

Autumn Gold in God's Country

BY JENNIFER WILSON PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

Ancient effigy mounds, 500-foot bluffs and cold springs abound along the Father of Waters in magical Marquette and McGregor. From high atop Pikes Peak, let fall colors ignite your soul.

Wrapped in a fiery blanket of autumn maple, oak, sumac, birch and aspen, the northeast Iowa towns of Marquette and McGregor tuck into a pocket of land where farm and river meet. High limestone bluffs hoist travelers up to view this fine spectacle of nature, as the fall colors of thick lowland forest along the Mississippi River bid farewell to summer.

Ancient burial mounds and effigies in the region stand as evidence that people have always come here for solace, be it to commune with the spirits or to pull a big old Northern pike from moving water or to drink a great cup of coffee in a sprightly little shop that's seen 100 years of wanderers just like those traversing its bluffs and backwaters today.

DESCENDING TO THE RIVER

In northeast Iowa, the cattle and corn just seem to fall off the edge of farm country and into the Mississippi River valley. Here, anglers dip into the river's abundance every season of the year.


At Pikes Peak State Park, just over 11 miles of trail traverse 960 acres of land, including Pikes Peak Overlook a few steps from a pristine campground. In its brilliant panorama, the area's history unfurls.

In 1805, after the Louisiana Purchase, Zebulon Pike explored the Mississippi to find a suitable military fort. Pike chose this very spot for the rockin' view, though the government settled on the more accessible Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin. (Later, Pike was sent further west, accounting for The Other Pikes Peak in Colorado.)

Just across the river from the overlook, two centuries earlier, explorers Marquette and Joliet rounded the final bend of the Wisconsin River in a canoe.

"They were the first white men to see what is now called Iowa," says Park Manager Matt Tschirgi (pronounced shur-gee—it's Swiss).

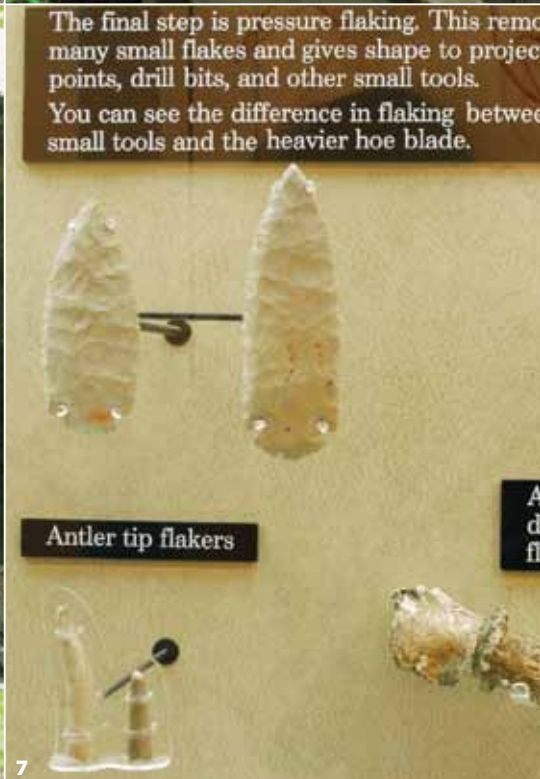
Families funnel past the overlook, then hike 15 minutes along a wooden boardwalk to Bridal Veil Falls, with its horseshoe-shaped dribble of water that freezes in winter to look like its namesake. The quieter old-growth oak and hickory forest trail to Point Ann takes 3 ½-hours—less on a bike. Its reward is a cool view of McGregor (and an unfortunately gigantic grain mill), originally established in 1837



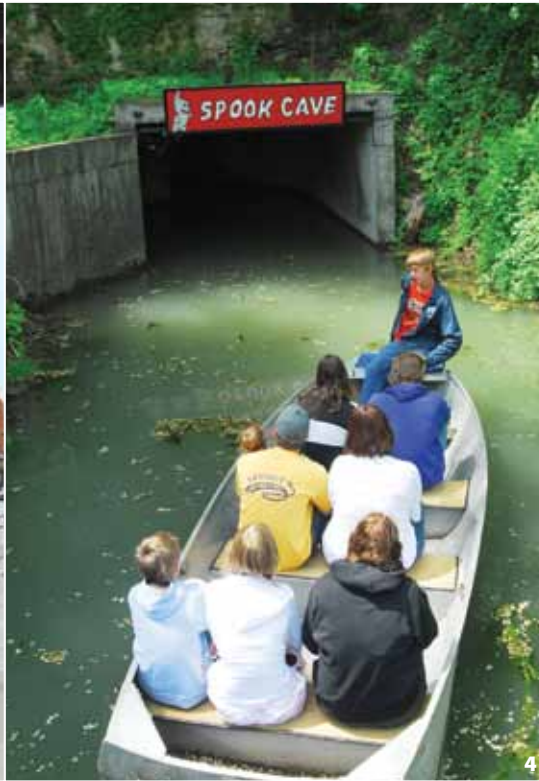
The adjacent river immersed in fog, The Great River Road, a U.S. National Scenic Byway, peeks through the treed bluffs near Effigy Mounds National Monument and Pikes Peak State Park. For peak fall color reports, visit the DNR forestry webpage at www.iowadnr.gov.

LOST IN IOWA

1) Hikers examine three conical burial mounds adjacent the Effigy Mounds visitor center. **2)** At Pikes Peak State Park, several hundred steps take hikers down to Bridal Veil Falls. **3)** McGregor's Main Street offers antique shops, eateries and places to parch thirst after an active day outdoors. The town sprouted in 1837, when a river ferry began, although local history reaches back thousands of years, evidenced by American Indian effigy and conical mounds. **4)** Named by settlers for the strange sounds near the hillside entrance, today visitors can explore the 47-degree Spook Cave via boat tour. **5&8)** Fall color views from Pikes Peak near the picnic area. **6)** In the winter, Bridal Veil Falls forms a long wedge of ice that resembles its namesake, says park manager Matt Tschirgi, who notes a bear-shaped effigy mound is found left of the falls.



7&10) Visitor center exhibits at Effigy Mounds show stone points of chert and flakers used to chip or knap the stone points. A model eagle nest built by Boy Scouts gives visitors an impression of actual nest size. Visitors should budget 2.5-3 hours for the center and several hikes—more to hike 7 miles roundtrip to Hanging Rock. **9)** The office at Spook Cave near the private campground. **11)** Pikes Peak campground offers 77 campsites with pine and oak tree shade and an immaculate restroom/shower facility. Fall is the busiest camping time, with campsites filling as early as mid-week (make reservations at 1-877-IAPARKS). Peak leaf viewing is usually mid-October, or call the park for conditions (563/873-2341). Hikers can explore steep wooded bluffs and valleys, sheer walls of Decorah limestone and river overlooks.



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as a ferry crossing by the man whose private land became this park.

“This is where everything funneled through, and trails and roads developed to move westward,” says Tschirgi. “It was a gateway to the west.”

It’s now a gateway to a fine portion of the Upper Mississippi, where the river is relatively clean and slow, and a few hours in a boat restoreth the soul.

A DELICATE BALANCE

“I really love this river.”

Tschirgi pushes off a canoe from the Sny Magill boat ramp just south of the park. He’s a young guy, tall and thin, wearing that standard floppy canvas hat canoe people often do. He glides along Johnson Slough, noting where motorboat wakes erode the riverbank, and trees seem to nearly slide into the water. An otter eases into duckweed, and a fish breaks the smooth surface in search of breakfast.

Yet there is something that seems almost brittle here. Hunks of Styrofoam bob against a bank. Fishing line dangles from a tree, just across from a roosting bald eagle studiously ignoring visitors.

Tschirgi says local river clean-ups make a good reason to visit—a little work, a little sightseeing. At the very least, any traveler can pack out trash.

Paddling is a fine way to survey the water’s health. Tschirgi nods toward the eagle to make his point. “If we would’ve been in a motor boat, he would’ve been outta here,” he says. “Motorboats seem like they push the wildlife out of their homes.”

Silver river maples line the water in pastel shades of yellow and green. A misty fog hangs low. Tschirgi drops a heavy rock in a small net as an anchor, and casts a few times around a snag, hoping to catch a bass or northern.

In fall, he says, the buzz of Jet-Skis and power boats subsides. Leaf-peepers crowd in during weekends, but weekdays, visitors can get pleasantly lost here. The Upper Miss just seems to offer a sense of enveloping calm that feels pretty good.

Robert Myers, owner of Boatel’s boat rental on the north side of McGregor, says that’s what brings his customers back every year. White-haired and tan, Myers scuttles around a white-and-aqua pontoon that matches his white jeans and cobalt blue shirt in retro style.

He hands out advice before vacationers launch his pontoon. “Stay in the channel, and use common sense,” he says. “Have a safe trip, and watch out for barges!”

Boating the main channel boils down to this: Stay between the red buoys of the Wisconsin side and the green buoys of the Iowa side. Easy stuff. There isn’t a lock and dam to cross for 17 miles north or 18 miles south. The river is wide, so it’s easy to avoid kayakers hugging the shoreline and barges chugging coal

shipments upstream or grain downstream to the Gulf to ship overseas. There are plenty of sand bars to dock and hang out.

“You can hike any of the islands, and see eagles in the winter,” says Myers. “Not too long ago, we saw trumpeter swans. Anytime of the year, it’s muskrats, beaver, or little water animals.

“It’s really just a great place to be.”

OLD TIMES, NEW TIMES

“... ‘feeling’ the past and the environment is as valid an experience as ‘knowing’ it scientifically.”

The words of anthropologist R. Clark Mallam posted at Effigy Mounds National Monument, three miles north of Marquette along Highway 76, seem a direct command for visitors to immerse in the spirit of this area. Over a 1,000 animal-shaped earthen Indian mounds, known as effigies, remain in the three-state region from a Woodland culture that built them for reasons that we may never know. No other place in the world has this concentration of effigy mounds.

A museum, interpretive center and more than 200 American Indian mounds are located at the monument, on steep trails along 400-foot bluffs.

Three khaki-clad women head to the mounds, lured in after a guided hike along the Mississippi Flyway. “I think it’s because they’re mysterious, and so old,” says Angie Farrell of Lakeville, Minn.

“Not only can you enjoy the mounds for history,” says Judy Beckman of Fairmont, Minn., “you can enjoy the natural surroundings, which are really unique to this part of the world.”

Just as area parks preserve traces of bygone times, so does the town of McGregor, showing how renovated storefronts revive the spirit of a place. It’s clear that the town is flourishing because of its conservation efforts. Marquette, a mile north, isn’t as far along, but does have a winery worth checking out, and the popular Isle of Capri casino.

As more people travel here, places like Iowa roadtrip icon Spook Cave will see even more traffic. Seven miles west of McGregor on Highways 18 and 52, this 93-acre campground features a cave at the base of a 90-foot bluff along Bloody Creek (good for trout fishing). Take a flat-bottom boat on a drippy, damp guided tour (not good for the claustrophobic) and immerse in its lore and legend as people have done for decades.

Fall brings an arts and crafts festival, farmers market and flea market to the small towns. But soaking in the surroundings seems to be the favored pastime around here.

“There’s a phrase that some of the old-timers use that I like—they call this area Little Switzerland,” says Tschirgi. “Maybe I’m partial to it because I’m Swiss, but anyone who visits here knows that description isn’t too far off the mark.”

1&2) Spook Cave, 7-miles west of McGregor, closes Oct. 29th, along with the private campground and lake. Boat tours of the cave last 35 minutes and a light jacket is recommended for the 47-degree air temperatures. **3)** "It's a common misconception" of the view, says DNR Pikes Peak manager Matt Tschirgi, "You can't see three states from here, that's farther upriver," he says. But from this overlook, you can see Wyalusing State Park across the river in Wisconsin at the confluence of the Wisconsin and Mississippi River here, and an eagle's eye view hundreds of feet above numerous hideaway sloughs and islands. The park also offers limited mountain biking. **4)** After gazing at commercial barges navigating the channels, casting for trout on area streams offers solitude on smaller water as autumn gold spills forth on streams with great place names like Sny Magill and Bloody Run.



IF YOU GO...

LODGING:

PIKES PEAK STATE PARK

15316 Great River Road, McGregor, IA 52157-8558

ph. 563-873-2341, fax 563-873-3167

E-mail address: Pikes_Peak@dnr.state.ia.us

77 campsites and pristine restroom facilities. \$11-\$16.

PARADISE VALLEY CAMPGROUND

19745 Keystone Road Garnavillo, IA 52049

563-873-9632 or email: sandy_landt@hotmail.com

Includes a swimming pond, trout fishing pond, cabins and laundry facilities.

LITTLE SWITZERLAND INN


Built in 1862 when the town was established, a collection of

guest rooms and one funky little cabin with a kitchen garden as a yard on Main Street in McGregor—breakfast could be anything from biscuits and gravy to quiche. Ask for Sadie's Cabin or the spacious Rob Roy with a balcony overlooking town. \$85-\$125 for doubles. **563-873-2057** or cell 608-412-0400; www.littleswitzerlandinn.com.

EATING:

THE TWISTED CHICKEN. Great food from local producers, decent wine list, enthusiastic service and fresh flown-in seafood. A fantastic break from the supper-club scene or the fried-food drudgery of road travel. It's a small, contemporary space—call for reservations. 212 Main St., McGregor. **563-873-1515; www.thetwistedchicken.com**.

MR. MCGREGOR'S BEER AND BRATZ GARDEN. Brats soaked in beer with warm sauerkraut and onions—and plenty of options



A warm sunrise lights-up Fire Point at Effigy Mounds, giving the appearance of a wooded trail in the clouds. Across the river, Prairie Du Chien, Wis. is lost in the fog. Fire Point is named from charred clay found in an excavated burial mound built about 2,000 years ago. A ceremonial fire may have burnt the clay, hauled up from the river, 350 feet below.

for just plain beer. Riverfront and Main streets, McGregor; [563-873-9613](tel:563-873-9613).

LATINOS MEXICAN RESTAURANT. Good gut-busting eats in a restaurant by day, bar by night. 213 Main Street, McGregor. [563-873-3838](tel:563-873-3838).

ON THE WATER:

PADDLERS can use any public boat ramp, though Sny Magill is a quiet backwater for easy paddling, located by the Paradise Valley Campground on County Road X56.

BOATELS HOUSE BOAT RENTALS & MARINA. Season through the third week in October. On the north side of McGregor along the river, a variety of rentals from houseboats to pontoons. Check the website for pricing. [563-873-3718](tel:563-873-3718), [800-747-2628](tel:800-747-2628); www.boatelshouseboatrentals.com.

ATTRACTIONS:

EFFIGY MOUNDS NATIONAL MONUMENT. 151 Highway 76, Harpers Ferry. \$3-\$5. [563-873-3491](tel:563-873-3491); www.nps.gov/efmo.

SPOOK CAVE: Cave tours \$8 adults, \$5 kids. Camping \$15-\$21, cabins \$55-\$95. [563-873-2144](tel:563-873-2144); www.spookcave.com. The campground is popular, as the high bat population keeps the mosquitoes at bay, and a pretty waterfall and fishing/swimming pond add scenery.

EAGLES LANDING WINERY, 127 North St., Marquette. [563-873-2509](tel:563-873-2509); www.halvorson.org/vineyard/.

PAPER MOON. Shopping in McGregor is fun, and this little bookstore and gift shop is the best for browsing. 206 A Street, McGregor. [563-873-3357](tel:563-873-3357); www.papermoonbooks.com. 🐾