

**BELGRADE LAKES:
A LOVE STORY**

**ENDLESS DAYS AT
THE FAMILY CAMP**

**SUMMER BOOKS: FIND
YOUR BEACH READ**

Down East

THE MAGAZINE OF MAINE | JUNE 2019

MAINE LAKES

34

**CLASSIC SPOTS
TO PADDLE,
FISH, AND SWIM**

**PLUS
ONCE MORE
TO MOMMA
BALDACCI'S**



fire up the boat and we're off. Five minutes in, as we pass between the green and red buoys in the channel, we spot a great blue heron taking wing, and I cut the engine. We float there in silence for a moment, my wife and I, watching that beautiful, awkward bird fly past. Mist rises off the water.

Loons call across the lake, one to another: the female shrieking maniacally, the male answering, a melancholy *hoo*.

Deedie and I have lived here, in Rome, in the Belgrade Lakes region of central Maine, for almost 30 years now. The Belgrade Lakes chain consists of seven ponds, each with its own character. The biggest is Great Pond — over 8,000 acres and abundant with brown trout, brook trout, landlocked salmon, white perch, and pickerel. Messalonskee Lake — known by Belgravians as Snow Pond — is 3,500 acres; you can find some good northern pike there. Then there's North Pond and East Pond, Long and Salmon and McGrath: each with its own unique history, each connected to another by tiny streams. But those streams connect

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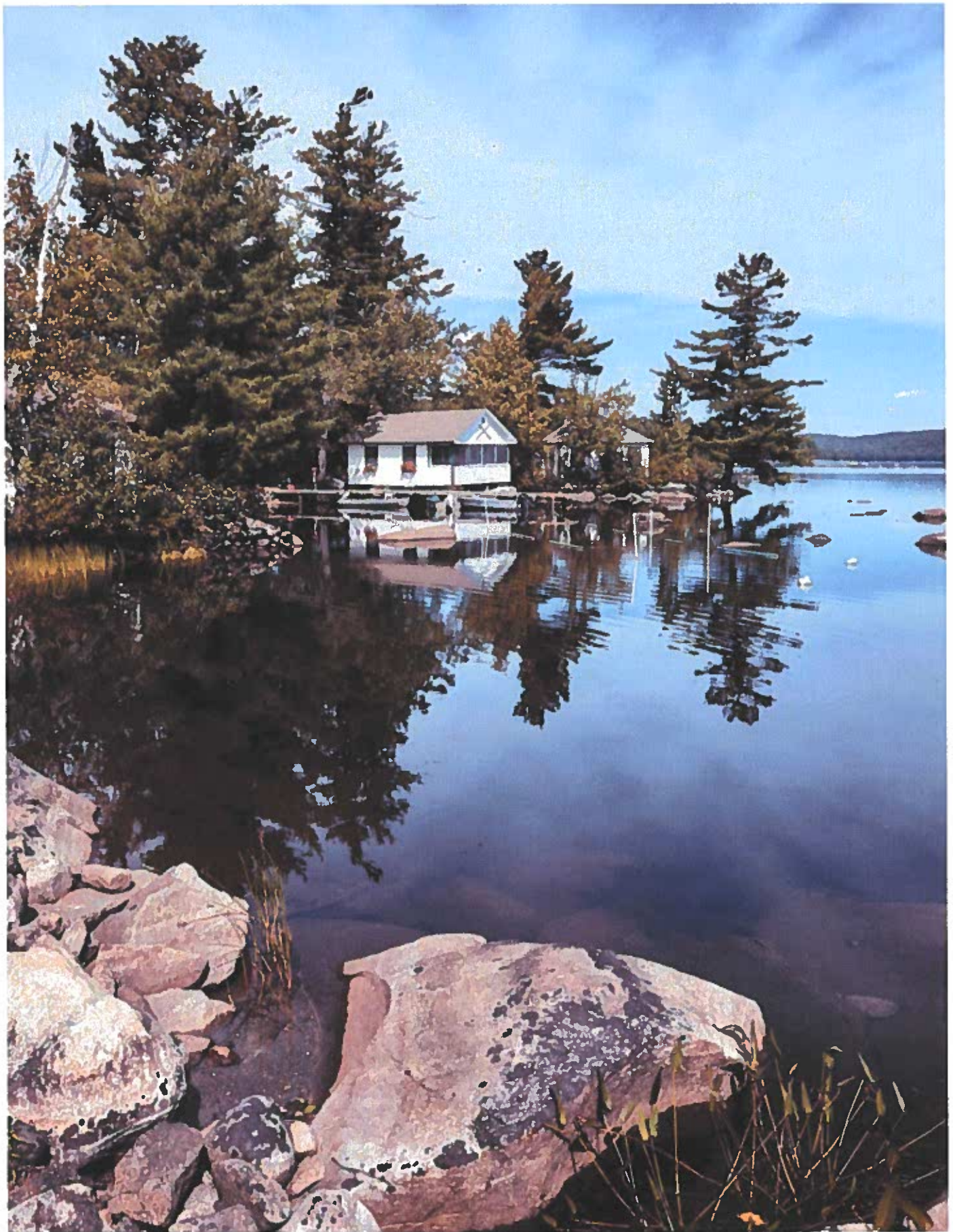
It was on Great Pond that E. B. White spent boyhood summers, at [Bear Spring Camps](https://www.bearspringcamps.com/). His classic essay "[Once More to the Lake](https://genius.com/E-b-white-once-more-to-the-lake-annotated)" is about Belgrade. Here he is, singing the pleasures of fishing in early morning and remembering fishing in the same place as a child: "I felt the same damp moss covering the worms in the bait can, and saw the dragonfly alight on the tip of my rod as it hovered a few inches from the surface of the water. It was the arrival of this fly that convinced me beyond any doubt that everything was as it always had been, that the years were a mirage and there had been no years."

There are moments, living in Belgrade Lakes, when things still feel this way. I look out my window and see fishermen drifting past in their boats. Sometimes I swear they are the same guys I saw drifting past on a similar morning, some 30 years ago now, when we first looked out on these waters.

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South Island Camp on Long Beach celebrates 20 years this summer. Above: Coast Road designer Park and Ben Ford built this 1100 sq ft cabin in 1970. Photo by [unreadable]

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The lake my wife and I live on, Long Pond, is divided into a northern and a southern half, connected by a channel. In the middle of the channel sits rustic, adorable Castle Island, home since 1929 to a classic fishing camp. When I first moved here, there really was a Horatio Castle running the place. These days, [Castle Island Camps](http://www.castleislandcamps.com/) is run by the Rice Family, John and Rhonda and their daughters. But in most ways, it is unchanged since the old days: The dozen-odd cabins are still centered around the main lodge, where visitors gather around the stone fireplace. Yes, there is a moose head on the wall. No, there is no television.

The southern end of Long Pond narrows to a lovely stream, this one connecting to Messalonskee Lake. At the other end, the northern tip is fed by Whittier Brook, which comes down out of the Kennebec Highlands and makes a merry, clear sound as it rushes over granite boulders. Some people say the fishing is better in the southern half of the lake — Horatio Castle used to tell people how to find “Lucky Point” and its legendary “salmon hole” — but it’s the northern half, which my wife and I are crossing this morning, where you’ll find the village of Belgrade Lakes, a small collection of buildings on a finger of land between Long and Great Ponds.

Today, we’re off to the summer farmer’s market. On another visit, we might drop in on one of the town’s two longest-tenured restaurants: the homey [Sunset Grill](https://www.facebook.com/Sunset-Grill-127493177265155/) or the stone-cold classic [Village Inn and Tavern](https://www.villageinnandtavern.com/), known for its slow-roasted duck. The Village Inn is flanked by a pair of docks — one for folks coming from Long Pond, another for visitors from Great Pond, by way of a connecting stream. There are a lot of things I love about this town, but going out to dinner by boat, tying up at a dock in front of the Village Inn — how great is that?

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Then there's [Day's Store](http://www.go2days.com/), Belgrade Lakes' unofficial town hall, which has its own set of docks on the Long Pond side. Day's has been run by the same family since 1958 — it's now on its fourth generation. This is the place for homemade doughnuts and coffee, for your copy of the [Kennebec Journal](https://www.centralmaine.com/) or a six-pack of [Sea Dog](http://seadogbrewing.com/), for corn on the cob, lobsters, fudge, or a fishing net. There's a sign out front, proclaiming the hours: "Summer: NEARLY ALL OF THEM. Winter: DAMN FEW."

Our town has been a tourist destination since the 1920s. Once, the majestic Belgrade Hotel stood on a small bluff on Long Pond. Summer people from New York and Philadelphia used to come off the steam train to Belgrade Depot — now a [Hammond Lumber](https://www.hammondlumber.com/) yard — then settle into the massive inn for the summer. It was an old-school grand hotel, built in 1900, with 75 rooms, gardens, a golf course. But the inn burned to the ground in 1956, putting an end to that era — although some folks will tell you the era had already ended a decade earlier, after the war, when cars replaced trains and small cabins succeeded grand hotels as the vacation options of choice.

Golf continues here, anyway — boy, does it ever. Built by entrepreneur and philanthropist Harold Alfond in the mid-1990s, the course at the [Belgrade Lakes Golf Club](https://belgradelakesgolf.com/) is a showstopper, designed by architect Clive Clark to stretch across a dramatic ridge. Alfond said he wanted to build "a country club for the average guy." I don't golf, but the course's 360-degree views of the lakes make me wish I did.

Life in Belgrade has a seasonal rhythm to it. The ice disappears by mid-April, and the fishermen arrive soon after. In summer, it can be crowded, the golf pilgrims wandering town before their tee times, the lakes filling up with bass boats and water skiers and the dreaded Jet Skis. Things thin out again as the colors change. By late fall, Day's is on reduced hours; the Village Inn closes after Thanksgiving.

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“We have all seen

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other, and in this town, but there are constants as well — the love we have for each other, the love we have for this place.”



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In the lodge at Castle Island Camps; guest Ryan Saucier tosses his daughter at Bear Spring Camps; sailboat in the Commodore's Cup regatta on Great Pond; *Liberty*, a 23-foot wooden cabin cruiser on Great Pond; roast duck at the Village Inn and Tavern; on the dock at Bear Spring Camps; mail carrier John Govostes delivers mail by boat on Great Pond; boat racers on the dock at Great Pond's [Camp Runoja](https://runoja.com/)(<https://runoja.com/>), one of the Belgrade Lakes' many summer camps, following a summer regatta.

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the lakes, alongside the shacks of ice fishermen. The “Christmas Stroll” in town is the last celebration before we all turn inward for deep winter. Sometimes, that’s my favorite part of the year — the house warmed by woodstoves, dogs lying on the floor in front of the fireplace, the sound of a neighbor chopping kindling. My wife likes to make stews and chilis and soups in winter; I like to bake hearty loaves of bread — whole wheat, or rye, or pumpernickel brown with molasses. We sit in front of the fire on those long winter nights and drink a cocktail and eat Irish stew from handle bowls and play Scrabble. My wife beats me nearly every time; after 30 years, it no longer surprises me when she makes BLOOPIER on a triple.

Sometimes, in late spring, I’ll get a phone call from someone down south, a friend whose tulips are already out while Deedie and I are still socked in. They always say they’re sorry for us at those times, those friends of mine. I just sit there in the warmth of the fire with our dogs and act like I’m grateful for their pity. But to be honest, I wouldn’t trade places for the world.

In 2003, I got to see what this town was made of when I came out as transgender and published a bestselling book about that transition, called *She’s Not*

There (<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/16892/shes-not-there-by-jennifer-finney-boylan/9780385346979/>).

If you would expect people in a small town in Maine to be close-minded and cruel about LGBTQ issues, you would be wrong. Mostly, my wife and I got to see how good people could be. Again and again, we heard variations on one generous refrain: *Well, you’ve always been our neighbor. We will have your back.*

The lakes have always been a good place for artists and writers, free spirits and iconoclasts. A century ago, the Maine Chance Spa, run by Elizabeth Arden, provided a respite for all sorts of women who needed a little solace. Judy Garland, Ava Gardner, Edna Ferber, and Lillian Gish were among its visitors. Today, the Arden Estate has been transformed by celebrated hero Travis Mills (<https://travismillsfoundation.org/>) into a center supporting wounded American veterans.



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Sailboats on Great Pond.

Ernest Thompson wrote *On Golden Pond* during Memorial Day weekend at his Great Pond camp in 1978, and his play — as well as the film adaptation — captures what life in Belgrade used to be like (and sometimes still is). Thompson has said that his play is about families who used to spend whole summers at the lake, as he did as a child, in places where there was no television or phone. The Thompson cottage, instead, was filled with books. Now 68, Thompson has continued to visit Great Pond all his life.

As our boat makes its way toward the village, Deedie and I see a lot of summer cottages, some of them

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We arrive at the dock, and Deedie and I step onto the bank in front of the Village Inn. Two doors down is the headquarters of the [7 Lakes Alliance](https://www.7lakesalliance.org/), a nonprofit focused on environmental conservation in Belgrade. Among other things, the group leads efforts to combat nutrient pollution and invasives in the Belgrade Lakes, helping educate homeowners on how to be better stewards of the lakes and of this precious, fragile region. The group also hosts the Sunday farmer's market in the side yard of its headquarters. Today, we'll buy some quiche from [Hello, Good Pie](https://hellogoodpiecocom.wordpress.com/) and maybe some sausages and ice cream and coffee. There will likely be someone there picking a banjo. I know I'll see at least a few faces that I've known for over 30 years now. We've all seen changes in each other, and in this town, but there are constants as well — the love we have for each other, the love we have for this place.

Before we step off the dock and into town, my wife and I pause and look back in the direction from which we've come. There in the distance is Vienna Mountain, atop which is a blueberry farm, and the trees and trails of the [Kennebec Highlands](https://www.7lakesalliance.org/blog/land2), the Maine reserve lands I sometimes explore with my mountain bike. There are loons and herons on the lake and red-winged blackbirds flitting among the trees.

And there, on the far bank, almost invisible to me now, is our home. Music calls to us from the market in the village. My wife and I join hands.

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Snow Pond Center for the Arts and New England Music Camp announce their 2019 Summer Music Series

Snow Pond Center for the Arts and the New England Music Camp announce their 2019 Summer Music Series. Featuring some of the world's finest musicians and performers, the 2019 series is blends a variety of thrilling performances, from the Broadway Under the Stars: The Classics of Rodgers and Hammerstein with the Snow Pond Symphony, to The Stranger: A Tribute to Billy Joel, music lovers are in for an incredible summer of music spanning from Broadway to Christian Pop-Rock, and Billy Joel to Johnny Cash!

On June 29, Snow Pond will present Broadway Under the Stars: The Classics of Rodgers and Hammerstein with the Snow Pond Symphony Chamber Orchestra. Snow Pond welcomes some of Broadway's top performers for this one-night-only event. Directed by Broadway veteran Frances Mercanti-Anthony (Spring Awakening, Jerusalem) and Music Directed by Paul Staroba (A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder, My Fair Lady), this spectacular evening is sure to be one you don't want to miss and features performers from blockbusters such as Les Miserables, Beauty and the Beast, Mame, and Camelot! The concert will begin at 7:30 p.m. at the Bowl-In-The-Pines. Tickets: \$10-\$30.

On July 20, New England Music Camp will present its 40th Annual NEMC Pops Concert at the Bowl in The Pines. Come enjoy a glass of wine as you listen to the beautiful music of the NEMC Symphony Orchestra, Symphonic Band, Chorale and Jazz Ensemble.

This terrific performance that also features a silent auction and door prizes. All proceeds go directly to the NEMC scholarship fund. Performance begins at 7:30 p.m. Tickets: \$20.

New England Music Camp will continue to hold free weekend concerts and weekly recitals throughout the summer. All concerts are held at the Bowl-In-The Pines at 3 p.m. and all recitals are at Alumni Hall at 7:30



New England Music Camp's stoned Bowl in the Pines fills its surroundings with the sounds of music throughout the summer.

Contributed photo

p.m. NEMC Concerto Competition winners will perform with the faculty orchestra on July 19 and Aug. 9.

Weekend Concerts - July 6, 7, 13, 14, 21, 27, 28 and Aug. 3, 4, 10, 11.

Faculty Artist Recitals - July 3, 10, 24, 26.

Student Honor Recitals - July 12, 17, 19, 31 and Aug. 2, 9.

NEMC Counselor Recital - July 5.

NEMC Musical Theater Showcases - July 18 and Aug. 7.

An NEMC tradition, Maine Appreciation

Day, will be celebrated at the Sunday, Aug. 11 Concert at the Bowl. The Artisan Market will begin at 1 p.m. and run throughout the 3 p.m. Concert. Over 30 artists, craftsmen, and gourmet carts from across the state of Maine will be selling their goods at what is sure to be one of the best Artisan Fairs in the area this summer. Bowl-In-The-Pines, 1 - 6 p.m. Free to the public.

On Aug. 25, Snow Pond welcome The Man In Black: A Tribute to Johnny Cash. With his striking resemblance, spot on mannerisms and baritone voice, Shawn Barker embodies the character and spirit of Johnny Cash. Barker's Tribute to Johnny Cash is an accurate and energetic recreation of an American music icon and the show is bringing the legend back to life onstage for the fans of today and the next generation. Concert will begin at 4 p.m. at the Bowl in the Pines. Tickets: \$20-\$30. Please note: This is a Sunday event, so alcohol will not be sold. There will be a picnic option for ticket holders.

On Sept. 5 Snow Pond will close the summer with The Stranger: A Tribute to Billy Joel. Formed in late summer of 2009, The Stranger has already amassed an impressive list of high profile shows and events across America. All six members residing in the Charlotte area with several decades and thousands of shows between them, it's a musical powerhouse that is quickly being recognized as one of the best live bands in the tribute genre. This concert will begin at 7:30 p.m. at the Bowl in the Pines and is Snow Pond's Sponsor Appreciation Night. Come help us celebrate another tremendous summer season! Tickets: \$25-\$35.

Tickets for all shows are now available! All proceeds from ticketed events go towards student scholarships, and all of Snow Pond's and NEMC's youth educational opportunities and events. Please visit snowpond.org for tickets and details on all summer events.

July 8, 2019

Bowl in the Pines renovation gets boost from Kennebec Savings Bank



COURTESY / SNOW POND CENTER FOR THE ARTS Upgrades to the Bowl in the Pines amphitheater at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts in Sidney, seen here before recent upgrades, are expected to boost the economy of the Belgrade Lakes region and nearby Waterville and Augusta.

By Maureen Milliken

The renovation to the historic Bowl in the Pines amphitheater in Sidney got a boost with a \$25,000 donation from Kennebec Savings Bank.

The \$675,000 renovation to the 89-year-old outdoor stage and its seating area, parking and access is expected to be completed, by next summer. The

amphitheater is part of the Snow Pond Center for the Arts campus on Route 23 in Sidney.

“We are incredibly grateful to Kennebec Savings Bank in support of the Bowl in the Pines project,” said John Wiggin, executive director of Snow Pond, in a news release. “This gift will have a major impact on the renovation of this historic outdoor amphitheater and ultimately supports a project that will benefit the entire central Maine community.”

Andrew Silsby, the bank's president and CEO, said the amphitheater is a “historic gem.”

“We are pleased to provide our support of this important renovation project that will bring even more opportunities for people to enjoy the arts in central Maine.”

The bank's check was presented June 29 on the amphitheater stage at a “Broadway Under the Stars” performance of the Snow Pond Chamber Orchestra, as well as New England Music Camp musicians, which kicked off the center's 2019 summer concert season.

The Bowl in the Pines was built in 1930 and is still one of the nation’s largest outdoor stages, according to Snow Pond officials.

The additional infrastructure, which includes power and gear for lights and sound equipment, will allow Snow Pond to accommodate larger-scale events starting next summer. Snow Pond will scale up to accommodate audiences of up to 7,500 over the next four years, said Christa Johnson, director of development. Before renovations began last year, it accommodated 2,000.

The venue can also accommodate parking for up to 3,000 and is in discussions with area sites about off-site parking arrangements and shuttle logistics, she said.

Boosting the region

The upgrade is aimed at increasing tourism and area visibility and concerts and other events at the venue are expected to draw audiences from beyond Maine, Snow Pond officials have said. Those audiences, Wiggin and Johnson have said, will also spend money in the region.

The Snow Pond Center for the Arts, which includes the Snow Pond Arts Academy charter school, is on Messalonskee Lake and part of the Belgrade Lakes region, between Waterville and Augusta.

"A thriving cultural scene attracts visitors who not only spend their money on the events themselves, but also contribute to local economies by dining in restaurants, lodging in hotels and purchasing gifts and services in the community," according to the news release. The benefit to area businesses is an average \$31.38 spent by each ticket holder, according to "Arts and Economic Prosperity, a project of Americans for the Arts," the release said.

Conservative projections by the arts center are five concerts in the 2020 season with total attendance of 9,000; six in 2021, with a total attendance of 14,000; seven in 2022 with total attendance of 21,000; and eight in 2023, with total attendance of 30,400.

New England Music Camp, which is held on the Snow Pond campus every summer, also holds two ticketed events a year that draw approximately 1,250 each, along with 10 free concerts that draw approximately 500 patrons each, for a total of 7,500 additional guests per summer.

Overall revenues to the local communities, outside of Snow Pond, are estimated to be in the range of \$525,000, \$675,000, \$900,000 and \$1.2 million respectively for years 2020 to 2023, Johnson said.

Much of the renovation, designed by Carla Haskell, of Design Group Collaborative in Ellsworth, is completed, including expanding the stage and adding power poles, a transformer and other infrastructure for electricity and lights.

A major electrical upgrade by Central Maine Power Co. will also include wiring the stage for audio-visual use.

The entrance to the bowl, on Route 23, has been widened to ease bottlenecks.

The renovation is part of wider expansion to the campus, which also includes the Snow Pond Learning & Innovation Center, [was completed last year](#) and houses many functions of the charter school as well as after-school programs for area youth.

October 17, 2018

Snow Pond Learning & Innovation Center finishes with a flourish



PHOTO / MAUREEN MILLIKEN The Snow Pond Learning & Innovation Center is the newest building on the campus in Sidney, and will be the center of its distance learning program. The building was officially dedicated Tuesday.

By Maureen Milliken

The original design for the Snow Pond Center for the Arts Learning & Innovation Center in Sidney didn't include a clock tower, but that was before a \$1.8 million USDA Community Facilities Loan in May.

The **USDA money** allowed the organization to add some square footage and an elevator to the 6,400-square-foot two-story building ... and how better to top off an elevator shaft that with a clock tower?

“To look at it, you’d never know it was an elevator shaft,” John Wiggin, executive director of Snow Pond Center for the Arts, said on Tuesday, before the building’s ribbon-cutting and dedication.

The clock, which is due to arrive in a few weeks from Electric Time Co. Inc., of Medfield, Mass., is one of the last touches remaining for the center, which is used by Snow Pond Arts Academy during the day and in the afternoon by the center’s afterschool program for kindergarten through eighth-graders from around the region.

The building, which opened a year ago, not only has classrooms, but also music practice rooms, study areas and relaxation space. It was built by Snow Pond staff at a cost of about \$1 million, and designed by Mike Richman, of Custom Concepts architects, of Scarborough.

The USDA loan, as well as a previous \$130,000 grant from the USDA, will support the school’s distance learning program.

Christa Johnson, director of development for the arts center, said the technology has been added to three classrooms, and will eventually be added to all 12 classrooms.

The distance learning will allow the academy’s students to take advantage of instruction that wouldn’t otherwise be available in Maine, and is being done with support from the Manhattan School of Music, which has been involved with distance learning for 20 years, she said.

Latest piece in ambitious push



PHOTO / MAUREEN MILLIKEN

The new Snow Pond Learning & Innovation Center rises above the practice huts used by the New England Music Camp in the summer.

The learning center is one piece of an ambitious push for the 40-acre campus that began after Wiggin became executive director in 2010.

Wiggin's grandfather, in 1937 started the New England Music Camp, which still operates at the site in the summer.

The nonprofit Snow Pond Center for the Arts in the past few years has added a music festival, a summer concert series, adult music camp, community music school, the after-school program and the arts academy, which opened as a charter high school two years ago.

Now the nonprofit organization is poised to become a community arts and gathering center that extends beyond Sidney, Wiggin and Johnson said Tuesday.

This year's expanded summer concert series at the Bowl in the Pines amphitheater was the first foray into that expansion. Though upgrades to the Bowl area aren't complete, some 1,700 people from across the country and Canada attended a September performance by Fab Four, a Beatles tribute band.

"It's funny, the concerts are what everybody wants to talk about," Wiggin said. "But we have a lot more going on."

'A lot going on'



PHOTO / MAUREEN MILLIKEN

Executive Director John Wiggin gets a drum roll at Tuesday's ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Wiggin said infrastructure renovations to make the campus usable year-round, including adding parking that will eventually accommodate nearly 1,000 cars, are big piece of the plan.

Another piece is adding two miles of four-season trails in the woods across Route 23. The organization has owned the 285 acres, but hasn't done much with it.

The trails have been cut in the woods, and by next summer will be graded and made accessible for people with mobility issues. While they'll initially be on 135 acres, bridges over marshland will be eventually added to add more miles to the trail systems.

Part of the marshy area is clear enough to be used for ice skating, and that's in the plan, too, Wiggin said.

A parking lot on that side of the road will provide overflow parking for Bowl events, as well as for those using the trails.

The organization has been working with Sidney planning and recreation departments, and the trails will be for public use.

The next step is completing the upgrade to the 88-year-old [Bowl in the Pines](#), a project designed by Carla Haskell of Design Group Collaborative, of Ellsworth.

Much of the work has been done, including expanding the stage and adding infrastructure for electricity and lights, including power poles a transformer that was installed Tuesday. Lights will have ambient lighting for nighttime concerts as well as spotlights for when the show is over.

The major electrical upgrade by Central Maine Power Co. will also include wiring the stage for audio-visual use.

The entrance to the bowl, on Route 23, has been widened to ease bottlenecks.

The \$675,000 upgrade will also increase seating from 2,000 to 6,000, and the organization expects shows to eventually bring an estimated \$300,000 per event in revenue to area businesses.

Johnson said it will be done in time for next summer's concert series, which will include Who's Bad, a Michael Jackson tribute.

Sidney in the middle

The center this year has hosted a number of Sidney community events, including a farm-to-table public supper and a meeting to find out what community need are.

The town, which is bordered by Messalonskee Lake to the west and the Kennebec River to the east, and stretches from Augusta to Waterville, doesn't have a real center, but Johnson said the campus could become one.

In the works are a weekend restaurant at The Lodge, a campus building on the lake that includes an industrial kitchen, and a winter event lineup, some of which will be in Alumni Hall, which has an auditorium and was also recently upgraded.

Johnson said meals may be offered before the winter events as well.

This year's lineup of events is modest — an Oct. 27 Red Cross blood drive for a community resident, the second annual Chili & Chowder Cook Off on

Nov. 10, comedian Krazy Jake on Nov. 17; the Maine Pond Hockey Classic the weekend of February 8-10, Family Fun Day & Fishing Tournament winter carnival on Feb. 23, and the Elton John tribute band Yellow Brick Road on March 23.

Tuesday's ribbon-cutting drew representatives from U.S. Sen. Susan Collins and Angus King's offices, as well as from second-district U.S. Rep. Bruce Poliquin, whose Maine home is nearby in Oakland.

Also attending were Katie Doherty, CEO and president of the Kennebec Valley Chamber of Commerce, headquartered in Augusta, and Kim Lindlof, president and CEO of the Mid-Maine Chamber of Commerce in Waterville.

Wiggin and Johnson said that, while that day's focus was on the school, it's all part of the bigger picture.

"We're in the middle (between Augusta and Waterville)," Johnson said. "We could be a real community center, not just for Sidney, but for the region."

May 23, 2018

USDA loan boosts Snow Pond Center development plans



COURTESY / SNOW POND CENTER FOR THE ARTS Upgrades to the Bowl in the Pines amphitheater, and other projects at Snow Pond Center for the Arts in Sidney, are getting a boost with a \$1.8 million USDA Community Facilities Loan.

By Staff

SIDNEY — Snow Pond Center for the Arts will use a \$1.8 million U.S. Department of Agriculture Community Facilities Loan to upgrade the Bowl in the Pines amphitheater, as well as for several other projects that are part of the planned upgrade to the 88-year-old campus.

The loan was [announced last week](#) and Christa Johnson, director of development for the arts center, which includes Snow Pond Academy charter

school and the New England Music Camp, said the money will go toward the 6,200-square-foot Learning Center, for additional classroom and rehearsal spaces, upgrades to campus roads and parking, and an additional 2,300 square feet for the performing and visual arts, as well as the consolidation of several small loans.

John Wiggin, executive director, said the campus-wide upgrade is part of an overall vision, which will also benefit the Belgrade Lakes region.

The Bowl in the Pines is one of the nation's largest outdoor stages, according to Snow Pond officials. The amphitheater is part of the 40-acre campus on Messalonskee Lake.

With the [planned improvements](#), Snow Pond plans to hold up to eight ticketed events on a larger scale and 12 free concerts a year.

“The renovations will help Snow Pond become one of the premier outdoor concert venues in New England, allowing all of central Maine to enjoy major national music performances in our own backyard,” Wiggins said in a news release.

The upgrade will increase seating from 2,000 to 6,000, add electricity, lighting and other infrastructure and extend the stage, among other things.

The Bowl in the Pines has traditionally been the venue for free New England Music Camp concerts and still will be, said Johnson., But the expansion also allows an eclectic roster of national artists. The first will be The Fab Four, a British Beatles tribute band, which is scheduled to perform Sept. 5.

“It is likely to be largest act the venue has hosted based on audience scope and we couldn’t be more excited,” Johnson said.

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Snow Pond Center for the Arts continues to develop its mission



Christa Johnson, left, director of development at Snow Pond Center for the Arts, and executive director John Wiggin, say projects on the Sidney campus will help boost the area economy. Alumni Hall, the campus indoor auditorium, is directly behind them.

[By Maureen Milliken](#)

SIDNEY — A major renovation to the historic Bowl in the Pines outdoor amphitheater at the Snow Pond Center for the Arts is expected to be an economic boost for the area.

But that work is only one part of what's been going on at the 175-acre campus on Route 23.

Since the Snow Pond Center for the Arts rolled out a five-year plan to add revenue and community engagement in 2012, a lot has changed at the campus that was once only inhabited in the summer by the New England Music Camp.

The campus' rustic buildings were renovated and winterized for the Snow Pond Arts Academy charter school, which is in its second school year.

An addition was added to the Alumni Hall auditorium and a 6,000-square-foot learning center opened on the campus this past fall.

The Augusta Symphony, the arts center's Community Music School and others keep the 300-seat Alumni Hall busy nearly every night, said Christine Durgin, director of community relations.

The historic lodge on the campus, closer to the lake, is not only the school cafeteria, but is also rented out for events and hosts community meetings and more.

When the Arts Academy students leave in the afternoon, buses pull up with area elementary and middle-school students who take part in the afterschool program that's held in the new Learning Center.

And tucked in the woods at the north end of the campus, the historic outdoor Bowl in the Pines, once renovated, will become one of the premier outdoor venues in New England.

“It’s exciting for me that the things we said we were going to do four, five years ago, we’re doing,” said Durgin as she gave a tour of the campus last week.

More than just a camp



PHOTO / MAUREEN MILLIKEN

The learning center, foreground, and an addition to Alumni Hall, back, are two projects at Snow Pond Center in Sidney.

The New England Camp began as the Eastern Music Camp in 1930, but was closed by the Great Depression. In 1937, Paul Wiggin, music director of Cony High School in Augusta, and his wife, Nina, took over the camp.

The camp flourished over the decades, attracting talented young musicians, as well as music teachers, from around the country.

In 2010 when John Wiggin, grandson of the founder, took over as executive director with his wife, Kim, a movement began to expand what the camp had to offer. That now includes programs like the Snow Pond Music Festival, an Adult Music Camp, the Summer Concert Series and the Community Music School.

Snow Pond Academy for the Arts now has about 140 students from 53 towns.

The 6,000-square-foot \$1 million learning center, which opened in the fall, was a big step forward for the school, Durgin said.

Besides classrooms, the center has storage for the huge variety of musical instruments stored on site — there are more than 60 pianos alone on campus — and practice rooms, study areas and areas for students to relax.

A \$130,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture will allow the school to buy and install technology and train staff for a distance learning program that will operate out of the new building.

Bowl renovation an economic move



PHOTO / MAUREEN MILLIKEN

Renovation to Bowl in the Pines at Snow Pond Center for the Arts will allow more options for musical performances.

But the biggest move, as far as impact goes, is the Bowl in the Pines renovation, school officials said.

The stage, surrounded by woods on three sides and backed by Messalonskee, was the biggest outdoor amphitheater on the east coast when it was built in 1930, and still considered one of the country's largest outdoor music venues, school officials said.

Snow Pond officials say the upgrade, which will cost \$675,000, is necessary to create more visibility for the music camp, arts center and school, as well as to provide revenue for scholarship and financial aid programs. But it is also expected to be an economic boon for the Belgrade Lakes region, which includes several towns, including Sidney, clustered around the lakes north of Augusta.

The organization expects concerts to eventually bring an estimated \$300,000 per event in revenue to area businesses.

The project won't be completed this summer, but the arts center still plans to hold seven or eight ticketed events and 12 free concerts at the Bowl, up from three ticketed events and 11 free concerts last summer.

While many nationally renowned musicians have played on the stage, when Fab Four, a Beatles tribute band, plays at the Bowl on Sept. 5, it will be the largest show the venue has accommodated as far as scope of audience appeal, said Christa Johnson, director of development. She said most of the renovation work is being done this fall, and the venue should be fully ready for larger-scale concerts next year in 2019.

The Bowl accommodates an audience of about 2,000, in both fixed seating for 400, and on the lawn, where those attending often bring blankets and picnic baskets. But Johnson said the audience capacity will grow as parking, ambient lighting, signs and more is added. Once the renovations are done, it will accommodate about 6,000.

The stage has been stabilized with concrete, but work left to be done includes extending the stage out eight feet with new decking, steel supports for sound and lighting, so national touring acts can use it, as well as landscaping and other elements.

Central Maine Power Co. is also helping with a major electrical upgrade that includes three-phase power to support audio-visual needs for the stage, as well as lighting in the parking lot and audience areas.

Durgin said that Snow Pond uses local vendors as often as possible for supplies and construction. Hammond Lumber of Belgrade, Peachey Builders of Augusta and Bryan O. Bacon Excavation of Sidney have all done work on the Bowl project.

Snow Pond has created a task force of local public safety and town officials, as well as business owners that will focus on safety, traffic and parking, and the scale and type of events to make sure that it fits with the community, Johnson said.

Wiggin, the executive director, said the investment in the Bowl renovation is relatively modest compared to the benefits it will provide.

“A lot of our emphasis up until now has been on the educational component and creating an infrastructure,” he said. “The emphasis going forward is going to include a little more of quality of place emphasis.”