

Nature's Spring Trifecta

Spring in southeast Iowa fills the belly and the senses.



ABOVE & 4) At Shimek State Forest, elm trees are felled or girdled to help meet sunlight needs of young oaks. Those dead elms are heaven for mushroom hunters. Elm-studded pine stands make for easy morel picking among pine needles, too. RIGHT: 1&4) Picnic area in Lick Creek Unit overlooks the meandering creek and pine and hardwood forest. 2) Rue anemone frequents dry, open woodlands. 3) Zadio Wilson, 2, of Des Moines, enjoys Shagbark Lake in Shimek's Donnellson Unit where an east shore mile-long trail is a popular quiet escape along this electric motor only lake. A nearby primitive hike-in campsite offers solitude to backpackers.



It's springtime in Van Buren County. And that means three things:

Turkey, fish and morels.

Each year, this trifecta of outdoor pleasures transforms a tranquil, sparsely populated corner of the state into a giddy bunch of nature bunnies. Should you choose to join them, we're guessing you're going to dig into the earth with similar relish. But while you'll come to southeast Iowa to fill your dinner table, you'll stay for the peace within shady cathedrals of forested hills.

Think of the region in gradual stair steps toward civilization. Shimek State Forest, 9,000 acres of worn-out farm ground coaxed back to wildness in the 1930s. Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, 1,653 nicely groomed acres bordering a horseshoe bend of the Des Moines River, with cabins, 19 ancient burial mounds, a 30-acre lake and a Mormon Trail river crossing.

Further into settled territory, the Villages of Van Buren stoke the local economy with gift shops, small restaurants and antique stores.

"There's a peaceful way of life in Van Buren County

you don't find in other places," says Betty Printy, who runs a pottery shop in Bentonsport. "I had a big plate of mushrooms for dinner last night. Summer is coming—we can eat off the land again. It's a fine time for a visit."

STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

May apples and bluebells dapple the green shag floor of Shimek State Forest. But area forester John Byrd isn't looking for flowers. He's hunting around the base of a dead elm tree for mushrooms that look more like brains-on-a-stick than dinner.

"As far as beauty goes, this place'll knock your socks off," he says, rooting around the forest floor. He's slow and deliberate, the kind of big, thoughtful guy you'd want to show up if you called the volunteer fire department.

Byrd has good reason to be proud of this massive contiguous forest that he and his staff tend using controlled burns, plus selective, shelter-wood and clear-cut harvesting where wildfire once did the housekeeping. You'll most likely be alone on its 25 miles of hiking trails and 27 miles of horse and multipurpose trails. Four

LOST IN IOWA



primitive campgrounds provide shelter during nights alive with primal sound. Four lakes are stocked with bass, bluegill and channel cat (electric motors only). Morning or dusk, a hike past Shagbark or Black Oak rewards you with a perfect shoreline mirror.

“Shimek is a lot less civilized compared to state parks,” says Byrd. He saw an albino turkey foraging in a campsite not long ago.

Just seven decades ago, this was tired farm ground until Bohumil Shimek helped establish a state forest divided into five separate units—Keosauqua, Donnellson, Farmington, Croton and Lick Creek. In the 1930s, the Civilian Conservation Corps began planting the oak-hickory woods patched in with red, white and jack pines that lend an air of magic to the place.

Incidentally, pine groves are nice places to look for dead elms, as the thick cover suppresses sun-loving trees. When searching for ‘shrooms, Byrd says, “The tree’s roots are as wide as it is tall, so walk around some.”

He plucks a few morels, holding up a thumb-sized treat, soon to be fried in butter over a campfire. A hunter

walks by, interested.

Byrd smiles and keeps picking. Word on this spot is out now. “Tomorrow, this place’ll be crawling with mushroom hunters.”

The word is apparently already out nearby, at Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, among Iowa’s oldest, where mushroom hunters pick over the forest floor, poking the ground with walking sticks.

In fact, a few of the campsites back to elm trees that have been known to harbor a few morels.

But you didn’t hear that from us.

TESTOSTERONE AND TURKEY

When DNR biologist Kevin Andersen heads to the public hunting grounds of Shimek, he’s got an odd job if he wants to bag a turkey.

He’s going to seduce a promiscuous male into hitting on him (females can’t be harvested).

“In the spring, a male gobbler is just a showboat,” says Andersen, who looks a lot like Tom Arnold, but is even funnier. “They puff up. They strut. They want to attract



1) Outdoorsman Kevin Anderson of Fairfield enjoys turkey hunting in Shimek State Forest where spring explodes with mushrooms and turkeys amidst white, purple and yellow wildflowers. 2-4) Bentonsport's old river bridge now holds a walking trail with an adjacent fudge shop. The Des Moines River Valley history is varied—from floods to Mormon crossings at Lacey Keosauqua State Park and historic settlements dating to 1839. 5) Equestrian trails in Shimek Forest range from easy to difficult with steep slopes. Riders can protect the forest by staying on trails. 6) Six family cabins are for rent at Lacey Keosauqua State Park along with shady campsites. 7) Sam Wilson, 5, of Des Moines, enjoys primitive family camping at White Oak campground in Shimek Forest. "If you love the outdoors and want to hear some strange nature sounds at night, that's the place to go," says forester John Byrd. 8) Built in 1836, Meek's Grist Mill in Bonaparte burnt down in 1841 and was rebuilt in 1878. It houses the popular Bonaparte Retreat Restaurant with great eagle watching. 9) Hiking trails at Lacey Keosauqua S.P. wind among valleys, burial mounds and cliffs along the river.

as many girls as they can.”

Andersen has been turkey hunting for decades, and he’s got a box full of goofy-sounding turkey calls to prove it. This morning, he imitates the cry of the barred owl—which has a bad habit of stealing young poults. He lets loose a loud “Oo OO! Oo OO!” into the cool morning air. With a grin, he holds a hand to his ear. An outraged geffuffle of gobbles fills the air.

Andersen does the owl call a few more times, and then heads toward the noise. He sets up his blind and unfolds his hen decoys like little plastic umbrellas.

“Fortunately, turkeys have a bad sense of smell, or we’d never shoot one,” he says, settling into a lawn chair.

Inside the blind feels like Turkey TV, with two decoys out front, and Andersen mouthing a little diaphragm call that erupts with a comical series of yelps, cackles and clucks. If a male gets too close, Andersen will shoot right out the mesh window.

“See, that gobbler is happy with his girls right now, but he’s still calling me back,” he says. “It’s like when you’re starving and you drive by a burger joint—you make the

same noise this guy is making right now.”

It strikes a person that shooting a lecherous male turkey wouldn’t be all that difficult.

A bobwhite quail calls in the distance, and the woods begin to awaken. Canada geese. A warbler. A cacophony of bird chatter.

Andersen used to hunt by “running and gunning,” but he says that with the gobblers’ testosterone jacked up since March, they’ve already pinpointed the decoys and the same results come from sitting here.

And what’s better than listening to morning sounds, watching stars dissipate to dusty glimmers in a periwinkle sky? Because even as the gobbles fade away—there won’t be shots fired this morning—there’s more to this than the hunt.

“Taking a life is a serious thing,” says Andersen. “I always like to say a little prayer when it’s over, whether I’ve got something or not. God gave us these critters to hang out with, and it’s an amazing opportunity.”

FISHES AND DISHES

On a hike through Lacey-Keosauqua State Park, the Des



Moines River is your constant companion. Its muddy expanse is partially to thank for the abundance of birds, ancient Woodland Indian burial mounds and a Mormon Trail crossing at Ely's Ford, where a band of traveling Mormon musicians were invited into Keosauqua for a jam.

Fresh deer tracks pock your hiking path, and you might see a possum, fox or a big ole bullsnake as you wander. A yellow regal fritillary butterfly bumbles and bobs past a little cluster of Dutchman's breeches. You can smell the damp river bottom on a path that turns

occasionally mossy. (There's no one to thank but Mother Nature for all the ticks, which seem to be having a springtime party all their own).

When you're ready for a rest from your walk, fishing a hidden finger of the park's Lake Sugema will do. In spring, the crappies are biting, and the thwup-thwup-thwup of Canadian geese taking wing stills the mind.

Equally restful is a drive through the Villages of Van Buren along scenic County Road J40. Adjacent to the park, Keosauqua is the biggest small town here, and a



Just off Coal Mine Hollow Road, a hiking trail is flanked on the left with dark, smooth-bark white pine and red pine on the right. Planted in the 1930s by CCC workers, the trees remain for their beauty, several of a dozen species from ponderosa to Virginia pine in the forest. Coal Mine Hollow is named for an early 1900s strip mine. "It's a perfect example of how an area will heal with proper land management," says DNR forester John Byrd.

Shimek State Forest

stop at Misty's Malt Shop is tradition. Main Street (or in this case, First Street) pizza and steak joints such as Riverbend and the Louisiana Purchase are popular.

Driving east, bare trees stand out like black veins against weathered hills. The tiny red-brick town of Bentonsport tucks into a curve in the road near an old iron bridge.

This is Betty Printy's town, where she sells her pottery pressed with Queen Anne's Lace at her store Iron & Lace, near an old-time general store and a waterside garden

built from the ruins of a flour mill. Tall, her hair in a bun at her neck, Betty speaks as her wide strong hands sweep the river landscape.

Bentonsport's small local businesses (you won't see chain stores in the Villages) do everything from sell fudge to lodge guests in the Mason House Inn Bed & Breakfast. Betty says this steamboat town once bustled, but when the railroads brought river bridges with them, the steamboats could no longer fit through. "When the train went on west, the people went with it," she says.



Betty's blacksmith husband Bill—the “Iron” part of Iron & Lace—chuckles through his white beard. “Horace Greeley said ‘Go west young man,’ and they did,” he says. “Of course, they forgot to come back.”

Betty shakes her head. “But we think our 50 residents here are pretty fine,” she says.

For taking pretty pictures on a spring day, you can't beat the views of this country drive where the fishing, hiking and hunting doesn't get much better. Shops like the Dutchman's Store in Cantril, an old-fashioned general store run by a Mennonite family, draw visitors from miles around. Travelers hit the Bonaparte Retreat in Bonaparte for dinner, where you'll likely not find a better steak.

Lola Hayes rings up customers at Laplanders Junction truck stop, near Lake Sugema, where you can order breakfast items with names like “A Mess” and “Slop.”

“Come to Van Buren County,” she says with a smile. “We have no stoplights, do you know that? We're pretty proud of our little county.” And with good reason.

TRAVEL NOTES

SHIMEK STATE FOREST

Area Forester John Byrd

319-878-3811

33653 Route J56

Farmington, Iowa 52626

john.byrd@dnr.iowa.gov

With 55 campsites (one is hike-in on Shagbark Lake), all primitive, some specifically for equestrians.

LACEY-KEOSAUQUA STATE PARK

P.O. Box 398

Keosauqua, IA 52565

ph. 319-293-3502

fax 319-293-3329

Lacey_Keosauqua@dnr.iowa.gov

Cabins \$50 per night (\$300 weekly) include showers, kitchenette, AC/heat. 113 campsites, some with electrical hook-ups.

OTHER LODGING

• **HOTEL MANNING**, Keosauqua: T.S. Eliot once lodged in this Gothic-style hotel. Double rooms from \$69 include a full breakfast, or stay next door in the Riverview Inn where you have access to television and river views from \$58. 800-728-2718 or 319-293-3232;

www.thehotelmanning.com

• **MASON HOUSE INN BED & BREAKFAST**: 319-592-3133 or 800-592-3133; <http://showcase.netins.net/web/bentonsport/>.

ACTIVITIES

• **VILLAGES OF VAN BUREN COUNTY**: 800-868-7822; www.800tourvbc.com

• **TROUBLESOME CREEK OUTFITTERS**. Canoeing trips and cabins on Lake Sugema. 108 Main St., Keosauqua. 319-759-5818; <http://troublesome-creek.com>.

• Canoeing. Paddlers along the Des Moines River Water Trail can kick off the trip in Ottumwa to the northwest, and spend the night in the Hotel Manning (<http://www.desmoinesriver.org/gazebo/clifvan.html>), a symbol of the town's steamboat era.

FOOD

• **MISTY'S MALT SHOP**. Keosauqua, 319-293-3815

• **THE BONAPARTE RETREAT RESTAURANT**. Bonaparte, 319-592-3339

• **LAPLANDER'S JUNCTION**, Jct. Hwy. 1 & 2, 4 miles south of Keosauqua, located near Lake Sugema. Breakfast served daily. 319-293-6152.

• **RIVERBEND PIZZA & STEAKHOUSE**, Keosauqua. 319-293-9900.

• **LOUISIANA PURCHASE STEAKHOUSE**, Keosauqua. 319-293-3999



1-3) Renown for pottery fired with Queen Anne's Lace flowers and intricate ironwork, the Iron & Lace Shop in Bentonsport offers handmade arts. Owners Bill and Betty Printy take a break from the forge and pottery wheel. The Printy's sell their wares and offer workshops in both crafts.