

ADK TRAILHEAD STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM END OF SEASON REPORT 2026

ADK's Trailhead Stewardship Program (TSP) is a crucial part of the Adirondack Mountain Club's (ADK) outreach initiatives and daily operations. From mid-May to late-October, these passionate volunteers work closely with High Peaks Information Center (HPIC) staff to ensure that visitors to Heart Lake—the site of New York State's most popular backcountry trailhead—and the High Peaks Wilderness Complex are well prepared to embark on their backcountry endeavors.

Our trailhead stewards also serve as ambassadors for ADK by sharing our mission and encouraging membership growth with new visitors. Regardless of weather conditions, these committed volunteers work to communicate the principles of Leave No Trace and aid in rescue prevention by educating hikers and backpackers on effective food storage, backcountry hazards, and the Ten Essentials for backcountry hiking.

According to New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Forest Rangers, over one-third of rescues may have been avoided if hikers had a dedicated light source (i.e. headlamp or flashlight) and a physical map. The High Peaks Wilderness Complex contains some of the most remote trails in the state, making the short conversations TSP volunteers have with hikers a crucial opportunity to share last-minute education tips and potentially lifesaving advice before recreators head out into the backcountry.



Not only are these volunteers a last contact for preventative search and rescue education, they also serve as an integral part of managing traffic flow in and out of the hiker parking area at the HPIC. When our parking lots fill to capacity (160 vehicles), before 5:30 a.m., our volunteers provide critical communication about what's happening in the parking lot to our staff in the entrance booth to ensure smooth daily operations.

This communication maximizes both our face-to-face impact as an organization and the revenue brought in through parking fees that support our Professional Trail Crew, the Summit Stewardship Program, and year-round educational programming.

The diverse and demanding nature of this role requires a unique combination of skills that we value greatly in our volunteers. Our 2026 team of **14 stewards** helped make this another successful and impactful TSP season.This year, we welcomed back **11 volunteers** from previous seasons and added **3 new stewards** to the program. We were impressed by their extensive expertise, deep passion for the Adirondacks, and ability to educate hikers of all backgrounds and experience levels. Between May and October, the **program offered 23 slots**, consisting of **14 weekend shifts and 9 full-week assignments**.

Of those, **15 were covered in their entirety, while another 4 received partial coverage**. Many volunteers generously stepped up to cover two or even three shifts, helping ensure the program's continued success. In total, our trailhead stewards **donated 500 hours** to ADK while **connecting with more than 7000 visitors** in our parking lots.

On our busiest days, volunteers worked tirelessly to share meaningful interactions with **up to 300 hikers during their shifts**. Each interaction provided an opportunity to promote both responsible and safe recreation while introducing visitors to ADK and our mission of encouraging others to become better stewards of our land.

During the 2026 season, our first and last TSP volunteers ensured that hikers were prepared for variable weather and shoulder season trail conditions. Our first volunteers in May had to help hikers plan around a lingering snowpack on some of our most popular trails. Our last volunteer of the season had to ensure folks were prepared for icy winter conditions on our highest summits.

Our late summer–early fall stewards dealt with their own unique challenges as they navigated some of the busiest summer weekends we have seen at Heart Lake. From August to October, our parking lots reached capacity nearly every weekend as well as several weekdays.

During peak leaf-peeping season, we hit a record number of visitors to our trailhead, **with nearly 500 cars parked on Loj Road** on October 3. That weekend, our trailhead **steward contacted over 600 visitors**!

Another challenge our stewards navigated was the lingering closure of Avalanche Pass due to the disastrous landslides that occurred in July 2025. The HPIC team and volunteers worked together along with DEC staff to communicate alternative routes and trail updates. The trail reopened on August 26.





Our volunteers spend the season **dedicating hundreds of hours**, generously sharing their passion for the outdoors, our beloved High Peaks, and the mission of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

The High Peaks Information Center would not be nearly as efficient during the summer season without their hard work, tireless dedication, and friendly conversations. We are incredibly grateful for these individuals and the immeasurable contributions they make.

Their commitment and willingness to support ADK's mission of protecting New York State's wild lands and waters by promoting responsible outdoor recreation and building a statewide constituency of land stewardship advocates is truly invaluable.

Submitted by Syd Steger
Manager, High Peaks Information Center

