



# Bird Hills Nature Area



Newport Road

Bird Road

M-14

**Legend**

- Trails
- Stream
- Seeps
- Parking Lot
- Restrooms

Down Up Circle

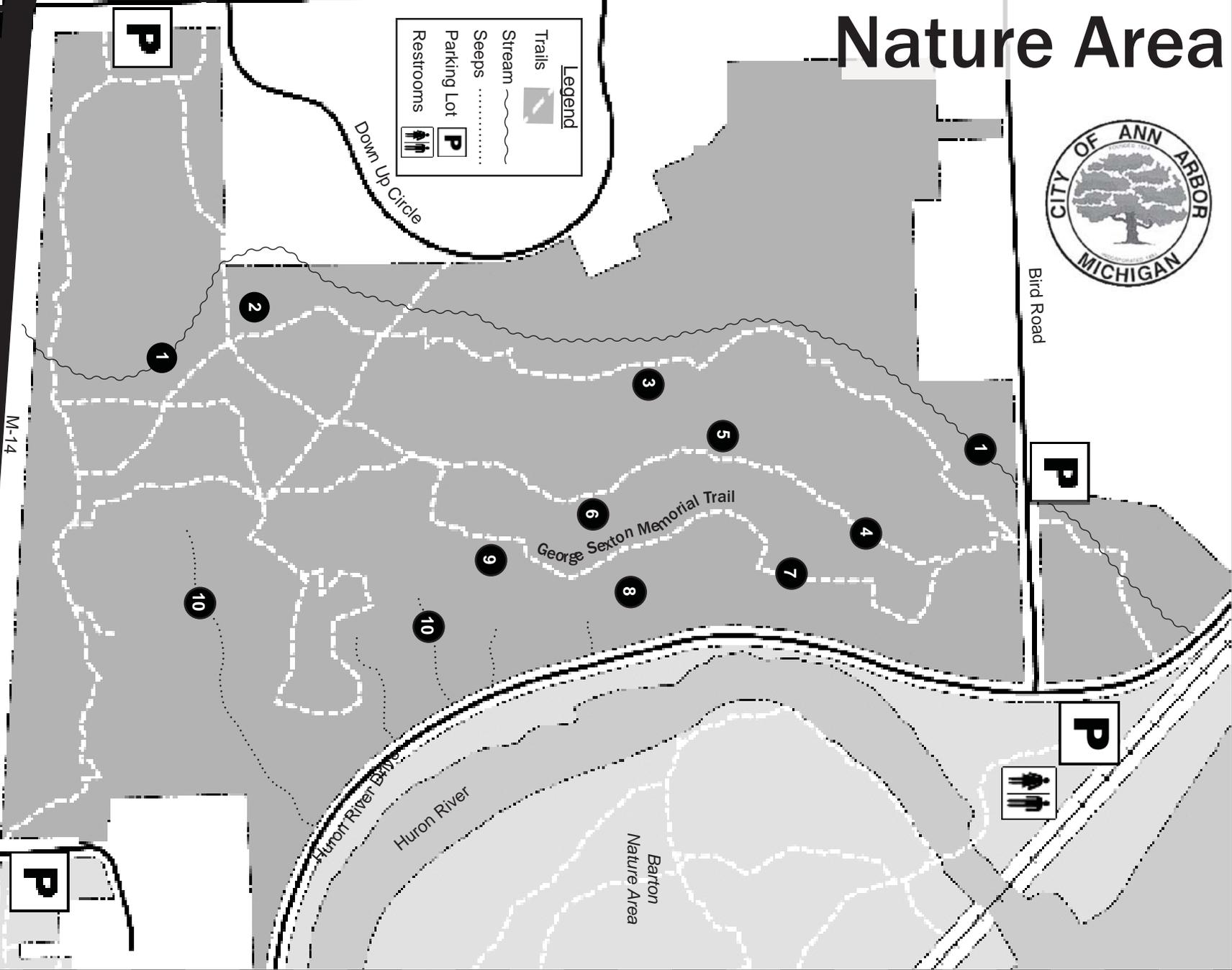
George Sexton Memorial Trail

Huron River

Barton Nature Area

Beechwood Dr

If you are interested in supporting our ongoing ecological restoration efforts, or more information, contact Natural Area Preservation  
 734.794.6627 - [nap@a2gov.org](mailto:nap@a2gov.org) - [www.a2gov.org/nap](http://www.a2gov.org/nap)



Bird Hills Nature Area is a 153-acre park, including a 7-acre parcel north of Bird Road. In 1967 the city purchased the original 116 acres of the park, with the remainder acquired in 1990.

## History

The park is located on the Fort Wayne Moraine, which was created by the retreat of the Wisconsin glacier over 10,000 years ago. As the glacier receded, it left soil in ridge-like hills near its melting edge. One such ridge runs north-south. Steep slopes fall east to the Huron River and west to an intermittent stream that flows into the Huron River. There is a 176-foot elevation change in the park.

The land was logged in the late 1800s and was grazed by cattle until the 1920s, when the Graves family purchased the land and began a reforestation plan. Disturbance from logging, farming, and the plantations have allowed non-native plant species (some invasive) to become established, but other areas of the park have re-vegetated to have relatively natural character. In fact, due to its varied topography and soils, Bird Hills is one of the most floristically diverse natural areas in Ann Arbor. Look for these five main plant communities in the park:

- **Oak-Hickory forest** is found at the southern end of the park. Dominant trees in these woods include pignut hickory, red oak, white oak, black walnut, and red maple. There are smaller trees such as witch-hazel and flowering dogwood, and lots of spring wildflowers, including trillium.
- **Beech-Maple forest** is present in wetter areas on the eastern edge. Trees like sugar maple, shagbark hickory, basswood, and tuliptree grow here with many ferns and flowers.
- **Conifer plantations** are on the main north-south ridge, including red pine and Douglas-fir. Soil disturbance has allowed other non-native species, like Norway maple, to invade here.
- An **abandoned apple orchard** is located in the northwest part of the park. This area has very low plant diversity and is composed mostly of non-native species. This portion of the park has been set aside as a wildlife sanctuary without trails.

- **Wetlands** can be found along the shallow stream and near seeps (see 1 and 10 in Special Features); they contain bottomland tree species such as eastern cottonwood, boxelder, and American elm. Skunk cabbage, marsh-marigold, and golden ragwort are also common throughout these wet areas.

## Special Features

Look for these landmarks, indicated by circled numbers on the trail map.

1. **Shallow Stream.** This small ephemeral stream winds through the length of the park. In early spring, look for the flowers of skunk cabbage or the bright yellow marsh-marigold. When this land was a farm, the stream provided a source of water for livestock.
2. **Hemlock Grove.** Pause for a moment under the dark canopy atop this tiny knoll. Deep shade from the planted eastern hemlocks keeps other trees from establishing on the forest floor beneath them. Hemlocks grow naturally in other parts of Michigan, especially in the Upper Peninsula.
3. **Birch Trees.** Easily recognized by their white papery bark, paper birch trees are also more common farther north. Washtenaw County is near the southern limit of their natural range, so they were probably planted here. Unlike hemlocks, birches do not grow well in shade, preferring to grow in open, sunny areas created by fires.
4. **Concrete Tracks.** The double row of narrow concrete tracks running along the trail was once part of a farm road. Wagon wheels rolled on this hard surface while horses or oxen walked between the tracks pulling the wagon. See if you can find other clues that this area was once farmed.
5. **“Climbing Tree.”** The wide-spreading branches of this oak indicate that it had plenty of sunlight and space to stretch out when it grew to maturity, making it a perfect climbing tree for past generations. In contrast, trees in forests grow tall and straight while competing for sunlight.

6. **Cherry Rock.** This large rock is a glacial “erratic”, having been carried to this location by the Wisconsin glacier. It is not named for a nearby cherry tree, but instead for the small reddish quartz pieces that give the rock a cherry color.

7. **George Sexton Memorial Trail.** This path was renamed in 2002 to honor this avid defender of natural areas and a long-time leader within the local environmental community.

8. **Tuliptrees.** These tall, straight trees are near the northern edge of their natural range. Look for the large, fragrant, tulip-shaped flowers in early spring.

9. **Sassafras Grove.** This is another more southerly species. Notice the variable leaf shape. Sassafras has aromatic leaves, twigs, bark, and roots that were used by Delaware and Cherokee Native Americans to treat various ailments and by early settlers to brew root beer. Today sassafras is known to be carcinogenic and is prohibited in food by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

10. **Intermittent Seeps.** As rainwater soaks into the soil on top of the ridge, it travels down through the porous sand and gravel. When it hits a layer of less permeable clay soil, it flows horizontally out of the slope as a spring or seep. These seeps keep the soil wetter than in the surrounding areas, which, along with the steep terrain, promotes a unique community of plants, including several rare species.

## Help Preserve Bird Hills Nature Area

- Bicycles are not permitted in the park.
- Dogs are allowed provided they are leashed and their feces are removed.

This park is managed by the City of Ann Arbor Natural Area Preservation. For more information, see our website at [www.a2gov.org/nap](http://www.a2gov.org/nap) or call 734-794-6627.