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## MORAIN HILLS STATE PARK HIKE

KEY AT-A-GLANCE  
INFORMATION

**LENGTH:** 8 miles with several cutoff points for shorter hikes

**CONFIGURATION:** 2 loops

**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate to difficult

**SCENERY:** Woods, marshes, ponds, lakes, hills, prairies, and the Fox River

**EXPOSURE:** A mix of shaded and open

**SURFACE:** Crushed gravel; 5 feet wide with mowed sides

**HIKING TIME:** 2–3 hours

**ACCESS:** The park is open 6 a.m.–9 p.m.; the nature center is open 9 a.m.–4 p.m.

**FACILITIES:** Picnic areas, playgrounds, fishing, boat rental, water, restrooms, and concessions on first floor of visitor center and at the dam; benches situated occasionally throughout the trail system

**MAPS:** Maps are available at the park entrance and at the visitor center; USGS topo Wauconda, IL

**SPECIAL COMMENTS:** There are 800 acres of wetlands at Moraine Hills; be sure to bring mosquito repellent. Cross-country skiers and cyclists must follow the directional arrows; hikers may proceed in any direction. Pets must be on leashes.

## IN BRIEF

It's a good thing this hike is 8 miles long—the entire distance is needed for you to get a complete picture of Moraine Hills' mosaic of marshes, lakes, prairies, bogs, wooded hills, and streams.

## DESCRIPTION

When glaciers receded from the landscape at Moraine Hills State Park some 15,500 years ago, they left behind the hills, the wetlands, and the centerpiece of the park, Lake Defiance. Fed by a sprawling network of marshes, ponds, and old irrigation ditches within the park, Lake Defiance was initially formed when a chunk of ice from a retreating glacier left a watery depression in the ground. Lake Defiance is one of the few glacial lakes in Illinois that has remained undeveloped and in a near-natural state. Another highlight of the park, also the result of retreating glaciers, are the moraines. These develop when an ice sheet stops in its tracks and the idling glacier acts as a sort of conveyor belt, depositing gravel and rock at its edges and sides. The wooded hills and ridges at Moraine Hills serve as records of where glaciers paused during their retreat.

While the park offers more than a half-dozen parking/picnic areas where this hike

UTM Trailhead  
Coordinates

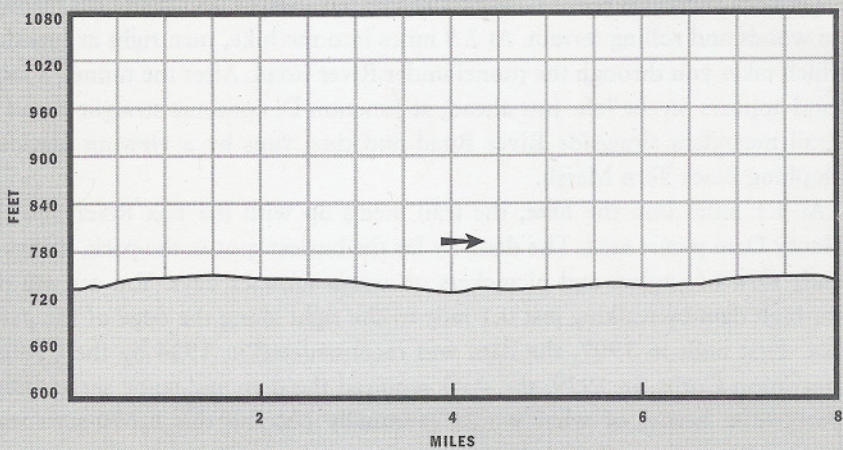
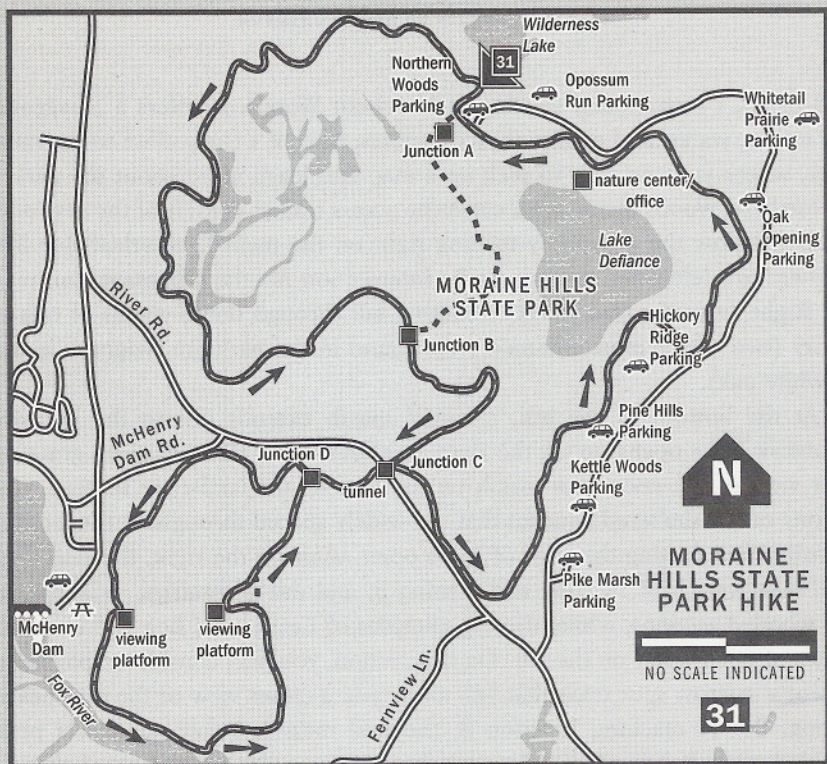
UTM Zone (NAD27) 16T

Easting 398518

Northing 4686253

*Directions* 

From Chicago, head north on I-90/I-94. Follow I-94 as it separates from I-90, and continue on I-94 until you reach West Belvidere Road (IL 120). Follow West Belvidere Road west for 17 miles until reaching North River Road. Turn left (south) on North River Road and travel 3.2 miles. Turn left (east) at the sign for the park and proceed 2 miles to the Northern Woods parking lot and picnic area.



could begin, I recommend starting at Northern Woods. It offers a playground, flush toilets, water, and plenty of picnic tables. Also, it's fairly close to the nature center, where you can stop to pick up a map and learn more about the park. At the Northern Woods picnic area, catch the access trail at the left of the restrooms. For now, follow the arrows by turning right on the main Leatherleaf Bog Trail, and then turn left when you reach the intersection for the Opossum Run picnic area. Right away the trail starts to climb a hill through dense stands of oak and hickory (two of the most common trees found in the park are shagbark hickory and white oak).

At the bottom of the hill, a cattail marsh extends out to the left while Tomahawk Lake opens up on the right. Without delay, the trail rises, granting a better view of the enormous marsh on the left. As the landscape flattens, you'll pass one of the sheltered benches that are widely spaced throughout the length of the trail. After skirting the edge of more open water on the right, the trail begins a half-mile stretch of twisting and turning in and out of prairies, savannas, and brief wooded sections, while offering glimpses of Leatherleaf Bog and occasional patches of open water on the left. On this section, you may consider exploring the occasional narrow spur trails that will allow you a closer view of the marshes and the bog. Before reaching Junction B, the trail meanders through a wet prairie sprinkled with stands of cattails, and then passes a drainage channel that cuts through the marsh on the left. At Junction B, stay to the right.

Between Junctions B and C, the trail turns left sharply, and then runs through dense woods and rolling terrain. At 2.9 miles into the hike, turn right at Junction C, which takes you through the tunnel under River Road. After the tunnel, a large wetland appears on the left. Just ahead, at Junction D, continue straight ahead as the trail meanders alongside River Road and then runs by a viewing platform overlooking Black Tern Marsh.

At 4.1 miles into the hike, the trail meets up with the Fox River and the McHenry Dam picnic area. The dam, by far the busiest spot in the park, brings in a steady flow of anglers and picnickers on warm summer days. You can see the 4-foot-high dam by walking just 0.1 mile to the right along the edge of the parking lot. First built in 1907, the dam was reconstructed in 1934 by the Civilian Conservation Corps. In 1939, the state acquired the dam and some surrounding property—the kernel of what would eventually become this 1,690-acre state park.

Following the dam, the trail runs between the Fox River and open marshes before passing a levee and a drainage channel on the left. Next, the trail mounts a couple of small hills that afford a good view of the large wetland you saw earlier (while on a summer walk on this trail, I counted several sandhill cranes and more than a dozen snowy egrets from these two hills). On the second hill, take the trail branching left, which leads to another viewing platform overlooking Black Tern Marsh.



**Moraine Hills State Park contains sprawling wetlands.**

Reaching Junction D again at 5.4 miles into the hike, turn right, pass through the tunnel, and turn right again at Junction C. For 0.35 miles after C, the trail runs next to River Road and alongside a recently installed, paved bicycle path that follows much of River Road through the park. For the remaining 2.1 miles of the hike, the trail runs by eight separate parking and picnicking areas. Some are right at the edge of the trail, while others are a short walk off the trail. Each is well marked and offers drinking water and pit toilets.

Beyond the turnoff for Pike Marsh, the trail skirts the edge of a marsh on the left and soon starts to roller-coaster up and down a series of small wooded hills (many of the steep sections are paved to prevent erosion). After passing the trail to the Pine Hills picnic area and a short spur on the left that provides access to Lake Defiance, the trail turns right and then accompanies the park road for a bit. Just beyond the spur leading to the Whitetail Prairie picnic area, the trail heads up a hill overlooking the 48-acre Lake Defiance. At the base of the hill, the trail again runs alongside the park road until you reach the nature center. From the nature center, proceed through the prairie for 0.3 miles to the Northern Woods parking lot.