

Take a hike

Exploring the best of the area's walking trails

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When Doug Schanzenbach took up recreational walking years ago, the rest of his family wasn't interested in joining him.

"My wife will walk for a few miles but my son's not into it and my daughter's sort of asthmatic," he explained.

Schanzenbach eventually found a friend in fellow walker Kent Barker and together the two trekked all over the Twin Cities metro.

"Kent would never drive out here, though," Schanzenbach recalled. "So I declared it my territory."

While Barker still leads walks around the Twin Cities metro with the Minnesota Lifestyle Center, Schanzenbach has started his own walking club in Chaska. For the last three years he has led people on some of the area's better known walks and also its best kept secrets.

The Chaska Walkers Club meets Wednesdays evenings at the Chaska Community Center. So far this summer, the group, which includes three regulars plus Schanzenbach, has tackled the Arboretum, the chain of lakes in northern Chaska, the dike trail along the Minnesota River and the Minnesota River bluffs near Flying Cloud airport.

"We have had great weather and great hikes, though we got into wood ticks (and mud and berries and amazing scenery) on that last walk," Schanzenbach wrote.

Schanzenbach has about 20 walks within a 12-mile area that he has discovered over the years. Each has its own unique qualities that Schanzenbach lives for sharing with others, even if that means only one other person. For him, it's not necessarily about having gobs of people along on his walks.

"I'm not in it for the money," he explained.

"If I can share it with just one person, I'm happy."

Getting in touch

For Schanzenbach, there is more to walking than fresh air and exercise. Walking promotes a better understanding of your environment.

"If you are a walker and periodically visit the trails within your local 'tribal zone' you will see the habitat, the effects of erosion, the development, the things that work, the things that don't, the condition of the infrastructure, where there might be danger, where people have insulated themselves from their surroundings, how money is made, the things we throw away, the things we undervalue, and the things we should aspire to," he wrote.

"You can learn the names of the flowers, birds, plants, streets, wild animals and, once you know that, how these elements of your environment look at different times of the year and how well they are doing in our changing environment.

"You can learn history and how old things look different from new things and what was good about the old and what is good about the new. You don't get all this on a treadmill."

Margaret Schrank would agree. Schrank, who lives in Shakopee, regularly walks the trails at Louisville Swamp in the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge (one of Schanzenbach's top five walks). On her walks she has encountered deer, turkeys, beavers, badgers and her fair share of wood ticks. Every walk brings a different experience.

"It changes so much from spring to summer to fall to winter," she said.

Last winter, she donned a pair of cross-country skis and explored the swamp in its snowy wonder just before spring set in.

"It was great," she said.

For Darrold Holtz, walking Chaska's chain of lakes trail in north Chaska provides a necessary break in the day. An engineer at Mammoth Inc., Holtz regularly slips out the door at lunch, grabs a walking stick and hits the trail.

"I do that five days a week," he said. "It helps me work up a good appetite for lunch."

Holtz, too, has had his own encounters with Chaska's wildlife, running into deer and spotting the occasional hawk on his walks.

Top five

Schanzenbach's top five walks run the gamut as far area sights are concerned. At the top of his list is the Arboretum with its acres of flower gardens and tree-lined drive.

"There are so many people-friendly places to walk with different habitats, labeled plants,

great bird watching, an art event each summer (this year Secret Gardens), ski trails, specialty hikes and many events," he explained.

In contrast to the finely manicured lawns of the Arboretum are numbers three and four on his list: the rough and tumble trails in the Minnesota Valley National Wildlife Refuge. The Chaska unit, behind Athletic Park, is prone to frequent flooding and a mosquito breeding ground in summer.

"It's not a good walk right now," Schanzenbach noted.

But the egrets that inhabit the swamp can more than make up for the mud and muck that one has to wade through to catch a glimpse of Chaska Lake.

Equally primitive is the Louisville Swamp's maze of trails, some 13 miles, where a worn path through a grove of oak trees quickly gives way to a carpet of swamp plants whose only indication of a path is a recent footstep marring their green leaves.

But ripe raspberries and fresh mushrooms, fields of wildflowers, stunning views and a bald eagle soaring high above the swamp all beckons walkers to trudge ahead.

Schanzenbach's number two walk, Chaska's chain of lakes, makes the list for its continuity.

"You can walk for over six miles on trails of various quality continuously from the Spring Peeper Meadow parking lot on 82nd Street to the intersection of Highway 212 and Yellow Brick Road (or to the river along the flood control channel)," he wrote.

Its close proximity to the heart of Chaska makes it an ideal trail for enjoying the city's green space through a host of activities from a simple lunch-time escape to an evening dog walking to a challenging bike ride.

"It's so much better than walking along Highway 41," said Holtz.

Number five on Schanzenbach's list isn't about escaping into nature at all. Its focus, rather, is to pay homage to Chaska's history from the Guardian Angels Catholic Church to the old livery stable to the city's Indian mounds in City Square Park.

It's one walk that Schanzenbach doesn't have to scout out first for washed out bridges or trails. Urban paths are usually in fairly usable shape.

"Sidewalks are meant to be walked on," said Schanzenbach.

Other walks that made Schanzenbach's list include the Jonathan trail system, the LRT trails and cemeteries.

"Cemeteries can make for interesting walks and lead to interest in local history," he wrote. "These are places to remember some old friends, too."

But Schanzenbach adds that not every walk has to be a destination walk. He reminds people that neighborhood walks can be just as fruitful.

"Walks don't have to be rural," he said. "Know your neighborhood. Share your walks."

1. Minnesota Landscape Arboretum

Features: A variety of manicured gardens, pasturelands full of trees in different habitats, numerous trails and regular exhibits.

Access: The Arboretum entrance is located just west of the intersection of highways 5 and 41.

Hours: 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. year-round (closed on Thanksgiving and Christmas)

Admission: \$7 for adults. Arboretum members and children under 15 are free. The Arboretum is free to everyone on Thursdays after 4:30 p.m.

More info: www.arboretum.umn.edu

2. Chaska's chain of lakes/East Creek trail system

Features: Big woods giving way to Chaska's chain of lakes. Includes Big Woods Lake, McKnight Lake and Lake Grace.

Access: Start at the very northern edge of Chaska, parking at the Spring Peeper Meadow parking lot off of 82nd Street. The trail begins across the street, just behind Mammoth Inc.

Hours: No restrictions

Admission: Free

More info: www.chaskacommunitycenter.com/pdf/ChaskaMap_Amy_11x14.pdf

3. Chaska Lake trail and dike trails

Features: Chaska Lake, home to a healthy population of egrets, and great views of the Minnesota River.

Access: The Chaska Lake trail begins behind Athletic Park. The dike trails can be accessed just south of the Carver County Justice Center.

Hours: No restrictions

Admission: Free

More info: <http://midwest.fws.gov/minnesotavalley/chaska.html>

4. Louisville Swamp

Features: Prairie lands, big woods, a picturesque swamp and a multitude of trails to explore.

Access: Parking for the trail head is located off of Highway 169, about four miles south of Chaska. Turn right on 145 Street and follow the road over two sets of railroad tracks. The parking lot will be located on your left.

Hours: No restrictions

Admission: Free

More info: <http://midwest.fws.gov/minnesotavalley/louisville.html>

5. Historic Downtown Chaska

Features: Plenty of beautiful old Chaska-brick buildings and houses.

Access: Ample on-street parking with a city-owned lot on East Second Street behind Chestnuts Restaurant.

Hours: No restrictions

Admission: Free

More info: Brochures highlighting historic Chaska are available at the Chaska Historical Society/Chamber of Commerce, 112 East Fourth Street.