

## The Pine Grove Trail

The Pine Grove trail is a wonderful trail in winter, especially just after a light snowfall, as all the Loblolly Pines and American Hollies hold the snow, often in graceful arches over the path. This is a short trail, 0.8 mile if you just walk the loop, or about 1 mile if you take the two side trails as well. The official trailhead is at the end of the road which leads to Fleetwood Pond, but you can also begin on the east end of the loop where the trail crosses the road at Turtle Pond.

We will begin at the official trailhead and walk north (right) for our guided tour. This first portion of the trail skirts the densest section of the Loblolly Pine forest. When I first walked this trail back in the early 80's, these pines were young and only about 25 ft. tall. Now they are mature and about 100 ft. tall. This first section is an excellent place to listen for the beautiful song of the Wood Thrush beginning in mid-April, and often still heard in July. Another very vocal songster at this time of year along the entire trail is the Ovenbird, a resident warbler. The Ovenbird got its name from the nest it builds on the ground, because the nest looks like an old clay oven.

After about 0.2 miles, there is a side trail to the left which leads to a dock and marshy overlook. The trail turnoff is marked, but not obvious due to a fallen pine that is part way across the trail entrance. It is a worthwhile diversion, as I have encountered a Bald Eagle perched in a large pine where the marsh begins. If you go in winter, note the extensive greenery in the tops of the deciduous trees out in the marsh. This is Mistletoe, a parasitic evergreen plant. The marsh edge is also a good place in the spring to look for Prothonotary Warblers, suitably nicknamed the 'Golden Swamp Warbler'.

From this overlook return to the main trail and proceed east. This is prime habitat for Pine Warblers, which begin singing in March, and a little farther along, for Pink Lady Slippers, a native orchid that blooms in early May. After about 0.4 miles from where you began, you will come to where the trail crosses the road. If you have not already checked out Turtle Pond, you can walk east on the road about 200 ft. to scan the pond for possible Bald Eagle, and in late fall or winter for waterfowl, such as Hooded Merganser, Ring-necked Ducks and Bufflehead, all three of which were present today, November 19, 2010.

Pick up the trail on the south side of the road and begin walking back toward where you parked. This section of trail has a High Bush Blueberry under story, which is very colorful in the fall. Because of extensive shade, these bushes do not bear many berries. This section of trail is the best location on the Refuge for Yellow-throated Warbler. They return in early April and are present into July. If you have not noticed already, along this portion of trail are many downed pines and hollies. They got so loaded with snow in the blizzards of March 2010 that they bent over and snapped.

This area can be excellent during spring migration, which peaks in mid-May. Birds such as Scarlet Tanager and Hooded Warbler are two eye catchers possible here. In late fall, be alert for American Woodcock, a shorebird that lives in the woods, and sometimes is found in the wet areas along this section of trail. A spectacular year round resident that likes the woods around the Pine Grove Trail is the Pileated Woodpecker. This is

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Delaware's largest woodpecker, about the size of a crow. It is frequently seen going from one tree to another with its undulating flight, or detected by its loud call and drumming.

After about 0.4 miles from where you left the road, the trail returns to the parking lot and trailhead. If you have time, walk out the south path to the fishing pier. This is an excellent vantage point for watching Osprey fish, especially in early spring when they first return. Belted Kingfishers and the aforementioned waterfowl may also be present, and in spring a Prothonotary Warbler can usually be heard singing and often seen.

Hope you enjoy the beautiful Pine Grove Trail!

Bill Fintel