

Logging forces changes in Yellowwood State Forest trails

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Hikers, bird-watchers and horseback riders may have to change their summer plans due to logging in Yellowwood State Forest near Yellowwood Lake.

The logging operation is just now getting underway, according to Jim Allen, property manager at Yellowwood State Forest, but the trails in that portion of the forest have already been closed. "We do have a timber harvest on the property," he said, and the restrictions on trails are needed to ensure people are safe.

Trails affected include the Lake Trail that circles Yellowwood Lake; part of the Tecumseh Trail, which starts in Morgan-Monroe State Forest and winds its way toward Lake Monroe, ending in Brown County just south of Ind. 46; and Scarce O'Fat Trail, which is a loop trail west of the dam and lake and shares its trail with the Tecumseh Trail and an area horse trail for a short way.

"Several different trails intersect, so this had a bigger impact than some of our other closures," Allen said.

He expects the logging operation will close the trails for six to eight weeks. Allen is hopeful the trails may be open by the time the leaves begin to turn this fall.

A total of 140,000 board feet will be taken out of the woods west of Yellowwood Lake, Allen said. More than half of that will be white ash and yellow poplar. "We've had a lot of mortality lately," he said of those two tree species.

The ash trees are suffering from an infestation of emerald ash borers, an Asian beetle that is killing ash trees across much of Indiana; the tulip poplar trees have been hit hard by tulip tree scale, which are insects that can kill the trees.

Allen said the trails where the logging is happening should not be affected by the operation. "Once we open back up the trails, they will be as they were," he said. There is a temporary rerouting for the Tecumseh Trail that will take hikers along the eastern side of Yellowwood Lake, Allen said.

Part of proposed wild area

The area of Yellowwood State Forest that is scheduled to be logged is in the heart of what the Indiana Forest Alliance hopes will become one of 13 areas across Indiana to be protected from logging. Although the area's trails will reopen after the logging, Jason Flickner, conservation director for the alliance, doesn't think it will be a good place to hike like it was before.

"It will still be a mess after that," he said. "That's the problem. The Indiana Forest Alliance stance has always been that the Department of Natural Resources should stay away from recreational trails. Once they go in there and log, even if they open it in time for fall colors, it's going to be a muddy, sloppy mess."

Flickner said loggers should have a best practices review before they begin logging so the area doesn't have any erosion or harm trails and recreational areas during the logging. He also is very strongly opposed to the removal of most of the poplar and ash trees, saying that removing trees hasn't been proven to eliminate or lessen the number of the pest insects. Also, some ash trees seem to be surviving even with emerald ash borers, and removing those trees takes away the genetic material that might combat the insects' destruction.

Flickner and others with the Indiana Forest Alliance are opposed to timber harvesting in the state forest, especially near recreational areas. "We believe (loggers) should stay completely away from those trails and the viewshed of those trails," he said.

The logging will take place in the heart of the Scarce O'Fat Ridge Wild Area, a proposed 2,100-acre area in Yellowwood State Forest that is one of the 13 areas that are distributed across Indiana that the alliance is proposing be protected from commercial logging. The Indiana Forest Alliance believes establishing the wild areas will be a step toward restoring a more balanced state forest management policy and would protect forest areas that offer the best potential for interior forest habitat and wilderness-type recreation for people.

Flickner said the Scarce O'Fat Wild Area is on that list "because it's one of the largest contiguous blocks (of forest) in that area of the state." Some of the trees in Yellowwood State Forest are "soon going to grow into old-growth status," he said. "There's no private property in the middle of it."

He said the area is worth saving from logging "because of the age of the wilderness and the value of the wilderness, and the recreational opportunities that are possible within it."

Flickner added, "Unfortunately, there's not much we can do except comment on it at this point."

A hiker's perspective

Yellowwood State Forest and Yellowwood Lake don't attract as many tourists as nearby Brown County State Park, but its scenic beauty and trails are known and used by many hikers and area hiking groups, including Bloomington Hiking Club, members of various chapters of the Sierra Club and the Central Indiana Wilderness Club.

Steven Higgs is a member of the Hoosier Chapter of the Sierra Club and has traveled across Indiana, visiting many of its natural areas. Although he hasn't been out on the trails affected by the logging, he is concerned because of what he has witnessed at other logging sites in Morgan-Monroe State Forest, which is close to and sometimes abuts Yellowwood State Forest lands.

"I've hiked through Morgan-Monroe State Forest several times," he said, adding that he's come upon clear-cut areas where recent logging had occurred. "There's no respect to hikers or trails at all," he said of what was left behind after the logging operations had been completed. "You're walking through nice old timber, and it's scenic, and then you're all of a sudden in the sunlight. There are piles of logs right there on the trail and scrap piles on the trail."

Hikers and other people visiting state forests don't expect to come upon logging sites, Higgs said. "You're in a hot open area that's muggy and is certainly not what you expect to see."

More info

Yellowwood State Forest is in Brown County and includes more than 2,000 acres. Yellowwood Lake is a 133-acre lake where people can fish or boat. There is no swimming allowed. Activities allowed in the state forest include primitive camping, hunting, picnicking, horse-back riding and gold panning. For more, go to www.in.gov/dnr/forestry/4817.htm.

For more about the Indiana Forest Alliance, go to <https://indianaforestalliance.org>. For information on the state wild areas, click on "Initatives" on the home page and then on "State Wild Areas."

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