

## Overnighting in Toledo's magical new treehouse village, where the sounds of the forest come to life



Cannaley Treehouse Village, part of Metroparks Toledo's Oak Openings Preserve, illuminated at dusk. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com

# Up in the air

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SWANTON — There are noises in the trees — unexpected, unexplained noises.

"Is that someone knocking on the door?" I nudged my husband, nearly asleep beside me. "It's the wind," he said, rolling over.

I stayed up and listened to the knocks, pops and creaks — they eventually lulled me to sleep — a magical, mysterious feature in a place with lots of them.

I was overnighting in a treehouse near Toledo, part of the new Cannaley Treehouse Village in Oak Openings Park Metropark, about two hours west of Cleveland.

The village features four overnight treehouses, plus three elevated platforms for tents, and a day-use treehouse for group gatherings. The collection of structures — which also includes a series of bridges, slides, hammocks and rope-climbing obstacles — is a whimsical, wonderful creation, an enchanting destination for couples, families, friends and anyone else who loves the outdoors.

"It's like you're in a fairytale," said Scott Carpenter, director of public relations for Metroparks Toledo.

The only thing that might have made this tale perfect: a toilet in my treehouse, to avoid any middle-of-the-night wanderings through the forest.

### BOOKING INTO 2021

One other problem with this treehouse village, which opened in July: these overnights are so popular, they're booking well into 2021, although you may be able to find a stray night available here and there, according to Carpenter.

Metroparks Toledo says this is the largest publicly owned collection of overnight treehouses in the country. My guess is it won't hold the title for long — other park districts should be clamoring for their own version of temporary treetops living.

According to Carpenter, the idea for the treehouse village evolved from ongoing conversations about how to entice more people, families especially, into the parks. In recent years, the parks here have added archery, kayaking, mountain biking, campgrounds and more.

"We want to get people out," he said. "We want to fool them into loving nature."

No fooling necessary here — this place offers an authenticity all its own.

The park district hired renowned treehouse expert Pete Nelson, the host of Animal Planet's "Treehouse Masters," to design the \$1.5 million, privately funded village. The park system's own construction crew did most of the building, creating a collection of residential units lofted between 10 and 20 feet off the ground, connected via a wooden boardwalk that winds through the trees.

### AMONG THE THEMED STRUCTURES HERE:

- › The horse-themed Stable, with accommodations for six, a small living room, kitchen, outdoor space and more.
- › The Hub, with a bicycle theme, space for four, slide exit and more.
- › The Dragline, for two, with a bed, a rope hammock and small kitchen.
- › The Nest, where we stayed, with one full bed, a "nest" loft area accessible via ladder, a mini fridge, microwave, small table and two chairs on a screened porch.

The attention to detail in the houses is terrific, with decorative fencing made out of tree limbs, sink bowls carved from tree trunks and cabinet handles formed from bicycle chains.

All units are equipped with electricity, heating, air conditioning, and 5-gallon jugs of water hooked up to the sinks, but no real plumbing.

The two bigger overnight treehouses have a compostable toilet inside. The two smaller units — along with the tent platforms — can use two portable toilets located at the village entrance. There's also a bathroom, with showers, sinks and toilets, located about a quarter-mile from the treehouses.

Flatwood Commons day-use treehouse has space for up to 49 guests, with a full kitchen. It was not in use during my stay.

Each of the overnight units, including the tent platforms, has an electric grill, which took some getting used to, as it

SEE UP IN THE AIR. K2



Flatwood Commons is the day-use treehouse, which is connected by suspension bridge to a crow's nest lookout tower.



The Nest is a bird (and baseball) themed treehouse, with a slide exit.



Interior of the Stable treehouse at Cannaley Treehouse Village in Swanton.

TRAVEL

# Up in the air

Continues from K1

cooks food at a much slower pace than gas or charcoal.

There's a communal firepit, stocked with cut wood, for the group to use, as well.

Sharing the firepit with us during our stay: a young couple from Cincinnati, a family from Perrysburg, and three father-daughter pairs from Northeast Ohio, traveling together, including Gary Fleming from Mentor and daughter Elena, 13.

Fleming picks a different campground for the group of six every fall, and stumbled across the treehouse sites while looking at other nearby camping areas. "I'm going to have a hard time topping this," he said.

The treehouse village is part of the Beach Ridge area of Oak Openings Preserve, an area popular with mountain bikers. There's a 12-mile mountain biking trail that winds through this part of the park, as well as a FitPark Ride, a skills course for bikers with numerous man-made obstacles, including ladders, teeter-totters and more.

There's a hiking trail, the 2-mile Swanton Reservoir Trail, that launches from near the treehouses, as well.

But for the best hiking, head about 3 miles southeast to the heart of Oak Openings Preserve, a 5,000-acre park that features a rare ecosystem mixing sand dunes with unusual plant species. It once made the Nature Conservancy's list of "the last great places on Earth."

Most of the park is an oak savanna, featuring towering oak trees widely spaced amid the sand with low-lying prairie plants in between. The unique habitat was formed after the last ice age, when a melting glacier left behind a large lake, a precursor to Lake Erie, and a mass of sandy soil.

"Welcome to the beach," said Carpenter. "It's a botanist's paradise. It's a birder's paradise."

A hiker's paradise, too. My husband and I spent a couple of hours wandering through this area, following parts of the Sand Dunes and Ferns & Lakes trails, absolutely stunning on a gorgeous fall day.

Also here: a place called The Spot, a 4-acre grouping of aligned pine trees that has become an extremely popular subject for amateur photographers on Instagram.

As terrific as the hiking was, however, it couldn't compete with the magic of the treehouses.

On the morning of our departure, after we had moved out of the Nest, I wandered around the village, taking photos, trying to capture the place. Photos do not do it justice.

I spent part of the morning, too, inspecting the exterior of the treehouse, trying to figure out where the noises from the night before were coming from.

The Nest is held aloft by a deck attached to six maple trees, none of which seemed close enough to the house to bang against it. Other, nearby trees didn't appear to be likely culprits either.

So the unexplained noises remain a mystery, at least to me. And that mystery just adds to the magic.

**If you go: Cannalee Treehouse Village**

**Where:** The treehouse village is located near Toledo Express Airport, within the Beach Ridge Area of Oak Openings Preserve Metropark, one of 18 parks in the Metroparks Toledo system. Address for the village is 3250 Waterville Swanton Road, Swanton, an easy two-hour drive from Cleveland via the Ohio Turnpike. Treehouse village visitation is restricted to guests except during special events and public tours.

**Reservations, prices and tours:** Treehouse reservations are being accepted through 2021. Treehouses and tent platforms are open year-round, Wednesday through Sunday. Overnight rates are \$225 for the six-person Stable treehouse; \$200 for the Hub; \$150 for the Nest and Dragline; and \$30 each for a tent platform. Reservations can be made for one or two nights only. The park is also offering free tours of the treehouse village, which are filled for this month and will resume in April. Currently, reservations are accepted only by phone.

**More information:** metroparkstoledo.com/discover/cannalee-treehouse-village, 419-407-9723



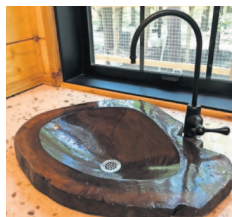
The Nest, left, and the Dragline, two overnight treehouses that are part of the new Cannalee Treehouse Village near Toledo.



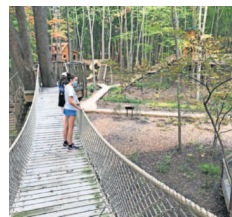
View from the balcony of the Nest, one of four overnight treehouses in Cannalee Treehouse Village. Photos by Susan Glaser, cleveland.com



A rope ladder leads to an oversized hammock on one of three elevated tent platforms at Cannalee Treehouse Village near Toledo. Credit



Sink bowl made out of a tree trunk at Cannalee Treehouse Village near Toledo.



On the suspension bridge, part of Cannalee Treehouse Village near Toledo.

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*Scott Carpenter, director of public relations for Metroparks Toledo.*