

Potomac Gorge, Montgomery County, MD/ Fairfax County, VA



Daniel White/TNC



The rushing speed and force of the Potomac River carved out the Potomac Gorge over thousands of years, creating a complex geological landscape. This preserve has many interesting features, such as Great Falls, an area where the river drops about 80 feet over less than a mile as it goes through the tight Mather Gorge, creating cascading waves of water. There are more than 60 rare plants and animals. Numerous ecosystems exist

Great Falls at the Potomac River. The waterfall and whitewater rapids are breathtaking.

at Potomac Gorge, such as high rocky bluffs, ancient

wooded river terraces, riverside outcrop barrens, gravelly scour bars, and prairie glades lush with warm season grasses. Floods from spring thaws are frequent, and they continuously reshape the landscape.

Key Elements

- Great blue heron
- Eastern tiger swallowtail butterfly
- Riverside prairies
- River scour woodlands

Visitors can go white water rafting on class I-IV rapids, wander along the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath that has informative and interactive signs, or hike the more rugged Billy Goat Trail. Visitors can also learn about the unique history of the canal, including Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas’ efforts to make sure the area was preserved. People also run, bike, photograph, and paddle through the area. The natural area also includes Virginia, and looking

out past the falls one can see Virginia just across the river.

Visiting

- Several parking sites, visitor centers and trails
- Many activities including rafting, hiking and learning about canal history
- Trails sometimes close after a heavy rain, snow, snow melt, or whenever the river is especially high

Located along the Fall Line between the Piedmont Plateau and the Atlantic Coastal Plain, the Potomac Gorge is one of the most geologically diverse places on Earth. The shifting river has created different scales of terrain in Maryland and Virginia. For example, the terraces on the

Maryland side are believed to represent base levels of the river before it eroded away bedrock. Many wildflowers and songbirds appear in the spring, while temporary pools and side channels harbor choruses of frogs, wading birds and freshwater mussels. Some flowers at the Potomac Gorge are the threatened wild false indigo (*Baptisia australis*), a member of the pea family, the rare riverbank goldenrod (*Solidago simplex var. racemosa*), a native sunflower threatened by habitat loss, and the halberd-leaf rosemallows (a native hibiscus), which can be found on the floodplains.

Mark Godfrey/TNC



An Eastern Tiger Swallowtail butterfly in its natural habitat, one of many species found at the Potomac Gorge.

Mather Gorge: A Geological Marvel

This gorge was named for Stephen B. Mather, the first director of the National Park Service. The area is composed largely of sedimentary rocks. These rocks are more than 600 million years old, but lack fossils. They originated as sand and silt from the ancient Iapetus Ocean. Over time, sediments cemented together while igneous rocks (formed from molten lava) were injected between them. Both rock types can now be seen along the gorge.



Erika Nortemann/TNC

Visitors kayaking through the rapids. The Potomac River is one of the few large rivers in the eastern U.S. that lacks major dams, reservoirs or large-scale development along its banks. Natural floods can scour the islands and riverbanks, which disrupts the growth of trees and shrubs and creates new habitats for rare wildflowers and early successional species.

River Facts

Contact

C&O Canal National Historic Park
Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center
11710 MacArthur Boulevard
Potomac, MD 20854
P: 310-767-3714
For more information:
www.nps.gov/choh/planyourvisit/greatfallstavernvisitorcenter.htm

The Potomac Gorge is managed by the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy. The Conservancy has worked for more than 50 years to protect and restore this 9,700-acre natural area. The Conservancy works in partnership with the National Park Service, the George Washington Memorial Parkway, state agencies, and other private conservation groups to protect the lands and waters in the Potomac watershed through land acquisition. The Conservancy helps by restoring important habitat areas and increasing its understanding of how much water the river needs and when those flows are necessary to fulfill wildlife and habitat needs. Volunteers and Conservancy employees also help control invasive species, route trails to avoid visitor trampling and degradation of groundwater invertebrate and rare plant habitats, and control access to dangerous or fragile areas. There is also an audio tour available to enhance a visit to the preserve.

Watch Out For!

- Slippery, rugged terrain
- Ticks and mosquitoes
- Rushing water

Directions (GPS Coordinates: 39.000972,-77.239989)

From Washington, DC: Travel I-95/495 (Capital Beltway) to Exit 41 at Clara Barton Parkway. To reach the Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center near Mather Gorge and Bear Island, head north about 1.7 miles and turn left onto MacArthur Boulevard. Proceed nearly 3.5 miles to the Visitor Center.