



Where the waterfalls are

(finding them is half the fun!)

BY AMANDA N. WEGNER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JERRY LUTERMAN

There is something raw in this experience. I am literally standing in the middle of a waterfall and the sound of rushing water bounces off walls of dirt, stone and trees around me, creating a cacophonous song of nature.

Above me, the Upper Potato River Falls roars and foams as its water crashes into a misty cauldron before leveling out and streaming toward me. The loud cascades drop 20 feet before gathering momentum as the water races toward its next descent: 30-feet over the Lower falls.

Iron County is a winter playground, getting more than 200 inches of snow per year. But when that snow begins to melt and the ski trails and snowmobile paths turn to mud, Iron County has another ace – or rather, more than 30 aces – in the hole: a fabulous cache of waterfalls.

“Our waterfalls are largely undiscovered by those outside of the area,” says Gene Cisewski, owner of Hurley’s Anton-Walsh House and local historian. “They are our best-kept secret.”

While Marinette County markets itself as the “Waterfall Capital of Wisconsin,” Iron County is tops in total falls, ranging from bubbling cascades to five of the state’s 10 tallest falls (see box, p. 42), providing a full array of waterfall-watching opportunities.

Several are located within public areas with marked paths leading the way to fall’s edge, some are located on private land (with public access), but almost all are remote. With the exception of Copper Falls State Park, we were the only souls around at the falls we visited, which is the way you wish it could be at any natural attraction – when you try to imagine that you are the first person who ever stumbled upon such beauty.

Half the fun of waterfall watching is actually finding them. The other half? The physical adventure of getting to the fall’s edge.

Foster Falls, located in Iron County, is the tenth-tallest waterfall in Wisconsin. Despite its humble appearance, the waterfall drops 25 feet into the Potato River.



Above: A signature cascade at Copper Falls State Park, Copper Falls in Ashland County drops approximately 30 feet. Take the Doughboys' Nature Trail to view Copper and Brownstone Falls.

Morgan Falls

My husband and I start out in the expansive Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. Through-out the Northwoods, and especially so in the national and county forests, there are precious few signs. My bible for our journey, *Wisconsin Waterfalls*, by former DNR warden Patrick Lisi, is never out of reach.

Eventually we find the parking area, and there is nobody around. The first leg of the half-mile trek to the waterfall is a relatively easy footpath, punctuated by wooden bridges crossing small trickling creeks. As we get closer, I notice more moss and a dampness in the dry late-summer air. A wooden bridge spans a substantial stream, the crystal-clear South Branch of Morgan Creek.

The trail winds alongside the creek, and then appears Morgan Falls, cascading down a mountainous, mossy slab of granite. It's a slim flow of water, and just a few pinpoints of light from the morning sun pierce the tall tree cover.

Morgan Falls has two drops: The first is a 64-foot cascade into a hidden crevasse, and the second six-foot drop of water shears over the rock face before tumbling into a shallow pool. The creek then winds back along the trail.

We stop to rest on a fallen tree trunk before continuing on the mile-plus trail to St. Peter's Dome. This path is much more strenuous, bordering on treacherous, with inclines covered with knotted tree roots serving as makeshift stairs and switchbacks. St. Peter's Dome, known locally as "Old Baldy," stands at 1,565 feet and on a clear day, you can see the Chequamegon Bay of Lake Superior and the Apostle Islands 20 miles north.

Copper Falls State Park

Even if there weren't signs at Copper Falls State Park directing us to its main waterfalls, we'd find it by following the constant line of traffic.

Copper Falls and Brownstone Falls are the park's signature cascades, conveniently located just a few dozen feet from each other and encircled by well-kept trails built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

On the day we visit, Copper Falls State Park is teeming with people, an alarming contrast to Morgan Falls' solitude. Each end of Doughboys' Nature Trail is located near the woodframe concession building. We cross the footbridge directly behind the building and head right, walking along a tall ridge that overlooks the Bad River. We haven't walked very far when we spy the first waterfall. Here, the Bad River hits a stoic slab of basalt, splitting the river in two before forming what is Copper Falls.



Above: One of few covered bridges in the state, Horton Bridge spans 55 feet at the Lower and Upper Amnicon Falls.

We come to a little fenced-off corner that looks deep into the gorge where the Bad and Tyler Forks rivers merge. Together they flow northward to Lake Superior, passing two towers of sandstone, Devil's Gate. Once on the other side of the river, the trail gets somewhat strenuous, with rock and wooden staircases. Lookout platforms near Brownstone Falls, which sits on Tyler Forks of the Bad River upstream of where the rivers converge, gives me a new perspective on the raw power of water. At the bottom of the 30-foot falls, the water pools like thick, foamy rootbeer and the rock walls create the illusion of infinite depth.

We loop back to the concession stand, and break for lunch. It's a homey place, complete with a booster seat and cheese curds. Looking back, it was even a bit luxurious. The rest of the waterfalls on our itinerary won't have amenities like this ... if any at all.

In the park's south corner is Red Granite Falls, more cascade than true waterfall. And because it's a 2.5-mile loop hike, we decide to skip it and hit the cool waters of the park's Loon Lake Beach.

Peterson and Interstate Falls

Peterson and Interstate Falls are open to the public but located on private land. We take U.S. Highway 2 north from Hurley, but it's not long before we see our guidepost, a sign for Ero Nasi Construction. We turn onto the unnamed

road just past the sign, follow it down about 500 yards, and find a small parking area, large enough for two or three cars. Compass in hand, we turn due north to find a break in the trees signaling the footpath. It's something of a guessing game, which trodden path to take, but we grab one and go.

The hike is not long, through a damp, misty woodland, and we hear the waterfall well before we see it.

Located on the Montreal River, the two falls drop for a combined 35 feet, directly onto a hunk of quartzite that broke off the fall's ledge, probably hundreds of thousands of years ago. The path continues downstream, but we sit instead, on a large, flat rock near the fall's crest, mesmerized. Off in the distance, a female voice calls for her dog, and the trance is broken.

Spring Camp Falls

Remote does not even begin to describe Spring Camp Falls, nor can I describe how we found it.

Following Lisi's directions in *Wisconsin Waterfalls*, we started well, but a wrong turn and the occasional cryptic sign sent us on a perilous tour, apparently along ATV trails.

Eventually, we found a brown county sign pointing down an unnamed, one-lane dirt road, pocked with pond-size puddles, to Spring Camp Falls. Not sure if our vehicle could handle the road, we parked and walked. The wind through

Trip essentials

- Good hiking boots
- Compass
- Directions

Patrick Lisi's *Wisconsin Waterfalls* is a great guidebook and contains driving directions. However, since it was published in 2000, there are a few changes, so check online before visiting.



Waterfall-watching safety

1. Stay out of the water above and below as currents can be unpredictable in both places.
2. Be cautious of walking/hiking on wet rocks near falls as they are slippery.
3. Most importantly, be respectful of the power of the river and currents and stay on designated trails.

—Ben D. Bergey, Superintendent
Copper Falls State Park

the towering trees sounded remarkably like tumbling water. Convinced the waterfall was just over the next ridge, we walked, and walked, and walked before finally finding it.

Fed by the West Branch of the Montreal River, Spring Camp Falls drops 20 feet, its cascade wedged between a stone embankment and a ledge of basalt. Its energy is dampened by the pool it drops into before running downstream, straight into a small rock island formed by boulders cast off by glaciers. A tree, some bushes, and a few clusters of ferns have taken root here.

Potato River Falls

To the right of the parking lot, there's an observation deck offering an obstructed view of the falls.

This view does not suffice, however, and we start exploring. We find a path that's more steep crevasse than trail, but it leads us to the middle cascade that stands between the Upper Potato River Falls and the impressive Lower Potato River Falls. I cautiously scurry out on the smooth basalt, made possible by the fall's low water. Lying deep in a gorge, red walls of Keweenaw conglomerate seem to contain the falls, which are spread out over 400 feet of the Potato River. Standing here I feel both free and contained, on the edge of something dangerous. Of all the falls we have visited, here I am the most humbled and inspired.

After our walk on water, we head back up and cross the parking lot to a sign directing us down another trail. Initially, we are thankful that this trail contains stairs, but after 150 steps, I lose count. At the bottom we get an upstream view of the falls. Dripping with sweat from the hike down – and dreading the climb back up – we pull off boots and socks and dip our feet into the water and rest, hypnotized by the scene.

Superior Falls

As we pull into the parking area of Superior Falls, we are greeted only by a looming hydroelectric station – and, as for all the other falls we've visited, with the exception of Copper Falls State Park, we see no other cars or people.

To the left of the park area, a sign points in the direction of the falls. The trail and view are uninspiring, so we opt to forge our own path. It's not difficult to find our way to the waterfall's edge, as explorers have left beaten paths. We crabwalk and gingerly leap along some rocky inclines and find ourselves inches from the moving, tumbling water. Nearly 75 percent of

10 TALLEST WATERFALLS IN WISCONSIN

1. **Big Manitou Falls**, Douglas County, 165 feet
2. **Superior Falls**, Iron County, 90 feet
3. **Potato River Falls**, Iron County, 90 feet
4. **Saxon Falls**, Iron County, 75 feet
5. **Morgan Falls**, Ashland County, 70 feet
6. **Peterson Falls**, Iron County, 35 feet
7. **Brownstone Falls**, Ashland County, 30 feet
8. **Little Manitou Falls**, Douglas County, 30 feet
9. **Copper Falls**, Ashland County, 29 feet
10. **Foster Falls**, Iron County, 25 feet

the waterfall's power has been diverted by an upstream dam, but it is still awesome, dropping 90-feet into a beautiful reservoir that reminds me of a goldfish bowl; it's a perfect spot for swimming and kayaking.

To the right of the parking area is the entrance to the Montreal River Scenic Outlook & Access Trail. As this branch of the Montreal River marks the border between the Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin, we step over the state line and find a steep path paved with rough cement leading to the Lake Superior shore. The winds are rough, so we only pay homage to the lake before following a path that loops behind the pumping station and delivers us to the river's edge. The winds and waters are calm here, though the water falls just a few hundred yards away. The waterfall is just as impressive from this view, only louder thanks to Lake Superior's brutal, pounding waves.

Saxon Falls

Located two miles upstream of Superior Falls, the eons-long struggle of man versus nature is evident at Saxon Falls.

Almost 90 percent of the waterfall's flow has been diverted for hydroelectricity; as such, we park near an upstream power dam and follow a sign screaming "Danger! Falls ahead." On the left, a fenced walkway leads us over an

enormous water pipe that crosses the Montreal River. We come to a cement bulkhead and then continue walking atop the pipe to a power station, about a quarter-mile ahead. About halfway there, we notice a short plankway to the left leading into the forest, but continue to the power station (we'll come search this out later). From the power station, it's possible to glimpse Saxon's still-awesome power, but there's an illusion at play. The upper falls, which drop along the left bank, disappear behind walls of rock before spilling, white, foamy and full force, over the bottom right-bank drop. We consider trespassing by making our way down a steep staircase on this Michigan side, but I have no doubt that there's a locked gate at the bottom, so we double back to the plankway.

No more than two feet wide, the plankway leads to a trodden footpath through the woods. We follow its curves, bobbing under low-hanging branches. The path brings us right to the top of the waterfall. We laze for a few minutes on some large boulders just upstream of its drop, then wander along the land's edge, getting an ever-improved look at the 75-foot cascade.

Waterfall Weary

We call it a day after Saxon Falls and head home on U.S. Highway 2 toward Hurley. The landscape is dotted with small signs pointing to waterfalls, beckoning us to scamper and explore just one more. There are many we missed: The remote Foster and Wren waterfalls. Rouse Falls, where romantics find privacy behind its diaphanous curtain of water. A waterborne visit to Rock Cut Fall to test our kayaking skills.

The call is strong, but we don't stop. So many times over four days, we faced the raw power of water, even tempted it by coming within inches of its terrible, awesome strength. Perhaps it was the clean invigorating air, ionized by the mist of the falls, or the opportunity to explore paths less traveled. Maybe it is the connection to something greater and sharing this experience with nature and northern land. In any case, the quest for Northwoods waterfalls is unforgettable. **wr**

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GO AND KNOW*

Morgan Falls/St. Peter's Dome

Ashland County, 16 miles south of Ashland
Height: 70 feet
Difficulty: Easy to strenuous; 1.2 miles round-trip to Morgan Falls, 3.6 miles round-trip to St. Peter's Dome
Fee: \$5/day

Copper Falls State Park

Ashland County, 3 miles northeast of Mellen
Height: Copper and Brownstone, both about 30 feet; Red Granite Falls, 8 feet
Difficulty: Easy to moderate (Brownstone Falls overlook is handicapped-accessible); 1.7 miles around Copper and Brownstone; 2.5-mile looping trail to Granite
Fee: \$20 annual resident state park sticker plus \$5/day resident pass

Peterson and Interstate Falls

Iron County, 1 mile northeast of Hurley; located on private land but open for viewing
Height: 35 feet, combined
Difficulty: Easy (less than 1/4 mile)

Spring Camp Falls

Iron County, 8 miles southeast of Hurley, within Iron County Forest
Height: 20 feet
Difficulty: Depends on condition of 1.1-mile entrance road

Potato River Falls

Iron County, 1 mile southwest of Gurney
Height: 90 feet drop over three falls
Difficulty: Depends on trail; easy to strenuous

Superior Falls

Iron County, 15 miles northwest of Hurley
Height: 90 feet
Difficulty: Moderate
Note: During dry or drought periods, the power company can divert all water from Superior Falls.

Saxon Falls

Iron County, 13 miles northwest of Hurley
Height: 75 feet
Difficulty: Easy to moderate

*No fee unless listed.

Right: Peterson and Interstate Falls drop for a combined 35 feet into the Montreal River in Iron County.



Watch, listen and see more Wisconsin waterfalls on wisconsintrails.com *click on "Multimedia."*