



# Nature in the Midwood



# Welcome to the Midwood



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The underlying theme of this tour is change over time, decay, and regrowth. *"[Nature] conveys in all its phases and through all its changes no emotions which are not in harmony with the highest refinement of the soul."*

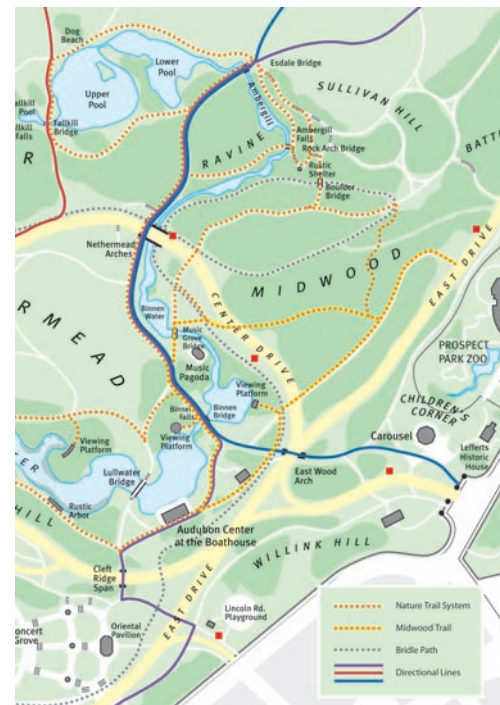
-- E. L. Viele, original engineer for Prospect Park

Welcome to the Midwood, the oldest remaining forest in Brooklyn and home to the tallest trees in Prospect Park. The Midwood is one of the largest stands of intact forest habitat in the park: a place of mossy logs and towering trees, some of which may be older than the park, and could even have stood here during the opening salvos of the Revolutionary War.

Birds and other animals seek food, shelter, and nesting spots in this quiet woodland, drawn here by the diversity of plant life, and taking part in an ancient cycle of birth, growth, decay, and renewal.

This guide will take you on an easy, 30-minute walk along a paved path, beginning and ending at the Audubon Center.

For guided tours and information about other nature trails, visit the Park's Information Center at the Prospect Park Audubon Center.



**The Canopy**  
Look up! Far above, the towering trees of the Midwood spread their branches and their leaves catch the sunlight. Imagine you are a migratory bird or bat, flying over Brooklyn. This island of green in the concrete and glass expanse of the city forms an inviting oasis.

**The Understory**  
Here, tree trunks rise from the shadowed Understory, and branches first appear. Many birds can be seen in the lower branches; with luck, you may spot a bird's nest. Many species have been found nesting in the Midwood, including our largest resident predatory bird, the Red-tailed Hawk.

**The Forest Floor**  
As you walk along this trail, scan the forest floor for fallen leaves and wildflowers. Small mammals such as chipmunks and cottontail rabbits may be seen foraging here, and sparrows and other birds search for food in the leaf litter.

**The Underground**  
Look down! Under the leaf litter and rotting logs, there is a hidden world. Worms and other soil creatures help break down fallen trees and other organic matter. Below the surface, trees have roots that extend as far as their canopy. Webs of underground fungi help the trees absorb nutrients from the soil.

forests such as the Midwood have four main layers. These layers form distinct and important parts of the forest ecosystem and are home to different creatures.



When designing Prospect Park, Calvert Vaux and Frederick Law Olmsted, its original landscapers and designers, made use of the existing forests and farmland to create a wonderfully varied environment of streams, fields, lakes and forests.

Certain elements they changed or created from scratch (the lake, for example, is entirely their creation) and others were untouched. The Midwood was left largely intact.

Vaux and Olmsted incorporated existing forests and hills into their design. These tall trees extend their roots into rich soil deposited during the last ice age. If you could look belowground, you would see a tangle of their roots extending as widely as the trees' canopy. Their roots anchor the trees in place and draw water from the soil.

Please stay on the paved or chip paths. If even 1 percent of the Park's 7 million annual visitors leave the trails, the soil will be compacted by the trampling of 70,000 pairs of feet. This trampling compresses the soil, so that water runs off instead of being absorbed. This leads to erosion and declining health of the plant life.



This fallen log is a sign of other changes within the forest. As trees age and die, they fall and begin to decay, a process helped along by molds, fungi, and many other small organisms. The trees are left to decay where they fall (unless they obstruct a path or waterway) and return a lifetime of nutrients to the soil. This is a crucial resource in the park, where soil is often trampled by human feet and washed away by the rain.

At times the Prospect Park Alliance takes a more active role in the removal of certain trees. Many species of plants in the park are not native to the region and certain kinds are particularly aggressive, growing quickly and crowding out native species. Animals are less likely to use these invasive species for food or shelter, since they are unfamiliar to them. So these species, such as the Norway maple, are removed and native trees are planted in their place, creating a healthier forest more welcoming to wildlife.



Look through the trees to the hill beyond. It has seen many changes through the years. This ridge running through the forest is a remnant of the last ice age, a pile of gravel and rocks left behind as the huge glaciers melted 12,000 years ago.

During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Army fought one of their first battles with the British upon this hill, before retreating through these woods en route to Manhattan. Nearly 100 years later, Prospect Park was constructed on the battle site. Visitors explored the Midwood in carriages, riding along interweaving paths, and viewed elephants and bears in a menagerie that stood at the top of the hill. This hill is sometimes still referred to as "Elephant Hill", although the current zoo replaced the menagerie in the 1930s.



You are standing before the tallest measured tree in Prospect Park. It is a native Pin Oak, soaring 127 feet above the path below. There are at least four species of native oaks found in this small patch of woods including: Black, Red, White, and Pin. They can be distinguished by subtle differences in their leaves and acorns. Other species found here are typical of eastern hardwood forests: Tulip Trees, tall and straight with dramatic tulip-like flowers in the spring; Red and Sugar Maples; Sweetgums, easily identified in the autumn and winter by the spiny seed-balls hanging from their branches and scattered on the ground below; and Black Cherry, with dark furrowed bark and small berries which robins and other birds devour in the autumn and winter.



Through our continued restoration efforts, these woods can continue to grow and flourish, and some of the trees sprouting from today's fallen logs may shade visitors to Prospect Park 200 hundred years from now.