

BASS RIVER STATE FOREST

NOT ALL WATER FUN IS FOUND ALONG THE COAST

Children are anxious to take off their shoes and wade in Lake Absegami, but it's too cold for wet feet in Lake Absegami in November. Playing in the cool sand will have to suffice for the youngsters. Adults seem content to admire the last of the fall leaves, the beauty of the lake, and the peace and quiet all around them.

The Bass River State Forest in New Gretna is proof that not all New Jersey water activities take place along the coast. Encompassing 26,700 acres, the Bass River State Forest with Lake Absegami is a popular spot year-round for camping, fishing, and picnicking. It is located in Bass River Township, encompassing areas of Burlington and Ocean Counties.

A staff from Memorial Day through Labor Day guards Lake Absegami beach. Campers and day visitors are everywhere. Concessions include food, beach supplies and souvenirs, large changing areas and a first aid station are convenient.

Rowboats are rented during the summer months. An Interpretive Center is in full swing at this time. Picnic areas are set up next to the beach with grills provided. A special area is available for parties. Electric boats are the only powerboats allowed on the lake. Small sailboats such as Sunfish are easily launched.

Even late in the year, walkers emerge from pathways and a surprisingly large number of campers are enjoying the weekend. Two kayaks circumnavigate Lake Absegami, scouting the perimeter looking for deer, fox or birds. The lake is more dark blue than cedar tea brown; it must be the reflection of the dark sky. A few canoes filled with teenagers noisily cross the lake, their enthusiasm echoing off the trees.

The Absegami Natural Area is a self-guided nature trail helping to expose visitors to native foliage. In the late fall there is not too much to see with most areas covered with falling leaves. But the lake shimmers in the afternoon sun. The forest itself dwarfs all living things under it with large pine trees, oaks, and a small white cedar bog.

In the distance through the trees are three people on horseback, a favorite year round pastime. (Bring your own horse, of course). Mountain biking and hiking is probably the most popular activities.

The Bass River State Forest has just celebrated its Centennial. In 1905 Bass River became New Jersey's original state forest with 597 acres. A number of special events were held during 2005 to commemorate the 100th Anniversary culminating with the Forestry Centennial Festival in October.

The 26,700 acre forest is located six miles west of the Garden State Parkway (Exit #52 heading south, Exit #50 going north), and about twenty-five miles north of Atlantic City. Land has been acquired over the years.

According to the Bass River State Forest brochure:

“From 1933 to 1942, the Civilian Conservation Camp (CCC), company #225, camp S -55, planted 4,500 acres of timber; provided fire-fighting services; made forest stand improvements; surveyed forest boundaries and built foot and vehicle bridges.

“In addition, the CCC constructed Lake Absegami, which became the center of recreational activities, by impounding the two streams flowing through the forest. The CCC also constructed cabins, shelters, lean-to's, roads and other recrea-

tional activities.

“In the early 1940’s, forest officials built fire lines and safety strips to prevent fires in the area. When WW II started, the CCC ended. However, the Bass River CCC camp continued to be utilized by the military, and became barracks for U.S. troops. Forest recreational development did not continue until the end of the war. Bass River State forest was designated for public recreation, water conservation, wildlife and timber management.”

Workers, making a good wage of \$1.00 per day, lived either in the barracks or near the State Forest. They were given food and clothing. Some of the members married local girls, settling in the region. The barracks also housed World War I veterans for a period. Civilian Conservation Corps camps were located throughout the United States. Luckily for many, one was built in the forest of New Gretna, Bass River Township.

Early experimentation started with pines, locusts, oak, and fir. Trees were continually planted and spread throughout the Pine Barrens. Lake Absegami was built after constructing a dam and spillway from 1939 – 1941.

By the start of World War II, the CCC – started during the Great Depression by President Roosevelt to give employment – was not needed. The war had improved the economy. For a time a Military Police Battalion was housed at the site. After World War II, the Bass River State Forest barracks were torn down. All that remains today is a monument.

Samuel Budd Allen was chosen in 1906 as the first caretaker and warden for \$35.00 per month. Jim McDonald followed for many years. Cynthia Coritz is the current Superintendent.

Hunting and fishing is allowed in the area according to the NJ Fish and Wildlife Laws. Sunfish, pickerel and sunfish are the most often caught in Lake Absegami while rabbit, grouse and deer are found in the forest.

Bass River State Forest is open all year with 176 campsites, toilets and showers, laundry facilities, lean-to’s, shelters and cabins which can hold up to six people with fireplaces, kitchens, bunkrooms, bathroom, and screened porch. Activities offered depend on the season. All facilities at the Bass River State Forest are available to people with disabilities.

Other preserved lands adjoin or are close to Bass River such as Franklin Parker Preserve, Wharton State Forest, and the Brendan T. Byrne State Forest. All are rare ecological treasures making up part of the vast area of the New Jersey Pine Barrens.