



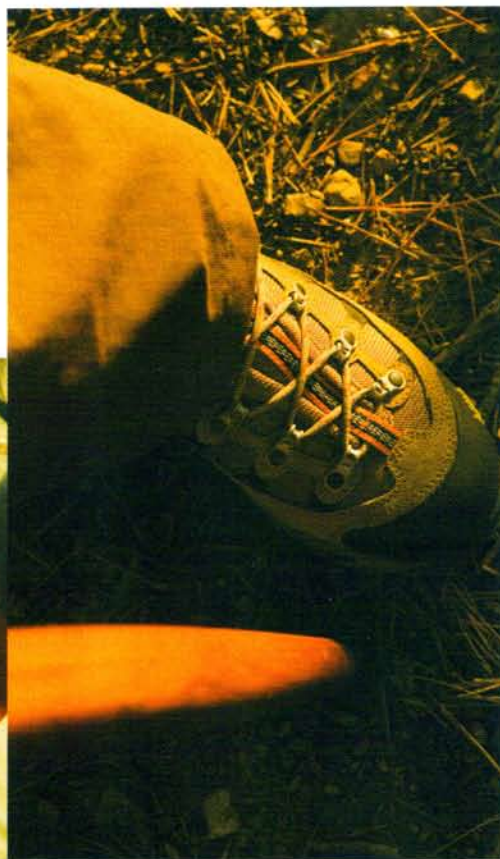
health  
& fitness

# Take a Hike

The great outdoors  
beckons hikers of  
all skill levels.»

BY LOYD McINTOSH  
PHOTOS BY KARIM SHAMSI-BASHA





While Boulder Canyon has been around since the first trail was cut by a Vestavia Central fifth-grader in 1989, the trail system has undergone quite a bit of improvements over the past three to four years, thanks to local Boy Scouts who have adopted Boulder Canyon as a special project.

"Boulder Canyon is a beautiful hike and is great for kids, and there is a nice stream that runs through the canyon," says Russell Helms, author of *60 Hikes Within 60 Miles—Birmingham*. First published by Birmingham-based Manasha Ridge Press in 2002 with a second edition due out later this fall, *60 Hikes* is an exhaustive guide to hiking options in metropolitan Birmingham.

Helms, who is also the acquisitions editor at Manasha Ridge, says Boulder Canyon has benefited from the efforts of the Boy Scouts, who over the years have extended and improved existing trails, added new trails, built several benches throughout the preserve and constructed a small bridge connecting two of the trails.

"It's a very nice trail with a couple of small waterfalls and a number of hiking options. You can walk in a loop or wander in and wander out for a great hike," Helms says.

**OAK MOUNTAIN STATE PARK, PELHAM** >> Without question, the most popular and well-known hiking location in the area is Oak Mountain State Park. With more than 9,900 acres to explore, Oak Mountain is by far the largest state park in Alabama, with miles of hiking and biking options.

The Treetop Nature Trail ranks as one of the most family-friendly hiking trails in the park. A 1.69-mile loop can be walked in about an hour's time and provides hikers a wonderful chance to see a spectacular array of wildlife among the oak, maple, hickory and dogwood trees that shade the trail. The trail meanders through the Alabama Wildlife Center, Alabama's premiere wildlife rescue center, where visitors to the park can see all manner of wild birds, including rare hawks, owls, vultures and turkeys that have been rehabilitated at the center and now call Oak Mountain home.

According to the Alabama Wildlife Center website, [www.awrc.org](http://www.awrc.org), the facility "cares for nearly 3,000 injured and orphaned wild birds, mammals and reptiles annually, returning as many as possible to the wild."

**HOMEWOOD FOREST PRESERVE, HOMEWOOD** >> Just a few minutes away from Boulder Canyon lies the Homewood Forest Preserve, 100 acres of green space near Homewood High School. Part of the Shades Creek Watershed, the Homewood Forest Preserve offers several easily accessible trails along the banks of

**W**HETHER YOU ENJOY THE QUIET AND SOLITUDE of a short stroll through the woods or a longer outing with the entire family, plenty of undiscovered gems and well-traveled trails throughout Birmingham are waiting to be explored.

Fall comes but once a year, so take the opportunity to burn calories and breathe in fresh air during these cool autumn days. Birmingham and the surrounding area offer a great deal of natural diversity—from the green and fertile banks of the Cahaba River, to the rugged and historically significant terrain of Ruffner Mountain, to the natural beauty and diversity of Red Mountain. So dust off your hiking boots, fill up your water bottle, pack up your trail mix and check out this list of cool Birmingham hikes.

**BOULDER CANYON, VESTAVIA** >> One of the most celebrated suburban hikes in the Birmingham area is Boulder Canyon in Vestavia. Located off Highway 31 near Vestavia Central School, Boulder Canyon has been preserved as a green space, thanks to the work of Keep Vestavia Green, a nonprofit organization created to protect the natural area. The City of Vestavia has also made a serious commitment to make the city pedestrian- and hiker-friendly.

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Shades Creek and the slopes of Shades Mountain. The preserve is also home to many interesting species of wildlife. According to the website [www.shadescreek.org](http://www.shadescreek.org) (the website of the Friends of Shades Creek), mink, muskrats, beavers, herons and the spotted salamander—the main attraction of the annual Salamander Festival—all thrive in the preserve.

**RUFFNER MOUNTAIN NATURE CENTER, EAST LAKE** » Hidden above the older neighborhoods that make up south East Lake is Ruffner Mountain, one of the best hiking treasures in the city and quite possibly in the Southeast. The second largest urban nature preserve in the United States, Ruffner Mountain is a fascinating study in contradictions, with the mountain's two distinct sides providing a glimpse into the area's natural character and a historical snapshot into the steel industry that put Birmingham on the map.

Iron ore and limestone were mined and quarried from Ruffner Mountain and shipped by train five miles up First Avenue to Sloss Furnace beginning in the late 1800s and continuing until the 1950s. Beginning on the side of the mountain facing Irondale, mining operations ended before the forest of southern pine, hickory and oak could be disturbed on the side of Ruffner facing East Lake and U.S. 11.

Entering the park from 81st Street South in East Lake, visitors are greeted by quiet and peaceful virgin forest even as life on Interstate 59 keeps moving just minutes away. As hikers continue up the mountain, visible reminders of Birmingham's industrial past come into view. Old railroad lines, abandoned mines and even an old ore crusher—a huge piece of equipment that separated the ore from other rocks and debris—are still visible from many of the mountain's trails.

With 11 miles of hiking trails making their way up and through the heart of the mountain, hikers can see both natural surroundings and a glimpse of the city's history first hand at no charge, seven days a week.

**TRUSSVILLE SPORTS COMPLEX AND THE CAHABA RIVER, TRUSSVILLE** » To the northeast in Trussville, hiking enthusiasts can choose from several hiking trails. The City of Trussville has made considerable strides in upgrading its outdoor recreation offerings, including the five or six miles of trails behind the Trussville Sports Complex. Accessible from Cherokee Drive near Hewitt-Trussville Middle School and Jack Wood Stadium, the five to six miles of trails wind through the pine-tree woods. The hilly terrain is very popular among mountain bikers but provides an inviting area for family hiking as well.

"There are several short trails that sort of lace through the park. If you live in the Trussville area, it's a great place to go," Helms says.

However, hikers can stray from the beaten path. For a great river hike, Helms suggests hiking the banks of the Cahaba where the river is narrow and can be easily crossed.

"In Trussville, the Cahaba River is only six to eight feet across in some places. You can walk it for one to two miles out and back very easily for a great hike," he says.

If you come to Trussville to spend some time on the banks of the Cahaba, be sure to bring your flying discs to take advantage of the disc golf course located on Cherokee Drive off of Highway 11. ♦



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