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FEATURED

## Winter walk

**Hiking, enjoying outdoors in colder seasons has benefits**

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Dottie Warmbier, Gillian Harris, center, and Mark Sheehan look at some of the plants during a January 2016 winter hike.

Imagine walking through the woods without threat of biting ticks and itchy poison ivy. That's a possibility this time of year, after the leaves have fallen off the trees and the cold temperatures have killed off most of the biting insects.

Although she hikes year-round, Jill Vance, interpretive naturalist at Lake Monroe, really enjoys walking through the woods in late fall and winter. "Once all the vegetation has died off for the year, a lot of the things that I take people to see are easier to see," she explained. Those things include foundations from former houses still visible in the ground, unique geological formations and old roads.

"You can also get a much better sense of the lay of the land," Vance said. When venturing outside to get a historical perspective of the area, wintertime offers a better view of the topography of the land and allows people to see with their own eyes what's present and what was probably there 20, 50 or 100 years ago, she said.

Something else Vance does with participants for winter hikes is going off-trail. "You can't do that in the summer," she said. "The idea of the winter hike series that I do is that we go to a different place every time." That allows people to explore more areas. Vance said there's no one area near Lake Monroe that she sends people to explore during the winter months.

Kathy Ruesink and Dottie Warmbier are two people who have enjoyed winter hikes with Vance. Both

say it's a good time with the leaves off the trees to see the lay of the land and be able to see other geographic features. "There's always the possibility of finding some wonderful new thing: an irruptive bird or magical ice crystals, perhaps," Ruesink wrote in an email. She also noted that there's "no need for the insect deterrent arsenal" when hiking in the winter.

What Warmbie said she likes best is that "you get an unobstructed view of lay of the land and beautiful vistas reveal themselves. It's a great time to learn about geology of favorite hiking spots and begin to associate plants with different soils and terrains."

Dave Simcox has also been on winter hikes with Vance's group. He likes winter hiking because he can hike all day and have the woods to himself. "One thing to watch out for is that with all the leaf clutter, trails can be difficult to follow," he cautioned. "Make sure you have good paper maps and a compass. Cell phone coverage is not reliable, so some GPS mapping programs can run into difficulty. Some apps run off of satellite and are more reliable. Spending hours after sunset trying to find your way is dangerous."

Shane Gibson, environmental education director with Sycamore Land Trust, believes there's a beauty to each season of the year when hiking. The late fall and winter offer a time when "you're no longer encompassed by this green view," he said. "In the summer I can't see where I am." That changes in the winter "when you get into the woods, even if there's a dusting of snow, you can see every little ripple of the land. You see all the details and it brings out the character of the land," he explained.

Gibson said it's some of his hobbies that have helped him stay outside during winter. Those include hunting and maple syrup. He tells about watching a gray fox lay down near its den and then pouncing on grasshoppers while he was hunting. He's also watched mink playing.

Last February, Gibson said he and a neighbor were tapping trees for maple syrup when two mature bald eagles flew overhead. "They were talon to talon," he said, adding that one of them ran into a large branch of a tree and, with a loud crash, fell to the ground. "It all happened in about 20 seconds," Gibson said. "If I hadn't been outside, I never would have seen it."

Gibson also appreciates the peace and solitude of hiking in the winter. "I almost feel like I'm the only person there," he said. He often tracks animals on his sojourns and has led winter hikes at Trevlac Bluffs and Beanblossom Bottoms preserves.

#### Dressing properly for cold temps

Although many people will wear different clothes in winter than in summer, Vance said she wears "pretty much the same stuff" when it comes to her boots and socks. But she does wear layers of clothes that are easy to put on and take off. "The temperature you are when you start isn't the same temperature you're going to feel when you're 30 minutes into it," she explained.

Vance's recommendation is to wear wool or synthetics — anything but cotton. Warmbie said she makes sure she has warm gloves and socks and thinks waterproof boots are a plus. "And be sure to hydrate — the drier air will zap you before you know it," she said.

Being able to add and subtract layers of clothing is one of the benefits to winter hiking, as far as Ruesink is concerned. "It's always possible to add or subtract a layer of clothing in the winter, whereas in summer there's only so far you can go — and even not that far if you need to wear your insect repellent shirt and trousers," she said.

Fellow winter hiker Liz Robb believes wool socks are a must. She carries an extra pair. She also recommends heavy hiking boots and protection for ears, or a face mask. "Really, it is never too cold if

you have enough protection," she said. "Carry a walking stick if there is snow or ice or if you go off-trail."

In the winter, Gibson follows the three Ws of clothing: wicking, warmth and weather-proof. That means he wears clothes that wick moisture away from his body as the first layer, topped with warm clothes. When necessary, he then adds a weather-proof layer that can also act as a wind barrier. If he's not wearing his rain jacket, Gibson said it's often in his backpack, along with water. "Having it available is the important part," he said.

#### More on winter hiking

There are "first day" hikes and events scheduled for area parks and reservoirs.

- At Fairfax State Recreation Area at Lake Monroe, the fourth annual First Day Trail Run and Walk will begin at 3:30 p.m. The event is untimed and noncompetitive, with two different distances of about 4 miles and 1 1/3 miles. Runners and walkers of all fitness levels are welcome. Preregistration and event info is available at [bit.ly/firstdaytrail2017](http://bit.ly/firstdaytrail2017). Cost is \$15. People are encouraged to sign up by Dec. 30; all who do will get \$15 gift certificates from Fourwinds Resort and an embroidered patch. There will also be same-day registration.

- At Brown County State Park the Hills and Hollers hike will begin at 11 a.m. in front of the Abe Martin Lodge. The 1.5- to 2-mile hike will last about 1 hour. After the hike, a hot chocolate bar will be available at the lodge.

- At McCormick's Creek State Park there will be a canyon hike and photo contest. Participants should meet at 2 p.m. at the Canyon Inn. There will be a 3/4-mile hike that's easy to moderate. Participants can bring cameras or smart phones to take photos for an optional contest. Refreshments will be available at the end of the hike.

- At Patoka Lake, there will be a 3/4-mile hike on the scenic Garden Rock Loop trail that begins at 1 p.m. Meet at the nature center. The hike will last an hour. Hot chocolate will be available.

- At Shakamak State Park there will be a 3/4-mile hike that will take about 45 minutes. Meet at the Group Camp mess hall at 2 p.m. The Friends of Shakamak group and the park will offer hot cocoa, coffee and snacks. There will also be entertainment for all ages after the hike in the mess hall.

- At Spring Mill State Park there will be a 2.5-mile hike. Meet at 10 a.m. in the Lakeview Activity Center. Hot chocolate and coffee will be available in the activity center after the hike, courtesy of Spring Mill Inn.

There will be more winter hiking events January through March in state parks and at Lake Monroe. The annual off-trail hiking series at Lake Monroe will begin in January. For more about this, go to [bit.ly/monroelakeprograms](http://bit.ly/monroelakeprograms). Also, a winter hike on one of two self-guided trails will be Jan. 14 at Brown County State Park. There will be interpreters greeting people and a local Boy Scout troop will provide snacks.