

The Devil makes them visit the bog

Creature of lore promotes Pinelands

BY ELEANOR BARRETT
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

They go looking for the Jersey Devil but end up finding Mother Nature.

The bat-winged creature who is a star of South Jersey lore is reputed to haunt and howl through the 1 million acres of forests and bogs of the Pine Barrens, so environmentalists who want to introduce people to the natural wonders of the area have come up with a new gimmick: Jersey Devil hunts.

"We want people to experience (the Pines) so they will be inspired to be a part of the conservation effort," said Russell Juelg, who runs about a dozen Jersey Devil hunts per year for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance, based in Pemberton.

One recent hunt was led by naturalist Hazel England of the Somerset County Environmental Education Center in Basking Ridge. Her group hiked four miles through Whitesbog Village, a former cranberry and blueberry farm that is now part of the 3,000-acre Lebanon State Forest near Browns Mills.

England came armed with a Jersey Devil book and lots of stories about the cloven-hooved creature that is said to have the head of a horse and preys on livestock.

But she spent most of the four-hour nighttime hike talking about the flora and fauna of the Pine Barrens — with topics ranging from wild mushrooms to ant colonies.

"The goal is to really acquaint people with the Pine Barrens," said England. "It's something close by that offers great hiking, lots of different plants and animals and lots of natural and cultural history."

While working for the Whitesbog Preservation Trust, England found that talking about the Devil was an easy way to start people talking about the environment.

And while she can tell a pretty good story about the Devil — how it was born in 1735 near Estelville, the cursed 13th child of one Madame Leeds — the people who go on her hike get a pretty good crash course in nature. A typical England-led hike goes through abandoned blueberry fields and cranberry bogs, where great blue herons and snowy-white egrets nest.

"If you like nature, this is the place to be," said Rita Lukas, a school bus driver who lives in Whitesbog with her retired police officer husband, Matt. "You can ride back into the bogs, see the foxes and, in winter, the tundra swans."

Karen Stober of Warren, a frequent Jersey Devil hunter, says she sometimes sees evidence of the Devil, too.

"I've seen tracks, strange shadows, prints of cloven hooves in the [See DEVIL, Page 14]



PHOTOS BY MATT RAINEY/THE STAR-LEDGER

Pine Barrens explorer Karen Stober bends for a closer look at Union Pond, usually submerged but now nearly dry because of the drought.



Naturalist Hazel England recently led a group through Whitesbog Village, a former cranberry and blueberry farm.

DEVIL

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A creature of lore promotes 'Pineys'

sand," she said.

Other groups who bring Jersey Devil hunters to the Pine Barrens

include the Great Pine Barrens Life and Lore Expedition Company, the Whitesbog Preservation Trust and the folks at Wells Mills County Park.

Juelg, who has been leading hunts for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance for six years, said his three-hour program in Wharton State Forest includes a campfire, complete with roasting hot dogs

and the singing of "Piney" songs — including one about the Devil.

But his big thrill is knowing he is introducing people to a rare and wild place that's less than a two-hour drive for most Jerseyans.

"I really think the main value of the program is getting people into a first-hand experience of the Pine Barren's ecosystem. It's an oblique way to introduce people to the ecology," he said.