

Poor Mountain Natural Area Preserve

925 acres - Roanoke County, Virginia

The Site: Located in rugged mountainous terrain, Poor Mountain Natural Area Preserve hosts the world's largest known population of a globally rare shrub called piratebush (*Buckleya distichophylla*). This property was purchased in part with funding from The Nature Conservancy's Partners in Conservation project, the 1992 Virginia Parks and Natural Areas Bond, and the Open Space Recreation and Conservation Fund (tax check-off).

Natural History: As its name suggests, Poor Mountain Natural Area Preserve has predominantly infertile, acidic soils derived from metamorphic bedrock. The slopes and ridges of this rugged area are vegetated with open-canopied pine-oak woodlands. On higher elevations most of the trees are low and gnarly, and include species such as chestnut oak (*Quercus montana*), scarlet oak (*Quercus coccinea*), bear oak (*Quercus ilicifolia*), table mountain pine (*Pinus pungens*) and pitch pine (*Pinus rigida*). The understory is comprised largely of ericaceous shrubs such as huckleberry (*Gaylussacia* spp.), mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) and fetterbush (*Pieris floribunda*).

Scattered throughout these scrubby woodlands is the preserve's rarest plant – piratebush. This much-branched shrub could be easily overlooked were it not for its pale green foliage, which is one indication of its parasitic nature. By tapping into the root systems of neighboring plants, piratebush requires less chlorophyll than most plants, thus the lighter color. In autumn it is conspicuous, as well, with bright yellow leaves. At first glance, the leaves appear to be compound, but they are actually simple, growing neatly in two ranks from light green twigs. Small green flowers appear in mid-spring at the ends of new shoots. Oval-shaped, yellow-green fruits, about an inch (2.5 centimeters) long, mature in late summer. While this shrub can grow to 15 feet (5 meters) in height, most specimens on the preserve are no more than waist-high.



Piratebush
Drawing by Caren Caljouw

Found at only a few locations in Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina, piratebush is considered one of the rarest shrubs in eastern North America. It thrives on Poor Mountain, however, which has more specimens than all other known populations combined. The reason for this abundance is unknown. There are places throughout the southern Appalachians with seemingly identical habitat conditions but no piratebush. The species is typically found on moderately dry, wooded slopes with open canopies. While it is often associated with hemlock (*Tsuga* spp.), which it parasitizes, a wide variety of trees, shrubs and herbs are also suitable hosts. At Poor Mountain piratebush mainly seems to parasitize table mountain pine (*Pinus pungens*). Piratebush also seems to do well in areas that have experienced periodic wildfires. Indeed, there are many signs of past fires on Poor Mountain.

Resource Management: As Natural Heritage scientists learn more about the life history and habitat requirements for piratebush, preserve stewards will develop and implement management plans that may include prescribed fire.

Compatible Uses: Compatible uses include bird watching, hiking, nature study and photography. Some uses are prohibited, including horseback riding, off-road vehicles, and collection of plants, animals and minerals.

Location and Public Access: The preserve (in two parcels) is about four miles west of the Roanoke city limits. A small parking area and short hiking trail (1/4 mile) are located on the west side of Route 694 (12 O'clock Knob Road), 4.8 miles south of Salem.

From I-81 near Roanoke take Exit 137 onto Route 112 East into Salem. Go 0.5 mile to Main Street (Route 460). Turn left (east) and go 0.8 mile to Mill Lane on the right. Turn right and go 0.4 mile - across railroad tracks and the Roanoke River - to West Riverside Drive. Turn left and go 0.8 mile to 12 O'clock Knob Road (Route 694) on the right. Turn right and go 4.8 miles to the preserve entrance on the right.

From the north on the Blue Ridge Parkway exit onto Route 220 north and go 1.8 miles to Route 419 north. Turn left and go 2.3 miles to Route 221 south. Turn left and go 4.9 miles to Route 694. Turn right and go 3.6 miles to the preserve entrance on the left.

From the south on the Blue Ridge Parkway exit onto Route 221 north, just south of Bent Mountain. Go 8.0 miles to Route 694. Turn left and go 3.6 miles to the preserve entrance on the left.

Natural Heritage Resources

Plant

piratebush (*Buckleya distichophylla*) G2/S2

Community

pine-oak/heath woodland

For more information contact:

Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation
Natural Heritage Program

Mountain Region Steward (540) 265-5234

or

217 Governor Street

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Department of Conservation & Recreation

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