

Quarterly Newsletter of the Lamont Ecosystem Impacts & Stewardship Committee  
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## LAMONT CREATURE FEATURE

The American five-lined skink, *Plestiodon fasciatus*, is a small lizard native to the Eastern United States and Canada and one of only 3 species of lizards native to New York State. The Lamont campus is home to this skink, and they can be found basking on the Geoscience/NCL deck, among other sun-soaked locations.

Five-lined skinks are the most common of the native NY lizards. The cobalt blue tail means the skink is a juvenile.



Photo credit:  
 Linda Pistolesi

## THE LIVING DEAD:

### The importance of deadwood to wildlife

Deadwood is a tree, or part of a tree, that has died and is in a stage of decomposition. Deadwood is an important part of a healthy ecosystem and provides a suite of **ecological services that humans and other organisms rely on for survival:**

- Nutrient recycling
- Carbon sequestration and microclimate regulation
- Soil stability and erosion control
- Macro- and micro-habitats for birds, salamanders, insects

Unfortunately, deadwood is often removed. In parks, public woodlands, and backyards, deadwood is considered messy, useless, or dangerous. Consider leaving piles of sticks and branches as "[habitat piles.](#)" When dead trees pose no threat, leave them to stand.

Humans and wildlife cannot thrive in a sterile landscape.



A dead apple tree near Lamont Hall. Tree swallows raise their young in its cavities.

Photo credit:  
 Sheean Haley

## JOHN TORREY: A GROUND-BREAKING "LAMONTER" YOU'VE LIKELY NEVER HEARD OF

John Torrey (1796-1873) was a renowned taxonomic botanist and, one could argue, **the first famous scientist of Lamont!** Formally trained in medicine and chemistry, Torrey held professorship posts at the Columbia Medical School (then the College of Physicians and Surgeons), Princeton, West Point, and NYU teaching mineralogy, geology, chemistry, and botany. He was a founder and president of the Lyceum of Natural History (now the NY Academy of Science), a member of the American Philosophical Society, and an elected foreign member of the Linnean Society of London. But, Torrey's prominence and reputation came from his investigation and identification of plants. He jointly published "A flora of North America" with botanist Asa Gray. Torrey became the State Botanist for the New York Natural History Survey in 1836, which required him to prepare a comprehensive document of the State's flora. Published in 1843, "A flora of the state of New York" is still regarded as a monumental masterpiece (NY Botanical Garden Archives).

### What does this have to do with Lamont?

John Torrey had a summer home and small parcel of land on the Palisades Cliff. And, in a serendipitous twist, "In 1928 Thomas Lamont purchased 100 acres, including Torrey's former property atop the Palisades above Sneden's Landing. He gave it the name of "Torrey's Cliff." In 1950 the Lamont family deeded the estate to Columbia University as the site of the Lamont Geological Observatory."<sup>1</sup> **And here we are in 2026, still discovering like John Torrey!**

<sup>1</sup>Excerpt from: Robbins, C. (1968). John Torrey (1796-1873) His Life and Times. Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club, [doi.org/10.2307/2483657](https://doi.org/10.2307/2483657)



Photo credit: Wikipedia

