

Effigy Mounds

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Monument
Iowa



ILLUSTRATION NPS / MICHAEL HAMPSHIRE

With basketloads of fill material, Effigy Mounds people in northeastern Iowa created a variety of animal shapes three to four feet high and up to 212 feet long.

With what nature provided, Effigy Mounds people fashioned tools and ornaments like this bird-bone awl (far left) and bear-tooth pendant (left).



Bears and Birds Made of Earth

At first you see low rises on the landscape, but soon your eye picks out regular patterns in the hills. Trace the patterns, and those hills turn into familiar shapes—animals rising out of the ground in low relief. The effigies aren't nature's work—American Indians created them between 850 and 1,400 years ago. American Indians built mounds at various times and places across the Americas, but only in the upper Midwest did a culture regularly build mounds seemingly shaped like birds, turtles, lizards, bison, and, most commonly, bears.

Why were effigy mounds created? They are best viewed from above, so who or what was meant to see them? With no written records and few surviving tribal stories and traditions, the mounds' origin and meaning remain a mystery.

Effigy mounds have attracted the most attention but are not the area's oldest mounds, nor were their builders the first to live here. Humans have lived in eastern Iowa for over 10,000 years. Dome-shaped conical mounds began to be built about 2,500 years ago by people now known as Woodland Indians.

By 1,400 years ago, in the Late Woodland period, area Indians began to build effigy mounds from just west of the Upper Mississippi River to Lake Michigan's western

shore. Locally this hunter-gatherer culture thrived on the rich resources of Mississippi waters, wetlands, and forests. From summer camps along the river they fished and gathered freshwater mussels, arrowhead roots, wild rice, acorns, fruits, and berries. White-tailed deer and elk were staple foods in winter when extended family groups lived in rock shelters in the local river valleys.

Earthen effigy mounds began to appear 1,400 years ago, and were possibly religious sites or clan symbols used in seafire, probably ceremonial, in the mound's head, heart, or flank. Some tribal stories hold that the bear is the guardian of Earth and the bird the guardian of the sky. Perhaps the mounds were a means of connecting the people to the land and their spirit world and ancestors.

Around 850 years ago, the building of effigy mounds ceased. Archeological evidence suggests a major cultural transition: the people started to live in larger permanent villages, making new forms of pottery, and most significantly depending far more on agriculture than on hunting and gathering. Archeologists call the prehistoric people who took up this new way of life the Oneota Culture. It is believed that they are the ancestors of historic tribes in the effigy mounds region.

European explorers began arriving in the late 1600s. The fur trade among the Indians, French, British, and later Americans continued into the mid-1800s. The region saw a big influx of American settlers starting in the 1840s. Land with mounds was logged, plowed, and turned into farmland. In the early 1700s many held that technologically advanced cultures from the Middle East, China, or Europe had built the mounds, but Smithsonian Institution research in the 1880s showed that the moundbuilders were prehistoric American Indians. Surveys of northeastern Iowa in the 1800s and early 1900s documented the presence of over 10,000 mounds of all types. But within 100 years, fewer than 1,000 survived, and several people mounted efforts to preserve some of the remaining mounds. Effigy Mounds National Monument was established in 1949. Today, as you walk along the bluffs and around the mounds, be respectful of the ancient people whose relationship with nature inspired these creations.

The heart of the Effigy Mounds world lay in today's southern Wisconsin and parts of adjacent states. Most surviving effigies lie along waterways.



Tools and Trade

Stone was abraded to make a celt or adze (below) and a hammerhead (right). Chert was fashioned into spear points and arrowheads (lower center and right). Clay from riverbanks was used for pottery like

this decorated shard (far right). Exotic materials came from trade: the breastplate (upper right) was made from copper mined on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.



ARTIFACT PHOTOGRAPHS NPS

A Guide to the Mounds

Effigy Mounds National Monument holds 206 known prehistoric mounds, 31 in the form of animal effigies. Others are conical, linear, or compound (left to right); the bird's-eye diagrams below. Little Bear effigy mound (right) is near Fire Point.



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Conical

Conical mounds, round domes of earth, are the oldest and most numerous mounds in this area, dating back 2,500 years. They are 2 to 8 feet high and 10 to 20 feet in diameter.

Similar mounds can be found throughout the eastern United States,



Linear

but especially in the Mississippi and Ohio river valleys. Ancient peoples in this region buried their dead in conical mounds. The oldest have traces of red ochre (iron oxide) used in burials.

Linear mounds, built between 1,700 and

1,300 years ago, were 2 to 4 feet high, 6 to 8 feet across, and could be 100 feet long.

Compound mounds are conical mounds joined by linear mounds. They may mark a conical to linear styles. Groups of these mounds usually



Compound

will have three or four linked conical mounds. The largest group in this park has seven conicals and extends 480 feet. Linear and compound mounds are found only in the Effigy Mounds region.

This upper Mississippi region is famous for

its effigy mounds. The Effigy Mounds culture lived in northeastern Iowa, southern Wisconsin, and northern Illinois, and southeastern Minnesota (see map).

They created many different shapes, but here the bird and bear mounds predominate.



Bear Effigy

A tall effigy is 2 to 4 feet high, 40 feet wide, and 80 feet long. Wing-spans of 124 and 212 feet are found in two bird mounds here in the park.

The Great Bear Mound measures 137 feet long and 70 feet wide at the shoulder.

Exploring Effigy Mounds



Wild sweet William
NPS



Dutchman's breeches
NPS



Great blue lobelia and cardinal flower
NPS



Bald eagle
NPS



Swamp milkweed
NPS

Planning Your Visit

Effigy Mounds National Monument is three miles north of Marquette on Iowa 76.

Stop first at the visitor center, open daily except for certain public holidays. For hours and days of operation, call the monument or check the website.

There are picnic areas along Iowa 76 south of the visitor center but no picnic tables in the park. Nearby towns offer

lodging and restaurants.

Plants and animals of Effigy Mounds are typical of the upper Mississippi River valley. The park's main section has two units separated by the Yellow River. Both units are best explored by trails.

North Unit North of the visitor center a two-mile walk on the Fire Point Trail goes past

Little Bear Mound (outlined with pebbles) and conical and compound mounds, with good river views. South of the visitor center the one-mile Yellow River Bridge Boardwalk Trail (wheelchair-accessible) lets you explore a wetland environment. Rangers conduct programs from mid-June through Labor Day. A longer, self-guiding walk follows the Hanging Rock Trail past the Great Bear Mound, tall-

grass prairie, and river overlooks. Educational tours may be arranged in advance during the school year.

South Unit The trail system in the south unit leads through hardwood forest and restored tallgrass prairie (see map). Destinations include Marching Bear Group (ten bear and three bird mounds), Compound Mound Group, Founders Pond Overlook, and Nezekaw Point Overlook. A parking lot is 0.5 mile south of the

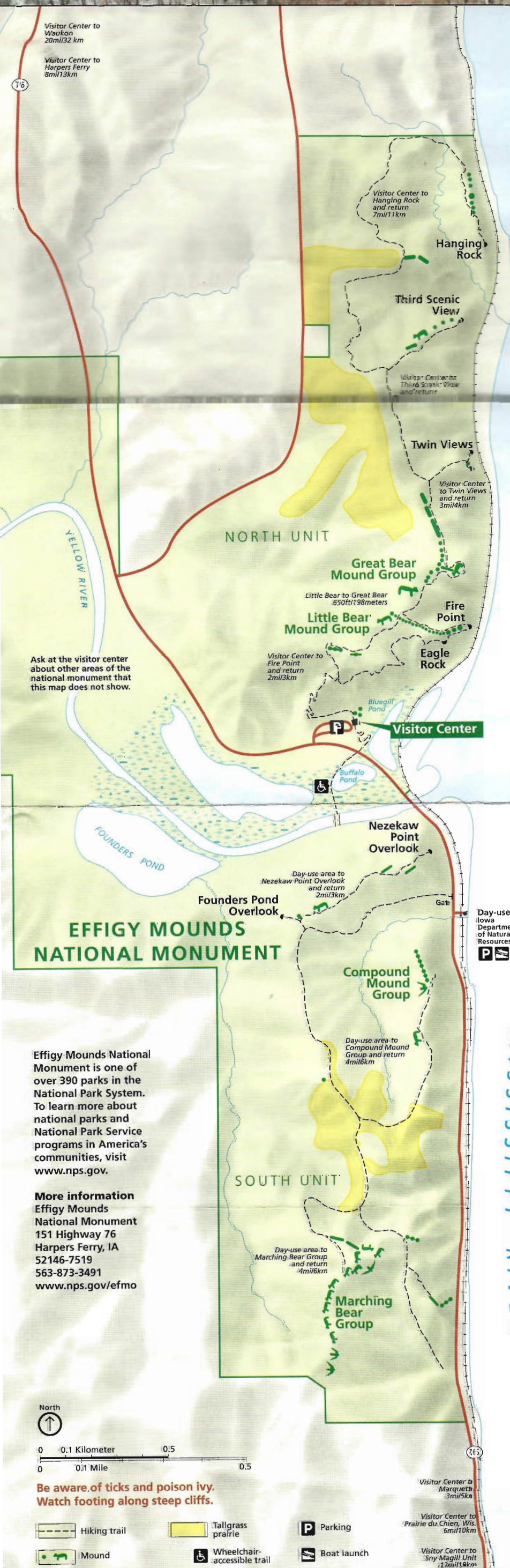
visitor center at the day-use area.

Sny Magill Unit The monument's largest mound group is 12 miles south of the visitor center and other park areas shown on the map. Please contact or inquire at the visitor center for information and directions to this remote unit.

For a Safe Visit All archeological and natural objects in the park are protected by law. Vandalism, looting, digging, or altering the mounds or features is prohibited. • Use or possession of firearms

is prohibited. • Watch for poison ivy, mosquitoes, and deer ticks. • Pets must be restrained by leash at all times. • Stay on trails. • The visitor center, museum, audiovisual program, and public restrooms are wheelchair-accessible.

Related Sites Other Woodlands-era mound sites are the Fish Farm Mounds, north of Lansing, Iowa; Pikes Peak State Park in Iowa; and Wyalusing State Park in Wisconsin. There are also mound sites that are open to the public in St. Paul, Minn., and throughout southern Wisconsin.



View from Hanging Rock
A trail (3.5 miles one way) from the visitor center takes you to the Hanging Rock overlook, part of a large limestone outcropping. On your

way you will pass several mound groups. As you walk the trails, watch carefully for white-tailed deer, a common resident.



Third Scenic View
Northward is a good view of Hanging Rock as well as the islands that make up the Upper Mississippi River National Wildlife and Fish Refuge.

The park grounds are forested with mixed deciduous trees, oak, maple, walnut, shagbark hickory, birch, and aspen.



View from Fire Point
A mysterious feature of Fire Point Mound is burned clay. Found in the top layer of the mound, this clay was carried up from the Mississippi River banks.

The expansive view from here includes Pikes Peak State Park, far to the south, and Prairie du Chien across the river in Wisconsin.



View from Eagle Rock
Looking to the south you can see Bluegill Pond, Buffalo Pond, and, on the far side of the Yellow River marshlands, the south unit of Effigy Mounds.

Eagle Rock is an excellent place to spot bald eagles, which nest along the rivers. November through March is the best time to see them.

Effigy Mounds National Monument is one of over 390 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.

More information
Effigy Mounds National Monument
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www.nps.gov/efmo

Be aware of ticks and poison ivy. Watch footing along steep cliffs.

- Hiking trail
- Mound
- Tallgrass prairie
- Wheelchair-accessible trail
- Parking
- Boat launch