NATURAL COMMUNITIES

Natural communities are recurring assemblages of plants and animals found in particular physical environments. New Hampshire has a fascinating and complex variety of them, from tidal marshes to alpine meadows, riverbanks to mountain forests, and streams to lakes. Each type of natural community has a unique set of environmental conditions that support certain species adapted to those conditions. Communities in turn often cluster together on the landscape in similar settings to form larger scale natural community systems.

The NH Natural Heritage Bureau surveys and maintains a comprehensive database of the state’s exemplary natural communities and systems, as well as all of the rare and endangered plants and animals.

Since natural communities are assemblages of multiple species of plants and animals, protecting a community provides protection for many individual species. Therefore, if we protect an adequate number of viable examples of each type, we can protect the majority of New Hampshire’s species. This is sometimes referred to as the “coarse-filter” approach to biodiversity conservation.

Pondicherry harbors numerous natural communities and systems, including bog, fen, marsh, swamp, and forest types. The poor level fen / bog system at the margins of both Cherry and Little Cherry Ponds is considered exemplary, and the surrounding upland supports an extensive stand of lowland spruce – fir forest, one of the southernmost in the state.
Little Cherry Pond is another hotspot for birding. White pine trees on the west side of the pond support a great blue heron colony. You may spy an osprey sitting on a snag. Palm warblers, black-backed woodpeckers, spruce grouse, and marsh wrens nest here. Boreal chickadees and gray jays are sometimes seen. It is one of the southernmost points for nesting ring-necked ducks. Wood ducks, hooded mergansers, and American black ducks may all be seen. Other animals you might see here include moose, black bear, otter, beavers, coyotes, dragonflies, and butterflies.

Heading back towards Cherry Pond, take the other leg of the trail by going left at the junction. Pitcherplants appear on the black spruce flats that you will soon cross on bog bridges. Much “primitive” flora abounds including Sphagnum moss, lichens, and liverworts. A little further on, the low-growing tristia maria and parula warblers can be heard here in May and June.

Arrive at a junction and follow the path to the left (marked with an arrow). Twinflower (Lunarea borealis) can be seen along this trail. Be sure to look for a very short spur trail “loop” through the middle of several glacial erratic boulders to the right of the main trail.

Go straight ahead at the second trail junction. After crossing a stream on a small bridge, larch (Larix laricina) becomes abundant and creeping snowberry (Gaultheria hispidula) and peat mosses (the genus Sphagnum) carpet the ground. This is a small zone of black spruce swamp, with a strong larch component. The boardwalk then curves left through leafleath, bog rosemary (Andromeda polifolia), sheep laurel (Kalmia angustifolia), and rhodora. The bright pink rhodora blooms are especially spectacular here in May.

The boardwalk ends at a viewing platform on an abandoned beaver lodge by the edge of Little Cherry Pond. There is 2-3 person bench here. Nice views of Garfield Ridge and the Franconia Range over the lowland swamp - forest on the far side of the pond. This could make a perfect sunset spot, as long as you bring flashlights! The water level is fairly constant in this pond (maximum depth 3 ft). Near it’s edge emergent marsh and, in somewhat deeper water, an aquatic bed community support yellow pondlily (Nuphar variegata), pickerelweed, bladderworts (Utricularia spp.), and pondweeds (Pistiastrum spp.).

Little Cherry Pond Trail begins ¼ mile northeast of Waumbek Junction on the west side of Cherry Pond. This woodland path with 600 feet of bog bridges (use care – the boards are slippery when wet) takes you through a regenerating lowland spruce - fir forest. The area was logged in 1952. Little Cherry Pond and Wildlife Service in the 2000. Now, the stand is comprised of both snags and live aspen, paper birch, balsam fir, and some large red and black spruce (Picea rubens and P. mariana) trees. Plants on the forest floor include partridgeberry (Mitchella repens), Canada mayflower (Maianthemum canadense), pink lady’s slipper (Cypripedium acaule), painted trillium (Trillium undulatum), wakerobin (Trillium erectum), goldthread (Coptis trifolia) and peat mosses (the genus Sphagnum). The forest is perfect habitat for snowshoe hare, which browses on the shrubby vegetation (look for patches of their orange urine on the snow in winter). Several kinds of birds such as golden-crowned kinglets and blackburnian and parula warblers can be heard here in May and June.

TRAIL DESCRIPTION

From the trailhead kiosk at the parking area off Airport Rd, walk northeast along the wide and flat trail. Note the white spruce and balsam poplar along the flat part of the trail. The route follows the old Maine Central railroad bed through a young mixed forest, passes under a powerline, and in 1.5 miles arrives at Waumbek Junction, a former railroad station within the Memorial. At the junction, bear right on the trail to reach the Tudor Richards Viewing Platform on the south side of Cherry Pond. This deck is a great vantage point for viewing scenery and the tremendous diversity of wildlife that visits Pondicherry throughout the year. Over 200 species of birds have been identified here. Moose can often be seen frequenting the edges of the shallow pond (max depth 6 ft). Also look for signs of otter, muskrat, and beavers, as well as painted and snapping turtles, frogs, dragonflies, and butterflies.

Several wetland natural community types can also be seen from the platform. A small sweet gale - meadowsweet - tussock sedgen community occurs just off the trail along the upland edge. A larger leafleath - sheep laurel dwarf shrub bog occurs farther out and extending around the pond, and both emergent marsh and aquatic bed occur in shallow water along the its edge. These communities intergrade in places, but each is comprised of a distinct assemblage of dominant and characteristic plant species. The bell-shaped flowers of leafleath (Chamaedaphne calyculata), the dominat shrub in the bog, are arranged in a delicate arc. Other notable plants found in bogs and fens that can be seen here include Labrador tea (Ledum groenlandicum) and rhodora (Rhododendron canadense). The rhodora flowers create a sea of purple in late May. In the pond, look for the showy terminal blue flowering spikes of pickerelweed (Pontederia cordata) emerging from shallow water in mid-summer.

At Waumbek Junction, continue walking northeast and cross the Johns River. Cherry Pond’s tidal flats, rocky, and meandering outlet stream. Note the area downstream to the left of the wooden rail bridge that has been flooded by beavers. This river eventually drains into the Connecticut River. After crossing the bridge, take an immediate right into a stand of balsam fir (Abies balsamea) on the Shore Path. This short trail follows a low berm called an “ice-push ramp.” This post-glacial feature is caused by the force of freeze-thaw action on the wind-driven floating ice packs along the pond’s margin. Note the National Landmark plaque on a boulder beneath a large white pine tree. Just offshore are several floating islands of peat moss and shrubs. These wandering bog mats occasionally get caught on submerged rocks for periods of time. Beavers have built a lodge on one of the mats, and loons can also be found nesting on them sometimes. There is a magnificent view from here of the western slopes of the Presidential Range above the pond.

The Little Cherry Pond Trail begins ¼ mile northeast of Waumbek Junction on the west side of Cherry Pond. This

porcupine-girdling on some of the larch trunks here. Soon you cross more bog bridges and arrive back at the first trail junction. You have now closed the Little Cherry Pond Loop. Continue straight ahead and follow the trail to the railroad tracks at Cherry Pond. Cross the railroad tracks and continue for 100 feet until you come to the Rampart Path (described below).

Before returning, hike left on the Rampart Path, a short out and back trail along the north shore of Cherry Pond. Along the way there are several spectacular views of the pond and the mountains beyond. The spongy peat mat is mostly inundated, but its outer edge is in the open and very supple.

On the north side of the pond, the mat itself is composed primarily of Sphagnum moss, but other plants present include leafleath, rhodora, Labrador tea, alder, and black spruce. Landward, it grades into a swampy forest of mostly larch, with some black spruce, over a bed of wintergreen (Gaultheria procumbens). Map and photos by Ben Kimball and Dave Govatski, 2006.