It always pays to have connections. Connections can encompass many aspects, from our connection to the natural world to the intricate web of connections between organisms in nature that we are only just beginning to comprehend.

Establishing and nurturing people's connection to the natural world is a critical factor in conservation efforts. When people feel connection to a particular place they are more likely to take steps to protect it. This is one reason why we offer so many engaging events at preserves and programs such as the Nature Bus, to provide firsthand experiences in nature and foster appreciation for the value of natural areas and the importance of preserving them.

Though development and change are inevitable, we also need to consider connections in regard to landscapes. Too often we see developments proposed with set asides for wetlands, steep slopes, and other limitations, while largely ignoring what is occurring on neighboring properties and the potential for connections between properties that could result in better design for wildlife and people. The result is a patchwork landscape of isolated pockets of protected areas creating fragmented landscapes that are less effective in supporting biological diversity and can diminish the quality of life and community identity.

One of our first steps when considering land for conservation is to determine if we can link parcels and places to capture living systems and provide opportunities for life to move more easily, including people. The recent addition to the Albany Pine Bush Preserve described in this issue is one small example of connecting properties across municipal boundaries and linking ecosystems. On a larger scale, the Creek Acres farmland conservation easement project maintains a vital connection to our food sources while working towards greater connectivity between the Catskills and the Adirondacks.

Building community connections to nature is another lens through which we focus our work. The Albany County Helderberg-Hudson Rail Trail offers opportunities to connect people with the land through a beautiful corridor of green space. From the Noonan Preserve in the City of Albany, where you can observe beavers on the Normanskill, to the Bender Melon Preserve and Hilton Park, we are working to create shared open spaces and define boundaries between populated areas.

We will continue to apply these principles as we preserve lands in the Mohawk and Hudson Valleys, and we hope you will support this important work.

Now that winter is behind us, take a walk and see if you can enhance your connection to nature and the beauty that surrounds us.

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From the Executive Director

Mark King, Executive Director

Mark King

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Now that winter is behind us, take a walk and see if you can enhance your connection to nature and the beauty that surrounds us.
Conservation of the beautiful landscapes of the Mohawk and Hudson Valleys drives the work of MHLC. The completion of two conservation easements in Montgomery County earlier this year raised MHLC’s total protected acreage to 14,226 acres! This achievement is a point of pride, showcasing our growth over the last three decades. However, saving land is only one aspect of our work. The other crucial piece is connecting people to these lands, ensuring future stewards of our environment. We firmly believe that appreciating nature firsthand is the key to becoming effective stewards, and we are dedicated to providing meaningful opportunities for people to engage with the natural world.

Beyond simply accessing nature, we strive to help people discover new ways to enjoy and experience it. The events we host at our preserves are designed to bring people together, allowing them to appreciate the solace of nature while learning more about our protected areas. Whether joining a group for a birding walk, learning to identify plant species, or embarking on a scavenger hunt at the preserves, people actively engage with and form bonds with the natural world around them.

While many of us are fortunate enough to access natural areas easily, city residents often face challenges in reaching parks and preserves. This summer, in partnership with CDTA, the Nature Bus will connect City of Albany residents to popular outdoor destinations in the Capital Region for its third year. The service has gained significant attention regionally and beyond as one way to provide equitable access to nature. We are excited to announce that the service is expanding to the City of Schenectady this summer! MHLC worked closely with ECOS: The Environmental Clearinghouse and CDTA to establish a brand-new Nature Bus route in Schenectady. For details on Nature Bus 2023, visit www.mohawkhudson.org/nature-bus.

Another opportunity we offer to deepen your experience with nature while getting more involved with our organization is our volunteer program. We are grateful to have hundreds of volunteers who generously donate their time and talents to support our staff. Thanks to their efforts, our trails and preserves are well-maintained, our events run smoothly, and news of our work spreads throughout our communities. We are actively recruiting new volunteers. This year we introduced a new series of training sessions called “Building Confidence.” If you’ve considered joining our volunteer team, this series is a great way to get started!

As we work to reconnect people with the outdoors and the healthy benefits of nature, we have witnessed a dramatic increase in preserve visitation. Until recently, we relied on sign-in sheets at preserve kiosks to estimate the numbers. Thanks to the generous donation of electronic counters by our long-term supporter, Jeff Leon, we now have far more accurate—and astonishing—counts. Based on this new technology, we estimate that in 2022, over 67,000 people visited our 22 preserves. (View the data on p. 5.)

Our efforts aim to inspire appreciation, stewardship, and a deeper understanding of the environment. We warmly welcome you to join us! You, too, can inspire someone’s connection to nature—invite a friend to an MHLC event or volunteer workday, or you can simply pass along this newsletter to share our mission.
Great support comes in all forms, and sometimes it takes a creative approach to meet specific challenges. In using their expertise and experience, some donors go beyond traditional methods of giving to help MHLC succeed in carrying out our mission. Their unique skill sets help educate the public, maintain trails, expand our impact, strengthen our outreach, and much more. In this issue of Viewpoints, we are proud to honor just a few of the individuals who have generously given their time, talents, and resources to support MHLC’s year-round conservation efforts and outreach activities.

Ebony LaBrew

Growing up in New York City, Ebony LaBrew cherished outings to Central Park, the Botanical Garden, Bronx Zoo, and Coney Island beach. “As a child, it simply felt good to be outdoors,” said Ebony. “I now know not only does it feel good, it is good for you.” Ebony is dedicated to helping others enjoy the mental and physical health benefits of nature. Last year, she launched Sacred Space to support youth, families, and communities with nature-centered wellness activities and workshops.

After hearing about our work with Nature Bus, Ebony reached out to MHLC to get involved. “There are a number of farms, preserves, and parks in the Capital Region and beyond that are simply inaccessible to people without the financial means or transportation to get to these places that are out of reach from the community. For those who do have the means to travel, they may be reluctant to venture outdoors on their own due to a lack of experience or not having the proper equipment and clothing,” explained Ebony. “Luckily, MHLC had come up with a solution: Nature Bus, a free bus service designed to connect Albany residents to the health benefits of nature! It was only natural that I wanted to fully support the Nature Bus program that not only provided transportation but also free programming and activities at the various nature preserves.”

Ebony enthusiastically volunteered to help us spread the word about Nature Bus through community outreach and served as a Nature Bus ambassador to greet bus riders. She created an on-your-own activity to engage families who visited the preserves and led a couple of forest bathing sessions coordinated with Nature Bus drop-offs. Ebony and her two daughters were also a part of our Nature Bus video filmed last summer to help promote the service.

Ebony has been an integral part of the team that has worked to create a Schenectady Nature Bus, which launches this summer. Her forest bathing sessions will be among the free programs offered on both the Albany and Schenectady Nature Bus routes in 2023.
**Thom Breitenbach**

Thom Breitenbach has enjoyed a successful career as an artist and writer. Among his many accolades, he is famous for his painting *Proverbidioms*, a raucous and comical depiction of over 300 common proverbs and clichés, which he publishes as posters. We have the pleasure of knowing Thom as a dedicated MHLC volunteer. Thom was a part of the crew that initially cleared the forest trail at the Bozen Kill Preserve and has since volunteered at many workdays. Thom’s wife, Debra Barnes-Breitenbach, is also a longtime MHLC volunteer and serves as one of the preserve stewards at Wolf Creek Falls Preserve.

Thom is exceptionally skilled at stone building and has actually built a castle for his home and art studio in Altamont. Of all his contributions as a volunteer, Thom states that he is most proud of the several stone benches and trail markers he built in the Bozen Kill Preserve and has loved the friendships he has made with other volunteers over the years. Thom said, “My friend Chris Albright helped me move the estimated 1,400 lb. stone used on the first bench. I learned how to safely move large rocks by hand using leverage while building my castle, which contains stones as long as 12 feet long.” These stone structures at the preserve serve as a place for visitors to rest and provide protection from a steep drop-off to the ravine. Last summer, Thom taught MHLC volunteers some tricks of the trade in a stonewall building workshop he led on his property. Thom will offer another stonewall workshop later this year for interested volunteers.

Although the castle is currently the Breitenbach’s private residence, the castle and Thom’s art are in trust to be a future museum, including a 50-acre preserve featuring a 40-foot waterfall and a couple of miles of trails.

**Charles & Elizabeth Seeley**

If you’re a frequent visitor to the Ashford Glen Preserve, you may have already met MHLC volunteers Charles and Elizabeth Seeley. As neighbors of the Ashford Glen Preserve since 2000, the Seeleys enjoy summers exploring the trails and winters of snowshoeing. Their daughter, who grew up on these trails, was especially fond of playing in the creek in the springtime and sledding on snowy winter days. Charles and Elizabeth volunteer their time to assist MHLC with maintaining the 11.5-acre preserve in Colonie. Last year, they took on the role of preserve stewards, a year-round commitment to monitoring and caring for the preserve.

Besides their regular round of duties at the preserve, Charles and Elizabeth have also been involved in a few large-scale projects. In 2018, they spearheaded the installation of a rail fence at the preserve, making the project into a neighborhood weekend event.

Charles is a trained arborist who assisted when tree removals were necessary at Ashford Glen Preserve. He also helped to enhance the overlook view at Bennett Hill Preserve by strategically downing several trees along the trail. (Staff who witnessed this process still marvel at his impressive chainsaw work at Bennett Hill!) Charles led a chainsaw training workshop for MHLC staff and volunteers last summer. Participants gained confidence with the tool, learning useful techniques and essential safety protocols.
Meet our Summer Land Stewards!

Managing thousands of acres and 22 preserves requires a significant amount of work. That’s why MHLC hires a Summer Land Steward each year to provide crucial assistance during our busiest season. This year for the first time, we are fortunate to welcome two Summer Land Stewards to the team—Andrew Brunner and Noah Savastio! Andrew, a recent Siena College graduate with a BS in Environmental Science, has always had a passion for the outdoors. He is eager to learn more about trail building and sustainable public access. Noah, a senior at Siena majoring in Environmental Science, also enjoys spending time outside and contributing to MHLC’s mission. Throughout the summer, while assisting in the maintenance of MHLC’s preserves, Noah and Andrew will gain valuable field experience and have the opportunity to observe the operations of a thriving nonprofit organization, jump-starting their careers.

Since 2021, MHLC has been tracking visitation to our preserves. Knowledge of how many people are using the trails helps our stewardship staff plan trail projects that accommodate visitors while protecting these natural spaces. This graph shows visitation data from 2022, across all our preserves. We estimate that well over 67,000 people visit our preserves each year!

Did you know that more than 5,000 dogs visit the our preserves each year? Keeping your dog leashed prevents disturbance to wildlife, ensures your pet’s safety from other dogs, and respects the private property of those who live near our preserves.

Read more about this policy at www.mohawkhudson.org/preserves.

Make Plans for Summer Fun

Annual Summer Hike-a-thon Scavenger Hunt

Get ready for some family fun! Our annual scavenger hunt will take place during the entire month of July at all 22 MHLC preserves. This year, look out for woodland animals hidden along the trails! Hand-cut by our executive director and painted by a team of creative volunteers, these critters are sure to delight visitors of all ages. In July, you can also look for ART’s Fantastical Creatures on the Rail Trail.

Sign up to receive a list of clues, then send a selfie with the critter you found to earn a Stewart’s Shops ice cream card and entry into our prize drawing for two tickets to Six Flags Great Escape!

Learn more and register at www.mohawkhudson.org/events.
Adding Acreage to a Globally Rare Habitat

Conserved habitat within the globally rare Albany Pine Bush is expanding with a recent acquisition of 8.3 acres in the Town of Colonie by the Mohawk Hudson Land Conservancy. The property creates an important connection between the Albany Pine Bush Preserve and the City of Schenectady’s 135-acre Woodlawn Preserve—the first conserved linkage between these unique protected areas. The property was acquired through a partnership with Albany County that helps to identify and preserve tax foreclosed parcels with ecological significance.

The Albany Pine Bush is one of only 20 inland pine bush habitats worldwide. The sandy soils support pitch pine-scrub oak barrens and are home to wild blue lupine, frosted elfin butterflies, and the federally endangered Karner blue butterfly. MHLC began adding lands to the Albany Pine Bush Preserve in 2016 and, to date, has protected more than 74 acres of this globally rare habitat. A management agreement between MHLC and the Albany Pine Bush Preserve Commission helps assure the long-term stewardship of lands within the Preserve.

Inland pine barrens are rare due to habitat loss and strict fire suppression policies since the 1900s. The ecological system of pine barrens is fire dependent. Pitch pine trees are serotinous, meaning the tree’s cones only open and release seeds in high-heat situations. Other species, such as low bush blueberry and huckleberry, also respond to fire management. Indigenous cultures in the region would set fire to these areas to replenish the berries for food gathering. Today, management of this habitat includes controlled burns which mimic the effects of natural wildfires that can no longer occur due to the development of the area.

The Albany Pine Barrens were not formally protected habitat in New York State until 1988. This left decades for parcels to be sold for private ownership and residential development. In a joint effort to restore this important habitat, MHLC works with the Albany Pine Bush Commission, Albany County, other area partners, and willing landowners to acquire and protect these lands. Careful stewardship and habitat restoration by the Commission are restoring this rare habitat and the species that rely on them.

To learn more about the Albany Pine Bush Preserve, visit their website: www.albanypinebush.org.

Photos courtesy of the Albany Pine Bush Preserve, Left to right: Blueberry | Spring peeper by Jake Humm | Barred Owl by MAKosek | Rue anenome

Special Incentive for New Monthly Donors

Give back to Capital Region conservation and kick back with your favorite drinks from Great Flats Brewing and Arthur’s Market! For a limited time only, donors who sign up to give $15 or more each month will receive a punch card in the mail valid for 6 drinks; choose from any draft item at Great Flats Brewing or any house-made beverage at Arthur’s Market in Schenectady!

Learn more and sign up at www.mohawkhudson.org/evergreen.
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Pathways & Preserves
MHLC’s Annual Fall Fundraiser
Thursday, September 14, 2023
Orchard Creek Golf Club, Altamont

Join us this year as we celebrate our conservation successes and share exciting plans for future land protection. The lively event will feature a cocktail and dinner reception, exciting raffle and auction items, and more!

For their outstanding dedication to conservation in the Capital Region, our 2023 fall fundraiser honorees are:

- Henry Stebbins & Val Washington, Event Honorees
- Dr. Barbara Kapuscinska & Dr. Peter Kelly, recipients of the Saving Special Places Award
- Linda Stein, in memory of Ben Stein, recipients of the Dan Driscoll Volunteer Leadership Award

For more information and tickets, visit:
www.mohawkhudson.org/fall-fundraiser

Our Mission
To conserve and steward lands and waters of the Mohawk and Hudson River Valleys for the benefit of people and the environment.