

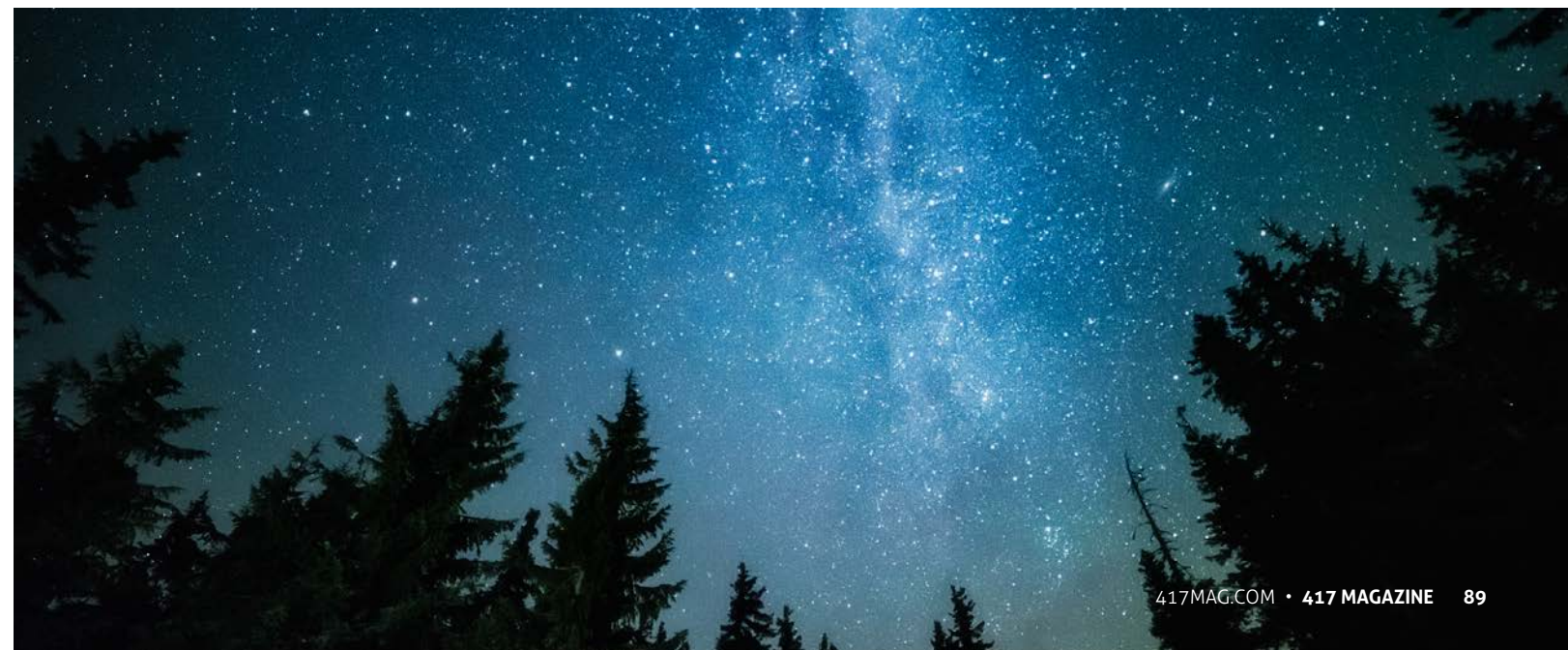
CAMP OUT!

The ultimate guide to sleeping under the stars in the Ozarks

BY ADRIENNE DONICA

There is, perhaps, no better time than fall in 417-land to pack up your car or camper and head toward undiscovered adventures in the great outdoors. Crisp air, rustling leaves and chirping birds greet you as you pull up to your campsite and set up your temporary home. As dusk turns to darkness, the day's heat breaks, replaced by a cool night breeze. Crackling fires pop up around you as the stars above begin to twinkle, and

the chorus of crickets grows louder. When you turn in for the night—relaxed and without a single unanswered notification on your phone—the constant melody lulls you to sleep. This is what you came for, and we can help you get there. Whether you're a nature novice, experienced explorer or cabin camper, this guide shares the very best of Ozarks camping, including where to go, what to eat and how to make the most of your night under the stars.



HAWN STATE PARK

Head east for a centrally located adventurer's playground.

Rarely can you find a place in the great outdoors that makes beginners and more ambitious explorers feel equally at home. Hawn State Park in Ste. Genevieve achieves this feat and, put simply, is camping at its finest.

The 51-site campground is family-friendly and wonderfully versatile, including electric, basic and walk-in spots; a playground; a frost-free water spigot for winter excursions; and an unparalleled bathhouse with large bathrooms, unisex shower stalls and a coin-operated laundry facility. Shortleaf pine trees and hardwoods such as white oak and red maple tower overhead, as they do throughout the park, and tent campers enjoy soft ground here. The sites are mostly exposed, but that makes it all the easier to strike up a conversation with your neighbors. The park's five backpack camps provide an added challenge for those who seek it.

Once you've settled in, there's plenty to see and do. Take the short, paved Overlook Trail to get a bird's-eye view of rolling hills and the Pickle Creek valley. Speaking of Pickle Creek, getting up close and personal with this pristine water is a must. (You can see it from select campsites.) Eat lunch at the picnic tables near the Pickle Creek Trailhead before hitting the 1.4-mile round-trip rugged trail or enjoy your meal creek-side. The park's other trails are also worth exploring as long as you are comfortable with moderate to rugged hiking.

If you need a break from nature, visit one of the many wineries in the area or head to nearby Farmington for a meal at 12 West Bar & Grill. Within an hour's drive, you'll also find three other state parks worth visiting for a quick day trip on your way home. Climb on gigantic boulders at Elephant Rocks, swim at Johnson's Shut-Ins or visit Missouri's highest point at Taum Sauk Mountain State Park.

QUICK PITCH

DISTANCE FROM SPRINGFIELD:

3 hours, 45 minutes

CAMPING LEVEL: Very civilized

COST: \$12-23

SLEEP HERE: Site 19 has electricity and a paved pad and is close to all the action.

UPGRADE YOUR STAY: The picturesque Old Orchard Inn (theoldorchardinn.com) in Farmington has four cozy rooms.

TYLER BEND CAMPGROUND

Rest your head near awe-inspiring bluffs and the gorgeous Buffalo National River.

If you haven't experienced the splendor of the Buffalo National River, it's high time. This natural playground is practically in 417-land's backyard and is replete with crystal clear water ideal for floating, hiking trails, plus incredible views of bluffs and the stars above. Take it all in at Tyler Bend Campground in the river's middle district south of St. Joe, Arkansas. Easily accessible, this is a great spot for casual car or RV camping. There are 28 regular, 10 walk-in and five group sites, which are the only spots you can reserve. You won't find hookups here, but restrooms with showers, water spigots and a dump station make for a pleasant stay. (During winter, only primitive camping is available and fees aren't collected.) From the campground, walk to the river or head down one of the easy-to-moderately-rated Tyler Bend Campground Trails. Be sure to watch the sunset from the Riverview Trail's overlook deck. On your way home, eat breakfast at Ferguson's Country Store and Restaurant near St. Joe. It's kitschy in all the right ways.

QUICK PITCH

DISTANCE FROM SPRINGFIELD: About 2 hours

CAMPING LEVEL: Civilized

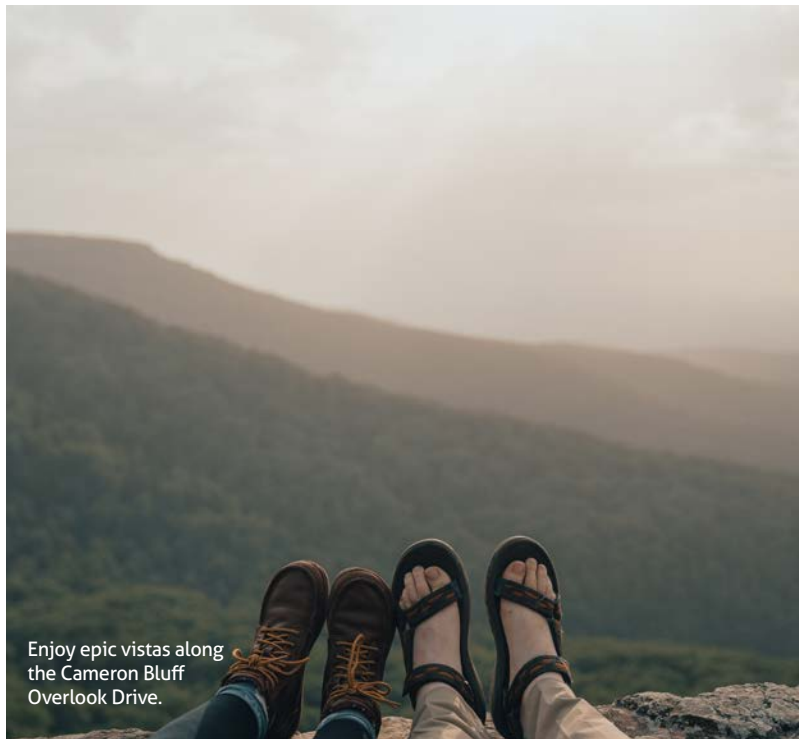
COST: \$16

SLEEP HERE: Sites 12 and 13 are pull-thru sites.

UPGRADE YOUR STAY: Cozy into one of 10 cabins at Buffalo Camping and Canoeing at The Gilbert General Store (gilbertstore.com) just 15 minutes away.

Near the Pickle Creek Trailhead at Hawn State Park, you'll find a shady picnic area to enjoy lunch. Make sure to hit the trail afterward and venture down to Pickle Creek.

Photo by Catherine Donica; Illustrations courtesy Shutterstock



Enjoy epic vistas along the Cameron Bluff Overlook Drive.

MOUNT MAGAZINE STATE PARK

Hike to the highest point in Arkansas and revel in breathtaking vistas.

Compared to the rest of the park, Mount Magazine's Cameron Bluff Campground is nothing special. Don't misunderstand us: A trip to this park—about 20 miles south of Paris, Arkansas, and packed with activities and unbeatable views that stretch for dozens of miles on a clear day—is well worth it.

With three access points, hiking the quick and easy (albeit rather uninteresting) Signal Hill Trail to the state's high point is practically required. The other must? Taking in the Petit Jean Valley and Blue Mountain Lake from The Lodge at Mount Magazine. Experienced hikers will appreciate Bear Hollow Trail, a 5.6-mile round-trip path with several noteworthy sights. Visitors can also rock climb (bring your gear!), watch hang gliders and see the sunset on the Cameron Bluff Overlook Drive. Enjoy the undisturbed shoreline at nearby Cove

Lake Recreation Area and dine at The Lodge's Skycrest Restaurant one evening. Expect to see several deer and, if you're lucky, a black bear.

The shady campsites—all 18 of which are equipped with water, electric and sewer hook-ups—offer moderate privacy and excellent hammock spots. However, we recommend bringing an RV or air mattress, as the sites are very rocky.

QUICK PITCH

DISTANCE FROM SPRINGFIELD: About 4 hours

CAMPING LEVEL: Civilized

COST: \$28–34

SLEEP HERE: Sites 15, 17 and 18 offer the most privacy.

UPGRADE YOUR STAY: The park's lodge or one of 13 cabins have views of the Petit Jean Valley.

Photos by Jeff Rose; Illustrations courtesy Shutterstock



Cove Lake Recreation Area, north of Mount Magazine State Park, offers camping, boating, swimming and more.

CAMPING IN COMFORT

For many 417-landers, trailers, pop-up campers and RVs provide access to the outdoors without the hassle and pains of tent camping.

Shortly after getting married, Cynthia and Jeff Reed planned a romantic weekend camping trip. The Springfield couple packed their tent and other supplies and headed to Mutton Creek Marina & Campgrounds near Stockton Lake. Cynthia had only gone camping once as a child. Jeff was the more seasoned camper of the pair but hadn't spent a night under the stars in several years. They arrived and set up camp, but soon the getaway turned south. Their campsite was a long walk from the bathhouse, and their neighbors were loud long into the night—not that they were sleeping well, anyway. “The air pump didn't work for the air mattress I brought, so we ended up sleeping in our lawn chairs,” Jeff says. A decade passed before they attempted anything remotely close to camping again.

These days, the Reeds and their 8-year-old daughter, Cerise, hit the open road with their pop-up Rockwood trailer, the second camper they have owned. It still has the feeling of a tent, something the family likes, but with the creature comforts they desire: two beds, a small kitchen and a heating and cooling system. “We're hoping that our new camper will allow us to extend our camping season,” Jeff says. Currently, they camp mostly in May through October, hitting their favorite state parks in Missouri and Arkansas, including Stockton and Petit Jean.

When they retire, Cynthia and Jeff dream of camping more frequently and farther away, but, for now, they enjoy being outside and escaping from the demands of their daily life. “What I really enjoy about camping is the leisurely morning because whenever I'm at home, there's always laundry to do, there's a house to straighten, errands to run,” Cynthia says. “Whenever you're camping, really all you can do is get up and sit in your chair and be outside and sip your coffee.”

That escapism is one reason Springfield resident Teresa Schroeder joined Sisters on the Fly, an international women's-only outdoors group, in 2009. “We have three rules: no men, no children and be nice,” Schroeder says. After becoming a member, she bought a vintage trailer that her husband, David, refurbished. Today, Schroeder sports a 21-foot pink Winnebago Micro Minnie trailer and acts as the group's Missouri wrangler, the go-to source of information for Missouri members.

Sleeping on the ground never appealed to Schroeder. She likes hunting and other outdoor activities but, like the Sisters on the Fly members she knows, hadn't camped much. The group offers her a way to sleep under the stars with comfort, ease and, best of all, with like-minded individuals. “I mean I have good friends, but man... I've made some of my best friends in this group,” Schroeder says. “And our husbands have become friends. It's just a wholesome way of life, and you get to see nature.” And regardless of your gear, that's all that really matters.

“We have three rules: no men, no children and be nice.”

—Teresa Schroeder



Photo by Brandon Alms; Illustrations courtesy Shutterstock

Teresa Schroeder (left) sets up shop outside her pink camper with her friend Debbie Jay-Reichert (and Cordelia the raccoon).



Reserve a campsite at Bull Shoals–White River State Park that is right along the river so you can watch boats cruise by each morning.

Photos by Jeff Rose; Illustrations courtesy Shutterstock

BULL SHOALS

WHITE RIVER STATE PARK

Wake up by the water—and then keep playing in it!

Our region's lakes are some of the best natural gems around. Combine lake life with a camping trip and you've got a perfect pair. There are many places to achieve this level of outdoor perfection, but Bull Shoals–White River State Park in Bull Shoals, Arkansas, tops our list. It has plenty of amenities and a bounty of activities and is quite beautiful.

Construction is nearly complete on the renovation and expansion of the park's campground, which will soon have 112 sites. We recommend making reservations due to the White River's national acclaim as a top trout-fishing destination. Many campsites sit right along the river, and if you're lucky enough to book one, you can watch boats zip past as the morning fog breaks. That is, if you're not joining in on the fishing fun. Stock up on bait at the park's marina, which also has boat rentals, before hitting the water. Those less inclined to reeling in a catch can float the river in a kayak or canoe, also available for rent at the marina, or reserve a seat on a park interpreter-led river or lake cruise.

The minimally developed shorelines on Bull Shoals Lake afford breathtaking landscapes and habitats for many animals, including approximately 100 bald eagles each winter. You might be able to spot America's bird on a cruise or at the overlook on the 1.75-mile Big Bluff Trail. Take a dip in the lake at nearby Brown's Beach or Lakeview Public Use Area, where there is a daily use fee.

In the park, hike or mountain bike and don't forget to stop at the James A. Gaston Visitor Center for a view of the Bull Shoals Dam, which was the fifth largest dam in the world when it was completed in 1951. The park also hosts a handful of annual events. Each January, there's Eagle Awareness Weekend, during which you can learn more about and observe these birds of prey up close. Trout Days, held in June, combines camaraderie and competition for a fun-filled weekend. And women can connect with nature and build their outdoor skills at the Women's Outdoor Weekend every October.

A trip to this park—packed with activities and unbeatable views that stretch for dozens of miles—is well worth it.

QUICK PITCH

DISTANCE FROM SPRINGFIELD:

2 hours, 15 minutes

CAMPING LEVEL: Civilized

COST: \$13–34

SLEEP HERE: Hammock-friendly site 106 (tent-only) is slightly secluded.

UPGRADE YOUR STAY: Book one of the park's three Rent-an-RVs or reserve a room at Gaston's White River Resort (gastons.com).

GLAMP LIKE A CHAMP

Skip the tent and get cozy at these five atypical camping destinations.



BUNK BY THE LAKE

Camp Long Creek at Big Cedar; 1368 Long Creek Road, Ridgedale; 1-800-225-6343; bigcedar.com/lodging

Starting next May, you can spend the night at Camp Long Creek. Sleep in a shepherd's hut, luxury glamping tent or cottage at this 64-unit campground next to Table Rock Lake. Reservations available now.



ELEVATE YOUR NIGHT

Table Rock State Park; 5272 State Highway 165, Branson; 417-334-4704; mostateparks.com

Forget sleeping on the ground. Table Rock State Park's two platform tents, \$26 per night, are built on a 16-by-18-foot wooden deck. Be sure to bring other gear as it is not provided.



HORSE AROUND

Devil's Den State Park, 11333 W. Highway 74, West Fork, Arkansas; 479-761-3325; arkansasstateparks.com/devilsden

Bring your camper and your steed to this northwest Arkansas park's horse camp. All 42 sites, \$18 per night, feature electric and water hook-ups and are located near 20-plus miles of horse trails.



SLEEP IN THE TREES

Branson Treehouse Adventures; 159 Acorn Acres Lane, Branson West; 800-338-2504; bransontreehouseadventures.com

Branson Treehouse Adventures' six decked-out treehouses, plus three others you can rent as a group, are the stuff of childhood dreams. Book Owl's Roost for the family or Southern Comforts, just big enough for two.



STAY IN A YURT

StoneWind Retreat; 15840 Wilson Branch Drive, Chester, Arkansas; 888-369-0049; stonewindretreat.com

Enjoy a romantic getaway at StoneWind Retreat's super-secluded Sanctuary Suite. The 709-square-foot yurt, from \$189 per night, has all the comforts you're used to: a full kitchen, a bathroom, air conditioning and heat, a TV and Wi-Fi.



Echo Bluff and Sinking Creek are two must-sees at Echo Bluff State Park.

ECHO BLUFF STATE PARK

While away the days among wild horses and historic sites.

The widely known secret about Eminence's Echo Bluff State Park is out: This park is awesome. So awesome, in fact, that it has been tough to reserve a campsite since Echo Bluff opened in July 2016. The former youth summer camp now boasts 72 basic and premium sites at Timbuktu Campground, a lodge, cabins, duplexes and several activities.

Southeast Missouri has long been home to wild horses, which are typically hard to find. But at Echo Bluff State Park, spotting these creatures is easy as they frequent the campground regularly. Be sure to visit Sinking Creek, which winds throughout the park. The water is perfect for families with young children, and you can marvel at the park's namesake, Echo Bluff. More adventurous types can head to the Current River for a day of floating fun. Travel back in time on a 90-minute, lantern-lit tour of nearby Round

Spring Cave (closed Labor Day through Memorial Day) or to the former corporate retreat of the Alton Box Board Co., built in the '30s and '40s, at Current River State Park. Both attractions are a quick drive away on state highway 19. Spend your evenings at Echo Bluff's Betty Lea Lodge, where you can play board games, enjoy a view of the bluff from the patio's rocking chairs or cozy up by one of the fire pits.

QUICK PITCH

DISTANCE FROM SPRINGFIELD: About 2 hours, 30 minutes
CAMPING LEVEL: Civilized
COST: \$12-35
SLEEP HERE: Site 19 faces the woods in an otherwise open campground.
UPGRADE YOUR STAY: Stay at the Betty Lea Lodge or one of the park's 13 cabins and duplexes, also available to rent.

Photos by Jeff Rose; Illustrations courtesy Shutterstock

At Echo Bluff State Park, spotting wild horses is easy as they frequent the campground regularly.

PRAIRIE STATE PARK

Sleep where the bison roam and venture into Missouri's largest tallgrass prairie.

If you're a regular Ozarks explorer, you're used to the rocky trails, dense woods and frequent creek crossings that come with our region's karst topography. Prairie State Park, just east of the Kansas border in Mindenmines, is a lovely departure from this norm.

As the name implies, this is prairie land. Fields of wildflowers and billowing grasses abound in the nearly 4,000-acre park. And that's not all—Prairie State Park is home to about 100 free-roaming bison and more than 150 bird species, among other animals. Spot the bison herd on a guided hike, held the first Saturday of each month, or stop by the park office to find its whereabouts that day. At the office, you can also find bird and wildflower checklists; use them as you explore one or more of the park's six trails, which are all less than 5 miles and rated easy. For even more birding, head to nearby Shawnee Trail Conservation Area. You can also hunt, fish and trap on this land, managed by the Missouri Department of Conservation. Be sure to check season dates and regulations at mdc.mo.gov.

Camping at Prairie State Park is on a first-come, first-served basis. The campground, unlike the rest of the park, is in a small thicket outside of the fence line, meaning no bison will stampede through your camp. There are four drive-in sites and one backpacking site on the Coyote Trail. Sites 2 and 4 even comply with ADA access guidelines and can fit smaller campers, but, beware, there are no hook-ups. A clean single-stall vault toilet, water spigot, dumpster and large picnic area are all short walks from the campground. At night, you'll likely hear owls hooting, coyotes howling and a distant train horn. Best of all, the park's relatively low traffic might just mean you have the place all to yourself.

QUICK PITCH

DISTANCE FROM SPRINGFIELD: 1 hour, 45 minutes
CAMPING LEVEL: Primitive
COST: \$12-13
SLEEP HERE: Site 1 has space for a group or a roomy stay.
UPGRADE YOUR STAY: Himmel House Bed & Breakfast (himmelhouse.com) in Pittsburg, Kansas, is an easy half-hour drive away.

HAW CREEK FALLS RECREATION AREA

Get a backcountry experience without the hassle of backpacking.

T rue solitude is hard to find these days, but not at Haw Creek Falls Recreation Area, where the closest cell reception and internet access is miles away. This serene Arkansas retreat is tucked deep in the Ozark–St. Francis National Forests, about halfway between Hagarville and Sand Gap.

Consider this campground, managed by the U.S. Forest Service and closed from late December to late March and during high water, a training ground for your first backpacking trip. Aside from trash cans, vault toilets and nine basic campsites, you're on your own. That means doing your research beforehand and bringing enough food and water for your stay. Don't forget your swimsuit and water shoes so you can lounge around in Haw Creek and enjoy the falls.

This serene Arkansas retreat is tucked deep in the Ozark–St. Francis National Forests.

Find more waterfalls by taking the Pack Rat Falls Trail that begins behind site 6 or the Pam's Grotto Waterfall Trail, across Highway 123. Hop on the Ozark Highlands Trail, spanning more than 197 miles and growing, at the campground or as you head north on Highway 123 just before you reach Sugar Creek. About half an hour away, rock formations, bluffs and another waterfall await at Pedestal Rock Scenic Area.

QUICK PITCH

DISTANCE FROM SPRINGFIELD: 2 hours, 45 minutes

CAMPING LEVEL: Very primitive

COST: \$4

SLEEP HERE: Site 7 is within earshot of the falls.

MORE

Brush up on your fire-building skills, avoid ticks, stock up on gear, download a packing list for your next excursion and more at 417mag.com/camping.

Photo by Vivian Wheeler; Illustrations courtesy Shutterstock



Don't sacrifice a tasty meal in the wild; enjoy breakfast burritos featuring beet hummus you can make in advance.

CAMPSITE KITCHEN

Cooking outside has its challenges, but with creative planning and some preparation, you can enjoy a gourmet al fresco meal.

Brandi Keltner developed her love of camping and cooking from her mother, Robin Viles. When Keltner was growing up, the family would camp around Table Rock Lake and Lake Taneycomo. It was on those trips that Keltner watched her mom make hearty meals—biscuits, bacon and eggs, among other dishes—over the campfire. Viles moved to South Carolina in 2017, but Keltner is carrying on her mom's campfire cooking legacy on trips with her fiancé, Scottie McElroy, and occasionally their friends.

"I want to create meals that not only taste great and are healthier but are also a little more gourmet-ish when it comes to camping," Keltner says. Despite having years of experience, she feels she honed her techniques at home. "That's because the biggest part of the process is that preparation, and... I feel like, for me, that will make or break amazing meals. But I think the key is to bring things that are multiple use."

For example, Keltner typically makes a quinoa tabbouleh before camping trips, which the couple can eat as a side dish, use to make fried rice or add as an ingredient in burritos or tacos. Keltner will also cut, season and, for longer camping trips, freeze meat ahead of time, so it's ready to cook when they get to camp. Beet hummus is another staple that the Springfield resident makes ahead of time and packs. Keltner says the healthy recipe is excellent as a side dish or a topping to an entrée. Best of all, it's lasting fuel to keep you adventuring for longer.

Beet Hummus

Recipe from Brandi Keltner

Ingredients

- 4 medium beets
- 1 small clove garlic
- 2 tablespoons tahini, plus more to taste
- 5 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1 tablespoon lemon zest
- Generous pinch of sea salt or Kosher salt
- Ground pepper to taste

To prepare

Heat oven to 375°F. **Cut** off any tops from the beets and **scrub** the roots clean. **Place** garlic and beets in a covered dish. **Add** about ¼-inch water to the dish and **roast** until a knife can easily cut into beets, about 30 minutes. **Let cool** then **peel** and **chop** the beets into ½-inch cubes.

Place beets, garlic and remaining ingredients in food processor or blender and **pulse** until smooth. **Taste** and **adjust** seasonings and ingredients as desired (Keltner generally uses ½ cup tahini). **Chill** and **store** in the refrigerator or cooler for up to three days. You can also freeze for longer storage. **Serve** with chopped vegetables, on breakfast burritos with scrambled eggs and arugula or with a meal of your choice.