

There's no arguing with the benefits of wandering through the woods. Whatever we're looking for—fresh air, exercise, time with (or away from) the family, a bit of adventure, or a momentary escape from the concrete grid—traipsing through the local landscape helps us take stock of ourselves and the world around us.

The best thing about hiking in the Chicago region is the variety of scenic spots, each with a distinctive topographical flavor, its own combination of plants and wildlife, and its unique seasonal ambience. When it's time to dodge city living for a while, a short trip to Lake Michigan is the first idea in the minds of many. Mesmerizing us every chance it gets, the Big Lake's endless blue horizon is no small part of the region's allure. Profoundly intertwined with the area's weather, economic and social history, and, of course, its visual charm, Chicagoans are fortunate to have this exquisite diversion in their front yard. Heading inland away from the lake, there is no shortage of patches of parkland that can provide us with a respite from our daily routines. These are places that invite us to trace the routes of meandering rivers, wander through expansive prairies, and scramble up steep, wooded hills. These are places we go to enjoy a picnic in a dappled oak savanna, or where we can sit on the edge of a quiet lake while admiring a field of water lilies beyond the weeping willows.

Spring and fall provide some of the best times to explore local trails: temperatures are moderate, bugs are dormant, the number of visitors is minimal, and lovely surprises often present themselves to those who look. Spring, of course, brings a sensory banquet as buds pop, wildflowers bloom, and the landscape becomes braided with intermittent streams. The only thing more pleasurable than the awakening of spring is getting hit with a Technicolor blast in fall. Places such as Deer Grove Forest Preserve, Morton Arboretum, and the Bailly/Chellberg Hike at the Indiana Dunes are a few spots where one can witness brilliant displays of autumn's leaves. Fall also offers opportunities to swim through a sea of prairie grass as the mauve stalks of big bluestem reach heights of eight to ten feet at places like Goose Lake Prairie State Park and Chain O' Lakes State Park.

Destinations swarming with visitors in the warmer months usually supply a pleasing solitude during winter. While the dead grasses, naked trees, and frozen streams of winter can seem stark and barren, the snowy landscape is alive with opportunities to follow the comings and goings of elusive creatures such as raccoons, opossums, and coyotes. Winter serves up other delights, too. Opportunities for sledding and outdoor ice skating can be found at places such as Lakewood and Goodenow forest preserves and Oak Ridge Prairie County Park.

Winter's fleeting daylight hours need not prevent you from seeking treatment for your cabin fever—many of the destinations listed in this book stay open after dark. Just bring a headlamp or a flashlight, or better yet, take a hike under the glow of a full moon. When hiking in fall and winter, be mindful that some parks may be closed for hunting, while others may provide restricted access, and still others will allow hikers and hunters to coexist. During hunting season, it's never a bad idea to call the park administration to ask about access and safety precautions.

Many people prefer hiking in summer, when the sun is warm, the greenery is lush, and kids are searching for something to do. Lake Michigan excursions such as the Cowles Bog and Dead River hikes are particularly fun for the family on hot summer days when you can kick off your shoes and float in the lake at the hikes' halfway points. It's true, summer is the most conducive season for combining your hike with a myriad of other outdoor pursuits like picnicking, playing Frisbee, casting a fishing line, or practicing your tai chi. It's also the time of year to combine hiking with a night or two sleeping under the stars at places like Chain 'O Lakes, Illinois Beach, and Shabonna Lake state parks.

Whatever the season, I can't stress enough the advantages of getting out on the trail as early as possible. Early mornings—the time of day when wildlife sightings outnumber sightings of people—deliver the most captivating moments: a line of deer leaping over a fence, steam rising off a pond on a cool spring morning, or a great blue heron fishing for frogs.

▶ CITY ON THE PRAIRIE

At the time of European settlement, the landscape of the Chicago region was mostly tallgrass prairie, an especially fertile type of grassland due to thousands of years of tall grasses decomposing. While this eastern edge of the nation's grassland is known for being productive farmland, farmers were initially in for an unpleasant surprise when they struggled to plow soil that seemed to have more roots than dirt. But once the sod was turned over and seeds were planted, their efforts were rewarded. To this day, Illinois continues to be a top producer of national staples such as corn and soybeans. While nearly all the tallgrass prairie has been cultivated, the remnants described in this book provide a taste of what it was like to trek through prairie grass growing as high as a horse's head.

Even though much of the native landscape was gently rolling prairie, numerous hilly wooded exceptions could always be found. Among those places spared from the

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steamrolling effect of the last glacier were the steep hills scattered throughout McHenry and Lake counties, the wooded bluffs within the Palos/Sag Valley Forest Preserve, and the sandstone cliffs and canyons along the Illinois and Kankakee rivers. And later, after the last glacier began to recede some 14,000 years ago, the colossal sand dunes formed at the south edge of Lake Michigan.

▶ THE TRAILS

While the destinations in this book are scattered across three states and more than a dozen counties, there are a few places where trails are concentrated. The most accessible of these areas are the trails in the vicinity of the Palos/Sag Valley Forest Preserve (southwest of downtown) and the Indiana Dunes (southeast of downtown). In the far northeastern corner of Illinois is an assortment of good destinations in McHenry and Lake counties. Southwest of the city, beyond Joliet, a great collection of trails lies within the vicinity of the Illinois River and the Illinois & Michigan (I&M) Canal.

THE I&M CANAL TRAIL

Perhaps the most important development that led to Chicago becoming the economic and cultural capital of the Midwest was the digging of the I&M Canal in 1848. Running parallel to the Illinois and Des Plaines rivers, the canal provided a link between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. After the canal was completed, the task of getting grain from the Midwest's breadbasket to markets in Chicago and beyond suddenly became easier, and in the larger picture, shipping traffic could travel from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. For much of canal's life span the boats were pulled by mules along an accompanying towpath.

Today, 60 miles of the old towpath between Joliet and LaSalle has been preserved as a multiuse trail. This trail and its surrounding environs now offer some of the best hiking in the Chicago region. Sprinkled in the vicinity of the trail and the Illinois River are the high bluffs of McKinley Woods; sandstone cliffs and canyons of Starved Rock, Buffalo Rock, and Matthiessen state parks; and the largest tract of tallgrass prairie in the state, at Goose Lake Prairie State Park. There are also a dozen locks that were once used for raising and lowering boats along the canal, as well as a handful of charming little towns that grew up alongside the waterway.

INDIANA DUNES

Located on the southern tip of Lake Michigan, the Indiana Dunes offer great stretches of sandy beach, dense bottomland forests, and soaring mountains of sand overlooking the lake. Even though the dunes are bounded by steel mills, residential developments, and a power plant, the 17,200 acres that make up the national and state parks can feel surprisingly remote. At the state park and at the national lakeshore's West Beach and Cowles Bog trails, you'll encounter curious dune formations known as "blowouts," where forceful lake winds have scooped out huge bowls in

the sand. Other hikes in the area, such as the Li-co-ki-we Trail and the Bailly/Chellberg hike, feature rolling oak savannas, gentle dune ridges, winding streams, and marshland active with birds. With quick access via the South Shore Rail Line, the dunes are an especially attractive destination for individuals using public transit.

PALOS AREA

The Palos/Sag Valley Forest Preserve hosts about 35 miles of trails that branch out and converge within 14,000 acres of woodland, lakes, ponds, sloughs, and rugged glacial terrain. Families visiting Palos will enjoy the Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center, where they can take a short hike along the banks of Long John Slough and through groves of stately oaks, and then visit a small nature center featuring a menagerie of birds, snakes, and frogs, as well as a beehive under Plexiglas. Across the Des Plaines River, at Waterfall Glen Forest Preserve, a 10-mile loop trail through rugged wooded terrain winds around the Argonne National Laboratory. To the east, Lake Katherine Nature Preserve provides an unrivaled spot for a casual urban stroll. The most scenic and remote hiking destination in the Palos area is Cap Sauers Holdings, which is the largest roadless area in Cook County and one of the largest state-designated nature preserves in Illinois.

LAKE AND MCHENRY COUNTIES

Thanks to a glacier that dumped enormous heaps of dirt and gravel as it retreated from the area some 14,000 years ago, Lake and McHenry counties possess hills galore. Situated side by side in Illinois' far northeast corner, these counties are where you'll find destinations with names like Glacial Park, Moraine Hills State Park, and Marengo Ridge Conservation Area that hint at the area's geological legacy. The glacial heritage is also evident in the many types of wetlands dotting the landscape. When glaciers retreated, chunks of ice often would get left behind, leaving depressions in the ground that eventually became lakes, ponds, marshes, or bogs. This process created extensive wetlands at places such as Volo Bog, Chain 'O Lakes State Park, and Moraine Hills State Park.

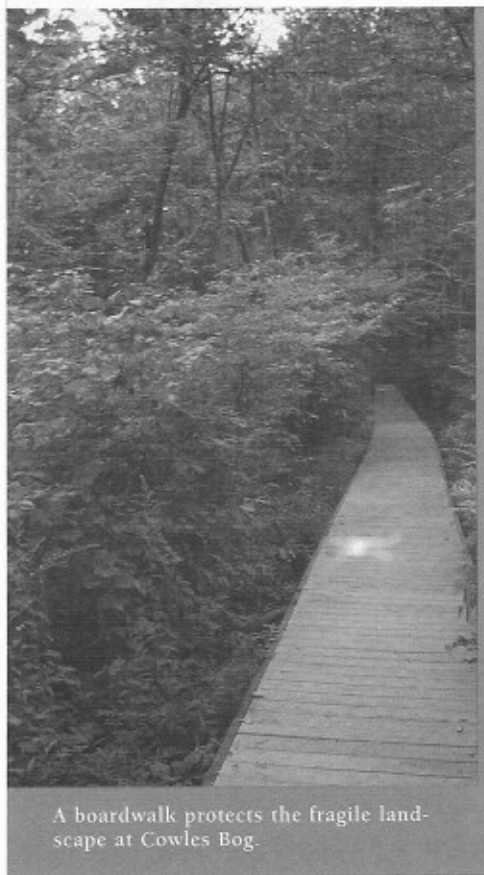
▶ PICK A TRAIL, ANY TRAIL

Even though the focus of this book is hiking, much of the information will be useful to cyclists, trail runners, cross-country skiers, snowshoers, parents with strollers, and wheelchair users. With a growing number of trails classified as "multiuse" (trails offering a wide, smooth, crushed-gravel surface), more people are seeing that there's more than one way to follow a



A stairway leading up one of the monstrous sand dunes at Indiana Dunes State Park.

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A boardwalk protects the fragile landscape at Cowles Bog.

trail. One mother I know, for example, runs along multiuse trails while her ten-year-old son rides his bicycle beside her. Hitting the trails is a great way for them to stay fit while spending time together outdoors.

Local hikers will want to keep an eye on the changes at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie, the first national tallgrass prairie (pages 164–167). Several years down the road, the U.S. Forest Service will start opening some 40 miles of trails throughout the 19,000 acres that once hosted the largest ammunition-production plant in the world. While prairie restoration is planned for much of Midewin, large sections will be woodland.

As I mulled over the trails to include in this book, I sometimes found it difficult to eliminate one hike in favor of another. As much as possible, I leaned toward variety in terms of length, location, and scenic attractions. While I hope you enjoy the hikes I have laid out, keep in mind there are many more excellent hikes that are not among these 60. Some are included in the “Nearby Activities” sections of the various profiles, but many are not. In any case, good wishes to you and your companions as you ramble through the natural wonders of the Chicago region.