Summer Lovin’

You have probably heard the phrase, “loving the parks to death.” If not, try googling it. You will find an actual search phrase with a string of references and editorials, detailing how parks and their resources can be “loved” or visited by so many people that they are seriously degraded. Is this happening at Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore? Definitely! The national lakeshore alone (not counting the state park) receives close to 2 million visitors each year. That’s more people than Everglades National Park. Approximately 70% of those 2 million people come during 25% of the year—the summer months of June, July, and August. This makes sense, as those months are the best times to visit the beach for sun, sand, and swimming.

Now let’s also condense the area in which those 1.4 million people (70% remember) visit. The primary locations for summer visitation are the beaches at West Beach, Portage Lakefront, Porter Access, Kemil Access, Lakeview and Central Avenue Access, which is actually less than 20% of the total area of the park. So you can see what is happening here if you follow the math—the dunes are suffering from summer lovin’.

How are the dunes harmed by summer lovin’? Basically the damage to the dunes comes from people’s feet and where they choose to walk and set up their beach picnic. The dune grass, called marram grass, is critical to stabilizing the sand and creating new dunes along the beach. Marram grass is sensitive, and will die if trampled. You might notice that lots of little paths snake their way up the dunes. Most of those are considered social trails and are created by visitors who mistakenly get off the main trail or walkway. Of course, once a social trail is made, other visitors think it is a legitimate path and follow it, thus making it wider and more prominent. Eventually, these social trails can erode into blowouts and moving dunes, creating problems for other plant and animal species. As you can see, one simple visitor decision to get off the trail to explore or set up a picnic under a shade tree in the dunes can cascade into serious damage to the park.

Please know that we do not expect or want visitors to stop coming to the beach in the summer. It is a great time to visit the national lakeshore. In fact, if we just follow a few simple rules of behavior and beach etiquette, we can enjoy and love the dunes without harming them.

**Suggestion #1**—Bring your own shade. It is for your own UV safety and also helps the dunes. You can see from photos that many social trails and dune impacts stem from beach-goers seeking shade under cottonwood trees. If we just bring our own shade, and set up near the shore, we will save the trees, grass, and the dunes around them.

**Suggestion #2**—Stay on the designated trails and walkways at the park. If you see a path that is not marked with a park sign, it is likely a social trail. Please don’t follow it just to explore. You could be trampling sensitive plants, even endangered species such as Pitcher’s Thistle which the park is trying to protect.

**Suggestion #3**—Respect the fences and barriers, and don’t climb over or around them. You will notice a lot more fencing this summer at several dune locations. We are trying to minimize the social trails and erosion in the dunes. Climbing over the fences could also land you a ticket if you are found in restoration areas in the park.

**Suggestion #4**—Make your own photos; leave only footprints on designated trails. Share your photos on social media and let others know how important it is to love your national park and protect it at the same time. If enough people follow these good beach behaviors, summer lovin’ can be positive for both visitors and the park resources.

Visitor Centers - A Great Place to Start

Unless otherwise posted, the public areas of the park are open from sunrise to 30 minutes after sunset. Most parking areas are open from 7:00 a.m. until 30 minutes after sunset. Lake View parking area remains open until 11:00 p.m.
Dune Protection Efforts

Efforts to restore and protect the fragile dune ecosystem at West Beach were initiated in September of 2012. Informal signs and fencing were installed to try to reduce the unintentional impacts caused by visitors venturing from designated trails. Off-trail foot traffic has led to trampling of vegetation, creation of a network of unauthorized trails, and erosion in sensitive areas including globally imperiled panne wetlands. In order to measure the effectiveness of the signs and fencing, park employees are working with Valparaiso University and Prairie State College to monitor the recovery of plants in previously impacted areas. We see increased stabilizing plant growth where feet aren’t going!

Oak Savannah Restoration

Restoration of 1,045 acres of oak savanna will begin this year at the Miller Woods and Tolloast Dunes Units. Oak savanna occurs in only 0.62% of its pre-settlement extent. The work will include reducing the overgrown canopy to allow more light to the grasses and flowering plants as well as treatment of invasive plant species across each of the units. The project will benefit the federally endangered Kame blue butterfly as well as a wide range of plants and wildlife. Planting of native forbs and grasses will occur during spring 2015 to augment the native seed bank.

Passport to the Dunes

Discover hidden treasures of Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore through the brand new Passport to the Dunes program. Pick up a passport booklet at either the Indiana Dunes Visitor Center or the park’s Paul H. Douglas Center and start exploring. Complete your passport by visiting at least eight of the nine listed locations and answering one question related to each site. Bring your completed passport back to either center and get a free mini-poster featuring our newly-designed park site logos. This is a great program for someone who has at least a couple of days to explore the park or who makes multiple visits.

Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk

This popular spot is operated under a unique partnership to provide this national treasure for the enjoyment of our neighbors and visitors. Park staff continue to monitor this temporarily closed area of Mount Baldy, and have been working with others to understand what is happening to this giant moving dune. Ground penetrating radar studies by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), identified a large number of anomalies below the dune’s surface, but analysis by scientists from the National Park Service, Indiana University and the Indiana Geological Survey have not yielded answers on how these holes form. Scientists report that the holes are very short-lived, remaining open for less than 24 hours before collapsing and filling in naturally with surrounding sand.

Scientists Investigating Mystery Holes on Mount Baldy

A casual observer might think that, after more than an century of robust scientific inquiry at the dunes, we would have discovered almost everything about the park and its resources. Last year we were reminded that there is still undiscovered mystery under foot. Literally. In June of 2013, a curious 6-year-old boy entered a deep hole he found on the slope of Mount Baldy. To the horror of his friends, family, park staff, a researcher and other bystanders, this boy closed up trapping the boy under what was later discovered eleven feet of sand. Today, the family reports the little boy is just fine. The cause of the hole remains a mystery.

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Additional work is planned this summer as part of a more comprehensive investigation of the dune. This study will include mapping of openings, depressions, and anomalous features, the use of multispectral Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR) and coring to develop a better understanding of the overall internal architecture of the dune, and detailed GPR and coring of some of the anomalies identified in the EPA report.

Stewardship Opportunities

In 2013, over 1,100 volunteers donated more than 2,400 hours to learn more about their national lakeshore during Stewardship Saturdays. We are grateful that citizens donate their time, give back, and help protect our public lands. We’re in better shape because of their help. Want to join us on select Saturday mornings? See the listing of stewardship programs in the Ranger Guide or section of the Singing Sands or on the national lakeshore’s website for details and locations.

Nature Play Zone

The new Nature Play Zone, located at the west end of the park at the Paul H. Douglas Center for Environmental Education has exceed our expectations! Families who have discovered this unusual outdoor play area return all smiles and want to visit again. This summer, enjoy the site and each family will receive a free set of nature play cards and a water bottle (while supplies last). This is part of our Nature in My Neighborhood campaign, which encourages families to explore nature in the parks and their own backyards. We’re also hosting fort-building contests June 14, July 5, and August 2 from 10 am - 4pm.

Heron Rookery

Construction on a nearby bridge on 400 East Road will keep the main entrance and parking lot of the Heron Rookery temporarily closed. Despite the closures of the main lot, access to the trail will still be accessible from a small lot at the west end of the trail. Normally just open during the spring wildflower season, this site on 450 East Road will be kept open throughout the construction period. While Great Blue Herons have not nested in this rookery for years, you can still spot them in a number of wetlands around the national lakeshore. Check out the overlooks at the Great Marsh Trail or Long Lake in the West Beach unit to see herons and other wetland birds.

Habitat Restoration

This summer you may see work being done to remove 40 Older structures and former sites. This two-year contract is a continuation of a nearly thirty-year effort to help restore the park’s natural habitats. When the national lakeshore was established in 1966, close to 1,000 commercial buildings and house sites were included within the park’s boundary. When appropriate, the park removes these structures and restores the landscape to a more natural state. A few historic structures have been preserved, and other buildings were converted to create office space, interpretive centers, and other park facilities.

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Happy Anniversary NPS!

100 Years

1916-2016

Happy 50th Anniversary

Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore

Mount Baldy, adjacent parking, trails and beach remain closed.
For Your Safety in the Park

Insect repellents work great to keep biting bugs away from you. Staying out of the woods during the very early morning or around dusk will also limit your exposure to mosquitoes. When you go exploring in the woods, you can keep ticks at bay by wearing long-sleeve shirts and pants, with cuffs closed and pant legs tucked into your socks.

Bees, yellow jackets, spiders, and snakes are not your friends, so don’t put your hand anywhere you can’t see. Even small bites and stings can disrupt your enjoyment of the park. Keep shoes on to protect your feet from unexpected wildlife. The risk of snake encounters is greatest when the weather is warming up. March and April are the times when snakes are likely to be most active. Be aware of your surroundings when walking along paths through the forest. If you see a snake and it coiled or hopped off the path, then it was most likely a harmless reptile. If you see a snake on the path you may want to consider walking around it. If you see a snake moving slowly on the path you may want to consider walking right on past it. If you see a snake moving quickly towards you, then it was most likely a dangerous snake. Do not go near a snake moving quickly towards you. Staying out of the woods will also limit your exposure to mosquitoes.

For Your Safety in Lake Michigan

Entering Lake Michigan is a lot different than splashing in your local pool. It’s serious business! Wind driven waves can quickly create dangerous conditions that pose a severe threat to even the most expert of swimmers. People drown in the lake every day. Don’t let your visit end in tragedy. People drown in the lake every day. Don’t let your visit end in tragedy. If there are whitecaps on the lake, the water conditions are too dangerous for swimming or wading anywhere along the 15-mile shoreline. Keep a safe distance. Keep a safe distance. Stick to the sandbars. Stick to the sandbars. Keep your children at arm’s length at all times.

Lake Michigan, like all bodies of water, is susceptible to contamination by natural and human created bacteria. When concentrations are high, these bacteria can pose a threat to your health. Consider staying out of the water and enjoy the lake from the beach. Even on clear days, you should rinse off with fresh water after swimming.

Leaves all natural and cultural items you find them to preserve the present and past. Collecting items such as shells, fossils, rocks, and wildflowers is prohibited.

Respect all wildlife from a safe distance. Never feed wild animals. Feeding wild animals is dangerous, harms their health, and alters their natural behaviors. Avoid introducing or transporting non-native species. For example, don’t bring firewood to the park. Exotic pest plants that live in firewood can kill native trees. Burn all firewood; take no firewood home.

Dispose of your litter and recycle items in marked containers.

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Summer Beach Parking

Parking Lots Capacity Directions from Indiana Dunes Visitor Center
West Beach 596 vehicles Follow Indiana Hwy. 49 north to Hwy. 12 and proceed west to County Line Road. Turn north on County Line Road and follow signs. Lifeguards are on duty. Fees are charged from Memorial Day through Labor Day – $6.00/vehicle and $30.00/bus.
Portage Lakefront and Riverwalk 125 vehicles Follow Indiana Hwy. 49 north to Hwy. 12. Travel west to JCT 249 south, which is the first left after the overpass. Turn left on Hwy. 249 south and stay in the right-hand lane to traffic light. Turn right at traffic light and follow the park signs.
Porter Access Point 66 vehicles Follow Indiana Hwy. 49 north to Hwy. 12 west to Waverly Road, and turn north.
Kemil Road Access Point 81 vehicles Follow Indiana Hwy. 49 north to Hwy. 12 east to Kemil Road (East State Park Road), and turn north.
Dunbar Access Point 26 vehicles Follow Indiana Hwy. 49 north to Hwy. 12 east to Kemil Road (East State Park Road), and turn north. At the dead end, turn east to Dunbar.
Lake View 40 vehicles Follow Indiana Hwy. 49 north to Hwy. 12 east to Kemil Road (East State Park Road), and turn north. At the dead end, turn east to Lakeview along this road.
Central Avenue Access Point 70 vehicles Follow Indiana Hwy. 49 north to Hwy. 20 north to Hwy. 320 north. Follow Indiana Hwy. 12 east to Central Avenue and turn north.
Mount Baldy (Temporarily closed) (Temporarily closed)

Parking Tips

• Parking along the road is prohibited.
• Smaller parking lots fill quickly during the summer months.
• The large parking lot at West Beach, with 600 spaces, rarely fills.
• You will be ticketed if you do not use a designated parking space.
• Always lock your vehicle, and leave valuables in your trunk, out of site, or at home.
• Some parking strategies may be to plan an early arrival, midweek trips, or visit during shoulder seasons.

Top Visitor Questions

Where is the beach?
The 13-mile beach can be accessed from many different locations. See map on back.

Where may I climb a dune?
Most of the park trails cross over forested dunes. You must stay on a designated trail when you walk on any dune to protect this fragile resource.

West Beach offers a spectacular overlook on the one-mile Dune Succession Trail. The new Miller Woods Trail extension traverses the dunes to Marquette Park. Please stay on designated trails to protect sensitive dune species.

Do you close the beach when high waves are present or E. coli levels are high?
No. The national lakeshore does not close its beach due to water conditions. Risks are inherent in all natural areas and you must determine what is safe for you. During summer months, lifeguards are stationed at West Beach. Lifeguards are not present at other locations of the beach.

Call 219-826-7561 followed by prompt #2 for information regarding E. coli levels.

May I take my pet with me for a stroll or hike?
Yes. The national lakeshore has over 40 miles of hiking trails. Pets restrained by a leash (6’ or less) are permitted on most park trails. Pets are prohibited on the Great Marsh Trail, Glenwood Dune Trail, and at the Nature Play Zone. Pets are only permitted on the beach east of the Kemil access point.

The Glenwood Dunes Trail (intersection of Hwy 20 and School House Road) is open for horseback riding March 16 through December 14.

Hike with others and stay on designated trails for your protection and that of park resources. Trail maps are available at the two park visitor centers and the park web page.

Do you have a campground?
Yes. The Dunewood Campground is open the last Friday in April through the third Thursday in October and is located at the intersection of U.S. 12 and Broadview near Beverly Shores. Its 33 campsites are available on a first-come, first-served basis for a fee of $18 per night. The walk-in sites are temporarily closed. Credit or debit card ONLY. No cash or checks accepted.

The restrooms are centrally located and have showers. Electrical hookups are not available. Use firewood from local suppliers to help prevent the spread of invasive insects. Alcohol is strictly prohibited.

How do I reserve a curriculum school camp program?
Teachers and youth group leaders should call 219-395-1885 to arrange for a free ranger-led program. Many of these programs are conducted at the park’s Paul H. Douglas Center for Environmental Education, located in Gary/Miller, Indiana, and focus on the park’s resource issues.

Is Mount Baldy Open?
Mount Baldy remains temporarily closed this summer as scientists continue their investigation of spontaneous holes forming in the dune. Additional holes have been found since the initial incident and scientists still don’t know the cause. Research will continue into late fall. Mount Baldy remains closed to protect the public’s safety.

May I launch my boat and fish?
The park does not have a boat launch. Personal motorized watercraft (Jet Skis and Wave Runners) are prohibited. However, you may launch and/or carry your own non-motorized canoes or kayaks at various locations. An Indiana state fishing license is required to fish.

Do you have a Junior Ranger Program?
Yes! Ask a ranger at the Visitor Center to help you select the free Junior Ranger or Junior Explorer program that best fits your visit. There are three Junior Ranger books to guide you on adventures through several park locations. We also offer the Beachcomber Junior Explorer program if you have just a short time at the beach, other Junior Explorer activities are offered at special events. Once completed, each participant will have earned a badge, patch, sticker, or temporary tattoo. Pick up Junior Ranger and Junior Explorer materials at the Indiana Dunes Visitor Center, Douglas Center, download them at www.nps.gov/indu/. For more information, Ask a ranger at the Visitor Center to help you select the free Junior Ranger or Junior Explorer program that best fits your visit. There are three Junior Ranger books to guide you on adventures through several park locations. We also offer the Beachcomber Junior Explorer program if you have just a short time at the beach, other Junior Explorer activities are offered at special events. Once completed, each participant will have earned a badge, patch, sticker, or temporary tattoo. Pick up Junior Ranger and Junior Explorer materials at the Indiana Dunes Visitor Center, Douglas Center, download them at www.nps.gov/indu/.

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A mat of sphagnum moss keeps water from soaking into the soil, creating a rich habitat for small plants and animals. Explore an 1820s fur trading outpost and a 1900-era farmstead. Enjoy Maple Sugar Time in March. Follow the trail that starts here and winds through a wide diversity of landscapes, including the Mnoké Prairie, Little Calumet River, and a mature beech/maple woodland.

West Beach
West Beach is a great destination, even when the weather is too cold for swimming. Enjoy a meal at the picnic shelter, walk a marked trail traversing the dunes and forest, learn how plant and animal communities are replacing one another through time, or watch migrating waterfowl at Long Lake in autumn and spring. Light food service available during the summer.

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Dunewood Campground
Dunewood is one mile south of Lake Michigan and features 53 wooded campsites. Enjoy camping with the convenience of access to restrooms and showers. Fees are charged, and registration is on a first-come, first-served basis. Credit card or debit card only, no cash or checks accepted. The campground is open April 25 - October 19, 2014.

Mount Baldy
(Temporarily closed)
Hike the trail to the top of the national lakeshore’s largest moving dune. Mount Baldy, at 126 feet tall, provides stunning views of Lake Michigan and its shoreline. Boy Scout trail to protect the park. Stay on designated trails and avoid walking on plants. To reach the summit, you must first follow the trail out to the beach.

Pinhook Bog
A mat of sphagnum moss keeps everything from trees to insect-eating plants from fouling above an ancient, and now-hidden, lake. This extremely rare and fragile habitat can only be entered during ranger-led tours.

Water Safety
Lake Michigan waters can be hazardous. Rough waters occur frequently during periods of high wind, and make it unsafe to enter the lake. During the winter, shelf ice forms along the lakeshore and is never safe to walk on. Check with local authorities about conditions and potential hazards. There are no lifeguards at the national lakeshore beach during the fall, winter, and spring.