

White River Falls

- Hike Type: In and out
- Distance: 1.4 miles
- High point: 1,045 feet
- Elevation gain: 250 feet
- Difficulty: Easy

White River Falls is central Oregon's mini-Niagara although water levels diminish considerably as you go into the summer. In fact, it is a two-tiered waterfall with each tier having its own name (The lower tier is Celestial Falls). Despite its remote location White River Falls has been severely compromised by the hand of man: the Pacific Power and Light Company built a power plant and penstock here and supplied electricity to Wasco and Sherman Counties from 1910 to 1963. Since then, there have been various attempts by local government agencies to revive the hydroelectric scheme, but none have fared successfully. Much remains of the old hydroelectric operation: part of the penstock, a diversion dam, irrigation dam, weir and the old power plant complete with rusting generators can all be observed. The park is rustic and, while the distances are short, the trails are uneven: take care as you descend into the canyon and explore downriver to 15-foot Lower White River Falls. Also, despite the fact that this location appears in a couple of canine travel guides, I would think twice about taking a dog down into the lower canyon.

A railed viewing area overlooks the 90-foot White River Falls, which thunders in the spring and becomes series of individual trickles late in summer. Across the river, you can see the mesas of the Devils Halfacre. You can walk a little way to the right to overlook the diversion dam for the penstock and a weir across the river at an oxbow meander. Looking east, you get a view down the canyon to the old power plant building. Find the trail leading down the slope. Cross a wide wooden catwalk in front of a dam on a shallow gully. Down below see a broken cornerstone citing the date of construction: 1910. Look for California ground squirrels in this area. The main trail keeps to the left down a series of railroad tie steps. A scramble trail leads right for you to get a view of Celestial Falls, the 45-foot lower tier of White River Falls. Celestial Falls was formally named in 2014 although it had been called that by kayakers for many years: it was a well-known 'run' until Oregon State Parks banned the practice recently. It's a very steep scramble down from here past a rusting boiler to the old power plant, so it's better to return to the main trail, which proceeds down the uneven steps to the building. There are a couple of openings in the power plant itself, so you can peek inside to see the line of generators. Around the back, you get a good view of Celestial Falls and the penstock leading down from above.

To continue downstream, follow a user trail through sagebrush to the wide basalt ledge above 15-foot Lower White River Falls (known to kayakers as Rooster Falls). The pool here is a good spot for a dip on a hot summer's day, and pungent desert parsley adorns the rock ledge in spring. The trail continues up above a precipice on a balsamroot slope and then takes a plunge down a slippery chute to reach river level again. It's best to turn around here, but the trail can be followed on state land and continues on private land to the confluence with the Deschutes River.

