



## Forest Habitat

Forests are fascinating ecosystems. How can you recognize a forest? The defining feature of a forest is its dense growth of trees. But why do forests grow where they do? Generally speaking, two key variables dictate the geographical distribution of Earth's different habitat types: precipitation and temperature. Forests grow where there is enough water available to fulfill trees' needs. The extent of forest growth also depends on temperature ranges, soil nutrients, adequate growing season and altitude.

All of the forests in the continental United States are temperate forests (located between the boreal and sub-tropical zone). Eastern temperate forests tend to have cold winters and wet, hot summers. Deciduous trees (those that lose their leaves in the fall) like oak and maple thrive in these conditions. In fact, most eastern forests are defined by the mix of oak, maple, birch and other trees that grow there. These trees create a canopy that shades the forest floor and provides a variety of habitats for many creatures, such as gray squirrels, white-footed mice, white-tailed deer, blue jays and much more.

Generally speaking, deciduous trees dominate the forests of the Eastern United States, while coniferous trees (those that keep their leaves year-round) predominate in western forests. What kind of wildlife would you expect to live in the forests Western United States?