

Winter Hiking at Great Falls and the Billy Goat Trail, Section A

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Chesapeake Conservancy/National Park Service (NPS)

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Figure 1: Icy view from Great Falls Overlook

While I would prefer being in a kayak on a warm summer day, winter in the Chesapeake Bay watershed is also something I enjoy because it gives me a chance to get out in the fresh, crisp air for some hibernal hiking. When the weather is exceptionally cold, I remind myself of what the Norwegians say: “There’s no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothes,” as I add another layer. With less foliage and lower humidity, scenic views can be spectacular, especially on a bright, sunny day. But perhaps the best thing about winter is that it keeps the fair-weather crowd indoors, making popular places like the Billy Goat Trail less congested.

The Billy Goat Trail in Potomac, Maryland is undoubtedly one of the busiest, most stunning, and most diverse trails in the Washington, D.C. area. Situated between the Potomac River and the [Chesapeake and Ohio \(C&O\) Canal](#), it is comprised of three sections totaling eight miles. The longest and most strenuous part, Section A, is on [Bear Island](#), just west of an old river channel of the canal known as [Widewater](#). Though only 1.7 miles long, this route requires scrambling and navigating over angled rocks and boulders, so you should allow two hours to complete this route and wear thick-soled shoes, preferably with good tread and ankle support.

I did this trek twice during the Covid-19 pandemic, when there was a significant increase in visitors due to people wanting to be active outdoors. In June 2020, I found parking lots near capacity and hikers sometimes waiting to get through bottlenecks on the trail. The following month, in response to health concerns, Section A was made a one-way route.

My second visit was on January 27, 2022. While the shortest day of the year is Winter Solstice, the average coldest day in the Washington, D.C. area is January 30. The morning of my visit, the temperature in Potomac started out a mere 10 degrees Fahrenheit. A few hours later, I arrived at the [Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center](#) to discover an almost empty parking lot. As I commenced walking south on a segment of the 184.5-mile-long [C&O Towpath](#), I wondered if I would see anyone else.

There were indeed others, probably with the same goal as me...to photograph some of the icy views and enjoy hiking the trail in near solitude. Not surprisingly, the refreshments stand was closed and the drinking fountains were turned off, but the restrooms remained open. The visitor center was also closed but that was due to the virus, not the time of year.



Figure 2: Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center and Lock 20

Just east of the towpath is the C&O Canal and locks 17-20 which were once used, along with 70 other locks, to help boats overcome the 605-foot elevation change between Georgetown and Cumberland. During the

warmer months, visitors can venture back to the year 1870 by taking a short ride on the [Charles F. Mercer](#) replica canal boat through some of these locks.



Figure 3: Lock 17 with cattails

North of [Lock 17](#), I took a 0.2 mile detour from the towpath to [Great Falls Overlook](#). A bridge and boardwalk guided me across Falls Island to Olmstead Island, the latter containing a rare and fragile bedrock terrace forest known for its stunted tree growth. At the end was the overlook, where I could see [Great Falls](#). Here, the Potomac River drops 60 feet as it flows into Mather Gorge, the narrowest section on the lower Potomac River.

Slightly south of Lock 17, I took a side trail to the river, where I had a view of [Mary's Wall](#), which, at over 50 feet tall, is one of the tallest dry laid walls still in existence.



Figure 4: The towpath passing over Mary's Wall

Continuing south on the towpath, I turned off at the [northwestern terminus of the Billy Goat Trail, Section A](#). I left my dog Daphne at home for this hike because pets are not permitted on Section A or the trail to Great Falls Overlook. They are allowed on the 1.4-mile Section B, 1.6-mile Section C, and the C&O Towpath, although at the time of this writing, Section B is closed due to trail damage and erosion.

By midday, the temperature rose to above freezing, and the few areas covered with crunchy [needle ice](#) in the morning were turning muddy. Slippery ice is always a concern with winter hiking, but I encountered very little on the trail because we'd had a stretch of dry days with high temperatures above freezing.

To soak in the fabulous views, I spent a lot of time perched atop the numerous rocky outcroppings looking down on the Potomac River. I watched big chunks of ice float downstream and appreciated the natural ice sculptures formed when cold water sprayed mist onto boulders and logs.



Figure 5: Ice in the Potomac River

I observed a kayaker near [Sandy Landing](#), a launch site on the Virginia side.



Figure 6: Kayaker in Mather Gorge

For some, the most challenging part of hiking Section A is Spitzbergen Cliffs. It is by no means technical, but those with a fear of heights might find the 50-foot ascent difficult, at least mentally.



Figure 7: Climbing up Spitzbergen Cliffs

About a mile into Section A is Trail Marker 2, where an emergency exit allows one to take a 100-yard shortcut back to the towpath. The more adventurous can continue another 0.75 mile to complete Section A.

In the summer, I see lots of wildlife while hiking on Section A, particularly lizards, turtles, and snakes. Animals aren't so easy to find in the winter, but if you remain attentive, you never know what you'll find. Near the [southeastern terminus of Section A](#), I spotted a pileated woodpecker, while on the towpath, I saw a red-shouldered hawk and three beaver dams.



Figure 8: Red-shouldered hawk above C&O Canal



Figure 9: Beaver dam in C&O Canal

Arriving back at the towpath, I continued southeast for 0.55 mile to [Anglers Inn parking](#). Like the Great Falls Tavern Visitor Center, it has lots of room for vehicles and an open restroom, but unlike Great Falls, which charges \$20 entry per vehicle, Anglers is free. It is very popular with whitewater kayakers since it offers easy access to the river, so it tends to fill up quickly in warmer months. From Anglers, it was an easy 2.3 mile walk back northwest to the parking lot at Great Falls via the towpath. My total trip was about 5.3 miles.



Figure 10: C&O Canal and towpath

Winter hiking can be a fun and rewarding activity if you are prepared, plan your trip to avoid hazardous conditions, and choose an interesting location, such as the Billy Goat Trail. Hiking Section A is a fun activity at any time of the year, but if you want to avoid the crowds and maybe see some beautiful ice features, plan your trip for the winter.

For more information, see

[Weather Spark – January Weather in Washington, D.C.](#)

[National Park Service – Billy Goat Trail](#)

[National Park Service – Hiking Trails of Great Falls Maryland – Map](#)

[C&O Canal Trust – Billy Goat Trail A](#)