

## Jane Milliman: Old-growth forest, right in the middle of Rochester

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In a big, old town like Rochester, one would think that there were very few places where nothing has ever been built and the ground has never been cleared.

Even what appear to be mature forests in rural areas often will contain clues that the land was once farmed — stone walls, for instance.

Yet within Monroe County there are about 50 such areas, according to University of Rochester assistant professor of biology Justin Ramsey.

The closest one to city center is in West Brighton on the University of Rochester campus and is easily accessible by car (park at the Alumni and Advancement Center, formerly St. Agnes School) or by bike or on foot (via the Lehigh Valley Trail).

Last week I set out with a group led by Dr. Ramsey and his wife, Dr. Tara Ramsey, also an assistant professor in the department, to explore the area. The pair explained that when they first moved to Rochester and started poking around the UR campus, they came across some sections that seemed to display the same characteristics of old-growth forests they had seen elsewhere.

They studied canopy composition, downed and standing dead wood, and what native and non-native (including invasive) species made up the understory.

The Ramseys were still skeptical that an area in the middle of so much development could truly be old-growth forest, so they took some core samples of some trees. Some turned out to be 150 to 200 years old, definitely pre-suburbia.

Rochester being what it is, there is a lot of photographic documentation of, well, everything. For further evidence as to the old growth, Tara Ramsey explained, they looked at aerial photographs from the 1930s, and found that this particular parcel of land was fully mature at that point, meaning that it probably never had been disturbed.

Why did this land go undeveloped? It tends towards swampiness, the Ramseys theorize, and did so even more before the Mt. Morris dam was built, around 1950. Also, the ground undulates quite a bit — not so much that you could call it hilly, but enough that another, flatter piece of land nearby might be easier to clear and farm.

Visiting the site, don't expect giant sequoia. You're not going to necessarily know you're in an old-growth forest — it might not seem old at all, in fact — some of the trees are quite young. It's the site itself that is old. The plants that make it up have their own varying lifespans, many being descendants, or even clones, of the ones that lived here a few hundred years ago.

For more information, visit [ramseylab.org](http://ramseylab.org).