



FROM LEFT: Sarah Bird in her backyard in Austin; a rock wall along Panther Canyon Nature Trail at Landa Park in New Braunfels.

# A Long Soak in a Sea of Green

HOW THE JAPANESE PRACTICE OF FOREST BATHING IS CONNECTING UNDERSERVED TEXANS WITH THE BENEFITS OF COMMUNING WITH NATURE

BY SARAH BIRD | PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM MCCARTHY JR.



**“SO, FOREST BATHING?”** my husband inquires dubiously on a sublime fall day as we drive south on Our Highway of Perpetual Construction, Interstate 35. We’re heading from Austin to New Braunfels, where I’m going to investigate this exact practice.

“Yes?” I counter.

“Are you sure this isn’t going to be a repeat of that Jemez Mountains deal?” he asks.

That “Jemez Mountains deal” was a cross-country ski trip we’d taken in New Mexico. Our destination was a “secret” hot spring where we’d envisioned taking a blissful, private soak. When we approached the rising mist at the end of a long, snowy trail, however, we spotted three burly German tourists, completely nude except for surprising amounts of body hair. Friendly types, they all stood to greet us. Hard pass on tubbing with the Teutons.

El Hubbo’s confusion and skepticism are understandable. “Forest bathing” is an unfortunate translation of *shinrin-yoku*, the name coined in 1982 by the Japanese government when it began promoting immersion in nature to combat skyrocketing suicide rates. Dr. Qing Li, a member of Tokyo’s Nippon Medical School, later used science to back up the intuition that nature is good for humans with his 2018 international bestseller, *Forest Bathing: How Trees Can Help You Find Health and Happiness*.

The results of the Japanese government’s experiment were so promising that scientists around the globe put the simple practice of spending mindful time outdoors to the test. In the four decades since, a whopping 290 million participants from 20 different countries were tracked in

hundreds of studies. Scientists measured everything from how much more stress levels dropped when strolling in nature instead of along a city street, to how much faster sick patients recovered when they had a view of trees rather than a hospital wall. The research confirmed what we know intuitively: Spending more time outside is good for our bodies and minds. Unhurried strolls in forests, parks, and leafy neighborhoods—even along golf courses—can be effective for helping to lower heart rate, blood pressure, and anxiety.

*Hello anxiety, my old friend.* Like most sentient Americans, the cascade of jarring events loosed upon us in recent years has left me as jangled as any Japanese commuter being stuffed onto a Tokyo subway. Could forest bathing, I wonder, be a way to help me ditch my blood pressure pills and achieve serenity?

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:  
Comal Springs; John Warner of the Texas A&M Forest Service; Kortnee Whitehawk examines a mountain laurel.



Since I spent a fair chunk of my childhood as an Air Force kid on bases in Japan, I understand how immersion in their serene pine forests and artfully manicured gardens could be a Zen experience. Texas on the other hand? A state where, historically, nature has been a hostile place always trying to attack us with a cactus spine, a rattler fang, or scorching heat? Would this practice even work in Texas?

“Forest bathing most certainly does work in Texas,” John Warner, a recently retired Urban District Forester with the Texas A&M Forest Service, assures me with infectious enthusiasm. The 32-year veteran of the state agency became an ardent advocate of forest bathing because it connects perfectly with his mission to teach citizens that public lands are essential. For him, the practice is “a no-brainer.”

“People won’t protect or advocate for something unless they have an attachment to it,” Warner says. “We have 29 million people in Texas; we want to get every one of those lives touched by nature. We want to get them attached to forests. That’s the reason I got involved.”

In 2019, Warner set up the state’s first forest bathing program at W.G. Jones State Park in Conroe with the help of volunteer guides. I asked if I could sign up. But sadly, those large, public sessions have been temporarily discontinued for exactly the reason my anxiety levels have spiked and I need this treatment more than ever. Read: the pandemic.

Luckily, Warner suggests another option: Kortnee Whitehawk, one of only a couple Certified Forest Therapy Guides in the state accredited by the Association of Nature and Forest Therapy. A few days later, my husband and I are on our way to Landa Park in New Braunfels to meet with Whitehawk.

When we reach the little Central Texas town, a van from a kayak rental business pulls in front of us. A sign on the back of the van orders us to “Let the RADventure Begin!!!”

Why yes, I believe I will.

I start relaxing the instant we pass beneath Landa Park’s towering oaks. I am suffused by happy memories of family picnics in the shade of these ancient trees. A couple more recent memories return when I spot Wursthalle, where I might have over-celebrated a few Wurstfests.

We park and I pull out the blood pressure monitor I’d brought along to chart the wondrous effects forest bathing is sure to have on my system. I pump it up and note my typical, borderline terrifying reading.





*There is a lot of nice research showing that exposure to nature can help a patient manage ADHD, asthma, hypertension, and mental health issues.*

Since he's not coming along, I use El Hubbo as my personal control group. He's engrossed in a conference call, but he grudgingly sticks out his arm. As usual, he has the blood pressure of a lizard sunning on a rock. Not that it's a competition.

**I meet my guide at the source of Comal Springs, where the Edwards Aquifer pumps its crystalline waters into Texas' largest springs.** What more can I tell you about the radiantly exuberant Whitehawk, except that she is the rare middle-aged woman who can pull off a newsboy cap *and* pigtailed? Not to mention her great-great-great-grandmother was a medicine woman with the Abenaki tribe in Vermont and the last name she uses professionally was inspired by her spirit animal. If anyone can turn me into a forest bathing aficionado, it is this wood nymph.

"The whole idea of forest bathing is a series of invitations to get you out of the cerebral brain," Whitehawk explains as we enter Panther Canyon Nature Trail, a popular 1.7-mile hushed green corridor of oak, juniper, and cedar elms. She invites me to scratch a rock and smell, to listen for the hoot of an owl, to imagine the dry bed of Panther Creek flowing with rushing water, to notice the countless shades of green.

A couple wearing flip-flops zips past, and I realize my Rocky Mountain-battered hiking boots are overkill on this tranquil amble. Forest bathing doesn't require Gore-Tex and cardiovascular endurance. All you need is an open mind.

For a quarter of a mile, we stroke bark and sniff lichen, and imagine a life story for one of Whitehawk's favorite trees, a live oak she calls Flying Tree. Then we stop, and she invites me to find a "sit-spot" off the trail and simply "observe and see what comes up."

Tucked away behind a boulder, I face the majestic limestone canyon wall and watch tree shadows play across its face. A ginormous black beetle trundles under the python crawl of fallen branches. Jays squabble.

I lie down and surrender entirely as I watch a soft breeze rustle the high branches that paint swaying patterns across the bluer-than-blue sky. In all my communing with nature, some scratchy oak leaves have managed to work their way into my underwear, but I don't care. I can feel my blood pressure plummeting.



Without much effort, I find that I am doing what 70% of us fail to do while meditating: I am present in the moment. My hamster wheel of a brain briefly disengages, and I sigh with contentment as the stress drains away. This, I reflect, is almost as relaxing as sitting in my backyard.

That would be my exceptionally bucolic backyard, where I can see just as many trees and a lot more wildlife, and where fewer oak leaves will work their way into my underwear. In that instant, the hamster wheel starts squeaking again and I wonder if forest bathing might not be just a leafier version of the hippies' "Be Here Now" or Oprah's infatuation with "The Power of Now." How, I ask myself, is this really any different from any stroll in the woods?

I am close to deciding that it's not when a gaggle of utterly silent preteens passes on the trail behind me. With eyes freshened by my forest bath, I notice what has become so normal that none of us even sees it anymore. They are—yes, all of them—on their phones. Not a single one of the five is interacting with the trees. Or, even, each other.

I'm struck by a vivid memory of the first time I encountered screen bewitchment in the young. This was 20 years ago. Our son, Gabriel, was 10, and we'd arranged for a couple of his pals to come home from school with us. I sprang what I thought would be a surprise treat and took the trio to one of Gabriel's favorite spots: Mayfield Park, a warren of lakeside trails in Austin.

As soon as I stopped the car in the Mayfield parking lot, Gabriel bounded out. His bewildered buddies, however, didn't budge. They simply gazed out the car window while Gabriel disappeared down a trail, then pulled out their Game Boys and were consumed.

We were still a couple of decades away from 2019, when ABC News told us teens spent an average of nine hours and 49 minutes on their phones a day, but even then, the boys' inertia was alarming. Clearly, this was a teachable moment.

"Out," I ordered. "Now."

After finally dislodging them, the two boys hovered around the car like a pair of rehabilitated orangutans yearning to return to the safety of the cage, but eventually they wandered off.

This memory triggered my first forest bathing epiphany: The ones who need to return to the wild are today's digitally distracted youth. I thought urgently about the increasing number of kids growing up in neighborhoods paved and perhaps perilous rather than lovely and leafy—who don't have a pleasant, safe park to drive to, or a parent available to do the driving.

This led to my second epiphany: Those who need forest bathing most aren't fortunate people like me. People who grew up roaming woody neighborhoods from the second we finished our cornflakes until we chased the mosquito spray trucks home at dusk. People who own far too much fleece



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Whitehawk relaxes along Panther Canyon Nature Trail; Comal Springs; tree bark and lichen.

and have cross-country ski memories. People with parents who shoo them into nearby parks.

I am now enthusiastic about the importance of forest bathing for greenery-starved youths as I slug down some of the dandelion tea Whitehawk has thoughtfully brewed. I thank her effusively for an experience that enlightened me in a completely unexpected way, and head home.

I don't even bother taking my blood pressure. I have other questions about forest bathing, and they no longer concern me and my own tiny, personal anxiety hive.

**"I literally write prescriptions for my patients to go outside."**

I'm speaking with Dr. Daniel Porter, director of the Lone Star Family Health Center in Conroe, about why he became one of the state's most ardent advocates of forest bathing.

"I have seen a 90-pound 3-year-old who almost couldn't walk, and it broke my heart," Porter says. "But when I have conversations with parents about what they do with their kids, I see the anxiety. They know their children should be getting out, but both parents are working. And maybe they live in a dangerous neighborhood. So, the kids come home, get locked in, and jump on their phones or on TV.

"I deal with an underserved population," he adds. "Some of them stress over immigration, economics, opiate issues, methamphetamines, and the perennial No. 1 issue: drinking. And this is all pre-COVID. Before schools had to close. Screen use now is insane."

Porter estimates 30%-40% of what primary caregivers struggle with are mental health problems. But many caregivers simply don't have time for in-depth therapy. Sometimes, prescribing medication is the best doctors can do. Mental health counseling is another option, but many patients are reluctant to go or have financial barriers to care. "It got to me that I didn't have anything else to offer," Porter says. "And then John Warner came along."

Warner agrees unequivocally when I share both of Porter's comments and my forest bathing revelation. "Yes, absolutely, we need to talk about social justice."

How, though, does that commitment jibe with Warner's role at the state agency?

"I'm the land manager," Warner says. "I'm inviting everyone to get out there and enjoy their public lands. But there is a huge difference between the groups that might use that land. One group just wants to get a little exercise while another group is worrying about 'How am I going to pay the rent? Where is my next meal coming from?' One group understands that getting out will make them feel better. Another group doesn't have time to feel good. Dr. Porter helps me connect with that group."

Everything came together in 2008 when Warner and Porter met Tamberly Conway, the first U.S. Forest Service employee to receive financial support from the agency to become a Certified Forest Therapy Guide.

"Reaching out to diverse groups is my personal passion," says Conway, who worked for years as a Partnerships, Diversity, and Inclusion Specialist, and Conservation Education

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:  
Dr. Daniel Porter of Lone Star Family Health Center in Conroe; W.G. Jones State Park; the nature area at Lone Star Family Health Center.



Specialist with the U.S. Forest Service in Washington, D.C. Now based in Lubbock, she is spreading the gospel of outdoor inclusion. In partnership with conservation and health-related organizations, Conway has supported the development of programs for veterans, many of whom have experienced trauma; people suffering from depression and chronic diseases; and bilingual groups like Corazón Latino, a national nonprofit focusing on social and environmental projects.

In 2008, Warner was searching for programs to reach Latino audiences and invited Conway to meet with him and Porter. Conway's multicultural approach helped them understand that nature does not automatically mean happy frolics to everyone. For some, "outside" has negative connotations.

Porter recalls how that pivotal meeting with Conway opened new doors for him. "She helped us get a grant to build a small nature area where kids 2 to 8 can explore and parents can relax. It's right outside the [clinic]," he adds proudly. "That's when I started getting into the idea of prescribing nature: 'Two times a week, spend an hour outside.'"

Until COVID shut it down, many of those prescriptions were for the program at W.G. Jones State Park. Alexis Sham, an immigration attorney in The

Woodlands with 4- and 5-year-old adopted daughters who struggle with weight issues and other challenges, says his kids have benefited from this program. "It gives them a sense of wonder," Sham says. "They get so excited seeing deer and collecting pine cones. They love the bridges. It helps them not only physically but mentally as well. They're always asking, 'When are we going on an adventure?'"

Even with the program now shut down, Porter remains undaunted. "It really feels like we're on the cusp of something big," he concludes. "As a scientist, you want the data, not just the feel-good stuff. And there is a lot of nice research showing that exposure to nature can help a patient manage ADHD, asthma, hypertension, and mental health issues. It's not expensive. There are no side effects. It's a game-changer."

At this point, I am sold on everything about forest bathing except the unfortunate name. A title that conjures up images of hot-tubbing Teutons and wood nymphs is too goofy for a practice with the potential to change lives and reaffirm every Texan's essential right to access verdant spaces. Whatever the name, I was certain the kayak rental van was right, and forest bathing is indeed one RADventure all Texans should embark on. 🐾

## Self-Care Anywhere

**Want to get in on some nature therapy magic, but don't live near any inviting patches of green? Kortnee Whitehawk has you covered with the following tips:**

Get yourself near nature. Sit down next to a houseplant or an open window. Find a spot on a fire escape or your patio, or in your backyard or a nearby park. It does not have to be a wilderness expedition.

Leave your phone at home. The idea is to slow everything down. Find a sit-spot and be still for a minimum of 30 minutes. Pay attention. Notice.

Create a scent blend of dirt, leaves, and flowers. Rub it. Smell it.

Dig in the dirt with a stick.

Put your feet and hands in water.

Feel the breeze on your face and hair.

Put your forehead against a tree and hug it.

Reconnect with joy, and remember that we are human beings, not human doings.

To find a guide near you, visit [natureandforesttherapy.org](http://natureandforesttherapy.org).