

Old Growth Forest / Virgin Forest

Virgin forest is something rare in WV and most of the east coast. At the turn of the last century, most of WV was clear-cut: the hillsides stripped of all their trees. But a few areas remained untouched, for a variety of reasons.

The stand of hemlocks along the Virgin Hemlock trail at Coopers Rock is one of the few remaining places. It survived solely due to the timber company going bankrupt before the area could be logged.

WV's most well-known old growth forest is at [Cathedral State Park](#), a 133 acre sanctuary, which is a place you should visit if you have not before. (Many of the trails are flat and relatively clear for easier walking.)

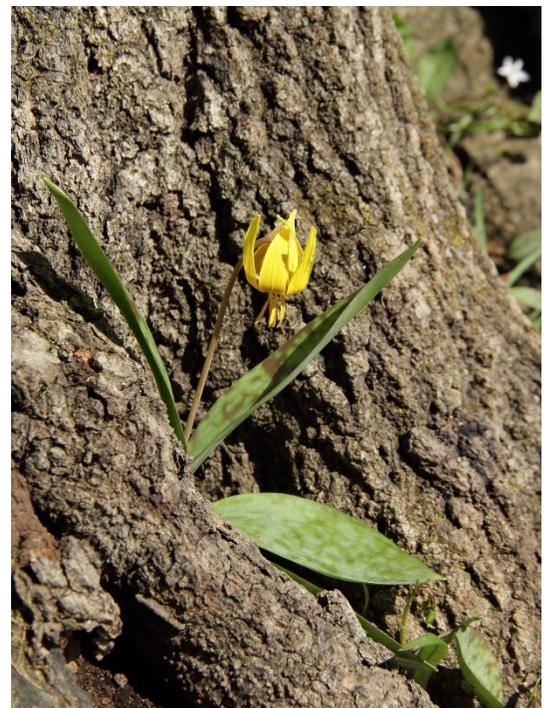


An area you might not realize is old growth forest is the WVU Arboretum –particularly the hilly area down to the river. On one of his spring flower walks, Zack Fowler talked about how that area remained untouched, and also what old growth forest means in WV.

Old growth forests tend to have specific characteristics: a diversity of tree, plant, and animal species, trees of mixed age, gaps in the canopy as well as dead tree falls and snags, woody debris on the ground, and few signs of human interference, as well as [pits and mounds](#). What confuses people is that they are expecting to see an area that looks like Giant Sequoia National Monument in California, but that's not what you will find in WV.



A signifier of old growth forests can be found in the spring, when ephemeral wildflowers bloom. Flowers that take years of growth before they flower (such as the [trout lily](#)) that spread across large portions of the forest floor are signs of an area that has been untouched for a century or more. (Zack believes that trout lily patches in the Arboretum predate colonization.)



Unfortunately, an invasive species, the [Hemlock Woolly Adelgid](#), has been killing hemlocks in WV. There is a treatment, but it is [expensive and time-consuming to implement](#). When you hike in WV forests, a tag on a hemlock generally means the tree has been treated for adelgid infection, so when you're somewhere like Cathedral, you can see all the time and money that were invested to keep the trees safe



We'll never be able to see the ancient forests that once existed in the state, but old growth forests can give us a hint of what things might have been like.

<https://highland-outdoors.com/cathedral-state-park/>

<https://www.wvhighlands.org/article/celebrating-old-growth-forests/>

<https://appvoices.org/2018/12/19/volunteers-identify-old-growth-forest/>

<https://www.wvnps.org/old-growth-forest-network>

<https://www.oldgrowthforest.net/>

<https://www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1751>