Grove Run Trail

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Hiking Grove Run: Striped Maples and Thunderstorms

The woods around Linn Run in southeastern Westmoreland County are a second (or, maybe, even a third or a fourth!) growth forest that date back to the first decade of the Twentieth Century. This was one of the first tracts of land to be purchased by the State of Pennsylvania (in 1909) in its efforts to reclaim and protect potential forest lands in the Ohio River watershed. There are historical descriptions of this area in a state of complete deforestation: acres upon acres of shrub land dominated by ferns and briers. When the state acquired the land (much to the derision of the locals), it was a scrubby, tree-less tract almost completely devoid of wildlife or beauty. Not only had the woods been clear cut by logging companies, but extensive fires caused primarily by the logging railroads had repeatedly burned and decimated early successional recovery stages. There was little wildlife left, and it was only through a reintroduction program sponsored by the State of Pennsylvania that white-tailed deer have returned to the area.

The passage of time, though, has been kind to this land. The ecological resilience of Pennsylvania’s ecosystems is an important feature to note when considering the history and the present day structure of these recovery forests. There is an abundance of rainfall, seeds, and seedling reservoirs, which in spite of the thin, rocky soils, are more than sufficient to allow the robust re-growth of a diverse forest ecosystem.

Linn Run is shallow, rocky stream. It has a fast pace and lots of splash and foam and an abundance of trout and other fish. The forest that fills in the spaces around the narrow road that follows the run is dense and lush and moist with the spray from the creek. Ferns and mosses grow in great abundance along the streamside. Hemlocks, yellow birches, and red maples crowd the edges of the creek and hang their branches over the water frequently generating a continuous tree tunnel along the path of the creek. It is a shady, cool place even on the hottest days of the summer. The hills and ridges around Linn Run through which our hiking trails run vary in elevation from 1300 to 2800 feet above sea level. Many of the trails climb up slopes in long switchbacks, and others are carved directly into some midway point on the hillsides.

We park in the picnic area of Grove Run (a small tributary of Linn Run) and head up along an old logging road (mostly labeled "Grove Run Trail"). Immediately we are struck by the lushness of the undergrowth and canopy trees. Many tall yellow poplars, red oaks, black oaks, sugar maples, red maples, black cherries, and scattered basswoods, cottonwoods, and American beeches fill the forest. At the start of the trail the understory is rich with American chestnut and yellow poplar seedlings. The American chestnut was a major component of both the primary and recovery forests in this area (the nearby “Chestnut Ridge” speaks to the former abundance of this large, graceful tree). The impact of the chestnut blight in the early decades of the Twentieth Century,
though, almost completely erased this species from these forests and reduced their presence primarily to short-lived seedlings and root sprouting saplings that will eventually succumb to the fungus. The small army of chestnut seedlings crowded together in the entry areas of the trail speak to both the ecological past and also to a sad, attenuated future.

On the trail, there is a grace and spacing of the trees that seems almost managed and park-like. This openness was the dominant feature of the trail for many hundreds of yards. As a consequence of this spacing, abundant sunlight reaches the forest floor and a rich mass of plants grows in between the trees. Stinging nettle, hay-scented fern, interrupted fern, sensitive fern, Christmas fern, jewelweed, partridgeberry, and extensive patches of blue cohosh (left) grow densely along the trail and out into the surrounding forest. Seedlings of yellow poplar, American beech, red maple, and striped maple grow in clusters among the ground plants and form a dense, green ‘sea’ between the rich mixture of mature trees. Witch hazel, spicebush, and dogwood form a scattered understory layer, and near several of the oaks are the odd, brown, pine-cone-like patches of squawroot (left).

The trees are very uniform in diameter (and, therefore, age). At the start of the trail trunk diameters of over a foot are common, but soon diameters of significantly less than a foot become the norm. These younger trees generate a “pole forest” that runs up the surrounding hillsides and down the short slope to the stream. Along the way, there are a few very large, widely dispersed red oaks. These trees must have either survived the early logging or, at the very least, the initial rounds of fire that leveled the forests and grew as some of the first components of the recovery forest.

Another very consistent feature of these forests is the abundance of downed trees and branches. Large trees, often wind-thrown with huge, still attached root balls lay in regular lines mostly perpendicular to the path of the trail. Some of these fallen trees are old and are covered with mosses, lichens, fungi, and even stands of robustly growing tree seedlings. Other fallen trees have bare, intact bark and look like they have been quite recently thrown down. The fallen trees are yellow poplars and a mix of oaks, but most seedlings growing on and around these fallen trees are yellow poplars.

The cycle of canopy disturbance, light influx, and the consequential growth of seedlings seems to favor the very rapidly growing, sun-loving yellow poplars over the oaks. It is possible that this “dynamic equilibrium” of wind throw disturbance and re-growth will result in a persisting, yellow poplar “climax community.” Among these yellow poplars are also an increasing number of striped maples. This maple species gets more and more abundant along the trail and
becomes a dominant species later on. I will talk more about striped maples later in the hike.

Bird songs fill the forest. Wood thrushes, eastern towhees, northern flickers, and the distant, raucous percussion of crows generate a baseline of almost continuous song that is frequently punctuated by elaborate (and, to me anyway, unknown) songs. We frequently stop along the trail and scan the surrounding branches with our bare eyes and our binoculars but cannot find these secretive singers.

Towhees are the birds of the day! We see them half buried in the piles of dry leaves, digging wildly for grubs or worms. We also see them patrolling the tree branches as they search for insects. Their bright “cheerite!” whistle announces their presence. Several of the individual birds seem to follow us along the trail for long periods of time. They boldly sit on the open branches over the trail and sing and watch us as we pass.

After only 100 yards along the trail we stop to listen to an elaborate and extremely musical bird song coming from the canopy of a stand of tall poplar trees. We watch and listen for maybe 20 minutes but never see the singer. At the time I could whistle the song, but it’s gone from my memory now. It was a very long (20 or 30 seconds from start to finish?) sequence with fantastic musicality and complexity. The bird must have been a warbler of some type (later we saw three different warbler species: a black and white, a chestnut sided, and a common yellowthroat….was it one of these?).

The trail follows the curve of the hollow back into deeper and deeper forest. As we rise up away from Grove Run, the trees cluster together. The forest and the trail get darker and more and more still. The breeze fades away and the undergrowth supports fewer herbaceous plants and an increasing number of ferns. There are some very large yellow poplars here and increasingly abundant basswoods and red maples. There are even larger numbers of downed trees that are surrounded by dense growths of yellow poplar and striped maple seedlings. We climb along the hillside on what had to have been a laboriously carved side-slope trail that was cut down into the underlying rock. There are many rocks and fallen trees all up the sides of the ravine. The uneven trail surface and the necessity of climbing over fallen trees becomes more and more exaggerated as we go along! THIS was a hard 4 or 5 miles! Wood thrushes sing to us all along the trail. Their fluting, ethereal songs make the trail seem mystical and unconnected to the outside world.

The trail is marked with fresh red blazes. Older, blue blazes are seen occasionally. Many of the red and blue blazes are on fallen trees. In the middle of the trail is a large pie of day-old dog feces that is almost completely covered by large, orange slugs. Deborah refuses to take a picture of it (probably for the best).

While we are looking at some ferns we are passed from behind by an older gentleman who is out hiking with his Welsh terrier. The dog is full of energy and exhibits that great personality and élan that defines a terrier. We see the dog frequently throughout the morning. He is usually alone, cutting at right angles to the trails, racing up and down the side-slopes, finding needed short-cuts between here and there. He is definitely busy with items on his own daily agenda. I don’t know if I would have the courage to bring a terrier on a hike in the woods, but this one seems to know his way around these trails very well. When we pause to say hello to them, a male scarlet tanager lands near us on a branch of a young poplar tree and begins to sing.
A maintenance crew has been along this section of the trail. Downed logs have been sawed and pushed off the path, and, very significantly, the stinging nettle and greenbrier has been cut back from the narrow path to make a three or four foot wide swath through the woods. I brushed my bare leg against some of the nettles earlier along in the hike. I can still feel the burning sting on my calf. Warm weather, to me, demands hiking shorts, but the abundance of greenbrier and nettle on this trail might make one consider wearing long pants.

A black and white warbler flies in and out of the surrounding tree branches. It sings a high pitched “tseee tseee tseee” and appears and disappears almost magically throughout the camouflaging leaves.

We cross a narrow wooden bridge over Grove Run. The stream bed is filled with rocks and fallen trees. The water races over and past these obstacles occasionally gathering into a five or six foot wide flow but most frequently running as narrow, multiple flow fragments. The water makes a very pleasant roar as it tumbles past. Some of the rocks have been deeply grooved by the steady water flows. The long etchings cut by the water make the rocks look more like wood than stone.

Across the bridge we climb steadily up the slope on the opposite side of the deep hollow and head, in general, to the east. The trail follows a small tributary of Grove Run back up the ridge. This side of the hollow is exposed to a northern sky. In this more shaded environment, American beech saplings and pole trees become increasingly abundant. Beeches should grow especially well in this ravine. The cool, moist conditions are ideal to nurture this slowly growing species, and the near immunity the species has against deer predation will greatly favor its persistence.

All along the trail fresh red blazes are painted over older blue blazes.

The trail is frequently crossed by spring seeps and tiny water rills. The flowing water is starting to dig down into the looser surface materials of the trail making the trail very rocky and irregular. The individual sizes of the rocks increase as we steadily gain elevation up the ridge. We have to pay close attention to each footfall and are forced to stop when we want to look around or listen to a singing bird. The walking is hard, and I am glad that I am wearing boots and have my hiking stick. We pause frequently to look at more birds and to listen to their songs. I watch another male black and white warbler flit in and out of a thicket of vegetation on the far side of the creek. I keep my binoculars on him for several minutes not sure if he is feeding on the abundant flies and mosquitoes or if he is patrolling around his hidden nest.

More towhees jump in between the surrounding trees and the dense undergrowth. They make their high, sharp pitched whistles while they harvest insects. In a dense shrub thicket that encases a large spring seep I saw another black and white warbler and what I presumed to be its drably colored female mate.

Wild leeks (“ramps”) are quite common along the trail along with trillium (which was long past its flowering), Canadian mayflower, Indian cucumber root, and the ubiquitous greenbrier and nettle. A mix of ferns fills in

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among the other plants. The soil is very wet. Yellow birch, black cherry, and red maple seedlings, saplings, and mature trees grow intermixed with the American beech.

There are even more downed trees along this section of the trail than in the previous one. There are great stacks of fallen tree trunks piled up on the slopes and scattered down into the deep recesses along the stream. There are extensive areas of open canopy generated by newly fallen trees and abundant zones of sunlight that illuminate the forest floor. The “sun spots” were especially filled with yellow poplar and red maple seedlings.

We turn left and walk due north up a side hollow. We cross several small streams by short rock hops or long, stretching strides. To the right of the trail one of the streams oozes over an uphill boulder that is sculpted by the water flow and green and softened by layers and layers of covering moss. We hike up and up on long switchbacks that were edged by briers and nettles. I am glad that we hadn't brought our dog Kozmo with us as he would have undoubtedly slashed though these potentially painful patches of vegetation probably in some wild romp with the terrier. The utility of the rough coat of the terrier was clearly illustrated by his apparent immunity to the briers and thorns. Kozmo’s thinner, smoother coat would not have offered nearly as much protection. My legs end up with abundant scratches (I see why they call these briers "cat briers") but, in spite of the welts and blood loss, I still feel that shorts are more comfortable than long pants on a warm day.

In one section of the switchback trail someone has cleared away most of the path rocks and lined them up neatly along the left side of the trail. Suddenly, it was very easy to walk! The twisting, jarring strain on the ankles and knees with each footfall is gone! Our walking pace picks up. It is possible to look around while walking without fear of missteps. The trail is clear for about a quarter of a mile and then reverts back to its unmanaged state. The memory of the cleared trail, though, actually slows us down as we twist and step up through the rocky footpath.

Crows fly just above the tree tops along the crest of the ridge screaming in raucous, chaotic voices. They continue making their unbelievable racket for the next forty minutes. When they stop (and they stop suddenly with no discernable cause or moment of resolution) the trail seems empty and strange. We catch glimpses of them, a group of eight or ten individuals, flying and wheeling about each other. There is, though, no sign of the cause of their apparent distress.

The trail surface and most of the surrounding boulders are covered with moss. Everything is green, and wet, and soft looking. The “up” continues and we pass into an increasingly dry forest that is dominated by oaks. In particular chestnut oaks (right), frequently very large specimens, fill in the surrounding woods inter-mixed with red, black, and also white oaks. One very large chestnut oak has fallen across the trail. A maintenance crew sawed the tree in half and pushed it clear of the trail. A quick count of the growth rings reveals an age in excess of one hundred years. This tree must have been a seedling in the first recovery forest that grew after the

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logging and then the fires of the early twentieth century.

A trail register and a sitting log are set at the top of one of the switchbacks. We stop and have some water and some gorp and could not believe our trial guide’s description that we had only hiked two miles from the parking area. With all the forced attention to each step and all of the stops and starts, it had seemed like twice that distance! While we rest, two chestnut sided warblers (a male and a female) dance around us in the trees and underbrush. They perch and twitter so that we can almost reach out to touch them! A wonderful show!

Leaving the trail register, we turn right on a striped maple dominated trail and were caught short by one of the greatest bird displays I have ever seen. First a rose breasted grosbeak jumps into view and follows us along the trail for a dozen yards or so. Then a northern oriole, and then a catbird dart out of the brush onto branches next to the trail, and each are joined by several other individuals of the same species. Then, as I stare into the thicket, I see that nearly every branch of the interconnected mass of striped maples along the right side of the trial has a perching and twittering bird on it!

The birds must have been swarming in response to an emergence of insects! Common yellow throated warblers, chestnut sided warblers, grosbeaks, orioles, chipping sparrows, song sparrows, towhees, and more fill the surrounding spaces. The tree branches throb with bird life! It is noisy, chaotic, and magnificent!

Most of the trees on this ridge top are striped maple (left). This is a tree species of some poor reputation among foresters, and I have heard very little good about it. There are some foresters who predict that the increasing abundance of striped maple in Pennsylvania, accompanied by the increases in black cherry and ferns, is generating a particularly poor forest that could come to dominate the state. Their idea, of course, of a “poor” tree is heavily influenced by the economics of that tree’s wood. Striped maple is not a tree from which any lumber or wood products could be easily made. Whatever the future potential of this tree is, though, along this ridge it was generating a rich habitat for all of these birds.

Striped maple is also called “moosewood” in places, I assume, that have the luxury of having moose. It is a small tree or large shrub that thrives in cool, moist, but well drained sites. It is found throughout the northeastern United States and across southern Canada. It makes up part of the understory vegetation in a wide variety of forest types.

Striped maple can live in the deep shade of a forest for many decades in a slow growing, suppressed state. Over these decades, in spite of a very high mortality rate in its first year seedlings (9 out of 10 seedling die in their first year of life), very large numbers of individuals can accumulate in the forest system.

Canopy disruption allows increased light to reach this understory triggering a vigorous growth response in these suppressed striped maples often to the great disadvantage of other, less abundant seedlings. Forests that have striped maple making up 30% or more of its total seedlings typically will generate after clear cutting nearly pure striped maple stands. These ridge forests, then, must have had dense undergrowths of striped maple that were released when the larger trees were cut or burned.

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Deer browse heavily on striped maple. Rabbits, porcupine, and moose (hence the “moosewood” name?) also readily eat it. Beaver will even take striped maple if their preferred aspens are not available. The very large number of individual trees that build up in a stand, though, and their rapid potential growth rates upon release from shade suppression, enable this species, unlike many of its less abundant or less robust competitors, to thrive in areas even with very high deer populations.

Striped maple flowers in May or June and has a very interesting “gender” story. Most striped maple individuals are either “male” or “female” and, thus, only set either pollen synthesizing flowers or ova synthesizing flowers. But, from year to year, an individual tree can either be male or female. Environmental variables are thought to determine the yearly gender of a particular tree.

In a stand of striped maples there are always many more female trees than male trees, and these female trees, undoubtedly due to the extreme energetic demands of seed production, are much less vigorous than the males. In fact, in one study 65% of the female striped maple on site died by the end of the growing season.

The seeds in winged samaras are wind dispersed in October or November and may germinate the next growing season or, possibly, the season after that. Birds (including ruffed grouse) and many types of small rodents eat striped maple samaras, but, again, overwhelming numbers insures the survival of more than enough seeds to fuel the explosive growth of seedlings in the forest understory.

There is a feeling of a change in the weather after we passed through the striped maple stand. The air is getting cooler, the sun is getting less intense, and the wind is starting to pick up. We cross Quarry Trail (part of the snowmobile trail system that crisscrosses through the Laurel Highlands) and then hear the thunder. Behind us, to the west, the sky is pitch black and highlighted from far north to far south with flashes and streaks of lightning. The storm is coming at us very rapidly.

There is very little that we can do. We are just past the halfway point of our hiking loop. There is no shelter closer than the picnic pavilions back where our car is parked some two and a half miles away. We are not directly on the crest of the ridge and, so, have some protective cover from the surrounding trees. I am very concerned about lightning (which is becoming more frequent and more violent as the storm gets closer. The flashes are accompanied by ground-shaking blasts of thunder), but, I think that I am most worried about the wind. The high winds generated by passing thunderstorms had undoubtedly been one of the main causes of the extensive windthrow of the trees all along this trail. The abundance of large, fallen trees especially up on these higher sections of the ridges speak clearly to the potential dangers and incredible frequencies of tree falls. We do not want to be near any of the trees if the wind began to violently gust, but we also do not want to be out in the open under a sky full of lightning. For right now, there is more lightning than wind, so we keep on the trail under the cover of the trees and listen closely for the onset of possible wind blasts.

The rain begins to fall: a driving, soaking rain that comes down in semi-solid sheets. We keep walking. I remember taking my rain jacket out of my pack a few days before. I am sure that I was jettisoning a few odd ounces of weight in the name of hiking efficiency. I was closely watching the weather reports for our hikes and was sure that rain gear would not be necessary. Hail begins to fall. Pea-sized pellets strike us on our heads and backs and begin to accumulate on the side-hill trail. Within minutes the trail is covered with a inch of ice. The

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formerly only somewhat slippery mud of the trail is now a frictionless surface hanging over a steep downhill. We walk scuffing the ground to push the hail aside and keep traction on the mud. My right foot slips at one point and slides downhill. When I jerk it back into balance, I feel a sudden burning pain in my left lower abdomen. I had strained my left external oblique and now was walking doubled over worried at first that I had herniated myself.

We stop and crouch in the half-shelter of a large, fallen oak tree. We put our daypacks on our heads to protect ourselves from the pounding of the hail stones. In a few minutes, though, we begin to get too cold to remain immobile and so we push back onto the trail, slipping and sliding over the layers of mud and ice.

The remaining trail is a side-hill cut into a very steep slope. To our right is the valley of Linn Run and all around us are stands of beautiful oaks and maples. But we don’t really look around at all. We keep our eyes on the path surface and on the trail blazes ahead of us. We had hiked this section of the trail a couple of years before and had had a great deal of trouble keeping on the trail and keeping sight of the trail markers due to the large numbers of downed trees that blocked the path. Fortunately, a great deal of work has been done on the trail since then and we cross the formerly blocked sections quite easily.

The hail finally stops and the thunder begins to fade away off to into the east. The rain lessens and then also stops. The ground and trees (and hikers) start to steam away the accumulated surface water back into the air. I feel like a walking cloud machine. We are soaked to the skin. My legs are covered with a strange, foamy froth that I think comes from a long traverse through a thick stand of hay scented ferns. It is either that, or I am starting to foam up like an overworked horse.

The sun comes out. We regularly take short pauses in sun breaks along the path to warm ourselves. At one of these breaks Deborah sees something moving in the brush uphill from the trail. From the amount of brush being disturbed, the disturber had to be fairly large. In between two dense masses of brush about twenty yards away we see a flash of reddish brown and an outline of two, tall pointy ears. It is a red fox. He is fully visible for a second or two as he jumps on uphill into deeper cover. We watch his long, white-tipped tail flick in and out of the dense branches and then disappear.

We push on. There is more thunder coming up from behind us. We are nowhere near dry but do not want another soaking. We keep our eyes on the red blazes and step carefully along the rocky trail. We re-crossed Quarry Trail and catch glimpses of the Linn Run Road down below to our right. Before this side-trail was cut, hikers had to descend to the road and walk along it back to the Grove Run picnic area. Suddenly, we follow a steep grade down to Grove Run and rock hop across its shallow flow. We climb up the opposite slope and are, at last, in the picnic area’s parking lot.

At the car we put on what dry clothes we have. My pocket notebook is a wet pudding mass of paper. My notes, though, are all written in pencil, so I am hopeful that I will be able to eventually read them if, and when, the notebook dries out (after a day or so the pages were, indeed, decipherable). We get into the car and turn on the heater. As we drive out to Linn Run Road, the next wave of rain begins. The dry blast of the car heater is a joy!

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