

Crushed Keep Environs

At the base of the Stormy Point peninsula, around 47 degrees South latitude, on the southern side of Basher Bay of Fisher Island, northernmost isle in the Forlorn Archipelago, is the Silent Forest. Although the locals are unsure who, if anyone, still lives there, tales remain about an Old Wizard whose Tower was at the heart of the Forest, surrounded by other towers, and even some settlements, intended to keep watch over his activities. Those towers and settlements have been long abandoned, and are assumed to lie in ruins, like the Old Wizard's Tower. The Forest's name is said to derive from the fact no animal or bird sounds are to be heard there, because the Wizard does not, or did not, like noise. Scattered in the woodlands are a number of small freshwater ponds (although curiously no streams or rivers). These ponds are rumoured to be dangerous, having unknown depths. It is said that if anything falls in, the trees use their leaves to hide even where the pond was, leaving no trace that anything or anyone had come by there. Other aspects of the Forest and the lands nearby appear to have been changed by some force in the past as well, although few visitors chance-by to find out more.

One such strange place is Crushed Keep, roughly two miles (three kilometres) east of the Wizard's Tower. Tales hold only that this is a broken fortress that weirdly has no lying debris, broken rocks, rusted weapons or anything else nearby as found in more typical ruins, with no sign it was ever inhabited. This map explores the area of the Silent Forest within half a mile (800 metres) of Crushed Keep in more detail.

Ideas for the features noted here were derived and inspired from cards drawn randomly from three of Inkwell Ideas' Hexploration Decks, "Into the Wilderness", "Settled Lands" and "Beyond the Pale", with a couple more from two of the Creature Decks, "Fey, Constructs, & Wildlife" and "Animals & Vermin". These were adapted to fit the overall pattern already established by notes for the existing Atlas maps in this area.

General Area Notes

The Forest is indeed Silent most of the time, with only very occasional animal or bird calls, commoner with greater distance from the Forest's central region, nearest the Old Wizard's Tower, off this map to the west. The wind still rustles the leaves, although most of the woods are pines, so even this sound tends to be muted. There is a preponderance of fungus in the mapped zone, and fruiting bodies of various kinds are frequently to be seen, even where not noted below. These are commoner closer to Crushed Keep itself. Ashmoths are a frequent kind of flying insect likely to be found in the woods, usually in twilight and at night. They are roughly hand-sized, ashy-grey moths that blend-in at rest with the local rocks and tree-trunks. When in flight, their bodies glow like fiery embers, and they magically absorb any fire they pass close to (within 10 feet, 3 m), dousing it instantly. If they land on a warm creature, they absorb some of its warmth and vitality as well (doing an amount of damage like a dagger, if an RPG-equivalent level is required). These are most often noted closer to Crushed Keep as well. Game trails are to be found in various places, although these are rarely reliable ways to traverse the Forest, being apt to vanish as easily as they seem to be found, even where they may appear path-like.

Feature Descriptions

Cavern Entrance: At the southwestern foot of the low hill on which is perched Crushed Keep, is a low (roughly 8 ft high, 2.5 m), rather overgrown and difficult to enter, rocky cave, that opens into a subterranean rock tunnel that winds generally northeast for about 250 ft (75 m) into the Glow-Fungus Cave of the Crushed Keep Caverns complex. The Entrance is at the northwestern end of the sunken line of the Collapsed Tunnel. The Caverns complex is detailed by a separate Atlas map.

Collapsed Tunnel: Running from the southwestern end of Crushed Keep's low hill (at the Cavern Entrance there), in a winding line southeastwards to the southwestern slopes of a similarly low hill in the Fungous Heath in which Fungus Cave is situated, is a sunken, rocky, hollow-road-like channel, between 10 to 15 ft wide (3 to 4.5 m), and like the Cavern Entrance, rather overgrown in places. This linear feature has resulted from the collapse of a former underground cave tunnel linking Fungus Cave to the subterranean caves below Crushed Keep's hill, Crushed Keep Caverns. Only its start and end caves remain accessible, and the Tunnel-line is merely a distinctive landmark, harder to use as a pathway than the open, scrubby heath and grassland to either side of it. Its centre is sufficiently far below the surface to be used for shelter from the wind, at least.

The Crushed Keep: Set atop one of the low, small hills of the area, with a further defensive raised platform on its summit, stand the broken wall and buildings of a small, stone castle. While broken, there is no rubble or debris nearby, nor any vegetation growing over the damaged walls and buildings, the whole looking rather as if it had been built this way, rather than as if it was destroyed, or fell to ruin after being abandoned. The largest building has the remains of several surface-level rooms, and a few upper floor remnants attached to the more

upstanding walls. The base of a small, hexagonal tower is at the southwestern end of the Keep's raised platform, and the base of a gatehouse is to the southeast. In the main building, one 40 ft square room (12 m), oriented so its corners match the four primary compass directions, has a roughly 10 ft diameter (3 m) magical circle design set into the centre of its stone floor. It is inactive, but if revived, it would be possible to use it to magically teleport to an identical circle in the Ritual Chamber of the Crushed Keep Caverns complex, far below. Crushed Keep Caverns is detailed by a separate Atlas map. An alternative way into this subterranean complex is using the Cave Entrance at the foot of the Keep's low hill.

Derelict Village: Around 750 ft (230 m) east from The Crushed Keep are the decaying remains of a long-abandoned, small, simple wood-and-thatch settlement. Old tales tell of a village of musicians in these parts, who preserved an ancient tradition of songs and regionally-famous harp music, known as The Dragon Harpers. Motifs carved into some of the surviving timbers suggest this was that village, though no trace of its former inhabitants, their instruments, or music remain. Further tales suggest that perhaps their music was their downfall, given the Old Wizard's preference for quietude.

Eightstones: Towards the upper right map corner, in the denser pinewoods there, and quite well-hidden until fairly nearby, is a ring of standing stones, incised with rune and spiral designs. At night, and in the woodland gloom of overcast days, it is said that parts of these designs glow with points of yellow light. The stones are large and tall, although whether they are really eight in number, no stories seem sure. Legend suggests they are dangerous, powered by some deeply-buried toxic magic, left there by a mysterious elder race of giants, or giant-sized Humans, who brought the stones and raised them here by unknown methods in the distant, if vague, past. In actuality, the stones only show their points of light when certain stars are above the horizon, and when so activated, anyone inside the ring may be healed, although few, if any, tales mention this fact.

Fire Beetle Burrows: In the next denser woods southeast from Pell-Mell's woodland, and within his area of influence, is a series of burrows made and occupied by a number of Giant Fire Beetles. Their glow-patches are a particularly fine shade of turquoise, which would be prized elsewhere, were anyone to discover this. Their burrows form a quite extensive network below ground, so they may easily pop-up anywhere within about 1,000 ft (300 m) of their marked lair site at times.

Fungus Cave: Northernmost of the low hills that undulate across Fungous Heath, and about 1,000 ft (300 m) southeast of Crushed Keep, on the southeastern side of its hill, is the opening to a probably modest-sized Cave that was once the entrance to the underground passage leading to the subterranean complex beneath Crushed Keep's hill, long-since fallen-in as the Collapsed Tunnel. The dimensions of the Cave are impossible to estimate, as it is filled with Candyfloss Fungus, to within a few feet (about a metre) inside its mouth. The Fungus is fairly harmless unless eaten, in which case it causes vivid hallucinations for up to six hours (randomly, 1d6). A far greater problem are the metallic-sheen Giant Centipedes that live in and on the Fungus (without suffering any ill-effects from it). Their bites can cause similar hallucinations, albeit for a lesser amount of time (randomly, say 1d6 RPG rounds), and they are very difficult to kill, as they regenerate at much the same rate that Trolls do. The Fungus Cave was once a Troll's lair, and the Candyfloss Fungus continues to thrive by feeding on ever-regenerating Troll meat in the Cave's depths.

Fungous Heath: Most of the more open areas in the Silent Forest hereabouts are filled with a mix of grasses, shrubs and scattered trees. This area, in the map's south-centre, along with a few peripheral places in three of the corners, has a preponderance of low-growing heather, gorse and moss instead, along with occasional scrubby trees. Here too, there are substantial numbers of fungi to be seen, and there is always a distinct scent of fungal mould about the place, which is not unpleasant, though it does tend to cling to fabrics.

Haunted Pond & Woods: North of Pell-Mell's woodland, and still within his area of influence, is one of the small, dangerously deep Ponds the Forest is noted for, surrounded by trees and bushes, with a low hill to its southeast, and heavy pine woods to its west, north and a little more distantly to its east. Its water is fresh and safe to drink. However, silent, ghostly figures are to be seen around, over and near it, appearing anywhere up to 1,000 ft (300 m) from the Pond into the denser pine woods, grasslands and hill, though not beyond the trees surrounding the Pond to the south, towards Pell-Mell's woods. These figures are drawn to travellers, seeming to point out the locations of buried or hidden secrets, as if imploring them to seek such things out. There is a definite force here channelling necromantic energy to hold these lost spirits in place in this region. Should some key buried item be located, this would release the ghosts from their bondage here. The ghosts cannot attack or be attacked, though they may try to scare. If struck, they reform like mist, and cannot be removed from here by other means. They cannot pass the 1,000 ft limit either.

Lappit Pond: This lies a short way southwest of the Wood-Chewer Kobolds, on the edge of some pinewoods, with trees all around it, like the other small Ponds in the district. Its more regular visitors are the Kobolds and crows that live in the same, fungus-affected trees as each other.

Lucky Pool: One of the small Ponds of the Forest region, roughly midway between the Werebadger Clan and Outlaws' Hideout in the map's northwest. On the edge of some denser pinewoods, the Pool is surrounded closely by a range of different trees, like many of the others hereabouts.

Outlaws' Hideout: In the depths of a denser stand of pinewoods, a little southeast of Lucky Pool in the map's northwest, a small band of Outlaws maintain a den here in a shallow vale. Their Hideout is concealed by illusion magics, and further protected by watchful sniper-archers in the trees around it. They have been trying to collect evidence of some serious wrongdoings by several leading people in the port of Basher, 20 miles or so to the northeast (30 km). Terrified of being found out, they are liable to kill anyone who discovers their Hideout, leaving the bodies some distance away in the Forest, battered and mauled to look like the victims of a monster attack.

Pell-Mell, Fey Trickster: When passing anywhere within 1,000 ft (300 m) of the marked area of woodland in a small valley of the map's southwest, any paths or tracks being followed subtly start drifting visitors away from whatever was their intended destination. Grass and bushes thicken, trees appear in the way, game trails fork, take a diversion, or vanish entirely, animals are spooked by nothing anyone can see, hear or catch scent of, and suchlike, though never in a way to attract definite suspicion. Pell-Mell, the Fey Trickster will be found at some point in all this, sitting on a log or tree branch, in a hollow trunk, leafy tree or a thorny bush that seems hollowed-out inside, with what looks like a small market stall with a brightly-striped awning cover on a barrow alongside, that offers all manner of minor, shiny trinkets. Pleasant to talk with (he has a quiet voice), if the visitors explain their difficulties, he will offer to sell them a travel amulet (a small gewgaw with a minor magical glamour on it), at which point their troubles are ended, so far as finding their way is concerned. The amulet has no actual powers; Pell-Mell has simply removed his magical effect causing the party's confusion. He will happily sell any of his other trinkets too, which are all similar in nature and effect, while promising different minor boons (some of which may genuinely work if he takes a liking to the buyer).

Screaming Frog Pond: Towards the southeast corner of the map is another of the area's infamous small Ponds, surrounded by trees, which lies between two denser areas of pinewoods. This Pond is home to a horde of normal-seeming frogs, that when startled - commonly on sighting any travellers - give a loud, screaming call instead of the typical quiet croaking, something which is apt to both terrify the local wildlife, and attract the attention of the Old Wizard, given the ordinary silence that usually exists here. They can be pacified, and even befriended, with Benker Nuts gathered from the bushes near the pond, and which grow too high-up on the thorny bushes for them to reach easily. The Nuts are perfectly good to eat in general, although the Screaming Frogs may not take too kindly to those who feed themselves but not the Frogs with them. The Frogs are descendants of the former villagers from near Crushed Keep, cursed and transformed long ago, their screaming calls an ironic remnant of their former musical abilities. Even if returned to their former shapes, they would have no recollection of who or what they once were.

Werebadger Clan: In the denser pinewoods a little northwest of Lucky Pool is the underground burrow settlement of a small Werebadger clan. They use the Pool for water, and are well aware of the Outlaws' Hideout to its southeast, although they will pretend ignorance, as they have no interest in what they are doing, and are used to the Outlaws' presence. The Werebadgers hunt chiefly in the Forest and hills from north sunwise to southwest from their sett.

Wood-Chewer Kobolds: Close-by Lappit Pond in the denser woods of the lower south-centre of the map, a few large, healthy, yet squat, deciduous oak trees have enormous, often hollow or partly-hollow boles, with gigantic bracket Wingnut Fungi sprouting from them, and with even larger rounded galls growing right out of their trunks as well, at various heights. These galls are a byproduct of the Wingnut Fungus affecting the trees. Many of the galls have had rounded window and door openings cut in them, and their hollowed-out interiors made into houses for the Wood-Chewer Kobolds that live in them. Technically, it is the dried fungus, and the soft interior fungal material of the galls they have hollowed-out that they chew, not wood, and which provides their daily nourishment, but which is also relatively harmlessly addictive - meaning the Kobolds live in and protect the Fungus-affected trees in a more-or-less symbiotic arrangement. The Fungus is quite pleasantly nutty in taste and texture, though it takes a degree of chewing to properly eat. More such trees can be found in the woods south of here and off-map, not all currently occupied by Kobolds. Eating it regularly softens the voice and sharpens the hearing, so the Kobolds tend to speak in little more than whispers. Somewhat disturbingly, the Forest crows are also attracted to eat the Fungus, often settling in silent flocks on the tops of affected trees to graze on it there. Kobolds and crows in the fungal trees leave one another quite alone, as if the Fungus is really controlling their behaviours.