

Wintergreen Woods

Phyliss Benn Trail



Owned and managed by the La Porte County Conservation Trust Inc.

Welcome to Wintergreen Woods State Nature Preserve and the Phyliss Benn Trail

As you enter the woods, you will notice that it has similarities and differences to many other woods within Indiana. It is known as a Boreal Flatwoods and is representative of woodlands normally found much further north. Although the plant communities found here are relatively common in Michigan, a few miles to the north, they are uncommon in Indiana.

In *Plants of the Chicago Region* (4th Edition, 1994), renowned botanists Floyd Swink and Gerould Wilhelm describe woodlands like Wintergreen Woods as follows: **“In the broad low flats behind the high dunes of Lake Michigan lies one of the richest and most complicated forested systems in our region. It is characterized by a complex hydrology and is interspersed by gentle rises, shallow depressions, and hummocks, and consists of an inseparable mixture of wooded fen, bog, and mesic forest.”** Plant species common to the savannas in Lake and Porter Counties, such as Canada mayflower, are found here with northern species such as our namesake, wintergreen.

Mostly flat, Wintergreen Woods holds pockets of water during wet periods, making it ideal habitat for unique plants, amphibians, and other animals. Although we have boardwalks through the wettest areas, you may still get your feet wet as you walk the Phyliss Benn Trail.

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Station 1



Starflower

Paper birch (white birch), with its peeling white bark, is characteristic of these woods. Although this is a common species of the northwoods in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota, in Indiana it is found only near Lake Michigan. Many ferns including **cinnamon fern**, **marsh shield fern**, and **sensitive fern** can be found here. One of the highlights of these northern woods is **goldthread**, a tiny plant of bogs and swamp forests that blooms in April-May, often at the base of trees or on hummocks. Note the bright yellow “roots”, which give it its name, and the shiny, dark, evergreen leaves. Other unique plants are **Canada mayflower (wild lily-of-the valley)** and **starflower** (another northern species), both blooming in May-June. Keep your eyes out for all of these plants along the trail. A variety of blue, yellow, and white **violets** are also seen in spring.

Station 2

Look closely for a **black gum (tupelo)** tree with its sometimes shiny, ovate leaves that turn a magnificent red in the fall. **Highbush blueberry** produces tasty blueberries in late summer for wildlife (and others!) to enjoy. Another sandy soil lover, **witch hazel**, which is one of the last plants in this area to bloom in the fall, has unique long-petaled yellow flowers in October-November.



Pileated Woodpecker

Station 3

As you approach this station, look both directions and you can imagine what much of this woods looked like prior to being logged in the past - **magnificent!** Within your field of view are various layers of vegetation and pockets of water in depressions. Many of the overstory trees are **red maple** in the wetter areas and **red oak** on hummocks. If you look closely, you'll see a common northwoods groundcover with evergreen opposite leaves, **partridge berry**, growing on the hummocks. Swink and Wilhelm

describe this species as an inhabitant of "**swamp forest, where windthrow has been heavy and the rotted logs have formed hummocks interspersed with holes left by the overturning of the root system of the fallen tree**". This aptly describes Wintergreen Woods! In the spring and summer listen for the many frogs found here, including **spring peepers**, **wood frogs**, and **tree frogs** throughout the woods. Walk softly and you may even hear a **wood thrush** or see a **pileated woodpecker** if you are lucky.

Station 4

You'll see remnants of past logging activity in this area, with many trees sprouting multiple root sprouts. **Sassafras**, with green young bark, has three different leaves - entire, one-lobed, and two-lobed, resembling a mitten. Also notice **tuliptree (yellow-poplar)**, the State tree of Indiana, with its 4-lobed leaves with a tulip-like outline. This **magnolia** has tulip-shaped flowers in the spring and is one of the largest of the eastern hardwood trees, growing 80 to 150 feet tall. **Black cherry** seedlings are also common here, with long white flower bunches in spring and small dark berries in late spring and summer. As the woods recovers from past logging activity, many of these resprouts will be shaded out. In the spring look for the beautiful **flowering dogwood** blooms. The white flowers of the **maple leaf viburnum** will be showing in the spring, and in late summer and fall the birds will enjoy the berries.



Station 5

Look around into the forest and on the trail ahead of you. There are several long narrow ridges that are 1 or 2 feet high. These are **tree-throw hummocks** and they are remnants of the trunks of trees that have fallen in the forest from

strong winds, disease, or old age. In this area the hummocks are very apparent, including some recently blown-over trees with their roots exposed. **Windthrow** is common in areas that have loose, sandy wet soils. The decaying material from the tree provides organic matter and is an important component for the development of soil from which all plants rely upon for nutrients. They also create micro-relief that can provide a unique place for different kinds of plants.

Station 6

The woods become somewhat drier as you move into the northeast portion of the property. You'll see **Mayapples**, with their umbrella-like leaves (with a surprise underneath!), and **wild sarsaparilla**, with its umbel of flowers that bloom in mid-spring on a separate stalk; both species that can also be



Mayapple

found in the dry dune savannas of Lake and Porter Counties. But beyond the trail are **club moss** and **ground pine**, unique northwoods species that are uncommon in Indiana. Various **fungi (mushrooms)** can also be found here, including some tiny red ones that you may have to get close to the ground to see.



Club Moss

Station 7

At the wetland overlook there are many sights and sounds to take in and enjoy. Here, the deepest aquatic habitat on the preserve supports many floating **pondweeds** that are rooted deep beneath the water. A unique floating **liverwort** can be found sitting on top

of the water. A large stand of **buttonbush**, named for its round flower-head and later seed-head, can be seen at the end of the overlook. Scattered **black ash**, with corky bark, are found growing in deeper water. Growing on hummocks out of the water are **red oak** and **swamp white oak**.

Whispy **hummock sedge**, as its

name indicates, inhabits the hummocks as well. **Blue flag iris** and **lizard's tail**, which bloom in spring and summer respectively, can be found growing near the overlook in the water. Turn around and look up and you may be able to see our only **white pine**, denizen of the northwoods. Although once common in the dunes along Lake Michigan in Indiana, as a native this species is now uncommon. It has been widely planted in yards and plantations in the state, but natural populations are restricted to the dunes and various other sites with cool microclimates.



Liverwort



Lizard's Tail

Notice the majestic smooth-barked **American beech** tree, inhabited by many creatures. If you were an animal living in the woods, where would you live in or on this tree? Beechnuts (not the gum!) are a favored food of many species of wildlife. Look closely at the ground and you will find the namesake for this woods, **wintergreen**, along with **partridge berry**. The thick-leaved **wintergreen** has one or two bright red berries in the fall. This plant gets its name from the odor the plant emits when crushed, which is a refreshing wintergreen smell. This plant can be found year-round as it is considered evergreen.

Station 8



Wintergreen

Geology of Wintergreen Woods

Geology is a fundamental component of ecosystems. The rock and minerals that form the substrate for plant communities and the character of the landscape that controls micro-climate, surface-water drainage and infiltration, and soil development create unique conditions for habitat.

The geology of Wintergreen Woods is a descendant of the last part of the Ice Age. Glaciers in Indiana reached their last maximum extent about 21,000 years ago and began melting as a result of climate change. About 15,000 years ago the margin of the glacier that occupied the area of Lake Michigan stood stationary in the vicinity of Wintergreen Woods. Various kinds of sediment were deposited by the glacier. A mixture of sand, silt, clay, and boulders (glacial till) was deposited beneath the glacier. As the ice margin retreated northward, sand, silt, and clay were deposited in layers in a glacial lake dammed between the front of the glacier and the Valparaiso moraine to the south. As the ice margin continued its northward retreat, the level of the glacial lake dropped, leaving the sandy sediment of the flat lake bottom exposed to the forces of wind. Wintergreen Woods occupies the former lake bottom but the soil that feeds nutrients to the plant communities is made from the windblown sand derived from the lake bottom sediment. Several feet beneath the windblown sand and lake bottom sediment is clayey glacial till. Water doesn't percolate through the clayey glacial till, so groundwater is perched, creating a water table just a few feet beneath the ground. In Sebert Woods on the south side of 925 North, wind created a long sinuous sand dune. The sand dune probably formed soon after the glacier margin retreated. Then, plants quickly stabilized the dune and it probably hasn't been active for thousands of years.

Thank you for visiting Wintergreen Woods and please
come back with your friends.

For more information, including a list of flora and fauna,
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