

## **Book Review: *Whispers in the Pines: The Secrets of Colliers Mills*** By Barbara Peterson, published Aug 11, 2005

***Whispers in the Pines: The Secrets of Colliers Mills.* By Karen F. Riley. Illustrations by Glenn Foster. Cloonfad Press. 2005. Available from [www.whispersinthepines.com](http://www.whispersinthepines.com)**

New Jersey is the fifth smallest state in the Union, and yet it is the most densely populated. It also has the largest number of Superfund sites (the Superfund was established in 1980, so that government money could be used to clean up toxic waste left in certain locations by the chemical and pharmaceutical industries).

So it usually comes as a surprise to people not familiar with the Garden State to learn that New Jersey is the home of our country's first national reserve (established in 1978). The Pine Barrens - a forest of pine, oak, and juniper, covers some 1,300 sq miles of southern New Jersey. An amazing diversity of plants and wildlife are found here - including many endangered species. (Visitors come from all over the world to see the two tracts of unique pygmy pine forests. The Pine Barrens are also said to be the home of the mythical Jersey Devil).

At the northern tip of the Pine Barrens lies the Colliers Mills Wildlife Management Area (12,652 acres). Author Karen Riley calls this the jewel of the Pine Barrens, and within the pages of this book tells us of its history, of its flora and fauna, and of the efforts to protect this ecosystem from unnecessary development.

This is a slim book, so of necessity the history of the founding of Colliers Mills is brief, from the different tribes of native Americans who were the original inhabitants, to the acquisition of the land by a group of white settlers in the early 1700s. How did Colliers Mills get its name? Either from John Collier who operated a saw mill in the area, or because charcoal mining was the first great industry here, and charcoal makers were called colliers. We learn the process for making charcoal, and bog iron, and finally the intricacies of cranberry growing (each of which is pretty interesting, actually).

Brief history of some of the businessmen in the area are given, especially Stanley Switlik, a Russian immigrant of Polish-Ukrainian descent, who eventually became a millionaire after forming the Switlik Parachute Company. Riley tells a charming story of Amelia Earhart, who in 1934 became the first 'civilian' to jump from the Switlik Tower - a 115-foot tower used to train airmen in parachute jumping.

Riley provides the salt-and-pepper flavor of personal experience as she tells us of the flora and fauna to be found at Colliers Mills, each with their own individual chapter: the birds from the wild turkey to the cowbird (with a brief segue into the controversy over DDT), insect life to be found (or which will find you), from dragonflies to ticks to mosquitoes. Frogs, toads and snakes fill an entire chapter. The unique plant life in the area has its own chapter, as do the trees. There are seventy seven different species of trees in the state, most of them growing in the Pine Barrens. White-tailed deer, red fox, black bear, groundhogs, squirrels and rabbits - their habitat and habit, are all described.

Riley also explains conversation is so important, and how people can become involved even in their own backyards. Finally, she returns to the attractions of Colliers Mills for the nature enthusiast: orienteering, hunting, dog training and exercise, boating, horseback riding, fishing, and archery. (Unfortunately she doesn't give specifics into where each of these attractions are to be found!)

Riley has done her research thoroughly, and her prose is clear and clean for the most part (she is at times wordy), with the occasional touch of humor. Personal anecdotes from her trips into Colliers Mills in each chapter separate this from other guidebooks to the region.

The book does have a few flaws. Chief among these is the lack of maps. The book only has one (well, two, really, if you want to get technical) and they're both located on the same page in the back of the book. A map of the current boundaries of Colliers Mills is provided, but because it's set apart from the rest of the state it doesn't tell the average reader as much as it should. (For example, how to get there). Below this is a picture of the Pine Barrens, showing how much of New Jersey's space it covers.

Illustrations are provided by Glen Foster - but there are too few of them. For every type of flora and fauna depicted, not more than a fourth of them are illustrated so that you know what you're looking for. Also, the illustrations do not seem to have reproduced well...they seem a bit dot-matrixy. Room for more illustrations could have been found if Riley had put all the backmatter (very useful stuff) on the book's website rather than in the back of the book.

She provides three appendices: threatened and endangered plants and animals of the Pinelands, and a partial list of the plants that can be found (since in her chapter on the subject she only highlights a few). There's a bibliography - books and periodicals, footnotes, and two pages of websites. At the very least, the list of websites for further study (and a very thorough list at that) should have been placed on her website - [www.whispersinthepines.com](http://www.whispersinthepines.com).