

Members of the Mountain Club of Maryland and Miller's Grant Hiking Club set out on the Wincopin Trail for a seven-mile morning hike.

A guide to the county's best spring hikes and bikes

HAPPY TRAILS

BY SARAH MEEHAN | *Howard Magazine*

PHOTOS BY KIM HAIRSTON

A vast network of trails stretches throughout Howard County — following rivers, traversing developments and leading hikers to historic ruins. Most are close to parking lots and other amenities, but swinging bridges, blooming meadows and wooded canopies make it easy for the county's outdoor explorers to forget they're so close to civilization.

"Unless you look at a map of them, you really wouldn't know that you could get from Savage all the way up to Ellicott City on trails," said Bridget Graham, director of operations and visitor services for Visit Howard County. "You really can travel through a huge portion of our community on trails, which I think is really cool."

With terrains ranging from flat paved paths to steep rocky climbs, the county has trails for hikers and bikers of all abilities.

Patuxent Branch Trail

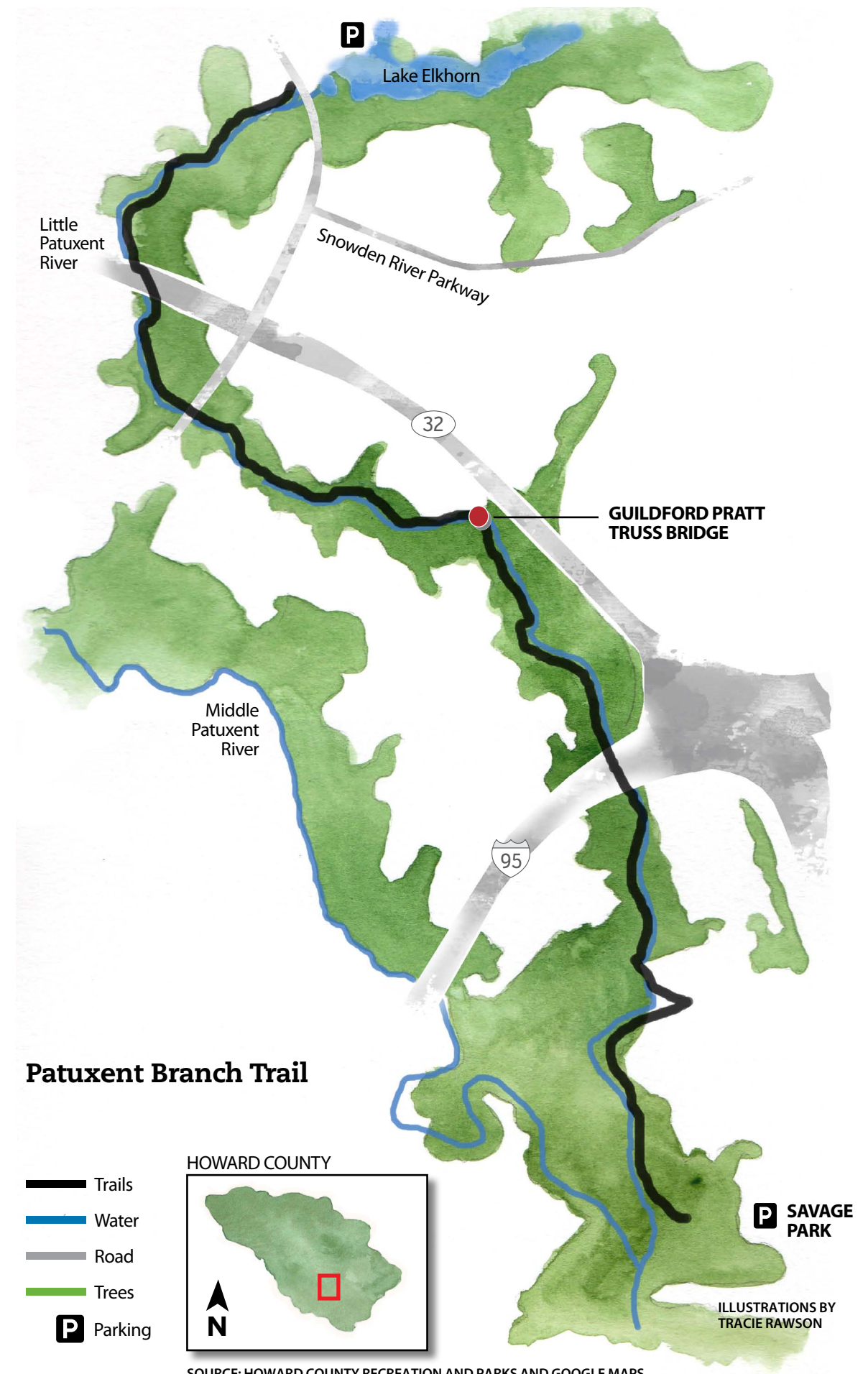
This rail-trail parallels the Little Patuxent River from Savage Park to Lake Elkhorn. About half the path is paved, with the rest coated in gravel, and it's suited for walkers, runners, bikers and equestrians. Hikers on the wooded trail, which follows an old Baltimore & Ohio Railroad line, will cross several bridges, most notably the Guilford Pratt Truss Bridge, a structure built in 1902 over the Little Patuxent. Heading north on the trail from Savage, the route climbs more than 300 feet to Lake Elkhorn. Visitors looking for extra distance can tack on mileage on either end of the trail, such as the 2-mile loop around Lake Elkhorn, or paths at Savage Park.

Length: 4.6 miles one-way

Difficulty: Easy to moderate

Where to park: To access the trail from the Lake Elkhorn entrance, park at Lake Elkhorn Park (7200 Dockside Lane, Columbia). To access the trail from Savage Park, visit at the park at 8400 Fair St. in Savage.

Trail maps and more: howardcountymd.gov/PatuxentBranchTrail





Monica Fortner of Elliott City talks about the railroad that ran to a quarry as members of the Mountain Club of Maryland and Miller's Grant Hiking Club stop at an overlook on the Wincopin Trails near the confluence of the Little Patuxent and Middle Patuxent rivers.

Tulip Poplar Trail at Howard County Conservancy

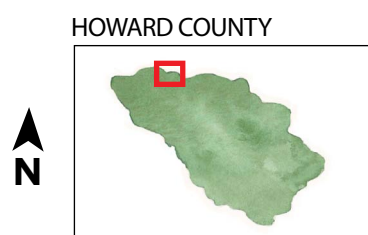
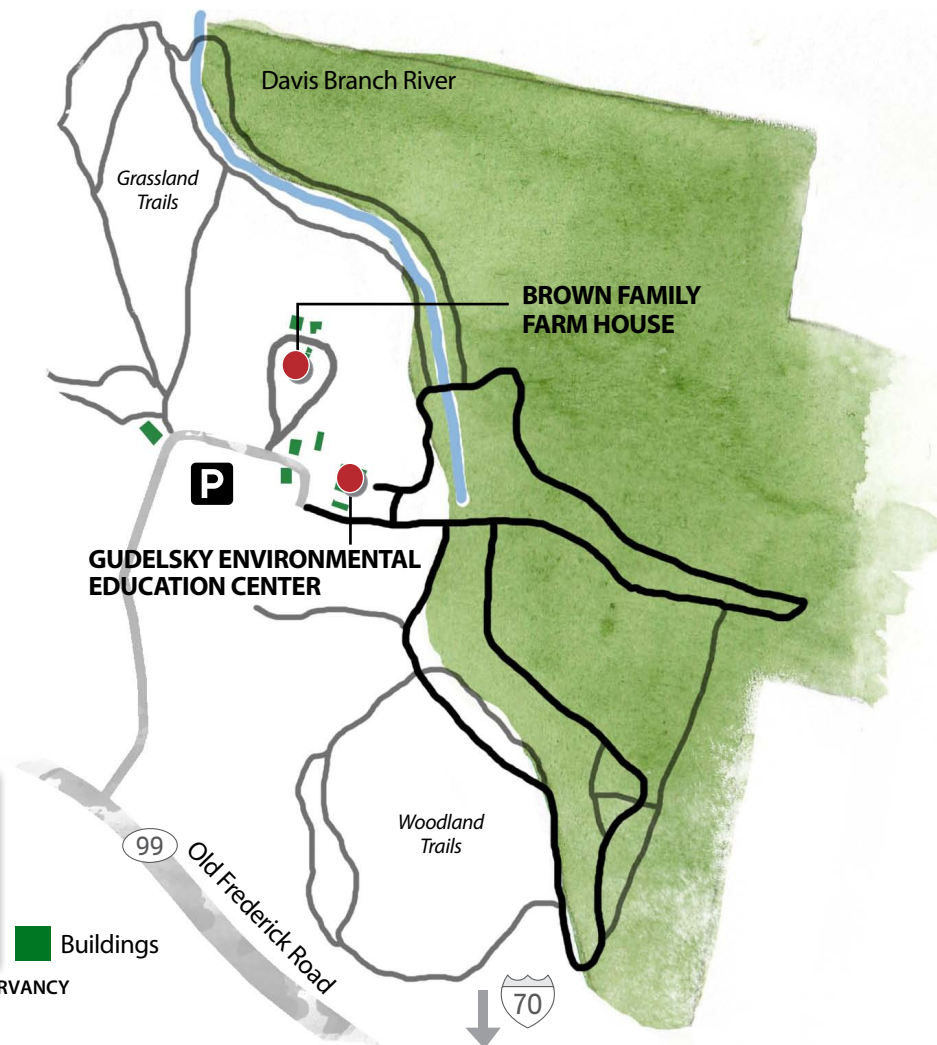
The 232-acre Howard County Conservancy at Mt. Pleasant is home to a four-mile network of trails that wind through its woods and meadows. The two loops on the wooded Tulip Poplar Trail are some of the conservancy's longest paths, and they connect to other trails. The conservancy provides habitats for more than 140 species of birds, including wild turkeys, American kestrels and Cooper's hawks, and a number of geocaches are hidden throughout the property. Dogs on leashes are allowed on the hilly trail, but no bikes.

Length: 1 mile total (two half-mile loops)

Difficulty: Moderate

Where to park: The Woodstock section of the conservancy is located at 10520 Old Frederick Road.

Trail maps and more: hconservancy.org/mt-pleasant/



SOURCE: HOWARD COUNTY CONSERVANCY



Wincopin Trails

The Wincopin Trails in Jessup are a network of hilly and wooded trails covering 3.4 miles. Frequent by experienced hikers and mountain bikers, the trails are sandwiched at the confluence of the Middle and Little Patuxent rivers.

The area is among Mountain Club of Maryland hike leader Monica Fortner's favorite parks in Howard County for scenery and history. The park includes a quarry, bridge remains and a Civil War grave. Fortner, an Ellicott City resident, hikes about twice per week and leads six to nine hikes with the group per year.

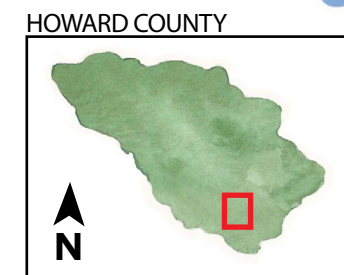
"Sometimes it's just nice to be out by yourself where it's quiet," she said.

Length: 3.4 miles total

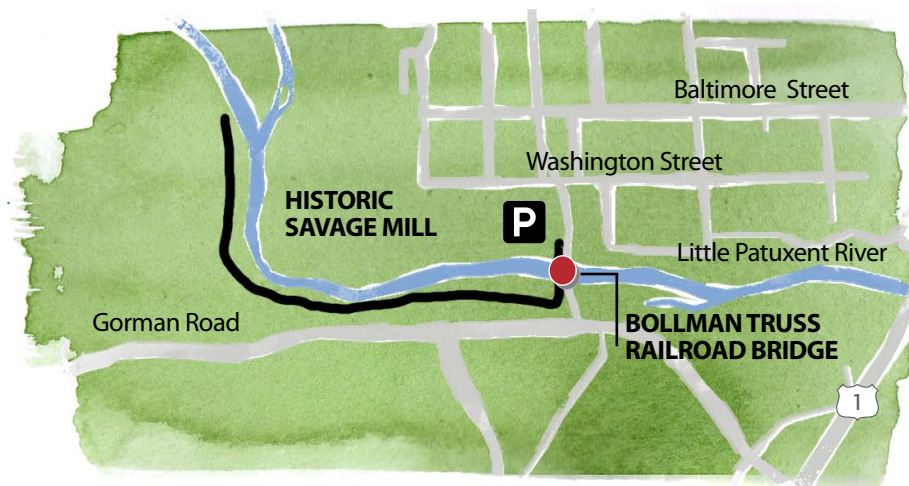
Difficulty: Moderate to difficult

Where to park: Free but limited parking at 9313 Vollmerhausen Road, Jessup.

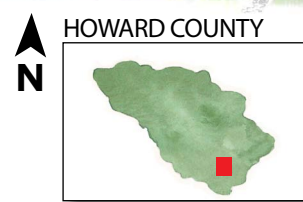
Trail maps and more: howardcountymd.gov/Departments/Recreation-and-Parks/



SOURCE: HOWARD COUNTY RECREATION AND PARKS AND GOOGLE MAPS



SOURCE: HOWARD COUNTY RECREATION AND PARKS AND GOOGLE MAPS



Cascade Falls Trail in Patapsco Valley State Park

Greg Eder, who has been leading hikes for the Hiking Around Baltimore Meetup group for six years, frequents the Cascade Falls Trail in the Orange Grove Area of Patapsco Valley State Park. The Ellicott City resident said it's a versatile trail that can be incorporated into short or long hikes.

"It's close by, so I can do it for an evening hike," Eder, 56, said. "It's scenic, it's a nice trail, it's a very popular trail."

As its name suggests, the blue-blazed trail winds through the woods, leading hikers past waterfalls and rapids. Portions of the trail are steep and rocky. The falls are less than a quarter-mile from the trailhead, so don't stop there. The trail's concentric loops can be hiked alone or tacked onto a longer trek. The Ridge Trail (2.2 miles one-way) connects the park's Avalon area to the Orange Grove portion and can be added for extra distance.

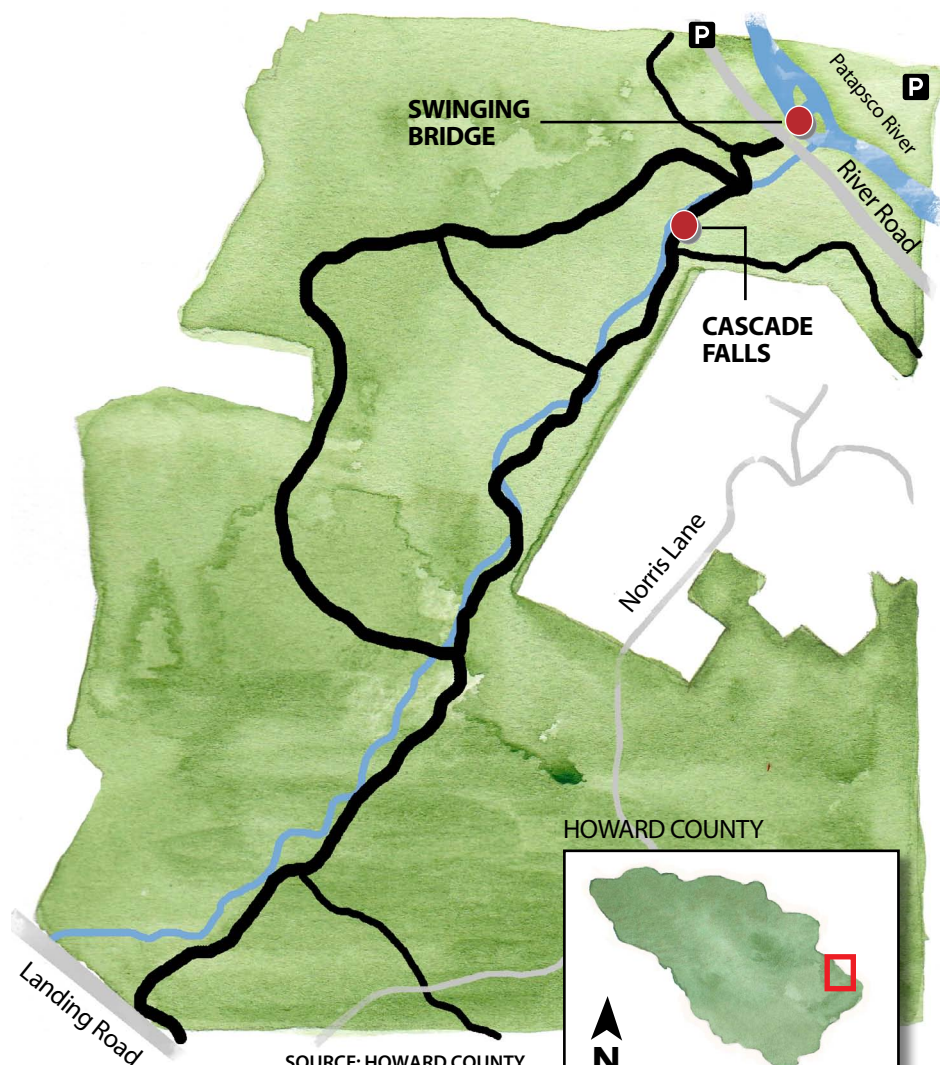
"It can transport you what feels so far away, even though you're only a quarter-mile away from the Baltimore beltway," Graham said.

Length: 2.2 mile loop

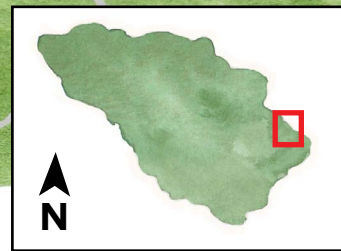
Difficulty: Moderate

Where to park: Hikers can access the trail from several directions. The closest parking lots are in the Orange Grove Area or across a swinging bridge in the Glen Artney Area. Those looking for a longer trek can park in the Avalon Area and hike the Ridge Trail to the Cascade loop. From Monday through Friday, park fees are \$2 per in-state vehicle and \$4 per out-of-state vehicle. On weekends and holidays, visitation is \$3 per person in-state, \$5 per person out-of-state.

Trail maps and more: dnr.maryland.gov/publiclands/



SOURCE: HOWARD COUNTY RECREATION AND PARKS AND GOOGLE MAPS



Savage Mill Trail

Located in Savage Park on the grounds of a historic cotton mill, the Savage Mill Trail traverses 1.1 miles along the Patuxent River. The trail starts by crossing a Bollman Truss bridge — the last iron bridge of its kind in the country — and hikers have views of historic ruins from the 1800s textile mill along the path. Most of the trail is flat and paved, with some dirt and gravel sections, and it's short enough to be a safe bet for families with children.

The trail backs up to the Savage Mill shopping center, where visitors can shop or grab a bite before or after their hike. "You get a completely different perspective of Savage Mill on foot and from below, and [see] what a behemoth it actually is," Graham said.

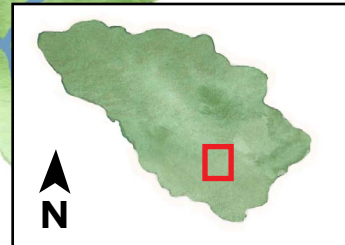
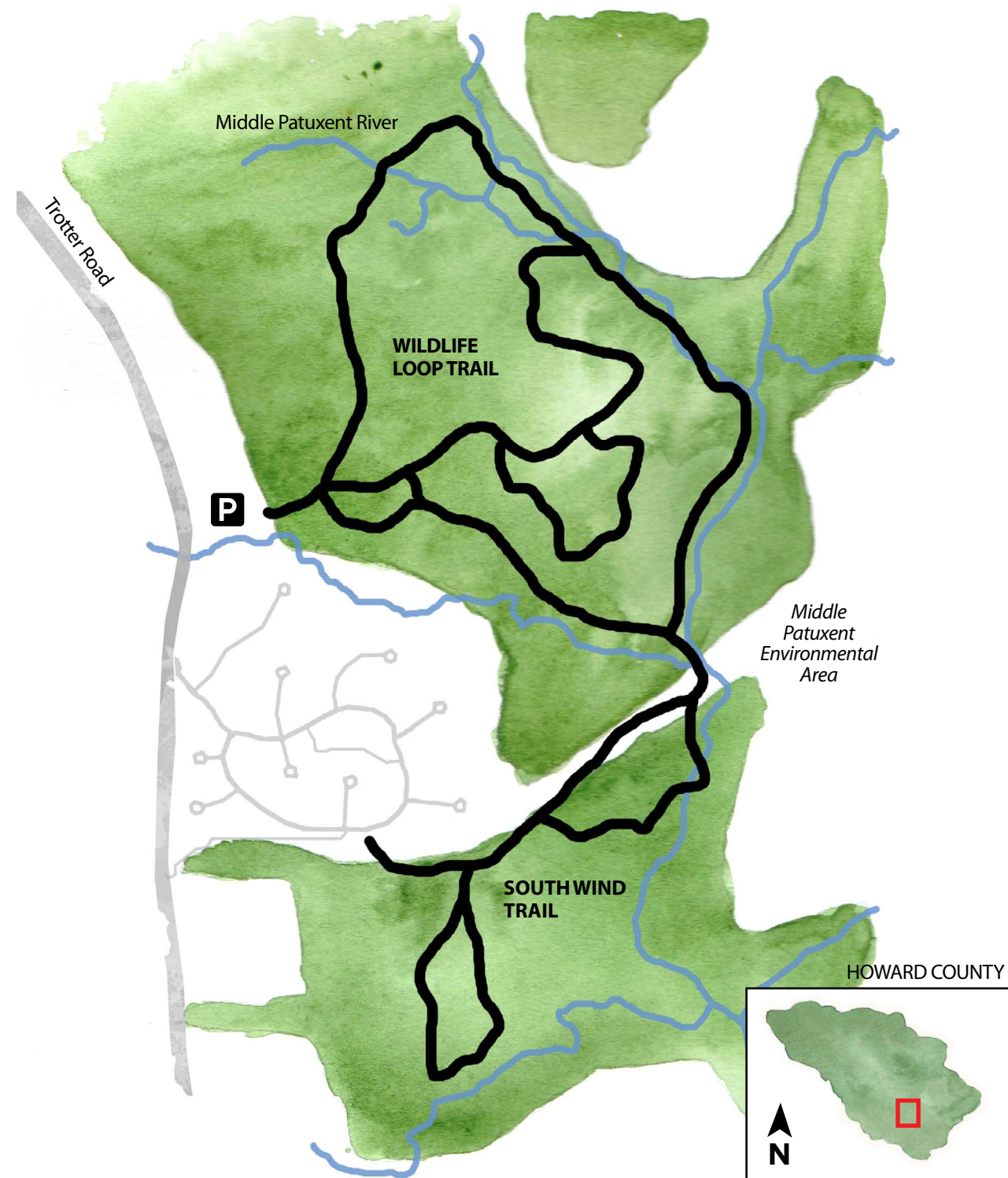
Bikes are allowed on the trail, which could be worked into a lengthier ride. Other paths in the park on the opposite side of the river connect to the Patuxent Branch Trail.

Length: 1.1 miles one-way

Difficulty: Easy

Where to park: Free parking at Savage Park at 8400 Fair St., Savage.

Trail maps and more: howardcountymd.gov/SavagePark



Wildlife Loop in Middle Patuxent Environmental Area

The Middle Patuxent Environmental Area's 1,021 acres in Clarksville contain 5.5 miles of trails, and a self-guided nature walk makes its Wildlife Loop a good option for families. The area is home to more than 150 species of birds and 40 species of mammals, and the shaded trail includes signs that correspond to a brochure with descriptions about plants and animals hikers may encounter along the way, such as butterflies, frogs and birds. Hikers looking for a longer route can follow the a 0.75-mile

connector path to the South Wind Loop, a 2.3-mile loop that crosses a meadow and meanders into the woods. The mostly flat trails are restricted to foot traffic only.

Length: 2.4-mile loop

Difficulty: Easy to moderate

Where to park: Free parking at the Middle Patuxent Environmental Area at 5795 Trotter Road, Clarksville.

Trail maps and more: middlepatuxent.org/; howardcountymd.gov/MPEA