



Forests of Mount Rainier



Ancient Communities

Exploring the forests of Mount Rainier National Park is like traveling back in time. Before Mount Rainier became a national park, visitors traveled by horse or foot for miles through thick forests and tangled undergrowth to reach the mountain. You can still walk among these trees, enjoying the grandness of forests that once covered the mountains and lowlands of western Washington.

In the lower forest, see the giant, towering stands of Douglas fir, hemlock, and cedar towering above you with low-growing, shade-tolerant plants brushing at your ankles. Higher up the slopes of Mount Rainier, the forests open up into tree islands of subalpine fir, surrounded by meadows.

Most of the trees in Mount Rainier National Park are evergreen conifers, keeping their needle-like leaves year-round. Only a few trees in the park are deciduous, losing their leaves in the fall.

Will these forests survive? With your care and continued protection, they will continue to provide the same experiences that visitors have enjoyed for over a century.

Lowland Forests



The park's lowland forests extend up to an elevation of around 3,000 feet. Entering these ancient forests, you will find yourself sheltered by giant trees reaching more than 200 feet into the sky. Western hemlock, western red cedar, and Douglas fir are the most common trees found in Mount Rainier's old-growth lowland forests. Some of these large trees are as old as 1,000 years, interspersed with others of different ages. The canopy of these trees and the low-growing plants below provide homes for a variety of animals.

You can find the Douglas fir by looking for the thick, ridged bark and small cones that appear as if mice are hiding inside with their tails and feet hanging out. The western red cedar has a unique look with scale-like leaves and thin, fibrous bark.

Some of the last extensive stands of old-growth forest left in the United States are the lowland forests of Mount Rainier. You can stroll along trails at Carbon River, Longmire, and Ohanapecosh to experience the magnificence and grand scale of these trees.

Mid-mountain Forests



As the name suggests, the mid-mountain forest occupies a transitional zone between the dense, lowland forest and the more scattered subalpine forest. In most areas of the park, this usually occurs between 3,000 and 4,500 feet in elevation. As the park roads ascend the ridges around Mount Rainier, the change in forest type is clearly visible. Here in the mid-mountain forest, you can see that the trees are typically smaller than the massive old-growth near the Nisqually Entrance and Ohanapecosh. The forests begin to open up, occasionally providing views of Mount Rainier and the surrounding river valleys.

The most common trees in this transitional forest include the Pacific silver fir, western hemlock, mountain hemlock, Douglas fir, Alaska yellow cedar, and western white pine. At these elevations, the trees must adapt to harsh winters, heavy snow, intense cold, and a shorter growing season. Look for the "skirting" effect with stunted upper branches and longer, denser branches near the ground. Brutal winds stunt the higher branches, while snow protects the lower growth.

You can immerse yourself in these forests along many trails at this elevation, or enjoy great views at overlooks throughout the park.

Subalpine Forests



Like islands in an ocean, the high meadows are dotted with subalpine fir, mountain hemlock, Alaska yellow cedar, and whitebark pine. The landscape looks different here where the snowpack lingers, holding back the forest, and allowing meadows to grow. The trees live in a harsh environment of wind, intense sun during the summer, and cold, snowy winters.

Winter in the subalpine forests is a challenging time of the year. Like a blanket, the deep snow covers the lower branches of the trees, insulating the limbs and needles. As the warmth of spring approaches, the trees' dark green needles absorb the warm sun causing the snow to melt from their bases. This extends their growing season.

You can identify the most common trees in the subalpine forest by looking at their limbs and tops. The subalpine fir has short, sturdy limbs with a pointed top. In contrast, look for the longer, flexible limbs and droopy top of the mountain hemlock. These hardy trees have adapted to heavy snow and harsh winds by developing limbs that either support or shed snow.

You can enjoy this unique forest along trails on the higher vegetated slopes of Mount Rainier.