrived as trees were cut down and land was cleared. Other weedy species show up too…and we see the chestnut decline because of the early 20th century blight, while the hemlock increases again after being extensively exploited for the tanning and other industries. So we can observe our human imprint in the vegetational history. And we hope to continue linking the Native American imprint through the Rockshelter tools they used to the environment in which they lived. From the Swamp record, we will continue to examine the core samples from more than 7000 years ago to give us clues as to perhaps why or how the arrowheads from the Rockshelter changed, and all the sensory environment they experienced. The devil is in the details.

Dorothy M. Peteet is a NASA scientist who is also Adjunct Professor at Lamont Doherty Earth Observatory and teaches a class called "Wetlands and Climate Change." Her group is studying the Late Pleistocene archives of lakes and wetlands (peatlands, salt marshes, tidal freshwater marshes, bogs, fens) in eastern North America as well as Alaska.

Photos by D. Peteet

A Bit about the Brooks

by Jean Lerner

I was assigned the task to write a portrait of a family, Francis, Judith, and Bill Brooks who wanted to sell their land to FOS/TSC for preservation rather than to a developer for possibly more money. But, I frankly don't know where to begin. Since I'm new to this area (been around only 16 years!), I had no idea that the Brooks family was legendary. At one time or another five generations of the family owned property from one end of Rock Hill Road to the other, and they were key figures in the history of Rosendale/High Falls.

Bill Brooks is currently the official Rosendale town historian. A visit to Bill at his office is a revelation. He's shoehorned into a sort of open closet in the repurposed Rosendale Elementary School. Five times the space wouldn't be enough for all the treasures he has accumulated. The nearby halls are hung with fascinating historic photos and posters that he has managed to preserve and frame on his minuscule budget.

Bill has had a barber shop in Rosendale for many years, and it's a popular place to hang out. Ever been to the Rosendale International Pickle Fest? Bill and his beloved wife Cathy started it in their house in 1998. Sadly, Cathy passed away a year ago.

Faced with this dense history, the best I can do is to relate a few anecdotes that Bill provided, and hope I get it right.

Bill's grandfather Benjamin worked at the Mohonk Mountain House. There wasn't much in the way of transportation back in 1908. He would walk to work on a Sunday night, and come home the following Friday. When Bill's father, William, was five their house burned down on a Tuesday. Benjamin knew nothing about it until he returned from work on Friday night.

Visitors to the museum at Mohonk would have seen the Tally-Ho, a horse-drawn touring wagon. Benjamin was the first driver, when it was new. William also worked at Mohonk, building the Sky Top tower and doing road maintenance on the Minnewaska Road (now the Old Minnewaska Trail).

Francis, Bill, and Judith

In 1933 Bill's dad built a tavern on Mohonk Road a half mile from High Falls. Bill remembers the apple whiskey they made there in their still, and an old hay wagon where he hung out with his friends. FOS president John Hayes has fond memories of playing bumper pool in the back room with his sister in the mid-60's while his dad was having a few beers in the front room. The tavern is also where Bill started barbering informally, before working in a real shop in Accord in 1964.

The seven acres that Friends purchased from the Brooks had been used by the family over the years as a wood lot. It was the last piece of what had once been a much larger parcel. We are delighted to have preserved a property that is associated with such rich local history.

Cover photo of Brooks parcel by John Hayes

TWO TO THANK

We extend our heartfelt thanks to former Board members Joe Raiola and Steve Jervis. Both Joe and Steve resigned from the Board at the end of last year.

We'd like to thank Steve for his seven years of service on the board. Before and during that time he was a regular contributor to this newsletter, writing book reviews and recounting his climbing exploits with a gentle humor. He has promised to continue to contribute articles. We'd also like to thank Steve for his very generous donations to FOS over the years. A frequent world traveller, Steve's been grounded by the Covid-19 epidemic, so he plans to spend the summer here in the Gunks. Maybe we'll see him on the cliffs.

In his two years of service Joe provided many pragmatic suggestions about our way forward, particularly in the area of land purchases. In both the newsletter and website he used his communication skills to help us convey our deep commitment to land protection. Joe writes, "After having been a member for so many years, it was a great experience for me to serve as a FOS Board member. It gave me an even greater appreciation for the vital role that FOS plays in protecting the ridge. It is work that requires deep commitment and ongoing vigilance. I will continue to support FOS with the intention of remaining a positive force."

PINK SLIPS

The label on the envelope in which you received this issue of Shawangunk Watch *may indicate that your membership has expired. This is probably because it's been a long time since our last issue (December 2019) of this newsletter, and you haven't received any reminders since then. Our bad. Don't worry, of course your membership is active until you renew.*

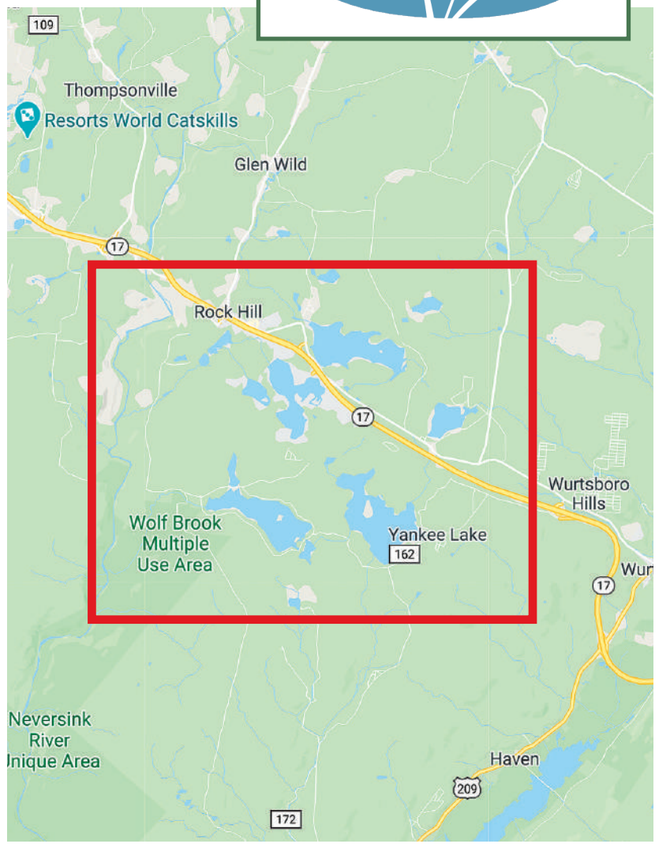
New Land Conservancy

We would like to acquaint our members with The Ridgetop Lakes Conservancy, that focuses on a ridge a little to the west of the Shawangunk Ridge. The following self-portrait of the group was written specially for us by its secretary, Cathy Dawkins.

Founded in 2018, the Ridgetop Lakes Conservancy grew out of a history of fighting to protect against over-development around the five lakes that dot the Mount Prosper ridgetop in the Southern part of Sullivan County. [See map]

Lake communities have long fought to preserve the pristine quality of the water and the natural surroundings. Quoting from "*A History of Yankee Lake New York* (2016): "*As early as 1915, developers saw the potential to cash in …*" and the community "h*as consistently, diligently, and fiercely fought urbanization and destruction of our pristine, natural habitat.*" Most recently, the lake communities, individually and in concert with the Towns of Thompson, Mamakating, and Fallsburg, have fought the plans set forth by China City of America (CCoA). CCoA initially proposed creating an amusement park in the areas touching Yankee, Wanaksink, Masten and Wolf lakes. Quickly, the CCoA plans morphed, from an amusement park, to a wild animal park, to a business conference center, to a college, and finally to what is now called the Thompson Education Center (TEC). It is still quite unclear what TEC really has in mind for the property, but what is clear is that it would have huge deleterious impacts on the flora and fauna on the ridgetop, and to the Basha Kill, which is fed by the lakes.

As a nonprofit organization RLC serves an educational function as well as advocating preservation. It has offered lectures on birds to the community, and when public gatherings are allowed again it plans to provide education on the risks of Hazardous Algal Blooms to the lakes and waterways, and will continue training volunteers in water testing. To volunteer or for more information, contact the RLC at info@ridgetoplakesconservancy.org.



TAKING IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL

FOS maintains an all-volunteer Board of Directors. As with most Boards of not-for-profit organizations, board members serve for various lengths of time, then vacate their seat for someone else. FOS is looking for FOS members who might want to increase their level of participation, i.e., we are seeking to recruit new board members.

We are particularly interested in recruiting members who can assist with, among other things, the newsletter, website or social media. Do you have that experience, or do you feel you could contribute to the newsletter as a writer, researcher or editor? How about website maintenance, or Facebook posting? We are also looking for someone to lead the annual hike-a-thon.

If you feel you would like to ratchet up your participation with FOS, please send an email to FOSand TSC@gmail.com.

Thank you!

TILLSON LAKE DAM UPDATE

From the PIPC minutes for 4/20/2020

The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation has engaged Schnabel Engineering to update design concepts and prepare construction documents for the repairs necessary to bring the Tillson Lake Dam into compliance. This will allow for a more refined estimate to be made of the cost to repair the dam. Having construction documents "in hand" will also allow the agency to move forward expeditiously with the project, should the necessary funding be obtained.

Current construction cost estimates to repair the dam are $3.2 million versus $1.7 million to remove the dam. Other soft costs will need to be added for both alternatives. Funds will need to be identified in OPRHP's FY 2020-21 budget to act upon either alternative.

OPRHP is interested in expanding recreational opportunities for the public at Tillson Lake as part of the project, as long as the Town of Gardiner is willing to enter into a cooperative agreement with the Commission to manage the property. Adding a recreational component to the project will increase the cost, but it will also strengthen the justification for repairing rather than removing the dam. The Town of Gardiner has agreed to meet with Commission and OPRHP representatives to determine whether an agreement can be reached.

At this time, three outcomes remain possible for the Tillson Lake Dam:

- Repair the dam (with or without a recreational component).
- Remove the dam.
- Leave the dam in place and drain the lake.

The decision will likely hinge on the OPRHP FY 2020-21 capital budget. If funding is identified to repair the dam, the project would likely be bid in the fall of 2020, with construction to begin in the spring of 2021. In the interim, staff continues to monitor the dam and remains prepared to drain the lake if weather events require such an action.

Schnabel Engineering drilled probe holes on the dam to obtain structural and geological data required for the dam repair design work.

Photo: Tiffany Coviello Dyckma

JOIN US! DEVELOPMENT THREATENS ALL PARTS OF THE SHAWANGUNKS. JOIN OR RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP.

☐ **BENEFACTOR $250**

☐ **PATRON $100**

☐ **FAMILY $40**

☐ **INDIVIDUAL $25**

☐ **OTHER $ _____**

☐ I would like to make an additional contribution to The Shawangunk Conservancy for land acquisition.

AMOUNT $ _____

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Contributions are tax deductible.

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P.O. Box 270, Accord NY 12404

Shawangunk WATCH

is the publication of Friends of the Shawangunks and its companion organization, The Shawangunk Conservancy. This issue was edited and assembled by Friends board members.

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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.

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The latest financial report of Friends of the Shawangunks and The Shawangunk Conservancy may be obtained by writing to the Office of the Attorney General, Charities Bureau, 120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271, or by writing to us at the above address.

FRIENDS of the SHAWANGUNKS
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