

# Yosemite High Route

## *Part 2: As you go*

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### Introduction

In Part 2 I introduce each section of the Yosemite High Route, and inject environmental, historical, and personal context that is useful or interesting. But my primary mission in Part 2 is to describe in appropriate detail the Core Route, Approach Routes, and Alternates.

By intention, the route descriptions are succinct, so as to be navigator-friendly. They can also be cryptic or reserved, because they shouldn't steal your sense of adventure. Greatest attention is given to off-trail sections, to supplement detail that couldn't practically be included on the maps. On-trail bits are more often glossed over -- for backpackers capable of undertaking the Core Route, the topographic maps and datasheets should be entirely sufficient.

Where Alternates and Section-Hikes join or depart from the Core Route or Approach Routes, I have embedded a page-wide sidebar. Find full route descriptions of Alternates at the end of the section in Part 2, and of Section-Hikes in Part 3.

## Part 1: To Grace Meadow

The Core Route extends 94 miles from Grace Meadow, near the park's northern boundary, to the base of Quartzite Peak, along the Merced River ten miles upstream of Yosemite Valley. To reach Grace Meadow, follow one of the eight Approach Routes. For logistical information, consult Part 1 of the Guidebook; for mileage and vertical statistics, the Datasheets.

### #1: Pacific Crest Trail

Two Approach Routes to the northern terminus of the Core Route depart from Tuolumne Meadows, both about fifty miles in length. They overlap for the first six miles and for the final thirteen. The more well known option is the Pacific Crest Trail.

#### Parking

For thru-hikers, it's best to leave a vehicle at the Tuolumne Meadows Wilderness Center or the Lyell Canyon Trailhead (for the John Muir Trail and Pacific Crest Trail). The Core Route passes by these parking lots later on, so you can easily retrieve your food cache from a locker.

Both lots are on Tuolumne Meadows Lodge Road, which spurs off Tioga Road a half-mile east of the Tuolumne River bridge. The entrance to the Wilderness Center is 75 yards down this road, on the right; the Lyell Canyon Trailhead is 600 yards further, on the left.

The third parking area seems to have more space and to be used less. It's suitable for section-hikers, and may be required overflow parking for thru-hikers during peak days and times. At the Lumbert Dome Picnic Area, turn northwest off Highway 120 and park where permitted along this gravel road.

#### Tuolumne Meadows

**Approach Route: Grand Canyon** (junction 1) || Follow the Pacific Crest Trail to the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp.

**Section-hike: North Loop** (junction 1) || Follow the Pacific Crest Trail to the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp.

Begin this Approach Route at the Tuolumne Meadows Wilderness Center. Behind the food lockers in the southwest corner of the parking lot is the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), which here is the width of a car.

Walk west on the PCT towards the Tuolumne River, enjoying views of Unicorn Peak and Cathedral Peak to the southwest, and cross Tioga Road at the Lumbert Dome Picnic Area. Follow the gravel road northwest to a metal gate, beyond which the road becomes a sandier service track.

Following signs for Glen Aulin, veer right onto another track and walk around the north side of Soda Springs. Marked by placards and singletrack, find the official Glen Aulin Trailhead on the right/northwest side of the road. If you reach Parsons Memorial Lodge, built out of stone in 1915 by the Sierra Club, you've gone too far.

Probably happy to have that scene behind you, follow the Pacific Crest Trail to the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp, ignoring side-trails to the horse stables, Young Lakes, and Tenaya Lake. After crossing the Tuolumne River on a suspension bridge below White Cascade (a.k.a. Glen Aulin Falls) and walking past the camp entrance, reach a junction for Waterwheel Falls and Pate Valley.

**Approach Route: Grand Canyon** (junction 2) || Depart the PCT at this junction, and follow

## Jack Main Canyon

From Wilma Lake, the Pacific Crest Trail climbs gently for nearly ten miles along Falls Creek through Jack Main Canyon, to the park boundary at Dorothy Lake Pass. Follow it for two-thirds of this distance, until reaching the northern terminus of the Core Route in Grace Meadow at about 8,800 feet.

## **#2: Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne**

The Pacific Crest Trail may be better known, but I prefer the Approach Route through the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne. It's more varied and unique, and the namesake feature -- down which the Tuolumne River plummets 4,000 vertical feet in just 14 miles, an average of almost 300 vertical feet per mile -- is spectacular, especially in early-summer after healthy winters.

## Pacific Crest Trail

**Approach Route: Pacific Crest Trail** (junction 1) || From the Tuolumne Meadows Wilderness Center, follow the Pacific Crest Trail Approach Route to Glen Aulin. The parking instructions are equally applicable.

**Approach Route: Pacific Crest Trail** (junction 2) || At the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp, depart the PCT. These two routes reunite in Kerrick Canyon, and share the final thirteen miles to Grace Meadow.

## Grand Canyon

At the trail junction just north of the entrance to the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp, depart the Pacific Crest Trail by turning left/northwest onto the Tuolumne Canyon Trail. Drop into Glen Aulin, which in Irish Gaelic translates to "beautiful valley" and which is a filled-in lake now forested with aspens, red firs, and lodgepole pines.

The river meanders slowly to the lip of California Falls, where it begins a nearly uninterrupted succession of cascades, drops, and chutes eleven river miles to Pate Valley. The largest of these, Waterwheel Falls, is named for the shooting plumes that can be blown backwards by strong upcanyon winds, creating a circular flow.

Camping is permitted beyond California Falls. Sites will be easiest to find where the canyon bottom is wider and flatter, like below Return Creek, Cathedral Creek, and Register Creek. Unrelatedly, these side creeks -- as well as the detour above Muir Gorge -- are useful landmarks for navigation.

The hyperbolically but aptly named Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne was bored by the massive Tuolumne Glacier, which originated near Mt. Lyell and reached its maximum length of sixty miles about 20,000 years ago. Interestingly, it also carved much of Yosemite Valley, by pouring over into the Merced River drainage by way of present day Tenaya Creek.

As you descend, observe the changing tree species. Lodgepole pine, which were predominant in Tuolumne Meadows, will give way to the red firs, Jeffrey pines, and western junipers of the upper montane forest, the range for which is about 6,000 to 8,000 feet above sea level. Below that is the lower montane, characterized by black oak, incense cedar, and sugar pine (which is the source of the giant cones).

You may also notice climbing temperatures. Pate Valley is 4,000 feet lower than Tuolumne Meadows, and will be about 15 degrees warmer on average. Shade, ample water, and swimming holes (at least later in the season, once the current is less pushy) will help take the edge off, but deliberate scheduling is best. I recommend starting early from Tuolumne Meadows, resting during the hottest hours, camping near Pate Valley, and getting another early start to climb out of the canyon. Beware of