

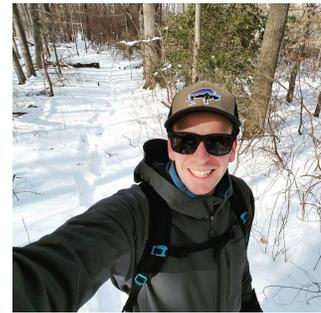
New Jersey Hills Media Group



HIGHLANDS HIGHLIGHTS - What's in your backyard?

Zachary Cole, *Published in New Jersey Hills Media March 1 , 2021*

Around about this time last year much of the world was beginning to come to terms with the dangerous reality of COVID-19 and the implications it would have for the rest of the year.



For me the restrictions imposed on international travel meant that plans to visit my family in Europe went from uncertain to impossible, then spring cycling events in Vermont and summer backpacking plans in the White Mountains all had to be shelved for another time. But this is not a story lamenting all the things I couldn't do; quite the contrary! The year 2020 presented me and many many others with a unique challenge: explore your backyard.

I am privileged that my backyard abuts almost 8,000 acres of the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, but what I mean is that stay-at-home orders and restrictions on travel meant that, for me, this was going to be the year of the New Jersey Highlands.

My principal form of exercise – and escape – is to ride my bike. This is not unusual. Lots of people “ride” around here – and for good reason. New Jersey, I am sure surprisingly to some, offers some of the most scenic cycling anyone could ask for, with a great mix of challenging hills and bucolic country roads that stretch for miles. The riding in this area is so good, in fact, that the Garden State Fondo, a 100 mile ride from Morristown out to the Delaware River and back, has been recognized as one of the “best rides in America.”

The route of the Gran Fondo is entirely within the New Jersey Highlands Region, and it is a tremendous source of pride for me to share my “backyard roads” with thousands of fellow enthusiasts. 2020’s Gran Fondo event was cancelled, but I am registered and training for 2021, in case anyone needs a riding partner!

Beyond bicycles, I am a keen hiker and it won’t be news to many of you how good the trails are in our region. 2020 saw record participation in outdoor recreation, as people sought to exercise and escape their home offices.

Some locations saw such high volumes of people that state officials deemed it necessary to close state parks for a period. The public outcry was enormous and a true testament to how important and valuable our parks and public lands are to us.

Fortunately, parks reopened, and a well coordinated state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) campaign, supported by the environmental community, educating people on responsible recreation allowed them to stay open. Of course, responsible recreation is a practice we should all be conscious of everytime we venture outdoors. Beyond social distancing and covering your face when you encounter others on the trail, the principles of leave no trace apply always.

The Highlands Coalition runs an informal hiking group, Highlands Hikers, where we introduce folks to the outdoors and encourage them to forge connections with their natural environment, and take pride in protecting these wild places that provide us clean and plentiful water.

By now you have probably worked out what kind of winter person you are: eagerly cross country skiing down Main St. to get coffee, or curled up under a blanket with a fresh bowl of soup. So long as there is a little snow on the ground, I wanted to share my perspective on the wonders of exploring outside year round.

The Fall is indisputably the best time for outdoor recreation, the temperatures are perfect and the magnificent colors can be so inspiring. Hiking my local trails in winter gives me a whole new perspective.

No leaves in the trees can offer some incredible sight lines, and a recent snowfall can turn any park into a magical winter wonderland. So pack a thermos and a snack – you burn lots more calories exercising in winter.

Wrap up warm; there's a whole backyard to explore out there.

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