

Big fun under the sun

Headlands Beach State Park on Lake Erie draws millions to sand and surf each year

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Headlands Beach is the biggest and best natural sand swimming beach on Ohio's North Coast.

Next door is one of the only remaining Lake Erie sand dunes and its unique plant community.

Headlands Beach State Park east of Cleveland in Lake County stretches for more than one mile along Lake Erie.

It is a deep beach, more than 100 yards of sand between the water and the park's 19 parking lots that lie in both the city of Mentor and Painesville Township.

The 120-acre state park is popular with swimmers and sunbathers. It is routinely rated the best swimming spot at a state park in the Buckeye state and gets up to 10,000 visitors a day in the summer.

It is also home to picnics, beach volleyball, wind surfing, jet skis, fishing and more.

The park gets nearly 2.2 million visitors a year.

Lifeguards are on duty from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weekends and holidays and noon to 7 p.m. on weekdays during the summer.

The state of Ohio began acquiring land west of Fairport Harbor in 1951-1952 to create a state park.

The park opened in 1953 as Painesville Beach State Park. In 1955, the name was changed to Headlands Beach.

In 1957, the beach was closed when Lake Erie's waves and undertow created safety problems. The public enjoyed swimming instead in a creek that flowed into Lake Erie.

The Lake Erie undertow is still an issue and swimming is prohibited when the waves are at 4 feet high or bigger, said park spokesman Dave Frank.

The state in the late 1960s added parking lots, concession buildings,

restrooms, changing buildings and a sewage treatment plant.

Tucked between the state park and the Grand River is the 25-acre Headlands Dunes State Nature Preserve with its natural beach and plants that typically are found only along the Atlantic Coast.

It is a highly specialized environment too hostile for many other plants and animals to survive.

The dunes and sandy beaches that once stretched from Sandusky Bay east to Dunkirk, N.Y., have all but disappeared, wiped out by lakeshore development. Headlands Dunes is one of the last and rarest ecological communities in Ohio.

Such dunes are typically found west of where rivers such as the Grand enter Lake Erie.

The dunes, shaped by wind and water, are up to 20 feet tall and surprisingly colorful with reddish brown and tan-colored grasses dominating.

It is a fragile environment with a handful of trails going through the dunes. Some areas are fenced off to restrict access.

Please see Wild, E9



Headlands Dunes is a good site for visitors to observe migrating birds and monarch butterflies.