

The Basin-Cascades Trail

Hiking Data Distance, parking area to:

The Basin 0.1 mile
The Cascades 0.2 mile
Kinsman Falls 0.5 mile
Rocky Glen Falls 1.0 mile



Altitude gain: 600 feet to Rocky Glen Falls (altitude 2000 feet).

Difficulty: EASY to Kinsman Falls; MODERATE thereafter.

If there were a delight meter for measuring the splendor of waterfalls, its reading for the Basin would be surprisingly low, considering the spot's great popularity. This large pothole pool set in a riverbed sculpture of polished Conway granite is a fascinating natural feature, to be sure, but not much of a waterfall. Most visitors gaze at the swirling currents for a few minutes, snap a photo, and then tramp back to their cars. Adventurers who leave the crowds behind and forge up the Basin-Cascades Trail, however, quickly find their delight meter swinging high into the Lovely zone Dr. William Prime, who was known as America's Izaak Walton for his popular nineteenth-century book *I Go A-Fishing*, called Cascade Brook "the finest brook in America for scenery as well as for trout." Cascade Brook is a delight not only in terms of lovely views. The cascades and waterfalls that extend for a mile along the brook are also great fun to explore, offering a mixture of broad ledges, cool glens, and tempting pools. If you bring any rambunctious kids along it will be hard to hold them back! They'll find the urge to scamper up the ledges nearly irresistible. And on a warm summer day they might "accidentally" get pretty wet investigating the clear pools. A visit to the falls can be combined with a hike to Lonesome Lake, which occupies a picturesque basin beneath the high bluffs of Cannon Mountain, 1000 feet above the floor of Franconia Notch. Best of all would be to combine the waterfall hike with an overnight stay at the Lonesome Lake AMC hut. The hut offers visitors hearty home cooking, fine hospitality, and a perfect view of evening alpenglow shimmering on the cliffs of Franconia Ridge across the notch.

The Trail to the Falls

Both lanes of the Notch Parkway (I-93) have large, well-marked exits to parking for the Basin. Heading north, you will reach the turn-off 1.5 miles past the Flume. A footpath passes through a tunnel under the parkway and then follows the Pemigewasset River—here just a sparkling stream—a short distance upstream. Cross the footbridge to the west bank for the best view of the Basin and access to the trailhead. Driving southbound you will find the turn-off 1.5 miles below Lafayette Campground. The walk in from this direction is more interesting, as the Pemi here exhibits a fine collection of scoured granite molds—the best being the Basin itself. An asphalted path along the east bank of the river provides access to the Basin for handicapped persons.

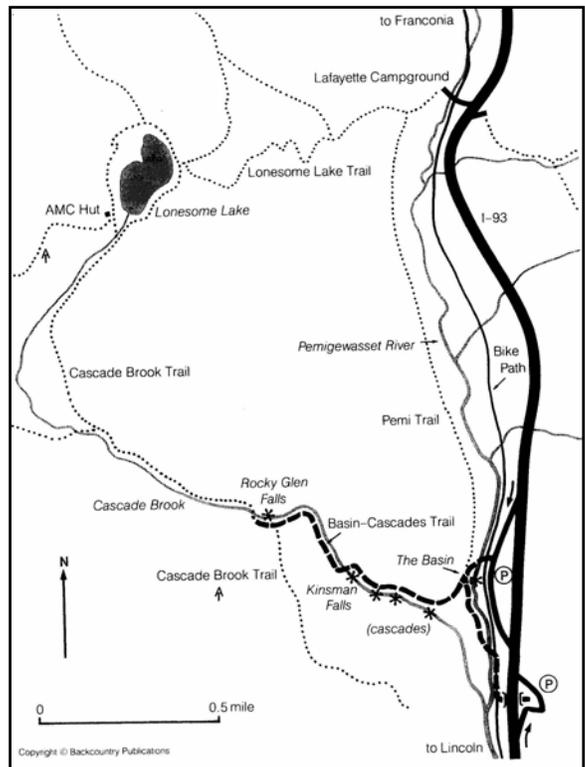


For the best view, though, cross the first footbridge and continue along the west bank path to the Basin. Anyone camping at Lafayette Campground can hike along the river all the way to the Basin, via the Pemi Trail. After visiting the Basin follow the path across the footbridge behind the viewing deck, past an information sign about the non human mammals of Franconia Notch. Dogleg to the right along the clearly marked pathway. Only about 50 yards from the Basin you will reach a large sign identifying the Basin-Cascades trailhead.

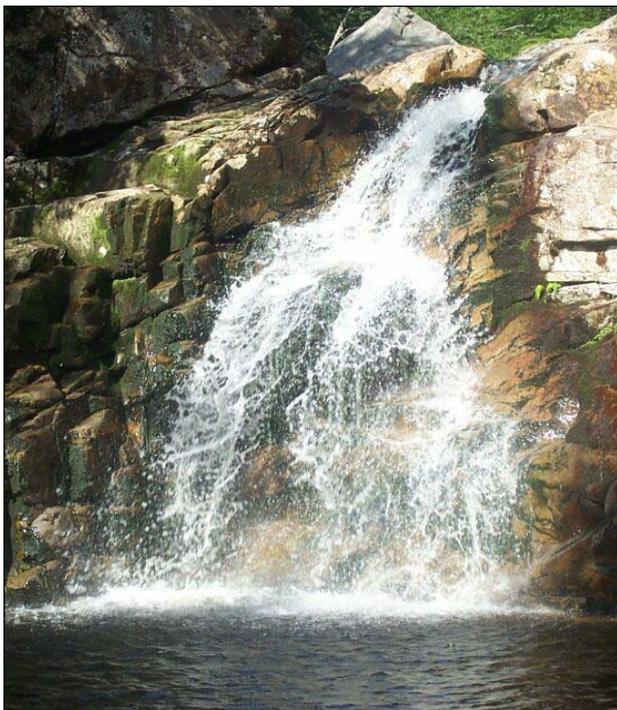


Very quickly after you start up the trail the lower ledges of Cascade Brook appear off to the left. Smooth granite slabs slope hundreds of yards upstream, bedecked with an assortment of cascades. The ledges can be reached from the trail almost anywhere along this stretch. In fact it is most enjoyable to leave the trail altogether and scramble up the sloping streambed or the woods immediately alongside. Since the trail parallels the cascades, meeting the ledge at a number of points, you won't get lost. Immediately above the ledges

Cascade Brook becomes a boulder strewn mountain stream. The trail here slants into the woods and mounts the side of a ridge above the north bank of the brook, climbing steadily. At 0.4 mile from the trailhead a side path leads down to Kinsman Falls, which can't be seen until you reach the bottom of the ravine. Slightly farther up the main trail another side path runs to the top of the falls. Soon thereafter the trail crosses to the south bank of the brook on a narrow bridge—consisting of a log beam with a single rough handrail. Beyond the log-beam bridge the trail becomes considerably rougher. Footing can be tricky in spots where the trail passes over slick roots, damp rocks, small side streams, or stretches of mud. To compensate for the poor footing you will find a running exhibit of brook treasures. There is a pretty cascade spilling over a steep granite wall into a shady gorge; a pool glittering like a tiny green starburst, a pothole tub serviced by a shower of cold stream water. Beside the trail the damp forest floor puts on its own display of mushrooms and mosses. At 0.4 mile above the narrow footbridge a Forest Service sign nailed to a spruce points to Rocky Glen Falls. This is one sign that is hardly needed. It is not difficult to discern the identity of the formation to the right of the trail—a rocky glen split by a beautiful set of falls. To reach the ledge platform atop the falls climb up through a damp cleft in the glen wall off to the left, being careful of slick footing. Just above Rocky Glen Falls the Basin-Cascades Trail merges with the Cascade Brook Trail. The latter proceeds across the brook and continues at a moderate grade another 1.4 miles to Lonesome Lake. The Cascade Brook Trail also links up with routes leading to the surrounding summits. For a moderate 5.4-mile loop, you can hike up to the lake by the route just described and then descend by the Lonesome Lake Trail to the Pemi Trail, which returns to the Basin. Although the Basin is only a minor-league waterfall, it shouldn't be missed. Here the crystal-clear Pemigewasset—old guidebooks were fond of the adjective "pellucid"—funnels down a narrow chute into a deep pool. The force and angle of the cascade incessantly stir the pool's cold jade waters, creating a sweeping whirlpool that has undercut a granite shelf to form an elegant arched grotto. Watching the current revolve around the Basin pool, you can easily understand how water-borne sand and stones could carve such potholes in the solid granite bedrock. Geologists estimate that the Basin has been formed during the past 25,000 years, with most of the cutting being done as the retreating ice cap swelled the Pemi with grit-laden meltwater.

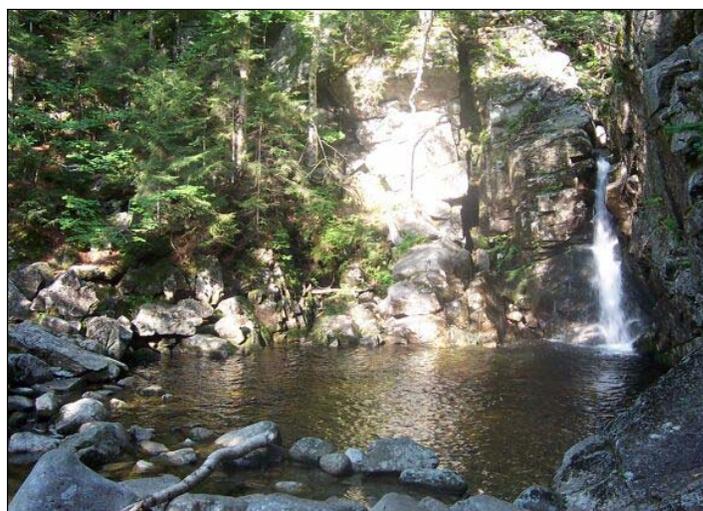


Whereas the Basin is for viewing, the cascades are for playing. For the price of a very short hike you get lovely, sunny ledges that have been bared by the stream and then scalloped, grooved, beveled, and polished by thousands of years of freshets. Near the base of the formation the stream is confined to a narrow channel along the left edge of the ledge (except when the water is high). Here the rock is smooth and level enough that even a toddler (under close supervision) can have a safe romp, in dry conditions. Scrambling up and over a granite hump, you will find pretty waterslides and small, shallow pools dotting the long, sloped cut of rockbed. Higher, the views across the notch improve as the rock becomes more angular and ornamented with lacy cascades. Altogether there are more than a half-dozen distinct levels of cascades and pools stacked along the ledge. The entire stretch is custom made for exploring.



At Kinsman Falls exploring is less easy. The side path from the main trail descends steeply into a cool ravine. At the

head of the ravine a 20-foot-high ribbon of whitewater pours through a narrow chute flanked by dark cliffs that rise nearly three stories above an oval pool. The ravine forms a cool, breezy amphitheater with the falls at center stage and a mural of mosses and lichens adorning the walls. Rounded boulders at the foot of the pool provide ample seating for the audience, which is generally quite small in number. Indeed you might have the theater all to yourself, even on days when the Basin below is jammed with tourists. If you are not content being a spectator, it is possible to hop boulders to the left bank of the stream and climb carefully to the slabs atop Kinsman Falls. Considering the strength of the current and the dangerous plunge just below, attempts to leap the channel above the falls are definitely inadvisable.



Rocky Glen, the last of the waterfalls along the trail, is the most lovely of the lot—though it has keen competition for the honor. The dictionary defines a "glen" as a secluded, narrow valley. In this instance the valley is a narrow gorge carved into a large outcrop of frost-fractured rock. The formation looks as if some great force had pulled at the sides of the outcrop until it split along a zigzag fissure, providing a channel for the tumbling brook. At the bottom of the falls you can approach the mouth of the glen and peer up the lower tongue of cascades, but the sheer cliffs make it difficult to get very far. The best view is obtained from the flat topped boulders and ledges flanking the brook just above the falls. From this vantage point you can see the wide whitewater curtain cascading into the glen, forming a large pool at the center. The walls below amplify the lilting music of the brook. Altogether it is a wonderful place to sit a spell and absorb the woodland atmosphere