# Hickory Hill Park
# Spring Nature Guide

The warm temperatures and cool rains of spring trigger the appearance of many signs of life in Hickory Hill Park. Buds of all sizes and shapes burst forth and reveal young leaves. Flowers now ornament the once-naked branches of many trees and shrubs; later these blossoms will mature into seed-bearing fruits that provide food for many forms of wildlife. Young green plants appear among the dried plants of the past winter. The scant winter diets of many animals inhabiting Hickory Hill Park are replenished by the young, nourishing plant growth of spring.

This season is a magical time of year, for each day the environment changes. The wild geraniums that blanket the forest floor on Monday will give way to the equal beauty of the multiflora rose on Friday. A constant change of color, texture, and focus makes Hickory Hill Park an exciting place to visit in April and May.

The nature trail, 1½ miles in length, is a welcome welcome retreat for individuals seeking to view life in the various communities of Hickory Hill. The numbers in the booklet correspond with the twelve station markers along the trail (see centerfold map) to aid visitors in their discoveries.

# 1

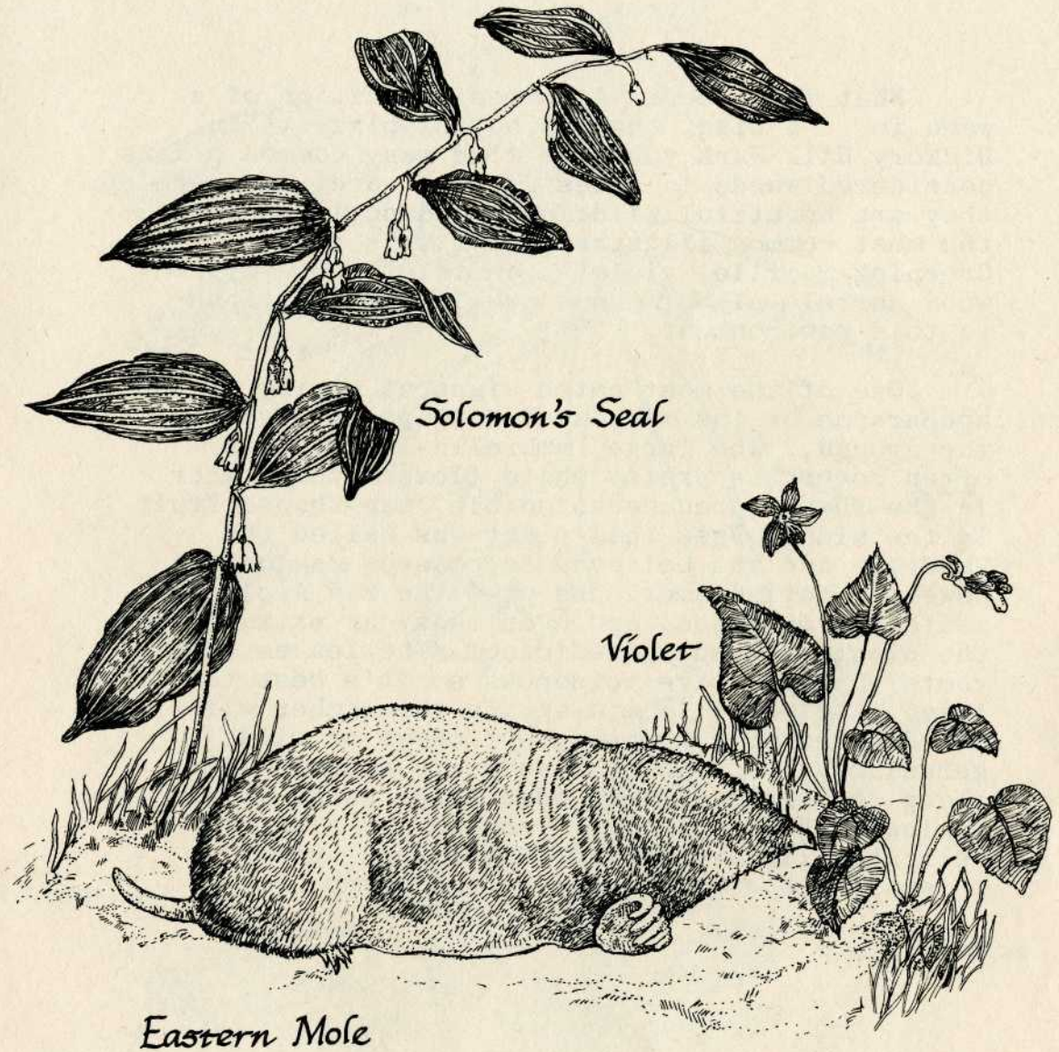
Ralston Creek, replenished with runoff from winter's snow-melt, is teeming with many forms of aquatic life. Dragon and damsel fly nymphs voraciously consume mosquitoes, midges, and other insects. Mayfly nymphs are burrowed into the mud banks of the creek or are found on the water's surface. The diet of immature mayflies consists of organic debris and small aquatic organisms. Water striders inhabit the water's surface and feed on small insects. The gyrating movements of the whirligig beetles may be spotted on or below the water's surface. Toads, frogs, and turtles burrow out from a long winter's rest in the creek's mud. Stimulated by the lengthening days of spring, these herptiles (reptiles and amphibians) begin the search for a suitable area to deposit their eggs in or near Ralston Creek.

As you look up the hill toward Station 1, you will see the park's namesake--a hill full of hickory trees. There are, of course, other species of trees, such as oak; but the distinctive characteristics of the shagbark hickory are what inspired the park's name.

# 2

The woodland community in Hickory Hill Park consists primarily of white oaks and shagbark hickories. Other overstory trees found among the dominant white oak/shagbark hickory stand are bitternut hickories, and pin, burr, and red oaks. These trees flourish in the loosely compacted soil, rich in humus. One animal that thrives in the loose soil of the woodlands is the eastern mole. Look for ridges of dirt (three inches in width) winding along the woodland floor. These ridges are evidence of the mole's subsurface runways. The eastern mole, equipped with "spade-like" front feet and a probing snout, creates these subsurface passages while searching for earthworms, grubs, and insects.

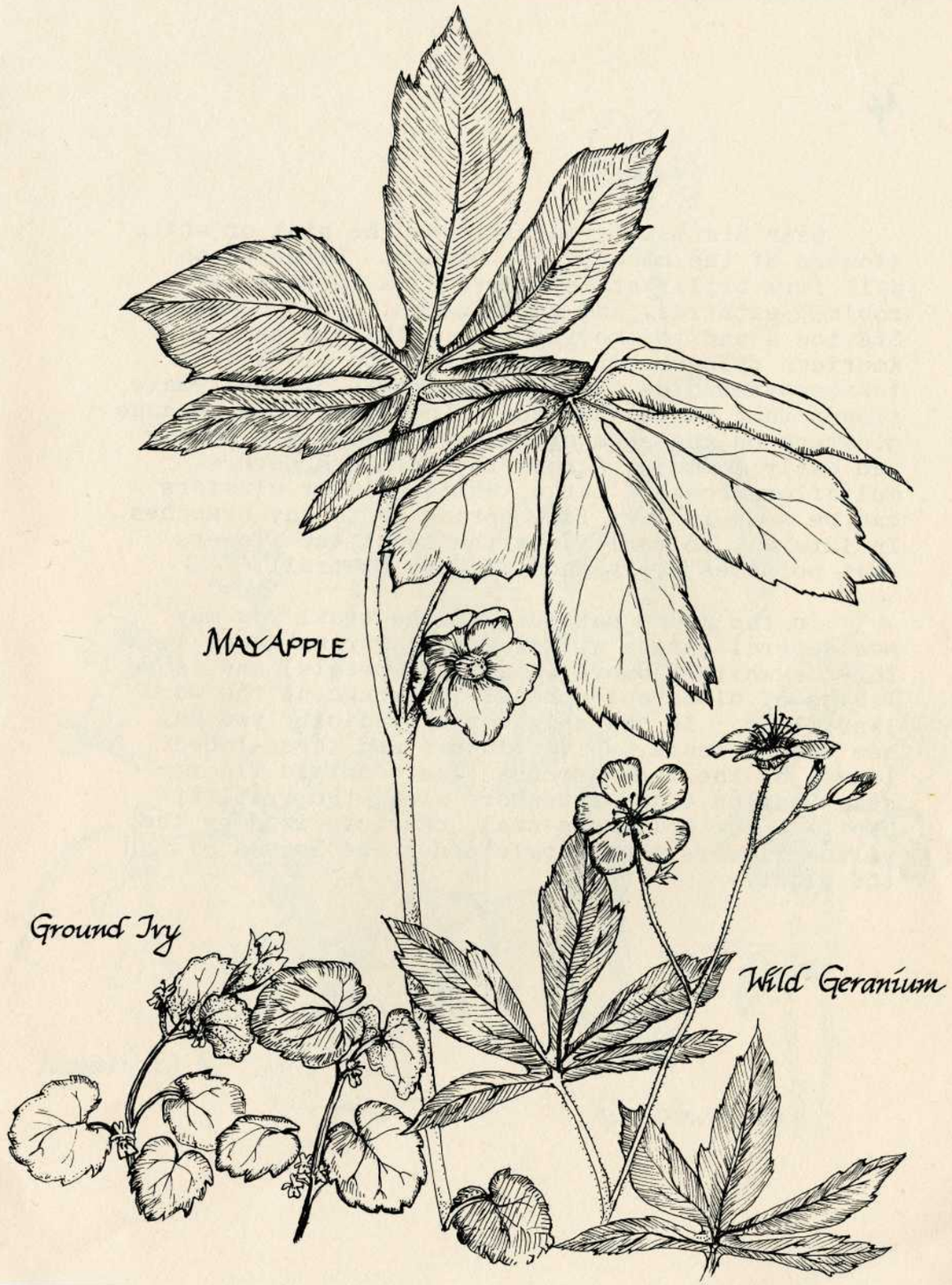
See if you can detect a distinctive odor around Station 2. If you look to the ground, you will see a little-leafed carpet of green foliage with tiny purple flowers. The scent of this spreading plant, often called Creeping Charlie, Creeping Jenny, or Ground Ivy, gives you a hint to which family it belongs--the mint family. Also in this area one can find many violets and dandelions. Shifting your focus to the lower branches of the shagbark hickory, you can make a discovery that many people by-pass. In late April, when the hickory buds begin to open, each branch tip becomes a beautiful pink flower amazingly similar to a tulip. These unique flowers often go unnoticed because of the height of the branches. If they are carefully noted now, one can spot young whips (single-stem trees) with their single flowers peppered throughout the thicker timber.



# 3

What is a weed? A common definition of a weed is: "a plant that is out of place." In Hickory Hill Park you will find many common plants considered weeds in a residential yard; but here they are beautiful wildflowers, dandelions being the most common illustration of this point. Creeping Charlie, violets, white clover, yellow wood sorrel--all of these are lovely additions to this environment.

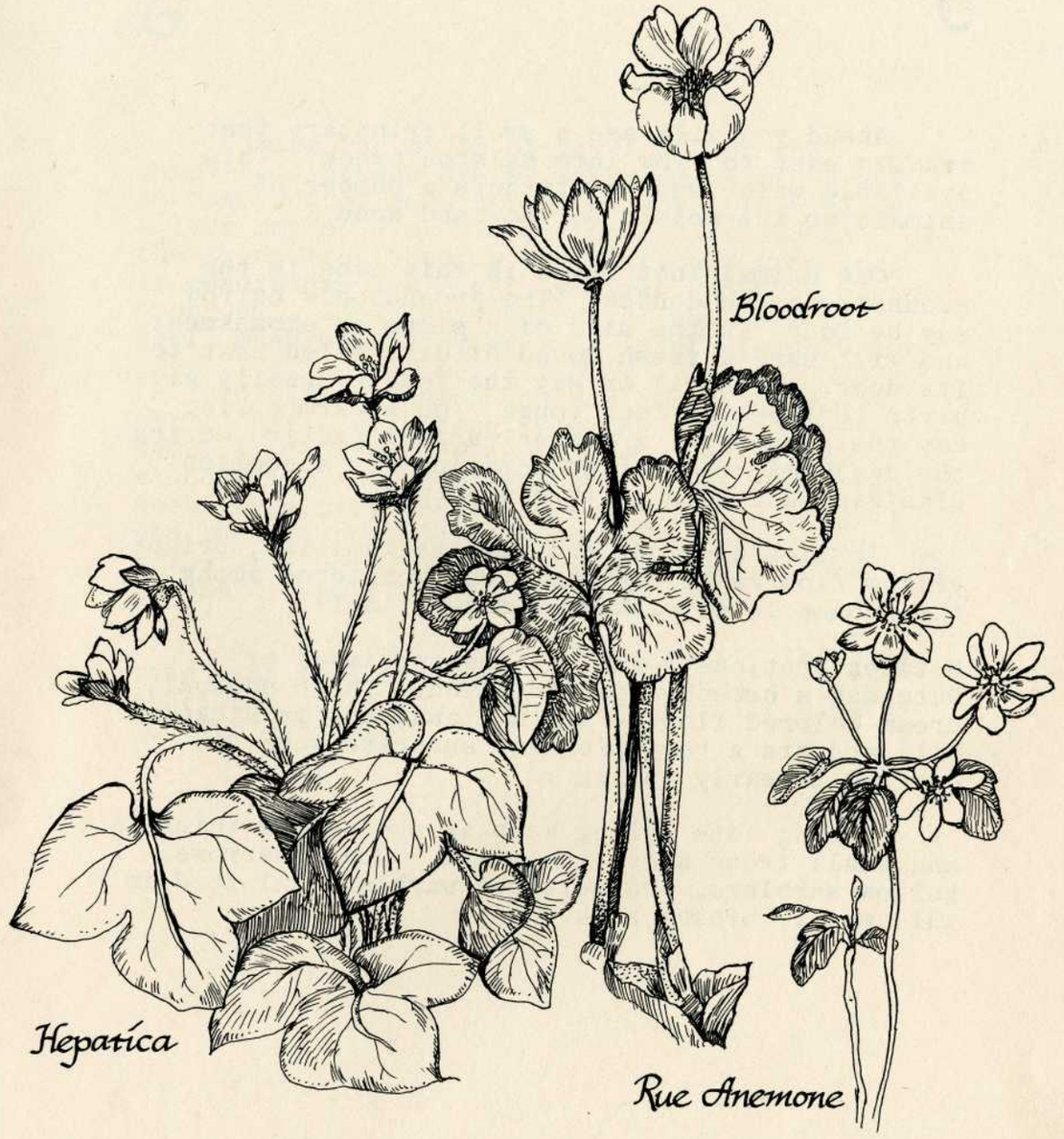
One of the most noted signs of spring is the appearance of the masses of May Apples covering the ground. The large, umbrella-like leaves often cover the pretty white flowers that later in the summer produce an edible, egg-shaped fruit. In the Middle Ages this plant was called the Mandrake and was believed to possess magical powers. Native Americans used the May Apple for medicinal purposes, and even today an extract from the plant is used in medicine. The leaves and roots, however, are poisonous so it's best to leave it alone. In mid-spring the timber will be carpeted with the purple flowers of wild geraniums. Gooseberry bushes are sighted often along the trail and are identified early in the spring by hairy, thorny branches and also by delicate, light-colored flowers that appear to be small lanterns hanging on the shrub.



# 4

Near Station 4 you will see the pink or white flowers of the honeysuckle bushes. Later these will form brilliant red berries, a favorite of robins, catbirds, and goldfinches. Just beyond Station 4 and to the right is a thick stand of American filberts or hazelnuts. The cloth-like leaves often hide the unusual growth of the female flower that houses the nut. Look for these strange clusters on the ends of twigs in very late spring and early summer. Across the path are several multiflora roses. Large, white, flower clusters can be seen in very late spring on thorny branches. In late May to early June the scent the flowers emit perfumes every sunny length of trail.

In the woods surrounding the trail you may see several spring wildflowers. During March look for the white flowers (eight-ten petals) and lobed leaves of bloodroot sprinkled throughout the woodland floor. In the neighboring vicinity you may see the delicate, white flowers and three-lobed leaves of the rue anemone. The woodland floor near Station 4 and elsewhere along the trail are habitats for Solomon's-seal, characterized by the yellow flowers that dangle under the leaves of the plant.



# 5

Ahead you will see a small tributary that travels east to flow into Ralston Creek. This available water source attracts a number of animals to the moist, bottom-land area.

One animal that lives in this area is the groundhog or woodchuck. The groundhog's burrow may be found in the side of a slope or embankment and will have a fresh mound of dirt piled next to its door. In April or May the female usually gives birth to three or four young. On a warm spring day the groundhog, a diurnal animal (active during the day), may be spotted foraging for dandelion, plantain, and wild lettuce shoots.

In this area one can see the familiar, bright, yellow flowers of the buttercup scattered among the ground level plants of Hickory Hill.

Between Stations 5 and 6 a few specimens of Dutchman's breeches can be found. These unusual, cream-colored flowers are not abundant in Hickory Hill and are a very pleasant surprise when discovered in early spring.

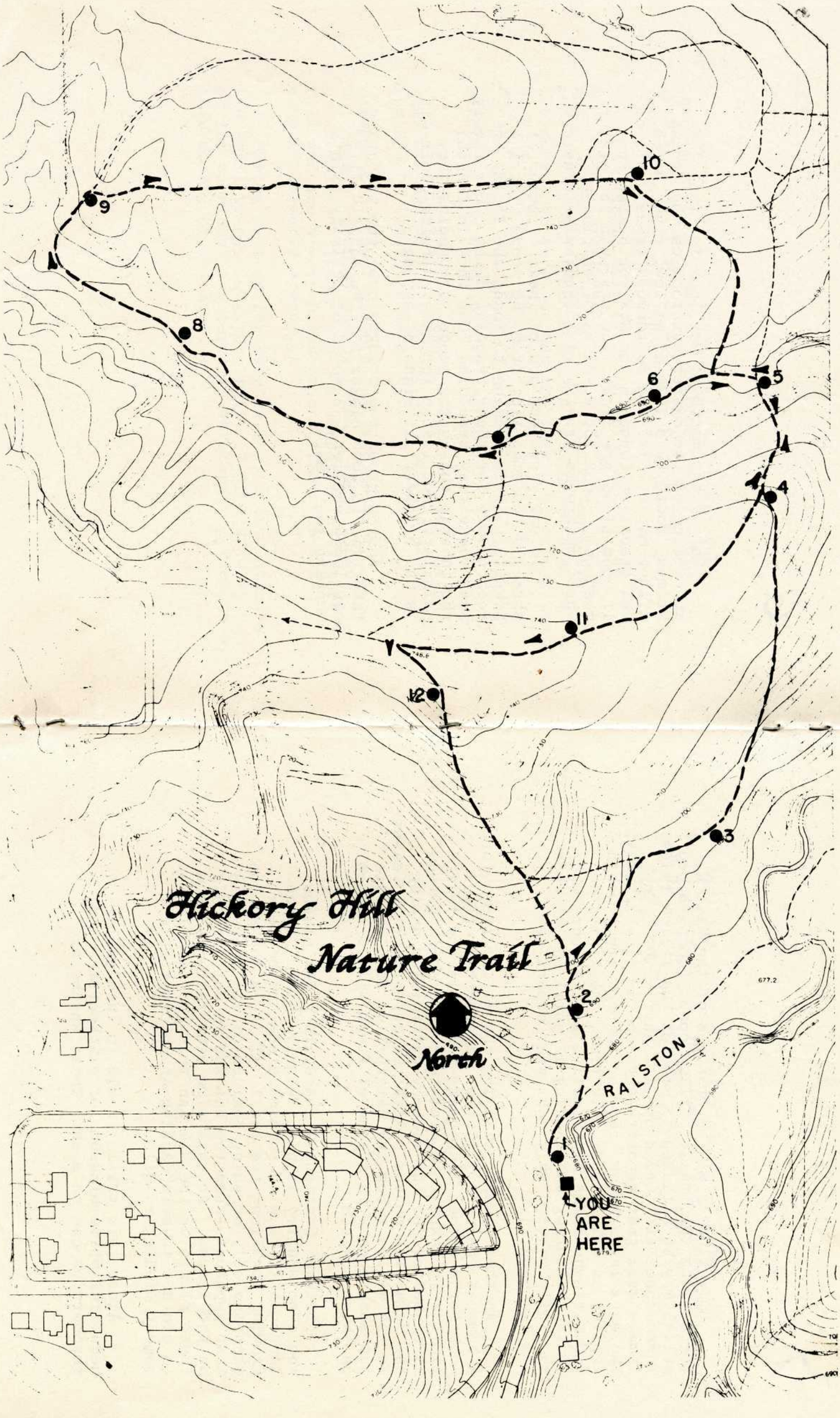
During late spring keep an eye on the thickets and small trees along the trail. Song sparrows, yellow warblers, and cerulean warblers all feed in this moist, brushy area.

# 6

During the month of May look for the appearance of the oyster mushroom on the trunks, stumps, roots, and logs of willow, river birch, silver maple, elm, and cottonwood trees. All of the trees are found in the Station 6 area and, if conditions are right, you may spot the oyster mushroom. Look for a series of whitish-gray shelf mushrooms growing in a lengthwise cluster.

In early evening you may hear a chorus of shrill notes emanating from the woods. Spring peepers (little cousins to toads and frogs) are responsible for these resonant notes. One rarely sees these tiny creatures (one inch in length) who inhabit the nearby woods surrounding the tributary; but listen for this chirping choir--it is one of the first signs of spring.

As you cross the bridges over the tributary, take time to look closer for the aquatic life mentioned earlier. A world of activity exists beneath your feet.


Hickory Hill
Nature Trail
North
RALSTON
YOU ARE HERE
1
2
3
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12

# 7

Look closely at the branches of the willow trees along the trail. Willow cones (cone-shaped galls) may be attached to some of the willow twigs. These cones are formed by gall gnat grubs. The female gall gnat deposits eggs on the tips of twigs. The eggs later hatch, and the newborn grubs begin feeding on willow buds. In time, the irritated plant tissue forms a protective gall around the grub, sheltering and feeding it until spring when the fully matured gall gnat will depart as a small-winged fly.

Another insect utilizing the willow trees for a home is the caterpillar of viceroy butterfly. Look for a dried, lengthwise-rolled willow leaf, similar in shape to a miniature cup, which serves as a shelter for the viceroy caterpillar during the remaining months. With the appearance of leaves on the willow trees the caterpillar abandons its cup-shaped home in search of fresh willow leaves on which to feed.

Between Stations 7 and 8 are a few places where poison ivy is particularly thick. Three lobed leaflets with reddish stems can be seen growing low along the trail. This is the season when the oily or shiny feature of the leaves is most apparent--when the hot sun is not directly on the leaves. At this time stay far away from these plants as the oil can transfer from leaves to clothes to skin causing an unforgettable memory of Hickory Hill.

Along this trail, in mid to late spring, the beautiful white blossoms of blackberries and raspberries can be seen. These shrubs are thorny like the rose but with much thicker and rounder branches. Blackberries and raspberries can be differentiated by turning under the leaves. A white underside identifies the plant as a raspberry.

On a warm spring day you may spot a snake wriggling through the grass along the trail. Snakes inhabiting Hickory Hill Park are the garter, ribbon, De Kay, blue racer, bull, and hognose. These snakes can be seen in a number of places--along the banks of Ralston Creek and its tributaries, along the edge of the woods, and in open grassy areas. Earthworms, insects, toads, salamanders, frogs, and mice make up the diet of these snakes.

Along the flood plain are several interesting creek plants. Equisetum, also known as horsetail or scouringrush, is a water-loving plant that was once used by native Americans and pioneers to clean utensils--thus, the origin of the name scouringrush. Also called snake weed, the plant first comes out of the ground looking amazingly like a snake. This is a fertile shoot. The infertile shoots look like a green, coarse cylindrical brush. In the past this plant was used in the treatment of tuberculosis. Among the Equisetum, boneset plants can be found. The leaf is often thought to be more interesting than the white flower, as it surrounds the stem entirely, uniting at the base. This plant was widely used as little as 50 years ago as a cure for colds and malaria.

Look closely in the brush and small trees along the trail. Several species of warblers may be seen--the nashville, myrtle, and Tennessee warblers. These warblers usually stop over to rest and feed in Hickory Hill Park before continuing the next leg of their migratory journey to northern Minnesota and Canada.

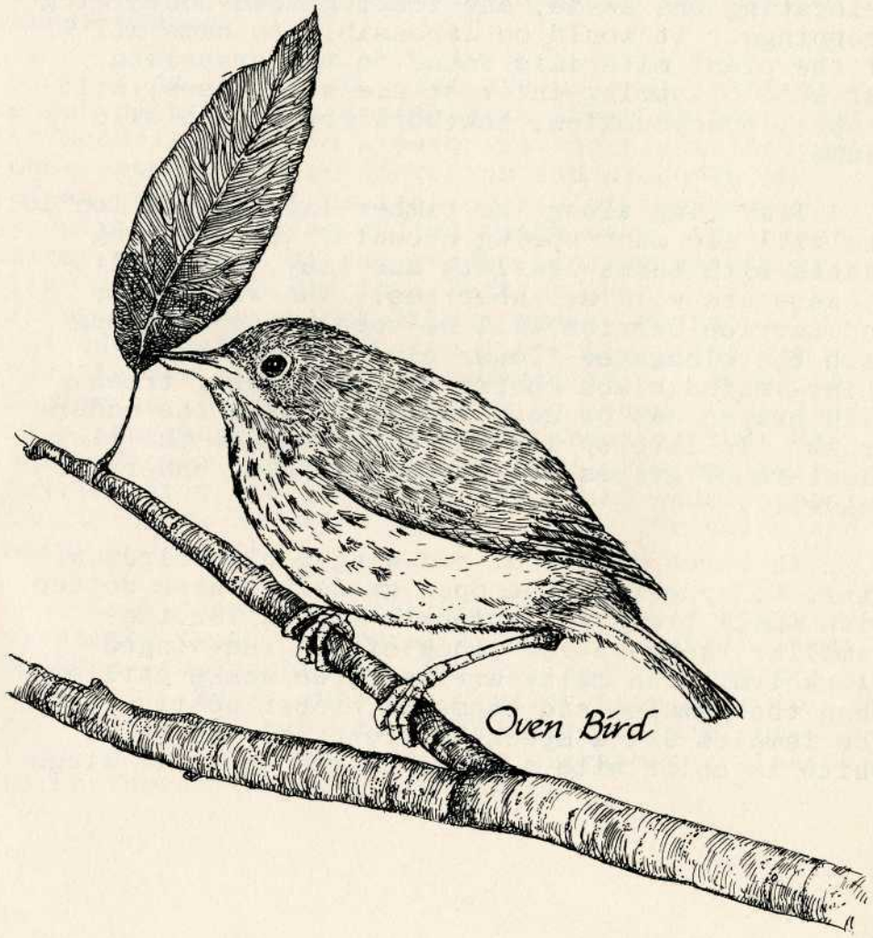


Northeast of Station 9 is an area that was mowed until three years ago. It is now in its pioneer stage of naturalization. This is an excellent area in which to see how a grassland becomes a forest--without human help. How do trees just pop up in a barren area? Seeds are dispersed in various ways--by rain, wind, people, and by animals brushing against plants thus relocating the seeds, and leaving seed-containing droppings. It would be impossible to name all of the plant materials found in the grassland, but some of spring interest are wild roses, wild grapes, honeysuckles, hawthorn trees, and wild plums.

Traveling along the timber line to Station 10, one will see many spring accents. Low-growing plants with three leaflets and tiny, pure white flowers are wild strawberries. The wild plums and service berries will be seen blooming along with the elongated flower clusters of the shiny-leafed black cherry and pin cherry trees. Wild grapes can be seen vining through the underbrush. In late spring and early summer the tiny clusters of grapes can be seen hanging under the leaves.

In March flocks of red-winged blackbirds will start to appear in the open grassland area dotted with small trees and shrubs. Listen for the familiar "kong-ka-ree" song of the red-winged blackbird. The males arrive three weeks earlier than the females and choose a proper nesting site. The females are a speckled brown, black, and white in color with a tinge of red on their wings

and throats. The rather inconspicuous female selects a mate and, later in May, fulfills the nest-making duties. The nest is built of grasses and plant stalks and is located in small bushes and trees or sedge grass. The spring diet of red-winged blackbirds consists of caterpillars, beetles, grubs, and the remaining seeds of ragweed and smartweed plants.






During your search for spring wildflowers you may come across the scarlet cup fungus. This brilliantly colored fungus is found attached to dead wood lying about the woodland floor. Look for a saucer-shaped fungus about one inch in height and diameter. The inside of the cup is scarlet-colored, and the outside is flesh-colored.

The rich soil and moist woodland environment is the perfect growing medium for the prairie trillium, jack-in-the-pulpit, bellwort, and sharp-lobed hepatica. In April the three-petaled maroon flowers of the prairie trilliums may be found nestled in the leaf debris along with the three-lobed leaves and white flowers of the sharp-lobed hepatica. In May look for the purplish-green spathe of the jack-in-the-pulpit. Usually the young plants have one three-parted leaf, and the older plants have two to three leaves.

Several ground-feeding birds may be spotted grubbing for food in this area. Look for brown thrashers, rufous-sided towhees, ovenbirds, and fox sparrows scratching in the leaf debris for earthworms, beetles, ants, and caterpillars.

After crossing the bridge, you will be in familiar territory. Turn left (east) and you will be back at Station 5. Please back track up the hill and, at the top, turn west to find Station 11.

# 11

The false Solomon's-seal--a cousin of the true Solomon's-seal--may be found in this wooded area. Look for a plant with a gently curving stem, alternately situated leaves, and terminal (at the tip of the stem) clusters of delicate, creamy-white flowers. Spring beauties may also be ornamenting the woodland floor. These plants inhabit moist woods and have pinkish-red flowers (five petals) and a pair of linear leaves.

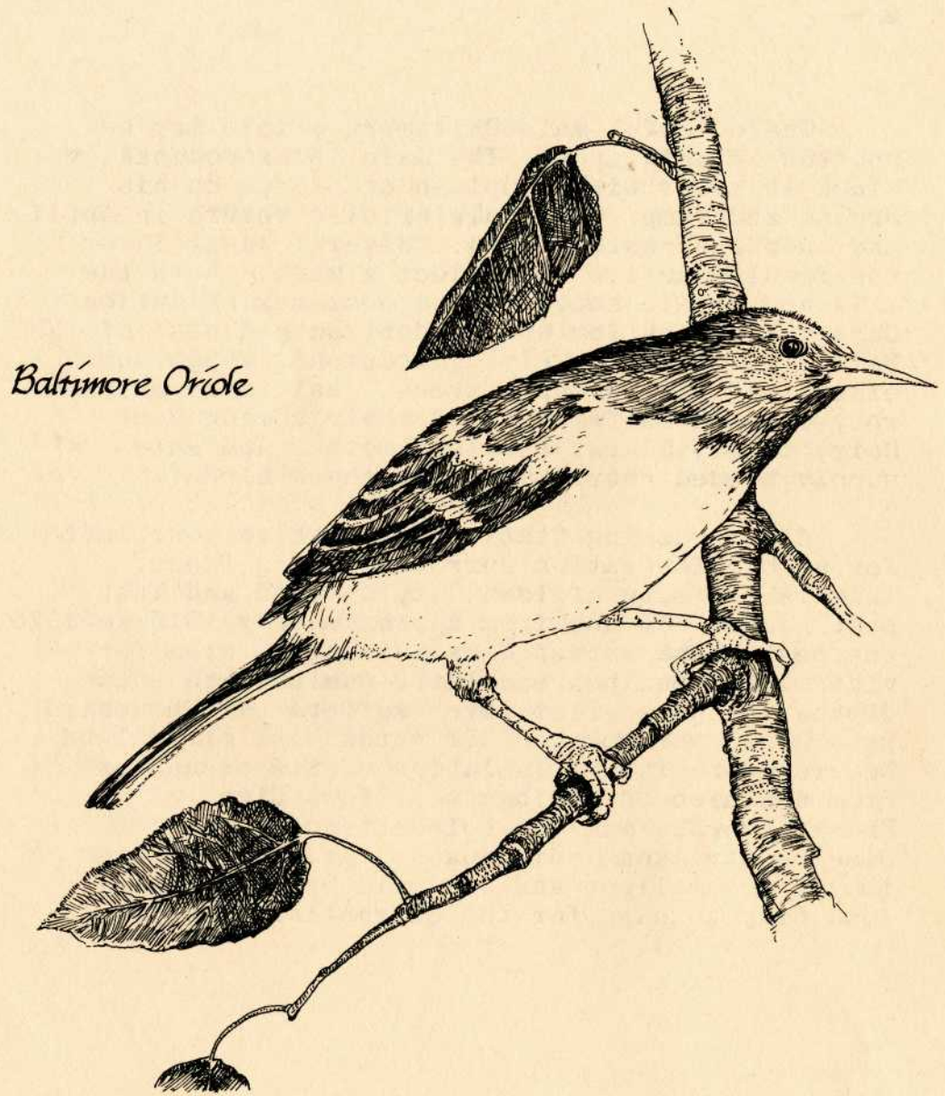
Glance into the timber bordering the trail. Black and white warblers and American restarts may inhabit the understory trees in this area. Beetles, insect eggs, and larvae make up the bulk of these two warblers' diets.

Winding through the underbrush, trumpet and limber honeysuckles can be found. The round leaves have the same characteristic as boneset, in that they unite at the base. In mid-spring to summer the honeysuckles' coral or yellow flowers can be spotted. The white flower clusters of the highbush cranberry can also be seen blooming along the trail at this time. On the north side of the trail one can view some of the few ferns at Hickory Hill.

# 12

The colorful male Baltimore oriole may be spotted in this area. The male is predominantly black in color with a splash of orange on his breast and rump. The male orioles return in April and choose a nesting area. Several weeks later the females arrive and select a mate. Both the male and female share in the nest-making duties. During May look for the pendant-shaped nest of the Baltimore oriole in elm, cottonwood, apple, box elder, and silver maple trees. Baltimore orioles rely on insects for most of their spring diet. Hairy caterpillars, beetles, moths, and ants supply needed nourishment for these birds.

After passing Station 12, look to your left for an old foundation surrounded by a fence. This is the site of Iowa City's third and last pest house. In use from approximately 1915 to 1925, the pest house served as a quarantine area for victims of smallpox and later was used to house diptheria and scarlet fever sufferers. The third pest house was located 200 yards east of Oakland Cemetery--to insure isolation of its occupants from noninfected residents of Iowa City. Frank Yavorsky was the sole attendant for the disease-stricken individuals. Mr. Yavorsky was immune to smallpox and was paid by the City of Iowa City to care for the quarantined people.



Baltimore Oriole

There is so much to see, smell, hear, and feel at this time in Hickory Hill Park. This booklet does not try to name everything in the park, but attempts to touch the wonder and curiosity in our visitors. We hope that you will be inspired to search further, with the aid of our bibliography and any other sources that are at your disposal, for the magic that can be experienced in this unique park.

If you have any questions concerning the nature trail or are interested in a guided hike for groups, please contact Dianne E. Lacina or Deb Quade at 354-1800, extension 249.

Thank you.

Prepared for the City of Iowa City
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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

A Field Guide to the Insects - Donald W. Borror and Richard E. White

Handbook of Nature Study - Anna Botsford Comstock

How to Know the Wildflowers - Mrs. William Starr Dana

Attracting Birds: From the Prairies to the Atlantic - Verne E. Davison

Fieldbook of Illinois Mammals - Donald F. Hoffmeister

A Field Guide to Wildflowers - Roger Tory Peterson and Margaret McKenny

Birds of North America - Chandler S. Robbins, Bertel Bruun, and Herbert S. Zim

The Shrub Identification Book - George W. D. Symonds

The Tree Identification Book - George W. D. Symonds

Irving Weber's Iowa City - Irving Weber

Golden Guide Series:

A. Weeds - Alexander C. Martin

B. Non-flowering Plants - Floyd S. Shuttleworth and Herbert S. Zim

C. Birds - Herbert S. Zim and Ira N. Gabrielson

D. Flowers - Herbert S. Zim and Alexander C. Martin

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