



Statement on the Condition and Future of the Trailless Peaks October 26, 2022

As the founding membership-based hiking organization in the Catskill high peaks, the Catskill 3500 Club strongly believes that hiking should be a sustainable activity with minimal environmental impact. Since its foundation in 1962, the Club has encouraged hikers to go off trail, using navigational skills to safely reach summits over 3,500 feet that are not connected to a trail system. This challenge has provided a great sense of accomplishment and enrichment for countless hikers. For hikers who are learning, we have offered guidance and education by sharing navigational and wilderness preparedness skills and promoting the ethos of 'Leave No Trace.'

For many years, the impact of off-trail hiking was minimal. There were simply not that many hikers who wanted to venture off trail, and those who did were encouraged to do so by finding their own way—not by following predetermined routes. Consequently, foot traffic in sensitive areas was infrequent and dispersed and left little discernible impact on the forest floor.

In recent years, far more hikers than ever before have climbed the high peaks, including the trailless peaks. With the arrival of smartphones featuring sophisticated GPS navigational services, hikers are now considerably more confident venturing off trail. Many hikers follow existing digital tracks to ensure they stay on their route. These changes have had a noticeable impact. The Club acknowledges that our challenge of summiting the high peaks has encouraged new off-trail hikers and contributed to the degradation of sensitive habitat. In 2003, the Club Board voted down a proposal to start sponsoring the four seasons and grid challenges, because we felt that these challenges would increase the level of use on all the peaks, particularly the trailless peaks. In 2012, responding to the formation of informal trails known as 'herd paths,' the Club formed a Wilderness Stewardship Committee to discuss concerns about this development. In 2021, recognizing the substantial pandemic-induced increase in Catskills hiking, we formed a Trailless Peak Committee to engage with the DEC. Also in 2021, when the landowners of Graham and Doubletop mountains stopped granting permission for hikers to access them, the Club recognized the impact that hikers were having and chose not to add another trailless peak to the challenge. We understand that a return to the old mentality of minimal traffic and dispersed route finding is not realistic. And we believe that trail infrastructure must be enhanced and hikers must modify their behavior in order to stop the degradation of these summits.

The Club recognizes the ecological significance and sensitivity of the boreal habitat found on many of the higher elevation peaks and ridges in the Catskill Park, including most of the trailless summits. This ecosystem is dominated by balsam fir, red spruce, mountain ash and birches, and is home to bird species with declining populations such as the Bicknell's thrush and the blackpoll

warbler. Hermit thrushes, whose distinctive song has enchanted countless forest passersby, are known to build their nests under the cover of small shrubs and conifers. They are especially vulnerable when they are raising their hatchlings. The soil layer in these places tends to be thin and easily disturbed, making it harder for plants to grow back after being trampled. The Club believes that hiking routes through these ecosystems must be concentrated and sustainably implemented in order to protect the plants and animals that live here.

We have offered to maintain agreed upon herd paths on each of the trailless peaks, to contain and channel the impact to one path instead of many. The DEC, however, is not in a position to decide on this until its recommendations are publicly announced. The DEC will make its decision soon, and we look forward to working with them to bring remedy and relief to the mountain forests, recognizing that it may take years to implement a permanent and sustainable solution. In the meantime, here is our guidance to hikers to address the problem:

Trailless Peaks: Whenever a herd path is present from the approach you are taking to a summit, the Club encourages you to use the most-evident herd path at all times. Hikers should try to hike in a line and remain on the herd path. All Club-led hikes will be following this guideline. The purpose of this is to limit impact to one already existing path and to let the other parts of the forest recover. In the coming weeks, we plan to publish the most evident herd path GPS tracks for each trailless peak, based on the DEC data, to encourage their use. The 2022 edition of the NY-NJ Trail Conference Catskill Maps shows evident herd paths to follow for Kaaterskill High Peak and Vly.

The Club discourages hikers (and their dogs) from wandering off trails and herd paths in the fragile boreal ecosystem when the ground is not frozen. We support dogs being on leash when in the high elevation boreal habitat during spring. This will protect the many species of ground nesting birds and other ground-nesting animals and their offspring that live there.

We are working on additional recommendations. We welcome suggestions for additional ways the Club can make a positive impact to mitigate the damage that comes with increased use of our state lands. Help us find more ways to concentrate use to certain areas, so that the other parts of the forest can remain viable habitats for the organisms that live there. Please email president@catskill-3500-club.org with comments or suggestions.