



Barred owl

Steve Shaluta

Steve Shaluta/WV Dept. of Commerce

Description: Located just seven miles south of Charleston, this forest's proximity to the heavily populated Kanawha Valley has made it a recreational haven. The 9,300-acre forest is noted among naturalists for its diversity of wildflowers, reptiles, amphibians and birds. The forest's sole paved road winds through the middle of the property, surrounded on both sides by tall hills. Located in the hills are 25 miles of hiking trails and many more miles of gas and oil well service roads, providing access to much of the forest. Some of the trails and all of the roads are open to mountain biking. Campers will find 46 sites, 25 of which have electrical and water hookups. Small RVs have no difficulty reaching Kanawha State Forest, but large RVs will have trouble negotiating the narrow, winding roads leading to and within the forest.

Viewing Information: Rich cove forest sites, dry piney ridges, and moist bottomlands provide nesting habitat for 19 species of wood warblers, a feature that draws bird watchers from as far away as Canada. The cerulean warbler, a species in rapid decline over much of its former range, is abundant in the high canopy forest of the oldest timber stands within the Forest. Colorful hooded warblers, American redstarts and yellow-throated warblers sing a variety of songs from, respectively, the low understory, the mid understory, and the canopy. Numerous other species of birds also nest here, including turkey vultures on bare ground in the remote rock cliffs, pileated woodpeckers in dens hammered out of ancient beech trees, and yellow-throated vireos in pendulous woven nests attached to small branches.

Because many of the trees are more than 100 years old, there are numerous hollows where barred owls nest. Listen for the haunting hoots of these large, gray nocturnal predators at dusk as they prepare for a night of hunting. Your best chance to catch a glimpse is along the roads and trails in the forested bottomlands. Numerous small clearings in old-growth forest around gas

NOTE: State forests are open to public hunting. Please check with the superintendent for seasons and affected areas.

Directions: From I-64 in Charleston, take Exit 58A, drive south on US. 119. Turn left onto Oakwood Road at the second stop light. Following the brown and white routing signs, turn right onto Bridge Road, and right onto Connell road. At the bottom of Connell, make a sharp left turn onto Kanawha Forest Drive and follow a few miles to the forest entrance.

Closest town: Charleston

Ownership: West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (304-558-3500)

and oil wells provide good habitat for another declining species, the whippoorwill. These fascinating songsters provide another reason to stay awake till dark or to get out of your sleeping bag in the predawn hour during late spring. Worm-eating warblers are difficult to see, but the preponderance of dry oak woods on the western slopes of the north-south ridges make your chances to see one fairly high in May and June.

Walk the Shrewsbury Hollow service road and branch off onto Alligator Rock Trail or Teaberry Trail for a good chance to hear and see these small, stripe-headed warblers who sing like buzzing insects. Upper slopes covered with oak and hickory host an abundance of scarlet tanagers. Mossy Rock Trail, Overlook Trail, Pigeonroost Trail, and several others are good spots for viewing bright red males establishing territories in May.

The clean water of Davis Creek and its headwater tributaries in the forest provide good fishing for belted kingfishers and good aquatic insect foraging for Louisiana waterthrushes. While walking Davis Creek Trail or Polly Hollow Trail alongside bubbling riffles, listen for the yellow-throated warblers who like to sing from tall bottomland trees on sunny spring and summer days.

Mammals living in the forest include white-tailed deer; bobcats; red and gray foxes; raccoons; red, gray and fox squirrels; southern flying squirrels; white-footed mice; coyotes and black bears. Several of the forest's trails (Beech Glen, Ballard, and Mary Draper Ingles) pass by massive sandstone overhangs that harbor woodrat middens. These



Pileated woodpecker (male)

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interesting rodents can be observed at twilight, but their home turf is usually very rugged.

The Forest provides important habitat to a number of bat species at different seasons. The conversion of much of the forest land to the south and east of the forest to treeless grasslands by mining companies has made the old-growth forest stands and the old coal mine portals critical to bat population survival. The federally-protected, endangered Indiana bat was found to have a maternity colony in the forest in 2009. Big brown bats, little brown bats and pipistrelles hibernate in the old coal mines along Davis Creek. Watch them fly over the impoundment or over the small openings at dusk and dawn during the summer, when insect hatches are commonplace.

The best time to view amphibians is spring. From February to April, with the first warm rains, spotted salamanders migrate to breeding

sites at night. They are easily identified by their bright yellow spots. Visitors can also look for four-toed and marbled salamanders among others. Spring nights are filled with the sound of spring peepers, green frogs, American and Fowler's toads, and gray tree frogs. Daytime amphibian choristers include the aptly named mountain chorus frog and the "quacking" wood frog.

The Forest is blessed with many vernal pools along the main road through the Forest and along the road to the shooting range. The Spotted Salamander Trail is easily accessible and includes a vernal pool that dries out in mid-summer, and provides good amphibian watching opportunities. Most of the smaller tributaries of Davis Creek are loaded with northern dusky salamanders, two-lined salamanders and spring salamanders. Slimy salamanders are abundant under rotting logs and shaded rocks.

Black rat snakes, ring-necked snakes, northern water snakes and garter snakes are abundant in the forest. Less frequently seen, but likely no less abundant are rough green snakes, eastern hognose snakes, milk snakes and black racers. Both species of poisonous snakes in West Virginia – the copperhead and timber rattlesnake – live here. Skinks and northern fence lizards round out the reptiles that can be seen, especially on warm spring and summer days along the drier trails.

The Kanawha State Forest Foundation organizes guided walks led by experienced naturalists in the spring, fall, and winter. Both the spring and fall events (held on the last Saturday in April and the second Saturday in September) offer as many as twelve different guided walks that focus on a wide variety of nature-related subjects. To learn more about these walks, or other activities and events at KSF, visit the Foundation's website, www.ksff.org.



Spring is the best time to view amphibians, including the spotted salamander, at Kanawha State Forest.

Photo by Steve Shaluta