

The Highlands Trail: A local long-distance hiking adventure.

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The Highlands Trail is a long-distance trail that invites visitors to immerse themselves in the natural beauty and history of the Highlands; a distinct physiographic region made up of parts of Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The Trail currently spans 180-miles between the Riegelsville Bridge on the Delaware River and Cornwall-on-Hudson on the west side of the Hudson River. It is maintained and managed by the [New York-New Jersey Trail Conference](#), a volunteer-lead nonprofit organization that builds, maintains, and protects public trails throughout the New York Metro Area. Planning is underway to



Long Pond Ironworks State Park

extend the Trail on the east side of the Hudson River to Connecticut and beyond. Similar progress is being made in Pennsylvania under the leadership of the Appalachian Mountain Club. Resources for visiting and navigating the Highlands Trail, including detailed trail descriptions and maps, are available at www.thehighlandstrail.org.

A trail with a purpose

The Highlands Trail connects people with rolling ridges, deep valleys, winding rivers, and glorious forests. However, the broader significance of the Highlands region is not so well known. In New Jersey alone, the reservoirs and lakes characteristic of the region provide water for over 70% of the state's population. The forests that once played a critical role in defeating the British during the War of Independence are today some of the oldest and most intact in the state, providing important species habitat and carbon sequestration. And now, every year, thousands of people visit the Highlands to recreate and enjoy nature through its marquee trail.

The concept for the Highlands Trail is a connected path linking public open spaces and parks across the region. This is achieved by co-aligning the Trail with existing trails in public parks and establishing new trail connections where required. The complex make-up of the Highlands Trail requires strong partnerships between the Trail Conference and state and local agencies. Managing and maintaining such a trail also involves meticulous attention from a cadre of dedicated



Highlands Trail Blaze

volunteers. The overarching objective of the Highlands Trail is to showcase the magnificent natural features of the region and provide visitors with the opportunity to explore and experience it for themselves. For this reason, the Trail does not shy away from an iconic vista such as the epic views from the summits of Wyanokie High Point in Norvin Green State Forest or Storm King Mountain, or the picturesque settings of the Musconetcong Valley, the Newark Watershed Lands or Sterling Forest State Park.

Beyond a hiking trail, the Highlands Trail offers another lens through which to view conservation in the Highlands. In addition to providing a backbone for the recreational potential of the region, it represents a thread tying together conservation initiatives at the landscape scale that transcend local jurisdictional boundaries. Preserving contiguous land between parks creates corridors of natural open space for wildlife to travel and boosts ecological and climate resiliency.

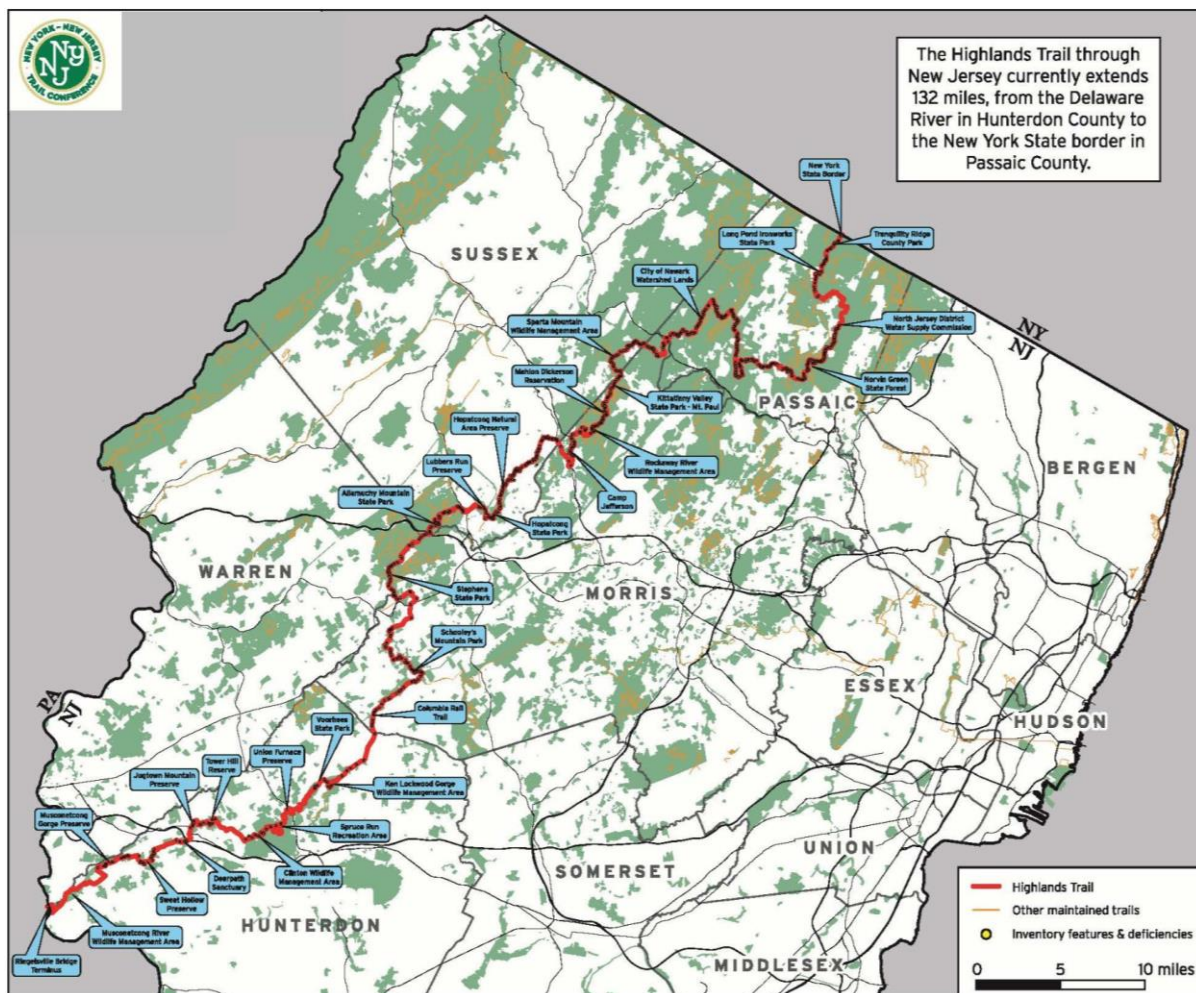
Twenty years ago, in recognition of this, Congress passed the Highlands Conservation Act in support of the important natural resources and cultural value of the Highlands. The Act determined the boundaries of the four-state region and established funding administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to conserve land. In 2022, the Highlands Conservation Act was reauthorized and its objectives expanded to incorporate climate resilience, habitat connectivity, and equitable access to recreation and the outdoors.



Map: Highlands Trail overview of New Jersey

Growing the identity of the Highlands Trail

The Highlands Trail is a decades-long project of the Trail Conference to connect the whole of the Highlands from end-to-end by a footpath. In 2000, the Highlands Trail was recognized as a *Millenium Legacy Trail*, one of only fifty in the United States, earning its place as a visionary project. In 2019, the Trail Conference was awarded a contract by the New Jersey Highlands Council to develop the identity of the Highlands Trail, starting in New Jersey. Over the course of a couple of years staff and volunteers set about documenting the trail in order to produce a detailed maps of the sections and aid visitors.



Map: Highlands Trail Overview of New Jersey

Additionally, signs promoting the Highlands Trail were installed at popular access points. Three sign types were created: turquoise Trailhead Signs, designed to match the colorful diamond blazes that mark the Highlands Trail, and provide information about the Trail; Long-distance Signs indicate the mileage from their location to the Delaware River in one direction and the Hudson in the other; and Directional Signs to help visitors with wayfinding along the trail. The objective of this campaign is to raise public awareness of the trail and the incredible resource in our own backyard.

This year the Trail Conference was awarded new funding to develop a Highlands Trail Town program, building on the success of the signs campaign. This next phase aims to integrate the Highlands Trail with the towns and communities along its route, enabling them to leverage the Trail for economic development opportunities. The program will also focus on improving visitor amenities such as overnight camping and resupply options. At the core of the Trail Conference's mission is to turn the Highlands Trail into a unique and interesting hiking experience grounded in the natural beauty of this spectacular region.

Get involved!

The Trail Conference is always looking for volunteers to adopt and maintain sections of the Highlands Trail, as well as the extensive network of other trails in our beautiful parks and forests. To learn more about this and other training or volunteer opportunities visit www.nynjtc.org.

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