

The Best Weekend in the Woods

By Kristen Rosenburg

As the sun sinks below the horizon, a group of adults and kids descend upon a tranquil pond, surrounded by trees. A red-winged blackbird's song, "kon-ka-rees," can be heard in the distance, and green frogs' "plunk" at the pond edge. The group eagerly scans the water, looking for signs of movement. I take a quick look as I reach down into my bin, when someone suddenly exclaims, "there's one over by the dam!" I breathe a quick sigh of relief; although I know that everyone might be interested in the skull, fur and chewed twigs I brought along for my presentation, they are really here to see the beavers! This is how it goes almost every year at my Beaver Colony Walk at the annual Allegany Nature Pilgrimage, in which I have had the pleasure of participating 10 times.

As a child, I enjoyed yearly camping trips to Allegany State Park with my family. I remember collecting a wood chip from a beaver-cut tree and learning the "who-cooks-for-you" call of the barred owl at programs led by park staff. It wasn't until much later that I learned about this amazing annual event for nature-lovers.

As a graduate student at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF), I conducted research on the beaver population in Allegany State Park. I was told by park staff that I should suspend my research during the first weekend in June, since there would be a lot of people in the park for a special event. And

they were right. A fellow grad student, my field technician, and I stopped by Camp Allegany to check out the pilgrimage and were surprised by the size of the crowds and the wide variety of nature programs. A few years later, I attended a Buffalo Audubon workshop and met one of the pilgrimage committee members. We spoke about my grad school research in the park, and he invited me to lead the beaver programs that year. I have been hooked on the pilgrimage ever since.

Jen Schlick



Enjoying a hike through a mature forest.

The Allegheny Nature Pilgrimage has been held annually since 1959, always on the weekend after Memorial Day. This year is the 60th pilgrimage, which was initiated by O. Gilbert Burgeson, who was inspired to start a local event after attending the annual Spring Wildflower Pilgrimage held in Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

The pilgrimage has grown from 70 nature lovers who attended the first year, to more than 650 attendees last year. Some key organizations have played a major role in making the pilgrimage possible over the years, including the Audubon Community Nature Center (Jamestown), Buffalo Audubon Society (Buffalo), Presque Isle Audubon Society (Erie), Burroughs Audubon Nature Club (Rochester) and Allegheny State Park. A volunteer committee works hard behind the scenes to organize the logistics before and during the pilgrimage, and volunteers (amateurs and professionals) lead the individual programs.

Tim Baird



Rose-breasted grosbeak

Since the pilgrimage is sponsored by Audubon societies, there are many bird-focused programs, including Birding for Beginners, an All-Day Bird Hike and the popular Birds of Prey presentation, which features live raptors. Many programs are offered annually, so if you can't fit in everything you want to do this year (and that's true for many families), you can always check it out next year.

In addition to all the walks and programs, there are evening tent programs on Friday and Saturday nights where guest speakers discuss natural history topics, and a Saturday chicken BBQ or vegan meal with folk music by Nan Hoffman. This year's speakers include Sharon "The Bird Chick" Stiteler, who

There is truly something for everyone to enjoy at the Allegheny Nature Pilgrimage:

- Are you an early bird? Join the 6:00 AM bird hike or enjoy the bird banding demonstration.
- Creative artist? There is Nature Photography, Watercolor Birds or Nature Greeting Cards.
- Plant lover? Learn about Wild Edibles, Plant Lore or how to identify local ferns on the Fern Walk (one of my favorites).
- Have young kids? Join the Splash Hike, the Nature for Kids by Kids walk or Nature Play Pop-Up activities.
- Creepy crawly critter fan? Come for programs about spiders or the popular Salamander Hike.
- Interested in insects? Don't miss the Butterflies of Allegheny, the Dragonfly & Damselfly Walk or see the incredible variety of nocturnal insects at the Bugs by Nightlight station.
- Night owl? Explore the nightlife in the park on an Owl Prowl or Night Hike.

See www.alleganynaturepilgrimage.com/ for information about registration, programs and lodging. Registration is available online or by mail, and the early bird discount deadline is April 24th. You may also register on-site during the event for either weekend passes or day passes. Participants are responsible for arranging their own lodging (cabins and campsites in the park or nearby hotels); sites in the park book quickly so don't hesitate to make your reservations.

For historic reading about pilgrimages past, see the August 1967 and June 1984 issues of *Conservationist*.

will entertain us with humorous tales of global expeditions in search of birds, and “Paleo Joe” Kchodl, who will bring creatures extinct for millions of years “back to life” through puppet shows and dinosaur fossils.

Saturday night also includes the review of the bird sightings for the weekend, as well as finding out who has traveled the farthest, the youngest and oldest participants, and who has attended the most pilgrimages. Many people who attended the pilgrimage as a child now bring their own families. Lon Myers, a pilgrimage committee member and leader of the Splash Hike and Night Hike, has attended about 55 times, almost every year since he was 2 years old!

Besides the educational nature programs, my favorite part of the Allegheny Nature Pilgrimage is the community of people it draws together. New attendees are welcomed warmly and old friends happily reunite. Participants get to know each other by carpooling to programs in the park. As one new participant said, “I found my people!”

If you are looking for a weekend to get away in the woods and want to find your tribe of fellow nature lovers, join us this year on June 1st, 2nd and 3rd. And look for me by the beaver pond!

Kristen Rosenberg is Program Coordinator at DEC’s Reinstein Woods Environmental Education Center. She enjoys attending the Allegheny Nature Pilgrimage with her husband Chuck (who leads the Owl Prowls) and son Colin, who has already attended 4 pilgrimages by age 3!



A young participant examines a replica of a prehistoric giant beaver skull.

Nick Sly



Eastern milksnake

Jen Schlick



The Nightlight program is very popular.

Tim Baird



The park is a good place for birders.

A Frantic Pilgrimage with Friends and Family

(including kids with endless energy)

By Megan Mills Hoffman

My friends and I are mothers of young children, and as mothers have for generations, we are constantly seeking ways to positively connect our children with the great big wide world. So we decided to check out the Allegany Nature Pilgrimage where the region's most devoted and experienced naturalists, geologists, birders, foragers, artists, and writers are available to lead activities.

It was easy to handpick the topics we were interested in, and those that were most age-appropriate for our families. In one morning, we hunted for butterflies in the meadow, inspected frogs and salamanders in the creek down the hill, climbed logs, talked to birds of prey, watched a baby screech owl from a foot away, and shared lunch with friends under a beautiful blue summer sky.

After lunch, a few families with slightly older children went off to find crawfish in the bigger creek, and those with kids young enough to still be napping, like us, retreated to our quiet places. Cabins are conveniently located close by for nap times, and a picnic lunch and barbeque are available if you don't want to prepare a meal. Accommodations range from heated cabins with electricity, within walking distance to hot showers, to tent sites near a creek that you can wade in.

For dinner one night, we met up at one cabin and had potluck while our kids ran around with each other. Grandparents came with their grandchildren; parents optional. Neighbors invited friends, friends invited neighbors. Friends of friends finally met each other. Dads disappeared looking for firewood. Moms were able to catch up with each other without a million household duties looming. One of the joys for our youngsters

was being able to run around as far and late as they could, before crashing into bunks at night, exhausted, with sticky marshmallow on their dirty fingers after staying up late around campfires.

One evening after dark, we joined the Owl Prowl. The kids fell asleep on our backs as we crept along with the larger group, and remained asleep through the car-to-bed transfers. On our last morning we woke to the most enormous hawk moth resting on our screen door. We spent an hour marveling at his

size and placid calm as he was gently passed from hand to small hand.

As soon as we all returned home, we began sharing favorite pictures and re-living precious moments with each other. One friend shared, "After bath last night, I asked my two-year-old if he was ready for night-night and he yelled, 'NO! OUTSIDE! PLAY! FIRE!'" I think he's ready for next year!" Another friend chimed in, "What a wonderful

weekend! Gorgeous park, good friends, and special memories. We can't wait for next year! My husband has already agreed we need to stay longer next time!"

We all came home with hearts full of sweet memories, the kind that make us proud of our parenting, and excited for the future. We all need, as do our children, as many days like this as we can fit in. Thanks to the generous, knowledgeable, and dedicated pilgrimage professionals and volunteers, we too can introduce our next generation to wildlife, and help them learn to care about nature, each other, and the environment we all share. And importantly, we can have a blast doing it.

Megan Mills Hoffman, writer, mother, and serial social entrepreneur, relishes every opportunity to foster community-sufficient learning.



Rick Miller