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WEEKEND

Finding an escape is a walk in the park

Local outposts provide serene scenery, wildlife viewing and places to hike or swim 9



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The clock is finally ticking down on summer.

It's not that we don't love long, steamy days. In any other year, we'd grin and bear the jokes about D.C.'s swamp-like weather. But when you can't find relief from the heat at the pool or movie theater or your usual beach getaway, it's easier to stay home in the air conditioning — you know, the same place where you've been sitting around for months.

As the all-enveloping humidity eases, however, we've been venturing out to different parks for socially distanced fun. Some of these are longtime favorites, while others are places we've only begun to take advantage more recently. Whether you're looking to explore a waterfall, spot rare plants and birds, or go wading with the kids at a beach, one of these nearby destinations will provide some relief.

Fort Smallwood Park

The northern tip of Anne Arundel County, overlooking the confluence of the Patapsco River and the Chesapeake Bay, and within sight of Baltimore's harbor, was once the perfect place to build a

Commune with nature

Visiting local parks can be welcome relief from summer heat, pandemic fears

BY FRITZ HAHN, ANGELA HAUPT AND MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

fort protecting Maryland's largest city. A century later, those same attributes make Fort Smallwood Park a wonderful place to spend a day with the family, splashing in the water with a pup, or just sitting alone with a fishing pole.

Stretching for 90 acres, the main attraction for most visitors are the beaches facing the Bay, separated by narrow jetties. The water is calm, warm and shallow — perfect for wading and floats. (Pro tip: The beach right next to the parking lot fills quickly; if you can't safely distance from other groups, keep walking down to another beach to find room to lay your towels.) Dogs are allowed to join their owners in the water at

the beach furthest from the parking lot.

On the other side of the peninsula, the Bill Burton Fishing Pier extends 380 feet into the Patapsco River, providing plenty of space for anglers, though many seem content to try their luck at the edge of the water, casting their lines and settling into a camp chair. Nearby are picnic groves, a playground and benches offering fantastic views of the water; the Key Bridge and Baltimore beyond.

While enjoying a day out, it's worth knowing about the site's history, too. Built to defend Baltimore in the 1880s — the boxy concrete Battery Hartshorne, long stripped of guns or interesting features, is all

that remains of the fortifications — Fort Smallwood was sold to Baltimore City in 1929. Its beaches and recreation grounds became a popular day-trip destination for White Baltimore families, many of whom came by ferry. After a lawsuit, the city opened a separate, segregated area for Black families in 1951, which was used until Maryland parks were desegregated in 1954.

9500 Fort Smallwood Rd., Pasadena. aacounty.org. \$6 per vehicle (cash only). — FH

Huntley Meadows Park

On the winding boardwalk at Huntley Meadows Park, you'll see splendid birds — Great Blue Her-

ons, red-winged blackbirds — and various species of turtles, frogs, toads and snakes. You can spot a beaver lodge, which may or may not be occupied. Maybe you'll spy a muskrat if you're lucky, or even an otter.

The Alexandria park, home to vast, lively wetlands, is one of the best wildlife-watching spots in the region. It's a photographer's dream. The half-mile boardwalk over the wetlands is the highlight of any visit, says park manager Karen Sheffield. But be aware that there are strict rules to preserve the habitat: no pets, even if you're carrying your pooch. No yelling, which could disturb the residents. And no bikes, scooters or skateboards, though strollers are permitted.

Outside the wetlands, walk a two-mile trail system that curves through lush forest. There's a mile-long portion that's paved, and bikes and pets are permitted there. It ends at a viewing platform with a 360-degree perspective of the wetlands.

Historic Huntley, an 1825 mansion a half-mile up the road, is also managed by the park. It was built for Thomson Francis Mason,

While walking along the winding boardwalk at Huntley Meadows Park, visitors can see Great Blue Herons, red-winged blackbirds and various species of turtles, frogs, toads and snakes.

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the mayor of Alexandria from 1827 to 1830 who was also George Mason's grandson. Reserve a private family tour of the interior of the house — an opportunity to admire 19th-century architecture and design. Before departing, Sheffield recommends walking to the top of the hill that rolls around the home; you'll be rewarded with dramatic views of Huntley Meadows.

In addition to the mansion tours, the park is continuing to offer varied programming during the pandemic. In-person programs are either open to the public with capped attendance, or reserved for families and small groups by request.

3701 Lockheed Blvd., Alexandria. fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/huntley-meadows. Free. — AH

Lady Bird Johnson Park

Seemingly located on Virginia's side of the Potomac but altogether an asset of the District, Lady Bird Johnson Park is a tranquil spot with remarkable views — which are largely underappreciated 364 days a year. In 1968, Columbia Island was renamed as the park to honor the former first lady's contributions toward the beautification of Washington and other American cities. (It's still, however, commonly known as Columbia Island; Columbia Island Marina is a popular spot for boaters and paddlers.)

Among the park's highlights is the Lyndon Baines Johnson Memorial Grove on the Potomac, built in the mid-1970s as a living memorial to the late president. It features a compact white pine forest and pleasing pine needle floor — as enchanted as it gets for a park wedged between the George Washington Memorial Parkway and the Pentagon. With picnic tables and benches, a flagstone pathway to a granite monolith, and a view across the Potomac to the Washington Monument, and Lincoln and Jefferson memorials, it's a fitting celebration of the Johnsons, who used to stop here and enjoy the same view when they drove into Washington. Decades later, it's worth stopping for nature and solitude, save on the Fourth of July, when it's overrun with merrymakers.

The 17-acre park also includes the stunning Navy and Marine Memorial, nicknamed "Waves and Gulls," an aluminum sculpture that's surrounded by an explosion of tulips in the spring. The marina, open daily, offers prepared sandwiches, salads and snacks; their kayak rentals are on hold at least through this year.

Accessed via the Mount Vernon Trail (on foot or bicycle) and the southbound lanes of the George Washington Memorial Parkway (by car). nps.gov. Free. — MDGK

Prince William Forest Park

The air smells different at Prince William Forest Park: fresh, floral, musky. Credit the 15,000 acres of trees and abundant vegetation for that.

The park in Triangle, adjacent to Quantico Marine Corps Base, is one of the largest green spaces in the Washington region, which makes it particularly appealing as the pandemic lingers — there's no need to worry about bumping up against your fellow outdoorsmen.

Come prepared for activity: There are 37 miles of hiking trails and 21 for biking. Chris Alford, the park's chief of interpretation and visitor services, recommends starting with the South Valley Trail. It's 9.7 miles long and runs parallel to Quantico Creek, offering a full sense of the park's natural beauty. Pets are welcome.

The park is a terrific spot for birdwatchers: songbirds, Barred owls, wood ducks and belted kingfishers are all regulars. More than 900 species of plants live in the forest — such as rare mosses and striking wildflowers — and freshwater sponges grow in the creek.

Come for a day, or for an isolated vacation. Choose from an assortment of camping options, including traditional tent camping in Oak Ridge Campground and remote backcountry camping in Chopawamsic Backcountry Area. Groups can rent rustic cabins that were built in the 1930s; four of the five have a spot on the National Register of Historic Places. They were initially used as summer camps for underprivileged kids from the District, and repurposed during World War II into a spy training area.

18170 Park Entrance Rd., Triangle. nps.gov/prwi. \$10-\$20 (valid for seven consecutive days). Sept. 26 is a fee-free day. — AH

Scott's Run Nature Preserve

If every hike ended at a gorgeous waterfall, I'd go on a lot more hikes. At least that's what I tell myself at Scott's Run Nature Preserve.

Scott's Run, one of two designated nature preserves in Fairfax County, is only a mile north of the Beltway and a few miles downstream from the better-known Great Falls. Hiking trails crisscross more than 300 acres, climbing through hardwood forest and meandering next to the rocky stream that gives the park its name.

Most visitors take the easier route, following the half-mile trail that begins in the western parking lot and leads to the Potomac River. It's a relatively gentle gravel path, with one moderately steep hill, and two stream crossings that involve hopping between wide concrete steppingstones. The banks of Scott's Run offer spots for picnics, or just sitting and enjoying nature.

The real reward, however, is



TONI L. SANDYS/THE WASHINGTON POST

Lady Bird Johnson Park, originally known as Columbia Island, was renamed in 1968, as the park to honor the former first lady's contributions toward the beautification of Washington and other cities.



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Spirit of Justice Park, built in 1969 atop parking garages for Cannon and Longworth House office buildings, is a serene spot for lunching, relaxing on benches or lazing on the lawn.



FRITZ HAHN/THE WASHINGTON POST

Fort Smallwood Park in Pasadena stretches for 90 acres, and its main attraction for most visitors are the beaches facing the Chesapeake Bay, separated by narrow jetties.

when the trail dead-ends at the Potomac River. Ahead are rocky shores with an unobstructed view of the river, with boulders jutting from the water and trees lining the banks, looking far more majestic than it does flowing through the city. To the left, up a trail that involves scrambling across large rocks, is the waterfall, which pours into a clear pool.

There are almost always people in the water, wearing swimsuits and posing for selfies. That said, it should be noted that the Fairfax County Park Authority does not want you wading in the creek or splashing underneath the waterfall. Beyond signs warning of \$250 fines for entering the water, the park's website includes images of water rescues, warns of strong undertows, and links to an article titled "Scott's Run: Terrific, Torrential, Treasured and Terrifying."

7400 Georgetown Pike, McLean. fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/scotts-run. Free. — FH

Spirit of Justice Park

Perched just a block south of the U.S. Capitol may be one of the most delightful — and best disguised — green roofs in the city. Spirit of Justice Park, built in 1969 atop parking garages for Cannon and Longworth House office buildings, is a serene public spot for lunching at tables, relaxing on benches or lazing on the lawn. The two-block park, part of the Capitol grounds, is bisected by South Capitol Street and has wide pathways lined with deep pink crepe myrtle blossoms and several varieties of hollies. Each of the twin sections has a large fountain (turned off this year) surrounded by butterfly gardens with roses, echinacea and dogwood.

Critics of the park maintain that because it's a roof, the space can't support trees large enough for ample shade, but recent visits verify lovely shade spots just pleading for picnickers. In the mornings, some neighbors walk their dogs here, and the occasional pedestrian strolls through, but during this time — without House staffers frequenting the park during the workday — it's often vacant. Both sections of the park have somewhat hidden entrances, which is why some locals don't even know it exists; accessible entryways are located on C Street between South Capitol Street and New Jersey Avenue for the upper park and South Capitol between C and D streets for the lower park. Parking is restricted around much of the park; if you're driving, park south of D Street on New Jersey Avenue or 1st Street, SE.

Follow the signs along a twisting path through pine barrens, even though it sometimes becomes no more than a trace. The path crosses a grassy meadow, where butterflies flit about, before a short trail leads to the Bog's gates. You can be in and out in less than an hour, but it's an excursion unlike any other inside the Beltway.

Main gate in the 6000 block of Suitland Rd., Suitland. The Department of Parks and Recreation suggests parking at the Suitland Community Center (5600 Regency Ln., Suitland) and entering the Bog by a trail at the intersection of Regency Lane and Regency Parkway. pgparks.com/3237/Suitland-Bog. Free. — FH

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Suitland Bog

"Bog," like "swamp," isn't a romantic word, and doesn't sound like a place you'd want to visit. But the Suitland Bog is neither gloomy or desolate. It's a rare example of a type of wetlands that once covered a wide swath of Maryland — the last surviving example of its kind in Prince George's County, saved from development in the 1970s, and home to a number of plants that appear on Maryland's "Rare, Threatened or Endangered" list.

A circular wooden boardwalk winds around the Bog, occasionally blocked by ferns and flowering plants, and over pools of water. The area is shaded by tall magnolia trees, and the air is filled by the songs of frogs and birds. You might catch the rancid odor of wild raisin, which uses its stench to attract pollinators, or admire the bright purple blooms of a wildflower named Handsome Harry. The real attractions, at least for some of us, are populations of carnivorous plants: Stoop for a closer look at the champagne flute-shaped cup of a pitcher plant, for example, and you might find remnants of bugs that were lured in, trapped, drowned and digested. (Isn't nature cool?)

The Bog lacks signs guiding visitors to the most rare or impressive specimens; a 2000 Post story revealed that park rangers don't want to guide plant thieves to the natural treasures. Instead, download a plant identification app, such as Picture-This, to figure out what's caught your eye.

Despite its importance, the Suitland Bog feels unloved. Its gates on Suitland Road are chained shut outside special events because of problems with illegal dumping. Instead, visitors to the Bog have to park at the nearby Suitland Community Center, cross a four-lane street and follow a lonely-looking trail into the woods. There are no large maps or welcome signs: Just a wooden post next to the sidewalk reading "Suitland Bog 1/2 Mile."

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