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Getting to the bottom of the myths of the Blue Hole in the Pine Barrens

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MONROE

They say the Blue Hole's bottomless.

Surrounded by quicksand.

Created by a meteor crash.

Filled with water blue as the sky itself, quite unlike the murky brown cedar water elsewhere in the Pine Barrens.

It's been called the Bottomless Pit of Beelzebub and the Jersey Devil's Bathtub, where swimmers insisted they felt a hand come up from below and grab their legs.

All this over a pool of water about 130 feet in diameter just south of the Great Egg Harbor River.

Ever wonder if any of it's true?

Tony Scriviani did.

"It's not really a lake," Scriviani said. "It's a hole. It has blue water. Here in the Pine Barrens, we usually have cedar water. They say that this hole is deep."

Seekers of the strange here often relay a story about a group of scientists who some years ago dropped a huge weight with a long line of cable into the middle of the pool. Supposedly, the cable kept going down until it was all fed out. So, they dropped more cable. Same thing happened.

The thing is, that story's as apocryphal in 2003 as it was in 1937 when the late South Jersey historian Henry Charlton Beck first put it into print in *More Forgotten Towns of Southern New Jersey*.

Joe Gionti, 87, a member of the Williamstown Historical Society, never took a dive into the Blue Hole, but he remembers it well.

"Children were forbidden to go into that water for two reasons," said Gionti. "One, there was no bottom. Two, there were demons in there."

The science, however, is quite different.

According to Richland natural historian Mark Demitroff, the Blue Hole in Monroe is one of numerous such blue holes in the Pine Barrens. There are also blue holes in Newtonville and Egg Harbor Township, each with its own folklore. The science is something unique to the Pine Barrens.

"Blue holes are places in or near streams where large amounts of water under pressure upwell," Demitroff said. "They shoot up like a geyser. They're large springs."

Most water in the Pine Barrens, at least when the weather's warm, appears brown and murky and is called "cedar water" locally. Bacteria take iron from marl, a type of heavy soil, near Marlton

and turn it to rust, Demitroff explained. The warmer the temperature, the more active the bacteria will be, and the rust color will be produced in the water.

Because blue holes' water comes from so far below ground, the water temperature stays relatively constant, about 55 degrees year-round, Demitroff said. The bacteria is less active in cooler water and doesn't turn the water brown. As a result, the clear water reflects the sky.

And what swimmers thought was the Jersey Devil grabbing them from beneath the surface was really just the frigid water.

"You were always told never to swim there because you would cramp up and sink like a stone," Demitroff said. "Suckholes would come up and grab you."

These days, the only thing close to the Blue Hole is a shooting range off Piney Hollow Road. The remnants of a bridge over the Egg Harbor remain, about 50 feet from the Blue Hole.

The best way in is a dirt road off Piney Hollow Road, leading northwest into the Winslow Wildlife Management Area. Hike in three-fifths of a mile and follow blue trail markers, and you'll eventually come to the Blue Hole.

A crew from the Courier-Post made the pilgrimage Jan. 29 amid a drifting snowfall. Elsewhere, the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers froze over in spots. Children played hockey on ponds in Medford. Temperatures had been below freezing for days.

The Blue Hole had no ice on it. Neither did the Egg Harbor.

The hole wasn't blue this day. But it wasn't brown. Rather, it appeared crystalline green at many parts. You could see the bottom, where odd vegetation grew.

Measured at several spots from a canoe in the center of the lake, the Blue Hole rang up at no more than seven feet deep. Demitroff blames urbanization and agriculture for this, saying the Pine Barrens have been drying up for years.

As for the quicksand, Bill Witcraft, who runs the Auto Express shop on Piney Hollow Road, said he has towed many cars from the side of the Egg Harbor opposite the Blue Hole. They all sink in the sand.

But no, it's not quicksand, he says.

And no, there's no Jersey Devil around here.

At least not that anybody's seen lately.

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