



Requires the use of the d20 Modern Roleplaying Game, published by Wizards of the Coast, Inc.



“Howdy” from 12 to Midnight

In case you are not familiar with us, 12 to Midnight is a Texas-based RPG publisher specializing in modern horror. You might not normally think “Texas” and “horror” go together, but we are pretty sure you will change your mind after spending some time in Pinebox.

That’s Pinebox, Texas. It is a nice little rural community smack-dab in east Texas. There is a university nearby, a pine forest called the Big Thicket, and a mess of beautiful wildflowers every Spring. Unfortunately, it is also the epicenter of a whole lot of bad mojo. We’re talking dark magic, serial killers, haunted buildings—the whole ball of wax.

If you want to learn more about Pinebox, just visit our website at 12tomidnight.com. You can start using the free campaign setting on our site right now, then watch it continue to grow right here in the pages of *Modern Dispatch*. Of course, Pinebox is *our* setting but all the material in these pages can just as easily be dropped into *yours*.

If you have any ideas for future issues or want to comment on what you read here, please drop by the forums on our website.

Fallen

For years reports of a giant creature flying over Golan County were dismissed as wild tales from an area known for its folklore. But the disappearance of a game warden, said to be tracking the creature, suddenly lends new credence to the story. Some say the Pinebox thunderbird is a giant condor, while others whisper of demons and other dark creatures. Nobody would believe that the truth is even stranger.

Fallen is a modern paranormal adventure for low-level heroes. Although it is set in 12 to Midnight’s fictional Pinebox setting, the adventure can easily be relocated to any rural community.

Background

Local game warden Gary Wheeler is obsessed with the Pinebox thunderbird. This piece of folklore has belonged to the small rural community for the better part of a decade. In fact, Gary is one of a handful of people from whom the stories originated. According to the local folklore, the thunderbird is a nearly extinct predator that makes its home in the area’s untamed forests. Although it is often compared to California’s endangered giant condor, the thunderbird is said to be more than twice as big. Over the course of ten years, the infrequent sightings have occurred at deep dusk and nobody has come forward with a shred of proof.

Wheeler aims to change all that. In fact, his obsession with photographing or capturing the creature has steadily grown with each successive year of ridicule. Yet even while trying to penetrate the mystery of the thunderbird, Wheeler carries a secret of his own. The game warden owes tens of thousands of dollars in gambling debts. When legitimate gambling operations spurned him after a run of bad luck, he resorted to the local back-room poker game. There his luck turned even worse. Now, with interest on his debt mounting,

Wheeler needs a way to quickly earn fame and fortune in order to avert an ugly end.

With Wheeler’s recent disappearance during one of his thunderbird searches, the biggest question is, Did he find what he was seeking or did his own secret finally catch up with him?

Plot Hooks

The GM knows best how to introduce the heroes to the adventure. Here are some ideas. The heroes are inspired to investigate because

- One of the heroes knows the Wheelers personally.
- They are reputed to have an interest in the paranormal. A tabloid offers to pay the heroes for an article and photos of the Pinebox thunderbird—or proof of the hoax, if it turns out to be fake.
- They are researching other strange activity in the area when they learn “through the grapevine” about a game warden who has gone missing while searching for a legendary creature. (For other adventures that might have already drawn the heroes to the area, see *Bloodlines*, *Journal of American Paranormal Research* issues 1-3, or *Modern Dispatch* issues 26, 30, 34, and 38).



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RPG OBJECTS

12 to Midnight

ADAMANT ENTERTAINMENT

RONIN ARTS

d20 system

Investigation

Sandy Wheeler

If the heroes visit the Wheeler home, Sandy Wheeler is glad to talk to them about her missing husband. Read or summarize the following:

The Wheeler home is very small and the inside is surprisingly sparse. The living room's only furniture consists of a rickety card table and equally questionable chairs.

The authorities seem busy investigating the attempted assassination of the mayor (see Modern Dispatch #26: On the Steps of City Hall) and have only made a token effort to locate her husband. Heroes who take the time to speak with Sandy and treat her with consideration (i.e., roleplay) gradually learn the following (potential questions from the heroes are in bold and answers are in italics):

Question: Do you have any idea where he was going? Where was he last seen?

I just heard from the sheriff's office a few hours ago. They found Gary's pickup truck parked near an old logging road. He did that all that time. He'd find a deserted place to park, lock up the truck, and use a four-wheeler to go up old logging roads. Gary told me he found an old deer stand at the top of a hill with

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a good view. It's pretty deep out in the Thicket, but that's where he says he has been spending his time lately. I can loan you his map (Player's Map) if it will help find him.

Question: When was the last time you saw Gary? Were you and Gary getting along okay? Does Gary like to drink?

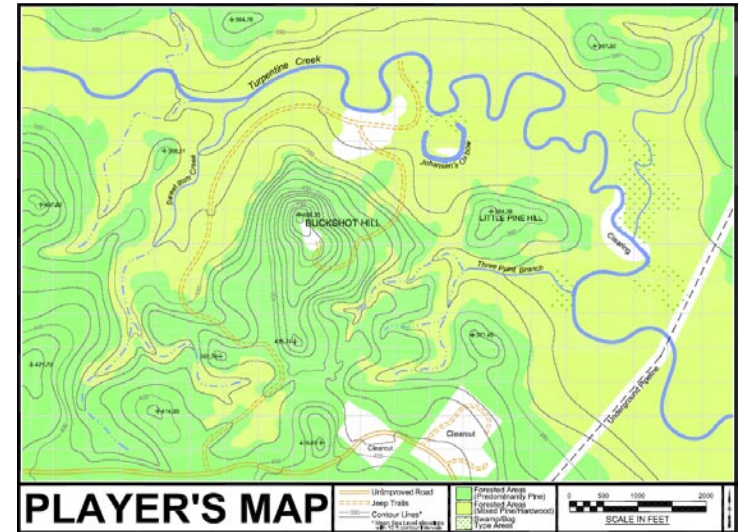
[Breaks down crying.] ... I'm sorry. It's just ... things haven't been so good here lately. Gary's a good man. I love him so much! ... He just can't help himself sometimes. He gets the itch to gamble, and it just controls him. Last year he fell in with a poker game at the Angry Stick. He lost all our money. All of it. We had to sell almost everything we owned, and we still owe more. I know Gary wouldn't leave me. I know it. It's just ... what if something happened? What if they got tired of waiting for their money?

Question: I hear your husband was fixated on the Pinebox thunderbird?

Yes, Gary has been obsessed with that bird since his first sighting. I guess that's been more than eight years ago. He was looking for poachers out in the woods 'round about dusk when he says he saw this gigantic bird fly almost directly overhead. He says it had at least a 15-foot wingspan, and I believe him.

Question: Most people say it is just another tall tale. Was Gary upset that he wasn't believed?

It's true; Gary was sorely hurt when nobody would believe him. He started spending time out in the woods on his time off. He even bought a bunch of surveillance equipment. He had to sell all that stuff off last year when ... well, never mind. Anyhow, he got him a map and started keeping track of other sightings.



Question: You know thunderbirds are just a myth. What kind of bird do you think Gary saw?

Well, I can't say that I know what it is. Some kinda bird, maybe, like one of those giant condors like they got in California—something everyone thought was extinct. I don't know who started calling it the Pinebox thunderbird, but maybe they aren't far off. I mean, those Indian legends must have got started somehow, right? Of course, if you're a fool like that football player we got on city council then you might think it's some sort of demon. Me, I say it's a bird. If they can discover a woodpecker out in Arkansas that everyone thought was extinct for the last 50 years, then why not some other kind of giant bird? We got our share of wilderness in these parts.

Question: Just how many times has Gary seen this bird?

Gary has seen the thunderbird three times. The first time was by accident. He spent the next three years looking for it before he spotted it again. Every time, it's been at late dusk, and right before a big storm. I looked up some books on the thunderbird legend,

and they say that the birds were so big they needed the strong winds of a storm to keep them up in the air. You know, there's supposed to be a big storm blowin' through tonight. Maybe you could kill two birds with ... I mean, maybe if you found the thunderbird then you could find Gary.

Question: Why are you so sure Gary was telling the truth? Are you sure he wasn't just spinning a tall tale?

I know my husband was telling the truth about that bird because he showed me something he hasn't shown another living person. He didn't want anyone else coming along and taking the credit for finding the bird before him.

With the last statement, Sandy retreats to a bedroom and returns with a long, round cardboard mailing tube. As she carefully tips out the contents, the heroes see the end of a large feather. She continues to draw more and more of the feather out of the tube. It is enormous—four feet long and solid black.

She refuses to give or loan the heroes the feather, but merely wanted them to see it so they would know her husband was telling the truth. However, Sandy does loan them a map Gary had been using to plan his searches (**Player's Map**) and the names of two other people who claim to have seen the Pinebox thunderbird (see *Other Leads*). She can also give them directions to the Angry Stick.

The Angry Stick

This ancient pool hall, located in the heart of Pinebox, has been the site of countless nights of drinking, fun, fights, gambling, and deal making. It is the largest of the three pool halls in Pinebox. The smoky bar and pool tables are located on the ground floor of a two-storey brick building sandwiched between more respectable businesses.

The thick plate glass on the front window (wide enough to drive a compact car through) was painted

black several years ago and is adorned with painted letters the size of an adult hand. Like a scarred veteran, the wooden front door proudly displays chipped paint and gouges from several decades of abuse.

The bar's interior is always dimly lit. The brightest light hangs directly above the entrance, forcing newcomers to stop just inside the doorway while their eyes adjust. This usually gives occupants a few seconds to inspect newcomers before being seen themselves.

The Angry Stick contains a long, well-worn bar; a

I'll Have What He's Having

To those who know how to ask (*Diplomacy*, DC 25), the bar offers some very special drinks. "The Plumber" instantly clears all effects of inebriation, at the expense of five minutes of vomiting. "Quicksilver" doubles the speed of one's normal reactions for up to an hour. "Giggle Juice" causes uncontrollable laughter for half an hour. Each of these drinks costs at least \$100 for a single shot. Regular patrons whisper of a fourth drink, but nobody seems to know anything about it and the bartender just shrugs when asked.

These drinks are paranormal in nature, although their exact composition and origins are left up to the GM's imagination.

half-dozen scarred, wooden tables with mismatched chairs; a relatively new jukebox; and five well-used, coin-operated pool tables. An open area, where the industrial carpet is a slightly lighter color, marks the former location of a sixth table, which was wrecked three years ago and never replaced. Those requiring more privacy in their dealings use the sparsely furnished back room. It is lit by a single low-watt bulb dangling from the ceiling.

I Told You Those Skill Points Would Come in Handy!

Heroes who profess to be, or appear to be, employed in law enforcement get no useful information.

Heroes who take the time to *Gather Information* (DC 14) learn from the local patrons that once a month, burly bouncers declare the back room off limits. Gamblers from Houston, New Orleans, and beyond drift into town for poker. Participants each put up a \$25,000 stake. This is the game Gary Wheeler found himself in, and this is the game he lost. Heroes who exercise *Diplomacy* (DC 15) with the bartender learn that the people to whom Gary owes money believe that it is generally easier to get money from a live man than a dead one. They are likely to be just as interested in finding Gary as the heroes are.

Other Leads:

- Manuel Travis, the city councilman, has a good reason for thinking the flying creature is a demon. Check out *Modern Dispatch #26: On the Steps of City Hall* for ideas.
- Two other people claim to have seen the Pinebox thunderbird. One was a high school student who graduated and moved to Houston. The other is a deer hunter who caught sight of the creature while hiking from his deer stand to his truck. The hunter, Dale Burnquist, reluctantly speaks with the heroes but can only vaguely describe the creature as a giant bird with an oddly shaped body. Because it was dusk and black thunderclouds were threatening, he only saw the creature in silhouette. Wheeler now regularly uses Burnquist's deer stand as a lookout spot.

Thunderbird

While you might require a *Survival* check (DC 10) for the heroes to follow the map provided by Sandy Wheeler, be prepared in the event that they fail. If nothing else, by taking 10, the heroes should be able to locate the deer stand Gary had commandeered. Along the way, feel free to throw in a random encounter, such as the ones suggested in *Modern Dispatch #38: Big Thicket Adventures*. To make matters more interesting, a storm is approaching. Once the heroes arrive, read or summarize the following.

It sure didn't look that far on the map, but you have been traveling up and down pine-covered hills for what feels like a lifetime. Finally, at the top of the tallest hill so far, you find the spot. You could easily have missed it if it had not been for the four-wheeler parked in plain sight. Nailed directly to the mature pine tree are a series of weathered, horizontal, wooden slats, forming a ladder probably thirty feet high. Up above, you can see a wooden shipping pallet lashed to a pair of branches. It does not look very sturdy, but the view is probably amazing.

What's a Deer Stand?

Those of you who are city folks may not have ever heard of a deer stand (also called a hunting blind or deer blind), but that's okay because I'm here to set things straight. Think of a deer stand as a tree house for hunters. At four a.m., the hunter climbs up a tree with his trusty rifle, shivering in the darkness while he more-or-less patiently waits for the sun to rise and hopes a deer comes within his sights. Some deer stands are entirely artificial, looking like a box or fifty-gallon drum perched on four 15-foot legs. Many others are not much more than a few handholds on a tree trunk and a wide branch to perch on.

The four-wheeler is Gary's. It contains enough gas to carry a pair of characters back to the main road with a little to spare. An empty shotgun holster is mounted on the right, and a "Texas Parks and Wildlife Game Warden" decal is affixed on the left. The vehicle has a pair of small lights (one tinted red, and the other blue) mounted below the headlamp, and a spotlight is on a swivel-mount between the handlebars.

The wooden slats on the tree are not in the best condition, but as long as a character is careful he should be able to *Climb* (DC 5) up to the relative safety of the platform. If more than one character tries to use the platform simultaneously, have them all make *Balance* checks (DC 10) to avoid falling from the small, unrailed space.

Dusk

Any characters in the tree at dusk should make a *Spot* check (DC 15). Characters on the ground may make the same check at DC 25. If a character passes the check, read or summarize the following.

The view from the deer stand is indeed magnificent. A gust of wind sends pine needles swirling, and the thunderclouds that had been building on the horizon seem suddenly closer. The clouds prematurely darken the sky, heralding an early dusk. Two hills away, in the fading light, you see a shape silently rise up into the sky. Although you only see its silhouette, it is clear that the creature must be enormous. As graceful as a figure skater, it twirls and dances as it rides an updraft above the horizon.

Allow characters who pass their *Spot* check one action of any sort, then read or summarize the following.

The creature's silent dance is brought to a sudden stop with the unmistakable sound of gunfire. As if stumbling in midair, the beast lurches and spirals into the embrace of the pine forest.

Even those who are not watching the creature may still hear the gunshot with a successful *Listen* check (DC 10). No other sounds are forthcoming. Assuming the heroes intend to find the creature, or the person who shot it, proceed to *Meth Lab* below.

Daylight or Full Night

If the characters arrive at the site early in the day or after dusk and do not appear to have plans to stay until the next dusk, have any character in the deer stand make a *Spot* check (DC 15). In daylight, the character spots a large tent half a mile or more away. At night, the character spots the glow of a campfire. Assuming the heroes intend to approach the camp, you might require a *Survival* check (DC 10) in order for them to find their way to the meth lab.

Meth Lab

The camp in the distance doubles as a methamphetamine (meth) lab. In addition to the domed tents, sleeping bags, and small campfire, three drug dealers have set up a surplus army tent 60 feet from the main campsite. Here they have been cooking up batches of meth far from the watchful eyes of civilization. Unfortunately for Gary Wheeler, they were not hidden quite well enough. When Gary approached the campsite, two of the three drug dealers shot and killed him. They then wrapped his body in a plastic tarp and made a token attempt at burying it in a shallow grave 50 feet from camp. The fresh mound of earth is easily visible in daylight.

Use three Fast/Tough Low-Level Gang Member Ordinaries (found in the **Supporting Characters** section of the *d20 Modern Roleplaying Game*) for the criminals. Two are armed with Glock 17 pistols, and one uses a Mossberg Model 500 ATP6C shotgun that belonged to Gary Wheeler.

No matter what time of day the heroes approach the scene, the gang members are found arguing. This

gives the murderers a -10 modifier to *Listen* checks against the heroes' *Move Silently* skill. As long as they do not use the game warden's four-wheeler, the heroes can probably get quite close to the camp before being noticed. If the three men notice the approach of strangers, they immediately open fire. See *Shootout*, below, for their tactics.

The Argument

If the heroes approach within listening range without being detected, read or summarize the following:

As you approach the campsite, you overhear three people loudly arguing.

"I can't believe it! You killed an angel. You KILLED an ANGEL! We are so screwed! This isn't happening!"

"I didn't know what it was, okay? I thought it was one of them-- what you call it? Hang gliders!"

"A hang glider?!? That ain't no @\$ hang glider!"

"I don't know!!! These woods got me freaked, yo?"

"What are we gonna do now? First the cop, and now an angel. I mean, we're going to hell, right? We're going to hell!"

"Maybe not. He ain't dead yet. Maybe we take him into that town and drop him off in front the emergency room."

"Take him to town? You remember how long it took us to get out here? No man, we're screwed. Do you hear me? Screwed!!"

At their feet is a body. At first it looks like a giant bird with black feathers, but if the heroes get within 40 feet they see that it has the body of a human ... sort of. One wing is bent at an impossible angle, and its legs paw weakly at the earth in pain. The body is facedown, preventing a look at its face. (See *Wrap-up: The Fallen*, below, for more information.)

If the heroes are patient, after a few more minutes of bickering one thug returns to the tent to check on the progress of their latest batch of meth. The other two

gingerly drag the creature back to the main camp but decide to let nature take its course.

Shootout

Unless the heroes leave the area altogether, sooner or later the gang members must become aware of the heroes' presence. Whether the heroes try a friendly approach or a forceful one, the gang's response is the same—a shootout. Having already killed a game warden and some sort of creature, they are extra paranoid. Their first response to any situation is to shoot.

The beginning of combat signals the onslaught of the building storm. Lightening forks the sky and driving rain pounds the campsite. Visibility is cut in half. Rain also makes the ground slick with mud. Characters who exceed their standard movement must succeed at a Dexterity check, DC 10, or fall prone.

If he has not already done so, at the beginning of combat one gang member retreats (fighting defensively) to the army tent. Inside, he has access to jars of dangerous chemicals that can be compared to the listings on tables *Grenade-Like Weapons* and *Splash Weapons*. Acetone and ethanol are flammable solvents and may be used as Molotov cocktails. Lithium aluminum is a solid, but it is an extreme fire or explosion hazard. For every combat round that

someone shoots into the tent, there is a 10% chance that a broken container will spark an explosion equivalent to a thermite grenade (6d6 damage). All of these explosions would be quite likely start a forest were it not for the massive thunderstorm raging overhead.

The other two gang members stick together and try to kill anyone approaching the camp. If their hit points drop below half, they may attempt to retreat to the three rented four-wheelers parked near their camp.

Wrap-up: The Fallen

The "Pinebox thunderbird" is actually a chimera—also called a semi-human (See *Chimera Template: Semi-Avian*, below). In this case, the semi-human is a 16-year-old boy named Joshua, a reject from an ongoing project to create viable chimeras. Joshua was considered a project failure at the time because his brain was seriously underdeveloped and his wings were considered inferior compared to those of other test subjects. Even at age 16, his brain is barely that of a five-year-old. He cannot explain where he came from, and not even his adoptive parents can guess his true origin.

How a five-year-old, mentally handicapped "semi" escaped from a presumably secure research facility is anyone's guess, but Joshua has been hiding out in the

Table: Grenade-Like Weapons

Weapon	Dmg	Critical	Type	Range Increment	Reflex DC	Burst Radius	Size	Weight
Lithium Aluminum	2d6	-	Fire		12	-	Med	2 lb.
Thermite grenade	6d6	-	Fire	5 ft.	12	10 ft.	Small	2 lb.

Table: Splash Weapons

Weapon	Direct Hit Damage	Splash Damage	Critical ¹	Type	Reflex DC	Range Increment	Size	Weight
Acid, hydrochloric	1d6	1	20	Acid	-	10 ft.	Tiny	1 lb.
Acetone	1d6	1	20	Fire	-	10 ft.	Small	1 lb.
Ethanol	1d6	1	20	Fire	-	10 ft.	Small	1 lb.

¹ Threat range applies to direct hits only; splash damage does not threaten a critical hit.

Big Thicket for more than a decade with the help of a local ranching family. The Royders keep Joshua's existence a closely guarded secret and only allow him to go outdoors after the sun has set. Joshua often longs to fulfill his instinct to fly, but only the winds of a storm front are strong enough to hold him aloft.

Option A: Joshua Lives

If the campaign world is ready to have the existence of such a creature unleashed upon an unsuspecting populace, this is your chance. Joshua is in bad shape from the fall, but if you wish, he can be nursed back to health. The hero who picks him up immediately notices that he weighs next to nothing. His bones are hollow, like a bird's. He manages to communicate to the heroes that he wants to go home and the name of his "Mama". This should be enough information to reunite Joshua with his adoptive family.

If you wish to carry the adventure even further, you can introduce agents from the secret lab who are following up on reports of a giant bird. This could lead to an eventual confrontation. Look for more adventures involving semi-humans and their creators in future 12 to Midnight adventures.

Option B: Joshua Dies

Most campaigns are not ready for the horrific truth about semi-humans to be revealed. The truth is simply too much for the public, and possibly the heroes, to handle. If it better fits your campaign, Joshua is in shock from the fall and completely unable to communicate with the heroes. He dies from his wounds shortly after the conclusion of the battle. If the heroes take the body back with them to town, it mysteriously disappears (thanks to agents from the secret lab) shortly after it leaves the heroes' care. Any photo or physical evidence is denounced as a hoax.

Option C: Forget Joshua— It's Actually a Bird

So you're not running a paranormal campaign? Why didn't you say so? Forget all that stuff about Joshua. If the meth lab dealers had not been sampling their own product, they would have easily seen that they were looking at nothing more than a giant bird. If the heroes reveal what they have discovered, the Pinebox thunderbird is quickly established as the largest living species of avian on the planet. The thunderbird is the

find of the decade. If the heroes return with its carcass, they can become national celebrities. Their photos and names appear in news magazines, newspapers, scientific journals, and more. The amazing discovery leads the government to close access to more than 100 square miles of Big Thicket national forest while scientists flood the area looking for signs of other members of the amazing species.

Chimera Template: Semi-Avian

A chimera is a creature whose genetic structure is made up of artificially spliced human and animal genes. Chimeras are more often referred to by their nicknames—*semi-humans*, *semi-(animal name)*, or even just *semis*. Since World War II, experiments in creating the ultimate chimera have been ongoing in secret labs around the world. While true success is ever elusive, some programs have come very close.

SEMI-AVIAN (TEMPLATE)

"Semi-avian" is a template that can be added to any human character. It uses all the character's statistics and special abilities, except as noted here.

The semi-avian template allows the character to fly, with the help of enormous bird-like wings. These wings protrude from the character's shoulder blades and stretch anywhere from 15 to 25 feet when fully extended. When folded against his body, the semi-avian's wings span almost his entire height.

Special Qualities: A semi-avian retains all the special qualities of the character and gains the additional special qualities listed below.

Flight (Ex): A semi-avian may fly at twice his base land speed. The character can ascend at one-quarter flying speed and descend at double flying speed, and his maneuverability is poor. In ideal conditions, semi-avians can stay aloft for hours by gliding on updrafts. The character's carrying capacity is limited to light loads.

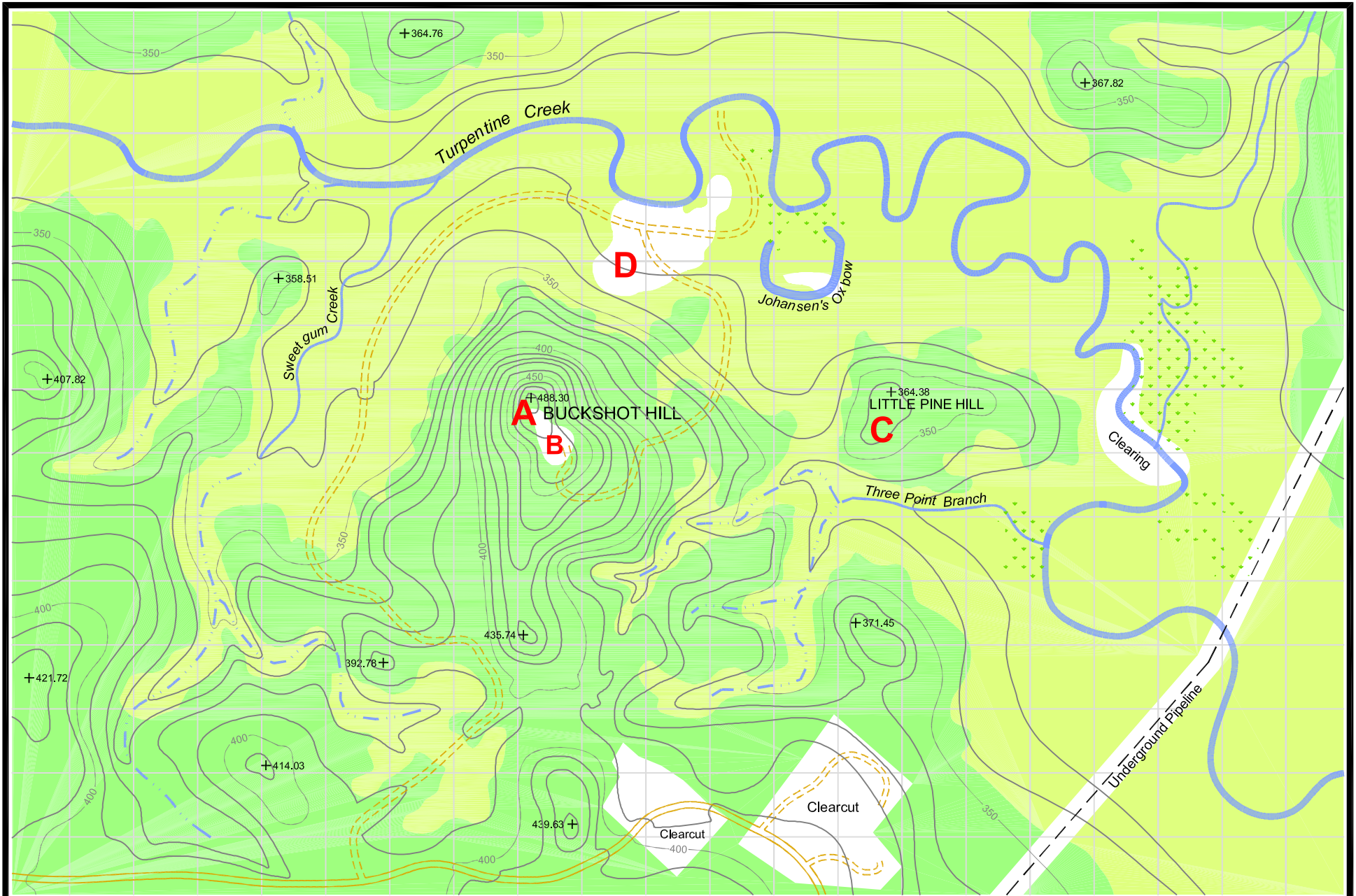
Lightweight (Ex): The bones of semi-avians are honeycombed, just like the bones of a bird. This results in the character's body weight being 1/3 that of a normal person his size.

Brittle Bones (Ex): The character's bones cannot withstand hard or sudden impacts, which reduces his massive damage threshold by 3. In addition, a semi-avian character takes an additional 1d6 points of damage from any fall.

Skills: Same as the character, with the addition of a +2 species bonus on *Move Silently* checks while in the air, a +2 species bonus on *Navigate* checks while in the air, and a +2 species bonus to *Jump* checks.

Feats: A semi-avian gains *Alertness* as a bonus feat.

Advancement: By character class.



GM'S MAP

GM MAP KEY

- A = The Deer Stand
- B = Oat Patch
- C = The Campsite
- D = Large Open Clearing

— Unimproved Road

- - - Jeep Trails

—350— Contour Lines*

* Mean Sea Level elevations with 10 ft level intervals

Forest Areas (Predominantly Pine)

Forest Areas (Mixed Pine/Hardwood)

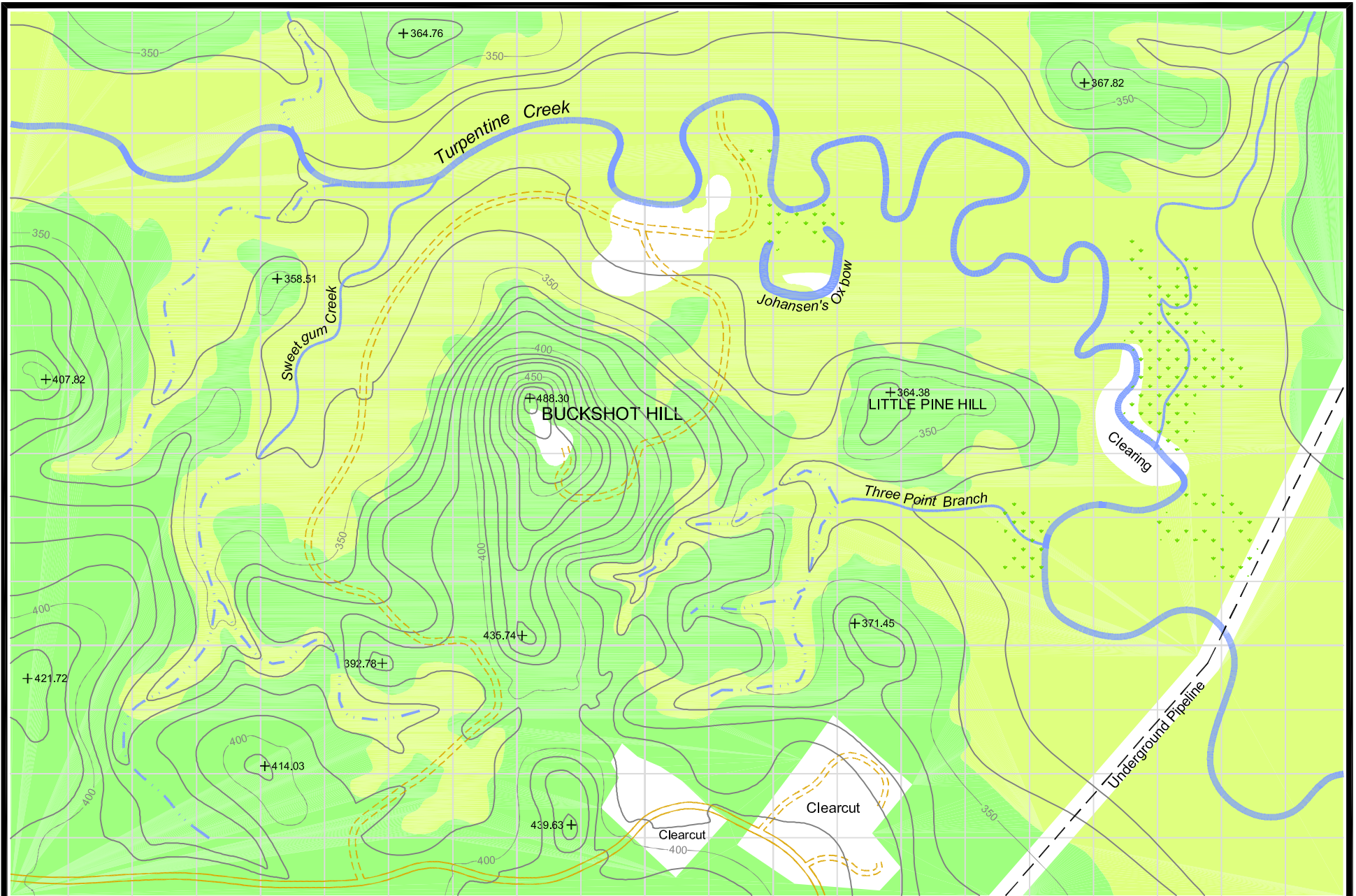
Swamp/Bog Type Areas

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SCALE IN FEET

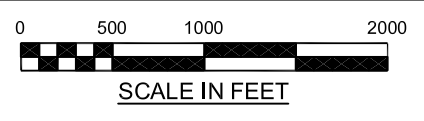


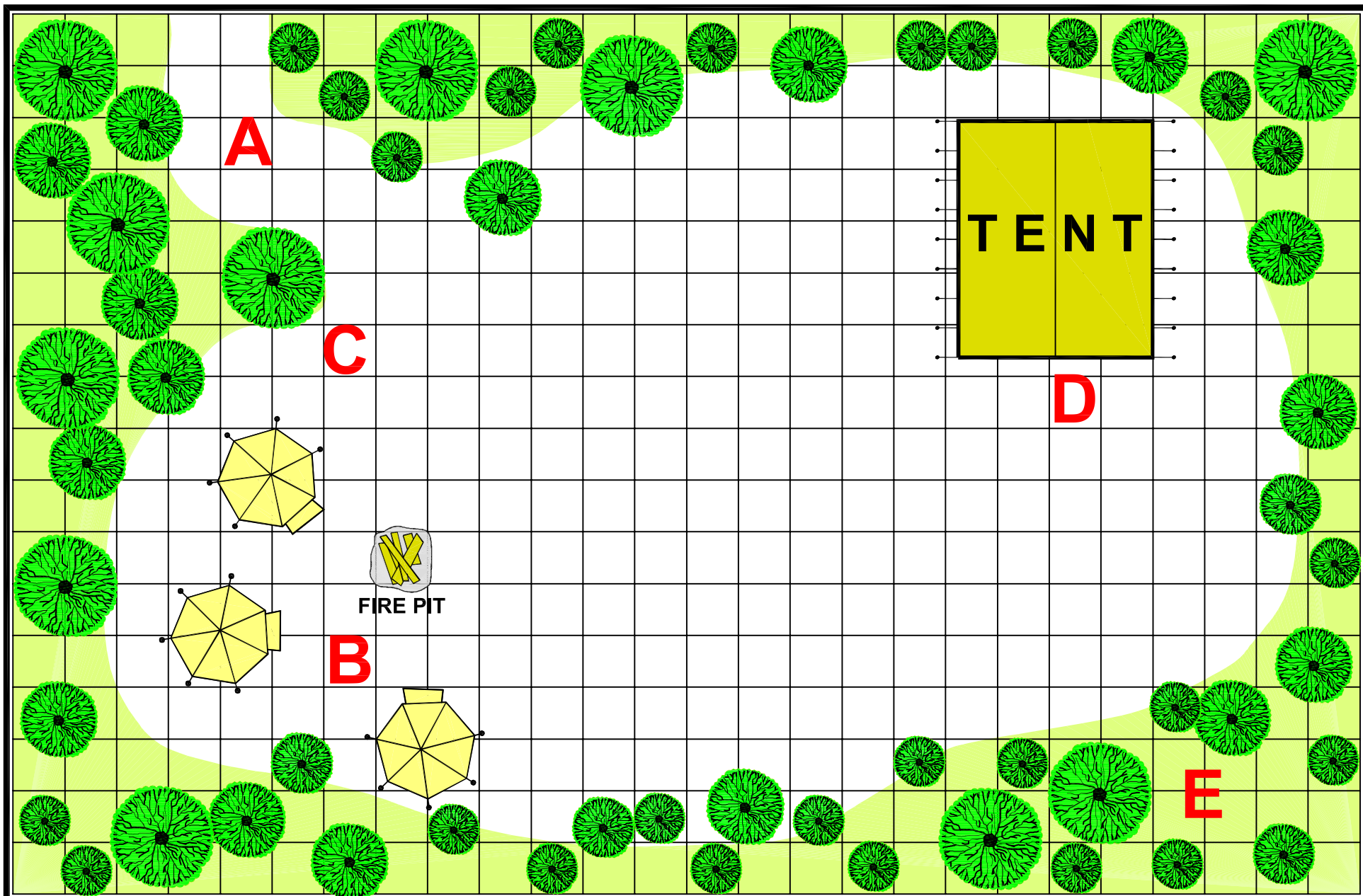


PLAYER'S MAP

- Unimproved Road
- Jeep Trails
- Contour Lines*
* Mean Sea Level elevations with 10 ft contour intervals

- Forested Areas (Predominantly Pine)
- Forested Areas (Mixed Pine/Hardwood)
- Swamp/Bog Type Areas





THE CAMP SITE

A = Trail to Camp Site
 B = Domed Tents and Campfire
 C = Location of Parked 4-Wheelers

D = Surplus Army Tent
 E = Thunderbird

Scale: 1 square = 5 feet



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