Old-Growth Forest in Watoga State Park

a photographic report by Doug Wood

Watoga's Magnificent Forest

A treasure for all to enjoy

by Doug Wood

On February 17 and 19, 2017, I and several Pocahontas County supporters of Watoga State Park found one of the old-growth tracts in Watoga State Park. Former superintendent Mark Mengele joined the group; he said he had often heard from old-timers that there was a 500-acre tract of pre-settlement forest (a.k.a. virgin timber) in the Rock Run watershed. We found the western border of the tract, measured tree diameters, and identified part of the tract's boundary (see map).

We saw White Oak, Red Oak, and Chestnut Oak, as well as some 100+ year old Black Oak, Yellow Poplar, Black Gum, Pitch Pine, White Pine, Mockernut Hickory, and Cucumber Tree. We found abundant sign of buck rubs and scrapes, boar bear territorial tree marking and scat piles, and bobcat territorial scratching posts within the old-growth tract.

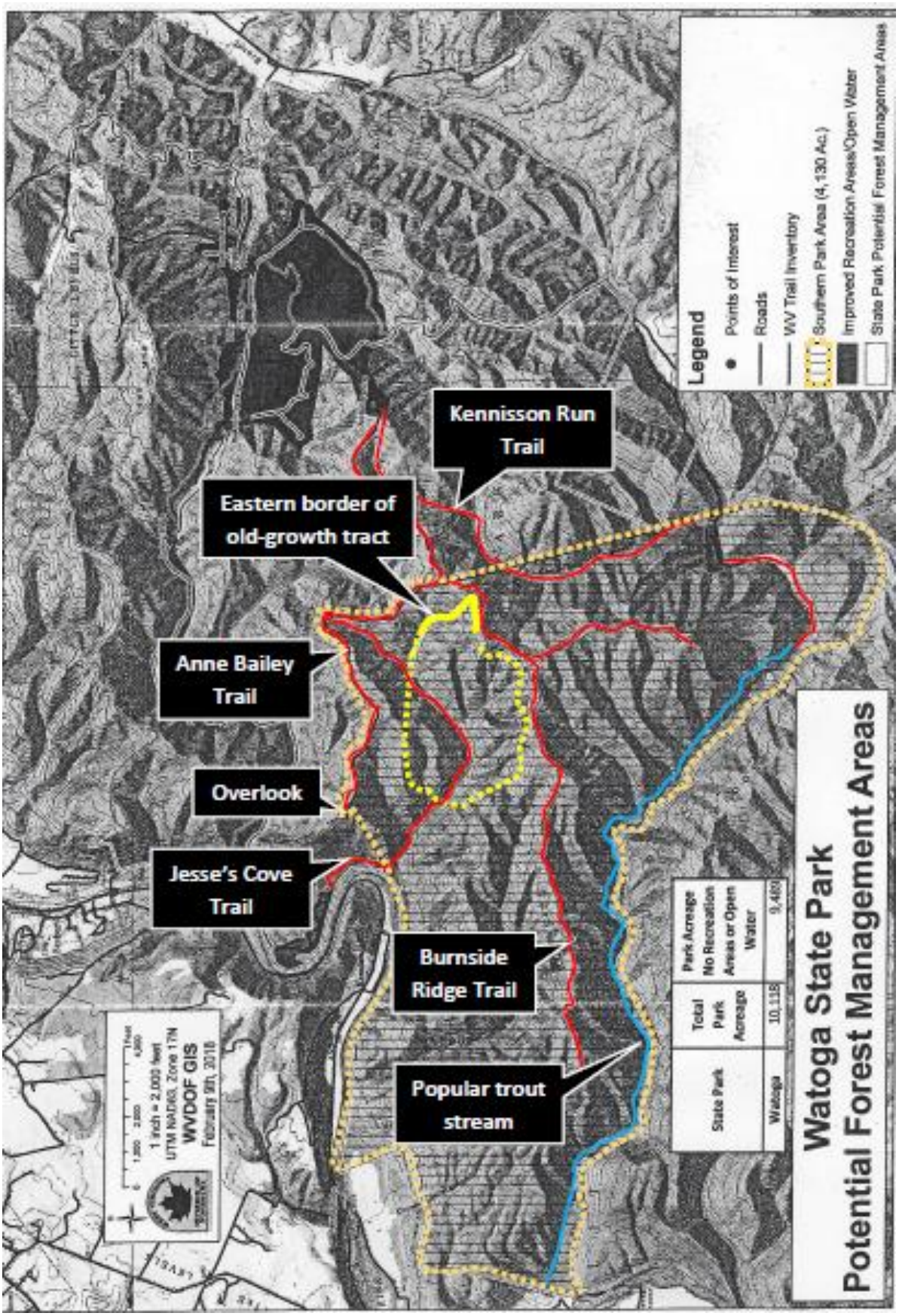
Watoga is the most popular state park for black bear observations. Watoga is so productive for black bears because of the abundance of hard mast from the mature oak and hickory forests, as well as plenty of hollow logs and trees in the old-growth forests for denning.

It is possible that this tract experienced limited cutting in the past, but the evidence for that is slim. It certainly meets all the criteria established by the U.S. Forest Service for identifying old-growth forest.

This old-growth tract is worthy of protection. In these pages you'll see the unique opportunity Watoga provides visitors to its old-growth forest tracts within the proposed logging zone. There should never be commercial logging in our state parks — now and in the future.

FEBRUARY 16-18, 2018 WATOGA STATE PARK OLD-GROWTH HIKE

Doug Wood photos and captions. Report Feb. 19, 2018.



Map compiled by WV Div. of Forestry showing the 4,000+ acre area they intend to log, claiming there is no use of that portion of Watoga State Park.

The Hillsboro (Pocahontas Co.) Beezley boys use a dbh measuring tape on a 200+ year White Oak on Saturday Hike before snowfall.

Ken (daddy) is a WVU Master of Science graduate of the Forest Science program.

Dominant male bobcat territorial scratch and scent post on a 200+ year Chestnut Oak.
Both claw marks and spray mark the post, on the underside of the oak's overhanging buttress root. Eddy Fletcher is a primitive technologist and excellent hunter/tracker. Like me, he has taken many deer and turkeys in mature forest environments.

Bobcat claw marks.

Locating the Bobcat spray spot.

Following a Whitetail Deer buck rub line through the shrub understory in a canopy gap created by a fallen forest giant. Five of the trees in the background are in the 30-40 inch range, and many others in the 20-30 inch range.

Tracking Deer among the forest giants.

Buck rub on Striped Maple. The 200+ year Red Oak in background is in the 30-40 inch range. Several buck scrapes were visible on the ground before the snow fell.

200+ year old White Oak in center. Note the leaf clusters in the crown where a bear had climbed and broken them to eat acorns before they ripened and fell.

The broken White Oak branches. Leaves stayed on the green branches because the abscission layer that normally causes leaf fall in autumn, could not form when autumn came around.

Bear climbing claw marks on the White Oak trunk.

150+ year old Black Gum. Note the owl-sized den holes ~6-inch diameter.

A good sow bear denning place in a 200+ year hollow Chestnut Oak log. Mark Mengele (retired former Watoga superintendent) saw sows with two, three, and four cubs in 2017.

Standing in a deer forage zone. Three standing oaks in the upper right are in the 200+ year category, while the Pitch Pines (crowns visible in upper center) are in the 80-100 year range (old-growth category for that species).

Evidence of deer pawing through snow and leaves to find acorns under 200+ year old oaks.

100+ year White Pine. Watoga volunteer trail maintainer Dave Elliott and his trail dog, Freya.

100+ year Cucumber Tree.

100+ year Black Birch.

Ken Beezley and Solly Workman measure another 200+ year Red Oak. Solly's grandfather lived in a cabin nearby that is still part of Watoga's cultural interpretation program.