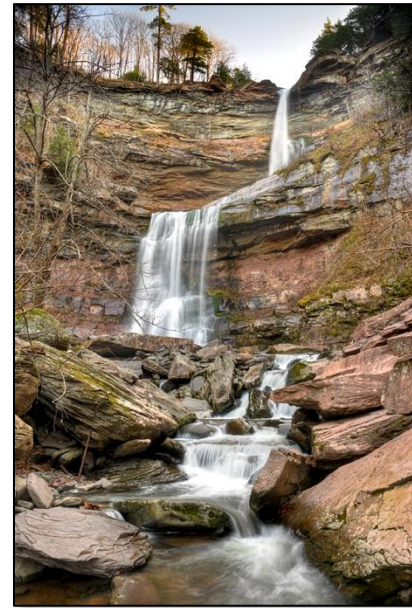


KAATERSKILL FALLS

Description: Dramatic 260' double drop (175', 85') waterfall on Spruce Creek.

Location: Kaaterskill Falls was once a major tourist attraction, with three large hotels: Laurel House near the top of the falls, the Catskill Mountain House overlooking the Hudson Valley and the Kaaterskill Hotel between the two. There was also a tramway from the base of the mountain up to the Catskill Mountain House, and two tramways from the two distant hotels to the top of the waterfall. Remnants of the hotels can be seen if you explore the trails that are part of the North-South Lake campground, and the tramway can still be seen as a scar on the escarpment as you approach from the east. (Some sources state that this is the highest waterfall in New York State, but this is wrong. Inspiration Falls at Letchworth State park is a single drop, 350' waterfall that unfortunately only flows after a heavy rain or spring runoff.)



One of the features of this location is the huge number of names and symbols carved into the rocks over the years. These are easily found at both the top and bottom viewing areas. I should do a photo series on these someday!

The geology of Kaaterskill Falls is a bit unusual. The Catskills are 'root-less' mountains, composed mostly of conglomerates, talus and sedimentary rock deposited to the west of the Acadian Mountains about 390 million years ago. This range was once just as high as the current Rockies. The stream bed at the top of the upper waterfall, and the floor of the basin are resistant sandstone, while the eroded 'amphitheater' area is composed of softer red shales and slates, that were fine grain river sediments. If you manage to get to the trail that runs behind the upper falls, check the fragments in the rock layers above you.

Update! There have been major changes here! The parking area for the Bastion Falls trailhead is closed. If you can arrange to get dropped off there, it is still a great access point. The new trails and stone stairs offer a way to reach the base of Bastion Falls, and both waterfalls is possible. The issues with ice on the trails in winter still applies!

Directions*: There are two access points for this waterfall. (This parking location is currently closed.) The best views are from the bottom, so the parking area on State Route 23A provides the best access. Follow the road downhill, minding traffic, to Bastion Falls and the trailhead to Kaaterskill Falls. The waterfall is about ½ mile up the trail.

For access to the falls from the top, follow SR23A into the village of Haines Falls. There is a large sign for the North-South Lake State Campground, and Country Route 18. Follow that sign to find

* Use the accompanying KML file to generate your own driving directions in Google Earth!

Laurel House Road and the parking area at the end; about 1¼ miles along from SR 23A. It's a short walk to the top of the waterfall. (This parking area straddles two old railroad beds that used to carry people from the hotels to the top of the waterfall. There are paths along both heading west.)

Photography: Bastion Falls offers the first photographic opportunity. This is a quite respectable waterfall, but often overlooked due to the fame of its big brother. Some people believe this is Kaaterskill Falls and never make the trip to real waterfall. This waterfall is quite wide, but at low water, not impressive.

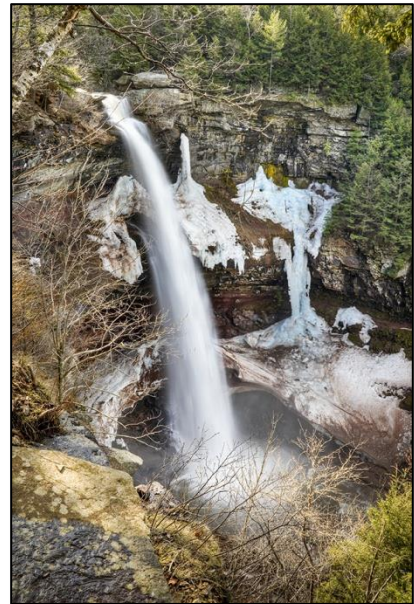
The climb to the top of Bastion falls is steep. But after a sharp right turn, you can descend to the red slate streambed. You can bushwhack up the streambed and find many small cascades. The trail moves much higher on the gorge side, and the climb back to the trail can be steep. Worth the experience though.

The image at the top was made at the end of the lower trail, and is a very popular location for photography. It is not difficult to get even closer to the base of the lower waterfall by moving carefully along the right side of the stream.

The adventurous will want to get into the basin of the upper waterfall. In the past, it was possible to climb the steep talus to the right and follow a small trail that leads left to a point about 50' above the basin floor, and then behind the waterfall itself. Today, a stone stairway now leads to a new side trail to the base of the upper waterfall and continues to the top of the upper waterfall ... still fairly steep, but much safer!

From the top, the newly made trail can also take you to this location. But there is also a new trail that leads to a viewing platform that provides an excellent view of the upper waterfall. Coincidentally, the platform was constructed at the same location that this image was made many years ago.

When the new trail construction was announced, with the accompanying closures, I was concerned that images made at Kaaterskill Falls would be cluttered with man-made structures. But this is decidedly not the case. The viewing platform is well away for intruding into head-on images of the upper waterfall and the distant view point. From the platform, the stairway is visible but again not intrusive. I'm very impressed with the design!



Accessibility: The lower approach from the SR23A parking area is problematic. The highway is narrow with little room for pedestrian traffic. Wheelchair impossible! (This parking location is currently closed.)

The trail up from Bastion Falls is quite steep at the beginning, very rocky, and slippery when wet. When you reach the stream bed at the top, the trail flattens out; be sure to scamper down to the stream to check views back over the top of Bastion Falls and Kaaterskill Clove. The trail itself is extremely dangerous while there is ice present, and this condition continues well into spring as little sunlight reaches this part of the gorge. Thick ice remained on the trail long into spring.

The trail continues to the base of Kaaterskill Falls, and can be quite rugged in places. The winter of 2010 was particularly hard with one snowfall of over 50" causing several large trees to fall across the trail.

The newly constructed stairway starts here and provides safer access to the base of the upper waterfall. It continues to the top of the upper waterfall and the parking area there.

From the top, new trail construction provides good views from near the top of Kaaterskill Falls. Modest fencing rightly suggests that you stay away from the lip of the waterfall. It can be quite dangerous; there is no guardrail and several people have fallen, or been swept over the edge trying to cross the stream.

The trail to the new viewing platform is quite wide, gravel surfaced, and uses switchbacks to manage the slope. I believe it would be wheelchair accessible.

Seriously ...

I have always been amazed at the number of families with small children that come to Kaaterskill Falls in Spring totally unprepared for the often difficult trail conditions. At best, the lower approach is 'family cautious' not family friendly, all year.

The new stairway that runs from the base of the lower waterfall to the top of the upper waterfall is a great improvement. In winter it too is covered in ice, and while better than previous talus slope, still dangerous.

There have been many deaths at Kaaterskill Falls. In January 2010, a man died after simply slipping on the ice at the top of the waterfall. In 2014, there were two deaths; one person swept off the top, another by a fall from the trail behind the upper waterfall. Both of these occurred in summer. (These incidents were the sentinel events that produced the new stairway and viewing platform.)

A little recognized hazard of streams and waterfalls is the growth of algae on the rocks and stream beds. Even hiking boots do not grip well on this type of surface. The individual who was swept off the top was wearing flip-flops and once down had nothing to arrest the fall. This makes the wide, smooth lip of the upper waterfall dangerous even in summer.

I can't overstate the need for appropriate footwear here.

Web: <http://www.dec.ny.gov/outdoor/24487.html>
http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/permits_ej_operations_pdf/northsouthlake12710.pdf