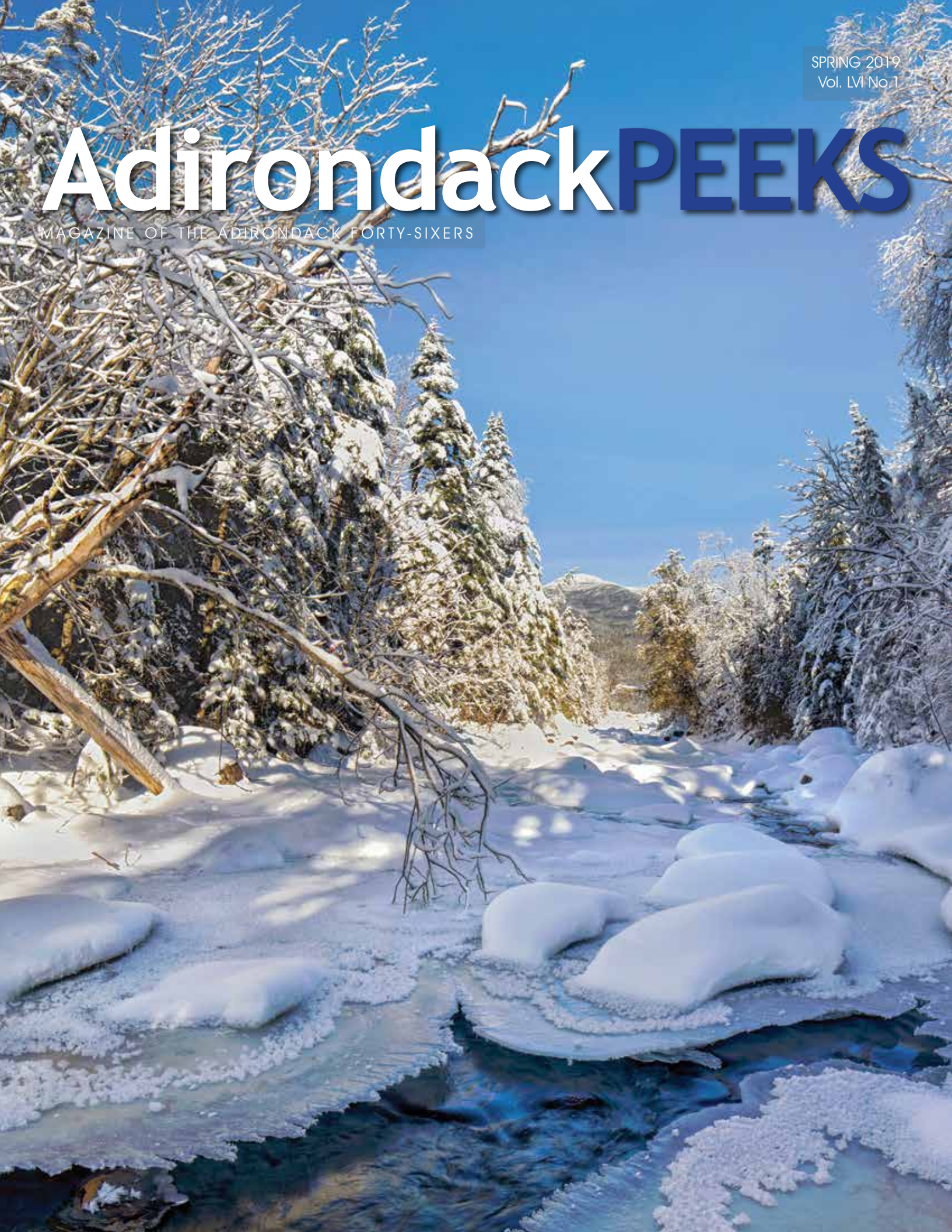


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# Adirondack PEEKS

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# Skylight Has a Rock Problem



View of Skylight from Mt. Marcy, New Year's Day 2012. Photo credit: Justine Mosher #7207W

By Kayla White and Tyler Socash #6026W

There is no easy passage to Mount Skylight. Encircled by an intermingled tangle of spruce and fir krummholz (German for “crooked wood”), the summit is as geographically isolated from civilization as any place can be in New York State. Determined peakbaggers must rise out of the valleys of Panther Gorge, brave the floating bog bridges of the Opalescent, or even climb up and over the state’s tallest peak just to have an opportunity for a summit push. Scrambling out of the Four Corners junction, the trees become gnarled and stunted and the well-earned mountaintop goal is finally within reach.

It must be a curious sight, after all of that hiking, to come upon a group of laboring summit stewards in this transition between the krummholz and the alpine zone. Interestingly enough, these stewards aren’t carrying rocks up Skylight towards the summit—they are bringing them down.

Skylight, the fourth-tallest high peak, is a favorite among Adirondack hikers and 46ers. Whether influenced by the mountain’s innate beauty or challenging remoteness, many 46ers save Skylight for the final peak in their quest. The summit is broad and open, with a sky that seems to go on forever. Upon its crest, and only here,

can Adirondack hikers admire the only state population of fragile Alpine Azalea (*Kalmia procumbens*). Alpine Azalea blooms in the first week in June after the snow has finally melted, expending only enough energy to flower for a week. Their small stature and short blooming period make them a hard plant to spot, but botanists and stewards always try to make the trip. Most hikers will miss this natural wonder of the plant world below and instead be increasingly distracted by the looming silhouette ahead. The once modest summit of Skylight has morphed into a gigantic, unsightly rock pile. As

Legend states that if a climber fails to carry a rock from timberline to place on the summit cairn, it will surely rain.

—Rev. Ernest Ryder #7

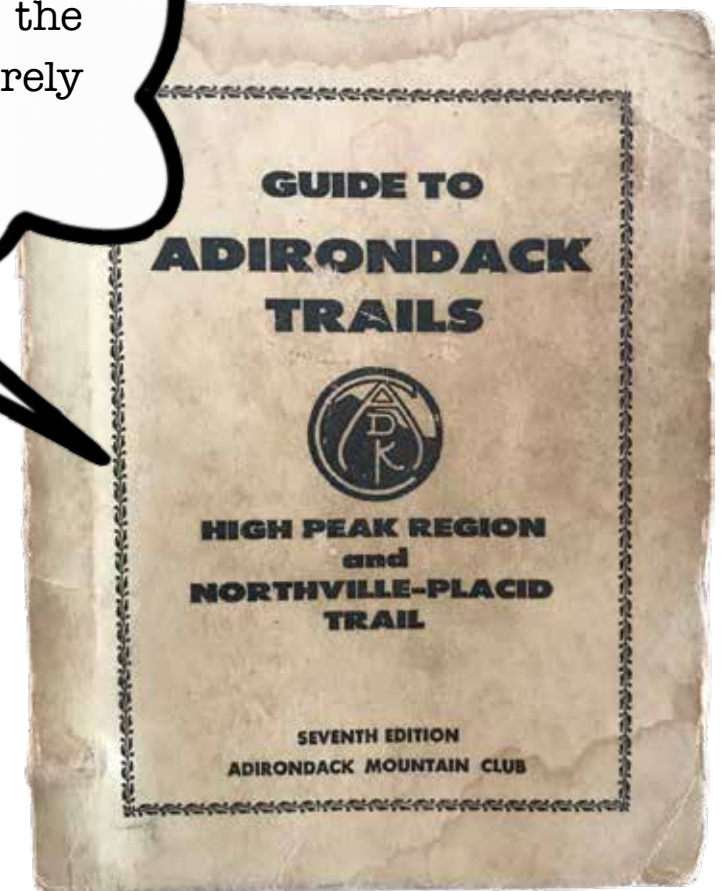
Skylight’s rock pile grows with every addition, it threatens more than New York’s rarest ecosystem. On one of the Northeast’s most secluded peaks, the wild character of a mountain is beginning to change.

## Tradition

Adding rocks to Skylight’s summit cairn is not a new phenomenon. The Adirondack Mountain Club’s own guidebook says, “Legend states that if a climber fails to carry a rock from timberline to place on the summit cairn, it will surely rain.” Rev. Ernest Ryder #7 (and co-founder of the Forty-Sixers of Troy) is credited with creating that legend. However, there are other theories on why hikers started carrying a rock to Skylight.

“As for how that ‘tradition’ started, I seem to recall my father saying that there were those for whom Skylight was the favorite of all the High Peaks,” says Tony Goodwin #211, referring to his late father James Goodwin #24. “By the 1902 maps, Skylight was the third highest at 4,920 feet, compared to Haystack at 4,918 feet. The 1953 series of topo maps, however, reduced Skylight to fourth at 4,924 feet compared to Haystack that ‘rose’ to 4,960 feet. The idea supposedly was to build the

pile of stones high enough to again make Skylight higher than Haystack. Making up 36 feet was clearly impossible, but such an impossibility hasn’t stopped hikers in Maine from trying to build enough of a cairn (40 feet, I think) to make Katahdin one mile high.”



Alpine Azalea flowers are only a quarter of an inch wide. Photo credit: The Summit Steward Program



## Damage to Alpine Plants

Skylight is one of only 21 Adirondack summits to have alpine vegetation growing above its tree line. The Adirondack alpine zone is home to 27 rare, threatened, or endangered species of alpine plants. Only 173 acres of this unique ecosystem exist in the state, all of it located amidst heavily used hiking trails and popular summits. Skylight features a mere ten acres of alpine habitat on its summit, which surprisingly ties it with Iroquois as the fourth-largest alpine summit in New York. Protecting these “islands in the sky” has been a massive undertaking by organizations like the 46ers, Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK), New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC), and the Adirondack Chapter of the Nature Conservancy (TNC). The Summit Steward Program is a partnership of the latter three and has been supported by the 46ers since the program’s inception in 1989. The Summit Steward Program’s mission is to protect New York’s alpine habitat through education, trail work, and research.

Skylight’s rock pile has become a burden to summit stewards, hikers and alpine plants alike. Over the years, hikers adding stones to the summit cairn on Skylight has caused damage to the alpine plants. When dealing with impacts to the resource it is important to think about the cumulative effects. One person putting one rock on a summit doesn’t

seem like a big deal, but when this effort is compounded with hundreds, if not thousands, of people the impacts multiply. This rock pile is now so large that it spills onto alpine plants, crushing the plants in its immediate vicinity. Hikers are also trampling alpine plants to navigate around the rock pile, causing further destruction. Alpine vegetation can only handle being stepped on a handful of times before being killed off, leaving exposed soil to be eroded quickly away by wind and rain until only bedrock remains.

## Spirit of Wildness

Even though Mt. Marcy saw its first recorded ascent in 1837, decades passed before the same could be said for neighboring Skylight. There was no rock pile to be found when Verplanck Colvin pounded his surveying bolt into Skylight’s crown in 1873. At that moment, Skylight became the last major mountain to be climbed in the northeastern United States. In the wake of Colvin’s ascent, change has been favorably slow to come to the mountain. Even in our increasingly populated and developed world, one can enjoy the increasingly rare feelings of solitude, tranquility, peace and smallness atop Skylight. In recent years, however, the toll of visitation is adding up. The amassing pile of rocks on the summit, much like the frequency of spotting unburied toilet paper below tree line, continues to rapidly exceed the visual

impact of Colvin’s historical survey bolt, informative trail junction signs, and subtle scree walls that concentrate hiker traffic on durable surfaces while protecting the alpine resource. While certain infrastructures must be in place to aid people in recreating safely and protecting the resource, it is important to balance the wildness of a place. Laura and the late Guy Waterman #670W, both avid wilderness preservationists and staunch protectors of the wild character of the northeast Mountains, wrote extensively on the need to consider preserving the spirit of wildness in places like Skylight’s summit:

*Being intangible—more a perception than anything else—wildness is far more fragile than alpine flowers, the boot damage to which we can measure, monitor, and attempt to control. Wildness is imperceptibly eroded away. It is chipped at over time by those who want to build a hut at a quiet view spot, or locate a trail up a hitherto pathless ridge, or construct a bridge where none had been deemed necessary in the past... Each must be carefully weighed; measured against what is gained and what is lost in terms of mountain solitude and wildness. Wildness, it seems, is expendable. But once spent, like time itself, we can rarely gain it back.*

When thinking about the wild character of Skylight, it is important to consider how the aesthetics of a massive rock pile can detract from a hiker’s experience. Although you might be enjoying a

moment of summit solitude, the massive rock pile is a jarring reminder that you are not alone. Thousands of hikers have climbed this mountain before. While that will always be true, you can choose to join the stewardship movement to help ensure that primeval characteristics remain at large in places like Skylight and beyond. Are these places not worth our best efforts to defend?

## Summit Steward Trail Work

With Skylight’s rock pile toppling over, hikers have found other places to put rocks. These surplus rocks have been used to create rock stacks (hiker-made rock piles) and rock art (designs made using rock). Rock stacks should not be confused with cairns, which are navigational markers that are professionally built by summit stewards. These cairns are designated to be placed in specific locations by the NYS DEC land manager to keep hikers on bare rock and off alpine plants. When building cairns, summit stewards quarry rocks from below tree line or find rocks that are sitting on bare bedrock to ensure no damage occurs to fragile plants and soil. Cairns are specifically designed to withstand intense weather conditions like hurricane-force winds and snow storms. When built correctly and left undisturbed, cairns should last forever. Unfortunately, summit stewards have to rebuild cairns over the years due to hikers dismantling or adding rocks to them.

Summit stewards primarily use rock for their trail work in the alpine zone. When approaching any project, stewards carefully consider how their actions affect the wild character of the mountain. Summit stewards use rocks to build small scree walls that delineate the trail. These are placed in precise locations where alpine plants have been damaged in the past, visually reminding hikers to walk only on bare rock surfaces. Summit stewards also brush in areas to aid in restoration and pack loose soil with rocks to prevent erosion.

Since most of the rock above tree line is already stabilizing shallow soil, stewards need rocks carried up. The Summit Stewards’ Carry-a-Rock program encourages hikers to bring fist-sized rocks to Marcy, Algonquin, Wright, Colden and Cascade—but not Skylight. There are signs at the Heart Lake Program Center trailhead asking hikers to grab a rock, and leave it at the summit of those particular mountains. This program involves hikers in the management of the alpine plants, giving them a tangible connection to the alpine zone, and has proven to be an excellent avenue for stewards to make direct contact with the people participating.

## Future

With all of these impacts in mind, it is important to consider breaking the tradition of bringing a rock to Skylight’s

summit. If you must bring a rock, consider taking it back down with you when you leave. ADK, in conjunction with NYS DEC and the 46ers, will be working to finish removing the rocks this year. Please spread the word that bringing a rock to Skylight is no longer the preferred behavior. By choosing to preserve the natural scene, you are doing one small act to protect Skylight’s wild legacy. These thoughtful acts of stewardship add up, too.

Decades from now a hiker may toil through Panther Gorge and head ever upwards from Four Corners. With sweat on their brow and determination in their heart, this aspiring 46er might be your future great-granddaughter, or perhaps merely a stranger destined to be labeled an “unnamed woodsman.” Cresting Skylight in an increasingly populated and developed world, these unyielding souls find themselves above the krummholz. Enraptured by wildness, even with subtle guidance owed to a few modest cairns en route, the mysteries of the natural world thrive. Skylight appears untrammelled, unchanged, and these visitors are allowed to mentally embrace the intangibles of wildness. Perhaps they’ll wonder at the remoteness and the vastness of their view. Maybe they will sit in awe of the stillness unlike anything experienced in civilization. Or perhaps they’ll marvel at a tiny blossoming Alpine Azalea, springing like eternal hope. Wildness, though modest, endures.

Interested in learning more about protecting alpine plants? ADK is hosting the Northeast Alpine Stewardship Gathering on October 25-27, 2019 at the High Peaks Resort. The Gathering is an opportunity for alpine researchers, planners, land managers, hiking clubs, stewards, and interested parties to meet to share information and improve the understanding and management of the alpine areas of the northeastern United States. This event provides a forum for the discussion of challenges and opportunities common to all northeastern alpine areas, as well a chance to celebrate the qualities that make each of these areas unique. It will also be a celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Adirondack High Peaks Summit Stewardship Program. To learn more, visit [www.watermanfund.org/alpine-gathering/](http://www.watermanfund.org/alpine-gathering/). ■

**2018** Before and After pictures of the rock pile on Skylight. Stewards relocated over three tons of rock.



Photo credit: Chuck Pacer



Photo credit: The Summit Steward Program