

Saco Heath Preserve



Welcome to the 1,223-acre Saco Heath Preserve. The Nature Conservancy invites you to visit one of Maine's unique natural ecosystems by walking our self-guiding trail. The one-mile walk will take you along a woodland trail to the heath, where a boardwalk will lead you through a variety of peatland communities.

Saco Heath formed when adjacent ponds filled with decaying plant matter called peat. With each year's plant growth adding to the peat accumulation, the two peatlands eventually grew together above the water table to form a raised coalesced bog. Saco Heath is the southernmost example of this peatland type.

Self-guiding Trail

Please look for the corresponding numbers along the trail.

1 The woodland trail leading to Saco Heath is deceiving. Lined with maple, white pine and hemlock, the trail only hints at the unique peatland that lies beyond. White pine is distinguished by its bunches of five dark green needles. On the heath this tree appears yellowish due to the acidic peat on which it grows. Hemlock is an evergreen with short needles on flat branches, and it favors a cool, moist habitat. This forest provides shelter for moose, deer and other wildlife that inhabit the heath.



black tupelo
Nyssa sylvatica



leather-leaf, *Chamaedaphne calyculata*

2 The plants found in this forested wetland differ from most of those you will see on the heath. Unlike the heath, whose plants receive nutrients from rainwater only, this habitat is also nourished by groundwater. The soil here is a sandy type, very different from the heath's 15-foot deep peat layer. To your right is a black tupelo (black gum) tree, which reaches its northern limits in Maine. Its bark looks like alligator hide, and its leaves turn a bright scarlet in autumn.

3 This is one of the few places on the heath where the surrounding upland changes abruptly to peatland. Usually a watery moat or lagg area, often with alder trees, divides the two. Scattered to each side of the boardwalk, the lacy tamarack tree grows on hummocks of sphagnum moss. This is the only conifer that loses its needles in the fall. Here it grows poorly due to a lack of nutrients. A variety of grass-like sedges, such as beaked sedge and cottongrass, cover layers of moss and peat. Many species of moss occur on raised bogs and eventually decay to become peat.



rhodora, *Rhododendron canadense*

4 Myriad plants grow on the heath, including sheep laurel, leather-leaf, Labrador tea and rhodora. These plants are specially adapted to the

harsh, nutrient-poor, acidic conditions found here. Sheep laurel and rhodora brighten the heath in early summer with their show of pink and purple blossoms. Leather-leaf is an evergreen with white flowers in the spring and a leathery feel to each leaf. Labrador tea can be identified by the soft, rust-colored wool underneath the leaves.

5 An old ATV trail crosses beneath the boardwalk to join a system of trails that have scarred the heath. All-terrain vehicles not only damage the plant life and tear up the surface of the heath, but also cause the underlying peat to compact, thus altering the hydrology and vegetation of the immediate area. These impacts can last for many decades. On a smaller scale, repeated foot traffic can cause similar damage, which is prevented here by the boardwalk.



sheep laurel
Kalmia angustifolia



Labrador tea,
Rhododendrum groenlandicum

tawny cottongrass, *Eriophorum virginicum*

6 Here, the heath opens up to a wide expanse of sedge, sphagnum moss and heath plants, with a scattering of pitch pine, white pine and tamarack. Cottongrass is one of the tall sedges that you see during spring and autumn. Its cottony tufts sway with the wind as its seeds wait to be dispersed.

7 Saco Heath is the only known location in the world where Atlantic white cedar grows on a raised coalesced bog. It also is the only known Maine location for Hessel's hairstreak butterfly, whose larvae feed on the cedar.

As you walk back to the woodland trail, look carefully to each side. You might catch a glimpse of the carnivorous pitcher plant. This funnel-shaped plant lures insects inside its pitcher of sweet-smelling water, where the insects drown and are digested by the plant. This plant also serves as host to three moths that feed on the plant and several other insects and spiders that use the plant for protection or as a food source.

Preserve Guidelines

Please help us protect this fragile natural area by respecting the following guidelines:

- Foot traffic only.
- Stay on trails and boardwalk.
- No collecting of plants or animals.
- No pets.
- Carry out all litter.
- No fires, smoking or camping.
- Day use only—preserve closes at sunset.

Directions

Take Exit 36 (formerly exit 5) off I-95/Maine Turnpike. Take the first exit after the tollbooth and turn left onto Industrial Park Road. Turn right onto Route 112, Buxton Road. Follow Route 112 about two miles. The parking lot for the Saco Heath Preserve will be on your right in a wooded area.