

LASALLE FISH AND WILDLIFE AREA LOOP 46

IN BRIEF

If you like riverside hikes and sprawling marshlands busy with birds, you'll find this to be one of the great undiscovered hikes in Chicagoland. Nearly every inch of this hike accompanies a river, a drainage ditch, a pond, or a marshland.

DESCRIPTION

About 150 years ago, the Grand Kankakee Marsh was the largest wetland in the Midwest, stretching for nearly a million acres through northwest Indiana. Then in the mid-1800s, the marshes were drained, and the Kankakee River was deepened and channelized in order to use the flat, moist landscape for farming. Drainage tiles were installed, ditches were dug, and pumps were installed to push water away from the cropland. Also, an extensive levee system was built to reduce flooding near the waterways. According to the United States Geological Survey, only 13 percent of the Kankakee Marsh remains.

Grand Kankakee Marsh was named by the early French explorers who came through major waterways of the area looking for a water route to the Pacific Ocean. One of these explorers was Robert Cavalier, Sieur de LaSalle,

Directions

From Chicago, take I-90/I-94 south. Stay on I-94 as I-90 splits off. When I-94 reaches I-80, continue straight ahead on IL 394 for 4.8 miles. Turn left (east) on US 30 (East Lincoln Highway) and proceed 6.1 miles to JS 41 (Wicker Avenue). Hang a right (south) on US 41 and continue 23.8 miles until you reach IL 10 (County Road 1000). Turn right (west) on IL 10 and proceed 2.4 miles until you see the sign for parking lot 3A.



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 5.2 miles

CONFIGURATION: Loop

DIFFICULTY: Moderate

SCENERY: Kankakee River, expansive marshland, large lake, prairie, savanna, woodland, numerous drainage ditches, and a stream

EXPOSURE: Mostly exposed

SURFACE: Sand/dirt two-track road

HIKING TIME: 3–3.5 hours

ACCESS: Much of the west half of this hike is closed for waterfowl hunting from October 1 to December 1. If you're visiting during that time, stick to the east half of the fish-and-wildlife area.

FACILITIES: Boat launch at parking area

MAPS: Map posted at park office; USGS topos straddle the state line between Illiana Heights, IL, and Schneider, IN

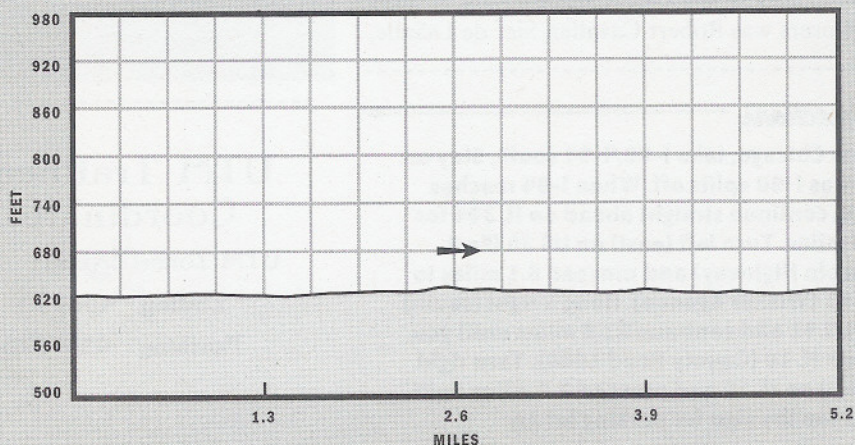
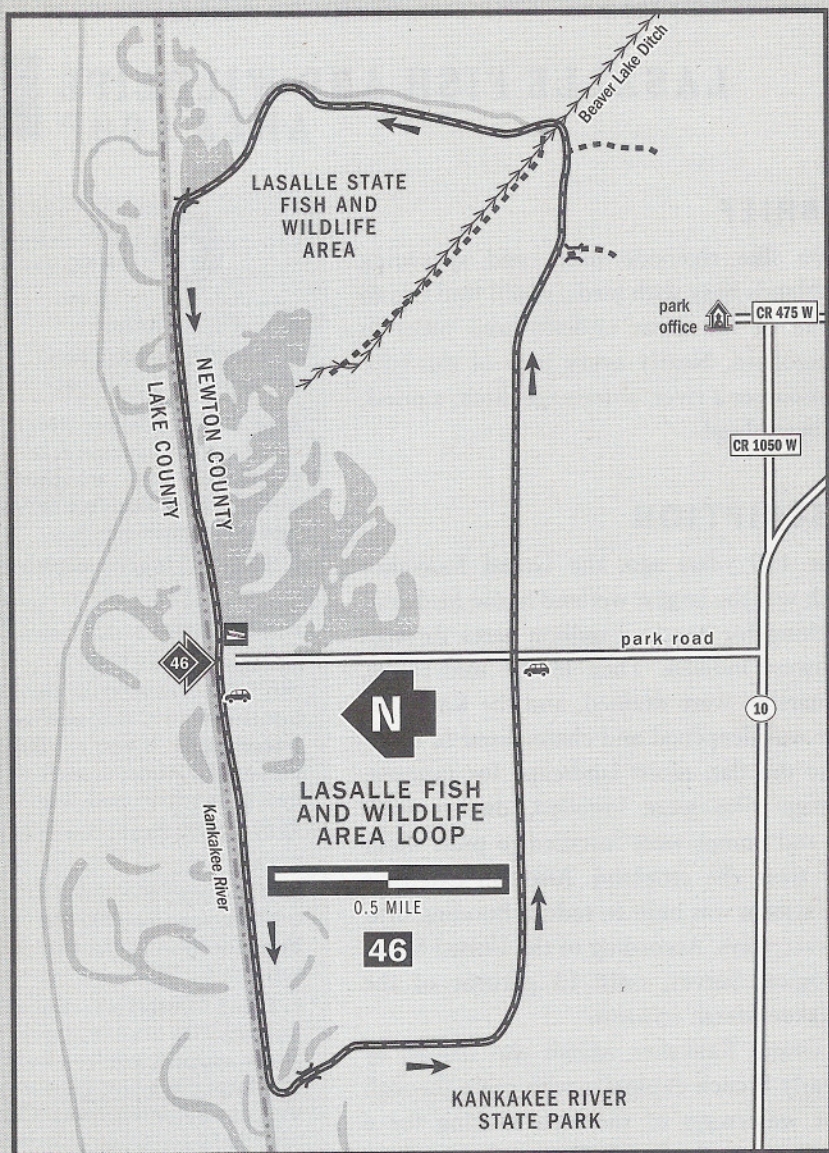
SPECIAL COMMENTS: Because this wildlife area is largely undeveloped, you're likely to be all alone once you get away from the prime fishing spots. Call (219) 992-3019 for more information.

UTM Trailhead Coordinates

UTM Zone (NAD27) 16T

Easting 458293

Northing 4557326





LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area is a remnant of what was once the largest wetland in the Midwest.

for whom the 3,797-acre fish-and-wildlife area is named. LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area—one of the few original remnants of the Grand Kankakee Marsh—was first established as a state park in the 1960s.

Start the hike in parking lot 3A, situated at the edge of a vast, open water marsh called the Black Oak Bayou. Facing the Kankakee River, take the gravel two-track road to the left as it runs along the levee. The levee—which is about 15 feet above the surrounding landscape—provides a bird's-eye view of the river on the right and the marshes and woodland to the left. At 0.2 miles, a large, swampy pond covered with algae and speckled with dead trees opens on the left. Many of these riverside ponds are shaped like short, wriggling worms—indicating their former life as the curves or perhaps the oxbows of the Kankakee before it was channelized. After a brief stretch of cottonwoods and oaks growing in a wet savanna on the left, you'll encounter more marshland alive with swallows soaring among the dead trees, turtles plopping off logs into the water, and lily pads tilting in the breeze.

Once you've logged nearly a mile of hiking, the trail turns left and passes over a bridge spanning a waterway between the marshes on each side of the trail. As the small open marsh on the right turns into an algae-covered ditch and the marsh on the left fades into stands of cattails and willows, the trail turns left again. Prairie grass and compass plants fringe the trail, while willows and cottonwoods hang over the algae-covered drainage ditches on each side of the two-track road. Beyond the footbridge on the right that provides a connection to parking lot 4B, you'll see some cropland peeking through the trees on the left as the trail enters a savanna.

After crossing the road at 2.25 miles into the hike, you'll pass a wet, shrubby prairie with a backdrop of oak woodland on the left. At the point

where two-track roads come from both sides, continue straight ahead as the trail angles slightly to the right. Soon, two successive footbridges cross the continuous ditch on the right. Stay on the two-track road as you cross a gravel road and then swing left.

As the trail curves left, Beaver Lake Ditch splits to the right and left, running under the road. Continuing ahead, the trail accompanies a pleasant stretch of the sandy-bottomed creek that gently meanders through wet savanna and woodland. The damp, shady sides of the trail are thick with horsetail grass, the stems of which come apart at their black-fringed joints. After passing a marshy area through the trees on the left, Beaver Lake Ditch flows into the Snag Bayou, which is bordered by quaking aspen and oak. Once you cross a bridge, the trail hits the Kankakee River.

Turning left, finish off the hike with a mile-long stroll between the straight, fast-moving Kankakee River, and the immense bayou with stands of dead trees jutting upward and patches of green algae on the surface. Above the cattails and sedge grasses, listen for the loud chattering of belted kingfishers, and watch for them hovering over water as they scout out a meal. The view of the marsh is obscured now and then with berry bushes, small trees, and full-size cottonwoods. In places where the bayou meets the edge of the trail, you'll see that the water level in the marsh is several feet higher than the water level in the river. Continue ahead on the levee until you reach the parking lot.

NEARBY ACTIVITIES

Ten miles northwest of the LaSalle Fish and Wildlife Area is the Grand Kankakee Marsh County Park Hike (page 215). Thirteen miles south of LaSalle is the Iroquois County State Wildlife Area Hike (page 281).