

Happy Trails: Five Hiking Trails

Here are five nature-filled, easy-to-hike trails that will make you feel like you've been on a vacation.

By Linda Tagliaferro

The sultry, sun-dappled days of summer are gone. Although temperatures are dropping, nature compensates for the lack of warm weather with a spectacular fall display of brilliant red and yellow colors, as leaves gently whirl their way from treetops to forest floors. This is a perfect time to take a gentle hike, observing trees and wildlife getting ready for their winter rest.

Here are five nature-filled, easy-to-hike trails that will exercise your eyes as well as your legs, as you quietly stroll through fall's natural wonders. If you can't get away for a vacation this season, read on and you'll feel like you did.

Michigan
Pyramid Point Trail, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore
Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore spans a gracefully curved 64 miles of golden sand coastline on the shores of Lake Michigan.

This stunning area encompasses a diversity of natural wonders: immense, imposing sand dunes, high bluffs and serene beech-maple forests interspersed with shimmering lakes and inviting beaches.

The lakeshore features a number of trails that meander through colorful forests and meadows.

The Pyramid Point Trail leads visitors through a 2.8-mile loop that explores surrounding forests, meadows, hills and dunes. The trailhead parking area is on Basch Road, where a wooden box holds maps of the area.

You'll start out in a grassy meadow and follow the trail to a patch of verdant hills. The trail ascends slowly to a beautiful stand of paper birch trees. Along the way, visitors can pause at a dune with a spectacular panorama of Lake Michigan, with North Manitou and South Manitou Islands in the distance.

Visitors pass through a forest where tall maple trees boast blazing red leaves in the fall, and beech trees hold on to their leaves of gold.

Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore also offers a flat trail that traverses a field and woods. The trail is accessible to all, including visitors in wheelchairs and those with visual impairments. The trail is marked with signs that describe the birds and trees of the area. There are 160 species of birds that nest in the park throughout the year—a birdwatcher's paradise.

For more information, call (231) 326-5134.

Rhode Island
Clay Head Hill Trail, Block Island
Twelve miles south of Rhode Island, Block Island offers wonderful natural vistas with a well-maintained trail system throughout the island.

Although relatively small--just 10 square miles--Block Island features spectacular 150-foot bluffs, great bird watching opportunities and miles of pristine land that inspired The Nature Conservancy to dub it one of the "Last Great Places in the Western Hemisphere."

During the fall, the swells of summer tourists dwindle, and the island foliage bursts into brilliant red and gold hues. Located off a small dirt road that connects to Corn Neck Road, Clay Head Hill Trail leads to some of the island's most inspiring panoramas. In the fall, migratory songbirds flock past the island; if you visit, you'll be in one of the best places in North America to observe them.

Follow the trail to the northeast shore of the island and its majestic bluffs. Clay Head also features smaller trails-within-a-trail leading to ocean vistas, pine groves and hidden ponds.

There are several ways to reach Block Island. The Block Island Ferry sails year-round from point Judith, R.I. (and in the summer from other points in Rhode Island, New London, Connecticut and Montauk, N.Y.) The Island Hi-Speed Ferry sails mid-May through mid-October from the State Pier in Galilee, R.I.

For more information, call the Nature Conservancy at (401) 466-2129.

Pennsylvania

Turkey Hill Trail, Lancaster County

Lancaster County, also known as Pennsylvania Dutch Country, brims with natural beauty.

Located in the southeast corner of Pennsylvania, the county boasts its main outdoor attraction: the Susquehanna River, which affords stunning views of autumn's natural palette of colors, as well as the opportunity to appreciate wildlife like bald eagles, ospreys and Canada geese.

The area offers many trails near and along the river, but novice to moderately experienced hikers may enjoy the Turkey Hill Trail which rises above the Lower Susquehanna.

Just a short drive from Lancaster City, the Turkey Hill Trail leads visitors through a mostly deciduous forest that turns spectacular shades of red and yellow during the fall. The easiest way to access the trail is from the parking lot of the Highville Fire Company; from there the trail winds downward.

A unique aspect of this trail is the large stand of pawpaw trees, whose leaves have a distinct aroma that resembles green pepper. The pawpaw fruit is also known as custard apple or wild banana and are revered for their sweetness. Hikers will also see sassafras, red oak, red maple, sweet birch and other trees flaunting their autumn foliage.

Parts of the path are steep, but hikers who venture further up the path may be rewarded with sightings of herons, swans, hawks and even turkey vultures.

For more information, call the Lancaster County Conservancy at (717) 392-8220.

Washington

Barclay Lake, Snohomish County

Just 12 miles north of Seattle, Washington State's Snohomish County is home to many scenic hiking trails. For the beginning hiker, the 2.2-mile trail to Barclay Lake, located in the South Fork Skykomish River Valley, offers an easy path through tall trees towering over a blanket of soft moss. To the south, this narrow valley affords a stunning view of the sheer vertical cliffs of Baring Mountain looming overhead; to the north, the jagged faces of Gunn and Merchant Peaks come into view. In the fall, the mountains are streaked with the fiery red of blueberry bushes against the dark green of old-growth Douglas Firs. In the understory, huckleberry leaves turn a vibrant yellow while birds like thrushes, wrens and flycatchers flit from branch to branch.

Hikers on this gentle trail can walk comfortably past wild, majestic surroundings without scaling tall peaks, so bring the whole family. The trail can be muddy in places, so keep an eye on children and make sure everyone is wearing suitable hiking shoes. Bring along a picnic lunch and settle down for a quiet meal in the open air when you reach Barclay Lake, and enjoy the amazing mountain views.

For more information, contact the Snohomish County Tourism Bureau at (425) 348-5802.

Ohio

Shawnee State Park

Nestled into the Appalachian foothills near the banks of the Ohio River, Shawnee State Park lies within the 63,000 lush acres of the Shawnee State Forest in south central Ohio.

You'll find over 100 different species of trees in this densely forested area. In the fall, towering black gum trees blaze a brilliant red, sassafras leaves turn bright orange and sugar maples shimmer with golden yellow leaves.

Shawnee State Park's Harry Knighton Trail features two miles of low-impact terrain that is high in natural beauty. The trail weaves through gentle hills in the dense, shaded forest near Turkey Creek Lake. Wildlife in the park includes deer, turkeys and grouse, but they generally shy away from hikers who announce their presence. If you tread softly and whisper to your friends, you might have a wildlife encounter. In early fall, you might spy Monarch butterflies getting ready to leave for their annual migration. Occasional Swallowtails and Red Admiral butterflies may also be flitting about through September.

If you'd like company on your walk, the park sponsors its annual fall hike on the third Saturday in October. The free hike covers about five miles, with a break in the middle. You can even learn how to make your own apple butter from park guides.

For more experienced hikers, the park boasts a 60-mile backpacker trail in some of the most awe-inspiring natural areas of Ohio.

For more information, call the park office at (740) 858-6652.

10 Essentials

Make sure you're well prepared for a safe, pleasant hike. Craig Romano, author of several guidebooks on hiking in the Northwest, advises bringing the following 10 items on all your treks:

1. Map and compass
2. Sun protection
3. Extra clothing, such as a wind-proof jacket
4. Flashlight
5. First-aid supplies
6. Matches
7. Pocket knife
8. Extra food
9. Extra water
10. Emergency shelter such as a Space blanket

It's a good idea to bring your cell phone, but remember that in many outdoor areas you won't be able to pick up a signal.

Want to read more stories like this one? Hobby Farms and Hobby Farm Home magazines are your resources for rural living.

About the Author: Freelance writer Linda Tagliaferro loves walking through autumn-colored landscapes when she's not writing, drawing or singing. She's the author of 35 books for ages ranging from children through adults.