

Is Yosemite's rare firefall too beautiful for its own good?

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

- With a partner, write the names of as many waterfalls as you can in two minutes.
- Have you ever seen a waterfall? Describe the waterfall and how you felt when you saw it.

2 Key words

Match the key words with the definitions. Then find them in the article to read them in context.

unsanitary	spectacle	capturing	evaporation	huddled	orgy	convergence
buzz	precipitation	shooting	tripods	vividly	trampling	draconian

- very clearly and in a lot of detail _____
- an unusual, exciting or impressive event or sight _____
- a situation in which things gradually join to become one thing _____
- taking photographs or making videos _____
- lively positive interest from people who are all talking about the same particular thing _____
- recording an event in a film or photograph _____
- objects with three legs used for supporting a camera _____
- gathered close together _____
- putting your feet down on something in a heavy way that causes damage _____
- so dirty that you might catch diseases _____
- extremely strict and severe _____
- an occasion where a lot of people do something in an extreme way _____
- rain, snow, hail etc _____
- when a liquid changes into steam or gas and disappears into the air _____

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'It's a photo party': is Yosemite's rare firefall too beautiful for its own good?

Every February, Horsetail Fall is lit by the setting sun, bringing thousands of people to Yosemite to watch the phenomenon

Katharine Gammon

17 February, 2020

- 1 Aaron Meyer vividly remembers his first firefall. The spectacle of Yosemite's famous Horsetail Fall lit up by the setting sun, which lasts for just a few minutes per night for a few weeks in late February, is sought out obsessively by photographers like him.
- 2 "The clouds opened up just before sunset, and it looked like someone had taken a match to the waterfall – you watched it light up from top to bottom," he says of his first visit in 2011. "Everyone erupted in cheers; it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen."
- 3 Back then, photographing the natural phenomenon was a guessing game. The firefall requires a convergence of forces: enough moisture to fuel the falls, skies clear enough for the light to shine through and the right angle for the sun's light to hit the 1,000ft waterfall for a dazzling display of colour.
- 4 Soon after his first visit, Meyers, a trained engineer, built a computer program that could calculate the days that would have the best angle of the sun for optimal viewing and published his recommendations on his blog.
- 5 For a couple of years, no one seemed to notice – until 2015, when someone shooting beside him pulled out a paper copy of his blogpost. "It was like, people are actually using this," says Meyers.
- 6 Photographers are one of the reasons why the firefall has got so much buzz – from the time Ansel Adams captured the falls in 1940 up to now. But in recent years, the firefall's popularity has soared, boosted by social media and enthusiasts such as Meyers who have made capturing the phenomenon more accessible.
- 7 Paul Reiffer, a photographer from the UK, says he actually tries to avoid this time of year in Yosemite because the firefall's popularity has made it overwhelming. Reiffer says, when he visited in 2019, there were hundreds, if not thousands, of people jammed into the small areas ideal for viewing the falls.
- 8 "It felt like an outside concert, with everyone and their picnic blanket trying to claim their spot," Reiffer says. "It's crowded to the point where you are locking tripods with each other."
- 9 Reiffer also saw people leaving litter on the ground, breaking branches to get a better shot and leaving the appointed area to walk down to the riverbank for a closer view, causing large amounts of erosion.
- 10 "People forgot they were in Yosemite, in wilderness, which is really cool on its own," he says. "Instead, they just focused on getting the perfect shot. It's just a victim of its own success."
- 11 The park service says more than 2,200 people huddled to catch a glimpse of the falls on 22 February, the best day for viewing in 2019. The park's website describes visitors "trampling sensitive vegetation," while "areas became littered with rubbish, and the lack of toilets resulted in unsanitary conditions."
- 12 In response to the crowds, in 2020, the park service closed two of the ideal viewing areas, requiring everyone to walk 1.5 miles to the third remaining one – a step photographers call draconian.
- 13 The popularity doesn't deter everyone. Phil Hawkins, a Fresno-based photographer who has been visiting the falls for 37 years and teaches photo workshops in the park, says the party atmosphere is a positive. "Everyone is happy, everyone is in a good mood," he says. "People share equipment and food – it's a photography orgy."
- 14 In 2020, a dry winter left water levels in the park unseasonably low. Patrick Gonzalez, an environmental scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, who studies climate change and national parks, says the future of the firefall is uncertain.
- 15 "Projections under continued climate change also show a mixed picture, with two-thirds of climate models projecting increased precipitation and the rest projecting decreases," Gonzalez says. And even if total precipitation increases, it's not guaranteed that there will still be water; hotter temperatures due to climate change could increase evaporation and leave the park dry.
- 16 Gonzalez says that climate change has also been altering the park through droughts, bark-beetle infestations and wildfires.

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- 17 The photographers are seeing the changes on the ground, too. "Up until three years ago, it was fairly reliable that you'd have snow in February, spring conditions in June and July, and August would be dry," says Reiffer. But recently, he says, the seasons have become "completely random".
- 18 Ironically, the climatic shifts may allow a second viewing of the firefall: in late October, there's another window of time where the sun's angle

hits the falls. Usually, there's no water then – but it's possible that there could be another opportunity to see the phenomenon if moisture comes later in the year.

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3 Comprehension check

Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. Where is the waterfall?
2. What is its name?
3. How high is it?
4. What makes it light up and turn into a firefall?
5. How often does this happen?
6. What threatens the future of the firefall?
7. What problems and challenges does the firefall bring to the park?

4 Phrases

Rearrange the words to make phrases from the article. Read them again in context, and say what you think they mean.

1. to take something a match (para 2)
2. a spot claim (para 8)
3. own of victim its a success (para 10)
4. time of a window (para 18)

5 Photography vocabulary

- a. Find three verbs in the text that mean *take a photo*.
- b. Underline the stressed syllable in the following related words.

1. photo
2. photograph
3. photographer
4. photographic

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6 Discussion

- What beautiful natural phenomena are there in your country? If you've visited any of them, describe your experience.
- What is your favourite type of photography – portrait, landscape, wedding, wildlife, architectural, aerial or fashion photography?
- What's the most beautiful photo you've ever seen?
- What makes a photo beautiful?

7 Webquest

- Search for images of the natural phenomenon by typing *firefall Yosemite* into an images search field. Describe what you see.
- Read more on yosemitefirefall.com, including tips on how best to photograph the firefall.
- Find out more about Ansel Adams: who he was, where he worked and the type of photos he was famous for.

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KEY

1 Warmer

Famous waterfalls (possible answers): Niagara Falls (the US/Canada); Skógafoss Waterfall (Iceland); Angel Falls (Venezuela); Iguazu Falls (Brazil); Victoria Falls (Zambia/Zimbabwe); Yosemite Falls (the US)

2 Key words

1. vividly
2. spectacle
3. convergence
4. shooting
5. buzz
6. capturing
7. tripods
8. huddled
9. trampling
10. unsanitary
11. draconian
12. orgy
13. precipitation
14. evaporation

3 Comprehension check

1. in Yosemite National Park
2. Horsetail Fall
3. 1,000 feet (around 305 metres)
4. the setting sun in late February; For this to happen, there needs to be enough water in the falls, clear skies and the sun has to be at the right angle in the sky.
5. It can happen each night if the conditions are right for a few weeks in late February. It may also happen again in October due to climate change bringing more rain later in the year, too.

6. Climate change: dry winters could mean that water levels will not be high enough and/or increased temperatures in summer could leave the park dry and this could continue over into winter meaning that there would not be enough water in the falls.
7. It has become better known in recent years through social media, and more and more people want to be there to see it and to photograph it. Not all of these people respect the park – they leave litter, trample down vegetation, break branches to get a better view, leave the toilet areas unclean and treat the whole spectacle like an open-air party.

4 Phrases

1. take a match to something – light something up / set it on fire
2. claim a spot – say a space is yours
3. a victim of its own success – be badly affected because something is so successful
4. a window of time – a period of time when something can happen or is possible

5 Photography vocabulary

a.
photograph, shoot, capture

- b.
1. photo
 2. photograph
 3. photographer
 4. photographic