The Flyin' Solo VanLife on the Highways and Byways of North America
RICK'S ROADS
Ride Along and Enjoy the People, Places, and Who Knows What

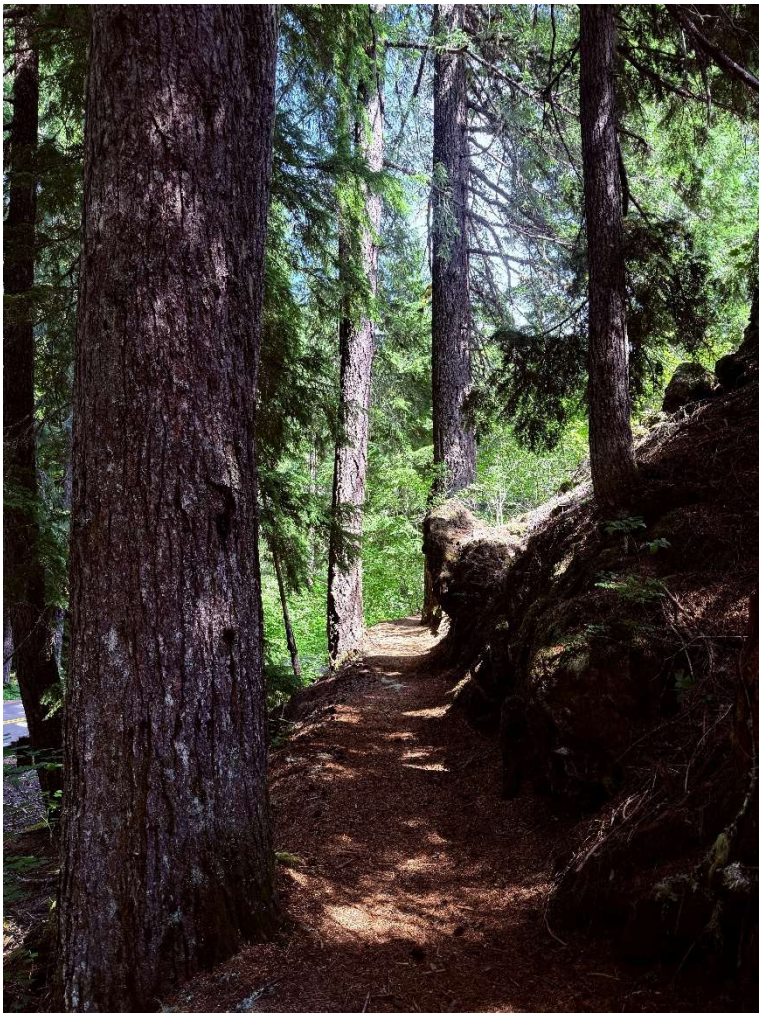
BLOG POST: 2026.07.06

Proxy Falls, The McKenzie, Willamette National Forest, Oregon



Come along OR-126, heading east from Eugene, and, about 40 minutes into the ride, you'll see a large, framed, rectangular sign atop a fancy stone base. It proclaims, Welcome to The McKenzie". You, my friend, are now on the McKenzie Highway, whichis also designated as the McKenzie River Scenic Byway. The fast and smooth two-lane road runs a roughly parallel course with a long stretch of the McKenzie River, officially a Wild & Scenic River.

Heading through The McKenzie, you might not see a traffic light or any electric roadside lights for a couple of hours. There are a few tiny villages (including the town of McKenzie Bridge) with small grocery stores, gas stations, cafes, and such, but almost nothing larger than a decent-sized house would be.



This is Willamette National Forest, and that is pronounced with a heavy accent on the middle syllable -- *wil-**LAM**-met*– and the locals are quite particular about that. You're asking for an eye-roll or a head-shake if you say *WILL-a-met.* (Damn tourists…)

Oregonians have unusual pronunciations for a lot of their place names. I talked about this in the 2025 post about this area. I'm almost surprised that they don't say ***MC**-ken-zie.*

The trees here are tall and healthy, and hiking trails abound. The air is dry and clean. The forest shares the region with lava fields, the river, a few lakes, many waterfalls, and even a few snow-capped mountains.

I hung out here for a couple of days last year, staying overnight at the McKenzie Bridge Campground, and resolved to spend spend more time *and less money* here this year.

That campground was nice, but it no electricity, and if I wanted water, I had to walk a couple hundred yards to get to the spigot. I did not use the picnic table, nor did I burn anything in the fire ring (partly because a high-fire-risk prohibition). I made no use of restrooms or a shower (if there even was one).

So, why did I spend almost $40 to stay there when the National Forest has hundreds of spots for **free** "dispersed camping" (i.e., boondocking)? I guess I was just stupid.

So, I was smarter this year. On my final day here last year, I bought myself a detailed USFS map of the area for $14, planning to make good use of it in 2026. It is huge and amazing. It spans 44" x 44". I don't even have room to spread it out anywhere. Every tiny footpath, trailhead, creek, and narrow, dirt, boondockable road is shown. I love maps anyway, but this one is incredible.

I got to The McKenzie late Sunday afternoon. I knew where I wanted to go on Monday (Proxy Falls), so I scoped out the dotted lines with the simple 3-digit numbers and went to see which ones might be a good home for the night.

There were some beautiful spots, surrounded by dark evergreen forest, with soft, level dirt underfoot and a well-constructed fire ring left by prior campers. But that deep woods kind of site would not suit me. I needed two things which seemed to defy the odds in a National Forest: sunlight for my solar panels, and open sky for my Starlink Mini. (I committed to working remotely this summer, so I could not be totally off the grid. But, hey, work bought me the Mini and pays the monthly Starlink bill, so WTF.)



It did not take too long to find such a site. It was on the edge of a clearing that had lots of choppy underbrush and broken tree parts, so it wasn't beautiful, but it had enough sky for the night, and enough early-day sunshine to provide breakfast for my EcoFlows. And it was **free**.

When I shut off my lights to go to sleep, I might as well have gone blind. The darkness was absolute in Maxx. And the night was totally quiet.

I would use that site once more in my week here, but I found an even better one a mile further up US-242 (The McKenzie Pass – Santiam Pass Scenic Byway) that used four nights.



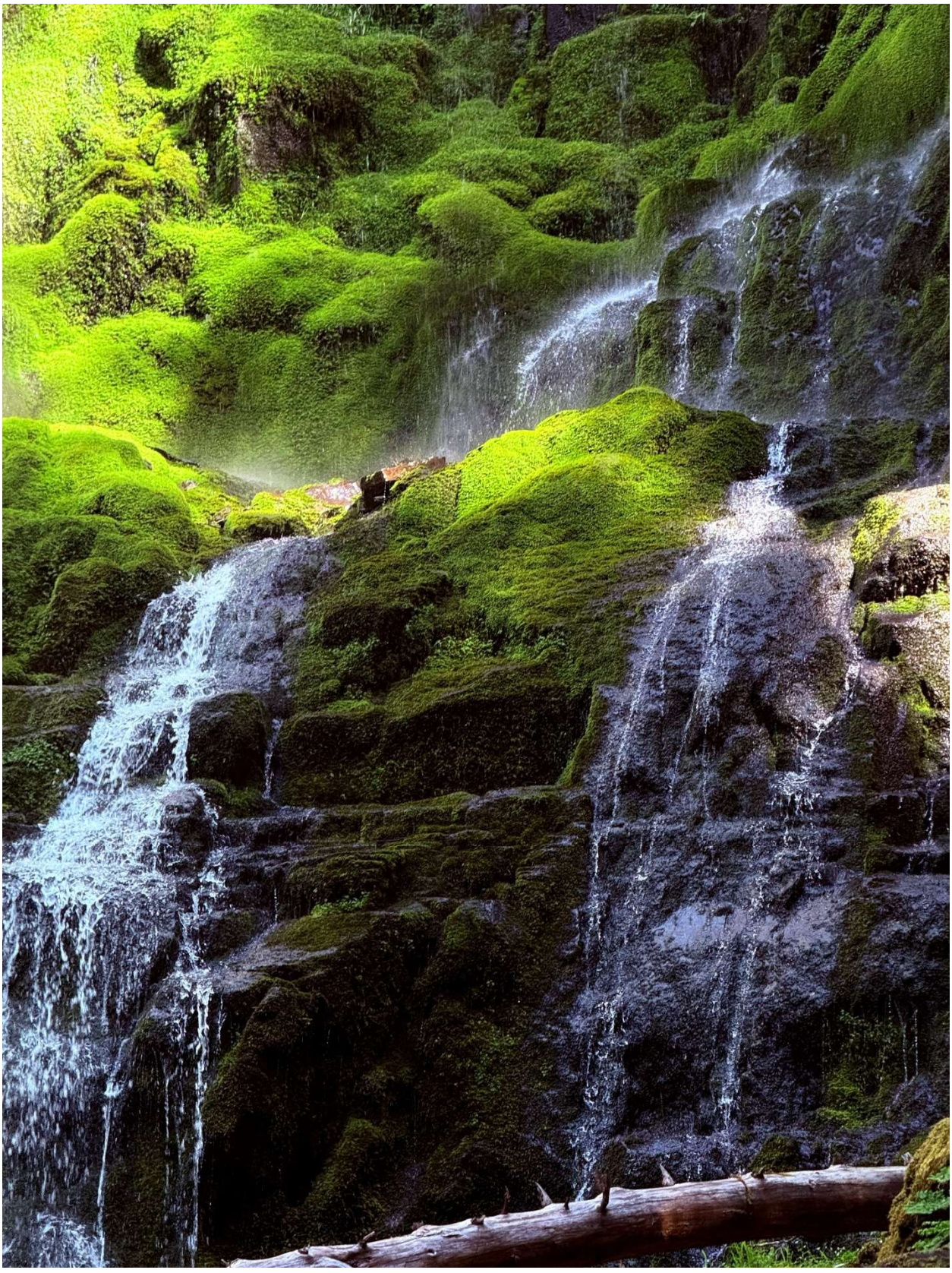
I hiked this trail and took pics and vids of both Lower and Upper Proxy Falls last year, but the day was overcast, and Lower Falls (above), though wowing, was clearly not at its dazzling best. Today, Old Sol was all over the 292-foot-tall Lower Proxy, and it was spectacular.



A zoomed shot of the upper section of Lower Proxy Falls



I love the way this one came out: from light into shadow, the water still glows as it flows.



Another zoom shot: moss galore



The hike to get here last year was long, picking my way through boulder fields and zigzagging wooded trails. It was entertaining, in its own way, but the falls was a good three-quarters of the way through the loop trail, and the final quarter (back to Maxx) was cake.

I was photo-focused this time, though, so I did the trail in the opposite direction and got there much quicker. It was smoother hiking, wider and much flatter, this way.

There's a sign that points down a side trail to Lower Proxy Falls. After a short walk, you hear the muffled roar of a waterfall, and a few steps later, there's a gap in the trees to your left and – bam! – you get the long-range view of the full falls (see page 4 (this is page 8)).

Some people get this far, take their pics and head back. I'm sure there are a few that don't realize that the trail continues down the the base of the falls, but others simply don't take on the steep, narrow, and uneven downbound dirt footpath into the ravine.

Even at the bottom, where the creek flows away from the falls, the "trail" consists of walking the spine of a fallen tree trunk – about 100 feet long and maybe five feet in diameter – six feet above the rocky creek bed. I saw people tentatively picking their

way across that last year, and I just strode right through the flowing water. It was only ankle deep. Sure, my shoes and sicks got soaked, but it seemed safer.

The views from down below (see previous few pages) were well worth the effort of the climb down, and back up.

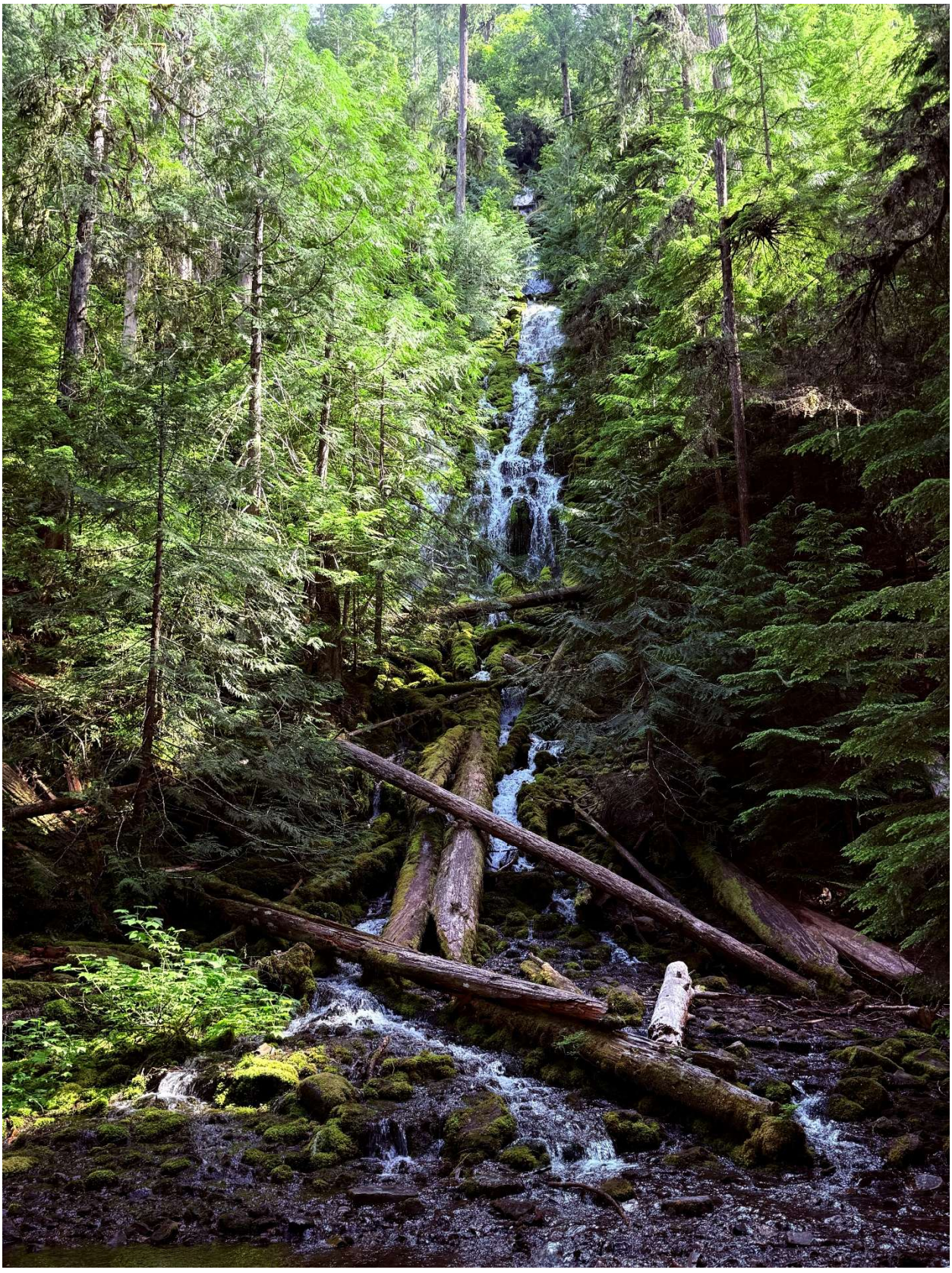


But, where there's a Lower, you'll often find an Upper. I had actually passed the sign for Upper Proxy on my way here. I knew it from last year, but Lower was my goal number one, so I saved Upper for after.

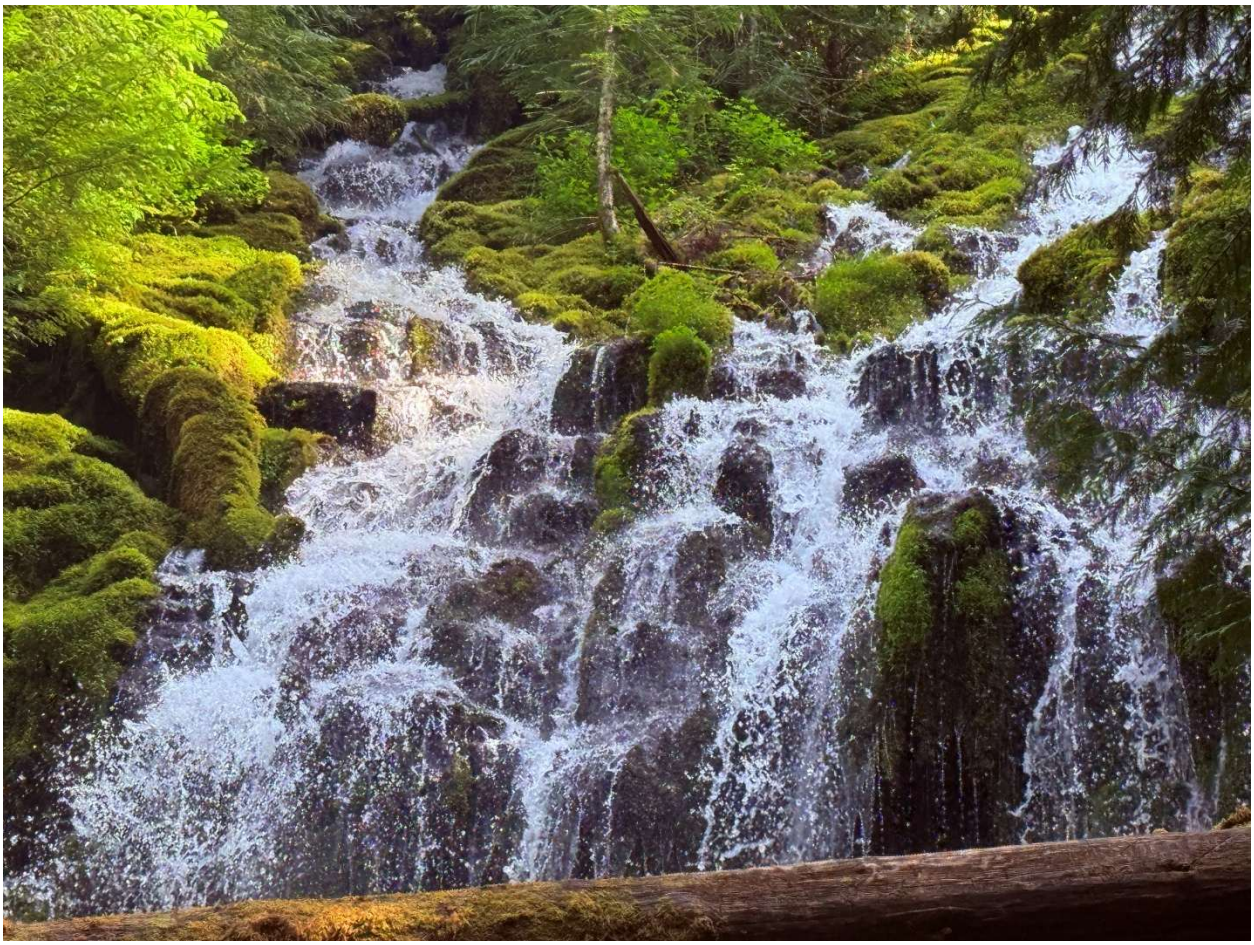
This trail is really nice, flat, shady, and short. It leads to a small pool surrounded by high banks and huge trees, with Upper Proxy gently tumbling down countless narrow steps and shelves before threading through a tangle of mossy timber and spreading into a delta at the edge of the pool. It is puny compared to Lower.

Sunshine was not really an issue here. Upper seems to be sneaking carefully through the steep sloping floor of the forest, making a babbling sound rather than a roar.

You can have a seat in the serene shade on the bank opposite the cascade and just chill out and let it hypotize you…



Upper Proxy Falls



Zoom shot of the middle section of Upper Proxy Falls

To fully appreciate it, though, you need to zoom in. There are dozens of tumbles and splashes in that zoom photo that can go unnoticed in the full view.

I made a video that zooms in and follows the water from brink to pool. Check it out on my Little Bird Video channel on YouTube. Or just click the [video] link on 7/31/25.