

## Calumet Heritage Area



Partners across the Calumet region have joined forces to establish the Calumet Heritage Area, to ensure that the region's unparalleled environmental and cultural heritage resources are stewarded and preserved for the benefit of current residents and generations to come.

Wolf Lake will be a centerpiece and serve as a demonstration site for the proposed Calumet National Heritage Area, a federal designation to recognize the national significance of the region. Please visit [www.calumetheritagearea.org](http://www.calumetheritagearea.org) for more information.

## Plan your visit today!

For more information about Wolf Lake and William W. Powers State Recreation Area (12949 Avenue O, Chicago IL 60633), please visit [www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/WilliamWPowers.aspx](http://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/WilliamWPowers.aspx), send an email to [dnr.wmpowers@illinois.gov](mailto:dnr.wmpowers@illinois.gov) or call 773-646-3270.

*NOTE: The Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) gathered information and images for this document from a variety of sources, including: The Field Museum, Southeast Chicago Historical Society, Encyclopedia of Chicago, Chicago State University, Forest County Potawatomi Tribe, Northern Illinois University, ChicagolandAutoRacing.com, Chicago Wilderness Alliance, Walter Marcisz, Association for the Wolf Lake Initiative (AWLI), Openlands, Lower Wisconsin State Riverway Board, Sanborn Fire Insurance Company (via the Library of Congress), and the Calumet Heritage Partnership (please contact IDNR at 847-608-3108 or [ted.penesis@illinois.gov](mailto:ted.penesis@illinois.gov) for specific informational/image attributions).*



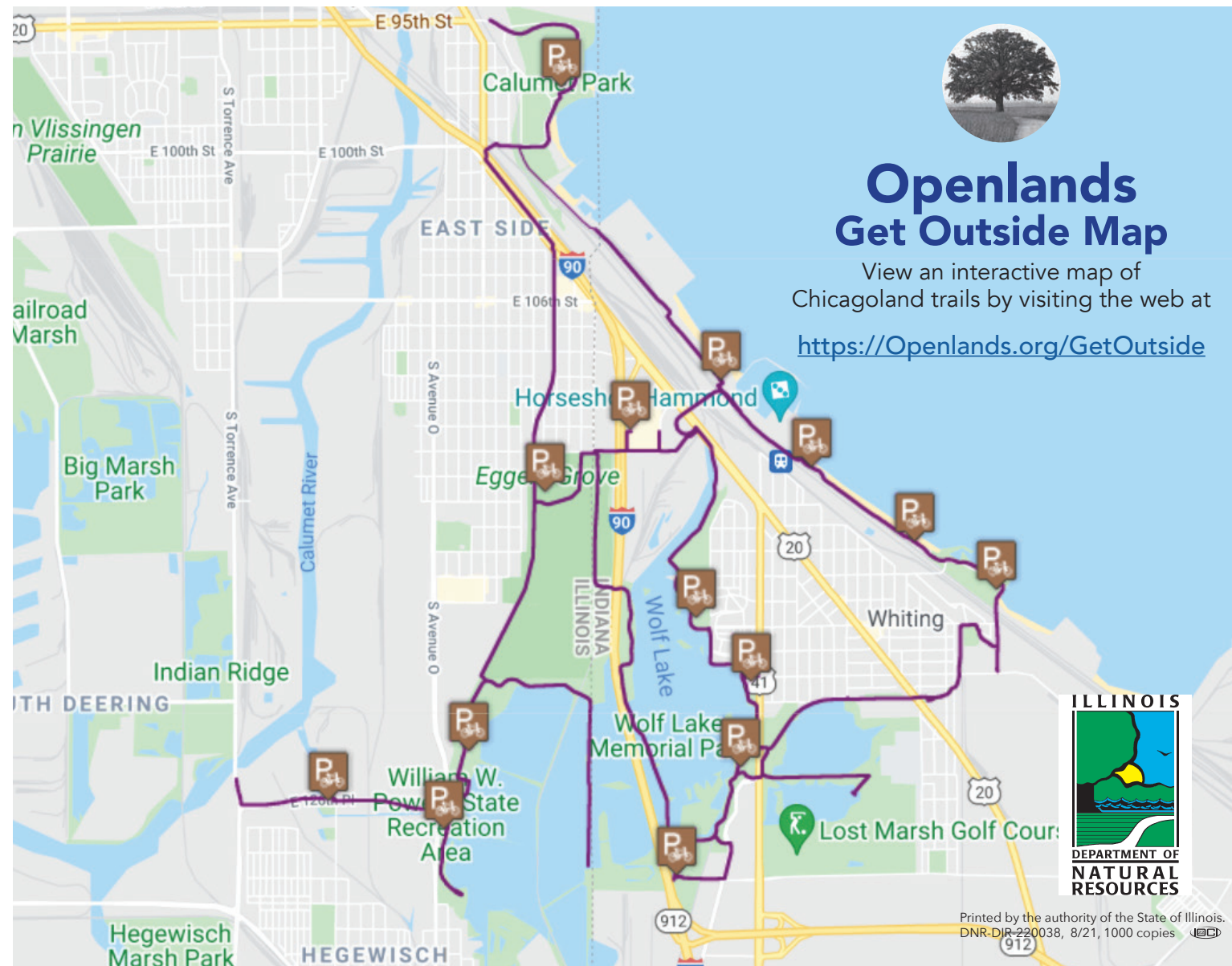
State of Illinois  
Illinois Department of Natural Resources

Past, Present, and Future

# A Guide to Wolf Lake



## Recreational Trails in the Wolf Lake Area



### Openlands Get Outside Map

View an interactive map of Chicagoland trails by visiting the web at <https://Openlands.org/GetOutside>

## Have fun at the beautiful Wolf Lake and nearby William W. Powers State Recreation Area in Chicago!

With over 400 acres of water, Wolf Lake provides a variety of activities for families – picnicking, biking, dog walking, and boating – as well as rare opportunities for fishing and hunting in the City of Chicago. With a history stretching from the Ice Age through the Cold War, and hundreds of species including monk parakeets from South America and, if you're lucky, the occasional bald eagle, Wolf Lake has something to offer everyone.

*"...a famous hunting ground for aquatic wildlife... where the plants form one of the most remarkable assemblages of aquatics in the country...no body of water of equal size can boast such a list."*  
-naturalist Donald C. Peattie

Providing a resilient natural habitat in the heart of industrial Chicago, Wolf Lake houses a startling variety of plants and wildlife. In 2002, to demonstrate the resiliency and biodiversity of Wolf Lake and the surrounding area, over 150 scientists participated in the Calumet BioBlitz, identifying as many organisms as possible in just 24 hours.



In total, they counted over 2,200 species and have added even more in the years since.

These species include common sport fish like largemouth bass and carp as well as the occasional salmon and rainbow trout; native birds include cardinals, blue jays, woodpeckers, mallards, swans, and the sporadic bald eagle; mammals include rabbits, raccoons, coyotes, white-tailed deer, and beavers; and a myriad of insect species.

The lake also serves as a habitat for a colony of monk parakeets, a kind of parrot native to Argentina. Brought to Chicago in the 1960s as exotic pets, the birds' complex nest structures are warm enough to let them survive the Chicago winter and colonies have popped up in other parts of the city.

The lake also houses at least 7 endangered or threatened species, including the Lake Sturgeon, Banded Killifish, Iowa Darter, Little Blue Heron, Yellow-Crowned Night Heron, Black-Crowned Night Heron, and the Yellow-Headed Blackbird.

# Wolf Lake History

Wolf Lake's history begins thousands of years ago, when it was part of the much larger Lake Chicago which covered what is now Lake Michigan as well as most of the Chicagoland area. Lake Chicago eventually retreated to the current banks of Lake Michigan, leaving Wolf Lake behind to be enjoyed by residents for the centuries since.

In the years before the establishment of Chicago, the land around the lake and much of the surrounding area belonged to the Potawatomi tribe until the Treaty of Chicago in 1833 when it was seized by the US government.

While the land along the nearby Calumet River was settled quickly, the first white settlers around the lake were recorded in the 1850s. These included Fredericka and Joe Konyvesy (whose grandson, Joe Neubieser, is pictured at right in 1923\*), German/Hungarian immigrants who moved to the shores of Wolf Lake in 1859. They made a living through fishing, beekeeping and trapping muskrat and mink, as well as hosting lake visitors.



Wolf Lake played an important role the establishment of Chicago as America's "Second City" in the late 1800s, as it provided much of the ice needed to keep meat from Chicago's famous stockyards cool on the trip to major eastern cities, and to keep food and drinks cool in Chicago as well. In the 1880s, the Knickerbocker Ice Company (whose operation is sketched in the drawing below\*) even claimed their Wolf Lake ice houses – one of four such companies on the lake – were the largest in the world.



Although the famous 1893 World's Fair was held miles away from Wolf Lake, one of its exhibitions found its way to the lake's shores when frontiersman Ellis Bennett purchased the Delaware Exhibition House after the end of the World's Fair and had it floated down to Wolf Lake. Despite disputes with the Knickerbocker Ice Company over land rights, Bennett was allowed to stay in the house, which remained by the lake until it fell into ruin and was eventually taken down in the 1950s.

In the latter years of the 19th Century, Chicago's Southeast Side was transformed by the arrival and development of the steel and railroad equipment industries. From the 1870s through the early 1900s, the Calumet area became one of the largest producers of both steel and railcars in the country, and Wolf Lake's sister Hyde Lake to the west was filled in to create land for what would become the nearby Republic Steel plant.



During the 1920s and 30s, Wolf Lake was used by Chicago gangsters to dispose of bodies. A culvert leading into the lake was also used by the infamous Loeb and Leopold to hide the body of Bobby Franks, the victim in their attempted "perfect murder" that resulted in the "Trial of the Century."

In the Great Depression, former alderman and state representative William W. Powers hosted food relief events and picnics at the lake for hungry area residents. These actions inspired legislators years later to rename the park after him.



From 1933 to 1936, the lake saw a different kind of activity when "The Most Unique Racetrack in the World" was constructed in the middle of Wolf lake. The track consisted only of a dirt ring, without even guardrails or

fencing, and with water both inside and out. It saw many races during its four-year history, both racecars on the track and speedboats in the lake contained within it.

In 1946, the area was purchased by the state to become Wolf Lake State Recreation Area, and was opened with the dedication of a living veterans memorial consisting of 119 plaques and trees, one for each veterans organization on the South Side.

Although mostly used as parkland from here forward, the area around the park also served to house several Nike missiles during the Cold War, part of an air defense system protecting Chicago. The missiles were removed in the 1970s, but veterans' organizations paid to install a decommissioned missile in the park commemorating this role, which stands to this day.



\*Courtesy of Southeast Chicago Historical Society

# Amenities and Activities

## Facilities

The Visitor and Education Center includes displays on the Calumet region's natural resources and cultural history and is the focal point for special events and educational programs at the lake. To improve the patron experience, numerous upgrades are currently underway surrounding the center (see Diagram #1 at bottom of page for details) as well as beautification improvements to the park entrance at Avenue O and 126th Place.

## Fishing

Wolf Lake contains largemouth bass, northern pike, bluegill, redear sunfish, crappie, bullhead, carp, walleye, hybrid muskie, and yellow perch. About six miles of shoreline is available to bank fisherman, with the presence of dikes in the middle of the lake allowing patrons to fish without a boat. Ice fishing is permitted in the winter, depending on ice conditions. An ADA-compliant fishing pier and nearby vault toilet are also currently under construction just south of the newly built kayak launch (see Diagram #2 below for upgrades to this area).

## Trails

In addition to walking and biking paths around the lake, the Burnham Greenway along Wolf Lake will soon connect Chicago's Lakefront path and bike route to the Old Plank Road Trail in the south suburbs, all part of the Grand Illinois Trail looping all the way to the Mississippi River and back (please see map on back page for trails in the greater Wolf Lake area).

## Boating

Motors of any size are allowed (motors larger than 10 H.P. must operate at no-wake, idle speed), and the lake is equipped with four boat launches and a kayak launch. Additionally, ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant canoe/kayak launches are currently under construction (see Diagram #2 for the upgrades to this area).

## Picnicking

The main picnic area is located to the north and south of the main entrance, paralleling Avenue O. An ample quantity of tables and grills are provided in shady spots beneath the many willow and cottonwood trees. Four shelters, two for 50 people and two for 100, are available and may be reserved at <https://camp.exploreremoreil.com/location/278>, or by scanning the QR code.



## Hunting

The area is used for waterfowl hunting during the fall of the year. Hunting must be done from one of 25 authorized blinds, which are allocated at a public drawing during the month of July. Unoccupied blinds are available through a daily drawing each morning during the hunting season. Consult the park ranger for information concerning hunting regulations and blind site locations.

