



Islands in the Sand

As you look around the dunes you will see “islands” of vegetation. These plants are the result of a long process of soil-building, which starts when a combination of minerals, green algae, bacteria, and fungi form a crust on the sand, drawing nutrients from the air and water. Lichens, which consist of algae and fungi, also coat the dunes. When these organisms die and decay, they contribute organic matter to the sand beneath them, and prevent the evaporation of water, thus forming new soil. As soil builds up, grasses, shrubs, and even small trees, such as bear oak and black cherry can take root. As this process of succession — the change in vegetation species structure — continues, more areas of the dunes become forested.



Life in the Dunes

In summer the exposed dunes feel like a desert. The heat index can exceed 100° F. In contrast, harsh winter winds can whip the snow and sand into a frothy cappuccino-like appearance. Despite these extreme conditions, the open dunes hold a surprising array of life.

WHOSE TRACKS? On a daytime hike through the dunes you are unlikely to encounter animals, but you may see their tracks — large dog-like paw prints of coyote, long three-fingered scrapes of turkey, S-shaped impressions of hognose snake, and V-shaped deer tracks — meandering over the dunes.

Plants also leave tracks. Beach grass earned the nickname “compass grass” from the perfect circle it traces around itself as its blades bend to sweep the sand on windy days. Beach heather, also known as “poverty grass” for its ability to survive harsh conditions, can also scrape the sand in high winds.