

Easy Going - Wisconsin's Northwoods

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Wetlands, Forests, Flowers & Forest Management

The northwoods, as we casually call it, is not all woods by any means. In reality, it is a combination of wetlands, field openings

Its wetlands include marshes and swamps, common elsewhere in the state too, plus a particularly northerly phenomenon, the northern bog.

To be a *marsh*, technically, a wetland must be treeless, dominated by grasses and sedges. Powell Marsh is a good example, though far larger than average. Its grasses used to supply hay for loggers' horses and raw materials for manufacture of grass rugs or wicker furniture downstate. Now the marsh is managed for wildlife control. Thunder Lake Marsh near Three Lakes was once the subject of a drainage scheme designed for farming its promising soils. It too is now a game area.

The plant communities of a wet marsh include tiny but lovely orchid types, water lilies, reeds, grasses, cattails, aquatic shortweed, duck potato, and wild celery. Sometimes a wet marsh or reedy lake shallow also contains wild rice beds. Vilas County authorities are now experimenting with seeding wild rice in locations from which it is known to have vanished.

A dry marsh, whose decayed vegetation has raised the growing level above the original water level, has grasses, sedges, iris, and shrubs like willow, leatherleaf, and alder.

A swamp is a wetland that hosts shrubs and such trees as tamarack, spruce, and cedar. The needles of the tamarack, interestingly, turn yellow in fall.

The *northern bog*, marked by dark, acid water, usually occurs in a motionless kettle area, where the vegetation at first rings the kettle pond shore, gradually encroaches outward around a diminishing central pond, and eventually chokes and overgrows the pond completely. In its oldest stages, near shore, the bog supports spruce and tamarack, but nearer its younger center it is a quaking bog of grass tufts, cranberry, and labrador tea, interlaced with the creeper known as sphagnum moss. Lending fascination are the insect-eating sundew and pitcher plant. Beware, though: quaking bogs will not usually support the weight of a trespasser.

The northwoods also contains many openings, most of them not of prairie origin but traceable to abandoned farming operations or logging camps, or to old forest fire burns. These have value as game openings, and those in hollows where cold air collects and tends to inhibit vegetation are likely to remain naturally in grasses. The natural plant communities in forest openings are grasses, bracken fern, blueberries, and blackberries. Wildflowers are heavy-stalked *compositae*, members of the daisy family like black-eyed susan, asters, or oxeye daisy.

Forests, of course, have been the major northern vegetation type for ages. The first surveyors, around the time of the Civil War, gave us an idea of the virgin growth they encountered as they listed section corners, bearing trees, and witness trees in their field notes. Though they encountered some large sedge meadows and pine barrens, most of the area was about evenly divided between great pine forests and northern mesic forests of maple, hemlock, and yellow birch. Oneida had a somewhat larger share of the pine forests, Vilas a larger area of the hardwoods.

Loggers with their "cut and bum" philosophy removed most of these forests, ninety to fifty years ago, and the forests are still trying to restore themselves. Thus we see woods in the north that are in any of three stages: the pioneer or early reestablishing stage; the subclimax stage with competing trees and brush; and the climax forest, usually hardwoods like maples, so dense and mature that their thick overhead canopy precludes any heavy understory of brush or plants on the ground below.

Climax forests, of course, are the loveliest, and perhaps the most magnificent climax forest in either county is a hemlock stand on end moraine ridges off Rearing Pond Road near the community of Star Lake. Subclimax forests can also be very beautiful, and they are much more common, especially on well-drained uplands. Predominant trees in these forests are maple, hemlock, yellow birch, and bass.

Pioneer forests are the early stage in forest regeneration. White birch and aspen (also known as poplar or popple) figure prominently in this forest type. Pine forests in Vilas and Oneida counties generally combine white pines, distinguished by black bark and short delicate needles in sets of five, with Norway or red pines, which have reddish-brown, scaly bark, long, coarse needles in pairs, and often a very tall, limbless profile. Jack pine barrens are ugly, sandy areas dominated by the scraggly jack pine with its short, coarse needles. Boreal forests of spruce and balsam are not very common in these counties. Where any especially attractive forest areas exist, I have listed them at their respective towns.

Woodland wildflowers are mostly spring varieties that flourish before the leafy canopy above closes over. Some are delicate white spring ephemerals like anemones. Others are the violet, the partridge berry and bunchberry, the bloodroot, the twinflower, and, most enchanting of all, the trillium. Among good trillium-viewing areas are Highway G south from Pelican Lake and Highway A east of Phelps.

Visitors in the Vilas-Oneida area can see evidence of forest management-trucks hauling pulpwood to paper mills or rail sidings, popple peelers stripping new-cut trees of bark in May, when bark peels easily (giving the pulpwood premium value at the mill), or just the sight of cutover lands.

Modern forest management focuses on three principal cutting practices. Selective cutting removes target species for their own value or to strengthen remaining valuable species in a tract. Clear-cutting removes all trees from a tract, much as a farmer might clear a wood land for cropping, but more crudely, since the slash may be left. The tract then usually regenerates in quick-growing popple. Popple is an even-aged species that cannot compete with other trees under a subclimax or climax canopy. When a tract grows up in popple, the trees all have equal sun and grow swiftly to maturity, a croplike harvest, and then another cycle of regeneration. A fresh clear-cut may look hideous for a few years, but it often represents good use of land as well as sound economics.

One new antidote to this ugliness of clear-cutting is corridor residual cutting, whereby loggers leave belts of trees along roadways and other natural barriers over perhaps 5 to 10 percent of the tract. These improve the esthetics, provide shelter to wildlife that need forest cover, retain seed trees, and leave slash-free corridors where fire protection plows can penetrate easily, should fire occur.

One procedure that should be mandatory after every day in the woods in spring and summer is a careful check for wood ticks on oneself and on children.

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