

Ijams Nature Center An Outdoor Adventure



The sun's rays shine down through the treetops, and the wind whistles through the leaves. Birds sing their lovely melodies, and a peaceful feeling is in the air. A fluffy squirrel bounces through the leaves, then quickly scurries up a tree. A nearby sign points the way down a long and winding trail. The magnificent beauty of nature is apparent all around at Ijams Nature Center.

"When the Ijams family first came here, they were right next to this horrendous industrial site where Mead's Quarry is right now, a Tennessee marble industry site, and now they are all part of Ijams and three hundred acres of protected greenspace....," pronounced Paul James, Executive Director of

Ijams Nature Center. Five years ago, Ijams Nature Center celebrated the 100th year anniversary of the Ijams family legacy. The 300 acres comprising Ijams have grown in that time from a mere 20 acres. The formal nonprofit organization has been together about 39 years, which was preceded by a memorial park in honor of the Ijams family, a Girl Scout camp, and semi-private bird sanctuary in

the same location.

According to James, Ijams Nature Center offers four primary things to the general public: education, conservation, recreation, and history. "What we offer to the community is this amazing location to be able to be educated and to learn about conservation and get involved with projects as well as come and recreate..." he stated. Visitors can engage in numerous recreational activities including hiking the 12 miles of trails, bird watching, mountain biking, kayaking, canoeing, paddle boarding, and swimming. Ijams is also a popular place for weddings, meetings, retreats, and other signature events, which include Symphony in the Park, the Meadow Lark Festival and other



music series, and horror theme nights.

The workers at Ijams Nature Center are constantly striving to make improvements, and they have created several new and interesting activities. In May, the nature center opened the Ijams Crag, Knoxville's only outdoor climbing cliff. According to James, there are now 10 routes open, but they are working with experienced local climbers with hopes to open more soon. Another recent addition to Ijams is a swimming area at the quarry where the high demand for river sports has previously kept swimming off limits. "We are also developing an adaptive program – adaptive meaning to allow people with physical disabilities to be able to get on the water and to do climbing..." James added. Ijams is also working with groups like the local Boys and Girls club on a program to get kids outdoors.

A gift shop and an exhibit hall are located inside the visitor center at Ijams, which is where a display case with two mounted ivory-billed woodpeckers are displayed. James said that one of the most unique experiences in his 15 years at Ijams was when he was

able to go to Boston with one of the senior naturalists to meet the donor, a Catholic priest, and bring back the rare specimens.

There is a wide variety of wildlife and a unique landscape at Ijams. "We have a terrain that really changes quite dramatically plus 200 of about 300 acres was former quarry..." said James. The Ijams family planted an assortment of native species and placed hundreds of bird boxes on the property. Every year, Lenten roses that Mrs. Ijams planted still shoot up, and there are trees that are over 100 years old. The wildlife is extremely diverse for an area so close to downtown, and while most of it is native, freshwater jellyfish have recently been found at Mead's Quarry Lake; questions about how they came to be there remain unanswered.

Ijams Nature Center is a nonprofit

organization and runs on the generosity of the public. Donations keep the nature center operating. Individuals can make donations at the park, online, or by becoming an Ijams legacy member. Ijams is also constantly seeking volunteers to help with park maintenance, special events, behind the scenes work, and leading group activities; volunteers are a necessity. "We manage volunteers all the time, and we can't get enough," said James.

Ijams Nature Center is a great place to learn, explore, have fun, and relax at no expense to those who want to experience its beauty. An abundance of opportunities await the adventurous soul just two miles from downtown Knoxville. Whether you like mountain biking, canoeing, cliff climbing, or strolling along the trails, Ijams has something for anyone interested in the outdoors.

-Lettie McKay



Sources

Interview with Paul James, Executive Director, pjames@ijams.org
Ijams Nature Center Website: www.ijams.org

*Photo Credit: I took all photos at Ijams Nature Center, Knoxville, TN.