

## Forest for the trees

### A trek through the protected Lost 40 old-growth tract of south Arkansas

RACHEL O'NEAL CHANEY ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

CALHOUN COUNTY - Sixteen years into an agreement to leave the Lost 40 untouched, botanist Theo Witsell was more interested in what he didn't see than what he did.

Witsell was part of a seven-person group that recently made the trek into a remote south Arkansas forest that is being preserved by - of all things - a timber company.

What Witsell didn't see was invasive plants - fast-growing nuisances like kudzu that can take over an area and strangle the native habitat.

"There's none," Witsell says of invasive plants, leaning over to get a better look at a small plant. "It's all native species."

How it got its name is debatable, but the Lost 40 is just what it sounds like: 40 acres of virtually untouched, virgin forest in southeastern Calhoun County - believed to be one of the few remaining pristine forests in Arkansas.

Timber on all sides of the Lost 40 has been harvested.

"The neat thing about the Lost 40 is the condition and the age and the maturity of the forest. That's what makes it rare," says Witsell, a botanist with the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission.

"It is very rare to have an oldgrowth forest left where the trees are 200 years old, especially in southern Arkansas where the gentleness of the terrain has allowed a lot of timber management. There are very few places that have a mature hardwood loblolly pine forest left with the fullness and maturity."

On this trip into the Lost 40, Witsell was joined by two men from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, a representative of Potlatch Corp., a reporter and a photographer. Potlatch has owned the land for more than 50 years.

#### **LIVING LIBRARY**

In 1996, Potlatch and the Natural Heritage Commission signed a 40-year cooperative management agreement to preserve the Lost 40 as a living library. Since then, researchers make annual trips into the Lost 40 to check on conditions. Potlatch makes the arrangements for the private tours.

"To some degree, they can use this to understand a possible range of conditions that would be out there," Don Bragg, a research forester with the Forest Service - Southern Research Station, says of the preservation of the Lost 40. "Other people are just interested in old trees, big trees. It's got an aesthetic to it."

"Some people treat it, in ways, as a religious experience. It's a communing-with-nature opportunity for them," Bragg adds. "Others have a less esoteric, recreational aspect. ... People love to hunt in these woods."

The land is leased to the Community Deer Club and deer stands are the only manmade objects seen around the forest. Wooden deer stands dot the dirt roads leading into the Lost 40 and at least one high-tech stand is seen within the 40-acre boundary.

## **ACTS OF NATURE**

Older, relatively undisturbed bottomland hardwood forests like the Lost 40 are rare in Arkansas, according to a 2005 study by researchers from the Forest Service and the University of Arkansas at Monticello.

The study found that the Lost 40 "is home to a diverse array of woody and nonwoody plant species proving excellent opportunities for studying various influences of environmental conditions on plant distributions."

Potlatch removes trees from the Lost 40 only if they have been hit by lightning, have fallen or are infested with insects - and are still salvageable.

Just a few minutes into this trek into the Lost 40, the group notices a massive loblolly pine that had fallen - probably from high winds. Ricky O'Neill with Potlatch paces it off, saying the tree is about 115 feet long. The tree has rotted and is not worth removing, O'Neill says.

At the base of the fallen tree, the root system is exposed, creating what can best be described as a hill. It is more than twice as tall as an average-size man.

Farther in, the group stopped to inspect a sweet gum tree. Bragg guessed the tree at 46 inches in diameter. "I haven't seen many like this before," he says. He pulled out a tape measure and he wasn't far off - it was 42.3 inches. Then using a laser measuring device, Bragg calculated the height at 115 feet.

"In most of Arkansas, you don't have trees this big," Bragg says, estimating the tree is 100 to 150 years old.

Like most of Arkansas, the area has been affected by the drought. Cypress trees - and cypress knees - grow in and along a dried-up oxbow of Moro Creek. The stump of one huge cypress tree was evident.

Bragg says from the looks of the stump, the tree was probably cut down in the mid-1880s. It and one other cypress stump are the only evidence the group saw of tree harvesting. Back then, Bragg says, men would cut down the huge cypress trees and let them dry out and become buoyant and would float them down the creek to later be sold for building material.

According to a 1996 report by the Natural Heritage Commission, the Lost 40 "may have been selectively logged at one time."

Nearby, Witsell saw evidence of rooting by feral hogs. The group did not want to encounter a hog - which can grow to 100 to 150 pounds.

"They're out there, somewhere," Witsell says.

## **ORIGIN OF A NAME**

How the area got its name has never been resolved. Some think it can be traced to a lengthy land-title dispute. Others believe it's because of the remote location.

At one time, the area was a part of Bradley County but at some point, Moro Creek changed its channel and the land shifted into Calhoun County. According to old records, Thomas J. Tatum received a patent for land - including the Lost 40 - in 1857. He never filed a deed. In 1906, the Freeman-Smith Lumber Co. filed a deed for the land. Six years later, Tatum's heirs sued, contending it was their land. Because Tatum died without a will, a judge ordered the land sold and Freeman-Smith bought it for \$960. The Bradley Lumber Co. bought it in 1929. It was sold to Potlatch in 1958.

Without a guide, finding the Lost 40 would leave you ... well ... lost. For this trip, the group met at a gas station in Hampton and traveled several miles south on U.S. 167 before turning onto a dirt road. After nine miles of twists, turns and ruts, the group arrived at a small clearing. A barely visible trail led the way into the Lost 40.

## **126 DIFFERENT TYPES**

During the hike, Witsell recorded the vegetation he saw along the way. According to his list, which he cautioned is not comprehensive, 126 different types of plants have been noted in the Lost 40.

The area may be protected from human exploitation, but it is not immune to nature. Piles of what looks like sawdust are evident below two massive pines. The trees are dead - taken over by some type of insect. It is just a matter of time before those trees will fall. Like the one the group saw early into the trip, these trees probably are not salvageable.

And the proliferation of enormous hardwoods like oaks, hickories, sweet gums and elms in the forest is blocking the sun - creating an environment that is not suitable for sun-loving pine trees. In a scientific paper Bragg wrote in 2004, the forester estimated that pines in the Lost 40 will "virtually disappear" over the next few decades.

While the temperature hovered around 100 degrees that day, it was a tad cooler under the canopy of trees. After a couple of hours, the group was hot, tired and ready to head back to civilization. Finding the way out of the Lost 40 was just as challenging as finding the way in. Bragg asked everyone's opinion on which way was out. Everyone gave a slightly different answer. Luckily, Bragg knew the way.



Caption: Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND Forester Don Bragg (left) and botanist Theo Witsell measure a sweet gum tree in the Lost 40. It is 42.3 inches in diameter.



**Caption:** Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND Forester Don Bragg studies the massive root system of a loblolly pine that has fallen - probably due to high winds. It was about 115 feet tall.



**Caption:** Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND In the Lost 40, trees standing at 130 feet tall and more than 40 inches in diameter are not uncommon. This loblolly pine is at least 150 years old.



**Caption:** Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND Botanist Theo Witsell (left) and forester Don Bragg check on the conditions of the Lost 40, a 40-acre tract of virtually untouched timber in remote Calhoun County. In the Lost 40, trees can live for hundreds of years.



**Caption:** Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/RICK McFARLAND Botanist Theo Witsell records vegetation in the Lost 40. He finds it interesting that he sees no evidence of invasive plants in the virgin forest.



Caption: Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/ RICK McFARLAND Tiny mushrooms dot the forest floor of the Lost 40, growing under a canopy of massive hardwoods and pines in the protected tract.