

## Making the Most of Your Fall Hike

Fall is one of the best times of the year to get out into nature, and take your kids, to hike and explore. The cooler temperatures and changing leaves create unique opportunities to see changes in the natural world. In Shawnee County and across the state there are hundreds of miles of beautiful trails to be enjoyed!

To start your hiking adventures, you have to pick a trail! Locally, Shawnee County Parks and Recreation offers 50 miles of trails within the county. These trails include paved trails for kids just learning to ride their bikes and unpaved trails for the adventurous hiker. Consider visiting the Dornwood trails for a nature walk or look for wildlife at the Warren Nature Area. You can find a complete trail guide here: <https://parks.snco.us/DocumentCenter/View/1571>

If you're interested in seeing new parts of the state, the Kansas Department of Wildlife Parks and Tourism has wonderful trail guides for their more than 100 trails: <https://ksoutdoors.com/Services/Publications>

While hiking, don't forget to respect the written and unwritten rules of nature. One rule that is primarily unwritten is to leave trails, parks and forests as you find them! Make sure you have the permission of the land owner, if you're on private land before collecting rocks, flowers or insects. If you're on public land, like parks, think about what you're leaving for the next person. Will they miss what you're taking home with you? A great opportunity to teach our youth this valuable lesson is to encourage them to look at the things they find with their eyes only. As they look, ask them questions about what they're seeing. What color is that leaf? Are all the leaves on that tree the same color?

Another rule that is often posted in our state parks is to respect the wildlife. We may not have an abundance of bears in Kansas, but we do have bobcats, deer, groundhogs, squirrels, birds, otters and an abundance of aquatic life. If you come across an animal on your hike, give it space. Sometimes that may mean turning around and going back the way you came.

A lesson we all know is not to litter! Something less obvious is to teach our children when it's safe to pick up other people's litter. Although it's nice to leave our trails better than you found them, not all trash is safe to touch. If you plan to pick up litter, make sure to pack gloves and trash bags and talk about types of unsafe trash such as sharp objects and bottles of unidentifiable liquids.

A large part of why I enjoy hiking so much is taking my dogs with me. They enjoy the fresh air, exercise and jumping into any body of water that presents itself. Although I enjoy taking them, I also understand that they aren't welcome everywhere I want to go. Look out for posted signs that may indicate pets are not welcome. No matter what trail you're taking your dog on, make sure you have the needed supplies to clean up after them. It's also a good idea to pack a dog only water bottle and bowl just for them. There are many new products intended just for the task. Never allow your dogs to drink from puddles, streams or rivers as they can contain pathogens that make them sick.

As you hike, enhance the learning with books and activities! Books that help children identify trees, flowers and animals help them to look at the natural world with an inquisitive eye. Activities such as scavenger hunts encourage them to slow down and look for the tiniest details. Journaling can be an excellent nature-themed activity. Drawing leaves, insects and trees helps children to build an appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the natural world. Scouting for harmful plants, such as

poison ivy, or learning how to avoid ticks, empowers youth with skills they will use throughout their lifetimes.

With your magnifying glass, sunscreen and snacks packed away, you will be well equipped to enjoy our local treasures. Our county and state parks are for us all to enjoy and by following a few rules of etiquette we can make them places for us all to learn and love for years to come!