

**St. Charles Park District
Nature News – September 25**

If you listen to the radio or watch TV much, you've probably noticed that tourism officials for the state of Michigan have picked 2009 as The Year to Spend A Lot on Advertising. You may even have noticed that they picked a famous resident to make the sales pitch—Tim Allen, of Home Improvement and Santa Clause fame. (I'll admit, I didn't make that connection until my friend Lisa pointed it out. But, boy, if they'd used a western chorus frog or eastern screech owl, I'd have been all over it...)

Anyway, for the last nine months or so, the ads have been touting all that Michigan has to offer—snowy winter wonderlands, endless sandy shorelines, challenging but breathtaking golf courses, lush vineyards, world-class wineries...and now, drop-dead gorgeous fall colors. Just this morning I heard Mr. Allen cooing about a “slow dance of turning leaves,” the “crescendo of a trillion trees aflame,” and “an entire state in its annual blaze of glory.” He encouraged us to “get up, get out and go see something we'll remember for the rest of our lives” and noted that “This show is appropriate for all ages. This show is pure Michigan.”

Allen's voice is so soothing, and the ad copy so smooth, it was all I could do to not run to the computer and start my trip, as he suggests, at Michigan.org. because I'm a big fan of Michigan. I spent part of every summer of my growing-up years at our family's cabin in Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Tucked away from the tourist towns, nestled along the Menominee River, the cabin is indeed a place that “can flood our minds with memories of the greatest times we will ever know,” to quote another Michigan ad. It's surrounded by woods and water, and wildlife so abundant we sometimes had to chase it out of the cabin with a broom (something you probably won't hear in any ad campaign).

It's also about a seven hour drive from here. I don't know about you, but I don't have that many hours to spend every time I get the urge to see “Mother Nature put on a whole new wardrobe” and “look at life in a whole new way.”

What I do have, though, are a lot of magnificent natural areas only a few minutes from my front door. And guess what? You do too.

For one, there's Norris Woods in St. Charles. The red, white and bur oaks in this Illinois Nature Preserve are ready to burst forth with rich hues of russet and bronze, a palette of earth tones new and exciting, yet warm and familiar all at once. Peppered between them are shagbark hickories, whose glorious compound leaves soon will turn the sort of gold that positively glows when warmed by the autumn sun. Walk on a day when the wind is calm and boat traffic is minimal, and you'll get a double feature—colors overhead and again down below as they reflect off the glassy surface of the Fox River.

A little farther west, at Johnson's Mound Forest Preserve in Elburn, sugar and black maples are the stars of the seasonal show. The bold yellows meld together to form a radiant saffron canopy that brightens the woods—and your mood—even on gloomy days.

Tim Allen says that Michigan's fall color show has free admission, and great seats are available everywhere. We can say the same thing about our own dazzling displays, waiting nearby for you to come out and enjoy. Say yes to pure Michigan, if you'd like, but be sure to give a nod to pure Kane too.

* * *

Along with fall color comes cooler temperatures. What better way to stay warm than with a crackling fire? The St. Charles Park District Naturalist Department is selling mixed hardwood (oak, hickory, cherry) firewood for \$90/face cord. Add another \$10 if you'd like your load delivered. Pickups are 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturdays through October 17 at the district's Primrose Service Center, 37W755 Bolcum Rd. Questions? Call restoration manager Denis Kania at 630-513-4367.

Pam Otto is the manager of nature programs and interpretive services for the St. Charles Park District. She can be reached at potto@st-charlesparks.org or 630-513-4346.