

## The Mighty Potomac and Mather Gorge

Text and photography copyright © Joe Rossbach. All rights reserved.

Separating Maryland and Virginia, the mighty Potomac River takes a dramatic plunge through Mather Gorge in Great Falls National Park. The river drops over 70 feet in less than one quarter of a mile through raging waters and house sized rocks before snaking its way past 100 foot cliffs and into Washington D.C. and then finally the Chesapeake Bay. The scenery in the park is amazing and the wildlife is not so bad either. Come June, the Great Blue Herons return to the park and dazzle visitors with their daredevil fishing tactics below the big falls in Mather Gorge. The park is laced with trails for the adventurous photographer including the Billy Goat Trail on the Maryland side and the River Trail on the Virginia side of the Park. The Billy Goat trail climbs across rugged rocks and steep cliffs bordering the Potomac River and is not to be missed when visiting the Park. In the warmer months, brave Kayakers surf the rapids below the falls and if you're lucky you may even catch them taking free fall drops over the largest drops. A sight to be seen!

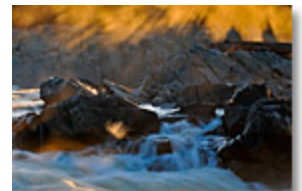
### Places To Shoot

There are a few favorite places of mine to shoot in the Park. On the Virginian side, there are 3 great overlooks that give an aerial view of Mather Gorge. Sunrise is my favorite time to shoot on the Virginia side as you will most likely have the park to yourself and probably get some nice mist rising off the river in the early morning hours. For the more adventurous photographer, you can get off-trail and leave the overlooks behind to climb along the banks of the gorge in search of waterfalls and cascades. I like to enter the woods directly behind the visitor center and walk strait back to the river. Once you get to the edge, it's just a matter of exploring the area in search of the best composition. Make sure to bring a wide angle for grandiose landscapes and a telephoto for recording intimate compositions of the waterfalls and rocks.

The Maryland side is less visited but no less dramatic. The Billy Goat Trail is a great hike early in the morning or late in the day. I like to hit the trail well before sunrise to be on location when the light and mist begin their morning dance in the deep cool gorge. Another great location for photography is along the Overlook trail that passes over Olmstead Islands. From the boardwalk, there are a couple of nice waterfalls to photograph in the spring and autumn. If you are in good physical condition, you can climb down the steep and jagged rock face at the end of the Overlook Trail to the river below and be in a great position to shoot the Great Blue Herons and the interior of the gorge. Sunset is best for the scenics and sunrise is best for shooting the Great Blue Herons.

### Seasons

Great falls is a fantastic place to shoot in all four seasons. Summer brings the Great Blue Herons, kayakers and thick morning mist in the gorge. Autumn comes to the park in late October and lasts well into the middle of November bringing along with it wonderful color along the banks of the rivers and in the forests surrounding the gorge. Winter snowstorms are infrequent, but after long periods of cold, the riverbanks and water pockets in the rocks fill with ice. Spring is by far the most dramatic season in the park. The snowmelt in western Maryland and West Virginia coupled with rain bring a thundering amount of water through the gorge. At times the water levels are so high they can cover up the 30- to 50-foot house-sized rocks in the middle of the river!



## The Surrounding Area

While you are in the Park, you may want to consider visiting Difficult Run and Scotts Run Nature Preserves. Difficult Run and Scotts Run are two small streams that empty into the Potomac just below Mather Gorge. There are trails that follow each stream down to the base of the Potomac and there are countless waterfalls and cascades as well as intimate scenes in the woods. Scotts Run in particular has an absolutely stunning end as the stream drops very quickly over at least 5 smaller waterfalls and jagged rocks before taking one last plunge over a 20-foot fall and into the Potomac River. Difficult Run is popular among kayakers in the spring when the water levels are high. Both areas are best photographed under overcast skies and especially after a rainstorm. You can reach both areas off Rt. 193 Georgetown Pike just a few miles outside of the Park.

Comments on NPN nature photography articles? Send them to the [editor](#).

**Joseph Rossbach** is a professional landscape and nature photographer based out of Annapolis, Maryland. Over the past ten years, he has traveled into some of the most beautiful and remote areas of the United States in order to capture the American landscape. His images have appeared in local and regional magazines, calenders, advertising campaigns, websites and in books and art galleries and corporate collections. Joe is a [Mountain Trail Photo](#) team member and leads through Mountain Trail Photography Workshops. To see more of Joseph's images visit his website at [www.josephrossbach.com](http://www.josephrossbach.com).



---

Comment on this article:

---

[Front Page](#) | [Galleries & Forums](#) | [Portfolios](#) | [Articles & Reviews](#) | [Membership](#) | [Terms of Use](#)

Copyright 2000 - 2009, Nature Photographers Online Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved.