

# The Acadian Forest

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Describing the Acadian Forest is tricky. It requires qualifiers. In one sense, Maritimers are surrounded by the Acadian Forest. As a region, it covers each of the Maritime Provinces, and extends into Maine, and parts of northern New England and eastern Quebec. But as a forest type, Acadian Forest in its natural state is now a rarity, found only in isolated pockets scattered throughout its former range.

This distinction is understandably lost on many people. We see forest around us almost wherever we find ourselves in the Maritimes. It's easy to assume that this is the Maritime's natural forest: dense growths of small, young trees of species such as Balsam Fir, White Birch, White Spruce, or Poplar. It is only when we happen upon a remnant patch of old forest do we know what we've been missing.

Old, tall giants of trees, mixed with standing and fallen dead trees, and seedlings and saplings filling the gaps in the canopy left by the dying trees. Old-forest tree spe-

cies dominate these natural forests: Red Spruce, Eastern Hemlock, Cedar, White Pine, Sugar Maple, Yellow Birch, Beech, White Ash, Ironwood. Remnant patches of natural Acadian Forest are rare now, but these old-growth forests once covered the majority of the Acadian Forest region.

The loss of natural Acadian Forest began with clearing land for agriculture. The axe was effective, but slow. Fire was often the land-clearing tool of choice for early colonizers, and it was not always contained to the land destined to be cleared. Fire became common in Maritime forests during this time. Trains and forestry operations were other sources of accidental forest fires. The Miramichi Fire of 1825 is the largest fire ever known in the Maritimes, burning approximately a fifth of New Brunswick's landmass.

In recent decades, industrial forestry operations have replaced much of what remains of the Acadian Forest with

*Hemlock and Cedar*  
Photo by B. Brown



clearcuts. A study in New Brunswick found that remaining mature forest was lost at a net rate of 1.5% per year over the study period of 1975 to 2001 (Betts, M.G., D. Mitchell, A.W. Diamond, J. Bety. 2006. "Uneven Rates of Landscape Change as a Source of Bias in Roadside Wildlife Surveys." *Journal of Wildlife Management*. 71(7). 2226-2273.). Clearcuts are often followed with plantations or other intensive silviculture actions such as herbicide applications and thinning, thereby further altering the character of our forests.

These pressures, both past and present, have reduced natural Acadian Forest to

the point that it is classified as an endangered forest type by the World Wildlife Fund. But the Acadian Forest is nothing if not resilient. While we will not likely see caribou return to the Maritimes, old-forest tree species could regain their dominance on the landscape. They've been reduced in abundance, but not lost entirely. Old forest exists only in tiny remnants now, but with time, old forest could regain a presence on the landscape. There is nothing stopping the Acadian Forest from returning from its endangered status, save for the political will to create an effective protected areas network, and to require ecologically responsible forestry practices.



Philomyces and Arion slugs and mushrooms (Caledonia Gorge)  
Photo by D.F. McAlpine/ New Brunswick Museum