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# 10 places to savor spectacular fall foliage



A canopy of brilliant fall foliage decorates a road through Indiana's Hoosier National Forest. | Photo by Gary Robbins

**By Katherine Rodeghier**

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The splendor of autumn's symphony of changing leaves on oaks, maples, birches, and other trees crescendos in a spectacular show each year that starts in the North and takes its final bow in the South.

So plan a road trip to state and national parks and national forests across the Midwest and South to follow nature's migrating display. In northern climes, some trees will have already begun to change when fall begins on September 22, and their colors will peak at various times from North to South through early November. Take in the fall foliage at this collection of sites where you can hike, drive, gallop, cycle, and paddle through the grandeur.

# Where to see fall foliage in the Midwest

## 1. Shawnee woodlands, Illinois



A hiker enjoys a spectacular view in Shawnee National Forest, which is tucked between the Mississippi and Ohio rivers in southern Illinois. | Photo courtesy Illinois Office of Tourism

Oak and hickory trees dominate the **Shawnee National Forest** (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/Shawnee>), which sprawls over 289,000 acres between the Mississippi and Ohio rivers in southern Illinois. Hikers see them dressed in fall colors mingled with beeches and other species en route to the 90-foot span of Pomona Natural Bridge and the Little Grand Canyon, a box canyon with bluffs and river views. Nestled within the forest, **Giant City State Park** (<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/GiantCity.aspx>) has 75 tree varieties and maze-like passages below sandstone bluffs that pioneers likened to streets of a giant city. To them, one of the park's most remarkable rock formations, the Devil's Standtable, resembled a pulpit the devil might use.

## 2. Illinois river parks



Starved Rock State Park's Council Overhang, an alcove in a canyon wall, perfectly frames an autumn scene. | Photo by Katherine Rodeghier

Along the Illinois River just west of Chicago, the 18 canyons of **Starved Rock State Park** (<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/StarvedRock.aspx>) formed when glacial meltwater eroded sandstone. Kaskaskia Canyon Trail passes Council Overhang, a bandshell-shaped rock framing fiery foliage. Free guided hikes pass ash and cottonwood trees, oaks, maples, and cedars. Starved Rock, a 125-foot bluff overlooking the river, is named for a Native American legend that one tribe atop it perished when another surrounded it in a siege. The river flows southwest through the state, and, before it ends in the Mississippi River, it skirts **Pere Marquette State Park** (<https://www2.illinois.gov/dnr/Parks/Pages/PereMarquette.aspx>) near Grafton. Approximately 12 miles of trails delve into forests and navigate past bluffs in this 8,000-acre state park, the largest in Illinois. For a less strenuous adventure, fall-color drives are popular along the park's wooded ravines and riverside roadways.

### 3. Ozark Mountains, Missouri



A visitor takes a walk on a crisp fall day at Alley Mill in the Ozark National Scenic Riverways, the first national park area to protect a river system. | Photo courtesy VisitMo.com

Covering most of southern Missouri, the Ozark Mountains provide an abundance of opportunities for leaf peeping. **Ha Ha Tonka State Park** (<https://mostateparks.com/park/ha-ha-tonka-state-park>) on Lake of the Ozarks has more than 17 miles of trails that showcase woodlands, sinkholes, a spring, and a natural bridge. Castle Trail leads to the ruins of a mansion destroyed by fire in the 1940s. About 160 miles southeast of the park, the **Ozark National Scenic Riverways** (<https://www.nps.gov/ozar/index.htm>), part of the National Park Service, protects the free-flowing Current and Jacks Fork rivers. Canoeists float past fall colors unfolding on oaks and hickories lining the banks and bluffs. Alley Mill, one of park's many highlights, dates to 1894, and its red paint beautifully complements the vibrant foliage that surrounds it in autumn.

## 4. Columbia parks, Missouri



Mature redbuds, oaks, and conifers line a pathway that encircles the 11-acre lake at Stephens Lake Park. | Photo courtesy VisitMo.com

Fans of fall foliage flock to a smorgasbord of parks in and around Columbia. Within the city limits, **Stephens Lake Park** (<https://www.como.gov/parksandrec/park/stephens-lake-park/>) has a tree-lined 1.7-mile greenway and an 11-acre lake reflecting brilliant autumn hues. On the nearby **Katy Trail State Park** (<https://mostateparks.com/park/katy-trail-state-park>), paved on a former railroad corridor, bicyclists pedal through a tunnel, pass a restored depot, and trek along banks of the Missouri River against a backdrop of limestone bluffs. Five miles south of the city, **Rock Bridge Memorial State Park** (<https://mostateparks.com/park/rock-bridge-memorial-state-park>) draws hikers to its Devil's Icebox Trail, where boardwalks wind through brilliant fall foliage to its namesake 63-foot stone bridge.

## 5. Brown County State Park, Indiana



Brown County State Park guests can rent the Hoosier's Nest Shelter, a day-use facility that resembles a cabin. | Photo courtesy Indiana Department of Natural Resources

Tucked in an area nicknamed “Little Smokies” for its resemblance to the Great Smoky Mountains, **Brown County State Park** (<https://www.in.gov/dnr/state-parks/parks-lakes/brown-county-state-park>) stretches over 15,815 acres of ridges, rugged hills, and ravines that formed when Ice Age glaciers stopped short of the area. The Depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps reforested eroding slopes with black locust, black walnut, pines, and spruces that create a patchwork of autumn colors. Visitors can take in the views from a 90-foot fire tower and a dozen hiking trails. Indeed, Indiana’s largest state park is a traditional fall color hot spot. A saddle barn has horses for riding 70 miles of paths, and mountain bikers can explore 27 miles of trails.

## 6. Hoosier woodlands, Indiana



A palette of changing leaves surrounds a grist mill and more than 20 historic buildings at Spring Mill State Park. | Photo courtesy Indiana Department of Natural Resources

With 204,000 acres for hiking, horseback riding, and mountain biking, **Hoosier National Forest** (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/hoosier/home>) comprises almost half of Indiana's public forest land. Among the most popular spots, especially in fall, the Hemlock Cliffs Trail meanders through a box canyon passing hemlock trees, ravines, and sandstone cliffs. Just outside the massive forest lies one of Indiana's smallest state parks, 1,319-acre **Spring Mill State Park** (<https://www.in.gov/dnr/state-parks/parks-lakes/spring-mill-state-park/>), where autumn colors brighten its Pioneer Village with a working gristmill and more than 20 historic buildings. Autumn colors shimmer in tree-lined Spring Mill Lake and along a paved path around the Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom Memorial housing a space capsule and spacesuit of the astronaut—a hometown hero of Mitchell, Indiana.

## 7. Prairie Spirit Trail State Park, Kansas



Cyclists and hikers are drawn to Prairie Spirit Trail State Park, which traces a former railroad route from the 1860s. | Photo courtesy Kansas Tourism

Designated a National Recreation Trail by the U.S. Department of the Interior in fall 2020, the 51-mile **Prairie Spirit Trail State Park** (<https://ksoutdoors.com/State-Parks/Locations/Prairie-Spirit-Trail>) between Iola and Ottawa in eastern Kansas, ranks among the nation's top rails-to-trails projects. Fall visitors delight in autumn hues of the park's tallgrass prairie and forests of oak and hickory as they hike, jog, or bike along this former path of the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Fort Gibson Railroad, built in the 1860s. Ten rural towns along the peaceful route make convenient rest stops.

## Where to see fall foliage in the South

### 8. Buffalo National River, Arkansas





A popular haven for photographers, Roark Bluff offers an outstanding place to take in fall color along the Buffalo National River. | Photo courtesy Arkansas Tourism

Part of the National Park Service and America's first national river, the **Buffalo National River** (<https://www.nps.gov/buff/index.htm>) flows through Arkansas' Ozark Mountains. While the Upper Buffalo is often too shallow for fall canoeing, the park and nearby **Ozark National Forest** (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/osfnf>) offer superb hiking and scenic drives. From the **Buffalo Outdoor Center** (<https://www.buffaloriver.com/>) on Arkansas Route 43 in Ponca, drivers loop around Arkansas Routes 21, 74, and 7 to see elk graze in Boxley Valley around dawn or dusk. Hikers find fiery fall foliage on the Lost Valley Trail to Eden Falls and on the Whitaker Point Trail leading to Hawksbill Crag—one of Arkansas' most photographed spots.

## 9. Tishomingo State Park, Mississippi



Tishomingo State Park's 13-mile trail system showcases autumn splendor, beautiful rock formations, and a 45-acre lake. | Photo courtesy MDWFP

Tucked amid the Appalachian Mountain foothills in northeast Mississippi, **Tishomingo State Park** (<https://www.mdwfp.com/parks-destinations/state-parks/tishomingo>)s immense moss-covered rock formations are unique to the state. Tishomingo takes its name from the Chickasaw chief who fished and hunted here. The Natchez Trace Parkway runs through the park's woodlands of hickory, sweetgum, dogwood, and oak trees that embellish 13 miles of hiking trails in autumn. Anglers can enjoy fall hues on Haynes Lake, which is stocked with bream, bass, and catfish, while paddlers can savor similar views on scenic Bear Creek trips through a hardwood canopy. The park supplies canoes and gear (\$40) for 6.25-mile float trips.

## 10. Webster Parish, Louisiana



A sunset glow illuminates the Spanish moss that hangs from many trees at Lake Bistineau State Park. | Photo courtesy Louisiana State Parks

Known for stands of cypress and tupelo trees, **Lake Bistineau State Park** (<https://www.lastateparks.com/parks-preserves/lake-bistineau-state-park>) draws fall visitors to northwest Louisiana. Ten miles of woodland trails wind through a mixed hardwood forest. Park boat launches close if the lake is drawn down in autumn, but the Webster Parish public launch and Port O'Bistineau remain open for fisherman going after black crappie, bass, and catfish. Fishing also is great at the nearby Caney Lakes Recreation Complex in the 604,000-acre **Kisatchie National Forest** (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/main/kisatchie/home>). Landlubbers can enjoy hiking and biking on the Sugar Cane National Recreation Trail named for the crop once grown here.

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