

Raven Hill is a Hands-on Mecca

wetlands boardwalk, spectacular overlooks
and stone labyrinths complement
scientific marvels

by Alex Rossman

Off the beaten path and up one of East Jordan's trademark steep hills lies the 157-acre Raven Hill Discovery Center. Raven Hill Discovery Center was established in 1992 by Cheri Leach and her husband Tim. Former educators, the pair sought to reinvigorate the sometimes staid subject of science by creating a hands-on learning center. Raven Hill had 1,250 visitors the first month of its inception, and during the past fifteen years since, more than 90,000 visitors have come to Raven Hill to experience science, technology, history and the arts through interactive exhibits and displays.

Crossing the threshold of Raven Hill is like walking into Mr. Wizard's attic. Every inch of floor and wall space is utilized, and the rooms are literally stacked to the rafters with elements of science. It's easy to get lost in the childhood exuberance of exploration—even if you're not a kid anymore—with a symphony of antique instruments, an electric-generator bicycle, a magnet table and a gyro cycle at your fingertips. Posted challenges at certain stations pique innova-

tion, and the stationary bike isn't the only thing lighting bulbs overhead. One room is full of live animals, including snakes, lizards, turtles and spiders, while another contains a wall-engulfing periodic table that illustrates the elements in action.

With so much activity crammed into one indoor space, it may take an extra trip to explore all of Raven Hill's *outdoor* experiences. Continually expanding, Raven Hill Discovery Center has evolved into what could easily be mistaken for an old-fashioned town, aptly named "Timeline Village." This village contains: A print shop that houses an antique linotype and letterpress for printing and graphics activities, a glass studio with hot and cold glass capabilities, a ceramic studio with a kiln and a complete jewelry lab; Raven Hill Schoolhouse, converted from Wilson Town Hall, which was moved there in 1997; an old Great Western caboose; a blacksmith forge; and the Time Tunnel in the old Classroom Building, which has collections of cameras, sewing machines, cameras, typewriters, other technology from the past, a room from the 1920's, and



an old doctor's office and a laundry room from the early 1900's.

The time travel continues with "Beyond Jurassic Park: Exploring Geologic History" where visitors can walk a brick pathway through time, starting with the volcanic action that formed the earth to the appearance of humans. The outdoor exhibit includes living plants, rocks, fossils, interpretive stations with signage, and outdoor sculptures of extinct species. Other outdoor exhibits in the main yard include sixteen medicinal gardens (with plants used for everything from hair care to stomach flu), a stone labyrinth, and the open-air Art Pavilion, which accommodates more art classes and workshops.

One of the newest and coolest exhibits at Raven Hill is "The Ancient World," featuring technological feats and inventions from more than 2,000 years ago. The exhibit illustrates an array of cultural and geographic interpretations of nature, including: a ten foot tall Easter Island head, the blue stones of Stonehenge, a pyramid, Native American mounds, a Zen garden, cave and Mayan ball court. The replicas of these wonders of the world are a window into the past, while providing some entertaining interaction in the present, such as raking sand patterns in the Zen garden or attempting a slam dunk on the ball court.

Incorporating additional elements of science and history, Raven Hill employs one of the greatest teachers to this day: nature. There is a wetlands boardwalk and a half-acre pond on the grounds, and the Taxonomic (Taxi) Trail, which also was started in 2005. The Taxi Trail is a walking

pathway that will eventually allow visitors to experience families of related plant species and their uses by the first and early Americans as they take a leisurely walk on Raven Hill grounds. Twenty-five trees are already planted; with a grant from the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, fifty trees were added during spring 2006. And in 2001, the Little Traverse Conservancy purchased an adjacent 140 acres of land to establish the Raven Ridge Nature Preserve. The land includes a mix of open fields and wooded ridges, including a spectacular overlook that's especially awe-inspiring with the advent of fall color. The preserve connects to Raven Hill's trail system and also incorporates an old farm homestead, providing a location for archaeological studies with students.

Whether it's a science book, art book or a history book, Raven Hill Discovery Center allows you to walk right into it, which makes it the perfect destination for kids, parents, teachers and nature-lovers alike—anyone who wants to get back in touch with science. Raven Hill has special holiday events and family-friendly activity days throughout the year, and will even bring its experience to the classroom with its outreach program.

Raven Hill Discovery Center is open Saturdays and Sundays year-round plus Mondays through Fridays from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and can be contacted at (877) 833-4254 or www.ravenhilldiscoverycenter.com 