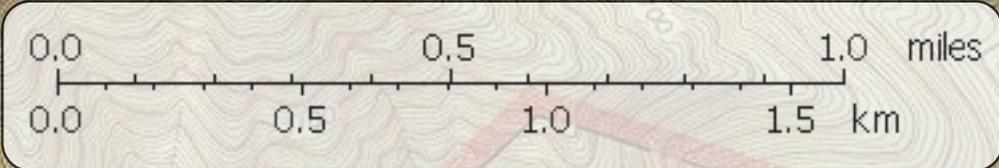


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EAKS OF OTTER

Fallingwater Cascades/Flat Top Mountain - Bedford, Virginia

Length	Difficulty	Streams	Views	Solitude	Camping
1.7 mls	★2	★4	★1	★3	N/A
Hiking Time: 1 hour and 10 minutes with 15 minutes of breaks Elev. Gain: 360 ft	Fallingwater Cascades				
6.0 mls	★3	N/A	★4	★3	N/A
Hiking Time: 2 hours and 50 minutes with 30 minutes of breaks Elev. Gain: 1,755 ft	Flat Top Mountain				
7.7 mls	★3	★4	★4	★3	N/A
Hiking Time: 4 hours with 45 minutes of breaks Elev. Gain: 2,115 ft	Fallingwater Cascades/Flat Top Mountain				
Parking: Park at the Flat Top Mountain Overlook. 37.46846, -79.58028					

[Click Here For Detailed Location](#)

By Trail Contributor: Zach Robbins



Peaks of Otter Recreation Area is an extremely popular destination along the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia. Sharp Top Mountain and Flat Top Mountain guard the central Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia like sentinels rising from the valleys around Roanoke and Lynchburg. Sharp Top Mountain was proclaimed to be the tallest mountain in the U.S. by Thomas Jefferson, and although this is far from the truth the mountain is wildly popular for tourists. A reasonably short summit trail combined with the alternative of a paved road + bus service close to the peak makes this one of the most crowded hikes in the region.

If you want good views, a waterfall, and more solitude, head to the northern section of the park to hike the Fallingwater – Flat Top National Recreation Trail. You'll instantly avoid the crowds surrounding Abbott Lake by parking at the Flat Top Mountain Overlook, and have the option of doing separate hikes to Fallingwater Cascades or Flat Top Mountain. Better yet, combine both for a great half-day hike with a waterfall and a rocky mountain summit.

Peaks of Otter Recreation Area is accessible all winter long due to VA-43 concurrently following the Blue Ridge Parkway for 5 miles south of Abbott Lake. However, this hike starts north of the highway convergence and access is typically closed all winter. For winter hiking you can start at the southern trail head for Flat Top Mountain east of Abbott Lake near the picnic area. Starting here will add 3.2 miles to the hike making it 10.9 miles, and a lot of tough elevation gain on the initial climb from the picnic area.

- ▶ **Mile 0.0** – From parking area at Flat Top Mountain Overlook cross the Blue Ridge Parkway to begin the Fallingwater Cascades Trail, part of the Fallingwater – Flat Top National Recreation Trail. At the junction with the loop trail turn right towards the top of the waterfall.
- ▶ **Mile 0.4** – Pass by the parking area for Fallingwater Cascades at Wilkerson Gap. From here the trail begins descending into the gorge.
- ▶ **Mile 0.7** – Cross a bridge over Fallingwater Creek above the waterfall.
- ▶ **Mile 0.8** – Along the trek down to the base you have views south of Flat Top Mountain and Sharp Top Mountain. There is also a side path to the middle of the waterfall.
- ▶ **Mile 0.9** – Reach the base of Fallingwater Cascades. Fallingwater Creek plummets nearly 100 feet over 2 sliding drops. The lower drop is approximately 40 feet over a wide rock face. From this angle the upper portion of the falls is obstructed from view.
- ▶ **Mile 1.0** – A nice series of cascades over smooth, moss-covered boulders.
- ▶ **Mile 1.2** – Rock hop over Fallingwater Creek. The bridge over the creek was washed out in 2012. Unless the water level is very high it is unlikely you will get wet. From here the trail climbs steeply out of the gorge.
- ▶ **Mile 1.7** – Cross back over the Blue Ridge Parkway and begin the Flat Top Trail. The trail parallels the parkway for the next 0.8-mi.
- ▶ **Mile 2.5** – Begins a series of seven long switchbacks as you climb the northern slopes of Flat Top Mountain. The forest varies from hardwoods to dense mountain laurel.
- ▶ **Mile 4.0** – Directly below the summit of The Pinnacle turn left on a steep descending spur trail to Cross Rock. At the start of the trail on the left is a series of rock outcrops with views north.
- ▶ **Mile 4.1** – Spur trail ends at Cross Rock, a highly unusual formation with two, gigantic rectangular rocks stacked on top of each other at a perpendicular angle.
- ▶ **Mile 4.3** – Returning to the Flat Top Trail continue left beyond The Pinnacle along a narrow, exposed ridge towards the summit of Flat Top Mountain. As you approach the summit there will be large boulders lining the trail with small caves.
- ▶ **Mile 4.8** – Reach the broad summit of Flat Top Mountain (3,994 feet). There are two primary spots for views. From both viewpoints you will be able to see The Pinnacle, Apple Orchard Mountain, and Sharp Top Mountain. On the west side of the mountain is a large cliff with 180° views of Harkening Hill and the Goose Creek basin. There is smaller cliff on the east side with 180° views of the rolling hills of Virginia and most impressively the mountains to the north across the Stony Creek basin including Headforemost Mountain and Apple Orchard Mountain. Turn around and head north back down the trail to the parking area.

****Optional****

- ▶ **Mile 5.5** – There is no trail to The Pinnacle but it is an easy ~200 foot scramble from the main trail. You will have similar views north of Apple Orchard Mountain with the additional benefit of the southern view of Flat Top Mountain.
- ▶ **Mile 7.7** – Hike ends at the Flat Top Mountain Overlook.