

## Hidden Treasures

If you're from the area, then you already know about many of the things that make Secaucus a great place to raise a family, grab a bite to eat, or just spend a quiet afternoon. We've got a new Recreation Center, a terrific ice-skating rink, dozens of parks, playgrounds and ball fields, a full calendar of town-sponsored activities, a friendly atmosphere, an ideal location for a quick shot into NYC, and a list that goes on and on. But this already apparent to most people who spend time here. What you really need to look into are the hidden gems that this town has to offer. I've spent my whole life in Secaucus, so I have a pretty good idea of where to look. If you have some time this summer, take advantage of the beautiful weather and follow up on a lifetime of discoveries.

Let's start at Laurel Hill Park. Clearly the rock that dominates the landscape is no secret to anyone. However, what may be hidden to many is the history behind the rock at Laurel Hill. We know that the rock is big, and most of us know that it used to be called Snake Hill. But do you know that before demolition activities in the late 1950s, the rock was 50 feet higher and 80% larger at its base? Did you know that the name Snake Hill came from Dutch Settlers? Or that the area was the site of various Hudson County facilities – including an almshouse, penitentiary, hospital, and asylum – dating back to the 1860s? If you're interested in this part of our past, Google “Laurel Hill Rock Secaucus” and you'll find out a lot more. Or if my history lesson is enough, just head down and check it all the outdoor activities that you can enjoy there.

In addition to the obvious recreational opportunities offered at Laurel Hill Park – such as strolling along the waterfront or taking advantage of the well-groomed ball fields – if you are lucky enough to own a boat or know someone who does, you can hit the public launch at no charge and cruise the Hackensack River and take in the natural beauty of the Sawmill Creek Wildlife Management Area. If a guided tour is more your style, look into hopping a pontoon boat or canoe with the Hackensack River Keeper or the New Jersey Meadowlands Commission (NJMC). Their guides can explain the unique eco-system of the Meadowlands District, point out a rich variety of wildlife, and take you through the ruins of docks and landings that document the region's maritime and industrial history. Open River Keeper tours begin in Laurel Hill Park, but you can also charter a tour with them by visiting the Red Roof Inn, just off of Route 3 on Meadowlands Parkway in Secaucus. See the River Keeper web site if you'd like to read up on all they have to offer: [www.hackensackriverkeeper.org](http://www.hackensackriverkeeper.org). You can find out more about NJMC tours by visiting [www.njmeadowlands.gov/environment/tours.html](http://www.njmeadowlands.gov/environment/tours.html). Additionally, on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup>, the town – in collaboration with the NJMC – will be offering free boat rides originating at the Laurel Hill boat launch. Call 201 865-4422 for more info.

If fishing is your niche, bring your rod and reel to Laurel Hill because this area has some of the best fishing on the East Coast. A little known fact is that striped bass up to four feet long have been caught in the Hackensack River – but you have to act fast, as they don't stay long. Large bass caught and tagged in this region have been found as far south as the Carolinas and as far

north as New England. Another great site to bring your tackle box, canoe, or kayak is Mill Creek Point. With free parking and a free public non-motorized boat launch, it's just as easy here as it is at Laurel Hill to hit the water and immerse yourself in sport and wilderness with the amazing New York City skyline as a backdrop. Where else can you go fishing, kayaking, and bird watching, then look up and see the Empire State Building? Mill Creek Point also features a new dog park and a picnic grove with tables and benches.

At the south end of Mill Creek point you can pick up the elevated boardwalk that crosses Mill Creek Marsh and leads to the High School. Observation benches and wildlife signage along the boardwalk make it a perfect place to check out many of the estimated 260 bird species that have been spotted in the Meadowlands District, a major stop along the Atlantic Flyway. At the other end of the boardwalk, you can continue past the athletic fields at the high school to the Acorn Road park, the point where the path ends...for now. In the future, you will be able to continue on to the foot of Farm Road and Acorn road (where there is a little known water park) and beyond, all the way to Laurel Hill Park.

Another hidden treasure is the Mill Creek Marsh Trail. This 1.5 mile walking loop is accessible from the free parking lot behind Bob's Furniture in the Mill Creek Mall. Here you can see the remains of the White Cedar forest, interesting not only for its significance in natural history but also for its former role as a hideout for pirates in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Keep a sharp eye out when you visit – the area is teeming with interesting, and sometimes alarming, wildlife. I once saw a 10-foot rat snake while out on a nature walk, and I have to admit, I was a little startled when what looked like a discarded truck tire started to move! Not scared, mind you, just startled.

While it is on the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of Town history, XChange is another destination that should not be missed. The area is developing all the time, with new events and features available to the general public. One of their centerpieces is the beautifully landscaped town-owned park. Fashioned after Central Park, this area features a small dog park and an amphitheater, playgrounds and a gazebo, where both the town and XChange host concerts, movies, and more. See the town calendar at [www.secaucusnj.org](http://www.secaucusnj.org) for more information.

Next on the list is the Anthony Just Duck Pond, over on Metro Way. I do see some residents taking advantage of the great fishing when I'm there, but not nearly what I would expect at a place where the largest bass in the state – almost 11 pounds – was caught. A word of warning though if you do decide to test these waters...Duck Pond is also the site where the world record piranha was reeled in – I have the certificate to prove it. I'm pretty sure this was a cast off from a home aquarium and a one-time phenomenon, but I want to make sure that our residents are prepared to face any challenge, just in case!

If you head west from Duck Pond, you'll find a couple of lesser known gems. The first is Snipes Park, located behind the Channel 9 building on Meadowlands Parkway. At present, Snipes is a bit run down; however, it's still great for passive recreation, and we have a commitment from

Hartz Mountain Industries to fully renovate the park by next spring. North of Snipes Park is the Baker Residential Complex, which features a parking area and brick paver trail that are open to the public. From here you can see both the beauty of the Hackensack River and all that is taking place around Giants Stadium.

While everyone knows about Schmidt's Woods, you may not know that the back end of this property contains some of the last untouched forested area in Hudson County with some of the oldest trees in the state. Here visitors can see a wide variety of wild life; even the endangered blue night heron has been known to nest here. While this may seem a bit far-fetched, I can back it up – I, and others, have seen white tailed deer, foxes and turkeys in these woods. Another little-known fact is that Tai Chi classes will be conducted here over the summer. Check the town web site for more detail on this.

If rare bird species interest you, you might want to head over to the back of the Secaucus Recreation Center. In my office, I have a picture of an American Bald Eagle that I snapped while exploring here just a few weeks back. There are great views of Mill Creek Marsh, and in the future the area will be a meditation garden where visitors will be able to sit for inner contemplation, read a book, relax, or even take a yoga or Tai-Chi class.

Secaucus is a town with a rich history. And as I have begun to list here, many aspects of this history – industrial, agricultural, maritime, natural, and otherwise – are still there for us to experience if we know where to look. But don't take my word for it. Get out there, hit the water, go hiking, hop on your bike, or just take a walk and discover these hidden treasures for yourself.