James Baird State Park Draft Master Plan
and
Draft Environmental Impact Statement

December 15, 2021
Draft Master Plan for
James Baird State Park
Town of LaGrange, Dutchess County

Prepared by:
The New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation

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Introduction

Centrally located in scenic Dutchess County, James Baird State Park has been a popular destination for day use recreation for decades in the Taconic region. While perhaps best known for its world-class, 18-hole golf course, in its earlier days the park drew visitors for its popular community swimming pool, decommissioned in the 1980s. Around the pool, visitors could also enjoy a playground, softball field, a large outdoor roller skating rink, tennis and volleyball courts, a small nature center, bandshell, and food and ball concession stands. For the less energetic, there were open areas and walking paths for picnicking, strolling, and relaxing.

Many of these amenities are still found at the park today, and Baird’s good recreation infrastructure base continues to draw visitors. A large bathhouse – part of the pool’s original infrastructure – remains, as do the tennis courts, bandshell, picnic areas, and a softball field. In 2017, a new turtle-themed playground was opened, replacing the original outdated equipment. Some park elements need updating however, and there is demand for new amenities as recreation trends, preferences, and visitor demographics evolve.

An important tool for addressing these needs, a master plan helps the agency offer the public new recreation opportunities while protecting and interpreting the site’s natural and cultural resources. The planning process identifies the park’s existing physical elements, evaluates their condition and their ability to provide a safe place for healthy recreation. It considers new possibilities for revitalizing and repurposing existing elements and provides strategies for ensuring a more sustainable park that is resilient to the increasing impacts of climate change.

A central part of the planning process is to develop and analyze potential actions that will foster stewardship of the park’s resources while improving the public’s recreational experience. Alternatives for future actions are selected that best meet OPRHP’s mission and the planning team’s vision for the park. These proposed actions ultimately comprise the master plan.

Creating a master plan for James Baird State Park will also further the OPRHP mission to provide safe and enjoyable recreational and interpretive opportunities for all New York State residents and visitors and to be responsible stewards of our valuable natural and cultural resources. The plan offers a strategic route to implementing new and updated recreation facilities and up-to-date event spaces. Once implemented, the actions proposed by this plan will result in a safer, more cohesive, and inclusive park that welcomes all visitors – whether on foot, by car or bicycle. The park will offer a destination for outdoor exercise, fun, and relaxation for people in the community and beyond.
Agency Mission

Actions and recommendations in master plans developed for OPRHP facilities are guided by the mission of the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, which is: “to provide safe and enjoyable recreational and interpretive opportunities for all New York State residents and visitors and to be responsible stewards of our valuable natural, historic and cultural resources.”
James Baird State Park Vision Statement

At the beginning of the planning process, a core team consisting of regional staff, OPRHP planner and environmental analyst, and other resource people, developed a statement about how they envision James Baird State Park in its best possible state over the next ten years. The vision statement the group developed is as follows:

James Baird State Park will be an accessible year-round destination offering a variety of event spaces and diverse recreational opportunities while providing a healthy natural ecosystem that protects and enhances habitat for sensitive and significant species.

Goals

Each recommended action that appears in this plan was considered in the context of how it will help to accomplish this vision. As part of developing alternatives for actions to undertake at the park, the planning team established broad goals for protecting and improving the park’s resources, as follows:

Goals for Natural and Cultural Resource Protection

- To expand and protect habitat and create new habitat for key species
- To increase pollinator habitat where appropriate at the park
- To expand invasive species management efforts
- To identify cultural/historic resources at the park and provide parameters for protection, preservation, rehabilitation, and re-use of both designed structures and landscape
- To educate the public on the park’s significant elements that determine historic character
- To establish an annotated bibliography for historic and cultural documents relevant to the park

Goals for Recreational Resource Protection and Enhancement

- To redevelop infrastructure and amenities in the day use area to help transform the park into a revitalized destination for events and recreation
- To enhance environmental education and outreach, including publicity, programs, and partnerships, to encourage people to visit the park
- To incorporate the newly acquired Freedom Road Property into the overall park program

Goals for Park Operations, Management and Infrastructure

- To create a clear separation for safe pedestrian/bike/vehicle use that will accommodate both existing and future operations and development
- To provide an efficient and up-to-date regional maintenance area, to include buildings and associated infrastructure with new and retrofitted elements
Park Background

The setting of present-day James Baird State Park site was once the land of a mixture of Algonquin-speaking peoples, including the Wappinger people and other members of the Algonquin Federation who had inhabited the region for centuries. Wappinger means “easterner” in most Algonquin languages, and the Wappinger’s New York territory once stretched along the eastern shore of the Hudson River from the Bronx to Northern Dutchess County. They called a place near Baird, Pooghkepesingh, meaning “the reed-covered lodge by the little water place.” A waterfall, river, and small stream here provided good places to fish and the surrounding hills offered both protection and woodlands in which to hunt.

In 1683, the Wappinger signed a deed giving control of the land around the falls to two Dutch settlers. Among the earliest European settlers in this area, Pieter Lansingh and Jan Smeedes, planned to build a mill on the small creek running from the falls. By 1697, much of the land here had been acquired by Henry Beekman, Sr., a native of Kingston, NY, and the 100,000-acre Beekman Patent of 1703 was part of the second largest land holding in Dutchess County. Beekman's heirs continued to lease the land to tenant farmers, many of whom remained there into the nineteenth century.

In 1836, John D. Brown paid $15,000 for the 280-acre farm containing the structure now referred to as the “Baird House.” This rural complex including several houses, barns, a blacksmith shop, cider mill, and apple orchard. Early records show that the farm’s first tenant in 1766 was a German emigrant, Jacob Miller, a currier who also served in the French and Indian Wars. Unoccupied since the mid-1970s, the Baird House deteriorated over the years and was demolished in 2016. The park manager’s house is Baird’s sole remaining nineteenth century structure.

Establishment of the Park

James Baird (1873-1953) was a civil engineer who worked for the George A. Fuller Co. and later formed his own construction company. Baird directed the construction of many important American buildings, including the Lincoln Memorial, New York’s Flatiron Building, and Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He owned 590 acres in Dutchess County that included the former Pettit and Brown farms, and he renamed the property "Hidden Farm.”

In 1939, James Baird donated his 590-acre farm to New York State for construction of a park, under the stipulation that it be known as James Baird State Park. As an additional gift, Baird agreed to pay for part of the park’s development. Included in the gift were several buildings and much useful farm equipment which was used in the development, maintenance, and operation of the facility.

The donation also enabled the state to route the Taconic State Parkway, or – as it was then called – the Eastern State Parkway, just north of Freedom Plains Road. A portion of the site was to be used for parkway right-of-way, with the remainder as a public park. At the time of its development this area was the only state park in Dutchess County traversed by the parkway.
In August 1940, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) established Camp SP-58 at the site to begin construction of the park, and Baird’s early infrastructure was built primarily by these workers. World War II and dissolution of the CCC interrupted construction until after the war; work was then taken over by the Taconic State Park Commission. The park officially opened in 1948.

Planning that has been done in the past

No formal, comprehensive planning has ever been done for the park. In summer 2017, a Capital Facilities summer intern created a report and conceptual plan for the day use area, the Activity Area Concept Design, which described park context and history, provided a brief site inventory and analysis, and proposed ideas for upgrading the park’s recreational offerings. Many proposed elements in the report are still relevant and will be incorporated here as recommendations; some of the proposed items have since been implemented.

Planning and Environmental Review

The environmental review of proposed master plans for state park facilities is conducted in accordance with the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA). OPRHP fully integrates environmental review processes into its master planning process. This document is accompanied by a Draft Environmental Impact Statement which provides that review and compliance with SEQRA.

Park Description

The Region

James Baird State Park is located in Dutchess County, NY, with a portion of the park in the northern part of the Town of LaGrange and the remainder in the Town Pleasant Valley. Prior to the 1960s, Dutchess County was primarily agricultural. Since then, the southwestern part of the county has developed into a largely residential area, with many of its residents commuting to jobs in New York City. The northern and eastern regions of the county are still rural with large farmlands.

Location and Access

With a location only 10 miles from the City of Poughkeepsie, 140,000 individuals live within a 20-minute drive of the park. The park can be accessed directly from both north and south-bound Taconic State Parkway, with exits 12 miles north of I-84. An entrance is also located to the west along Freedom Road.
Park Boundaries and Adjacent Land Uses

The area immediately surrounding the park is rural and agrarian. The park’s closest neighbor is Arlington High School. The school has its own athletic fields, but student athletes use the park for cross-country practice and races. For a map showing park boundaries and location, see Figure 1 in the DEIS.

Existing Conditions

Physical Resources

Geology

The geology of Dutchess County is complex. Its history extends over one and a half billion years and has included several periods of major mountain building, ocean invasion and retreat, and glaciation. The county is divided into two major physiographic units: The Valley and Ridge Province, and the New England Province. The Valley and Ridge Province includes the Hudson Lowlands and the Low Taconics. The Hudson Lowlands extend eastward three to six miles from the Hudson River, which includes the Baird site.

Topography

Dutchess County lies within the Middle Hudson River Valley, which includes the counties of Putnam, Orange, Dutchess, and Ulster. The terrain in this region alternates between low and relatively flat, and gently rolling landscapes. The Baird site is typical of the region, with a low area of level terrain surrounded by higher, hilly, and wooded topography.⁷

Soils

Predominant soils found in the park are typical of soil types found commonly along the western edge of the Hudson Valley lowlands: Hoosic gravelly loam, nearly level and Hoosic gravelly loam, undulating. Hoosic gravelly soils are generally associated with level lands, and, because of their loose and open structure, are usually well-drained. The absence of stones and smooth surface of this soil type make it a valuable soil for agricultural uses.⁸

Natural Resources

Water

In general, Dutchess County has an adequate supply of ground and surface water supplied by its many aquifers, streams,
wetlands, lakes, ponds, and vernal pools. The largest source of surface water is the Hudson River, which forms the western boundary of the county. The largest city in the county, Poughkeepsie, is supplied with drinking water from the Hudson River.9

Baird has a variety of water resources, including mapped state-regulated wetlands (see Figure 11 in the EIS). The facility has five man-made ponds, including two golf-course ponds and a small farm pond. The newly constructed irrigation pond serves as the main water source for golf course irrigation and a second pond, Pumphouse Pond, serves as an emergency irrigation source.

Sprout Creek, the largest tributary of Fishkill Creek, passes through the property. A newly acquired land parcel on the west side of Freedom Road also contains wetlands, a farm pond, and a small stream.

Watershed

Baird is located within the Hudson River watershed area. Subwatersheds include the Hudson-Wappinger, Wappinger Creek, Fishkill Creek, Sprout Creek, and Great Spring Creek-Wappinger Creek (for maps showing watersheds and water resources at Baird see Figures 8 and 9 in the Appendix).

Wetlands

Dutchess County overall has a network of four major wetland complexes that provide important habitat for a diverse assemblage of amphibians, reptiles, and birds, and the county supports the highest diversity of turtles in the state. These wetland complexes occur east of the Hudson River in western Dutchess County from Interstate 84 north to the Dutchess-Columbia County line, including the towns of LaGrange and Pleasant Valley, where the park is situated. This regionally important area provides essential habitat for breeding waterfowl, rare turtles and rare plants, and other species.

Baird has its own significant water resources, including a number of mapped, state-regulated wetlands (for Wetland Delineation Map, see Appendix B in the DEIS). Wetlands are a significant natural resource at the park and range from ephemeral vernal pools, kettle holes dominated by native buttonbush (Cephalanthus occidentalis), and shrub swamps, beaver impoundments, forested wetlands, and shallow eutrophic ponds. Baird has several large complexes of NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) mapped wetlands within its boundaries. The day use activity area is adjacent to freshwater emergent wetlands and its northwest corner falls within a portion of the 100-foot state-regulated wetland adjacent area.
In addition to their general ecological value, the wetlands in the park support a segment of a local population of the State-Threatened Blanding’s turtle (Emydoidea blandingii), and is one of the few viable sites for this species in the northeastern U.S.

**Ecological Communities**

As part of an OPRHP park-wide biodiversity inventory completed in 2001, staff from the New York Natural Heritage Program (NYNHP) characterized and mapped all natural and cultural community types in Baird (for a map of the park’s ecological communities, see Figure 7 in the Appendices). Compiled in a March 2001 report, these surveys identified 12 ecological community types within Baird, with approximately 33% categorized as developed or cultural. Community types in newer land acquisitions, including the 132-acre Freedom Road section of the park, have not been mapped and characterized.

In addition to the significant wetland complexes, the range of notable natural communities documented at the park include floodplain and upland forest communities. The park’s Appalachian Oak-Hickory Forest is considered significant from a statewide perspective.

**Flora**

The flora at Baird includes species typical of forests and fields of the region, as well as less common species that occur in more unique habitats. These plant species are described in greater length in the accompanying DEIS (see Appendix G for a list of flora identified at Baird).

**Fauna**

Baird supports a diverse assemblage of wildlife species – both common and rare (see Appendix F for a list of fauna species identified at the park). The region’s sprawling complex of wetlands, forests, and fields offer prime basking, foraging, nesting, and overwintering habitat for turtles.

**Rare and Endangered Species**

The park and eastern Hudson Valley region provide habitat for a number of rare plant and animal species. As noted, the wetland complexes here support populations of the State Threatened Blanding’s turtle, one of the few locations supporting this species in the northeastern United States. These wetlands also provide critical habitat for several NYS Species of Special Concern and regionally rare species.

The presence of State Threatened Blanding’s turtles at Baird has been known since the 1950s, and the park has received increased environmental attention for the presence of this species. Blanding’s turtles also inhabit the adjacent Arlington High School campus and wetland complexes and uplands to the north, south, and west.
Wetlands in parks are given protections generally, but the presence of the Blanding’s Turtle at Baird means that development is subject to additional regulations.

**Invasive Species**

Invasive plants pose a concern in some areas at Baird and a number of species have been identified at the park. Regional Natural Resources staff are developing a management plan to control the invasive species more effectively, particularly Mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris*), which occurs in critical turtle habitat. Actions proposed in this plan will further develop invasive species management efforts at the park.

Invasive fauna are generally non-native species — insects, aquatic animals, and mammals — that have the potential to harm ecosystems and developed environments such as agricultural crops. Introduction of invasive species can have large-scale impacts to biodiversity. They can cause or contribute to:

- Habitat degradation and loss
- Loss of native fish, wildlife, and trees
- Loss of recreational opportunities and income
- Damage to crops
- Diseases in humans and livestock
- Risks to public safety

**Climate Change**

Going forward, climate change will increasingly affect the natural and developed environment, with corresponding impacts to outdoor recreation. Higher average temperatures and seasonal shifts are already affecting fragile ecosystems, and patterns for outdoor sports, leisure activities, and play are also changing. Recreation options in urban areas especially are limited by extreme heat waves. When the temperature is 100 degrees or higher, walking, running, and cycling are not as enjoyable or safe as in more moderate temperatures. Public access to green spaces will become even more valuable.

A changing climate also means the likely possibility of more frequent and extreme weather events, including heavy rainstorms with high winds, flooding, heat waves, and severe drought. Algal blooms and decreased snowfall may increasingly affect some regions, where water- and snow-based recreation may no longer be possible. Conditions such as these directly affect how people recreate outdoors by both limiting seasonal options and making it unhealthy to engage in some activities.

Scientists are developing a better understanding of the mechanisms by which species and ecosystems can be impacted by climate change. Seasonal temperature shifts are impacting suitable habitat for tree species in the eastern U.S., resulting in changes in forest composition and productivity. As average seasonal temperatures increase, species that are specially adapted to particular plants for food and shelter, or reliant on a local water source, are in some cases moving upwards in both elevation and latitude. Migrations have been documented in some tree species, including, for example, Sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*), Red maple (*Acer rubrum*), and American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*).

These recent trends and current research indicate that because of a changing climate, ecosystems and natural resources will be increasingly altered, and therefore climate impacts must be a consideration when planning for future conditions at our parks. Responding to climate change proactively is key to protecting New York’s rich natural environment. OPRHP can play a large role in this response.
Cultural Resources
James Baird State Park has been determined eligible for inclusion in the State and National Register of Historic Places (S/NRHP) at the local significance level in the areas of recreation, architecture, and landscape architecture. That S/NRHP determination of eligibility (DOE) was made in 2015, at which time the park was identified as a historic district with a period of significance from 1940-1972. The qualifying criteria include that it may be “…associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns in our history,” and it “embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or represents the work of a master; or possesses high artistic values; or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.”

Additionally, a segment of the nearby Taconic State Parkway between Kensico Dam Plaza up to Interstate-90, which includes the segment that passes – and provides access to Baird – is on the National Register of Historic Places. Regional factors, such as proximity to the Hudson River Valley corridor, increase the potential for archeological sensitivity in the park and surrounding area.

Scenic Resources
The Hudson River Valley overall, including portions of Dutchess County, has been designated a Scenic Area of Statewide Significance by the NYS Department of State.13 Baird offers visitors open space away from roads and traffic where they can enjoy a pleasant green respite. Views across its waterbodies, lawn expanses, woodlands, and rolling topography are characteristic of the region, as is its rural and agrarian setting.

Recreational Resources and Activities
Baird’s recreational offerings have not changed much since the park opened. Along with the 18-hole golf course, the park features wooded trails, ball courts, a playground, spacious open lawns, walking paths, and a picnic area. Two pavilions are available for visitors to rent for events up to 300 people each. Popular for larger gatherings, including parties, corporate events, and weddings, in warmer months these spaces are booked most weekends.

Nationally renowned golf architect Robert Trent Jones designed Baird’s fairly flat, 18-hole golf course on this large tract of former farmland. The par 5, 13th hole is considered one of the most challenging in the Hudson Valley. In addition to the golf course, the golf complex has a driving range, pro shop, clubhouse with a restaurant, and a snack bar at the 1st and 10th holes.

Day Use Area
Baird’s 20-acre day use area borders the golf course to the south and wooded hills to the north. This central area originally focused on a large public swimming pool which was added to the park in 1951. For
years the pool was a popular destination in the community and outlying areas; many area residents have fond memories of their summer visits during that era. In addition to the pool, the day use area offered a playground, softball field, roller rink, tennis and volleyball courts, a nature center, bandshell, and food and ball concession stands.

While the pool was decommissioned in the 1980s, the 4000-square foot bathhouse remains in the day use area. The structure is in good condition and is used to provide restrooms for day use area patrons. Surrounding the bathhouse, is an open lawn area with picnic tables and paved paths, often used by people looking for an accessible walking loop. While park rules do not officially allow dogs beyond the bathhouse in the activity area (a rule from the pool era), the rule is no longer enforced. People often come for short visits throughout the week to walk their dogs.

**Parking**

Also original to the park is the 180,000 square foot day use area parking lot, adjacent to the bathhouse. With capacity for around 190 cars, this large, paved area is well-sited for larger events and day recreation. The lot is filled several times a year during events including a car show and charity walks. Scout groups also use the day use area each winter for a Boy Scout Jamboree. Larger events in recent years have included the Embalmers Car Show, which is held in the lot twice annually, and the Miles of Hope Breast Cancer Foundation charity walk, which brings several hundred people to the park each year.

**Recreation Amenities**

Approximately 35 charcoal grills and as many picnic tables are spread throughout the day use area, and it is often used for picnicking. Groups need a permit for gatherings over 25. Most barbequing happens on the perimeter of the main lawn.
Unveiled in fall 2017, the themed “Turtle Walk” playground has become a popular community amenity and regional draw to the park. It is the most-visited element in the day use area, and its fun sculptures, graphics, and playful aesthetic are an impetus for further renovation of the day use activity area.

**Sports Facilities**

The park’s four tennis courts were repaved in 2008. Due to demand, two courts have been re-configured for pickleball. The park’s original softball field is also available but is rarely used – its footprint is still visible in the grass and a backstop remains in the northwest corner. The flat, mowed field is used only occasionally for impromptu recreational activities.

A sand volleyball court at the western end of the day use area is most often used by families picnicking at the park. Two new sand volleyball courts are planned to be installed in a new location (see Appendix S – Volleyball Court Location Options). A large, oval paved area – the former roller rink -- is now used for basketball.

**South Field**

A mowed field at the southern end of the day use area is used occasionally for informal games. A chain link fence separates the day use area and the golf course’s ninth hole. The field functions as a buffer between the two areas.

**Trails**

Nature enthusiasts will find the seven miles of scenic wooded trails enjoyable for hiking in the warm months and for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing in the winter. (See Appendices Figure 11 – James Baird State Park Existing Trails.)
Day Use Area Buildings

The small complex of buildings in the day use area is characteristic of the park as it was originally conceived. With its shed-style roof, the park’s small bandshell (left), is also a visual marker of the park’s early days. Constructed between 1948-1949, it is still used when the park hosts larger events. Electricity is available and is activated when organizations obtain a permit. The location of the stage adjacent to the parking lot creates visual and auditory challenges from traffic.

Designed by the prominent architectural firm of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and constructed in 1949, the bathhouse is a low-profile structure that offers a good example of park architecture of its era. Other buildings in the park’s day use area include a former ball-lending stand (middle left), which is not in use, and also once housed a small nature center. Similar in style to the bathhouse, this small building has been closed due to staffing cuts and a lack of demand, but it remains in good condition. Today, the concrete pad of a former roller rink in front of the building functions as a basketball court. A former food concession building (not in use) at the park has been condemned and is roped off from the public.

Other Park Structures

Over the years various buildings have been added at the park, as needed. The maintenance center at Baird, which serves the entire OPRHP Taconic Region, has an office building, a garage for auto and equipment repair, storage structures, and a pole barn to provide shelter for machinery.

More recently, pump houses, a water treatment building and an irrigation control building were constructed, and a comfort station constructed in 1964, which was renovated in 2015. The oldest building in the park is the Manager’s Residence, portions of which were originally built in 1780, with additional modifications over the years.

A one-story cabin built in 1925 still stands at the park. In 2020 the building was declared uninhabitable and has been slated for demolition.
Golf Course Area Buildings
Buildings related to golfing activities at Baird include the Golf Clubhouse, a shed for golf carts, and a small structure at the driving range used for equipment storage. The Clubhouse has a restaurant and new bluestone patio with a fire pit that overlooks the course's scenic fairways. Larger parties and events at the facility are accommodated with an outdoor tent installed adjacent to the Clubhouse.

Economic Contribution
In general, public parks and open space can offer a range of economic benefits to a region. Proximity to parks has been demonstrated to enhance real estate values and increase tax revenues for communities. Green open space also provides valuable environmental benefits by capturing precipitation, reducing stormwater management costs, and protecting valuable wildlife habitat. Less directly, benefits can decrease medical costs from more healthy exercise and a cleaner environment as trees and shrubs reduce air pollution and help protect ground water.

Tourism revenue is another benefit of open space. An economic mainstay in Dutchess County, tourism is estimated to bring more than 4.75 million people to visit the county annually. The region’s historic sites, farmlands, quaint villages, and green open spaces all play a significant role in attracting visitors. A 2018 Empire State Development report found that tourism spending in Dutchess County increased in 2017 nearly 6% over 2016, to more than $601.5 million. This was the eighth consecutive year spending had increased and a 25% increase since 2013.

During the 2020-2021 fiscal year more than 115,200 visitors came to Baird, a significant increase from the previous years. This was partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic, during which people sought public outdoor spaces in larger numbers. As improvements proposed in this plan are implemented, it is anticipated that the park will appeal to a more – and wider range of – visitors, who will spend time and money within the county.

Recreational Needs Assessment
The 2020-2025 NY Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) indicates high demand in Dutchess County for recreation facilities of all types. More details about recreation need at Baird is discussed in the DEIS.
Legal Constraints, Designations and Other Programs/ Designations

James Baird SP is within the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area, a region designated by Congress in 1996 as having nationally significant cultural and natural resources. A partnership with the National Park Service, the Hudson River Valley National Heritage Area is managed by the Hudson River Valley Greenway, which collaborates with residents, government agencies, non-profit groups, and private partners to interpret, preserve and celebrate the Hudson River Valley.\textsuperscript{18}

In its 2016 Open Space Plan, the NYS DEC identified James Baird SP as part of an important Turtle Conservation Area.\textsuperscript{19}

More recently, property adjacent to Freedom Road has been added to the park. This area has an easement with Central Hudson for power lines to pass through, as well as an agreement with Solar Liberty for a solar array. The solar facility was constructed in 2021 and scheduled to come on line late that year.

Operations

The maintenance facility at Baird serves OPRHP’s Taconic Region. The park maintains a number of vehicles and machinery for regional maintenance activities as well as serving as a repair facility, tool bank, parts supplier, and storage facility, as well as supplying fuel and parking for state and personal vehicles.

Other Park Infrastructure

James Baird has no existing dams or significant bridges.
Actions

The master plan provides a blueprint for future action to be taken at James Baird State Park, which will help protect and enhance the park’s natural, cultural and recreation resources, and support management and operations, as funding becomes available.

Most actions described here are based on the analysis process documented in the accompanying DEIS, which results in selection of the preferred alternatives (see DEIS, Chapter 2). Proposed actions are guided by the vision the planning team developed for Baird. Elements of the park’s vision have been translated into specific actions which will help to realize each element. These comprise the essence of the master plan.

Actions proposed in the master plan are also presented graphically in the large format Master Plan Map that accompanies, and is part of, this document.

The specific actions planned for implementation in the Park are divided into three general subject areas:

- **Natural and Cultural Resource Protection** – Actions that foster stewardship of the park’s natural, cultural, and historic resources
- **Recreational Resource Protection and Enhancement** – Actions that will help revitalize the facility’s recreation infrastructure
- **Operations, Infrastructure and Facilities Improvements** – Actions that will improve park operations and infrastructure, including management practices and infrastructure that support the functioning of the park

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### Actions for Natural Resource Protection

**Rare/Endangered Species**

**Action 1: Expand and improve management practices for Turtles of Conservation Concern.**

James Baird State Park has protocols and management strategies in place to protect key species and their existing habitats in the park and region. This action looks to expand these efforts by implementing an active management approach to further protect the park and region’s rare and endangered species.

**Action 2: Expand and implement natural resource protections for key species and habitats by acquiring land when available and partnering with adjacent landowners and other involved entities to develop additional species protection.**

These actions will help increase habitat connectivity, foster knowledge-sharing, and provide greater protection and habitat enhancement for rare and endangered species across the region.
Habitat Enhancement

**Action 3: Investigate opportunities to implement riparian/streambank or wetland creation and expansion; enhance buffers and create greater connectivity along wildlife migration zones.**

Much of Dutchess County has been extensively altered for agriculture, mining, and urban development, impacting the region’s wetland complexes. These proposed actions will help restore and expand crucial wildlife habitats, protect, and improve water quality, and offer new opportunities for visitor education and interpretation.

Pollinators

**Action 4: Construct a berm system planted with native species between the golf course and day use area to provide pollinator habitat and visual/functional separation.**

Replacing an existing chain link fence with a berm system planted with native plants will add important pollinator habitat while enhancing the visitor experience in the day use area. The berm will improve aesthetics at the day use area while providing new opportunities for environmental education.

Invasive Species

**Action 5: Implement a more proactive approach to invasive species management at the park.**

Addressing invasive species at Baird using a more systematic approach will protect existing wildlife habitat and enhance biodiversity at the park.

Actions for Cultural Resource Protection

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**Goal: Identify cultural/historic resources at the park and provide parameters for protection, preservation, rehabilitation, and re-use of both designed structures and landscape.**

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Administration

**Action 1: Finalize Draft Amendment to The New York State Historic Preservation Act of 1980, Section 14.09 that identifies Categorical Exclusions for certain defined activities on the park’s golf course.**

An amendment to Section 14.09 will allow historic golf courses, such as Baird, to move forward on certain types of work without further DPH review. This action will improve the efficiency of implementing projects at the golf course and help ensure that historical elements are protected.

Education

**Action 2: Develop an interpretation program that tells the story of the establishment of the park and the significance of its design.**

As part of New York’s historic state park system, every park has the opportunity to foster a wider understanding of regional history and the part that state parks overall have played in the state’s
development. Implementing this action at Baird will improve the visitor experience as well as protect significant historic elements at the facility.

**Documentation**

**Action 3:** Develop an annotated bibliography that identifies original design documents for historic elements that have been identified at the park.

Creating a digital archive of material that documents the park’s development will ensure that information on historical elements at Baird will be available when needed and retained for the agency’s institutional history.

**Actions for Recreational Resource Protection and Enhancement**

**Goal:** Redevelop infrastructure and amenities in the day use area to help transform the park into a revitalized destination for events and recreation.

**Bathhouse**

**Action 1:** Retrofit the bathhouse as an events venue to accommodate up to 500 guests, with ADA accessible restrooms, upgraded utilities, appropriate facilities for caterers, and a large-scale pavilion.

The vision developed for the park sees Baird as an events destination that offers comfortable, up-to-date facilities for larger gatherings. As a focal point of the day use area the bathhouse will become a more productive asset for the park, while substantially improving the visitor experience.

**Bandshell**

**Action 2:** Rehabilitate the existing bandshell structure; remove paved gathering area and create visual separation/screening from the adjacent parking lot to provide a discrete performance space.

As part of Baird’s original infrastructure, the bandshell contributes to the park’s character. This action improves the bandshell’s function and the visitor experience.

**Parking Lot**

**Action 3:** Design and implement a new parking lot with green infrastructure elements and improved functionality.

This action will create a safe and welcoming environment in the day use area with increased functionality for vehicles and pedestrians. It will provide a more aesthetically appealing and environmentally friendly environment for park users. Incorporating green infrastructure into the lot will protect the environment while offering new educational opportunities at the park.
Picnic Shelters

**Action 4: Make improvements to picnic shelters; upgrade comfort stations and utilities and improve pathway connections leading to day use area.**

The existing pavilions are very popular at the park, and this action will help meet demand for this type of amenity in the community. Improvements to them will attract more visitors and provide better connections to the park’s recreation resources.

Playground

**Action 5: Install an accessible walking path with seating and shade structures at the playground section of the day use area.**

The master plan vision of Baird includes improvements in circulation, connectivity, and visitor safety. This action addresses a need for shade and seating at the playground and provides shelter for small gatherings, such as birthday parties.

Softball Field

**Action 6: Repurpose the existing softball area as an exercise route.**

An exercise path offers a new and different type of activity in the day use area that will draw more people to the park while encouraging an active lifestyle. It also adds interest and improved functionality to an underutilized part of the park.

Former Roller Rink

**Action 7: Create a multi-purpose court at former roller rink (e.g., to include basketball, lacrosse rebound wall, street hockey, handball, or other)**

Repurposing and upgrading this paved area will offer a wider range of up-to-date recreation opportunities that will improve park aesthetics, attract new and different users, and encourage more healthy activities.
Winter Recreation

Action 8: Develop limited (passive/less staff-intensive) winter opportunities to encourage more year-round park use for activities such as snowshoeing.
This action offers visitors the opportunity for winter recreation at the park without adding significant maintenance responsibilities. It will increase enjoyment of the park by the public year-round.

Park Circulation

Goal: Create a clear separation for safe pedestrian/bike/vehicle use that will accommodate both existing and future operations.

Trails

Action 1: Construct an accessible, off-road park-wide multi-use path.
Providing an accessible, off-road path in the park will address the need for safer pedestrian facilities at the park while increasing connectivity through the park. It will provide a new recreation amenity and better accommodate any future increases in visitation.

Action 2: Improve the park’s existing trail system: repair low, wet, and eroded areas; reroute non-sustainable sections, repair bridges, and improve trail markers.
A well-functioning trail system is an important part of the overall park revitalization and implementing this action will contribute to a more safe, cohesive circulation system for the facility.

Action 3: Designate a natural surface hiking/cross-country trail system at the Freedom Road area using existing service roads, utility corridors, and farm roads to the extent practicable; eliminate unnecessary trails and provide connectors and/or new segments as appropriate.
This action will help to meet goals for integrating the new area into the park. It offers the public a new recreation amenity and addresses community demand for this type of facility.
Actions for Education and Outreach Development

Goal: Enhance environmental education and outreach, including publicity, programs, and partnerships, to encourage people to visit the park.

Sports Programs

Action 1: Make use of the park’s sports infrastructure by developing new visitor activity programs (e.g., workshops on beginner/intermediate pickleball, golf, disc golf). Offering programs that help people learn new sports will encourage a healthier lifestyle and may attract new visitors. Programs on these and other topics will also help the park become more engaged with the community.

Environmental Education

Action 2: Add new environmental programs by establishing partnerships that will help develop and implement in-person educational programs, and develop signage, podcasts, social media, and other technologies for self-guided educational content. These actions will help meet the master plan goal of revitalizing the park and making it a regional destination. Developing new partnerships and utilizing different media will enable the park to reach new people who might not otherwise know about the park’s amenities and resources.

Outreach

Action 3: Develop updated information for the Parks Explorer Mobile App that addresses frequently asked questions on park amenities, activities, events, and resources, including interactive maps and the capacity of facilities. Creating downloadable information about the park’s functions, offerings, and amenities will maximize the park’s ability to reach the public. It will allow for better use of staff time, get the word out about what the park has to offer, and help the facility function more efficiently.

Actions for Operations, Infrastructure, and Facilities

Vehicular Circulation

Action 1: Plan and implement traffic calming measures at the park. Making modifications to manage traffic flow through the park will improve visitor safety and protect wildlife. It will enhance the recreational experience for visitors who enjoy the park’s tranquil, natural environment.
Signage

**Action 2**: Develop and implement a comprehensive, parkwide plan to improve signage, including wayfinding, regulatory/traffic control, trails, and interpretation.

Providing a safer and more cohesive signage system at the park will ensure that visitors are informed on location and types of all park amenities. The facility will function more safely, efficiently, and be more aesthetically pleasing.

Park Entrances

**Action 3**: Improve park entrances by developing a design with more appealing and visible signage to provide a safer and more welcoming arrival experience.

Creating clearly marked and more aesthetically appealing entrances will facilitate park access and improve public safety. It will provide a more welcoming experience for visitors and offer a positive presence for the park, better integrating the facility into the community.
Maintenance and Operations

Goal: Provide an efficient and up-to-date maintenance area, buildings, and associated infrastructure with new and retrofitted elements.

Regional Maintenance Facility

Action 1: Implement a more efficient and functional maintenance facility at its current location. Improving staff safety, comfort, and efficiency, enables them to better meet visitor needs. This action will also improve energy efficiency and enhance the working environment for park staff, while addressing an important operational need for the region.

Utilities

Action 2: Upgrade the park's electric infrastructure, including the phone/internet system, to provide reliable service for current needs and planned park development. An up-to-date utility infrastructure helps advance the master plan goal of improving the park's event amenities. Staff time needed for ongoing repairs will be reduced. It will improve the visitor experience and accommodate future improvements proposed in this plan.

Water System

Action 3: Upgrade water supply systems to better accommodate current and future park operations. Taking this action aligns with the vision for the park as a regional events destination and will also help meet the statewide goal to repair aging infrastructure in park facilities.

Staffing

Action 4: Create a staffing plan and related increased operational budget that addresses current and proposed activity at the park. Assessing the facility’s staffing needs will enable the park to function more efficiently. It will allow the facility to appropriately prepare for and accommodate the new amenities proposed as part of the master plan.

Park Manager's Residence

Action 5: Build a new park manager's house at the Freedom Road section of the park. Constructing a new house for the park manager will provide better working conditions for current and future staff. The existing house will continue to be utilized by the park with minor updates. This action will increase the environmental efficiency of the facility.
Golf Course

Parking Lot

Action 1: Redevelop the golf Clubhouse parking lot to meet current and anticipated demand, including a safe overflow area.

Current and future needs of the facility will be met by implementing this action. Improving parking conditions at the golf Clubhouse will provide greater pedestrian safety while accommodating future uses proposed at the facility. It will help realize the master plan vision for the park as a regional events destination.

Golf Practice Facility

Action 2: Improve the golf practice facility at driving range and upgrade existing facilities.

The golf practice facility is a popular amenity at the park. Improvements will meet park goals and vision to provide new recreational activities at the park, attract new users, and support new programming at the park.

Pro Shop

Action 3: Develop a banquet facility in the former Pro Shop to accommodate smaller, indoor events (up to 50 people).

This action allows the park to repurpose underutilized infrastructure to increase opportunities for the restaurant concessionaire and provide a wider variety of events facilities for visitors. It will use existing infrastructure and make the park more attractive and accessible.

Freedom Road Area

Goal: To incorporate the Freedom Road section of the park into the overall park program (maintenance/operations/recreation)

Recreation and Usage

Action 1: Implement recreation offerings and natural resource protections proposed in the master plan at the Freedom Road section of the park.

Creating a plan for Freedom Road area will improve visitor experience by integrating the new area into the facility while helping to achieve master plan goals for natural resource stewardship.
Disc Golf

**Action 2: Install a disc golf course at the Freedom Road area.**
Adding disc golf to the park’s recreation offerings will further connect visitors and the community to the new section of the park. It will provide a popular amenity to the park and provide additional opportunities for people to relax in the park.

**Action 3: Designate four-season use of selected trails at the Freedom Road area with groomed trails for cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.**

This alternative was selected because it will help meet the demand for this type of activity. Visitors will have a dedicated area for winter activities which will help meet the plan goal to activate the park year-round. It will help protect other areas in the park from potential damage.

Fishing

**Action 4: Provide fishing access to the pond at the Freedom Road area.**
This action will help meet goals for offering new recreation activities at the park and for integrating the new area into the facility. There is currently no other fishing access within the park, and this action will help meet demand for this activity and may attract new visitors by providing a new amenity unique to the park.

Habitat Enhancement

**Action 5: Implement habitat enhancement opportunities (e.g., grassland management; bird habitat) on former agricultural lands.**
Phasing out agricultural use at the Freedom Road area will enable the park to improve environmental stewardship and to enhance important regional habitat. It will also offer new opportunities for public education.
Implementation

Partnerships
James Baird State Park has maintained partnerships with various groups and agencies over the years. These have included the Boy Scouts, local schools and colleges, girls’ golf teams, and fundraising events with non-profit groups such as Sparrow’s Nest and Miles of Hope.

Priorities
The master plan sets forth OPRHP’s vision for capital improvements and operational enhancements to the park for the next ten to fifteen years. OPRHP has not developed detailed cost estimates for the proposed components. Cumulatively they will cost tens of millions of dollars to implement. The pace and sequencing of recommended actions will be determined by the availability of funding, which is a function of the size of OPRHP’s annual capital budgets and the need to balance investments throughout the park system.

The master plan will be reviewed annually to select projects that will be added to the park’s budget for implementation and to assess the progress of plan implementation. Any operational improvements that are already planned at the time of the master plan will go forward as planned.

Implementation of this master plan is divided into priority phases.
Projects fall generally into one of three priority levels. The prioritized actions for specific components in the table shown below are subject to reorganization based on available funding.
Priority 1 = Completed in 1-3 years
Priority 2 = Completed in 3-5 years
Priority 3 = Completed in 5-10 years

Table 1 - James Baird State Park Prioritized Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPLEMENTATION PRIORITIES</th>
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<td><strong>Actions for Natural Resource Protection</strong></td>
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<td>Priority 1 (1-3 years)</td>
<td>Develop and implement a more proactive approach to invasive species management at the park.</td>
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<td>Expand and improve management practices for turtle habitat.</td>
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<td>Implement habitat enhancement opportunities on former agricultural lands.</td>
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<td>Priority 2 (3-5 years)</td>
<td>Investigate opportunities to implement riparian/streambank and wetland creation/ expansion; enhance buffers and create connectivity along wildlife migration zones.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priority 2 (3-5 years) (cont.)</td>
<td>Construct a berm system planted with native species between the golf course and day use area, to provide pollinator habitat and create visual/functional separation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Priority 3 (5-10 years)</td>
<td>Expand and implement natural resource protections for key species/habitats; acquire land when available, undertake research projects, and implement techniques to decrease predation; partner with adjacent landowners and other involved agencies to educate on species protection.</td>
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### Actions for Cultural Resource Protection

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<th>Priority 1 (1-3 years)</th>
<th>Finalize Draft Amendment to existing Section 14.09 protocol that identifies Categorical Exclusions for certain defined activities on the park's golf course.</th>
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<td>Develop an interpretation program that tells the story of the establishment of the park and the significance of its design.</td>
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<td>Develop an annotated bibliography on original design documents and resources on historical elements at the park.</td>
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<td>Improve the park’s existing trail system: repair low, wet, and eroded areas; reroute non-sustainable sections, repair bridges, and improve trail markers.</td>
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<td>Develop limited (passive/less staff-intensive) winter opportunities to encourage more year-round park use (e.g., no grooming activities such as for cross-country skiing).</td>
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### IMPLEMENTATION PRIORITIES

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<td>Implement Golf Course Bunker Rehabilitation project</td>
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<td>Upgrade water supply systems to better accommodate current and future park operations.</td>
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<td>Develop additional park programming opportunities with new visitor activities.</td>
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<td>Build a new park manager’s house at the Freedom Road section of the park.</td>
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### Actions for Education and Outreach

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<th><strong>Priority 1 (1-3 years)</strong></th>
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<td><strong>Priority 2 (3-5 years)</strong></td>
<td>Make use of the park’s sports infrastructure by developing new visitor activity programs (e.g., workshops on beginner/intermediate pickleball, golf, disc golf)</td>
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<td>Add new environmental programs by establishing partnerships that will help develop and implement in-person educational programs (e.g., partner with schools, DEC, etc.), and 3) Develop signage, podcasts, social media, and other technologies for self-guided educational content.</td>
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Planning Team Findings

The planning team began its work by considering strengths and weaknesses of the Baird facility. The Park’s recreation offerings were identified as one of its strongest characteristics. The group noted, however, that a good portion of the Park’s infrastructure is aging, outdated, or inefficient. Therefore, a many of the actions proposed here focus on upgrading, retrofitting, and repurposing buildings, and amenities already at the park, with the goal of becoming a more relevant and sustainable facility.

The group also looked at regional demographics and visitor recreation preferences, which have evolved since the Park was first conceived. To ensure that Baird’s offerings reflect current recreation demand, the master plan proposes a range of new and updated outdoor amenities, to include an accessible multi-use path, expanded event facilities, and an exercise route.

The Park is also part of an important ecological complex that provides habitat for rare and endangered species. Therefore, the master plan proposes expanding efforts to protect these species by enhancing existing habitats, adding new protections, and improving invasive species management. Recognizing that wildlife travel across property lines, the group also included a goal to improve habitat connectivity both within and outside the park’s borders.

Finally, the group agreed that more efficient and well-designed staff facilities are integral to a well-functioning park that offers a high-quality visitor experience while minimizing its impact on the environment. Actions proposed in the plan include providing up-to-date and well-designed facilities at the park’s regional maintenance center, a new park manager’s house, and upgraded utilities to improve energy efficiency across the board. These are important actions for attracting and retaining staff and providing a safe, comfortable, and efficient working environment.

This plan is the product of months of research, many hours of discussion, and -- finally -- converting ideas into actions, with the overall goal of making James Baird State Park a great destination, a thriving natural environment, and a good neighbor within the community and region.
Photo Credits

Unless shown otherwise, all images are from the OPRHP photo collection or in the public domain.


P. 14 https://www.teatown.org/pollinator-pathways/

P. 16 https://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/7166.html

References


6 OPRHP. *History of the Baird House,* digital project files.


8 Ibid.


Ibid.