THE BANNER

10 hiking trails near Baltimore to help nourish your soul and stretch your legs

Rona Kobell

10/4/2026 5:30 a.m. EDT

A portion of the Serpentine Trail at Soldiers Delight Natural Environment Area in Owings Mills. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

Don’t miss these close-to-home beautiful spots to see fall foliage

Autumn in New York is the stuff of songs and cinema, but fall in Baltimore is pretty great, too. As is fitting for a population center of a state that dubs itself “America in Miniature,” the Baltimore region offers everything you could want: rivers, flatlands, hills, beaches,

waterfalls and the Chesapeake Bay. Some of our state parks are filled with history; others with fossils.

And the best way to experience all of this splendor in the fall is on a hike. Finally, it's not too hot and the mosquitoes are (mostly) gone. As a reporter covering the Chesapeake Bay for 20 years, I've been lucky to explore so much of the woods in our watershed, and I've become an avid hiker and tried, with mixed success, to get my kids to come out with me, too. Bribing them with Starbucks usually helps; hence, the importance of hikes not too deep in the wilderness.

Here are 10 hikes within 30 minutes of the city to suit various tastes, along with tips for how to get the most out of them.

For the social ones: Lake Roland

A pair of fawns along the shore of Lake Roland. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

This nature lover's paradise at the edge of Baltimore City and the county offers a lot of ways in. Some like to park along Falls Road near Brooklandville and stroll right into the woods; some prefer parking near the dam and walking out to hear the rushing water. I park at the Falls

Road Light Rail station – plenty of room, and an easy walk over a bridge and through the main park until the trails diverge. Hikes vary, but most of the trails are about 2 miles. Lake Roland is dog-friendly — there's a dog park — and child-friendly. Kids love the playground and the occasional art walks, not to mention the programs at the nature center.

I suggest walking from the light rail parking lot up the hill past the playground, then left down the redone steps and across the railroad tracks. Then you're in the woods. Once you get down the steps, the trail is flat and pretty easy, though you can peel off onto a more difficult one. Turtles bask on logs, leaves crunch underfoot, and birds chirp overhead. You might see some deer cross in front of you! You're deep in the woods, but less than a mile from pizza and mocha lattes. Plus, you will run into a lot of people you know and a lot of friendly dogs you might want to know.

For those seeking seclusion: Severn Run

If you don't want to run into another human being, consider Severn Run in Anne Arundel County. The Indian Landing Road Trailhead at Severn Run Natural Environment Area is a mouthful, which might be why more people don't know about it. Sandy Point State Park rangers manage the woods here, but I've never seen a ranger, much less anyone else, on the 4-mile hike. You come for the seclusion and the views of the Severn River. Park in the lot on Dicus Mill Road, near Najoles Road.

The terrain here is flat, though be mindful of tree roots, pebbles, and larger rocks. The airport nearby and the highway make the walk a little noisy. You may see a few paddlers, but mostly this place lives off the grid. There's also plenty of shade.

For the rock scramblers: Rocks State Park

If you think you are in decent shape, the climb to the King and Queen Seats of Rocks State Park will humble you. These fantastical rock formations rise 190 feet above Deer Creek in Jarrettsville, a particularly picturesque corner of Harford County. The hike is about 3 miles, but distance is a bit misleading when you are essentially ascending rocks.

When I climbed it years ago with my kids, I had to keep reminding them to wait up. If you have good hiking boots, this is the time to wear them.

The views from the top are spectacular, and not many places around here deliver this kind of thrill. When you're done, if it's still warm enough, you can take a dip in Deer Creek. You can access the climb at the Rock Ridge Picnic Area or from the Rapids parking lot.

For chasing waterfalls: Kilgore Falls

Kilgore Falls in Harford County. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

Though technically part of Rocks State Park, Kilgore Falls is 5 miles north on a separate 67-acre parcel. Instead of the King and Queen Seat, it features a 17-foot waterfall, Maryland's second-highest vertical drop in a falls. In a word, this place is magical. No wonder Tuck Everlasting was filmed here.

There's a little more than half a mile of hiking to the waterfall and back, though the windy trails make it feel longer. While you're there, say a silent thank you to the elementary school students who saved their pennies and quite literally saved the falls from development in the

1980s. Without them, this beautiful state park could be little more than a water feature for a housing development.

You can do Rocks and the falls on the same day, but you need a reservation for the 28-spot parking lot at the falls, so plan ahead and reserve your parking.

For fossil hunters: Soldiers Delight

Soldiers Delight Natural Environment Area in Owings Mills. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

Less than a mile from shopping and townhouses is the largest protected and undeveloped mass of serpentine bedrock in the United States. It is about 500 million years old, a fact sure to impress any reluctant teenager you have brought here for some away-from-screen time.

Because Soldier's Delight Natural Environment Area is an island of oceanic rock, you find rare wildflowers here that don't grow anywhere else. Trees here don't grow too tall, given the bedrock's origin in magma and generally rocky soils. But it's still a gorgeous place to see foliage. Follow the Serpentine Trail and the hike is about three rigorous miles.

For the bird lovers: Cromwell Valley Park

A migrating Palm Warbler forages along the Minebank Trail at Cromwell Valley Park. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

Don't let the construction dissuade you. This park off Interstate 695 near Towson is open but you can only use the Sherwood Farm entrance for the time being. Cromwell Valley is great all year, but it shines during spring and fall migration season. In the fall, you can catch sharp-shinned hawks, warblers and finches.

After parking at the Sherwood entrance, you have a choice of trails, which are all about 2-4 miles, and some shorter. I like the Willow Grove Trail because it takes you to a meadow where there is an old sycamore tree that looks stunning against the backdrop of a crisp autumn day. Keep walking through the woods for a loop with a view of the Loch Raven Reservoir.

For the family archaeologist: Patapsco Valley State Park

The Patapsco River rounds a bend in Patapsco State Park. (Jerry Jackson/The Banner)

Patapsco Valley State Park is so popular and so large that it has several different entrances and a reservation system that often fills up on weekends by mid-morning. One solution: head to the less popular Alberton Road trailhead. Park in the tiny gravel lot off Dogwood Road, just west of Hollifield Road. Keep walking past a half-buried car from the 1960s on the opposite riverbank.

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You're on your way to about a 3-mile hike along the river to the ruins of Daniels, a one-time mining town that stood until 1972, when Hurricane Agnes killed what remained of a company community that had lost its mining company. There are fewer ruins every time I go, but you can still climb steps from an old church and you may spot some gravestones. It's a perfect prelude to Halloween. Afterwards, lunch options abound in Ellicott City.

For the leisurely stroller: NCR Trail

Officially The Torrey C. Brown Rail Trail, this 21-mile path stretches all the way to the Pennsylvania border. It follows the former North-Central Railroad line and is named for the former Department of Natural Resources secretary who ensured its preservation.

This trail is popular and offers several waypoints. I park at Paper Mill and then bike to the Monkton train station. But that's about 7 miles each way, so if you're walking, you might want to turn around at Phoenix (about 1.5 miles) or Sparks (3.8 miles).

For the History buff: North Point State Park

This Eastern Baltimore County park is peaceful now, but in the early 1800s, it was the site of several skirmishes between the Americans and British. North Point is proud of its role in the War of 1812, and different groups hold reenactments and events throughout the year.

Given its perch on the water, the park has also been a historic stopover for birds, particularly the wading ones that also love nearby Hart-Miller Island. Bring binoculars and also your mosquito spray. Trails are marked and have different mileages, but most are between 1 and 4 miles.

For city dwellers who don't want to go far: Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park

In 1922, J. Wilson Leakin died and bequeathed several downtown buildings to the city he loved, instructing Baltimore to sell them,purchase a wilderness park with the money, and name it after him. The city announced that it instead wanted to use the money to buy smaller parcels for playgrounds and ended up fighting the Leakin heirs in court.

Thankfully, cooler heads — namely Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. — prevailed. The famous landscape architect talked city officials into buying the first 243 acres of what would become one of the United States' largest urban wilderness parks. Adding parcels over the years

has resulted in one combined 1,216-acre park.

Where to begin? I like to start at the trailhead next to the I-95 interchange near Ravens Stadium and Carroll Park. This is a 4.5 mile hike, but you can add to it or make it shorter, as it connects to other parts of the sprawling park. There's something extraordinary about how quickly the city noise and stadium views disappear. Ten minutes in and it feels like West Virginia, all colors and gorges and stone ruins and solitude. Almost heaven? Definitely.

Rona Kobell
rona.kobell@thebaltimorebanner.com

Rona Kobell is a regional reporter covering Baltimore County. Before joining The Banner, she worked as an environmental reporter in the region for nearly 20 years at The Baltimore Sun and the Chesapeake Bay Journal.

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