

Big Woods: Yesterday and Today

By Amy Acheson

Hiking along the Big Woods Trail on a sunlit morning under a thick canopy of age-old trees one can find a world that exists all its own. Peeking through the lofty foliage, streams of light angle down, touching the delicate ecosystem of flora and fauna that flourishes below.

Nerstrand Big Woods State Park, located eight miles southeast of Northfield and about 50 miles southeast of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Wheeling Township, is the best remnant left in Minnesota of what was known as the “The Big Woods,” a massive band of hardwoods that once stretched (over two million acres) diagonally across the state, extending as far north as St. Cloud, west to Mankato and southeast to Faribault.

For several reasons the Nerstrand Woods tract was preserved over the years. It serves as a sanctuary for habitat indigenous to the region and is of historic significance to its visitors today.

The Big Wood’s History Runs Deep

Glaciers grooved the way for a unique topography in this part of Minnesota that later became open prairies, brushland, oak savanna, rivers, lakes and the Big Woods. The Cannon and Minnesota rivers served as barriers, protecting the Woods from prairie fires over the years. A Minnesota DNR document accurately depicts the Woods and its surroundings well: “The Big Woods forest in all its fullness rose from the sundrenched expanses like a great dark wall.”

Although early pioneers cleared much of the original Big Woods for farming and logging purposes, this particular tract, by Nerstrand, had a unique purpose as small wood lots for over 150 early pioneers, used for fuel and timber. This arrangement turned out to have an unlikely benefit that would later prove to be pivotal in the

Woods preservation. An inspection report by the United States Department of the Interior National Park Service in 1935 states, “During the early settlement of the country surrounding this area, it was divided into small 5 and 10 acre plots to serve the various farmers of the region as wood lots ... This condition has prevented any one individual from acquiring a large piece of the area and has prevented entirely its use for pasturage and its complete elimination in a single operation by an individual.”

So the forest floor was kept intact. Of course, windstorms, disease, and climate changes all took their toll over the years. Then as time went on, the threat of accelerated timber clearings for economic benefit became apparent. Ecologists, botanists, and concerned neighbors alike put forth a valiant effort to “Save the Big Woods!” According to newspapers in the late 1930s, it stood in most imminent danger of depletion by the encroachment of the woodman’s ax!

An article written by the Nerstrand Bicentennial Committee of 1976 states, “Credit for the movement to save the woods must be given to the conservation-minded citizens of the surrounding communities. Carleton and St. Olaf

College botanists, who had been bringing their students into the woods to study its vegetation, worked especially hard for its preservation.”

A botany professor at Carleton College by the name of Harvey E. Stork was instrumental in the movement and he was even working towards this effort back in the 1920s. In a paper read before the Rice County Historical Society in 1934 he states his plea: “The axe is fast making inroads into this forest which should be made a state park before further destruction makes that impossible for all times.



The tiny and elusive dwarf trout lily can only be found in the Nerstrand Big Woods State Park and is on the federal endangered species list.

Photo courtesy of Doug Ohman, Pioneer Photography

This has a direct bearing on the preservation of state historical records for the woods itself is a living record of what this natural feature so important in the trends of the state's history was like."

Citizens did not want to lose Nerstrand Woods and believed in "preserving for all time this beautiful remnant of the historic Big Woods," according to a 1939 article in *The Pioneer*, a magazine section of the *St. Paul Sunday Pioneer Press*. What was set in motion by Stork, other biologists, environmentalists, and concerned neighbors finally took hold! In 1945, the land was designated as Nerstrand Big Woods State Park.

Today's Plan for Landscape Ecology

As we've settled into the 21st century, prairie farmers surrounding the Woods have embraced a broader ecological view. Landowners now work in stewardship with specific farming practices to protect the Woods ecosystem and the area lakes and rivers that feed into it. There is more education on the importance of biological diversity. In *Managing Landscapes in the Big Woods Ecosystem*, it states, "A certain variety of living organisms is needed for the natural environment to fully function. When an ecosystem is fragmented, or when some of its components are removed, it may continue to exist in a partial or simplified way—at least for a time. At some point, however, if too much diversity is lost, the ecosystem effectively collapses, no longer able to regenerate its species, habitats, or soil."

To further protect the Big Woods ecosystem, the park plans to expand over the years by ecological boundaries rather than geographical lines.

Today, this broad-leaf deciduous forest, contains excellent woodland habitat for migratory and nesting birds indicating a quality, mature forest, according to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. They have recorded presence of such species as cerulean warblers, Acadian flycatchers, blue-gray gnatcatchers and

red-shouldered hawks to name a few. Park management is currently watching over an endangered redheaded woodpecker.

The park also contains a wildflower known as the Dwarf Trout Lily that only exists in this area and nowhere else on earth! It is considered a federal endangered forest wildflower as it was jeopardized with the possibility of extinction. It is a delicate, pale pink flower about the size of a dime or less. It is unique from other trout lilies in that it is an underground vegetative runner and has a variable number of petals. Its mode of reproduction is only by a single offshoot by flowering plants and only a small proportion actually produce flowers. It is believed the plant was spread from glacial floodwaters somewhere on the Cannon River. Great efforts have been made to maintain its existence.

Various activities are going on all year long using the designated paths and recreation areas at the park. They have skiing, camping, hiking, snowshoeing, bird watching, geocaching ... and various other programs. Some come to see the impressive spring wildflowers, to hike down to the Hidden Falls, or for the vibrant fall colors. Whatever brings you to Nerstrand Big Woods State Park, you will find a place of primitive beauty with a remarkable history that has been protected, enjoyed and revered over the years.

Websites: www.dnr.state.mn.us and www.visitingnorthfield.com

Managing Landscapes in the Big Woods Ecosystem
The Pioneer, Seek to Save the Big Woods Remnant
Nerstrand Big Woods State Park - Park History document
Geology of Nerstrand Woods State Park, H.E. STORK
Wildflower Checklist, NBWSP
Bird Checklist, NBWSP
Inspection Report, U.S. Department of the Interior National Park Service
Nerstrand - a History by the Nerstrand Bicentennial Committee, 1976
Minnesota Dwarf Trout Lily, an endangered Minnesota Wildflower
Faribault Daily News

Nerstrand Big Woods waterfall



Photo courtesy of Doug Ohman, Pioneer Photography