

## DESTINATION

# Shifting sands

*A writer retraces her childhood steps across, up and down the Indiana Dunes, a haven for birds on the shore of vast Lake Michigan that has recently joined the roll-call of the United States' superstar national parks.*

BY KIT BERNARDI

I leave the highway and open the car windows. A cheery chorus of ribbiting frogs replaces the monotone drone of traffic, scents of fresh water and deep woods banish the smell of exhaust fumes. My heartbeat slows, synchronising with rhythmic whooshing waves lapping the beach.

I've been coming to the Indiana Dunes, on the southern tip of the United States' Lake Michigan, since I was a kid. My dad was a travelling salesman and northwest Indiana's cities and towns were in his territory. After dozens of sales calls and more ice cream cones than gas station stops, we always ended our road trip in what was then known as the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore, a designation bestowed by the US Congress in 1966 to protect the area.

We always seemed to have it to ourselves. But since 2019, when Congress voted to make the 6,000 hectares of federally protected land – including 24km of beaches – the nation's 61st national park, the Indiana Dunes region has been getting a lot more attention.

In 2021, during the coronavirus pandemic, 3.2 million people visited the Indiana Dunes National Park. It had joined the ranks of superstar parks Yellowstone, Yosemite, Smoky Mountains, Grand Canyon and the newest, New River Gorge.

The Indiana Dunes National Park map resembles a patchwork quilt, the result of it having been pieced together – around small towns and beach communities – over 80 years, through roughly 7,000 independent real estate

transactions, legislative conservation victories and donations of untouched land by local families.

Now, more than 140km of hiking-only and multi-use, biking and horse-riding trails traverse beaches, sand dunes, prairie, woods, bog and wetlands. Most of which are easily accessible.

“Although the Indiana Dunes doesn't have vast size, a deep canyon or soaring mountain peaks like other extremely popular national parks, our abundant, diverse ecosystems are easily accessible to people living in and visitors travelling to Chicago, Indianapolis, Milwaukee and Detroit,” says park ranger Rafi Wilkinson.

Indiana Dunes National Park is a 72km drive from downtown Chicago and the South Shore electric train connects the nation's third-largest city to the park.

Impressively for an urban type, the Indiana Dunes is one of the top six most biodiverse national parks in the US, according to the National Park System. More than 370 species of bird – including those unique to North America such as bald eagles, wood warblers and ruby-throated hummingbirds – fly to and through the Indiana Dunes during spring and autumn migration periods. Of those, 150 species stay in the park and nest during summer months.

“[Lake Michigan] provides a source of food, but its sheer size is daunting,” says Brad Bumgardner, executive director of the Indiana Audubon Society, which conducts research and hosts birding events in the park. “Birds stop in the Indiana Dunes to feed and rest before continuing

their journeys north to boreal forests in the Upper Midwest and Canada.”

The sedimentary stage for the park's biodiversity was set 14,000 to 18,000 years ago, when the glaciers covering what is now northwest Indiana melted.

“When the giant finger of ice slowly retreated north, it acted like a conveyor belt scouring out the Great Lakes and forming a sedimentary, intercontinental divide which determined the region's watershed,” says Erin Argyilan, who chairs the Geosciences Department at Indiana University Northwest. Among the several park trails through geologic glacial and coastal evolution she recommends is one that ascends the 38-metre-tall Mount Baldy sand dune, the tallest in the park.



**Clockwise from left:** a sunset hike over Mount Baldy in the Indiana Dunes National Park; a rose-breasted grosbeak in the national park; spring flora at the park's Heron Rookery; a pileated woodpecker in the park.

“Mount Baldy Trail hikes tell a story about human disturbance and conservation efforts to heal the dune,” says Argyilan.

The one-hour, park-ranger-led hike starts in the Mount Baldy car park, where our guides explain how wind erosion moves the dune 1.5 to three metres inland every year, burying the car park and swallowing surrounding woods.

On the ascent through woods to Mount Baldy's sand summit, we learn about the region's geology, wildlife, sand-mining history and inspiring Indiana Dunes conservation movements through the years, including the most recent, aimed at removing the lakefront Northern Indiana Public Service Company's coal and natural gas-fired power plant.

At the top – with unobstructed views of vast Lake Michigan meeting the horizon – we lay eyes on the culprit for Mount Baldy's erosive, steady march inland: a breakwall with a lighthouse stretching into the water. Built to protect Michigan City Harbour, the wall stops lake waves from naturally replenishing Mount Baldy's sand, thus starving the dune of the sediment it needs to thrive.

“Windswept, constantly shifting sand doesn't allow marram grass to grow a deep root system, which prevents erosion,” says Wilkinson.

My favourite time to hike Mount Baldy is at sunset, when Chicago's iconic skyline looks like a cut-out against a sky changing from glistening gold to tangerine, then lilac to dusky plum.

Northwest Indiana's fur trading, railroad and Swedish settlement histories are preserved at family-friendly Chellberg Farm and Bailly Homestead, a rustic, 1860s log cabin, late 19th century house and family cemetery. The National Historic Landmark is next to the Little Calumet River, which has recently had a boat launch installed to accommodate paddlers with mobility limitations.

It's a good spot from which to launch a kayak or canoe for a paddle down the gently flowing, shallow river, which twists through dense woodlands. Wildflowers spring from the forest floor



Picture: Indiana Dunes National Park Ranger Rafi Wilkinson



Picture: Indiana Dunes National Park Ranger Rafi Wilkinson



Picture: Shari McCollough





**Left:** sunset over Chicago and Lake Michigan.

**Right:** the Florida Tropical House, located on Lake Michigan's shoreline in Beverly Shores, was built in 1933 for that year's World's Fair. Pictures: Indiana Dunes National Park Ranger Rafi Wilkinson



in late April and early May. The staccato pounding on tree trunks by red-headed woodpeckers is the drumbeat in the summertime birdsong opera performed in the leafy canopy. Come autumn, when yellow leaves carpet the forest floor and swirl upon the river's surface, it's easier to spot timid white-tailed deer.

Tucked inside the quiet beach community of Beverly Shores is a compact national historic district showcasing Century of Progress model homes designed for the 1933 World's Fair, which was held in Chicago.

The concept homes represented the future of American housing design. Four of the five homes have been restored to the way they were in the 1930s by the people living in them. During the last weekend in September, Indiana Landmarks, the state's historic preservation organisation, conducts ticketed tours with park ranger assistance.

Often the homes' residents greet visitors before docents show them around. A regular attendee, I'm fascinated by how design features and

appliances in these almost 90-year-old homes – open-floor plans, floor-to-ceiling windows, flat roofs, contiguous kitchen countertops, concrete floors, air conditioning, dishwashers and “iceless” refrigerators – are now commonplace.

Several decades before those innovations were wowing visitors to the 1933 World's Fair, the Indiana Dunes contributed to the development of human flight. In the 1890s, French-American engineer Octave Chanute flew double-winged gliders off the sand dunes of Miller Beach to test automatic flight control. Chanute shared his findings with Orville and Wilbur Wright, who then adapted his glider design for their first aircraft.

Visitors to the glider launch site, in the park's far west, find a statue

of Chanute and a commemorative plaque near a 1921 beach house that is undergoing restoration with a view to it being opened as an aviation museum. A replica of his glider hangs in the Indiana Dunes Visitor Centre's atrium lobby, where park rangers help visitors plan their days in the dunes.

Perhaps confusingly for people not familiar with the system of park classification in the US, enveloped by the Indiana Dunes National Park is the Indiana Dunes State Park: 880 hectares of dune habitats, including 5km of Lake Michigan beaches.

Ten state park hiking trails, most flanked by interpretive signage, lace through these preserved dune habitats. One is the strenuous 3 Dune Challenge,

which summits the park's three tallest dunes via a 2.4km circuit. Visitors tackling the route, through loose, deep sand and up wooden staircases, climb a total of 169 vertical metres: equivalent to ascending stairs to the top of a 55-storey building. I prefer to combine one dune circuit leg with an easier trail through woodlands or wetlands.

In the autumn, a wheelchair-accessible, bluff-top bird observation platform on the state park's east side affords great views of the sandhill crane migration. Trilling calls fill the air as these elegant, long-necked birds with wingspans of more than 1.5 metres soar overhead.

The Indiana Dunes State Park Pavilion is a newly restored 1929 Palladian windowed brick building. At its popular lakefront bar, Rooftop, guests relax around glowing firepits, listen to live music on weekends and take photos of panoramic lake views.

Here, sipping evening cocktails alfresco, the Indiana Dunes works its magic once again, the light of the sinking sun gilding Lake Michigan. ■

## THE STACCATO POUNDING ON TREE TRUNKS BY RED-HEADED WOODPECKERS IS THE DRUMBEAT IN THE SUMMERTIME BIRDSONG OPERA PERFORMED IN THE LEAFY CANOPY.

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