

Life in the Valley

15 essential waterfalls hikes



Outdoor Adventures
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USA TODAY NETWORK

Waterfall season is here in Oregon. ■ In that awkward late autumn period, when the rain has arrived but the snow is lagging, waterfalls hit center stage. ■ Here are 15 of my favorite waterfall hikes within 90 minutes of Salem. Most of these waterfalls are open year-round, except in low elevation snowstorms. A few are a bit higher.

Cascade Foothills Silver Falls State Park

This is the most obvious choice, of course, so we're just going to scratch the surface. Ten waterfalls, six more than 90 feet tall all in a glorious temperate rainforest east of Salem. If you don't want to hike the entire Trail of Ten Falls — a challenging 8 to 9 miles — consider the shorter loops detailed in this story. My favorite rainy season hike begins at Winter Falls Trailhead and travels past five waterfalls and back on a 3.6 mile tour. The highlight in Double Falls, which at 178 feet is the tallest cascade in the state park.

Shellburg Falls

The overlooked little brother of more famous Silver Falls State Park is home to three waterfalls — including one 100-footer — small crowds and dog-friendly trails. It's the quickest drive among the five hikes. The trek begins on an old gated road, passing farmland that usually has a few cows grazing, before winding up into the dense, temperate rainforest, where wildflowers can be found in spring. At mile 1.3 the old road passes over a concrete bridge and just above lower Shellburg Fall's 40-foot plunge. Turn left and you'll shortly arrive at the main attraction, Shellburg Falls, a 100-foot waterfall where you can hike behind the falls in a narrow, dark cave. A side trail brings you down to the grotto at the waterfall's base. It's a roughly 3-mile hike out-and-back. You can continue past Shellburg Falls for a roughly 6-mile loop.

Henline Falls

This waterfall in the Opal Creek area roars with a real fury once the rain starts falling on this short and kid-friendly hike. The trek is two miles round-trip, climbing just 200 feet through ever-green forest carpeted with ferns and moss, to the 126-foot vertical curtain of Henline Falls. From the trailhead, the trail enters the Opal Creek Wilderness. Stay left at two junctions until you reach the falls plunging into a shallow emerald pool. If you have kids, be wary toward the end as the place to view the waterfall is fairly small and steep.

Cascade De Los Ninos (Opal Creek Trail)

The "waterfall of the children" is one of the most impressive cascades on the ever-popular Opal Creek Trail east of Salem. The hike follows a gravel road that's so pretty it's more like a trail, winding below hundred-year-old trees along the Little North Santiam River. From the gate/trailhead, the trail crosses Gold Creek on a 60-foot-tall bridge. After 2 miles, it reaches the former Merton sawmill site which operated for just two years a half-century ago. Look for a spur trail on the right leading a short distance to a view of the 30-foot falls roaring out over a wide rock out-cropping. Turn back here for a 4-mile hike or continue another mile to the wilderness village of Jawbone Flats. Note: If you reach the log bridge crossing the river, you've gone too far.

Little North Santiam Trail

My favorite trail in the Little North Santiam gets nice and quiet during the rainy season, which allows the area's waterfalls to bloom. The waterfalls aren't super obvious to the uninitiated, and some require a bit of off trail scrambling. The LNS Trail is a total of 4.5 miles one-way from the Elkhorn Trailhead to Shady Cove Campground. But here's a few options with waterfall payoff. At mile 0.7, you'll reach a well-worn user trail on the left that leads to a small but powerful 10-foot waterfall sometimes called Elkhorn Falls.



Behind Shellburg Falls in Santiam State Forest. ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Keep going a mile or so, as the trail climbs uphill, and you'll hear the rush of Triple Falls. It's necessary to scramble down a steep and sketchy slope to view it, but it's a very scenic area. If you hike the full trail, you'll eventually come to Three Pools, the uber-popular summer swimming hole that in rain is transformed into a triple rapid of mini waterfalls.

Pup Creek Falls (Clackamas Trail)

Old-growth rainforest along the Clackamas River Trail is the primer, but 200-foot Pup Creek Falls is the real stunner, especially during the rainy season. The hike is a longer one at 7.5 miles with around 1,000 feet of climb, and it's fairly popular even in the off-season. Even so, it's well worth a 90-minute drive northeast of Salem. The hike begins at Fish Lake Trailhead (right next to a campground of the same name). After following the river and climbing above it, keep an eye out for a "falls" pointer around the 3.5 mile mark and drop down to Pup Creek Falls.

Butte Creek Falls

These two waterfalls just outside the tiny hamlet of Scotts Mills are both stunners — though in different ways — and require only a quick and easy hike. The driving directions have recently changed following installation of a gate, so take note below. As for the hike, it's short and sweet. A 1.5-mile loop heads into temperate rainforest and, starting the loop going left, reaches 78-foot Butte Creek Falls dropping into a small pool viewed overhead from the trail. Be careful here with young children. The trail travels to a narrow point with steep cliffs dropping away on both sides, and there are no guardrails. Just beyond, staying left on another side trail, Upper Butte Creek Falls drops small (26 feet), wide (40 feet) and pretty into a small splash pool. Paths lead behind the falls into the deep grotto.

Abiqua Falls

The trek to Abiqua Falls is an adventure, but those willing to make the trip are rewarded with one of Oregon's most scenic (and popular) waterfall views. The waterfall is on private property but is available to the public via the Abbey Foundation of Oregon. Stay on marked routes and make sure to have correct directions. The hike is only 0.8 miles but feels longer due to a steep trek down to the creek and a rocky, slippery trudge upstream to the waterfall. From where you parked, walk 100 feet back along the road where there is a metal sign on a tree stating that the land is Abbey Foundation of Oregon. This is the trail. The path leads steeply downhill to Abiqua Creek in 0.2 miles. At the steepest points in the trail, there are lengths of rope tied to tree trunks for handholds that people can use. Turn upstream along the creek, following a rough trail for another 0.2 mile. You will have to climb over and around rocks and logs (tough in high water). Eventually, you'll reach the falls.

McDowell Creek Falls

Whether it's the lack of notoriety or

remote location, the feeling you get arriving at McDowell Creek Falls Park is that of stumbling upon a hidden gem. Located 10 miles north of Sweet Home, the unassuming park is home to four spectacular waterfalls found on an easy, fun, trail home to unique bridges and viewing platforms. Dogs on leashes are welcome. A 1.8-mile loop passes Royal Terrace Falls, Majestic Falls and Crystal Pool. There's a map at the trailhead and the trails are well maintained.

Soda Creek Falls

A very quiet and pretty trail leads from the South Santiam River to a tiny crystal stream with a thin, 150-foot waterfall. In summer, Soda Creek Falls is little more than a dribble, while in winter, it thunders down the canyon. The hike begins at Cascadia State Park, east of Sweet Home, and is 1.4 miles total with a 575-foot elevation gain, making it an easy but sometimes a steep trek. The path begins on the far side of the parking area and follows the creek upstream (there are wooden signs that are easy to follow). The farther you hike, the more narrow the canyon becomes. The forest also becomes denser. Once you reach the waterfall, there are a few scramble trails worth exploring through a slit in the rock walls — although this can be fairly dangerous and slippery.

Columbia Gorge waterfalls

There are too many waterfalls in the Columbia Gorge to name them all. But these are the closest to Salem and are currently open. Many trails are still closed due to the Eagle Creek Fire damage.

Latourell Falls

One of the few classic waterfall hikes in the Gorge that was relatively unscathed, this 2.3-mile loop takes in two beautiful waterfalls in a lush environment. But to actually enjoy this hike on a weekend, officials recommended arriving by 8 or 9 a.m. "If you arrive later than 10 a.m. on a weekend, there's a good chance you'll find yourself driving around looking for a place to park," said Glenn Littrell, park ranger supervisor for state parks in the western Gorge. "It can get really congested." Bridal Veil Falls Another classic Gorge waterfall, the full hike to Bridal Veil and back totals about 1 mile. It's just up the road from Latourell, and the same rules apply: Arrive early on weekends. Otherwise, you'll be stuck with nowhere to park and no shoulder space during the hike.

Coast Range Waterfalls

Niagara Falls

Despite the famous name, and despite its close location to Salem, few people have even heard of this spectacular hideaway, home to a pair of 120-foot waterfalls. An easy trail of 2 miles round-trip takes hikers into a remote box canyon

where Pheasant Creek and Niagara Falls roar like neighbors attempting to outdo each other. Located northwest of Willamina, and about 10 miles east of Hebo Mountain, the drive from Salem requires navigating a series of county, BLM and Forest Service roads, but it can be reached in an hour-and-20-minute drive. I often take my daughter and dog here. I've seen a total of five other people in all my times traveling there. One other fun thing about this hike is that there's actually some controversy in the waterfall world about which cascade is named Niagara and which is called Pheasant.

Chitwood Creek Falls (Harts Cove Trail)

One of the most beautiful hikes on the Oregon Coast ends with views of a dramatic cove with a small waterfall dropping into the ocean. The trail is Harts Cove Trail, located on Cascade Head north of Lincoln City. The waterfall is Chitwood Creek Falls. The hike, only open July 16 through Dec. 31, begins at a trailhead at the end of Forest Road 1861. The first part of the trail highlights Cascade Head's giant sitka spruce trees and dense, lush forest. The sound of barking sea lions begins to drift onto the trail near the 1.4 mile-mark and after 2.7 miles, the forest opens into a meadow about 200 feet above the ocean. Follow the trail to the left toward a grove of spruce for the trail's best view — Harts Cove. Surrounded by ocean-front walls, this cove encircles a turquoise pool and thin waterfall.

Munson Creek Falls

Of the hikes mentioned so far, the trip to Munson Creek Falls is by far the easiest. Located south of Tillamook, a short 0.3-mile hike winds through old-growth coastal forest to a waterfall that, at 319 feet, is the tallest in the Coast Range. The creek tumbles over a fern-covered wall of stone, splashing into a tree-encircled pool. The trail follows the creek from the base of the falls to an open grove. The best time to visit is winter and spring after a nice heavy rain.

Drift Creek Falls

Easy and flat enough to wheel a stroller, but with a dramatic 80-foot waterfall and swinging bridge at its end, Drift Creek Fall is among the great family-friendly hikes in the Lincoln City area. The hike is moderately difficult at three miles round-trip. After crossing the bridge, a half-mile hike leads down to the creek-level view of the falls. The view once at the bottom has may require some slippery rock hopping to enjoy. Note: The suspension bridge does move somewhat and can make some kids (and adults) nervous. Open: Year-round, but best in spring after a good hard rain. \$5 trailhead fee or Northwest Forest Pass

Directions

For instructions on how to get to these 15 beauties, see this story at StatesmanJournal.com/Outdoors.