



The Ferrum Nature Society Bulletin

Dedicated to the appreciation and conservation of our natural world

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February arrives with a coating of ice:



Ice storms are common winter events in our area and will occur when supercooled rain falls on surfaces that are below the freezing point for water. The most severe ice storms in recent history occurred during 1994, when ice accumulations of several inches occurred.

Sky calendar:

Full moon - February 20, the "Snow Moon".

Total lunar eclipse - February 20-21. The full Moon will line up directly opposite of the Sun and will pass through the Earth's shadow. The eclipse will start at 7:35 PM and end at 1:17 AM. The Moon will be completely eclipsed around 10 PM.

Planets - Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Mercury and Venus are all visible.

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Our own Virginia Pine

David Szynal

Virginia pine (*Pinus virginiana*) is a medium-sized pine tree common in our area. It is also known as "Scrub Pine" or "Black Pine" and is a relatively small tree reaching 30-60 ft. The bark is reddish-brown; it is smooth on young trees but, as the tree matures, it changes to flat, shaggy, small scales or plates. The branches are long, thin and are spread horizontally, with old dead branches remaining embedded in the trunk. The color varies from dull yellow-green to gray-green. The needles are paired in fascicles less than 3 in. long and are slightly flattened and twisted. The lifespan of the tree is from 65-90 years. Pollination occurs through wind and/or self-pollination. Fruit production can start as early as when the Virginia pine reaches 5 years. The fruit



is a reddish-brown, egg-shaped cone that ranges in length from one to four inches. The cone matures in about 13 months and releases its seeds usually in October: The prolific seed production of Virginia pine makes its reproduction faster and easier than most other pines.

This species can grow in a wide variety of acidic and poor soils and a variety of textures (clay, loam and sandy loam). It tolerates drier sites. Good survival and growth occurs even on shallow and severely eroded soils. It grows at different elevations and its range extends from central Pennsylvania and New Jersey southward to mid-Alabama and along the eastern U.S. coast

from New York to Virginia.

Virginia pine is considered to be only marginally desirable for lumber. The wood is mostly used for pulpwood, paper pulp, fuel, and railroad ties. The widest commercial use of this species is for Christmas trees and it has become accepted as a preferred species for Christmas tree production in the southeast United States.

Like other pines, it is susceptible to harsh weather, pests and diseases. Virginia pines have shallow roots and older trees are easily damaged in strong winds and ice storms. Rodents and deer eat saplings and young trees. Small seedlings are susceptible to pales weevil (*Hylobius pales*) and pitch canker (*Fusarium moniliforme*), which can cause up to 90% mortality. Insects such as the Southern pine beetle (*Dendroctonus frontalis*) and the Virginia pine sawfly (*Neodiprion pratti*) can cause damage to this species.

Once viewed as an undesirable pine, the Virginia pine has seen an emergence as a valued species for pulpwood and Christmas trees. It is tolerant of poor growing conditions and it is drought- and disease-resistant. It is also a prolific seed producer and its rapid growth makes it a valuable tree species in the Southeast.

MASTER NATURALIST BASIC TRAINING

Begins April 1, 2008 for the Blue Ridge Foothills and Lakes Chapter.

Check out <http://www.brfal.org/> for details



Winter hooting and the Great Horned Owl

Ben Rictor



The Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) was named for the first place it was discovered - the Virginia colonies. This owl is one of the largest members of the Strigidae family, which includes about 142 other owls and is in the *Bubo* genus. The species can range in size from 18-25 inches tall and weigh between 2-4 pounds, with females being larger than the males. The “horned” part of the great horned owl’s name comes from the large feather tufts it has on the top of its head, but these tufts are not ears as many believe. They have very large yellowish eyes surrounded by a buff-colored facial disk. The Great Horned Owl has adapted to many different climates and is found throughout North America and as far south as central South America. Some Great Horned Owls in the northern most reaches of Canada have been known to migrate south in times of extreme cold. Their preferred prey are rabbits but they are extremely opportunistic and will feed on a wide range of small animals including rodents, snakes, frogs, and birds. The Great horned owl has few predators, and most deaths are due to contact with humans. Great Horned Owls can live up to thirteen years in the wild. The nesting season of this species begins in January and is easily noted by the marked increase in hooting between males and females. Great Horned Owls do not build nests of their own, but use old nests of other birds or even squirrels. The Great Horned Owl is a dominant predator in many ecosystems throughout the United States and is an important force in controlling small mammal populations.

Spicebush adds color to late winter and early spring

Ashley Hardy



Among the aromatic plants that exist in our area, there is one particular plant that has a distinct spicy smell from which it gets its name, Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*). Spicebush is a large shrub with several stems that grow 6-15 feet tall. The stems are slender, olive-green to brown and have lenticels on them. In addition, it has stalked buds covered with 2-3 yellow-green, brown scales.

When the stems are broken, it smells like spicy peppers (or to some, lemon Pledge®). It has dark green, smooth oval-shaped leaves that grow to five inches long. The leaves also have this spicy odor when crushed. The bark is brown to gray-brown and has light colored lenticels. They are found in moist woods or marshes.

The Spicebush blooms with small pale yellow flowers from late-February through March. Multiple flowers bloom at the same time, so it seems flashy, bright and crowded. Bright red berries called drupes form in late summer to fall. These berries grow to 3/8 inch long with a seed inside and they also have a peppery scent.

Many bird species such as the Robin, Northern Bobwhite Quail, Gray Catbird, Eastern Kingbird, and Great-crested flycatcher eat the drupes, as do many mammals such as the Raccoon and Virginia Opossum. Black bear and White-tailed deer eat the leaves and twigs of the Spicebush. Several species of fungi, called mycorrhizae, surround the roots and aid in nutrient and water uptake.

Spicebush is important to butterflies in the swallowtail family, especially the Spicebush Swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) (left), which serves as a host for the larvae. It also provides understory cover for many small animals such as rabbits, chipmunks and squirrels.

