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Black River Wild

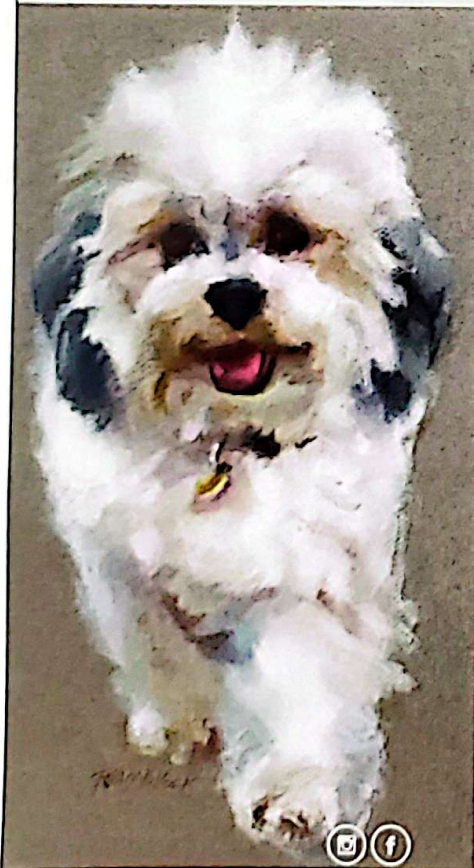
# Expand Your View of the Natural World



## Rent a Naturalist at Schiff Nature Preserve

By Sara Catherine Lichon  
Photos courtesy of Schiff Nature Preserve

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A mink scampering along the riverbank among a cluster of trout lilies showing off their orchid-like flowers. A skulk of foxes romping through the trees with a flock of noisy grackles overhead. The Black River region is brimming with spectacular natural areas and varied wildlife. Take a walk in any direction and you'll come across wetlands, forests, fields, rivers and streams.

But if you've ever gone exploring in these areas and wondered about the plants and animals around you and our connection to them, or just want to know what that bird is called – "Rent a Naturalist" on your next hike and expand your view.

I recently took a guided hike with Schiff's resident naturalist, Janis Slutsky, through their "Rent a Naturalist" program at McVicker's Preserve, one of several properties owned and managed by Schiff. Dressed in layers against the fickle spring weather and armed with a pair of hand clippers, Janis's smile brought warmth to a damp morning. Her intrepid attitude and fun-loving approach, combined with her love and knowledge about the plants, animals and landscapes found at Schiff, paves a way for hikers to get to know nature on a more personal level – cultivating a strong relationship between humans and the world around us.

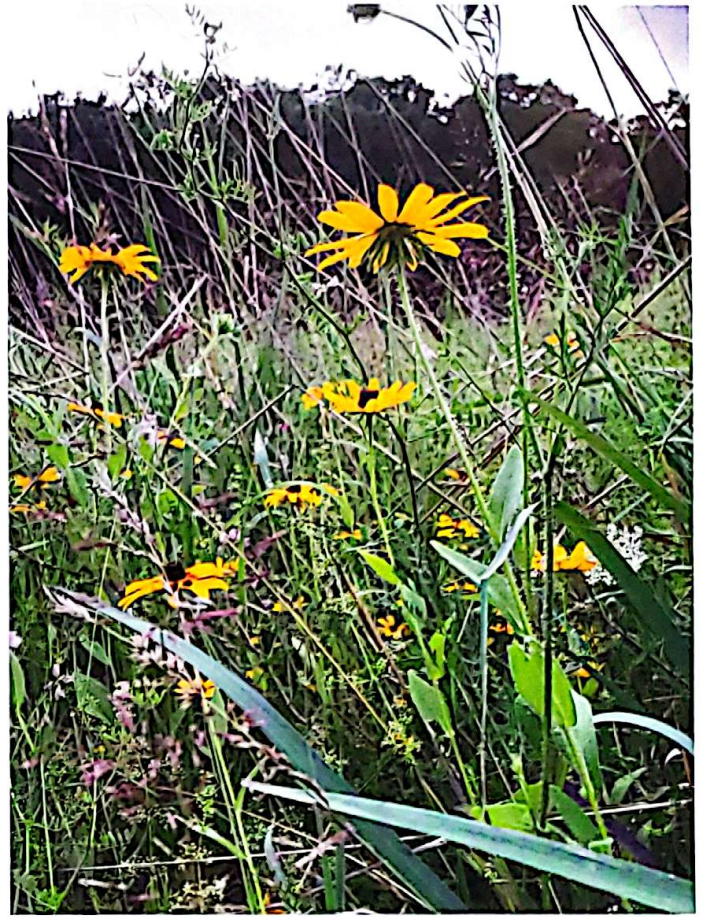
The smell of skunk cabbage was quick to reach our noses, as we set out over two rushing creeks. "McVicker's is one of my favorite areas at Schiff, because it's quieter, more condensed here," Janis said. And she's right – immediately upon crossing one of several bridges to enter the trail, a peacefulness fills the air, the only sounds being the stream babbling and sparrows chirping while they hop from branch to branch in the many bushes dotting the landscape. "You can see that we weren't immune to the flooding," Janis says, pointing out the flattened and damp plants where the stream had risen, referencing the heavy, flooding rains that covered New Jersey a month before.

Janis has been a naturalist since 1991. After receiving her Master's in Environmental Education from Montclair State University, she worked for the nearby Great Swamp Outdoor Education Center before making her way to Schiff. "I've been associated with Schiff

since the beginning, she recalled. "I was up at the Education Center. When Schiff was just getting started, there was no educator. There was a Board [of Trustees], and they called me up to do some educational stuff. That's when I learned about Schiff." As a current Trustee of Schiff and their resident naturalist, Janis has decades of volunteering and hiking around the preserves under her belt, and she started the "Rent a Naturalist" program to share her knowledge with those looking to take a guided hike.

"The bushes gave way to tall trees and thick ground cover, the forest enveloping us in its branches"

Our boots thumped on the ground as we ascended a steep hill, and the bushes gave way to tall trees and thick ground cover, the forest enveloping us in its branches. "I have had a variety of requests," Janis says as she reminisces on her previous guided hikes. "Grandparents who had their grandchildren for a week in the summer took advantage of the program to do a guided hike with some fun trail games to keep them engaged. Another group was a non-profit who meet once a month for bonding/team building experiences and they just wanted a guided hike. I have also led a group on a night hike. I almost always add in some information about the natural world around them and the history of the Schiff property."



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My art journey began in 2021 when I created a house portrait for a local realtor who gifted it to her client as a closing gift. Since then, I've been marketing my services to the surrounding area and have met some wonderful people along the way. I can't wait to meet more Hunterdon County residents and continue connecting with our small businesses.

You can contact me by email: [myminstudio@gmail.com](mailto:myminstudio@gmail.com), or phone: 908.328.4873. See a portfolio of my work at: [www.MyMinStudio.com](http://www.MyMinStudio.com)

Once at the top of the hill, the shrubs thinned out and the trees spread further apart. A small clearing with tall grasses, short thorny bushes and goldenrod seedheads greeted us, marking the boundary between MeVicker's and a nearby farm that graciously donated part of their land as an easement to expand the refuge for wildlife. Peer through the trees, and you can see the fields of the surrounding farms rolling over the hills into the distance.

Covering well over 700 acres, Schiff boasts a vast assortment of habitats across four separate preserves. "The variety of habitats at Schiff is something I enjoy pointing out to visitors," says Janis. "Habitats include meadow, forest, wetlands and stream." Each habitat is home to different kinds of wildlife, displaying just how alive the wild areas of New Jersey are." The list of wildlife at Schiff is long, with the standard mammals of deer, fox, squirrels etc., but now bobcat have been recorded on our trail cameras," Janis explains. "Also, snakes, dragonflies, salamanders, frogs and plenty of insects. We have endangered wood turtles, barred owls and box turtles."

As we walk, Janis pulls out her clippers and prunes thorny branches encroaching into the path, holding their stems in her hand, and she points out which plants are native and which are invasive. A few steps later, and we were back in the woods by another stream, this time the woodland appearing much less crowded with only leaves and rocks on the ground. Following the

"Each habitat is home to different kinds of wildlife, displaying just how alive the wild areas of New Jersey are."

stream took us to the first of two conservation ponds. "I've seen wood ducks in here, not nesting, but resting, and they take off when we come up the trail," Janis laughs. "But we hear them making their noises."

Through the woods, over smaller streams and mossy stepping stones, we reached a stone foundation - remnants of the former Boy Scout camp at Schiff. As is the case for much of our area in New Jersey, Schiff has a rich history. Originally home to Native Americans and then housing a Revolutionary War outpost, the land that Schiff now stands on became part of the R.H. Williams estate in the 20th century. In the 1930s, the land was gifted by Therese Schiff to the Boy Scouts of America, and it became a Boy Scout Training Camp until the Boy Scouts sold the land to AT&T in 1979. Years of dispute followed in order to prevent the land from being developed.

Janis recounts the many historical artifacts found on Schiff property, as we continue our hike. "I was doing trail work and I came up with a whole plate, one of those old-fashioned white plates. It had the old logo on it. We have a pile of stuff, some were donated, some were found." She points back towards the stone foundation. "One interesting thing about that site is they found George Washington's inaugural button. We have that [on display] at the center."

A short stroll from the foundation and we were in the Sugar

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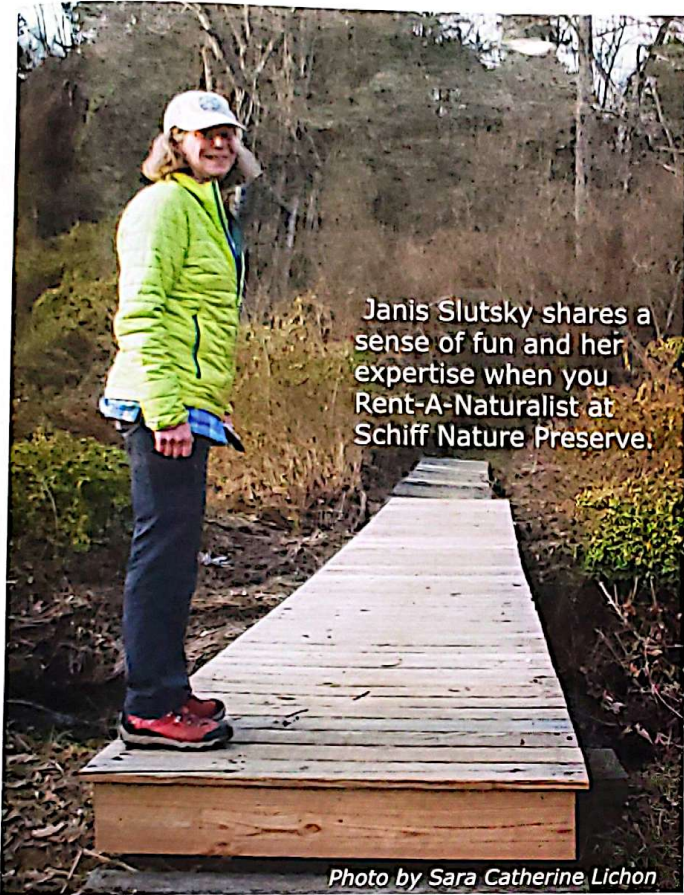
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Janis Slutsky shares a sense of fun and her expertise when you Rent-A-Naturalist at Schiff Nature Preserve.

Photo by Sara Catherine Lichon

Maple Grove. Dozens of maple trees towered over us, all connected by a tube tapping them for sap. Schiff brought their maple syrup making program back eight years ago. The syrup is auctioned off at fundraisers and used in their annual farm-to-table dinner.

The sun was setting, turning the sky and clouds a lovely mandarin orange color. A chill began settling in the air, and remnants of snow could be seen on the other side of the stream. "With the snow over there, you can see what's north-facing versus south-facing," points out Janis. Woodcocks, a quirky little bird with the most unique "pleet" of a mating call, announced spring's arrival just as we concluded the hike back at the parking lot. Hundreds of geese flew overhead, a honking army as fierce as any air force, closing out the night.

Janis brought her knowledge and sense of fun to our stroll but her presence imparted more than just friendly nature facts. I left with a strong sense of peace and connection. I asked Janis what her favorite part about "Rent a Naturalist" is. After thinking for a moment, she responded: "The people that you meet, out here exploring, who are excited about expanding their view of the natural world. I enjoy having the time to get to know them personally. I have learned in life that everybody has a story, and my curious mind loves to hear those tales." Then, a smile. "And, it means I'm out more, too!"

To "Rent a Naturalist" and explore Schiff's other offerings, including their summer outdoor music events and the Environmental Film Festival, visit: [schiffnaturepreserve.org](http://schiffnaturepreserve.org)



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