

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

### Level 2 • Upper intermediate

#### 1 Warmer

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

#### 2 Key words

Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

erosion  
drought

litter  
orgy

spectacle  
accessible

dazzling  
overwhelming

deter  
phenomenon

1. an unusual, exciting or impressive event or sight \_\_\_\_\_ (para 1)
2. an event that can be seen to happen or exist, especially a mysterious one \_\_\_\_\_ (para 3)
3. extremely impressive \_\_\_\_\_ (para 3)
4. easy for anybody to find and take advantage of \_\_\_\_\_ (para 6)
5. difficult to deal with the consequences \_\_\_\_\_ (para 7)
6. things such as pieces of paper that people have dropped on the ground in a public place, making it untidy \_\_\_\_\_ (para 9)
7. when the surface of land is gradually damaged and begins to disappear \_\_\_\_\_ (para 9)
8. make someone decide not to do something \_\_\_\_\_ (para 12)
9. an occasion where a lot of people do something in an extreme way \_\_\_\_\_ (para 12)
10. a period of time when there is no rain \_\_\_\_\_ (para 14)

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

Katharine Gammon

17 February, 2020

- 1 Photographer Aaron Meyer clearly 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 each night for a few weeks in late February.
- 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 cheered; it was the most amazing thing I'd ever seen."
- 3 At that time, photographing the natural phenomenon was a guessing game. The firefall requires a meeting of forces: enough water in 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 and published his recommendations on his blog.
- 5 For a couple of years, no one seemed to notice – until 2015, when someone taking photos beside him pulled out a paper copy of his blogpost. "I thought, people are actually using this," says Meyers.
- 6 Photographers are one of the reasons why the firefall has gained so much interest – 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 in the small areas with the best views of the falls.
- 8 "It felt like an outside concert, with everyone and their picnic blanket trying to claim their spot," Reiffer says.
- 9 Reiffer also saw people leaving litter on the ground, breaking branches to get a better shot and leaving the viewing 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 were at the falls on 22 February, the best day for viewing in 2019. The park's website says visitors walked on sensitive plants and left litter.
- 12 The popularity doesn't deter everyone. Phil Hawkins, a photographer who has been visiting the falls for 37 years and teaches photo workshops in the park, says the party atmosphere is positive. "Everyone is happy, everyone is in a good mood," he says. "People share equipment and food – it's a photography orgy."
- 13 In 2020, a dry winter meant water levels in the park were 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.
- 14 Gonzalez says that climate change has also been changing the park through droughts, bark-beetle infestations and wildfires.
- 15 The photographers are seeing the changes in the park, 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".
- 16 Ironically, climatic change 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 rain 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 problems and challenges does the firefall bring to the park?

#### 4 Phrases

Rearrange the words to make phrases from the article. Find them, 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 16)

#### 5 Photography vocabulary

- a. Find two verbs in the text that mean *take a photo* (in paragraphs 3 and 6).
- b. Underline the stressed syllable in the following related words.

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

#### 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.
- 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. spectacle
2. phenomenon
3. dazzling
4. accessible
5. overwhelming
6. litter
7. erosion
8. deter
9. orgy
10. drought

#### 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. 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, damage vegetation, break branches to get a better view, cause erosion and behave like they were at 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, capture

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