Welcome to the Loblolly Marsh and Wetland Preserve Virtual Nature Trail

"When I arrived, there were miles of unbroken forest... streams of running water, the road around the edges corduroy made by felling and sinking large trees in the muck. Then the Winter Swamp had all the lacy exquisite beauty of such locations when snow and frost draped, while from May until October it was practically tropical jungle."

-Gene Stratton-Porter
The Moths of the Limberlost, 1912

At one time, the Loblolly Marsh was a landscape more often than not covered with water. The marsh acted as a sponge, absorbing water and silt that otherwise would have caused floods. The area was also home to many different types of rare animals and insects.

However, this all changed in the early twentieth century when opportunists began to
see the marsh not as a place of unique beauty, but rather as an untapped resource waiting to be developed. Thus, the marsh was drained, drilled for oil, and converted to farmland. Much of the land was farmed unsuccessfully for nearly a century.

Then, in 1997, the Limberlost Swamp Remembered group began restoration of over 400 acres of the original 13,000 acres of the Limberlost Swamp. Like the Miami Indians who used to inhabit the area, the group called the area the Loblolly, or "stinking river." Even though this 400-acre plot was only a small fraction of the original Limberlost Swamp, its restoration was needed to remind local residents of the benefits that wetlands provide. The area does not look the way it did when Mrs. Porter explored the marsh for the first time in the 1890s, but portions of the Limberlost may look similar someday.

Today, many different species of plants and animals live at the marsh. Even though the number of species that live there is a far cry from what once did, the reclaimed wetlands are still an excellent place to many plants and animals.

Please take time to virtually explore this unique landscape by clicking on the "Start your hike" or "Trail Map" links below. If you'd like to visit or obtain more information on the Loblolly Marsh Nature Preserve, click on the "Visit the Loblolly Marsh Wetland Preserve" link located at the bottom of every page.

Enjoy your hike!

Start your hike . . .

Source:

Stop 1: The Trailhead

This is where the Loblolly Nature Trail starts. The trailhead is located directly to the east of the parking lot and Veronica's Handicap Accessible Trail. The nature trail follows the gravel path directly in front of you. If you are looking for a panoramic view of the marsh, follow the mowed trail north to the Painter's Overlook.

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The Loblolly Virtual Nature Trail was created as a part of the Our Land, Our Literature website.
Stop 2: Pothole Wetland
A disappearing resource

The pothole wetland located on the Loblolly Marsh Wetland Preserve is a rare example of what used to be quite common across Indiana and other midwestern states. Some people estimate that between 60 and 98 percent of wetlands that were here in 1850 have now been destroyed. Most of these destroyed wetlands were pothole wetlands.

Erosion became a problem for the land surrounding the destroyed wetlands. As farming increased, layers of minerals in the soil began to collect in places like the Loblolly Marsh. A thick layer of soil rich in minerals now rests on top of the traditional organic top layer.

Pothole wetlands formed thousands of years ago, when the glaciers that covered the northern two-thirds of Indiana began to melt. Depressions were formed in the ground because of the intense weight of these glaciers and buried ice.
blocks. The melting of the glaciers exposed the depressions and also filled them with water.

**Why shouldn't we destroy wetlands?**

- They prevent floods by storing water
- They absorb silt and nutrients that would otherwise pollute rivers and streams
- They provide habitat for many different species of plants and animals

**Links:**
Prairie Potholes

**Source:**

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Stop 3: Tall-Grass Prairie

Tall-grass prairies are typically found in areas that are saturated during the first few months of the year. This water drowns any invasive woody plants, allowing for the successful growth of grasses and flowers during the summer. In Indiana, this ecosystem was historically located in the western part of the state. Prairie grasses are unique due to their ability to regenerate after drought and fires. The plant's root systems are to thank for this. The roots of big bluestem, a common prairie grass, can extend more than seven feet below ground, which allows them to remain moist during times of drought and not be burned during times of fire.

Many species thrive in the prairie ecosystem including snakes, birds, insects, and small mammals.
Links:
Our Land, Our Literature: Prairies
Butler Prairie
Regional Trends of Biological Resources — Grasslands
A Prairie in Upland Indiana?

Source:

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Sedge meadows are characteristic of wetlands found in Indiana. These areas are usually covered with water in early spring but are much drier during the other parts of the year. Although the soil is not saturated, it still must be quite moist in order for the sedge grasses to thrive. The sedge meadow’s peat soil stores this needed moisture during dry spells and can also function like a sponge in periods of high rainfall.

The Loblolly Marsh contains several sedge meadows. These meadows consist mainly of sedges like hummock sedge (Carex stricta) and wool grass (Scirpus cyperinus). Other common plant species in the meadow include blue vervain (Verbena hastata) and marsh milkweed (Asclepias incarnata). The thick vegetation provides excellent habitat for ground-nesting migratory birds as well as for smaller animals.
and insects.

The managers of Loblolly Nature Preserve use fire to prevent woody plants from overtaking the sedges that the animals depend on for cover. Like the tall-grass prairie, sedge meadows like the one found at the Loblolly Marsh are accustomed to fire.

Links:
The Nature Conservancy: Wetlands-
Sedge Meadow
Wetland Plants
Sedge Meadow

Sources:


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Stop 5: The Woodie Retreat

This wetland is called the Woodie Retreat because of the wood ducks that seem to always be there except during cold winters. This marshy area has water standing in it nearly year round and attracts waterfowl, other wildlife, and wildlife enthusiasts. Some of the birds found at the wetland include green herons, American bitterns, and king rails. Woodie Retreat is one of the best places to see waterfowl throughout the year and sometimes the only place during a dry year. Like the wetland at stop 2, the Woodie Retreat is also a pothole wetland.

Woodie Retreat Video

"And the male wood duck is a bird so variously and so gorgeously marked that no other bird in the ornithology of the whole wide world can surpass it in intricacy of
pattern and design, in multiplicity of colour and in grace."

-Gene Stratton-Porter
Tales You Won't Believe, 1925

Source:

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Stop 6: The Winter and Summer Trail Junction

The trail splits just past Woodie Retreat. The winter trail heads back into the second-growth deciduous forest while the summer trail follows the forest edge near the large open wetland.

The winter trail provides its visitors with a rare glimpse of a forest in the Limberlost area. Most forests were destroyed at the turn of the twentieth century while Gene Stratton-Porter was living just northeast of the Loblolly Marsh in Geneva.

"In its day it covered a large area. . . . Now, the Limberlost exists only in ragged spots and patches. . . . Canadian lumbermen came seeking tall straight timber for ship masts and tough heavy trees for beams. . . . Then a ditch was dredged across the North and through my best territory, and that carried the water to the Wabash River until oilmen could enter the swamp."

-Gene Stratton-Porter
Moths of the Limberlost, 1912
The Winter Trail also splits. The upland trail wanders around through the forest, taking hikers up small bluffs and back down again, eventually ending at the summer trail. The bottomland trail heads directly toward the summer trail and is much shorter.

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The Loblolly Marsh is an excellent place to see birds in northeast Indiana. This location on the north side of the wetland is a particularly popular place for birders because of its location between the Woodie Retreat and the large swamp.

Birding has become a popular activity throughout the nation. This pastime, once mainly associated with senior citizens, has now become popular for people of all ages. Birding provides participants with exercise, stress relief, camaraderie, and a sense of accomplishment, among many other things.

Birding can be done in a group or individually. When you first start to bird watch, it is wise to do so in a group setting. Many groups, like the one to the left, have experienced bird spotters come along to help novices learn more about the birds they are watching as well as tips on how to bird watch effectively.
Woodie Retreat is a popular place for birdwatchers to look for a variety of waterfowl due to the year-round water supply, cover, and food sources.

Links:
Robert Cooper Audubon Society
Sycamore Audubon Society
The National Audubon Society

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Stop 8: Wildlife

Birders have long known of the value of the Loblolly Marsh to birds. Not surprisingly, this location on the east side of the property is a popular habitat for year-round residents like great blue herons and red-tailed hawks, as well as many others that spend only part of the year there, like sandhill cranes, bitterns, egrets, and rails. However, birds are not the only residents of the wetland. Read below to learn what other creatures spend their time here.

Watch these short videos to see and
hear the sounds of the Loblolly Marsh.

• Clip 1
• Clip 2

Other residents of the swamp include a family of beavers. These playful and fun-loving creatures enjoy swimming in the Loblolly Ditch, looking for their next meal on shore. However, not all of their time is spent having fun and games. The creatures are also excellent lumberjacks. They use the trees that they cut down to build lodges or dams.

Many of the animals that live at the Loblolly Marsh are well camouflaged and blend in well with their surroundings. Look at the picture of a frog on the right.

Can you see him? Click on his body to get a close-up view of him. If you can't find him, click here for the close-up view.

Many insects call the Loblolly Marsh home as well—like this praying mantis that is taking a stroll on Veronica's Trail. This protected area is an excellent place for insects to live because no insecticide is used
that could make them sick and cause them to die. There is also plenty of space, food, and water for these important creatures.

Many more animals live at the Loblolly Marsh than we viewed here. The signs of these creatures are all-around including animal tracks and scat.
Stop 9: Transforming the Landscape

At the turn of the twentieth century, Limberlost property owners began to drain the wet soils and cut down the forests in the interest of produce, timber, and oil. To Gene Stratton-Porter, this was both an unwelcome and unimaginable change to her precious swamp. Farmers used a network of ceramic drainage tiles (like those shown at the right), connected to concrete boxes (see photo to lower right), to drain the field into the Loblolly Ditch, which you are now following on our trail. Water is drained off fields in a similar way today, but plastic pipes have replaced the clay tiles of the past.

Draining water-logged land is necessary in places like the...
Loblolly Marsh if the land is to be farmed. However, this process causes water to leave the land much faster than nature intended it to do. This rapid draining into streams causes soil erosion and water pollution.

Ken Brunswick and others living near the present site of the Loblolly Marsh began to realize the importance of the then-defunct wetland in the 1980s. The Limberlost Swamp Remembered group was formed. These people began to restore the marsh by removing the tiles that were installed 100 years before. This piece of land began to soak up water like a sponge and prevented the water from entering into the drainage ditches too quickly. Amazingly enough, the Loblolly Marsh coexists with a farm field to its east.

When the picture to the left was taken, the marsh was full of water but this farm field was still dry, thanks in part to the wetland's ability to hold water so well.

In addition to holding water, wetlands like the Loblolly Marsh provide wildlife with a place to live and eat instead of feeding on active agriculture land. In the end, both farmers and wildlife benefit from the presence of a wetland in the area.

Links:
Audubon: Limberlost Swamp

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As you continue our tour on the south side of the swamp, you begin to realize that the Loblolly Marsh wasn't always a productive wetland as it is today and as it was 125 years ago. For approximately 100 years, the area now known as the Loblolly Marsh was a farm field. Throughout this time, the field was often covered with water, causing crop damage. In 1997, the Limberlost Swamp Remembered group established the Loblolly Marsh Wetlands Preserve with the help of community sponsors.

The transition from farmland to wetland does not happen overnight. The first step is to remove portions of the main drainage tile. By removing or blocking this portion of the tile, water will no longer flow easily off the property.

If needed, native grasses and
woody plants are planted onto the reclaimed site. In many cases reseeding is not necessary on former wetlands as seeds can still be found in the soil. The seeding process is long and arduous but well worth the work when the plants begin to grow during the next growing season.

Links:
Limberlost Swamp Restoration Dedication

Loblolly Marsh Wetlands Preserve Sponsors:
- Indiana Heritage Trust
- Ropchan Foundation
- ACRES, Inc.
- M.E. Raker Foundation, Inc.
- The Lawton Doll Company
- The Dr. John W. Flory Foundation
- George M. and Christine Plews
- Sycamore Audubon Society

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Appendix L

Stop 11: The Future of the Marsh

Although the marsh will never again look like it did when Gene Stratton-Porter studied it in the early twentieth century, it is still a unique and beautiful natural area. But it is so much more—a home for wildlife, a "sponge" to absorb floodwaters, and a recreation destination. The marsh is truly a rare find in Indiana where wetlands are more often than not destroyed for agriculture or development.

Fortunately, the Loblolly Marsh is protected from a future of destruction because it is a state nature preserve. But many other wetlands throughout the country are not protected from destruction. We must seek to preserve those precious wetlands for upcoming generations before it is too late.

As you complete your tour, you are back at the road that separates the two sections of the Loblolly Marsh. But there’s much more to see! Come visit the Loblolly, or the the Limberlost State Historic Site in Geneva, Indiana, in person, to learn more about the Limberlost Swamp and Gene Stratton-Porter.

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Loblolly Marsh Painter's Overlook

The Painter's Overlook is a great place to get an overview of the Loblolly Marsh.

Panoramic Photos:
   Medium | Large

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Veronica's Accessible Trail

The photos below are from Veronica's Trail, a paved accessible trail. The trail was constructed in 2001 and dedicated in 2002 to allow for all visitors to experience the Loblolly Marsh. The interpretive trail signs were created as part of Kristen Saile's honors thesis.
The Loblolly Virtual Nature Trail was created as a part of the Our Land, Our Literature website.