



The U.P.'s fall hot spots lengthen tourist season

DIANNA STAMPFLER | THURSDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2022



Trich Shipley

A week or so ago, *USA Today* named Michigan’s Upper Peninsula the “#1 Place to View Fall Foliage in America” as part of its annual readers’ poll (beating out Door County, Wisconsin; Aspen, Colorado; Pocono Mountains, Pennsylvania and Stowe, Vermont among others). This is the third time in recent years that the U.P. has snagged this sought-after accolade – the others being in 2018 and 2020. As with most of the USA



Today "10 Best" polls, a panel of travel experts chose 20 destinations around the country and then readers cast their digital ballots to determine the Top 10.

But it didn't take an online popularity contest for Yoopers (and those who enjoy visiting the U.P., no matter the season) to know this 10.481-million-acre slice of heaven on earth is top of the heap when it comes to fall color tourism.

Most of the U.P.'s 16,538-square-miles are forested (85%), skirting along 4,300 inland lakes, 12,000 miles of rivers or streams and 1,700 miles of Great Lakes shoreline (Lake Michigan, Lake Huron and Lake Superior) and next to the more than 200 waterfalls tucked into the nooks and crannies of sandstone cliffs at the end of winding woodland trails.

"Over the next few weeks, come see why the U.P. is the number one fall color destination in the U.S.A.," says Tom Nemacheck, executive director of the Upper Peninsula Travel and Recreation Association. "Our 384 miles of forests, from Drummond Island to Ironwood, will take your breath away."

Yet, this year's color show is later than in years past, by two weeks or more, due to a slightly warmer September and early October. A traditional indicator is that when evening temperatures drop into the 20s for a couple near-consecutive days, it will jumpstart the color change in the week or so to follow.

"Mild days and cool nights are often needed to bring out the brightest colors," says Matthew Zika of the National Weather Service in Marquette. "Up until the last 10 days [two weeks] or so, we haven't had a lot of those ideal cool nights. With several recent mornings with lows in the 30s, we've seen the color start to progress fairly quickly (especially inland) but it's lagging behind our typical peak by several days."

Looking ahead to mid-October, the Keweenaw Peninsula shows evening lows in the mid-to-upper-30s as the surrounding Lake Michigan waters keep the narrow peninsula insulated. In Curtis and Sault Ste. Marie, temperatures will hover in the low 30s in the coming week, pushing peak conditions forward.

Zika notes the loss of daylight – 90 minutes in August and 90 minutes in September – as the main driver to start the color change process. So, with shorter days the change of colors is inevitable and something that communities and business owners throughout the region are banking on...literally.



“[Fall] has a big economic impact,” Nemacheck noted in a recent television interview. “The last several years it has become almost an extension of summer. The traffic isn’t as big as July or August, but the numbers are up.”

Among the most popular areas are the Keweenaw, Porcupine Mountains, Marquette, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore and Tahquamenon Falls.

Keweenaw Peninsula

“Fall color season is an exciting time of year in the Keweenaw, and we’re thrilled to see local businesses offer new ways to experience the area’s natural beauty,” says Brad Barnett, executive director of Visit Keweenaw. “Tours are being offered by boat, foot, chairlift and even seaplane, and that speaks to the Keweenaw’s appeal as a fall destination.”

After a day of scenic driving, settle in one of the area’s newest attractions – the Keweenaw Dark Sky Park in Copper Harbor – for a different kind of color show. In addition to hopes of seeing the Northern Lights, autumn stargazers can check out the Draconids Meteor Shower (Oct. 8-10), a full “Hunters Moon” (Oct. 9) or the Orionids Meteor Shower (Oct. 20-21). This is just the third Dark Sky Park in Michigan (and the first in the U.P.), headquartered at Keweenaw Mountain Lodge.

Ontonagon/Baraga County

Colors are nearing peak in Ontonagon and Baraga County, according to Kelly Somero with the Baraga State Park. “Our park use (camping, overnight lodging, day use) for Baraga and other sites like our state forest campgrounds, boating sites, ORV trails, Bond Falls and Agate Falls have remained high. Numbers aren’t quite as high as during the pandemic, but we are still higher than pre-pandemic use.”

Canyon Falls (an MDOT roadside park) is considered the “Grand Canyon of the U.P.” and a great place for a fall picnic. More active hikers will enjoy Sturgeon Gorge with breathtaking views of Prickett Lake and the colorful panorama of the Sturgeon River Gorge Wilderness. Travelers can also visit the highest point in Michigan – Mount Arvon, at 1,979.238 feet above sea level.

The Porkies (Porcupine Mountains) stretch for nearly 60,000 acres and is home to



Michigan's largest state park (and one of the few remaining large wilderness areas in the Midwest). The Presque Isle River boasts three waterfalls – Manabezho, Manido and Nawadaha – all accessible from nearby parking areas. Here, you'll also find one of the state's most popular fall destinations: Lake of the Clouds. With a surface area of 133 acres and elevation of 1,076 feet, this picturesque natural site is also one of the most photographed areas in the region during the fall season.

"The color along the [Presque Isle] river is just starting to change [as of Sept. 29]," says Gina Penegor of the Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. Conditions were close to 30% throughout the region (as of the same date). "I'm guessing its going to change quickly with these cool nights and warm/sunny days predicted in our near future."

For a unique perspective on the colors, the Porkies Winter Sports Complex offers chairlift rides from the top of the hill where you can see for miles (and miles) with a gorgeous view of Lake Superior on the descent.

In June, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) announced upgrades to several state parks including "\$1.4 million to renovate and preserve the Kaug Wudjoo modern lodge [which sleeps 12], staff quarters, mechanic's shop, carpenter's shop and fire barn. Renovations include the construction and replacement of new roofs and siding, as well as enhancements to accessibility features. Utility and structural upgrades also are included in ongoing historic preservation efforts." Funding for this project was made possible through Governor Whitmer's Building Michigan Together Plan.

Gogebic County

The longest designated state hiking/biking trail in the nation, the Iron Belle Trail, begins and ends in downtown Ironwood (depending on which direction you're going). At more than 2,000 miles between this U.P. town (population 4,925 according to the 2020 population) and Detroit's Belle Isle, this 70%-complete route is a popular autumn destination for locals and visitors alike.

"(The Iron Belle) created an opportunity where people could see the advantage of having trails in the area and I think it also helped spur enthusiasm for trail development," according to former Ironwood city manager Scott Erickson (in an article published Sept. 8, 2022 on UPword). "I do think having reinvestment in a community, in an area, supports economic development in that business owners who can locate anywhere in the United States see there is positive growth in our area ... and it makes it probably a



little more appealing to them to invest their money in a community that's going in a positive direction and reinvesting back in itself."



Copper Peak. Photo by Trich Shipley.

Ironwood is also home to the largest artificial ski jump in the world (at 469 feet) and this fall visitors can soar to new heights at Copper Peak Adventure Ride. After an 810-foot chair lift ride to the crest of the hill, you'll elevate even further by an 18-story elevator to the main observation deck for stunning panoramic views – overlooking 2,500-square-miles, three states and even Canada if weather conditions allow. Those NOT faint of heart can walk an additional eight stories to the highest unobstructed vista in the Midwest.

Earlier this year, Copper Peak was awarded \$20 million from a state infrastructure spending plan to restore and redevelop the ski jump (which operated from 1970 to 1994) after nearly 30 years of inactivity. According to its website, the mission is to "re-establish



Copper Peak as the world's largest active ski jump for both summer and winter competitions that will showcase Michigan's Upper Peninsula and the entire surrounding region as a global outdoor recreation destination."

Marquette

Mountain biking is one of Marquette's premier outdoor activities (that, along with visiting the many breweries in this shoreline college town), and around the country it is recognized for its diversity in trails. Marquette Mountain Resort offers fall color tours with chair lift rides to the top and hikes down Weasel Gulch (through Oct. 9). With 169 acres of rideable terrain, their Downhill Bike Park caters to beginners and experienced riders (like those who want to haul their bike up the chair lift for an exhilarating ride down).

Travel Marquette promotes several other area trails and routes, including the Iron Ore Heritage Trail; the 17-mile Multi-Use Path; the Range Area Mountain Bike Club (RAMBA); the North Trails Loop (part of the Noquemanon Trail Network (NTN)); and the Morgan Creek Loop, also known as the Green Loop, part of the NTN South Trails.

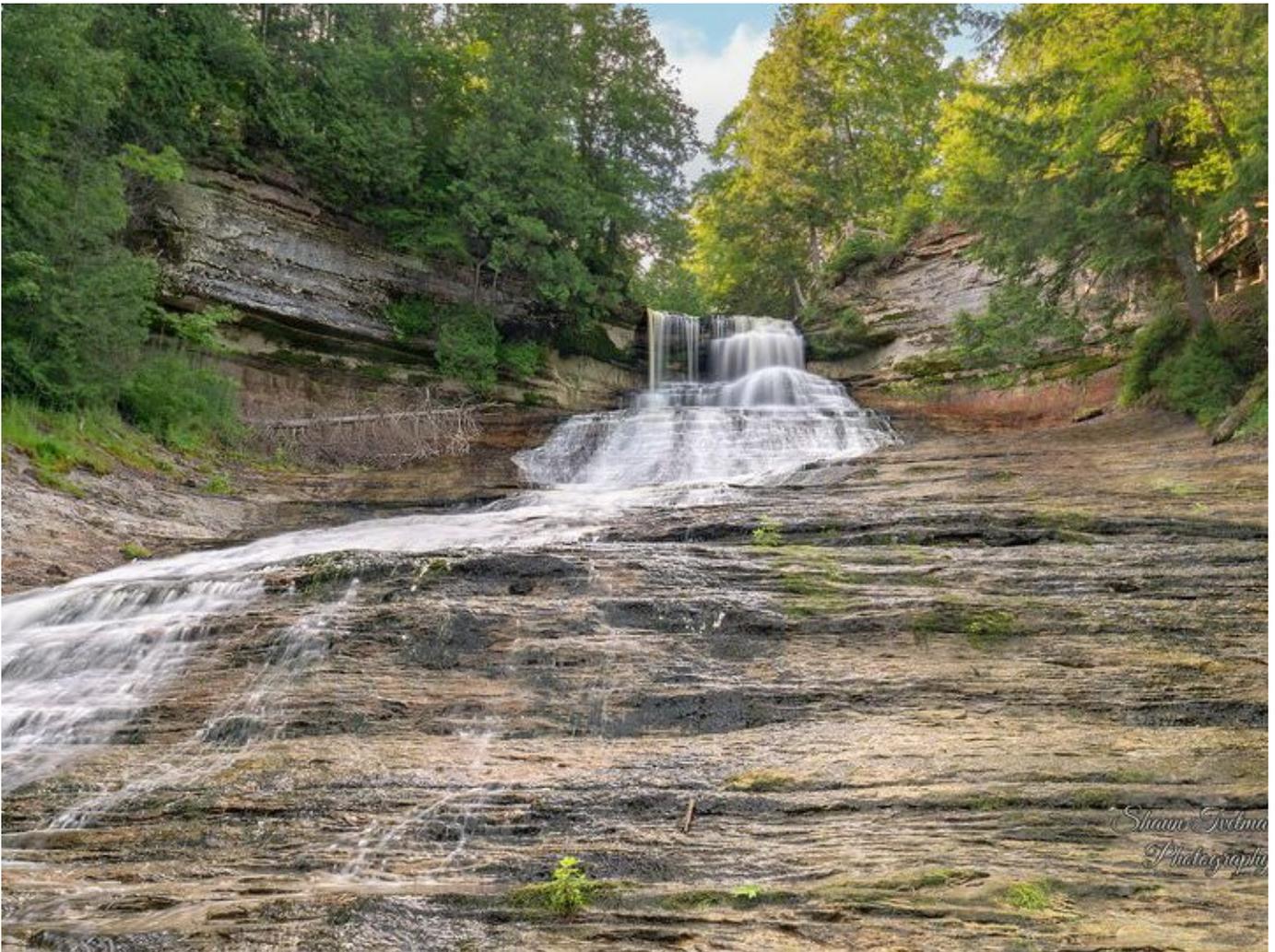
"From hiking, biking or even driving, there are multiple trails and overlooks for leaf peeping in Marquette," according to Travel Marquette. "For those looking to experience one of Marquette's many waterfalls, the three topic picks for the best of fall include Morgan Falls, Warner Falls and Yellow Dog Falls."

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore

"Autumn is a wonderful time to hike one of Pictured Rock's many trails," says Andrea Chynoweth, park ranger at Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore. "Crisp, clear days are just right for hiking under a canopy of colored leaves. There are no bugs and fewer people. You may have a remote beach along Lake Superior all to yourself.

Trees in this area, between Munising and Grand Marais, began turning late last week and should peak in another week or so – which gives travelers time to make plans.





Laughing Whitefish Falls. Photo by Shaun E. Tvetmarken.

Chynoweth also suggests kayaking or canoeing one of the park's calm inland lakes, where autumn colors often reflect in the clear waters. A trek on the Marsh Trail might be rewarded with sightings of migrating geese overhead and with shorter days, there is even more time for stargazing or a chance to see the illusive Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights). Autumn backpacking and camping may be an option for the more adventurous.

Those looking to get out on Lake Superior to see the colorful sandstone cliffs for which Pictured Rocks are named can still tour with Pictured Rocks Cruises out of Munising, through October 23 (be sure to dress appropriately, as the temperatures are cooler out on the water).

"Autumn is also the season of storms on Lake Superior," Chynoweth says. "For the who only visit in the summer, come back in the fall to see the lake whipped up in a



Watching Lake Superior in all its power is an amazing experience!”

Tahquamenon Falls Area

On the first Sunday of October, the parking lot was full (with license plates as far as California, Texas, Florida, Georgia and Ontario, Canada) at the Lower Falls inside the Tahquamenon Falls State Park in Paradise. Despite the lack of color on the trees, a steady flow of tourists was there walking the three-quarters of a mile along a picturesque boardwalk to the new 142-foot-long aluminum Ronald A. Olson Island Bridge, which opened in May. This pedestrian bridge, at the trailhead which connects to the Upper Falls (Michigan’s largest waterfall) four miles away, provides easy access to a 5-acre island complete with gravel trails and countless photo ops.

By next summer, visitors will find a new restroom building and gift shop, funded by the American Rescue Plan and the State Park Capital Outlay Fund. Park Manager Kevin Dennis says rowboat rentals, which allow for in-water access near the falls and the island, are also expected to resume next spring.

Why Do the Colors Change?

So, what makes the Upper Peninsula’s color show so spectacular? It is a combination of things like the variety of trees that produce an array of pigments from deep reds to bright oranges and brilliant yellows, set against the backdrop of dark green pines and the majestic sparkling blue waters of the Great Lakes.

“In parts of the state where conifers dominate, the color of scattered hardwoods is often accentuated against the deep evergreen background” according to a 2017 post on the Michigan State University Extension website by Bert Cregg of the Departments of Horticulture and Forestry. This site lists a variety of trees that grow throughout Michigan, with descriptions of the leaf pattern and fall color for easy identification, including these found in the U.P.:

- Sugar maples: large trees with large palmately lobed leaves, provide our most spectacular red fall color.
- Red maples: relatively small, three-lobed leaves and can provide colors ranging from vivid red to orange to bright yellow.



- Aspens: characterized by light gray bark and bright yellow fall leaves that flutter or “quake” in the wind.
- Oaks: provide subtle, russet red fall color, in contrast to the brighter colors of maples.
- Hickories: produce patches of yellow along roadsides and trails in agricultural regions.
- Honeylocust: tough and durable trees that produce bright yellow fall color.

The best resource for current color conditions can be found at [FunInTheUP.com](https://www.funinthep.com). Also, check out these regional webcams for up-to-the-minute conditions:

<https://www.december.com/places/up/cams.html>.

Beyond the Trees

In addition to leaf peepers (“a person who visits wooded areas in autumn to view the changing colors of the foliage” according to Merriam-Webster), the U.P. sees an increase in visitors in October for annual hunting seasons like bow season for deer, rabbit, pheasant, quail, ruffed grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, woodcock, squirrel, waterfowl, wild turkey and the king (or queen) of the forest: bear. Statewide (both the Upper and Lower Peninsulas), Michigan sees more than 1.4 million hunters and anglers contributing \$9.5 million to the state’s outdoor activity economy each year.

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Fun Ways to Check out the U.P. Fall Colors

- Follow in Nick Adams’ footsteps with a visit to the Big Two Hearted River along the Lake Superior shoreline between Grand Marais and Paradise. Or, stop by to see the historic marker at the South Fox River in Seney...the REAL river that Ernest Hemingway was writing about.
- Get a glimpse for miles from the top of one of the U.P.’s many lighthouses open into October, including Crisp Point (near the Two Hearted River), Point Iroquois in Bay Mills Township, Eagle Harbor in the Keweenaw (final day October 9) and Whitefish Point in Paradise (home of the Great Lakes Shipwreck Museum).



- Take a leisurely drive along the 8.883-mile Brockway Mountain Drive just west of Copper Harbor. This historic road was constructed by the county road commission in 1933 with funding through Depression-era work programs.
- Explore the ghost town of Fayette, along the Garden Peninsula and the northern Lake Michigan shoreline. Once a bustling industrial town, this area was known for manufacturing charcoal pig iron between 1867 and 1891. Today it is a preserved historic state park site.
- Crank the wheel and ride out on the glass-bottom raft over Kitch-iti-Kipi (Big Spring), the largest natural, freshwater spring in Michigan (200 feet across and 40 feet deep). Here, 10,00 gallons of water per minute erupts from fissures in the limestone rocks at the spring's floor.
- Take to the skies with Isle Royale Seaplane Fall Color Tours, through October 20. Flights cruise along the canal that connects Houghton and Hancock in the Keweenaw Peninsula and along the shoreline just shy of Eagle River, across the peninsula to Mohawk over Lake Linden and Dollar Bay.
- Hit the links...at the oldest continually played golf course in Michigan! The Les Cheneaux Golf Club in Cedarville opened in May 1898. This historic lakefront course is open to the public and even has a boat dock for those coming in from one of the many islands in "The Snows" (the nickname for the Les Cheneaux Islands).

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