

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

Conservation Through Community



2022 Newsletter Highlights
2021 Annual Report

Securing a better future, forest by forest

The past few years have tested us all, pushing us to ask what is most important and how we can build the kind of world in which we'd like to live.

Striving to help create a brighter future, RPA's Board and staff have deepened our commitment to **access and inclusivity**. In 2021, we delved into issues of diversity in the outdoors, and who feels welcome and safe on our trails. You can read about these efforts on page 17.

To ensure that everyone in this beautiful region has access to nature; clean air and water; and protection from damaging weather events, we embarked on the Forests Forever Campaign, our first major capital campaign, with the goal of raising \$2 million for land conservation and long-term stewardship.

The focus of the Forests Forever Campaign is to connect large tracts of forest so that wildlife can move, water can flow naturally, and people can enjoy the land.

Launching such a campaign mid-pandemic was no small decision, but one made in response to **rising development pressure, a changing climate, and the need for open, connected land and wild places.**

Forests Forever has already been a tremendous success, thanks to many people like you who care. We're now in the final push to reach our goal through donations and pledges by fall 2022.

I hope you enjoy the following stories of new community forests underway, the communities engaged, and the people behind it all.

With gratitude,

Jim Bonesteel

Forests Forever Campaign Conservation Milestones



With **\$228,000 to go** by October 2022, scan the code to **see how you can help in the final stretch.**

You'll see these QR codes throughout the report. Scan them with the camera on your smart phone; they'll take you to a webpage with the full story!



Working across state and county borders for a **brighter future**

Taking a cue from the diverse forests and wetlands we all love—with their connected roots and fungal networks—land trusts have learned that we cannot work in isolation. Threats like climate change and rising development pressure make it even more critical to conserve our forests and wetlands with the help of regional partnerships across state and county borders.

Connection is important not only for the plants and animals, but for our human communities, too.

“To have the opportunity to work with several neighboring land trusts, and build on all the momentum across the region — we couldn’t pass that up.”

The need to work together is why RPA has been a member of the **Berkshire Taconic Regional Conservation Partnership (BTRCP)** since its inception and why we decided to take the lead on a major grant from the USDA’s **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP)**.

The grant program allows conservation partners to collaborate with the NRCS to help agricultural and forest landowners conserve water, soil, and wildlife habitat.

TEAMING UP FOR FORESTS

Jim Bonesteel, RPA’s Executive Director, worked closely with Columbia Land Conservancy, Highstead, and Housatonic Valley Association, along with six other participating land trusts—representing three different Regional Conservation Partnerships—to produce a project proposal.

“To have the opportunity to work with several neighboring land trusts, and build on all the momentum across the region — we couldn’t pass that up,” explains Jim.

The working group asked questions like: How can we best serve our unique and vulnerable Northeastern forests and human communities? How can we maximize this opportunity to store carbon and mitigate the effects of climate change?

They ultimately decided on the **Uplands to Lowlands Climate-Resilient Cores and Connectors** project to conserve and care for forested hills and the riverside lowlands from the Hudson Valley to Vermont.



The Uplands to Lowlands Climate-Resilient Cores and Connectors will support land conservation and restoration through three Regional Conservation Partnerships: Berkshire Taconic Regional Conservation Partnership, Hudson to Housatonic (H2H) Regional Conservation Partnership, and Litchfield Hills Greenprint Collaborative. RPA, a member of Berkshire Taconic RCP, is the lead.

In April 2021, the RCPP grant was awarded at \$6,239,000 to ten Northeast land trusts working in partnership through 2026. We're now in the beginning stages of the project.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR WILDLIFE?

With the help of this funding, forested uplands and farmland throughout the region will remain undeveloped through conservation agreements. Partner organizations will work within their home locations to restore stream banks and support habitat for pollinators like bees and butterflies.

The project's outcomes align well with the partners' current work on multi-state, landscape-scale initiatives like **Follow the Forest**, led by Housatonic Valley Association, which seeks to protect and connect a continuous forested wildlife corridor from the Hudson Highlands to Canada while engaging community volunteers.

This kind of dreaming is how land trusts across the country will make a lasting impact. Tackling huge issues like climate change and wildlife habitat loss can be challenging — but less so when we work together. For the full list of partner organizations, **scan the code to the right.**



For our climate

To build climate resilience and prevent mass extinctions, scientists advise a worldwide effort to protect at least 30 percent of our lands, rivers, lakes, wetlands, and oceans by 2030. The U.S. has established a national goal to conserve 30 percent of the undeveloped lands and waters by 2030.

Here in the Northeast, land trusts are collaborating to conserve large, **connected forests** for **wildlife movement** and **healthy waterways.**

What we do in our region will build on the impact of land trusts all over, helping to store carbon, reach the national land protection goal, and support thriving human communities for years to come.

Forests Forever Campaign

Two new community forests
on the Rensselaer Plateau



Nate Simms

Valentino Family Community Forest : Kay & Bill

Bill and Kay Valentino love the plateau's wildness. Inspired by a visit to Albert Family Community Forest in East Nassau and the story of Kevin and Mary Albert who donated that land, they wanted to help create a new community forest.

Today, this generous couple is leaving a legacy for their four grandchildren—and all future generations in the region with their gift to the Forests Forever Campaign for the Valentino Family Community Forest.

The area is rich with wildlife, and offers opportunities for visitors to build connections with the land—each season, all year long.

A Marine Captain who flew helicopters in Vietnam, Bill retired as the President of New York State Energy Research and Development Authority. He was also an Adirondack Park

Commissioner and a licensed Adirondack guide. Kay taught at Albany Academy and after retiring, volunteered with an urban after school reading program. Her father, who fled Nazi Germany and arrived to the States with nothing, impressed upon his children to give back to the community.

STEWARDS WHO LOVE THE LAND

For Chuck Porter (p. 8), the wild forests of Grafton are worth his time—and sweat. A former geology professor at Hudson Valley Community College, Chuck, now 83, stays connected outside through his weekly work with the RPA / Rensselaer Land Trust Volunteer Trail Crew and as a volunteer land steward.

Chuck was the steward for Grafton Forest—a property beloved to many, with striking views out over the Tomhannock Reservoir—where he helped build and keep up the trails.

Streams, waterfalls, and beaver ponds make Valentino Family Community Forest a wildlife haven and enticing destination for nature enthusiasts. Kay and Bill Valentino gave a gift to the Forests Forever Campaign to help make it possible to conserve this beautiful, wild place in Grafton.

Valentino (continued)

After Grafton Forest was transferred from RPA to the NY State Department of Environmental Conservation to become part of Pittstown State Forest, Chuck was eager to put time and care into another special place.

“I was ready for a new challenge,” Chuck says. Luckily, the newly conserved, 418-acre Valentino Family Community Forest was the perfect fit.

Chuck is co-stewarding the Valentino forest with Dan O’Brien, a Grafton resident and RPA volunteer. The volunteer committee, made up of neighbors and other passionate members, is helping shape the vision and management plan for the property.

ADDING A KEY STRETCH OF WILD

Chuck and Dan are eager to see what happens over the next few years through the committee’s hard work and care. “This land was logged carefully in the years before it was sold to RPA. I’m interested to see how it evolves over time,” says Chuck.

The Valentino Family Community Forest adds to an almost entirely connected 7-mile conserved corridor along the northwest edge of the Rensselaer Plateau—important for wildlife and plants, water quality, and floodwater control.

“Valentino Family Community Forest’s proximity to Grafton Lakes State Park and Pittstown State Forest make this area now, collectively, one of the largest open space areas in the Capital District,” Dan says. “It’s important and timely work, and an honor to play a part.”

A black-throated green warbler, a canopy-dweller of our most northern forests, sings out from the conifers. More than 3,000 acres of wetlands on the Rensselaer Plateau filter storm water, store carbon, slow the effects of climate change, and are home to plants and animals. Chuck Porter on a workday at Valentino Family Community Forest. Page 9: Donna Simms and Nate along Dill Creek.





Dill Brook Community Forest : Donna & son Nate

In 2020, Donna and her son Nate—a photographer and videographer with a passion for local conservation—had the idea to help conserve the Dill Brook property on the eastern edge of the Rensselaer Plateau in honor of Donna’s late husband and Nate’s father, Robert (Bob) Simms. Bob was an avid conservationist and environmental activist.

Donna owned a forested property in Maine called Popple Hill that she was ready to part with to conserve land closer to home.

With RPA’s help and the hard work of volunteer and former Colorado land trust executive director, Jim Daus, Donna put a conservation easement on the Maine land in 2021. Once conserved, she sold it to a neighbor and used the proceeds as a gift to RPA’s Forests Forever Campaign.

Donna’s leadership gift allowed for RPA to conserve the **Dill Brook Community Forest in memory of her husband, Robert Simms.**

It is a legacy that keeps not one, but two, forests wild forever. “Bob cared so deeply about keeping wild land undeveloped. He would be very happy to see the natural character of Dill Brook protected forever.”

“Bob cared so deeply about keeping wild land undeveloped. He would be very happy to see the natural character of Dill Brook protected forever.”

– Donna Simms

A WORK GROUP BREAKS TRAIL

On a cool but sunny morning in late April, volunteer members of the Dill Brook Community Forest committee hiked the future community forest land along Dill Brook Road in Petersburg. They traversed steep terrain and hemlock groves, looking for special features and possible routes for future hiking trails.

Winding through the woods, the group wandered past trillium blooms that lit up the forest floor, amphibian breeding pools, and what looked like a fox den.

Some folks on the hike live close by in the Petersburg area. Others have different reasons for wanting to help steward the 153-acre community forest.

A HAVEN FOR BROOK TROUT

Tom Carroll, a Trout Unlimited New York Council Conservation Committee member, is especially excited about Dill Creek, which flows through the property's southern end. As they walked, he explained that this stream is a haven for brook trout. The shaded pools and small rapids make it a place where trout can thrive, protected from predators.

“The shaded pools and small rapids make Dill Creek a place where trout can thrive, protected from predators.” – Tom Carroll

In the next steps, the committee will create a vision and land management plan for the property, and the RPA/Rensselaer Land Trust Volunteer Trail Crew will help build the first trails.

Once open to the public in 2023, everyone will be welcome to walk among old hemlocks and pines and along the beautiful, wild trout stream.

Scan the code on the right to read more about how Dill Brook Community Forest came to be.



Dill Brook sits opposite the Valentino Family Community Forest, flanking the eastern edge of the plateau and sloping down toward the valley between the plateau and the Taconic Mountains. It connects to the wider region, helping to support wildlife between here and Western Massachusetts.





Forests Forever Film

Forests Forever?

Here's why.

If we happen to be thoughtless and just build human stuff wherever we want... and there's no pathway for wildlife — it's too late to think about it after the fact.

– Sheree Cammer, RPA volunteer

We want to conserve the forests faster than they're developed.

A lot of lands are for sale now; this is our chance. – Jim Bonesteel, Executive Director

Part of your personal health — and just your whole emotional outlook is dependent on having some place close and integrated with nature.

– Dick Gibbs, Board Member Emeritus



Scan the code to
watch Forests Forever.



The whole Rensselaer Plateau is within our Mohican nation's traditional territory. Anyone who stewards the land is stewarding our relative as well.

– Bonney Hartley, Historic Preservation Manager, Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians



Nature just feels really safe and secure for some reason.

– Amelia Aguirre, Poestenkill Community Forest visitor



Community members enjoy Dorothy's Equal Access Trail—the inspiration for Fred creating an equal access trail in Albert Family Community Forest. The project is supported by Callanan Industries, The Community Foundation for the Greater Capital Region, Fane Trucking, Perennial Landscaping, and John Keegan & Jennifer Wiley.

Equal Access Trail in the works

Albert Family Community Forest

For Fred McCagg, steward of Albert Family Community Forest, the community forest isn't complete without an accessible trail where everyone, including people with limited mobility, can enjoy the peace and beauty of nature. Fred is engaging the community to create a trail compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) out at Albert. The new trail will travel along a stream, with a viewing platform over a wetland and an accessible picnic table. The trail crew has helped Fred clear a path, and he hopes to finish by fall of 2022 with support from the community.

“This trail will offer a place for folks of all ability levels to get out to explore the forest. Nature is for everyone, and the outdoors should be accessible to all.”

– Fred McCagg



Karen Boswell

The RPA / Rensselaer Land Trust trail crew is no ordinary group of volunteers. Each year, they create miles of new trails and occasionally take on special, multi-day projects like the recent trail improvements at Barberville Falls. The crew built a safe pathway to the base of the falls, complete with a new viewing platform.

Volunteers are the heart of Barberville Falls Trail improvements mean safer access to nature

You may already know and love the new Falls Trail at Barberville Falls Preserve, built in 2020 by the RPA / Rensselaer Land Trust volunteer trail crew. That trail—plus the new parking area and year-round public access—made this iconic preserve a place where people found solace during the pandemic.

This spring, the trail crew was hard at work at the base of the Falls Trail. Co-leaders Fran Egbert and Peter Wood organized more than a week of consecutive work days. The group built a viewing platform, bridge, and stairs—all to protect the soil and plants from erosion and make it safer for visitors to view the falls.

When Fran and Peter planned the project, they knew hauling wood and buckets of gravel down a steep and winding trail was too dangerous. Luckily, volunteers Chuck Porter and Michael Jensen offered some very effective solutions. Chuck used his skills as a caver to create a pulley system for sending buckets and wood from the top of the falls to the bottom. Michael, an engineer and woodworker, designed the bridge and platform.

“It wasn’t easy work, but it will be worth it. I’m just so grateful to the whole crew and everyone who helped,” says Fran.

“As much as I love being active outdoors, the real attraction of the trail crew is the people you spend time with.” – Karen Boswell

2021 Income



| | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| Individual Gifts | \$938,278 |
| Government Grants | 331,118 |
| Foundations, Trusts | 31,500 |
| Special Events | 29,356 |
| Other | 3,188 |
| TOTAL: | \$1,333,440 |

2021 Expenses



| | |
|---------------------|------------------|
| Land Acquisition | \$466,500 |
| Program Services | 336,577 |
| Management, General | 91,128 |
| Fundraising | 60,709 |
| TOTAL: | \$954,914 |

Thank you!

You keep **community conservation** going and growing

Every year, the generosity of you, your friends, and neighbors sustains the work of preserving forests and wildlife habitat, ensuring that all people have access to the healing power of nature.

In 2021, you and others who care made so much happen for the Rensselaer Plateau region ... and all those who call it home. To see the full list of our generous 2021 donors, scan the code to the right.



2021 Highlights



35 bird species identified and recorded by volunteers & visitors at annual Spring Bird Walk



16 RPA board and staff attended Soul Fire Farm's **Uprooting Racism training**



115 community members attended talk with leader from **Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans**



11 species of invertebrates identified by Forests Conservation Corps teens



12 homeschoolers used Albert Family Community Forests as an **Outdoor Classroom**

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and **justice**

In the national land trust community and here at RPA, we've been looking closely at unequal access to nature, environmental injustice, and the divide in who is heard, represented, and served in conservation and outdoors.

We know that communities of color are more likely to suffer due to climate change, pollution, and lack of greenspace. We know that until all people feel safe on our trails and included in community projects, we have work to do.

GUEST SPEAKER SERIES

In summer 2021, we introduced a Guest Speaker Series featuring non-white perspectives on the outdoors and land stewardship. In addition, anti-racist speakers from the RPA community led discussions on inclusivity in conservation.

First in the series, Heather Bruegl of the **Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohicans** spoke about the rich history and present-day realities of the people indigenous to this land that we call the Rensselaer Plateau.

Next, we heard from Chaya Harris and Benita Law-Diao of **Outdoor Afro**, Keith Hirokawa of RPA, and Celia Kutz of Rensselaer Youth Outdoors (RYO).

Racism in the outdoors and environmental injustice are complex, deeply-rooted issues. By supporting and amplifying Black, Brown, and Indigenous leaders, we can create safer, more welcoming outdoor experiences for all.

UPROOTING RACISM

In 2021, RPA attended **Soul Fire Farm's** Uprooting Racism Training. We learned the history and structure of racial injustice, examining our own complicity—and ability to change. Now, we are assessing our day-to-day systems to make anti-racist choices.

Soul Fire Farm in Grafton, NY is an Afro-Indigenous centered community farm committed to uprooting racism and seeding sovereignty in the food system. **SoulFireFarm.org**.

Outdoor Afro is a national organization celebrating and inspiring Black connections and leadership in nature. Plus, they have a local network. **OutdoorAfro.org** or Outdoor Afro Albany/Upstate New York on Facebook.



Rensselaer Youth Outdoors

Natural connections for the youth of Rensselaer County

On a warm Saturday morning in May, the participants of a six-week program for teens called “Earth Day at Oakwood” gathered at Oakwood Community Center in Troy with work gloves and full water bottles. It was finally time for the community workday they’d planned as the program’s culminating event.

Friends and family members came along, ready to get their hands dirty.

Rensselaer Youth Outdoors (RYO) Coordinator Celia Kutz created and led this opportunity for 14-to-18-year-olds from

Troy to learn and work on behalf of their local environment and earn a stipend.

Joining RYO as program partners were Oakwood Community Center and The Sanctuary for Independent Media.

During the six weeks, eight earth-loving teens met at Oakwood Community Center and around town. The Sanctuary’s Sina Basila Hickey held a media workshop for the group, guiding them in how to conduct an interview. With their new skills, they interviewed community leaders and educators about local environmental



A boost for 2022 RYO Forest Conservation Corps grows

RYO's Forest Conservation Corps (FCC) program engages young people on the land—learning, working, making friends, and earning a stipend. Over the summer in 2021, FCC returned after a break in 2020. RPA hosted several week-long sessions for Rensselaer County teens out at the community forests.

The teens restored an old well, learned about water quality, and talked to conservation experts. In 2022, funding for FCC from the US Forest Service has increased, allowing RYO to offer additional weeks of summer programming (for five full weeks!) and hire two program staff to work with the young students.

Friends Neya, Satya, and Khin hard at work prepping the garden beds at Hillside North Community Garden and planting cherry trees at the future Osgood Woods Nature Preserve in South Troy. The Hillside garden is a project of Troy Rehabilitation and Improvement Program (TRIP) and Troy School 2.

issues. Everything they learned added to their approach to planning the final event.

“It was really important that these young people were supported by adults to follow their interests and see what caring for the earth looked like to them,” says Celia. The teens brainstormed, coming to the consensus that they would host this community workday.

The group picked up trash from streets around Oakwood, weeded a garden at an outdoor classroom for Troy School 2, and helped prepare a new nature preserve in South Troy.

“It’s really good to *do* something. I’m a hands-on person,” said Neya, one of the teens, while

pulling weeds in the community garden.

Now, eight creative young people will go forward with more experience in working together on behalf of the place they call home.

“If we are nurturing future conservation leaders, we need to support them in developing leadership skills.”

– Celia Kutz, RYO Coordinator

RYO is a partnership program of RPA, Dyken Pond Environmental Education Center, and Grafton Lakes State Park. To learn more, scan the code to the right.



Where **people and nature** come **together**

Social work and conservation

Last school year, RPA had the opportunity to host two Master of Social Work candidates as interns, Lisanny Manzueta Custodio and Scott Groffman. Molly Freiberg, a licensed social worker and RPA's Community Engagement Manager, recruited and supervised them.

You may be wondering how the fields of social work and conservation overlap. As Lisanny says, "Conservation and social work can both use a holistic approach to connecting with people. Both fields center around humanity and creating community."

Scott and Lisanny brought fresh insight into community conservation and how our natural spaces can support wellness across society.

"Conservation and social work can both use a holistic approach to connecting with people. Both fields center around humanity and creating community."

– Lisanny, Master of Social Work Graduate

Lisanny focused her internship on working with Rensselaer Youth Outdoors (RYO). She supported programming with young people out on the land and in the City of Troy, learning and working together.

Lisanny says, "I really enjoyed my time working directly with young people. Having interned at a high school and worked at a university, I was able to experience a side of youth engagement not always possible in a formal educational setting. I got to witness teens expressing themselves genuinely and talking about the environment in enlightening ways."

Lisanny also led the early phases of a new community forest committee. She had the chance to bring people together around their shared interest in the newly-conserved Dill Brook Community Forest in Petersburg.

While Lisanny has graduated from her MSW program and her internship period has ended, she's excited for the future of the Dill Brook Community Forest and RYO. And—we hope—she'll bring some rich experiences from her work with RPA along on her journey.

"I am hoping to find ways to stay involved with RPA because I have enjoyed my experience so much. I don't see it ending quite yet," she says.

*Scott's internship culminated in the community forestry workshop *Valuing our Forests*, held in partnership with New York Forest Owners Association at Pineridge Cross Country Ski Area. Read the story in the red left reader at rensselaerplateau.org/storyhub.*

RPA's social work and wellness programs include monthly mindful nature walks and healing walks with Nopiates Committee, a local organization supporting people affected by addiction and the opioid epidemic. In 2021, RPA's Molly Freiberg initiated discussions with other land trusts across the country on the value of social work and its intersection with land conservation. Clockwise from top left, Celia (of RYO) with Lisanny; social workers and therapists on a nature-immersive staff retreat hosted by RPA; a forest bathing moment; and Molly maintaining her interactive mindfulness trail at Poestenkill Community Forest.



Honoring the Plateau's **Indigenous stewards**

The Rensselaer Plateau sits within the ancestral and traditional homeland of the **Stockbridge-Munsee Band of the Mohicans**, who stewarded this land before they were forced to move west to Wisconsin by European settlers.

Some Mohican people remained in New York, and some have returned home from Wisconsin.

RPA cares for this land today with deep respect and gratitude for the **Muh-he-con-ne-ok (the People of the Waters that are never still)**. We seek to build lasting relationships with this community so that we can amplify the needs, values, and priorities of the First People.

There are so many ways to care for the Rensselaer Plateau

We are here to help you find a way of giving that's right for you. To learn more, **scan the code to the right**, or contact Jim Bonesteel for a confidential discussion of your giving options at 518-712-9211 or jim@rensselaerplateau.org.



Become a monthly donor

You can make a difference every day with a sustaining membership. Monthly gifts—\$10, \$25, or \$100—make conservation possible year-round.

Plan a gift to future generations

There are some amazing options for planned giving include leaving a gift of any size in your will or planning a gift of real estate.

Give back with a Qualified Charitable Distribution

If you are 70 ½ years or older and must take the Required Minimum Distribution (RMD) from your IRA, a Qualified Charitable Distribution could be used to satisfy the RMD by making a direct, trustee-to-trustee transfer to the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance.

Join the Woods & Water Heritage Circle

If your annual gifts add up to \$1,000, we invite you to be part of this leadership circle and to enjoy a special event with other members.

Donate stock

A gift of stock can provide you financial and tax benefits while supporting conservation. Scan the code with your smart phone to learn more about this and other options for planned giving.

Volunteer

Stand up for forests and your community by building trails, sharing your talents, or doing office work. Send an e-mail to Dan Morse at dan@rensselaerplateau.org to learn more, and become part of the team.

Rensselaer Plateau Alliance

Conservation Through Community

PO Box 790
Averill Park, NY 12018
518-712-9211

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Community Engagement Manager
Celia Kutz
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Stories and content by Annie Jacobs
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Save the Date
Celebrate Community Conservation
at the 2022 Forests Forever Gala

Tuesday, October 25, Old Daley Inn

We hope to announce the success of the
Forests Forever Campaign on this special evening.