



MITTEN TRAILS

FREE SAMPLE GUIDE

LUDINGTON & SILVER LAKE DUNES

Big Sable Point, the Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness, Silver Lake's open sand and Little Sable Point on Lake Michigan

*From **Lakeshores, Dunes & the Straits**, a Mitten Trails guide*

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Dune grass at Ludington State Park. Photo: Notorious4life, CC0 1.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Ludington & Silver Lake Dunes

A free sample from *Lakeshores, Dunes & the Straits*, Mitten Trails Michigan Guides. Free sample edition, October 2026.

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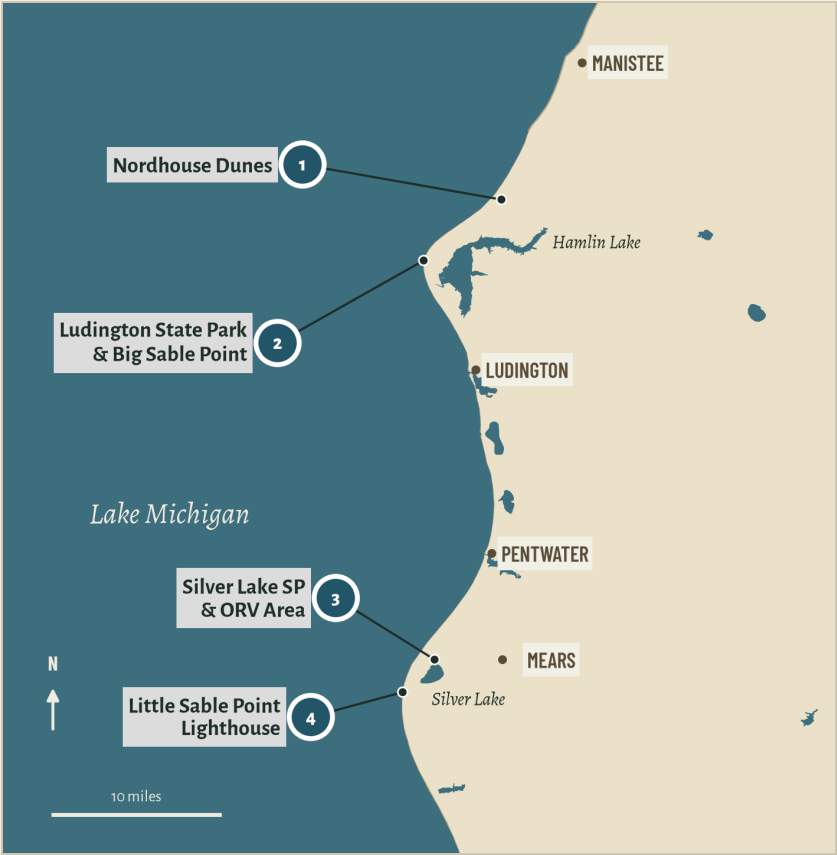
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Information was current as of October 3, 2026; seasonal dates, hours and closures were re-checked October 11, 2026. Fees, hours, closures and conditions change, so check official sources before you go. Maps are not for navigation. Outdoor activities, cold water and dunes carry real risk; use your own judgment.

Sources for every fact are listed by number on p. 15.

TWO DUNE PARKS, ONE STRETCH OF SHORE



Map: Mitten Trails, drawn from US Census Bureau cartographic boundary and TIGER/Line water data (public domain); spot locations © OpenStreetMap contributors (ODbL). Town dots are approximate. Not for navigation.

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PASSES & SAFETY AS OF OCT. 3, 2026

STATE PARKS (MICHIGAN DNR)

- Vehicles entering Ludington and Silver Lake state parks need the DNR's Recreation Passport: **\$15** a year for Michigan-registered vehicles (\$29 for two years), or **\$42** a year or **\$12** a day for out-of-state vehicles (prices effective Jan. 1, 2026).¹
- Riding the Silver Lake dunes also takes an ORV license and ORV trail permit.²

NATIONAL FOREST (USDA FOREST SERVICE)

- Nordhouse Dunes trailheads charge a day-use fee; daily and 7-day passes can be bought on site with cash or check, or online.^{3,4}

SAFETY FIRST

- State parks have no lifeguards. Never swim alone, watch children closely, and bring U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jackets.⁵
- Never dig into a vertical sand dune; it can collapse without warning.⁶

HOW THIS SAMPLE WORKS

- Numbered spots match the map on p. 3. Fees, hours and closures carry an “as of” date; confirm on the official page before you go.
- Superscript numbers point to the sources on p. 15. In this PDF, page numbers and web addresses are clickable.

This guide is not a pass. Prices change; check before you go.

Lake Michigan

1

Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness

Big Sable Point Lighthouse

2

Ludington State Park

FREE SAMPLE · LAKE MICHIGAN DUNE PARKS

Part 1

LUDINGTON STATE PARK & NORDHOUSE DUNES

Map: Mitten Trails, drawn from US Census Bureau data (public domain); locations © OpenStreetMap contributors (ODbL). Not for navigation. Numbers match the map on p. 3.

LIGHTHOUSE, LAKE AND WILDERNESS

Ludington State Park sits between 5,000-acre Hamlin Lake and 7 miles of sandy Lake Michigan shoreline, with dunes, three campgrounds, 21 miles of marked trails and Big Sable Point Lighthouse.⁷

Just to the north, the dunes continue into the Nordhouse Dunes Wilderness, one of only two federally designated wilderness areas in the Lower Peninsula.⁸

PLACES TO SEE

Big Sable Point Lighthouse

Reach it on foot or by bike on the 1.8-mile (one-way) sand-and-gravel Lighthouse Path. There's little shade and it can be hard going in warm weather, but the reward is a sweeping view of Lake Michigan. Volunteer keepers lead tours of the lighthouse.⁷

Lake Michigan Beach House

The historic beach house has exhibits on Great Lakes and dune ecology, plus restrooms and concessions.⁷

Hamlin Lake

The Hamlin Lake beach house rents kayaks, canoes and stand-up paddleboards. Beginners can paddle Lost Lake's sheltered coves; experienced paddlers can follow the 4-mile Hamlin Lake water trail through the marshes.⁷

Big Sable River

A 1-mile stretch of the river runs through the park, good for fishing, paddling and tubing. A paved path links the campgrounds and day-use areas along it.⁷

Skyline Trail

The elevated boardwalk over the dunes, its intersecting trails and the park amphitheater closed in September for reconstruction. **Closed through mid-2027 (as of Oct. 3, 2026).**⁷



Dune grass meets the Lake Michigan beach at Ludington State Park. Photo: Notorious4life, CC0 1.0; p. 16.

SWIMMING

Buoyed swim areas are at the Lake Michigan and Hamlin Lake day-use areas. Each has an accessible walkway to the water and floating beach wheelchairs.⁷

NORDHOUSE DUNES WILDERNESS

Congress protected these 3,500 acres between Ludington and Manistee in 1987. There are about 10 miles of trails for hiking, primitive camping, beachcombing and wildlife watching.⁸

Nordhouse is part of the Big Sable Dunes Complex, along with the Lake Michigan Recreation Area and the Ludington dunes. The dunes formed 3,500 to 4,000 years ago and some stand up to 140 feet high. The complex holds the world's largest area of freshwater interdunal ponds and is home to the federally endangered Pitcher's thistle and piping plover.⁸

Trailheads

Nurnberg Road Trailhead has a 24-vehicle lot, picnic sites and shoe-cleaning stations for invasive seeds; a day-use fee applies (as of Oct. 3, 2026).^{3,8} The **Lake Michigan Recreation Area** campground (102 sites) also has a trailhead into the dunes and to the beach.^{4,8}

LAKE MICHIGAN RECREATION AREA AS OF OCT. 3, 2026

This Forest Service campground on the shore between Manistee and Ludington has 99 family sites and 3 group sites, plus a day-use area with pavilions, a playground and an overlook. The Arrowhead Trail links it to the wilderness trails. Fees: \$40 a night for a single site and \$10 for day use. Senior and Access pass holders get 50% off single sites.⁹

Season: early May to mid-October. Reservations are made on Recreation.gov. There is potable water and vault toilets.⁹

STAYING THE NIGHT & ACCESS

Three modern campgrounds

Beechwood (147 sites) has loops that connect to the popular Lost Lake–Island Trail. **Pines** (99 sites) is the start of the Lighthouse Path, between sites 58 and 59. **Cedar** has 114 sites, including 8 tent-only sites.⁷

Jack Pine walk-in sites

Ten tent sites about a mile from the parking area, for a quieter night near Lake Michigan.⁷

Mini cabins

The Beechwood and Cedar mini cabins are ADA accessible and each sleeps five, and the Cedar cabin allows up to two pets for \$10 a pet per night

(as of Oct. 3, 2026). Reservations: 800-447-2757.⁷

ACCESSIBLE & FAMILY-FRIENDLY

- A track chair to borrow at no cost, and floating beach wheelchairs at both buoyed swim areas, each with an accessible walkway to the water.⁷
- An accessible playground on a rubberized surface at Hamlin Lake, and an accessible canoe and kayak launch just north of its boat launch.⁷
- Scenic viewers for visitors with color vision deficiency.⁷

FISHING & THE LIGHTHOUSE AS OF OCT. 3, 2026

Salmon, lake trout, steelhead and brown trout run in spring and fall along the shore and in the Big Sable River, which has special hook rules from Aug. 1 to Nov. 1.⁷ Anglers 17 and older need a Michigan fishing license.¹⁰ Big Sable Point Lighthouse tours, including a tower climb (fee), run May through October.⁷

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

WILDERNESS RULES (NORDHOUSE)

- A maximum of 10 people per campsite.
- No camping within 400 feet of the Lake Michigan waterline or the wilderness boundary roads, within 200 feet of Nordhouse Lake, or within 100 feet of established trails.
- No campfires within 400 feet of the Lake Michigan waterline, and no burning of dune-wood, driftwood or shipwreck timbers.
- No bikes, carts or other mechanical or motorized vehicles, and no glass containers.¹¹

LUDINGTON STATE PARK

- **Entry:** a Recreation Passport is required for vehicles (see p. 4).¹ The main entrance is at the end of M-116.⁷
- **Pets:** most of the Lake Michigan shoreline is closed to pets to protect piping plover habitat (*as of Oct. 3, 2026*). There's a pet-friendly beach between the beach house and the Big Sable River; pets must be on a 6-foot leash.⁷

PLAN IT

A LUDINGTON DAY

1. Morning: walk or bike the Lighthouse Path to Big Sable Point before the day heats up.⁷
2. Afternoon: paddle Lost Lake or swim at Hamlin Lake.
3. Next morning: drive about 45 minutes to the Lake Michigan Recreation Area for a hike into Nordhouse.¹²

☐ Big Sable Point Light

☐ Hamlin Lake

☐ Nordhouse Dunes

☐ Lake Michigan beach house

☐ Big Sable River

☐ Interdunal ponds

Lake Michigan



FREE SAMPLE · LAKE MICHIGAN DUNE PARKS

Part 2

SILVER LAKE STATE PARK

Map: Mitten Trails, drawn from US Census Bureau data (public domain); locations © OpenStreetMap contributors (ODbL). Not for navigation. Numbers match the map on p. 3.

THE DUNES YOU CAN DRIVE

Silver Lake State Park has nearly 3 miles of Lake Michigan shoreline and 2,000 acres of sand dunes. Its 450-acre ORV area is, per the DNR, the only motorized sand-dune riding east of the Mississippi River.¹³

Two-thirds of the dunes are for people on foot only, so you can have the big sand to yourself without an engine.¹³

RIDING THE SCRAMBLE AREA

The scramble area is 450 acres of open dunes on the Lake Michigan shore.² Riders bring their own ATVs or UTVs, rent one locally from DNR-approved partners, or take a guided tour.^{2,13}

BEFORE YOU RIDE AS OF OCT. 11, 2026

- Every motor vehicle on the dunes must display an **ORV license, an ORV trail permit and a Recreation Passport**. Flags, safety gear, sound limits and age rules depend on the vehicle.²
- Towing an ORV on a weekend or holiday from mid-May to mid-September? You need a **parking voucher** for the lot.²
- Season: April 1–Oct. 31. Hours are 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. in April and from Sept. 16, and to 10 p.m. from May 1 to Sept. 15. Access to the dunes stops half an hour before closing.²
- No vehicles at the water's edge. Alcohol is banned in and within a quarter mile of the scramble area.^{2,13}

Don't ride? Anyone can park in the ORV Area and walk to the water.²

WALKING, NOT RIDING?

The pedestrian dunes have their own parking at the end of North Shore Drive.¹³ In the ORV area, the Lighthouse Grill food trailer sets up near the Lake Michigan shoreline from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day. *(as of Oct. 3, 2026)*¹³

KID-FRIENDLY PICKS IN THE DUNE PARKS

- **Ludington:** the accessible playground at Hamlin Lake (p. 8).⁷
- **Silver Lake:** the playground and buoyed swim area on the inland lake (p. 13).¹³
- **Hoffmaster:** the Gillette Visitor Center's dune dioramas and ant lion video (in the full guide).¹⁴

ON FOOT AND ON THE WATER

Walking the dunes

There are no designated trails, but many visitors climb and walk the pedestrian dunes. The DNR rates dune walking as more difficult.¹³

Dune ride tours *as of Oct. 3, 2026*

A concessioner runs a 40-minute interpretive dune tour in a dedicated part of the park, mid-May through October.^{2,13}

Little Sable Point Lighthouse *as of Oct. 3, 2026*

This 1874 tower, more than 100 feet tall, still houses its original third-order Fresnel lens. For a fee you can climb its 130 steps; tours run mid-May to October through the Sable Points Lighthouse Keepers Association. A paved, accessible walkway leads to the base.¹³

Silver Lake day-use area

On the inland lake: a buoyed swim area, an accessible beach house and playground, picnic pavilions and a boat launch (the lake has no boat access to Lake Michigan). Paddling is popular, but not inside the swim area.¹³

OFF-SEASON ON THE SAND *AS OF OCT. 3, 2026*

A fat-tire biking season runs in the ORV area Dec. 15–March 15, 8 a.m. to dusk. The DNR has also offered a November shoreline horseback season (last posted: Nov. 1–30 except Thanksgiving, \$10 per horse per day, 125 slots a day); check the DNR page for this year's dates.¹³

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- **Pets** are allowed along the whole Lake Michigan shoreline and on Silver Lake except the swim beach, on a 6-foot leash.¹³
- **Entry:** Recreation Passport required (p. 4).¹

☐ Pedestrian dunes

☐ ORV scramble area

☐ Dune ride tour

☐ Little Sable Point Light

CAMPING, FAMILIES & THE WATER

Modern campground

200 sites on the inland lake, mostly shaded. Sites have 20- or 30-amp electric service, and sites 1–13 are on the lakefront.¹³

For families

The day-use area on Silver Lake has an accessible playground on a rubberized surface, three pavilions, and picnic tables with charcoal grills. Silver Lake is stocked with walleye; fishing is busier outside summer, when boat traffic is lighter.¹³

Access

A track chair can be borrowed at no cost. So can two beach wheelchairs. The beach house is accessible and has family restrooms.¹³



Bare snags on the open sand at Silver Lake. Photo: See1,Do1,Teach1, CC BY 2.0, cropped; p. 16.



Little Sable Point Lighthouse (p. 12). Photo: Riis2602, CC BY-SA 4.0, cropped; p. 16.

SWIM SMART ON THE GREAT LAKES

- State parks have no lifeguards. Never swim alone, watch children closely, and bring U.S. Coast Guard–approved life jackets.⁵
- Buoyed swim areas are usually in place from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day (*as of Oct. 3, 2026*). Silver Lake’s is on the inland lake.^{13,5}
- Read the beach flags. **Green** means low hazard, **yellow** medium, and **red** high (stay on the beach). Under **double red**, entering the water from the beach is not allowed.⁵
- In an emergency, call 911.⁵

THE REST OF THE COAST

This free sample is two of the eight destinations in **Lakeshores, Dunes & the Straits**, the Mitten Trails guide to Michigan's lakeshores, dune parks and the Straits of Mackinac, arranged roughly north to south:

- Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore
- Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore
- Mackinac Island
- Mackinaw City and the Straits
- Ludington State Park & Nordhouse Dunes (*in this sample*)
- Silver Lake State Park (*in this sample*)
- P.J. Hoffmaster & Saugatuck Dunes
- Warren Dunes State Park

The full guide adds a numbered overview map keyed to every page, four suggested trips with drive times, passes and know-before-you-go notes for every park, and a checklist of every stop.

GET THE FULL GUIDE

Find *Lakeshores, Dunes & the Straits* in the Mitten Trails shop on Etsy:
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NUMBERED SOURCES

Retrieved Oct. 2–3, 2026 unless noted; seasonal dates re-checked Oct. 11, 2026. Numbers differ from the full guide.

1. Michigan DNR, "Recreation Passport," re-checked Oct. 3, 2026.
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3. USDA Forest Service, Huron-Manistee NFs, "Nurnberg Trailhead."
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<https://www.fs.usda.gov/r09/huron-manistee/alerts/nordhouse-dunes-wilderness-area-restrictions>
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13. Michigan DNR, "Silver Lake State Park," re-checked Oct. 3, 2026.
<https://www.michigan.gov/recsearch/parks/silverlake>
14. Michigan DNR, "Gillette Sand Dune Visitor Center." <https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/places/v-centers/gillette>
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