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WARREN DUNES STATE PARK LOOP

KEY AT-A-GLANCE
INFORMATION**LENGTH:** 4.2 miles**CONFIGURATION:** Small loop inside of larger loop**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate because of a few steep and sandy climbs**SCENERY:** Lake Michigan beach, sand dunes, wooded bluffs, forested bottomland, wetlands, creek**EXPOSURE:** Except for a mile of hiking on the beach, this hike is mostly shaded**SURFACE:** Dirt, loose sand, woodchips**HIKING TIME:** 2–3 hours**DRIVING DISTANCE:** 85 miles from Millennium Park, downtown Chicago**ACCESS:** 8 a.m.–dusk. Out-of-state residents are charged an \$8 daily access fee. In-state residents pay \$6.**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** No**FACILITIES:** Concessions, beach, beach house, restrooms, water, campground, picnic areas**MAPS:** Maps available at trail board near campground and online at michigandnr.com; Bridgeman, MI, USGS topo**SPECIAL COMMENTS:** Because the dunes can be easily damaged by unofficial trails, please remain on the designated trails. The park offers more than 200 campsites year-round. Call the park for more information at (269) 426-4013.GPS TRAILHEAD
COORDINATESLatitude 532749
Longitude 4639565

IN BRIEF

One of the most beautiful spots on Lake Michigan's southern shore, Warren Dunes is a perfect place to combine a trip to the beach with a ramble through rugged wooded dunes and bottomland forest. About a quarter of this hike runs along a beach that looks like more remote beaches farther north along Michigan's shoreline.

DESCRIPTION

Located 12 miles north of the Indiana border, Warren Dunes is one of Michigan's busiest state parks. Despite the popularity of the park, the trails are relatively quiet. Nearly all the visitors come for the park's 2.5-mile-long beach. Some also come to hurl themselves down Tower Hill. Among the many soaring sand dunes at Warren Dunes State Park, the highest and best known is Tower Hill. During the summer, Tower Hill hosts a steady stream of adults and children scrambling up it and then running—or often tumbling—down.

After starting the hike from the northwest corner of the parking lot, follow the sign to the right pointing to the campground.

Directions

From Chicago, take I-90/I-94 south. Follow I-90 (the Skyway) into Indiana, and then get back on I-94 as it heads northeast into Michigan. Get off I-94 at Exit 16 in Bridgeman; turn left on the Red Arrow Highway heading south. The entrance to the park is 2.4 miles ahead on the right. Follow the park road to the beach. Park in the lot that is farthest north along the beach. The trail starts from the northwest corner of the parking lot.

Warren Dunes State Park Loop





Warren Dunes offer secluded spots to sit and enjoy the landscape sculpted by wind and water.

Right away the trail leads you into a dense woodland and climbs a dune through an area with rolling ravines on each side of the trail. The first part of this hike brings you over a series of old dunes. Unlike younger, exposed dunes, these dunes are no longer pushed about by the wind. These older dunes and the ravines between them are blanketed with maple, oak, and beech trees, as well as an assortment of shrubs and wildflowers. After a short climb on a staircase, the trail continues to ascend and sides of the dune just keep getting steeper. While catching your breath at the top, you may be able to see the bottom of the dune nearly 200 feet down. To the west, Lake Michigan peeks through the occasional break in the trees.

Heading down the dune, keep watch for the bowl-shaped ravine on the right and the clifflike exposed dune on the left. As the trail takes a series of small dips and climbs, you'll pass flowering plants such as columbine and Solomon's seal. Sassafras and beech trees mixed in with the many specimens of oak and maple also line the trail. Farther along, you'll have more fine views of a ravine on the right as it tumbles precipitously downward. The trail briefly levels out before passing an unofficial spur trail heading up the dune to the right. From this spot, you'll descend a sandy path into a large marshy area. Sprinkled between log-strewn patches of open water are stands of cottonwood and maple and clusters of shrubs. Shortly after the trail meets flat ground, you'll encounter a couple of junctions; skip the first left and take the second one where the trail signs and map box are posted. You'll see that the trail to the right crosses Painterville Creek on a wooden bridge and enters the main campground. (In recent years, the park has removed thousands of ash trees in this campground in an effort to combat a tree-destroying invasive beetle called the emerald ash borer.)



The beach at Warren Dunes is perhaps the most serene spot on Lake Michigan's south shore.

In late summer and early fall, look for asters (clusters of small white flowers) lining the half-mile stretch of the trail that accompanies Painterville Creek. Follow the small spur trails on the right to get closer to the sandy-bottomed creek. While surveying the tannin-tinted creek, look for patches of watercress growing in the shallow spots. Unfortunately, it's not just the sound of the gurgling creek you'll hear on this stretch of trail. At this spot and other areas on the east side of the park, the hum of traffic announces the proximity of I-94 to the east.

Savanna gives way to woodland as you approach the concrete foundation of a former house. Stay left at a junction in front of the former house and pass through a grove of big maple trees, and continue straight ahead past the junction for the White Tail and Red Squirrel Trails on the left. Just ahead, take the next left on the Blue Jay Trail.

The Blue Jay Trail wastes no time leading you out of the flat bottomland forest. The landscape changes quickly on the gentle sandy climb alongside a small ravine on the right. Just past an unofficial trail that heads up a steep incline on the right, the trail skirts the edge of a large area with open sand. At the junction, turn left on the Oak Ridge Trail. The Oak Ridge Trail rises quickly and brings you on a switchback climb through a maple forest. Peek down the steep left side of the dune to see the Blue Jay Trail below.

At the junction with the Red Squirrel Trail, turn left and then, up ahead, turn right for a quick loop on the White Tail Trail. On this section of trail and elsewhere in the park, you may notice that the park is slow in cleaning up the deadfall on the trail. If possible, it's best to step over branches and logs rather than creating new trails going around them. The Whitetail Loop, surrounded by steep bluffs, occupies the flat bottom of a rounded ravine. The second half of the loop brings you

by a grove of attractive hemlock trees growing on the side of a bluff. Finishing the White Tail Loop, stay to the left on the Red Squirrel Trail, past the junction with the Oak Ridge Trail.

As the Red Squirrel Trail gently roller-coasters through the wooded dunes, it runs through a small ravine and passes by more hemlock trees. Once the trail leaves the woods and enters an open grassy area, a great view of Lake Michigan appears in front of you. In the language of dune ecology, this area of mostly grass and patches of open sand is known as a “blowout.” A blowout is like an amphitheater of sand, often with little vegetation growing within it because the sand is still on the move. This massive blowout is mostly covered with marram grass and the occasional sprinkling of oaks. As you journey down into the blowout, you’ll hit the junction with the Blue Jay Trail.

Continuing straight ahead toward the beach, the trees thin out considerably and soon disappear, leaving just the hearty marram grass holding onto the sand. Once you’ve reached the wide sandy beach, all that’s left is turning left and hiking 1 mile back to the parking area. On the walk back, however, you may want to take a closer look at several more of the blowouts (the largest blowout by far is the one you just walked through). To get closer views of these strange and awesome sculpted sandscapes, be sure to follow the well-used trails from the beach, and when returning to the beach, try to retrace your steps as much as possible.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

After the hike, consider a swim and a picnic somewhere along Warren Dunes’ 2.5 miles of beautiful sandy beach. If you’re eager to explore other vistas, you may want to check out some of the restaurants, antiques shops, and galleries that have multiplied in recent years along the Red Arrow Highway between the Indiana border and St. Joseph.

For more hiking in Warren Dunes, consider the Yellow Birch and Golden Rod Loops in the far northeastern corner of the park. Most of the Yellow Birch Loop runs along the edge of a large wetland (these trails may get mucky in the spring). Another option is to hike along the Warren Dunes beach north to Weko Beach. Weko Beach is operated by the town of Bridgeman and adjoins the northern border of Warren Dunes. A round-trip hike between the Warren Dunes day-use area and Weko Beach is 5 miles.

Another hiking option is Warren Woods State Natural Area. The park is home to the last mature beech-maple forest in southern Michigan. The 3.5 miles of hiking trails run through the forest and follow the Galien River. Bird-watchers cite the park as a good place to spot pileated woodpeckers. To reach Warren Woods from Warren Dunes, follow the Red Arrow Highway 1.4 miles south of the park entrance. Turn left (east) on Halloway Drive. Immediately turn right (south) on Three Oaks Road. Continue south 4 miles, and then turn left (west) on West Elm Valley Road. The entrance is 1 mile ahead on the right.