

ENVIRONMENTAL Fact Sheet



29 Hazen Drive, Concord, New Hampshire 03301 • (603) 271-3503 • www.des.nh.gov

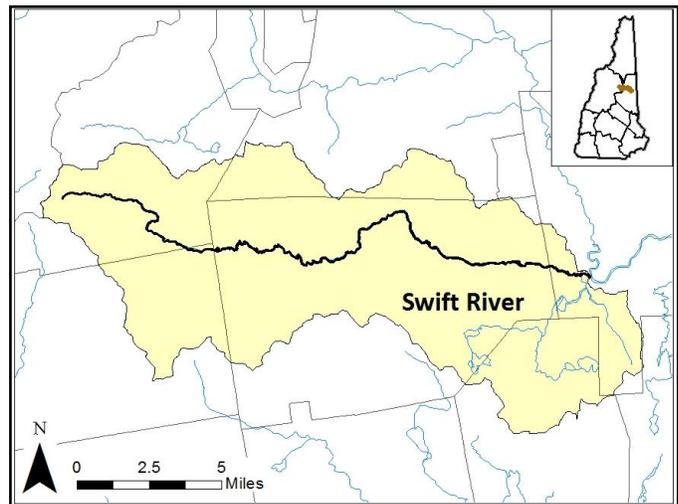
WD-R&L-12

2019

The Swift River

The Swift River is one of the outstanding natural resources that attracts visitors to the Mt. Washington Valley. This completely free-flowing river offers spectacular views of whitewater cascades and waterfalls as it cuts a steep valley through a small section of the majestic White Mountains. The Swift River's scenic location and natural resources provide opportunities for canoeing, kayaking, swimming, sightseeing, fishing and camping for residents and visitors alike. As such, the Swift River is important to both the quality of life in the adjacent communities and the health of the regional economy.

The headwaters of the Swift River begin on Mt. Kancamagus in Livermore. From there the river flows east along the Kancamagus Highway for 26 miles through the towns of Livermore, Waterville Valley and Albany before joining the Saco River in the town of Conway. From the headwaters to its confluence with the Saco River, the river experiences a drop in elevation of more than 2,400 feet.



The watershed of the Swift River covers approximately 115 square miles, almost all of which is located within the White Mountain National Forest. Land use along the river and throughout the watershed is predominantly forestland, providing for good water quality. The Swift River watershed is part of the larger Saco River Basin. Both rivers were among the first five rivers designated into the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program in June 1990.

History

The history of the Swift River is linked to the early settlement of the larger Saco River Basin. Early Native Americans, such as the Pigwacket kin-based group, inhabited this area. In 1642, a settlement containing 200 wigwams existed where the Swift River joins the Saco River in Conway. The Kancamagus trail ran along the Swift River and archaeological excavations have confirmed the presence of Native American activity along the terraces of the river. In the early 1800s, small farmsteads dotted the region. The Russell-Colbath House, located near the Swift River in Albany, remains as an example of these farmsteads and is now owned by the U.S. Forest Service. It is open to the public during summer months as a museum of early American life, and in 1987 was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. The Swift River is crossed by two covered bridges that were built in the mid-1800s. The Albany Bridge was restored by the U.S. Forest Service in the early 1990s. The Swift River Bridge in Conway is open only to foot traffic.

Wildlife, Habitat and Vegetation

The location of the Swift River within the White Mountain National Forest ensures the continued existence of a large, contiguous tract of forest habitat surrounding the river. A 1983 U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative Study of the Saco River Basin listed 36 species of fish, 32 species of amphibians and reptiles, 165 species of birds, and 56 species of mammals as occurring in the various habitats of the basin. Wildlife in the river corridor includes black bear, moose, coyote, fishers, and mink. Endangered and threatened species such as the state- and federally-listed threatened northern long-eared bat and the Peregrine falcon, a state-listed threatened species that has been documented nesting within the watershed since 1989, have also been found.

Several state-listed plants have been documented within the river corridor such as the state-listed threatened dwarf blueberry and lance-leaved arnica, and the state-listed endangered species Wiegand's sedge. The New Hampshire Natural Heritage Inventory has identified the presence of several natural communities including an exemplary natural community, the Northern New England level bog, within the river corridor.

Fishing

The Swift River is a cold water sport fishery, supporting brook, brown, and rainbow trout. The river also provides good spawning habitat for anadromous fish), however, several downstream dams in Maine prevent their return to New Hampshire. An effort is underway to require fish passage facilities at those dams, thereby restoring anadromous fish runs, including Atlantic salmon, to the Swift River.



Recreational trout fishing is a popular activity on the Swift River during the warm weather months. On weekends, anglers may often be found between Rocky Gorge and the Albany-Conway town line. Due to angler demand, the natural reproductive capability of the native fish populations has been exceeded; therefore, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department stocks the river with hatchery-reared brook and rainbow trout. The U.S. Forest Service maintains an access for handicapped anglers next to the Albany Bridge.

Recreation

The headwaters of the Swift River lie high within the White Mountains and offer outstanding views of the surrounding mountain ranges and valley below. The river can be viewed at numerous points along from the Kancamagus Highway, declared a National Forest Scenic Byway by the U.S. Forest Service. Two of the most distinctive scenic resources on the river, Rocky Gorge and Lower Falls, are classified and managed by the U.S. Forest Service as Scenic Areas. Recreational opportunities are available year-round along the Swift River. Most of the recreational facilities are managed by the U.S. Forest Service, including the Sabbaday Falls picnic area and the Passaconaway, Jigger Johnson, Blackberry Crossing, and Covered Bridge camping areas. During the winter, the river corridor attracts cross-country skiers for wilderness skiing along the Nanamocomuck Ski Trail. During the summer, swimmers and sunbathers frequently visit Rocky Gorge and Lower Falls.

Boating

Every year, the Swift River is used by many people from throughout the Northeast for canoeing, kayaking and rafting. During spring run-off, the river provides some of the best whitewater boating in the region, with most of the river runnable from mid-April to the end of May. A 6-mile segment of the river below Lower Falls provides one of the most difficult, uninterrupted whitewater runs in New England. A regional boaters' guide, Classic Northeastern Whitewater Guide – Appalachian Mountain Club, describes the Swift River this way: "if veteran boaters were to pick five of the best whitewater rivers in New England, the Swift would surely be on everyone's list ... Although only a medium size riverbed, even by New England's standards, it boasts some of the biggest, meanest soue holes and choppiest standing waves to be found anywhere." Public access to the river is available for all of its length within the White Mountain National Forest.

For More Information

For further information about the New Hampshire Rivers Management and Protection Program, visit the NHDES website at <http://des.nh.gov/organization/divisions/water/wmb/rivers/>, or contact the Rivers Coordinator, 29 Hazen Drive; PO Box 95; Concord, NH 03302-0095; (603) 271-2959; riversprogram@des.nh.gov.