



**60 Hikes Within 60 Miles:**

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**WASHINGTON, DC**

**Paul Elliot**

**1st Edition**

# **C&O Canal Towpath: Carderock to Great Falls**

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# #10

## C&O Canal Towpath: Carderock to Great Falls

### IN BRIEF

The C&O Canal towpath provides hikers with scenery, exercise, and glimpses of history—and is on the level. This close-in segment in Maryland features great falls, wide water, a canal boat, a museum, and spectacular cliff trails.

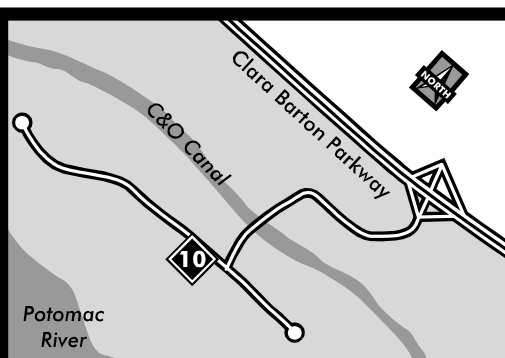
### DIRECTIONS

Starting from American Legion (or Cabin John) Bridge on Capital Beltway (Interstate 495), proceed north on beltway for about 100 yards and exit at Exit 41. Bear left at small “Carderock” sign onto Clara Barton Parkway heading west. Go 0.9 miles to first parkway exit. Ascend short ramp, turn left at stop sign, and cross over parkway. Follow road as it swings right into Carderock Recreation Area and then swings left and goes through underpass. Go right at T-junction. Then take first left into parking lot, 0.4 miles from parkway.

### DESCRIPTION

From 1850 to 1924, the 185-mile Chesapeake and Ohio Canal carried boat traffic between Washington, DC, and Cumberland, Maryland. Mule teams plodding along a towpath powered the boats. The US government acquired the flood-devastated and abandoned property in the 1930s, and made it a national historical park in 1971.

Today, the park, which preserves the left bank of the Potomac River, is a prime metro-area recreation resource.



### KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

**Length:** 11.7 miles

**Configuration:** Modified out-and-back

**Difficulty:** Moderate

**Scenery:** River/canal views, woodlands

**Exposure:** Mostly open

**Traffic:** Usually light; heavier on warm-weather evenings, weekends, holidays, especially on Billy Goat Trail and around Great Falls

**Trail surface:** Hard-packed dirt on towpath, with rocks, grass, sand, pebbles, mud in places; dirt, rocks, roots on Billy Goat Trail—dangerous when wet, icy

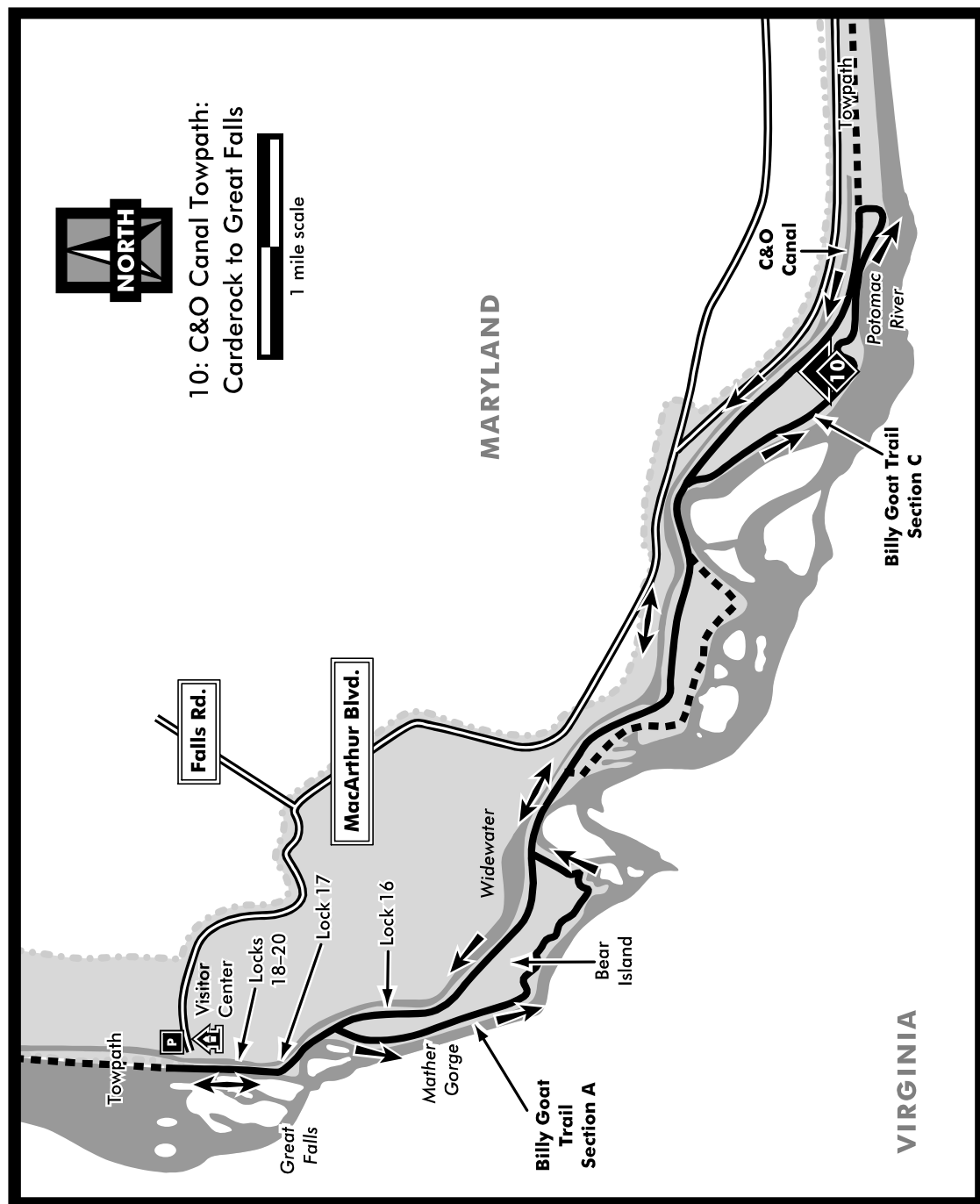
**Hiking time:** 7.5–9 hours

**Access:** Open daily, dawn to dusk

**Maps:** USGS Falls Church, PATC Map D

**Facilities:** Toilets, water, phone at trailhead, off-trail at Great Falls (plus warm-season snack bar); water at Lock 10; off-trail toilets, phone at Cropley

**Special comments:** For more information on the park/hike, visit or call NPS’s Great Falls visitor center, (301) 299-3613, or call the park’s headquarters office in Sharpsburg, (301) 739-4200



The restored towpath is a multi-use trail, and its lower 22 miles border a rebuilt and scenic canal section.

This 11.7-mile, modified out-and-back hike starts with 4 miles along the canal just outside the beltway. The return leg features four detours, including a close look at thundering Great Falls and two sections of the rugged Billy Goat Trail.

From the parking-lot trailhead at Carderock, cross a grassy strip, then cross a nearby road. Follow a woodland trail (marked by a notice to cyclists) about 150 yards to reach the towpath. Turn left and head northwest, keeping the water-filled canal on your right.

Half a mile along the broad and level towpath, pass milepost 11 (the path is studded with mileposts, starting in

Washington). Pressing on upstream, reach the Copley area, about a third of a mile past milepost 12. A footbridge there provides access to MacArthur Boulevard.

Continuing up the towpath, pass a mile-long lake flanked by rocky cliffs and woodlands. On a waterway averaging less than 6 yards in width, this stretch, up to 200 yards wide, is aptly known as Widewater.

The adjoining towpath is narrow and rocky. Near the end of Widewater, it becomes a jumbled line of rocks that serve as stepping stones across a shallow channel prone to flooding. If the water level is too high, go back to the other end of Widewater. There you'll find an alternative route called the Berma Road. It rejoins the towpath upstream near Lock 16.

After the stepping stones, pick your way across bedrock along the water's edge. Watch for an alternative, dirt-surfaced trail to the left; it has some rocks and roots, but is easier going. After that, head down a short wooden walkway onto the usual dirt-surfaced towpath.

Lock 15 begins the mile-long Six Locks area that ends at Great Falls. Originally built around 1830 of red sandstone quarried upstream at Seneca, the locks have been much rebuilt and repaired.

Just past Lock 16, where there's also a surviving 1830s lock house, is a curious canal-straddling structure. It's a reconstructed stop gate, designed to divert floodwater out of the canal. The walkway atop the gate leads to the Widewater detour, a half-mile stretch of towpath with great views of the rapids-filled side channels. The main falls, on the far side of Olmstead Island, are not visible, but the signposted walkway leading to an overlook is.

Between Locks 18 and 20, is the Canal Clipper. During the warm-weather

season, it gives visitors a taste of canal travel, with the help of rangers in period costume and a pair of mules. At Lock 20, which is the hike's 4-mile mark, step across a short wooden bridge spanning the canal to reach Great Falls Tavern. For much of the canal's lifetime, the building served as a lock house, hotel, or both. It now serves as a visitor center, and includes museum exhibits.

Head back down the towpath. Your first detour is down to the Great Falls Overlook and back. Located on a quarter-mile-long walkway the detour crosses narrow gorges often choked with flood debris, if not filled with roaring torrents. At the spray-flecked mid-river overlook, discover just how great the falls are—not so much from their height as from the awesome sense of brute force.

Continue down the towpath. At Lock 17, embark on your second detour by turning right onto a side trail that pitches steeply downhill. Two wooden steps from the bottom, take a narrow dirt trail to the right and clamber about 50 yards up to a rocky knoll that provides a splendid view down a narrow gorge.

Return to the narrow trail, turn right, and follow the undulating trail a couple of hundred yards to a lovely, off-the-beaten-trail spot featuring a rock-rimmed pool, a sand-and-shell beach, and—if it's off-season or a weekday—utter tranquility. Leaving the beach, stay to the right and take a narrow trail leading uphill. Turn right when you reach a retaining wall, and follow it until you find the low place where you can easily climb up and over. Turn right onto the towpath.

Just before reaching the stop gate, turn right at the sign for the blue-blazed Billy Goat Trail. The sign doesn't say so, but it's the trail's section A and your third detour. For most of its roughly 2 miles,

section A follows the perimeter of Bear Island. It includes a rocky clifftop route along the Potomac's narrow, mile-long Mather Gorge.

The blue blazes lead through a wild and beautiful landscape dominated by steep rock and scraggy vegetation. Wend your way around huge boulders, over smaller ones, and past huge potholes and rockbound ponds (some with water lilies). After several chances to see the river below, perhaps you'll also gaze into the abyss to see if it gazes back. Eventually, after the trail curves left again, you'll reach the towpath, near the southern end of Widewater.

Continuing downstream on the towpath, ignore the various Billy Goat Trail signs (I prefer to skip section B) until you pass milepost 11. Then watch for a sign that puts you on the Billy Goat Trail's section C, your final detour, at the "West End." Section C takes you on a scenic 1.7-mile wood-land trek along the edge of a side channel and then the now-broad main channel. It has

its ups and downs, but it's a lot easier than section A. Follow the blue blazes.

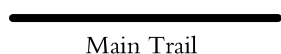
Eventually, the towpath appears again at the "East End," near the ruins of a swing bridge built in 1941. From there, head upstream for half a mile, passing milepost 10. Then, soon after crossing an overpass, turn left onto the inconspicuous woodland path, which began the hike, and return to the trailhead.

One way to shorten this hike is to omit detours. Rough estimates: omit section A to save almost 1 mile and 2 hours; omit section C to save almost 2 miles and 1.25 hours; omit the overlook to save 0.5 miles and 0.75 hours; and omit the rock pool detour to save 0.1 miles and 0.5 hours.

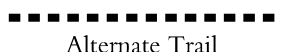
### **NEARBY/RELATED ACTIVITIES**

Do the C&O Canal Association's spring-time Justice Douglas Annual Hike (the association started as a small group formed by Douglas on his 1954 save-the-canal hike). Contact the association, (301) 983-0825.

# MAP LEGEND



Main Trail



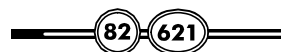
Alternate Trail



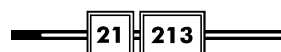
Interstate Highway



U.S. Highway



State Highway



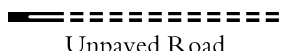
County Road



Forest Service Road



Local Road



Unpaved Road



Direction of Travel



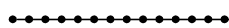
Board Walk



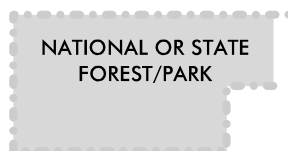
State Border



County Border



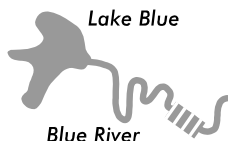
Power Line



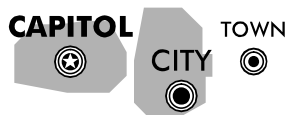
Park-Forest Boundary and Label



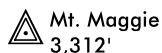
Trailhead  
Locator Map



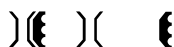
Water Features  
Lake/Pond, Creek/River,  
and Waterfall



capitol, city, and town



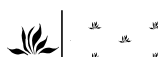
Peaks and Mountains



Footbridge/Dam,  
Footbridge, and Dam



Tunnel



Swamp/Marsh



35: Name of Hike



Map Scale

Compass, Map Number,  
Name and Scale



Off map or pinpoint  
indication arrow



Caution/Warning



Trailhead  
for specific Maps



Ranger Station/  
Rest Room Facilities



Ranger Station



Rest Room Facilities



Shelter



Structure  
or Feature



Monument/  
Sculpture



Parking



Recreation Area



Metro Rail



Shuttle  
Dropoff



Campgrounds



Picnic Area



Gate

# Introduction

Welcome to *60 Hikes within 60 Miles: Washington, DC*. If you're new to hiking or even if you're a seasoned trail-smith, take a few minutes to read the following introduction. We explain how this book is organized and how to use it.

## Hike Descriptions

Each hike contains six key items: a locator map, an In Brief description of the trail, an At-a-Glance Information box, directions to the trail, a trail map, and a hike narrative. Combined, the maps and information provide a clear method to assess each trail from the comfort of your favorite chair.

## Locator Map

Use the locator map, along with driving directions given in the profile, to find the trailhead. At the trailhead, park only in designated areas.

## In Brief

This synopsis of the trail offers a snapshot of what to expect along the trail, including mention of any historical sights, beautiful vistas, or other interesting sights you may encounter.

## At-a-Glance Information

The At-a-Glance Information boxes give you a quick idea of the specifics of each hike. There are 13 basic elements covered.

**Length** The length of the trail from

start to finish. There may be options to shorten or extend the hikes, but the mileage corresponds to the described hike. Consult the hike description to help decide how to customize the hike for your ability or time constraints.

**Configuration** A description of what the trail might look like from overhead. Trails can be loops, out-and-backs (that is, along the same route), or figure eights, or any of those in modified form. Sometimes the descriptions might surprise you.

**Difficulty** The degree of effort an “average” hiker should expect on a given hike. In this book, the author has used a standardized range of terms—from “very easy” to “extremely difficult” that are explained in the Preface.

**Scenery** Summarizes the overall environs of the hike and what to expect in terms of terrain and land use

**Exposure** A quick check of how much sun you can expect on your shoulders during the hike. Descriptors used are self-explanatory and include terms such as shady, exposed, and sunny.

**Traffic** Indicates how busy the trail might be on an average day. Trail traffic, of course, will vary from day to day and season to season.

**Trail surface** Indicates whether the trail is paved, rocky, smooth dirt, or a mixture of elements.

**Hiking time** How long it took the author to hike the trail.

**Access** Notes times of day when hike route is open, days on which it is officially closed, and when fees or permits needed to access the trail.

**Maps** Which maps are useful in the author's opinion, for this hike.

**Facilities** Notes any facilities such as rest rooms, phones, and water available at the trailhead or on the trail or nearby.

**Special comments** Provides you with those little extra details that don't fit into any of the above categories. Here you'll find reminders about such matter as park or road gate closings that could trap you or your car, trails that are susceptible to flooding, and hunting seasons that could affect your hiking.

## **Directions**

Check here for directions to the trailhead. Used with the locator map, the directions will help you locate each trailhead.

## **Description**

The trail description is the heart of each hike. Here, the author has provided a summary of the trail's essence as well as highlighted any special traits the hike offers. Ultimately the hike description will help you choose which hikes are best for you.

## **Nearby Activities**

Not every hike will have this listing. For those that do, look here for information on nearby dining, recreational opportunities, or other activities to fill out your day.

## **Weather**

The best time to go hiking in the Washington, DC, area is any time you can. If you make prudent decisions about which of these 60 hikes to try, what to take with you, and what the weather is likely to be, you can count on being able to get out and hike enjoyable and safely on most days of

the year.

The area has a generally temperate climate that favors year-round hiking, although deep freezes occur from time to time in the winter and the often hot and humid summers do take some getting used to. During the winter, morning temperatures are usually in the 30s, and frosts are not uncommon. If that's too cold, wait until the middle of the day and you're more likely to have temperatures warm enough to go hiking. Also, help yourself by selecting hikes in sheltered areas or, if there's no wind, hikes where you'll be out in the sunshine. Make allowances for the occasional winter storms that lash the Washington area.

On the hottest days of summer, from late July to early September, go hiking first thing in the morning and look for hikes that have heavy shade—or for trails in the mountains, where temperatures are somewhat lower. Keep in mind that even if you wait until late in the day, the temperature and humidity won't have dropped enough to be really comfortable. Also be aware of the possibility of thunderstorms; they're the area's worst weather hazard (short of hurricanes), and you need to be careful not to get caught by one when you're out on a trail.

All in all, the best hiking weather in the Washington area occurs in the fall and then again in the spring. Autumn can be glorious, especially from September to early December, during Indian summer, when the light pours down like melted butter and covers everything in a kind of golden glow just before sunset.

Even a mild Washington winter tends to be a gray winter of short days, and so the period from about mid-March to mid-May brings not only balmy weather but also the reawakening of nature as plants start to bloom, migrating songbirds start to appear, and a fresh hiking season gets underway.



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