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## **Rare Forest Habitat Discovered Near Anacostia River in Suburban Maryland**

*Arlington, Virginia* — Rare forest habitat types and a number of rare plants have been newly discovered in the upper Anacostia River watershed in suburban Maryland. While documenting natural habitats during recent field surveys at the Henry A. Wallace Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, scientists found a previously unknown part of the forest where pitch pine trees and oaks grow together in an unusual combination. This forest type, which ecologists call the *Pine Barrens Pine – Oak* plant community, is most closely related to vegetation previously known only from the famed New Jersey Pine Barrens of south-central New Jersey.

The discoveries were made as part of a study carried out in the summer and fall of 2005 to classify and describe the significant natural communities in the upper reaches of the Anacostia River watershed. The results of the study, funded by the Washington, D.C.-based Naomi and Nehemiah Cohen Foundation, are described in a report released this week by NatureServe, a non-profit conservation group that carries out similar studies of habitats and species across the United States.

The surveys covered a number of the most undisturbed places around each of the five main tributaries of the Anacostia: Northwest Branch (including Sligo Creek and Long Branch), Paint Branch, Little Paint Branch, Indian Creek, and Beaverdam Creek. Because of its significant undeveloped natural areas, the USDA Beltsville Agricultural Research Center was the location for much of the field work.

“A great deal of attention has been paid to the lower part of the Anacostia River, where it flows through Washington, and rightly so,” said Bruce Stein, Ph.D., NatureServe’s Vice President for Programs. “But we may not have appreciated until now just how significant are some of the natural habitats found in the upper portion of the Anacostia watershed. You don’t normally expect to find globally rare plant communities in Montgomery and Prince George’s counties, but there they are.”

“This new information identifying globally rare habitats, as well as rare plant species, greatly increases the value of the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center as a scientific resource for further research,” said Dr. Phyllis Johnson, director of the USDA-Agricultural Research Service’s Beltsville Area, which includes the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. “This information will also be very useful in helping us manage our land.”

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The rare *Pine Barrens Pine – Oak* forest type is found on relatively dry soils and is characterized by large numbers of pitch pine trees (*Pinus rigida*) mixed with oak. Another highly significant plant community newly documented at the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center is the *Fall-line Terrace Gravel Magnolia Bog*, a type of forest wetland that is habitat for several rare species. This rare magnolia bog is apparently found only in the Anacostia and other nearby watersheds. A third rare forest type, *Pine Barrens Lowland Forest*, was also found during the field survey. It differs from *Pine Barrens Pine – Oak* forests in being found on lower-lying wetland soils.

The surveys also found 22 plant species that are uncommon or highly rare in Maryland, most associated with the bogs and other wetland habitats. The rare plants include such beautiful bloomers as white-fringed orchid (*Platanthera blephariglottis*), pale green orchid (*Platanthera flava* var. *herbiola*), sheep laurel (*Kalmia angustifolia*), and bog goldenrod (*Solidago uliginosa*).

The study had three main components: 1) field inventories and review of existing information on forest types in the area; 2) classification of plant communities according to the U.S. National Vegetation Classification, the most widely-used standard for such work; and 3) analysis of the rarity and conservation importance of the plant communities found. Field surveys were carried out by scientists from the Maryland Native Plant Society and the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History, Department of Botany, working in collaboration with NatureServe.

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**NatureServe** is a non-profit conservation group dedicated to providing the scientific information, technology, and services needed to guide effective conservation action. Representing a network of 75 natural heritage programs and conservation data centers in the United States, Canada, and Latin America, NatureServe is a leading source for detailed scientific information about threatened plants, animals, and ecosystems. Visit us online at [www.natureserve.org](http://www.natureserve.org).