

Brown County should be awash in color soon

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"The slow crescendo" is how Nashville glassblower Jim Lawrence identifies the annual invasion of Brown County by 3 1/2 million gawking leaf peepers in late September and October.

They come to see what vibrant colors Mother Nature selects from her paintbox and applies to the leaves. And, according to Dan Ernst, an assistant state forester in the Indiana Division of Forestry, she'll be picking up her brushes early this year because of August rains and cold evenings.

"I would say by late September we'll start seeing some things," he said. "The peak color will depend on where you are in the state. Brown County's peak color traditionally is Oct. 15 to 17. I'd say it might be a little earlier than that."

The changing colors can be observed daily on six live Leaf Cams run by the Indiana Tourism Department at www.enjoyindiana.com. Beginning Oct. 1, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources will fire up its Leaf Line at (317) 232-4002 for phone reports on leaf color changes all over the state. Leaf reports for Indiana and the rest of the nation also can be found at www.earthcam.com and www.intellicast.com.

Although the changing of the seasons is celebrated in festivals statewide, no other area gets as much tourism as Brown County, especially on weekends in Nashville, where parking spaces are rare, traffic crawls, sidewalks are jammed, the waiting list grows for fried chicken and fried biscuits with apple butter at the Nashville House, and lines of automobiles and campers lengthen at the gates of Brown County State Park.

That's fine with Lawrence, whose Lawrence Family Glassblowers shop on Van Buren Street will welcome up to 20,000 visitors a day in October.

"Tourism accounts for more than \$155 million to Brown County's economy annually," said Kate Mejaski of the Brown County Convention and Visitors Bureau. "We have our highest hotel occupancy rate in October, around 75 percent of the 800 hotel rooms in the county. And we have our highest foot and vehicular traffic in late September and early October."

John Boyd has been leaf-looking in Brown County before, but he won't visit this year. He suggests travelers head north, not south, for the fall infusion of colorful leaves.

A Hertz rental manager in Chicago, Boyd sang the praises of the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore in Porter County when Hertz asked for recommendations for appealing drives. The Lakeshore wound up on Hertz's list of the nine Top Scenic Drives in the United States for fall.

The Lakeshore drive runs nearly 25 miles along southern Lake Michigan. Just take the Chesterton exit off Interstate 80/94, head north on U.S. 12 and "suddenly you're in God's country," Boyd said "There are a huge variety of trees, so you get this symphony of colors. "At the Dunes, you don't have the madness you have in Brown County. I love Brown County, but if you go there in the leaf season it's pretty scary."

Lawrence knows exactly why travelers brave the crowds in the fall. "I fell in love with Brown County and moved here 28 years ago," he said.

"The essentials really haven't changed that much . . . the beautiful vistas in Brown County State Park . . . the colors of the countryside. The village has grown a little bit, but the historic heart of Nashville hasn't changed at all. That could be one of our true treasures we possess.

"One of the main attractions of Indiana is the connection with the earth and the environment and the woods and the natural beauties we possess. People get reconnected with that whenever they come to Nashville. Really, they begin to find home again."

Bob and Sue Kirlin own Lexington House in Nashville, a store that sells "anything we think would look good in a log cabin, from a moose cookie cutter to hickory furniture."

Bob traveled the world wholesaling a men's apparel line and had just received a letter from Delta Airlines congratulating him on flying a million miles when his doctor told him he had prostate cancer.

"We took our life savings and moved to Nashville eight years ago. "We always enjoyed the quaintness of the village."

The Kirlins make it a tradition to drive through Brown County State Park each April to see the budding dogwoods, but crowds at their store keep them from visiting the park on leaf weekends in the fall.

"I'm guessing 5,000 to 6,000 people walk through the door at the store on leaf weekends," said Sue Kirlin. "After three days like that, the last thing you think about is going to the park. We do try to get out there, though, because it's one of the true treasures of Brown County."