



State of the Kittatinny Report 2023



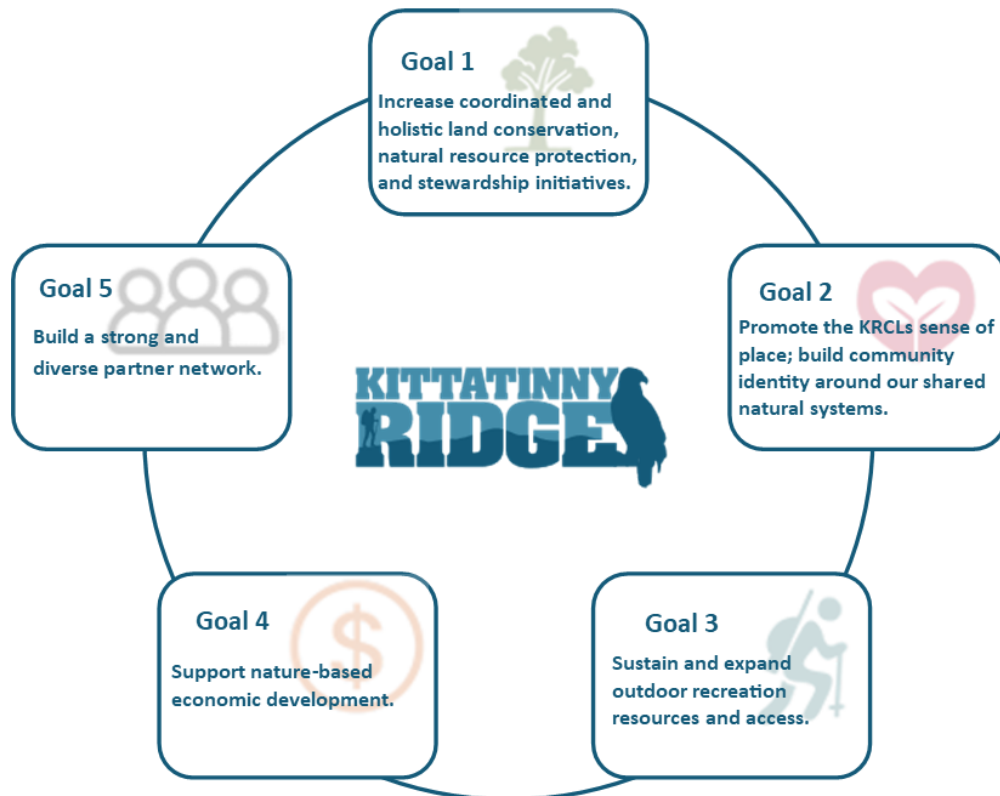
Welcome to the 2023 State of the Kittatinny report! Read on to learn about the newly updated Conservation Plan as well as stories that highlight successes and progress throughout the year across the Ridge.

2023 Highlight: KRCL Releases Five Year Conservation Plan

After a two-year effort, KRCL leadership released the [KRCL Five-Year Conservation Plan](#). Resilience Planning & Design and the KRCL leadership team led outreach and engagement with broad range of participants to both guide the development of the Plan and ensure diverse feedback. This included a virtual summit, four in-person community meetings, and a digital survey. Feedback from these efforts informed the recommendations and eventual implementation of the Plan.

The document includes photos, infographics, and GIS analysis and maps, and will serve as a tool, resource, and framework for strategic, coordinated landscape-scale conservation. The five goals illustrated below emerged from the Plan.

[Learn more!](#)



With the overall goal of conserving and protecting the KRCL’s natural resources, the Plan integrates ecological connectivity, outdoor recreation, equity, climate change, governmental action, and economic development into its guiding framework.

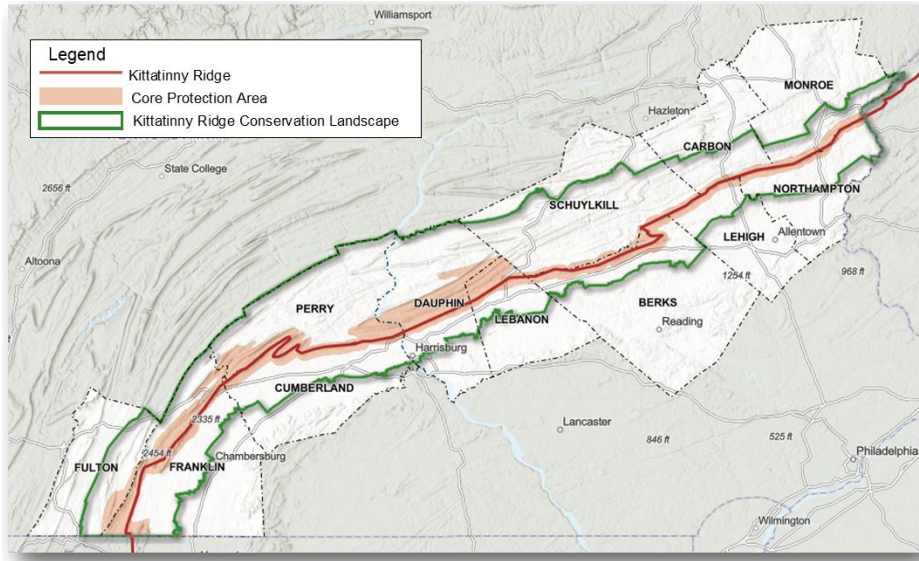
Goal #1 - Conserve Land

Effective land preservation efforts over large areas, such as the Kittatinny Core Protection Area (shaded below), are best achieved with focused, synchronized effort. This Core area is prioritized for protection due to its climate-resiliency that

sustains biodiversity and ecological functions under a changing climate.

Since 2015, [The Nature Conservancy](#) (TNC) has been the primary partner for coordinating and tracking land preservation along the KR Core area in collaboration with Ridge partners and under their Land Partnership Program (LPP).

Exploring [The Nature Conservancy's Resilient Land Mapping Tool](#) reveals that the Kittatinny figures prominently in several categories of resilience and connectedness. For a quick review of this tool, [click here](#).

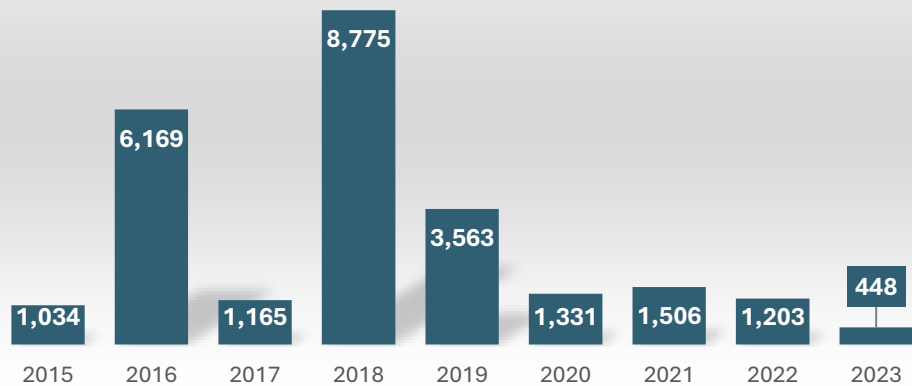


In 2023:

[The Nature Conservancy](#) added 78 acres to Cherry Valley National Wildlife Refuge in Monroe County.

Berks Nature protected [131 acres](#) in Schuylkill County that abuts State Game Lands 110 and another conservation easement held by Berks Nature, which adds contiguous acreage to those preserved lands.

Kittatinny Ridge Acres Conserved By Year 2015-2023



Habitat Enhancement Along the Ridge

Audubon continues to partner with The Nature Conservancy (TNC) to advance migratory stopover habitat projects at Cove Mountain. In 2023, the Hamer Woodlands at Cove Mountain's habitat expanded with an additional **four-acre patch** that received direct seeding of fruit-bearing species. This new migratory stopover site is a short walk from the first habitat site, allowing hikers to observe a variety of management scenarios and forest habitat types. These sites provide the fuel that birds need to migrate and reduce the loss of birds that rely on Eastern Forests. These sites also support a more diverse breeding bird community relative to the surrounding forest.

Dr. Julian Avery of Penn State University is conducting surveys, which have indicated a higher migrant diversity in the project sites relative to unimproved locations within the preserve. [To learn more](#).

Goal #2 – Build Community Identity around Shared Natural Systems

Schuylkill River Trail's "Auburn Bridge" Opens

The Schuylkill River Trail's (SRTs) "Auburn Gap" is now closed with the opening of the Auburn Bridge in Schuylkill County. The newly rehabilitated bridge creates a 9.5-mile trail segment that connects Berks and Schuylkill Counties, including the towns of Auburn, Hamburg, and Port Clinton.

The bridge's opening enhances recreational access for cyclists and walkers and strengthens regional connectivity and boosts local economies. Trail users can start at the Auburn Trailhead for a short roundtrip or opt for a longer journey from the Kernsville Dam Recreation Area Trailhead. [Read more!](#)



Courtesy <https://schuylkillriver.org/the-auburn-bridge/>

Want to go? Approximately 75 miles of paved and crushed stone trail (in sections) are open to the public. Information about trail heads and open sections are available at the [SRT page](#) of the [Schuylkill River Greenways](#) website.

Lehigh Gap Nature Center Celebrates 20 Years - from Superfund to Super Habitat



Seeding by airplane.

Courtesy Lehigh Gap Nature Center

Lehigh Gap Nature Center (LGNC) celebrated its 20th anniversary, marking the remarkable transformation from toxic Superfund site to thriving ecological refuge. Once rendered barren and contaminated by nearly a century of zinc smelting, the 756-acre area underwent restoration in the 1990s via ariel seeding and hands-on planting of native grasses, wildflowers, and trees. It now supports endangered species and welcomes thousands of visitors annually. As the only nature center in the U.S. located on a Superfund site, LGNC symbolizes environmental resilience. The celebration honored the individuals and organizations that contributed to its success, and featured tours, and reflections of the center's inspiring journey.

Want to go? LGNC has ample opportunities to get involved with classes, camps, and conservation. Visit their [website](#).

Goal #3 – Sustain and Expand Outdoor Recreation Resources and Access

Fort Hunter Playground Improves Accessibility

Dauphin County's [Fort Hunter Park](#) began planning for much-needed improvements to increase accessibility to the existing 20-year old playground, thanks to funding from The Giant Company and the Friends of Fort Hunter. Plans for the playground include ramped equipment, rubberized surface, concrete paths, and upgraded restrooms to make it easier for people using wheelchairs or other mobility devices. Groundbreaking is expected in Fall 2024. [Visit here and here.](#)

Chutes and Ladders at Reservoir Park

[Chutes & Ladders](#) comes alive at Reservoir Park's unique new playground. Harrisburg has a new neighborhood hotspot!



Chutes & Ladders Playground
Courtesy Pennlive.com



Courtesy Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

In Color Birding Club at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

[In Color Birding Club](#), based in Philadelphia, helps diverse communities experience PA's natural spaces. In autumn, ICBC caught raptors in flight and fall colors at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. ICBC visits HMS often, enjoying its trails and birding opportunities at all times of the year.

Reporting Out on KRCL Mini-Grants

The [KRCL Mini-Grant Program](#) helps partners protect this important and cherished ridgeline by offering funding for projects through an annual grant cycle. Grants up to \$10,000 are awarded to support projects that help advance the [KRCL's strategic goals](#).

Five mini-grants were awarded totaling \$21,050 with \$23,920 in match for a grand total of \$44,970. This year's projects are outlined below.

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary conducted research on forest raptors to learn their habitat needs and distribution along the Ridge: *Mapping and analyzing key habitat features for Broad-winged Hawks, Black and Turkey Vultures, Red-shouldered Hawks, and Cooper's Hawks.*

In this project, researchers:

- ID'd and mapped active nests from the last 10 years.
- Analyzed land cover types and human disturbances near nest sites for each species.
- Developed descriptions of nesting habitat requirements.
- Created fact sheets for property owners for each species.

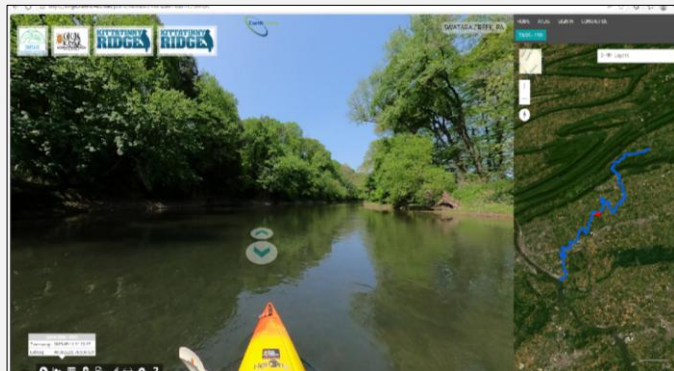
To learn more and for links to fact sheets, [visit here](#).

Keystone Trails Association (KTA) hosted [Kittatinny Rambles](#), a series of six guided day hikes highlighting the diverse trails and conservation efforts across the Kittatinny Ridge. Held in partnership with local trail organizations, the hikes engaged participants in recreation and conservation awareness and trail stewardship.



Photo courtesy KTA-hike.org

Swatara Watershed Association created a GPS-tagged, 360° imagery-based virtual map covering the Swatara Creek from Pine Grove, PA, to the Susquehanna River confluence. The interactive ArcGIS map allows users to explore the water trail in street view format with tagged landmarks such as access points, geological sites, and historical features. **Visit** www.swatarawatershed.org.



Screen capture courtesy of [EarthViews - Swatara Creek, PA](http://EarthViews-SwataraCreek,PA)

Northern Swatara Creek Watershed Association (NSCWA) assisted the Penn State Master Extension Watershed Stewards in a successful *live stake nursery planting* at Sweet Arrow Lake County Park. NSCWA also installed a *fenced enclosure* to prevent deer browse and created a dedication sign to accompany this project. **Visit** Nscwa.homestead.com to learn more.



The **Harrisburg Redevelopment Authority (HRA)** used mini-grant funds to develop a [preliminary design](#) and cost estimate for the *15th & Swatara Street Park Project* in Harrisburg. The project will transform the space into a community park with native plantings, habitat restoration, and public amenities. The Foundation for Enhancing Communities (TFEC) managed the funds, which helped cover initial design expenses. **Visit** redevelophbg.org.

Goal #4 – Support Nature-Based Economic Development

Sustainable Business Highlight

In addition to state and federal agencies, municipalities, land trusts/conservancies and other conservation-based non-profits, (among others), the KRCL partners with and uplifts sustainable businesses that increase the quality of life in the KRCL region. These businesses contribute greatly to our communities by providing outdoor recreation, nutritious food, meaningful jobs, and rich cultural experiences. We value our sustainable business partners and the positive impact they have across the region.

For this issue, we celebrate **Spiral Path Farm**, whose mission it is to build the fertility of their soils and health of their farm and surrounding woodlands. Located on 300 acres in western Perry County, Spiral Path Farm offers Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), which involves customers selecting and purchasing a share size upfront, then picking up weekly boxes full of organic, in-season, freshly-picked produce at one of 33 pick-up locations in PA and MD. CSA members can choose to receive produce from April to December, or opt for a shorter, summer season. Don't know what to do with eggplant? The weekly box also includes a newsletter with member-tested recipes.

Spiral Path has an inspiring story worth exploring, from its beginning in 1977 with Mike and Terra Brownback, their growing family and feeder pigs, to USDA Certified Organic in 1994 and the next generation of Brownbacks operating a well-orchestrated, thriving business that promises generational and ecological sustainability. You'll find Brownbacks in the community as well as the field, advocating for healthy soils and sustainable farming practices.



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Nature is Serious Business – What’s New with Return on Environment (ROE) Studies

The [Berks County Return on Environment Study](#) illustrates how open space is greatly contributing to the health of the local economy, as well as to a lower cost of living and improved quality of life for citizens.



Courtesy https://kittatinnyridge.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/KIT_ROE_berks_factsheet_2_WEB.pdf

For more about ROEs, including methodology and references, **visit** kittatinnyridge.org and select Explore.

To learn more, visit:

- Berks Nature [ROE StoryMap Collection](#)
- Berks County [ROE Video Nature’s Value](#)
- Berks County [ROE Factsheet](#)
- [Berks Nature ROE Report and Planning Tools](#)
(Includes Conservation Planning Tools factsheets, and ROE Findings & Conservation Selector Apps)
- Berks Nature’s [ROE Interactive Map](#)

By understanding nature’s financial value, decision-makers are better equipped to balance protecting natural resources and supporting smart economic growth. Additionally, there is an increasing demand for outdoor recreation in the county, which is larger than the business capacity to meet it.

Goal #5 – Build a Strong and Diverse Partner Network

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Coordinates Hawk Counting Network

For the first time, six historical hawk count sites along the Kittatinny Ridge were staffed with paid counters from September 1 to November 30 in a coordinated effort, thanks to a grant from PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. Staff and volunteers collaborated to tally the migrants by date and weather, align educational materials for visitors, and track visitation numbers.

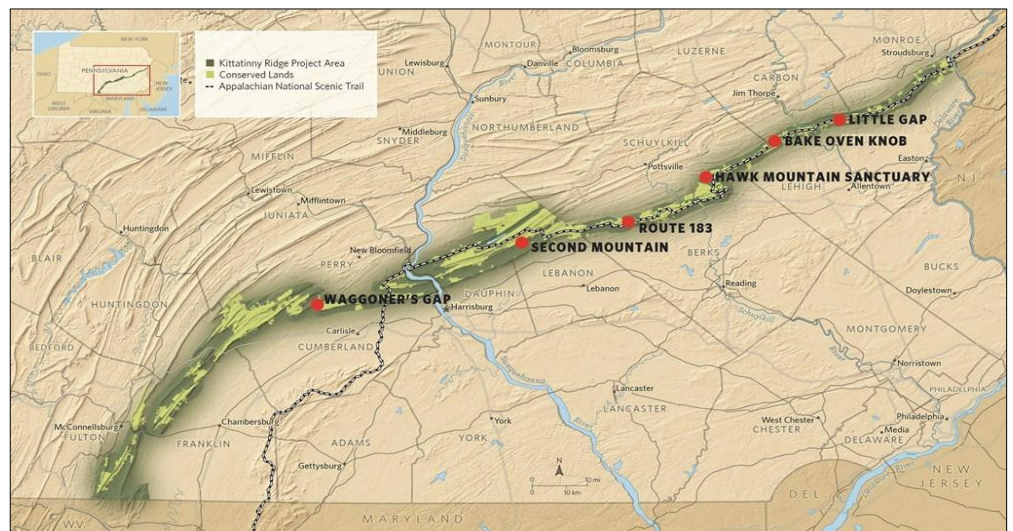
While a dozen or so sites along the Ridge Corridor have, over the past decades, been occasionally manned with volunteer counters, some of the more remote sites may only have sporadic data over time. Only a few of these Ridge-top sites have had consistent and dedicated counters over time. This project consolidates efforts, provides resources for staff, volunteers, and visitors, standardizes data collection, and adds valuable data to our knowledge and understanding of these amazing birds and their migration patterns along the Ridge. **[Read more about this project here!](#)**

Visit HawkCount.org for site data, directions, access, and parking information.

Also visit: [Hawk Mountain Sanctuary](#), [Bake Oven Knob](#), [Second Mountain Hawkwatch](#), [Pa Game Commission Raptor Migration Lookouts](#).

Learn more on Cornell Lab’s [eBird](#), [PA Society of Ornithology](#), and [Raptorpedia](#).

For an expanded version of this article, **visit here.**



Map courtesy Hawk Mountain Sanctuary