8 Black needlerush

This rush grows only in the higher parts of salt and brackish marshes. Emerging dark stems and leaves contrast against the green of saltmeadow cordgrass. The dead gray, needlelike spikes are last year's growth. It is valuable as cover for small animals, particularly rails, which often nest in it.

9 Predation

Any animal that takes other living animals for food is a predator. The chickadee feeding on insect larvae is as much a predator as the screech owl that feeds on the chickadee. In the Assateague forest the carnivorous great horned owl is at the top of the food chain. Other than owl, the only exclusively predatory vertebrate animals here are shrews, snakes, bats, and hawks

10 Food for forest creatures

Serviceberry and highbush blueberry produce abundant fruits that are valuable to many species. Serviceberries are tall shrubs or small trees that generally grow in clumps and may reach 40ft. in height. All around you is highbush blueberry, occurring in dense thickets when moisture and light conditions are favorable. Fruits of serviceberry and blueberry are eaten by the mourning dove, catbird, mockingbird, brown thrasher, flicker and other woodpeckers, towhee, red fox, opossum, and raccoon.

11 Habitats

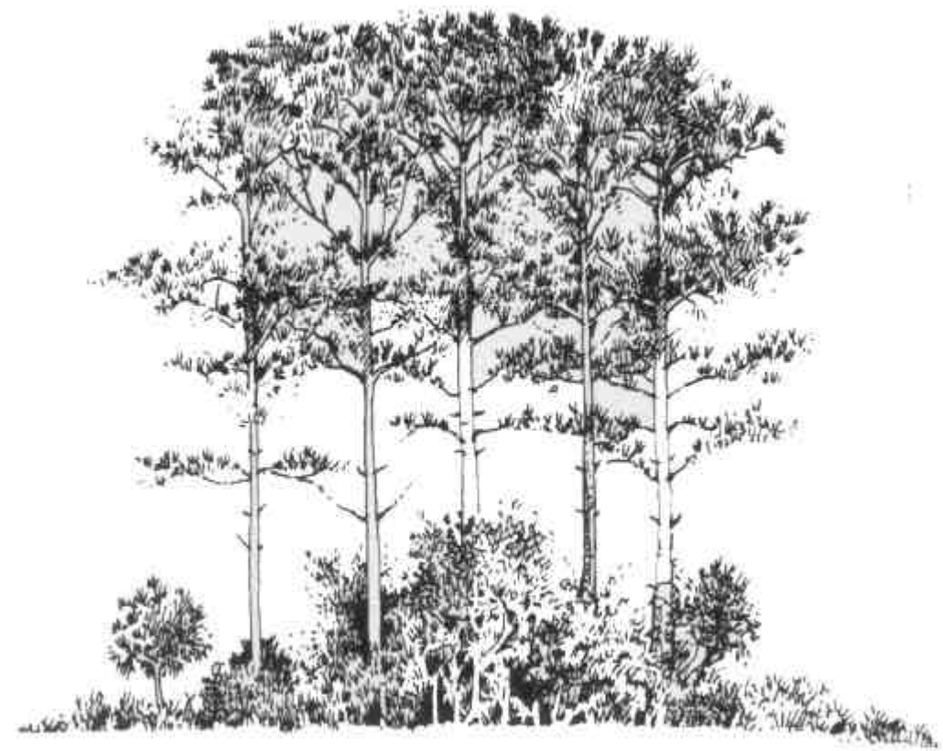
A habitat is an environment that provides basic needs: food, water, oxygen, shelter from the elements and natural enemies, and living space with conditions for reproducing. One animal may provide shelter for another; for example, the screech owl may take over an old flicker nesting activity. Dead and decaying standing trees are a valuable component of wildlife habitat - - - not only for nesting owls and woodpeckers, but for a wide array of less conspicuous creatures that are important parts of the forest food web.

The maritime forest is a unique habitat, not always found on barrier islands. Some islands are narrow low-lying barriers with only beach habitat, very little, if any, vegetation or all habitats have been lost to human development. Assateague's forest and other habitat zones are an irreplaceable natural resource.

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Assateague Island National Seashore

The Life of the Forest Nature Trail



The Life of the Forest

The variety of plants and animals found in the maritime forest is vast due to its distance from the ocean and protection provided by the interdunes minimizing salt spray. This woodland community is relatively sheltered but has characteristics not found in most mainland forests. Notice the many microenvironments and the plants, insects, birds, reptiles and mammals utilizing them.

1 A safe trail experience

Thorny greenbrier and poison ivy forms virtually impenetrable thickets providing protective cover for birds and mammals. Poison ivy, recognizable by its familiar three-part leaves, grows as a trailing or climbing vine and as a shrub and is widespread on Assateague. The fruits and twigs of poison ivy and greenbrier are food for a wide array of forest animals. Three species of ticks live on the understory plants and in the leaf litter. They too are part of the web of life in this forest community. Stay on the designated trail in these woodlands.

2 Pioneer tree

The twisted loblolly pine began growing when this site was open duneland. Ocean winds and salt spray prevented it from achieving the height and symmetry characteristic of this species in protected zones. It is called a "pioneer" because it was among the first to gain a foothold in the harsh environment, and because it helped to create conditions that enabled other species to become established. Around you will see many younger pines with straight trunks and undistorted branches. The high manmade ocean foredune (first built by developers in the 1950s) is accomplishing what pioneer trees used to do, sheltering young trees from salt spray and allowing them to grow straight.

3 The loblolly pine forest

Loblollies dominate this community and multilayered forest. The taller trees, including sweet gum, red maple and oaks, form the canopy. In the shade of the canopy, shrubs, vines, and young trees make up the understory. In the denser parts of the forest, greenbrier, poison ivy, and bayberry dominate the understory. Where more light penetrates the canopy, arrowwood, serviceberry, and highbush blueberry thrive. The canopy and understory vegetation determines what animal species find a home in the forest. Rodents and insects live on and under the forest floor.

4 A sheltered environment

A higher forest canopy of undistorted loblolly pines and red maples grows tall and straight well away from the influence of salt-laden winds. Here even wax-myrtles attain the stature of small trees, a height of more than 20 ft.

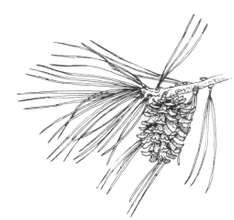
5 A changing marsh habitat

Until the mid-1970s this site was a freshwater reed and cattail marsh with crimson-eyed and rose-mallow intermixed. Common reed (Phragmites australis) has taken over and cattail is no longer present. A few straggling mallows remain to display their large white blossoms in late summer. Phragmites is less favorable for wildlife than cattails; and it tends to dominate its sites, with greatly decreased plant diversity resulting. At this location it is mixed with bayberry and shrubform poison ivy, which do have substantial value for animals.

6 A bird of the forest floor

The eastern towhee, a year-round resident of Assateague Island woodlands, spends much time on the ground typically finding food by turning over dead leaves. Look for its chestnut sides, black upper parts (brown in the female) and by the white tail corners, which flash when it flies up. Its song is described as "Drink-your-tee-e-e-e", with the "tee" on a higher note. Its call is a loud "che-wink"! Other birds that nest and winter in the Assateague forest are cardinals, catbirds, mourning doves, screech owls, great horned owls, Carolina wrens and house wrens.

7 Transition to marsh



Loblolly Pine

Where forest elevation drops and merges into open marshland a transition zone of species from both communities is form. Loblolly pine, greenbrier, poison ivy, bayberry, and an occasional red cedar give way to marsh-elder, groundsel tree, saltmeadow cordgrass, and sedge. In late summer the pinkish-lavender blossoms of salt-marsh fleabane add a scattering of color to the high marsh community.

Groundsel-Tree

Marsh-Elder