

Poor Mountain Natural Area Preserve

ROANOKE COUNTY | 1,326 ACRES



The Natural Area Preserve System

Natural area preserves are dedicated to protect habitat for rare and endangered plants, animals, and significant natural communities and geologic features. Currently, there are 66 natural area preserves protecting more than 59,700 acres statewide. While DCR provides public access at many preserves, recreation is secondary to biodiversity protection. Preserves are open from sunrise to sunset unless otherwise posted. When you visit any preserve, please follow these guidelines so DCR can ensure these natural areas will be healthy and resilient for generations to come.

- A full parking lot means the preserve has reached capacity.
- Stay on marked trails.
- No camping or fires.
- No unleashed pets.
- No bicycles, ATVs or off-road vehicles.
- No horses.
- No collection of plants, animals, minerals or artifacts.

About Poor Mountain

Located at the southern terminus of Virginia's Northern Blue Ridge, Poor Mountain Natural Area Preserve protects 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 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. Small green flowers appear in mid-spring at the ends of new shoots. Oval-shaped, yellow-green fruits, about an inch long, mature in late summer. While this shrub can grow to 15 feet in height, most specimens on the preserve are no more than waist-high.

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 individual shrubs 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. It is able to parasitize a variety of forest tree species. Piratebush seems to do well in areas that have experienced periodic wildfires. Indeed, there are many signs of past fires on Poor Mountain.





Public access for Poor Mountain

The Poor Mountain Natural Area Preserve in Roanoke County is about 4 miles west of the Roanoke city limits. A small parking area (10 spaces) and 4 miles of hiking trails are located on the west side of Route 694 (Twelve O'clock Knob Road), 4.8 miles south of Salem.

Trails include a relatively easy 1-mile loop through the piratebush population, and a steep and strenuous 4-mile loop that takes several hours to complete. The steep, poor soils of Poor Mountain Natural Area Preserve are easily eroded. Visitors to the preserve are asked to stay on marked trails at all times to prevent damage to these soils.

Directions to Poor Mountain

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 Twelve O'clock Knob Road (Route 694) on the right. Turn right and go 4.8 miles to the preserve entrance on the right.

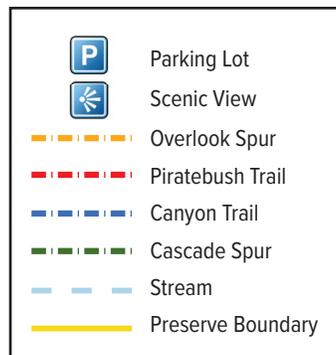
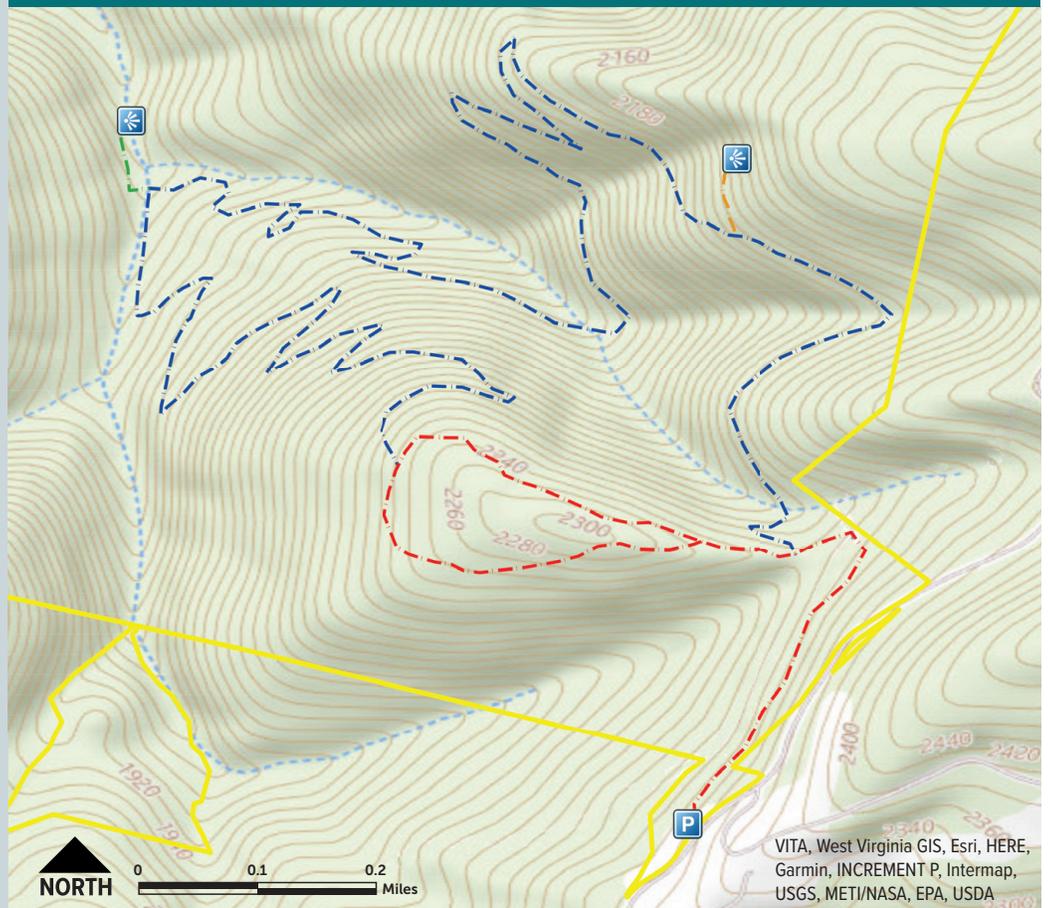
From the north on the Blue Ridge Parkway exit onto Route 220 north and go 1.8 miles to Route 419 north. Turn left and go 2.3 miles to Route 221 south. Turn left and go 4.9 miles to Route 694. Turn right and go 3.6 miles to the preserve entrance on the left.

From the south on the Blue Ridge Parkway exit onto Route 221 north, just south of Bent Mountain. Go 8 miles to Route 694. Turn left and go 3.6 miles to the preserve entrance on the left.

If the lot is full, please wait for a space to open or come back another time.

Photos: *Piratebush fruit*: Ryan Huish, Ph.D.
Canyon Trail: James Francis, DCR

POOR MOUNTAIN TRAIL MAP



Natural Heritage Resources

PLANT

Piratebush (*Buckleya distichophylla*)

Global Status: Vulnerable (G3); State Status: Imperiled (S2)

NATURAL COMMUNITIES

Pine-oak/heath woodland

Global, State Status: Apparently secure (G4/S4)

Central Appalachian xeric shale woodland (Chestnut oak/ mixed herbs type) Global, State Status: Vulnerable (G3/S3)

Updated 10/21