

Inside Outside
By Allen Young

Royalston Falls -- Not Yosemite, But Close to Home
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I sometimes say that the scenic attractions of the North Quabbin Region are not as spectacular as those of a national park, but they are spectacular nonetheless.

Royalston Falls helps illustrate my point. In Yosemite National Park, the largest waterfalls plunges 670 feet into the valley floor, and it's gorgeous and dramatic. However, a visitor views Yosemite Falls with hundreds of other people. Royalston Falls is only 45 feet high but it is also gorgeous and dramatic – and is usually viewed in solitude.

Royalston Falls is located near the New Hampshire state line in a remote forested property of 217 acres owned by the Trustees of Reservations. The Trustees' web site (www.ttor.org) provides information about all of its 100+ properties, as well as the organization's inspiring history.

Through the acquisition of more land and the creation of the Tully Trail, the Trustees have made Royalston Falls accessible from Route 32. The trail head, marked with a sign, is located 1.7 miles north of the intersection of routes 32 and 68 in West Royalston. It's a downhill hike of about one mile to the cascade.

The Trustees' web site uses rather flowery language – not my usual style – but it's an accurate description of this place:

“Carved over the ages by Falls Brook, the boisterous cascade plunges 45 feet into an icy pool, sending up a misty spray through the thick forest hugging the gorge...As you make your way into the ravine, the dramatic falls remain hidden within an emerald cloak of dense forest and ferns. The flume appears suddenly, as if to offer a sensory reward for your exertions. In winter, freezing spray creates a fantastic landscape of ice.”

Once on a hot summer day, a friend and I hiked a short distance downstream from the falls, descended to the brook, and waded upstream through the ravine to stand directly under the cascade. That was fun! If you do this, wear old sneakers to protect yourself from sticks and debris hidden underwater.

Our local woods may not be at their most beautiful in the late fall, but especially on a sunny day, the light comes through the leafless trees, adding to the experience. Hikers can enjoy not only Falls Brook with its surprises of small gorges, mini-falls and pools prior to the “main event,” but also the varied greens of mosses and ferns, the unique textures and colors of boulders and tree bark, and the last of autumn's fungi and dragonflies. The trail is not well-groomed and can be wet in places, so use caution.

There have been some trail improvements and the Trustees built a substantial shelter for overnight hikers with the help of volunteers from the Pioneer Valley Hiking Club. Fred Heyes of Heyes Forest Products in Orange provided a forwarder, a modern forestry machine, which amazingly zig-zagged through the forest to get the materials onto the site.

Edward Hitchcock in his 1841 “Geology of Massachusetts” called this falls “one of the finest indeed in the state,” and he suggested it be named “The Royal Cascade” In fact, it was known for many years as Forbes Falls, being part of a farm owned by the Forbes family.

The 1917 Royalston history book by Lilley B. Caswell adds this:

“At one time the proprietor of the property improved the surroundings by building a railing around the falls, with a flight of stairs to go below them, and seats, tables and swings in the grove adjoining, and the place was visited by thousands every season. For many years an

annual town picnic was held there with bands of music and they were great gala days for the surrounding towns for miles around.”