

Immerse yourself in Ozaukee County's rich, peaceful forests

**Submitted by the
Ozaukee County
Tourism Council**

Have you ever surprised yourself by discovering a new level of a place you've been many times before? It could be as simple as turning to look in a new direction, or digging a little deeper below the surface of something you already enjoy. This month we're inviting you to travel deeper into the woods. To take a dive, submerge yourself...to get lost in the essence of our forests.

In 1982, Japan made shinrin-yoku, or "forest bathing," a part of its national health program. The aim was to reconnect people with nature in the simplest way possible. To encourage people to simply go into the woods, breathe deeply and be at peace.

Forest bathing was Japan's medically sanctioned method of unplugging before there were smartphones to unplug from. The concept is somewhat new to this part of the world, but its tenets have been around for a long time and new information is emerging on both physical and mental health benefits of being submerged in nature.

The hardest part of practicing shinrin-yoku is disconnecting from our ingrained expectations of ourselves. There is no other

objective — you're not going into the forest to exercise, take photos or hunt for morels. The ultimate goal is to simply be in nature — to connect with it through sight, sound, smell and — using discretion — taste and touch. Opening our senses to bridge the gap between us and the natural world.

In October, the Treasures of Oz annual Eco-Tour is about immersing ourselves in nature, inspired by the art of shinrin-yoku. This week-long event will include passports to nature sites and the opportunity to encounter naturalists and docents. Watch for more about the mid-October event at treasuresofoz.org.

Ozaukee has some quiet and intensely hued woodlands, perfect for relaxing, reconnecting and making autumn memories with your family. Lovely Bratt Woods Nature Preserve in the Town of Grafton sits on the banks of the Milwaukee River and borders the Ozaukee Interurban Bike Trail. There is a bike rack at the entrance just off the trail so you can park your bike and walk the oval meandering trail through the blazing color of the sugar maples and relax in the soft browns of beech leaves in autumn. There are a few benches if you care to just sit and breathe in the crisp fall air.

Would you like to fall down a rabbit hole, or feel

as if you did? A few steps down the trail in Kurtz Woods and you have magically transported from a Grafton suburban scene to what feels like the heart of the Northern Kettles. Some of the tallest and oldest protected trees in Ozaukee reside in this nature preserve that is protected through the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust. The trails take you around, up and down some surprising topography. There are benches along the way so you can take some time to listen, watch and breathe. Not only are the living and growing things varied and intriguing, but there are rock formations that will call to your imagination.

Another great spot for forest immersion is the Shady Lane Natural Area Trail on the north side of Hawthorne Hills County Park. It begins on top of the hill just past where the park road splits — keep to the left (north) side. Here again you will find huge, old trees dressed in autumn colors, rolling trails and beautiful topography that lead you along the Milwaukee River.

All three of these places are State Natural Areas. State Natural Areas are designated as such because their forest floors were around in pre-settlement times — there are lots of amazing plants to observe as you let your mind and

senses play, letting you go back in time for a while and forget the cares and busyness of your daily life.

What about Lion's Den Gorge, you ask? Of course it is a fabulous place to commune with nature but it can also be busy, depending upon the day and time you visit. We are hopeful that by next year an even larger version of Lion's Den Gorge will be in the public domain, just to the north of it, Cedar Gorge - Clay Banks. It will if the Ozaukee Washington Land Trust's capital campaign continues to be successful to purchase the land and then turn it over to Ozaukee County for another fabulous piece of natural space for the public. More information about this is available at owl.org

Directions to all of these sites can be found at <https://treasuresofoz.org/treasures>. In addition, many of our parks and natural areas offer classes throughout the year — before heading out, consider visiting websites for special events, pet-friendly areas, classes, fees or seasonal updates. Then get out and enjoy the beauty of the trails throughout Ozaukee County! For information, pick up a copy of the Ozaukee County Tourism Guide available at area chambers and visitor centers, visit www.ozaukeetourism.com and follow the Ozaukee



Photo courtesy of Paul Gutelius

Bratt Woods Nature Preserve in the Town of Grafton sits on the banks of the Milwaukee River and borders the Ozaukee Interurban Bike Trail.

County Tourism Facebook page. On behalf of the Ozaukee County Tourism Council, thank you for helping make our county a great place to live and play!