



An elevated boardwalk allows views of powerful Majestic Falls..



Hiking trails at McDowell Creek Falls County Park outside Lebanon.

PHOTOS BY ZACH URNESS / STATESMAN JOURNAL



Crystal Falls and pool at McDowell Creek Falls County Park.

McDowell

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favorite — especially with kids, who universally love this place.

The drive is also similar to Silver Falls — after traveling through farmland much of the journey, you enter temperate rainforest and a mini-canyon with an upper, lower and middle trailheads.

Most people park at the lower trailhead — the first one you come to off McDowell Creek Drive.

Hike to three waterfalls on 1.7 mile loop

Before you start hiking, take a picture of the map to refer back to, or better yet, get a hiking guidebook with a map. You'll probably be OK without a map, but it helps at a few intersections.

The trail starts by crossing a wooden footbridge and entering lush forest along the creek. After a very short stretch, you'll reach a junction that begins the loop — one pathway turns right and heads up steep stairs, while the other heads forward toward a wooden bridge.

We always head forward to the base-level view of Royal Terrace Falls, a 119-foot multi-tiered cascade. By summer, it's not as powerful but is still an impressive sight.

Beyond, the trail travels into deep forest, with the creek always nearby and a number of fun places to stop and wade.

Eventually, the path crosses the road, then heads back into the forest for more forested hiking. Keep your ears open for views of 14-foot Crystal Falls, a waterfall you can see in the distance, but can only reach by scrambling down steep user trails.

The pool below the falls is famous — it's called Crystal Pool — and some people swim in it. But again, this might not be safe for young kids and there are better places to wade.

Beyond Crystal Falls, you'll reach an elevated boardwalk traveling out over the creek to an iconic view of Majestic Falls. It's smaller than Royal Terrace at just 39 feet, but far more powerful. Combined with the boardwalk, this is probably the coolest part of the hike.

To continue on the loop, head uphill,

above Majestic Falls, to the upper trailhead named Royal Terrace Falls. The upper trail continues just beyond and takes you through lush and pretty forest. Turn left at a junction, and you'll reach the top of Royal Terrace Falls.

The creek that feeds it, the aptly-named Fall Creek, allows for some fun wading in its shallow pools and tiers. (Obviously, make sure it's safe so no one gets swept downstream, but in summer, it's quite mellow).

The final stretch of the trail takes you down a long and steep set of stairs alongside the waterfall to complete the loop, then turn left and return to the trailhead.

Fun at the trailhead

A fun reward for finishing the hike, I've always found, is having lunch and playing at the trailhead. There are a few picnic tables set up along the creek with awesome wading and even swimming possibilities.

Overall, McDowell Creek Falls County Park is a great and unassuming place for a summer escape from the heat.

McDowell Creek Falls County Park

In a nutshell: Waterfall trail in deep forest with places to wade and sometimes swim near Lebanon.

Hike length: 1.7 miles

Difficulty: Mostly easy, with a few steep cliffs

Good for kids: Yes

Camping: no

Dogs: yes, but keep them leashed

Directions: About an hour and 10 minute drive from Salem. Follow Interstate 5 south to Exit 233 for Lebanon/Sweet Home. Follow Highway 20 east for 19 miles, through the town of Lebanon. Turn left onto McDowell Creek Road and follow signs about 9 miles to the park. If you reach Sweet Home on Highway 20, you've gone too far.

Coordinates: 44.464232, -122.682278.

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