



EXCLUSIVE CONTENT

WEEKENDS

CENTRAL



Camp along the Winding Stairs on night 2.

RIVERLANDS OUACHITA MOUNTAINS, AR

SUNSHINE SETS THE fall foliage around me aglow, each leaf casting a thousand shades of red and yellow against the blue sky on this rare, low-humidity fall morning in Arkansas. I'm about halfway along the 16-mile Little Missouri Trail, which follows its namesake river as it carves a narrow valley out of the hard novaculite of the Ouachita Mountains. I close my eyes to focus on the roar of the water as it cascades over massive boulders and into deep pools. That's the sound of compromise between a persistent river and a stubborn rock. And this trail alongside both is the reward. *By Mara Kuhn*

TURN-BY-TURN

- 1) Follow the **Little Missouri Trail**, marked with white blazes, as it begins at its first river crossing. Note how small the river is here.
- 2) Immediately after crossing the river, veer east at the trail junction with the Athens Big Fork and follow the **Little Missouri Trail** 4.1 miles to Little Missouri Falls Recreation Area.
- 3) Continue along the paved path where rock

outcroppings rise more than 50 feet above a series of waterfalls. The **Little Missouri Trail** snakes through these bald, knobby peaks dotted with pine trees. Camp in a nice flat spot at mile 7.5.

4) Next day, continue south along the **Little Missouri Trail**. At mile 13, veer south (hiker's left) to stay on the trail. Need to bail? The shuttle car you parked yesterday is .1 mile to the north (hiker's right) via a spur.

5) Continue south for 2 miles to the **Winding Stairs**, the crown jewel of the hike, and set up camp within earshot of the river.

6) Next day, retrace your steps but take a left toward the parking lot at mile 17.2.

CAMPSITE 1 MEADOW (MILE 7.5)

Pitch your tent along this long, flat stretch of trail, or hang a hammock under the old-growth pines and fall-perfect hardwoods. Bonus: The drum of cascading water echoes off the rock wall on the other side of the river, amplifying its hypnotic sound.

CAMPSITE 2 WINDING STAIRS (MILE 15.1)

There are no designated spots, but impacted sites with fire rings dot the area. Best bet: Throw down just before the trail climbs over a large boulder. This impacted spot is nestled between the hillside and a rock outcropping and offers an excellent view of the river.

NOVACULITE

The Little Missouri River cuts through a narrow belt of novaculite, an extremely hard, flint-like rock that is resistant to erosion. The effect: Deeply cut gorges and spiny ridges, which are uncommon in the Ouachitas.

WINDING STAIRS

Walk along this .5-mile stretch of river to take in the novaculite outcroppings, massive boulders, and cascades that make up the "stairs." Here, the river's narrow chutes and deep pools maneuver their way around 15-foot-tall rocks and the opposite bank rises 100 feet to a bluff. In the distance to the northwest, Blaylock Mountain rises nearly 1,000 feet above the churn.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 34.3659,-93.9019; 2 miles southwest of Albert Pike Recreation Area on Forest Service Road 106 **TRAILHEAD** 34.4340, -93.9738; 54 minutes (13.5 miles) northwest of your shuttle car on Forest Service Road 25 **SEASON** Year-round, but watch for high river levels in the spring **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/ouachita

Distance 17.3 miles (point to point)

Time 3 days

Difficulty ●●●●●



From the shuttle car, hike 1.5 miles east to reach Hawksbill Crag, which rises over the Whitaker Creek drainage you camped in.

OFF SCRIPT

UPPER BUFFALO WILDERNESS, ARKANSAS

SUPPLY AND DEMAND in the Ozarks is a touchy subject. Hikers here tend to funnel into a few main drags (which, to their credit, are replete with hollows, waterfalls, and hardwoods), making it hard to score a slice to yourself. Venture into the trailless Upper Buffalo Wilderness, however, and that changes. Off-trail navigation is allowed there, so if you're handy with a map and compass, solitude beckons. Yesterday, I linked river drainages to camp in a sycamore-ringed clearing near Whitaker Creek. Though it was less than a mile as the crow flies from popular Hawksbill Crag, I spent the night completely by myself. Today's agenda calls for more of the same: trailless creeks and woods, where solitude and beauty are never in short supply. *By Jeff Howell*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE MAGNOLIA FALLS TRAILHEAD

- 1) Take the **Magnolia Falls Trail** 1.3 miles to its terminus at a small stream.
- 2) Parallel the creek downstream to **Boen Gulf Branch** at mile 1.6.
- 3) Turn west (hiker's left) and trace Boen Gulf Branch 1.5 miles to the **Buffalo River**.
- 4) Veer north (hiker's right) and follow the Buffalo River downstream to **Whitaker Creek** near mile 4.3.
- 5) Continue hiking upstream beside Whitaker Creek for just over a mile, dodging boulders and circumventing waterfalls, to a confluence.
- 6) Go .4 mile upstream along **Lower Fork Creek** to locate a convenient break in the cliff band on the west side (hiker's left). The writer found a direct route near 35.8925, -93.4474.
- 7) Climb out of the drainage, setting a bearing for an old road near 35.8882, -93.4576, less than a mile southwest.
- 8) Follow the lane about .3 mile north to County Road 5.
- 9) Take the road .5 mile northeast to the Whitaker Point trailhead at mile 7.4.

CAMPSITE WHITAKER CREEK (MILE 4.3)

Look for an old chimney from a long-gone homestead on the north side of Whitaker Creek, just beyond where it meets the Buffalo River. (Scouting a safe crossing should be easy in September.) In the morning, wander down to the shore to spy elk, coyotes, and white-tailed deer getting a drink.

BUSHWHACKING 101

Budget extra time: In the Ozarks, the thick understory means that the going can be extremely slow despite the relatively basic navigation and terrain. Plan to walk less than half your usual speed.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 35.9011, -93.4579; 14 miles north of Arbaugh on Co. Rd. 5
TRAILHEAD 35.8625, -93.3858; a 31-minute drive east from shuttle car **SEASON** Year-round **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapUpperBuff (\$15) **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/osfnf

Distance 7.4 miles (point to point)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Camp on Eagle Peninsula.

SPRING FLING

OUACHITA NATIONAL FOREST, ARKANSAS

THE DOGWOOD BUDS decorating the branches around my campsite are like kernels of corn ready to pop. They surround a panorama of blue: Lake Ouachita, Arkansas's largest body of water. I watch as the sun peeks over Hickory Nut Mountain, setting the lake on fire. A loon calls from somewhere, and I spot it bobbing 100 yards away near a wooded island. I've found a rare piece of backcountry solitude in this part of the state, one that I owe to the 40-mile Lake Ouachita Vista Trail, a relatively new path that snakes around the southern shore of its namesake. Like its name suggests, the Lake Ouachita Vista Trail offers near-constant water views—and if you want to see it all, you'd better arrive before the dogwood flowers do. *By Mara Kuhn*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE WATCHABLE WILDLIFE

TRAILHEAD

- 1) Follow the **Watchable Wildlife Trail** boardwalk .2 mile west through a swamp where hundreds of wintering birds like coots, loons, and bald eagles reside.
- 2) Veer north to take paved **Trails End Lane** .4 mile to the western terminus of the **Lake Ouachita Vista Trail**.
- 3) Follow the Vista Trail to a junction near mile 6.9.
- 4) Turn north onto the **Eagle Vista** spur—a 1.6-mile lollipop-loop—and follow the “stick” of the lollipop .6 mile.
- 5) At the junction of the loop, head .2 mile east to camp.
- 6) Next day, close the loop counterclockwise and retrace your steps back to the **Vista Trail** at mile 8.5.
- 7) Continue 8 miles east through budding hardwoods to emerge at the Hickory Nut Mountain trailhead at mile 16.5.

CAMPSITE EAGLE PENINSULA (MILE 7.7)

Make camp in a site with water views on the peninsula's eastern edge, backed up to the oaks, loblolly pines, and dogwoods. Set an alarm for sunrise to watch color seep over the Ouachita foothills on the lake's east edge. (There are no designated sites here, so if this

one's claimed, keep hiking counterclockwise to find another site.)

THRU-HIKE IT

This itinerary ticks off just the westernmost piece of the Lake Ouachita Vista Trail. Completed in 2014, the whole thing stretches 40 miles across the winding southern shore of 40,000-acre Lake Ouachita from the Watchable Wildlife Area at Denby Bay to Avery Recreation Area, just below Blakely Dam. Tack another night or two to complete it.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 34.5619, -93.4227; 10 miles west of Crystal Springs on FS Rd. 7426

TRAILHEAD 34.5435, -93.4728; 18 minutes west of the shuttle car on Trails End Ln.

COMMERCIAL OPTION Ouachita Rides & Guides (\$30); facebook.com/ridesandguides

SEASON Year-round **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM**

MAP bit.do/BPmapLOViT (\$15) **CONTACT** lakeouachitavistatrail.org

Distance 16.5 miles (point to point)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



HEAD FOR THE HILLS

COLORADO BEND STATE PARK, TEXAS

YESTERDAY, I NAVIGATED cactus-dotted scrubland caked in orange dust. Today, I'm negotiating a slick gorge decorated in green hanging gardens. It feels like two different trips, and, in a sense, it is: I threaded together a dozen trails to flow the desert and upland

savannah into a damp karst canyon that hides a 65-foot-tall waterfall. In doing so, I've created a multiday epic that touches every highlight in this dayhike-oriented park. That's the way it should be: The longer you look, the better you see. *By Anna Saikin*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE CEDAR CHOPPER LOOP TRAILHEAD

1) Like most backpacking trips in Hill Country, this one requires creativity: Begin in the middle of the figure eight (leave yourself a



cache in your car for day two), and link the **Lemons Ridge Pass, Lively Loop, and Windmill Trails** 4.4 miles through a desert landscape to the **Windmill Backpack Camping Area**.

2) Next day, string together the **Windmill, Lively Loop, Gorman-Windmill Connection, and Gorman Falls Trails** 3.4 miles to a tributary of the Colorado River.

3) Venture upstream on the 1-mile, out-and-back **Gorman Spring Trail** to see the namesake bubbler (scan for Texas's state fish, the Guadalupe bass).

4) Back at the Colorado River, take **Old Gorman Road** (dirt doubletrack) south to the Cedar Chopper Loop parking lot and your cache at mile 10.5.

5) Tack on leg two: Trek 3.5 miles east through karst **Dogleg Canyon** (trailside sinkholes and permit-only caves here) and up the shady **River Trail** to the **River Backpack Camping Area** path, which wends upstream to campsites by Texas's Colorado River.

6) Back on the main trail, thread together the **River and Lemons Ridge Pass Trails** 4.2 miles to close the circuit where you started at the Cedar Chopper Loop parking area.

CAMPSITE 1 WINDMILL BACKPACK CAMPING AREA (MILE 4.4)

Pitch your tent in the prairie, where mountain cedars provide some shade. But this quiet desert site feels straight-up Texas, complete with prickly pear cactuses and nighttime coyote yips. Note: BYO water.

CAMPSITE 2 RIVER BACKPACK CAMPING AREA (MILE 14.4)

Camp on a flat spot trimmed with Queen Anne's lace and cattails. Easy access to the lazy Colorado River makes water duty a breeze—and means you'll have thirsty visitors, like armadillos.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 31.041102, -98.485403; 30 miles west of Lampasas on CR 446
SEASON October to May **PERMIT** None, but you need to reserve campsites online for \$10 apiece at texas.reserveworld.com. **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapCoBendSP (\$15)
CONTACT bit.do/colorado-bend-sp

Distance 18.6 miles (figure eight)
Time 3 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Limestone outcropping on the Cumberland Trail

GOLD RUSH

LAUREL-SNOW STATE NATURAL AREA, TENNESSEE

ISCANDOWN the bridge to where the path disappears into a palette of warm reds, oranges, and yellows. It's the sort of scene that would cause a bumper-to-bumper jam on the scenic roads, but I've got this one to myself. I've barely left the trailhead, and already the Laurel-Snow reveals its secrets in the gums, oaks, and maples that fan out in either direction of Prairie Creek. Better yet: Those hardwoods hide limestone caves and year-round waterfalls. And I only have to go another 2 miles to see it all. I tighten my pack straps and keep walking. It's time to see what's on the other side. *By Heather Balogh Rochfort*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE PARKING AREA

1) Pick up the **Cumberland Trail** and follow

Richland Creek 1.3 miles to a junction.

2) Veer east (hiker's right) onto a set of steep switchbacks and continue .7 mile on the main path to the **Henderson Creek Campsite**. (At press time, the bridge over Laurel Creek near mile 1.8 was unusable; prepare to ford. It should be lower than knee height in October.)

3) Next day, stage a 5.8-mile, round-trip day mission to 35-foot Snow Falls via the Cumberland Trail.

4) From camp, return to the trailhead by the same route.

CAMPSITE HENDERSON CREEK CAMPSITE (MILE 2)

If weather allows, ditch the fly to truly savor this large, hickory-and-oak-shaded spot as leaves flutter down to your tent. From the prime location, you're also in position to tackle day trips to 35-foot Snow Falls (as per the itinerary) and 80-foot Laurel Falls (1.2 miles east on the Laurel Creek Falls Trail).

FOLIAGE

Embrace the medley of oaks, maples, sumacs, hickories, and sweet gums on a .5-mile, one-

way detour off the day trip to Snow Falls (step 3 in this itinerary). Buzzard Point stretches like a diving board over the Cumberland Valley, awash in autumn colors. Foliage here tends to peak around the third or fourth week of October, but call ahead to check.

CAMPFIRE STORY

A network of abandoned mining tunnels from the late 1800s snakes through the underbelly of this area. The Dixon Slope Mine is just east of the trail near mile .3, and rumor has it that voices and laughter can still be heard echoing from its depths. Note: The abandoned mines are structurally unstable; do not enter.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 35.525912, -85.021924; 3 miles north of Dayton on Pickett Wilderness Rd. **SEASON** Year-round **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapLaurel-Snow **(\$15)** **CONTACT** bit.do/laurel-snow-sna

Distance 11.2 miles (out and back)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



An American alligator on the banks of the Brazos River

PAY YOUR RESPECTS

BRAZOS BEND STATE PARK, TEXAS

A CALM SETTLES over a forest of bleached tree trunks. It's dusk and I've entered a grove where the last light splashes over a group of the drowned sugar hackberries. They mark where the Brazos River overflowed in 2015 and 2016, a graveyard of trees. It's uncannily wild, given I'm less than an hour from Houston. Brazos Bend has three coastal ecosystems within its borders, and its network of short trails passes through all of them. They were designed for dayhikers, but if you link them up just right, you can cross marshes, prairies, and forests on a single overnight adventure. It's well worth the commute. *By Anna Saikin*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE NATURE CENTER

1) Begin leg one: Link the **Pilant Slough, Live Oak, Prairie, 40 Acre Lake, Spillway, and Elm Lake Loop Trails** into a 5.4-mile clockwise circuit around lily pad-covered 40 Acre Lake and back to Park Road 72. (Climb the 30-foot-tall Observation Tower over the pool to scan for egrets, white ibises, Mississippi kites, and purple gallinules.)

- 2)** Parallel the paved road .3 mile east.
- 3)** Split north onto the **River View Trail** and take it .6 mile to the **Premium Primitive Site** beside a bend in Big Creek.
- 4)** Retrace your steps to the park road and continue .1 mile to the Nature Center, ending the first leg of your trip.
- 5)** Second section: Link the **Creekfield Lake, Roadside, Bluestem, and Whiteoak Trails** into a 4.8-mile lollipop-loop that hits the best of the east side of the park and follows the brown Brazos River for .7 mile.
- 6)** Back at the Nature Center, tack on one final piece: Head west along the park road .5 mile to a junction.
- 7)** Connect the **Elm Lake and Horseshoe Lake Loop Trails** into a 2.2-mile lollipop-loop around boggy Horseshoe Lake and back.
- 8)** Continue .5 mile back to the Nature Center.

CAMPSITE PRIMITIVE PREMIUM SITE AT RED BUCKEYE CAMPGROUND (MILE 6.3)

This trip route looks like a three-petal flower, with a trio of loops that meet in one central spot—so feel free to pull off for the night after any of the three legs. (This itinerary reflects camping after the first loop.) Secure the park's one hiker-only site, which is on the banks of Big Creek, north of the Nature Center. It feels backcountry and has easy access to the George Observatory, if you want to do some late-night stargazing. (There is no backcountry camping, but this site is guaranteed to be car-, horse-, and RV-free.) Reserve it for \$12 at texas.reserveworld.com.

WILDLIFE

See American alligators sunning along the lakeside trails during spring and fall. Stay at least 50 feet away for everyone's safety. White-tailed deer and raccoons often leave their prints on the trails, and rattlesnakes hide in the tall prairie grass. Great egrets and white herons roam the cattails, stalking frogs and insects, while red-bellied woodpeckers hammer away in the trees.

STARGAZING

Brazos Bend is one of the darkest spots near Houston. Look for the Lyrids meteor shower on April 22 or the Eta Aquarids one on May 5. The short Observatory Trail leads from the Nature Center to the George Observatory, which has three high-powered telescopes for amateur astronomers. (The George Observatory is open Saturday nights and admission is \$7 per person.)

DO IT TRAILHEAD 29.375425, -95.596611; 45 miles southwest of Houston on FM 762 Rd.
SEASON October to May for mild temps
PERMIT None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapBrazosBendLoop (\$15) **CONTACT** bit.do/brazos-bend-sp **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/brazos-bend-loop

Distance 15 miles (three loops)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Soak in the view of the Big South Fork from the Yahoo Falls Overlook at the trailhead.

AMERICA'S ORIGINAL FRONTIER

BIG SOUTH FORK NATIONAL RIVER & RECREATION AREA, KENTUCKY

I WONDER WHAT crossed the minds of the 18th-century pioneers who trekked into what's now Daniel Boone National Forest in Kentucky. Breaking trail through lush gorges, past sandstone bluffs, and across miles and miles of waterways, they probably had a lot of hope for the West. I trace their path along the Sheltoewe Trace, paralleling one of the country's longest protected rivers, on my way to a bluff-top campsite. I think I know what the pioneers thought: Let's stay awhile. *By Eric Benich*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE YAHOO FALLS TRAILHEAD

1) You could start on the Sheltoewe right away, but then you'd miss out on the state's

tallest cascade, so begin on the **Yahoo Falls Trail** and take it .7 mile to the 113-footer.

2) Pick up the **Sheltoewe Trace** by the falls and head 4.7 miles southwest along the Big South Fork Cumberland River to the **Cotton Patch Shelter**.

3) Back on the main trail, continue 3.5 miles to the Big South Fork crossing.

4) Take the bridge to the western bank and continue less than .1 mile south on KY 1363 to the trail junction.

5) Back on the Sheltoewe, hike 8.4 miles south to 1,430-foot **Grassy Knob**.

6) Take the Sheltoewe 1.9 miles west to the trailhead on Beech Grove Road.

CAMPSITE 1 COTTON PATCH SHELTER (MILE 5.4)

Pull up at this first-come, first-serve, three-sided shelter and it will be obvious why builders omitted a western wall: It opens to the Big South Fork and its hemlock glory. If the hut is occupied, set up a tent just south of the lean-to for the same view.

CAMPSITE 2 GRASSY KNOB (MILE 17.4)

The big miles will feel totally worth it when you land this top-of-the-world, ridgetop spot. Be sure to top off water at the Trace Branch en

route.

ELK

Spot a member of the East's largest elk herd on this trip. Elk were native to the area until the mid-1880s (when they succumbed to habitat degradation and over-hunting), and reintroduced in 1997. The now-10,000-strong herd typically hangs on the fringes of the Big South Fork.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 36.645054, -84.621992; 11 miles southwest of Yamacraw on Beech Grove Rd. **TRAILHEAD** 36.773657, -84.524102; 23 miles northeast of the shuttle car via KY 92 on Yahoo Falls Rd. **SEASON** Year-round; expect solitude in winter **PERMIT** Required (\$5); obtain from a visitor center **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapBigSouthFork (\$15) **CONTACT** nps.gov/biso **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/big-south-fork

Distance 7.4 miles (point to point)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ● ●



HIDDEN WONDERS

TAUM SAUK MOUNTAIN STATE PARK, MISSOURI

IN JUST A couple of hours on the Ozark Trail, I've already hit the state high point and the state's tallest waterfall. And yet the big and the tall aren't what make the Ozarks great. The miniature forests of lichens, the tiny pools at the foot of quiet cascades, and the glades hidden within rolling hills prove that here, in southeastern Missouri, it's all about the small stuff. And count yourself among the little things, because that's exactly how you'll feel amid the deep forests of oak, walnut, and maple that seem to go on forever. *By Mark Hinch*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE TAUM SAUK TRAILHEAD

- 1) Pick up the **Taum Sauk Trail** and head southwest past 130-foot-tall Mina Sauk Falls (mile 1.5) to a junction at mile 3.2.
- 2) Stay right and continue 8.9 miles on the Taum Sauk, passing a handful of campsites, to

another intersection.

- 3) Split northwest (hiker's right) onto the **Johnson's Shut-Ins Scour Trail** and take it 1.2 miles to your shuttle car.

CAMPSITE UNNAMED CREEK (MILE 4.8)

Don't be tempted by the first few trailside sites: Keep walking to mile 4.8 where a social path veers hiker's right off the Taum Sauk into a large flat area amid a grove of oaks. (Fall bonus: The oaks turn in mid-October, and some red usually persists into November.) A small stream flows nearby year-round, making water duty a breeze.

DON'T MISS

The hike starts on the state's high point, 1,772-foot Taum Sauk Mountain. It's a drive-up, so not remarkable, but the vista overlooking the fall-radiant hardwoods is worth admiring. At mile 1.5, pass 130-foot-tall Mina Falls, the tallest in Missouri, which tumbles down four tiers into a jade pool. Then walk through Devils Tollgate, a 50-foot-tall hunk of fractured granite that's supposedly 10 times older than the Rocky Mountains.

STAY LONGER

The best part about hiking a small section of a 350-mile long path? It's easy to keep going. Instead of splitting off onto the Johnson's Shut-Ins Scour Trail, keep going south through the rocky Scour and across the Black River. Regular glades offer great views and there are plenty of social campsites in the oak woods. Loop back to your shuttle car via the Goggins Mountain Loop and Johnson's Shut-Ins Scour Trails. This adds another 13 miles.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 37.556145, -90.839596; 14 miles southwest of Middle Brook off State Hwy. N **TRAILHEAD** 37.572746, -90.728016; an hour east of the shuttle car off MO 21

COMMERCIAL OPTION Johnson's Shut-Ins State Park (\$50/group; bit.do/johnsons-shut-ins-sp) **SEASON** Year-round, but it's best in shoulder seasons (less humidity). **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapTaumSaukTrail (\$15) **CONTACT** bit.do/taum-sauk-ozark-trail **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/taumsauktrail

Distance 13.3 miles (point to point)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Check out Greer Spring, a mile south of the Greer car campground, en route via MO 19.

A RIVER RUNS THROUGH IT

MARK TWAIN NATIONAL FOREST, MISSOURI

WHEN I DUCK beneath boughs of blossoming dogwoods and emerge atop McCormack Bluff, I see everything that gives the Ozark Trail its reputation. A pocket of mist is lifting, revealing rows of tree-topped hills that stretch into the horizon. Directly below me, the Eleven Point River twists through the limestone cliffs, giving life to patches of yellow goldenrod and purple ironweed on the banks. It's tough to leave a view like this, but the next is just around the corner. *By Savannah Waszczuk*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE MCCORMACK LAKE

TRAILHEAD

- 1) Head 3.7 miles south on the **Ozark Trail to MO 19**.
- 2) Follow the road .1 mile south.
- 3) Continue 2 miles east on the Ozark Trail to camp. (Take the upper path for better views and drier boots.)
- 4) Head 6.7 miles east to the trailhead on **FS 3152**.

CAMPSITE UNNAMED PINE GROVE (MILE 5.7)

Secure a rare flat spot: After passing the Greer car campground and Graveyard Hollow (top off water here), ascend a mile to the level terrain and select a social site. Wander south to glimpse the river 200 feet below.

FLORA

The first week of May is prime time for the dogwoods (which bloom white) and redbuds (pink); see the best display from McCormack Bluff (mile 1.4). Also in bloom: yellow goldenrod and purple ironweed.

GONE FISHIN'

Between Greer Spring (pictured below) and Turner Mill, the Eleven Point River is considered a Blue Ribbon Trout Area—meaning it has a naturally reproducing rainbow trout population. Fish for 18-inch keepers (they're more common than you'd think) near Pigpen Hollow at mile 3.8.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 36.792515, -91.257763; 16 miles south of Fremont off FS 3152

TRAILHEAD 36.823319, -91.350417; 10 miles northwest of the shuttle car off CR 3155

SEASON Year-round, but spring and fall are prettiest **PERMITS** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapElevenPoint (\$15) **CONTACT** bit.do/eleven-point-section **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/elevenpoint

Distance 12.5 miles (point to point)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



FIRST FLOWERS

OUACHITA NATIONAL FOREST, OKLAHOMA

SNOW BLANKETS MANY of the country's wilds in March, but here in the Ouachitas, I trek through a different kind of white: trillium. I navigate around moss-covered boulders and past pockets of springtime blooms en route to Winding Stair Mountain, where I hit sensory overload. Ribbons of purple geranium and yellow violet decorate forested hills under a cloudless sky. Not bad for the first overnight of the season. *By Erica Zazo*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM CEDAR LAKE

- 1) Pick up the **Horsethief Springs Trail** and head 2.1 miles south.
- 2) Take its west fork (flip the loop clockwise

for a shorter first day) and continue south to a T-junction at mile 5.3.

3) Take the **Ouachita National Recreation Trail** 1.4 miles east across Winding Stair Mountain to a fork (pass the hike's namesake spring near mile 6.6).

4) Hook up with the Horsethief Springs Trail again and descend to camp at mile 7.

5) Continue 3.7 miles north to close the loop (cross Cedar Creek at miles 8.8 and 10.2; it can be ankle-deep in March).

6) Retrace your steps 2.1 miles to your car.

CAMPSITE LIMESTONE BLUFF (MILE 7)

To camp near the midway point, park it in this pine-protected social site just west (hiker's left) of the switchbacks off Winding Stair Mountain on the backend of the loop. Seasonal streams run near the trail, but top up at Horsethief Springs, the most reliable water on the route, .4 mile back. If the bluff is claimed, continue 1.7 miles to the spots near Cedar Creek.

FLORA

Scan for March blooms like green trillium, purple wild geranium (pictured), and yellow violets growing trailside. By early summer, sunflowers, like asters and black-eyed Susans, hit their prime.

HORSE THIEVES

In the post-Civil War 1800s, outlaws—including Jesse James and the Daltons—would hide out near the natural spring on Winding Stair Mountain and ambush passing travelers.

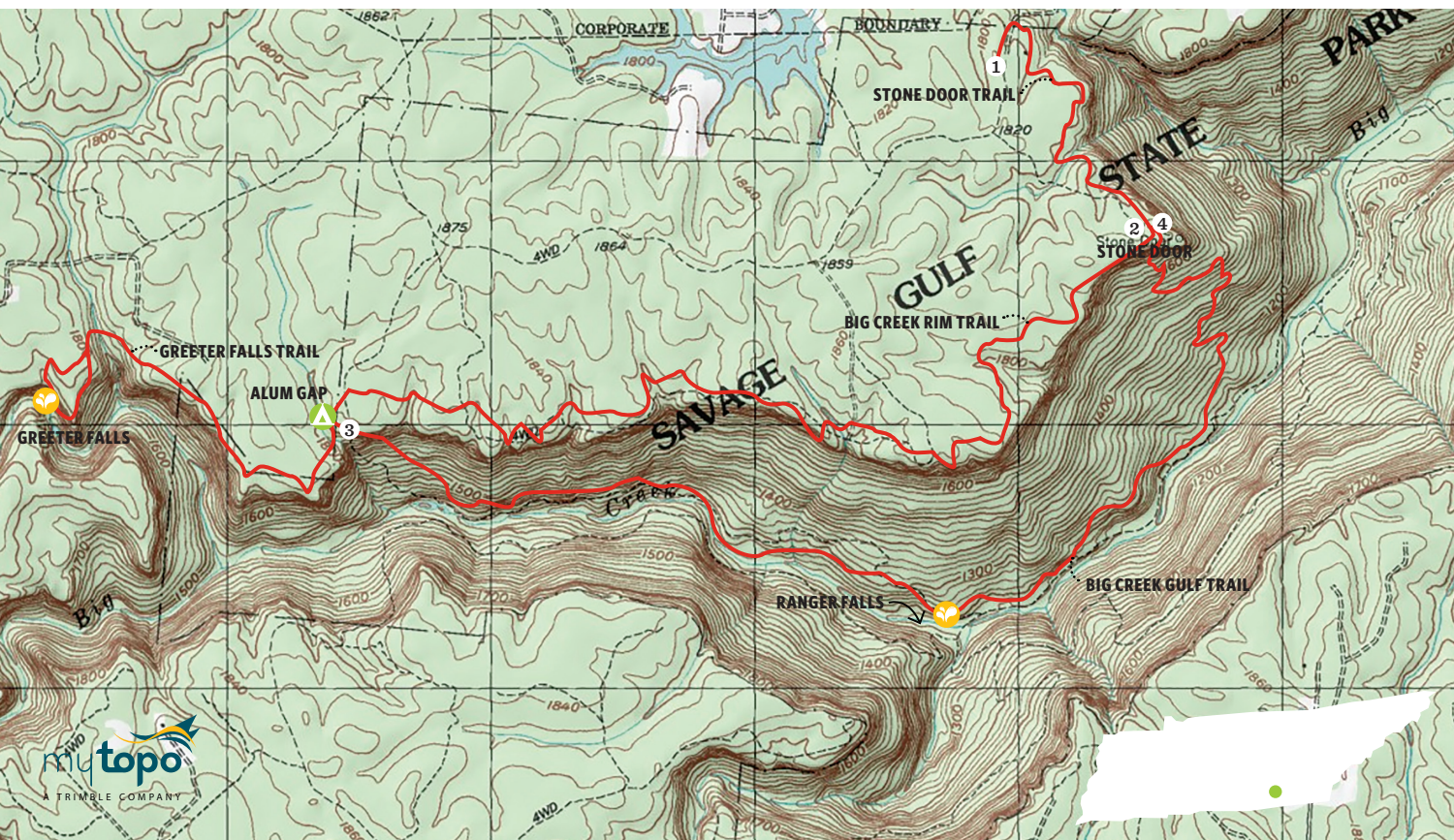
DO IT TRAILHEAD 34.778854, -94.692436; 18 miles north of Big Cedar on Cedar Lake Rd.

SEASON Year-round **PERMIT** Self-issue (\$3/day) **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapHorseThief (\$15) **CONTACT** fs.usda.gov/ouachita **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/horsethiefspring

Distance 12.8 miles (lollipop loop)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



RIM TO RIM SAVAGE GULF STATE NATURAL AREA, TENNESSEE

FROM MY VANTAGE, the sandstone chasms stretching through the wilderness look like tentacles. They spread across the Cumberland Plateau and out of view. Scattered within them, 50-foot cascades spill over escarpments into jade pools. It's no wonder this area, known as Savage Gulf, draws crowds. But not in January. I can see plumes of my breath drift away as I parallel Big Creek midway through an 8.6-mile loop—a small price to pay for getting one of the South's prettiest spots to myself. *By Eric Harrison*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE STONE DOOR RANGER STATION

- 1) Head 1 mile south on the **Stone Door Trail** to a junction.
- 2) Continue south into the gorge via the **Big Creek Gulf Trail** to complete the loop clockwise. (You could take the Rim Trail and do it counterclockwise, but we recommend tackling the gorge on fresh legs.) Hike 3.6 miles

west to Alum Gap.

- 3) Split east onto the **Big Creek Rim Trail** and take it 3 miles back to the Stone Door junction.
- 4) Retrace your steps to the parking lot.

CAMPSITE ALUM GAP (MILE 4.6)

Nab one of the sites closer to the gorge (4 through 8) for the best views—and a sunrise with your coffee. You must camp in a designated spot, and the 10 sites at Alum Gap (\$3; reserve online) are the only ones along the route. There's an outhouse, fire rings, and one group campsite (for parties larger than eight). Be sure to top off your water at Big Creek before climbing out of the gorge, as these sites are dry.

CHASING WATERFALLS

In January, some of this area's many cascades will freeze over into intricate towers, but 60-foot Ranger Falls and 62-foot, two-tiered Greeter Falls flow year-round. To see the former, split south for about .5 mile on the Ranger Falls Trail (near mile 2.8 on day one). Make sure you have room on your memory card for the latter, though: A 1.2-mile walk west from Alum Gap on the Greeter Falls Trail lands you by the 12-foot upper falls. Downclimb to reach the 50-foot lower falls (if you visit in summer, take a dip in the swimming hole here).

STONE DOOR

Linger at the Stone Door near mile 1 for the best vista on the hike. This 100-foot natural staircase—named for a crack in the rock that looks like a door ajar—faces the limestone escarpment that formed 250 to 325 million years ago when seas covered this area.

SEASON

Expect daytime temps in the 40s if you go in winter. Beware the slick, often-icy rocks, and be prepared to ford frigid, ankle-deep water once or twice—but nothing beats winter's solitude. Spring is also chilly, but the budding trees are beautiful. Summer is crowded. Fall showcases the foliage.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 35.446250, -85.656366; 7 miles northeast of Altamont on Stone Door Rd. **PERMIT** Required for camping (\$3); obtain one at the park office or at bit.do/cumberlandpermit. **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapSavageGulf **CONTACT** bit.do/SouthCumberlandSP **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/SavageGulf

Distance 8.6 miles (loop)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ●●●●●



WEEKENDS

CENTRAL NORTH



WEEKEND BLAST

HIGH ROCK BAY, MICHIGAN

A COLD WAR-ERA rocket range was the last thing I expected to stumble upon while hiking at the edge of Lake Superior, yet there was the crumbled launch pad. It's hard to believe a place so peaceful was once part of the war machine. Moving farther through the trees revealed the shore of Lake Superior, inlaid with thousands of kaleidoscopic agates. I pitch camp on the beach and build a small fire to ward off the cold air that blows off the lake. Then, just as the last embers began to gray, my eyes adjust to something even more mind-bending: the aurora borealis shimmering over a distant lighthouse. It will be a while yet before I close my eyes tonight. *By Hannah L. Weeks*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE TRAILHEAD AT US-41

1) Follow the dirt trail at the beginning of **US-41** (also called Mandan Road) for .9 mile. Keep right where the trail splits, passing the marked pathway to Horseshoe Harbor.

2) Continue east for 3.9 miles through old-growth white pine State Forest, then keep left at the unmarked split in the trail following **High Rock Bay Trail**.

3) Continue for 2.9 miles to reach **High Rock Bay**.

4) Veer left and follow the shoreline for .5 mile to reach the decommissioned **Keweenaw Rocket Range**. Camp on the concrete pad or continue to the water and camp on the beach.

5) Next day, take the **Rocket Range Trail** to the main trail.

CAMPSITE

A mix of pine and white birch trees line the northern boundary of the Keweenaw Rocket Range, providing a barrier from the northern winds as well as a variety of anchor choices for hammocking. Move closer to the shoreline for sunset views over Manitou Island Light Station Preserve and to use Lake Superior's waves as your personal sound machine.

LIFT OFF

The Keweenaw Rocket Range was operational from 1964 to 1971 as part of a study to collect meteorological data. Due to its remote location and low ship and air traffic it was also used for testing small rockets during the Cold

War. Michigan's first rocket to space launched from here in 1971.

GEOLOGY

Agates are swirled with banding of chalcedony, a type of translucent quartz. While this rock occurs all over the world, the Lake Superior agate is distinctive as its banding is stained red from iron deposits. The most desirable stones have small round circles on their faces. Visitors may collect up to 25 pounds.

WILDLIFE

Look up for jumbles of sticks comprising aeries the size of truck tires; bald eagles routinely nest above the rocket range campsite and return to the same nests year after year. Black bears also live here.

DO IT TRAILHEAD Mandan Road (47.4659, -87.8527) **PERMIT** None **SEASON** June to October; foliage peaks in early October. **INFO** michigan.gov/dnr

Distance 16.4 miles

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Silver maples in the St. Croix floodplain

WHISPERS ON THE WIND

AFTON STATE PARK, MINNESOTA

THE WIND PLAYS Afton State Park like an instrument. The music begins at the start of this 11.1-mile loop, when the summer breeze rustles through the leaves of oak, aspen, and hickory above the trail. When I step into the prairie, the whispers follow all around me, as big bluestem and wild rye sway in the gentle breeze, and insects buzz all around. With no other hikers around, the sounds seem magnified. I can't help but wonder what secrets the trees and the grasses hold. Whatever they are, I hope they're as good as mine—that I'm only 30 minutes from the hustle of downtown St. Paul, and yet still in the untamed wilds. *By Korey Peterson*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE VISITOR CENTER

- 1) From the second parking lot, take the main trail .3 mile west to a T-junction.
- 2) The loop is 10.5 miles and camp is near the middle, so you can go either way; the writer went counterclockwise. To do the same, veer south and proceed .2 mile to another fork.
- 3) Turn west and follow the unnamed trail

past hardwoods to the park road at mile 1.

4) Cross under the paved road and pick up the **Deer Valley Loop**, following it 1.8 miles through the forest to the park road again.

5) Take the connector trail .2 mile east.

6) Head south on another connector that doglegs east to the **St. Croix River** at mile 3.6.

7) Trek north on the **River Trail**, paralleling the water to the park boundary at mile 5.7.

8) Head west on-trail away from the St. Croix before cruising into the backcountry campsites at mile 6.7. (Stay straight through half a dozen trail junctions along the way.)

9) Next day, backtrack .2 mile north to a four-way intersection.

10) Turn west and hike .3 mile to another junction.

11) Head north on the **Prairie Loop**, which wends 2.5 miles through the grasslands.

12) Turn east off the **Prairie Loop**, plunging .4 mile through the forest to the final junction.

13) Veer south to reach the T-junction from step 1 near mile 10.8.

14) Turn east and retrace your steps to the **Visitor Center**, closing the circuit near mile 11.1 overall.

CAMPSITE BACKCOUNTRY CAMPSITE #2 (MILE 6.7)

Find Afton's 27 backcountry sites tucked on this bluff above the St. Croix River. Each comes with one or two tent platforms, a fire ring, and a table (first-come, first-serve or reserve online). A solar-powered water pump negates the need for long hauls to the St. Croix. Arrive early to nab Campsite #2, the

most secluded of the bunch.

RESTORATION PROJECT

Since Afton became a state park in 1969, an ongoing effort has been underway to restore its tallgrass prairie. You'll notice some sections still overrun by invasive cheat grass (uniform and monotone compared to the colorful native prairie), but a program of prescribed burns and native seed dispersal is steadily reclaiming the land. Look for native pasqueflowers, butterfly weeds, puccons, and blazing stars—and bluebirds and meadowlarks flitting among them.

WILDLIFE

In summer, look for painted turtles sunbathing on the banks of the slow-moving St. Croix and bald eagles soaring above. Foxes, white-tailed deer, badgers, and wild turkeys inhabit the forests and prairie here.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 44.8535, -92.7767; 22 miles southeast of St. Paul on 70th St. S/ Washington County Hwy. 20 **SEASON** Year-round; summer brings wildflowers and abundant wildlife, winter is even quieter and you get to use the ski trails and yurts. **PERMIT** Required (\$19); reserve online or obtain at the ranger station. **CONTACT** bit.do/afton-sp

Distance 11.1 miles (lollipop-loop)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ●●●●●



Cruising the Middle River

HEAVEN ON EARTH

MIDDLE RIVER, IOWA

WE GLIDE SILENTLY around a bend in the river, unintentionally sneaking up on two fawns playing in the shallow water. Close wildlife encounters are an unexpected perk of both boat travel and Iowa's little-known Middle River. The easy current delivers us past rolling farmlands, beneath historic bridges, and by animals unaccustomed to human presence. In summer, the river is low, so we find ourselves pushing and pulling our fiberglass canoe around boulders and snags in several places, but it's a fair trade for the peaceful travel as we float nearly 40 miles. Cottonwood fluff floats lazily beside us, and we drift past turtles and great blue herons so closely that I'm sure I can reach them with my paddle. This is America's heartland at its finest. *By Diana Lambdin Meyer*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM MIDDLE RIVER FOREST COUNTY PARK

- 1) From the launch, paddle 28 miles downstream past forest and farmland in the gentle current of the **Middle River Water Trail** to the Pammel Park takeout (access point 63).
- 2) Pull ashore on the east side.
- 3) Next day, continue 10.6 miles east downstream to the take out at the **Holliwell Covered Bridge** (access point 50).

CAMPSITE PAMMEL PARK (MILE 28)

Knock out a big day on the water, then savor a hardwood-shaded tent site. (The white oaks at this park are some of the oldest in the state, creeping up on 400 years.) Paddle ashore (boater's left) and secure your canoe to a tree beyond the water line before hiking .6 mile to the campground. Primitive camping isn't allowed on this route, so reserve one of the five tent-only sites (\$14; madisoncountyconservation.org).

GEOLOGY

Perk of the shallow water? Easier to see to the

bottom. Rocks containing animal and aquatic plant fossils are common here.

WILDLIFE

Watch for river otters, beavers, and white-tailed deer along the banks (peak viewing at dusk). In June, look for great blue herons and raptors like red-tailed hawks and bald eagles.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 41.3230, -93.9596; 38 miles southwest of Des Moines on Holliwell Bridge Rd. **PUT IN** 41.3523, -94.2814; a 30-minute drive west of the shuttle car off 200th St. **GEAR UP** Middle River Rentals (middleriverrentals.com); canoe rentals start at \$50 and kayak rentals at \$30. The shop offers shuttle services (prices vary). **SEASON** April to October **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** madisoncountyconservation.org

Distance 38.6 miles (point to point)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



WINTER WONDERLAND

BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA WILDERNESS, MINNESOTA

AS WE FASTEN the bindings of our skishoes, the talking stops. We'd been laughing about the contrast between this place now, in January, and last summer, when we'd done the same trip, but in canoes. Instead of blue rimmed with green, we stare out at white. The lakes that have made the Boundary Waters renowned among paddlers are frozen. We embrace the silence and glide onto the ice. *By Joseph Friedrichs*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM ROCKWOOD LODGE AND OUTFITTERS ON THE NORTH SHORE OF POPLAR LAKE

1) Donning skis, snowshoes, or skishoes, find an entry point onto **Poplar Lake** (near 48.0541, -90.5204) and cross the frozen surface to the Lizz Lake portage at mile 1.2. You don't have to haul a boat, but portage trails in winter are still tough: Expect to encounter

waist-high drifts, and avoid tree wells.

2) String together **Lizz** (beginning at mile 1.3), **Caribou** (mile 2.2), **Horseshoe** (mile 3.3), and **Gaskin Lakes** (mile 5.6).

3) At the far end of Gaskin Lake, hike .2 mile south to reach the eastern tip of string bean-shaped **Winchell Lake** at mile 7.3.

4) Find a campsite on the north shore near mile 7.9.

5) Retrace your steps to Poplar Lake.

CAMPSITE WINCHELL LAKE (MILE 7.9)

The summertime campsites on this tarn are either buried in drifts or tough to access in winter. Instead, set up your tent on the frozen surface of the lake. The wind-protected bay on the north edge is perfect. From there, the view stretches south to the cliffs lining the opposite shoreline and east to the remnants of the 2006 Redeye Fire. Be on the lookout for moose, lynx, and wolves.

ICE-TRAVEL SAFETY

Avoid weak spots—like inlets and outlets—that hide underwater currents. (Clear, blue ice is the strongest. White, milky ice is weaker.) To check ice thickness, make a hole with an auger, then dip a stick or trekking pole in; the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources says ice 4 inches thick is safe for traveling by foot, skis, or snowshoes. Study up at backpacker.com/ice-travel-skills. And be

always be prepared: Carry ice claws and a 50-foot rope.

STAY COOL

It's easy to work up a sweat when postholing through portage trails. Pay attention to your internal temperature and move at a pace that keeps you dry. With air temps dipping below 0°F at this latitude, you do not want to sweat.

GONE FISHIN'

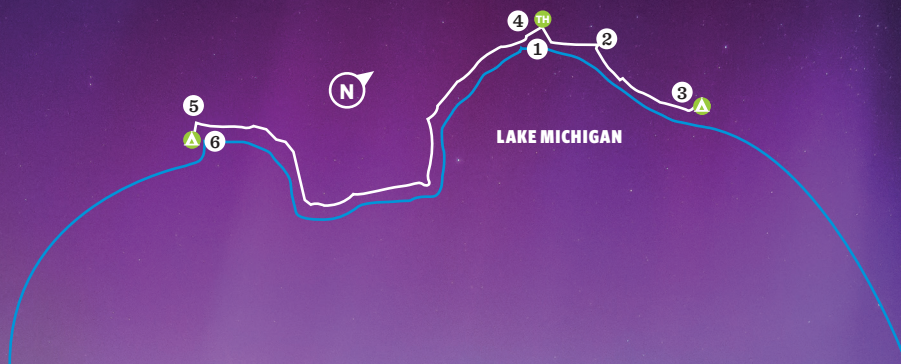
Huge lake trout and northern pike swim in Winchell Lake, which gets 130 feet deep in spots. Carry along a manual auger (no motors allowed), a tip-up, and frozen smelt for a chance at ice fishing.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 48.0541, -90.5204; 32 miles north of Grand Marais off of Gunflint Trail **SEASON** January to March for winter conditions; pack for deep cold (the writer brought a canvas tent and woodstove).

PERMIT Required (free in winter); self-issue at the trailhead. **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapWinter-BoundaryWaters (\$15)

CONTACT www.fs.usda.gov/superior

Distance 15.8 miles (out and back)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ●●●●●



November bonus: better chance at also seeing the Northern Lights.

STARRY NIGHT NEWPORT STATE PARK, WISCONSIN

AT 2 A.M., chirping crickets and a streak of starlight piercing my tent's window wake me. I leave my headlamp behind and begin following a trail illuminated by the cosmos. I navigate around boreal tree trunks and between fern thickets as the sound of waves licking the shoreline grows. I had to get creative to make a true backpacking trip in this area, but after Newport was proclaimed an International Dark Sky Park, I knew I had to try. I strung together most of the trails on the Lake Michigan coastline into a 6.3-miler, and now, as I creep out of the canopy, the moonless, cloudless sky opens up. I stand beneath thousands of stars, the Milky Way and Cassiopeia hanging above Lake Michigan and reflecting in the water. Truly, I'm star-struck. *By Erica Zazo, CHICAGO FIELD SCOUT*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM PARKING LOT 3

1) To create a backpacking trip in Wisconsin's only formally designated wilderness park, connect two out-and-backs from the central trailhead. Begin with the north leg for a

shorter first day: Follow the **Europe Bay Trail** .3 mile north to a junction.

2) Veer east and take the **Lynd Point Trail** .6 mile along the shoreline to Campsite #2. (Climb down the limestone ledges to explore beachy coves along the way.)

3) Next day, double back to Parking Lot 3.

4) Now, tackle the second leg: Head 2.2 miles south on the **Newport Loop**—which passes through dense hardwoods inland and then past cedars along the shoreline—to an intersection at mile 4.

5) Peel off left to reach Campsite #7.

6) Retrace your steps to the parking lot.

CAMPSITE 1 CAMPSITE #2 (MILE .9)

This fern-framed site sits just back of the Newport Bay shoreline. Head to the private beach for stargazing. Reservations recommended here and below (\$15; recreation.gov).

CAMPSITE 2 CAMPSITE #7 (MILE 4.1)

Cozy up at this grassy site with private beach access: Take the path to the cobble beach—it's covered in golf ball-size rocks—for a view of wooded Varney Point. In mid- to late fall, the red-osier dogwoods blaze reddish-purple.

STAR SHOW

Enjoy your solitude in the company of thousands of stars at this International Dark Sky Park. Designated in 2017, Newport joined the

ranks of a rarified group: There are only 18 others in the U.S. This month, spot the Dippers to the north and Pegasus, Pisces, and Cassiopeia directly overhead. Tip: The darkest nights fall early in the month, with the new moon beginning its cycle on November 7 this year.

MULTISPORT

Bring a kayak (or rent one at Bay Shore Outfitters in Sister Bay for \$65 per day) and venture into the big blue to explore Lake Michigan. Paddle out from Newport Bay Beach (close to Parking Lot 3) and head a mile south to Duck Bay or 2 miles south to Spider Island, a refuge for nesting gulls. Both campsites on this trip are boat-accessible.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 45.2351, -86.9976; 5 miles east of Ellison Bay on Newport Park Rd.

SEASON Year-round **PERMIT** Required (\$15/night); reserve online or obtain from the park office. **RED TAPE** Campsites close November 19 to December 8 for hunting season.

CUSTOM MAP bit.do/BPmap-NewportSP (\$15) **CONTACT** bit.do/newport-sp

Distance 6.4 miles (double out-and-back)

Time 3 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Middle Fork Soldier Creek

LITTLE TRAIL ON THE PRAIRIE

SOLDIER CREEK WILDERNESS, NEBRASKA

THE LOW-HANGING autumn sun splits through the clouds, glinting off the still blade of a windmill. It's a piece of human presence in a place that's otherwise empty: I haven't crossed paths with anyone on this 12.3-mile loop through a Nebraska prairie. I've walked beneath ponderosas and through valleys where streams run even this late in the year, and I've been completely alone. I pull my eyes away from the windmill and scan to the horizon, where I spy blades of a different sort: a sea of golden, knee-high grasses ebbing in the afternoon light, wild as ever. *By Marie Vanderpool*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE NORTH FORK TRAILHEAD

1) Pick up the **Trooper Trail**, heading 4.4 miles west across grassy hills to a horse trough and

a 30-foot windmill.

2) Continue north on the **Historic Military Route**, following overgrown doubletrack 1.5 miles to camp in a grove of ponderosa pines.

3) Next morning, proceed .7 mile east on the main path to a junction.

4) Veer north onto the **Boots and Saddle Trail**, which twists past an old windmill, to a sign pointing toward a double windmill, near mile 10.3.

5) You could continue on-trail the rest of the way, but confident navigators can leave the trail here to see sandstone formations: Veer west across the grassy slope and then south down a small hill, beelining to the easily visible, 20-foot-tall buttes.

6) From there, set a southeast bearing to reconnect with the Boots and Saddle Trail near mile 11.2 at 42.7109, -103.5719.

7) Hike 1.1 miles south to close the loop at the North Fork trailhead.

CAMPSITE PONDEROSA GROVE (MILE 5.9)

Spend the night in this rare, can't-miss treed area, pitching your tent in the shade of the 40-foot-tall pines. Middle Fork Soldier Creek snakes by for easy water, but it's the last reliable source, so top off before leaving.

WILDLIFE

If you're lucky, see Rocky Mountain bighorns hanging near the sandstone buttes at mile 10.8. At night, listen for the distinct scream of mountain lions; an estimated 59 live in the Pine Ridge area. (Make plenty of noise when you round blind bends.)

HISTORY

The wilderness gets its name from the military personnel who frequented the area from the 1870s through 1946, patrolling the prairie on horseback. Near mile 9, head west uphill to see three old windmills that the soldiers used to draw water.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 42.6993, -103.5731; 10 miles west of Crawford on Soldier Creek Rd.

SEASON Year-round; wear blaze orange in fall.

PERMIT None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapSoldrCrk (\$15) **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/nebraska

Distance 12.3 miles (loop)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●

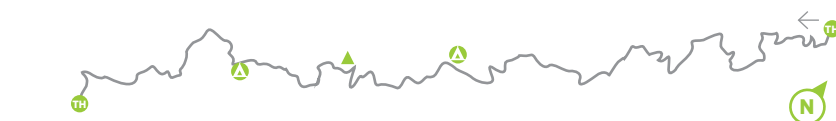


HIGHS & LOWS

HARRISON HILLS, WISCONSIN

WHEN THE COUNTRY'S last ice sheet melted away more than 12,000 years ago, it left calling cards across the Midwest. Chief among them are the deep kettles and lofty hummocks I'm puffing up and down here in the Harrison Hills. This 15.6-mile section of the Ice Age Trail only has 3,000 feet of gain and loss, but with near-constant dips and bursts, the elevation profile looks more like an EKG. I pause to catch my breath after cresting another hill, 1,920-foot Lookout Mountain, the highest point on the 1,200-mile long path. Thick stands of oak and maple mean there's no view, but that's not the point here. From this pile of ancient rubble, I can sense how massive the once-2-mile-thick glacier was—and how it shaped a hiker's dream. *By Melanie Radzicki McManus*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM 1ST LAKE ROAD



- 1)** Busy Friday? Enjoy a late start as this route's first leg is just 2.4 miles: Head south and west on the **Ice Age Trail** en route to 5-acre Chain Lake.
- 2)** Next day, continue 7.4 miles past a dozen glacial pools and across Lookout Mountain to **Bus Lake**.
- 3)** Close the segment by hiking 5.8 miles southwest to **County Rd. J**, passing summer-ripe raspberry bushes along the way.

CAMPSITE 1 CHAIN LAKE (MILE 2.4)

This first-come, first-serve spot sits on the southern shore of Chain Lake, a quick jaunt from the trailhead. Only a few tents fit, though surrounding oak and ash trees are great for slinging hammocks. Don't forget your rod: Chain Lake is rich with catfish, walleye, and northern pike.

CAMPSITE 2 BUS LAKE (MILE 9.8)

Nab this spacious clearing (first-come, first-

serve) on the shore of Bus Lake, the last campable pool on this route. Watch for beavers splashing at twilight, and wake early to see sunrise over the water.

WILDLIFE

A six-member wolf pack (at latest count) roams here; listen for the predators' howls at dusk. Also look for black bears, white-tailed deer, and grouse.

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 45.3518, -89.5594; 17 miles northeast of Merrill on County Rd. J
TRAILHEAD 45.4337, -89.4251; a 24-minute drive north of the shuttle car on 1st Lake Rd.
SEASON May to October **PERMIT** None
CUSTOM MAP bit.do/BPmapHarrisonHills
(\$15) CONTACT iceagetrail.org

Distance 15.6 miles (point to point)
Time 3 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Bison in Wind Cave's prairies

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE

WIND CAVE NATIONAL PARK, SOUTH DAKOTA

I KNEW I'D see bison. My itinerary was set to carry me through a prairieland named after Wind Cave's largest residents, but my breath still caught in my throat when I rounded a butte to see a herd of 40. I had stopped to study the huge creatures (bigger in person, trust me) when six pronghorn antelope sprinted through the scene. I was feverishly pawing my phone out of my hipbelt pocket to snap a picture when I spied a skulking coyote trying to score a meal in the prairie dog town up ahead. I'm on day one of a three-day trip that will take me more than 23 miles across the prairie. This national park isn't celebrated for what lies above ground, but that means I don't see another soul on my trek—well, the human kind, anyway. *By Korey Peterson*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE GOBBLER PASS TRAILHEAD

1) From the park's southern boundary, pick up the **East Bison Flats Trail** and take it 3.5 miles north to an intersection.

2) Turn east onto the **Wind Cave Canyon Trail** and follow it .6 mile through its narrow namesake to another junction.

3) Veer north onto the **Highland Creek Trail**, which meanders through grassy flats to the start of the loop at mile 6.5.

4) Create a 10.2-mile, clockwise loop by threading together the **Lookout Point, Centennial, Sanctuary, and Highland Creek Trails** across a high butte overlooking the park, through ponderosa woods, past open prairie, and back around Limestone Canyon.

5) Back at the T-junction from step 3, retrace your steps 6.5 miles to the trailhead.

CAMPSITE 1 BEAVER CREEK (MILE 9.9)

Backcountry camping is allowed anywhere in the northwest corner of Wind Cave National Park—so along the loop on this route. Near mile 9.9, look for a small, grassy knoll just east of the junction of the Centennial and Highland Creek Trails. Set up your tent on the butte, backed up against the pines and overlooking Beaver Creek (runs year-round). Enjoy a bird's-eye vantage over the 400-strong bison herd, should the big boys wander through. (Note: Top off bottles before leaving; this is the last reliable water.)

CAMPSITE 2 PONDEROSA GROVE (MILE 14)

Score the hike's best view east over the prairie on this butte, which is tucked in a stand of the dark-colored trees that give the Black Hills their name. (Set an alarm for sunrise.) Find the secluded rise south of the intersection of the Sanctuary and Highland Creek Trails. (Highland Creek is not reliable; call ahead to check, or carry water from the first campsite.)

FLORA

In June, enjoy the park's best blooms when white bluestem prickly poppies, pink wild prairie roses, and the yellow flowers of prickly pears grow trailside. Enduring purple pasque flower (South Dakota's state flower) may also poke out of the grass, though it peaks in spring.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 43.5213, -103.4776; 7 miles north of Hot Springs on US 385. **SEASON** April to October **PERMIT** Required for overnighting (free); obtain from the visitor center. **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmap WindCave (\$15) **CONTACT** nps.gov/wica

Distance 23.2 miles (lollipop-loop)

Time 3 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



Sunset at Spruce Island Lake

LONELY LAKES

SUOMI HILLS RECREATION AREA, MINNESOTA

DRAGONFLIES DART DOWN the overgrown path, flashing in the rays of sun that filter through the mosaic of maples, aspens, and basswoods. I follow them down singletrack that's crowded with ferns and deadfall, but therein lies the Suomi Hills' charm: Budget cuts mean the forest doesn't see as much TLC, but on the upside, the untamed trails on this 9.8-miler make for a wilder weekend. I feel like an 18th-century fur trader picking my way through the understory as I search for a tent site. With no other campers around, I can afford to be choosy, and it pays off: When I shoulder through a thicket and come upon a perfectly flat peninsula that juts into a pool so clear I can see to the bottom, I know where I'm landing. *By Rose Conry*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE SUOMI HILLS TRAILHEAD

1) Pick up the **Suomi Hills Trail** and head north along the escarpment flanking Kremer

Lake to the start of the loop at mile 1.4.

2) The best campsite is close, so your route from here depends on timing. If you're starting late, go clockwise to reach camp in 1.3 miles. If it's early, take the longer route as follows: Split onto the north fork, following the path 3.8 miles past the eastern banks of **Doctor, Adele, Beaver, Hooligan, and Balloon Lakes**.

3) Proceed on the main trail as it wraps back around the western shores of the same lakes to mile 7.

4) Now on the opposite side of Doctor Lake, continue .1 mile south to 15-acre **Spruce Island Lake** to camp.

5) Next day, head 1.3 miles south on the main trail to close the loop.

6) Retrace your steps to the trailhead.

CAMPSITE SPRUCE ISLAND LAKE (MILE 7.1)

Cross your fingers for a windless night because the grassy peninsula on Spruce Island Lake's eastern shore is just about perfect: flat, big enough for three tents, the most scenic on the trip. (In wind, set up your tent in the grove of maples.) Adventurous campers can swim to the island 500 feet from the sandy beach.

GONE FISHIN'

The lakes here are home to panfish and bass (large- and smallmouth). In May, fish swim in the still-cool shallows, so cast a line from land before the summer heat drives dinner to cooler, deeper waters.

HISTORY

Chippewa natives, European traders, Finnish loggers, and prisoners of World War II have all lived in the Suomi Hills. In 1908, land-use issues prompted the formation of the first national forest east of the Mississippi River, the Minnesota Forest Reserve (later renamed the Chippewa National Forest). The name Suomi Hills recognizes the Finns, who, in 1916, settled on the northern edge of the recreation area's modern boundaries. The landscape resembled their homeland, so they named the community "Suomi," or "Finland" in Finnish.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 47.4543, -93.6284; 15 miles north of Grand Rapids on Orange Lake Rd. **SEASON** April to October **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapSuomiHills (\$15) **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/chippewa

Distance 9.8 miles (lollipop-loop)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



HOLIDAY HIKE

STEPHENS STATE FOREST, IOWA

SURE, HIKING SEASON in the Midwest may be winding down come the end of November, but it's not over yet. I know it as I walk beneath a canopy of gilded oaks and hickories on a short, 3.4-mile loop an hour outside Des Moines. It's the day before Thanksgiving, and the Woodburn Unit seems dressed for the occasion. Wild turkeys even flutter across the path. Tomorrow, I'll be sitting around a long table with friends and family celebrating a great American holiday, but when you can sneak in a quick overnight in these fall-perfect woods, it makes for a festive start. *By Korey Peterson*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE WOODLAND UNIT TRAILHEAD

1) Cross unpaved 330th Ave. and pick up the

Turkey Foot Trail to tackle the East Loop counterclockwise. Take it roughly .8 mile to a river crossing.

2) Cross Arrowhead Stream (likely only a trickle in November) and continue north-east on the **Blackjack Trail** to a junction at mile 1.2.

3) Turn northwest onto the **Buckeye Trail** and go another .2 mile to an intersection.

4) Veer northwest toward signs for **Longbeard Camp** at mile 1.6.

5) Back on the **Buckeye Trail**, continue .2 mile southwest to the Broken Bone stream crossing.

6) Rock-hop through the trickle and keep going 1.4 miles on the **Twin Oaks Trail** to the parking lot. (From there, you can tack on the 2.7-mile West Loop to make a longer figure eight.)

CAMPSITE LONGBEARD CAMP (MILE 1.6)

Find this shady spot a short jaunt off the main trail. Set up your tent in the small clearing of oaks and hickories. A number of unnamed streams run by, but they're unreliable in fall, so pack in your water. (It's just 1.6 miles, after all.)

WILDLIFE

Turkeys, cottontails, squirrels, and white-tailed deer roam through the forests here in fall. (November is hunting season, so wear blaze orange.) Keen-eyed hikers may spot foxes or coyotes.

FLORA

Red and white oaks, along with shagbark hickories, thrive in the upland flats. Foliage here tends to peak in late October, but the color often lasts well into November. Ashes, cottonwoods, hackberries, and elms along the ravine bottoms change color earlier in October.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 40.964067, -93.576785; 15 miles east of Osceola on 330th Ave.

SEASON Year-round; November is best for solitude and foliage. **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapWoodburnUnit (\$15)

CONTACT bit.do/stephens-sf

Distance 3.4 miles (loop)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



In mid-September, the foliage near Gooseberry Falls is just about to go off.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

GOOSEBERRY FALLS AND SPLIT ROCK LIGHTHOUSE STATE PARKS, MINNESOTA

STANDING ATOP Bread Loaf Ridge, I scan east over Lake Superior, its steel-gray water outrunning my vision. I spin around and look west, where a carpet of classic Minnesota forest fans out like a putting green. That's where I'm headed. I'll weave between evergreens and red maples that have just turned, and then camp near a small creek amid fall's first yellow aspens. Usually you have to choose between the lakeshore and backwoods when you hike in Minnesota, but in just 19.1 miles, I'll savor both. It can be our secret. *By Korey Peterson*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM GOOSEBERRY FALLS CAMPGROUND

1) Pick up the **River View Trail**, which snakes 1.1 miles past tiered Gooseberry Falls to a

staircase.

2) Climb to the paved **Gitchi-Gami State Trail** and follow it north through the state park to mile 3.5.

3) Cross MN 61 and head 1.2 miles northwest on gravel **Blueberry Hill Road** to the **Superior Hiking Trail (SHT)**.

4) Take the SHT 2.5 miles east to the **Split Rock Loop**.

5) Follow the river 1.7 miles north (clockwise) to camp.

6) Cross Split Rock River on the main trail and trace its banks southeast to a junction at mile 10.7.

7) Turn east onto a clearly defined social path that leads .4 mile to MN 61.

8) Take the **Gitchi-Gami State Trail** .4 mile south to the Split Rock parking area.

9) Proceed .5 mile northwest on the **SHT Split Rock River Spur** to close the Split River Loop at mile 12.

10) Retrace your steps 7.1 miles to the trailhead.

CAMPSITE SPLIT ROCK CAMPGROUND (MILE 8.9)

Claim one of four campsites where the SHT crosses Split Rock River. Each has a fire ring and multiple tent platforms (first-come, first-serve). If available, nab the one just south of the bridge in the cedar-and-pine grove for its

easy water access.

FOLIAGE

The crimson sugar maples hit peak color the third or fourth week of September, while the golden aspens come to life the first or second week of October. Tip: Plan a midweek trip to avoid the leaf-peeping traffic on park roads.

BIRDS

Herring gulls nest along the lakeshore year-round, while loons are most active in summer. Bald eagles and red-tailed hawks cruise overhead in all seasons.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 47.140731, -91.457631; 41 miles north-east of Duluth off US 61 **RED TAPE** A 1.6-mile section of the SHT that runs through private land was closed to hikers in May 2015; this route uses the detour via the Gitchi-Gami State Trail and Blueberry Road. **SEASON** June to November **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapSuperiorHikingTrail (\$15) **CONTACT** shta.org

Distance 19.1 miles (lollipop-loop)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ●●●●●



TEST THE WATERS

PORCUPINE MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS STATE PARK, MICHIGAN

SITTING ON THE pebbly shore, Lake Superior licking my toes and the midsummer sun tickling my back, I have every reason in the world to make my camp right here. It'd be worthy of this magazine, but I'm just 3 miles into an 18.6-mile overnight and I have a hunch there's something better

ahead. That's how it is in the Porkies: Driftwood-strewn beaches give way to leafy corridors, and hardwood forests open to rocky promenades. So I snap one more picture, strap on my pack, and keep going. It's usually bad form to pass up a sure thing, but, luckily, the Porkies are full of them. *By Rachel Sayers*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE LAKE SUPERIOR TRAILHEAD ON HWY 107

1) Descend 2.4 miles on the **Lake Superior Trail** to the shoreline.

2) Turn west (hiker's left) and follow the lake 6.1 miles to the mouth of the

Big Carp River.

3) Veer south onto the **Big Carp River Trail** and take it 1.5 miles to **Shining Cloud Falls**.

4) Back on the main trail, continue 7.5 miles along the escarpment to Lake of the Clouds Overlook on Hwy 107.

5) Follow the paved road 1.1 miles back to your car.

CAMPSITE SHINING CLOUD FALLS (MILE 10)

Pitch your tent in a hemlock grove near nature's best white-noise machine. The campground has room for half a dozen tents (first-come, first-serve) and is just a short, camp shoe-friendly walk from Shining Cloud Falls. More a flume than a vertical cascade, the Big Carp River tumbles down smooth sandstone, bending through a natural channel, its largest drop just 12 feet. If the campsite is taken, backtrack .5 mile downstream.

GONE FISHIN'

Anglers will be hard-pressed to find better backcountry access for hooking a steelhead in the region than the Big Carp River. Throw your line in the 1.4-mile section between the river's mouth at Lake Superior and Shining Cloud Falls. Brookies also hide in the pools upstream from camp.

NAMING RIGHTS

The Ojibwa natives thought the forested ridgelines in this area resembled the spines of a porcupine, dubbing them the Porcupine Mountains. Yes, you can find the mountains' namesakes in the old-growth hardwood forests—one of the largest tracts west of the Adirondacks. Also cool: the large population of black bears.

MUSIC FESTIVAL

If you're into Americana or folk music, time your trip around the annual Porcupine Mountains Music Festival (this year: August 25 to 27). The festival is within the park boundary, so make a "basecamp" of sorts in the Union Bay Campground (starting at \$18; midnrreservations.com). It's \$90 for a three-day pass. Find more info at porkiesfestival.org.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 46.811318, -89.755020; 22 miles west of Ontonagon on Hwy 107

SEASON May to October; August has ideal air temps, but beware the blackflies **PERMIT** Required (\$15/night); obtain from visitor center **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapShiningCloudFalls (\$15) **CONTACT** bit.do/porkies **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/shining-cloud-falls

Distance 18.6 miles (loop)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



PIONEER DAYS

SHEYENNE NATIONAL GRASSLAND, NORTH DAKOTA

IS IT AGAINST a gnarled oak, resting my eyes on the prairie I waded through to get here. A gentle wind passes through the tan and-green grasses, and suddenly it looks less North Dakota than a vast ocean, the prairie swelling and glimmering in the breeze. I walked just 5.3 miles to reach this spot, but out here, remoteness isn't measured in miles. The terrain here is untamed, unmanicured, and wild. *By Korey Peterson*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY TRAILHEAD

- 1) Pick up the **North Country National Scenic Trail** and follow it 2.7 miles west to a junction.
- 2) Veer north (hiker's right) onto an unnamed

trail (it appears on topos) and follow it through hilly, short-grass prairie to another intersection at mile 4.5.

- 3) Split west (hiker's left) onto another unnamed trail (also on maps) and take it .8 mile to its end at **Mirror Pool**.

- 4) Retrace your steps to the trailhead.

CAMPSITE MIRROR POOL (MILE 5.3)

There are no designated backcountry campsites in Sheyenne National Grassland, but dispersed camping is permitted. We like the spot amid a grove of gnarled oaks that overlooks the prairie for its obvious views, but the easy walk to water is hard to beat in these parts: It's less than a quarter mile to aptly-named Mirror Pool.

WILDLIFE

White-tail deer, wild turkeys, prairie chickens, and pheasants live here year-round. Scan for eagles and red-tail hawks floating—and hunting—on thermals overhead, and listen for coyote yips at night.

CONSERVATION

Sheyenne National Grassland is one of the country's few remaining tracts of oak savannah, a mixture of grass prairie and small stands of oak (usually burr). Most were plowed for farmland in the 19th and 20th centuries, but this one preserves a 70,180-acre swath, which is critical habitat for several threatened and endangered species, such as the Dakota skipper and regal fritillary butterflies.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 46.523431, -97.203324; 46 miles southwest of Fargo on 153rd Ave. SE
SEASON Year-round **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapSheyenneNatlGrassland (\$15) **CONTACT** bit.do/sheyenne-natl-grassland **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/sheyenne-natl-grassland

Distance 10.6 miles (out & back)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



UP THE RIVER

MANISTEE NATIONAL FOREST, MICHIGAN

IT WOULD BE a stretch to call the Manistee River Loop undiscovered. In summer, hikers flock to the hardwood-lined trail and its peekaboo vistas of the jade river. But in early spring, the 22-miler may as well be the Upper Midwest's best-kept secret. I breeze across the quiet trail, savoring the crisp, woody smell—and the sheer emptiness of the place. In fact, apart from nighttime temps that dip into the 30s, the only thing that's really different about the trip in March is the solitude. Oh, and that the barren hardwoods mean more river views. Not a bad tradeoff. *By Erica Zazo*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE UPPER RIVER ROAD TRAILHEAD

1) Pick up the **North Country Trail** and take it 8 miles north (paralleling the Manistee River) to **Eddington Creek**.

2) Continue 2.3 miles, crossing the Manistee via a 245-foot-long suspension bridge, to a junction.

3) Split south (hiker's right) and continue 8.1 miles on the **Manistee River Trail** to **Campsite #8**.

4) Continue 1.9 miles south to a road.

5) Turn west and follow **Coates Highway** .5 mile before picking up the Manistee River Trail again.

6) Walk .7 mile northwest to close the loop.

CAMPSITE 1 EDDINGTON CREEK (MILE 8)

Spend night one in this first-come, first-serve clearing on the bank of Eddington Creek (call ahead to check if it's frozen). From camp, use deadfall bridges to cross the creek and check out a hidden sand dune. A handful of clearings pepper the trail around here, so if this site is claimed, keep going.

CAMPSITE 2 CAMPSITE #8 (MILE 18.4)

Pitch your tent between the red and jack pines (great for hammocking) atop this riverside bluff, and ditch the fly to enjoy a view of a horseshoe bend of the Manistee without leaving your tent. There are 22 designated sites (first-come, first-serve) scattered along the

Manistee River Trail side of the loop, but none have a view quite like this.

WATERFALL

An unnamed stream flows over smooth, red clay and spills 10 feet into a pool at mile 12.4. Budget extra time so you can scale down to the basin for splashing or, if it's too cold, gawking.

FALL FOLIAGE

Come back in October to see the maples and aspens gilded amber and gold. You won't be the only one, but it's worth it.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 44.291234, -85.871458; 28 miles west of Cadillac off Coates Hwy.

SEASON Year-round; March is best for solitude. **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapManisteeRiverLoop (\$15) **CONTACT** fs.usda.gov/hmnf **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/manistee-river-loop

Distance 21.5 miles (loop)

Time 3 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



To photograph the Northern Lights (like here, above Lake Superior), use a tripod, open your aperture as wide as you can, bump your ISO to 800, and adjust your shutter speed for proper exposure.

LIGHT UP YOUR LIFE

SUPERIOR HIKING TRAIL SUPERIOR NATIONAL FOREST, MINNESOTA

WE HUDDLE IN our sleeping bags on a natural jetty that extends 50 yards into the black, placid waters of Lake Agnes. We'd foregone our tent because the view was so good: Above the maple canopy, yellow and green lights flicker across the star-speckled night sky. It's a well-earned prize on the 310-mile Superior Hiking Trail, which stretches from Duluth up to the Canadian border. Today, we took on perhaps the best section: a 13-mile piece that crosses peaks and valleys

as it winds past small, unnamed lakes and wide panoramas of Lake Superior. The Northern Lights feel like a bonus, but we're spoiled. Tomorrow will bring another fall spectacle when daylight illuminates a collage of red and yellow foliage. *By Kathleen Ferraro*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE OBERG MOUNTAIN TRAILHEAD

- 1)** Pick up the **Superior Hiking Trail (SHT)** and proceed 5.8 miles northeast past rocky Oberg Mountain and over Moose Mountain to the **Mystery Mountain Campground**.
- 2)** Descend from the campsite and continue 6 miles northeast on the SHT to a junction.
- 3)** Take the north (hiker's left) path .8 mile to the Caribou trailhead.

CAMPSITE MYSTERY MOUNTAIN (MILE 5.8)

The dense birches and firs make this four-site camp (first-come, first-serve) ideal for hammocks, but there's plenty of space for tents. Collect water .5 mile north at Poplar River, where you can also gather thimbleberries and raspberries in July and August. If you're OK with a long first day (or want to stretch the hike into three days), spend a night on the natural jetty at Lake Agnes (mile 11.2).

MOOSE

Look for tracks and antler rubs in the Poplar River area. Moose are most active in fall, especially during dawn and dusk.

NORTHERN LIGHTS

Target clear nights with little moonlight in late fall and winter to try to spot the aurora borealis. (Get an aurora forecast at softservevents.com before you set out.)

DO IT SHUTTLE CAR 47.707228, -90.667473; 7 miles northwest of Lutsen Resort off Caribou Trail. **TRAILHEAD** 47.627400, -90.783248; 20 minutes southwest of the shuttle car on Onion River Rd. **SEASON** May to November **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapSHTsection (\$15) **CONTACT** shta.org **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/shtsection

Distance 12.6 miles (point to point)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



See hardwood-ringed Oberg Lake from Oberg Mountain.



CALL YOUR BLUFF

YELLOW RIVER STATE FOREST, IOWA

YOU MIGHT NOT think of Iowa as rugged, but this trail, cut across bluffs and through rutted bedrock, climbs and drops relentlessly. You might not think of Iowa as pretty, but when Paint Creek glides beneath a gilded canopy of oak and hickory, it feels as if even speaking would mar the beauty. You might not think of Iowa as a place to go backpacking—and that's why I won't have to share my waterfront camp with another soul, save a few songbirds, even though it's just 4 miles into the woods. You might not think of Iowa as wild. That's your loss. *By Korey Peterson*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE BACKPACKING TRAILHEAD

1) Link the **White Pine** and **Forester Trails** 1.6

miles to a junction.

2) Turn east (hiker's right) onto **Brown's Hollow Trail** and take it 1.3 miles to where it merges with **Fire Tower Road**.

3) Continue .7 mile on the unpaved road.

4) Follow **Brown's Hollow Trail** as it splits east and walk .8 mile to the grassy clearing of **Brown's Hollow**.

5) Retrace your steps to the parking lot.

CAMPSITE BROWN'S HOLLOW (MILE 4.4)

Set up a tent (or hammock) in this grove of hickories, oaks, and walnuts north of Paint Creek. On the off-chance it's taken (there's room for a few groups), backtrack 1.7 miles to the John Shultz campsite.

GEOLOGY

Unlike much of the Midwest, the Yellow River area didn't experience glacial activity half a million years ago. Called a "driftless area," it was primarily shaped by wind and precip, which is why it has steep bluffs and ravines pockmarked with sinkholes, caves, and springs.

WILDLIFE

At night, this area transforms into something from a spooky campfire story, with the coyotes yipping and owls hooting year-round. Come daytime, listen for chattering wild turkeys and keep an eye out for white-tail deer and non-migratory birds, such as quail, ring-neck pheasant, and chukar partridge.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 43.170506, -91.248729; 75 miles northwest of Dubuque on State Forest Rd. **SEASON** Year-round; foliage peaks in mid-October. **PERMIT** Free; self-register at the trailhead. **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/bpmapyellowriver (\$15) **CONTACT** bit.do/yellow-river-sf **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/yellowriver

Distance 8.9 miles (out and back)

Time 2 days

Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



WITHOUT A PADDLE

BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA, MINNESOTA

THE BLACK WATER is so calm that I skip a stone across its surface to remind myself it's not a sheet of obsidian. I watch the ripples propagate out toward the opposite shore, where the aspens and tamaracks are just starting to turn. It'd be a nice place to camp, but I know there's a better spot just a few miles farther: at a tiny tarn shrouded in maples and pines that's only accessible by foot. Without paddlers and, this time of year, mosquitoes, I'm happy to share with just loons and beavers. *By Jason Drury*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE ANGLEWORM LAKE TRAILHEAD

- 1) Take the **Angleworm Lake Trail** 1.9 miles northeast to a fork near the lake.
- 2) For a longer first day (7.9 miles), do the

loop clockwise, splitting around the western shore of the lake through boreal forest to tiny **Whiskey Jack Lake**.

3) Continue 3.3 miles south on the main trail to the junction of the lollipop-loop.

4) Retrace your steps to the trailhead.

CAMPSITE WHISKEY JACK LAKE (MILE 7.9)

Whiskey Jack Lake has no portage connections to surrounding lakes—meaning you won't find any canoe campers here. In fact, there's just one site: an established spot nestled amid the pines on the eastern shore (marked with a fire ring). Only two permits are issued for this area each day, so you won't have company. If this spot is taken, select any of the sites along Angleworm Lake (best ones are near the middle).

FOLIAGE

By mid-September, the hardwoods should begin lighting up golden yellow and crimson. Color typically peaks the last week of September through the first week of October.

WILDLIFE

Massive glaciers created the scene around you, and the beavers are continuing their work. Many of the beaver projects—like the one on Angleworm's eastern bank—are staggering in scope, stretching hundreds of feet across. Loons begin to migrate south in September, but you're likely to hear them laughing through summer evenings and into fall. Also, listen for moose bellowing: They begin mating in early fall.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 48.063396, -91.929560; 17 miles north of Ely on MN 116 (Echo Trail)

SEASON June to November, but aim for late summer and fall when the bugs abate. **PERMIT** Required (\$16 plus \$6 reservation fee); obtain at the Kawishiwi Station in Ely. **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapAnglewormLake (\$15)

CONTACT bit.do/boundary-waters **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/anglewormlake

Distance 13.1 miles (lollipop-loop)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



PRIMO LAKESIDE CAMPING

CHARLES C. DEAM WILDERNESS, INDIANA

I UNDERSTAND THE attraction of loops—new scenery every step, no retracing your route, a sense of continuity. But I would argue that out-and-backs are better. Pick the right end point, and an out-and-back is more than a linear hike. It's a mission. Every step brings you closer to the prize, and here in the Deam, just an hour and a half outside Indy, the prize is best-in-class camping: a private peninsula, where I plan to kick my feet up (or maybe dangle them in the water), catch the best star show in Indiana, and cook over an open fire. Then I'll linger

lakeside in the morning; no rush, I know exactly how long it will take to retrace my steps. *By Stuart Peck*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM THE GRUBB RIDGE TRAILHEAD

- 1) Follow the **Grubb Ridge Loop Trail** 5.9 miles to an intersection.
- 2) Hang right and pick up the **Peninsula Trail**; take it 2.5 miles to its terminus at a beach on one of the fingers of Lake Monroe.
- 3) Head .3 mile north on the shore to a campsite at the tip of the peninsula.
- 4) Retrace your steps to your car.

CAMPSITE HOOSIER NATIONAL FOREST CAMPSITE #1 (MILE 8.7)

We're calling it now: This may be the best campsite in all of Indiana. It might even top the list in the Midwest. Surrounded by water on all but one side, you're almost guaranteed primo sunrise and sunset views across North Fork Salt Creek, the top portion of 10,000-acre Lake Monroe, the state's largest.

Seventy-foot pines, poplars, and maples shelter your camp from lake winds (there's space for six tents).

WILDLIFE

From your campsite, scan for bald eagles floating on thermals and geese and grebes in the shallows. Look for white-tailed deer and foxes in the nearby trees.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 39.016933, -86.389511; 16 miles south of Bloomington on Tower Ridge Rd.
SEASON Early April to November **PERMIT** None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapTheDeam (\$15) **CONTACT** fs.usda.gov/hoosier **TRIP DATA** backpacker.com/thedeam

Distance 17.4 miles (out and back)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●



CLASSIC NORTHWOODS

ST. CROIX STATE PARK, MINNESOTA

DESPITE FREEZING TEMPS and the snow-covered scene before me, I'm sweating beneath my pack and the brilliant sunshine. The cold is, of course, predictable as I'm just an hour and a half outside the Twin Cities in midwinter. What I couldn't have guessed, however, is the effect winter has on this wilderness. The Northwoods' familiar scent of birch mingled with spruce and pine is somehow stronger. The evergreens themselves look even prettier under pillows of snow, and the usual silence is magnified. But as lovely as this winter wonderland is, I'd still rather not camp on a bed of snow, which is why I'm snowshoeing 5 miles to an elevated shelter. I love winter, but not

that much. *By Korey Peterson*

TURN-BY-TURN FROM ST. CROIX LODGE

- 1) Head 1.6 miles north on the right branch of an unnamed loop trail to a junction.
- 2) Take the bypass .1 mile west to unpaved **St. John's Road** (closed to vehicles in winter).
- 3) Link up with the road for 2 miles to St. John's Landing at mile 3.8.
- 4) Veer north (hiker's left) through gate #14 and continue .7 mile to another fork.
- 5) Proceed .3 mile east onto the **Matthew Lourey State Trail**.
- 6) Turn north onto **Crooked Creek Trail** and walk another .4 mile to a Y-junction.
- 7) Stay left and take the spur .4 mile to Crooked Creek campground.
- 8) Retrace your steps to the trailhead.

CAMPSITE CROOKED CREEK (MILE 5.7)

Nab one of two three-walled Civilian Conservation Corps shelters that overlook the wetlands to the northeast (\$13 or \$15, depending on season) so you can get off the snowy ground at night. Each has raised sleeping platforms for three people and a fire pit outside.

BIRDING

With woodlands, rivers, and swamps, St. Croix is home to hundreds of bird species. Print out the checklist at bit.do/stcroixbirds and see how many you can ID. In winter, look for northern cardinals, red-tailed hawks, purple finches, and a number of owls, including screech, snowy, long-, and short-eared.

SEASON

You can usually snowshoe or cross-country ski in winter, but call ahead to check: Last year's milder winter, for example, left trails snow-free. Spring brings wildflowers, summer is best for paddling, and the sugar maples and birches turn in fall.

DO IT TRAILHEAD 45.952746, -92.567475; 23 miles east of Hinckley on St. Croix Park Rd.
PERMIT None **CUSTOM MAP** bit.do/BPmapStCroix **CONTACT** bit.do/StCroixSP
TRIP DATA backpacker.com/StCroix

Distance 11.3 miles (out and back)
Time 2 days
Difficulty ● ● ● ● ●