



# Chittenango Falls

Text and photos by Chris Murray

Chittenango Falls is one of the most breathtaking, yet little-known waterfalls in New York State. Plummeting 167 feet, the falls is the main attraction at the state park that shares its name. Here, Chittenango Creek makes its dramatic entrance into the park before winding its way down to meet with Oneida Lake.

Like virtually all landforms in New York State, the falls are a remnant of the last ice age; created as the glaciers retreated some 12,500 years ago. As an outflow of Cazenovia Lake, Chittenango Creek descends the north margin of the Allegheny Plateau through a narrow valley, which constricts into a gorge where the falls are today. Rather than a sheer drop, the falls are a series of cascades over ledges of resistant layers of rock.

While the falls are a relatively recent geologic feature, the rock over which they flow is much older. The gorge below the falls cuts through massive beds of limestone and dolomite that were deposited in a shallow sea more than 390 million years ago. Study the rock closely and you will see fossils of long-



Chittenango Creek



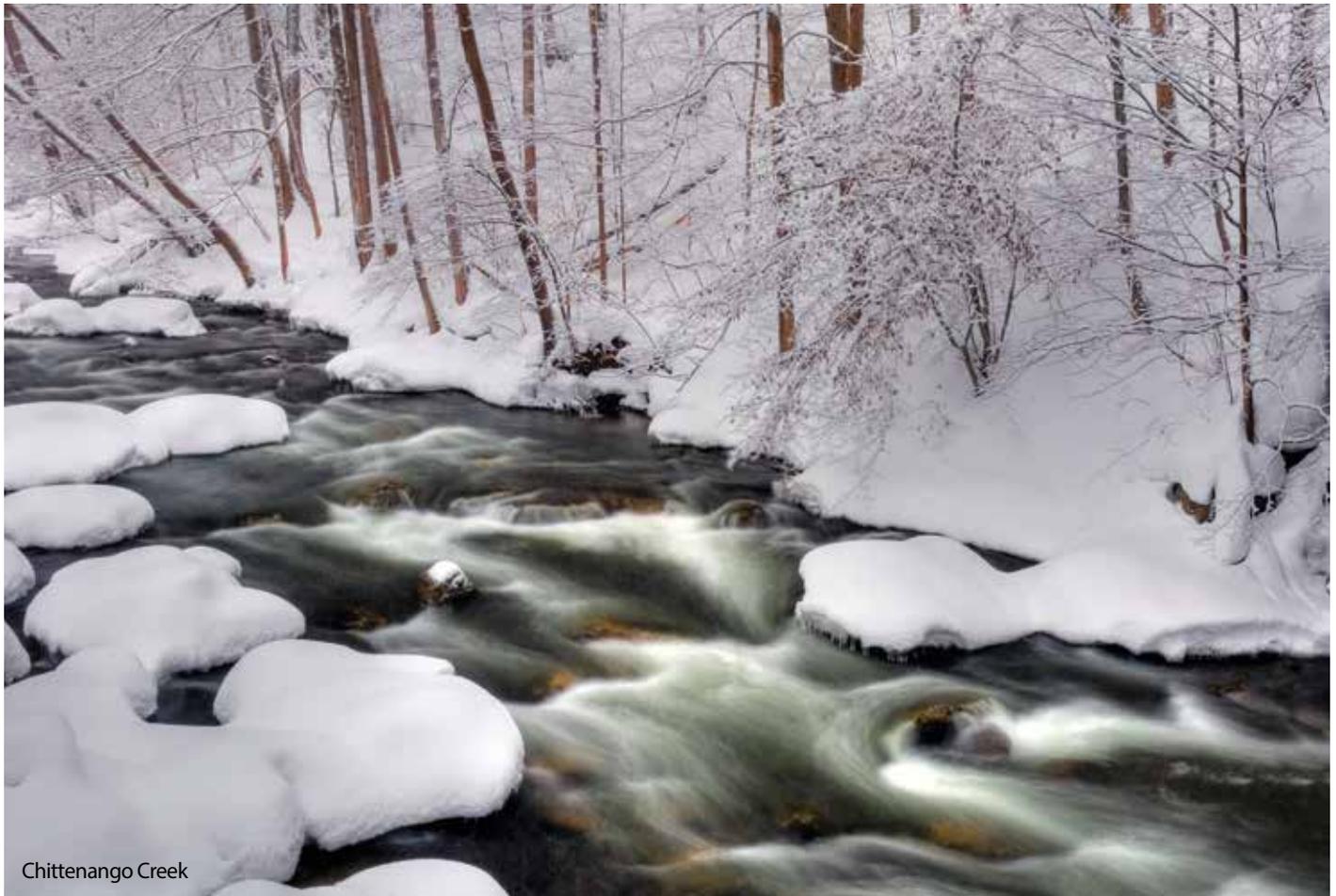


Chittenango Falls

extinct species. Early forms of marine algae, sponges, corals and mollusks are visible in the exposed outcrops and streambed in the falls area and along the creek below.

Although largely industrialized in the 1800s, the area surrounding the falls was made a park in 1922 to protect the area's rugged, scenic beauty. Today's visitors can enjoy a variety of activities here, including fishing, hiking and picnicking. The picturesque falls and creek below are a photographer's dream. While stunning in all seasons, the falls are especially attractive in autumn, when fall colors are at their peak. Just downstream from the falls, visitors can find beautiful views of Chittenango Creek from various turnoffs along Route 13.

In addition to its natural beauty and recreational offerings, Chittenango Falls is also known for its rich biodiversity. Importantly, the area around the falls itself is home to several unique and significant animal and plant species. Chief among them is the Chittenango ovate amber snail, a small land snail found nowhere else in the world and whose population is threatened (see next page). The park is also home to two unique plant species, the roseroot and the harts-tongue fern. The roseroot is known to occur in only three other locations within the state and survives by clinging to the falls' high, sheer ledges. The harts-tongue fern



Chittenango Creek

has been observed in fewer than ten locations in New York. Once more common, its existence has been threatened by plant collectors over the years.

The beauty and majesty of Chittenango Falls is without question, as is the need for its preservation. Geology and time have conspired to make the area critical to its unique flora and fauna; this fact alone makes it our duty to protect this natural resource. The survival of the Chittenango ovate amber snail and other rare species depends on our willingness to accept this challenge.

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DEC photo



## Protecting a Snail

First discovered in 1905, the tiny Chittenango ovate amber snail is only found in Chittenango Falls State Park. Its preferred habitat is vegetated slopes within the moderate climate and high humidity of the spray zone of the waterfall.



courtesy of Seneca Park Zoo

Originally reported as occurring in great abundance, today the snail is endangered. Decades of trampling by park users, unaware of its existence, and the accidental introduction of a competing snail from Europe have threatened the Chittenango snail's survival. According to research conducted by SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, the total population was estimated at fewer than 500 individuals in 1982. Only 25 snails were found in 1990. Conservation efforts have restricted access to the area immediately below the falls since 1983. Recent estimates place the population at about 450 Chittenango snails which are outnumbered by the introduced pest snail at a rate of about 6 to 1.

DEC took a lead role in completing a recovery plan for the Chittenango ovate amber snail. In March 1983, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service gave final approval to the plan, and it was then revised in 2006. This plan provides a detailed outline of activities essential to the protection and perpetuation of a self-sustaining colony. Recovery of this species requires strict protection of its habitat and a reduction of contaminants entering the creek. Chittenango State Park receives nearly 40,000 visitors annually. Park managers direct visitors away from critical habitat, and the immediate falls area is relatively inaccessible. Despite these safeguards, visitors occasionally disobey the rules and venture into the sensitive area immediately below the falls. Any disturbance can severely affect the snail's survival, so please keep a safe distance from the falls and respect all posted restrictions. The snails' future depends on it.