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From the editor

In this age of pandemic, we often reach for the familiar. For those of us fortunate to live in the Upper Delaware River Valley, the landscape—the rolling hills and the winding river—can bring comfort and good reason to feel blessed. There's ample opportunity to go outside and experience nature at its best. This special section celebrates that natural environment and all that it has to offer to us.

Take a hike with Lisa Lyons, explore how to lengthen the season and spend time with family outdoors with Hunter Hill and be amazed by the life of an eagle with Scott Rando's beautiful photo essay.

Nature is all around us. And it's here for you in Explore the Great Outdoors.

Happy reading!

—Laurie Stuart, publisher/section editor

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Mailing Address:
PO Box 150, Narrowsburg, NY 12764
Phone: 845/252-7414 • Fax: 845/252-3298

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Publisher/Section Editor: Rev. Laurie Stuart

Production Manager: Amanda Reed

Copieditor: Veronica Daub

Sales Director: Christine Trifari, ext. 134,

sales@riverreporter.com

Ad Sales Associates:

Eileen Hennessy, ext. 135, eileen@riverreporter.com

Barbara Winfield, ext. 121, barbara@riverreporter.com

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TAKE A HIKE!

By LISA LYONS

Two premier hiking seasons in the Catskills—fall and winter—will be rolling out their orange, yellow and white carpets for you over the next few months. These off-road pathways beckon you to slow down, exhale and notice changes in colors, sounds, smells and views.

Whether you're walking on a bed of autumn leaves, on fresh snow with snowshoes, or on crunchy ice wearing sturdy spikes, you can savor breathing in the fresh mountain air and exhaling your worries and stress. A simple walk along a woodland trail can provide just the break you need from stressors in your life while getting exercise, sensory stimulation and maybe even renewing your sense of wonder.

During the period when I was laid off from work and quarantining, the time spent on a trail in the woods was a huge calming influence. I started reconnecting with natural rhythms—from the blossoming of wild-

flowers to the arrival of hummingbirds—and began to feel more in tune with my surroundings. Now, when life keeps me inside for days, I feel a part of a bigger natural world and can't wait to get outside and tune in. I hope you will read on and consider exploring one or more of the beautiful woodland trails in our area this fall and winter and make some reconstructions of your own.

Here are three trail suggestions that offer a nice variety of Upper Delaware treasures. They will introduce you to different landscapes and hiking difficulty levels: a beginner hike through the forest in the headwaters where the Delaware River begins, a moderate local history hike close to a town center, and an uphill hike right along the Delaware River (where all headwaters flow into one). Let me tell you a little bit about each of them. Before you go, be sure to read our fall and winter hiking tips on page 4 so your adventure is a safe and happy one!

Snowshoe tracks on the snow lead the way on this Walnut Mountain trail.

Mountain Overlook & Mountain House Trails

Walnut Mountain Park,

Walnut Mountain Road, Liberty, NY:

1.5-mile round trip, beginner/moderate uphill trail

Liberty's 265-acre public park has Walnut Mountain as its centerpiece. Beyond the baseball, soccer and disc golf fields is an incredible network of trails.

The route to the site of Walnut Mountain House starts behind the large pavilion near the parking area (see link to trail map below). Named Mountain Overlook (MO), this trail is a wide red shale and dirt carriage road dating back to the 1890s when horse-drawn carriages transported guests to the Walnut Mountain House at the summit. Though it's tough to find a walnut tree on Walnut Mountain nowadays, there are abundant oaks that retain their leaves well into winter. Several oaks along the MO trail were surely around when the Walnut Mountain House was in its heyday; just look for the biggest trees with the widest trunks! The MO trail leads you to an open area with a great view and a new interpretive sign with historical details about the Mountain House (MH). From there, follow the map to the MH trail which ascends another 2/10 of a mile to the Walnut Mountain House foundation.

In recent years, the Renegades Mountain Bike Club has added 10 miles of single track trails for mountain biking, hiking and snowshoeing. There is a trail map and park description provided by the Town of Liberty Parks and Recreation Department: www.bit.ly/3lZbgeA.

Frick Pond Loop Trail

Willowemoc Wild Forest,

Beech Mountain Road, Livingston Manor, NY:

2.2-mile loop, beginner-level trail

Located at the northern crown of Sullivan County, this much-loved, scenic loop trail is fairly level with some loose rock and wet patches when temps are above freezing. It is part of NY state's Catskill Park trail system where you will find 40 miles of interconnected trails fanning out from Frick Pond's parking area. There are more connections to learn about here. The stream that flows out of Frick Pond is one of the many tributaries that travel from the hills into river valleys and eventually into the Delaware River. There's a curvy boardwalk through the hemlock trees and beautiful views across the pond. White pine, maple and yellow birch are just a few of the tree species that add color and habitat to this forested place. You can find a trail map at Trailkeeper.org: www.bit.ly/2FKh6kw. A free hand-drawn trail map is available at Morgan Outdoors.

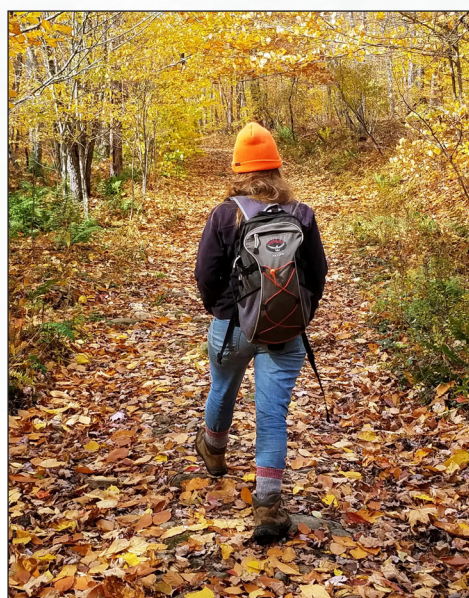


Photo by L M Lyons

A Frick Pond hike offers a 2.2 mile fairly level scenic loop. It's part of the NY state's Catskill Park trail system.



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TAKE A HIKE - Page 3



Photo by L M Lyons

The Tusten Mountain trail is a treat in all seasons. Moderately challenging, this 3-mile loop trail offers a spectacular overlook of the Delaware River.

Tusten Mountain trail

Crawford Road, Narrowsburg NY

Three-mile, moderate uphill trail

This loop trail has sections that are wide, fairly level woodland roads as well as some narrow footpaths. It begins with a moderately challenging uphill that is rewarded by beautiful views of the Delaware from an overlook at the summit. It's hard to pass by historic remains of the Tusten Settlement and evidence of quarrying without stopping to admire the bluestone and imagine days gone by. Tusten Mountain trail is a partnership between the NPS and Greater NY Council of the Boy Scouts, who own the property. "It is a wonderful trail to hike year-round with something new to see each season," said Ingrid Peterec, Chief of Interpretation at Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational

River National Park Service. "The trail is a great way to enjoy the outdoors but please remember to recreate responsibly including social distancing and wearing a mask when within six feet of other hikers."

In addition to the Tusten Mountain trail, five other trails in the Upper Delaware River region are detailed on the handy "Take a Hike!" brochure, available at the trailhead and at www.nps.gov/upde/planyourvisit/take-a-hike.html.

If you're able to fit in all three hikes this fall and winter, you will surely see how this area's natural assets and human history are so beautifully intertwined. And, hopefully, it will whet your appetite to make hiking a regular part of your life.

Lisa Lyons is the owner of Morgan Outdoors in Livingston Manor, NY.

Fall and winter hiking tips

- Trail map:** Bring one with you and review it before your hike. Leaves and snow blanket the forest floor during the fall and winter, so the trail might be hard to find. Each of these trails is mapped and marked with blazes on trees. Familiarize yourself before you go.
- Hunting Seasons:** Hunting is allowed at Frick Pond and Tusten Mountain trail during NY state's fall and winter hunting seasons, so it is highly recommended to wear bright blaze orange outerwear (see page 3). Hunting seasons include bow hunting for deer and bear, October 1 to November 20; regular deer season, November 21 to December 13; and small game seasons continue through February 28. See more details at www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/28605.html.
- Weather:** Avoid being surprised by rain, snow, sleet or wind. Check the forecast.
- Parking:** If the lot is full or there are a lot of people, go to another location. Select an alternate location before leaving for your hike so you have a Plan B ready.
- Traction:** Microspikes and snowshoes on your boots make it easy to walk with confidence on ice and snow. (You can rent both at Morgan Outdoors and other sporting good shops.) Soak in the sun on a clear winter day and say goodbye to cabin fever.
- Ticks:** Remember, ticks are still out there. If there isn't total snow or ice cover, there is a chance of ticks re-emerging, even in winter. Tick checks are super smart after a hike.
- Trash:** Carry a spare bag in your pack for your own trash and any you find on the trail.
- Solo Hiker:** When hiking alone, call or text someone with your hike plan and time you expect to be back. It's a great insurance policy.
- Wear:** Clothing layers that can be added or taken off as your body temp changes. You will heat up hiking uphill and cool down when sitting for a snack. Layers help.
- Fun To bring:** Binoculars, camera, tracks guide, tree ID book and yummy snacks.



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Reminder: Safety first during hunting season

REGION — Both sides of the river are expected to see more hunters comb the lands in search of game this season. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation has reported record-breaking sales of big game licenses and high levels of participation in virtual hunting education programs. The Pennsylvania Game Commission is wondering if it will break its bear harvest record; bear license sales are outpacing last year, when the agency sold a record 202,043.

No matter where, or what, you might be hunting, there is one thing that never changes with the targets, seasons, or stateliness: Safety first.

Both states require prospective hunters to complete a safety course. For more information, NY hunters should visit www.bit.ly/nyhuntcourse and PA hunters should visit www.bit.ly/pahuntcourse.

Regarding firearm safety, a reminder to stay SMART:

Safe Direction: Keep your firearm pointed in a safe direction at all times.

Make sure: Positively identify your target.

Always check: Know what's beyond your target before shooting.

Respect firearms: Treat all firearms as if they are loaded.

Trigger caution: Don't touch the trigger until you are ready to shoot.

Beyond handling your firearms appropriately, here are some other tips:

Wear fluorescent colors to ensure you're seen by other hunters.

Hunters should be spaced 25 to 40 yards apart and always in sight of one another. (More maintaining a safe zone of fire at www.bit.ly/safefirezone.)

Use a full-body safety harness and a climbing belt to stay connected to your tree stand, and never climb in or out with a loaded fire arm.

For more safety laws, tips and information, visit www.bit.ly/nyhuntersafety or www.bit.ly/pahuntersafety.

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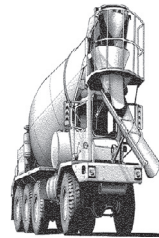
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Nature’s aviators: the life of an eagle

Story and photos by Scott Rando

The background

Today, it’s not uncommon to venture near a river or waterway and see a bald eagle—frequently, you can spot more than one. They’re usually seen soaring overhead or perched in a tree by the water, waiting for a fish to swim by. There are many breeding pairs in the region. In the winter, many eagles migrate from the North to take advantage of open water foraging spots. During a Veterans Day ceremony in Port Jervis, NY last year, an adult eagle soared over the ceremony as if to salute all the people who served and those who didn’t come back home.

Eagles were not always easily found in the region, however. As recent as the early 1990s, there were no nests on the Upper Delaware, in fact, there were a mere five nesting territories combined for both NY and PA as of the late 1970s to early 1980s. These nests were unable to produce young because the eggs could not stand the weight of an incubating adult due to eggshells that were too thin. This was caused by a pesticide known as DDT, a very persistent compound that had detrimental effects on wildlife. Regulatory actions regarding DDT took place during the 1950s and 1960s, and the EPA issued a cancellation order for all uses of DDT in 1972.

The damage was done in this and many other regions in the U.S. DDT is a chemical that can accumulate in the fatty tissue of animals. Through the process of bio-accumulation eagles ingested DDT through predation of fish in waterways where DDT had accumulated via runoff and other means. With eagles, DDT interfered with females producing eggs with strong shells. After the total ban on DDT, levels of DDT slowly but gradually fell to levels low enough to be deemed to be safe for eagle habitat. However, with so few nests in the region unable to produce young, the bald eagle was at real risk of being extirpated from widespread regions in the Northeastern U.S. and elsewhere.

In 1976, when NYSDEC started reintroducing just under 200 eagles over the span of a decade, there were no active bald eagle breeding territories in the region. Pennsylvania started their own reintroduction program a few years later, and both states were closely monitoring suitable habitats for new breeding territories as the transplanted young eagles became adults and able to breed. In this region, one of the prime areas monitored was the Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River, a 73-mile stretch between Sparrow Bush and Hancock, NY designated under the Scenic and Wild Rivers Act. NY and PA, as well as the NPS surveyed the Upper Delaware for many years without finding any breeding territories. In 1993, the situation changed; a single pair appeared and occupied an area along the river. They did not produce young for the first year, but successfully fledged young the following year. In the springtime, there are more than 20 occupied nests in the Upper Delaware corridor.

~ Page 8

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At the beginning

Bald eagles start their courtship flights over the winter, with both members of the pair locking talons and spiraling towards the ground; they unlock their talons and pull out of the dive, sometimes pretty close to the ground. They mate during late winter (not in the air, as rumor has it, but perched on a branch). During this time, eagles may be seen bringing dried grass to the nest to act as a bed for the soon-to-come eggs. The dry grass also helps the incubating adults further insulate the eggs against the colder days of late winter and early spring.

The actual eggs appear around the first or second week of March in the region, with some pairs starting incubation during

the last few days of February. The incubation period for bald eagle eggs is about 35 days, and both the male and female will exchange incubation duty. Both adults pluck some feathers from their breast; this is their “brood patch.” This enables an incubating adult to more efficiently incubate eggs by ensuring skin to egg contact. (An eagle’s body temperature is 102 degrees.) An “egg cup,” a small depression, is hollowed out in the nest lining material. This aids in incubation, especially during colder weather. Nests average two eggs, sometimes with as few as one and as many as three young. There have been reports of four, but that is rare.



This is a five-day-old eaglet being fed by one of the adults. This is one of two young in this nest. This eaglet still has its white primary down and cannot stay warm on its own, so it spends a lot of time under an adult when not being fed.



This eaglet is about three weeks old and has its gray secondary coat of down feathers. These feathers are thicker than primary down feathers which helps the eaglet stay warm during cooler days. A few tiny pin feathers are already pushing through the down, and the shafts of flight feathers are visible on the trailing edge of the wings.

Getting ready to fly

At around four weeks of age, patches of contour feathers start to become evident growing in patches amongst the grey down. These patches are small at first, but rapidly fill in to a point where the eaglet’s back is mostly covered with contour feathers. Just after this time is when the growth rate slows, by the time the young is six weeks old, it has reached 90% of its terminal weight (the weight at fledging, 10 to 12 weeks of age). Energy used for body mass increase is now being used for feather development.

At six to eight weeks old, young eagles start to look like a dark brown version of their parents.

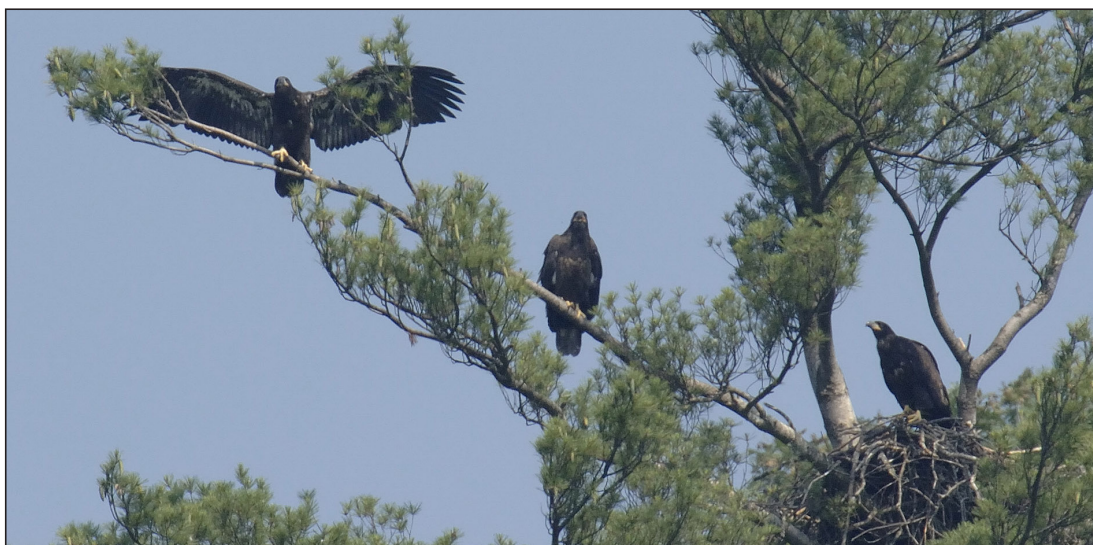
The belly feathers are the last to fill in as the flight feathers continue to grow. The young eagles are capable of feeding themselves for the most part. An adult may drop food in the nest and then fly off to let the young sort out which sibling gets to eat. When food isn’t being delivered by the adults, the young spend a lot of time sleeping. They flop down on their belly and nap. It’s probably safer for the young to sleep lying down at this point because the once spacious nest is now very crowded with up to three young and an adult or two. It’s more difficult for a young to get pushed out of the nest or slip off the side.

The youngsters

When the eggs hatch, they hatch in the order that they were laid. A female eagle usually lays an egg every other day, so in a nest with three young, there may be several days between youngest and oldest sibling. A newly hatched bald eagle weighs in at a couple of ounces and is about four to five inches long. These new eaglets are covered in natal down, which is white in color.

As the eaglets approach two weeks of age, their white natal down is replaced by a gray secondary, or mesoptile down. This is also referred to as thermal down, and it has better insulating properties than the white down. The eaglets are developing the ability to self-thermoregulate, so they don’t need to be brooded as much. The eaglets are more mobile during this time; some observers get their first look at the young as they are large enough to peer over the nest wall.

From two to about five weeks, young eagles enter a phase of accelerated growth. This growth spurt can add about 150 grams of weight gain per day for the average eaglet. The adults are busy foraging for the young at this time as this growth rate requires a lot of food. Three or four fish a day may be delivered to the nest during this time. The adults have another ongoing task during this time. They may be seen either carrying sticks to the nest, or adjusting what is there. As the young are getting more active, they can get too close to the side of the nest and fall out or be pushed out by another sibling. The addition of sticks to form a kind of “fence” may prevent the loss of an eaglet.



This trio is perhaps 10-11 weeks old, and not too far from fledging. They are confident on “branching out” or going out on the end of branches, and exercising their wings there. After fledging (and honing their landing skills), they will make brief return visits to the nest, especially when an adult flies over where different young are perched with food that will be dropped in the nest.



This is one of the fledglings from the trio branching out on the tree, about three weeks later. It decided to rest along the Delaware River, but it landed in the territory of a pair of red-winged blackbirds. The male is visible in the frame harassing, or "mobbing" the fledgling eagle, trying to get it to fly away.

Becoming an adult

As the summer wears on, fledgling eagles range further and further from the nest. As winter approaches, they may stay in the immediate area or head hundreds of miles away. Immature eagles go through the next four years wandering and foraging, though many do return to the region during summer months. They are brown but pick up a mottled appearance with successive molts. Aging of immature bald eagles can be done by knowing the various color phases of an eagle's plumage. When an eagle becomes around four years old, it looks like an adult with some mottling; the white head may have black streaks, the bill is yellow with some dark streaks, and white streaks may be present in the brown. This is the mark of a subadult. The next molt after this stage will be the classic adult phase we all recognize; this occurs at about between four and five years of age.



After four to five years, eagles become adults and will seek a mate and a territory. Immediately before this, they are considered subadults and have plumage with light streaks in the brown or dark streaks in the white. This subadult shows just a hint of dark streaking on the head and the end of the tail as well as light speckling on the back. Subadults are frequently seen as part of breeding pairs.

A happy ending

A bald eagle is sexually mature and capable of breeding when it reaches adulthood, and when eagles seek a mate and nesting territory, it typically finds a territory within 50 to 100 miles of its natal nest; banded young banded during NYSDEC nest surveys have been found several years later as part of a breeding pair just a few miles up and down river.

An eagle in the region may live 25 to 30 years on the average; a breeding adult may produce 20 or more broods of young in its lifetime. That number may go a little

higher. In 2015, an eagle was recovered in upstate NY after being killed by a car, and it had a leg band. The band was checked, and it turned out that this male eagle was one of the original eagles transported from Wisconsin to New York in 1977. This eagle was 38 years old when it met its demise, which is now the longest living eagle recorded in the United States. He could have been breeding for 34 years and likely fathered a lot of eaglets.

So is the end of a story of what first looked like a certain loss turned into a success through conservation efforts of

many agencies, organizations, and individuals. For myself, I was honored to be a part of the effort, especially with Pete Nye and others with the NYSDEC. I had to wonder when I saw that eagle fly over that one Veterans Day over the ceremony in Port Jervis; Was that one I tracked, or is it in my field notebook somewhere? The hope of myself and many other people is that we thoughtfully plan development that may occur in eagle habitat, for habitat loss is a big threat at the present time.

Get ready, get set, GO!

As eagles get to be nine to 10 weeks of age, the flapping of wings becomes more evident. They do this in a lazy manner when they are younger, but at this time, they are much more serious about it. They need to be flight-ready in a couple more weeks when they attempt to successfully fledge. An average eagle nest is about 90 feet off the ground, and it's a long drop if a mistake is made. When these young start their wing flapping, the siblings in the nest either duck or head off to the other side. This wing exercise builds muscle strength and confidence, both of which will be needed on the day. As these young gain skill, their feet leave the nest, and they seem to hover several feet above the nest for a few seconds. These young frequently go out on branches and wing exercise; this further builds up confidence.

Any time after 10 to 11 weeks of age is a likely time for a young eagle to fledge. A few may get injured or not make it, but the majority will successfully fledge, maybe landing in an awkward spot. Their landings rapidly improve with experience. With the successful fledge, young eagles now start learning survival skills it will need to survive, how to hunt, how to steal food and how to defend itself. The adults aid in this process in the first few weeks after fledging, but by the last weeks of summer, the fledglings are now on their own.



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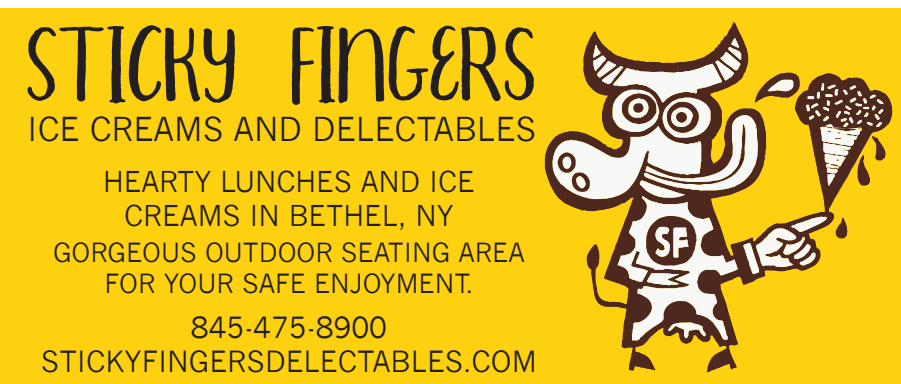
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Step out the door

By HUNTER HILL

The outdoors: It's this label we have for all things natural, all things outside of our realms of control and, even as the name would so obviously indicate, anything outside of our homes, beyond the door. If you're like me, having read "The Chronicles of Narnia," there's something reverently special about the symbolism of a door. Doors indicate a passing from one world into another, and although we might be lax in recognizing the transition from our indoor world to that of the outdoors, it is something that we must appreciate because not everyone has that magical door.

True, unlike "The Chronicles of Narnia," this door isn't some kind of portal to a magical parallel realm, but then again, what is it that makes a world magical? There are those, after all, who dream of being able to get out of their chairs and step outside. There are others, still, who can do so, but the world that greets them on the outer side is an urban extension of what they experience in their own homes. No, the outdoors that we are blessed to have here in the Delaware River valley region, on both sides of the river, consist of adventures, scenic majesties and, for many, a personal and even ethereal connection.

If you have not been so fortunate as to have already created this connection, you can be assured that it awaits your arrival. If you have, then perhaps it has been a while since you've engaged in this sacred relationship. As we head towards the winter months, there are still plenty of opportunities to enjoy perhaps one of the most celebrated seasons of the year in our Northeastern corner of the U.S. As the landscape becomes more barren, just before the colder temperatures and blankets of white descend, it is easy to say that the frivolity of fall has already passed. True, the season for picking apples is nearly at its end, although you can still find some orchards with apples already picked and ready to enjoy. Others, maybe further South, might even have them available to pick with your family. Corn mazes are still in full swing for some of these small farms and orchards, and there are likely a few pumpkin patches left to peruse. But the outdoors aren't designed to be a touristic carnival attraction. Not everything that you can do in the outdoors to spend time with your family needs to be a structured game or activity catered by small businesses or agri-tourism.

Quite simply, one of the most gratifying activities I now share with my family is walking out in the woods. We sometimes do this out of necessity while taking care of small chores around the homestead or my wife's family farm. Other times, we get the opportunity to do so for the sheer leisure of it. One of our favorite things to do is bring our young son along for these walks, watching him scamper through the dry leaves and discover small natural oddities and then carrying him atop our shoulders to survey the vast cathedral of towering green columns around us. Allowing our son this unrestricted time to observe and interact with nature not only relaxes us all as a family but also helps to ground and abate the distracting stress borne from everyday challenges.

Beyond the trees, you'll find an equally edifying force of nature: water. Armed with our fishing rods, we set out to enjoy another great pastime that is still available in late fall. Great for the whole family, fishing is a sport that one doesn't necessarily need to succeed at in order to receive positive results, nor does everyone need to participate in order to go and have fun. I am blessed with a wife who loves to fish as much as I do, however, for some like my sister and her husband, the fishing is enjoyed by one while the other enjoys the locale of the water and both enjoy each other's company. Water can be enjoyed in so many ways; it is a common interest of adventurous youth to explore creeks and rivers. There are a number of public launches and bridge areas for investigating shallow waters and getting to know the jungle-like brush and plant life along the banks. Parents can enjoy a stroll and supervise as their children excitedly expel their energy in a number of imaginary scenarios, from treasure hunting to taming the wild. My own mother,



RR photo by Hunter Hill

My wife and son meander the forest seeking nothing in particular, beyond what piques curiosity.

being a science teacher and interested in all things biology, was prone to explain the various species we collected and brought back to show her. Freshwater mussels in the river, hellgrammites and other water-loving insects under rocks and, once in a while, a captured minnow in a cup.

Still, though, there are those more practical who would seek a family activity that would be more productive than simply getting out into nature. For these hardworking folks, there is always the task of closing up the home for the winter. While it may not seem like fun or even truly enjoying the outdoors, winterizing one's home can be a rewarding family bonding activity that brings a sense of accomplishment to all. Part of living out here in the rural countryside is knowing how to take care of home needs that are not a typical part of home ownership in urban or suburban areas. Teaching your children how to complete these tasks can enhance their ability to feel engaged and enabled to live in the country. Splitting wood is a common task that many homeowners need to complete each year before the snow flies. If you have a wood stove, either indoor or outdoor, you will need several cords of wood. While the task could appear daunting, it could also provide the opportunity to teach. There is a lot to know about firewood. What kinds of trees burn the best, or the cleanest? What direction do you split wood in order to follow fracture lines in the wood? How do you stack the wood so it remains dry until use in the winter? There are plenty of ways to participate as well: cutting, splitting, stacking and, as in all chores, cleaning up. While this is not

the zen-like walk in the woods that was mentioned earlier, it could very well be the mortar to future relationships, especially between father and son. Draining hoses and emptying spigots to prevent freezing is another winterizing chore. Cleaning out gutters, closing up the tool shed and trimming and organizing the yard for the last time are all necessary parts of preparing for the cold weather that can be made all the more enjoyable by spending that time with family.

Even as chores and hikes are a good way to get out with the family, food is a unifying factor in the way that many seek indulgence. Even now in late October, there are wild berries that can be found in the right places. Fish caught from that trip to the water mentioned earlier can be served up as well with a nice side of vegetables from a local farmers' market. Sweet baked goods can be cooked up in the kitchen but enjoyed around a cool weather campfire in the evening as a family. And for those who aren't predisposed to proficient baking, no kid ever complained about the delicious simplicity that is s'mores.

Regardless of how you spend time out of doors, be productive, or make it a special point not to be—either way, step out of that door and enjoy what the countryside has to offer. It may not be a litany of entertainment options like a carnival but, in its own way, it provides more than enough opportunities to edify one's soul. Even as the snow begins to fly, the outdoors are a never-ending invitation to step out, breathe in and live uninhibited by the walls that surround the indoor world.



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