

AFALCONGUIDE[®]

Hiking

Southern New England

Second Edition

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Purgatory Chasm State Reservation



Guilford, Connecticut
An imprint of The Globe Pequot Press

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24 Purgatory Chasm State Reservation

OVERVIEW

In its 187 wooded acres, this south-central Massachusetts state reservation cradles a picturesque 0.25-mile-long gorge of jumbled rock enclosed by cliffs. The walls, both sheer and jagged, measure from 20 to 70 feet high. A second chasm on the property, Little Purgatory Chasm, captures the drama in miniature and spotlights a scenic grotto and cascade.

General description: Two hikes explore most of the reservation's trails and walkable woods roads. One travels the belly and rim of Purgatory Chasm. The other travels the wooded outskirts, with a side trip to Little Purgatory Chasm.

General location: 10 miles southeast of Auburn, Massachusetts.

Special attractions: Visitor center, a dramatic fissure in solid rock, mixed forests, varied understory, fall foliage.

Length: Chasm Loop Trail, 0.5-mile loop; Charley's Loop-Little Purgatory Hike, 2.6 miles round trip.

Elevation: Trails show less than 100 feet of elevation change.

Difficulty: Chasm Loop Trail, moderate; the Charley's Loop-Little Purgatory Hike is easy.

Maps: State reservation map.

Special concerns: Wear boots and beware of slippery rock. No food or beverages in the chasm. Mountain bikes are prohibited in or around the chasm. Do not climb chasm walls without a permit. Apply for permits at the park, and bring personal climbing gear.

Season and hours: Spring through fall for hiking, daylight hours.

For information: Purgatory Chasm State Reservation.

Key points:

Chasm Loop Trail:

- 0.0 Chasm Trailhead.
- 0.2 Devil's Coffin.
- 0.4 Fat Man's Misery.
- 0.5 End loop at Chasm Trailhead.

Charley's Loop-Little Purgatory Hike:

- 0.0 Charley's Loop Trailhead.
- 0.8 Little Purgatory Chasm Trail.
- 1.5 Grotto; backtrack to 0.8-mile junction.
- 2.6 Complete Charley's Loop.

Finding the trailhead: From the junction of U.S. Highway 20 and Massachusetts Highway 146 in North Millbury (south of Worcester), follow MA 146 south for 7.1 miles and turn right (west) onto Purgatory Road. Locate the visitor center on the right in 1.2 miles and trailhead parking on the left in another 0.1 mile.

The hikes: For the **Chasm Loop Trail**, start near the picnic shelter and mapboard. A sign points to the chasm, and blue markers lead the way. Pass into the gorge, negotiating the prescribed route over and between the massive boulders and slabs that litter the chasm floor.

The initial walls rise some 20 feet, with ferns invading the seams and fissures. Lichens and mineral stains accent the cliffs, while hemlock and deciduous trees fringe the rim. Among the rocks, look for etched inscriptions dating to the early 1900s.

The imposing rock shows hues of red, orange, gray, bronze, black, and purple, especially striking when wet. Fissures reveal how the rubble was created; massive overhangs lend drama. After the initial 0.1 mile, dirt trail segments bridge the boulder scrambles, as hikers descend into the chasm's lower bowl. Here, find 70-foot-high sheer walls and named features. Discover the vertical plummet of "Lover's Leap" and the triangular jut of "Devil's Pulpit," both on the right.

As the walls grade lower near the end of the chasm, find "Devil's Coffin" on the right. Aptly named, this feature holds a coffin-shaped rock in the dark

recess of a natural mausoleum. A canted slab for a grave marker completes the image. In the drainage at the chasm's mouth grow iris, fern, and grasses.

The blue loop then swings left for the return. Skirt the chasm, traveling within a white pine-huckleberry complex, before reaching the rim at "Fat Man's Misery" (0.4 mile). Smooth sides shape this widened fissure, measuring 15 feet deep, 30 feet long, but only 18 inches wide. From atop the outcrop, peer into Purgatory Chasm, gaining new perspective. Where the trail next visits the rim, find the boxy opening of "Devil's Corncrib." Complete the hike at the picnic area (0.5 mile).

For the **Charley's Loop-Little Purgatory Hike**, follow the paved lane between the picnic shelter and the stone rest room hut, reaching the cabled-off woods road of Charley's Loop; yellow blazes point the way.

Pass among picnic sites to explore the periphery woods of hemlock, hardwood, and pine, well removed from Purgatory Chasm. Enjoy an attractive lane and comfortable slow descent. Huckleberry, mayflower, twisted stalk, sarsaparilla, and fern contribute to the understory flora. Large boulders offer trailside seating.

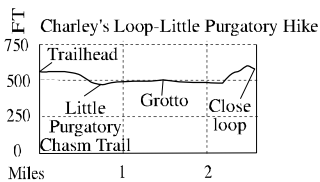
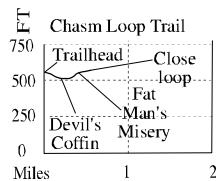
At 0.5 mile, turn right, now following yellow and blue markers along a narrow woods road that parts a varied woods. Ignore the unmarked side trails and any errant blazes without trails. At 0.8 mile, reach a multiple junction where a hard right on an old woods road enters Purgatory Chasm near Devil's Coffin, the yellow- and blue-blazed Charley's Loop continues on a footpath angling uphill along the chasm's west rim, and the main woods road proceeds straight for Little Purgatory Chasm and Trail.

Before completing the loop, detour forward on the woods road to visit Little Purgatory Chasm. In less than 0.1 mile, find a junction; the main road ahead is Little Purgatory Trail. Turn left onto the smaller woods road for the actual hike to Little Purgatory Chasm. In 50 feet, turn right onto an unmarked grassy lane entering woods. Before long, a footpath replaces the vegetated lane, paralleling Purgatory Brook upstream.

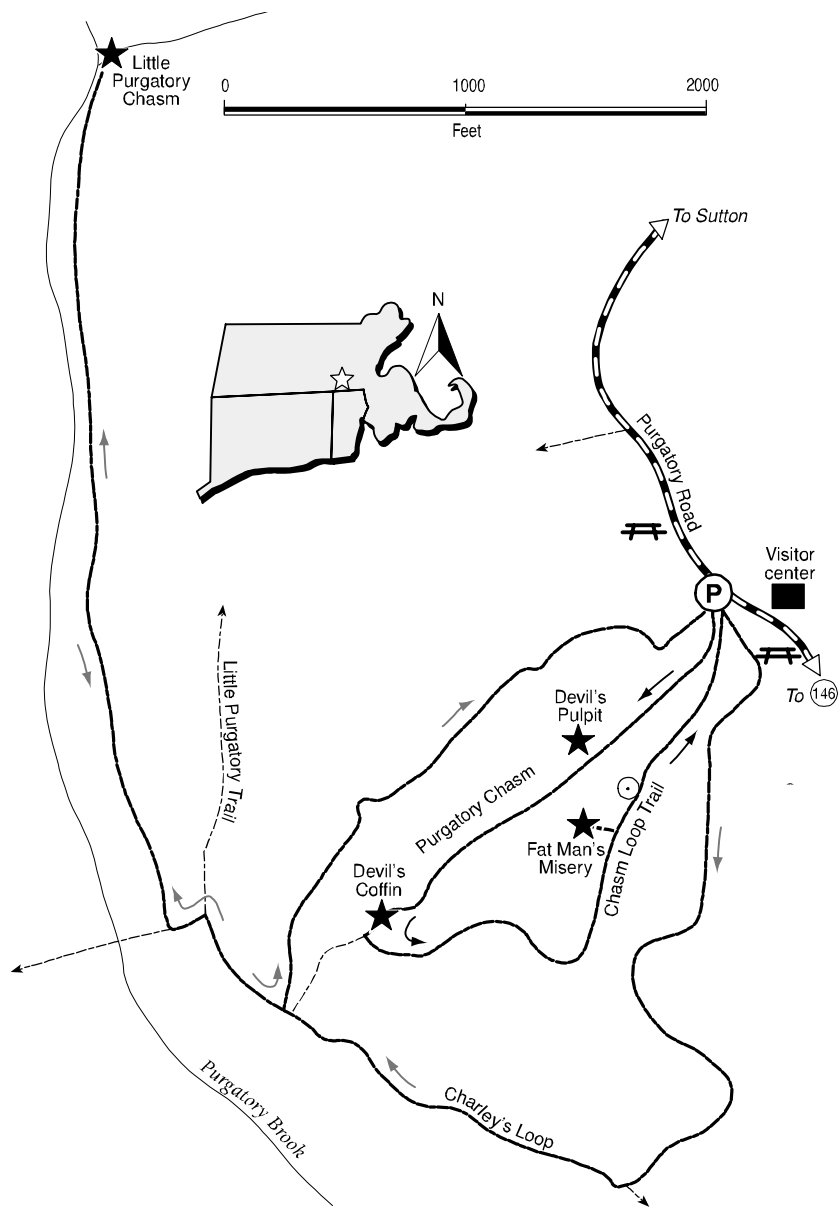
Step around and between the rocks along the shore, coming to a grotto cupped by 10-foot-high solid rock. There, find a small cascade at the confluence of Little Purgatory and Purgatory Brooks. By climbing the slope to follow Little Purgatory Brook upstream, gain an overlook of this smaller chasm before the trail ends in 200 feet.

Future plans call for a return trail. Meanwhile, backtrack downstream, returning to the 0.8-mile junction at 2.3 miles. Follow the yellow- and blue-marked foot trail uphill to the left to complete the clockwise hike of Charley's Loop.

Travel a rock-studded forest of beech, maple, white pine, and black and chestnut oak, adding hemlock as the trail progresses. At 2.5 miles, overlook Purgatory Chasm. Top a rise and descend to the picnic area, arriving amid











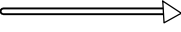

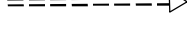







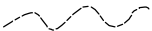

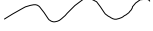






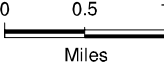



Purgatory Chasm State Reservation



massive outcrops and boulders.

An alternative return travels the woods road of the Little Purgatory Trail north to the woods road of the Old Purgatory Trail. Turn right onto the Old Purgatory Trail and again onto Purgatory Road to return to the picnic area and trailhead for a 3-mile hike; consult the park map.

Legend

Interstate		Wetland	
U.S. Highway		Campground	
State or County Road		Picnic Area	
Paved Road		Trail Shelter	
Gravel Road		Bridge	
Unimproved Road		Building	
Trailhead/Parking		Cemetery	
Starting Point		Mine/Quarry	
Described Trail		Viewpoint	
Alternate Trail		Point of Interest	
Brook		Power line	
River		Lookout Tower	
Body of Water		Railroad	
Summit		Scale	
Waterfall		Spring	
Dam			

How to Use This Guide

Summary entries provide a character sketch of the trail, its general location, special attractions, length, elevation change, difficulty, available maps, special requirements or concerns, season, and an information resource. The key points and elevation profiles further help you visualize a trail. Although the handful of key points allows a quick check on progress, the listing cannot replace the hike text for guiding you along the trail. At the end of each summary, you will find detailed directions to the trailhead.

"The hike" component of the write-up describes the progress of the trail, drawing attention to special features and alerting you to obstacles and potentially confusing junctions. Habitat changes, seasonal surprises, sidelights, and unusual discoveries flesh out the tour description. Where appropriate, we mention flaws and disappointments for a balanced view.

The maps in this book are not intended to replace the more detailed agency maps, road maps, state atlases, and/or topographic maps, but they do indicate the lay of the trail and the site's attractions, helping you visualize the tour.

AN EXPLANATION OF SUMMARY TERMS

Listed distances represent pedometer readings. Backpacking excursions—sometimes dictated by distance, sometimes by attraction—are left to the hiker's judgment and the rules of the appropriate agency.

The assignment of a subjective classification of "easy," "moderate," or "strenuous" considers overall distance, elevation change (the difference between the trail's elevation extremes), cumulative elevation (how rolling a trail is), trail surface, obstacles, ease of following, and its relative difficulty to other hikes in the book.

We do not estimate hiking times, because personal health, party size, the interest of the trail, the weather, and the trail's condition can all influence the time needed to complete a hike. Instead, gain a sense of your personal capabilities and hiking style and judge the time for yourself based on the distance, the elevation change, the difficulty rating, and what you glean from the text. Customize the hike to fit your needs; you need not continue just because a description does, nor must you stop where the description stops. Interlocking loops, side trails, and alternative destinations may await.

GLOSSARY

Car-shuttle hikes. Typically, these are linear routes that require a drop-off and pickup arrangement, spotting a second vehicle at trail's end, or hiking back to the trailhead you started from.

Corduroy. This side-by-side alignment of logs, boards, or branches provides dry passage over soggy trail segments or delicate meadow sites.

Forest lanes, carriageways, cart paths. These routes typically are narrower than a woods road, yet wider than a trail, serving foot and horse travelers.

Jeep trails. These doubletrack routes typically serve foot and horse travelers. Most are no longer drivable.

Service roads. These routes carry minimal traffic, allowing official vehicles only.

Woods roads. These dirt, grass, or rocky routes are abandoned logging, farm, and town roads that have been reclaimed as trails. Most are closed to vehicle travel, although some may allow snowmobile or mountain bike use. We alert you if we are aware of vehicle use (legal or illegal).

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All photos by George Ostertag

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 0-7627-2246-0

Manufactured in the United States of America

Second Edition/First Printing

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