Little Tract

The white pine in the Little Tract shows what the timber in this area looked like prior to settlement in the 1800s. In 1870, the clearing near Airport Road held 15 houses for loggers. A sawmill was located beside the creek. At that time, the large white pine you see today were too small to be logged. Since the County purchased the property from Mr. Robert Little in 1971, there has been one small-scale logging operation, at the north end of the Tract. The “natural” designation given to the Little Tract in the County’s long-term forest management plan in 1995 was affirmed in 2016 in the new long-term forest management plan. This means that there is no hunting, fishing, logging, or other resource extraction in this Tract, and only very low impact recreational activities such as hiking and cross-country skiing are permitted. The Tract is 40.4 hectares (100 acres) in size, and is square in shape (each side is 620 metres or 673 yards long). Enjoy your walk in the woods!

1 The first stop takes you back to the time of the first settlers - large, old white pine trees dominated the landscape. Many of these were cut to make ship masts and for building. Today, few of the original white pine trees remain, but we will one day see “old growth” here again.

2 The area around this stop is dominated by trembling and largetooth aspen. Aspen needs more light to grow than tolerant hardwoods (e.g. sugar maple, American beech) do. The aspen shades the site, allowing maple and beech seedlings to develop. Gradually, the maple and beech will take over and the aspen component in the stand will disappear until another disturbance occurs. This is the natural process of forest succession.

3 The forest floor is very diverse. Not only there are seedling trees (mostly sugar maple, American beech, and white ash), there are also many shrubs and plants. Depending on the time of year you visit, you can see bracken fern, Canada mayflower, partridgeberry, starflower, sarsaparilla, false Solomon’s seal, and alternate-leaf dogwood at this stop.

4 Dead and dying trees are a very important part of the forest ecosystem. They provide food and homes for insects, fungi, birds, small mammals, raccoons, and many others. Groups of fallen trees for drumming during mating season. You will see trees in all stages of death and decomposition as you walk along the trail. Look inside the holes and under the logs (please carefully put them back after you’re done) to see many species of animals. The decomposing log gives life to many kinds of mosses and is a nutrient-rich seedbed for the next generation of trees.

5 Here you can compare two species of pine common to the area - red and white. White pine has needles in bundles of five (an easy way to remember this is that there are five letters in “white”), while red pine has very long needles in bundles of two. The bark is also quite different - on white pine it is black and burned, whereas on red pine it is red and scaly. If you look up at the crowns of the trees, you will see that white pine has a “softer” look to it than red pine.

6 Look about 10 metres (30 feet) into the forest and you will see several hemlock. Hemlock is a shade tolerant conifer - something unusual in this part of Ontario, where native conifers tend to be intolerant of shade. This means that hemlock can readily mix with other shade tolerant species such as sugar maple, white ash, and American beech. Its dense foliage is also important in providing winter cover for white-tailed deer and other animals - the needles keep the snow from reaching the ground, resulting in significantly reduced snow depths. Hemlock foliage is similar to that of Balsam fir, but the needles are shorter, more densely packed on the stem, darker in colour, and lack the Balsam fir’s “Christmas tree” smell.

7 Red oak, which you see at this stop, is semi shade tolerant, and has difficulty outcompeting sugar maple, American beech, and white ash in an area where the canopy is closed. To regenerate, red oak generally requires a wildfire that removes the leaf litter (exposing the soil for acorn germination).
The Little Tract is just one of the fourteen tracts that make up the 1,066 hectare (2,636 acre) Dufferin County Forest. The largest of these tracts is the Main Tract (607 hectares or 1,501 acres) located in Mulmur Township, just north of the hamlet of Mansfield. Major tree species in the County Forest include red pine, red oak, sugar maple, white ash, black cherry, white pine, white spruce, eastern white cedar, larch, white birch, and poplar. Together with other biota, these represent a variety of ecosystems, including conifer and hardwood plantations, upland tolerant hardwoods, upland oak forests, bottomlands, wetlands, and creeks.

The Forest is managed by the County of Dufferin on a sustainable, multi-use basis. The Forest serves many important functions in terms of erosion and water control, natural heritage protection, biodiversity, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and support of the rural economy through timber production and employment opportunities.

For more information:

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