

"The Woods" - an appeal for preservation of the Chiles Tract in Fairfax County, 1975

TEEN AGERS
(MANY NOW IN
ENVIRONMENTAL-
CONCERN JOBS)
WERE ACTIVE IN
TRYING TO SAVE
THE 'WOODS' -

"THE WOODS"

by

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The Chiles Tract, known to most of us simply as "the woods" or "the creek" is a small pocket of wilderness within suburbia. It is a haven for plants and small animals, including the rare and beautiful pileated woodpecker and the pink lady's slipper. It is a forested stream valley, harboring a myriad of creatures, large and small. Holmes Run Creek runs through the valley from the north, and small streams and swamps dot the entire region. The largest and most interesting of the Tract's three sections is the one lying north of Holmes Run Acres, east of the Beltway, south of Rt. 50 and west of Falls Church High School. This area consists of three main living communities: the woodland, the open field, and the aquatic. The woodland community is divided into two types -- the pine and the deciduous.

The deciduous forest consists mainly of oaks and maples, understoried by dogwood and holly. Hickory and black walnut also grow in "The Woods." Virginia pine is most prominent in the pine forest, but these are being replaced by the deciduous forest through the natural scheme of things. The plants that inhabit the forest floor are many and varied. In the more moist hollows and ravines live ground pine, polypody fern, liverworts, and many other moisture-loving ferns and mosses.

One of my favorite mosses is sphagnum moss. This beautiful green moss holds twenty times its weight in water. In the Chiles Tract I know of it in only three locales. Two of these are only 50 yards apart and are found just off the power line field bordering the beltway known as "The Horse Path." These two patches are just bathtub-sized and are bordered by pine cones, boughs and needles. In this same area are found running ground pine, ground pine, Christmas ferns and the rare and local pink lady's slipper. Haircap and pin-cushion moss thrive in the poor soil, as do reindeer moss and British soldier lichen. Partridge berry cover the ground in mat-like beds, and leaves of rattlesnake plantain sprout nearby. Wintergreen is common and the dainty ebony spleenwort -- a small type of fern -- occurs here also.

Pine trees are the dominant tree type, although there are many dogwood, sassafras and holly. Shade-tolerant sapling oaks outnumber the pine tree seedlings, showing that a climax community is nearing.

East of here, the deciduous forest thrives. Here oak and maple reign over the land, though hickory, black walnut and a few large pines sprinkle the region. Sassafras, dogwood and holly survive beneath the larger trees. In a deciduous forest, however, these small trees are less numerous than in pine clad hillsides, due to the amount of sunlight blocked out by the broadleaf trees above. Many of the same plants growing in the pine forest thrive here, but in lesser quantities. Other wildflowers include Indian pipe -- a beautiful herb with nearly translucent white leaves, stems and flowers; bloodroot -- so named because of the redish orange fluid in the roots; and Jack-in-the-pulpit. The large fibrous roots of poison ivy climb oaks, as do other large

woody vines. In the occasional forest opening grow tiger lillies. Adder's tongue, mayapple, ferns and mosses grow in the flood plain of Holmes Run. In the wet swamp-forest grow skunk cabbage and large (4 - 5 feet) ferns. The animals which frequent the woods include insects, reptiles, amphibians, mammals and birds. Among the more interesting insects are beetles which hiss, beetles with horns, monarch and viceroy butterflies, zebra and black swallowtails and the occasional praying mantis and luna moth. Of the reptiles the forest observer might see shy box turtles, ringneck snakes, worm snakes, green snakes, garter snakes, black rat snakes, an occasional king snake, skink, or fence swift. Spotted, two-lined, red backed, slimy and marbled salamanders, fowler's and American toads, plus chorus, spring peepers, crickets and other tree frogs make up the amphibian wildlife.

Probably the most common and obvious of the animals in "The Woods" are the birds. Our forest is well represented by birds. An occasional turkey vulture drifts over, as do many species of buteos (a large type of hawk). I saw a turkey tom back there one afternoon, which was a very impressive sight at fifteen feet. Bobwhites frequently whistle in the summer, and occasionally a woodcock is spooked from its hiding place. A common bird is the mourning dove whose cooing is often heard in the Acres. Owls, rarely seen by day, are known to inhabit the forest because of the pellets of fur and small bone bits found on the forest floor. They also have been observed flying through the trees. Unfortunately, I have not heard a whip-poor-will for quite a while. However, another goatsucker, the nighthawk, is common, flying above the woods at dusk.

Hummingbirds are quite common in the summer in the deep woods, as are woodpeckers of various species. Most magnificent of all is the large pileated woodpecker. Uncommon in other areas, this bird is often heard and seen in the Chiles Tract. Flycatchers also live in these woodlands. The loudmouths of the forest are the aggressive blue jays and crows. A commonly seen bird in fall, due to the lack of leaves on trees, is the chickadee as well as the tufted titmouse. The forest's acrobat, the nuthatch, flitters through brush and trees. Another common brush bird is the wren. Thrashers, mockingbirds and catbirds also inhabit the hillsides. Thrushes and robins commonly are seen, and on very rare occasions a bluebird may be spotted high in the trees. Many species of warblers live here too. Grackles and house sparrows frequent the region, as do cardinals and grosbeaks. The rufous-sided towhee often rustles through leaf litter in search of insects and seeds. Juncos and about a dozen species of sparrows inhabit the forest, its boundaries and the fields.

Raccoons and opossums live in abundance within the Chiles Tract, along with a myriad of small rodents. Shrews, field mice, deer mice, chipmunks, grey and fox squirrels exist in large numbers. Beneath the forest floor tunnel the moles and voles. At night bats fly through the trees. The occurrence of flying squirrels here has not been verified, though it seems very likely that they do exist among the trees. Weasels and foxes nervously prowl for food, but not in such numbers as the preceding. Deer may live in the woods and many people believe that they have seen or thought they have seen them, but I have not seen either signs or the individuals. Perhaps they roam the inner reaches, away from man and his works.

There are numerous swamps and seeps throughout the region. These are usually devoid of large vertebrate life with the exception of the spotted salamander larvae. These larvae hatch from large gelatinous masses of eggs laid by the salamanders in woodland ponds during early spring. Another common salamander of the swamp borders is the dusky salamander. An abundant woodland pond breeder is the American toad. This small amphibian lays its long strands of eggs a little later than the spotted salamander.

The largest swamp in the Chiles Tract, known to many as "The Swamp," teems with life. Newts, spotted, painted and snapping turtles crawl along the muddy bottom in search of leeches and aquatic insects. Tadpoles of several frog species feed on the algae growing beneath the pond lilies. Occasional visitors of the aquatic habitat include great blue and green herons, mallard ducks, and even the wood duck has been seen every so often. These birds come to feed on the abundant minnows and green and leopard frogs which live in this pond, and in Holmes Run Creek as well as its tributaries.

Within Holmes Run live muskrats and even a few beavers have been seen. Holmes Run is a beautiful placid stream that often overflows its banks in a heavy rain. This activity makes it important to the entire flood plain ecosystem, for it keeps the forest moist and rich with nutrients. Many of the same creatures which inhabit the ponds find refuge here also.

The last community to be discussed is the open field bordering the Beltway. Here the forest has only a toehold, while grasses and vines flourish. Frequently seen or heard animals are black racer snakes, box turtles which feed on the abundant blackberries, many types of sparrows, quail, redwing blackbirds (who live in the cattail swamp near Rt. 50), field mice, rabbits and fox. The small streams which flow through the area are shadowed by willows and frequently harbor turtles, snakes, frogs and fish, and the occasional muskrat. Here, as in the rest of the woods, opossum and raccoon tracks are abundant at water's edge where the creatures feed and drink.

It is a wonder how all this lives within the roar of Interstate 495. The entire Chiles Tract should be saved, not only as a plant and wildlife sanctuary, but as a recreational facility as well. Many know of the ice skating which takes place annually on the creek and swamp. It also is a good bird-watching and nature studies area. There are some nice but obscure trails along the creek and in the woods. Some follow Holmes Run Creek, others lead to old building foundations and other 1800's remains. Unfortunately my knowledge and interest is limited to the natural aspects of the valley. I could go on and on about this area, for it was here that my interest in nature and its habits was fed and nurtured for the last nine years. I bid those interested by what they read to experience the creek, woods and swamp firsthand.

Save the Chiles Tract, for we all need some green in our lives.

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The Chiles Tract 1976



The Chiles Tract 2002