

# Nebraska Geographic

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**Oct. 30, 2024**

## **Falling for Fall Foliage**

The northeast United States is known for its autumnal displays of blazing fall foliage. Some of our more forested surrounding states have massive explosions of color when summer drains to fall. I think all of that is really cool. But you know what, autumn on the Nebraska prairie is no slouch either. Although our fall palette could often be accurately described as subdued, our greens, yellows, golds, and reds combine for a fall show that is just as glorious in my opinion. Here are few of my favorite leaf peeping destinations and a some fall foliage exploration tips for your next autumn adventure.

Calamus Reservoir State Recreation Area, especially the northern fringe, displays some impressive fall colors when conditions are just right. Thickets and shrubs reflect in dark reds against straw-colored golden grasses. The cottonwood trees flash in uniform pale yellow that turns almost neon when illuminated by the setting sun. They dangle until a hard freeze and fierce winds send the leaves sailing, the full bouquet of the magnificent trees becoming denuded, reduced to bare barked skeletons, almost overnight.

When the autumnal equinox arrives, and native prairie grasses are coming into season, this is the time of year when bluestem really shines. There are several varieties that display a natural kaleidoscope of colors like reddish, pinkish, orange, copper, gold, and a burgundy color that I think of as being the color of merlot. Statewide, big bluestem, and Nebraska's official state grass – little bluestem – hold their autumn colors long after most tree leaves have blown down and become brown and brittle. Prairie hillsides, wildlife management areas, and buffers between farm fields are good places to see bluestem.

Binoculars come in especially handy, allowing for close up looks without wading through and filling your socks with burrs, spines, and stickers. Which reminds me, watch out for poison ivy this time of year. The leaves of the plant turn beautiful with yellow, orange, and red. Don't get too close. Also remember that fall weather can change abruptly from what feels like an Indian Summer day to early winter in only minutes with a quick shift of the wind.

Last fall, while traveling west of Arnold, the South Loup River Valley was ablaze with miles of golden cottonwoods. Even from a couple miles away on Nebraska Highway 92, the scene was impressive. Simultaneously, on the hills in the

surrounding area, small groups of cottonwoods were equally brilliant. When leaf peeping in the area I suggest grabbing some coffee at BrewBakers Coffee & Gifts in Arnold and then slowly taking the backroads in whatever direction catches your fancy. If you head east, The Secret Garden is a roadside giftshop and coffee shop just off the beaten path near Merna.

In Southeast Nebraska, Indian Cave State Park near Shubert, and Nebraska City, are famous for their trees and foliage. In fact, the entire eastern edge of our state is punctuated here and there, in small and long stretches, with dense stands of foliage along the Missouri River.

The Loup Rivers Scenic Byway stretches along Nebraska highways 11 and 91 for just more than 140 miles from Wood River in Hall County to Duning in Blaine County. Cottonwood and oak trees, sumac, and a variety of other plants and grasses are showy in fall here and call out to visitors exploring the byway. This is also an opportune time to observe wildlife and visit local attractions.

Safe travels – and watch for deer!