

OVERTON PARK

notes

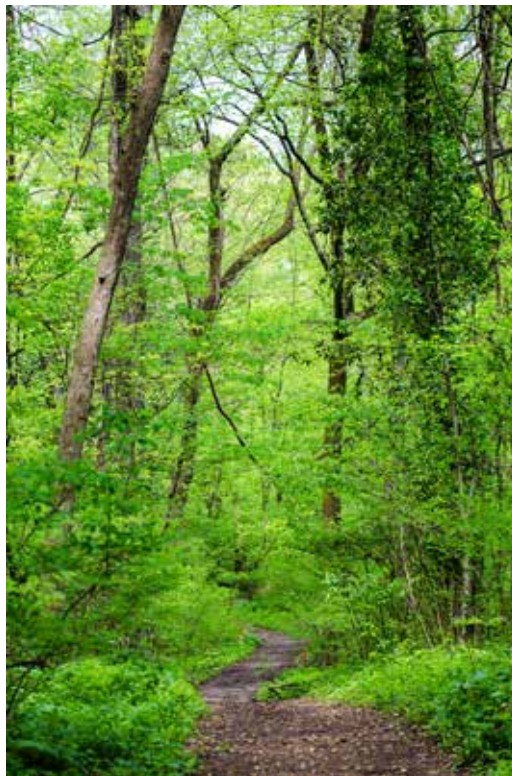
may 2019

A new day for the Old Forest

Few Memphis experiences compare to walking into the Old Forest State Natural Area in springtime, when the new leaves of towering trees glow an almost neon green, and the ground is carpeted with bright yellow poppies, deep red trillium, and soft purple phlox. Surrounded by the songs of birds tuning up for breeding season, it's easy to feel you're miles apart from a city that's just a few steps away.

But a forest ecosystem, especially one bounded on all sides by a busy urban area, is a fragile thing. Plants and insects native to other parts of the world can wreak havoc by preying on the native species a forest depends on to function, and climate change brings more frequent and damaging severe weather events. All these negative impacts can add up quickly, especially if no one is working to counteract them.

The restoration and protection of the Old Forest were two of the major reasons that Overton Park Conservancy was created in 2012. In our first seven years of managing the forest, you've heard us talk a lot about academic research and invasive species removal, and that's by design: we needed to get to know the forest, understand how it's functioning, and start removing the things that were making it unhealthy. Under the supervision of our Director of Operations, Eric Bridges, we are preparing to enter



the next phase, where practical research will allow us to develop a concrete plan that preserves the forest for future generations.

“Without intervention,” Eric says, “the forest will not be resilient, will not withstand all the threats humans and the environment throw at it, and will not function as a healthy, diverse ecosystem. And it definitely won't have the grand character that we enjoy today.”

Setting the Forest Up for Success

Urban forests tend to be magnets for invasive species because of their proximity to residential areas, where home gardeners have used fast-growing, dense plants like English ivy and Chinese privet as privacy screens. Those two plants, along with other ornamentals native to different parts of the world, easily escape into natural areas via wind, water, animals, and people.

Ten years ago, the Old Forest was dominated by Chinese privet in both the understory (ground level) and midstory (the level between the tallest and shortest trees). It choked out wildflowers and kept new trees from establishing, and in sunny gaps it could grow to 20 feet tall. While the deciduous native plants went dormant in the winter, privet stayed green and just kept sprouting up.

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The Conservancy's first priority was to fight back against privet. In our first two winters, we removed more than 2,000 cubic yards--about 100 truckloads of privet, opening up dozens of acres where sunlight could return to the forest floor and wake up native seeds that were waiting underground. Since then, we've continued to manage the inevitable privet re-sprouts while also fighting other aggressive invaders like ivy, kudzu, tree of heaven, mahonia, and nandina. (See sidebar below for details of our recent efforts.)

Getting these plants under control is a crucial first step before we can think about positive interventions like replanting native species. Invasive species are hardier and faster-growing because they have no natural predators in our area; the caterpillars and beetles that feed on the leaves of native trees don't have a taste for the introduced plants, allowing them to grow unchecked. As we remove invasive cover, we give native seeds a chance to burst forth on their own. But can we count on that to happen?

Regeneration: The Mark of a Healthy Forest

So much of the forest's emotional impact is tied up in the majestic 150-foot-tall oaks and tulip poplars. As those trees die off, their replacements have yet to begin growing in. If we want future generations to have a chance to experience the Old Forest in a

similar way, we need to figure out why.

In an ideal world, when a large tree falls down and creates a gap in the canopy, sunlight hits the forest floor, and native wildflowers begin to pop up the next spring. They're followed in the next few years by tree saplings, which compete with each other to reach the canopy. As the trees establish themselves, shade-tolerant shrubs and wildflowers take over the spaces underneath, providing a variety of habitat and food sources for wildlife.

In our forest, as in many other urban woodlands, that process of regeneration has been interrupted. The oaks and tulip poplars are sending out seeds, but we're seeing few saplings and even fewer mid-size trees, a sign that something is keeping them from being successful. We know that the presence of so many invasive species is part of the problem, but is it the whole problem? And if it's not, what can we do to help more native trees regenerate?

This is the question Eric is setting out to answer as he pursues his PhD in forestry at Mississippi State University. Using the Old Forest as his research lab, he will spend the next several years exploring large gaps to see what grows there after they have been cleared of invasive plants. The data he collects will help us understand what's keeping our signature trees from growing again--and what we might be able to do to help them.

In order to study how removing invasive species affects regeneration, we need people! We received a major assist this winter when an AmeriCorps NCCC crew spent two weeks in the park, primarily focused on removing English ivy. In some places, vegetation was so thick that crew members couldn't see through it and had to hack their way toward each other. They cleared multiple plots of invasives around the Old Forest.



The AmeriCorps crew with a tangle of English ivy.

The crew was led by Conservancy volunteer Bill Bullock, who has been working with us for over a year. He has received training and certification in the application of chemical treatments for invasive plants, and has developed a program that helps us apply any treatments safely

and efficiently. He also coordinates volunteer work events and helps to educate the community on which plants to avoid using in their home gardens.

One plant Bill has been treating is tree of heaven, a fast-growing invasive that's said to put out toxic chemicals when it's threatened. Christian Brothers University student Alexa Henderson is currently testing that theory with trees of heaven in the park.

She's disturbing these trees to varying degrees and then testing the surrounding soil to see if the stressed trees are poisoning native vegetation. This research would impact how we treat trees of heaven in order to minimize damage to adjacent native plants.



When will this work pay off?

Timelines are difficult to provide in forest stewardship, but if you're a home cook, you may have heard the maxim "cook to the indicator, not the time." In other words, if a recipe says to bake cookies for 10 minutes or until golden brown at the edges, it's the color you're looking for, not the buzzing of the timer. Forest management is similar (albeit with a much longer time horizon than a batch of cookies!). It's hard to say we'll have a healthy forest in ten years, because we can't control weather events, the arrival of disease-carrying insects, or other external factors. But we can point toward a goal.

So in the Old Forest, what is that indicator? What lets us know that our efforts are working?

According to Eric, it's when the ecosystem is displaying healthy function. It's when we start to see overstory trees like tulip poplars and oaks make it out of the sapling phase and begin to achieve the larger sizes that suggest they could make it to the canopy again. It's when gaps created by large trees falling don't turn into a breeding ground for a single invasive species, but instead foster a diverse mix of natives. We might start seeing a greater variety of birds and insects passing through and feeding on the increased native plant stock.

Stewards of a forest do their work knowing they will probably not see the results in their own lifetimes. Instead, they're planning, laying foundations, and building something for future generations. In that way, the Old Forest is Memphis' own cathedral. When you support Overton Park Conservancy's efforts to study the dynamics of our forest, make a management plan for its specific conditions, and implement solutions that create a high-functioning ecosystem, you are building that cathedral. You are helping to create a place that is resilient and diverse, fostering wildlife and nourishing the human spirit.



Your gift at www.overtonpark.org/give or in the enclosed envelope is critical to this work.

Be a smart gardener by avoiding these harmful plants

Did you know that several of the most harmful invasive species in the Old Forest are plants you can buy at garden centers? American stores routinely sell ornamental plants from Europe and Asia that escape from yards into natural areas like the Old Forest, devouring sun and nutrients needed by native plants. Here are a few plants you should avoid purchasing:

Invasive Vines

- English ivy
- Chinese wisteria
- Wintercreeper
- Japanese honeysuckle

Good Alternatives

- Crossvine
- American wisteria
- Virginia creeper
- Coral honeysuckle

Invasive Shrubs

- Chinese privet
- Nandina
- Mahonia
- Burning bush

- Inkberry
- Autumn sage
- American beautyberry
- Virginia sweetspire

Invasive Trees

- Bradford pear
- Princess tree

- Flowering dogwood
- Redbud



Invasive English ivy (left) and native crossvine (right).

Sustaining a forest for the future

In this issue, we decided to do something a little different. Instead of a survey of everything that's happening in Overton Park, we're taking a deep dive into one of the features that makes this park extraordinary: the Old Forest State Natural Area. (You'll find a few project updates on the back page).



If you haven't been into the Old Forest lately, I urge you to spend an hour on one of the trails. You'll notice immediately that the air is cooler under the tree canopy, and more humid. The light is softer, and the greenery surrounding you makes you feel a little more relaxed. Your pace may slow, you'll breathe deeply, and you'll start to notice some of the details of the plants around you. Research has documented the physical and mental health benefits of a nature walk.

Overton Park Conservancy is focusing significant effort on the health of the Old Forest because, without our help, it would cease to offer the grandeur that we're able to experience today. The impact of this work is measured in much longer time increments than the quarterly earnings reports you expect from big businesses. The investment we're making now is unlikely to yield dramatic, observable results for decades, maybe generations. While we may not live to see the ultimate fruits of our work, we are no less driven to put in the effort that points this remarkable place toward good health.

One of the strengths Overton Park Conservancy brings to the table is a team with genuine passion for the Old Forest, and a drive to understand what makes the ecosystem tick. Through partnerships with the academic community, the Tennessee Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and a growing cadre of citizen scientists, we're learning more about the forest's strengths and challenges with every passing year. The foundation laid by this research is vital to developing a management plan targeting the specific issues faced by a 126-acre forest that's surrounded on all sides by developed areas.

We want to share all we're learning with you, and especially with our youngest neighbors. We're growing the next generation of conservationists here at Overton Park and creating a culture of conservation that will continue to nurture this forest long after we're gone. We need your help to do this.

Please support our conservation work with a gift that sustains this legacy for future generations.



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Rhodes students document everything on six legs

When a bee and a wasp square off, who wins?

In the case of two insects caught by Rhodes College senior Colleen Hulseley during her entomology class this semester, the bee triumphed. During a sweep of her net in the Old Forest, Colleen wound up with two insects that she deposited into the same collection vial. Although they were the same length, she figures the bumblebee used its stouter body to stun the wasp. “It was kind of a knockout,” she says.

Colleen and her classmates are part of one of the first entomology courses being offered at Rhodes College. Under the direction of Dr. Stephanie Haddad and the permission of the Tennessee Department of Environment & Conservation, they’ve been spending time in the Old Forest this semester collecting insects. At the conclusion of their work, they will contribute the specimens to create a new insect collection at Rhodes.

“There was no baseline collection to measure against,” Dr. Haddad says. “Our goal this semester was to get an idea of the diversity of insects in and around the park to form the basis for future research.”

For the students, the class was a chance to get to know both Overton Park and the insect life within. Senior Bess Freeman said she had never really explored the trails before taking the course, but that she gradually became familiar with which insects would appear at certain places in the park. “On a sunny day when the ground is warm, I could go over to the golf course and find dragonflies on the ground,” she says. Her goal for the semester was to collect her namesake--a Bess beetle--which she finally did during a nighttime excursion with insect lights in April. “I was the last person in class to find one!”



Junior John McArthur and senior Bess Freeman net damselflies in the Old Forest.



Dr. Stephanie Haddad and senior Colleen Hulseley watch a newly caught bee and wasp.

Junior John McArthur said he also became familiar with the way insect populations changed with the weather. “When we started in January, we saw mostly beetles and termites living under logs,” he says. “As the leaves have come out, we’ve seen flies, moths, and butterflies. And I never knew how many different types of bees there were.”

The nighttime meetings offered a shortcut for students to build out their collections. “We lost track of time because so many things were swarming to the lights,” Bess says. “We stayed until we ran out of vials. I caught more insects that night than in four daytime trips to the park.”

Entomology courses are typically held in the fall semester, because with insects often emerging in warmer weather, January and February collection can be challenging. But Dr. Haddad says she was pleasantly surprised that the students were able to find insects on every excursion. The spring semester also gave them a chance to see which insect species, particularly pollinators, specialize on different spring wildflowers. “The spring ephemeral plants often get missed in these surveys,” she says, so they got to see which species of bee arrived with the spicebush and which favored wildflowers like sweet Cicely.

After this semester concludes, Dr. Haddad will organize the specimens into a collection, and we’ll begin to see a picture of the diversity of insect families in the Old Forest. This summer, she and several students will continue researching insects in the Old Forest, focusing on pollinator diversity in several plots in the woods. She looks forward to sharing her findings with the community and increasing our knowledge of the creatures with whom we share our backyards.

Getting to know (and love) our native copperheads



Malle Carrasco-Harris is a PhD candidate at the University of Memphis whose research on Southern copperheads is teaching us about one of the forest's most secretive

species. By implanting them with radio transmitters, she has tracked the movements of dozens of snakes at Overton Park and Meeman Biological Station. We asked her to share some preliminary findings with us.

What's special about copperheads in Overton Park?

I focused on copperheads because a previous study showed them to be the most abundant species of snakes found on walking surveys. Part of my work focused on spatial ecology—the movement and home range size of the animals. Imagine your home range to be where you live, work, and play frequently.

After three years of tracking, we conclude that Overton copperheads have smaller home ranges than not only Meeman ones, but also copperheads from other rural studies. Overton copperheads generally move less and their movement does not change as much seasonally as it did for snakes at Meeman. As anyone who spends a lot of time in the Old Forest may have noted, copperheads move the most in April-May and August-September, their two breeding seasons.

I like to compare the Overton snakes to people living in urban areas: they may live in smaller homes, but can work and shop right around the corner, so they don't travel as much as people who live in rural areas with lots of acreage and have to commute.

In terms of size, Overton copperheads are also small in weight and length, and males and females don't differ much. Male copperheads tend to be larger than females, but that's not the case in Overton.

When I compared the genetic fingerprint of copperheads in Overton and Meeman, I found those in Overton had less genetic diversity, and that their populations were distinct. Low genetic diversity could have devastating effects if a disease swept through the population, because they have less chance of having genes that are resistant to the new challenge. It could also mean in the future more and more snakes

are related to each other, although it doesn't seem (surprisingly!) that the population is inbred just yet.

What other snakes might people see in the forest?

Including the copperhead, we believe there are six species in Overton, including mid-size species like rat snakes and garter snakes. There are also small species such as worm snakes, brown snakes, and ringneck snakes (my favorite, besides the copperhead). These small species hide in dark places away from hungry birds. You may find some in the soil of your garden!

For those interested in identifying snakes or other wildlife, I recommend Tennessee Watchable Wildlife (tnwatchablewildlife.org). It has reliable pictures, descriptions, and distribution maps of animals by group.

What do you wish people understood about snakes?

I was new to snakes when I started doing my research, and coming from the part of Texas where the disagreeable practice of "rattlesnake roundup" still occurs, I was definitely apprehensive at first. Science has also shown that generally people are likely to be afraid of snakes, and that is something we pick up easily from the people around us. So, I'm sympathetic with people who are afraid of snakes.

However, wildlife has a place in urban ecosystems, too, and snakes are predators and serve an important role in the food web. When you visit a natural area, be open to seeing wildlife you wouldn't see in your own backyard. I encourage people to step away from learned fear, which can lead to negative outcomes for the helpless animal and potentially negative consequences for the person, and embrace wildlife diversity. Avoid disturbing a wild animal with physical contact and give it space to move away.



A map showing the home ranges of eight individual copperheads in the Old Forest.

Meet Fields, our new Visitor Services Coordinator

When Overton Park Conservancy welcomed our new Visitor Services Coordinator to the staff this spring, we weren't just adding someone with excellent customer service skills. Our newest team member, Fields Falcone, has a lifelong love for both Overton Park and conservation, and her deep knowledge of forest birds brings us a richer understanding of the valuable habitat that the park provides.

At the Conservancy, Fields is responsible for our facility rental program, assisting customers with scheduling events at pavilions, the formal gardens, and the Greensward. It's a role that provides her the opportunity to meet Memphians from across the city as they organize weddings, reunions, birthday parties, and church picnics. "I'm deeply moved by the value of family in this city," she says. "It's rewarding to have the opportunity to help Memphians plan the events that bring them joy."

The new role also affords Fields the opportunity to spend more time in a park she has treasured all of her life. After growing up in Memphis, she lived around the country pursuing her two passions, birds and music. Even after years conducting bird surveys in California and playing gigs in New York, she was still enchanted to return home and walk, binoculars in hand, in the only old-growth urban forest in Tennessee.

When she came home in the 1990s, Overton Park was experiencing the era of benign neglect, when lack of funding turned parks all over the country into ghosts of their vibrant former selves. The park's reputation plummeted as users stopped feeling safe. "I still wanted to feel like the park was mine to enjoy," Fields says, recounting that she walked her husky



Fields' favorite Old Forest bird is the white-eyed vireo, which breeds here in summertime. She says "They're spunky, they're curious, and they each have individual personalities. They also have the funniest song."

Shepherd on the trails every day. "I felt like I was one of the pioneers of reclaiming the forest as a place for recreation. It was a beautiful place, but less welcoming than it is today."

This isn't Fields' first time working in Overton Park. She also spent eight years at the Memphis Zoo, working

in the research department and in animal programs. There, she developed skills in lab work, animal training, and communicating conservation issues to the public. As a keeper in the China collection, she spent part of her days training giant pandas, which involved positively reinforcing behaviors (like presenting a paw) that assisted the staff in performing daily medical checks. She says her greatest joy at the Zoo was interacting with visitors and fostering "a-ha" moments about animals and conservation.

While she was at the Zoo, she developed a study of local park birds that is currently in process. Her focus on the density and diversity of birds in forested city parks takes her to four research sites: two forests connected to river corridors (T.O. Fuller State Park and the Lucius Burch State Natural Area), and two forests that are isolated in urban areas (Nesbit Park in Bartlett and the Overton Park Old Forest). Her point counts, conducted by listening for birds in a standardized radius, will help her understand how the urban environment impacts birds and their habitats. You may find her in the woods early in the morning, standing still and listening.

"I feel like working for Overton Park Conservancy is a full-circle story in my life," Fields says. "I have the opportunity to continue my passion for conservation outreach and bird research, and I feel a deeper integration with the city of Memphis because Overton Park is the park for everyone."



In her spare time, Fields participates in volunteer bird banding events. Here she is with an Eastern towhee.

Why trees are wanted, dead or alive

Overton Park is full of beautiful old trees. We've measured many specimens in the Old Forest State Natural Area at over 180 years old. But it's not just old trees that can fall during a wind or thunderstorm event—young trees that aren't structurally sound can fall at any time too. On the exterior of the forest, in the more landscaped areas of the park, it's easier to spot trees that aren't healthy and remove them before they become hazardous. But what about in the woods?

Within the Old Forest, occasional tree death is a fact of life. Strong windstorms this March caused two notable tree falls—one, a beloved old Shumard oak at the point where the limestone trail meets the entrance to the Old Forest Loop trail, and the other a cherrybark oak that fell near an intersection of trail segments closer to East Parkway Pavilion. The cherrybark hit another large tree on its way down, and that tree in turn toppled over a few days later.

The Conservancy manages the Old Forest in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, whose policy is to leave dead trees in place in natural areas. This means you'll get an up-close look at how the recently fallen trees adjust to their new role in the ecosystem. Dead trees may not be the most attractive part of a forest, but in reality, they're not just natural but essential.

In the woods, a tree's work is far from done after it's dead. Here are a few reasons why we don't remove dead trees from the woods:

Dead trees help create soil. Rotting wood is colonized by fungi and mosses, which break it down into nutrients that enrich the soil. In turn, wildflowers, ferns, and new trees have a welcoming environment to take root, and erosion of the existing soil is reduced.

They're an excellent habitat source. Dead trees make a whole menagerie of life possible, from ants



to toads to raccoons. Whole life cycles begin when a tree falls: insects move in, then woodpeckers make holes in the trees to pluck out the bugs. Those birds, along with smaller songbirds



Until groundcover fills in around the fallen cherrybark oaks, a few "cookies" are being used to help people stay on the trail.

like wrens and titmice, set up nests in the cavities. The sun also hits the forest floor, creating space for sun-loving wildflowers to emerge.

They provide a natural reservoir. When large trees fall, they create pits where their roots had been and mounds where the trees decay. The pits trap water and leaves, helping reduce runoff by diverting some water from collecting on trails. Mounds support fungi, insects, amphibians, lichen, and plants, adding to the richness of biodiversity in the forest.

Unfortunately, both of the March tree falls took place right across walking trails, so we needed to take some kind of action to prevent new trails from being created by people walking around the downed limbs. So we called our friends at Urban Forestry, who cleared the debris from the Shumard oak from the limestone trail to quickly reopen this path for runners.

Because the base of the oak is 7-8 feet high even when lying on the ground, we decided it would be unsafe to slice a path through it with chainsaws. Instead, we slightly rerouted the entrance to the Old Forest Loop around the base of the tree, which should provide a fascinating up-close look at how its decay will support new life.

The cherrybark oak in the forest interior was cleared from the trail, and because it was smaller in diameter the crew was able to cut some "cookies" (small slices of the trunk) to indicate where pedestrians should go in order to stay on marked trails. As the groundcover in this area re-establishes and makes the path more obvious, we'll likely remove those cookies.

Overton Park Conservancy gratefully acknowledges the individuals and organizations who made donations and in-kind (noted with italics) gifts from January 1, 2018 to December 31, 2018. If we have inadvertently omitted the name of one of our supporters, we sincerely apologize.

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Park news and updates

Tai chi class returns in June

Instructor Marjean Liggett brings tai chi to the formal gardens for the fifth year. Classes will be offered on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 7:15 AM from June through September (except Fourth of July week). Marjean offers these sessions free of charge as a gift to the Overton Park community. All skill levels are welcome, and no RSVP or special equipment is required.



Poplar Ave. sidewalk and bus shelter *(rendering by Amanda McGillvery)*

Poplar Avenue sidewalk project begins

Construction is set to begin on the MATA-funded sidewalk on Poplar Ave. from Veterans Plaza Dr. to Tucker. The project will provide a safe, ADA-accessible way to reach the park via the #50 MATA bus. As part of this project, the bus stop on Poplar across from Rembert will be removed as the historic trolley shelter will now be accessible to persons of limited mobility. Park entrances will remain open during the project, although they may be narrowed during some phases. Construction should be completed this summer.

Overton Bark to get new drainage

Overton Park Conservancy will install new French drains at the dog park this spring, working with contractors and arborists to redirect water flow with minimal damage to tree roots. Following the project, we will install a new top layer of mulch. Thanks to A2H for designing this project, Wagner General Contractors for performing the work, and Hollywood Feed for sponsoring Overton Bark.

Visitor counters set to be installed

Thanks to funding from International Paper and the Plough Foundation, Overton Park Conservancy will soon be able to quantify how many people are served by the park. Over the next few seasons, we will install vehicle, bicycle, and pedestrian counters at the main park entrances and at the gateways to the Old Forest.