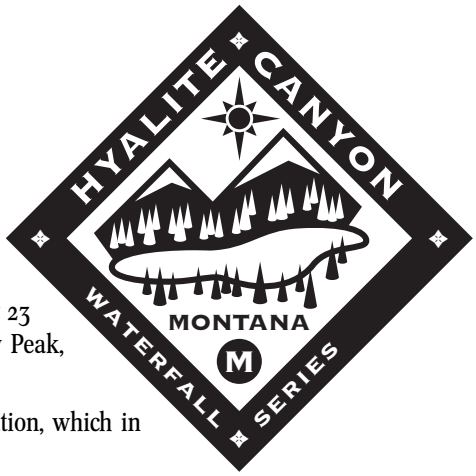
The Hyalite Canyon Waterfall Series of Letterboxes



These five letterboxes are the first known to exist in Montana. They were put in place Sunday July 25, 1999. All are accessed via the Hyalite Creek trail in the Gallatin National Forest, approximately 23 miles south of Bozeman. The trailhead and all five letterbox locations are on the USGS Fridley Peak, Montana 7.5 minute quadrangle map.

Compass bearings in the clues below are all true; that is they are adjusted for magnetic declination, which in this area is 15 degrees, 30 seconds east of north.

Hyalite Canyon is said to be the most popular National Forest recreation area in Montana. The Hyalite Creek trail is used by several hundred hikers, some mountain bikers, and a few "four-wheeler" ORV drivers each week between late June and early November. Please use discretion when searching for letterboxes on this trail. If possible, avoid retrieving and reconcealing them when you are being observed by others. The boxes are behind rocks or trees; no digging is ever required to retrieve properly concealed letterboxes. (Leave your shovel at home!)

Hyalite Canyon is outside the known range of rattlesnakes, scorpions, etc., but please use caution if you reach under rocks or logs looking for letterboxes. Any animal, if cornered, may bite.

Hyalite Canyon is bear country. Both grizzly and black bears can enter the area. Moose are very common in the canyon; they are large and can be dangerously aggressive. Don't hike alone. Use caution and make your presence known by talking or singing loudly. Jingle bells, whistles, and other mechanical noisemakers are useless; the human voice is your most effective deterrent to difficulties with bear or moose. Carry and know how to use a pepper spray product labeled for use as bear defense.

Water is abundantly available all along the trail, but may contain Giardia or other pathogens. Use a good quality water filter if you take drinking water from the streams.

The Letterboxing North America waiver of responsibility, reprinted below, applies to the Hyalite Canyon Letterboxes. Read and understand it before beginning your letterboxing adventure.

Waiver of Responsibility and Disclaimer

Letterboxing, like any outdoor sport, carries the risk of unforeseen hazards. "Letterboxing North America" supports a policy of not knowingly placing letterboxes in areas that will create undue risk to the letterbox hunter. However, as conditions may vary, it is the responsibility of the letterbox searcher to become thoroughly familiar with the conditions in the area to be searched, to adequately prepare for those conditions, and to conduct [him- or herself] safely and responsibly with respect to those conditions and with respect to his or her personal abilities and limitations. Letterboxing North America" and the individual letterbox sponsors assume no liability for events which may occur related directly or indirectly to one's searching for a letterbox.

Do not let children hunt for letterboxes unsupervised.

By reading and utilizing the letterbox clues [provided], you acknowledge the above conditions, and accept responsibility for your own actions, and agree to hold non-liable the clue writers, website authors, and letterboxing organizations, and further agree to provide this disclaimer to any person with whom you share these letterbox clues.

Grotto Falls

Approach: Easy ✦ Clues: Easy

This is a fairly easy, very popular half-mile hike from the Hyalite Creek trailhead in the Gallatin National Forest, Montana, to the first of at least nine named waterfalls visible from the trail. The hiking trail is paralleled all the way to Grotto Falls by a graded gravel path that is said to be wheelchair-accessible. However, recent washouts in the gravel path (as of July 1999) may make that designation inaccurate.

Clues: The last hundred yards of the trail to Grotto Falls are straight and broad. On the left, as you proceed toward the falls, is a talus field–broken rocks fallen from the cliffs above. Among the rocks closest to the path, one toward the middle of the talus field stands out as among the tallest. It's the size of four breadboxes and is standing on end. Look in the rocks behind it for a letterbox. If in doubt, look for a peppermint-striped boulder on the opposite side of the path. Find it. Face it. The boulder concealing the letterbox is directly behind you.

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Arch Falls

Approach: Moderate ✦ Clues: Easy

1.2 miles south of the Hyalite Creek trailhead in the Gallatin National Forest, Montana, is Arch Falls.

Clues: Proceeding south on the Hyalite Creek trail you will eventually see on your right a trail sign announcing your arrival at Arch Falls. A clearing separates the sign from the dangerous dropoff to the west. Enter the clearing and cautiously proceed toward the edge of the dropoff; stop when you think it prudent. Let your eyes follow the sound of falling water and you will see Hyalite Creek tumble, take a quick right turn through a stone arch, swing left, and proceed again to the north. To find the letterbox your gyrations will be simpler. Turn back toward the trail, but after just a few steps turn south again prematurely. You're on a trail, but not the right one! Don't worry; you're still on the right track. A lodgepole pine and a Douglas fir have taken up housekeeping together on the right, an unlucky number of paces from the clearing. Search behind them for the letterbox. And mind the dropoff!

Silken Skein

Approach: Difficult/Dangerous ✦ Clues: Moderate

2.0 miles south of the Hyalite Creek trailhead in the Gallatin National Forest, Montana, a side trail takes you east to Silken Skein. This is a slim, graceful, multi-level waterfall in the early summer. By summer's end it may have shrunk to a trickle. Hard to appreciate from a distance, it's best seen close-up.

Clues: The side trail to Silken Skein crosses the falls' outflow only once. Beyond that crossing, heading toward the falls, the trail climbs the left bank of the creek. Near the top of the bank a vague subsidiary trail branches off north and east. Follow the subsidiary trail steeply uphill through the forest. Your destination is the base of the tallest of Silken Skein's component waterfalls. Because the trail is so vague you will likely come to dead ends and need to backtrack. Here's one hint: After a minute or two of difficult climbing you will come to a small clearing. The trail to your destination will be on your right, roughly at eye level and hard to see.

When you reach the base of the falls, turn back the direction you came and enjoy a great view of Maid of the Mist Mountain. Linger at the falls for as long as you like, then head back toward the trail you climbed. Before starting down, notice a side trail on your right hugging the bluff that is now also on your right. At its junction with the trail you climbed, this trail's bearing is 350 degrees. Follow it for a short distance, rounding the bluff and passing large, twin Douglas fir trees. Just beyond the firs, the trail disappears at a narrow cleft that ascends steeply to your right. One boulder the size of a large refrigerator can just be seen leaning against the right-hand wall of the cleft, about half-way up. Leave the trail and climb the cleft, watching for crumbling rocks beneath your feet and falling rocks dislodged by the person in front of you. **Please be very careful. this is a dangerous area. under no circumstances should you enter it during a rainstorm; it is subject to flash flooding.** See if there is a letterbox under the boulder mentioned above.

Champagne Falls

Approach: Moderate ✦ Clues: Easy

2.6 miles south of the Hyalite Creek trailhead in the Gallatin National Forest, Montana, is a sign marking a side trail that leads southwest to Champagne Falls. This waterfall is surrounded by relatively open country and so is often sunny.

Clues: On the way to the creek, the side trail passes through forest and, after crossing a boulder field, into meadow. After you view the falls, head back the way you came, along the side trail, across the boulder field to the main trail. Some-where on the way, off this side trail, you'll find the letterbox. Where is it? I've mentioned its location exactly twice now. Here's one more clue: don't bother looking downslope from the trail. Once you get an overview of the area you'll pro-bably find the letterbox exactly where you think it should be.

Apex Falls

Approach: Moderate ✦ Clues: Easy

3.9 miles south of the Hyalite Lake trailhead in the Gallatin National Forest, Montana, the trail crosses one of the tributaries to Hyalite Creek. At present there is a single log bridge, which enables even those without good balance to cross dry-footed.

Clues: At a bearing of 225 degrees from the uphill end of the bridge is a young subalpine fir, 6–8 inches in diameter at breast height. The base of this tree is in a boulder field. The letterbox is concealed in a rock vault, open at one end, near the base of the tree.