



## Interpretive Guides Deliver Insight and Context to New Visitors

*October 2020, Laura M. Miller*

Anyone who lives locally or frequents Mohonk Preserve has been sure to notice the huge influx of visitors since the Preserve reopened on May 20. People looking to escape the confines of their homes after months in isolation sought outdoor recreation in record numbers during the spring and summer months. Many visitors are from in and around New York City – and many of them are first time visitors to Mohonk Preserve.

Those fortunate enough to stop in to the Mohonk Preserve Visitors Center are greeted by a friendly team of Interpretative Guides, led by Volunteer Coordinator **Kenneth Pawson**, in his second year in this role. There is some overlap in the responsibilities of Trailhead Ambassadors and Interpretive Guides; however, Ambassadors are out at the trailheads, whereas Interpretive Guides are stationed solely within the Visitor Center. The Trailhead Ambassadors take on more directional roles, while the Interpretive Guides aim to give visitors a sense of context to their surroundings by providing detailed information on specific hikes and what one might encounter in the way of geography, plant- and wildlife.

The number one question Guides get asked is about the probability of meeting up with a bear. This question may be fueled by the taxidermy bear cub on display in the Visitors Center, amidst the topographical maps and exhibits on local flora and fauna. It's a great teaching moment to explain the importance of not feeding the local wildlife, and visitors are ultimately relieved to hear that encountering a bear is extremely unlikely.

The Interpretive Guide group officially started at the Visitor Center in 2003. Mohonk Preserve currently has 17 Interpretive Guides and is always looking for more volunteers, especially with the recent increase in visitation. Pawson hopes to train the Preserve's next group of Guides in Spring 2021. Training is typically 3-4 hours – then the new guides “shadow” a more experienced guide, to get a better sense of the role and responsibilities. Volunteers are asked to commit to one four-hour shift a month.

While the Interpretive Guides all have various personal and professional backgrounds, they all have one thing in common – a passion for hiking at Mohonk Preserve and a personal knowledge of the trail system. “It's one thing to hand someone a map,” says Pawson, “but it's another thing to have personal knowledge of the trails and to be able to let visitors know what they can expect to see.” It's also helpful for Interpretive Guides to have knowledge of the Mohonk Mountain House and Minnewaska State Park Preserve lands, as the trails and carriage roads are all interconnected.

Another important quality for an Interpretive Guide is the ability to relate to people and communicate courteously, clearly and efficiently. Second-year Interpretive Guide **Lindsay Morgan** enjoys the challenge of matching visitors with the appropriate hike for their experience and skill level. “People often overestimate their skills,” says Morgan. They might show up late in the day or bring along a young child and hope to take on a particularly long or challenging trail. She also reminds visitors about the importance of adequate hydration. “All I can do is try to guide them and hope they make the right choice,” she says. Morgan and her husband spent many years hiking the trail system before becoming volunteers. They also volunteer for the Hudson Valley Rail Trail Association.

Says Pawson, “I've done a lot of volunteer activities here at Mohonk Preserve, but being an Interpretive Guide is probably the most fun and enjoyable assignment I've done here. I fell in love with it.” **Think you would make a great Interpretive Guide?** [Click here](#) to learn more about the role or contact **Andy Reynolds**, Volunteer Programs Manager, at [areynolds@mohonkpreserve.org](mailto:areynolds@mohonkpreserve.org) or 845-255-0919, ext. 1269 for more information.