

savanna habitat is critical for the survival of several species. The Bachman's sparrow, for example, hides its nest among tall grasses. The endangered red-cockaded woodpecker chisels its cavity exclusively in living pines and thus requires the soft heartwood of mature, fire-resistant trees. The open forest also affords the woodpecker safety from predators and hosts ample supplies of its favorite insects.

#### 5. Wind Disturbance

These downed trees and the clearing ahead are the result of high winds. Weather events such as hurricanes or strong cold fronts can topple large trees, potentially threatening red-cockaded woodpecker colonies. On the other hand, decaying trees on the forest floor harbor abundant grubs and insects—a veritable buffet for the many woodpecker species inhabiting these forests. These wind-created openings are only temporary, though, as seedlings will fill the opening within a couple of years.

#### 6. Bird's-Eye View

The raised observation platform just ahead will give you the perspective of a bird perched at the mid-story level of the forest. Take some time to sit quietly and observe the web of life in a southern pine forest—from crickets chirping in the carpet of pine needles to a yellow-rumped warbler belting out a song in the canopy.



## ENJOY YOUR VISIT

The Constance Darden Nature Trail is open from February through October, dawn to dusk, for birding, hiking, photography and nature study.

Piney Grove Preserve hosts the last remaining population of red-cockaded woodpeckers in Virginia. Since 1999, The Nature Conservancy has worked to protect and restore this endangered species and its extraordinary habitat. For information on how you can help, contact our Southern Rivers Program office in Richmond.

The Nature Conservancy  
Southern Rivers Program  
530 East Main Street, Suite 800  
Richmond, VA 23219  
(804) 644-5800

[nature.org/virginia](http://nature.org/virginia)

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

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#### Photo Credits

Cover: Constance Darden Nature Trail observation deck at Piney Grove Preserve © Daniel White/TNC  
Inside: red-cockaded woodpecker, Darden Trail and prescribed fire © Robert B. Clontz/TNC

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## Constance Darden Nature Trail at Piney Grove Preserve



# WELCOME TO THE CONSTANCE DARDEN NATURE TRAIL

## POINTS OF INTEREST

### 1. Pine Forests

Unbroken expanses of pine forest once covered thousands of acres of southeastern Virginia. Early settlers immediately realized the value of such immense pines. The wood fibers provided sturdy building materials, while pine pitch became a key ingredient in products used to seal seams in wooden boats, treat sails and ropes, and lubricate wagon wheels.

### 2. Seasonal Wetlands

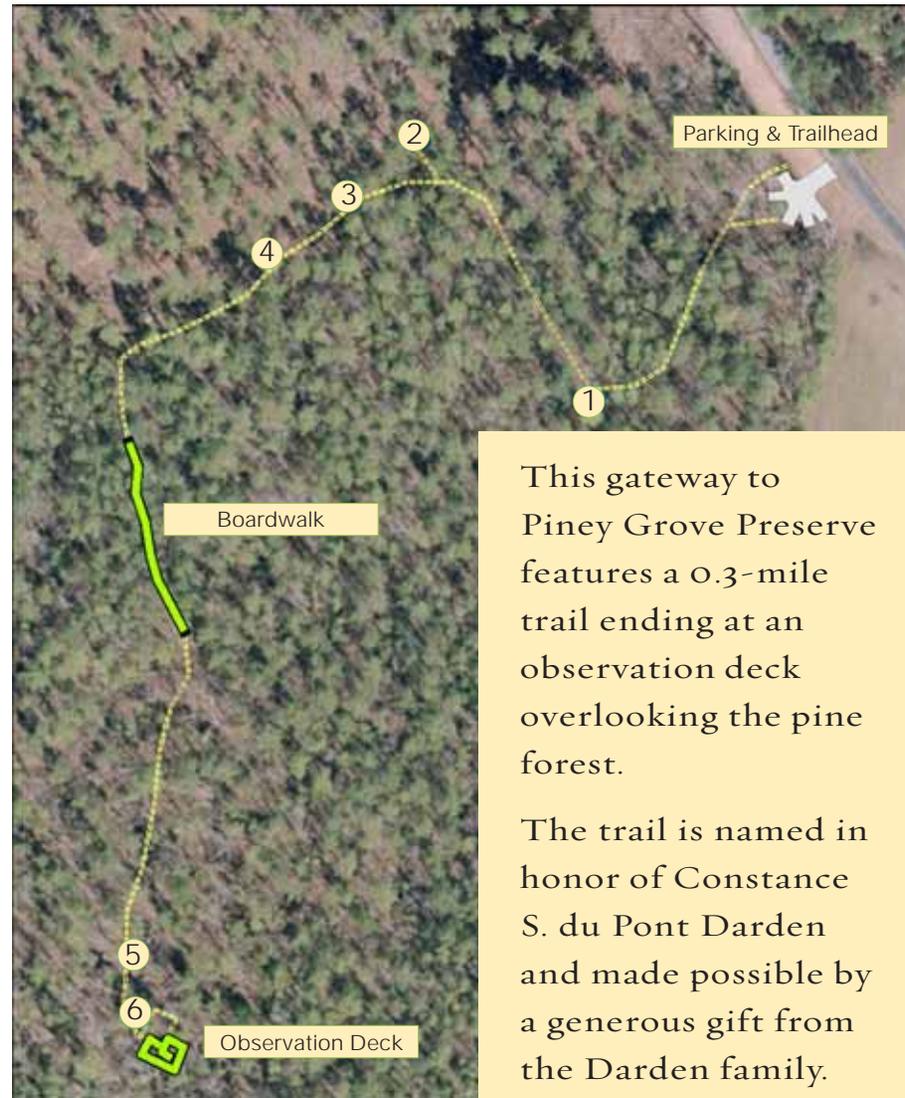
Depending on the time of year, the depression before you may be completely dry or filled with more than a foot of water. This seasonal cycle creates a haven for amphibians. When the pools flood, you may hear quite a racket here, as a variety of frogs, toads and salamanders congregate to breed. These small creatures and their eggs are safe from predation by fish, which cannot survive in pools that dry up.

### 3. Forestry

The tree stumps before you serve as apt symbols of the timber industry's long history in Sussex County, as well as recent habitat restoration here at Piney Grove. Today, privately owned timberland still covers some 80 percent of the county, and forestry remains an integral contributor to the local economy. On the preserve, the Conservancy has selectively thinned certain areas to facilitate our fire program and accelerate the restoration of pine savannas.

### 4. Pine Savannas and Fire

Open pine savannas like the one you see here once dominated the southern coastal



This gateway to Piney Grove Preserve features a 0.3-mile trail ending at an observation deck overlooking the pine forest.

The trail is named in honor of Constance S. du Pont Darden and made possible by a generous gift from the Darden family.

plain. This habitat evolved naturally over many centuries as lightning strikes and Native American burning made fire as much a part of the landscape as wind and rain. In more recent decades, however, a mindset focused on extinguishing all wildfires has transformed much of the landscape.

The Conservancy has worked since 1999 to return fire to the Piney Grove ecosystem. With support from numerous partners, our fire team carefully plans and conducts prescribed burns across several hundred acres annually. Regular burning stimulates the growth of diverse grasses and maintains an open forest. Such pine

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