

The Flume-Pool Loop

Hiking Data Distance, parking area to:

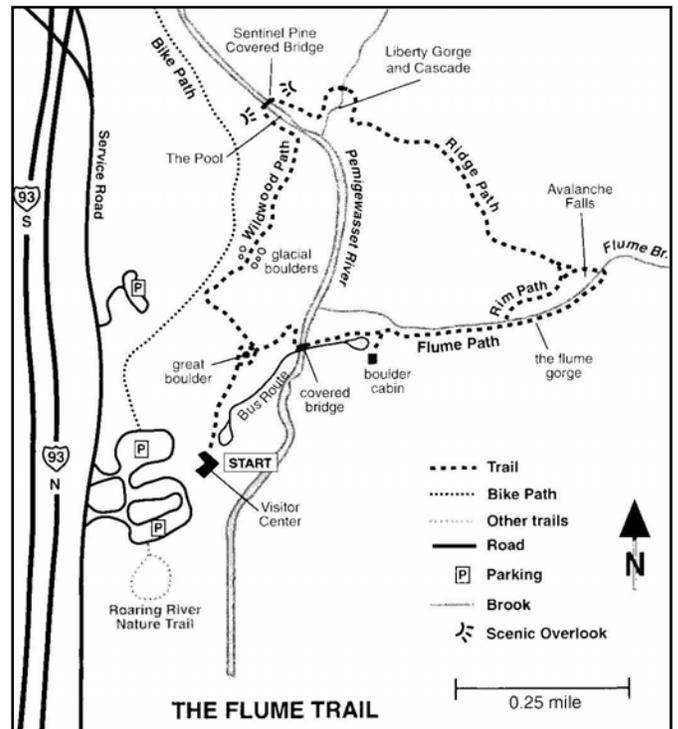
Avalanche Falls0.8 mile
 Liberty Gorge Cascade 1.4 miles
 The Pool1.5 miles
 Full loop2.1 miles

(Subtract 0.5 mile from each figure if the shuttle bus is taken to Boulder Cabin.)

Altitude gain: 250 feet from covered bridge (low point) to Avalanche Falls (altitude 1500 feet).

Difficulty: EASY (particularly with shuttle bus to Boulder Cabin).

"This natural curiosity fills the beholder with amazement and admiration." So Lucy Crawford, in her History of the White Mountains, reacted to the Flume. Ever since its discovery in 1808 the Flume has been a favorite tourist stopover. It has been celebrated by writers, artists, poets, photographers, post-card companies, and tour operators. Flume formations are actually fairly commonplace in the White Mountains. Among the better known are those in Dixville Notch, at Sabbaday Falls, and on Kedron Brook in Crawford Notch.



In geological terms a flume is formed from a narrow band, or dike, of softer rock such as basalt that has plugged a fissure in harder bedrock. When exposed to running water the dike erodes much more rapidly than the surrounding bedrock. The result is a narrow, sheer gorge that is gradually widened by frost action. The Flume in Franconia Notch, therefore, is not really a curiosity. What accounts for its notoriety is its size: 800 feet long and 12 to 20 feet wide, with vertical walls 7 to 9 stories high. Since the Flume gets so much publicity in its own right there is no need to discuss it at length in a book on waterfalls. There is a need, however, to tell about the three fine falls that lie along a pleasant loop hike, which just happens to pass through the Flume. It should be noted that these waterfall attractions are for spectators rather than explorers. The trail leads to overlooks offering excellent views, but off-trail recreational adventures are not permitted here due to the heavy tourist use of the area.

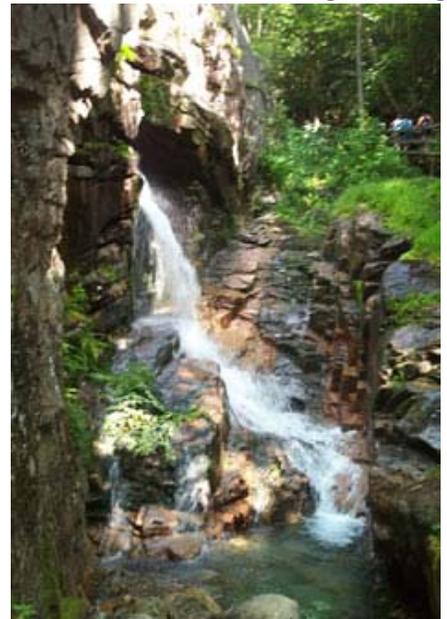
The Trail to the falls

The Flume-Pool loop trail starts from the Flume Visitor Center, which is reached off Exit 34A of the Franconia Notch Parkway (1-93) or by US 3 from North Lincoln. From the vast parking area there are three ways to get to Boulder Cabin, 500 yards below the Flume. First, when the state-operated Visitor Center is open (mid-May to mid-October, 9:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M.) a 0.5-mile shuttle bus ride to Boulder Cabin is included in the entrance fee. In 1988 the entrance fee was \$4—up from 25 cents in 1938. In addition to a ticket booth the Visitor Center has information exhibits, a gift shop, a cafeteria, and a short film on Franconia Notch State Park. Second, you may prefer to leg it rather than ride the bus. Just follow the asphalt footpath to the left behind the Visitor Center.

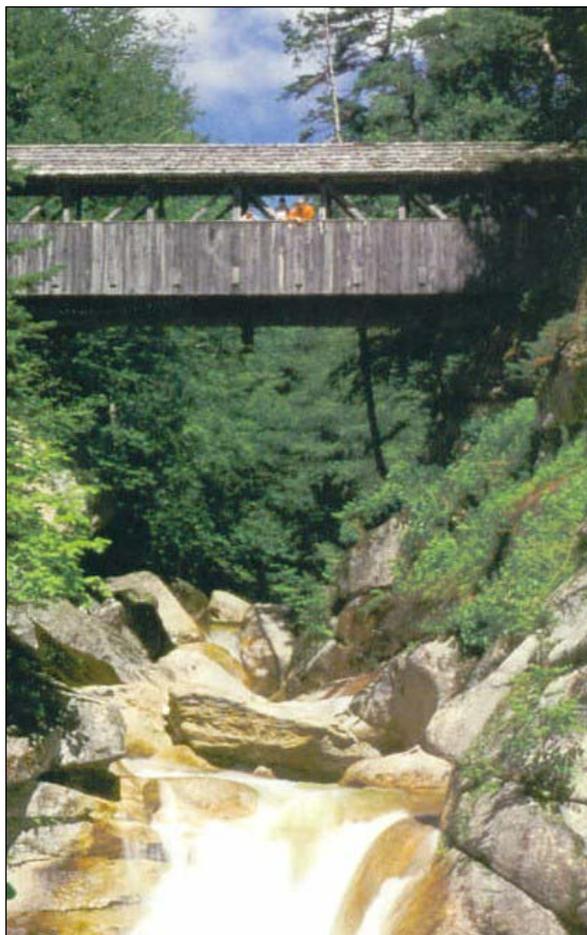
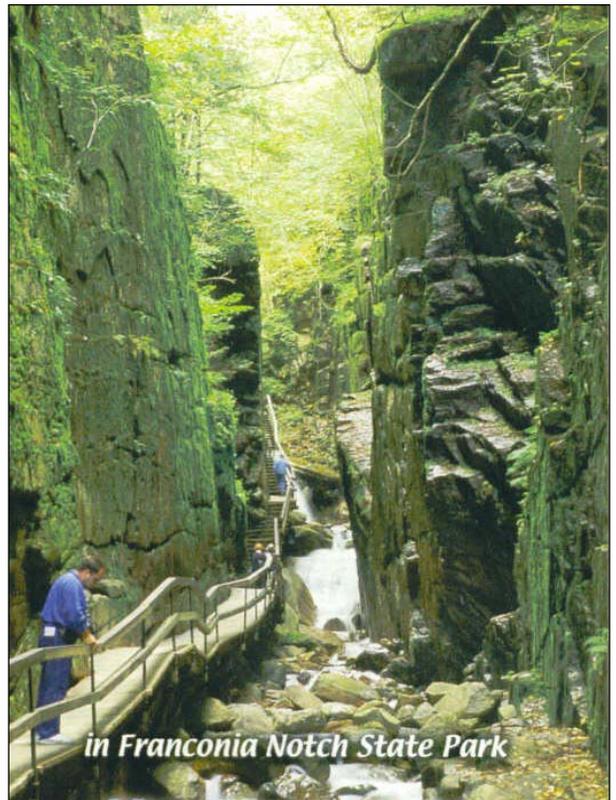


Continue down the gravel path to the covered bridge over the Pemigewasset River and then back up to Boulder Cabin. Third, when the Visitor Center is closed—off season or off hours—the hike is a bit more circuitous. But these are the times when the area is less crowded and therefore especially engaging. (Offsetting this advantage is the fact that the boardwalk through the Flume is dismantled during the off season and barricaded off hours, so you can't see quite

as much of the famous gorge.) Park at the highest lot and follow the asphalt bicycle path north into the woods. After 0.1 mile, turn right onto a paved service road that runs from the Liberty Springs Trail parking lot to the back of the Visitor Center. Then proceed to Boulder Cabin along the footpath. From Boulder Cabin the trail ascends sharply to Flume Brook, which it follows for a short distance upstream before crossing on a footbridge. Flume Brook at this point offers a splendid bonus attraction known as Table Rock. The glistening waters slip smoothly over a broad, sunny ledge of polished Conway granite: a total contrast to the damp, narrow gorge only yards upstream. Access to the steeper part of the ledge is restricted by a wooden rail fence. Past the footbridge the trail splits. The fork to the right leads into the mouth of the Flume gorge. The fork to the left is the usual descent route from the head of the Flume. But when the Flume boardwalk is closed, take the left-hand fork to the head of the gorge for views of Avalanche Falls. It might be tempting in the off season to scramble up the gorge without benefit of the boardwalk. This is quite unsafe, though, because the rocks are slippery when wet and extremely treacherous when iced. Indeed in the winter fully equipped ice climbers can occasionally be found practicing technical moves on the tremendous icicles that drape the perpendicular walls of the gorge.



The boardwalk into the Flume traverses the length of the gorge to the foot of Avalanche Falls, where a ramp climbs to the outlet at the head of the falls. En route to Avalanche Falls the walkway passes two very pretty small cascades at the narrowest part of the gorge. From the steps at this point you can see a band of dark basalt in the gorge wall to the left. At the top end of the Flume there is an interesting cave, which is guarded by jack-in-the-pulpits during the late spring. A wooden shelter provides a rest stop for weary visitors, and toilets are located behind the shelter. As you begin to descend from the shelter you will confront another fork in the trail. The path to the left returns to the bottom of the Flume and Boulder Cabin, while the wide dirt trail heading straight into the woods ahead is the loop trail to the Pool. This trail contours around the side of a long ridge and then drops gently through a fine hardwood forest. The large trees include stately white ash, which can be recognized by their compound leaves and deeply furrowed bark. In the spring the forest floor is dotted with wildflowers, highlighted by bright white hobblebush bouquets. In the summer thrushes, robins, and chickadees fill the air with gay song. After just over 0.5 mile the trail crosses a stream and reaches a gravel path on the left, which leads down a set of steps to the overlook at Liberty Gorge



Cascade. Continuing along the main trail, you quickly reach a second set of steps on the left. These descend to a sturdily railed viewing platform perched atop a 130-foot-high cliff that forms the northeastern wall of the Pool.

The trail then drops and curls around to cross the Sentinel Pine Bridge, a picturesque span over a gorge cut by the Pemigewasset as it cascades into the Pool. The bridge takes its name from a 175-foot-tall white pine that towered above the gorge until falling victim to the hurricane of 1938. This pine now forms the main beam for the bridge. Across on the southwestern rim of the gorge a side path leads down to another railed platform with picture perfect views across the Pool to the high wall of cliffs and the cascades beneath the Sentinel Pine Bridge.

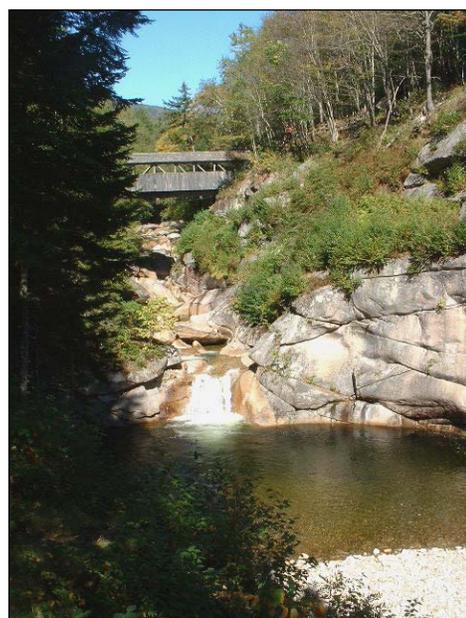
To finish the loop, just follow the main trail over a small ridge and back to the Visitor's Center (or to the parking lot, off season). This final leg of the hike features a garden of massive boulders called glacial erratics. These boulders were plucked off mountains and transported south by passing glaciers, then deposited at their present location when the ice sheets melted away.

The Falls

Avalanche Falls, once called Flume Cascade, is located at the head of the Flume. It is not a waterfall giant, but the setting is hard to beat. Flume Brook emerges from the woods on the hillside, dashes across bare slabs of smooth Conway granite, and plunges over the lip of the gorge. When the stream is low, the waters tumble steeply down large granite steps into an alcove carved in the side of the gorge, and then leap to the bottom of the Flume. When the stream is running high the waters surge over the edge in a single 45-foot drop. Viewed from alongside, on the ramp that leads out of the gorge, the falls form a sparkling mare's tail, with soft rainbows afloat in the spray. In early winter or early spring, when the gorge is bedecked with ice, Avalanche Falls can be unusually beautiful. (Only tremendous self-restraint prevents us from calling it "gorgeous.") Frozen spray builds up to form a rippled translucent mask for the falling water. Ice and snow linger well into May in a deep cave just above the falls. The cave is formed by the collapsed wall of what was once an extension of the gorge. In the roof at the back of the cave there is a secret exit just large enough for kids to climb through.

Liberty Gorge Cascade is generally overshadowed by its famous neighbors along the loop trail. Compared to the falls at the Flume and the Pool, the Liberty Gorge Cascade lacks drama. But this is easily the highest of the falls. The stairs from the trail lead to a railing set on a bluff halfway down a deep ravine. Across the ravine the cascades sweep in a long arcing chute down a steep cut of bedrock, framed with spruce, yellow birch, and hemlock trees. At the base of the long rock slab the waters fan out to form a broad sash that drops into a crystal pool. Below, the stream continues its steep tumble down the heart of the ravine. Unhappily there is not much to do at Liberty Gorge Cascade other than spend a few minutes admiring the scene from the viewing rail.

The Pool is not itself a waterfall. Rather, like the Flume, it is the name for a grandly impressive formation, with cascades at the upper end. Whereas the Flume is long and confining, the Pool is an enormous



basin—150 feet in diameter, 40 feet deep, under granite walls 13 stories high. And whereas everyone expects to be impressed by the Flume, the Pool generally comes as a very pleasant



surprise. As one young girl shrieked at first sight of the Pool, "Whooooo! That's beautiful!" The best views of the cascades are from the middle of the breezy Sentinel Pine Bridge, from the trail on the side path just past the bridge, and from the viewing rail at the end of this side path. Seen across the waters of the Pool from a high viewing rail, the cascades may appear rather insignificant. But the ring of turbulent foam they stir up in the Pool suggests that the cascades would be impressive closer up, especially when the Pemigewasset River is running high. From 1853 to 1887 an eccentric country philosopher named "Professor" John Merrill earned a living operating a rowboat in the Pool, providing summer visitors with a close-up view of these cascades. Today visitors are essentially confined to sightseeing from

various high perches. Another effect of being high above the Pool, across from the cascades, is that their song is strangely muffled. John Anderson and Steams Morse (1930) described the feeling: "It seems oppressively quiet, in spite of the noise of the water, as if some secret wood cull kept here a shrine of silence."