

Description: This is an easy to moderate 4 mile hike minutes from the hustle and bustle of our nation's capitol. It's a great place to take the family and for beginners to develop their "hiking legs". For a place so close to a major metropolis there is so much wild power and natural beauty here as you watch the Potomac force its way through the rocky crags of Great Falls and the narrows just above Mather's Gorge. As you walk along you can witness extreme sports firsthand, White Water Kayaking and Rock Climbing, and at the same time study the micro-ecosystems of the never ending vernal pools scattered along Billy Goat Trail. On the return leg you can take in the history of the canal. All of this power and beauty has its price: crowds. Since the C&O Canal runs straight through the middle of the park any reasonably suitable day for being outdoors will bring throngs of walkers, hikers, joggers and bikers to the park. Try to get there early. Then, at least, you'll only have to deal with the crowds as you walk along the tow path back to your cars.

A note: I classify this hike as being easy to moderate but those with balance problems and other certain phobias may have issues with this hike. I won't go into a detailed explanation but will just say that the trail's name was aptly applied.

Directions from I-495 Beltway around Washington, D.C:

1. Take the Clara Barton Parkway (Carderock) exit.
2. Clara Barton Parkway merges into Macarthur Blvd. Follow Macarthur Blvd. to the park. (\$4.00 entrance fee/vehicle)

Trail Notes: From the visitor's Center, cross the canal on a footbridge. An observation platform overlooking the falls is to the right. Check it out and then begin walking downstream on the towpath.

To the right is a trail w/bridges that takes you out to Olstad island, a worthwhile sidebar.

Continue down the towpath to the beginning of the 1A segment of the Billy Goat Trail. Turn right here and follow the blue blazes. When there is no tree available to support the blazes look for them on the rocks. Make sure you check out all of the little pools and ponds as you proceed.

Most of this portion of the hike is along the rocks but there is one point at which you descend to a small beach. On the other side of the beach is a large rock with a diagonal crack in it. It looks like a daunting task but it really isn't too bad. Walk up the crack to get back to the top of the rocky plateau. The trail will soon bear left and follow a footpath through a narrow stretch of woods to the towpath.

Turn left here and follow the tow path back to your car.