

# Elsen's Hill (West DuPage Woods), Winfield

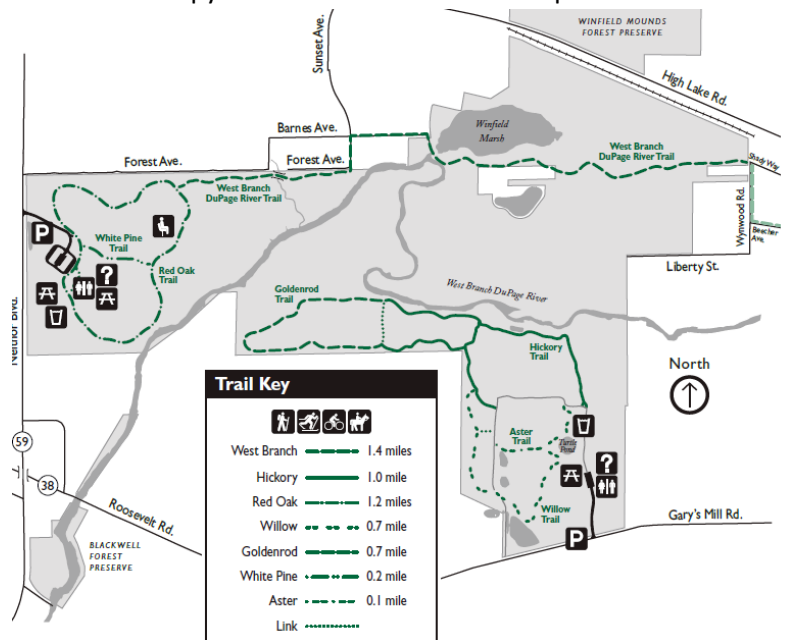
Elsen's Hill (the south unit of West DuPage Woods Forest Preserve) is located in central DuPage County on Gary's Mill Road off Roosevelt Rd. (Rt. 38) and Winfield Road. It lies along a greenbelt of preserves including Blackwell and St. James Farm to the south and Timber Ridge to the north. It enjoys a well-deserved reputation as a hotspot for migrants.



## Habitat type/site overview

Part of the larger 462+ acre West DuPage Woods Forest Preserve, Elsen's Hill has over 140 acres of woodlands, dense shrubby fields, and some more open grassy areas. Elsen's Hill occupies the lower right quadrant of the featured map, south of the West Branch DuPage River.

One of its unique features is the large collection of Hawthorn trees in the central open area and areas with a mix of shrubs, cherry trees, and low- and mid-level canopy trees. The north end of the preserve also slopes down to some sheltered oak and mixed woodlands along the western branch of the DuPage River and a restored fen area that decades ago was the site of a sled hill called "Elsen's Hill." Elsen's Hill is best known as a migrant hotspot and as of 2020 is one of only fewer than five currently accepted Important Bird Areas for migrants in northern Illinois.



## Topography

Elsen's Hill has a variety of trails that work through the central section of the preserve including a main gravel trail (shown in gray on maps) that goes north from the parking lot and then loops west and then back south to the "back pond" near Gary's Mill Road. That loop can be completed by continuing east along grass trails (the Willow Trail) that are unpaved and often muddy near the pond in wet months. Another grass trail called the "Aster Trail" cuts east to west around the front pond by the parking lot called "Turtle Pond."

Continuing north from the parking lot instead of turning west on the main loop will lead down the hill along the "Hickory Trail" to the oak woodlands and narrow bottomland area along the DuPage River. These trails can also be quite muddy in wet months or even impassable if the river floods. Most birders rarely go all the way west along the river, but one can go quite far down the Hickory and then Goldenrod Trail and loop back. These rarely visited parts of the preserve can also be very good for birds. All of these

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trails can also be quite wet or muddy in some seasons and one section of the Goldenrod trail is often impassable.

### Birds

All sections of the preserve are excellent for warblers and other migrants in spring and fall, especially April through May and again in September. The central area of Hawthorn trees is especially birdy when the Hawthorn and Cherry trees are in bloom; this area gives birders the opportunity of seeing many species of warblers at or near eye level. The insects around the many ponds and wet areas also attract birds during migration. The oaks along the river and by the “old homestead” area at the northwest corner of the main loop trail are also productive when the oaks have flowering catkins in the spring. These areas can be good for tanagers, grosbeaks, and thrushes in addition to warblers. Early to mid-May can be particularly incredible for seeing warblers and migrants. Over 250 species have been recorded at the site.



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West DuPage Woods, in particular the Elsen’s Hill unit, also boasts one of the largest reported single-day bird lists in all of Illinois with 115 species being seen there during a recent Spring Bird Count. Single observers have seen as many as 30 species of warblers or more at Elsen’s on a single day and the site has many spring records of Prairie Warblers, Cerulean Warblers, Connecticut Warblers (often multiple individuals), Worm-eating Warblers, and all other expected species. Rarities seen at the preserve have included a Black-throated Gray Warbler, Kirtland’s Warbler, Varied Thrush, and Northern Goshawk. In addition to migrants, in spring through summer, Elsen’s Hill has also hosted a variety of good breeding birds including Wood Thrushes, Broad-winged Hawks, Red-shouldered Hawks, Pileated Woodpeckers, stern Towhees, and Tufted Titmice.

### Best time to go



Elsen’s Hill is a great spot to look for early warblers starting in mid-April. The best season is May when migrants are plentiful at the site up until the warmer days towards the very end of the month. In fall, September and into early October is best for migrants. Summer and winter months are notably slower at Elsen’s, although the understory, sheltered ravines, and secluded location make it an enjoyable place to bird all year as well as avoid crowds.

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### Amenities

A latrine-type bathroom is located at the main parking lot. Picnic benches are located under the trees by the front pond.

### Access

The main and only parking lot is located along Gary's Mill Road. Individuals with limited mobility can still see a lot of nice birds even just along the paved road between the entrance and the parking lot as well as the gravel trail and front pond. The site is open during normal forest preserve hours, although the parking lot is often open earlier in the morning.

The main unit of West DuPage Woods, not to be confused with Elsen's Hill, is located to the west of Elsen's along Route 59/Neltnor Blvd. An even less-birded portion of West DuPage Woods and Elsen's Hill, often referred to as the "ball field area," is located north of the DuPage River off of Shady Way and Wynwood Rd. Some birders refer to this section as part of the Elsen's Hill unit.

### Site contributors

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