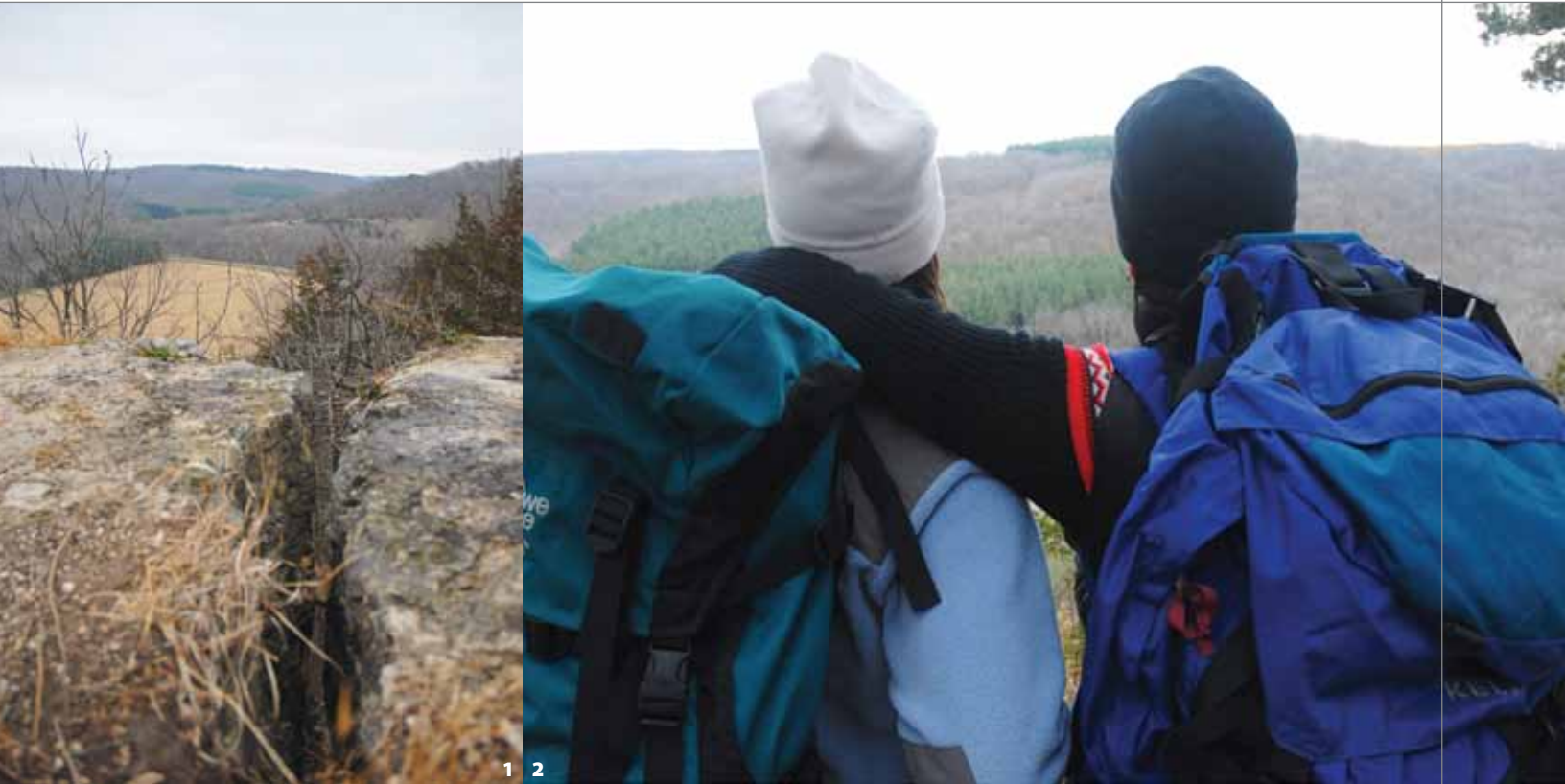


At Yellow River State Forest, sisters Jennifer Wilson and Stephanie Wadle of Des Moines hike rugged ascents and descents. RIGHT: A scenic overlook of forested hills. Explore the forest's 8,500 acres, and get rewarded with views of soaring eagles, meandering trout streams and solitude.

# Grown-ups Gone Wild

Take a breather in the wilds of northeast Iowa before the avalanche of holiday obligations.





Take it as a sign when you hit Gunder: Things might get a little woolly on your grown-ups-only escape before the holidays hit.

Fishing, hiking and cabin-lounging in far northeast Iowa seem innocent enough, and so does Gunder—the town looks as if God tossed out a couple Monopoly game houses along County Road B60. But it’s a low-slung commercial building hung with the sign “Irish Shanti” that you want to watch for. This is the beginning of your last gasp of carefree fun before you’re drifted in by decked halls, granny’s hotdish, and more candy-cane-shaped cookies than any human should eat.

Irish Shanti owner Kevin Walsh will probably greet you at the door, and any seasoned traveler will tell you that owner-operated is a good sign. True here, where the gi-normous Gunderburger steals the show, and the show might just be Iowa blues favorite Joe Price onstage. With the house rocking and a stunning array of beers on tap (“The best Guinness in Gunder,” brags Walsh from under his floppy fisherman’s hat), you’re about to check your turkey-roasting, gift-shopping, sibling-fight-neutralizing responsible self at the door and just relax, old school.

“What happens in Gunder, stays in Gunder,” says Walsh, whose day job as a hospice nurse means he knows how to take care of people, and urge them to live a little. “Around here, your only job is to have a good time.”

#### NO RULES

Walsh should be hired as the welcome wagon for northeast Iowa. As you drive past the final bits of

flat farmland past Gunder, the landscape becomes increasingly shaggy. This is Iowa’s driftless area, a complete change from the tame, deep soils across the rest of the state. The last glacier missed this chunk of Iowa, and so the dramatic elevations and limestone outcroppings weren’t ground down. A mix of forest covers the region—the fall colors are stunning.

Far northeast Iowa has been largely left alone by development, and as a result it’s teeming with life. The Mississippi Flyway hosts all manner of birds during migration, including pelicans in fall and pileated woodpeckers year round. It’s a mushroom hunter’s paradise, and cool weather brings Shaggy Manes and chanterelles. Rumors fly occasionally about bears and cougars, but no one has proof.

A person could hike forever in the remote glory of Yellow River State Forest, with a 25-mile trail system and free backcountry campsites. And it’s your pre-vacation vacation, so you really should.

Jack McSweeney was the state forester here from 1962 to 1990. If you see his short, thick body lumbering along one of its trails in a red-checked flannel



Kevin Walsh



## DNR FISH BIOLOGIST BILL KALISHEK'S GUIDE TO FEARLESS TROUT FISHING IN NORTHEAST IOWA

- Fish the days that are overcast and gray when using spin fishing gear. Trout seem to be less wary of lures at this time.
- However, if fly fishing, target midday on sunny and bright days. In cooler fall temperatures, bright warm days can stimulate an insect hatch.
- Streams are stocked with 10-12 inch trout weekly through October, so plenty of fish are available. But wander downstream of the areas that are stocked and you will find wilder fish and fewer anglers.
- Be careful where you walk. In October and November, brown and brook trout are laying their eggs in nests called redds, areas of cleaned gravel on the stream bottom. Avoid stepping in or directly above these nests.
- Remember, according to Iowa music legend Greg Brown, "the good fishermen are the ones who have fun."

shirt, jeans and beat-up boots, you're seeing the man who largely put this forest together, section by section, farm plot by steep ravine, to its current 5,000 acres.

"There's something nice about people coming to the area now," says McSweeney. "The topography is the feature that brings people in."

The state hasn't always understood this draw. For years, officials have tried to carve major tourist attractions from rivers, streams and deep woods. McSweeney remembers back in the '60s, when officials wanted to build a major golf course or landing strip where the forest is now.

"The basic concept when I was first here was multiple use and recreation," he says.

He mentions one of the goofier failed ventures—when the state imported Rio Grande turkeys to lure hunters.

"Those turkeys eventually just moved on into Wisconsin and Minnesota," says McSweeney. His friends in neighboring states still thank him for those turkeys, from time to time.

McSweeney just kept doing his job, reclaiming old farm fields and highly erodible property, converting it back to forests. Today, he says the No. 1

activity is pleasure cruising. As people drive, they can see another failed tourism effort themselves—a Fire Tower mandated by the federal government decades ago, but never used. "It really never was a hell of a good idea," he says.

As it was then, it is now: The appeal here is the land, and the old-school vibe of northeast Iowa. "There were no rules in Allamakee County. No paved roads," chuckles McSweeney. There are a few rules these days—aren't there always rules?—but none of them state you can't kick back in the woods before the Yuletide season volcano blows.

Drive into Yellow River State Forest, and just like that you're enfolded in the gnarly, tangled arms of Mother Nature. Park overlooks are the kind of money shots that'll take your breath away, with cedar trees growing out of sheer rock and pretty little creeks veining the landscape below.

From way above the forest, you can see the popular horse trails, and Little Paint Creek, where you might pull out a brown trout for dinner.

### FISH STORIES

Bill Kalishek is the DNR's regional fish biologist in northeast Iowa, which means he finds out what's in the water, and pretties it up for the fish. Of course, he's got to fish a little, too. (*see sidebar, above*)

"We try to make it really natural, like we didn't do anything at all," he says, a tall and bespectacled Bohemian. Then he laughs. "Of course, then people don't really know you did anything."

But you'll know, when you cast a line from the banks of the beautifully groomed creek that runs through Little Paint

Jack McSweeney







Justin Wadle of Des Moines casts for trout on Big Paint and Little Paint creeks, named for figures painted by American Indians on a high, limestone bluff in the area.









A red cedar grows from the rocks along a trail overlook. Yellow River's backpacking trails were featured in an article in the April 1996 edition of *Outside* magazine entitled "America's Top 50 Hikes—The Finest in Every State." Iowa's best was the Backpack Trail at Yellow River State Forest. There are more than 25 miles of trails in the Paint Creek Unit alone, with two backpacker camp areas.



## LOST IN IOWA



Howard and Donna Bright, left, own The Natural Gait near Yellow River State Forest. The location beckon visitors with sprawling views, cozy spaces and cabins perched high above the Yellow River. RIGHT: Justin and Stephanie Wadle of Des Moines enjoy a morning cup of coffee from their cabin at The Natural Gait.



### TRAVEL NOTES

- The Irish Shanti. 17455 Gunder Road, Gunder. [www.thegunderburger.com](http://www.thegunderburger.com); 563-864-9289.
- Yellow River State Forest. 729 State Forest Road, Harpers Ferry. 563-586-2254.
- Bucks-N-Bulls. 402 W Chestnut St., Harpers Ferry. [www.bucksnbulls.net](http://www.bucksnbulls.net); 563-586-2117.
- Bigfoot Canoe Rental. Canoes, kayaks and tubes for the Yellow River, near the Natural Gait. 419 Bigfoot Road, Monona. [www.bigfootcanoerental.com](http://www.bigfootcanoerental.com) 563-539-4272.
- The Natural Gait. 1878 Old Mission Drive, Harpers Ferry. Cabins \$125-\$150 in low season (Nov. 1-April 1). [www.naturalgaitresort.com](http://www.naturalgaitresort.com); 877-776-2208.
- Marquette Guide Service. Former Effigy Mounds interpretive guide Tim Mason is a guide for trout fishing on spring-fed streams and kayak fishing on the Mississippi River. He takes customized, small groups or individuals fishing, with insight into archeology, area history and natural resources, and emphasis on ornithology and local ethnology. His dad started the service in 1954, and Tim follows in his footsteps. Call for rates and reservations. 563-880-4107; [bloodyrun@alpine.com](mailto:bloodyrun@alpine.com).





Campground. The trout are biting well into a carefree crisp cold fall day, as the windscape bare the limbs of sycamore, hackberry, cottonwood and boxelder trees.

“It’s like coming to a whole different world up here,” says Kalishek.

The best way to hook a trout is to move upstream onshore or in the shallow water. Drift your bait past any rapids—anything from salmon eggs to Power Bait to small spoons, jigs and corn have worked for experienced anglers.

The familiar tug on your line means lunch, and you can spread out around a fire ring in the campground, or clean the fish and head to the Bucks-n-Bulls bar in nearby Harpers Ferry, a red naugahyde joint decorated with moose and deer mounts, and Canada goose decoys rigged up as lights. If you ask Linda behind the bar real nice, she might fry up your fillets if she’s not busy. It’s kind of a backcountry appetizer to the spectacular cheeseburger pizza (with pickles).

And that kind of eating just can’t be beat, Iowa or anywhere.

### **CABIN FEVER**

If the camping in Yellow River State Forest is too chilly—because for the last time until New Year’s, it really is all about you this weekend—the nearby Natural Gait resort is your place.

Owners Howard and Donna Bright bought a chunk of land along the Yellow River more than 20 years ago. “For the Woodland people, this was holy land,” Bright says simply, spreading his hands to indicate the forested ridgeline where most of his cabins sit, and the clear trout stream below, where a fishing line looks big as baling wire.

Standing on nearly 400 acres, the resort is horse-friendly,

like most of this area, and includes the Brights’ wildflower seed company, the Ion Exchange. The cabins aren’t the light version found in most resorts, either. Their thick timbers, wood-burning stoves and reclaimed lumber and barn pieces are as comfortable as they are beautiful, jutting from a lovely landscape in a way that begs for steaming coffee on the porch, or a rowdy round of cards at night.

If you stay at their Ion Inn, the original lodging next to the Brights’ house, you can wake up, cross the gravel road and start fishing first thing in the morning.

“A lot of the time, when man comes in, he destroys the very thing he came to see,” Howard Bright says. “That didn’t happen around here.”

A typical fall morning at Natural Gait unfolds atop a high ridge, in a cabin overlooking farmland and streambeds. The sky will turn pink, and then purple, and so on, until a full electric blue illuminates the bright beauty of fall.

This is the kind of day that’ll convince you how important it is to get grounded in the land before you have to entertain all those relatives at Thanksgiving, and then, seemingly minutes later, at Christmas.

Get out there, if only to hunker down in a cabin, its chinks lined by thick rope so the drafts can’t diminish the efforts of a thick, popping fire in the stove.

Have a good time with your friends. Dip into the treasure chest of nature that Allamakee County offers.

Take home a few trout, and cook them up just for yourself with chanterelles on the side. Eat the whole mess of it by yourself, right before the relatives show up.

Then take a deep breath, and have an old-fashioned Iowa happy holiday. 🐾