

N.H. SUMMER JOBS: N.H. STATE PARKS

Employees often have a passion for the outdoors

By Kathleen D. Bailey
Special to the Union Leader

Ninety-three venues. Almost 900 positions to fill. A three-to six-month window to show New Hampshire off at her very best.

Those are the numbers hiring managers for New Hampshire’s State Parks are working with, according to Greg Keeler, marketing and communications manager for the park system. There’s a state park for almost every personality and skill set, with competitive pay and perks for the right person.

New Hampshire has 93 properties classified as state parks, he said in a phone interview, though some of them are simple wayside stops and don’t require staffing. The 93 sites range from secluded Great North Woods campgrounds to the raucous Hampton Beach to historical sites such as the Franklin Pierce homestead in Hillsborough.

While the number can fluctuate from year to year, Keeler said that this year the state hopes to hire 882 people for spring, summer and fall. “It depends on what the needs are, and how many returning employees we have,” he said, adding, “we usually have a significant number coming back.”

Some high school and college-age workers “phase themselves out” as they graduate, he said. “They may work for us while they’re in school.”

Retirees and high school students are the two largest demographics for state park workers, according to Keeler. College students are third, teachers fourth.

Lifeguards needed

The agency tries to lock in its lifeguards as soon as possible. With a recurring lifeguard shortage across the country, that’s not always easy, he noted. “We used to staff all the inland beaches with lifeguards,” he said. “It was too hard to find them.” Now the state just has lifeguards on its saltwater beaches. Inland is “swim at your own risk,” he said.

“The Seacoast,” he said, “is a different animal. We are aggressively pursuing lifeguards to fill the ranks.” The swimmers, and their lifeguards, have to deal with undertows, tides and changing weather conditions not found on freshwater beaches.

But Hampton fares better in hiring than some area beaches, Keeler said. The Hampton Beach staff routinely competes in the New England Lifesaving Competition, and usually wins. It’s



PHOTO PROVIDED BY NH STATE PARKS

A New Hampshire State Parks worker rakes the beach at White Lake State Park.

a matter of pride and honor that draws lifeguards to Route 1A, he mused.

Customer service skills needed

Lifesaving aside, a summer parks employee could do just about anything, he said. There’s vehicle and equipment maintenance, grounds maintenance, selling ice cream at a park with a store.

The Deer Mountain campground in Pittsburg is the northernmost state park, “a stone’s throw from the Canadian border,” Keeler said. It’s a remote campground with primitive sites encompassing a campsite and a fire ring. Duties there would be different from a daily stint at crowded Hampton Beach or any state beach on the 18-mile coastline.

What should those 882 applicants look like?

“We find that our ideal employee is either passionate about the outdoors or passionate about a particular state park,” he said. For example, many applicants request Pawtuckaway.

“We also look for someone with great customer service skills,” he said, noting that many of the parks jobs are “guest-facing.” A good hire will be comfortable dealing with the public, he said, “in a generally fun environment.” The majority of the seasonal positions do involve the outdoors, he said.

For the historic sites such as the Pierce Homestead, it helps if the applicant has an interest in history, he added. Other historic sites include the Robert Frost Farm, the Daniel Webster Birthplace and the Wentworth-Coolidge Mansion.

While the agency has always been able to keep its parks going, the COVID

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N.H. SUMMER JOBS: WATER COUNTRY, MEL’S FUNWAY

Positive culture, friendly atmosphere help retain workers

By Kathleen D. Bailey
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Kathryn Nedelka, assistant general manager and director of finance and human resources for Water Country, has seen just about everything in her career with the popular Seacoast attraction. She’s even seen two employees fall in love and marry, and reports that they are currently expecting a child. Rumor has it, she added, that the couple used the Water Country jingle at their wedding.

It isn’t just a summer job anymore, or it doesn’t have to be. With a 2.9 percent unemployment rate, New Hampshire employers are looking at the best ways to retain people, even for a summer seasonal job. Two area attractions are doing their best to create a family feeling, so that the guests aren’t the only ones coming back.

Water Country:
Have some fun

At press time, Nedelka and the Water Country staff were at the 100-day mark from opening day, and they were actively hiring. They are looking for approximately 275 people for the park itself, she said, adding that Sodexo managed the food concessions and will be hiring another 60 to 80. The company maintains a winter skeleton staff of 10 full-time employees, six in maintenance and four in administration.

The number of potential hires is the same as last year, Nedelka said. “It stays pretty much the same, year to year.”

The first position they hire for is lifeguards, and those are hard positions to fill, she mused. “They need to be attentive to safety, watch the water, watch the guests,” she said. “They



PHOTO PROVIDED BY WATER COUNTRY

Water Country is looking to hire about 175 lifeguards for the coming summer season.

need to operate the attractions, and make sure the guest is sitting in the tube properly.”

They also have to be certified, she said. She often finds her lifeguards among those looking for nursing or EMT jobs, and Water Country is a good career experience for them, she said. She’s looking for 175 lifeguards for summer 2025.

There’s also a maintenance team tasked with keeping the grounds and buildings looking good. “You know it,” she said, “when we don’t have enough in maintenance.” Some of these jobs are filled by active retirees with maintenance experience, she said.

The largest group of seasonal employees is the guest experience team, according to Nedelka. They greet guests, sell tickets, park cars, operate the gift shop.

The guest experience staffers are primarily high school students, some as young as 14. The lifeguards are usually 15 to 18. They tend to work through high school and the first year of college.

And the maintenance staff is a blend of retirees and educators looking to

pick up a little cash over the summer. The educators, she said, are a really good fit for Water Country. “They know how to work with people,” she said. In addition to making guests feel comfortable, the teachers will often take a younger Water Country employee under their summer wing and mentor them.

Running a theme park 10 minutes from Hampton Beach can be challenging, Nedelka admits. There’s a fair amount of competition for those summer workers. “The way we approach it is to focus on our culture,” she said. “We celebrate our team and give back to them.”

There have been movie nights and baseball games, all on Water Country’s dime. “We challenge our team to create micro-events,” Nedelka said, noting that one of last year’s interns came up with a lip-sync contest. It could be as simple as spinning the “prize wheel” at the end of a challenging day, she mentioned.

Water Country also makes sure it stays competitive with wages, Nedelka said. The competition is

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Jobs

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real: “We’re 10 minutes from Maine, 10 minutes from Massachusetts.”

Water Country’s support of its seasonals doesn’t end when the leaves turn red, according to Nedelka. There’s a Friendsgiving reunion, a Valentine event. The year-round staff supports the seasonal workers at their events.

And it works. “We have about 40 percent returnees,” she said. “Our goal is 50 percent.”

Water Country is currently accepting online applications through its website. There’s also a job fair scheduled for Saturday, April 19, beginning at 10 a.m., with walk-ins welcome. For more information, visit watercountry.com.

A great first job at Mel’s

Mel’s Funway Park has the opposite problem from Water Country: it is the only theme park in its town, or the Litchfield area. But co-owner Mike Accomando said he’s filling the rosters, in part by creating the same family feeling as his counterpart on the coast.

While the past few years have been challenging for hires, 2024 was a good year, and Accomando is expecting the same for 2025. Part of the appeal, he explained, is that Mel’s is a “fun, outdoor job.” The teens and young adults can socialize, as long as they get their work done. “A lot of kids like it for their first job,” he said. There’s a variety of things they can do: scooping ice cream, helping with the go-karts, painting, raking and shoveling.

Accomando and the staff are also willing to customize work schedules. Summer workers can work two to four days a week, or up to five.

About half his workers are from Litchfield, and

though it isn’t the entertainment capital of the world, people find him and want to work there.

“We have at least 35 that have already told us they’re coming back,” he said. Many of his high school hires stay on through college, he said.

And in a few instances, they stay on for life. “Our director of operations came to us when he was 15,” he said. “We hired him for basic help with maintenance. He moved to the go-karts, became the shift leader for go-karts, and eventually ended up as director of operations.” They don’t always stay but Accomando is philosophical: “Our responsibility is to prepare them for other jobs.”

While he likes to have a full roster when he opens for the season, Accomando practices a rolling form of hiring. If he sees a prospect with potential, he’ll hire them even if it’s July, he said. And when the college kids go back to their studies, Mel’s fall programs still need staffing. He’ll be hiring for “Spooky World” and “Holly Jolly Journey,” the facility’s new holiday lights show. He also needs people to work corporate events, he said.

He motivates employees in several ways: with barbecues, with renting a movie theater in the off-season, with employee discounts. “I like to make them feel they are part of the team,” he said.

And he listens. “We listen to everybody. We can listen to 10, 15, 20 ideas — and the 21st might work.”

The listening pays off, according to Accomando. The first thing he looks for in an employee? Trust.

“I remember one time I was in the arcade, and this girl was working behind the counter,” he said. “Her friends came in and they were trying to get her to go to the beach with them. She said, ‘No, I signed up to work and I’m going to work.’”

And that has a mirror effect, according to Accomando. “We want to work with them to make sure they’re happy.”

State parks

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pandemic in 2020 “did some weird things” to hiring, Keeler said. “During the height of it, hiring was a challenge.” But now visitation levels have rebounded to what they were before COVID. “The past couple of years, we’ve been pretty fortunate to hire at the levels we want to,” Keeler said.

While a private entity can lure employees with higher pay and other benefits, the state has “guardrails,” according to Keeler. The competition for employees was “stiff” just after COVID, and the state developed a long-term plan for better compensation. “The raise got in at the right time,” according to Keeler.

Money is a factor in hiring any employee, Keeler noted. But with the New Hampshire State Parks, it’s not that simple. “We hear from our employees that they have a passion for the outdoors, that they want to give back to the community,” he said. “They want to work in the parks they grew up in.”

And there are perks, Keeler said. The seasonal employee receives a season pass to the state park system, other discounts, and even free camping. There are even dental benefits for those working 30-plus hours.

The New Hampshire state parks never had a dedicated marketing budget, Keeler said. “We just had a little piece of the tourism budget.” A few years ago Phil Bryce, former director of Parks and Recreation, carved out money from the budget specifically for marketing, and engaged a marketing agency. “We engaged in specific marketing efforts, which included employment,” Keeler said.

The marketing thrust allows the agency to zero in on a particular park. For example, Echo Lake in North Conway has “a ton of competition” from other White Mountain venues. The marketing agency will zero in on Echo Lake as an employment venue. “It’s aggressive, targeted marketing,” Keeler said.

“We poll the managers of our parks on a weekly basis, and we establish geo-targets,” he said.

For more information or to apply online, visit nhstateparks.org and look for the “Employment” tab at the top of the page.

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