

Exploring Yellowstone's Cascade Corner

Story and photography
by **BEN PIERCE**
Chronicle OutThere Editor

YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK – The roar emanating from the two tiers of Colonnade Falls is a welcome sound for weary hikers on the Bechler River Trail. Regarded as one of the park's most spectacular waterfalls, Colonnade highlights the grandeur of Yellowstone's aptly-named Cascade Corner.

Colonnade Falls is an easy – if long – 17.6-mile roundtrip hike from the parking area at Bechler Ranger Station. The station marks the trailhead into one of the park's most remote regions. Not an official park gate, Bechler Ranger Station is accessed by a 15-mile dirt road that cuts into Yellowstone's southwest corner from Ashton, Idaho.

"The Bechler Ranger Station is remote and difficult to get to," said Ivan Kowski, YNP backcountry program manager. "It sees less people, but in recent years its popularity has increased."

Still, the Bechler region is a long ways from the masses of tourists and traffic jams found on the Grand Loop. Here, visitors have to earn the views by hiking – and the views do not disappoint.

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Yellowstone Off the Beaten Path

COLONNADE
FALLS



The Bechler River plunges 102 feet down the two tiers of Colonnade Falls in the southwest corner of Yellowstone National Park.



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The route to Colonnade Falls begins from Bechler Ranger Station following the Bechler Meadows Trail for 3.2 miles through lodgepole pine forest before breaking out into Bechler Meadows.

Covered with golden grasses broken by a few stands of trees, Bechler Meadows extends for 2.2 miles before reaching the Bechler River.

"Late August and September are definitely prime season in the Bechler," Kowski said. "Being that it is the wettest area of the park, it takes a while for that water to dry out. In June and July the Bechler Meadows flood and with that comes some serious mosquitoes. People in the know definitely wait until mid-August at the earliest."

Passing through Bechler meadows, the trail crosses a footbridge over Boundary Creek with commanding views of Grand Teton and Mount Moran to the south.

Upon reaching the Bechler River, a thigh-deep ford is required to reach the Bechler River Trail and Colonnade Falls. The ford has a good gravel bottom and is easily navigated.

"On a hot day (the ford) can feel really good," Kowski said.

After crossing the Bechler River and entering Bechler Canyon the trail roughens slightly and begins to gain a moderate degree of elevation. The trail follows the Bechler River for 3.2 miles before reaching Colonnade Falls.

"It is really pretty remote trying to get to Colonnade," said hiker John Tileston of Odessa, Fla. "Either you hike over the Continental Divide from Lone Star Geyser or you hike in from (the Bechler Ranger Station). Either way, it



Andy McDougald, of Raleigh, N.C., right, and John Tileston, of Odessa, Fla., hike the Bechler Meadows trail after visiting Colonnade Falls in Yellowstone National Park on Tuesday.

is quite a trip getting in."

The vegetation changes upon entry into Bechler Canyon with Douglas fir lining the steep canyon walls. This time of year huckleberries, raspberries and thimbleberries line the trail – a tasty treat for hikers and the black and grizzly bears that call Yellowstone home.

"The canyon is old growth with some pretty big trees," Kowski said. "There was a fire along Robinson and Boundary creeks in the early 90s, but the canyon feels very much unaffected by the fire of '88."

The first waterfall of Bechler Canyon, visible through the trees on the north rim, is Ouzel Falls. Rippling over the rock face of the canyon, it represents the spectacular terminus of Ouzel Creek.

The creeks that feed Cascade Corner – so named be-

cause the region holds roughly half of Yellowstone's waterfalls – pour down from Madison Plateau and Pitchstone Plateau to the north.

"The Bechler is a wet region of the park and it gets a lot of precipitation from storms moving to the east," Kowski said. "The Madison and Pitchstone plateaus; the Bechler River is the natural drainage for that water."

Within a mile and a half of Ouzel Falls, the thunderous roar of Colonnade Falls become audible as it echoes throughout the canyon. A final push up a moderately

steep stretch of trail ends at an overlook with views of Colonnade's twin tiers.

"Colonnade Falls is really pretty," said hiker Andy McDougald of Raleigh, N.C. "Yesterday evening when we were coming up the sun was shining down through and the mist was just pluming up. It was beautiful."

While Colonnade Falls can be visited as a long day hike, most hikers choose to stay at one of Yellowstone's backcountry campsites. There are seven backcountry sites along the route to Colonnade Falls that can be reserved for free up to two days before the start of your trip by visiting a YNP backcountry office. Reservations can also be made in advance for \$20. The reservation period begins April 1 each year. For more information or to make a reservation, call the YNP Central Backcountry Office at (307) 344-2160.

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BEN PIERCE/CHRONICLE

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