

Dunes Nature Preserve

Description: Strong winds from the north and west have sculptured a nationally famous dunescape along the Indiana shore of Lake Michigan. It is fortunate that a significant part of this geological phenomenon still remains in the Indiana Dunes State Park. Dunes Nature Preserve protects the best natural features of the park.

As you walk inland from the water's edge the first evidence of Nature's control of shifting sands can be found where the base of the dunes meets the more level lakeshore. Beach grass, with its spreading underground root system, establishes little islands of cover in the wind-blown sand. Here and there small mats of bearberry (kinnikinnick), a procumbent evergreen shrub, add stability to the soil. With increases in elevation, sumac, sand cherry, cottonwood, and prostrate juniper gradually take over. There are also a few isolated stands of jack pine on these lakeward slopes.

This foredune area is characterized by a series of hills and swales. Mt. Tom, at 186 feet above the lake, is the highest of these ridge tops. Wind erosion has cut depressions, called blowouts, through these ridges. The 3 largest of these blowouts, Beach House, Furnessville, and Big Blowout, extend into the interdunes area of hills, pockets, and troughs. Big Blowout has uncovered an area of dead tree trunks known as the Tree Graveyard. This area was once a white pine forest before shifting sands buried it. Because sand is still unstable in the interdunes, vegetation here resembles that found on the foredunes.

The backdune area begins on the leeward slopes of active blowouts or on protected ridges. Tops and upper leeward slopes of the backdunes are forested with nearly pure stands of black oak, mixed with a few white oaks and stunted sassafras. Thick stands of blueberry, bracken fern, and greenbrier are found in the understory.

South of the dunes is a wetland area, composed of marsh, shrub swamp, and swamp forest. This large area is drained by Dunes Creek. Between the dunes and this wetland is a strip of sandy flats with greater organic matter. One sheltered cove on these flats has native white pines associated with oaks, tulip, white ash, and basswood.

From the wetland, there is a gradual upslope toward the park's southern boundary. This slope is one of the shorelines of prehistoric Lake Chicago.

