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The white sand of the Cape Henlopen shore provides a nice background for green pine trees (*Pinus spp.*), pinkish little bluestem grasses (*Schizachy-* *rium scoparium*), and dark-colored patches of low-growing beach-heath-er (*Hudsonia tomentosa*). (Also notice the animal tracks!)

Winter seashore scenes add touch to Delaware

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Garden Tales

Winter is a great time of the year to enjoy some of Delaware's unique natural landscapes, especially along the shore. On a recent hike around Gordon's Pond in Cape Henlopen State Park, I was struck by the beauty and simplicity of this seashore natural area.

The sand provides a clean white background for the green of the pine trees, the pinkish-beige of the little-bluestem grasses, and the dark grey-green of the beach-heather. Everything was peaceful, quiet, and sparkling in the sunshine.

Little bluestem grass (*Schizachyrium scoparium*) is abundant here, and the feathery tops catch the sunlight. The common name "bluestem" can seem a little strange for this grass which at this time of year has a distinctive pinkish color, but it does have a bluish tint in the spring. Curious circular patterns can be seen on the sand around the grasses, etched by the tips of bent-over stems pushed around by the wind.

Beach-heather, also known as sand-heather or false-heather (*Hudsonia tomentosa*), is a low-growing shrub with small scale-like leaves that forms dark-colored mats on the sand in winter. But this unassuming plant will surprise you in the early summer when it blooms with yellow flowers.

Beach-heather is a native shrub in the rockrose family (*Cistaceae*), a small family that is most abundant in Europe. In spite of being adapted to this difficult seaside habitat of shifting sands and salt spray, beach-

heather is said to be hard to grow outside of its native habitat, needing very well-drained acidic soil that is moist below, and full sun. One other species of beach-heather, Hudsonia ericoides, grows in Delaware, but it is rare.

Common pines at Cape Henlopen are Virginia pine (*Pinus virginiana*) and loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*). These two native evergreen trees are easy to distinguish: Virginia pine has short needles (1½ - 3 inches long) in clusters of 2, whereas loblolly pine has long needles (6 – 8 ½ inches) in clusters of 3 (here's a way to remember this: lob-lo-lly — 3 syllables, 3 needles). In nature, Virginia pine generally grows in drier sandy soil, and loblolly pine in moister sandy soil. Both are relatively easy to grow. Virginia pine, also known as scrub pine, is a slow-growing small/medium-sized tree, with an irregular shape. Loblolly pine is a fast-growing, relatively tall tree; its seeds are important food for wildlife, and its wood is important in the construction industry.

Non-native Japanese black pine (*Pinus thunbergiana*) was planted extensively at Cape Henlopen during World War II, but it has become invasive here and is being removed. It has relatively long needles (3 – 5 inches) in clusters of 2, and is salt and pollution resistant. Japanese black pine is susceptible to a nematode pest, which has been introduced into Japan, causing this

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pine to become endangered in its native land.

A striking native evergreen plant that also grows at Cape Henlopen is yucca (Yucca filamentosa), with its large clusters of long sword-shaped leaves. After a number of years, yucca produces a tall inflorescence of white flowers, which form fruit. Then it dies, but produces new offshoots at the base of the plant. Yucca is in the agave family (Agavaceae), and is pollinated only by the yucca moth. It is widely cultivated.

So, take a walk near the beach while the weather is nice and cool and see if you can locate some of these common native

Delaware plants adapted to the sandy soils. Also, especially if you live near the shore and have sandy soil, try planting some of these native plants that are already so well adapted to their native habitats. In this way, gardeners can help to support natural food webs, as described in Douglas Tallarny's book "Bringing Nature Home, How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens", now in its second edition.

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.