

Dwarf Pine Plains—Two Loops

2.5 to 3 mile loop--unblazed
0.64 mile loop—blazed with signposts

Why:

The Dwarf Pine Plains of Westhampton is the smallest of only three such areas, the other two being found in the New Jersey Pine Barrens and Ulster County's Shawangunk Mountains. Extremely poor soil and frequent wildfires combine to create a harsh environment where pitch pines rarely grow taller than six feet. Generously interspersed with the pines are scrub oaks, the host plant for the endangered buck moth. In the hot summer months, buck moths seek protection from the threat of wildfires by burrowing into earthen cells in the forest floor. In the autumn they come to the surface for their mating flight, laying eggs on a twig of scrub oak trees. In October, the moth emerges from underground resting places to live a few short days and seek mates. From late morning through early afternoon, these black-white-and-orange insects take to the skies in a sight not to be missed—and the pines are so accessible that you won't have to.

We suggest you try both shorts loops, one an unblazed route on the west side of County Route 31 and the other an interpretive loop on the east side. The Dwarf Pine Plains is extremely hot in the summer, so go early or wait for cooler seasons. The berry bushes here provide spectacular autumn color.

Directions:

Take Route 27 (Sunrise Highway) to Exit 63. At the southwest corner of the interchange, pull off immediately into an unpaved clearing just beyond the shoulder. Alternately, parking is available across the road at a Suffolk County Water Authority building adjacent to the interpretive loop.

For the west-side loop, locate an unmarked trail at the south end of the dirt parking area and heading south parallel to C.R. 31. The path extends a quarter mile to the side yard of a small commercial building. (If you wish, you can simply walk down the road to the building.) Turn right, and at the rear of the property a wide, straight trail heading northwest lures hikers into the heart of the Dwarf Pines.

Description for West-side Loop:

The soils of the Dwarf Pine Plains are the driest, most acidic, and most nutrient-poor of the entire Pine Barrens. Venture here in the middle of a warm day and you'll gain added respect for the plants and wildlife that can survive on this sere and sandy plain, which holds little of the moisture it receives. Amid the dominant dwarf pines and scrub oaks are bearberry, low-bush blueberry, huckleberry, wintergreen, sweet fern and *Hudsonia* heathers. All are well equipped to endure dry conditions. Up to ninety percent of the biomass of the plants here lies underground, a protection against fire. In fact, resins found in most of the vegetation here actually *promote* burning to drive out competing species.



Dwarf Pines Interpretive Trail

The abundant pines here have adapted to fire. Most pitch pines produce cones which open every fall naturally and drop seed every year. Most dwarf pines, however, produce closed, or “serotinous,” cones, which usually open only after being heated by a passing wildfire. After a fire, all the cones open slowly and drop their seed onto the ashy sand.

Deer, too, are plentiful, able to find enough moisture in the morning dew on the oaks and by occasionally wandering south to outlying ponds. They tend to lie low during the day, but you'll see plenty of tracks. Listen for the ever-rising notes of the prairie warbler, whose call sounds a bit like a jet engine warming up.

Farther along the trail the noise of Sunrise Highway's traffic grows more pronounced. Within a half mile or so (don't worry: there are no side trails to mislead you), one enters a clearing just south of the road. This barren spot was created in the 1960s by construction crews extending Sunrise Highway eastward. What makes the clearing interesting now is how relatively devoid of vegetation it remains so long after. Isolated patches of *Hudsonia* have crept in from the edges, an occasional scrub oak pokes barely a foot or two above the earth, and a few pitch pines are finally taking hold after forty years.

Follow the south edge of the clearing until a clearly visible path appears straight ahead. Follow it until the first cross path, and there turn left. The sandy path is sometimes a tough walk if it's been chewed up by illegal ATV users. As you walk south, you'll be walking on the eastern edge of the burn area from the 1995 “Sunrise Fire,” the wildfire that burned from Suffolk Community College in Riverhead south to the Westhampton LIRR station. To the right you'll see a vast area of scrub oak and low pitch pine that is filling this once completely blackened tract. To the north, the hills of the Ronkonkoma Moraine, created in the last Ice Age, are clearly visible.

Eventually you'll reach the end of an old east-west road paved with old, spent coal, or “clinkers.” The road dates to World War II, when the area was used as a military bombing and gunnery range. Follow it straight to C.R. 31, about a half mile away. At the end of the abandoned road, you'll need to walk around a gate built to keep vehicles from entering the plains. Turn left to return to your car, an easy half-mile walk on a safe, wide shoulder. You may choose to avoid half of the paved part of the journey by picking up the trail parallel to the road just north of the commercial building.

Now, cross the road and try the Dwarf Pines Interpretive Trail, a project of the Central Pine Barrens Joint Policy and Planning Commission that opened in the fall of 2008. Signboards at the trailhead, just south of the Water Authority building, describe the trail and the precious drinking water aquifer beneath it. The short, Q-shaped loop is an easy, pleasant walk.

Caution: Should you visit the Dwarf Pine Plains in early summer, you'll encounter the buck moth in its caterpillar stage. *Do not* touch the caterpillar. Its protective poisonous spines could make your trip much more memorable than you intended!

***Happy Hiking
from the
Long Island Pine
Barrens Society!***



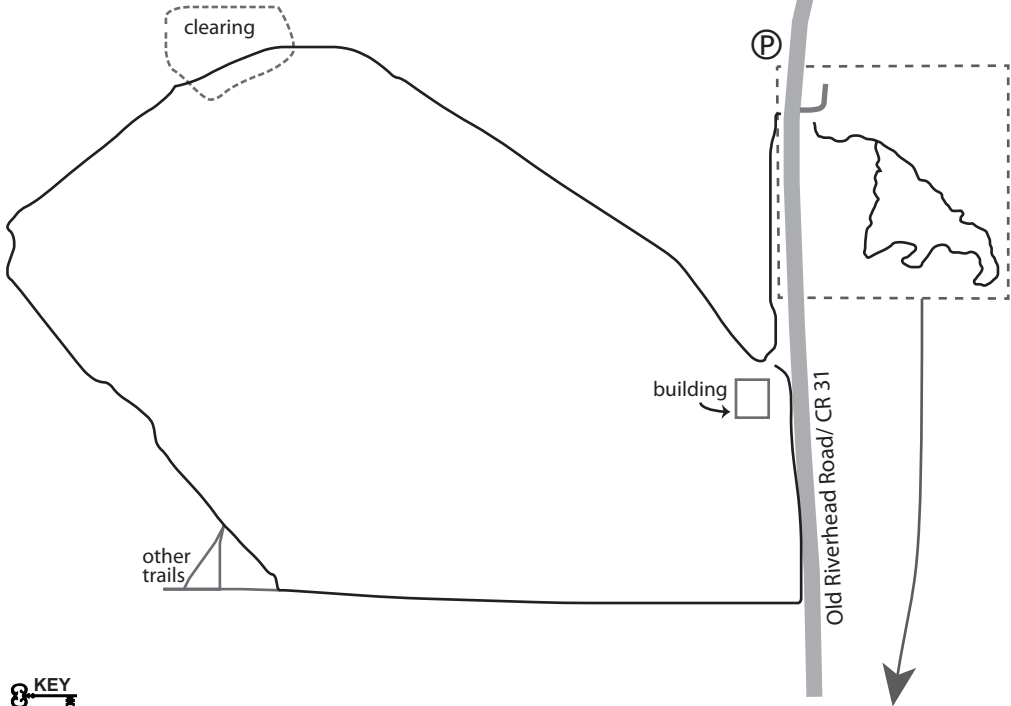
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Dwarf Pine Plains (two loops)

Sunrise Highway

Exit 63



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