

## Nature in the Neighborhood – October 2024 – Spending Time Outdoors

Want to sleep better? Reduce anxiety? Then try spending more time outdoors. There's no question that doing so improves physical health, but study after study shows that it helps with mental health as well. And, in this day and age, with media overload and news-related anxiety, who couldn't benefit by lowering the stress level in their lives?

A prescription for spending time outdoors may be just what the doctor orders--literally. Dr. Robert Zarr, a pediatrician at Unity Health Care in Washington, D.C., is the founder of "Park Rx America" ([parkrxamerica.org](http://parkrxamerica.org)), a nonprofit that encourages doctors to prescribe that patients spend time in nearby parks to improve mental health and reduce risks of certain physical conditions, such as heart disease, diabetes, and hypertension.

Rather than just telling patients to "exercise more" or "eat healthier," he recommends that physicians write a specific prescription, naming where to go, the activity to do, and for how long (for example, "walk in a nearby park for 30 minutes, 3 times per week.") Park prescriptions seem to be catching on. Just this spring, the National Park Service held a ParkRx Day for people to get outside and celebrate the healing power of parks and the great outdoors ([nps.gov/subjects/healthandsafety/park-rx.htm](http://nps.gov/subjects/healthandsafety/park-rx.htm)).

But you don't have to wait for a doctor's prescription; you can, as Dr. Zarr suggests, write your own prescription: name an outdoor place where you feel safe and comfortable; plan the activity you enjoy; and decide how often, on which days of the week, and for how long ([parkrxamerica.org/patients/write-your-own-nature-prescription.php](http://parkrxamerica.org/patients/write-your-own-nature-prescription.php))

You may be saying to yourself as you read this, "Yeah, right, if I only had the time." But keep in mind that studies have shown that just 120 minutes a week in an outdoor, natural setting results in health benefits and a greater sense of wellbeing ([nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3](http://nature.com/articles/s41598-019-44097-3)). It seems we should all be able to take two hours out of a busy, stress-filled week in order to feel better.

As for where to go, we're lucky to have a number of parks, forests, and beaches in our neighborhood to help fill the prescription. A partial list includes:

Swampscott: **Harold A. King Forest**, 47 acres of undeveloped natural forest and wetlands; **Charles M. Ewing Woods**, a small, wooded parcel nestled in a residential area near the new elementary school; and **Upper Jackson Park**, 12 acres of woodland of mature oaks and a lovely stand of white pines adjacent to the High School. There's also **Linscott Park** and **Phillips Park**. As for beaches, there's **Fisherman's, New Ocean House, Whales, and Phillips, with adjacent Palmer Pond**.

Lynn: **Lynn Woods Reservation**, with over 2,200 acres and more than 30 miles of scenic trails; and **Lynn Heritage State Park** and **Red Rock Park**, coastal walks with views of Nahant Bay.

Saugus: **Breakheart Reservation**, 600-acre forest featuring walking rails, swimming holes, and beautiful natural scenery.

And don't forget the neighborhood rail trails, including those in Marblehead, Salem, Danvers, as well as the **Northern Strand Community Trail** that connects Everett, Malden, Revere, Saugus, and Lynn and offers lovely vistas of the Saugus River.

So, consider writing yourself a park prescription today and boosting your mood by getting outside in our neighborhood!

### **A word on the Community Preservation Act**

The health benefits of being outdoors is all the more reason why communities need to invest in expanding and improving the open space in their neighborhoods. One tool for doing this is the Commonwealth's Community Preservation Act (CPA). Supported by organizations such as Audubon, the Trust for Public Land, and Essex County Greenbelt Association, the CPA is something 195 Massachusetts communities, including the Northshore communities of Salem, Nahant, and Peabody, have already taken advantage of. By adopting the CPA, these communities have created a reliable funding source to help pay for open space improvements.

After receiving strong support from its Select Board and approval at the spring town meeting, Swampscott has placed adoption of the CPA on the ballot for the November election. If adopted, Swampscott would implement a 1.5% surcharge on the real estate tax bill (with an exemption for the first \$100,000 of residential and commercial property, as well as exemptions for many seniors and those with low-income). Just as important, its adoption would make the town eligible for state matching funds from the Commonwealth's Community Preservation Trust Fund. Since the state gets the money for this match from fees on all Registry of Deeds real estate transactions, property owners in non-CPA communities are paying into the statewide fund without getting any of the benefits.

As the Swampscott Conservancy believes that the CPA would benefit the town by giving it a dedicated resource to expand and improve open space, we strongly supports its passage.