

## Saco Heath Preserve, Saco, ME

An interpretative trail through a hardwood and softwood forest features multiple forest and bog habitats. The boardwalk has several viewing and resting areas encouraging refreshing and relaxing exploration. The heath is unique because of its domed bog structure that opens to a vast leatherleaf sea.

Location: 163 Buxton Road, Saco, ME

Delorme Map edition and page: The Maine Atlas and Gazetteer (2019), Map 3, B-2

GPS location: 43.3228, 70.2854

### Directions

From Interstate 95, take exit #36 for I-195 East toward Saco/Old Orchard Beach and merge onto Interstate 195. Proceed to exit #1 and left onto Industrial Park Road. After 0.5 miles, at the T-intersection, turn right onto Route 112/ North Street which becomes Buxton Road and go 2.3 miles. The parking area is on the right identified by the Saco Heath Preserve sign.

### Bog Data

Bog type and acreage: Bog (raised/domed) and 1,233 acres for the preserve.

Trails: A 2.1-mile trail (roundtrip) with interpretative signs and boardwalks; the multi-colored bog boardwalk is 0.5 miles in length. Several large placards identify key points of interest.

### Saco Heath Preserve Overview and History

Saco Heath formed when two adjacent ponds filled completely with decaying peat. The two ponds grew together to form a raised coalesced bog, where the peat surface is higher than the surrounding woodlands. The maximum depth of the peat layer is 18 feet.

Saco Heath is the most southerly raised/domed bog in eastern North America. The Saco Heath Preserve was established in 1986 with a 475-acre donation from Joseph G. Deering and is managed by The Nature Conservancy.



The Saco Heath is an integrated habitat trifecta:

Atlantic White Cedar bog, Pitch Pine bog, and Raised Level bog ecosystems. This is the only place in the U.S. where Atlantic white cedar grows on a northern raised/domed bog. The Atlantic white cedar woodland at Saco Heath is one of the largest stands in Maine.

### Trails, Hiking, and Highlights

From the parking lot, the dirt path is marked with yellow blazes. It starts northeast making gentle curves through a mixed wood forest of Atlantic white cedar, beech, birch (gray, white), black gum, hemlock, maple (red), oak (red, white), and white pine. The verdant

forest floor is covered in mossy stumps, ferns (bracken, cinnamon, royal), a wide variety of flowers, and multiple sphagnum moss species. The bog is home to:

- Flowers: bunchberry, goldthread, painted and red trillium, pink lady's slipper, pitcher plant, 3-leaved false solomon's seal
- Ground plants and shrubs: bulrush, cottongrass, highbush blueberry, huckleberry, labrador tea, leatherleaf, mountain holly, rhodora, sheep laurel, witch hazel
- Trees: Atlantic white cedar, black spruce, pitch pine, and tamarack (hackmatack).

At the first section of the forest boardwalk, note how the flora begins to transition, from the forest floor through the canopy, as more sphagnum moss, low-bush blueberry, sheep laurel, rhodora, and witch hazel populate the understory.

In the middle section of the mixed wood forest ecosystem, the dirt path and boardwalk are cat-and-mouse, alternating between drier and more consistent wetter conditions. At the dirt path section where the trail turns left and heads east toward the bog, note the ragged hemlock, standing tall, despite its woodpecker holes and significantly damaged trunk. Even with an almost hollowed out trunk, there is still sufficient outer wood layers to promote root and tree growth. It is believed this tree was struck by lightning prior to 1970.

Once the multi-colored bog boardwalk begins, a northern raised bog habitat is present. The flora quickly changes to black spruce, bog myrtle, bulrush, leatherleaf, pitch pine, rhodora, and tamarack. Venture along southeast, as the boardwalk beckons, into the raised level bog. Black spruce and tamarack are sporadic, as leatherleaf, bulrush, and blueberries predominate.

Continue along into another section of a pitch pine bog habitat as the boardwalk zigs and zags its way toward its terminus. Look for colorful berries of blue (blueberry), red/maroon (mountain holly), and black (huckleberry).

Next along is another component of the surrounding mixed wood forest. At the Loop Trail sign and the gnarled red oak, turn left, and head east. Go past the Outlook sign to the last placard and sitting bench in an Atlantic white cedar bog habitat.



### **Other Places of Interest Nearby**

The Wells Reserve is a 2,250-acre conservation area. Enjoy woodlands and grasslands along paths, boardwalks, and observation platforms. Other local points of interest are:

- Cascade Falls Trail (Old Orchard Beach/Saco)
- Ferry Beach State Park (Saco).

In the central Maine area, two additional bogs and conservation areas to explore are:

- Hidden Valley Nature Center (Jefferson)
- Orono Bog (Bangor).