



INDIANA DUNES NATIONAL PARK

By Kit Bernardi

Towering sand dunes, rolling waves washing expansive beaches and blue water vistas with no land in sight. Sounds like views on one of America's oceanfront National Scenic Byways. But it's not. You're smack dab in the Midwest at Indiana Dunes National Park on freshwater Lake Michigan's southern coast.

Indiana Dunes National Park is 45 miles southeast of Chicago, the nation's third largest city.



Although wedged between two industrial Indiana cities, Gary and Michigan City, Indiana Dunes National Park ranks as one of the top five most biodiverse parks in the National Park System. It's right up there with biodiverse behemoths Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite and Great Smoky Mountains National Parks.

"Although not massive in size, within 15,000 acres, Indiana Dunes National Park offers year-round, easy access to abundant, biodiverse ecosystems through an 87-mile trail network and wide range of educational, conservation and outdoor sports programs," says Park Ranger Rafi Wilkinson.

ABOUT THE PARK

The Indiana Dunes region borders Lake Michigan, the second deepest and third largest of the Great Lakes. In 1966, it was designated a National Lakeshore, and in 2019 became America's 61st National Park.

Now, it's one of the country's top 10 National Parks in terms of visitation, welcoming more than three million people in 2022.

Unlike other headliner parks it shares super star status with, Indiana Dunes National Park is not a vast, contiguous swath of wilderness. Rather, it's an urban park that looks like a patchwork quilt of wild lands interspersed around cities, quiet beach communities and farmland. Over approximately 80 years, the park was pieced together through roughly 7,000 independent real estate transactions, legislation conservation victories and donations by local families of private, untouched land.

Within park boundaries, there are 15 miles of Lake Michigan beaches, four National Natural Landmarks, one National Historic District and one National Historical Landmark. The park encompasses the 2,182-acre Indiana Dunes State Park with three miles of lakefront beach and 10 miles of hiking trails. Both parks welcome leashed dogs on most trails and beaches. At the Indiana Dunes Visitor Center on State Road 49, you can talk with park rangers to get the lay of the land, see the excellent film about the park and gather information on the area's many attractions.

HIKING THROUGH GEOLOGICAL TIME

The half-mile thick Laurentide glacier covered northwest Indiana 14,000 to 18,000 years ago. It carved out the Great Lakes basin. As the glacier retreated, it molded the park's bogs, prairies, wetlands, woodlands, sand dunes and beaches where today's biodiverse ecosystems thrive. The park's oldest land is the furthest inland, seven miles south of Lake Michigan's shoreline.



Professor Erin Argyilan chairs the Indiana University Northwest Geosciences Department and conducts park research. She says, "By hiking park trails, you can see the land's geologic glacial and coastal evolution. Through time, geology and hydrology are constantly evolving, creating new, complex ecosystems on this very old land."

Cowles Bog Trail winds through a National Natural Landmark of pristine marsh, woodlands, dunes and beach environments. A lupine habitat, rare black oak Savanna, river-fed wetlands and lakefront dunes are some ecosystems along Miller Woods Trail. The Great Marsh Trail and its boardwalk viewing platform skirt the largest wetlands system in Lake Michigan's watershed attracting birds and beavers. Visiting the park's two most fragile ecosystems is restricted to ranger-led hikes held on summer and fall weekends. Pinhook Bog Trail loops through the park's oldest land designated as a National Natural Landmark. The bog's eight-foot-thick sphagnum moss matt supports nearly one third of Indiana's endangered, native plants, including rare orchids, carnivorous pitcher plants and 80-foot-tall tamarack trees.

On Lake Michigan's shoreline, the park's youngest land, Mount Baldy Summit Trail climbs the park's tallest sand dune rising 126 feet above the water and public beach. Park rangers explain how human disturbance destabilized the dune starving it of sand and the conservation efforts to restore it. For spectacular sunset lake views, join the last scheduled hike.

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES & EVENTS

Year-round, the park hosts more than 500 nature, cultural, outdoor sports, history, land stewardship and conservation programs. Birdwatchers from 30 states flock to the Indiana Dunes Birding Festival in mid-May.

More than 370 bird species migrate through the region, of which 150 nest in the park during summer months. Look for Sandhill Cranes, Prothonotary Warblers, Bald Eagles, Great Blue Herons, Peregrine falcons and Ruby-throated Hummingbirds.

Indiana Dunes Audubon Society executive director Brad Bumgardner explains, "Lake Michigan's expanse, measuring 307-miles long, is both a resource and obstacle for migrating birds. Before continuing their journeys, birds stop here to rest and feed."

Picturesque Chellberg Farm's restored, late 1800s farmhouse and barn set the scene for the spring maple syrup and fall harvest festivals. The annual Outdoor Adventure Festival held over a September weekend offers 50 free guided activities including kayaking, fishing, geo-caching, photography and birding. During fall evenings, visitors observe trained volunteers band migrating Saw-whet Owls.

At the Indiana Dunes Visitor Center, sign up for free, day-use geocaching kits and naturalist backpacks containing binoculars and field guides. For no charge, check out snowshoes and cross-country skis (weather dependent). There's seasonal bike rental available. Ask about volunteer drop-in conservation programs to pick up trash, plant, remove invasive species, rebuild park structures and help with special events.

CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Northwest Indiana's fur trading, railroad development and Swedish settlement histories are shared during tours of Bailly Homestead, an 1860s log cabin and 19th century house. The National Historic Landmark is adjacent to the slow-moving, forest-flanked Little Calumet River (boat launch accommodates paddlers with limited mobility).

Tucked inside the quiet beach community of Beverly Shores are the 1933 World's Fair Century of Progress concept homes. Comprising a National Historic District, these five restored homes showed fairgoers visionary architectural design elements that are now considered standard in today's residences such as open floor plans, dishwashers, and "iceless" refrigerators. Roadside placards explain each home's features. Over an autumn weekend, the homes open to the public for docent-led, ticketed tours.

The new, developing Indiana Dunes Indigenous Cultural Trail teaches visitors about the Miami and Potawatomi peoples who originally lived here. Recently opened, the arboretum Tree Trail has interpretive signage explaining native trees' significance for regional indigenous cultures.

INDIANA DUNES STATE PARK

Indiana Dunes National Park encircles the 2,182-acre Indiana Dunes State Park with three miles of lakefront beach. Two thirds of the state park's acreage comprise a pristine National Natural Landmark Dunes Nature Preserve. A \$5 million restoration of the park's 1929 beachfront pavilion added new public restrooms and outdoor showers, a wheelchair accessible boardwalk, restaurant and rooftop bar perfect for sipping cocktails alfresco at sunset.

The Nature Center's interactive exhibits and frequent, free interpretive programs explain the region's biological life, conservation history, and Lake Michigan shipwrecks. All 10 hiking trails flanked by informative signage start and end here. The park has a wheel-chair accessible, bluff-top bird observation platform. Visitors with physical challenges can use one of the center's four sand chair scooters at no charge.

Ambitious hikers earn bragging rights upon completing the popular 3-Dune Challenge. The 1.5-mile circuit climbs the park's three tallest dunes, a 553-vertical-foot elevation equivalent in height to climbing stairs to the top of a 55-story building. In summer months, lifeguards patrol only the park's West Beach. Lake Michigan can have dangerously strong rip currents and pounding waves. Always check beachfront signage and call the national park's visitor center for daily water conditions.

WHERE TO CAMP

Open April through October, Dunewood Campground has 54 drive-in campsites for RV and tent camping and 13 walk-in tent sites (you can reserve up to six months in advance). None has electrical or water hook ups. There is a dump station, modern restrooms and bath house. The campground is near a restaurant and gas station mini mart, and a mile from the public beach in Beverly Shores. Indiana Dunes State Park's campground has 140 campsites with 30- and 50-amp electrical hook ups, a dump station, and bath house. It is a half mile from the beach. Leashed dogs welcome.

MORE INFO

Indiana Dunes National Park, nps.gov/indu

Indiana Dunes Tourism, indianadunes.com

Indiana Dunes State Park, in.gov/dnr/state-parks/parks-lakes/indiana-dunes-state-park/



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