PALOS TRAILS

At 15,000 acres, the Palos Preserves in southwest Cook County are the largest concentration of preserved land in the Forest Preserves. Thanks to more than three decades of habitat restoration, they also hold some of the highest-quality natural areas in the county.

Given the size of the Palos region, it’s no surprise that the trail system includes more than 26 miles of connected trail loops and segments. These trails join many popular sites, such as the Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center, Pulaski Woods, Saganashkee Slough and Maple Lake which is home to a mountain bike staging area that provides access to more than 40 miles of unpaved trails.

The Palos Trails offer terrific opportunities for bird watching. More than 300 resident, migrant and overwintering bird species have been spotted in the Palos region. Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center offers bird walks and other programs about wildlife.

The Palos trails offer plenty of opportunities to get out and connect with nature, whether for an entire day or just an hour. Please use these recommended routes to help you explore and enjoy the trails, no matter your experience level.

The introductory route is shorter, with easy access to amenities, and is great for families or beginners. The intermediate route is slightly longer, and the advanced route is for visitors who want to travel substantial distances, connect to other trails or take on challenging terrain.

These routes are a great starting point but there are multiple entrance points to the trails, so you can plan a trip to suit your time and interests. We hope you’ll be inspired to discover new places and ways to connect to them.

For more details about the Forest Preserves’ trail systems, visit fpdcc.com.

RECOMMENDED ROUTES

INTRODUCTORY
LENGTH: 1.6 miles
TRAIL TYPE: Unpaved
TERRAIN: Mostly Flat
Start and end at Little Red Schoolhouse

If you’re new to the Palos Trails, start your hike at Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center. It’s located at 9800 Willow Springs Road (104th Avenue) in Willow Springs on the west side of the road, a half mile south of 95th Street.

Used as a traditional schoolhouse from 1886 to 1948, Little Red Schoolhouse Nature Center opened to the public in 1995. In 2000, a new visitor center with additional law exhibition and exhibits joined the old school. Now thousands of people come each year to learn about the plants, animals and historic past of the Palos area.

The Black Oak Trail is an easy, 1.6-mile unpaved loop that begins at the nature center. Hogs Long, John Slough—a popular spot for migrating water birds—and winds through prairie and woodlands. Another option is the White Oak Trail, a 0.8-loop with access across the nature center parking lot.

These trails are meant for hiking only, and their hours differ from our standard hours of sunrise to sunset. Check our website for specific nature center hours which vary seasonally.

Visit fpdcc.com/nature-centers.

INTERMEDIATE
LENGTH: 5 miles
TRAIL TYPE: Unpaved
TERRAIN: Rolling
Start and end at Country Lane Woods

Get to know the Palos Trails at Country Lane Woods. Enjoy a picnic before hiking a trail with slight inclines for about five miles around Cranberry Slough Nature Preserve, one of only a few peat bogs in Illinois.

The trail starts with an old gravel country lane that provides a wide path for hiking, biking, cross-country skiing or horseback riding through the heart of the preserve. Head south along the Tan Trail to the intersection with the Yellow Trail. Continue southwest on the Yellow Trail, then around to Cranberry Slough.

This ecological restoration site provides great viewing for wildlife as well as delicate woodland and prairie wildflowers. Hike another 2.5 miles, then rejoin the northern portion of the Tan Trail. Head south back to your starting point.

Note that dogs aren’t permitted within Illinois Nature Preserves.

Country Lane Woods is easily accessible by car; from South LaGrange Road (IL 12-20), turn west on 95th Street and park in the lot on the south side of the road.

There are a variety of driving options on 95th Street as you travel east from Country Lane Woods, before 1-294.

ADVANCED
LENGTH: 5.5 miles
TRAIL TYPE: Unpaved
TERRAIN: Hilly
Start and end at Wolf Road Road

For a more strenuous adventure, hike or mountain bike the 5.5-mile Orange Loop trail from Wolf Road Woods. This natural trail is twisting, rocky and narrow with varied topography.

Pick up the trail just north of the parking lot at Wolf Road Woods, and continue along past scenic Tomahawk and Horsecollar Sloughs.

Follow the outer trail loop as it winds south along Archer Avenue, then east along 107th Street. This area provides colorful autumn foliage and is home to a great variety and abundance of wildlife.

From there, continue following the trail north, up a challenging incline and finally back to the starting point.

Parking for Wolf Road Woods is in the Palos Preserves complex at the end of Wolf Road, 3/4 mile south of 95th Street in Willow Springs.

If you’re driving and want to get a bite to eat after your visit, follow Archer Avenue southwest, then turn north on Route 83. There are several restaurants along 83. For those taking the Metra, there are also several driving options northeast along Archer.

TRAIL INFO & ETIQUETTE

• Most trails are open from sunrise to sunset; nature center trails are open during posted hours. Nature center trails are intended for walking use only.

• Restrooms available at many preserves and trail parking lots.

• Permits for groups of 25+ require a permit. Visit fpdcc.com.

• Collecting plants or animals is prohibited. Please refrain from feeding wildlife; it can spread disease and harms the animals.

• Cyclists and equestrians must ride single-file and wear helmets required for riders 14 and under.

• Horses and their riders must be licensed.

• Off-trail use damages sensitive habitat. Stay on designated trails, and don’t use trails in muddy conditions.

• Ride or walk on the right side of the trail, and give an audible warning before passing other trail users. Ask permission before passing equestrians.

• Dogs must be leashed at all times, except in designated off-leash dog areas.