Jakes Branch A Destination for Discovery, Play, & Recreation

Discovery Play Trail Filled With Surprises, Learning in Six Engaging Vignettes

By: Victoria Ford

The 400-acre Jakes Branch County Park, off of Double Trouble Road in Beachwood, is home to the Discovery Play Trail, where little and big kids, from new walkers to experienced climbers, can experience play, physical activity, education and socialization.



Children Enjoying Playground.
Photo Credit: Tom Spader

County Park Supervisor Michelle Urban, who brought the Play Trail concept to the park after learning about it at a parks and recreation conference in 2012 and being inspired by the possibilities, provided a guided tour to a family of four who visited the Play Trail on a recent spring day. Mom, Dad, an energetic middle-schooler and his toddler sister all found ways to embrace the wonder and fun of the experience.

But first, a little history about the park itself.

Known as "The Gateway to the Pines," the park and its nature center opened in 2009 as the first in the county to offer both active and passive recreation at a single location. (Active recreation refers to a structured individual or team activity that requires the use of special facilities, courses, fields, or equipment; passive recreation refers to leisure activities such as walking or bird watching that do not require prepared facilities like sports fields or pavilions.)

Jakes Branch takes its name from a Toms River tributary called Jakes Branch, shortened from Jacobs Branch, whose namesake was Jacob Jacobs, a colonial settler who built a saw mill in 1761. That tributary runs along the park's northern property boundary and flows into the river upon whose banks the area's earliest known human inhabitants, the Lenni Lenape (pronounced le-NYE le-NAH-pay), once made their home.

In 1914, the New York Tribune ran a promotion where every new subscriber also received a plot of land in Beachwood. The Tribune gave the unsold land to Beachwood Borough in 1917; the Garden State Parkway, constructed in the '50s, split the area off from the rest of the town; and Ocean County bought it from the borough in 2000. It was originally planned to become the county's third public golf course, but that idea was thwarted by the endangered pine snake. In order to protect the sensitive ecology of the park, only about 10% of the total acreage was developed.

As for the Discovery Play Trail, the educational and recreational trail is a half-mile loop, marked with purple blazes, that winds through the Pines with six installations or "play pockets" of environmentally-themed play equipment. They're called

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Child Explores.
Photo Credit: Tom Spader

"play pockets" because they're tucked into the trees and around the bends for kids to discover along the way. Each play area is a cohesive, interactive vignette that integrates movement, imagination, and learning via interpretive signage and fun facts and information about the items in the scene and the flora and fauna native to the area.

The first of its kind in the state, the trail was created through partnerships with Robert Wood Johnson, Barn-abas, and Community Medical Center hospital systems; the National Recreation and Park Association; and CBS EcoMedia Inc. It opened in 2016. The trail was cut into an existing wooded area specifically for the purpose of the Play Trail installations, so Urban and the crew were able to map it out exactly how they wanted it to be. The twists and turns are an essential part of the fun.

Upon its grand opening, the late Ocean County Freeholder John C. Bartlett, Jr. called it "an exciting addition we are proud to feature in this regional park."

Play Trails, by a company called GameTime, is a concept that encourages parent-child interaction on and between the play pockets. Everyone benefits from the adventure. Designed to promote exercise, health and wellbeing, exploration and discovery, and environmental education, the trail provides an opportunity for children and parents alike to experience and appreciate the rich diversity of the natural surroundings. Ultimately it's meant to instill in its users the principle of environmental stewardship that will have a positive impact for generations.

Urban considers the Play Trail a highlight in her career with the parks system. She wants to make sure that Jason Hoger of the Parks Department receives credit for his contributions to the trail.



Child in Fresh Air and Sunshine.
Photo Credit: Tom Spader

At Jakes Branch, the first stop on the journey is "Ants: Cooperative Colonies," where kids can ride a big ant and tunnel through its habitat. Next is the pollinator pocket, starring bees and butterflies, where little ones can explore the honeycomb, crawl through the caterpillar tube and spin in a chrysalis. Then there's the giant spider and its inviting web to climb on; then pond life, complete with dragonfly seesaw and turtle spinner; then trees, "nature's air

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filter," with a log to traverse, a balance beam and swings; and leaves, "nature's paint box," with climbable leaves arranged in a vinelike ladder to reach new heights.

Urban said plans are currently in place to expand the Play Trail to include a new "free play" area filled with logs, sticks and sand to engage young imaginations. Partially complete is a new ropes course attraction that will eventually link up with a different part of the trail so little "monkeys" can amble through the trees from point A to point B. New equipment is expensive, so it's added piecemeal as funding becomes available, she said.

Robert Lassonde, 10, said his favorite parts of the trail were the spider web and the ropes course.

"I really liked it," he said. Overall he thought it was well designed, exciting to play on and educational. He's looking forward to visiting again when the new equipment is installed. As for Baby Violet, her appreciation took the form of a nice long nap in the car on the way home.

Benches located throughout the trail were made by a local Eagle Scout named Matthew Orlando. Two trellises at entry points within the park were also made by volunteers.

In total, the park has about 10 miles of trail, for bicyclists, runners, hikers and strollers. Jakes Branch and parks in general have seen a dramatic increase in usership in the last year, Urban explained, since the pandemic eliminated many other forms of recreation.

At the present time, the park is open for passive recreation only. The park closes at 8 p.m. nightly.

Even on days when the weather isn't conducive outdoor activity, the Jakes Branch Nature Center highlights the beauty, history and natural surroundings of the Pine Barrens through informational exhibits, live animals and environmental programs. The center has public restrooms, and an observation deck on top of the center (five stories up!) reveals breathtaking views of the surrounding Pine Barrens forest.

The quarterly Parks and Recreation Program Guide/Newsletter outlines the nature center's programs, some free of charge and some for a nominal fee, available for school groups, scouts, clubs, churches and civic organizations located within Ocean County. Arrangements can be made in advance by contacting the nature center.

Meanwhile families and friends can picnic (facilities can be reserved for up to 75 people, at least three weeks in advance), play sports and games, play on the playground or hike and bike the other nature trails. The park has cross-country skiing, an open play field, fields for softball, baseball, and multi-use; tennis, pickleball and basketball courts.

For pavilion reservation and rules, call 732-506-9090.



Children Climb and Discover.
Photo Credit: Tom Spader