

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

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Woodland Trail

*Chincoteague
National
Wildlife Refuge*



The Woodland Trail offers visitors the peace of the maritime forest. Visitors can also view the famous Chincoteague ponies, learn some basics about refuge management, and if they are really quiet, catch a glimpse of the endangered Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel.



Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel.
Photo: USFWS.

The Maritime Forest

The shifting sands of most barrier islands do not usually allow for slow-growing maritime forests to become established. However, Assateague Island has enjoyed enough stability to allow a lush, dense forest to develop. The forest serves as a vital wind-breaker for the mainland from severe ocean storms.

Spring/Summer

Spring is a time of rejuvenation on the Woodland Trail. Robins scratch along the forest floor for earthworms and insects, while warblers sing from the tall pine trees. Poison ivy begins to flower and produce white berries that feed a variety of animals. Where the sun touches the canopy, look for white dogwood blossoms and other spring flowers.



This is a stock image I can purchase if you like.

As the days get warmer, bobwhite quails whistle their two-toned call through the woods. Watch for Fowler's toads hopping across the trails and black rat snakes high up in the trees. At the Wild Pony Overlook, visitors can search for young foals.

Warning: Spring and summer also bring insects to the Woodland Trail. Staying on the designated trails will minimize your chances of picking up ticks. One species of tick, the Deer Tick (*Ixodes scapularis*) is known to carry and transmit Lyme disease to humans. Proper preventive care, including tucking your pant legs into your socks and applying insect repellent can assist visitors in warding off ticks and mosquitos. Always conduct a thorough tick check after your hike.

Fall/Winter

Visit the Woodland trail in the cooler months and you will enjoy protection from the wind and cold of the open marshes. Acorns and pine cones drop from the trees providing food for Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels, as well as other small mammals and birds. Wax myrtle and bayberry bushes produce small, gray berries that are favored by migrating yellow-rumped warblers. Autumn color changes are not as pronounced as in other areas, but a careful observer will notice the reds and yellows of poison ivy vines and sweet gum trees.



Sweet gum. Photo: J. Kent Minichiello.



Immature great horned owl. Photo: J. Kent Minichiello.

Winter does not often bring snow to the forest, but the cold, damp winds off the Atlantic Ocean blow through the trees. Many of the smaller songbirds travel south for the winter, leaving cardinals, grackles, and sparrows behind. The great horned owl also uses these woods to hunt and nest.

The Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrel is a large, silver, bushy-tailed squirrel that spends most of its time on the ground. Once these squirrels inhabited nearly all of the Delmarva Peninsula, from southern



Delmarva Peninsula fox squirrels in nest boxes. Photo: USFWS.



*White-tailed deer doe.
Photo: Irene Hinke
Sacilotto.*



Sika elk. Photo: Irene Hinke Sacilotto.

Pennsylvania through the Eastern Shore of Virginia. However, the loss of habitat due to agriculture and land development has caused this species to become endangered. Look closely into the forest and you will see rectangular boxes attached to the trees. These are nest boxes for the fox squirrel. Because natural tree cavities are scarce among the loblolly pines, the refuge provides these squirrels with a home.

Sika, a type of Asian elk, were introduced to the island in the 1920's. They can be identified by their "powder-puff" rump, small size, and dark color. Adults, as well as young, can be spotted.

The native white-tailed deer are shyer than their Asian cousins, the sika. Although you are less likely to see them, they can be recognized by their light brown color and brown tail, which flips up to a white "flag" when alarmed.



Pony mare with foal. Photo: Irene Hinke Sacilotto.

The Chincoteague wild ponies can frequently be seen from the platform overlooking the marsh. Legend has it that the ponies arrived from a sunken Spanish galleon, but more than likely, the ponies are the descendants of animals released on the island to avoid grazing taxes on the mainland.

The entire Woodland Trail, like most of the refuge, is habitat for poison ivy. Humans avoid the plant because of the skin irritation it may cause. However, sika, white-tailed deer, ponies, and many birds find the leaves and berries a tasty treat.

Loblolly pines predominate the maritime forest on the refuge. Their pine cones and branches provide food and shelter for many animals. The cleared areas along the trail are sites where trees infected with the Southern pine beetle have been cut and burned. Reforestation with hardwood trees occurred to restore the area's wooded habitat. The green, prickly vine found throughout the understory is appropriately named greenbrier. This tangled vine provides an excellent hiding place for many of the forest's smaller creatures.

Dead and decaying trees may look unsightly, but they serve an important role in the forest ecosystem by returning essential nutrients to the soil. These trees also provide homes for various animals including raccoons, opossums, and birds.



Yellow-rumped warbler. Photo: Irene Hinke Sacilotto.

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Chincoteague is one of over 500 refuges in the National Wildlife Refuge System administered by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The National Wildlife Refuge System is a network of lands and waters managed specifically for the protection of wildlife and wildlife habitat and represents the most comprehensive wildlife resource management program in the world. Units of the system stretch across the United States from northern Alaska to the Florida Keys and include small islands in the Caribbean and South Pacific. The habitat of the refuges is as diverse as the nation itself.

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service also manages National Fish Hatcheries, and provides Federal leadership in habitat protection, fish and wildlife research, technical assistance and the conservation and protection of migratory birds, certain marine mammals and threatened and endangered species.

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