

# A Jewel of Ocean County Parks Gets An Update

By: Pat Johnson

**W**ells Mills County Park is a jewel in the Ocean County parks system with over 23 miles of marked hiking trails, boating, and fishing access on a lovely lake, a children's playground, picnic area, and canoe rentals. It also has a nature center that is currently undergoing renovation. The building was closed to the public last winter as some structural issues had been discovered, said park supervisor and chief naturalist German Georgieff from his office in an on-site trailer.



Updates underway at Wells Mills County Park.  
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson

The park itself has remained open to hikers, birdwatchers, mountain bicyclists, and families looking for an outdoor adventure—in fact, since the COVID 19 lockdown, the park has seen a resurgence of use and welcomed many new visitors. “For a short time, the parks were closed because of the lockdown but then it was decided that outdoor activities were safe,” said Georgieff. “The first weekend we opened, there weren’t enough parking spaces as people wanted to get over their immediate dose of cabin fever. We had our existing outdoor enthusiasts plus those who weren’t that experienced and we had a slight increase in littering because of the numbers of people—but generally it was and is a good thing.”

The nature center is a beautiful wood building overlooking the Wells Mills Lake. Its three stories are being renovated for new displays and new uses, said Georgieff. In the past, programs and lectures were held in a meeting room in the basement—not an ideal setup. To accommodate a new media room, the second floor was enlarged. This meant losing the cathedral-like effect that had been the first floor but the increase in space will benefit the public and the administration. “Since 1991 we have held our power-point lectures, guest programs, and demonstrations at Jakes Branch or Cloverdale (other county parks). Now we will be able to do more here.” Besides a meeting room for “adult” programs there will be more youth-orientated, hands-on displays for kids, said Georgieff. “I know when I’ve taken my kids to places they are tugging at me when I’m reading something in a display so this will give parents and kids a break.”

The first floor will be dedicated to exhibits on early industries in the Pine Barrens. Wells Mills itself got its name from the damming of Oyster Creek and the establishment of two sawmills in the late 1800s—sawmills that cut the plentiful Atlantic white cedar into planks for both shipbuilding and home construction.

Other displays will include iron forges, glassmaking, agriculture, and charcoal making.

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Woodworker Dave Plano installing a new display at Wells Mills County Park  
Photo credit: Ocean County Parks & Recreation Department



“It’s estimated that the average iron works required 10,000 acres of forest a year just for charcoal,” said Georgieff. “Charcoal burns hotter and more efficiently than firewood,” he explained. “So they cut down a lot of forest—it was more barren than it is today!”

There will also be rotating, seasonal exhibits on the natural world happening right outside the doors. For instance in the late fall, webworms and galls formed in some of the trees and so a display on the caterpillars and wasps that make them will answer some questions. “People see these all the time and know they exist but not what made them,” he said. “In the spring we can have a display on Pine Barrens orchids and in the late summer carnivorous plants.”

There will be a new wheel-chair lift. The third floor was always an observation deck

but now the cupola will include a facsimile of a working fire tower. “We’ll have a display on fire ecology, fire prevention, and fire fighting. The recreation of a fire tower will include a plane table alidade that fire spotters use to pinpoint the source of smoke or fire and triangulate it on a map.”

The wrap-around porch on the building was always a shady retreat for tired hikers. Bird feeders were strategically added to the entrance and the porch served as a bird-watching platform. “Bird-viewing will be moved to the north side of the building with bird feeders and gardens with native plants. This will serve as a teaching experience with different types of bird feeders and plants that attract pollinators.”

“The Wells Mills staff is unique in that a majority of our programs are outside of the park—canoe trips and van trips but we use the park as our base of operations.” Ocean County Parks and Recreation offers hikes and trips outside of the county, as well. “We have a very active hiking program, we’ve been to every county in the state and to adjacent states, as well - as long as we can get back in a reasonable time. That’s been a great part of my job.”

The pandemic has caused some supply holdups in the reconstruction of the nature center but the county expects the center to be open in September. There will be a soft opening after Labor Day and then a grand opening at the Pinelands Jamboree on Saturday, October 8th, 10 AM - 4:30 PM. For more information call (609) 971-3085 or [visit www.oceancountyparks.org](http://www.oceancountyparks.org).



The lake at Wells Mills County Park  
Photo Credit: Pat Johnson