Far from the hubbub of city life, forests grow, rivers rush and animals walk free. Air is cleaner; water, too. Spend some time in this atmosphere and you'll feel your spirits rejuvenate, stress release and imagination dance.

Thanks to The Wilderness Act of 1964, most of our wild land will stay this way forever.
This year marks the 50th anniversary of the historic document that protected 9.1 million acres of federal land when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed it into law. The act allows Congress to designate "an area where the Earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Since then, the federal government has done just that — at last count, more than 750 different places (about 110 million acres of land) are protected by the legislation.»

Boundary Waters has about 1,175 lakes and several hundred miles of streams.
BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA WILDERNESS

Size: 1.3 million acres

Closest city: Duluth, Minn.; two-and-a-half-hour drive

Year established as wilderness: 1964
To put those numbers into perspective, consider this: The act protects about 5 percent of all land in the United States.

“The importance of what they did 50 years ago has only grown since the time they passed the act,” says Jamie Williams, president of The Wilderness Society, a nonprofit that protects the nation’s shared wild lands. “It has empowered people from all walks of life who love special wild places to protect them for future generations.”

Some of these wilderness areas may be familiar. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska has generated plenty of headlines as domestic oil advocates lobby to allow drilling there. But many places, such as Arkansas’ Leatherwood Wilderness, which contains some of the craggliest terrain in the Ozarks, remain outside the spotlight.

What these areas share is their wild, undeveloped nature. They’re the kinds of places you can go to listen to babbling brooks and swaying trees and maybe even hear your own heartbeat. Here are five worth exploring now.

**SHINING ROCK WILDERNESS**

*Size:* 18,483 acres  
*Closest city:* Asheville, N.C.; about one-hour drive  
*Year established as wilderness area:* 1964

Think of this wilderness southwest of Asheville, N.C., as old-school. It’s one of only three wilderness areas in the eastern U.S. that was established with the original Wilderness Act. Its name is derived from the quartz outcrops that shimmer and shine. The region is sacred to the Cherokee, and Shining Rock is referred to in the tribe’s Creation story. The area was logged and heavily scorched by fire in the early 20th century (because of this, all fires are now prohibited). The forest since has recovered with new-growth balsams and laurels. Shining Rock is one of the most visited wilderness areas. Expect crowds in the summer.

**Must do:** Sample the grandeur from the Art Loeb Trail, which winds through some of the highest peaks in the region with 11 of its 30 miles in the designated wilderness area.

**BOUNDARY WATERS CANOE AREA WILDERNESS**

This wilderness area in northeastern Minnesota is a different kind of wild; most of the nearly 1.3 million acres are water. Not surprisingly, the BWCAW is the only large lake wilderness in the National Wilderness Preservation System. All told, the area contains more than 1,000 glacial lakes, as well as 1,500 miles of canoe routes and nearly 2,200 campsites — most equipped with their own latrine and steel fire grate. Kayaks and canoes are the best way to explore the region and marvel at rocky cliffs, waterfalls and Native American pictographs.

**Must do:** Instead of planning your own trip, hire Ely-based Boundary Waters Outfitters to organize meals, plot a route, reserve the best equipment and help with pick-ups and drop-offs.

The grassy balds of Shining Rock were caused by catastrophic fires in 1925 and 1942.
Surprisingly, moose are not common in Moosehorn Wilderness. Puffins are among the migratory birds that stop along the coast, and beavers make their homes, below, in the marshes and creeks.

MOOSEHORN WILDERNESS

Size: 28,751 acres
Closest city: Bar Harbor, Maine; three-hour drive
Year established as wilderness area: 1970

In the southeast corner of Maine, Moosehorn sees the sun every morning before every other wilderness area in the country. This refuge is managed with a "hands-off" philosophy and granted special protection to maintain primitive qualities. That means vehicles, even bicycles, are prohibited, and habitat management is kept to a minimum to allow the areas to develop naturally. It also means the Moosehorn Wilderness protects some of the oldest mature forest in Maine, including a stand of white pines more than 150 years old. In the forest lives the American woodcock, an elusive species whose population has declined. Biologists study and intensively manage the species in the wilderness area.

Must do: Visit the Cobscook Bay area in late May to experience the Down East Spring Birding Festival, which celebrates the arrival of migratory birds, including puffins.
Gila Wilderness offers a range of landscapes from grasslands to sheer cliffs.

GILA WILDERNESS

Size: 558,014 acres
Closest cities: Tucson and Albuquerque, both about a five-hour drive
Year established as wilderness area: 1964

This New Mexico expanse is significant for its history — in 1924, at the insistence of American environmentalist Aldo Leopold, Gila became the world's first designated wilderness area. Today its topography includes pinyon and juniper woodlands, stands of ponderosa pines and the jagged rocky peaks of mountains in the Mogollon Range. With such a varied landscape, backpacking is the name of the game. In one day, hikers can summit elevations of more than 10,000 feet and descend steep canyons carved by tributaries of the Gila River. Hot springs in the area are worth the trek.

Must do: Save time for a daytrip to Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument, an ancient Native-American village built inside canyon caves.

TRINITY ALPS WILDERNESS

Size: 525,627 acres
Closest city: Sacramento; two-hour drive
Year established as wilderness area: 1984

A remote peak in this hard-to-get-to California wilderness two hours north of Sacramento resembles the Matterhorn on the border of Switzerland and Italy — hence the reference to the Alps. The similarities only make the "Trinities," as they're known, more spectacular. The region features barren rock cliffs, rugged peaks, stands of timber and large meadows that burst with wildflowers in July and August. There also are 55 lakes, many of which represent the headwaters for the system that delivers water to the state's Central Valley. The U.S. Forest Services maintains a total of 550 miles of hiking trails.

Must do: Drive or hike the bumpy (and unpaved) Coffee Creek Road to the "White Trinities," mountain peaks composed of white granite that sit at the center of the wilderness.