

Wilderness in Yosemite is a special place. It is the feeling of humility amidst the grandeur of granite walls, the challenge of a trail through a red fir forest, the independence in route finding through an alpine lake basin, and the connection to your family, friends, and those who came before you camping under the stars. It is also the diverse wildlife, plants, water, geology, and cultural history that makes up a majority of Yosemite and its most protected areas. It is a protection of land to be celebrated and explored.

When many of us think of wilderness, we may think of anything wild, from our backyards to local parks. Here, we celebrate the importance of legally designated wilderness, which may evoke some of the same feelings as places close to home but also have extra protections to keep them forever wild. Though humans have existed here for thousands of years, our presence and impact are not immediately obvious; nature itself remains the dominant force. Those who venture into the Yosemite Wilderness won't find roads, buildings, or modern conveniences. Instead, they are likely to find inspiration, deep connections, and meaningful challenges. Whether you are visiting the park for a few hours and gazing to the top of Half Dome or travelling for days far from cars and roads—you are seeing Yosemite Wilderness!

The [Wilderness Act](#) was passed by Congress in 1964 as a conscious decision to manage and act with restraint and let the natural world dominate in these special places. It is meant to be different! Wilderness areas are designated by an act of Congress and provide the highest level of protection for some of the most unique and least manipulated land in the United States. The Wilderness Act was enacted in 1964 with guidelines for future additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Twenty years later, Congress established the Yosemite Wilderness, which currently includes 704,028 acres (or 1,100 square miles—over 94% of the park) and 1,012 acres of potential wilderness. These potential wilderness additions include areas that had already been developed before 1984 and were non-conforming to designated wilderness such as water utility systems, roads, and High Sierra Camps.

Wilderness acreage cited is based on current acreages informed by GIS mapping technology, which may differ from older sources.

Explore more about the [categories of wilderness](#).

Wilderness is protected for its intangible and tangible qualities:

1. It is a protection of natural processes like the unique animals and their habitats of Yosemite like great gray owls, [Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frogs](#) and [whitebark pines](#), vibrant night skies and vistas from the high country, and water quality. It's a spectacular research location for studying flora and fauna that is less

manipulated by humans, a reservoir of all natural things that would be lost through modern development. These processes are important to be protected not only for species that call Yosemite home, but to all of us at our other homes as well—it impacts the snowpack of the Sierra Nevada, an important water source for the Central Valley, an agricultural hotspot growing as much as 25% of the food we eat in the United States!

2. It provides for solitude and opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation, which offer challenge, a sense of awe, and unplugging from the technological world. The Yosemite Wilderness is not an island—it is surrounded by other wilderness managed by the US Forest Service to our north, south and east. Which creates some unique opportunities for large areas of protection, and long adventures to take along the Pacific Crest and John Muir Trails. Explore our website to learn more about [backpacking opportunities, permits, regulations and trailheads](#),
3. Indigenous peoples, including the seven traditionally associated tribes of Yosemite, have historic and ongoing relationships with living, travelling, and stewarding this place. [Yosemite Indians](#) were some of the first protectors of the lands now designated as wilderness, and other people joined to continue to research, manage and protect these lands with them.
4. Wilderness areas are places where a conscious decision has been made by the American people to let nature prevail, to be unhindered or—as worded in the law—“untrammeled.” In wilderness, natural processes are the primary force acting upon the land, and the developments of modern technological society are substantially unnoticeable. For expanses as large as the Yosemite Wilderness this may include allowing lightning fires to burn, moving trails out of meadows for hydrologic flow and floods or allowing the natural wildlife cycles of life and death to carry on with minimal interference.
5. It is undeveloped by modern technologies and impact—including roads, buildings, structures or utilities. This lack of things provides for many, more places where we are awed and humbled by vast landscapes and powerful natural forces, places where we can connect—to the earth, to each other, and to ourselves.

The opportunities for exploring wilderness are as diverse as the landscapes these places protect. From hiking, backpacking, [rock climbing](#) and horseback riding to journaling, painting, and photography, there are ample ways for pleasure, inspiration, and adventure in Yosemite Wilderness. However you visit, it's important to be a steward and take of these special places. Familiarize yourself with [Leave No Trace](#) and start planning your next trip!

Wilderness is an enduring resource, and all our responsibility to learn about and protect. Take a deeper dive into the many other areas of [National Park Service wilderness](#).

Discovering the past is more than a process of archeological documentation, historical preservation, or even finding something old. Finding an artifact, reading an old document, or observing a cultural landscape is about the tangible connection to the people of the past. Preservation of objects, buildings, cultural landscapes, and documents creates the opportunity to connect with history throughout generations.

Yosemite National Park is home to:

- over 1500 [archeological](#) sites.
- Sixty [historic properties](#) with nearly 600 individual structures and five National Historic Landmarks.
- [Museum](#), [archival](#), and [library](#) collections that span from pre-history to modern day.

Through these collected and preserved items, insight can be gained into the history of humans on Yosemite's landscape.

Exploration of the past can begin with a single place, person, object, or structure. [Explore Yosemite's history and culture](#).

| Trail | Difficulty | Distance | Elevation Gain |
|---|------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Bridalveil Fall Trail | Easy | 0.5 mi / 0.8 km (round trip) | 80 ft / 24 m |
| Lower Yosemite Fall Trail | Easy | 1 mi / 1.6 km (entire loop) | 50 ft / 15 m |
| Cook's Meadow Loop | Easy | 1 mi / 1.6 km (entire loop) | Flat |
| Mirror Lake Loop | Easy to Moderate | 2 mi / 3.2 km (lake & back) 5 mi / 8 km (entire loop) | 100 ft (to lake) 200 ft (loop) |

| | | | |
|--|-----------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Valley Loop Trail | Moderate | 6.5 mi / 10.5 km (half loop) 13 mi / 20.9 km (full loop) | Mostly flat |
| Vernal Fall and Nevada Fall Trails | Moderate to Strenuous | 1.6 mi-8 mi / 2.5 km-13 km (round trip) | 400 ft to 2000 ft 120 m to 600 m |
| Yosemite Falls Trail | Moderate to Strenuous | 2.0 mi / 3.2 km (round trip) 7.2 mi / 11.6 km (round trip) | 1000 ft / 328 m 2700 ft / 825 m |
| Snow Creek Trail | Strenuous | 9.4 mi / 15.1 km (round trip) | 2700 ft / 825 m |
| Four Mile Trail | Strenuous | 4.8 mi / 7.7 km (one way) | 3200 ft / 975 m |
| Half Dome Trail | Strenuous | 14 mi-16.4 mi / 22.4 km-26.2 km (round trip) | 4800 ft / 1475 m |

Yosemite Falls Trail

A steep climb is well rewarded with close-up views of Upper Yosemite Fall and distant views of Half Dome and other Sierra mountain peaks. Along the hike, enjoy a bird's eye view of Yosemite Valley's meadows and the meandering Merced River.

ON THIS PAGE NAVIGATION



View of Upper Yosemite Fall and Half Dome from trail

Trail Overview

Columbia Rock

Distance: 2 miles (3.2 km) round trip

Elevation: 1,000 ft (328 m) elevation gain

Difficulty: Moderate

Time: 2-3 hours round trip

Begin at: Camp 4 area (near shuttle stop #7)

Top of Yosemite Falls

Distance: 7.2 miles (11.6 km) round trip

Elevation: 2,700 ft (823 m) elevation gain

Difficulty: Strenuous

Time: 6-8 hours round trip

Begin at: Camp 4 area

One of Yosemite's oldest historic trails (built 1873 to 1877), the Yosemite Falls Trail leads to the top of North America's tallest waterfall, which rises 2,425 feet (739 m)

above the Valley floor. This trail starts near Camp 4, along the [Valley Loop Trail](#), and immediately begins its climb, switchback after switchback, through oak woodland. You will begin to climb above some trees and into exposed plateaus that offer you a glimpse of what's to come: great views of Yosemite Valley and its many iconic landforms. Do not stray off of the maintained path, as you will find steep drops adjacent to the trail.

If you make the one-mile, 1,000 foot climb (via dozens of switchbacks) to Columbia Rock, you will be rewarded with spectacular views of Yosemite Valley, Half Dome, and Sentinel Rock. From there, it is worth the time and energy to hike another 0.5 miles (0.8 km) (some of which is actually downhill!) to get a stunning view of Upper Yosemite Fall. Depending on the season, you may even feel the mist from the fall, which may be welcome respite after the tough climb.

The upper half of the trail is steep and rocky, but the arduous climb is well worth the amazing views you will be rewarded with at the top. Here you may be surprised by the small size of Yosemite Creek, which feeds this massive waterfall. Use extreme caution when near the creek and remember you are directly above a waterfall.

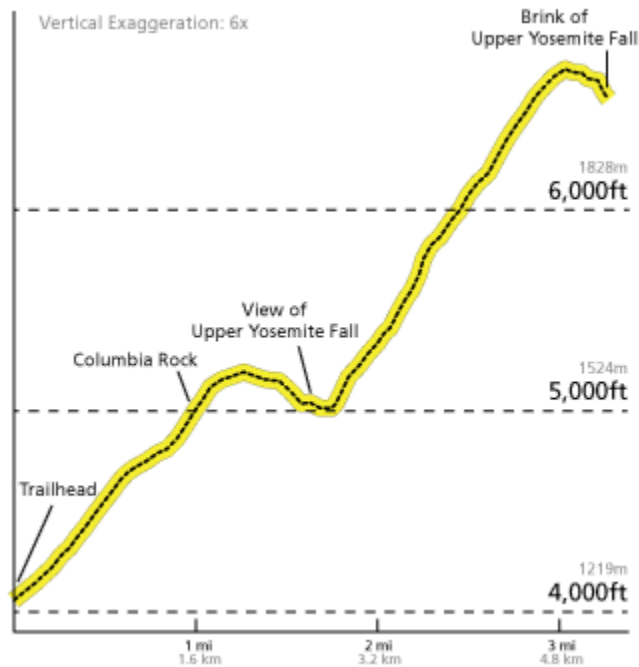
At the top of the Yosemite Falls Trail, you can extend your hike east to Yosemite Point (follow signs for North Dome; adds 1.6 miles roundtrip (2.6 km) to this hike) or west to Eagle Peak (follow signs to El Capitan, adds 5.8 miles roundtrip (9.3 km) to this hike). Yosemite Point offers direct views of Half Dome that rival those found on the North Dome trail, gives you an opportunity to see Lost Arrow Spire up close, and provides panoramic views of many other peaks. Eagle Peak, part of the Three Brothers rock formation, is the highest point on the north rim of Yosemite Valley, which gives you a different perspective of the surrounding granite landscape.

To learn more about this Yosemite icon, [view a 10-minute podcast episode about Yosemite Falls](#).

Seasonality

The Yosemite Falls Trail is open year-round; conditions vary depending on the season. In spring, when the waterfall is at its peak, this hike is stunning, and you may even get wet from the spray of the waterfall during a section of the hike. In summer, conditions are hot and dry, and the loose decomposed granite along the trail can be slippery. Keep in mind that by August, the water levels are low and you may only see a trickle here. (Check out our [Yosemite Falls webcam](#) to see a current view.) During winter, the lower portion of this trail gets direct sunlight, so hiking can be snow-free while other trails are icy. Visiting Columbia Rock, located one mile up the trail, is a

worthwhile trip at any time of year. The upper portion of this trail, which receives little to no sunlight in winter, can be very icy and slippery, or buried beneath feet of snow, making traction difficult. In winter, hiking in the colder early morning or late afternoon hours can be even more dangerous if the trail is icy.



Stay Safe

- Start your hike early; this trail can become very hot mid-day in the summer. By starting as early as possible, you will be able to hike during the cooler part of the day. The upper portion of the trail is exposed, receiving no shade until late afternoon or early evening.
- Avoid becoming dehydrated or experiencing heat exhaustion. Drink plenty and drink often; pace yourself; rest in the shade; eat salty snacks.
- Sprained ankles and knee injuries are common on this trail. There are many areas of loose sand mixed with rocky terrain, which makes for slippery footing.
- Stay on the trail; there are numerous steep drop-offs and ledges off-trail.
- Know your limits. Pre-existing medical conditions can be easily exacerbated on the steep ascent.
- Do not swim or wade in the creek above the waterfall.

Water

Drinking water is not available along the trail. A drinking fountain is available near the trailhead in Camp 4. Bring 4 quarts/liters of water if hiking to the top of Yosemite Falls.

Restrooms

Restrooms are not available along the trail; the nearest ones are in Camp 4 near the trailhead.

Parking

The Yosemite Falls trailhead is located along the [Valley Loop Trail](#) near Camp 4. The Camp 4 parking area is for campers only, but there is parking at the Yosemite Falls parking area across the street from, and just beyond the entrance to Camp 4.

Transportation

The Valleywide Shuttle serves the trailhead area. Ride the shuttle to stop #7 and walk directly across the street to Camp 4 and follow trailhead signs.

Trail Etiquette

[Pets](#), bicycles, and strollers are prohibited. Do not shortcut switchbacks, which causes rapid trail erosion and results in injuries. [Keep your food within arm's reach at all times](#) and do not feed the wildlife. Carry out all trash and food waste (fruit peels, shells, etc.).

Trail Overview

Vernal Fall Footbridge

Distance: 1.6 mi (2.6 km) round trip

Elevation gain: 400 ft (120 m)

Difficulty: Moderate

Time: 1-1.5 hours

Top of Vernal Fall

Distance: 2.4 mi (3.9 km) round trip (via Mist Trail)
Elevation gain: 1000 ft (300 m)
Difficulty: Strenuous
Time: 3 hours

Top of Nevada Fall

Distance: 5.4 mi (8.7 km) round trip (via Mist Trail)
Elevation gain: 2000 ft (610 m)
Difficulty: Strenuous
Time: 5-6 hours

You can also take the John Muir Trail to the top of Vernal Fall (via the Clark Point cutoff) and the top of Nevada Fall, or combine the Mist Trail and John Muir Trail into a loop. See the map, profile, and description below for more information.

All begin at: Happy Isles (shuttle stop #16)

This very popular hike originates near Happy Isles in eastern Yosemite Valley. The John Muir and Mist Trails offer spectacular, up-close views of two large waterfalls, enjoyable scenery along the Merced River, and unique views across Yosemite Valley. This first paved mile of trail is busiest and accesses the Vernal Fall Footbridge. Almost entirely uphill, you can appreciate views along the way, and during spring, when the water levels are at their peak, you can also glimpse Illillouette Fall from this first section of trail.

You'll find an excellent view of Vernal Fall from the footbridge at 0.8 miles (1.3 km). About 0.2 miles (0.3 km) beyond the bridge, the Mist Trail and the John Muir Trail diverge. To proceed directly to the top of Vernal Fall, follow the Mist Trail 0.3 miles (0.5 km) up a steep granite stairway of over 600 steps. Prepare for slippery footing and a tremendous amount of waterfall spray in spring and early summer (hence the name for this trail!). You will delight in views of Vernal Fall all along this stretch of trail and may even be able to see a rainbow in the spray of the fall. At the top of Vernal Fall, you can experience jaw-dropping views straight down the length of the 317-foot waterfall (please don't cross the railings and use extreme caution while you're near any flowing water or wet rock in this area).

From this point, you can: choose to turn around and head back the way you came; continue up to the next junction (about 0.2 miles / 0.3 km) and take the longer route back via the John Muir Trail; or continue uphill on the Mist Trail to the top of Nevada Fall. If you choose to continue on the Mist Trail, shortly beyond Vernal Fall, you will pass by Emerald Pool and Silver Apron. Both of these look may look inviting on a hot

summer's day, but it is illegal and dangerous to swim here due to the extremely hazardous current.

Continuing along the Mist Trail, you'll experience another 1.5 miles (2.4 km) of steep, rocky switchbacks in order to reach Nevada Fall. Crashing down 594 feet, this thunderous waterfall is fullest in spring and early summer, and you will find terrific photographic opportunities along this stretch of trail. At the top of the climb, head right to reach the footbridge that crosses the Merced River above the fall, allowing you a closer view of it. Use extreme caution while you're near any flowing water or wet rock in this area.

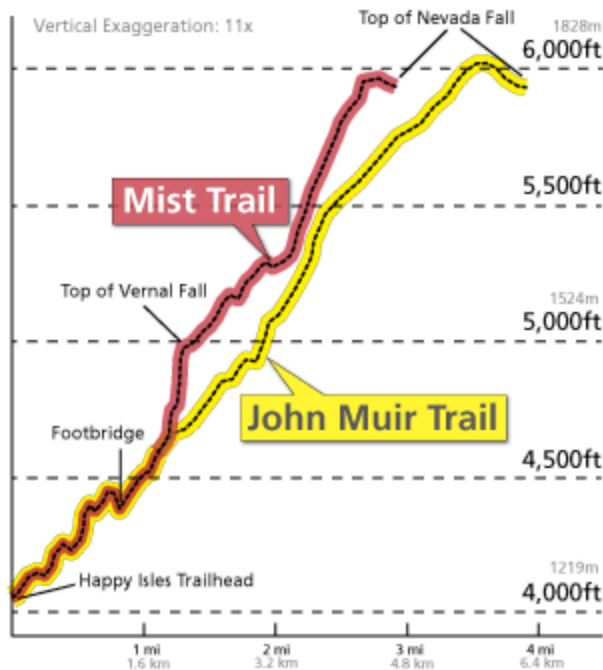
From here, you can either return down the Mist Trail, or continue over the bridge to the John Muir Trail for an alternate route back to Yosemite Valley. If you choose the John Muir Trail, you will enjoy different scenery, with great views of Liberty Cap and different views of Nevada Fall. The John Muir Trail is longer—approximately 4 miles one-way compared to the Mist Trail's 2.5 miles (4 km)—so plan accordingly.

Some hikers may be continuing from the top of Nevada Fall to [hike to Half Dome](#) or elsewhere in Yosemite's wilderness.

Seasonality

You can hike to both waterfalls all year. However, in winter, [there is a specific route that remains open](#) while some sections of trail are closed. The lower portion of the Mist Trail along Vernal Fall closes in winter due to risk of falling ice and rock. The upper portion of the John Muir Trail between Clark Point and the top of Nevada Fall is closed in winter due to treacherously icy conditions. Keep in mind that the sections of trail that remain open in the winter may be very icy and/or snowy. [View current conditions](#) for trail closures and [view historical opening and closing dates for this trail](#).

[View a trail profile and map](#) of the winter route to the top of Vernal Fall and Nevada Fall.



Stay Safe

- Stay on the established trail: do not swim or wade in the river and do not walk along the edge of the river.
- Observe warning signs and railings—these exist for your safety.
- Carry a head lamp (with fresh or extra batteries) in case you end up hiking more slowly or farther than planned and find yourself hiking back in the dark.
- Sprained ankles and knee injuries are common on this trail. There are many areas of loose rock/decomposed granite, mixed with steep steps, and water, which makes for slippery footing in places.
- Avoid becoming dehydrated or experiencing heat exhaustion. Drink plenty and drink often; pace yourself; rest in the shade; and eat salty snacks.
- The granite steps along the Mist Trail leading up to the brink of Vernal Fall can be slick and crowded. Consider making a loop by continuing on the trail, past the brink of Vernal Fall and Emerald Pool, taking the cutoff trail to Clark Point, and then hiking down the John Muir Trail.

Water

Drinking water is available at the shuttle stop near the trailhead (stop #16) and also at the Vernal Fall Footbridge (May to October). This is the only drinking water available along the trail, so carry plenty of water for your hike.

| Destination | Amount of water to bring |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Vernal Fall Footbridge | 1 quart/liter |
| Top of Vernal Fall | 2 quarter/liters |
| Top of Nevada Fall | 3-4 quarts/liters |

Restrooms

Unlike many other trails in the park, several restrooms are available along your hike. Restrooms are located at the shuttle stop near the trailhead (stop #16). Additionally, restrooms are located at the Vernal Fall footbridge, approximately 1 mile up the trail (May to October). Vault toilets are available beyond the top of Vernal Fall (along the Mist Trail) and at the top of Nevada Fall (along the Mist Trail).

Parking

Parking is not available at the trailhead itself, but you can park at Curry Village, less than one mile (1.6 km) from the trailhead.

Transportation

Ride the Valleywide or East Valley Shuttles to shuttle stop #16 and follow the signs across the bridge to where the trail begins.

Trail Etiquette

[Pets](#), bicycles, and strollers are prohibited. Do not shortcut switchbacks, which causes rapid trail erosion and results in injuries. [Keep your food within arm's reach at all times](#) and do not feed the wildlife. Carry out all trash and food waste (fruit peels, shells, etc.).