Virginia Pine
by Nancy Hugo

To a lumberman looking for straight timber, the Virginia pine may seem worthless, but to wildlife looking for food and shelter in late winter and early spring, this scrubby pine of abandoned fields and barren hillsides is priceless. Not only will the Virginia pine (*Pinus virginiana*) grow where other trees won't (in poor soils and in exposed situations), but its branches often grow low to the ground, providing cover where evergreens with higher crowns don't.

Virginia pine is also an important seed source. Its cones have small, light brown, winged seeds wedged between the cone scales, and because they're released over a long period (sometimes as long as four years after they mature), they're available to wildlife long after many other food sources have been depleted. Some birds, like nuthatches, chickadees, and grosbeaks, eat pine seeds from the cones while they're still on the trees; other wildlife, like turkey, quail, chipmunks, and rabbits, eat nutritious pine seeds from the ground. Because they're not really attached in any way to the cones, the seeds are easily dispersed by wind once the cones open. (These aren't the culinary seeds known as pine nuts; those come from western pinon pines). Squirrels gnaw the seeds from pine cones even before they open, and red crossbills, birds rare in Virginia but worth looking for, pry the cones open with their unusual crossed beaks.

Pine needles have wildlife value both as food for browsers and as nest-building materials, and the Virginia pine's branching pattern provides a particularly fine foundation for nests. The Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology ranks pines as among the upper echelon of nest-sites trees, those providing nesting sites for over 20 species.

Virginia pines also play an important role in the ecosystem. They are a pioneer species, claiming ground for other tree species. On poor soils, for example, Virginia pines are often the first trees to grow, sometimes forming thick stands until they begin to thin them–selves out. If the sunlight created by holes in the canopy doesn't encourage too much honeysuckle or greenbrier, dogwood and redbud will join the aging Virginia pine, and hardwoods will follow, even–tually overtopping them and shading them out. Virginia pines, thus, "hold" the land for about 75 years, until more valuable trees, like oaks succeed them.

So why are these native pines so underappreciated? Part of the reason, I think, is the way they look. "Scrubby" and "scraggly" are the two words I've heard used most often to describe the Virginia pine, and it's true that they have an unkempt appearance. Their needles are short (1 ½ to 3 inches long), slightly twisted, and divergent, which help account for their disheveled appearance, but they also lack the stature and symmetry of many more stately pines. Even at maturity, Virginia pines are only about 30-60' tall with an open habit and irregularly spreading branches. On the Piedmont hillsides where I know them best, they take on a hoary appearance because they grow so close together, have such twisted trunks, and hold so much dead wood, but even a young Virginia pine growing alone in an open field often looks gnarled. Once you've begun to appreciate it, however, their asymmetrical form takes on an almost oriental beauty, because, like bonsai, these pines seem to show the sculptural effects of weather and age even when young.

Among the distinguishing features of the Virginia pine are the prickly appendages on it 2-3" cones (each cone scale has a stout spine ending in a sharp point), and the number of needles to a bundle, while loblollies have three and white pines have five. Virginia pine cones also tend to stay firmly attached to the tree's branches even after they are mature, and, even on the ground, Virginia pine cones are often still attached to their twigs. I've heard squirrels often gnaw off twigs with multiple cones for ease of transport, but I don't know that for sure. What I do know is that these scrub trees of poor, dry soil offer more to wildlife than we usually give them credit for.