

MARKER # 4

FLOODPLAIN HABITAT

Descending from the eastern hemlock stand to the river provides a stunning contrast in both the amount of sunlight and the lush abundance of plant life. This habitat is part of the Little River's floodplain - a bottomland forest community growing in the lowland area.

Tree species include red maple, white pine, eastern hemlock, American hornbeam, and yellow birch. Note how light-seeking trees growing along the banks lean over the river. Eventually, gravity will have its way with them and they will fall into and across the river, providing habitat for aquatic species and corridors for animals to cross from one bank to the other.

Scattered among the open spaces are shrubs such as winterberry, sweet pepperbush, and poison sumac. The herbaceous layer is lushly carpeted with fern and sedge species and an abundance of flowering perennials such as cardinal flower, jewelweed, swamp milkweed, bottle gentian, and jack-in-the-pulpit. "Wet feet" perennials such as pickerel weed and arrowhead are found growing along the banks of the river.

This abundant and diverse plant life draws in abundant animal life. Wetland mammal species include beaver, otter, and mink. Northern water snake and painted, snapping, and wood turtles are present here as well as green frogs, bullfrogs, red-spotted newts.

Birds include warblers, sparrows, great crested flycatchers, and warbling vireos. Waterfowl such as mallard, wood duck and hooded merganser feed here and if a suitable nesting cavity is available, the latter two species may breed in the floodplain. Great blue heron, green heron, and spotted sandpiper are wading bird species that feed along the stream and river shallows. Woodcocks probe the wet soil for worms and other invertebrates. Ospreys and kingfishers hunt for fish along the river.

The Little River meanders here, curving gently back and forth. The water flows fastest on the outside of each "S" shaped bend of the river resulting in bank erosion. The floodplain habitat is subject to periodic flooding as rains and meltwaters cause the Little River to rise above its banks adding to the erosion and sediment deposits along the banks.

In addition to its value as habitat, the floodplain's porous nature makes it an efficient sponge, absorbing water during flood times and slowly releasing it to the river and surrounding lands. Excess flood water also travels deep into the groundwater, making it available during seasonal dry periods.

