



Gibson Woods Nature Preserve...a Lake County Park

Tucked away in the heart of the industrial region of northwest Indiana is an island of nature with some very unusual features. This 131-acre parcel of virtually "undisturbed" land is known as Gibson Woods Nature Preserve ... a Lake County Park.

Gibson Woods is the one of the last sizeable remnant of high-quality dune and swale topography remaining in the Midwest. Because of the widespread urbanization and industrialization in Northwest Indiana, this type of topography and its associated natural communities have been almost entirely eliminated. The dune and swale features of the preserve were produced after the last glacier created ancient Lake Chicago, the forerunner of Lake Michigan. The parallel sand ridges still found in Gibson Woods today represent the effect of ancient Lake Chicago as it retreated thousands of years ago.

Native Americans were the first visitors to the Gibson Woods area. Although no tribes resided permanently in the preserve, several Woodland Indian seasonal campsites have been found. The most recent native inhabitants were the Potawatomis, who lived in the area until their removal in the 1830s.

The Gibson Woods area was almost uninhabited by European settlers until the Michigan Central Railroad opened up the area by building the first railroad in Lake County in 1852. Gibson Woods was named for the Gibson station of the railroad, formerly located just west of the preserve. Before the railroad was built, the station was an inn owned by one of the first settlers, David Gibson. He ran the inn to accommodate travelers that went from Michigan to Chicago along one of the higher dune ridges trails. The railroad was built on top of the same ridge and Mr. Gibson sold the inn to the railroad to be used as a railroad station (the Gibson station).

The area remained railroad property until the Nature Conservancy purchased it in 1980. The Lake County Parks and Recreation Department purchased this tract from the Nature Conservancy and it was dedicated by the state of Indiana as a Nature Preserve on November 8, 1981. The unusual topography, high natural quality, flora associations and presence of endangered plant and animal species make this a truly significant natural area. It was the unique natural character of the Gibson area that attracted scientists to study plant and animal life here. Henry Cowles, known as the father of ecology, studied plant succession in northwest Indiana's dune region in the early 1900s including "a most interesting series of sand ridges alternating with depressions in the Gibson Station area." Today, it is still an area worth noting for many botanists, ecologists and naturalists.

Gibson Woods' topography is an exceptionally well-preserved example of the landscape as it appeared in Northwest Indiana 4,000 ago. Although humans have had some impact on the preserve throughout its history, Gibson Woods has remained largely as it was. It is this lack of disturbance that allows the preserve to have such a variety of natural communities. Black oak savanna dominates the dune ridges. The sandy soil supports tallgrass prairie composed of native wildflowers and grasses such as Big and Little Bluestem, Prairie Cordgrass, Indian Grass, Fringed Gentians, Yellow Coneflower, Nodding Lady's Tresses and a host of others. Over 300 species of plants have been identified in the preserve, several of which are considered threatened or endangered.

Because of its natural diversity, Gibson Woods Nature Preserve provides differing habitats which offer feeding and nesting cover for many animals. Over 160 species of birds have been recorded here. Certain species of animals inhabiting the preserve such as Blanding's Turtle and Franklin's Ground Squirrel are endangered or considered rare in Indiana.

By preserving this area, the people of Lake County Indiana have created a living museum for rare flora and fauna, and preserving a link with the past. Self-guiding trails allow the public to passively use the nature preserve. The Gibson Woods nature center was built in 1984 with a grant from The Land and Water Conservation Fund. The center houses exhibits that interpret the local flora and fauna. One display features the remains of a 10,000 year old mastodon that was found in Lake County. Staff offer a variety of interpretive tours, programs and lectures to the public throughout the year, and students of all ages visit through school, scouts, homeschool or other community groups.

Gibson Woods Nature Preserve is located at 6201 Parrish Ave. in Hammond, IN. The trails are open Tuesday-Sunday from 9 AM to 5 PM, March through October, and 9 AM to 4 PM, November through February. The nature center is open Tuesdays, Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays from Noon to 4 pm. year-round. The park is closed on Mondays and Holidays. For more information about Gibson Woods Nature Preserve, call 219-844-3188, or this and other Lake County Parks program information, visit www.lakecountyparks.com.