

Step-by-Step

TRAILS GUIDE

To

CHEESEQUAKE

STATE

PARK



State of New Jersey, Department of Environmental Protection
Division of Parks and Forestry • State Park Service
njparksandforests.org



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CHEESEQUAKE STATE PARK

Cheesequake State Park, located on the coast in central New Jersey, is a fabulous place to explore a variety of east coast ecosystems from lowland salt marsh to upland woodlands. The trails of Cheesequake allow you to step into the woods, traverse the marshes, see the wildlife, hear the birds, smell the earth and get away from it all for an hour or so – all within a stone’s throw from the Garden State Parkway.

TRAILS OF CHEESEQUAKE STATE PARK

Well-known among plant enthusiasts, Cheesequake State Park is a transitional zone between New Jersey’s southern and northern vegetation. This means that it is the southernmost tip of the range for northern NJ species and the northernmost end of the range for species more typically found in South Jersey. Add to this, the fact that Cheesequake has lowland saltmarshes, tidal creeks, streams, a lake, meadows, pine barrens, and other forest ecosystems and it all adds up to this being the perfect place to hit the trails!

Cheesequake has five official trails of varying lengths and difficulties that traverse through the various ecosystems of the park. The four hiking-only trails, all originating at the trailhead in the Trailhead Parking Lot, take you through the Cheesequake Natural Area. The White Trail is a multi-use loop trail for hikers and mountain-bikers. Permitted uses for all trails are indicated on trail signage.

TRAIL SENSE AND SAFETY






Trail Markings: Official trails in the state park are marked with colored blazes on plastic posts or as painted disks or markers on trees. Entrances to the trails are well-defined wooden arbors that bear the trail’s name. Permitted uses will also be indicated at the trailhead. Please stay on the trails. Note: A small percentage of the unofficial trails are represented on the printed map as a thin dotted line. Museum Road, Perrine Road, Dock Road, and Booth Road can be used to enhance your explorations.

Please keep the trails safe for everyone – do not alter the trail markings in any way.

Be prepared: Consider bringing water, snacks, sunscreen, insect repellent, and a hat. Check the weather before you go, dress appropriately, and tell someone where you intend to hike and when you expect to finish.

Ticks: It is best to stay on trails to avoid prime tick habitat. Ticks, however, always seem to find us wherever we go ☹️ Repellent is recommended. Also, wear light-colored clothing, tuck long pants into socks, check yourself all over when you get home, and put clothing into wash immediately (A wash might not kill ticks, but 20 minutes in the dryer should.)

Report: If you observe any trail maintenance issues, please report them to the Park Office (732) 566-2161

Cheesequake Trail Lengths at a Glance	
 Blue Trail (2.1 mi)	 White Trail (1.7 mi)
 Green Trail (3.1 mi)	 Yellow Trail (.3 mi)
 Red Trail (1.3 mi)	

THE TRAILS OF CHEESEQUAKE

HIKING TRAILS - Trailhead

The main entrance to the four hiking trails is off the Trailhead Parking Lot located just beyond the park entrance on the left. At this trailhead, there are kiosks and signs with maps and information, including the trail lengths. All four hiking trails begin at this point, share the space for a while, and then peel off one at a time. All trails are loop trails that return to the parking lot. You could pick one trail of a length you prefer and follow that color blaze, or you could plan a more elaborate route with multiple trails to suite your own needs. All trails have mileage markers on the trail, which helps keep track of distance.

Trail lengths vary from a third of a mile (Yellow Trail) to just over three miles (Green Trail) with a variety of routes and options possible.

While on the trail, look for the many interpretive signs that highlight interesting features.

The Yellow Trail

Yellow • 0.75-mile-loop • Hiking

Moderate difficulty: Some hills, stairs, uneven terrain

This short trail makes for a quick, scenic walk. After leaving the parking area, the Yellow Trail runs together with the Green and Red Trails before splitting to the right. The trail passes through mixed hardwood forest with a field of highbush blueberries. Look for songbirds feeding on the fruit and insects of the lowbush blueberries, sweet pepper bush, and sassafras.

The trail heads down some step/boardwalks then slightly uphill again. At between a third and a quarter of a mile, you'll be at the top of a long series of steps. To the right is Hook's Creek Lake. The Yellow Trail continues to the left at the bottom of the staircase. As you continue along the path, notice that it becomes sandy and that there is a saltmarsh to your right. The tall vegetation in the saltmarsh is the common reed, also known as "*Phragmites*". The shorter, grassier vegetation is salt marsh cord grass (*Spartina alterniflora*) and salt hay (*Spartina patens*).

Eastern red-cedar trees are growing along the salt marsh, to the left of the trail. Birds enjoy the blue berries of these evergreens. Listen here, especially in late spring and early summer, for red-winged blackbirds singing their "Conk-la-ree".

The trail continues to skirt around the edge of the saltmarsh. There are a few interpretive signs along the way telling you what plants are in the area. Plants with leaves growing in groups of three might be poison ivy! Take care!

About a half a mile into the walk, you might see skunk cabbage growing in the marshy areas. This is a sign that these wetlands contain freshwater and not saltwater. Listen here for woodpeckers

As the trail turns left and up the hill, the wetlands are left behind and you return to the maple-dominated woodlands. Towards the end, you can turn right to go on the other trails, uphill to Nature Center, or straight up the wooden step/boardwalk to the end of the trail.

The Red Trail

Red • 1.3-mile-loop • Hiking

Moderate • Some hills, steps, uneven terrain

The Red Trail begins at the Trailhead Parking Lot, and shares a path with the Green Trail before they diverge at Perrine Road. At this point, the Red Trail heads left and passes Interval Pond. In the spring, listen for the musical call of tiny frogs known as spring peepers. The males have a high pitched “peep” that can carry for up to a mile, attracting females. Eggs are laid on submerged vegetation and tadpoles emerge within two weeks, slowly changing into tiny frogs. By late June, the adult frogs have all left the water to live in the forest.

After crossing Museum Road, the Red Trail passes through a pine barrens ecosystem. Pine barrens in New Jersey are dominated by pitch pines but are also home to oaks and mountain laurel. Most of the plants in pine barrens habitats are adapted to survive varying effects of fire. The extreme heat of forest fires causes the pine cones to open and release their seeds. Fire also helps minimize competition from underbrush. Pitch pines are well adapted to the sandy acidic soils of this area and without regular fire to suppress oaks and trigger pine seed release, oaks would become the dominant tree here.

Once you reach the campground road, the trail continues under the wooden trail arch where the Green and Red Trails merge together again. The Gordon Field Group Campgrounds can be seen on the right of the trail. Once again the trail intersects with Museum Road. Turn right onto the paved Museum Road which leads back to the trail head.

The Blue Trail

Blue • 2.1-mile-loop • Hiking

Moderate • Some hills, steps, boardwalks, and uneven terrain

When you leave the Trailhead Parking Lot and enter the trail you will be in a mixed hardwood forest dominated by oak trees. Chipmunks might be heard running and digging in the leaf litter in search of acorns. The trail has a lot of tree roots across it, and there are several sections of ups and downs. Be sure to watch your step.

You will come to an elevated point in the trail where there’s a nice view through the trees of the salt marsh. Continue along the trail through the forest and walk down a big set of steps to a small bridge/boardwalk over a freshwater wetland area. Frogs may be heard calling in the spring and summer. Looking to the right, you will see the tall, waving common reed (*Phragmites*) that grows along the edge of the salt marsh.

As you continue along the trail, note that the ground is compacted soil - littered with oak leaves and acorns. After you proceed down a twisty section of the trail, the ground will slowly begin to change. What was once a hard, compacted soil will become a softer sandy soil littered with pine needles. You have now entered a pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*) forest. The pitch pine is recognized by its group of three stiff needles that grown

in a bundle, or group. As you travel through the pitch pine forest, you may notice that the air has taken on a pine-like scent. Keep an eye out along the trunks of the pines, you may see some new growth of green needles where the sun is hitting the trunks. Be sure to keep a listen for the distinctive “chick – a – dee – dee –dee” call of the chickadee.

As you come out of the forest, the trail crosses over Perrine Road. The tall pine trees you now see are white pine (*Pinus strobus*). White pines are recognized by their long, soft needles that grow in bundles of five. The branches of the tree also grow out along the trunk in a ring-like, fashion.

Make a quick left to continue on the Blue Trail. Look out for the trail marker. There are some bayberry shrubs along the right side of the trail.

Continue along the trail and to the pond. Visit the bird blind to take a look at wildlife activity on the pond. Exit the bird blind and continue along the trail. The trail goes around the pond and loops back to Perrine Road. Perrine Road, which will turn from gravel to black top, will lead you again into mixed hardwood forest. Perrine Road ends and at Museum Road which leads back to the parking lot.

The Green Trail

Green • 3.1-mile-loop • Hiking

Moderate • Some hills, steps, uneven terrain

Walk down a stepped boardwalk through a mixed hardwood forest of oaks, sassafras and sweet pepperbush. At the end of the stairway, the Yellow Trail peels off to the right; stay LEFT to remain on the Green, Red and Blue Trails. A small bridge leads uphill to the Nature Center where hikers are encouraged to visit and learn more about the natural resources of the park.

The trail continues up a long set of stairs to a T-intersection where the Blue Trail takes a right turn; stay LEFT to continue on the Green/Red Trail. After crossing Perrine Road (which serves as a portion of the blue trail) the Red Trail peels off to the left while the Green Trail veers to the RIGHT, goes downhill and enters what was once a thriving Atlantic white cedar swamp. The cedar swamp has transitioned, through natural succession, into a wetland forest of red maples, sweet pepperbush and birch.

The trail crosses over Museum Road into a forest. Look around for some large eastern white pine trees (some of which may be around 150 years old) and notice the white sand beneath your feet. The trail continues through a mix of hardwood trees and up a set of stairs to one of Cheesequake’s freshwater floodplains. A viewing platform under a black gum tree (1.7 miles into the trail) overlooks the open floodplain dotted with red maples and river birches. This is an excellent area to stop and view dragonflies feeding over the grasses or listen to the frogs that live within the floodplain. The trail moves upward into the hardwood forests along iron stained streambeds with abundant ferns growing along the ravines.

Approximately 2.5 miles into the Green Trail, a bridge provides dry footing over a tributary and the trail moves upward toward the campground passing a small stand of American beeches. Turn left at the campground road, hike for 0.1 miles and turn right under the wooden trail arch where the Green and Red Trails merge together again. The Gordon Field Group Campgrounds can be seen on the right of the trail. The trail intersects with Museum Road. Turn right onto the paved Museum Road that leads back to the trail head.

The White Trail

White • 2.7-mile-loop • Multi-use

Moderate difficulty • many short hills, uneven terrain, and obstacles

The White Trail is the only multi-use trail in the park and is open to hikers and bicyclists. Please use caution and courtesy when using this trail. Once in the park, continue past the large parking lot that serve as the trailhead for the Green/Red/Blue/Yellow trails. Turn right at the next road intersection and look for small parking area on the right side of the road after 0.2 miles. The trail leaves from this parking area, creates a loop, and returns to the parking lot where it began.

The White Trail highlights wetlands, forests, and fields, and provides a great variety of wildlife viewing opportunities. Soon after beginning, the trail passes a freshwater swamp ringed by red maples. The path begins to rise and overlooks a small ravine and parallels the Garden State Parkway to the north. Further along, as it passes into Booth Field, take a moment to visit the butterfly garden and enjoy the winged visitors. Though many butterfly species will visit the garden between spring and fall, the striking black and orange monarch is one of the most popular. After leaving the field, the White Trail continues its winding path through the forest, skirting the boundary of the property.

The trail is moderate difficulty with many short dips and elevation changes. There are many sections with rocks, roots, and other obstacles favored by mountain bikers.