



## POTOMAC GORGE, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MD/ FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA

Over thousands of years, the powerful Potomac River carved out the Potomac Gorge, revealing the complex geology which, with the river, is the foundation of this extraordinary Natural Area. The landscape at Potomac Gorge includes the Great Falls of the Potomac, a series of dramatic cascades forced through narrow Mather Gorge as the river drops nearly 80 feet in elevation over less than a mile. This exceptional site provides habitat for over 60 rare plants and animals. The Gorge contains high rocky bluffs, ancient wooded river terraces, riverside outcrop barrens, gravelly scour bars, and prairies lush with warm season grasses. Floods from spring thaws and storm events are constantly reshaping the landscape as they scour the floodplains and riverbed. Thrill-seeking visitors can enjoy class I-IV rapids that snake through the dynamic landscape, while hikers can enjoy the sights along the gentle Chesapeake & Ohio Canal towpath or the more rugged Billy Goat Trail. In spring, the lush upland forests and floodplains are brilliantly decorated by a riot of wildflowers and songbirds, while temporary pools and side channels harbor choruses of frogs, wading birds and freshwater mussels.



GARY FLEMING

This 1,900-acre Natural Area spans two states: Maryland and Virginia. Due to its location 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. Over time, the river has shifted south which has resulted in a more gentle, terraced landscape in Maryland compared to the steeper, dissected terrain in Virginia. It is believed that the terraces on the Maryland side represent base levels of the river as it eroded away bedrock. Potomac Gorge is managed by the National Park Service and The Nature Conservancy.



PHOTOS: R.H. WIEGAND

From lush, gentle floodplains accented by spring wildflowers (top), to rocky outcrops echoing with the thunderous roar of rapids (bottom); the Potomac Gorge's geologic diversity is truly spectacular.



GARY FLEMING

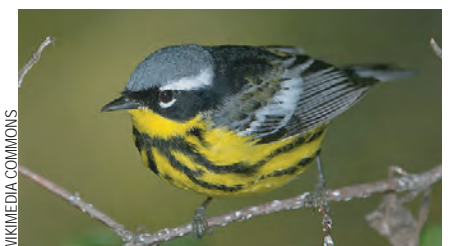
### THE BASICS

- 3 Visitor Centers
- Handicap Accessible Areas
- Facilities and Camping Sites
- Canoe/Kayak/Raft Access Areas
- Multiple Marked Trails and Information Boards



R.H. WIEGAND

The Threatened wild false indigo (*Baptisia australis*) is a member of the pea family that can be found in bloom along the Potomac River's scour prairies in May and June.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Spring migrants like this beautiful male magnolia warbler concentrate along the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal.



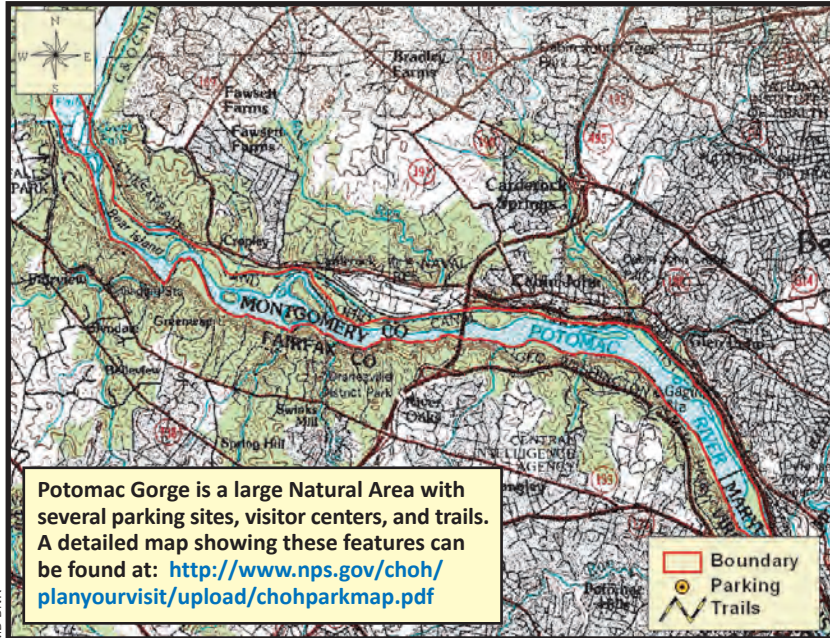
### WATCH OUT FOR!

- Rushing Water
- Ticks and Mosquitoes
- Slippery, Rugged Terrain





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Potomac Gorge Natural Area

### Directions

**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. Other areas can be reached by driving south on Clara Barton Parkway from the Capital Beltway.



### 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](http://www.nps.gov/choh/planyourvisit/greatfallstavernvisitorcenter.htm)



### KEY ELEMENTS

- Riverside Prairies
- Over 60 Rare Species
- River Scour Woodlands
- Riverside Outcrop Barrens
- Waterfalls and Whitewater Rapids



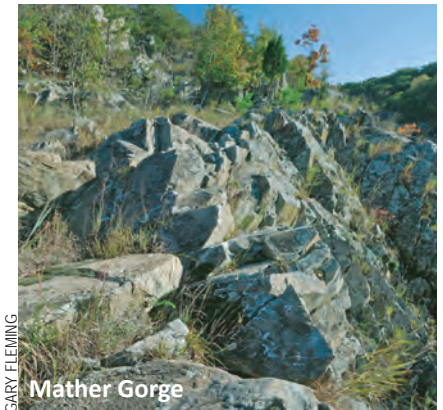
Potomac Gorge's scoured floodplains are a sharp contrast to its rocky outcrops. From mid-summer to fall, the plains are filled with stunning halberd-leaf rosemallows (a native hibiscus).

### Mather Gorge

Mather Gorge is named for Stephen B. Mather, the first director of the National Park Service. The area around Mather Gorge is composed largely of sedimentary rocks. While these rocks are over 600 million years old, they surprisingly lack fossils. The rocks originated as sand and silt from the ancient Iapetus Ocean. Over time, the sediments cemented together while igneous rocks (formed from hot, molten lava) were injected between them. Today, both rock types can be seen along the Potomac Gorge.

### Scour Power!

The wild Potomac River is one of the few large rivers in the eastern United States that lacks major dams, reservoirs or large-scale development along its banks. This allows natural floods to scour the islands and riverbanks which disrupts the growth of trees and shrubs and creates new habitats for rare wildflowers and early successional species.



GARY FLEMING

Mather Gorge



R.H. WIEGAND

**Left:** In summer, look among the rocky crevices at Mather Gorge for the rare riverbank goldenrod (*Solidago simplex* var. *racemosa*). This native sunflower is threatened by habitat loss.