

Woodland Dunes boasts multiple nature trails showcasing a rich diversity of species, like club moss found on Yellow Birch Trail.

# The wonder of the DUNES

WOODLAND DUNES NATURE CENTER ON LAKE MICHIGAN IS A MIX OF GLOBALLY SIGNIFICANT HABITATS.

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*Story and photos by Nancy Nabak*

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I didn't expect my dream job to be located on the second floor of a farmhouse but it is. In fact, when you pull into the gravel driveway of the Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve, the first thing you'll notice is an old, Cream City brick house, circa 1850s. Just northwest of the house sits an aging red barn. The quiet, unassuming appearance of Woodland Dunes Nature Center isn't just a nice place to visit. Your first impression may be anything but "globally significant," though I can assure you that it is.

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Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve in Two Rivers is located on the Lake Michigan shoreline just south of the Door County peninsula. The DNR's Bureau of Natural Heritage Conservation has ranked this 1,300-acre preserve as "globally significant" because of its rare and special terrain offering a great diversity of habitats: marsh, sedge meadow, shrub carr, old field, native grassland and the rare forested dunes and swales.

"You'll always find something new and interesting every time you're here," says Jim Knickelbine, executive director of the Dunes. "Caring for this special place," he says, "its wildlife and people, is an incredible opportunity and a great joy."

**How it all began**

In 1965, local resident Bernie Brouchoud

began catching, banding and releasing birds on what is now Woodland Dunes Nature Center property. It wasn't long before Brouchoud, a federally licensed bird bander, and a small group of junior high school students were making regular visits to the area. Realizing its value as a bird migration stopover and nesting area, they established a bird-banding research station on site. Interest and support grew as bird-watchers, hikers and schoolchildren visited the station.

In 1974 an organizing committee was formed and generated a plan to preserve approximately 1,200 acres with an additional goal of one day erecting a nature and education center. That year they purchased the first 40 acres and a few years later the nature center opened — a farmhouse converted to instructional space on the first floor with staff offices in the former upstairs bedrooms.

### Connecting kids with nature

Even before the nature center opened, community education began on the property and Woodland Dunes has been offering hands-on learning to school groups, summer camps, adults and families ever since. Jessica Johnsrud, education coordinator and assistant director, offers a variety of programs to keep learning fresh and exciting. She's as engaged and curious as the youngest member of her crew.

"I really enjoy watching young children make discoveries in the outdoors," says Johnsrud. "Their minds are so curious. Even something as simple as a toad hopping across the trail can ignite great excitement and wonder."

Johnsrud is a juggernaut when it comes to education. In the warm months, she's at the pond with kids in tow, holding dip nets looking for nymph dragonflies, or marching onto the Cattail Trail boardwalk. Heading into the marsh, she's ready to listen for frogs or teach the "vote for meeee" song of the red-winged blackbird.

"You don't need to be a nature expert to share the joy of nature with children," she says. "Simply taking them for a walk and allowing them to make their own discoveries can make a meaningful impact in their lives."

She also spearheads adult education programs and special events such as the Owl Fest, a morning of learning about Wisconsin owls; Enchanted Forest, a children's event created to showcase the natural wonders of fall; and Bird Breakfast and Migration Celebration, a cel-



David's Pond is an outdoor classroom for kids with dip nets searching for nymph dragonflies and other aquatic treasures.



Families are frequent visitors to the marsh via the Cattail Trail boardwalk.

bration of the return of migrating birds in the spring.

She has a great classroom for teaching. Woodland Dunes is home to more than 400 species of plants, 40 species of mammals, seven species of amphibians, thousands of species of invertebrates and over 260 species of both resident and migratory birds.

### Bird's the word

Because of the varied shoreline habitats, the Dunes is a fabulous stopover for migrating birds, with an interesting assortment of nesting species as well. There are Canada warblers, mourning warblers, winter wrens, alder flycatchers, willow flycatchers and scarlet tanagers.

That's not all. The Dunes is also classified as an Important Bird Area (IBA), a geographic location recognized as vital for the conservation of bird populations. Each year, Knickelbine, staff members and volunteers participate in multiple bird surveys to monitor what's on the preserve and to share with visitors what they may

experience while hiking the trails.

Visitors can observe nesting osprey on site, or via the osprey-cam that feeds to our website, [www.woodlanddunes.org/osprey-cam](http://www.woodlanddunes.org/osprey-cam). The webcam offers great opportunities to learn more about osprey behavior and other birds as well. Last spring, I witnessed a kingbird dive-bombing the female osprey on the nest!

When I asked about this, Knickelbine nodded saying, "Oh yeah, the genus for kingbird is *Tyrannus* — like the dinosaur. They're aggressive!"

We have a regular visitor at Woodland Dunes named Gwendolyn, 8, who is evidence of the positive influence birds have on children. She brings in her drawings of a variety of birds, shares how much she loves them and wants to be an ornithologist when she grows up. She gave me a picture of a magpie, labeled with the bird's call, territory and field marks — perfectly drawn and colored. It now hangs above my desk.

Her grandmother shared that Gwendolyn recently asked her, "Is a European



**Trails at the Dunes are free and open to the public sunrise to sunset every day. Sights you may see when you visit include a wood frog calling off of Trillium Trail (upper left), a mink trotting on the Cattail Trail boardwalk (upper right), the circa-1850s Cream City farmhouse turned nature center (lower left) or a swamp sparrow (lower right), one of 260 bird species found on the property.**

coot flightless?" Eight years old and on her way to an avian ecology degree.

### What you'll see at Woodland Dunes

The Dunes boasts multiple trails through an array of habitats. An interactive map can be found on our website under "Nature Trails" to give you an idea of what birds you'll find on each trail and the general ecosystem associated with it. Trails are free to the public and open from sunrise to sunset each day. An exciting new twist will be coming to one of them soon — a floating canoe/kayak dock at the end of Cattail Trail, allowing visitors to experience the softer side of nature from both water and land.

Visitors won't see sand dunes here, but they will see ridges and swales. More than 5,000 years ago, the lake bed was 30 feet higher than it is now. During the ice age melt, breaking waves scooped up and redeposited the sandy bottom of the shore, forming a series of parallel underwater ridges and troughs. As the water level fell, the ridges became long, low sand dunes, with swales alternating between them. Fourteen such ridges and swales, the ancient lake shorelines, are the geological foundation of the Wood-

land Dunes preserve today.

These forested dunes and swales provide a biologically rich habitat found in only two places in our ecological region — the other at nearby Point Beach State Forest.

### Staying power

The 1,300 acres of land that make up the Dunes require continual maintenance and forethought. Jennifer Powell, land management coordinator, has a big-picture vision with a warm-hearted passion for land at the Dunes. She can tenderly remove an invasive thorn from a volunteer's hand yet wield loppers and hand saws with the best of the "barberryians," a nickname for those who tackle invasive Japanese barberry and other nonnative species.

Of the Dunes she says, "I am drawn to its life, wonder and constant change. It has a calming effect and a beauty that is unmatched."

The Dunes owes that unmatched beauty in part to Powell and volunteers who spend countless hours and muscle power fighting the invasion of honeysuckle, common buckthorn, dame's rocket, Japanese barberry and autumn

olive. They replace them with beneficial native species that provide food and shelter for migrating and nesting birds and other wildlife. Native wildflowers benefit pollinator species such as bees and butterflies.


Their efforts translate into a richer experience for visitors. You're likely to see more wildlife because food sources are nutritional and plentiful. Beautiful colors and textures of native wildflowers, fascinating fungi, butterflies, pollinators, bats, swallows and flycatchers are all right in front of you.

Such an amazing, well-managed place also attracts some not-so-common species of animals. Rarities we've recorded include nesting little gull, fisher, red saddlebags dragonfly, seven of Wisconsin's bat species and the southern spreadwing damselfly. The Dunes has also attracted rare migrating birds such as horned grebe, hoary redpoll, Baird's sparrow and yellow-throated warbler.

### Potential threats and how you can help

The ongoing battle with invasive species — such as the priority management of reed canary grass — requires time, money and manpower and the Dunes' small staff can't do it alone. Hundreds of volunteers help answer the phone, weed the butterfly garden, plant trees and mow. Others volunteer at the Dash at the Dunes 5K Walk/Run held each April, or serve on the Tropical Blast fundraiser committee.

Dolly McNulty, a long-time volunteer and board member, says, "I enjoy helping an organization that is good for nature and good for people."

Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve is a treasured and special place to wander and wonder with dip nets and binoculars. It's a place to fine-tune your senses, to connect and hold hands on a well-managed trail. So make the trip, sign our guest book and when pulling away from our gravel drive, know that you will leave Woodland Dunes feeling fine. 

*Nancy Nabak is the Communication and Development Coordinator for Woodland Dunes Nature Center.*

### >>> MORE INFORMATION

**For more information about Woodland Dunes Nature Center and Preserve, please visit our website at [www.woodlanddunes.org](http://www.woodlanddunes.org) or call 920-793-4007.**