

New Hampshire To Do

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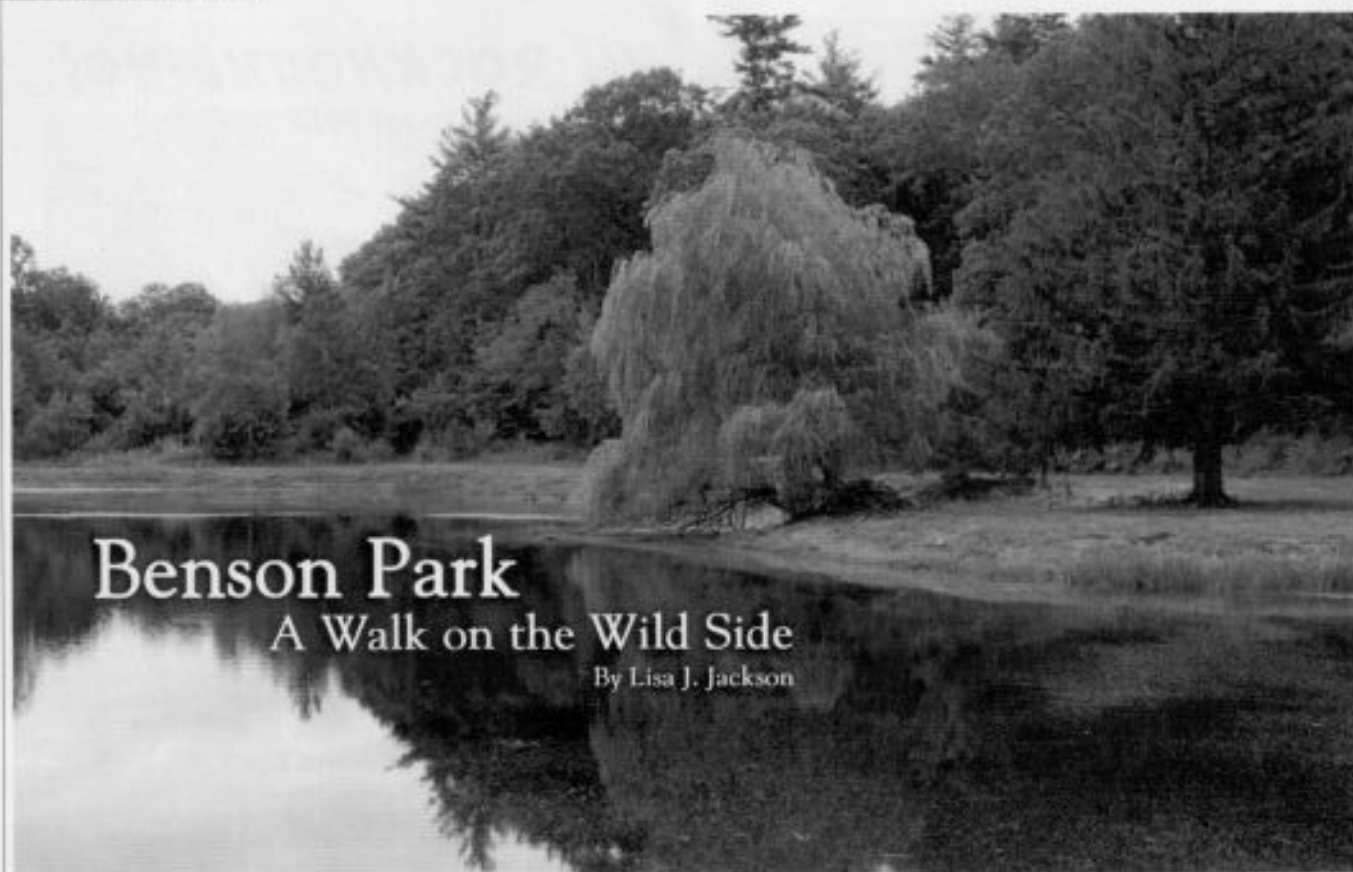
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On the cover:

The annual Master Sand Sculpting Competition at Hampton Beach is underway from June 17 through 25. Only one of many special events held at Hampton Beach throughout the season, it draws competitors and visitors from around the world. See page 52.

Lisa Martineau Photo



Benson Park

A Walk on the Wild Side

By Lisa J. Jackson

Last May, Hudson welcomed back a bit of history as it opened Benson Park. The site, where Benson's Wild Animal Farm used to be, is now a recreational town park that is open daily for public use, free of charge.

Growing up, I had the thrill of waking up to roaring lions, tigers, and, yes, bears, every morning. Maybe the bears weren't that loud, but the lions and tigers were. I could hear a lot of animals and it was fun to stir awake with them, even if it was as the sun came up.

The History

In 1922, John T. Benson started using a 250-acre parcel in Hudson as an animal lodging and training center. Nashuan Bob Goldsack, author of *Remembering Benson's Wild Animal Farm (1927-1987)*, describes the property as an Ellis Island for animals coming into the country. These animals were trained for circuses, zoos, movies, and stage shows across the U.S.

Town residents became curious at the animal sounds and watched the activity through the fences. After a couple of years, and the continued public interest, Benson opened

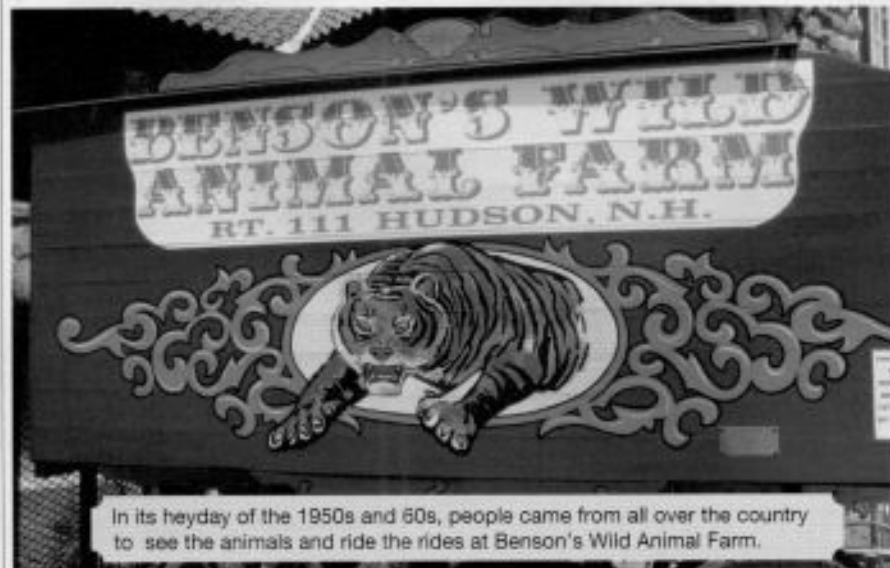
up a portion of the park to the public, with Hudson residents getting in for free. And then over the years, more animals, a miniature train, and games were added to expand the park and attract more attendance. In the early 1930s, a permanent wild animal circus was added to the property.

Tourists came from New England and beyond to visit the wild animal amusement park. Visitors could even come via the "Jungle Train" from Boston on Sundays, with admittance included in the train's ticket price. Benson's was a big attraction.

There were a multitude of positions available to local kids and adults. My grandmother worked in the park when she was a teenager. As teens, one of my uncles worked with elephants in giving rides to kids and my mother sold pony ride tickets. After retiring, my grandfather worked the main ticket gate. I worked at a gift shop in front of the elephant barn when I was a teen.

The wild animal park had its financial ups and downs as time went on due to competition with venues like Canobie Lake Park and Whalom Park, whose rides were magnets for the teen population.

The park officially closed in the fall of 1987 and remained idle for 8,553 days, according to the Benson's Animal Farm website. The Town of Hudson, after years of negotiation,





Benson's closed its doors in 1987. The monkey cages and attractions fell into ruins and the flora in the park was overgrown. But the hard work of volunteers and the Town of Hudson breathed new life and the 165-acre park reopened in May of 2010 as Benson Park.

purchased the now 165-acre property from the state in 2009. With a lot of help from volunteers, the area reopened as Benson Park (no apostrophe 's' in the name any more) in May of 2010.

New Discoveries

This family-friendly property has a lot of memories for many and so it draws a lot of past visitors who want to reminisce about wild animals, carnival rides, and days of fun with their families.

There is plenty of parking in the main lot and several handicap spots available in an upper lot. The main paths are wide and either paved or well-groomed for easy walking. It's a hilly area, so small inclines are everywhere, but level areas keep everything accessible.

A kiosk off the main parking area is a great place to start for your first visit. Maps are available there, and also online, if you want to plan ahead.

A handful of restored buildings from the park's heydays, including the gorilla house and elephant barn, are steps from the kiosk. The most reminiscent of almost any childhood is possibly the giant red shoe from the nursery rhyme "There Was an Old Lady Who Lived in a Shoe." A local Boy Scout troop assisted local construction company owner Peter Ripaldi in repairing this former park attraction located to the left of the elephant barn.

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The longest trail starts at the kiosk, goes through and around the parking lot, into the back of the property, up to the back of the historic Haselton Barn, and then back to the restored park area. It is 2.5 miles, mostly in the woods. The trail passes several ponds and is an easy walk with some minor inclines. There are several smaller spur trails throughout the park worthy of exploring, too.

Even though I spent many hours at the park growing up, visiting now is as much about being out in a peaceful natural environment as it is trying to remember what stops I used to make along the paths for animal exhibits, shows, games, and rides.

Trees are much taller than I remember and a lot more foliage fills the ground. Swan Lake is as beautiful as ever—its water is as smooth and shiny as glass when there isn't any breeze. Sitting along the edge watching ducks paddle around is relaxing. There are



to the public once more. The Friends of Benson Park, a non-profit organization whose mission is to "assist the town of Hudson, NH, with the construction, improvement, maintenance, and upkeep of Benson Park through volunteerism, fundraising, and promotion of the park," manages the volunteers.

A group of town officials recently toured Benson Park. Shawn Jasper, chairman of the Board of Selectman credits volunteers and their countless hours for having the park in such great condition so quickly. "The work is years ahead of where most of us thought it would be," he said. Over the next year, visitors should see the installation of a playground

for children with physical challenges, the train station moving to a permanent location, and improvement and completion of the loop path around the back side of Swan Lake.

Volunteers will continue to plant gardens and shrubs, clear brush, and improve the trails and buildings. When you visit, you'll see where a butterfly garden is already in the works.

Today and Beyond

Benson Park is a great outdoor getaway any time of the year and don't be surprised if you see some wildlife. The park no longer has zoo animals as residents, but you may spot some deer if the time is right. There are plenty of birds, including hawks and herons, turtles who like to sunbathe on logs, frogs, squirrels, chipmunks, and other woodland animals around.

You can enjoy walking, jogging, and cycling in the fresh air while exploring this new public park in southern New Hampshire. And don't forget about the winter months. The park is open 365-days a year, so think about winter hiking and snowshoeing when the time comes.

Benson Park is a beautiful oasis in an easy-to-reach location that offers a nice getaway for a few hours or more. Bring a camera, a blanket, maybe a picnic basket and a fishing pole, too. When you visit, you'll be stepping onto land that has a fascinating and well-remembered history. Maybe you'll even catch a whisper of time past upon the breeze.

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