

Value of the Oak Ridge Reservation for Conservation

When the federal government obtained land in east Tennessee and elsewhere for the development of nuclear weapons technology, its acquisitions included large buffer areas for security. Protected from fragmentation and disturbance over the ensuing decades, these areas evolved into ecological sanctuaries of remarkable size and diversity that contain species and ecological communities now absent or uncommon in surrounding areas. The Oak Ridge Reservation (ORR) is the largest tract of relatively unfragmented native forest habitat remaining in the Southern Ridge and Valley of East Tennessee and contains more species of breeding birds than any other single tract of land in Tennessee. The ORR is home to 26 state-listed threatened and endangered plants, 20 federally and state-listed animal species, with appropriate habitat for additional listed wildlife species. The Research Park contains seven registered State Natural Areas and has been recognized as an International Biosphere Reserve. The size of the land resource has shrunk considerably in recent years, so that only about 20,000 acres of the original 58,575 acres of the ORR remain in a relatively undisturbed state. Any further reduction in the size of the Reservation, even from the edges, could have serious consequences for the viability of many of these species that require large unfragmented tracts of forested land.