

On The Trail

Pine Tree Natural Area—*one small jewel*

By Gary Thornbloom

Pine Tree Natural Area in Elk State Forest offers a glimpse both of the past and of a possible future for Penn's Woods. The past can be read in the remains of a settler's cabin and white pines, some towering and some seedlings, that now cover what was once the attendant farm field. The future is seen in the promise of land left alone and given the time necessary for healing itself.

In the mid 1800's settlers cleared the heart of this area and farmed it. Pine Tree Natural Area preserves 276 acres that includes evidence of this farm, and a white pine stand of twelve acres that claimed the fields when they were abandoned.

Pine Tree Trail, beginning opposite Hicks Run Campground, follows the gentle grade of the settler's wagon road up the side of the mountain to a short trail that loops across the top, through the stand of white pines before continuing back down the wagon road. The trail is well blazed with orange blazes, but without the Interpretive Guide and accompanying map, other trails also orange blazed and branching off from the Pine Tree Trail will leave many hikers exploring the State Forest that surrounds the Natural Area. The guide is free from the Bureau of Forestry and provides descriptions and facts about over 20 trees species that are marked with numbers in red circles. The trail guide also includes information about the history and natural history of the area.

At the beginning of the wagon road I was eye to eye with a Pileated Woodpecker as the bird left its cavity in a trailside tree. Nice way to begin a hike! The West Branch of Hicks Run parallels the trail for the first half mile and, while you are rising above the stream and cannot see it, the sound of running water accompanies you up the mountain.

Large hemlocks at the bottom give way to white pines. The charming moss-covered mountainside is actually nature's protective covering over the scar from a 1975 fire that destroyed the forest litter and topsoil. As the trail turns away from the stream wind in the pine tops and raven croaking replaces the sound of water. Bear left at the fork in the trail to continue following the interpretive trail.

Note the deer-browsed tops of white pine saplings. Yellow violets dot the trail. Soon you will cross a small stream which may have been the source the settlers used for drinking. Now you are finally in the white pines that are at the heart of this Natural Area. All stages of growth are present. Take a good look around you and imagine this as a farm field 150 years ago. On a hot day this would certainly be a nice spot to stop and rest.

At the next trail junction bear right to continue the loop back to the wagon road out. If you turn left you will be hiking out of the Natural Area for a longer hike on East Hicks Run Road which will lead to additional options for extending your hike back to Hicks Run Campground. This extension includes nice views across the East Branch of Hicks Run, more hemlocks, large areas covered by trailing pine and club moss, and the

experience of hiking on a trail shared by horse riders. The erosion and generally deteriorated sections of trail demonstrate the need for constant trail maintenance after horses have been on trails. Once the trail descends to the stream more wildflowers are present and there is a delightful section that goes through a dense hemlock stand. Consult the Pine Tree Hiking Trail map to hike these trails.

Continuing to the right will bring you to another trail junction. To the left the trail droops off the top and into the East Branch of Hicks Run. The trail guide includes this segment; consult the map if you wish to hike this section. To finish the top loop continue to the right to a tree marked with a white arrow in a red circle. Off to the right is what remains of our settler's cabin. Foundation outline, root cellar, and a pile of rocks that once formed the chimney. Large trees now surround what was once a clearing. This is a place that leads to more questions than answers. It is a contemplative spot, a nice place to sit, rest, and have lunch.

The top loop ends back at the wagon road where you will bear left to hike back down the wagon road to the Hicks Run Campground. The sound of the stream replaces the wind in the pines as you follow the moss-covered trail that wraps itself across and down the mountain side. Note the characteristic stream-carved hollows of this part of Pennsylvania. The grade of the wagon road is as delightful going down as it was coming up.

In Pennsylvania's sixty-one Natural Areas the attentive hiker will find many opportunities for discovery as "These areas are set aside to provide locations for scientific observation of natural systems, to protect examples of typical and unique plant and animal communities, and to conserve outstanding examples of natural beauty and interest."(From the DCNR booklet on State Forest Natural Areas.) These areas are as large as seventy miles long and over 16,000 acres, as small as 10 acres, and assorted sizes in between. They are managed by letting nature take its course, and they are often areas of special interest. State Forest Natural Areas are varied and every hiker should make it their goal to enjoy and explore this natural heritage. Pine Tree Trail is an easy, enjoyable hike through the heart of Pine Tree Natural Area and is one jewel in the crown of protected public lands.

Gary Thornbloom is the Chair of Sierra Club Moshannon Group and can be reached at bearknob@verizon.net The website for the Moshannon Group of the Sierra Club is www.sierramsh.org.

Books and Maps

The Public Use Map for Elk State Forest is available free from the Bureau of Forestry and provides an overview of the area as well as showing the trail. A map of Pine Tree Trail is also available for free. You can acquire both of these by contacting Elk State Forest headquarters Emporium PA, 814-486-3353.

Natural Pennsylvania by Charles Fergus includes a chapter on each of our State Forest Natural Areas.

