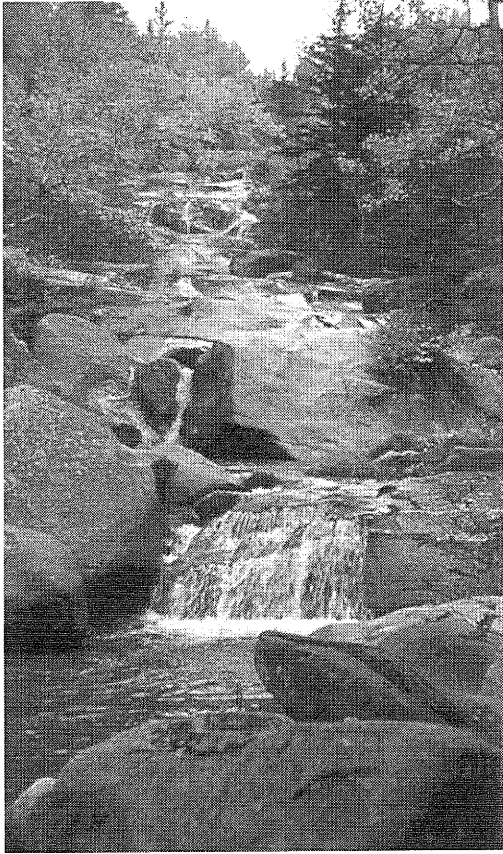


Step Falls Preserve



Step Falls, a steeply descending series of cascades and pools, is located near spectacular Grafton Notch. With a total drop of over 250 feet, it is one of the highest falls in Maine.

The 24-acre preserve features an easy walk to the base of the falls and a longer climb to the top, where the view of the surrounding mountains is breathtaking.

Acquired in 1962, Step Falls was The Nature Conservancy's first preserve in Maine. In 1983 the preserve was dedicated to Charles E. Heywood, Chairman of the Conservancy in Maine from 1961 to 1965.

History

In 1904, Mr. Charles Kellogg acquired the Step Falls property from the Wight family and built a nature camp consisting of a main lodge and several cabins. He advertised Step Falls as one of the most beautiful natural areas in western Maine. In 1909, the main lodge burned, and several years later the property was bought back by the Wight family.

During a 1961 visit, the Maine Chapter of The Nature Conservancy and the owner of Step Falls, Mr. Fred Wight, recognized the need to preserve the property's natural features. Ownership of the falls and the bordering land was transferred to The Nature Conservancy later that year.

Geology

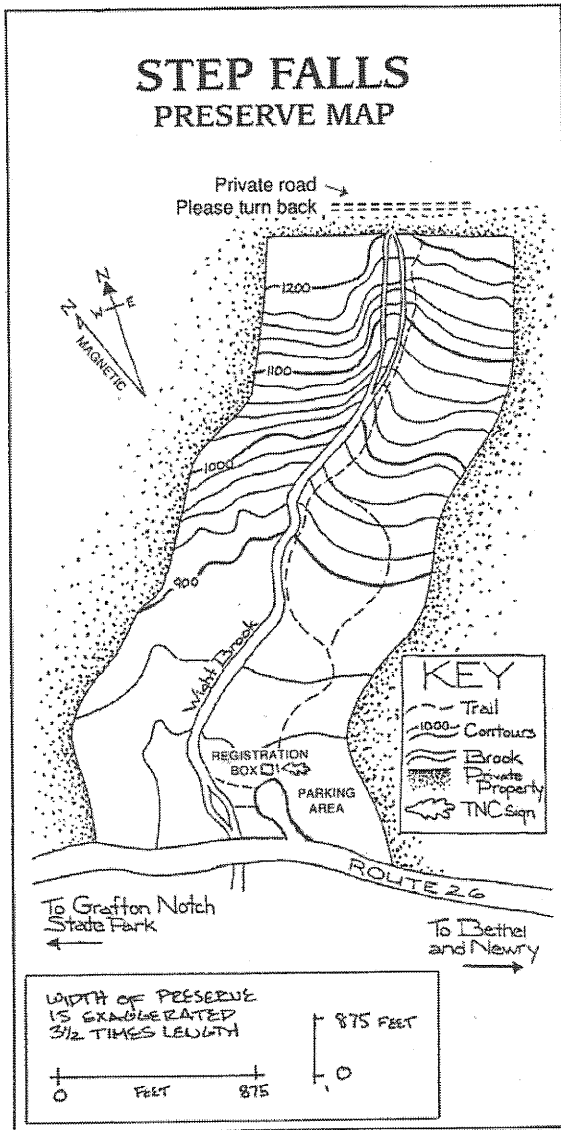
The dramatic chutes and pools of today's falls are only the latest chapter in a story that began over 360 million years ago. Eroded sediments accumulated to form shales; these shales were later transformed (metamorphosed) into harder schist and quartzite during a long period of mountain building. During this time, extensive intrusions of molten rock entered the metamorphic rocks, creating the granite formations over which Wight Brook now flows.

Numerous "pods," some over a yard wide, are found in the granite. They contain crystals of quartz, mica, feldspar, small garnets and tourmaline. Veins of milky quartz criss-cross the granite. These formed about 200 million years ago, when superheated mineral-rich waters were forced into crevices.

About 12,000 years ago, Maine was covered by ice sheets a mile thick. As the glaciers retreated, torrential meltwaters loaded with sediment carved Wight Brook gorge, scouring deep potholes in the bedrock and polishing the granite.

Today, the impressive process of erosion and change at Step Falls continues. Spring runoff can reach up to 500 cubic feet of water per second, strong enough to move granite slabs several yards wide.





Walking Around Step Falls

The trail begins north of a grassy parking area just off Route 26. It enters a dense stand of spruce and balsam fir, both species important to Maine's forest industry. The trail then divides, the right fork passing through a hemlock forest. The left brook trail descends onto Wight Brook's floodplain.

At one time, the land around Step Falls was pasture. It probably returned to forest in the mid-1800s. After several selective cuttings during the 1900s, the forest is now approaching maturity. Young beech and sugar maple, the dominant species of mature forests in this region, grow to the left of the brook trail.

The brook trail follows a section of Wight Brook that is classified as a braided stream. The water froths and foams as it flows around the rocks, creating an ideal environment for brook trout. Further up, there are deep plunge pools formed by the action of ice and water splitting the underlying granite.

After the brook trail rejoins the right fork, the forest becomes dominated by hardwoods and softwoods: white birch, beech, hemlock, white oak, fir and spruce. Other species such as ash, poplar, striped maple and yellow birch are scattered throughout. Hobblebush, painted trilliums, gold thread, bunchberry, club moss and wood sorrel grow in the understory.

As you approach the upper limit of the preserve, you will enter a small grove of red pine trees. Although these trees are only 60 feet high, red pine trees can grow to over 100 feet.

Just beyond the red pines is the upper boundary of the preserve. The woods road beyond the boundary is private property; please respect our neighbor by standing on the preserve and returning to the parking area by the trail.

Preserve Guidelines

Please help us protect this fragile natural area by respecting the following guidelines:

- Foot traffic only.
- Stay on trails and respect areas marked as private.
- No collecting of plants or animals.
- No pets.
- Carry out all litter.
- No fires, smoking or camping.
- Day use only—preserve closes at sunset.

Directions

Take Route 26 to Newry from Route 2 in Bethel. The preserve is on the right, just before Wight Brook, about eight miles from Route 2. The preserve is ten miles from the New Hampshire border, 14 miles northwest of Bethel and one-half mile southeast of Grafton Notch State Park. Please park in the field near the brook.

