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Eagle Island readies for summer campers

By Kim Dedam

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Camp experiences at Eagle Island are available for overnight and day sessions this summer.

UPPER SARANAC LAKE | Summer day and starry night walks on pine-padded trails are coming. Outdoor adventure, swimming and paddling excursions are scheduled at Eagle Island Camp for July and August.

Eagle Island Camp is moving forward in 2021 with Overnight Camp options for girls and co-ed Day Camp programs for children along with weekends for women, alumni and families.

Sessions at the historic summer camp will have fewer slots in light of Covid pandemic restrictions.

But the return to on-site outdoor and overnight adventure is a welcome moment for generations

of women who brought Eagle Island Camp back for public access.

Dedicated to outdoor experience and education, the camp is managed by a board made up largely of former campers. The site and its historic environs were once Levi P. Morton's Great Camp on its own island in Upper Saranac Lake.

The Henry Graves family purchased the property from Morton and later gifted the land and its many rustic buildings and trails to the Girl Scouts. Friends of Eagle Island purchased the property in 2015 and began detailed preservation and rehabilitation of infrastructure here in 2016.

Summer 2019 welcomed the first sessions of youth day camp to the island. And Eagle Island looked to reopen for overnight campers last summer, but decided to stay safe amid the pandemic and wait a year.

Patience over this winter kept the camp community together, and they celebrated the Eagle Island legacy with virtual campfires, sing-along Zoom sessions, auction and reunion events. Hundreds of former campers and volunteers have spent time together online.

And now, EIC Executive Director Paula Michelsen said they are looking forward to reunions in person.

"This summer looks very promising in that we'll be able to open all programs with smaller cohorts and new, carefully distanced sleeping arrangements," she told the Sun last week.

This will be the first Girls Overnight Camp session on the island since 2008.

"One of the qualities that makes Eagle Island special is that it is small," Michelsen said.

"We are scheduling a reduced capacity for campers per week, but that will allow a more personalized experience for a first-time camper, especially coming off of a covid year. The island is a wonderful place for small groups."

EIC will host Girls Overnight Camp sessions in July for girls in Grades 5 through 9. Another two weeks, from late June to early July are set aside for [Day Camp](#) for girls and boys in Grades 3 through 6. An Alumni & Friends Women's Retreat will be held from June 17 to June 20.

There are two [Family Camp](#) sessions: July 25 to July 31, and Aug. 1 to Aug. 7. And [Women's Wellness Weekend](#) will be held on the island from Aug. 27 to Aug 29.

Trips by pontoon boat to and from camp leave from the Eagle Island dock at Gilpin Bay on Upper Saranac Lake.

"It is an unplugged camping experience, offering young people and families a chance to explore and grow in an environment that many of us haven't had all year," Michelsen said.

"We have planned unique outdoor experiences with swim instruction and free swim time at the beach; water sports: paddling, kayaks and canoes, nature education throughout the trail system, as well as survival skills instruction, and unstructured time, too."

The summer programs are designed to make use of all the island has to offer in its special place in the Adirondacks, Michelsen said.

Overnight campers will use tents, several of the small cabins, and one of the historic buildings. Many former campers remember the renowned tent platforms that are arranged around and among the island's trails. They aren't going to be in use this summer with the smaller cohort campers, Michelsen said.

But they will open in subsequent summers, once the threat of pandemic ends.

"Our Camp Director, Katrina Dearden, brings many years of outdoor camp leadership experience to the island. She's wonderful," Michelsen said.

Dearden says outdoor, unplugged summer camp will be a welcome change from the past year's isolation, especially as students will have spent a significant amount of time taking classes online.

"We've prepared great opportunities for kids to develop social skills and make friends off-screen, a place to develop independence and explore nature outside their own backyards," she said.

"Eagle Island is excited to welcome everyone back. Programs will look a bit different to keep everyone safe, but we are meeting all Covid protocols set by the Centers for Disease Control, the American Camp Association, and the New York State Department of Health."

Small groups and longer breaks between activities are part of the safety plan, Dearden said, along with added nature excursions and use of unique natural settings on the island.

Registration for [Eagle Island Camp](#) is open.

There are also positions available for staff and summer jobs at EIC, which might provide a good experience for students interested or completing majors in Outdoor Education, Conservation and Wilderness Training. The camp sessions will be completed before college begins in August.

"We're ready and really excited to open Eagle Island this summer," Michelsen said. To find out more or register for camp or weekend sessions: eagleisland.org ■