

# A real place of myth, magic

## PINE BARRENS from A1

ceiling of his studio at Second and Arch Streets.

The projection casts cranberry tones and shades of sand on the studio. When he cranks the speakers, the ambient sounds drown out SEPTA buses below. The patter of snow falling on the pines gives way to the purl of a kayak's paddle in a tea-color stream. A muted trumpet's baleful note lingers. Tiny tree frogs the color of bruised limes call out like a chorus of car alarms in the middle of nowhere.

### Quonk. Quonk. Quonk.

The Pinelands National Preserve sits square in the belly of America's most densely populated state. The 1.1 million acres of pine, cedar, swamp, and farmland have many stakeholders, their concerns as varied as the flowers that grow there.

Conservationists believe business interests, politicians eager to loosen regulations, and unchecked recreational use have put the Pinelands at its greatest risk in decades.

"This is our Yellowstone," said Jeff Tittel, director of the New Jersey Sierra Club. "This is our Yosemite."

Hikers, hunters, Jersey Devil hunters, researchers, off-roaders, and artists venture in, their paths often crossing at different harmonies. A botanist looking for pink lady's slipper might stumble upon a teenager blasting old televisions with buckshot or hear the *braap* of Joe Springer's dirt bike in the distance.

Springer rarely sees a soul.

"There's no busloads of people getting dropped off here," said Springer, trail boss for the Pine Barrens Enduro Riders. "This is a sand road. This isn't Yosemite."

No one can completely agree on anything when it comes to the Pine Barrens.

More people live in the Pinelands than in the entire state of Wyoming, and those with roots in the sandy soil wear the title "Piney" with pride. Some are third- and fourth-generation cranberry and blueberry farmers, but there are also craftsmen and carvers, masters of things almost forgotten such as basket-weaving.

Some people live there just to be left alone.

"People who aren't from the pines ... they really fall in love with the place," basket-weaver Steve Carty says in Kessler's film. "It really grows on them."

On a blustery day in March, Kessler, musician Gretchen Lohse, and illustrator Allen Crawford trekked into a 10,000-acre, long-fallow cranberry farm in Woodland Township, Burlington County, hunting for footage.

Lohse, a singer-songwriter from Kensington, is part of the Ruins of Friendship, the orchestra that's been providing the ghostly sound track for *The Pine Barrens* and performing live at Kessler's screenings.

"It's a totally different way of doing music," Lohse said. "I've done music and film projects in the past, and there's something very unique and different about this."

Crawford, 48, defies straight-on description. Though the landscape is the star of Kessler's film, Crawford, an illustrator by trade, plays both interpreter and



Franklin Parker Preserve in Burlington County. David Kessler has spent hundreds of hours filming in the Pinelands. MARK C PSORAS

Kessler let his friends do most of the talking while he veered off-trail, pointing his digital camera at bogs and treetops.

Kessler was born and reared in Union, N.J., south of Newark and farther from the heart of the neighborhood under the Market-Frankford El. Kessler lived there but felt like an "alien," and used his camera to learn about people he saw every day. The series garnered attention in art and film circles and was covered by the *Inquirer*. *Shadow World* landed Kessler on the cover of Philadelphia Weekly.

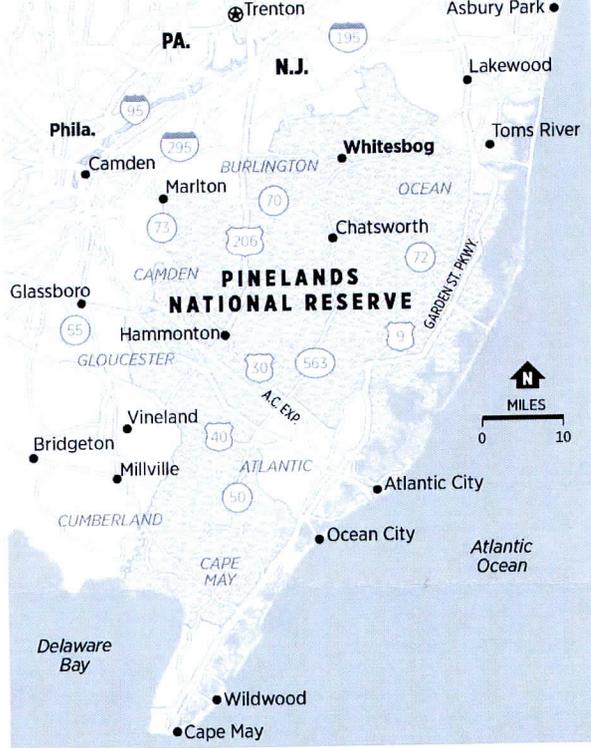
Kessler found a common thread between the Pines and Kensington, the same sense of underlying danger and misconceptions about the people who lived there.

"I had actually never been to the Pine Barrens," he said during the hike. It only took a few trips for the pines to pull him in.

The place also drew John McPhee almost 50 years ago, and his 1968 book, *The Pine Barrens*, is credited with saving the habitat from becoming an airport, paved over like most of New Jersey.

McPhee, who lives and teaches in Princeton, is modest about the book. He has said he came to tell stories, not prevent development. Kessler says he feels the same, saying he never intended to make a documentary that students would watch in biology class.

"It's an art project," Kessler said, trying to pin it down. "It's a



Staff Graphic

Mount Holly resident is the movie's conscience. Like Dr. Seuss' *Lorax*, he speaks for the trees and the pitcher plants, and every creeping thing that sucks blood and leaves a welt out there. That's why he thinks Kessler's film is so important.

"If you don't know what's out here," Crawford said, "you're not going to love it the way I do."

Snippets of NPR segments,

his shirt.

"It's a little stressful," he said, then ran back to his Jeep to grab gear.

Crawford was there in tall boots and a bush hat, leading a group of attendees down a trail, waxing about the pines and mosquitoes. Kessler knelt in the grass by the movie screen, connecting his laptop and cueing up the film. Once the sun was down and the katydids began calling loudly in the trees, Kessler took the stage and introduced *The Pine Barrens*.

The screening, Kessler said, was one of the "last evolutions of this process," but the film still needed color correction and professional audio mixing.

Some wanderlust still lingered, too.

"There is more exploring to do," he conceded.

Kessler also wanted the audience — self-professed Pineys, musicians and artists from the city — to see this unbroken swath of green as something a little more magical. It is more than just the middle of nowhere.

"This land is unique in a lot of ways, but it's also similar to a lot of places that we're losing across America, these kind of islands of wilderness that are slowly being nibbled away along with the culture," he said. "The Pine Barrens is over a million acres, so it's easy to take it for granted that it will always be here, but it almost disappeared 40 years ago and it's a miracle we have it now. We can't take anything for granted."

Then Kessler started the projection and the Ruins of Friendship called up their haunting sounds.

The rumble of dirt bikes and ATVs grew from deep in the woods, and soon a group of riders emerged from the dark. Their tires sent dust drifting past the screen and the riders gassed it down the sand road out of Whitesbog.

Deeper in the woods, rare blue flowers grew where fires swept

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where hosts discuss a controversial plan to run a 22-mile natural gas pipeline through the pines, in the film *Open*,

complete version of *The Pine Barrens* that Kessler had shown publicly, accompanied by a live performance from Lohse and the Ru-

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Crawford, 48, defies straight-on description. Though the landscape is the star of Kessler's film, Crawford, an illustrator by trade, plays both interpreter and poet, a self-trained naturalist with sand-flecked shoes who can identify every plant and flower he passes.

"You guys smell the pine needles cooking," he said early on in the trek. "They're really warming up. You can smell the sap."

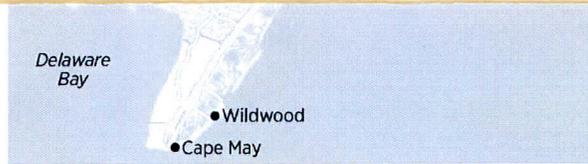
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On Sept. 17, a bluegrass band practiced harmonies at dusk on a patch of sand in Whitesbog Village, Burlington County, while Kessler tried to greet guests and prepare for the screening.

Whitesbog was once New Jersey's biggest cranberry farm, the place where Elizabeth White created the modern-day blueberry business. Soon as many as 350 people would watch the most

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Still, spending hundreds of hours in the Pinelands, talking to farmers and tinkerers and families dug in deep, has affected him, and issues at the heart of the pines development and off-road recreation have made their way into the film.

Then there's Crawford. The

where hosts discuss a controversial plan to run a 22-mile natural gas pipeline through the pines, also turn up in the film. Opponents call the pipeline the biggest threat to the Pinelands since it was deemed a national preserve in 1978. Four former governors oppose the project.

"Everyone wants David to save the Pine Barrens," said Lohse.

complete version of *The Pine Barrens* that Kessler had shown publicly, accompanied by a live performance from Lohse and the Ruins of Friendship.

The air was cool and dry, the moon full and rising. Kessler had been at work since morning, setting up equipment and art installations in the trails and bogs. The sweat had already dried on

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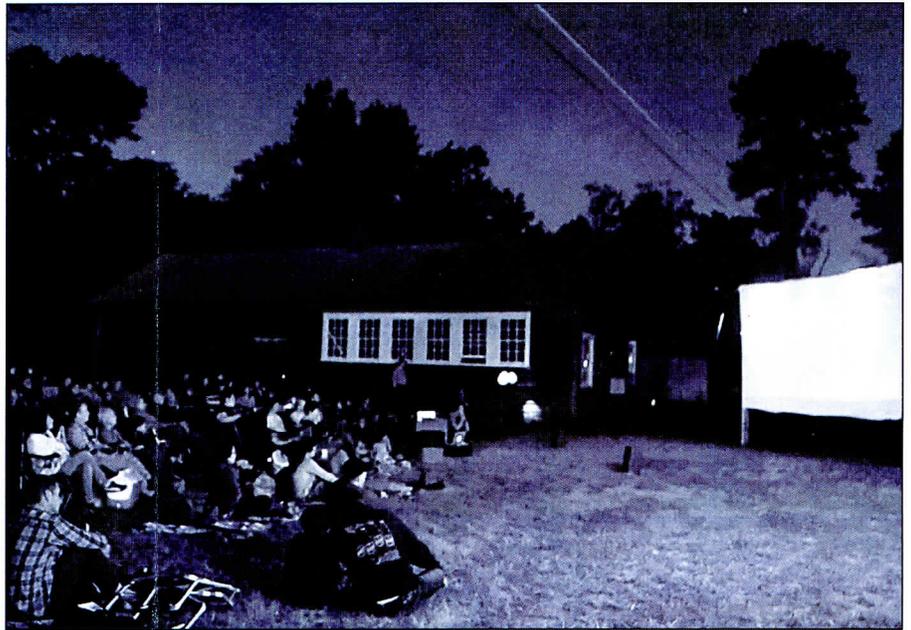
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Deeper in the woods, rare blue flowers grew where fires swept the pine floor clean, and they drew their petals inward for the night, each one a starry sky, and no human eye saw them.

✉ narkj@phillynews.com

☎ 215-854-5916 📱 @jasonmark



**A crowd of more than 200** gathered to watch "The Pine Barrens" at Whitesbog Village in September, accompanied by a live performance from Gretchen Lohse and the Ruins of Friendship. CURT HUDSON

**Kessler speaks** before a screening. The Union, N.J., native previously made a series of videos about Kensington. He had never been to the Pine Barrens but fell under its sway during a few trips there. CURT HUDSON