



Department of
Environmental
Conservation

Kaaterskill Wild Forest

Draft Unit Management Plan Amendment

for the

Kaaterskill Falls Area



Andrew Cuomo, *Governor*

Joseph J. Martens, *Commissioner*

May 2015

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Background

The Kaaterskill Falls is a two-tier waterfall located in the Kaaterskill Wild Forest unit of the Catskill Forest Preserve on the north side of NY Route 23A, between the hamlets of Haines Falls and Palenville in Greene County's Town of Hunter. A Unit Management Plan (UMP) for the Kaaterskill Wild Forest was written and approved in 1987. This UMP identified all the issues that are current today. Numerous items were proposed in the vicinity of Kaaterskill Falls including parking improvements, increased signage, construction of an observation deck, hiring of a seasonal caretaker, implementing special regulations, and closing trails. Management actions implemented from the UMP include the closure of a poorly designed connector trail from the top to the bottom of the falls, increased signage, and the hiring of a seasonal employee to act as steward at the site during the fall of 2014.

In May 2013, an amendment to the Kaaterskill Wild Forest UMP was approved. That amendment proposed the addition of approximately .8 miles to the Kaaterskill Rail Trail (KRT) as well as constructing a pedestrian bridge over Spruce Creek. The Kaaterskill Rail Trail Committee (KRT) is sponsoring an initiative to complete a 1.8-mile trail connection between the community of Haines Falls and the existing trail system in the Kaaterskill Wild Forest and North/South Lake Campground. The primary component to this linkage is an abandoned Ulster and Delaware railroad bed between Haines Falls and Laurel House Road, of which 0.6 miles are in the Kaaterskill Wild Forest. An additional 0.2 miles of trail on an abandoned town road and a new bridge crossing over Spruce Creek would complete the connection to the existing Escarpment Trail. The 0.6 mile section of the old railroad bed from the western boundary of Kaaterskill Wild Forest to Laurel House Road has been improved and was designated as a part of the KRT and opened in the summer of 2013. The construction of the bridge over Spruce Creek is scheduled for the 2015 construction season.

Since 1998 DEC Forest Rangers have reported 39 incidents at Kaaterskill Falls. The majority of incidents were injuries requiring rescue, with 5 incidents resulting in death. One of the deaths was attributed to a suicide. Two fatalities occurred in the summer of 2014. In light of these most recent tragedies the DEC installed approximately 500 feet of split rail fencing at both the upper and lower falls in the fall of 2014. The fencing serves as both a physical and visual barrier to the public to alert them to the potential dangers of proceeding further. In addition to the fencing, additional signage was installed in more conspicuous locations to warn the public of the potential danger.

In the coming years, the Department will be implementing the proposals from the 2013 UMP amendment as well as two proposals from the 1987 UMP: 1) the construction of an observation deck and associated spur trail at the top of the falls, and 2) the hiring of a seasonal steward to educate and interact with visitors at the falls. The

steward will also gather information about user numbers, peak days, peak times, and user preferences and behavior that will be helpful for managers.

The following management actions proposed in this current amendment are intended to complement the previously identified approved actions in the 1987 UMP and 2013 UMP amendment. When considered in their entirety, the actions are designed to provide a safer, more environmentally sustainable user experience at Kaaterskill Falls. While parking and pedestrian access along Route 23A have also been identified as an issue by stakeholders and the public, the Department has no jurisdiction over those areas and therefore are not addressing them in this UMP amendment.



Photo - potential view from observation platform.

Proposed Management Actions

A. Trail Expansion

Current Situation

Currently there is a 0.5 mile trail (Kaaterskill Falls Trail) from Route 23A that terminates at the base of Kaaterskill Falls. Many visitors continue past the official end of the trail and scramble up the steep bank, consisting mostly of loose rock and shallow soils, in order to gain access to the middle pool of the falls by way of an eroded catwalk. Currently, this bank is severely eroded. Over the years a number of herd paths have developed resulting in severe erosion and degradation of this bank as well as denuding the bank of vegetation. The steep slopes in this area continue to be prone to erosion from foot traffic and runoff. The area receives a high volume of foot traffic despite efforts to close the area.

Kaaterskill Falls is a popular destination with locals and tourists. During the fall of 2014 the site steward counted 4,900 visitors. On Columbus Day weekend alone there were 2,035 visitors to the falls. Kaaterskill Falls has become widely advertised on social media as a destination for thrill seekers. Numerous video clips are posted on the internet showing people behaving in a dangerous manner and encouraging others to ignore the warnings and proceed beyond the end of the trail, up the eroded slopes to the middle pool. Regardless of efforts to contain visitors to the top and bottom of the falls many visitors make the choice to proceed beyond the end of the trail and risk injury in order to reach the middle pool.

The lack of a designated trail causes visitors to choose their own routes up the slope. Some are climbing up the east side while others choose to cross the creek and scramble up the west side. This activity has resulted in numerous herd paths leading up the slope, eventually the vegetation becomes trampled, dies and the slope erodes. The eroding slopes are difficult to climb leading visitors to look for a new more stable route to scramble up. The current situation is a bare, eroded, slope with a surface of loose rocks. Efforts to discourage climbing the slopes beyond the end of the trail have failed. To prevent further damage and reclaim the site the following alternatives were considered.

Proposed Management Actions (Preferred)

1. Installation of a new foot trail and reclamation of the slope leading from the end of the Kaaterskill Falls Trail upslope to intersect with the Escarpment Trail on the east side of Kaaterskill Falls. The proposed trail would be approximately 0.2 miles in length. Construction of this trail would include the installation of a stone staircase at the end of the current trail, upslope to a potential viewing area, and then proceed upwards to the new connector trail leading to the Escarpment Trail. The staircase would be approximately 260

feet long and contain approximately 200 stone steps. Also proposed is an approximately 300 foot spur trail leading from the staircase, along a “herd path” that will be improved, to a point above the middle pool of the falls. At the end of this trail another shorter set of stone stairs would be installed to provide access to the middle pool area. The stone staircase would be designed to blend in with the natural stone of the area and located to limit its visibility from below.

This is the only alternative that creates a designated trail from the bottom of the falls to the top and a side trail to the middle pool. Visitor curiosity continually draws visitors up the slope to the middle pool and beyond to the top of the falls. Efforts to stop the activity have not been successful. This alternative addresses the public’s interest in having a better view and access to the falls.



Photo – looking down from top of falls at herd paths leading to middle pool area



Photo – looking up from end of trail at herd path leading up slope to the middle pool area

Alternative Actions

2. Installation of a new foot trail and reclamation of the slope leading from the end of the Kaaterskill Falls Trail upslope to intersect with the Escarpment Trail on the east side of Kaaterskill Falls. The proposed trail would be approximately 0.2 miles in length. Construction of this trail would include the installation of a stone staircase at the end of the current trail, upslope to a potential viewing area, and then proceed upwards to the new connector trail leading to the Escarpment Trail. The staircase would be approximately 260 feet long and contain approximately 200 stone steps. Access to the middle pool area from trail would be discouraged.

This alternative that creates a designated trail from the bottom of the falls to the top, but does not provide a side trail to the middle pool. Visitor curiosity continually draws visitors up the slope to the middle pool and beyond to the top of the falls. Efforts to stop the activity have not been successful. Because this alternative doesn't address the public's interest in having a better view and access to the falls it was not chosen as the preferred alternative.

3. Leave the trail system as is. The area will continue to operate as is. It is likely that visitors will continue to access the middle pool via the steep bank at the end of the Kaaterskill Falls Trail resulting in increased erosion of the site.
4. Install metal or wooden staircase from the bottom of the falls to the top. This would help solve the erosion problem, but would be aesthetically unappealing to visitors to the waterfall.

B. Parking Lot Expansion

Current Situation

Currently there are three parking lots that provide access to Kaaterskill Falls. The Molly Smith parking lot located on Route 23A managed by DOT, provides parking to access the Kaaterskill Falls trail bringing visitors to the base of the falls. Another parking lot at the end of Laurel House Road provides parking to access the top of Kaaterskill Falls. A third parking lot to the east of the Laurel House parking lot, located on Schutt Rd, provides access to a trailhead for the Escarpment Trail. The DEC parking areas are not large enough to accommodate the amount of visitors that Kaaterskill Falls receives. Visitors are parking illegal and causing a hazard to other motorists and pedestrians.

Proposed Management Actions (Preferred)

1. The Laurel House Rd parking lot can be easily improved and expanded in size to the west of the existing lot to accommodate the current approximate 12 vehicle capacity. The proposal is to increase the parking lot size to accommodate approximately 50 vehicles with eight parking spaces designated as accessible parking spaces.
2. The Schutt Rd parking area can be easily improved and expanded to the north and west of the existing lot to accommodate more than the current 9 vehicle capacity. The proposal is to increase the parking lot size to accommodate approximately 50 vehicles with eight parking spaces designated as accessible parking spaces.

Alternative Actions

1. Leave parking lots as they are. The parking situation will remain unchanged and undersized to accommodate the amount of visitors Kaaterskill Falls receives. People will continue to park along roadways creating hazardous traffic conditions.

C. Fencing

Current Situation

In the fall of 2014 approximately 500 feet of fencing was installed at the bottom and top of the falls. The fencing is a wooden three rail, split rail style fence.



The fencing the west side of the top of the falls runs from the informational kiosk on the old walking path near the Laurel House site, southwest to near the top of the falls. It then runs back up northeast along the side of the same path terminating upslope from the top of the falls. An additional 100 feet or so of fencing was installed on the east side of the falls set back from the steep cliff overlooking the falls.

The fencing at the bottom of the falls is situated at the current end of the Kaaterskill Falls trail near the base of the falls. It is located approximately 75 to 100 feet upslope on the east side of the trail. It was installed here to deter visitors from continuing to scramble up the step bank and continue to cause erosion issues.

Proposed Management Actions (Preferred)

1. The fencing will be allowed to remain and additional informational signage installed. This will serve as a physical and visual barrier to the public to alert them to the potential dangers of proceeding further. The additional signage will also serve to inform and warn the public of the potential dangers of the falls.

Alternative Actions

1. Fencing will be removed. The historical use of the facility will remain unchanged and the public will be able to readily access the top of the falls with no barrier (physical or visual) in place.

D. Rescue Climbing Anchors

Current Situation

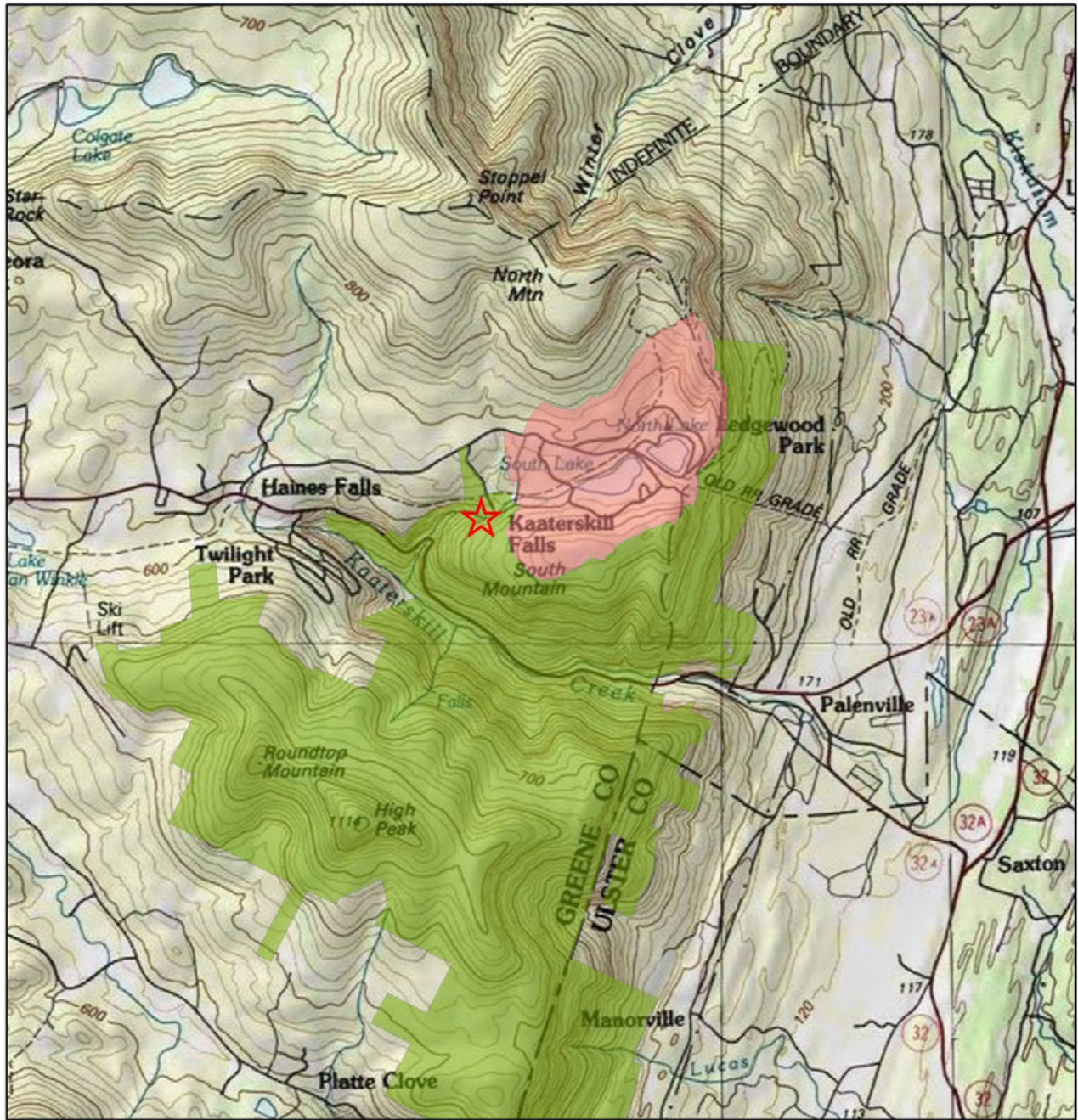
Since 1998 DEC Forest Rangers have reported 39 incidents at Kaaterskill Falls. The majority of incidents were injuries requiring rescue, with 5 incidents resulting in death. When rescuing or recovering individuals from Kaaterskill Falls, particularly from the middle pool, there are no permanent anchor points to tie safety ropes to in order to protect rescuers, and those being rescued, from potential falls and injury.

Proposed Management Actions (Preferred)

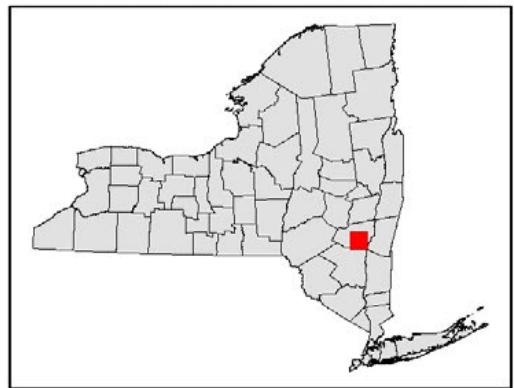
Install up to ten permanent anchor points located in the middle pool area. The anchors should be as inconspicuous and as small as practically possible to safely protect rescue personnel and those being rescued. The anchor locations should be determined by Forest Rangers who best understand where they should be.

Alternative Actions

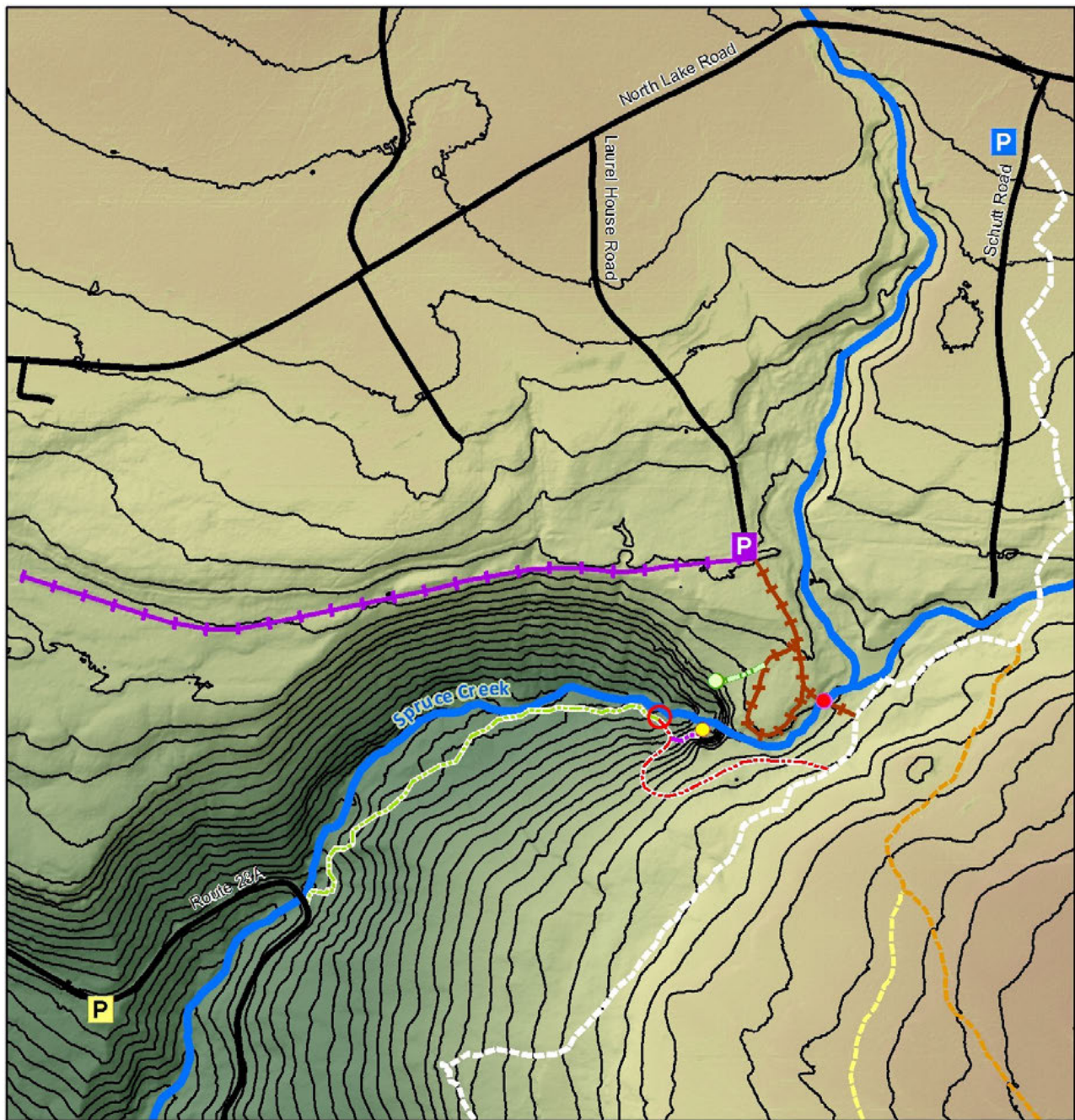
Do not install anchors. The historical use of the facility will remain unchanged and emergency personnel and those being rescued will not have additional anchor points with which to protect themselves from potential falls and injury



- KAATERSKILL WILD FOREST
- NORTH/SOUTH LAKE CAMPGROUND



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- Approximate Location of Observation Platform (Approved 1987 UMP)
- Pedestrian Bridge (Approved 2013 UMP Amendment)
- Observation Area (Proposed)
- Informal Viewing Area
- P Laurel House Road Parking Lot (Proposed)
- P Molly Smith Parking Lot (NYS DOT)
- P Schutt Road Parking Lot (NYS DEC)

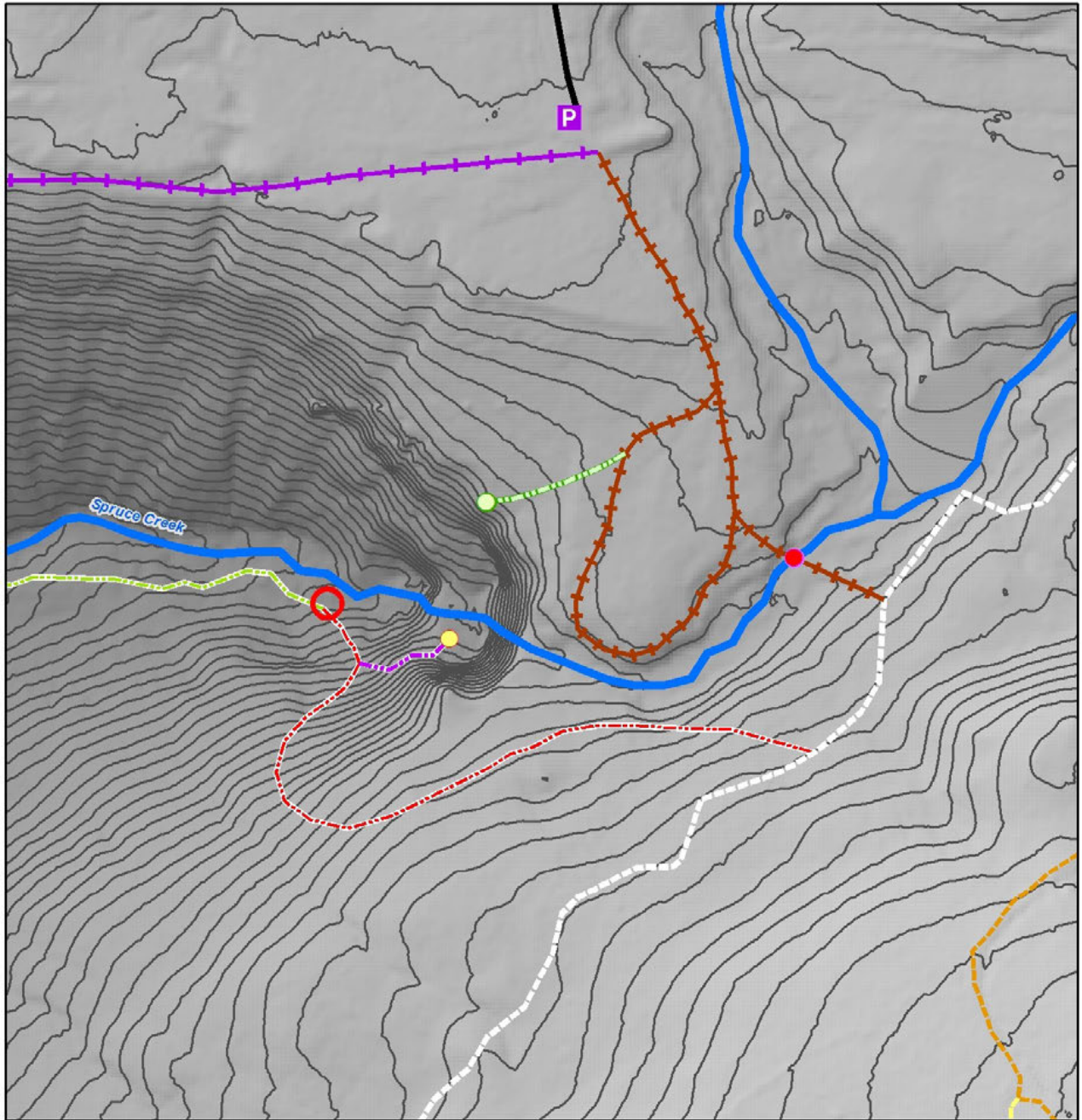
— Local Streets



Trails

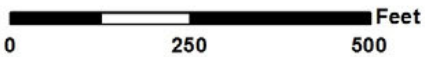
- Escarpment Trail
- Kaaterskill Falls Trail
- Kaaterskill Falls Trail Extension (Proposed)
- Middle Pool Spur (Proposed)
- Kaaterskill Rail Trail
- Kaaterskill Rail Trail (Approved Extension)
- Observation Platform Spur
- Schutt Road Trail
- Yellow Horse Trail

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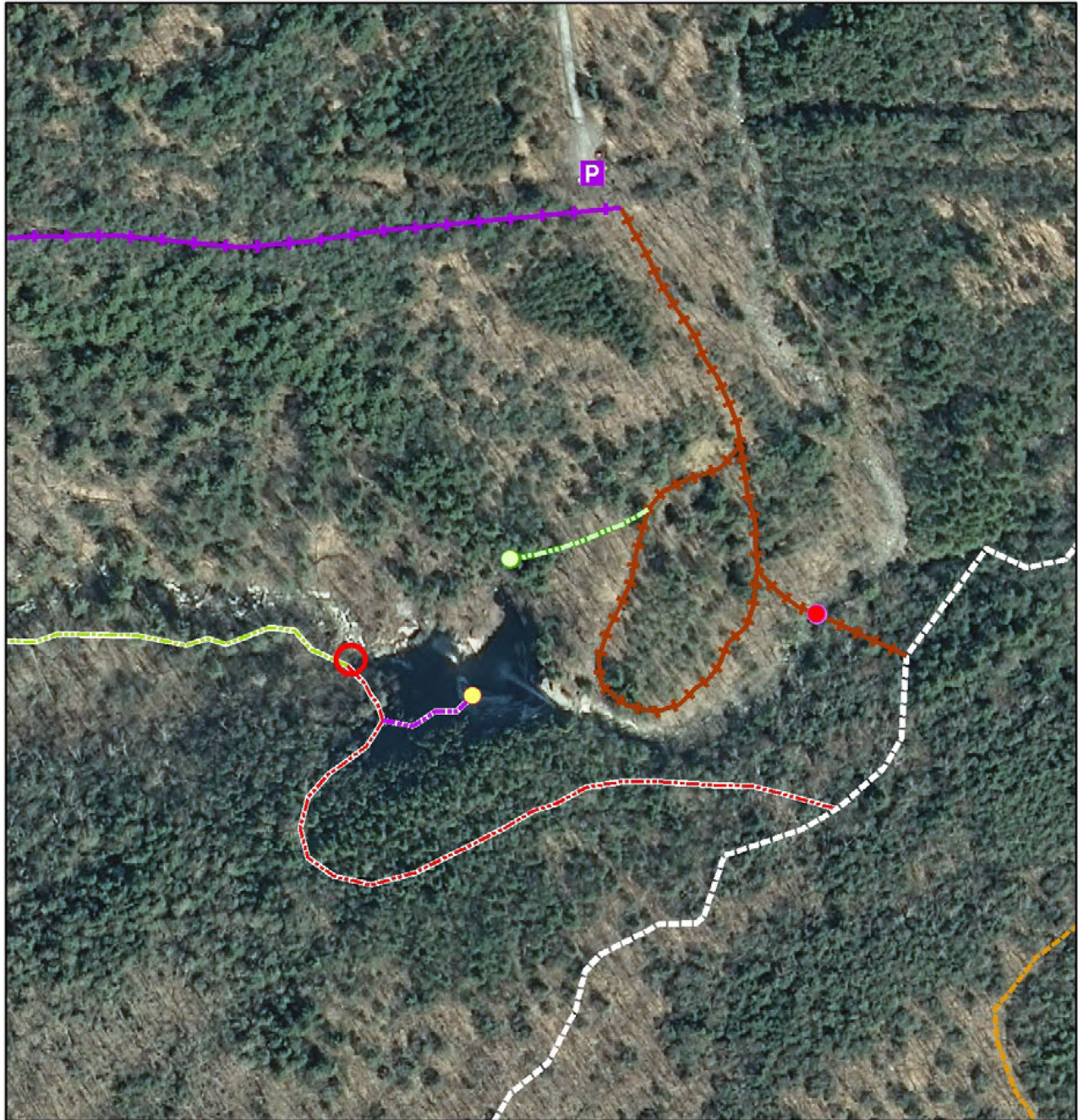


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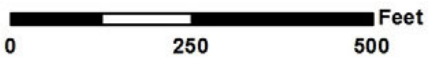


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