



Entertainment Section



OCEAN COUNTY ENTERTAINMENT

Free Fun For All The Family At Jacques Cousteau Center

by Roberta Gold

Ocean County has winter tourists, too. Among them are seals, frequently seen as bobbing heads in the ocean, but who, from time to time, crawl up and sun themselves on our shores and jetties.

Our most common pinniped is the Harbor Seal. Less often seen, but also frequenting our area are Grey, Harp, and Hooded seals.

How to learn where they hang out and how to difference among them? Earlier this month, I stopped in at the Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) for a free class on Seals: New Jersey's Winter Visitors at the NERR Coastal Center at 130 Great Bay Blvd. in Tuckerton.

The session was attended by a roomful of people, ranging from senior citizens to youngsters. On the tables were coloring pages of seals and crayons that kept the younger set busy. Our teacher was Melanie Reding, the education coordinator. The class was not only informative, but also made enjoyable by Reding, who is a gifted instructor.

Asking for a volunteer, Reding warned she wanted someone who would not mind getting a chuckle from the audience. Young Michael Baker of Toms River was game and helped her explain the anatomy of a seal. First, she placed broad pieces of

cardboard shaped liked flippers on his hands. She noted seals had sharp claws to help pull themselves up on rocks. She warned the audience to steer clear of close contact with the seals and other wild animals who might look cute and friendly. She said they were armed by nature to defend themselves and might misunderstand the intentions of humans approaching them. Next a pillowcase was tied on young Michael, representing blubber; diving flippers were added to his feet, then a small mask with whiskers, which are used to guide them on their swims. Last, a coat was added to show how fur would keep a seal warm.

Next Reding dumped ice in a bowl and recruited Savannah Stephenson from Little Egg Harbor as a volunteer for the next demonstration. Reding asked Savannah to place her hand in the bowl and to withdraw it when it became uncomfortably cold. Reding then took a gloves stuffed with a layer of lard between them. She repeated the experiment to demonstrate that the lard kept her volunteer's hand warm and toasty even though the water was icy cold, acting much as blubber does to keep the seal warm in the winter ocean. Seals enjoy swimming in the ocean for long periods of time, so the best time to find them is during stormy weather when they seek shelter ashore. Among the best sites in Ocean

County are the Barnegat Inlet and Great Bay, according to Reding.

TRACK A SEAL ON YOUR COMPUTER

Reding then told the story of "Ocean - 39390," a seal that had been rescued in Ocean City by the Marine Mammal Standing Center. At the time he weighed only 17.8 pounds, but was nursed back to a healthy 58.4 pounds. Dec. 1st, he was released into the bay at the end street at Great Bay Blvd. On his back was a small tracking device, about the size of pack of cigarettes. Between Dec. 4th and Dec. 5th, in just one day, Ocean - 39390 decided to go visiting and swam from New Jersey, past Delaware and stopped to enjoy the waters of Maryland. Reding invited the audience to track the Harbor Seal, both on the center's computers and at home.

You can track him, too, at whale.wheelock.edu, a site hosted by Wheelock University. Click on Satellite Tracking Program, then click on "Ocean" 39390, and then click on Maps-"Ocean" 39390. When I last checked, Ocean-39390 was hanging out south of the Assateague Lighthouse in Virginia. Can you imagine that small seal swimming that distance since the beginning of the month!

NERR

The Jacque Cousteau Center is one of 27 NERR's in the nation, but the only one in New Jersey. It features different habitats: A pinelands region, lowland forests, brackish/marsh regions (brackish tidal marshes and salt marshes) and coastal dunes, barrier islands and open waters. Their talented staff conducts a variety of activities for various age levels and different interest

groups. There's "Lunch 'n' Learn" brown bag series hosted at the near-by Tuckerton Seaport where they also host a free exhibit - "Life on the Edge," and they sponsor outdoor activities, such as field trips. Many activities are free. The rest are family friendly in pricing.

The NERR is a network of protected areas established for long-term research, education and stewardship. It is a partnership between National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the coastal states, protecting more than one million acres of estuarine land and water, which provides essential habitat for wildlife. They offer educational programs and serve as living laboratories for scientists. Their website is www.jcnerr.org Our NERR is only a half hour down the Garden State Parkway from Toms River. To reach it, take Exit 58 and head south on Route 539, turning right on Rt. 9. Turn left at the traffic light on Great Bay Blvd. The Center is less than half mile on your right from the intersection. It is close to the Tuckerton Seaport.

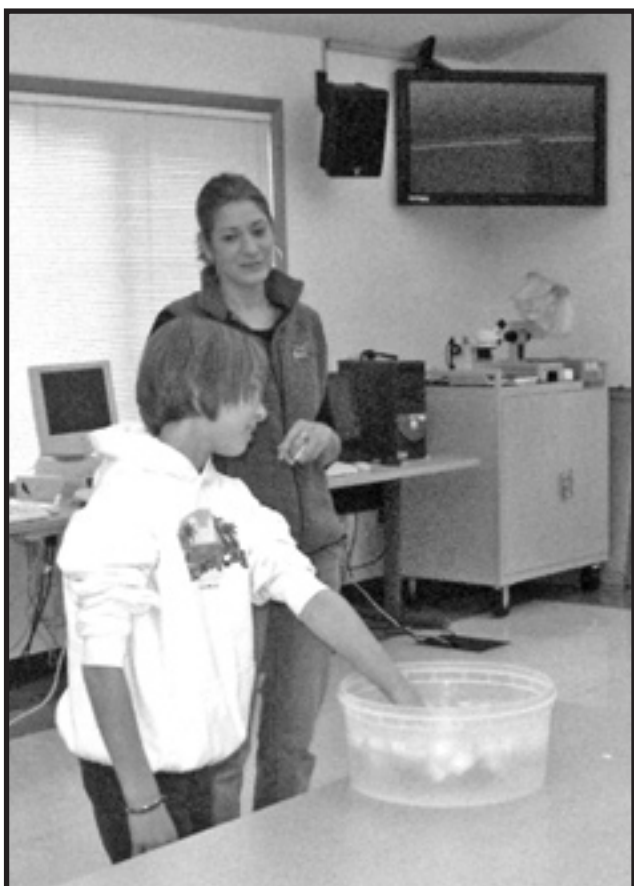
If you have not been to Tuckerton save some time to visit the Tuckerton Seaport, some of the quaint shops downtown and if the weather is nice, perhaps take a stroll around Tip Seaman County Park, which is on Lake Pohatcong,



ACTS LIKE A SEAL -- Melanie Reding, an educator at the Jacques Cousteau NERR, with a little help from Michael Baker of Toms River, demonstrates how a seal's body handles living in cold water.

as it undergoes some major renovations. Remember, Jan. 1st, the Bar-

negat Lighthouse gets turned on after six decades of darkness - about 5 pm.



DEMONSTRATION - Savannah Stephenson of Little Egg Harbor (foreground) participates in an experiment showing the value of blubber to help seals keep warm as Melanie Reding of the Jacques Cousteau NERR looks on.



The Jacques Cousteau National Estuarine Research Reserve includes the Rutgers Institute of Marine & Coastal Sciences, the Jacques Cousteau Coastal Center and the Rutgers University Marine Field Station. As part of the effort, they have a myriad of public education programs including a recent session on New Jersey seals.

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