

Panthorn Park Nature Trail Guide



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Welcome to the Panthorn Park Nature Trail.

This area was developed to encourage students, teachers and area residents to learn more about the habitats and wildlife found within the area. It is hoped that projects like this will foster a greater understanding and appreciation for wildlife and its habitat.

The development of this trail required the teamwork of the town and state officials, groups, companies and individuals. Please enjoy it and take care of it. Please leave only your footprints and take out any trash.

Look for numbered yellow painted poles throughout the nature trails; they correspond to the numbers in this guide.

Stop 1 – Red Maple

Red maples (*Acer rubrum*) provide winged seeds for wildlife in the spring. Red maples tolerate moist soils and are known to have cavities (hollows in which animals seek out shelter or use for nesting).

Stop 2 – Young White Pine Stand

This area supports a young eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*) stand. It is thick with young trees of white pine. These dense wooded areas provide great cover and shelter for wildlife. As time goes by, some trees will survive and others will die to leave a more sparse forest. Right now, this young stage is most valuable for predator protection for many species of wildlife. Connecticut's landscape is about 60 percent forested. Most of the forest is comprised of deciduous trees (lose their leaves each fall). White pine makes up less than 6 percent of the forest cover and provides valuable winter cover for wildlife.

Stop 3 – Wetland and Floodplain

Wetlands and floodplains serve very important functions. They absorb water, retain it, cleanse it and provide important habitats for wildlife. This wetland area contains a diversity of plant and animal life. You will find a variety of trees, shrubs and herbaceous vegetation which have adapted to the moist soil conditions. Move ahead to stop number 4 and you will find a short boardwalk which overlooks the floodplain area.

Stop 4 – Tussock Sedge/Red Maple

Observe the young red maple tree growing on tussock sedge. This is a classic example of how a forest begins growing in very wet places. Red maples gain a foothold by germinating on the tussock sedge which is above the water saturated soils. In spring and summer, you can observe wildlife such as red-winged blackbirds, mallards and painted turtles. Occasionally, you may see a green heron or a great blue heron hunting for small fish and amphibians. The nesting box you see on a pole is a wood duck box. Wood ducks require cavities to nest in, unlike the mallard which nests on the ground. Man-made nesting boxes help supplement their natural nesting cavities in trees.

Stop 5 – Mature Eastern White Pine

It is hard to imagine, but most of the pine trees which make up the young pine forest around you started from seeds cast from the tall, mature white pines. Their seeds are sought after by a variety of small mammals and birds. White pine was originally harvested by the colonists and shipped back to England to produce ship masts. The trees that were slated for harvest were marked with a symbol called the "King's Mark." White pine is a softwood lumber used in making furniture and other woodworking items.

Stop 6 – Eastern Red Cedar

This dead eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) is testimony to a changing forest. Red cedar is a pioneer tree. It comes into abandoned fields first. As the forest grows, it gets shaded out by other trees. Red cedar needs full sun to survive. It persists only where it gets a lot of sunlight. As the forest matures, you can find the “skeletons” of red cedars in the understory. The female cedar tree produces valuable berries (actually cones) which are eaten by many types of birds, particularly cedar waxwings. In winter, cedars provide good shelter and cover.

Stop 7 – Black Cherry

Black cherry (*Prunus serotina*) provides berries for wildlife in the early fall. Birds, squirrels and even raccoons eat the berries. This plant grows best in full sun, but its seedlings are tolerant of the forest shade. Historically and currently, humans use the wood for furniture and its berries are used in making pies and jams.

Stop 8 – Junk Yard

In the past, junkyards were common on properties. Here you will find old parts of cars and trucks. Today, there are laws which help prevent this from happening. Wildlife, such as toads, mice and cottontails, now use the junk for cover. This stop will hopefully make people think twice about spoiling nature through illegal dumping.

Stop 9 – Power of Nature

The awesome power of nature can be seen here by looking at the effects of a lightning strike on this white pine. Lightning can kill or injure trees. The dead or dying tissue, however, creates new habitat for a variety of wildlife. The “carpenter birds” such as the downy and hairy woodpeckers waste no time hammering away at the dying bark and excavate cavities to raise their young in the spring and summer. Woodpeckers also roost in the holes during cold winter nights. Secondary cavity users, such as flying squirrels, tree swallows and owls also benefit from the work of the “carpenter birds.” The secondary cavity users are not capable of excavating their own holes.

Stop 10 – Yellow Birch

Yellow birch (*Betula alleghensis*) has a characteristic peeling golden bark. It grows in wet areas. It produces small nutlets which are eaten by birds and chipmunks.

Stop 11 – American Elm

American elm (*Ulmus americana*) are known to grow in floodplains and were once planted along city streets. New Haven, known as the “Elm City,” had many elms along its streets. In the 1930’s, a disease called “Dutch Elm Disease” devastated most of the trees. Today, some trees still survive. Its seeds, produced in the spring, are eaten by birds, mice and squirrels.

Stop 12 – Tulip Tree/Root Adaptations

The tulip tree produces seed clusters which look like tulip flowers. Hummingbirds will feed on the nectar in its blossoms. The seeds are eaten by chipmunks, squirrels and some birds. The bark of the older tulip trees was used by Native American Indians to build their wigwams. The yellow birch, here on the right, has interesting adaptations on its base. Notice how the roots have grown irregularly to adapt to the moist growing conditions of this area. Plants adapt to varying conditions and develop specialized features. Often, seedlings will sprout on a rotted log, a rock or tussock sedge which leads it to form interesting root systems.

Stop 13 – Shagbark Hickory

Shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*) has a unique shaggy bark which is utilized by a variety of wildlife for cover. Some bats may use the bark crevices for roosting. Insects may hide under the bark for shelter and predator avoidance. The nut produced by this tree is eagerly eaten and stored by squirrels in the early fall, before the acorns start ripening. Shagbark hickories are usually teeming with squirrels in the fall. Humans have historically collected the sweet tasting nuts for food and used its strong wood for making furniture and bows (archery).

Stop 14 – Gray Birch

Gray birch (*Betula populifolia*) is a pioneer plant like the red cedar. It usually comes into abandoned fields or forest openings ahead of other trees. It is a relatively short-lived tree (20-40 years) and gets outcompeted by the oaks, maples and hickories. This plant produces nutlets (small seeds) that are eaten by wildlife.

Stop 15 – Quaking Aspen

Quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) gets its name from its quaking leaves in the wind. The leaves of this small tree have a leaf stem that is shaped in a fashion which causes the leaves to sway left and right in the wind. Its leaves “quake” in unison with the wind. The buds of this tree are relished by ruffed grouse, a local gamebird.

Stop 16 – Arrowwood Viburnum

Arrowwood viburnum (*Viburnum recognitum*) is a valuable fall berry producer. It is one of Connecticut’s finest native viburnum. It makes a nice ornamental shrub for your yard as well. The Native American Indians used the straight shoots of this shrub to make their arrow shafts for hunting. Note the straight shoots of this shrub.

Stop 17 – Pin Oak

Pin oaks (*Quercus palustris*) are found mostly on poorly drained soils. They have many lower branches that usually stay on the trunk even after they die. These trees are often used in landscaping because they lack a tap root and are easily transplanted. The acorns are small but abundant. This oak is also known as the “Constitution” oak in Connecticut.

Stop 18 – Mountain Laurel

Mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) produces Connecticut's state flower. The evergreen aspect of mountain laurel makes it valuable understory cover for some wildlife. Although toxic to humans and cattle, white-tailed deer commonly eat it in winter or times of food shortages. A Connecticut scientist, Richard Jaynes of Hamden, has propagated many varieties of this native laurel.

Stop 19 – Forest Edge or Ecotone

The forest edge or ecotone is a place where two habitat types meet. The forest edge contains a wide variety of plants and thus a wide variety of wildlife. A mixture of sun-loving and shade-thriving plants intermingles to form a diverse vertical and horizontal structure. Predators such as hawks and foxes will often hunt the forest edges to find prey.

Stop 20 – Nesting Boxes

The nest box on the field edge was built for an Eastern Bluebird. It has a 1-1/2 inch entrance hole. Putting out nest boxes help wildlife that need cavities. The lack of suitable cavities can be a limiting factor for most cavity-nesting species. Other wildlife that may use this box includes tree sparrows or house wrens. An invasive non-native bird named the house sparrow may compete for the box. This pest often times will kill an adult bluebird and its young to gain use of the nest box.