

History, habitat & nature's diversity

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The largest fire burned in 1942, and following this fire the land had little to no production value for land speculators or timber buyers. The Farmer's Deposit National Bank, the owner following the fire, sold the land in to the Conservation Commission and it was designated Sleepy Creek State Forest (a cruel twist of irony).

By 1954, the name of the area changed to Sleepy Creek Public Hunting Area and a full-time resident wildlife manager was hired to restore and improve wildlife habitat on the area.

Clearings were created, water holes were developed, and plantings were conducted from the 1950s to the 1990s to improve habitat.

Timber management began on the area in 1980, when a 56-acre planting of Virginia and Pitch Pines near the old Myers homestead was harvested to regenerate trees and improve cover diversity. Several salvage cuts occurred in the late 1980s following gypsy moth defoliation. Over 75% of the WMA had been affected in some degree by gypsy moths and forest damage was extensive. Effects of defoliation led to unintended cover diversity benefits as the understory began to regenerate.

Ruffed Grouse populations on the WMA, the "last, best bastion" of the species in Berkeley and Morgan Counties, flourished as dense new growth provided ideal nesting and escape cover.

Beginning in 1991, the DNR implemented a Ruffed Grouse Management Plan - which involved rotational small-patch clear-cutting of small forest blocks. Since then, nearly 200 acres of forest have been regenerated to create patches of young forest required by grouse, American Woodcock, Prairie Warblers, Yellow-breasted Chats, and many other passerine bird species.

In 2017-18, approximately 97 acres of forest were thinned to improve habitat for the Cerulean Warbler, a canopy-nesting neotropical migrant songbird species of significant conservation need. Bird survey data indicate approximately 40% of the global population of Cerulean Warblers breeds in West Virginia.

Revenues from timber sales to benefit Ruffed Grouse, young forest songbirds, Wild Turkeys, and Cerulean Warblers are used on the WMA to fund further management actions to improve wildlife habitat.

Because Sleepy Creek WMA encompasses the length and breadth of two significant mountain ridges -- Sleepy Creek Mountain and Third Hill Mountain -- it represents an important habitat reserve for many forest and mountain ridge-associated species.

The DNR plans to continue to aggressively pursue wildlife habitat improvement projects on this WMA into the foreseeable future. Wildlife, hunters, birders, and nature enthusiasts will all reap benefits from these actions.

Habitat Description: Sleepy Creek WMA features a wide diversity of quality wildlife habitat:

approximately 150 acres of open land and wildlife clearings, over 100 acres of wetland mostly occurring near Sleepy Creek Lake, 3,000-3,500 acres of regenerating and/or young forest (most of this is in the poletimber class), and over 17,500 acres of mature sawtimber (generally 15-20" trees are the majority, although trees exceeding 25-30" can be found on some of the higher-quality or historically un-harvested sites).

Forest stands on the area are comprised primarily of oak and hickory species, though some mixed pine-deciduous stands can be found on drier sites in the interior of the WMA. Large white pines and a rhododendron-eastern hemlock association can be found along the Meadow Branch Valley.

Meadow Branch represents the largest stream flowing through the WMA; Roaring Run is a tributary of Meadow Branch that originates at Neglar Spring and drains to Meadow Branch south of Sleepy Creek Lake. Little Brush Creek drains the southern third of the WMA below Locks-of-the-Mountain, the junction between Third Hill and Sleepy Creek mountains.

Wildlife Species: White-tailed Deer, Black Bear, Wild Turkey, Ruffed Grouse, squirrels (gray and fox), Raccoons, Red Fox, Gray Fox, Coyote, Bobcat, Fisher, Mink, Beaver, Muskrat, Virginia Opossum, and Striped Skunk are all present on the area in varying abundance. Populations of weasel species such as the Long-tailed Weasel and Least Weasel were historically present on the area. Many waterfowl species (Canada Goose, Mallard, Wood Duck, American Black Duck, Gadwall, Blue-winged Teal, etc.) and wading bird species (Spotted Sandpiper, Pectoral Sandpiper, etc.) use Sleepy Creek Lake and its surrounding wetland complex at various times of year.

Bird species and small mammal species associated with forest ecosystems and forest interior are present in abundance. While there are no plant or animal species that are listed under the U.S. Federal Endangered Species Act of 1973 known to occur on the area, there are a number of species - mammals, birds, herpetofauna, vegetative communities, plants, and insects -- present on Sleepy Creek WMA that are rare statewide, regionally, and/or are species of greatest conservation need listed in the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP).

These species are monitored by the DNR Wildlife Diversity Unit but are not publicly disclosed to protect at-risk populations from possible deleterious effects associated with unlawful capture, over-eager wildlife viewing, etc.

Birding Prospects: Sleepy Creek WMA offers some of the best birding prospects in the region and statewide. There are many public access sites on both the Morgan and Berkeley County sides of the area and multiple drivable roads cross through it.

Over 34 miles of access roads and trails, which are seasonally closed, offer ample walk-in or hike-in birding opportunities on the area. Additionally,

the Tuscarora Trail (not maintained by DNR) crosses the area and offers good hike-in birding.

For those who are even more ambitious, this area also offers some rugged back-country areas that are not accessible by road or trail. Sleepy Creek WMA's diverse vegetation structure and habitat components support a wide diversity of bird species, from waterfowl, to wading birds, to young forest species, to late-successional closed-canopy associated species. Adept birders may find such uncommon species as Red-headed Woodpecker, Blue Grosbeak, Orchard Oriole, Chuck-will's-widow, Eastern Whip-poor-will, Yellow-breasted Chat, Willow Flycatcher, Worm-eating Warbler, Kentucky Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Cerulean Warbler, Warbling Vireo, Golden-crowned Kinglet, Summer Tanager, and American Woodcock. Typical species of interest for the area are Black-throated Blue Warbler, Black-throated Green Warbler, American Redstart, Blackburnian Warbler, Hooded Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Red-eyed Vireo, Blue-headed Vireo, Yellow-throated Vireo, White-eyed Vireo, Louisiana Waterthrush, Northern Waterthrush, Ruby-crowned Kinglet, Scarlet Tanager, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Hermit Thrush, Wood Thrush, Field Sparrow, and many others.

Recreational Facilities: Sleepy Creek Lake and the campgrounds (67 campsites) surrounding the lake are used heavily during the spring and summer. This WMA represents the largest wilderness-type area destination for residents of the Baltimore-Richmond-Washington, D.C. metropolitan zone.

Roads and walking trails on the WMA are frequently used by day hikers, backpackers, horseback riders, birders, and mountain bikers.

Dispersed camping is not permitted on Sleepy Creek WMA. Camping must occur only at maintained and marked campgrounds.

Destruction and degradation of the area caused by unlawful 4x4 off-roaders and ATV/UTV riders is a persistent issue, and people witnessing these activities should promptly report them to the DNR's Natural Resources Police.

License plate numbers, vehicle descriptions, and location information should be provided as precisely as possible, if available. Those wishing to make a complaint anonymously may do so upon request.

Sleepy Creek WMA can be reached from multiple locations in Morgan and Berkeley counties.

An access road to the mid-point of Sleepy Creek Mountain is situated on White's Gap Road off Duckwall Road in eastern Morgan County. The northern end of the mountain can be reached from the Tuscarora Trail from a trailhead at Spruce Pine Hollow Roadside Park along Martinsburg Road.

Other gated access roads can be reached from Shanghai Road/Hampshire Grade Road in southern Morgan County and multiple points in Berkeley County.