

**T**he Catawba River is a major river in the Carolinas which provides water for the city of Charlotte and beyond. But here at its headwaters, the Catawba is creek-size, flowing wild and free. The walk to the Lower Falls is moderate. However, reaching the Upper Falls is very difficult and should not be undertaken lightly. Ropes assist with the rockiest part; you'll need to pull yourself with your hands on other sections. This is a good hike any time of year. However, if you plan to go to the Upper Falls, you'll want to avoid yellow jacket season, usually in the early fall. Please stay on the trail—that's a good rule in general, but especially where waterfalls are involved. At this writing, the Foothills Conservancy, which owns the access trail, allows day hiking only to the falls.

**Rules/Facilities:**

Daytime access only

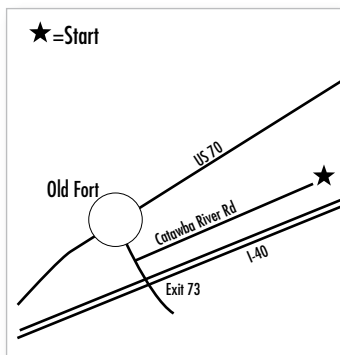
**Closest town:** Old Fort**Website:** [www.foothillsconservancy.org](http://www.foothillsconservancy.org),  
[www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc](http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc)**Type of hike:** Out and back**Distance:** 3.8 miles**Total ascent:** 700 ft.**Starting elevation:** 1,650 ft.**Highlights:** Waterfalls, old dam, power plants**USGS map:** Moffitt Hill**Trail map:** None**Land managed by:**Pisgah National Forest,  
Appalachian District;  
Foothills Conservancy ([www.foothillsconservancy.org](http://www.foothillsconservancy.org))**Getting to the trailhead:**

From Old Fort, take I-40 exit 73 and immediately make a hard right on Catawba River Rd., which parallels the interstate for a short while. Drive 3.2 miles to the end of the road, where there's a wide parking area on the left.

**The Hike**

At the trailhead, go through the gate and stay on the trail. There's a barn to your right. Cross the Catawba River at 0.3 mile and you'll come to a flat area. Pass a concrete building on the right that looks half-built and the remnants of a power plant across the river.

The wide, flat trail, which used to be a stage coach road, climbs gently, paralleling the Catawba River on your left. Most of the land is scrub, filling in with rhododendron and hemlock.



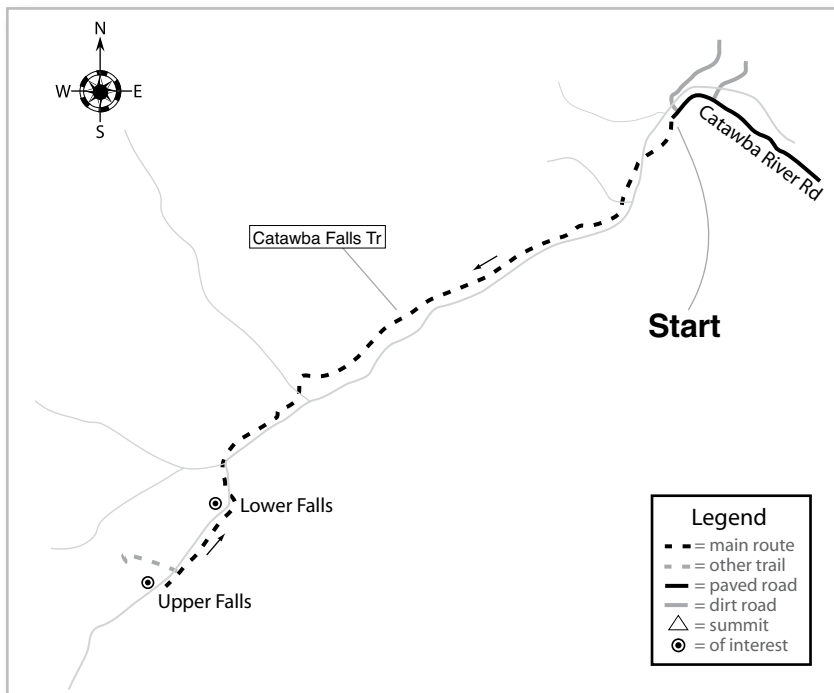
At 1.1 miles (1,850 ft. elev.), you'll pass a huge rock wall on your right and soon reach a dam that fed the first power plant, which you passed at the beginning of the hike; this is not the Lower Falls. On your right, a concrete wall is all that remains of the second power plant. The trail follows the river closely. You'll walk between the Catawba on your left and Chestnut Branch on your right; a dam on Chestnut Branch fed the second power plant.

Cross the Catawba River on slick, flat rocks. The trail turns right and goes up steeply. Do not cross the river again. At 1.5 miles (2,000 ft. elev.), you'll turn left to reach a flat

area at Lower Catawba Falls, a cascade which drops into a pool. Most people stop here, enjoy a break and snack, and hike back the way they came.

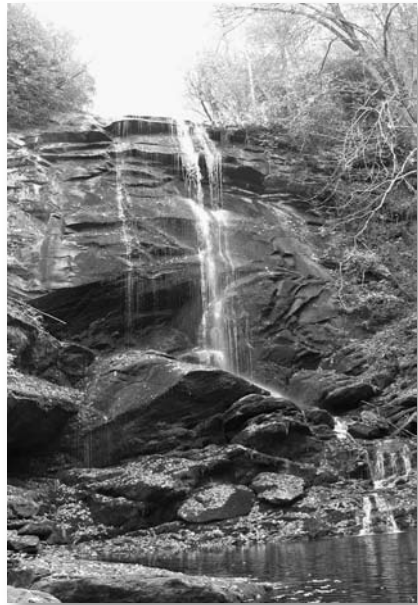
The way to the Upper Falls is steep, rocky, eroded, and slippery. Two ropes secured to tree trunks will assist you in climbing up. Only one person should use these ropes at a time. One experienced hiker said of climbing to Upper Catawba Falls, "It didn't get this technical up to the base camp on Mt. Everest." You might find it harder going down than up.

The trail hugs the sides of the Lower Falls. You'll go under a permanent blowdown to reach the top of the Lower



Falls, where you can rest. The trail continues through rhododendron and moves away from the creek. Though you can barely see the creek through the green heath thicket, you can certainly hear the falls. For a while, the obstructions disappear and you'll walk on a smooth trail, anticipating the Upper Falls, until the trail suddenly descends.

Turn left toward the river at 1.8 miles (2,350 ft. elev.), ignoring another trail going up steeply to the right. You'll be at Upper Falls, but if you want to get closer, look for a path on your left through the bushes which goes up toward a rock wall and down to the falls. A cairn close to the falls indicates the end of the trail. The waterfall hugs the rock and cascades into a pool ringed by rhododendron. Trees grow out of huge boulders. Several flat rocks give you a ringside seat at the falls. Return the way you came to end the hike.



*Upper Catawba Falls*

## Heritage

### The Catawba River

The 225-mile-long Catawba River winds through the heart of the Carolinas, providing water and power for more than 1.3 million residents. Along the way, it has been dammed to form several lakes, including Lake James, Lake Norman, and Fishing Creek Reservoir near Great Falls, SC. Eventually it flows into the Lake Wateree reservoir and downstream of the reservoir it becomes the Wateree River. The Catawba River was named for the Catawba Indian nations, whose traditional homes were along its banks in what

## Heritage continued

is now North and South Carolina. The path of the river provided a trail for the Cherokees, then in the 1800s it became a stagecoach route to Asheville which followed the Catawba and then Chestnut Branch, a tributary, to Swannanoa Gap.

Rufus Morgan, a portrait and stereograph photographer, photographed the Catawba Falls in the 1870s, encouraging people to hike along the river to see them. Today, after years of being off-limits, the falls are now on their way to becoming open to the public—but not quite there yet.

In the early 1900s, Colonel Daniel W. Adams, a pioneer in the development of hydroelectric power, bought thousands of acres of land in the Old Fort area, including the falls. In the 1920s he built the dams you'll pass on the hike, which generated electricity for the town of Old Fort. In 1928 he sold the power plant to a small power company. Eventually Duke Power Company took it over and closed the Catawba facility.

Catawba Falls was always privately owned; hikers could get to the falls only with permission of the landowners. The falls themselves were acquired by Pisgah National Forest in the late 1980s from the Adams family. However, a short access trail stayed in private hands and the falls became landlocked.

When the access land was put on the market, the Foothills Conservancy acted quickly to buy it with loan funds to secure public admittance to the trail. The Conservancy will turn over this path to Pisgah National Forest when the loan is paid off. Right now, the Conservancy is allowing only daytime access to the falls—no camping.



*An old dam on the Catawba River*