



**BLACK ROCK  
FOREST  
CONSORTIUM**

65 Reservoir Road  
Cornwall, NY 12518-2135  
T 845-534-4517  
F 845-534-6975  
brfoffice@blackrockforest.org  
www.blackrockforest.org

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## Black Rock Forest Consortium Opens ADA- Accessible Nature Trail

*Pathway provides outdoors access for wheelchairs, walkers and strollers*

October 21, 2016

Contact: Emily Cunningham  
Director of External Affairs  
845-534-4517, ext. 26

[ecunningham@blackrockforest.org](mailto:ecunningham@blackrockforest.org)

Recognizing the need for all people to have access to the natural world, the Black Rock Forest Consortium announces today the opening of more than a quarter-mile of ADA-accessible pathway that showcases breathtaking, 50-mile views up the Hudson Valley to the Shawangunk and Catskill mountains at the entrance of the 3,870-acre Black Rock Forest.

The 10-foot-wide packed stone Visitor Access Pathway (VAP) — which meanders through mature forests and past fern-covered cliffs — now offers access to some of the Hudson Highlands' most challenging and rewarding vistas. Because the trail was constructed in compliance with ADA building standards and trail guidelines, it can be safely accessed by just about anyone — including people using wheelchairs or walkers, as well as families with young children in strollers.

“We are looking forward to welcoming many people to Black Rock Forest for the first time, where they will discover an intact, native ecosystem that is home to a great diversity of wildlife, including more than 160 bird species,” said Bill Schuster, the executive director of the Black Rock Forest Consortium. “Black Rock Forest has been largely undisturbed for 100 years, and offers a distinctly different outdoor experience that all will now be able to enjoy, thanks to the generous support of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.”

The Black Rock Forest VAP was constructed over a 6-month period beginning in March 2016 using almost \$217,000 in funding from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund and equivalent in-kind contributions of labor and materials from the Black Rock Forest Consortium. It was completed in time to open in October, which is National Disability Employment Awareness Month.

“We are thrilled that more visitors will be able to enjoy the expansive trails that make up Black Rock Forest, thanks to the great new addition of the Visitor Access Pathway,” said State Parks Commissioner Rose Harvey. “Thanks to Gov. Cuomo and the Black Rock Forest Consortium, this treasured property that inspires us all will now be even more accessible.”

Black Rock Forest, a highly diverse, natural ecosystem, is home to many rare species of flora and fauna. The Forest and the adjacent Storm King Mountain are two of the most outstanding natural features in the Hudson Highlands, attracting tens of thousand of hikers and other visitors each year. Access to these areas, however, has been problematic for some due to the rocky, mountainous terrain.

For people with mobility impairments, these challenges can be substantial, and have historically prevented many seniors and people with disabilities from accessing these beautiful wilderness trails.

“The Black Rock Forest Visitor Access Pathway will provide meaningful outdoor experiences for people in places where they have not had them before,” said Douglas Hovey, the executive director of Independent Living, Inc. “As a person who uses a wheelchair, being able to experience nature and the great outdoors is such an essential part of my well-being. There are very few outdoor resources for people with disabilities, therefore this addition at Black Rock Forest is significant for the thousands of people living with disabilities in the Hudson Valley.”

People flock year-round to the Highlands region to experience its unique natural environment — stark, jagged cliffs juxtaposed with the calm waters of the Hudson River. The trail opening today represents the first of two phases of a project designed to improve that experience and connect other regional trails, allowing all persons to recreate and renew themselves in the unspoiled natural world.

The first half of the Visitor Access Pathway was constructed primarily by expert contractor Tahawus Trails using a combination of styles that literally carved the trail into the landscape. With grades not exceeding 7 percent and a width of 8 to 10 feet, this initial section is accessible for wheelchairs due to its small-grain, evenly packed tread material. The trail crosses three stone-covered culverts that let surface water pass underneath while traversing through a 100-year-old oak forest, a young stand of pines and a dense area of striped maple before ending at a broad overlook that boasts views across Black Rock Forest and up the Hudson Valley to the Shawangunk and Catskill ranges.

The pathway will also be equipped with ADA-accessible benches along the hiking corridor and at the viewpoint. Each bench will be 17 to 19 inches above ground, at least 42 inches in length, and will be built using wood from Black Rock Forest.

The second and final phase of the Visitor Access Pathway, which will also be suitable for use by people with moderate disabilities, is being planned for construction in 2017 and opening in 2018.

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*Black Rock Forest Consortium advances scientific understanding of the natural world through research, education and conservation. The Consortium maintains a 3,870-acre forest and scientific field station in the Hudson Highlands, 60 miles north of New York City. The Consortium collaborates with its members — universities, schools, scientific and cultural institutions — to pursue and foster scientific inquiry and educational programs for K-16 students. For more information on the Consortium, visit [www.blackrockforest.org](http://www.blackrockforest.org).*