

# Nebraska Geographic

*with ALAN J. BARTELS*

100ThingsSandhills@gmail.com



**May 29, 2024**

## **Falling for Waterfalls**

I remember a popular song on the radio a lot way back in the 1990s, blah-blah-blah something about not chasing waterfalls. It's a catchy tune – in fact that song becomes an earworm for me when I hear it today – but with so many streams and rivers in our state – why not chase waterfalls?

There are no thundering cascades of Niagara Falls magnitude anywhere in the Cornhusker State. But there are places in Nebraska where travelers can lose themselves in the peaceful serenity of the drone of tumbling water.

I will start with a couple of well-known Nebraska waterfalls. Snake River Falls is the largest waterfall in Nebraska by volume. Located on the Snake River north of Merritt Reservoir in Cherry County, Snake River Falls itself is not open to the public. But, the generous members of the Snake River Sportsmen's Club, appreciating the extreme appeal of the natural marvel, allow viewing of the falls for \$1 per visitor from a lookout near their clubhouse.

To find it, watch for the weathered sign on the west side of Highway 97 between Valentine and Merritt Reservoir. Paying \$1 to see the state's largest waterfall is a pretty good deal.

East of Valentine along the Niobrara River, Nebraska's highest waterfall has a state park named after it. Smith Falls State Park is one of the most popular state parks in Nebraska, and by association is home to our most visited waterfall.

The story of Smith Falls, at least in recent times, is the tale of two Freds. The park and falls are named for Frederic Smith who homesteaded the property. Another Fred, Mr. Fred Krzyanowski, bought the land in 1941 and the family still owns it. The Nebraska Game and Parks Commission leases the scenic land including the waterfall for the state park founded in 1992.

From the park, visitors walk a short trail that crosses historic Verdigre Bridge before reaching the brand-new boardwalk that leads to the falls. The water drops 63 feet and splashes on the rocky ground before trickling down to the Niobrara River.

Last time I was there, while working on my recent travel book about the Sandhills, I stood on the bridge for 90 minutes waiting to snap photos of canoeists or people on inner tubes floating under the bridge. I would see them round the

bend upstream and float my way. I'd get ready with my camera, and then without exception every group of adventurers would veer off to beach their craft and hike to the falls.

I finally got my shot, and so did the film crew from the Discovery Channel who was there flying their drone up and down the river. When you are watching reruns of the show *RV There Yet?*, and see only one person on Verdigre Bridge and he is wearing a blue shirt and holding a camera – yep, that is me.

The park covers 250 acres and includes tent camping sites, a small visitor center with educational displays, and a store that sells drinks, ice cream, and other treats.

According to the National Park Service, there are more than 230 waterfalls along the Niobrara River in Nebraska.

With a cascade measuring about 45 feet, Fort Falls is a relatively well-known waterfall on the Fort Niobrara National Wildlife Refuge. What is less known is that there are other waterfalls on the refuge. With a little effort and adventuring, visitors can discover Arrowhead Falls, Cross Falls, and Tyler Falls.

Some of the falls are unnamed, but if you're exploring the Niobrara River Valley, you might overhear people mention Big Cedar Falls, Refrigerator or Icebox Falls, and Stairstep Falls. This trio of amazing waterfalls are all on The Nature Conservancy's Niobrara Valley Preserve.

I last visited Stairstep Falls in 2023 during a tour I was taking while part of the Nebraska Water Leaders program. We had a geologist along on the trip who explained the area's distinctive geology and hydrology. The river, and the tributaries that feed it with cool flows bounding over ancient waterfalls, are fed by the Ogallala Aquifer. People imagine the aquifer as an underground ocean of water – which it is not. In some places along the Niobrara River downstream of Valentine, you can actually see the aquifer's flows seeping right out of the rock and sand walls above the south riverbank.

The Nature Conservancy allows people to explore Stairstep Falls as long as they are respectful of the unique natural wonder.

Further downstream is the famous Norden Chute. A chute is a waterfall-like feature where the stream flows through a very narrow course. Unlike the 230+ waterfalls that feed the Niobrara River, the Norden Chute appears toward the center of the river itself and has a five-foot-drop with enough tumultuous churning velocity that kayakers and canoeists must portage around it.

This brief description of waterfalls associated with the Niobrara River is a mere drop in the bucket. There are many more and each one is unique. And the Niobrara

and Snake rivers are not the only Nebraska streams with waterfalls. I'd be remiss for not mentioning a popular waterfall in another part of Nebraska.

Near Louisville, Platte River State Park is a haven for man and beast alike. Among its many amenities are a canoe and kayak access point on Decker Creek, educational and interactive ponds at Crawdad Creek, and the park entertains families with its Spray Park.

A natural spray feature draws visitors down the trail along Stone Creek. Home to a rare eastern Nebraska waterfall, the park has become known for its Stone Creek Falls. A trickle compared to Snake River Falls or Smith Falls; the tranquil stream here tumbles a few feet off of a thin rock shelf before resuming its slow march toward the Platte River.

Waterfalls are only one of many types of natural wonders to be seen along the rivers and streams of Nebraska. No matter where you explore across our great state, I hope your socks are wet and there is sand between your toes when you get home.

Safe travels – and watch for deer.