

# WATERFALLS

## Searching for sublime waters in the Cascades

BY ANDREW ENGELSON

If you're searching for a description of why many of us enjoy waterfalls so much, look no further than William Wordsworth. In "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey," the English poet wrote in 1798:

*The sounding cataract  
Haunted me like a passion:  
the tall rock,  
The mountain, and the deep  
and gloomy wood,  
Their colours and their  
forms, were then to me  
An appetite; a feeling and a  
love...*

In Washington's deep and gloomy woods (and also in its arid, rolling hills), you'll find an abundance of "cataracts," from subtle cascading streams to thundering falls that shake the stones to their foundations. In fact, our mountains—the Cascades—are named for the multitudes of falling waters you'll find here.

One of the joys of waterfall viewing in the Northwest is that you'll always find at least one flowing any time of year. Some are perennial, falling year-round. Others are seasonal. Some stream from glaciers heating in the summer sun, some are fed by winter rains, and others course from melting snow packs in spring. Many can be reached by car, but the most rewarding are those requiring a hike—either a short wander through the woods, or a grueling multi-day backpacking pilgrimage.

Pilgrimage is an appropriate term, since so many of us treat waterfalls with a special kind of reverence. There's something hypnotic about a waterfall. The incessant white noise tends to drown out flitting thoughts and provide a moment for contemplation. But there's also a raw power and danger about them. It's that mix of beauty and awe the poets called the sublime.

There's a good reason that Wordsworth is quoted on a sign at the start of the trail to Wallace Falls, outside the town of Gold Bar. "Come forth into the light of things. Let nature be your teacher," it reads. On a recent weekend, I decided to take that advice and savor the falls. What I learned was that you can experience the sublime even on a trail packed with fellow bootsteppers.

Broken into three tiers, Wallace Falls can be observed from a number of rest stops at the upper end of the 2.7-mile Woody Trail. Railings provide a small comfort as you peer into the chasm of the Wallace River. In late winter, the falls were surging with rainwater and sending out a roar worthy of the space shuttle.

The 265-foot Middle Falls is the most impressive, if for no other reason than this is the clearest view you'll get of the three falls. Many remote falls in the Pacific Northwest might be equally as popular as Wallace—if not for the fact that they

aren't visible through thickets of Douglas fir, devil's club and ferns surrounding them. But here the endless stream of white is very visible and inspiring.

There were plenty of other hikers gawking at the spectacle on a balmy March afternoon, but that didn't diminish the force of its beauty. The Upper Falls is my favorite—and not just because the higher elevation tends to weed out the exhausted masses. It's a novel perspective, peering down into the bowl of the falls opposite. At eye level with the plummet of water, you're more aware of gravity at work here. Gripping the smooth, peeled-log railing, I felt it shudder from the impact of falling water. The upwelling mist shook the mosses and ferns hanging precariously from the black cliffs, and as it rose, it cooled my face.

If nothing else, all that falling water makes a hiker thirsty. After a steep and quick climb to the top of the falls, I finished off the last drops in my water bottle, as a bead of sweat trickled down my arm. All this falling water makes you glad to be alive.

*Photo: Feature Show Falls along the Boulder River Trail, Boulder River Wilderness. Waterfalls combine the beautiful and the powerful in a compelling combination.*

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DON PAULSON



*A hiker contemplates Comet Falls, Mount Rainier National Park. In addition to the 320-foot falls, waterfalls coming out of Rainier's glaciers are another reason to check out this trail in mid-summer.*

## The Waterfall Guy

Bryan Swan knows Washington's waterfalls inside and out

BY ANDREW ENGELSON

Just about as long as he can remember, Bryan Swan has had a thing for waterfalls.

"One of my first memories," he says, "was hiking to Rainy Lake with my parents when I was maybe 3 or 4 and seeing the waterfall on the far end."

Since then, he has made an avocation of waterfall spotting in the Northwest. In 1998 he started a website cataloguing the region's waterfalls. In February 2005 it underwent a major transformation and [www.waterfallnorthwest.com](http://www.waterfallnorthwest.com) is now the most impressive collection of informa-

tion on Northwest falls. Over 3,000 falls in Washington state alone are cataloged, described, and sometimes photographed. Each listing includes height, width, magnitude (volume of water flow), seasonality, source, and GPS coordinates. As comprehensive as the site is, Swan insists he's only scratched the surface.

"I've got approximately 3,000 inventoried in Washington. I imagine that's probably less than 20 percent of the total count."

Swan is comfortable either driving, hiking, or bushwhacking to follow his obsession. He's never had a mishap at a falls, although one time he was so fixated on trying to get a glimpse of a falls in British Columbia he neglected to notice the rear end of an elk not more than a few feet from his nose.

He's recently started to venture off-trail to some of the more remote and spectacular falls in the state. He recently had the opportunity to see Depot Creek Falls, a 975-foot falls in Washington's North Cascades that's only accessible by crossing south over the border from

British Columbia. He describes it as "possibly the most impressive waterfall I've been to in person. Possibly only Yosemite Falls tops it." On his list to see firsthand: Sulphide Creek Falls on the southeast flank of Mount Shuksan and Green Lake Falls at the headwaters of Bacon Creek in the North Cascades. Both probably exceed 2,000 feet in height, and both require battling what he dubs "class 5 brush" to reach them.

But you don't have to wrestle devil's club and slide alder to see many of the state's impressive waterfalls. See the following page for a brief list of some of Swan's favorites in Washington.



ROBIN ROWAN

*Wallace Falls, a great year-round hike near the town of Gold Bar.*

### When's the best time to view waterfalls?

For waterfalls that aren't fed by glaciers, April to June is prime time, while glacier-fed falls tend to peak between June and September.

### How should I photograph waterfalls?

Swan suggests using a polarizing filter to help make the falling water stand out from the surrounding cliffs. He also recommends shooting pictures on an overcast day to reduce contrast, and better balance the white of the falls with the dark of the surrounding rocks.

### Where can I find more information?

Swan's website [www.waterfalls-northwest.com](http://www.waterfalls-northwest.com) is an invaluable resource.

For information on falls in Washington, Oregon, and Idaho consult Gregory Plumb's book *Waterfall Lovers Guide Pacific Northwest* (Mountaineers Books, \$18.95, 2005)

For information on waterfalls further afield, consult Bryan Swan's World Waterfall Database at [www.world-waterfalls.com](http://www.world-waterfalls.com).

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## Nine great waterfall hikes

### Boulder River

9 miles RT, Elevation gain: 600 feet  
Hikeable most of the year  
Green Trails 77 Oso, 109 Granite Falls

This lovely trail into the Boulder River Wilderness is a great hike for kids, and has several notable waterfalls to offer. Most prominent is Feature Show Falls, a wedding-cake of a falls across the river from the trail. It's at its peak flow in winter and spring.

### Foss Lakes

Alpine Lakes Wilderness  
8 miles RT, Elev. gain: 2,300 feet  
Hikeable July-Oct.  
Green Trails 175 Skykomish,  
176 Stevens Pass

This trail abounds with lacy tributary falls and a string of high lakes in this classic Alpine Lakes landscape. The capping attraction is Malachite Falls, 600-foot magnitude 74 falls at the outlet of Copper Lake.

### Lava Canyon

Mount St. Helens  
3.5 miles RT, Elevation gain: 1,100 feet  
Hikeable late June-Sept.  
Green Trails 364 Mount St. Helens

A geological wonder of a trail, with bizarre lava formations, deep gorges, an adventurous trail bridge and 7 waterfalls of varied height and magnitude.

### Lewis River Trail

Gifford Pinchot National Forest

Mileage varies, total one way trip: 18.5 miles, Elevation gain: 900 feet

Hikeable March-Nov.

If you can arrange to have a car at both the Lewis River and Quartz Creek trailheads, you'll be treated to rolling, 18.5-mile trek past some of the state's loveliest waterfalls, including Curly Creek, the Lower, Middle and Upper Falls of the Lewis River, and plenty of other unnamed falls along the way. Or pick and chose your favorite stretches to day hike, as there are numerous trailheads along the Lewis River. Be sure to also take the 1.5-mile jaunt to 130-foot Big Creek Falls

### Skyline Loop

Mount Rainier National Park  
5.5 miles RT, Elev. gain: 1,700 feet  
Hikeable late July-October  
Green Trails 365 Lone Butte

The popular Skyline Loop above Paradise is usually noted for its wildflower displays, but there are some fine waterfalls to be seen here, including the small, but beautifully braided Myrtle Falls and 300-foot Sluiskin Falls.

### Spray Park

Mount Rainier National Park  
6 miles RT, Elevation gain: 2,200 feet  
Hikeable mid-July-Oct.

If you want to see hundreds of fantastic waterfalls, hike the entire 95-mile loop around Mount Rainier. For those with less time or stamina, hike this popular route through meadows and subalpine forest to the base of Spray Falls, an elegant 350-foot fan-shaped falls.



DON PAULSON

*Middle Lewis River Falls. The 18.5-mile Lewis River Trail is packed with waterfalls large and small.*

### Taylor River

Middle Fork Snoqualmie River  
10 miles RT, Elev. gain: 500 feet  
Hikeable April-Oct.

Green Trails 174 Mount Si, 175 Skykomish  
On this road-to-trail you'll find access to three unique waterfalls: Marten Creek, Otter Falls, and Big Creek Falls. The highlight is Otter Falls, a 600-foot slide of creek descending a huge granite slab into Lipsy Lake. A cairn at 4.5 miles marks a short spur trail to the lake and falls.

### Van Trump Park

Mount Rainier National Park  
6 miles RT, Elev. gain: 2,200 feet  
Hikeable mid July-October  
Green Trails 269 Mount Rainier West

The obvious highlight of this summer hike in Mount Rainier National Park is 320-foot Comet Falls. But as you ascend to Van Trump Park, you'll see dozens of other falls, including many crashing directly from the Kautz and Van Trump Glaciers.

### Wallace Falls

5.5 miles RT, Elevation gain: 1,200 feet  
Hikeable most of the year  
Green Trails 142 Index

This great foothills hike is fantastic for families—although it does gain 1,200 feet, so prepare the kids for some exercise. The three-tiered falls is one of the state's premier lowland falls (ranking with Snoqualmie and Palouse Falls) and is accessible most of the year. Middle Falls is the most scenic. ♦

DAVE NOBLES



*Above: Hikers take in the lower section of 350-foot Spray Falls, Mount Rainier National Park. The summer hike is 6 miles round trip.*