



The Nature Conservancy's John Turner walks through a clearing in the Dwarf Pine Plains near Sunrise Highway in Westhampton.



Newsday Photo / Bill Davis

Magic of the Dwarf Pine Plains

Walking in reverence in one of the Earth's rarest places

It's a gray misty day and I'm in a forest. Not that most people would recognize it as such. Everybody knows that forests are places where sunlight streams through leafy canopies and oaks touch the sky. Where we mere humans look up in reverence at great green giants.

Instead of shadows playing across moist brown earth covered with fallen leaves, fog settles over coarse white sand reminiscent of an uncombed beach. Rain drizzles down but no puddles form — water drains right through the porous ground.

There is a haunting quality to the landscape. The maroon foliage of bearberry hugs the ground, interspersed by patches of reindeer moss and the tawny tufts of a native grass called little blue stem. The still-bare twigs of low-bush blueberry and scrub oak scramble across the sand. And the reigning trees look nothing like monarchs. They are twisted and knobby and bent — they remind me of wild bonsai instead of woodland titans.

There is little need for me to look up. Although a few of the trees come close to 8 feet, most are at eye level. Others are waist high or measured in scant inches. Some creep into clearings, almost prostrate with their piney branches like green fingers scratching the sand.

The trees are a pygmy variety of pitch pine. They give the forest its name — the Dwarf Pine Plains.

The forest covers four square miles in Westhampton. Embedded in the Pine Barrens, it is bisected by Sunrise Highway and County Road 31. Cars drone by but few of their occupants realize they're passing a globally rare ecosystem. This community of stunted trees that live in sand is not just a rarity on Long

Island. It's one of only three such places on the entire planet — the others exist in the New Jersey pine barrens and New York's Shawangunk Mountains.

Now I walk in wonder. Once, in an uncharted time, the trees that lived in this place were probably no different from pitch pines that grow to 75 feet tall. Nobody knows how or why or even when they branched off. What is known is that somewhere along the way, humans used fire as a means to clear forested land. And the trees developed a symbiotic relationship with flames. The big thing about the little trees is that they die and live by fire.

Because of their small size, they are consumed in a conflagration, and their waxy needles add fuel to the fire. But the cones survive and, for that reason, so does the species. We all make adaptations. The pinecones we usually collect in the woods open in the fall and shoot out seeds that may grow into new trees. The cones of the dwarf pitch pine are serotinous, which means they stay closed until fire melts the resin that holds back the seeds. Then the cones open and the seeds fall to the seared earth. Like the phoenix, the dwarf pines rise again from the ashes.

I see this resurrection in a small section of the stunted forest that was scorched eight years ago by a wind-whipped blaze. Charred trees bear testimony to the fiery past but bearberry and huckleberry crawl across the sand and I think that the bright green needles of young dwarf pines reaffirm the future.

In another part of the 1,800-acre land of little trees, much of which is owned by Suffolk County, humans are creating their own light in the forest. The Long Island chapter of The Nature Conservancy is restoring

an open area with hundreds of seedlings propagated from serotinous cones harvested in the fall of 2001. The cones were opened in ovens and the seeds grown in cold frames. Last fall, volunteers planted the baby dwarf pines in a clearing. The seedlings made it through the winter and now it's just a matter of time.

I squat to touch the tiny plants that are no bigger than my thumb. They seem so fragile and yet so strong. When I stand up I feel like Gulliver. It will take decades for these trees to reach my waist. But as befits this strange place, there is an ironic rub. If they are untouched by fire, in time some may grow tall like their cousins. Environment has the power to change us. The conservancy hopes to preserve the rare place that is the dwarf pine plains by staging controlled burns in various sites on a five- to 15-year schedule.

As I walk about the forest, I look down in reverence at the knobby trees. I search for the egg masses of buck moths on the branches of scrub oaks. They are rare creatures that live only to procreate, and the highest concentration of their kind is found here. Black-capped chickadees flutter in the brush and deer scat dots the trail. A mound of sand protects the entrance to a fox den. Soon, the bearberry will be loaded with small white flowers, and prairie warblers will sing from the ghostly branches of the charred trees.

The duality of my own species' relationship with the natural world plays out in front of me, and I am saddened. People who care about this amazing patch of earth are working to maintain it. But other humans are putting it in danger. All-terrain vehicle tracks riddle certain areas. Litter blows in from the road, and roofing supplies and construction debris and even an old port-o-john have been dumped along the paths.

I think of the dwarf pine plains as a place where humans should tread lightly. I do not have to be among redwoods to feel humble.

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Irene Virag