

Community

# Black Rock Forest A Jewel of the Hudson Valley

BY JEFF SIMMS

**T**HERE'S SOMETHING UNDENIABLY SPECIAL about spending time outdoors, especially in the Hudson River Valley. Its lush, green forests ground and rejuvenate us, while the fresh air and sunshine energize our spirits and nourish our bodies.

Last fall, at the height of leaf season, about 75 people gathered at the edge of Black Rock Forest, a nearly 4,000-acre privately owned but publicly accessible “living laboratory” in Orange County, to celebrate access to the natural world.

The event was not just for the hikers and bikers among us but for everyone— young or old, as well as those with physical disabilities—to have the opportunity to experience the outdoors. The occasion was the opening of the Visitor Access Pathway (VAP), a quarter-mile, fully ADA-accessible pathway that can be safely traversed by just about anyone—including people using wheelchairs or walkers, or families with young children in strollers.

The 10-foot-wide packed-stone pathway (a gentle 7 percent grade makes it ideal for wheelchairs or strollers) meanders through a 100-year-old oak forest and past fern-covered cliffs before ending in a clearing that showcases breathtaking, 50-mile views up the Hudson Valley and on to the Shawangunk and Catskill mountain ranges.

Access is one of the primary missions at Black Rock, where Bill Schuster, a conservation-minded biologist, heads the Black Rock Forest Consortium, the nonprofit organization that manages the forest.

“We wanted dedicated pedestrian and hiker access at the forest and, importantly, we wanted to extend that to a group who hasn’t always had that opportunity,” Schuster says. “From birth to old age, being disabled is part of the human condition, and we need to build that into the infrastructure of our society and the opportunities we present people.”

In June of 2017, the organization signed contracts with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation to begin Phase 2 of the VAP in November. The Office of Parks helped fund the first phase of the project and, soon, the second and final phase will double the path’s length, connecting it seamlessly with the vast network of existing trails in the forest. Humans of all shapes and sizes aren’t the only ones who benefit. Over the last decade, the Consortium has partnered with a number of Hudson Valley conservation groups to protect and connect wildlife habitat for birds and other animals. Up to 160 bird species have been known to live in Black Rock, while dozens of wildlife breeds, such as deer, bear, foxes, coyotes and mink, roam throughout the forest as well.

Moving parcel by parcel across the landscape, the partnering organizations have conserved streams, woodlands and ridges—hundreds of acres that together create the diverse micro-environments that these animals need. As their natural habitats shift due to climate change and the ever-growing human footprint, connecting these protected lands, which gives animals the ability to move freely if one location becomes unsustainable, is now critically important.

In April, New York State announced the preservation of more than 5,900 acres of parkland in the Hudson Highlands, including a conservation easement that permanently protects all of Black Rock Forest and its nearly 25 miles of trails. The move represents yet another effort to link the people of the Hudson Valley—and future generations—with the region’s incredible natural resources.

In an increasingly urbanized world, Schuster believes that connection to nature is vital.

“If people can connect with the outdoors in a personal way, then they understand that this is where your life support—your clean air and water—comes from,” he says. “I think it’s necessary because we’re part of nature, too.”

For information on the educational programs ongoing at Black Rock, as well as guidelines for hiking on its trails, see [www.blackrockforest.org](http://www.blackrockforest.org). ■



PHOTOS: (MOUNTAIN & WATERFALL) JOSH BLANK; (MAN & WALKWAY) COURTESY OF BLACK ROCK FOREST CONSORTIUM