

Forestry 101

Forestry for Woodland Owners

Reading Your Forested Landscape

By Doug McLaren

How many of us have either heard or used the saying, “I know it like the back of my hand”? Many of us who are seasoned managers of our own woodlands believe that we have this comfortable understanding of our wooded acreage. Many new owners developing their first woodland management plan may not have the same comfort zone of looking across the landscape and being able to understand the extreme diversity that can be found in our Kentucky woodlands.

There is much to be understood about tree growth, species selection, and management options when visiting stands growing on the different slopes or relative elevations on the landscape. An example of tree selection based on location would be the species of chestnut oak, hickory, and Virginia, shortleaf and pitch pine. These are normally found on the higher slopes and have adapted their growth due to the thinner soils and lower moisture contents.

In contrast, black walnut, sycamore, buckeye, hemlock, beech and yellow-poplar have filled the niches where deeper and moister soils exist along most stream systems throughout Kentucky. If you spend much time on west- and south-facing slopes, which are referred to as the aspect of the landscape, you will find the environment is heated during the daylong exposure to sunlight, and again dominated by many oak and hickory stems. On the opposite aspect, the east- and north-facing slopes, normally faster growth can be expected due to the cooler and moister conditions. In small drainages of your woodlands, you will find a mixture of species due to the varying degrees of the deposition of soil and retention of moisture.

Occasionally as you cross the landscape, you may find a small grouping of sassafras. In many situations, this indicates that this area was a field or pasture at a previous time. Without any cultivation of these old fields, these pioneer species of trees have taken a foothold on the land. Finding an extensive stand of pure yellow-poplar, you can assume that an old field existed previously, and the existing surrounding yellow-poplar with windborne seeds has naturally seeded this area. Finding any tree species that exist in well-defined rows indicates the influence of



Photo courtesy: Thomas Barnes

humans in attempting to convert a previous old field to woodlands by planting trees of a desired tree species.

Should a woodland owner learn to read these forested landscape indicators? Definitely yes! By understanding what tree species are growing in what locations, the land manager of the woodlands can better decide where to use their limited resources of time and money. More revenue and production can be achieved from your woodland management plan by allocating resources to the more productive areas.

Reading the forested landscape can be done by inventorying your woodlands in small groupings. If you join each of the similar groups of tree species and environmental characteristics together, you will find that management becomes an easier process while looking at your woodlands one acre at a time.

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