

CENTRAL PARK

B Y C L A Y L O R D

The creation of a park in New York City first became a citywide topic of discussion in the mid-1840s, and emerged as an issue in the mayoralty campaign of 1851. Both candidates were in favor, and by 1853, most of the land for the new park had been purchased.

And what a parksite it was! Prior to 1857, Central Park was a barren wasteland in mid-Manhattan. The land was strewn with rocks and boulders, and contained low-lying swamps.

A competition was held to determine the design of the park that would later be called a "bold democratic experiment" — a people's park, a completely man-made landscape providing bucolic relief from the noise of the bustling city surrounding it.

Winner of the competition was the Greensward Plan of Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, and between 1857 and 1873 the Park's 843 acres were transformed into a carefully sculpted and scenic park containing lakes, waterfalls, rolling grasslands and fountains.

The Park flourished up to the time Robert Moses became Parks Commissioner in 1934. Under Moses' stewardship, the Park began to deviate from the stated design goals of Olmsted and Vaux. It became more a site of active recreation than passive relaxation and sightseeing, and much of its originally feral character and naturalistic acreage was changed through the addition of well-manicured gardens, ballfields and playgrounds. The cycle of decline deepened during the 1960s — when crowds of 250,000 people drawn to "love-ins" and "happenings" trampled lush lawns into patches of dirt — and the 1970s, when New York City's fiscal crisis diverted monies previously spent on battling the effects of vandalism, erosion and wear and tear on Park facilities.

A nonprofit organization called the Central Park Conservancy has embarked on a 15-year program to rebuild the Park. All Park areas are slated for rehabilitation, and the program is expected to cost around \$150 million — not too large a price to pay to restore mid-Manhattan's idyllic refuge to its original pristine condition.



PARK PASTIMES

Millions of people, tourists and native New Yorkers alike, visit Central Park annually. Many are attracted by the sheer variety of recreational activities possible in the Park. The listings below summarize these offerings, and you can locate the facilities listed by matching the grid references given with those on the map of Central Park on page 284-285. Please note that many activities involving the use of courts or ballfields also require advance reservations or permits; it helps to plan ahead. The best sources of general information about the Park are the Central Park Conservancy (830 5th Ave.; 360-8236) and the visitors center (The Dairy; 397-3156). Guest Informant is published annually and makes every effort to provide up-to-date information at the time of publication. But before visiting any of the recreational facilities listed, please call ahead to confirm hours of operation, permit availability, rental rates or any other information you may need to plan your activities.

— Compiled by Clay Lord



BASEBALL/SOFTBALL

Fields for these sports are located at several sites in the Park. Reservations/permits are necessary at all fields and can be arranged by calling 408-0213 or 408-0209.

BASKETBALL

A court is located northeast of the Great Lawn (C.85), and is available on a first-come, first-served basis.

BIKING

The Park's roadways are closed to automobiles from 7 p.m. Friday to 6 a.m. Monday, and on weekends are taken over by bicyclists. Traffic is strictly one-way, and flows counterclockwise. The Century Road Club (718/343-8888) sponsors races around the Park's six miles of bike trails. You can also join their weekly rides, held Saturday at 7 a.m.; meet at 78th St. and

East Drive. For bicycle rentals, contact the Loeb Boathouse (E.75) at 517-2233; bikes rent for \$5 per hour. Another rental source is West Side Bicycles, 231 W. 96th St. (663-7531). They rent three-speeds for \$3 per hour or \$15 per day; 10-speeds are \$5 per hour or \$25 per day. Deposit required.

BIRD-WATCHING

The prime bird-watching venue in the Park is the 37-acre Ramble (C.76), a rustic and heavily wooded area in the center of the Park. Those who seek a glimpse of hawks, ruby-crowned kinglets or orioles should sign up for a birding tour offered by the American Museum of Natural History in spring and fall months. Call Stephen Quinn at 873-1300 for information. The New York City Audubon Society (691-7483) also sponsors outings in the fall and spring, convening at 7:30 a.m. Monday and Wednesday at 72nd St. and 5th Ave. (E.72). Cost is \$4 for nonmembers.

BOATING

With a fleet of nearly 200 rowboats, the Loeb Boathouse (E.75) rents boats for use on the adjoining lake. Fees are \$5 per hour, and a \$20 deposit is required.

CHESS AND CHECKERS

Even board-game aficionados have a place in Central Park. The Chess and Checkers House (C.64) is a small brick building with 10 indoor and 24 outdoor tables; outdoor tables are available for play during daylight hours, and indoor tables can be used weekends, 11:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Equipment can be borrowed at the Dairy.

FISHING

In the spring, all of Central Park's lakes are stocked with bass, carp and catfish. You can fish anywhere without a permit, but there are no bait and tackle facilities in the Park.



FOLK DANCING

Folk dancing is held regularly on weekends, 2 p.m. until dusk, at the statue of King Wladyslaw Jagiello of Poland (C.80). Saturday sessions are hosted by the New Prosperity Folk Dancers (533-6345), Sunday sessions by the Central Park Folk Dancers (673-3930).

GONDOLA RIDES

A Venetian gondola, *The Daughter of Venice*, offers rides around the Lake (C.75) from May through October, 5 to 10 p.m. Rates are \$20 for the half-hour ride, and reservations can be made by calling the Loeb Boathouse at 517-2233.

HANSOM CAB RIDES

Hansom cabs, horse-drawn covered carriages, can be hired on Central Park South and on most streets bordering the park; rates are \$17.50 for the first half-hour, and \$5 for each additional quarter-hour.

HORSEBACK RIDING

There are some four-and-a-half miles of bridle trails in the Park. Horses (with English saddles) can be rented at the Claremont Riding Academy, 175 W. 89th St. (724-5101). Rental hours are weekdays, 6:30 a.m. to 6 p.m.; weekends, until 4 p.m. Rate is \$20 per hour, and lessons can also be arranged; call for lesson information. Horses must stay on bridle path, and galloping is prohibited.

ICE SKATING

Closed for several years for renovation, Wollman Rink (E.63) reopens in the winter of 1986. Lasker Rink (C.107) is a swimming pool in summer, but is frozen over in the winter months. Skate rentals are available at both locations.



MODEL BOAT SAILING

Model boat sailing is the main activity at the Conservatory Water (E.74), a shallow pool. Season permits to store model boats at the nearby Kerbs Boathouse are available for \$10; call 397-3156 for information.

RACE WALKING

The swiftly striding members of the New York Walkers Club (722-WALK) congregate on weekends at Fifth Ave. and 90th St. (E.90). Free walking clinics held Saturdays at 9 a.m.; group workouts on Sundays.

ROLLER SKATING

Just east of the Sheep Meadow on a non-vehicular roadway is a paved circular track especially for roller skaters (C.66). Skates can be rented from the Mineral Springs Pavilion (C.69) on weekdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; weekends, from 9:30 a.m. Rates are \$6 for the first hour and \$2 for each additional half-hour; deposit required.



RUNNING

The most popular area in the Park for running is the track surrounding the Reservoir (C.90); a lap measures 1.7 miles. If you want some company, join the Saturday morning runs of the New York Road Runners Club (860-4455); meet at 5th Ave. and 90th St. (E.90) at 10 a.m.

SOCCER

There are four soccer fields at the North Meadow (C.99) and one on the Great Lawn (C.82). To secure a field, you should obtain a permit; call 408-0209 for permit information.

SWIMMING

Lasker Pool (C.107) is open daily during the summer, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Lockers available; bring your own lock.

TENNIS

There are 26 clay and four all-weather courts (W.95) available for play April through November. Open daily, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Permits required; call 360-8204.

VOLLEYBALL

Volleyball courts are located east of the Sheep Meadow (C.66). Permits are required; call 408-0209.

WALKING TOURS

From early June through Labor Day, the Urban Park Rangers (397-3091) conduct walking tours of the Park. On Saturdays at 1:30 p.m., a general walk is offered from the Dairy (C.65) to Belvedere Castle (C.79). This is followed by a 3 p.m. walk from Belvedere to the Dairy, which focuses on the natural history of the Park. Another option is to pick up brochures describing self-guided walking tours of some of the Park's most picturesque areas; these are available at the Dairy for 50 cents per brochure.



Photos: (opposite page, top) Steve Elmore®/The Stock Market; (this page, center) Katy von Brandenfels; (others) Sara Cedar Miller/Central Park Conservancy.

KID STUFF

Central Park has an incredible variety of activities geared especially for children. In addition, there are 21 playgrounds within the park. They are fenced in to keep youngsters from wandering off, and feature jungle gyms, swings, sandboxes and other equipment. Refer to the map for playground locations.

Children's programs are centered in Belvedere Castle (C.79), also known as the Central Park Learning Center. This restored castle offers superb views in all directions, and its "Discovery Chamber" presents a changing selection of exhibits and games designed for kids. Belvedere is open Tuesday through Sunday, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Year round, Saturday workshops are offered for those in the 5-to-11-years age bracket, from 1 to 2:30 p.m. These programs are free; call for program schedule and reservations at 772-0210.

Just west of Belvedere is the Swedish Cottage (W.79), home of the Marionette Theater Company. An 80-seat theater in the cottage regularly presents marionette shows; for program information and reservations, call 988-9093. Puppet shows are presented both at the Swedish Cottage and at the Heckscher Puppet House (C.62); for information on the Heckscher Puppet House programs, call 397-3089.

The Lehman Children's Zoo (E.65) is a perennial children's favorite, and offers themed areas such as Old MacDonald's Farm, Noah's Ark and Hansel and Gretel's house, plus a 100-animal petting zoo. The zoo is open daily, 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Nearby is a charming Carousel (C.65), located due west of the Dairy across Center Drive (879-0244). Complete with 57 hand-carved horses, two chariots and an old-fashioned organ, the 1903-vintage carousel operates weekdays, 10:30 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.; weekends, until 5:45 p.m. Cost is 50 cents per ride.

A final highlight for children is the Park's annual storytelling program, which begins in April and runs through September. Every Saturday from 11 a.m. to noon, storytellings are held at the statue of Hans Christian Andersen (E.74), located next to the Conservatory Water. □