

HEMLOCK GORGE LOOP **44**

IN BRIEF

This hike explores the Charles River where it spills through a gorge cut by a glacier 10,000 years ago. After surveying the gorge from within a hemlock forest, the trail circles a small island in the river then crosses the magnificent Echo Bridge.

DESCRIPTION

Carved by the force of a retreating glacier 10,000 years ago, Hemlock Gorge was once Massachusetts's equivalent of Niagara Falls. Young men came in droves to ferry their lady friends out onto the sprawling waters of the Charles River in rented canoes. In the late 1800s, there were few places besides in a canoe where a couple could be together without an interfering chaperon. Nonetheless according to the *Boston Herald*, one canoe paddler was arrested and fined \$20 for kissing his sweetheart on the river in 1903.

The trail that leads to Hemlock Gorge begins at the northern end of the small parking area. Follow the wide dirt road as it heads into woods between a quiet residential neighborhood to the left and the Charles River to the right. Almost immediately the road reaches a junction with another path that leads off to the left; pass this and continue



KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

LENGTH: 1.3 miles

CONFIGURATION: Loop

DIFFICULTY: Easy

SCENERY: A view of the Charles River running through a spectacular gorge with water flowing over two dams

EXPOSURE: Shaded

TRAFFIC: Moderate

TRAIL SURFACE: Packed earth

HIKING TIME: 30 minutes

SEASON: Year-round dawn–dusk

ACCESS: Free

MAPS: Posted at various locations in the reservation and soon to be available on the Friends of Hemlock Gorge Web site, www.hemlockgorge.org

FACILITIES: Picnic tables

SPECIAL COMMENTS: Before English colonists settled the area, the gorge was the fishing ground of the Ponkapoag people of the Algonquin tribe.

WHEELCHAIR TRAVERSABLE: No

DRIVING DISTANCE FROM BOSTON COMMON: 9 miles

Directions

From Boston, take MA 9 east past the MA 128 overpass, then take the first right onto the ramp over the Charles River. Take the first right onto Ellis Street and cross over the Charles River into Needham. Make an immediate right onto Hamilton Place and park at the small lot near the Hemlock Gorge Reservation bulletin board.

Hemlock Gorge Loop

UTM Zone (WGS84) 19T

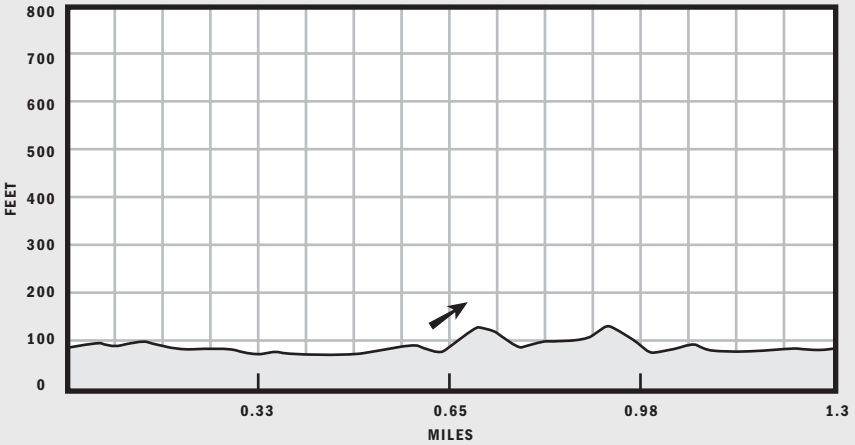
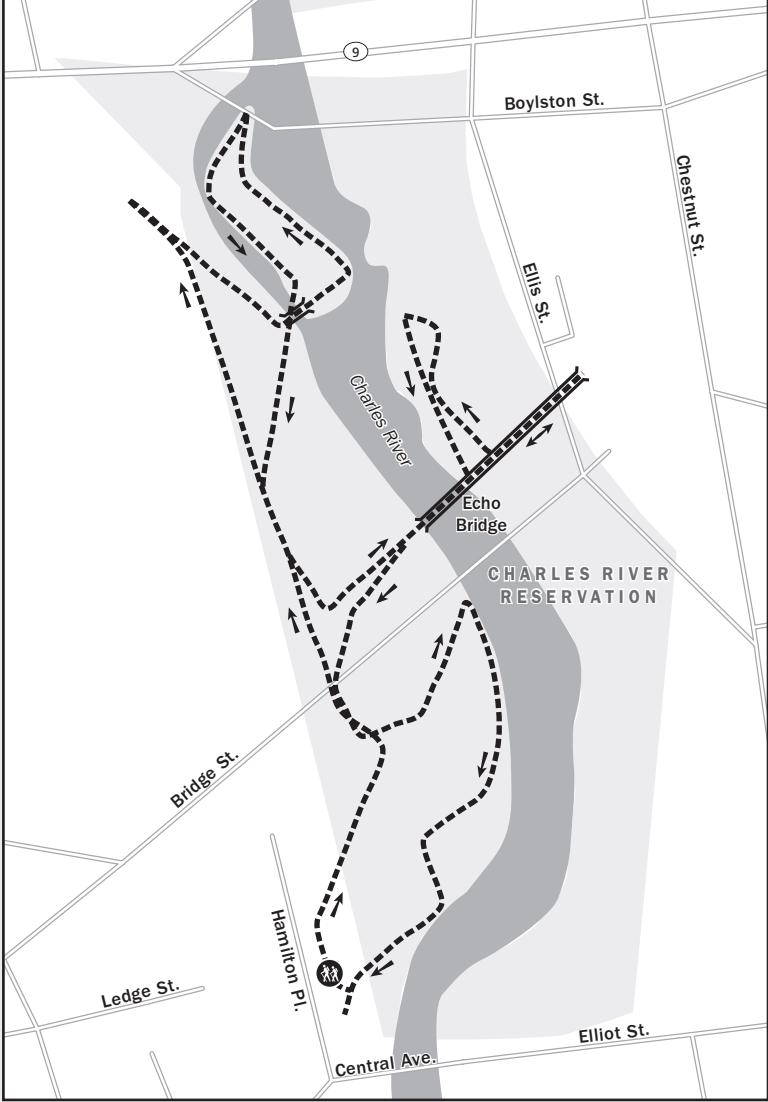
Easting: 316408

Northing: 4686906

Latitude: N 42° 18' 46"

Longitude: W 71° 13' 40"

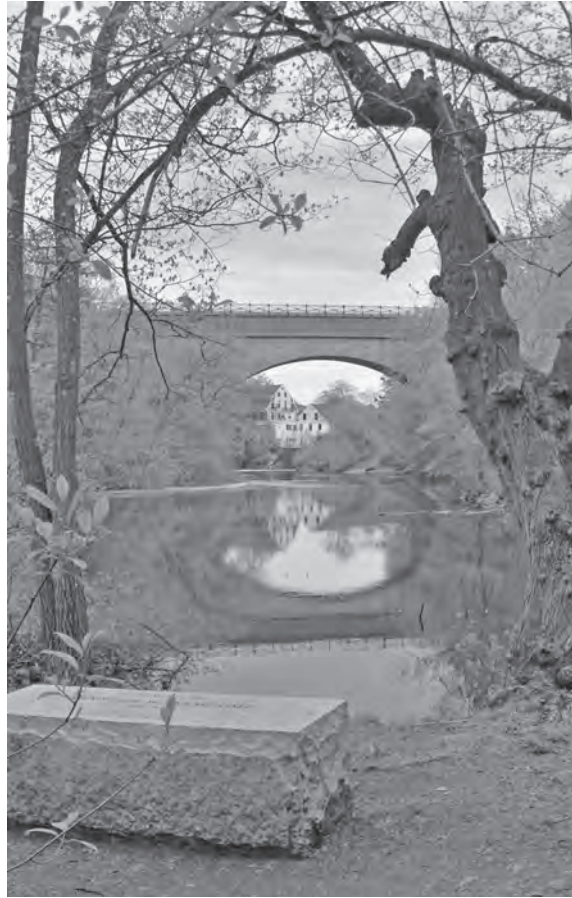
44 Hemlock Gorge Loop



Mill buildings framed by the arch of Echo Bridge

straight, even as you meet another trail heading off to the right. A few yards farther on, under the calming canopy of the hemlocks, the whoosh of traffic on nearby MA 9 dims and blends with the sound of the river flowing below.

At the next fork, bear left and climb a steep embankment. At the top of this rise, look to your right to see Echo Bridge reaching across the water. As I passed, a lone bicyclist glided across the public promenade from the opposite bank. Have a look, or save the pleasure for later and continue following the trail as it descends back into the woods.



The hemlocks of Hemlock Gorge, most well over a century and a half old, have been under attack by an infestation of hemlock woolly adelgid (*Adelges tsugae*) for several years. Though a little haggard, the trees are now showing signs of renewed vigor, thanks to the Friends of Hemlock Gorge. After the USDA Forest Service deemed the situation beyond hope, the Friends took matters into their own hands and pressed the Massachusetts Metropolitan District Commission to finance the purchase of predatory ladybird beetles (*Pseudoscyrmnus tsugae*) to combat the parasite. Between May 2001 and May 2002, foresters released 15,011 ladybirds, in three batches. In the years since, experts monitoring the situation report that the ladybirds have settled in and seem to be making headway against the woolly adelgid.

Go left at the next split in the trail and make your way downhill past beech trees growing among the hemlocks. Follow the trail a short way farther to the northernmost tip of the reservation where the land falls off abruptly, and evergreen boughs block the view of the traffic opposite. The roar of water falling from the lip of a dam in the near distance will lure you to land's end.

Picking up the trail again, turn and follow it southeast against the current. Closer to the water, things quiet down, ducks paddle in sheltered coves, and almost all human noise disappears. Not far along, the trail arrives at a wooden bridge providing a route to a small island. Cross over and face south for a spectacular view of Echo Bridge and an old mill. Vintage postcards verify that this picturesque scene is nearly the same as it was in the late 1800s.

A trail loops over and around the rugged island. Following it northwest takes you to the circular dam at the end of the gorge. Follow the trail southeast to find the Devil's Den, a natural cave formed in the island's granite face, low on the western side.

Take the footbridge back to the mainland and pick up the trail to the left heading up a steep banking to return to where Echo Bridge touches land. Mount the step to this elegant piece of engineering (built in 1877 to bear the Sudbury River Aqueduct) and stroll across to the river's opposite bank.

Once on the other end, take the stairs down to the base of the bridge, cross Ellis Street, and descend one more flight of steps to get to the lookout platform below. From this stage speak or sing words to the river and listen. Keep count to see if the number of times they repeat exceeds the record 15. Afterward take the steps back up to the riverbank and look for a path to the left. Follow this short route northeast along the river to the edge of a small field, then loop back to the bridge.

Climb the stairs once more to the promenade and head back to the other side of the Charles River. Though people gave up swimming in the gorge back in the 1970s, the water flowing through is becoming healthier every year. Thanks to environmental cleanup efforts the air wafting from the turbulent river smells fresh and fortifying.

Once back on the western side, take the path to the left, which leads back down to the river's edge. Here where the river narrows and bends in an oxbow, you will find a small sandy beach edged with crab apple trees. The trail takes you close to a second dam and a reclaimed mill on the opposite bank. From here, follow the path up a hill behind a brick building and then down again to a field that stretches along the river. Traverse this acre of green to arrive back at the parking lot.