

NEWS > ENVIRONMENT • News

Yosemite: Giant sequoia grove reopens after 100 mph winds topple 15 ancient trees

January storm caused at least \$3 million damage to facilities at Mariposa Grove



A storm with winds up to 100 mph toppled trees on Jan. 18 and Jan. 19, 2021 in Mariposa Grove, Yosemite National Park, including firs, pines and 15 giant sequoias. The grove reopened to the public on May 5, 2021. (Photo: Yosemite National Park)

By **PAUL ROGERS** | progers@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

PUBLISHED: May 5, 2021 at 1:54 p.m. | UPDATED: May 6, 2021 at 4:18 a.m.

Mariposa Grove, a landmark of Yosemite National Park first set aside for protection by Abraham Lincoln in 1864 and visited by millions of people since then, reopened to the public Wednesday, more than three months after a raging storm with 100 mph winds toppled giant sequoia trees, felled dozens of others and wrecked facilities.

The storm on Jan. 18 and 19 caused an estimated \$3 million to \$4 million in damage, sending trees crashing into the area's main restroom, and destroying new wooden boardwalks, fencing and trails at the grove, where giant sequoias dating back 2,000 years tower up to 285 feet high.



"There are still trees down," said Yosemite spokesman Scott Gediman. "But overall it's as beautiful as ever."

In all, 15 giant sequoias out of roughly 500 at Mariposa Grove fell, although none of the most famous named trees died in the storm. The boardwalks, trails and restrooms in the area have not yet been repaired. Those facilities were recently built as part of a \$40 million restoration project in Mariposa Grove that reopened to the public just three years ago.

Shuttle buses that normally bring visitors to the grove will not run this year because the park has had to set up portable restrooms and doesn't want to encourage large crowds. Until the facilities are repaired next year, visitors will have to walk or bicycle two miles each way and bring their own water.

It's an additional 1.5 mile-round trip hike to the grove's most famous features, the Grizzly Giant and California Tunnel Tree.

The Mariposa Grove Welcome Plaza, which is near Yosemite's south entrance, will have flush toilets and drinking water. The Mariposa Grove Arrival Area will have portable toilets and no drinking water.

The fallen giant sequoias will not be cut up for firewood or any other use, park officials said. Instead, trails will be rerouted around them.

"A fallen tree is part of nature," Gediman said. "Fallen trees provide habitat for animals. Their seeds can help new trees grow. It's part of the natural process."

The cost to repair everything is estimated at between \$3 million and \$4 million, said Frank Dean, CEO of the Yosemite Conservancy, a San Francisco-based nonprofit group that helps raise funds for park projects, and which paid for half of the previous \$40 million effort. Work will begin later this year and should be finished by this time next year, he said.

"Nature bats last, as they say," said Dean, a former Yosemite ranger. "But we are going to get it fixed."



A storm with winds up to 100 mph toppled trees on Jan. 18 and Jan. 19, 2021 in Mariposa Grove, Yosemite National Park, including firs, pines and 15 giant sequoias. The grove reopened to the public on May 5, 2021. (Photo: Yosemite National Park)

Dean noted that photographs and paintings of the massive, ancient trees — at least as much, if not more than images of Yosemite Valley — helped convince Lincoln and other 19th century leaders to save the park. There were glacially carved valleys in Switzerland and other places, he said. But nobody in government on the East Coast had ever seen trees like the famed sequoias, cousins of California's coast redwoods.

"The grove is very important from a conservation standpoint," Dean said. "It was the first active conservation on that scale by government anywhere in the world."

The wind storm that toppled the trees was an event for the record books.



On Jan. 18, it raged out of the east, tearing through the Central Sierra Nevada. The winds, known as Mono Winds, because they can originate near Mono Lake on the California-Nevada border, periodically rush over the Sierra's granite ridges, causing significant damage similar to Santa Ana winds in Southern California. The National Weather Service reported gusts from the storm reached 110 mph at Cascadel Heights, about 20 miles south of Yosemite's southern boundary near Oakhurst.


Eight giant sequoias fell in the upper part of Mariposa Grove and seven fell in the lower grove. Gediman said he is unaware of any storm in the park's 156-year history having knocked down so many of the ancient giants.

"Rockfalls, fires, floods, and wind events alter the landscape at Yosemite," he said. "It's a part of the Yosemite story. It's disappointing to see the damage but it's part of the ever-changing landscape of the park."



A storm with winds up to 100 mph toppled trees on Jan. 18 and Jan. 19, 2021 in Mariposa Grove, Yosemite National Park, including firs, pines and 15 giant sequoias. The grove reopened to the public on May 5, 2021. (Photo: Yosemite National Park)

[Report an error](#)
[Policies and Standards](#)
[Contact Us](#)

 The Trust Project

A hyperlocal newsletter with stories reported around a location that matters to you.

