

Baldcypress Trees a Big Attraction at TRAP POND

Those who come to see the typically southern trees discover the state park has much more to offer.

BY THERESA GAWLAS MEDOFF

Photos by Theresa Gawles Medoff and Katrina Medoff

DUSK WAS DESCENDING as the 10 of us — eight visitors and our guides, Natalie Miller and Diane Twining set out on a pontoon boat tour of Trap Pond in Laurel. All was silent except for the screeches of the grackles and the croaking of the tree frogs. The large-mouth bass were jumping to catch their supper, and a majestic great blue heron flew across our path. Ahead, in the middle of the pond, we spotted a stand of baldcypress trees, their trunks flared out at the bottom like a full skirt and their “knees” protruding from the water all around. The baldcypress tree, a deciduous conifer that grows in the pond and swampy areas of Trap and nearby Trussum ponds, is a distinctive feature of Trap Pond State Park, for this is the point farthest north where these southern trees flourish naturally.

Many of the baldcypress trees that we spotted at first were on the younger side 75 to 100 years old — but tucked away in a hard-to-reach section of the James Branch Water Trail is the park’s prize



Baldcypress trees growing in the middle of the pond can’t fail to arrest the attention of visitors to Trap Pond State Park.

baldcypress, the 600-year-old Patriarch Tree.

More than 300 years ago, this southwestern region of Delaware was covered in swampland, and cedar and baldcypress trees — treasured for their durability, light weight and resistance to water,

rot and insects — grew in such abundance that a thriving timber industry had begun as early as 1760, according to the Delaware State Parks Cultural Resources Unit. Trap Pond is actually a manmade pond, created in the late 1700s, most likely to power a saw mill. As the trees were cleared the lumber industry began to decline. Looking for new ways to earn a living, settlers began to put in ditches and channels to drain the swampy land so that it could support agriculture.

Luckily for us, Trap Pond remains.

Delaware’s First State Park

Trap Pond State Park had its start as a recreational area back in the 1930s, when the federal government bought up 1,000 acres of

marginal farmland from struggling farmers. The government sent in the Civilian Conservation Corps to remake some of that land into a recreation area, which opened in 1941. The men of the CCC rebuilt the dam and spillway and cleared the pond of trees to make it accessible



Katrina Medoff enjoys kayaking through the still waters of the pond on a peaceful morning at Trap Pond State Park.



In the shadow of a stand of several bald cypress trees, the bright yellow blooms of spatterdock contrast with the deep brown waters of Trap Pond.

for boating, notes park naturalist Will Koth. They also created hiking trails and built pavilions and a park office so that the public could enjoy this natural gem. Some of those early buildings remain in use to this day.

Ten years after the federal recreation area opened, Delaware assumed control of 927 acres of land, and got its first state park. A few years later the 73-acre Trussum Pond site was added to the park.

Today, 90-acre Trap Pond sits amid 4,000 acres of state parkland. Hikers have access to more than 10 miles of trails in the park, some of which are also open to mountain bikes and horses. Visitors can

canoe or kayak some 7.5 miles of water trails through Trap Pond and its three branches, and they can boat on Trussum Pond as well. Visitors also can explore Trap Pond on the rowboats and pedal boats available for rent or take a guided pontoon boat tour.

"Trap Pond State Park has some of the best paddles in the state," says Ray Bivens, operations, maintenance and programming section administrator for Delaware State Parks. "With the baldcypress trees all around, it makes you feel like you're in a whole different place from Delaware. You can definitely get away from it all at Trap Pond." Bivens

calls Trap Pond State Park "a hidden gem." It's a little off the beaten path, but those who have discovered it tend to return again and again, Bivens says.

The park attracts sportsmen, too. Bassmaster magazine recently named Trap Pond among the 50 best places in the country to fish for large-mouth bass, and fishermen also catch chain pickerel, crappie, yellow perch, catfish and sunfish in these waters. Hunters can hunt deer within specified zones in the park throughout deer season.

Trap Pond boasts the state park system's most in-demand camping site, its so-called island campsite, which has two primitive, walk-in campsites connected to the mainland by a footbridge. Other options include additional primitive campsites; tent and RV areas with water and electricity; circular tents with wooden floors, called yurts; and cabins with air conditioning and heat. Handicapped-accessible campsites are also available. Six docks give campers easy access to the pond for fishing and boating and simply enjoying the scenery.

"We get local folks who drive less than half a mile to camp here, but we also get people who come from New York, Pennsylvania, D.C. — even as far as Florida," Koth says. "The campers are very friendly. Between the local regulars and the people who travel from farther distances, there's a real nice mix and people have a good time together, not just in the campground but throughout the park."

On the shore opposite the campgrounds is the area most frequented by day trippers. Here are found picnic tables and grills beneath the shade of trees, volleyball courts and horseshoe pits, and swings and colorful playground equipment in a mulched area. The Baldcypress Nature Center, built in 2010, has exhibits about the pond's connection to the Chesapeake Bay as well as about the park's history and natural resources. A meeting/classroom space with large windows overlooks the pond, beautifully framed by loblolly pines. "It's a good place to view wildlife," Koth says. "During the winter we set up spotting scopes there so that people can watch the winter waterfowl on the pond."



Red-bellied turtles sun themselves on a fallen tree in Trap Pond.



The waters of Trap Pond teem with large-mouth bass. Fishermen might also catch chain pickerel, crappie, yellow perch, catfish and sunfish.

The Beauty of the Swamp

As our pontoon boat tour continued, we paused by another stand of baldcypress trees: a couple hundred of them near a section of open pond abloom in spatterdock, also known as cow lilies, with their bright, ball-like yellow blooms. We turned left and headed into the narrow Terrapin Branch Water Trail, which

was edged in baldcypress accented by blooming mountain laurel and sweet pepperbush. Along the way we spied the stick and mud mound of a beaver lodge. River otters also live here in the park's waterways, though we weren't lucky enough to see any.

The boat went as far back in the swamp as it could, and we stopped for a time to listen to the evening sounds of the swamp: a chorus of pickerel, cricket, and tree frogs and Fowler's toads punctuated by the low growl of a bullfrog. The park is also home to brown bats as well as a variety of birds. In addition to herons and grackles, birdwatchers look for hummingbirds, dozens of species of warblers, bald eagles, eastern wood pewees, pileated woodpeckers, snowy and common egrets, green herons and three types of owls: the great horned, barred and screech owls. Each May, birders come to the state park to see prothonotary warblers, which are uncommon elsewhere on the peninsula but are attracted to Trap

Pond because they nest in the knees and surface roots of the baldcypress trees.

By now the sun had set, and we started the engine again to head back across the pond to the boathouse. The air was fragrant with the scent of the campfires barely visible through the trees. We docked in serene darkness.

Exploring the Swamp by Day

The next afternoon, the sun was shining warm and bright, and my daughter and I returned to the pond on our own, renting kayaks to paddle across the pond and into the swamp. We weren't alone on the water, having seen a couple fishing from canoes near the shore. We also greeted some other kayakers headed in the opposite direction.

Before we had set out, we'd stopped at the Nature Center for some advice. We had hoped to kayak to the Patriarch Tree, but we learned that low waters and overgrowth had made sections of the James Branch impassable at this time



Bald cypress trees growing in swamps can be easily identified by the distinctive knees that grow up alongside the trunk. Scientists believe the knees provide structural support and stabilization.

of year. Instead, we paddled back into the cool shade of the Terrapin Branch, paddling in much deeper into it than had been feasible the night before in the larger pontoon boat. As we progressed, the waterway became narrower and shallower, and at times we had to bend down to pass under tree branches that extended low across the water. We had this stretch to ourselves, and all was peaceful. Even the animals were quieter than the night before.

The baldcypress trees were abundant, their knees more visible here than in the deeper waters of the central pond. The knees, woody protrusions that are part of the tree's root system, are a peculiarity of baldcypress trees that grow in swamps. It was once thought that the knees were necessary to provide additional oxygen to the tree, but further research has shed

doubt on this theory. A more likely explanation, scientists now agree, is that the knees provide structural support and stabilization.

Another interesting aspect of the baldcypress, Koth notes, is the way it reproduces. The tree drops seeds in the water, and they either float to the shoreline and sprout there, or they lay dormant until there's a drawdown of water, which exposes the seed to oxygen and allows it to sprout. Once it sprouts, it will continue to grow even after the water returns to a higher level and covers the sapling, which is how trees come to be growing in the middle of the pond.

Hiking the Trails

Although the baldcypress trees are Trap Pond's biggest claim to fame, a wide variety of trees grow in the forests there.

After our kayaking trip to the swamp, my daughter and I set out on the 4.5-mile Loblolly Trail, one of the more popular trails among hikers. The scent of the loblolly and Virginia pines was refreshing, and we identified a few other species of trees and shrubs, including American holly, dogwood and red maple, as well as a sprinkling of the mountain laurel that gave the Sussex County town its name.

Those well-versed in tree identification will also note sweet gum, black gum, a dozen species of oaks and others, Koth says. "Many people come to Trap Pond State Park just for the trees," including a forestry class from Penn State that comes annually for their studies. "Because of our latitude and climatic area, we have a mix of northern and southern species that you don't find many places. We are at just about the farthest

point north where trees like the baldcypress will grow and the farthest point south where trees like the northern red oak can occur naturally.”

The baldcypress trees are verdant in summertime, but come autumn the needles will turn a rusty color before falling from their branches. Coupled with the reds, browns, greens, oranges and even purples (of the black gum trees), the fall foliage is spectacular. Special pontoon boat tours are offered mid-October through early November for foliage viewing.

“Fall is my favorite time of year here at Trap Pond,” says park superintendent John McMillon. “Not only do you have all the fall colors, but you also see a lot more wildlife in the park, including white-tailed deer, wild turkey, wood ducks, Canada geese and many other types of birds.”

Programming at the Park

Trap Pond has been expanding its programming in recent years. In 2011 the park added free Friday night concerts during the summer, which have proven quite popular. This summer they offered several weeklong day camp sessions. The day camp and other child-oriented programs are in keeping with the nationwide “No Child Left Inside” campaign, Koth notes, and fit well with the park’s goal of attracting more children and families. The new, larger nature center has enabled



The popular Loblolly Trail at Trap Pond State Park takes visitors back through the woods and across a wide bridge that traverses a branch of the pond.

the park to expand its program offerings for school groups and homeschoolers as well, McMillon adds.

Bikes given by the park’s friends group, Trap Pond Partners, are available free of charge to visitors who want to bike around the park. They come in child and adult sizes, and some have infant seats as well. The bikes are available through October.

Activities are offered at the park

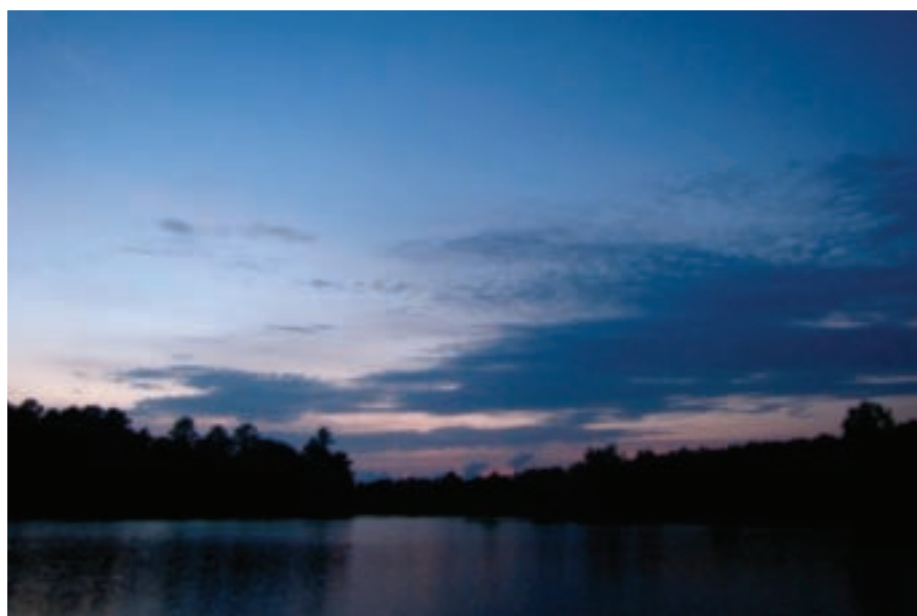
throughout the year, including hay rides, guided trail hikes and a variety of history and natural history education programs.

“We have a very dedicated staff who keep the park in great condition,” McMillon says. “And with the biking, hiking, fishing, boating, camping and wildlife viewing, we have so many opportunities for people to get out and enjoy nature.”

My daughter and I are already planning our return visit.

Discover more about Trap Pond State Park and its program offerings by calling 875-5163 or visiting destateparks.com/park/trap-pond. **DD**

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Serenity settles upon Trap Pond at dusk.