

Fall Newsletter

NATURAL AREA PRESERVATION

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PARK FOCUS

BARTON NATURE AREA

Barton Nature Area is defined by the history and course of the Huron River, and the stewardship of the original inhabitants of the Great Lakes.

**Barton is
a peek into
the past.**

Renée Hytinen, NAP PR and Special Events

Over the last 9,000 years, the Huron River has played an essential role in the lives of tens of thousands of Indigenous peoples—and in the last 200 years, the lives of European settlers and eventually people from all over the world. Glaciers first gave the watershed its moraines and outwash plains, and soon after, the cultural use of fire had its own lasting influence on the landscape. Across Michigan, diverse natural communities evolved with the influence of the stewardship practices of Great Lakes natives.

Photo: Barton fen area, mid-fall 2023

Photo monitor volunteer

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Natural Area Preservation's mission is to protect and restore Ann Arbor's natural areas and to foster an environmental ethic within the community.



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*Barton fen area, summer 2023
Photo monitor volunteer*

Wetlands are the most ecologically diverse natural communities in Michigan.

They are the invisible machinery of healthy watersheds; wetlands directly contribute to the quality of our drinking water. In Ann Arbor, about 80% of the city's supply comes from Barton Pond, just on the other side of Barton Dam from the oxbow.

BARTON'S WETLAND REMAINS

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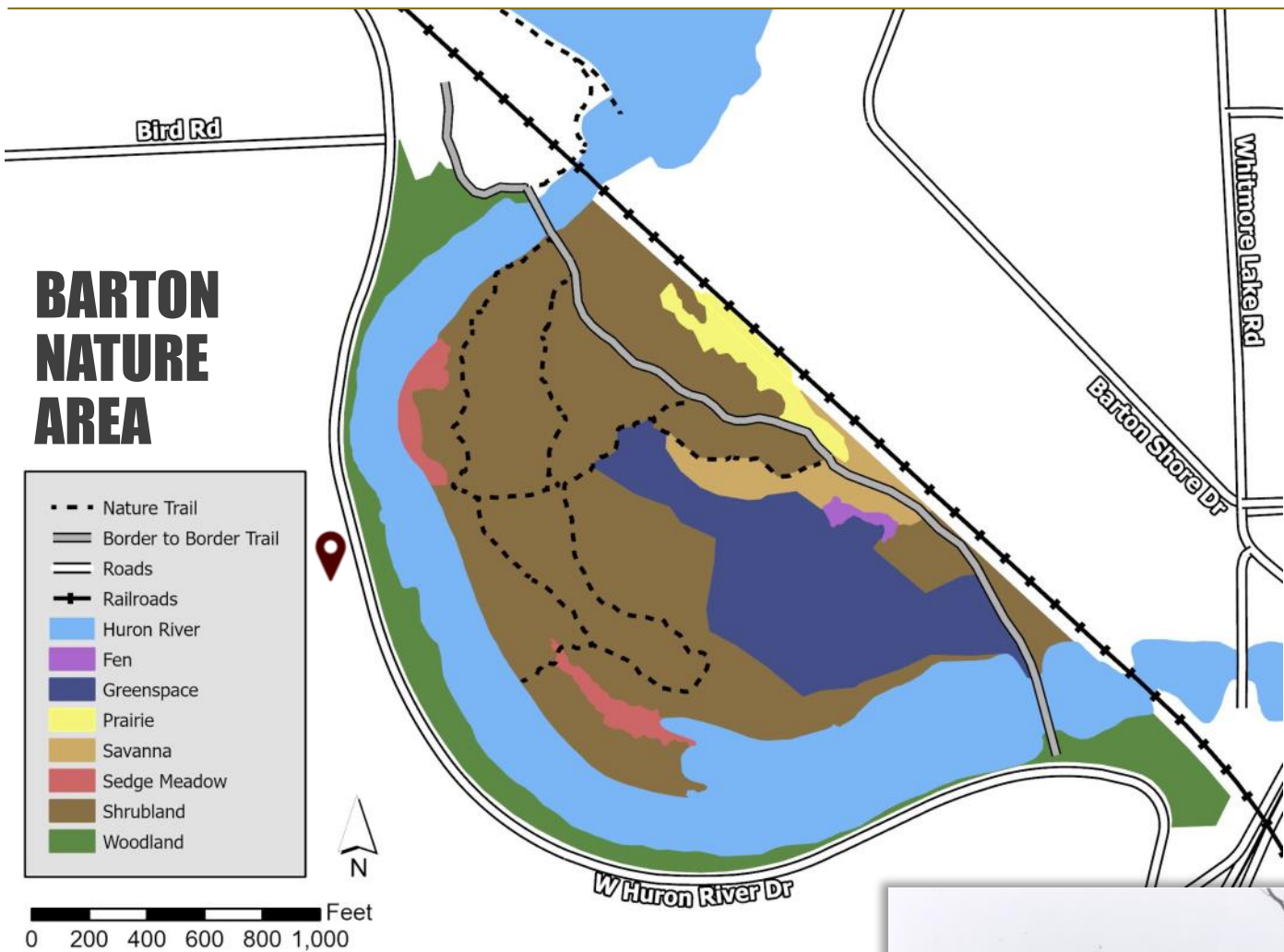
Barton Nature Area exists inside an oxbow (a term used to refer to a u-shaped meander in a river) with Bird Hills Nature Area on the outside. Water moves faster on the outer edge of a curve and can cause erosion of adjacent land. One could guess that the southern slopes of Bird Hills were worn down by erosion, and the sediment was then deposited across the river in the slower-moving water. This process set the geological stage for a floodplain, which probably had lovely oak savanna and prairie on the higher ground with wetlands emerging closer to where the land meets the river.

Complex circumstances have ensured that ancient landscape still exists at Barton. A rare wetland that takes millennia to form and thrives with regular burning: a fen, or more specifically, a prairie fen. Barton's fen is teeny tiny—barely large enough to mention—yet it is still a natural wonder to be appreciated and protected.

For thousands of years, Barton's fen was fed by groundwater and probably rivulets from the Huron. The water brought calcium up from abundant limestone, creating the anaerobic (lacking oxygen), and alkaline (as opposed to acidic) conditions that define prairie fens. Layers of peat accumulated while plants died but did not decompose.

Full of sedges and grasses, sometimes with a few adapted shrubs and trees, a fen is always wet during the growing season. In drier times, fire is a boon for seeds, clearing litter so sunlight can reach the soil and making nutrients available for those same seeds to grow up healthy and flower. Without fire, a fen can easily disappear over time, giving in to encroachment of woody plants.

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BARTON NATURE AREA

- Nature Trail
- Border to Border Trail
- == Roads
- + Railroads
- Blue Huron River
- Purple Fen
- Dark Blue Greenspace
- Yellow Prairie
- Tan Savanna
- Red Sedge Meadow
- Brown Shrubland
- Green Woodland

0 200 400 600 800 1,000 Feet



View of Barton from Bird Hills, undated

BARTON NOW AND THEN

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Within the wetland areas of Barton is a remarkable peek into the past. We can still find abundant sedges and occasional orchids, goldenrods and asters, joe-pye weed and boneset. Butterflies, dragonflies, and damselflies frequent the area. Birds return because of the variety and abundance of insects. Snakes, turtles, and frogs love it here too. These beings evolved with the cultural use of fire on the land – indeed, humans have been part of their ecosystem for at least 9,000 years. It is safe to say that Barton’s rich biodiversity would not have been possible without the stewardship practices of Indigenous peoples.

In the first half of the 19th century, settlers began rapidly and significantly changing the river. Around 1824, mills and dams started popping up, and fire suppression became the norm. Much of the Barton oxbow became farmland, with some hay fields and grazing. But waterlogged soils make plowing difficult, and it is speculated that this is one of the reasons the wet meadows and fen persisted.

*Barton prairie summer 2023
Photo monitoring volunteer*

MORE CHANGES AT BARTON

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The tracks of the Michigan Central Railroad were laid in 1839, now marking the eastern border of the park. An unintended benefit was the return of fire in small pockets along the tracks. Railroad sparks burned the adjoining prairie – and likely the fen – allowing them to survive another day. In 1912, construction started on Barton Dam, which still exists today at the north end of the oxbow.

Planning nine dams in total, the Detroit Edison Company bought about 2,000 acres along the river. However, by 1959, they deemed hydroelectric power on the Huron impractical and offered to sell close to 1,000 acres of the land to the City of Ann Arbor. In 1963, the City agreed to the sale – taking ownership of four dams and tripling the land owned by the city for parks and recreational uses.

After 200 years of industrial use and fire suppression, the Huron River and its watershed are forever altered. Still, over the last 30 years, the Barton prairie has recovered with the help of controlled burning by NAP. These burns also aided the survival of small areas of wet meadow and, of course, the fen. CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE



Burning around a utility pole in the Barton prairie



BARTON NATURE AREA

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This year marks another milestone in Barton's history, the completion of a paved, accessible trail – part of the larger B2B Trail. The new trail at Barton follows a previously existing trail that stretched across the park between the two footbridges. Two new accessible parking spaces are now available in the parking lot near Barton Dam as part of the project. This new trail segment will connect with the planned pedestrian tunnel between Barton and Bandemer Park, to be built in 2025.

A new nature playground, the "Great Oak Nature Playground," is also now open adjacent to the parking lot. The trail project required the removal of a dying and potentially hazardous white oak tree. The dying tree is estimated to have been more than 150 years old and was felled in a way that allowed it to be reused on site as a new nature play structure.

Barton Nature Area has welcomed thousands of Ann Arbor's contemporary residents and visitors to witness and enjoy the beauty of the remaining unique natural

communities there. Ann Arbor Parks and Recreation has owned the land for 60 years, and engaged in stewardship activities there for the last 30. Trails have been thoughtfully rerouted to protect the remaining

sensitive sedge meadows, at the same time making sure these areas are still viewable by visitors. Anglers love fishing from the footbridges, and canoes and kayaks are a daily occurrence around the river's oxbow. During the spring, the open areas of old field give us the chance to see Woodcocks dance, and the shrubby spots allow us to hear Gray Catbirds

singing and meowing. Along the water, turtles bask and frogs serenade. Stewardship continues with help from volunteers – some of whom are the same 200+ volunteers who conducted the plant and animal inventories of Ann Arbor's natural areas that still help inform decisions about the land today.



Top: New paved pathway at Barton

Left: One of two added accessible parking spaces at the Barton Dam parking lot

Above: Great Oak Nature Playground near the Barton Dam parking lot

NAPPENINGS

Thank You!

Many thanks to the individuals and groups who helped out with volunteer work or other support during the last few months. We could not make such a difference without you!

- Ann Arbor Open School
- SummerWorks
- UM BLUE Missions
- UM Chi Epsilon
- UM Ecological Issues class
- UM Field Ecology
- UM Michigan Community Scholars Program
- UM Program in the Environment
- UM Redefined
- UM Running Club
- UM School of Information
- UM Sigma Nu
- UM Tau Beta Pi



Snapshots of late summer and early fall workdays

OAK WILT UPDATE

The City's remediation plan concluded work in January. Following is a timeline of the process.

AUG. 2023 After concern was raised by a NAP Park Steward, **testing** confirmed suspected oak wilt infections in a cluster of several Northern red oaks (*Quercus rubra*) in Bird Hills Nature Area. City Forestry and NAP developed a remediation plan.

OCT. 2023 Belowground remediation required **trenching** the perimeter of the affected area and was completed in October, 2023. Trenching severs the root systems through which the infection spreads.

JAN. 2024 Aboveground remediation began with **felling** all the red oaks within the trenched perimeter, followed by **herbicide application**. The remaining oak material was chipped, with the larger logs removed to be safely repurposed.

... **Ongoing monitoring** has not found any evidence that oak wilt has spread beyond the treatment area



Oak wilt is a disease affecting oak trees, caused by the fungus, *Bretziella fagecaerum*. Members of the red oak family tend to be highly susceptible, while members of the white oak family vary in susceptibility but tend to be more tolerant or resistant.

Learn more about the disease at [Michigan Oak Wilt.org](https://www.michigan.gov/OakWilt)

NAPPENINGS

Staff Updates—Farewell!



Matthew Spoor
Park Steward
Coordinator

It's hard to believe, but the time has come for me to say goodbye to NAP. I've accepted a position as a

Senior Technician with GEI Consultants, where I'll be leading an ecological restoration team working on projects in the region. While I'm excited for this new chapter, I'm equally sad to be leaving the incredible

NAP community. Over the past three and a half years, I've learned so much about flora, fauna, and restoration, thanks to the dedication and passion of the NAP staff and volunteers. The commitment NAP volunteers bring to enhancing the biodiversity of our community has truly warmed my heart. Working with you has been the most

rewarding experience of my career, and I'll never forget the impact we've made together. Thank you for all the hard work. Keep it up—you're making a real difference!



Josh Doyle
Conservation Crew

In 2019, when I started with NAP, I had no idea the impact it would have on me. The passion

shared by the staff and volunteers for Ann Arbor's natural areas and conservation lit a fire in me that is still going—I left to work as an arborist, and as a park ranger, but carried the flame with me. In 2023, I jumped at the opportunity to return to NAP while I finished my degree at MSU. Now as I step into a role with City Forestry, I

will have a different focus, but the fire started within me at NAP still burns brightly. Thanks to the volunteers for making me look forward to coming in on the weekends, I will really miss workdays. Thank you to NAP staff for making our work so joyful. I feel very lucky to be able to grow in this new position while still working for the betterment of the community I love so much.



NATURAL AREA PRESERVATION

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Natural Area Preservation is funded by the voter-approved 2020-2026 Park Maintenance & Capital Improvements Millage.

Fall Events

**Volunteer Stewardship and
K-5 Environmental Education**



**TO FIND AND
REGISTER FOR EVENTS
VISIT VHUB.AT/NAP**



Nature Stewardship VOLUNTEER REWARDS 2024

VOLUNTEER YOUR TIME
WITH NAP TO EARN POINTS!

FREE



BUTTONS

2
points



CARABINER

3
points



EMBROIDERED CAP

6
points



LONG SLEEVE T-SHIRT

9
points



HOODED SWEATSHIRT

20+
points



ANNOUNCED IN
DECEMBER!

GRAND PRIZES

1
volunteer
event

=

1
point

How to use your points:



Sign in to
VolunteerHub.

Check the
point counter
next to your
profile name.

12 points



Decide which prize
you'd like.

Contact us at
NAP@a2gov.org
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Arrange to pick up
your prize!