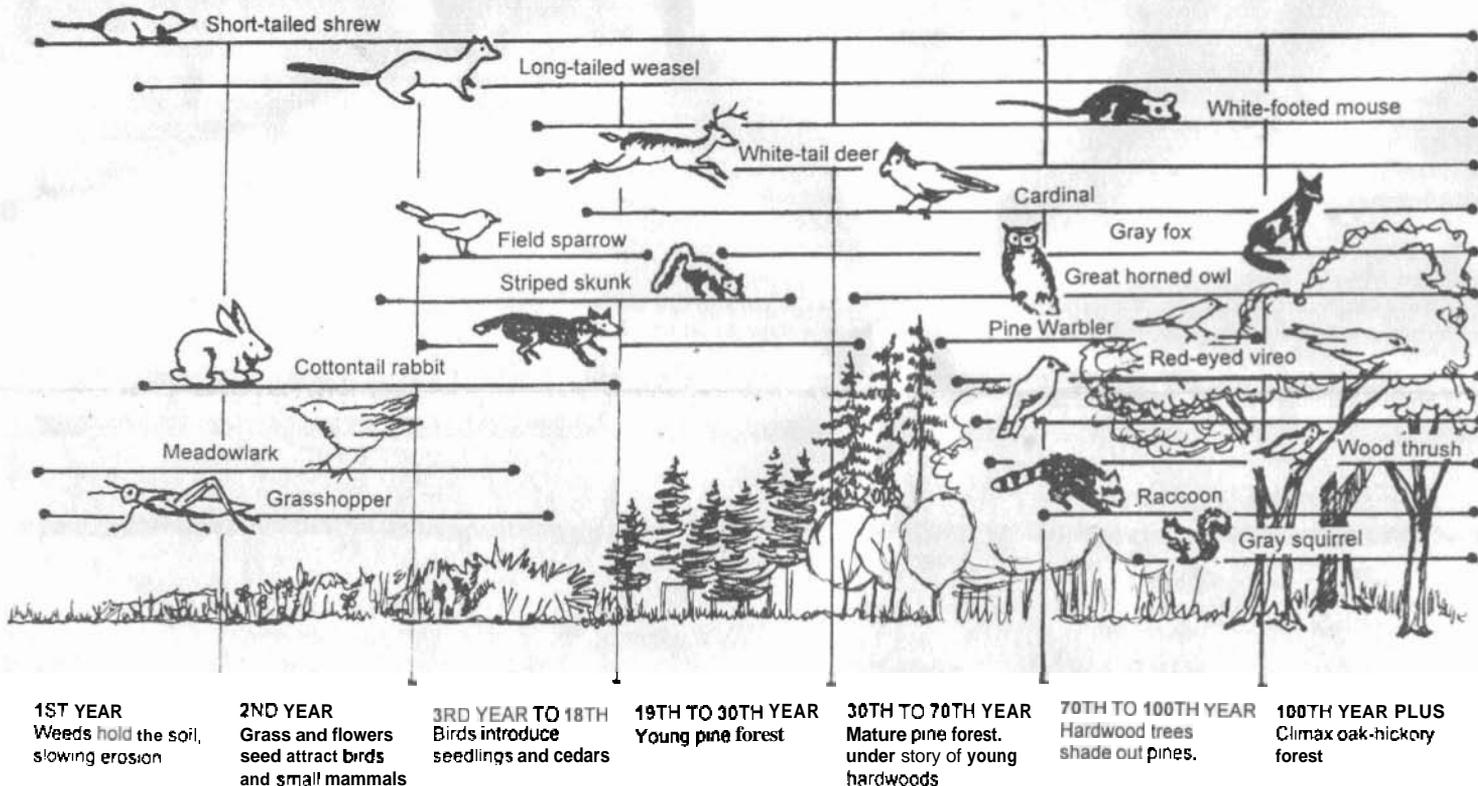


Prince William Forest Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Forest Succession

When cleared fields are abandoned, nature reclaims them. First come "weeds." The following summer grasses and soft-stemmed plants find a foothold. The years after bring seedlings of shrubs and Virginia pines. It may take almost a century for the forest to reach the climax stages. As the forest evolves, the animals change too. Rabbits give way to squirrels; birds of the field seek food elsewhere.

In this trail, a mile-long loop through the woods, takes you on a circle in time and shows you how nature reclaims a damaged land. Follow the yellow and green blazes from the starting point near the entrance of Oak Ridge Campground. At the beginning of the trail, take the right fork. Halfway through the loop, another trail branches off for 2 1/2 miles. Stay to the left unless you wish to take that longer hike.

1. Early Times

Four centuries ago American Indians camped on the banks of Quantico Creek. They hunted game and gathered nuts and fruits from the forest. In the mid-1600s colonists sailed up the Potomac River and came ashore at the mouth of the creek. They felled the tall trees and cleared the rolling land to grow tobacco and corn for cash crops.

Early settlers often used tobacco as money to pay wages and barter for goods. Trappers harvested beaver pelt and other animal skins. As the forest came down, lumber was shipped from Dumfries, which became one of the busiest ports in the colonies before the Revolution.

2. Hard Times

Wildlife retreated with the forest. In time, farming without mineral renewal exhausted the fertility of the soil. Without tree roots to hold the earth, fields began to erode; the topsoil built from centuries of forest life washed down the streams and silted up the harbor, now a marsh. The area directly ahead was once a field. Families had trouble scratching a living from the land and turned to other jobs to supplement their income. In 1889 many farmers worked in the new Cabin Branch Mine, extracting pyrite or "fool's gold," a source of sulphur.

In 1935 the federal government acquired the land to create a recreational demonstration area. Under the direction of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) young men were employed during the Great Depression to restore the watersheds of the worn-out fields so that the land could be dedicated for the enjoyment of all. The CCC built roads, trails, campgrounds, and cabins. In 1940 Prince William Forest Park joined the National Park System.

3. Human Traces

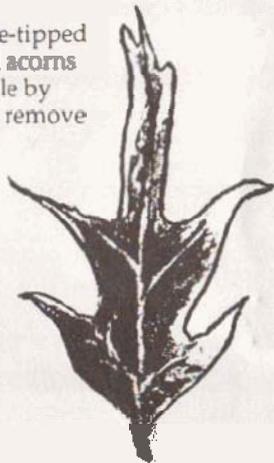
An old cemetery (seen through the clearing across the road) offers a short detour to one of over 40 such enclaves in the park, many with unmarked graves. A few date from before the Civil War. Some are still tended by relatives of the families who once lived here.

4. Tracks

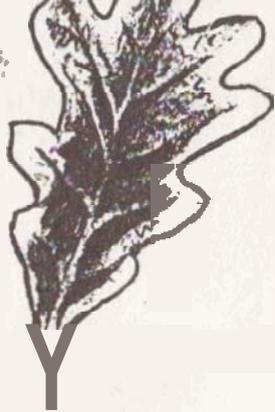
This old road winding through the forest leads nowhere today. Once it carried countless wagons from fields to farmsteads. Grinding the earth or sloshing through mud, wheels wore the deep grooves still seen.

Along this stretch of trail you can spot:

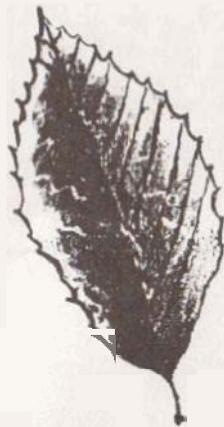
Red Oak
with bristle-tipped leaves and acorns made edible by treating to remove tannin;



White Oak
most common tree in this woods, with light bark and broad indented leaves;



Beech
latecomer in forest succession, with smooth gray bark and branches reaching low. Local settlers roasted beechnuts to make a kind of coffee.



Tulip or Yellow Poplar
actually of the magnolia family, with a showy yellow flower. Indians made dugout canoes by burning and scraping out the straight trunks.



5. Forest Floor

Small plants blanket the forest floor at different seasons. Can you identify Indian pipes growing near a rotting tree trunk and the reindeer moss, a kind of lichen? Note the wild blueberry and the laurel of the taller shrub layer.

6. Pioneers

The trees around this marker are called pioneers because pine seedlings can root in sunlight and begin to grow in poor soil. Bigtooth aspens are pioneers too. You can tell the age of a pine by counting the whorls of branches that circle the trunk, one year to a whorl. The pine, with shallow roots and soft wood, has a short lifespan, averaging 50 years. In its shade hardwood saplings get a start. When a pine falls, the space is soon filled by new seedlings.

7. Wild Things

While walking the trail, listen for the wind in the trees. Is any creature here? Whether you hear them or not, wild animals *are* here—gray squirrels, deer, raccoons, red-tailed hawks, owls. Even the birds usually keep quiet. In open areas, meadow mice and rabbits feed while the red fox stalks.

8. Wet Areas

Moisture collects and vegetation is lush on low ground and where slopes meet. Older trees survive on steep banks that were never cleared for crops. The stream trickling toward Quantico Creek is too small here to support beavers. Almost wiped out by trapping, beavers were reintroduced to the park in the 1950s and have made a strong comeback on wider waters. Kingfisher, wood duck, and the water thrush live by the creek.

9. Layers

A forest community is like an apartment building with different plants living at different levels. The forest floor lends room to mosses and mushrooms. Most wildflowers are found at the herb layer while shrubs occupy the next level. Low-growing trees of the understory, like dogwoods and red maples, top the canopy layer, formed by the tallest trees such as oaks, tulip poplars, and hickories.

10. The Future

So the cycle continues. After 50 years the land has healed itself. The woods here are entering the climax stage. In the towering stand of hardwoods with its springy footing below, you can envision the forest of the future.

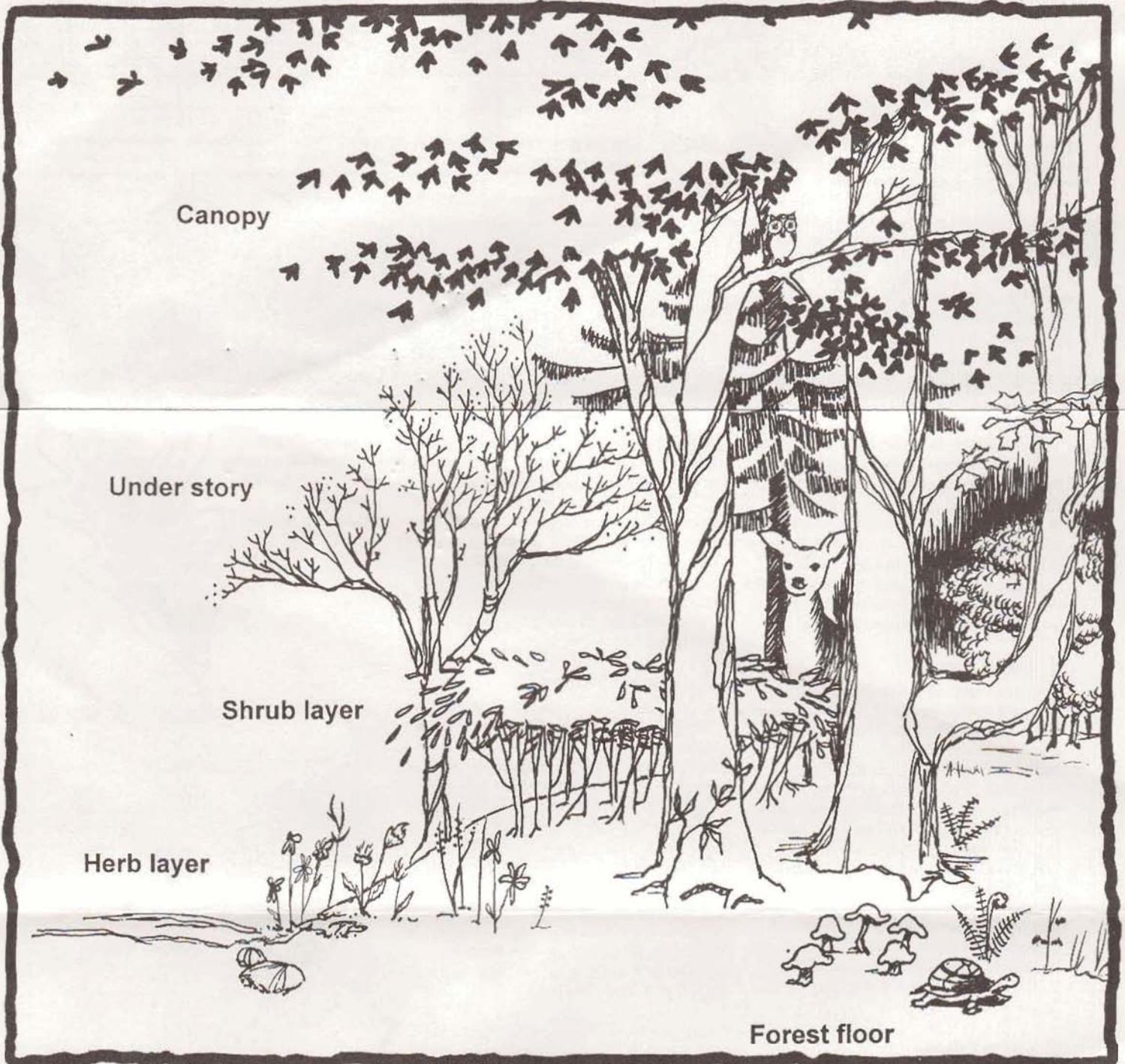
A Forest Profile



Under story

Canopy

A Forest Profile



If you enjoyed this trail, try Pine Grove Forest Trail, accessible also to the handicapped, or the Crossing Trail. The park brochure shows the location of these trails. Please return this guide to the box at the trail-head when you are finished with it. Thank you.

For information, call or write:
Superintendent
Prince William Forest Park
Box 209
Triangle, VA 22172
703-221-7181 v/TDD

Prince William Forest Park contains 17,000 acres of forested lands protecting the Quantico Creek watershed. Administered by the National Park Service, Prince William Forest offers a variety of outdoor recreation opportunities—bicycling, campgrounds, picnic areas, fishing, and more than 35 miles of hiking trails.



Courtesy of Parks and History Association, Washington, D.C., 1991,
in cooperation with the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.