

Introduction

Picture early Long Island. Before European settlers came here, the prairies of the Hempstead Plain extended from what is now Queens Village to near the current Nassau-Suffolk county line. Gradually, the plains gave way to a transition zone of scrub oak, heath plants and scattered pitch pines we now call the Oak Brush Plain. Little remains of these unique areas. Farther east, the pines grew taller and denser, and the Central Pine Barrens stretched for 250,000 acres from west of the Connetquot River to Hampton Bays.

Walt Whitman described "...wide central tracts of pine and scrub-oak, (charcoal was largely made here,) monotonous and sterile. But many a good day or half-day did I have, wandering through those solitary cross-roads, inhaling the peculiar and wild aroma."

Monotonous and sterile? The "barren" part of "Pine Barrens" reflects a farmer's point of view. The sandy soil, the glacial outwash of the last Ice Age, is so porous that many traditional crops fared poorly without extensive soil amendments. (The original name of Hampton Bays was "Good Ground," where the earth became more arable.)

Native plants, however, adapted themselves to near desert-like conditions and frequent brush fires. Pitch pines, scrub oaks and the understory "heath plants" – blueberry, huckleberry, wintergreen and so on – contain pitches and resins that actually promote their own burning. However, these plants store much of their energy in large underground roots, so that when a brush fire blackens the earth they re-sprout in great abundance, while competing, non-native species do not. Poison ivy, for instance, is intolerant of fire and thus rare in the Pine Barrens.

As you walk through this region, you may notice evidence of the frequency of brush fires: where pitch pine dominates the canopy, fire has occurred more recently; where tall tree oaks rule, fire has not been present for a long time. So we really have pine-oak barrens and oak-pine barrens. Some casual observers may find the vegetation here visually unimpressive, but contemplate the tenacity and survival mechanisms of what biologists call a "fire climax community," and you'll appreciate the true beauty of the Pine Barrens

Post-World War II development changed our landscape forever. The Hempstead Plains virtually disappeared except for two small tracts near the Nassau Coliseum, and the Oak Brush Plain likewise shrunk to the Edgewood Preserve in Commack and a smaller parcel in Brentwood. The Pine Barrens, too, dwindled to about 100,000 acres – and those might be gone had it not been for the 1993 Pine Barrens Protection Act.

The Pine Barrens sit atop vast aquifers of some of the best drinking water in the world. The threat of contamination grew ever closer with the suburbanization of Long Island, providing the impetus for a movement to save this precious resource. The Pine Barrens Act created a 53,000-acre Core Preservation Area where no new development is permitted (55,000 with the addition of the Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge in 1998) and a 47,000-acre Compatible Growth Area where limited, environmentally-compatible development may occur. Efforts to acquire remaining private land in the Core continue even now. Thanks to the Pine Barrens Act, we can still wander "solitary cross-roads."

The Long Island Pine Barrens Society was in the forefront of the battle to save our natural heritage, but we'll leave the politics and scars of war for recounting elsewhere. Most of the hikes described in this guide traverse the Core Preservation Area. We hope you'll journey into the woods and appreciate the beauty, diversity and importance of what we have worked so hard to save for future generations.

-Tom Casey, Long Island Pine Barrens Society

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



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Know Before You Go

Health and Safety:

Especially in spring and summer, take precautions against ticks, which inhabit several grassy areas, in particular, in great numbers. Stay on the trail as much as possible. Tuck long pants into socks and wear light colored clothing to easily spot ticks. In the summer months, hydration is key: bring sufficient water for an extended walk. Poison ivy is a non-native species and rare in the Pine Barrens, unless otherwise noted throughout this guide. However, it is always a good idea to refrain from handling plants you are unfamiliar with.

Following the Trail:

Many of the trails described here are marked, or “blazed,” to make them easy to follow. Blazes are usually painted on trees or posts; less often, you’ll find plastic or metal blazes fastened to trees. If you see a blaze, continue straight ahead. If two blazes appear together, follow the top one: if offset to the left, look for a left turn; if offset to the right, turn right. Three blazes mean you’ve come to the end of a trail. Generally, when you’re standing at a blaze, you should see another ahead of you, unless the trail is obvious. Sometimes we daydream our way past a turn, and sometimes a blaze simply is missing for any number of reasons. Should you lose your way, turn around and retrace your steps until you regain the blazes. For more remote ventures, it’s always wise to have a map or guide handy, too.

Maps:

Maps of preserves managed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation are also available from the D.E.C. regional office at Stony Brook University. See the descriptions of Rocky Point and Sarnoff Preserves. In other places, such as Quogue Refuge, maps may be available on site. Additional maps of many of the areas on Long Island are available for a modest fee from the Long Island Greenbelt Trail Conference, P.O. Box 5636, Hauppauge, NY 11788. Call 631-360-0753, or check the Greenbelt’s website, www.ligreenbelt.org for more details. Gail Evans also maintains a website with maps of East End hikes not featured in this guide, for more information visit www.gailstales.net.

Permits:

Use of some of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC)-managed trails require a permit. These are free, issued annually, and can be obtained by writing to or visiting NYSDEC, Division of Lands and Forests, 50 Circle Road SUNY-Stony Brook, Stony Brook, NY 11790-3409; or phone the license clerk at (631)444-0273.

Car Shuttles:

Some of our walks are loops or out-and-back routes. Others are better done point-to-point, which means a buddy system is in order. In such cases, hike with a friend. Leave one car at the *end* point of the journey, and take the other to the *start*. You can retrieve it afterwards. Of course, you can begin any of the point-to-point routes, walk only as far as you please, and return.

All-Terrain Vehicles:

ATVs chew up the sandy soils of Long Island and are prohibited on public land. Should you encounter illegal users in the Pine Barrens, do not confront the riders, but call 911 as soon as possible. The operator will route your call to the proper authorities. ATV use is illegal and is considered an emergency call. You can also dial 1-877-BARRENS, which is routed directly to the Suffolk County Parks Police.

The Paumanok Path

“Long Island’s Appalachian Trail” runs more than 125 miles from Rocky Point to Montauk Point. Completed from Rocky Point to Shinnecock Canal and again from the Southampton-East Hampton town line to Montauk Point, the Path awaits the closure of a few gaps in Southampton east of the canal.

Several of the hikes described here follow the Paumanok Path, which is the product of a collaboration of the Southampton and East Hampton Trails Preservation Societies, the Long Island Greenbelt Trail Conference, and state, county and town land-management agencies.

Pine Barrens Superstar: The Pitch Pine

Those hot, dry days when the pungent aroma of pitch pine fills the summer air are good times to reflect on just how remarkable this sometimes scrubby tree is. It survives in near desert-like conditions by sending huge taproots and lateral roots far into sandy soil. The plate-like bark of the pitch pine, full of insulating air pockets, allows the tree to survive fires as hot as 2,000 degrees if the crown remains intact. Failing that, a charred tree may send up basal sprouts from its roots. Pitch pines are also self-pruning, dropping their lower branches as a way of keeping their feet out of a fire. Some pitch pines exhibit epicormic buds, which sprout from under the bark in the aftermath of passing brush fires.

Ironically, one reason pitch pines have survived the commercial exploitation that has befallen other species is that it is perceived to have little dollar value. However, this was not always so. Soft, light, and durable, but too coarse-grained for fine woodwork, old virgin stands of pitch pine often ended up as railroad ties and joists in log houses. Much pitch pine was burned to create charcoal. At the turn of the 20th Century, pitch pine was a staple of the box-manufacturing industry; today it is still fashioned into cargo pallets. Because of its somewhat decay-resistant properties, the wood was also used for the buckets and spokes of mill wheels and occasionally for pilings. The heartwood was suited for small boat building and ship's pumps. Even the resinous pine knots from rotting logs had value: employing a technique brought to this country from Scandinavia, early settlers in the Pine Barrens split the resinous knots into thin splints and bundled them, often on long hickory or birch handles, for torches.

Pitch pines were also a source of turpentine. The original method of collecting the resin was to “box” the tree: it was cut into, a foot above the ground, to a depth of four inches; then a wide, slanting cut angled down into the initial cut, forming a collecting “box.” Additional slanting axe cuts angling toward the box allowed the resin to drip down. At the end of the flow, “scrape,” the dried resin remaining on the cuts, was scraped off and added to the harvest.

This technique caused severe damage to the trees, which survived only three or four years of such treatment. Later, galvanized iron “gutters” allowed for more efficient and less harmful collection.

Tar, important as wagon-axle grease, was yet another by-product of the pitch pine. Stumps, roots, and other waste wood were piled on clay-covered earth mounds up to twenty feet in diameter, with collecting ditches at their bases. The stacks, or “ricks,” received a very slow, controlled burn from the top down, permitting tar to ooze from the wood down to the ditch, to be quickly collected and barreled. The “humble” pitch pine, then, has played an important role in the lives of those who have lived in its shadow. - Tom Casey