



# Friends of Thacher State Park

Emma T Thacher Nature Center • 87 Nature Center Way • Voorheesville, NY 12186  
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## Ketcham Road Meadows: Thacher's Best Kept Secret

Thacher Park is home to many unique environments. Some, like the rocky Escarpment, are well-known throughout the state. Other local favorites are tucked away throughout the park, like the wetland complex in the Southern Property. With so much to see, it's easy to overlook many of the Park's amazing ecosystems—some of them right beside the road.

At first glance, the meadows that line Ketcham Road and Nature Center Way appear unassuming. They were originally cleared for agriculture sometime during 19<sup>th</sup> century and changed hands several times before coming under State ownership. The fields that line Nature Center Way, for example, belonged to the Albany Boys Club throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It's believed that the jumbled mass of wood and wire situated in Field One (closest to the Nature Center) is an old camp baseball backstop, the only remaining piece of summer ball games long forgotten.

The grasslands of New York have seen remarkable changes over the past few centuries. In precolonial times meadows formed as the result of wildfire, beaver activity, Native American agricultural practice, and a host of other causes. In the centuries that followed, these natural meadows were gradually subdued under the farmer's plow. Some forms of agriculture can mirror the ecological function of natural fields, like letting a field grow long for haying. But most others create monocultures that are unable to sustain a diverse range of flora and fauna.

The story has changed significantly over the past century. According to Audubon New York, two-thirds of the state's farmland has been lost over the past century. While it might seem that this reduction in agricultural space would free up area to be reclaimed by grasslands, only the opposite is true. Commercial development, reforestation, and renewed agricultural use have taken up space that could otherwise have supported natural meadows once again. Natural grasslands continue to face these and other threats across New York.

Grassland conservation across the state is as important as ever. New York Audubon estimates that some grassland bird species, such as Henslow's Sparrow and Grasshopper Sparrow, have declined by over 90% in the past six decades. In a recent habitat summary prepared by the NYS DEC for the Town of Knox (which includes much of the Northern Property and Thompson's Lake portion of Thacher Park), 80% of all birds listed as "Species of Greatest Conservation Need—High Priority" are grassland species.

Despite their overgrown appearance, these fields are today as important as ever. Most of the fields surrounding Ketcham Road support a number of declining grassland bird species, such as Woodcock, Bluebird, Bobolinks, and Savannah Sparrow. A Northern Harrier, listed as a Threatened Species in New York, was seen soaring over the Ketcham Road fields earlier this May. Although they've been known to nest in and around these grasslands in decades past, no reported nesting has occurred this year. The brush surrounding these fields also provides important habitat for Brown Thrasher, another "Species of Greatest Conservation Need—High Priority" that has been spotted in the area this year.

These fields support much more than just birds. Garter snakes and deer mice play cat and mouse in the thick grass. Coyotes regularly feed on rabbits here as they cross between the Thompson's Lake and Northern Property portions of the parks. Thousands of fireflies float over the air on warm summer nights. While these meadows enjoy protection and effective management under the ownership of OPRHP, they are still at-risk from several ecological threats. Non-native flora such as orchard grass, timothy, and knapweed threaten to crowd out native species. There is currently no known long-term management plan for these species, threatening the long-term health of these fields.

- by Peter Farquharson





# Garden Gang Turns 10

The 2012 “I Love My Park Day” had several planned projects ready for the crowd that showed up that Saturday morning. One such task came from Chris Fallon, Park Manager at the time. At a planning meeting he had asked Anita and me if we could clean out and tidy up the planters along Rte. 157 as a “project”. We agreed, and with a lot of pre-work, got ready for that Saturday’s I Love My Park Day. As folks were lining up for their selected work details, luck would have it that several ladies joined Anita and me on our first time at the planters. Little did we all know it, but at that moment, the “Garden Gang” was born.

Since that I Love My Park Day in 2012, our group has ebbed and flowed with its number staying around 6 or 7. In these years we have had friendships made and friends lost. What has remained constant, is the willingness of the group to give up an hour or so on a Sunday once a month from May through October to weed, cajole new plants, complain about deer, and when needed do rain dances, all to keep the planters tidy.

Not confined to these monthly responsibilities, the Gang tackled other projects too. Three of our bigger undertakings were creating and replacing the north and south park signs, gutting the Overlook planter, and updating the flag pole at the park office (Park Police office now). During the year of 2012 through I Love My Park Day 2013, two very talented ladies approached Manager Fallon with renditions for new park entrance signs. He agreed to the designs and arranged for space in the maintenance shed for the ladies to go to work over the year. What a year it was! Staff set aside an area in maintenance, cut the

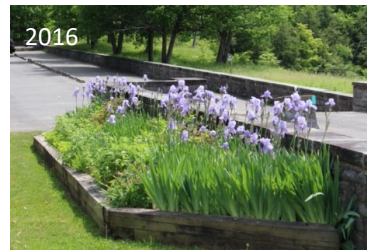
plywood, and set up horses for them to draw and then paint the signs. One of the signs was up before I Love My Park Day 2013, and the other later.



2015 saw the very tired and beat up yews surrounding the flag pole at the park office pulled out with the help of maintenance staff. We replaced them with new native plants and hardy

perennials that you still see there today.

Flush with success that staff could pull out yews, we decided in 2016 to do the same at the Overlook planter. Yews were gone and native shrubs (small at the time) planted. To fill the void until the shrubs grew, we re-planted dozens of irises which, in their own right, were show stoppers. Today the native St. John’s Wort plants are spectacular despite the dry conditions; they are covered with yellow flowers that are covered in bees!



So, there you have it, 10 years old and going strong – so when you see our yellow shirts, you’ll see ladies still playing in the dirt doing their little part for Thacher.



“Gang” Members 2022: Anita Wahlen, Leslie Hartnett, Jayne Maloney, Cary Patak, Susan Albright, Ann Hein and Bonnie Schaller

- by Bonnie Schaller

## Friends of Thacher Park Meeting Dates for 2022

Meeting dates are Wednesdays, September 14, and November 9.

7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center. Come join us! (Masks may be required)

## Welcome to Thacher's new Geology Interpretive Assistant!

On occasion after I have taken visitors to Thacher Park on one of my scheduled walks--centering on the Devonian-period rocks of the Indian Ladder Trail or the development of caves and karst terrain in the park--a visitor will ask me where I had gone to school and the subject on which I had written my doctoral dissertation. I always enjoy the looks when I say that I am a graduate of New York University and that my topic was "Theme, Character, and Technique in the Stories and Novels of Shirley Jackson." (Her best-known works are the short story "The Lottery" and the novel *The Haunting of Hill House*.)

And so the question arises: how did someone whose educational career began with a Ph.D. in American Literature end up as a "Geology Interpretive Assistant"? It was a road with many meanders.

My parents started taking me to Thacher Park when I was very young--probably no more than four years old. We walked the Indian Ladder Trail many times--and I never tired of observing the towering cliffs, the sea-floor fossils found in the rocks, and the mysterious-looking alcoves and cave entrances lined with ferns and mosses from which spewed cold streams. Like many kids I began collecting rocks and fossils while I was still in grade school and though I became an avid reader (and writer) my avocation was always geology. While I was in college excelling in English and formulating my plans to be a professor of the subject I became part of a group of sport cavers, none of whom were geology majors but all of whom loved the underground passageways. Simply by osmosis we picked up some geologic knowledge--enough to make us realize how much we did NOT know!

I started my career teaching English courses full-time at various local high schools and part-time at a local junior college, but my interest in cave exploration never waned. I became involved with organizations such as the National Speleological Society and the Cave Research Foundation, getting to help with some serious science being done at Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, learning a lot

of geology in the process. Soon I decided to become certified to teach Earth Science and spent much of my free time taking courses at Western Kentucky University and the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine. This led to my being hired to teach Earth Science and geology-centered classes on both the secondary school and college levels. And when the opportunity arose to be a "Geology interpretive assistant" at Thacher Park, I jumped at it.

As a result of my studies I came to understand the incredible complexity of the rock layers--strata--at Thacher Park, which Dr. Chuck Ver Straeten so wonderfully outlined in a recent issue of this newsletter, and to share that knowledge with visitors at some of my favorite sites: on the Indian Ladder Trail the active cave passages, the great fractures that over millennia have created the talus slopes, the subtle changes from limestone to sandstone to shale and back to limestone that chronicle great changes in Earth's climate and geography, the gaping sinkholes along Beaver Dam Road.

And as I have always told my students--and now visitors to the park--my background has allowed me to bring some science to poetry and some poetry to science. And to do so, I know of few places in this country better than Thacher Park.

- by Mike Nardacci

### Hawk Watch at Thacher Overlook!

Saturday September 10, 10am to 3pm.

Fall is a time for many species of birds, including birds of prey, to migrate south to their wintering homes. A great place to watch migrating birds of prey is the Helderberg Escarpment where steep cliffs provide warm updrafts of air that allow the birds to catch a ride and conserve energy during their journey. Come up to the Overlook to watch them soar by, and take advantage of the hikes and activities offered at the park that day! No registration is required for this program.



Check for updates at [www.friendsofthacherpark.org](http://www.friendsofthacherpark.org)

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As always, call (518) 872-0800 or (518) 872-1237 to verify activity times and dates.

Please feel free to call board members with questions or suggestions.

Many thanks to Peter Farquharson, Mike Nardacci, Bonnie Schaller and Sigrin Newell for their contributions to this newsletter.

Christine Gervasi—Editor

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<https://etc.usf.edu/clipart/>

Wednesday, September 14, 2022

Next:

## Board Meeting

7:00 pm at Thacher Visitor Center (masks may be required)

### Who are your kin?

It is such a basic part of English language that we don't stop to think about it. We use "people" pronouns for people, "he," "she," "we," etc. But for all other living things, plant and animal, we use the pronoun "it". For example, "Look at the worker bee in the Nature Center hive. It is doing a tail-wagging dance." "The pitcher plant in the bog is fascinating. It captures insects."

Robin Wall Kimmerer, author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* suggests a new pronoun which acknowledges other living beings. Based on a word in the Anishinaabe language which means 'beings of the living earth', Robin suggests that we use "kin" to replace "it" when speaking of plants and animals.

When we call birds and squirrels, trillium and oak trees our family, it changes our relationship to them. We feel the connection and are called to care for the plants and animals that live at Thacher and elsewhere.

Try it yourself. When you come to Thacher for a hike, look around you. Challenge yourself and the children who are with you to make up sentences using "kin". "The pitcher plant in the bog is fascinating. Kin captures insects." Look at the worker bee in the Nature Center hive. Kin is doing a tail-wagging dance."

Scientists are learning that plants and animals have intelligence. They communicate. They make decisions and act on them. They are more related to us than we ever guessed. Using "kin" in place of "it" reminds us that we are indeed kin to all living creatures in a great interdependent web.

This is a wonderful suggestion. However, I must admit that I am reluctant to call a tick my "kin".

<https://www.yesmagazine.org/issue/together-earth/2015/03/30/alternative-grammar-a-new-language-of-kinship>

- by Sigrin T. Newell

As always, you can find a color version of the newsletter at [www.friendsofthacherpark.org](http://www.friendsofthacherpark.org)