

Perfect Picnic Places

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Hudson Valley residents and visitors are never deprived of outdoor excursions and Ulster County in particular has a delicious collection of places to picnic.

Make it your goal to head to each one before school's back in session.

Minnewaska Lake and State Park are part of the Shawangunk Mountains — or "The Gunks," to locals — in Southern Ulster County. Picnic benches are located right next to the parking lot, making for an easy, languid day. Craving a bit more adventure? Minnewaska has 25 miles of hiking footpaths that lead across coarse terrain, through hardwood forest and past waterfalls. Stop mid-hike to picnic on a cliff overlooking Lake Minnewaska for a well deserved break. My favorite picnic spot on the property is on the stone slab "beach" at Awosting Lake. Route 44/55, Kerhonkson. Open daily at 9 a.m. Closing times vary. \$8 per vehicle. nysparks.com/parks/127/details.aspx.

Mohonk Preserve Outdoor lovers head to Mohonk Preserve not just for the lovely, natural surroundings, but also for the opportunity to reflect, rejuvenate and restore. Visitor's Center is just off Route 44/55, after 299 intersection, Gardiner. Open daily from sunrise to one hour before sunset. \$12 per person. Visit them online at mohonkpreserve.org.

Scenic Hudson Parks Scenic Hudson supervises and improves multiple parks throughout the Mid Hudson region. Ulster County parks include the Esopus Meadows Preserve, Falling Waters Preserve, Highland Landing Park, Shaupeneak Ridge and Sleightsburg Park. The best part? These parks are free to the public and open year-round. Find out more about Scenic Hudson and discover their collection of parks at scenichudson.org.

Esopus Meadows Preserve Set on 93 acres, the Esopus Meadows Preserve offers glimpses of the 1871 Esopus Lighthouse and Mills Mansion. Picnic on the river's edge in between bird watching and fishing or take the trail that leads to Lighthouse Park. River Road, Esopus. Open daily from dawn to dusk.

Falling Waters Preserve From tall ledges to the shoreline, there are plenty of places to picnic at Falling Waters Preserve. Settle down in the meadow to take in views of the waterfall and the Catskills. When you're finished with lunch, head to the Mulford Ice House remains. The ice house once held 10,000 tons of ice collected from the Hudson River and eventually shipped to New York City. Dominican Lane, Glasco. Open daily from dawn to dusk.

Highland Landing Park The Bob Shepard Highland Landing Park offers a unique view of the Mid Hudson Bridge. Many locals don't even know that this vantage point exists. Picnic as the sun sets to catch the bridge lights turn on. River Road, Highland. Open daily from sunrise to sundown.

Shaupeneak Ridge The 790 acres that make up Shaupeneak Ridge are part of the Marlboro Mountains in Esopus. Rich with wildlife, the farmland at the base of the ridge is protected to preserve the view and scenery. Make your way to the Louisa Pond to watch the water lilies float by as you picnic. Poppletown Road, Esopus. Open daily from dawn to dusk.

Sleightsburg Park Sleightsburg Park has trails that run parallel to Rondout Creek and a wooded peninsula that creates a long expanse into the river. Picnic with a view of the Kingston Lighthouse. Everson Street, Esopus. Open daily from dawn to dusk.

Hudson Valley Rail Trail No matter which of the many entrances you choose to begin your stroll and picnic, you will find spectacular views. Benches of stone and wood invite you to sit and enjoy the scenery on this paved railtrail connecting to Walkway Over The Hudson. Highland entrances on Commercial Avenue, Old Route 299, Tony Williams Field, & Walkway.