

Story by DAN HAAG



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The Junior Ranger Program runs at 10:30 a.m. each day in the summer in Nehalem Bay State Park.



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Musicians routinely make appearances at Nehalem Bay State Park's amphitheater, such as area Sedona Fire Band, pictured.



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As part of Nehalem Bay State Park's summer programs, the U.S. Coast Guard drops in to discuss their duties and beach safety.

LEARN AND PLAY IN THE PARK

Nehalem Bay State Park's summer programs kick off a busy season

Getting the family into the great outdoors together in an age of gadgets can be challenging. Why bother with a hike when you can watch a cat play the piano on your phone? Nehalem Bay State Park is determined to change that with its summer programs. Beginning in mid-June, the park offers exciting activities designed to engage young and old alike.

Nehalem Bay State Park couldn't ask for a better location: ocean beach on one side, river and bay on the other. Situated on a 4-mile-long sand spit, the park features a large campground, a boat ramp, two day-use areas, a horse camp, and winding forested bike paths. There's even an airstrip for fly-in campers. In short, you'd have to work really hard to be bored.

Shelley Parker, the state park's program director, is in charge of arranging programs for campers and day visitors of all ages. As thousands of visitors pour into the park every summer, she is confident that the schedule has something for everyone.

"Our goal is to make every program family friendly," she said.

Looking at some of the offerings backs that up: "Early Days Of Nehalem" covers the history of the area; "Treasures of Nehalem Bay" has kids make treasure chests and go treasure-hunting; "Maritime Mystery" travels back in time to discuss the cannons discovered from the USS Shark. The U.S. Coast Guard also drops in to discuss their duties and beach safety.

A biggie is the Junior Ranger Program, which runs at 10:30 a.m. each day in the summer. Offered at parks around the state, it encourages youngsters to explore the park where they are camping. Kids ages 6 to 12 learn about plants, animals, recycling and conservation. Run by park rangers and volunteers, it puts fun into learning about, and caring for, Nehalem Bay.

"Junior Rangers gets kids out into the park," Parker said. "They do as much exploration of our individual resources as possible."

The program offers an activity booklet and a "passport" for each participant.

"There's three levels of activities at the

park. If they don't finish them here, they can take it to another state park," Parker said.

Prizes are awarded at each level, including a Junior Ranger badge, pencil and decal. The final level awards kids a graduation certificate and official patch. There's even a secret handshake.

While younger campers are certainly a focus, park programs have something for the whole family.

"They learn about marine life in this area, the history of Neahkahnie Mountain and maritime history," Parker said. "Each Junior Ranger Program is tailored to the particular park they are in."

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That includes the recent the discovery of a nesting pair of endangered western snowy plovers. While the park hasn't yet received a lot of inquiries about the birds, Parker wants programs that are proactive in educating the public on the topic.

"We incorporate snowy plovers into our regular birding programs, but we are adding a program just to discuss them," Parker said. That includes bringing in a snowy plover intern who will be doing outreach at the park's day area, as well as scheduled presentations.

When asked what programs tend to be the most popular, Parker says the park's wide array of choices allow for all of the programs to be well-received.

"There's a lot of interest here in maritime mysteries, shipwrecks, history," she said. "People always like the owl program a lot, too."

Owls are a favorite; attendees learn about the elusive birds in a natural setting. A variety of owls can be found at both Nehalem Bay and Oswald West state parks, and Parker admits it's one of her favorites. "I like it because it's really interactive, it gets people

really involved in the topic," she said.

Beachcombing is a program particular to Nehalem Bay. Run by a park ranger, it introduces visitors to treasures hidden in the sand. "The program's ranger is an avid beachcomber who's found things like Japanese glass floats and agates," Parker said.

Birds and agates aren't all you'll find at Nehalem Bay State Park. Looking for a bit of "The Bard," but can't get to Ashland? Nehalem Bay State Park has you covered, as a Shakespeare program has become a well-received addition to the park's repertoire.

"We had a new manager from Nevada who introduced it about five years ago," Parker said. "Shakespeare was really popular in his previous park, so he brought it here."

Shakespeare runs nights at the parks' amphitheater in late summer and is performed by a professional troupe from Portland called OPS Fest, or Original Practice Shakespeare.

Musicians routinely make appearances, such as area bands Sedona Fire and the Tsunami Drummers. "Music varies each year, but we concentrate on getting local bands," Parker said.

Evening programs draw larger crowds, and there's plenty of room at the parks' amphitheater, which can accommodate up to 400. "We come close (to maxing out), especially for Shakespeare or music, but we generally average between 60 and 80 people," Parker said.

Evening programs are not just for campers and are open to the public. Parker reminds visitors that while programs are free, parking is limited and a \$5 day-use fee or annual pass is required for parking.

There's more for visitors to Nehalem Bay State Park to do than they could fit into one visit, and Parker adds there are more programs on the way. "There's always a few more things we are looking to throw into the mix," she said.

Interested in Nehalem Bay State Park's programs? Visit www.oregonstateparks.org and select Nehalem Bay State Park, or call 503-368-5943.