

VISTA

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Constantine (Deno) and George Macricostas at Camp House, May 2024

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IN THIS ISSUE



The Shepaug River at Hidden Valley Preserve, taken from Thoreau Bridge

Spring is a bustling time at Steep Rock Association. We are hard at work laying out new trails, cleaning up winter debris in our preserves, conducting species surveys, sowing seeds in Judea Garden, and planning a summer full of fun and engaging activities for you. In this issue of VISTA, we're pleased to share

our progress on completing the Camp House Education Center and Natural History Museum, offer a volunteer's perspective on building the stone steps on Meeker Trail in Macricostas Preserve, raise your awareness about new invasive species we're trying to eliminate in Steep Rock Preserve, and reveal a new look for Judea

Garden. We're also recruiting volunteers for Judea Garden, our stewardship efforts, and conservation science initiatives. And don't forget to sign up for some of the events and activities we have planned in the coming months. It's all in this issue. We hope you'll join us this summer. --Brian Hagenbuch, PhD.

DESTINATIONS

Steep Rock (2 Tunnel Rd., Washington Depot). Explore over 1,000 acres of wilderness, marvel at old growth forest from the Summit, and uncover history along the railroad bed and amidst the Holiday House ruins.

Macricostas (124 Christian St., New Preston). This 500-acre preserve boasts a diverse landscape, rare birds, and vibrant wildflowers. Opt for a leisurely hike around the hayfield or a challenging trek to Waramaug's Rock for stunning views. This preserve is also home to Judea Garden.

Hidden Valley (198 Bee Brook Rd., Washington Depot). Explore 900 acres of forest and meadows along the scenic Shepaug River. Highlights include the Thoreau Bridge, Quartz Mine, Bronson Fields Pollinator Meadow, and the Pinnacle.

West Mountain In southeast Washington, Johnson Farm (37 West Mountain Rd.) and Hillside Farm (397 Nettleton Hollow Rd.) highlight the area's agricultural legacy with trails skirting productive farmland and open meadows.

100

Join Our
Centennial Committee!

2025 marks Steep Rock's 100th year of protecting nature. Join our Centennial Committee to plan impactful events and shape our next century.

Together, let's plan a centennial that makes a difference!

Contact:
info@steeprockassoc.org

HISTORIC CAMP HOUSE RESTORATION

Have you noticed the recent transformation of the red Isaac Camp House (ca 1757) at the entrance to Macricostas Preserve? Over the past few years, Steep Rock has undertaken a major restoration of the historic colonial, which is among the oldest structures in the Town of Washington, second only to Cogswell Tavern. Local lore claims that General Washington passed by the house on at least two occasions when Christian Street was the main carriage road to Litchfield.

Initially funded by an incredibly generous \$500,000 gift from the Macricostas Family Foundation in 2022, this adaptive reuse project reimagines the 267-year-old residence as a vibrant resource for our entire community.

As part of the Steep Rock Campus at Macricostas Preserve, the Camp House will be the center for conservation education, school programs, events, and volunteer training. In addition, the museum will showcase Steep Rock's organizational history, the natural history of our preserves, and revolving exhibits.

The restoration is led by a team of Steep Rock Trustees—architect Reese Owens, builder Eliot Johnson, historian Steve Solley,

contractor Don Wyant—and other trustees and staff, in consultation with Constantine (Deno) and George Macricostas. George, who has a deep fondness for the house, occasionally stayed there during his hunting trips and walked the surrounding fields and mountain.

"The house radiates authentic historical character, from the basement to the attic, and it's nestled in what truly feels like God's country," George Macricostas remarked. "It's been a joy to contribute to this restoration, helping return the house to its former glory, and we're very pleased with the progress Steep Rock has made."

The team has made a painstaking effort to retain the essence of the original saltbox, requiring repair of the foundation all the way up to replacing the roof and chimneys. The rear wing additions, not original to the house, were removed and replaced with a cathedral "barn room" that will serve as beautiful program space. We are very excited about the community opportunities about to become available.

To learn more about the building's history and how you can help Steep Rock launch its education programs from the Camp House, please see page 8.



Before and after pictures of the Camp House

JAPANESE PRIMROSE A NEW INVASIVE PLANT ON THE LOOSE

Invasive plants are one of the most significant threats to natural communities within Steep Rock's preserves. By outcompeting native species for resources, altering soil properties in their favor and having few, if any natural enemies, invasives degrade the overall health of entire ecosystems. They are a daunting conservation dilemma given their pervasiveness and difficulty to remove.

In 2022, SRA created an Invasive Species Management Plan identifying the most consequential invasive plant occurrences and prioritizing actions for greatest conservation impact. Since the plan's adoption, two stands of Japanese barberry have been eradicated and we've made significant gains controlling reed canary grass and phragmites infesting rare wetlands. These species are

widespread in our preserves--barberry pricks and serves as an ideal harborage for ticks, reed canary grass slices, and phragmites simply becomes an impenetrable jungle. Recently, an exquisite flower has come to attention and jumped the ranks for priority management actions.

Japanese primrose is eye-catching, with rotund leaves, tall stems,



continued on pg. 6

Japanese Primrose in Steep Rock Preserve

EVENTS

Thanks to our donors and Conservation Education Sponsor National Iron Bank, we're able to offer all of these events at no cost. To register: steeprockassoc.org/events-programs

JUNE

CT TRAILS DAY

Sat., June 1, , 10:00AM
Hidden Valley Preserve, 198 Bee Brook Rd, Washington Depot
Enjoy a guided hike and explore Steep Rock Association's Hidden Valley Preserve. Ages 16+.

FAMILY MINDFULNESS HIKE

Sat., June 15, 2024, 9:00AM
Johnson Farm Preserve, 37 West Mountain Road #2 Washington, CT 06793. Join us for a mindfulness hike. All ages.

SUMMER SOLSTICE FIREPIT CELEBRATION

Thurs., June 20, 5PM Hike, 6PM Firepit. Steep Rock House, 116 Christian St, New Preston. Join us as we welcome summer. We will celebrate by the firepit behind Steep Rock House and offer light refreshments. All ages.

STEEP ROCK FAMILY SUMMER KICK-OFF

Sat., June 29, 2024, 11:00AM-2:00PM. Steep Rock Preserve Riding Ring, 2 Tunnel Rd, Washington Depot.
Join us for a day of family fun with a River Critter Hunt, Winnie the Pooh Stick Race, games, pizza food truck, and more. All ages

JULY

ODONATA (DRAGONFLY & DAMSELFLY) SURVEY BLITZ

Sat., July 13, , 9:00AM-5:00PM
Macricostas Preserve, 124 Christian St, New Preston
Become a "dragon hunter" for a day of conservation science in SRA preserves, learning about our fascinating dragonflies and catching them as part of a multi-year research project. Inclement weather will postpone the survey to Sunday, July 14. Ages 16+.

AUGUST

JUDEA GARDEN OPEN GARDEN

124 Christian St, New Preston
Sat., Aug. 17, 3:00PM-5:00PM
Experience the beauty of our gardens, meet our interns, and raise a toast to all the volunteers—past, present, and future—who have been instrumental in making this project a big success. All ages.

SEPTEMBER

ANNUAL COMMUNITY PICNIC

Sat., Sept. 7, , 12:00PM-2:00PM
Steep Rock Preserve, 2 Tunnel Rd, Washington Depot
All community members are welcome to join us for food, fun, and games! All ages.

FALL EQUINOX FIREPIT EVENT

Sun., September 22, , 5:00PM
Steep Rock House, 116 Christian St, New Preston
Join us as we welcome the Fall Equinox at our Firepit. Light refreshments. All ages.

TUNNEL RD. CONNECTOR HIKE

Sat., September 28, , 11AM -2PM
Steep Rock Preserve, 2 Tunnel Road, Washington Depot
Join SRA and Roxbury Land Trust for a 4.5-mile intertown hike on Tunnel Road, traversing nature preserves protected by both organizations. Experience the fall foliage, marvel at the Shepaug River, and learn about land stewardship along the way. All ages, but note the hike length.

3 PEAKS IN 3 WEEKS CHALLENGE

Sun., September 29, through Sun., October 20,
An annual event each October, this challenge invites participants to hike all three Steep Rock peaks

ACTIVITIES RECURRING MONTHLY

WEED & WINE THURSDAYS AT JUDEA GARDEN

124 Christian St, New Preston
Thurs., June 6, 2024 – August 22, 2024, 5:30PM
Stop by Thursdays 5:30-7:00 PM and weed the vegetable beds at Judea Garden alongside fellow gardeners, then enjoy a glass of wine on us! Please bring your own glass. No registration required, please email us with any questions. Ages 21+.

TRAIL WORK PARTY: 2024 SCHEDULE

Join our monthly Saturday trail work party! The work party meets from 10:00am -12:30PM the third Saturday of every month from April through November. No experience necessary, just a willingness to get your hands dirty and have fun. Ages 16+.

• June 15 • July 20 • Aug. 17 • Sept. 21 • Oct. 19 • Nov. 16

SAUNTERS WITH SRA

Join Executive Director Brian Hagenbuch on a series of casual walks through Steep Rock's Preserves.

June 11, 5:30PM: Hidden Valley Preserve
July 15, 5:30PM: Macricostas Preserve
Aug. 14, 5:30PM: Hidden Valley Preserve
September 17, 5:30PM: Hillside Farm at West Mtn. Preserve
October 9, 5:00PM: Johnson Farm at West Mtn. Preserve

SENIORS IN STEEP ROCK RELAUNCHED

Steep Rock Association is pleased to announce the return of our popular "Seniors in Steep Rock" programs. Together with the Washington Senior Center, SRA is hosting four events that promote a vibrant, engaged, and healthy senior population in Washington and the Litchfield Hills. Our goal is to offer area seniors fun, low-impact recreational and educational activities that showcase the natural beauty and history of our preserves while promoting overall health and wellness. We hope you will join us in one or more of these activities. The Seniors in Steep Rock programs are generously supported by a grant from the **Connecticut Community Foundation's** "Pathways for Older Adults" program. For more information, visit www.steeprockassoc.org/events-programs

2024 Events include:

- June 3: "Birding Bonanza: A Senior Exploration in Nature." 1:00PM, Johnson Farm at West Mtn. Preserve
- July 12: "Picnic and Tunnel Tour." 1:00PM, Steep Rock Preserve
- Sept. 13: "Judea Garden and Camp House Tour/History Presentation." 1:00PM, Macricostas Preserve
- Nov. 15: "Steeped in Steep Rock" Coffee Hour and Program. 1:00PM, Steep Rock Association office.

MEEKER STEPS

THE HEAVY LIFTING OF A “STEEP ROCKER”

We recently sat down with Chapin Bates, a dedicated volunteer who is one of our skilled “Steep Rockers”—a small group of craftsmen who, along with our Trail Management Team, was trained by outside experts to learn how to do specialized stonework.

Since 2022, their main responsibility has been to transform the Meeker Trail into a safe and sustainable passage for those enjoying Macricostas Preserve. The trail was continuously washed out and eroded due to heavy rainstorms and needed to be moved to a drier locale where a slope with a steep grade was a significant concern.

Throughout this past year, the Steep Rockers worked to “harvest” stone for steps from the surrounding forest, shaped them to the correct size, and installed them on the precarious slope, creating a sustainable natural passage that should last for decades with minimal maintenance. Thus far, 20 steps have been installed and another 10 are planned for this summer.

How did you get started volunteering for Steep Rock?

I have always loved Steep Rock and spent a lot of time exploring the trails, and after retiring, I wanted to get more involved with the community. I had done a couple of Saturday Work Parties in the past, so I signed up to participate in Trail Management for a year. The following year, they had so many volunteers on the trails that Mike, [Giapponi, former Trail Manager], said he had a special project for me: The Steep Rockers.

What constitutes the training program of a “Steep Rocker”?

The training involved a lot of information delivered in a very short period. Over two days, we met with Artie Hidalgo and Kent Strivers of the Jolly Rovers Trail Crew, a highly trained and skilled group of volunteers who specialize in trail stonework and providing public access to iconic places—a real niche in the world of conservation. They taught us to safely and properly handle the tools, most of them new and obscure to



Chapin Bates, Steep Rock Volunteer

us. We also spent hours on communication and the proper vocabulary for managing and manipulating those tools, the intricacies of laying a trail, understanding the slope of a hill, and measuring the rise and run to develop a trail plan when steps are required to provide accessibility and safety. The Goat Trail (also known as “River’s Edge Trail”), completed last year in Steep Rock Preserve, is a great example of stonework, where the steps add to the beauty of the trail and hiker experience. The steps keep our hikers on the trail, rather than clamoring around for an easier passage, therefore protecting the flora and fauna that live all around it.

What tools are used?

The most commonly used are hammers, pick mottocks, and other arcane-sounding tools like feathers, Maasdam, Porta-wrap, clinometers...and rock bars. The stones are sourced right by the trails, typically within 100 feet of the site. A step requires a rise of 7-10” and a flat surface on one side. Rock bars, 5-6’ long heavy metal bars, are used to position or free the stone in order to strap a sling around it. The sling is con-

nected to a winch line, usually about 40-50 feet long, manually cranked up hill with a grip hoist or a “come along” to the site. The bars are then used to lever the step into its final position. There is very little environmental impact on the site. The only source of electricity we have is a small Honda portable generator, which we use to power the drill needed to split the stone. It’s quite basic and harkens back to what the Egyptians were doing with the pyramids 2000 years BCE!

What has been most memorable?

Working with Artie Hidalgo, a retired senior executive at the MTA in New York, a short stout strong man with a deep Brooklyn accent, who in his retirement can be found all over the country, in the woods, pounding stone, teaching people about nature. He’s a great character and a great person.

What inspires you to continue to do this work? It’s wonderful to see how fellow hikers have benefitted from our work. Everyone is appreciative, and the permanence of the stone steps, knowing they will be there for years to come, is equally inspiring.



Steep Rockers laying 20 steps on Meeker Trail, Macricostas Preserve

EVENTS cont. from page 4

in three weeks and register to win prizes for participating. All ages and fitness levels are encouraged to join in this friendly adventure.

OCTOBER

WASHINGTON'S ANNUAL HARVEST FESTIVAL - CARVE FOR CONSERVATION

Sun., Oct. 13, 12PM-5PM
River Walk Pavilion, 11 School St, Washington
Bring your kids and join SRA as well as the rest of the town of Washington for some fall themed fun at the Harvest Festival from 12-5pm on Sunday. We invite you to visit our booth and carve the animals that call Steep Rock home. The Festival will be at the Pavilion behind the Primary School. All Ages.

JUDEA GARDEN CLEAN UP

124 Christian St, New Preston
Sat., Oct. 19, 9:00AM-12:00PM & Sunday, Oct. 20, 12:00PM-3:00PM
Clean away plant debris, prep beds, and plant seeds to greet us early next spring. All ages.

EXPERIENCE CAMPING AT STEEP ROCK PRESERVE!



Enjoy a night like no other under the stars by the Shepaug River. Steep Rock sites include a grill, picnic table, and more. Minimum two-night stay on weekends.

Reserve your spot online today at steeprocksassoc.org/activity/camping/



"I was honored to co-lead this hike with Carla and meet so many great women. We saw wildflowers, wildlife, a spectacular sunset, ethereal mists as we descended....it was purely magical." --Christine Adams

Women's Full Moon Hike in May, Macricostas Preserve led by guides Carla Mascaro and Christine Adams.

JAPANESE PRIMROSE cont. from pg. 3

and showy blooms, especially when densely grouped and in full expression at the end of May.

The showstopper features and clumping habits that make this Japanese plant prized as a garden ornamental also blatantly give it away in a natural New England setting. Unfortunately, primrose has been found throughout two incredibly valuable cold-water streams feeding the Shepaug River, with approximately 700 plants blanketing pockets of exposed streambed in one of those water-courses.

Although this species won't be found on most official invasive plant lists, it clearly has tenden-

cies which warrant control.

Applying our management plan, the newly established primrose stands scored highly in all heavily weighted criteria, prompting immediate action to prevent further spread of water-transported seed and rid this garden escapee from sensitive riparian habitat. SRA staff and conservation interns carefully hand-pulled all plants from one stream in 2023 and will focus on the other stream in 2024, monitoring our success, performing subsequent work, and building knowledge on this new invader along the way.

Combatting invasive plants requires tremendous effort, and we

sincerely thank all our supporters, visitors, neighbors, community members, and government officials for helping us conserve nature and native species

Whether financing stewardship, volunteering for projects, reporting sightings, creating plans and policies, or being conscious of vegetation on your own private property, you are having an impact, and together, we are making a difference for the sake of our woods, waters, wetlands, and all the wild inhabitants that rightfully call Washington home. For more on invasive management, visit <https://steeprocksassoc.org/invasive-task-force-resources/>



Judea Garden 15th Anniversary Tote
\$25.00

ADD TO CART



Sleep Rock Hat
\$30.00

ADD TO CART



Sleep Rock Honey
\$25.00

ADD TO CART

Steep Rock Shop

From apparel and accessories to unique gifts, every purchase helps protect Steep Rock's beautiful preserves. Great for gifts! Explore the collection at: www.steeprocksassoc.org/shop

THE GARDEN GETS A FACELIFT

After 15 seasons of hard work and 50,000 pounds of fresh organic vegetables grown and distributed to Litchfield County residents, we're giving our flagship garden a makeover. When we expanded seven years ago and created a new garden area directly across from the original plot, we made the strategic decision to install wooden frames around the garden beds.

While we recognized this might create additional work, such as tending individual beds rather than the garden as a whole, we felt that the benefits might be worth it. Grass paths surround the beds in the garden. Defining the beds with hard borders would allow us to easily weed and mow right up to the outside edge of the bed without harming the plants. Without frames, one of the biggest tasks each spring was rebuilding the edges of the beds. The frames actually reduced that extra work.

Given the results of the experiment with wooden frames, we

installed 74 raised beds in the original garden this spring. Until a few years ago, Judea Garden used a gravity fed irrigation system, so beds were laid to take advantage of the natural slope of the land to increase gravitational force. Installing the frames gives us the opportunity to return to a preferred north - south orientation working against the slope of the land and maximizing sunlight. We're excited to see how these changes will help increase production.

We invite you to join our Judea Garden team. Summer volunteer hours are Monday to Friday, 8:00 am - noon. Weed and Wine will now be held on Thursdays (June 6-Aug 22) at 5:30 pm. Our annual Open Garden takes place on Saturday, August 17. Garden distribution at 116 Christian Street will begin July 8 and continue each Monday into October.

Contact Denise Arturi for more information: denise.arturi@steeprockassoc.org.



SRA's Executive Director Brian Hagenbuch with Judea Garden's Head Gardener Denise Arturi amidst the new raised bed frames



Transform Futures Together

When a community gains access to conserved land, a profound shift occurs, benefiting both humans and the natural world. Families find peaceful retreats for rejuvenation, while local flora and fauna flourish in protected habitats. Join **Evergreen**, Steep Rock's monthly giving community, to protect land and wildlife, and enhance lives for generations to come.



GIVE MONTHLY
steeprockassoc.org/monthly



PO Box 279
Washington Depot, CT 06794

MACRICOSTAS MATCH CHALLENGE

TRIPLE YOUR IMPACT

Over the past few years, Steep Rock has been restoring the historic Isaac Camp House at Macricostas Preserve to serve as our visitor center, host educational programs, and house our museum. Now that the exterior is complete, we're moving forward with extensive interior renovations—electrical, plumbing, HVAC, flooring, drywall, and painting—before we can open it to the public.

Our aim is to open the Camp House in Spring 2025, coinciding with Steep Rock's 100th anniversary.

To help complete the construction of the Camp House, the Macricostas Family has announced a generous 2:1 match challenge. For every dollar donated to an education fund for programs and

exhibits at the Camp House, the Macricostas Family will contribute \$2 towards the total construction costs to complete the restoration, up to \$250,000. This means your donation will go three times as far in bringing this historic building to life as a vibrant community hub for conservation education and natural history.

So, what's the next step? It's simple. Join us in this exciting Match Challenge. Every contribution, no matter the size, brings us closer to unlocking the full potential of this match challenge.

Thank you for your continued support and commitment to our community. Visit <https://steeprockassoc.org/camp-house> to learn more about this project and to make your donation.



Macricostas Family and the Steep Rock team reviewing Isaac Camp House renovation plans in 2022.