

<https://www.nj.com/gloucester-county/index.ssf/2018/09/nearly-800-acre-habitat-in-the-nj-pinelands-is-a-r.html>

Nearly-800 acre habitat in the N.J. Pinelands is a refuge for animals

Updated Sep 25, 8:49 PM; Posted Sep 25, 8:43 PM



Unexpected Wildlife Refuge is located in the New Jersey Pinelands
32 shares

By [Matt Cosentino](#)

For NJ Advance Media

Dr. Nedim Buyukmihci -- "Ned" to his friends -- has lived in California, Texas and New Mexico, and now resides in the English countryside with his British wife.

But there is a particular piece of land in South Jersey that has always held special meaning to Buyukmihci, a retired veterinarian and international leader for animal rights. And although it has been quite a few years since he's been back, he still affectionately refers to it as "home."

Unexpected Wildlife Refuge is a protected natural habitat in the Pinelands consisting of 767 acres of forests, fields and wetlands where animals and plants indigenous to the area can live freely with minimal human interference. Buyukmihci spent a large portion of his childhood residing on the property and is now the president and secretary of the council of trustees, which oversees the refuge.

"It's a very special place to me," Buyukmihci said from the United Kingdom in a recent phone conversation. "It was an ideal place for me to grow up because I love nature and wildlife. I would spend many of my days out in the woods, in the pond or on the edge of the pond, just watching animals and learning by observation as well as learning in school.

"Growing up there was quite an interesting experience, because we were fairly isolated from people. My best memories are watching animals and seeing what they did."

Buyukmihci inherited his passion for wildlife from his late parents, Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci and Cavit Buyukmihci, a native of Turkey. His mother, an artist and naturalist, was interested in a place where she could study nature and sketch and paint her surroundings, so the family purchased 85 acres in Buena Vista Township in the early 1960s.

The family moved into a cabin in a cleared area of the property; Buyukmihci and his two sisters attended public school in Franklin Township and graduated from Delsea Regional High School. Before long, his parents realized they wanted to do more than just live on the land -- they wanted to help protect it.

"They recognized very early on that the biggest threat to wildlife is loss of habitat and fragmentation of existing habitats," he said. "So they saved money and did whatever they could to keep on purchasing more land so that it could be protected from exploitation: development, hunting, fishing, trapping, etc."

Buyukmihci remembers several heated arguments between the family and hunters, fishermen and trappers who were accustomed to using the property for their interests. Some hunters even shot at his parents, not to hit them but to scare them.

"But we persevered and I'm very glad to say that over the years, for whatever reason, people realized they weren't going to be able to use that land to kill wildlife," he said. "We still patrol the land, because sometimes people inadvertently come onto the property, but I think the days of people aggressively trying to gain access to kill animals are long gone. We haven't had serious problems for several years."

Today the refuge has an onsite manager, Jared White, who lives near the entrance and is responsible for maintaining and patrolling the area. Buyukmihci stresses that there is not much human influence on the land at all -- aside from the creation of walking trails -- to preserve the natural habitat.

Visitors are welcome in small numbers, such as school or church groups and scouts. Guests can expect to see a wide variety of animals.

"The place is rich with wildlife," Buyukmihci said. "There are lots of waterfowl, snakes, turtles, frogs, toads, rabbits, various birds like eagles and ospreys, and of course the main

feature of the refuge are beavers. My mother was an avid beaver defender and we still have lots of beavers on the land."

Beavers were once in danger of becoming extinct in North American, but thanks to the efforts of the Buyukmihci family and others, their numbers are now going up.

"People often think that beavers cause flooding and damage trees, and they do to a certain extent, but people don't realize that in doing those things, they create a very enriched habitat for other wildlife and reduce water pollution and sedimentation," Buyukmihci said. "They are great for the ecosystem overall, and that's why they're called the keystone species, because their presence is pivotal to the health of numerous other animals that share that habitat."

Buyukmihci is still heavily involved in the operation of the refuge from across the Atlantic. Since the refuge receives no government funding, the operation relies on donations for expenses such as taxes, insurance and maintenance, and is always in need of volunteers as well.

But most of all, Buyukmihci wants the people of South Jersey to be aware of the splendor of the refuge and to educate themselves about nature and the environment.

"Even if all they do is come to the refuge and avail themselves of the beauty and wonder of an unspoiled paradise for animals and plants, it will enrich their lives and they'll be good ambassadors for wildlife," he said.

"The refuge is just one part of trying to keep wildlife in the picture. People need to realize that even if they don't particularly care about wildlife, the health of our environment is tantamount to the health of our own species. Without having places like this available for wildlife, we're hurting ourselves. It's something that should be of global interest and concern."

For more information on Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, visit unexpectedwildliferefuge.org.