

# YOSEMITE CONSERVANCY

*Autumn Winter 2023*

VOLUME 14 ISSUE 02



# Into the Great Wide Open



“Americans will put up with almost anything unless it blocks traffic.”

— Dan Rather

**AFTER THE RECORD-BREAKING** snowfall of this past winter, Yosemite's waterfalls have been more spectacular than ever. And while there were no park day-use reservations this season, the experience of accessing the park to see the majestic waterfalls was challenging for many visitors.

The Conservancy typically does not take a position on park policy, but this crowding issue is so important that our board has sent a letter to the National Park Service to urge them to continue to plan and pilot solutions, and to ensure Yosemite is accessible to all.

As a Conservancy supporter, you are an insider, and in the know about Yosemite and its lesser-known places and stories. As we continue to celebrate our centennial year, we'll share some special insights made possible by you.

In this issue, you can read about Preventive Search and Rescue (PSAR), an in-park program that Conservancy volunteers staff at high-traffic trails, such as the Mist Trail. This guidance has proved to save lives, and we appreciate the hard work our volunteers do to make this happen.

United in Yosemite is a newer program that brings diverse rock climbers together for a weekend of learning and friendship in the park. It has been popular and enlightening to see the exchange of ideas and new faces in the park.

We also share the lesser-known-but-important stories of Chinese workers who helped shape the facilities and services in Yosemite today.

Howard Weamer, the longtime ski hut-keeper at Ostrander Lake, is also profiled. He has seen it all in his many winters in the backcountry.

Finally, thanks to you, the restoration of the facilities at Bridalveil Fall has been completed, and it is now open to visitors.

Yosemite Valley represents less than 5% of the park, but it's where well over 90% of visitors go. Next time you visit the park, consider exploring the less busy trails outside of Yosemite Valley and fall in love with a Yosemite you may never have seen before.

Thank you for all you do for Yosemite!

Frank Dean  
PRESIDENT & CEO

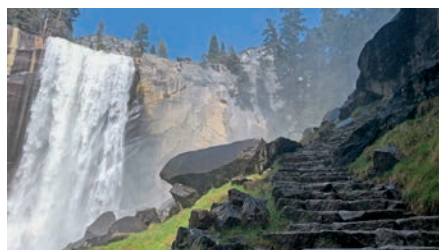
**COVER** Mist clings to Sentinel Dome on a perfect wintry day in Yosemite.

PHOTOS: (COVER) © CRAIG SCHOENBAUM.  
(LEFT) © DONNA ELLIOT. (OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM)  
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# Mist

## OPPORTUNITIES

*How Search and Rescue informs  
trail revitalization*

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BY MEGAN ORPWOOD-RUSSELL

With hundreds of miles of trails, Yosemite offers something for every adventurer — from gentle trails leading to famous vistas, to strenuous treks heading up remote peaks and passes in the wilderness. During the busy summer months, daytime in Yosemite Valley is like a busy city of 25,000 inhabitants, a vast number of whom are eager to explore the trails of the so-called Half Dome Corridor.

Home to legendary trails and iconic landmarks, the Half Dome Corridor includes the John Muir and Mist trails, Vernal and Nevada falls, Little Yosemite Valley, and of course, Half Dome.

The historic trailhead at Happy Isles acts as the gateway to the corridor, serving as a point of embarkation for hikers, as they leave the front country and journey higher and deeper into Yosemite's wild places. Visitors venturing into this part of the Merced River canyon are immersed in scenes of transcendent natural beauty: majestic waterfalls, sculpted granite cliffs, abundant ecosystems of flora and fauna, and the vast Sierra Crest panorama from the summit of Half Dome.

The trails in the Half Dome Corridor are also the busiest in Yosemite. Since 2010, estimates indicate that an astonishing average of more than 90,000 visitors use the trailhead at Happy Isles in each summer month (in years that weren't affected by

COVID). More than 3,000 hikers set off from the trailhead daily — a number that climbs to 4,000 hikers on Saturdays. From mid-May to mid-October, as many as 300 permit-holding hikers ascend the Half Dome cable route.

This year, some of the preliminary work to improve safety in the Half Dome Corridor is already under way, thanks to Conservancy donor-funded projects.

“The Mist Trail badly needs help,” says Bill Floyd, of the Floyd Family Foundation, which has generously supported this project. “Supporting the Conservancy’s work ensures this popular trail can be protected and enjoyed long into the future.”

With so many adventurers of differing experience and fitness levels out and about on these beloved trails, how does Yosemite keep visitors safe?

“When the public thinks about Search and Rescue

(SAR), they think about dramatic stuff, like big walls and activities with recognizably high risk,” former Chief Ranger Kevin Killian says. “But the overwhelming majority of Yosemite rescues aren’t what people think of. They are injuries like slipping while walking along the Mist Trail or becoming dehydrated on the Upper Yosemite Fall Trail — hikes that are, all too often, approached with little preparation.”

Preventive Search and Rescue (PSAR) is a powerful tool for ensuring visitors understand risks and trail conditions before embarking on their journeys.

“We want to make sure PSAR exists before people even leave home,” says Joy Marschall, a former PSAR ranger. “This work starts on social media and websites. By the time people are at an entrance, they should have a map downloaded and all the supplies they will need.”

PSAR achieves its goal through trail patrols, educational signs, audio messages played on shuttle buses, and one-on-one interactions with visitors to preempt or change risky behaviors.

And it’s very effective. Within six months of expanding the volunteer PSAR program in 2013, incidents on the Mist Trail were down by 45%. Effective PSAR activities mean less work for the Search and Rescue team.

“Our rescue numbers would plummet if people had more tools to keep out of harm’s way,” Killian says. “Some of those tools are educational: Are people wearing the right footwear? Do they have enough food and water? Have they checked environmental conditions? Set realistic hiking goals?”

Careful visitor preparation is essential for reducing the possibility of needing SAR while visiting Yosemite.

The Yosemite Search and Rescue (YOSAR) volunteer program started in the 1960s, as the demand for skilled rescuers rose in step with the popularity of big wall climbing. On average, the SAR team responds to about 250 incidents each year.

Helping lost or injured hikers on the Mist Trail — where nearly one-third of all Yosemite rescues occur — is a core part of their work.

Less frequently, they perform technical “high-angle” rescues on steep, difficult terrain, getting climbers down from walls using helicopters or long ropes, or performing dangerous swift-water rescues.



#### YOSEMITE SEARCH AND RESCUE

(SAR) volunteers, rangers and Student Conservation Association (SCA) interns work together to perform a litter carry-out of an injured person on the Mist Trail.

PHOTOS: (PREVIOUS PAGE), © ANNA ROUSE  
(ABOVE), © COURTESY OF NPS.



**FOR MANY WHO VISIT** Yosemite, ascending the Half Dome cables is a dream experience. The challenging hike takes between 10-12 hours, and requires preparation and training. PHOTO: © DENYS NEVOZHAI

“The fewer rescues that occur, the safer it keeps the rangers who perform SAR,” Killian says. “Recoveries are extremely challenging both physically and mentally.”

Today, the YOSAR response team is composed of park rangers and volunteer SAR site members who work closely together to ensure visitor safety. SAR volunteers are trained over many years, with the program serving as an informal apprenticeship. Typically, it will be two to three years before volunteers are ready for involvement in the field, then an additional five to seven years of experience before they can work on big walls. The PSAR program is a much newer initiative: The park started formalizing it in 2007, and it relies on volunteers to communicate essential information about trails and conditions.

After several accidental fatalities occurred in 2011, the park convened a board of review to examine deaths and implement safety mitigations. While significant improvements have been made in the intervening years, the Half Dome Corridor is in urgent need of comprehensive efforts to improve systemic problems. An interdisciplinary team — composed of Yosemite National Park Service staff,

local Tribal members, YOSAR, Yosemite Conservancy, and others — is in the process of assessing improvements to the Half Dome Corridor to both improve the visitor experience and ensure trails and habitats are safe.

The Refreshing the Mist Trail project will address long-standing safety concerns, visitor orientation, and wayfinding, along with natural and cultural resource protection.

The trailhead at Happy Isles, one of the busiest and most significant in the National Park System, will be a focus of the project to provide a trailhead experience worthy of the iconic John Muir Trail. A two-year design process will culminate in a plan that satisfies the project’s goals and elevates visitors’ experience in this iconic trail corridor. For Ken Pitzer, of the Pitzer Family Foundation, supporting this essential work has a more personal connection.

“My wife and I got engaged on the top of Half Dome in 1999,” he says. “We’ve been extremely impressed by the team of experts working on this project; they are so dedicated and hardworking, and their enthusiasm is magnificent.”

Construction is estimated to begin in 2025 and extend several years. ■



PROJECT UPDATE

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# PROTECTING POHONO

RESTORING THE ICONIC  
WEST-END WATERFALL

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BY LAUREN HAUPTMAN

**“ENTERING THE VALLEY,** gazing overwhelmed with the multitude of grand objects around us, perhaps the first to fix our attention will be Bridal Veil, a beautiful waterfall on our right. Its brow, where it first leaps free from the cliff, is about 900 feet above us; and as it sways and sings in the wind, clad in gauzy, sun-sifted spray, half falling, half floating, it seems infinitely gentle and fine; but the hymns it sings tell the solemn fateful power hidden beneath its soft clothing.”

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John Muir, 1912

Is there a more magnificent sight to see at the west end of Yosemite Valley than Bridalveil Fall? John Muir didn't seem to think so. And neither do millions of visitors who have gazed at the glorious 620-foot cascade.

Known as "Pohono" to Southern Sierra Miwuk Indians, Bridalveil Fall is framed by Leaning Tower and Cathedral Rocks. Bridalveil Creek, which feeds the waterfall, travels about 10 miles northwest from Ostrander Lake to Yosemite Valley. The tributary flows hundreds of feet up from the ground through a U-shaped channel with steep walls that were created by glaciers — a "hanging valley." Water jumps the rim, crashing to boulders below into a network of stream channels that eventually join the Merced River.

The view of the fall from Tunnel View is astounding — but up until recently, the experience of visiting the fall up close has been less than ideal. Thanks to our generous donors, the National Park Service, working in partnership with Yosemite Conservancy, embarked on a major, multiyear renovation at the site in 2019. The project will protect the area and enhance the visitor experience by reducing crowding and dispersing visitors; providing accessible, ADA-compliant trails and access; developing orientation and installing wayfinding and interpretation exhibits; and providing adequate parking, restroom facilities, trails, and viewing spaces.

The project's trail work, which is set to be completed in fall 2023, includes an elevated boardwalk spanning over wetlands and a seasonal stream channel to protect sensitive riparian habitat. Visitors will enjoy the expanded hiking possibilities along a new ADA-compliant loop trail that connects parking areas, the historic carriage road, and an additional viewing platform. The existing overlook, which was small and often crowded has been expanded nearly fourfold, providing visitors with informal seating options to pause, rest, and take in the stunning beauty of the fall plummeting from the valley rim above.

Improvements were made to area roads to accommodate traffic and improve safety. Most notably, a space dedicated to commercial buses provides a safe zone for passengers to disembark along South Side Drive. A new arrival plaza was constructed, and orientation and wayfinding were installed.

While the aesthetics of the plaza may not appear all that different, major improvements were made. Drainage was corrected to avoid springtime flooding, and utilities

were installed to support a brand-new restroom (which replaced the old vault toilets), to be completed in fall 2023. The restroom will provide 16 stalls, and a water bottle-filling station.

The final part of the Bridalveil project concerns "orientation," which helps visitors land, get their bearings, and plan their hike. Orientation panels were installed at the two main access points to the Bridalveil area, along South Side Drive and at the main parking lot. Interpretive exhibits intended to share stories and information on natural and cultural resources will be installed in summer 2024. Stories of Tribal stewardship, past and present, will join information on plants and wildlife, the unique geological features of the hanging valley from which the fall tumbles, and the climbing history of the Leaning Tower rock formation adjacent to the fall.

Thanks to the generosity of Conservancy donors, the renowned waterfall that so captivated John Muir and many other visitors, will continue to inspire people long into the future. ■



**IN JUNE** of this year, a bronze plaque was installed at the site to recognize major donors.

PHOTOS: (OPPOSITE PAGE) © TODD BOROWSKI. (ABOVE) © LAURIE PETERSON.





# DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES: ACCESSING YOSEMITE

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BY HEATHER VAN DER GRINTEN

Yosemite National Park is in a perpetual balancing act between protecting its natural and cultural resources and making the park accessible to all those who wish to experience its beauty and grandeur. People with various conditions, such as autism, aphasia, muscular dystrophy, hearing and vision impairments, neurodivergence, traumatic brain injuries, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), may experience the world differently. Throughout the park's history, there have been countless leaders who have worked to make the park more accessible, welcoming, and inclusive.

In 2019, the park celebrated the 40th anniversary of its deaf services — the longest running program within the National Park System. Yosemite has also been looking for ways to increase accessibility, such as adding more accessible trails and rehabilitating old buildings to make them compliant with the Architectural Barriers Act (ABA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

The donor-funded United in Yosemite festival — held this past June in Yosemite Valley — celebrated diversity in climbing, and prioritized accessibility to ensure that the event was as successful and inclusive as possible.

“United in Yosemite reached out to ParaCliffHangers while planning and they devoted a real part of their budget to an accessibility consultant,” explained Elliott Nguyen, a board

**ELLIOTT NGUYEN,**  
a board member of  
ParaCliffClimbers,  
attending the United in  
Yosemite climbing festival  
in summer 2023.

PHOTO: © MIYA TSUDOME



member of ParaCliffHangers — an organization that builds community where disability is not a barrier to climbing. You can read more about United in Yosemite on page 17.

The Volunteer Visitor Information Assistants program is a crucial part of visitor services in Yosemite during peak season, providing important information and knowledge to visitors. The program has been accommodating to volunteers with disabilities, such as Cat Maness, who uses a motorized wheelchair.

“The Conservancy has been amazing in terms of accessibility,” Maness says. “I feel like I have not just been given reasonable accommodation — I feel like I have been given generous accommodation.”

Maness completed an informal survey of the park, noting the quality of trails, accommodations, and certain design oddities, such as where a cement pathway ends a foot away from trash cans.

“Let me decide what’s accessible and what’s not,” she says.

The description of a pathway’s surface (paved, packed dirt, gravel, sand, etc.), width, and the presence of barriers, such as roots and steps, allows visitors with disabilities to plan their trips more effectively and choose an appropriate experience.

Maness recently launched YosemiteAccess.com, which shares crowd-sourced observations with the hope of providing better trip-planning information for a variety of disability groups.

“My son has muscular dystrophy and uses a motorized wheelchair,” Conservancy donor John Killian says. “Yosemite is the most accessible of the six national parks we have visited.”

When checking them in at the entrance gates, rangers provided Killian and his family with an accessibility parking pass and an information packet that details accessible trails



**LEFT** Donor John Killian and his son on their recent visit to Yosemite Valley. The Killians were impressed by the park's accessibility efforts.

**ABOVE** Valley trails are designed with accessibility in mind to ensure everyone can enjoy the park.

PHOTOS: (LEFT TO RIGHT) © JOHN KILLIAN.  
© YOSEMITE CONSERVANCY/JOSH HELLING.

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and parking areas. The number of accessible trails has grown through the generosity of donor support for large-scale rehabilitation projects at Glacier Point, Lower Yosemite Fall, and Mariposa Grove.

Two major Conservancy projects that will be completed in 2023 further advance accessibility in Yosemite. The newly finished Bridalveil Fall project includes an accessible lower viewing platform and loop trail. The bronze relief map at the Welcome Center uses Braille and different textures to show trails and roads in the landscape.

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## ACCESSIBILITY GUIDES

### ADAPTING INFORMATION FOR DIFFERENT NEEDS

In 2013, Yosemite Conservancy funded the creation of a guide for people with adult-onset brain injury resulting in communication disorders known as aphasia. The guide, which simplifies language and uses bold visuals to communicate key information, was the first of its kind in the National Park Service. Ranger Mary Kline managed the project from the park's side and collaborated with people with aphasia who were receiving treatment at California State University, East Bay (CSUEB). The treatment program was founded by Jan Avent, a Yosemite Conservancy board member and professor of communicative sciences and disorders at CSUEB.

The guide helps more groups than just people with aphasia.

"So many of the things that help one group help another group, so you're not having to reinvent the wheel every single time," Avent says. "There are ways to make people feel like they're wanted, that they're part of the park community."

The guide is available on the Yosemite National Park website as a downloadable PDF.

The Junior Ranger Adaptive Activities Guide is a groundbreaking accessibility milestone in Yosemite. Drs. Penny Hatch and Nancy Quick, research assistant professors at the Center for Literacy and Disabilities Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, worked to develop the guide for caregivers of Junior Rangers with communication challenges.

"The idea of these activities is you do not need to use speech to participate; there is a way for every child to respond and participate," Hatch says. "You do not have to have the ability to hold and control a pencil, to draw a circle, make an X, or draw a line. But you fully oversee developing your own responses."

The guide acts as a companion piece to the Yosemite Junior Ranger Handbook, providing suggestions to caregivers for how to engage Junior Rangers in Yosemite with the concepts from the handbook.

"My ultimate goal was always to develop a guideline for the National Park Service as a gift," Hatch says. She hopes this will inspire other national parks and public lands to consider adding adaptive guides for their youth programs.

The park's efforts to make itself more accessible, welcoming, and inclusive are ongoing. As accessibility innovations and advocacy advance, Yosemite Conservancy supports the National Park Service in Yosemite in fostering a more inclusive future. ■

PROJECT UPDATE

# IMPERILED *Carnivores*

SURVEYING FISHERS  
AND RED FOXES

BY MEGAN ORPWOOD-RUSSELL



**A PACIFIC FISHER**  
surveys the snow at the base  
of her den tree. Part of the  
mustelid family, the population  
of the elusive Pacific fisher in  
Yosemite is endangered.

PHOTO: © ROBB HIRSCH.

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**T**he past winter saw record-breaking snowfall in California, burying parts of the state in up to 15 feet of snow. In some instances, it lasted for several months.

While the unprecedented weather brought much-needed water to the region, it also presented challenges for native animals and the researchers who study them.

In 2020, fishers in the Southern Sierra Nevada were listed as federally endangered. Thanks to donor-funded research, park biologists are learning much-needed information about fishers in Yosemite by using data from GPS tracking collars. Park management uses the data to protect their existing denning habitat, identify important movement corridors, and improve the habitat long-term using prescribed fires.

During the winter, the crew persevered despite rockslides that shut down roads for multiple stretches, avalanches that blocked access to Highway 41, and record snowpack and rainfall that buried or obstructed the study sites. Even though field work was curtailed at various times for safety reasons, researchers were still able to capture, collar, and track 15 fishers; locate and monitor active fisher den trees; and witness (using remote-sensor cameras) several young kits leaving their dens to venture into the world for the first time.

“The past two years of fisher research have been incredible,” Yosemite wildlife biologist Sarah Stock says. “We have some of the most valuable data we could ever have dreamed of getting. The GPS collars are giving us exact locations, and now we have thousands of data points. With these astonishing windows into the lives of fishers, we can see exactly where they go and where they do not go.”

Starting in mid-October, in the third consecutive season of collaring and tracking fishers, Stock and her team are eager to learn how Yosemite’s fisher population is faring after such an extreme winter.

“There is evidence that small mammal populations might have declined in some areas,” Stock says. “We are worried the fishers’ prey populations may have suffered mortalities from the winter.”

This year, researchers are collaborating with Oregon State University biostatisticians, Drs. Sean Matthews and Marie Martin, to estimate the number of fishers that live in Yosemite. This information will establish an important reference point for tracking future population trends.

With snow surveys in May 2023 showing the Merced

“The past two years of fisher research have been incredible.”

**Sarah Stock**

YOSEMITE WILDLIFE BIOLOGIST

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River basin at 231% of normal and the Tuolumne River basin at 253%, the high alpine Sierra Nevada red fox will have experienced this historic winter at its most extreme.

The red fox was declared federally endangered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2021, with an estimated population of around 18 to 39 individuals across the entirety of their range in the Sierra Nevada. Because red foxes are so elusive and seldom seen, researchers survey them by placing remotely triggered cameras in travel corridors along mountain crests and analyzing their scats using genetic analysis.

Throughout this project, surveys have revealed 64 red fox detections (55 camera detections and nine scat detections) in 19 different locations, always above the tree line. Of those 64 detections, 25 are from the past two years, suggesting the population might be starting to rebound. Researchers plan to continue collecting scats for DNA analysis in order to get a more precise population estimate in Yosemite.

The cameras that photograph the red foxes help piece together behavioral patterns and contribute to population assessments. Secured beneath rock cairns, the cameras are checked at least twice a year to ensure batteries are working, and a new scent lure is placed at the site to attract the foxes. Scat is also collected in red fox habitat, which is then analyzed to confirm species and unique individual.

“With so many cameras buried underneath the snow and rendered dysfunctional this past winter, it’s hard to know what we missed!” Stock says. “We have just finished checking the 20 long-term red fox cameras that span Yosemite’s eastern boundary, and we are excited to report that a fox showed up at a new camera location this past winter. They have now appeared at 14 out of 20 long-term camera locations.”

And it isn’t just the red fox that was observed: In May of this year, a lone wolverine was spotted in Tuolumne, making it the second wolverine to be seen in the state in roughly 100 years. ■



Scan to Learn  
About Yosemite  
Field School

# UNITED *in* YOSEMITE

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BY LAUREN HAUPTMAN

It all began with a conversation in 2021. Yosemite Conservancy's then-Director of Projects Ryan Kelly convened a meeting with Yosemite climbing rangers to discuss the idea of holding a diversity-oriented climbing event in Yosemite. Included were representatives of the Conservancy, the National Park Service (NPS), the Yosemite Climbing Association (YCA), and the American Alpine Club (AAC), which already had a strong relationship with the park.

They put together an advisory group of leaders from affinity groups in the climbing space nationwide, as well as other community members. They had a mission of providing meaningful and culturally appropriate mentorships for climbers from historically marginalized groups, so they can be empowered to achieve their climbing goals, thrive among community, and develop strong relationships with the land. The group held a planning retreat in June 2022.

"We spent five days together, three of which were very focused on talking through issues related to creating a welcoming space for communities with really different identities and really different needs," says Yosemite park ranger Jesse Chakrin. "We also had to navigate just running a festival, which it turns out, is a lot of work!"

The group's challenge was to create an event that was welcoming to those who didn't already feel a part of the climbing community, for whom Yosemite felt daunting.

"How can we create an environment where you can enjoy





**TAKING NOTHING**  
for granite, climbing clinics  
taught a variety of skills  
for different levels of  
climbing experiences.

PHOTO: © MIYA TSUDOME.



**CLIMBERS** participated in a wide range of activities, from printmaking, to bouldering, to affinity-group activities. PHOTO: © MIYA TSUDOME.

the space as a climber at any level — as a beginner, as an intermediate — and from any background?” asks Katie Coit, director of projects for the Conservancy. “Climbing in Yosemite can feel so intimidating!”

The first steps were to seek funding from Yosemite Conservancy and begin “deep work” in trust-building with the community.

“We wanted to be really up front about what our goals and intentions were, and then do our very best to follow through on our words,” Chakrin says. “Because trust, especially with groups that have often been systemically marginalized, is hard to build and easy to lose. We knew we needed to have many people involved from the beginning, so the community members knew our goals here were not to do something performative, but to do something real.”

The five-night United in Yosemite festival, celebrating diversity in Yosemite climbing, took place June 23–28, 2023. It was an enormous success against a backdrop of the global conversation about identity and access and how people fit into spaces — including national parks, which have a charge of being open for and to everyone. Participants attended free of charge, and the festival

received more than 300 applications for the 100 available spaces, which were distributed by lottery. Organizers reserved 15% of tickets for members of the seven traditionally associated Tribes of Yosemite and 10% for people with disabilities. Travel stipends were also available via application.

The final event was a true collaboration among the NPS, the AAC, and the Conservancy, in partnership with Yosemite Mountaineering School and Guide Service, Queer Crush, ParaCliffHangers, Brown Girls Climb, Climbing for Change, and Yosemite Climbing Association. Thanks to funding from Conservancy donors, they were able to hire an event coordinator, who provided crucial continuity among organizations, work groups, volunteers, clinic and workshop leaders, and participants. United in Yosemite also received support from Parks Project, Rab, Arc’teryx, Luno, Wondery, Farm to Crag, All Rise, and Protect Our Winters.

“Yosemite is a notoriously intimidating and difficult-to-navigate location for any visitor — let alone if you’re trying to climb up rocks safely,” says Shara Zaia, manager of AAC’s Climb United. “That being said, this event

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“One of the things Yosemite is really good at is being an entrepreneurial test bed for ideas for other park areas.”

**Jesse Chakrin**  
YOSEMITE PARK RANGER

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didn't feel like just a climbing festival. It not only supported education about climbing practices and skills, but it also celebrated the community's passions for the arts, stewardship, and advocacy. The power of this event was that it reflected the perspectives and lived experiences of so many different people and organizations. It was truly a team effort.”

The organizers hope United in Yosemite will become an annual event and expand to parks beyond Yosemite.

“One of the things Yosemite is really good at is being an entrepreneurial test bed for ideas for other park areas,” Chakrin says. “We have a lot of capacity to try out new things, because we have amazing support from the Conservancy to be experimental. The goal is to talk to other national park areas that have significant climbing communities to see if we can get at least two or three other parks to host United events.”

The strength of the collaboration and community support is a testament to the success of the event.

“Despite how difficult and complicated it is to access the park, for the future of conservation in our national parks, it's important for the resources to be accessible to all who want to visit,” says Eddie Espinosa, director of community programs for AAC. “And with events like this one, we can learn and share information on how we can best make that possible.” ■

**Explore Yosemite**

DISCOVER the heights of Yosemite icons and how fire shapes our world at [shop.yosemite.org](https://shop.yosemite.org)

Conservancy donors receive a **20% discount** with code **HOLIDAY2023\***

\*Code valid through Jan. 31, 2024; online purchases only.

# Understanding Chinese History in Yosemite

*Funding the exploration and documentation of Chinese American contributions to the park*

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BY LAUREN HAUPTMAN

The contributions of Chinese American laborers to the development of historical infrastructure and other resources in Yosemite have long been unsung. Thanks to Conservancy donors, however, we are filling a gap in Yosemite's cultural history and interpretive offerings by researching and documenting the impact of Chinese American laborers to the park. New insights on Chinese American cultural history and involvement in the early years of Yosemite National Park are being recognized and readied to share with the public.

Chinese immigrants made up most of the workforce that built the Wawona Road — using only handpicks and shovels — during a period of just 18 weeks. Chinese laborers are also known to have helped build the 56-mile Great Sierra Wagon Road (today's Tioga Road) in the 1880s and, as well as Washburn Road, which connected Mariposa Grove to Wawona.

In 2019, a Conservancy grant to the National Park Service helped restore the old wooden structure in Wawona that once housed a laundry run by Chinese



A photograph of a kitchen exhibit. At the top, a white sign with red and blue lettering reads "LEE'S 李 CHINESE KITCHEN". Below the sign, a large black wok hangs on a red brick wall. To the right of the wok, a wooden rack holds several strings of dried red and white chili peppers and a smaller black wok. Below these, a black stove with a tall chimney pipe is visible. On the stove, a large black wok sits next to a wooden steamer basket filled with orange-colored dumplings. A wooden chair is partially visible in the foreground.

# LEE'S 李 CHINESE KITCHEN

**THE INTERIOR**  
of the Chinese Laundry features an exhibit depicting how the building would have looked when historic Chinese laborers lived and worked in Yosemite.

PHOTO: © COURTESY OF NPS.

workers. Conservancy donors Sandra and Franklin Yee were so inspired by this that they decided to fully fund the restoration and help develop new educational exhibits about Chinese history in the park.

“Franklin and I were looking for a long time for something to perpetuate the memory of my parents, who purchased a cabin in Wawona in 1953,” Sandra says. “We’ve had four generations there. We wanted our children and grandchildren to appreciate the legacy of what our parents left. My parents loved Yosemite, and Wawona was a special place for them. The fact that [the laundry] was on the same road as our cabin really made it for us.”

According to Franklin, most Chinese Americans at that time didn’t travel out of their locality.

“We loaded our family, including my grandmother, in the car,” he says. “I was on a stool in the backseat, and I have vivid memories of visiting the park. Both of us have these connections; our love for Yosemite goes back a long way.”

When Roger Fong saw press coverage of the Yees’ donation, he was delighted to see his family friend, Franklin, and was inspired to donate to the Conservancy, as well.

“All the times we went up to Yosemite, we never knew about that history,” Roger says. “It made us so proud.”

Roger and his late wife, Florence, contributed to the Chinese Laundry project last year. Their support facilitated the design and installation of two immersive display areas showcasing objects related to Chinese Americans at work in Western commercial kitchens and laundries, such as at the Wawona Hotel.

Additionally, thanks to the Yees and other generous donors, NPS staff members were able to survey and inventory construction sites and architectural ruins along Old Wawona and Tioga roads, evaluating the condition of historic retaining walls, roadbeds, culverts, quarries, and more. These comprehensive site records will provide evidence and support for future trail improvement and repair efforts, as well as opportunities to provide the public with new insights on Chinese American cultural history and involvement in the early years of Yosemite National Park.

“There’s a Chinese saying: ‘One generation plants the tree, and the next one enjoys the shade,’” Roger says. “This appropriately honors the forgotten pioneer Chinese immigrants in Yosemite who toiled tirelessly so we can all enjoy Yosemite today.” ■



# LEAVING YOUR *Legacy*

“Yosemite is as close to going home as any place can be ... the great meadows, familiar peaks, meandering river and inviting trails, the clear skies and twinkling stars at night never fail to move me deeply.”

**Nancy Weston**  
YOSEMITE CONSERVANCY DONOR

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**W**e all have magical Yosemite stories to share — from family vacations biking around the Valley to solo hikes through the Sierra. Whether you’re walking through Cook’s Meadow and watching the sunset, or exploring the park’s vast wilderness, Yosemite is a place where we create some of our most cherished memories.

For the past 100 years, generous donors have supported Yosemite in countless ways. Since the founding of the organization that would become Yosemite Conservancy in 1923, many hundreds of people have made a significant impact by including us in their estate plans, signaling to their loved ones that Yosemite is a place they hold dear. Recently, we’ve been especially fortunate to receive some exceptional bequest gifts, which will sustain the Conservancy’s work for generations.

Peter Sheldon and his wife, Ann, began contributing to Yosemite Conservancy in 2003, giving consistent annual gifts for almost 20 years. Advocates for the arts, education, and public lands, Peter and Ann generously supported several organizations, predominantly in their home state

of Maine, but they had a special connection to the West. Peter, who was the son of Huntington and Magna Merck, passed away in 2021. Yosemite Conservancy was honored to learn it was a beneficiary of his estate, along with 74 other charitable organizations. His bequest to Yosemite Conservancy totaled more than \$4.5 million, making it the largest bequest in the organization's history.

This transformative gift will ensure the vital work of Yosemite Conservancy continues to protect Yosemite for generations to come.

Nancy Weston, a longtime supporter of Yosemite Conservancy and an enthusiastic backcountry hiker, wrote in her 2008 journal: "It was my 41st trip to Yosemite since 1950. ... Had I known this would be my last trip, I would have wept all the way home."

Diagnosed with emphysema soon after, she was told not to go to high altitude again. But Yosemite was never far from her mind. When she passed away in 2011, Nancy left a generous bequest totaling \$2.85 million to Yosemite Conservancy.

Bequests or estate gifts such as Nancy's can go a long way towards enabling Yosemite Conservancy to protect and preserve Yosemite and enrich the visitor experience for all.

Dr. Larry Crane, a longtime fan of Yosemite, began supporting the park in the 1980s. When Larry passed away at the end of 2016, Yosemite Conservancy learned we were the beneficiaries of this estate. In partnership with



the executors of the will, the Lawrence & Annabelle Crane Endowment was formed, named in honor of Larry and his mother. This remarkable gift was Yosemite Conservancy's first unrestricted endowment fund, created with the \$2.98 million bequest. The Crane Endowment is an example of the lasting power and legacy of philanthropy.

By including a gift to Yosemite Conservancy in your will, you can help protect the park you love. Your donation will ensure Yosemite's wildlife, plants, and heritage are protected, and that life flourishes in this majestic park for generations to come. ■



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## Invitations are GOING DIGITAL

**TO SAVE PAPER** and streamline processes, Yosemite Conservancy donor event invitations are going digital! Please be sure we have your best email, so we can keep you in the loop. Email [info@yosemite.org](mailto:info@yosemite.org) to update your record with your new email address. Our next donor event is 2024 Spring Gathering, March 22-24.

*Be sure you're on the list!*



## MEET THE TEAM: HOWARD WEAMER

### THE REMOTE

Ostrander Ski Hut is only accessible by a 10 mile hike through snowy back country.

PHOTOS: (ABOVE) © ADONIA RIPPLE.  
(RIGHT) © COURTESY OF HOWARD WEAMER.



Scan to learn  
more about  
Ostrander  
Ski Hut

**FOR MORE THAN 50 YEARS**, Howard Weamer has welcomed intrepid winter explorers to the remote Ostrander Ski Hut. For many who make the journey to the High Sierra backcountry, Weamer is as integral to the experience as the shelter of the hut, itself. We caught up with him to learn more about what brought him to Yosemite, and what keeps him coming back time and time again.

### Tell us about your connection to Yosemite:

In the winter of 1970, I came to Yosemite researching a doctorate in history, of which John Muir was a piece. The park library had three of Muir's original journals and a fine collection of travel narratives, including reactions to Yosemite. After two years in an environmental school and two as

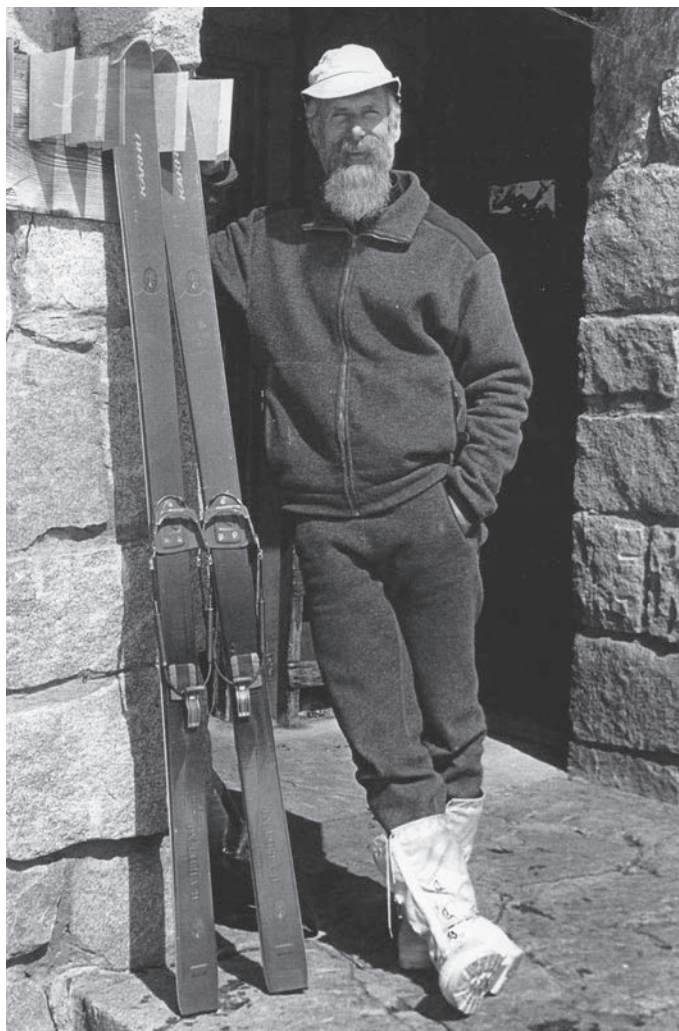
a photographer for the National Park Service (NPS), when the opportunity to spend a winter 10 ski miles in the backcountry arose, I took it. I packed up papers and books, and settled in upstairs at the Ostrander Ski Hut.

### Where do you spend your days?

What do hut-keepers do? First, there is no clock — I haven't worn a watch since 1963. The days are of our own making. There is some essential maintenance on an 80+-year-old structure — solar, water, plumbing, electrical — using what we have, we get creative with wire, glue and tape, and some creative additions.

A picture of (Chinese poet) Hanshan, taped on a kitchen cabinet, reminds us that every task is an opportunity to learn — every movement of the broom, every shovelful of snow — may bring enlightenment. We ski every day, and most guests ask about routes and avalanche hazards. We occasionally rescue the lost or delayed, and we have all been out in blinding snowstorms. We play games and socialize. And read, sometimes late at night in the quiet hut, or with the snow and wind rattling the sheetmetal roof, with a small fire and a book you can't put down. But why would someone do these simple tasks for nearly 50 years? When invited to join NPS, I thankfully declined. A structured office environment and its rewards held no interest for me. When Orion begins to rise in the east, shadows grow long, and the light is like late afternoon all day, I cannot imagine a better place than Ostrander Lake.

There is the meditative placement of a ski breaking trail uphill in fresh powder, the breath harmonizing with the stride, the effortless arc of a perfectly balanced turn, or the continual adjustment of balance in uneven snow, or travelling with a graceful glide through miles of untracked wilderness, stunned by how far one can go in a day. Balance, focus, openness — these are satisfying moments in a life. In this vein, one experience in the hut was particularly memorable. I was alone, descending the stairs, which have their own music. I paused, and the sound of a water droplet falling into a pot on the stove, passed



“Balance, focus, openness  
— these are satisfying  
moments in a life.”

through me, clearly changing the cells in my body by its wavelength, a brief oneness.

### What is one piece of advice you would give to hopeful Ostrander visitors?

The experienced need to stay with the inexperienced. It is an adventure and, hopefully, memorable for good reasons. ■

## 2023 HIGHLIGHTS

# YOU MAKE A *Difference*

**IN OUR CENTENNIAL YEAR,** Conservancy-funded project work illustrates more than ever the magnificent cumulative impact of sustained support. In a place loved by so many, the work of hands to restore and protect must keep pace with the impacts of 21st century visitation and climatic stressors. And even today, more than 100 years into our work, discoveries and epiphanies are still forthcoming on how to protect and share this special place.

So far this year, your support has helped our National Park Service partners ...



... survey salamanders! The first known **SALAMANDER SURVEY IN YOSEMITE** detected Sierra newts (above), ensatina salamanders, and Mt. Lyell salamanders at multiple locations in Yosemite Valley and Wawona. Individuals are swabbed to test for diseases, such as the chytrid fungus, which had such dire impacts on Yosemite's frog populations.



... assess the **MIST TRAIL** for improvements. Work is in full swing to overhaul visitors' experiences of the trail corridor from Happy Isles in Yosemite Valley, up the Merced River canyon, past Vernal and Nevada falls, and into Little Yosemite Valley, all the way to the top of Half Dome. This comprehensive project will address long-standing safety concerns, visitor orientation and wayfinding, and natural and cultural resource protection. Planning and pre-design are under way with a team that includes park and Conservancy staff; local Tribal members; and a team of architects, engineers, and exhibit specialists. Design will continue into 2025, and work will be phased through 2026 and beyond.

PHOTOS: (MIST TRAIL) © COURTESY OF RED BRIDGE GROUP. (NEWT) © COURTESY OF NPS. (ARC) © COURTESY OF ADVENTURE RISK CHALLENGE. (BATS, TOP AND BOTTOM) © COURTESY OF NPS.

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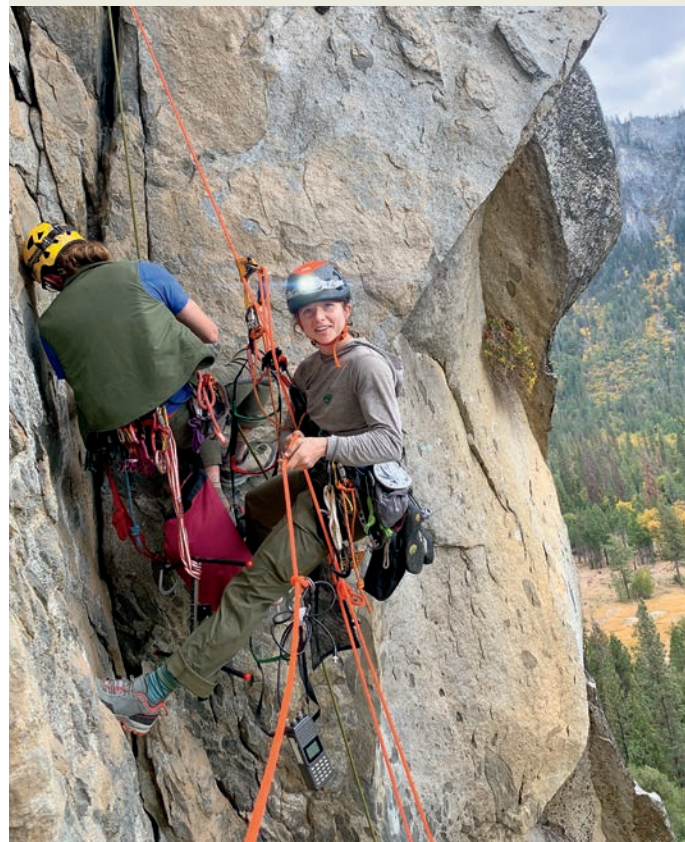
“With the ARC program, my confidence grew and made me stronger. I learned how to be a better person and how to be a leader. And when I get back home, I’m going to try to apply everything I learned here. I will be able to proudly say that I am a better person and that ARC was an unforgettable summer for me.”

**Dulce Garcia**

ADVENTURE RISK CHALLENGE PARTICIPANT



... host eight high school-aged students on **ADVENTURE RISK CHALLENGE’S** (ARC) signature Summer Immersion Course in Yosemite, which included 19 days of backpacking; three expeditions; and a total of 34 days of adventuring, classwork, writing, and skills building. The effective curriculum promotes self-reflection, personal growth, and leadership.



... discover 13 new **BAT ROOSTS**, representing seven different species, including the California myotis bat (pictured below). This year was the first of a three year effort to study bats in Yosemite, to better understand their habitat, and the threat posed by white-nose syndrome.





# Just Chillin'!

**Hey there, Junior Rangers!** Just because winter is cold doesn't mean the stories of Yosemite freeze. As the days get shorter and snow begins to fall, think about the animals that find a home in the park. Each one has adapted in its own unique way to thrive during the winter months. What winter secrets will you uncover in Yosemite's snowy landscapes?

**Imagine winter in Yosemite National Park:** Snow blankets the ground, icicles hang from towering cliffs, and the sun sets in the afternoon. The animals of Yosemite rely on unique adaptations to brave the harsh, cold months. Enjoy some of these untold tales of winter residents.

## Acorn Woodpecker

Acorn woodpeckers build granaries to store acorns for winter. Thousands of acorns are stored in individually pecked holes.



## Porcupine

Porcupines don't truly hibernate; they just become less active. Porcupines feed on tree bark and needles. A special underlayer of winter fur offers them protection from the cold.



## Ground Squirrel

While both male and female ground squirrels hibernate, males often emerge up to 14 days before the females in spring.



## Shrew

Shrews are among the smallest mammals in Yosemite. Scientists recently discovered shrews can shrink in winter when there are fewer insects to eat.



## Stay Curious!

Junior Rangers: Even in the heart of winter, nature keeps moving. In your own surroundings, what winter adaptations can you observe?

Birds might fluff up their feathers for warmth, or you might notice animal tracks in fresh snow.

Sketch or describe your findings, and maybe even research some cool winter facts. Embrace the season and stay warm, and more importantly, stay curious!

### Coyote

Coyotes use their excellent hearing to hunt in winter. They stand very still and listen for small mammals under the snow and then — POUNCE!

### Pacific Fisher

Fishers are tree-dwelling mammals that forage mostly for small birds and mammals. Despite the name, they do not eat fish, but they have been known to eat porcupine!

## Feed Your Curiosity

Find the official Yosemite Junior Ranger products at [shop.yosemite.org](http://shop.yosemite.org).

**NEW**

*Junior Ranger  
Pencil Pouch!*



### Sooty Grouse

Throughout the winter months, sooty grouse add to their diet by eating needles of fir and hemlock trees.



# YOSEMITE THROUGH YOUR LENS

Park fans share their  
photos of Yosemite.



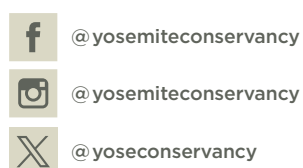
**A** Firewater  
© THOMAS SCOTT.

**B** El Capitan Reflected in  
the Icy Merced River  
© DEBRA SUTHERLAND.

**C** Reminiscing About That  
Time I Hiked Half Dome  
© PAOLO TANJUAKIO.

**D** Western Gray Squirrel  
Munching On Mistletoe  
© GARY ERBECK.

**Thanks for sharing  
your shots, Yosemite  
fans!** To see more  
photos of the park, and  
share your own, follow  
us on social media:



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There are many ways you and your organization can support the meaningful work of Yosemite Conservancy. We look forward to exploring these philanthropic opportunities with you.

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# PROVIDE A *Legacy for Yosemite*



**BY CREATING A LEGACY GIFT**, you can make an investment in Yosemite's future that will help protect this special place for decades to come.

Naming Yosemite Conservancy as a beneficiary of your will, trust, or retirement account ensures the park remains protected, well-preserved, and accessible. Your gift will sustain the enriching educational programs, scientific research, and habitat preservation efforts at the heart of the Conservancy's mission, so future generations can enjoy the wonder of Yosemite.

In the meantime, letting us know of your gift allows us to recognize you and welcome you to our Legacy Society.

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**To learn more** about a legacy for Yosemite, please contact Catelyn Spencer at [cspencer@yosemite.org](mailto:cspencer@yosemite.org) or **415.891.1039**.

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