

Grant Agreement Number  
#10-007W

**“Lowell Park Interpretive Trail Signage”**

Dixon Park District  
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July 18, 2010  
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## **Introduction**

With fewer and fewer families exploring the outdoors in recent years, it is crucial that children and parents actively learn about and familiarize themselves with the natural world around them when they have the opportunity to do so. To take advantage of their outdoor time, we have three objectives for our project. Most important is to educate visitors about the native flora and fauna found in Lowell Park. The flash of a bright wing in the sunlit canopy is just a bird until a walker reads about the feeding habits of an American redstart. Secondly, we want to display the importance of responsible trail use and "Leave No Trace" principles in natural areas. Our last objective is to attract the attention of the passive visitor and invite them to personally interact with the intricacies of woodland ecology. Revamping our existing trail to an interpretive trail complete with signs will help us accomplish our objectives.

## **Material and methods**

In the past, the focal point of this project, Lowell Park, had interpretive signage along its trails describing the plant and animal life in the park. Located two miles North of Dixon, Illinois, Lowell Park is a wooded bluff and riparian forest nestled against the western bank of the Rock River. Recently, the interior forty-nine acres were designated as an Illinois Nature Preserve, giving it the strongest form of land protection in the state. Within its boundaries many uncommon plants and animals thrive and reproduce. It is these unique organisms we based the topics of our signs.

Lowell Park is truly an historic park. Purchased by Charles R. Lowell 1860, the park was given to the city of Dixon in 1906 and has been kept in a natural state with relatively light disturbance for at least one hundred and fifty years. Matching the historical beauty of the park settings with tasteful, elegant signs was no easy task.

After reviewing past projects of various businesses, we decided to enlist the services of Freelance Illustrations of 28132 North Hickory Lane, Wauconda, Illinois. All work done at Freelance Illustrations is drawn by hand, later added to permanent, coated signs that last many years in the outside elements. The original project description and contracts called for seven signs, all 12"x18", for \$4000. Later in the project, the contract with Freelance Illustrations was amended to increase the size of one sign for a trailhead map. It was changed to an 18"x24" sign for an additional \$445 covered by the Dixon Park District. The total cost for the project was \$4445, paid in three phases on 10/06/09, 6/10/10 and 6/30/10 (See Attachment 1).

## **Results**

After three stages of development, six signs and one map were produced. The six topics were the importance of decomposing wood, park geology, local birds, woodland wildflowers, understory shrubs and trees, and the old park quarry (See Attachments 2-8). Each sign gives a brief background about the topic in conjunction with hand drawn art.

## **Discussion**

A large percentage of the trail users in the park are families enjoying a short walk and the fresh air. They have no particular purpose in their outing besides just getting outside. While they may notice a few wildflowers, habituated deer and common songbirds, they miss so much more: strange lichens, warblers in the treetops, or whitewash under a raptor perch. Even when we cannot follow along on the walk, their jaunt, no matter the length, is a wonderful opportunity to show them the outdoor world they are missing during a passive visit. We, the educators, may be absent, but these signs can adequately enlighten trail users. If these signs, over the course of their ten year lifetime, can spark an interest in a few youthful minds, then the funds and work spent to produce them will be tenfold their original costs.

## **Conclusion**

This trail project benefits not only the trail users but also fauna and flora. An educated public will likely show a greater appreciation for the park's inhabitants, decreasing pressure and future threats.

In conclusion, the Dixon Park District purchased six interpretive trail signs and one trailhead map for Lowell Park in Dixon, Illinois. Each trail sign details park life and significant features.

Hundreds of school children will directly benefit from this project every year while on nature walks led by park staff, as well countless other unguided visitors using the park's trail system.

# Attachment 1

## Itemized Expenditures

<u>Vendor</u>	<u>Quantity and Description</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Purchased</u>
Freelance Illustrations	Six 12x18" trail signs	\$3480	Final payment
28132 North Hickory Lane Wauconda, Illinois	One 18x24" map	\$1030	06/30/2010
		<u>Total</u>	
		\$4510	

Total matching costs from the Dixon Park District: \$2510.00.

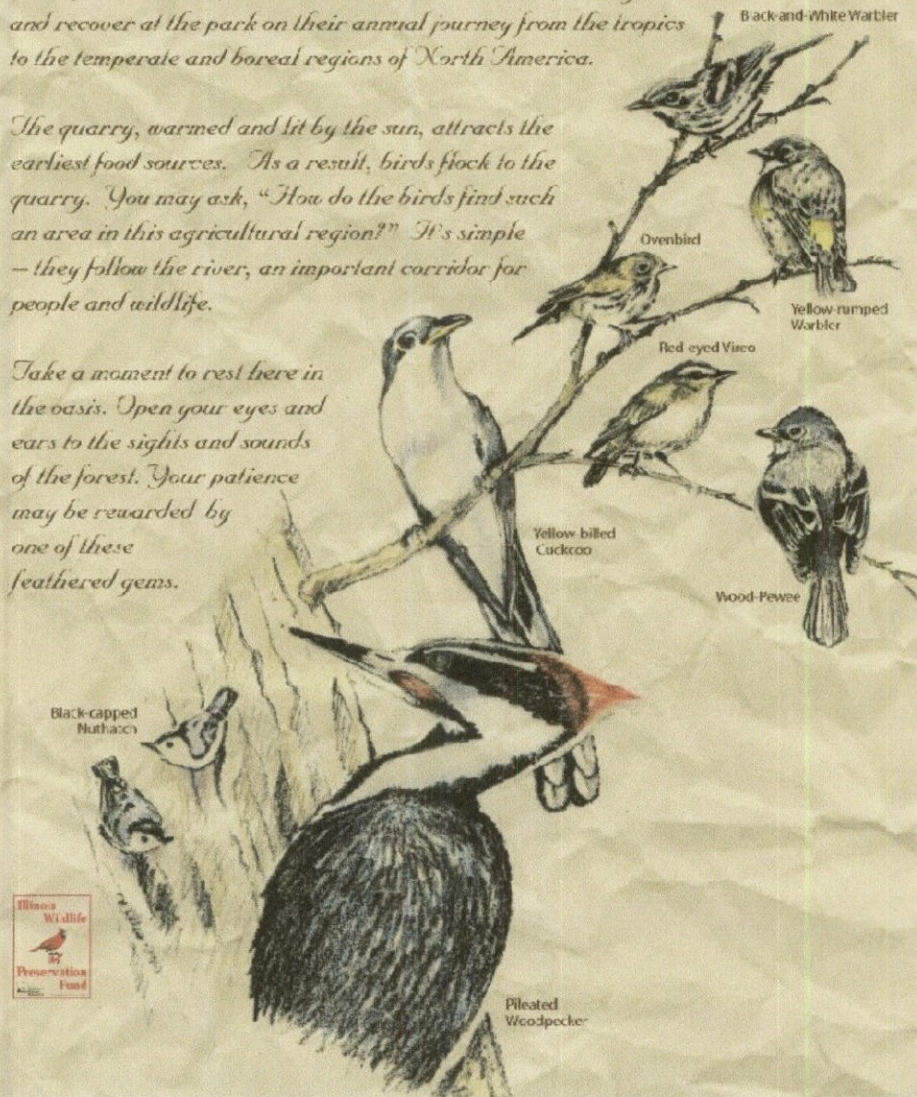
## Attachment 2

# Avian Oasis

At 200 acres, Lowell Park is a significant parcel of high-quality forested habitat in Northern Illinois. Each year, many species of birds fulfill their biological duty by raising offspring in the park. Others, like the insectivorous warblers, merely rest and recover at the park on their annual journey from the tropics to the temperate and boreal regions of North America.


The quarry, warmed and lit by the sun, attracts the earliest food sources. As a result, birds flock to the quarry. You may ask, "How do the birds find such an area in this agricultural region?" It's simple — they follow the river, an important corridor for people and wildlife.

Take a moment to rest here in the oasis. Open your eyes and ears to the sights and sounds of the forest. Your patience may be rewarded by one of these feathered gems.



## Attachment 3

# Dead Trees Team With Life



*Death is part of the natural cycle of life. Look closely at dead trees, both standing and fallen. The trees are no longer living but new life radiates from the decaying wood. Dead trees offer food and shelter to many plants and animals. Microorganisms, simple but diverse, flourish within the softening wood, returning years of energy and organic material back into the soil.*

*From the lifeless comes life.*

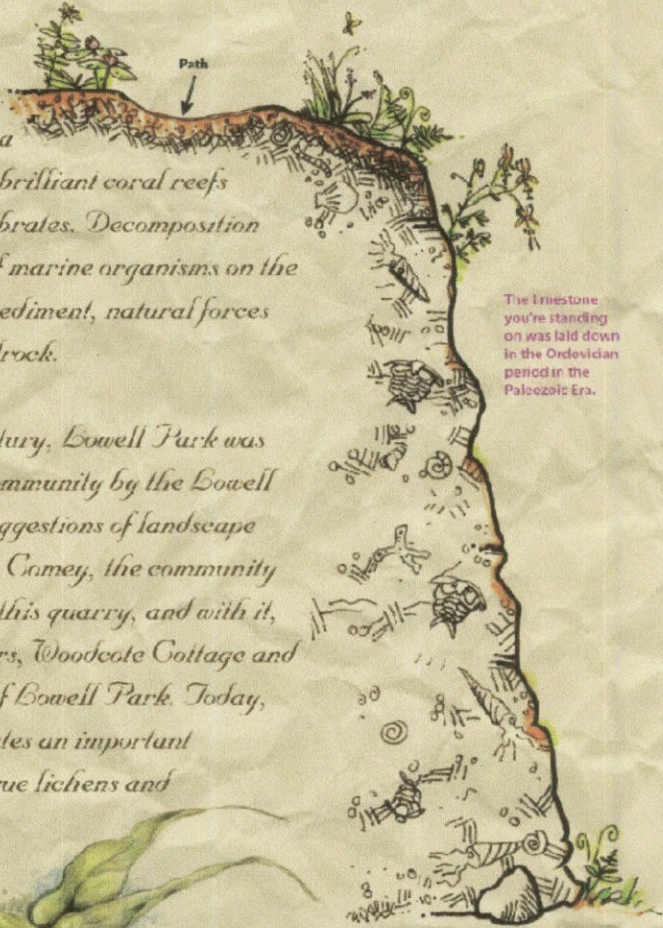
*Look carefully for critters, insects, mushrooms and molds. Be respectful of these microhabitats and their unique inhabitants; this is their home.*

## Attachment 4

# The Quarry Story

Just under your feet, fossils of prehistoric marine life are locked in a thick layer of rock. Many years ago the place you are standing was a shallow sea, home to brilliant coral reefs and the earliest vertebrates. Decomposition deposited the shells of marine organisms on the sea floor. From this sediment, natural forces created limestone bedrock.

Early in the 20th century, Bowell Park was given to the Dixon community by the Howell family. Using the suggestions of landscape architect Arthur C. Comey, the community harvested rock from this quarry, and with it, built the stone shelters, Woodcote Cottage and the entrance pillars of Bowell Park. Today, the exposed rock creates an important microhabitat for unique lichens and simple plants.



The limestone you're standing on was laid down in the Ordovician period in the Paleozoic Era.



**The Walking Fern, *Asplenium thalictroides* L.**  
A small, distinctive fern that grows on moss-covered rock in high-quality natural areas. Although it produces spores, the Walking Fern can also reproduce vegetatively when leaf tips stick in the moss and sprout a new plant.





## Attachment 5

# *Time Travel, High Drama!*

*These magnificent bluffs, some reaching as high as 144 feet above the Rock River valley, have greeted the morning sun for thousands of years. The exposed rock face was carved by the energy of water coursing through a much larger river channel. The water ripped around the outer bend of the river channel making a 90-degree turn just above Lowell Park.*



*Water forced to make such an extreme turn produces a tremendous amount of energy. The rushing water undercut the outer riverbank, sliced into bedrock and carved out the sheer bluffs of sedimentary rock you see today.*

This topographic map shows the ancient river course carved by meltwater from the last glacial retreat.

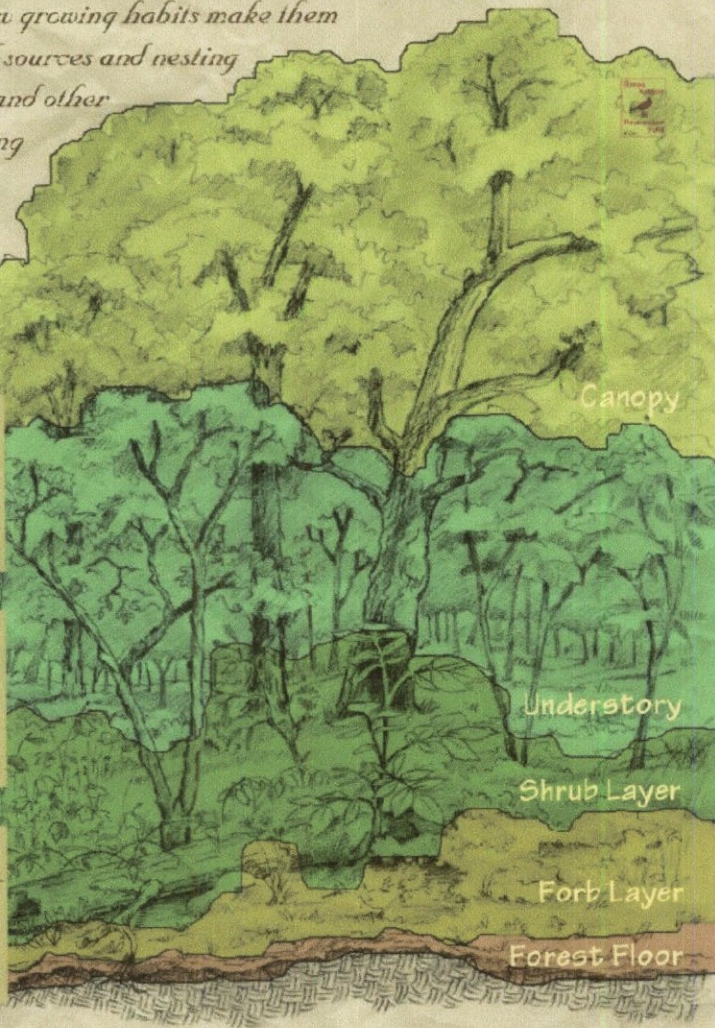


## Attachment 6

# The Mighty Understory

*A healthy woodland is so much more than the old, time tested trees that cast shade upon the ground from high above our heads. Woodland shrubs and smaller understory trees thrive in the shady conditions, rising no higher than the lowest branches of the canopy trees. Their low growing habits make them important food sources and nesting sites for birds and other ground-dwelling animals.*

Pictured below are three examples of the many understory trees and shrubs you'll find in Lowell Forest Nature Preserve



## Attachment 7

# Wonderful Wandering Wildflowers

*Not content to stay in one place, wildflowers have developed creative ways of moving from one place to another.*

*Some wildflowers have seeds that...*

*...ripen and explode outward, like ripples in a pond radiating from the center.*

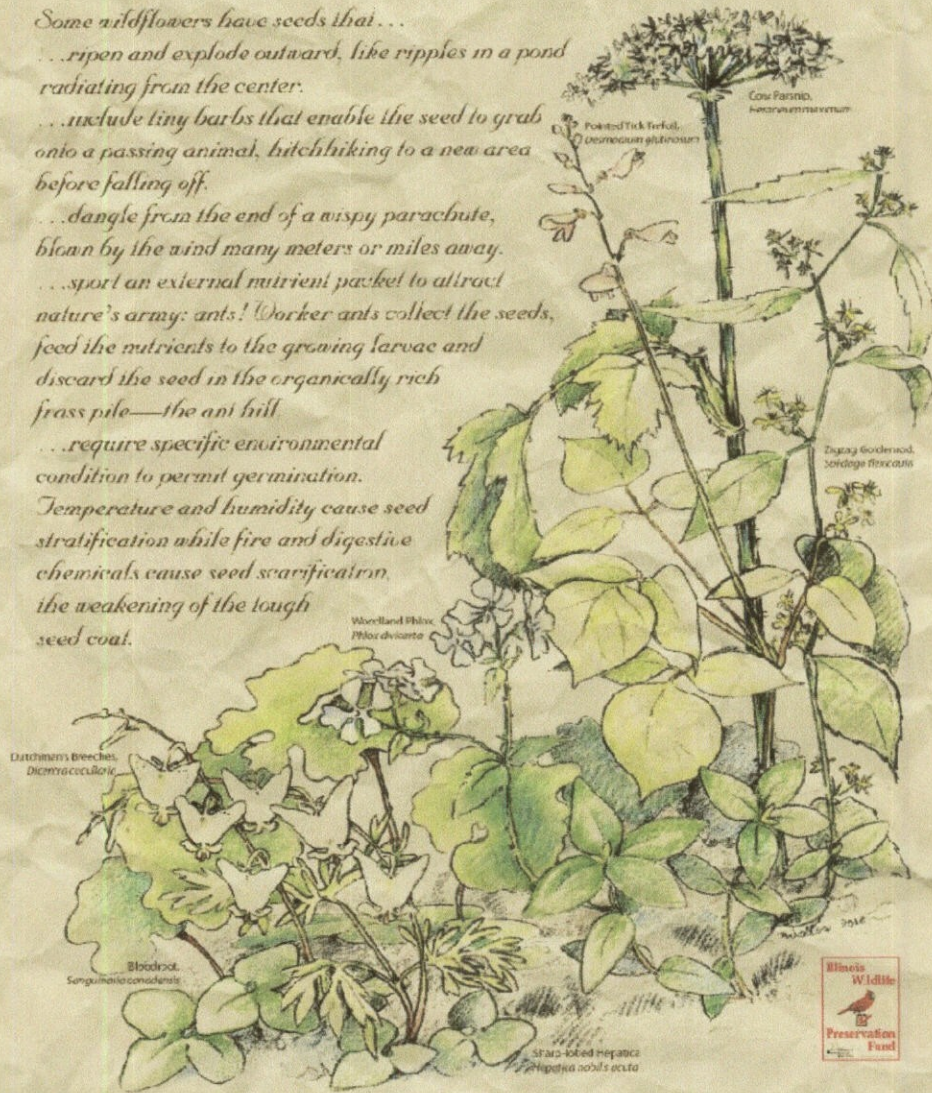
*...include tiny barbs that enable the seed to grab onto a passing animal, hitchhiking to a new area before falling off.*

*...dangle from the end of a wispy parachute, blown by the wind many meters or miles away.*

*...sport an external nutrient packet to attract nature's army: ants! Worker ants collect the seeds, feed the nutrients to the growing larvae and discard the seed in the organically rich frass pile—the ant hill.*

*...require specific environmental condition to permit germination.*

*Temperature and humidity cause seed stratification while fire and digestive chemicals cause seed scarification, the weakening of the tough seed coat.*



# Attachment 8



COPY

### **Park to get signs**

DIXON – Dixon Park District recently received \$2,000 from the Illinois Wildlife Preservation Fund to buy interpretive trail signs for Lowell Park.

Six signs and one trail-head map will be placed along the Quarry Trail. Individual signs detail local organisms and natural history.

Freelance Illustrations of Wauconda made the signs.

The wildlife fund is administered by the state Department of Natural Resources.