



A story in the trees

In August 1910, the interior Northwest United States was in the throes of an intense drought as the summer heat cranked up and turned the forests into a tinder box. Sparked by lightning strikes and cinders flying off passing trains, hundreds of small wildfires burned throughout the interior.

On August 20th hurricane-force winds struck the region, turning the hundreds of smaller fires into one massive and wild firestorm. By the end of the next day “The Big Burn” as it became known, torched 3,000,000 acres across Idaho, Washington, and Montana. The fire reduced towns to ash and claimed the lives of 87 people, 78 of which were firefighters.

The devastation of “The Big Burn” seared itself into the memory of the Forest Service, which was only 5 years old at the time. Fire Chiefs who witnessed the inferno firsthand would later institute policies that all fires, regardless of where they were, be extinguished by 10 a.m. the day following the fires report. This policy of fire-suppression has been in place for nearly a century and the forests have become filled to the brim with tinder, contributing to the devastating fires we see today.

The impact of the Big Burn can be seen throughout the forests of Cape Cod, as well. Cape Cod, with its dry, sandy soils that are dominated by pitch pine and scrub oaks, is quite prone to wildfires. Historically, low-grade fires set by indigenous peoples or lightning strikes would occur relatively frequently, promoting open habitats like pine barrens and sandplain grasslands. These fires would clear up the understory and allow species like pitch pines, which are protected with their thick plate-like bark, to reproduce. As the fire would pass, the heat would burn off resin on pinecones and they would open, dropping their seeds onto the newly bare ground.

Today, if you walk areas like the Baker’s Pond trail, you’ll be able to spot species like shagbark hickory and American beech, slowly growing waiting their turn to fill the canopy. These species are intolerant of fire and would have been killed by the



Top: John Hay poses in front of the remnants of a fire that broke out on the Hay Conservation Center property (5/5/1999).

Bottom: This area today is full of young pitch pines, huckleberries, and blueberry bushes—all species that are promoted by low grade fires. Burn marks can still be seen on some of the older pitch pines. (9/28/2022).

low-grade fires of the past. However, after a century of fire-suppression, these species are becoming more abundant in the landscape. The absence of fire and developmental pressures has also led to the absence of grasslands, meadows, and young forests. These habitats are critically important for a wide range of wildlife like the grasshopper sparrow, which has declined by 70% since 1970.

Climate change will only serve to accelerate some of these changes and drive stressors such as new invasive pests like Southern pine beetle into our woodlands. Coupled with more severe droughts, and storms, our productive forests can quickly become unproductive dead zones, as all these stressors compound on one another and take their toll on our natural lands. BCT is working to enhance the resiliency of several properties in the face of these new threats. At the Eddy Sisters property, 2 acres of invasive plants have been removed along the wetland border. This is the first step in a project that aims to create exceptional habitat for declining insects and pollinators that depend on that now-rare open habitat. At the Hay Conservation Center, BCT is working with a Forester to implement a 10-year Forest Management Plan. This plan seeks to ensure that the 65 acres that John Hay conserved all those years ago, stays a productive and healthy ecosystem.