

# Gerstberger Pines



**Nature Trail**



White Pine  
*Pinus strobus*



The idea for this trail was conceived in 1993 by the Taylor County Board of Supervisors and County Forestry Committee Chairman Herb Bergman after the purchase of this unique 20-acre parcel of land. The project was brought to fruition through the hard work of Brad Ruesch, Russell Aszmann, Arlen Albrecht, and the Wisconsin Conservation Corp (WCC) work crew.

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**W**elcome to Gerstberger Pines County Park and Nature Trail. The 3/4 mile interpretive trail will introduce you to some of the treasures this special area has to offer. The Taylor County Buildings, Grounds, and Parks Department invites you to hike the trail and learn about the plants, animals, and history of this unique old growth segment of forest.

Follow the gravel trail and numbered posts. This brochure includes information about a feature associated with each post.

This forest developed after the last glacier retreated over 10,000 years ago. ***Help us preserve it and its unique environment by staying on the marked trails, not picking flowers, plants or fungi, and carrying out any containers or litter. Thank you for your cooperation.***

***Caution—please watch for roots and rocks that could cause tripping.***

## STATION 1

**T**he wealth of Wisconsin's timber resources lured men from all over the world, who dreamed of fortunes and land. Within a lifetime (1880 to 1940), all they left was a fire-scarred, cut-over landscape. The struggle to make a living and the perceived never-ending forest resource lead to this quote published in the Lumberman's Gazette in 1881: "This valuable timber must be cut as fast as possible. It cannot be husbanded and preserved for the future." The value of an old growth forest like Gerstberger Pines has changed in the past 100 years from being strictly monetary to recreational, aesthetic, and environmental.

This parcel of land (originally 80 acres) was bought by Ed Gerstberger in 1892 from Mr. D. VanValm, an agent for the Wisconsin Central Railroad. It has been in the family until Taylor County purchased it in 1993. Why it was not logged off and farmed like much of the surrounding land is a mystery. For whatever reason, we are grateful that this 20 acres was saved for us to learn from and enjoy. Now we can imagine what it was like to be a Native American or an early settler first settling on this great forested land.

***As you proceed on to station #2, note the transition of tree sizes and the overhead canopy.***



## STATION 2

**W**e hope you noticed the difference in tree sizes as you entered the forest. The first 10 thirty feet of forest is regrowth; trees that are reclaiming the abandoned field land. These trees are an estimated 20 to 25 years old. They are no doubt offspring of the old red oaks seen at this site. Which ones do you think will carry on two hundred years of history? Future generations will say these trees claim to be witnesses to the birth of the worldwide web, the launch of the Hubble telescope, and 9/11. By looking past this post and into the old growth canopy, note the change in tree size, spacing of trees, and the majestic look of history. ***Proceed to your left and remember to stay on the trail.***



## STATION 3

**T**he old red oaks here are about 200 years old. They have witnessed events like the Civil War, the first light bulb, radios, and space travel. Oak trees are an important species in the ecology of a woods. They are long-lived, provide food for wildlife, and are one of the most valuable species of hardwood timber in Wisconsin's northwoods. These trees may be past their economic prime—they are probably hollow and riddled with decay, but they are now valued for their aesthetics, history, and awe-inspiring stature.



## STATION 4

**L**ook to the south at the nearby woods. This parcel was pastured up to about 25 years ago. Pasturing woods is a practice that is now generally discouraged because of its negative impact on forest regeneration and regrowth and because it compacts the soil, which is injurious to existing trees. Observe the seedlings and small saplings in the area.

## STATION 5

**L**ooking past this post to the west, you'll see a natural windfall and tree stumps that were cut over 80 years ago. The saw logs were probably taken to the Rib Lake Lumber Company (1882 to 1948). Note the large red maple with the burl, a large growth on the side of the trunk. What causes burls is a mystery, but causes may include bacteria, fungi, insects, wounds, or environmental stress. Woodworkers often use burls for bowls, furniture, and other projects.



## STATION 6

**H**ave a rest on the Leopold bench, which was built by the Wisconsin Conservation Corps for your convenience. Looking to the right, you'll see one of the giant white pines for which Gerstberger Pines was named. Unfortunately, of the eleven huge pines that were here when the property was purchased, only two are still alive. You will also see some of the largest basswood trees in the forest. Facing the back of the bench (east), note the decomposition of downed trees and the cradle-knoll, also called pit-and-mound, topography. *(We'll learn about this at the next station.)*

## STATION 7

**L**ook at the uprooted windfall hemlock. The dirt-filled roots will decay leaving a “knoll” (mound) of dirt with a “cradle” (pit) where the roots pulled up next to it. You will notice a number of cradle-knolls in this area, created since the last glacier came through here 10,000 years ago. The exposed dirt makes a good seed bed for new trees. Look at how many trees are growing out of these little mounds.



## STATION 8

**T**o your left, see where a fallen tree provided a good seed bed and anchor for three hemlocks to grow on. Since then, the host downed log has decomposed, leaving the exposed roots formed to grow around the old log. Yellow birch also often grow on decaying tree stumps and fallen trees. Fifty years from now, the fallen tree you see in the opposite direction might provide the same natural phenomenon. Behind the sign, notice the dead white pine and the holes that may have served as homes for woodpeckers and small mammals.



## STATION 9

**U**ntil recently, the large yellow birch laying on the ground behind the sign was a snag (a standing dead tree) with woodpecker holes—now it is decaying and is habitat for salamanders and insects and then compost. Look for shelf fungus growing on another fallen log nearby.



Right of the sign are tall eastern hemlock, basswood, and yellow birch. They form a dense canopy that inhibits understory growth. Eastern hemlocks grow very slowly, and the largest one in the park (29 inches in diameter), is estimated to be 255 years old and the oldest tree in the park. The filtered sunlight allows for interesting boreal, or northern, plants such as starflower and jack-in-the-pulpit to grow and flourish. As you proceed on the trail, note the tip up to the west, it has great den potential. Also note the log decomposing into humus.



## STATION 10

**T**he ancient yellow birch to your left is growing on a mound as previously described. Yellow birch lumber is used for cabinet and furniture making. Note the shaggy bark and gall growth unique to this species.

***(To follow the interpretive trail, take the left branch when the trail forks. The right branch is a short-cut back to the entrance.)***

## STATION 11

**T**his large dead white pine is presumed to have been hit by lightning 30 years ago. Some day it will add nutrients to the forest floor. Meanwhile, it can furnish shelter for woodpeckers, small mammals, and a multitude of insects. A fallen hemlock log is host to hemlock shelf fungus. This fungus is unique to hemlock. *Please don't destroy these fungi—or any other plants or critters you find in Gerstberger Pines.*

## STATION 12

**W**ell over 125 years ago, while it was still standing, this red maple was damaged either by insects or a windfall causing the severe curve in the trunk. The remaining log is decaying and hollow. It would make a good den site. Note the snag to the left and the trademark holes of the Pileated Woodpecker.



On your journey to the next station, take a few moments to sit on the Leopold bench and watch for wildlife. You may be lucky and see a deer, squirrel, or fisher (a large member of the weasel family). As you continue walking, look for the horizontal lines of holes on the hemlock on the side of the trail; the holes were made by a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, a species of woodpecker. These small woodpeckers lap up sap along with any insects that may get caught there. Also look for den trees as you walk.



On your way to Station 13, look for the lightening “zipper” on the large white pine near the trail intersection.

### **STATION 13**

**Y**ou are now standing in a “natural regeneration area” of a young forest. This land was used as a farm field up to 40 years ago. The further north you walk, the younger the trees, exemplifying the gradual progression or reclamation of the forest.

### **STATION 14**

**F**rom the Leopold bench, you can view the six giant white pines standing nearby plus a windfall right behind you. Unfortunately, only two appear to be alive. What caused most of the large old white pines in this woods to die is not known—it could be old age, disease, lightning, or some other factor. These giants of the forest are 32 to 38 inches dbh (diameter at breast height) and over 100 feet tall. Their age has been estimated at 200 to 215 years old. The largest



tree—39”dbh X 105’ tall—would yield approximately 5,000 board feet of lumber, enough to frame out two 1,500 sq. ft. houses. The reasons the logging industry found the white pine so appealing were that they are easily worked, resilient, and strong. These giants of this forest can be seen from far away, including by returning to County Road C and traveling south.

The poorly-drained soils of the Rib Lake area made widespread stands of pine uncommon. These pines were scattered through stands of hemlocks and a variety of mixed hardwoods. This area was one of the latest areas in the state to be logged for its virgin pine. In fact, the Village of Rib Lake was founded in 1881 by J.J. Kennedy to support the sawmill and heavy logging industry activity that was taking place within the surrounding area.

The early logging efforts produced some logs that were floated down the narrow Rib River to the mill at Rib Falls or to other mills in the Wausau area. Later, the harvest was transported to the Rib Lake Lumber Company in the winter by horse drawn sleighs or steam haulers.



As logging increased, camps were established to house the men. Camps were numbered (1-28) and were spread out all over the surrounding forests. The camps consisted of a bathhouse, cook shack, dining quarters, and several bunkhouses. Each camp had its own unique, well-loved cooking crew.

*If you are interested in more information about logging camps, you might be interested in visiting "Camp 28" in Rib Lake. This fine restaurant and motel contains artifacts and pictures from the logging era.*

## STATION 15

**T**his large white ash tree shows the scars from holes made by sapsuckers, like the holes in a hemlock along the trail near Station 12.

Further into the woods, look for the large man-sized cavity in an old maple tree. You can also see a eutypella canker in a smaller maple tree. These cankers are caused by a fungus. You may also spot a huge white pine that fell due to unknown causes. Imagine the sound when it hit the ground! Not far from the edge of the field to the east, notice the large rockpile, representing a lot of hard work that was done to clear fields in years past.

## STATION 16

**T**ake a seat on the Leopold bench. These easy-to-build benches were originally designed by renowned Wisconsin conservationist,



Aldo Leopold. The hemlock cathedral you experience is what the Native Americans and early white settlers experienced in this area. This is what Ed Gerstberger saw in 1892 when he purchased this land from the Wisconsin Central Railroad. While you are listening to the birds, think of what the early settlers may have thought as they went about their work felling trees and clearing fields. Think about the value of this and all forests. Think about the diversity this forest offers wildlife and humans. This truly is a special place!

The Taylor County Forestry and Recreation Department invites you to visit the 17,500 acre County Forest just three miles from here. You will see the forestry practices of today and learn how the forest is managed for wildlife, recreation, and timber/fiber production.

***~ If you don't plan on keeping this brochure for future reference, please put it back in the brochure holder at the beginning of the trail. ~***



Yellow Birch



Red Oak



Other trees of Gerstberger Pines.



Eastern Hemlock



American Basswood

To Hwy 13



To Hwy 13



Trail Parking



Campgrounds



Hiking/Ice Age National Scenic Trail



Taylor County Forest



ATV Trails



**For more information on the  
trails of Taylor County, contact  
the Taylor County Tourism Office at:**

**715-748-4729**

**Website: [taylorcountytourism.com](http://taylorcountytourism.com)**