

# Natural Highs

Four ways to reap the benefits of the Adirondack outdoors

BY VANESSA GENEVA AHERN

**T**hat being outdoors in the Adirondacks makes us feel good seems obvious. But recent research has shown just how much—and in how many ways—time in nature benefits our mental and physical well-being. A June 2019 study published in *Scientific Reports* found that people who spent at least 120 minutes in the outdoors every week were healthier than those with limited or no access to green spaces. Other studies show that breathing in phytoncides (microscopic compounds from plants) helps boost your immune system and stimulates creativity and focus. Even just looking at images or hearing sounds of nature has been found to lower stress and anxiety—but nothing beats actually getting out there. Here are four good opportunities to get your recommended dose of “vitamin N” in the Adirondacks this spring.

## Follow the Birds

Your chances of spotting your favorite northeastern bird during this season of transition are excellent, since this is when migratory bird species travel north to the Adirondacks.

John Thaxton, of Adirondack Birding Tours, leads bird-watching excursions in the park. He recommends the Magic Triangle, bounded by Clark, Cross and Lakeshore Roads, in Essex, for wintering rough-legged hawks; Noblewood Park, in Willsboro, for waterfowl such as wood ducks and hooded mergansers; and the Boreal Life trail, which includes a boardwalk over a wetland, at the 3,000-acre Paul Smith’s College Visitor Interpretive Center (VIC).

Another promising birding destination, Bloomingdale Bog, “has breeding gray jays that will eat out of your hand,” Thaxton says. You may also spot red-bellied woodpeckers and Carolina wrens, relatively recent year-round Adirondack inhabitants that “people are anxious to see, as well as the bald eagle, which has made an incredible comeback to the area.”



Amper sand Mountain photograph by Jamie West McGiver

### Exercise Alfresco

While hitting the gym is better than no winter exercise at all, recent studies on “green exercise” show that people gain more mental-health benefits from working out in nature. In a 2017 University of Innsbruck study, Austrian researchers found that adults who went hiking rated the exercise as less strenuous than when walking indoors on a treadmill at a similar incline and pace. Unsurprisingly, they also found the outdoor hike more pleasant.

Clint McCarthy, an associate professor of outdoor education at SUNY Adirondack, in Queensbury, teaches courses on backcountry exploration. He says, “The main benefit is that it allows participants to live in the moment. There are also ample opportunities to prove yourself and look inward. Time in the outdoors has the ability to be both thought- and action-provoking.”

Regional chapters of the Adirondack Mountain Club organize group outings in the Adirondacks year-round; check the calendar at [www.adk.org](http://www.adk.org). Join the Glens Falls–Saratoga chapter for a snowshoe hike up Moxham Mountain, in Minerva, March 14, or a Hoffman Notch bushwhack, March 28; visit [www.adk-gfs.org](http://www.adk-gfs.org) for sign-up information. The Albany chapter tackles Potash Mountain, in Lake Luzerne, March 15, and a Tongue Mountain traverse, March 21; visit [www.albany.adk.org](http://www.albany.adk.org) for details.

The Paul Smith’s College VIC ([www.paulsmiths.edu/vic](http://www.paulsmiths.edu/vic)) and the Adirondack Interpretive Center in Newcomb ([www.esf.edu/aic](http://www.esf.edu/aic)) also offer a variety of nature walks, snowshoe treks and other activities throughout the year.

### Lend a Hand

Volunteering for a nonprofit organization dedicated to land conservation or educating the public about nature can give you a sense of empowerment. Institutions such as The Wild Center, in Tupper Lake, will work to find a volunteer slot that suits your interests. “Many volunteers choose to lead naturalist walks that explore the 115-acre campus on foot or by snowshoe. Volunteers can also assist with painting, gardening,

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and trail maintenance projects,” says Rachael Kmack, volunteer coordinator at the natural history museum.

Volunteers can apply for an Adirondack Mountain Club summit steward position and take part in its trailhead host program. “Whether it be rebuilding trails or educating the public, people really enjoy having the chance to give back to the Adirondack Park,” says Benjamin Brosseau, content strategist at Adirondack Mountain Club.

The Adirondack Chapter of the Nature Conservancy’s Adirondack Park Invasive Plant Program ([www.adkinvasives.com](http://www.adkinvasives.com)) trains volunteers to document and control aquatic and terrestrial invasive species in the park.

You can also serve a two-week stint as a campground ambassador for the Department of Environmental Conservation ([www.dec.ny.gov](http://www.dec.ny.gov)), introducing new campers to the outdoors.

**Try Forest Bathing**

Forest bathing is a sensory immersion experience in nature that was developed by Japan’s Ministry of Health in the 1980s in response to an increase in anxiety and depression, says Helene Gibbens, co-owner of Adirondack Riverwalking and Forest Bathing, based in Saranac Lake.

Gibbens and co-owner Suzanne Weirich guide groups on winter forest bathing tours through April, including at Elk Lake Lodge and The Wild Center. “We will teach you how to heighten your sensory awareness, and with that suggest different sensory activities that allow you to engage with nature through one or more sense at a time,” says Gibbens. The leisurely snowshoe tours through the woods end with free time for participants to explore an area on their own. The group then shares cups of wild tea, which typically includes evergreen needles, high in phytochemicals believed to boost the immune system.

After forest bathing, participants may feel more grounded, with a deeper connection to nature, decreased anxiety and more mindfulness. “It’s focusing on your senses in nature that leads to that quiet, inspired mind,” adds Gibbens. ▲

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