

Touring Pine Barrens by moonlight

A hike into a hidden world

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The moon couldn't be more obliging as my friend Tom and I turn right at Mile Marker 13 off of a very rural Route 530 East in Burlington County. We drive for a few minutes between rows of evergreens, cross a bumpy bridge, and end up in front of the general store in the Historic Village of Whitesbog.

Moments later we're wrapped in winter jackets and heading out with a dozen other people on a moonlight hike sponsored by Whitesbog Preservation Trust. We follow a sandy path past cranberry bogs, ponds, and evergreens in the heart of the Pine Barrens. Although I'm very tempted to look up at the awesome night sky, I concentrate on what's underfoot.

There's a "no flashlights" rule on these walks, but our guides shine lights sporadically to point out large puddles on the trail. We maintain a steady pace, and I can feel pine needles, twigs, and roots underfoot. It's both intimidating and exciting to put one foot in front of the other with only the moon and the stars to shed light on the terrain.

"These walks give people a great opportunity to experience the woods at night. Many people are afraid to do that on their own," says Bill Bolger, the histo-

Activity of the week

WALKING

rian for the village and the cranberry plantation surrounding it. Bolger is leading this hike, a monthly adventure.

We pause for a moment in front of Suningive, a historic house formerly owned by Elizabeth White, granddaughter of the farm's original owner. The preservation society is fiercely proud of this woman, noted for being the first horticulturist in the country to successfully cultivate blueberries commercially.

Immediately past White's house we enter a tunnel of trees, and the canopy creates pitch blackness. This is where locals say the Jersey Devil lives. When we come out the other side, we're dazzled at the reflection of the moon dancing on a large pond. I jump when gunfire suddenly breaks the silence. It's coming from Fort Dix, just two miles away.

As we walk, members of the trust are eager to talk about the history of the farm. What started as a 108-acre cranberry plantation owned by Col. James A. Fenwick in 1857 expanded to

WHAT: Moonlight hikes.

WHEN: 7 p.m. Jan. 18, Feb. 15, and March 15. Pre-registration required.

WHERE: Whitesbog Village, Lebanon State Forest, Pemberton Township. (609) 893-4646; www.whitesbog.org.

HOW MUCH: \$5 per person and \$10 per family.

LENGTH: Walks are 1 to 2 or 2 to 5 miles depending on preference of participants. During the winter, walks leave from the front of the village's general store.

WHAT TO WEAR: The trails can be wet and muddy, so wear sturdy hiking boots.

GETTING THERE: Take the New Jersey Turnpike south to Exit 7 to Route 206 south to Route 530 east. Follow to Mile Marker 13. Watch for a sign before the mile marker that reads Whitesbog Road ahead. Make left onto Whitesbog Road to the village's general store. Allow plenty of time to get there, because the rural roads can be confusing at night.

UPCOMING EVENTS: Tundra Swan Tours, 10 a.m. and noon Feb. 2 and 15. Naturalist leads walk to see as many as 400 birds on the ponds. \$5 per person, \$10 per family. If there's ice on the ponds, the swans leave Whitesbog for the shore. Call the day before to make sure the tours are still scheduled.

more than 3,000 acres in 1912. It was then managed by J.J. White, who married the colonel's daughter Mary. Today,

the property is owned by the state and is part of Lebanon State Forest. It's open to the public for hiking, horseback riding, and biking. A portion of the farm is leased to descendants of the White family, who continue to grow cranberries and are members of the Ocean Spray Cooperative.

Rounding a corner, we come to a concrete bridge and can hear water rushing through the irrigation canal underneath. This is the second stop along the two-mile hike, providing a wonderful opportunity to gaze up at the spectacular night sky and absorb the intense beauty of the moonlight on the pine trees. Although we can't see it in the dark, we learn the bogs are surrounded by a series of canals, flume gates (chutes), and holding ponds. At this time of the year, the vines are covered by water to protect them from the frost. They lay dormant until the spring, when the plants will again flourish. The cranberry harvest in October attracts thousands of visitors to Whitesbog.

"People are fascinated to see how the berries are grown and picked," says Stephan Thompson, executive director of the trust.

In the 1890s, Italian immigrants who lived in Philadelphia traveled by train to harvest the cranberries. They stayed in the seasonal towns of Rome and Florence. (These settlements

have since been demolished.) In the village store there's a photo exhibit of the farm workers.

From the canal, we take a narrow path that snakes its way between rows of trees leading to Otter Pond. There we hope to see some wildlife, maybe even the tundra swans who arrive around mid-November each year to winter on the farm. The property is also home to deer, foxes, frogs, otters, beavers, and a wide selection of birds.

Some locals also claim to have seen a mysterious woman in white hanging around the general store in the village. Legend has it that it's the ghost of Elizabeth White.

There aren't any swans on Otter Pond, or otters either for that matter, so we continue walking to a wide sandy patch of ground. It's an airstrip once used by planes that flew over the bogs to spray the berries. Today, spraying is done by a sprinkler system, and the only planes to use the strip are those needed to fight large fires in the area.

After about two hours, the walk ends with a stroll along a village street. Back in the general store, some of the hikers sip cocoa while others browse the exhibits.

As we pull out of the village, Tom points to the spot where the woman in white is said to appear. I slow down and look out into the darkness. Seeing her would have been a perfect ending to the evening — I think.