

Tenaya Canyon - Sep 16, 2006

Matt Covington had been talking about doing a trip down Tenaya Canyon for several years for the annual YAF Yosemite trip, and this turned out to be the year where we could finally try it. This year was "Matt's Hike IV", and after a great trip up Mt Conness last year for Hike III, it would be a tough act to follow. We would not be disappointed.

We were camped at our usual spot in Housekeeping in the valley, and we knew we would have to be up early to drive to Tenaya Lake to start the hike. We had a good reference from <http://www.dankat.com/swhikes/tenaya.htm> containing a detailed description of our great adventure. The guide said it would be a 10 hour and 10 mi hike, but Matt C was anticipating at least 12 hours.

The "Magnificent Seven" started from camp a little after 5:00 in the morning - I thought 6:00 last year for Mt Conness was an early start! It looked like it would be a good day - Orion and a waning crescent moon hung high in the starry sky. A weather system had just passed a couple days ago, bringing some nasty weather to the mountains - we were pretty lucky. The 7 of us - Matt and Elizabeth Covington, Karen, Leon, Conrad, Sam, and me started up 120 out of Yosemite Valley and along the Tioga road. The first rays of dawn started as the sky turned from black to deep blue to lighter blue and finally to yellow and orange as we neared the trailhead. A black bear scooted by us on the road and scurried back into the woods.

We arrived at the Sunrise trailhead by Tenaya Lake around 6:30, and we started getting our gear ready. Much to my dismay, I realized some things were missing from my pack - apparently in the middle of the night while I was fishing for my earplugs so I could sleep (which I later realized were missing anyway), I dumped my harness out of my pack, and in the early morning in my semi-consciousness I didn't bother to double-check my pack. I also was wearing my sneakers, which I had planned to leave in the car, but again in my foggy mental state, I had forgotten that we weren't going back to the car. So I just needed to exchange my sneakers for my harness... oh well ... fortunately Matt C had an extra harness (since at 4:31 am, Ed decided to sleep in until 9 and not go on the hike), and my sneakers weren't that heavy to carry on the trail... I even almost grabbed my pillow so I could sleep in the car, but thanks Elizabeth for reminding me that unless I carried my pillow on the trail, I wouldn't have a pillow to sleep on tonight.

We hit the trail in the early morning light - the first rays cast a pink alpenglow on the peaks of Mt Hoffmann above us. Some deer were peacefully grazing on some of the meadows in the chilly morning air. A cold front had just passed, leaving frigid temperatures but clear skies. We had to take care not to slip on the ice of the frozen ponds in the granite slabs by the trail. The ground was frozen with long crystals of hoar frost - patches of sand were raised up a couple inches, and when you picked them up, you would see thousands of needle-like ice crystals.

We were on the trail about 15 minutes when Matt C pointed to the right and we promptly left it. It would be 10 hours later before we'd see a trail again. The trail passed some scattered granite slabs in patchy forest as we found the drainage of Tenaya creek. We were just passing by a frozen pond when we noticed some pretty fresh bear tracks and scat. Maybe it was from the bear we saw on the road a little earlier.

The path became rockier as we followed the boulder-strewn streambed of Tenaya creek. Just ahead, we saw an interesting sign - "WARNING - This is not a trail. Travel beyond this point is dangerous without climbing equipment. Return to Tioga Road". Well, we were with Matt C (on Hike IV), so we already knew we were not on a trail. And we had climbing equipment. We promptly ignored the sign and continued down the rocky canyon.

The canyon soon opened into a wide-open granite bowl of smooth polished rock. This kind of scenery is some of my favorite - this was classic Yosemite granite, stretching for miles all around. You could probably spend hours just wandering around and exploring, but we had a mission for the day - get down the canyon before dark! A deep pool filled an unusual isolated hole in the white rock. It was as if God took a big ice cream scoop and scoured out a chunk of the rock.

At the base of the bowl, we stopped for a short snack of beef jerky and dried mangoes before re-entering a forest. It was interesting how dramatically and how fast the scenery could change - we were now in a lush pine forest. Soon afterward, the forest disappeared and we were again on a huge granite slab, now looking for a large glacial erratic boulder called the "Lone Boulder". It was interesting to imagine how such a large boulder was just sitting there - it had been moved by glaciers long ago and deposited there. Finding this boulder and traversing the slabs the right way would assure us of avoiding the Pywiack cascades where the polished granite slabs got so steep that a slip would send you a thousand feet down.

We found the Lone Boulder and practiced our bouldering skills a bit - the view from the top of the boulder included the polished slabs leading deep into Tenaya canyon, the smooth south face of Mt Watkins, and Half Dome standing tall in the distance. We could tell what was coming, and this is what Matt C feared the most - the "slabs of doom". We had about 1000 feet to descend down smooth granite slabs, and we had to try to find the best route down. I figure you were OK on a slope up to about 45 degrees before slipping (the giant glaciers that created this canyon left a smooth glacial polish all over the rock, making it **very** slippery in places). The slabs here were about 40 degrees, pretty close to 45...

To get to the easier slabs, we had to cross some talus fields and do "a little bushwhacking" according to the directions. However, the "little bushwhacking" was about 15 minutes of pure torture in the "bushes of doom" - it involved swimming through a 8 foot high wall of thick bushes, where you had to hang onto branches to avoid falling deeper into the mess and dropping down 3 foot holes hiding under the tangled foliage.

Finally, past the bushes, we got on the steep slabs. The clean slabs descended all the way down to Tenaya creek, forming an elegant pattern of diagonal lines down the canyon. We got increasingly better views of Half Dome and Yosemite Valley as we descended - but we had to be even more careful - one misstep while gazing at the majestic scenery could send you on a long slide down the polished rock. In fact, somehow, my foot managed to dislodge a fairly sizable chunk of rock, which started sliding down the slope. After yelling **ROCK ROCK**, I saw the people in front of me get out of the way of the sliding boulder. The rock slid through a row of bushes, which I thought would have stopped it, but soon after, I heard it sliding again further down the slope. I couldn't tell if it went all the way down to the creek or something else managed to stop it. This proved even more how careful we had to be on the slabs.

My knees started to ache as we continued down the steep slabs. I had to keep my legs flexed all the time to make sure my feet were secure. A few times, I resorted to sliding on my butt, using my hands and feet for security - even then, I wasn't totally sure if I would start sliding! The scenery was rather surreal - nothing but open slabs of granite angling downward all around us toward the Lost Valley containing Tenaya creek.

We were almost done with the slabs of doom when we ran into the talus of doom. We had a talus field to cross, but each boulder in this talus field was 10 to 20 feet in diameter! It wasn't so easy to just hop from one to another, when there were 4-foot gaps in between boulders and one boulder was 6 feet higher than the next one down. We ended up all picking different routes between the giant rocks,

and I chose a route that actually passed underneath a bunch of the boulders. Numerous caves had formed in the spaces between and under the boulders, making an interesting labyrinth of passageways, some emerging at the bottom of the rock pile. The boulders looked pretty stable - hopefully one wouldn't decide to roll when there were people underneath it!

Finally, past the talus of doom, we were in the Lost Valley, following a boulder-strewn streambed through a nice pine forest. A few deep blue pools remained, remnants of the water that rushed through Tenaya creek during the spring snowmelt. The pools looked inviting for swimming, but after checking the temperature of the water, my mind was rapidly convinced otherwise.

After following the streambed for a while, our path soon took us to a steep drop-off. We were at the edge of the Inner Gorge - a place where Tenaya creek enters a deep inner canyon. A waterfall flowed down the granite slabs at the entrance of the gorge, and we found this to be a perfect lunch spot. We had to get our rappelling gear ready and get the rope rigged for our first drop. The directions indicated there were at least 4 rappels, even though some if not all could be down-climbed with care.

Just up a little from our lunch spot, we found the register. A man named S.L. Foster carved his initials into the wall - this spot was called the "Initial Ledge". Apparently Foster made annual trips down Tenaya canyon for many years. According to the register, it looked like only one other group made this trip down Tenaya canyon this year - and that was on Sept 11. It's possible other groups also went, since the register is a little out of the way, and groups would have to know to look for it in order to find it and sign it.

Our rappelling gear was ready, and Matt C had the rope rigged. Fortunately, enough groups descend Tenaya canyon that there are permanent anchors on all the rappel points, so groups don't have to worry about bringing bolts and anchors. It also looks like the anchors were replaced recently, since they looked pretty new and quite sturdy. Each rappel point had 2 anchors for redundancy in case one of them pulled out while somebody was on rope.

Elizabeth was the first one down, and she bottom-belayed the next few people. I was using one of Matt C's spare harnesses and a mini-rack for a descender. It was pretty easy - a nice 40 ft drop just a little way past the waterfall. Matt C was the last one down, and before he went down, he re-rigged the rope so it was just looped through the anchors and did a double-rope rappel. So when he was done, he could just pull on one end of the rope, sending the other end through the anchor and back out. This is how we did all the rappels.

At the base of the rappel, we were again in the rocky streambed of the canyon, boulder-hopping our way along and dodging the pools of water. It was starting to warm up a bit later in the day, and we were at lower elevation. A swim again looked really nice, but the water was still just a couple degrees above freezing! The directions say there are nice places to swim, but I think you'd have to be a member of the polar bear club to try it!

We reached a point where the rocky canyon walls were slightly overhanging on both sides, making the canyon almost like a tunnel. Directly through the tunnel, you could see Half Dome and Yosemite Valley clearly in the distance, and at the base of the canyon were some beautiful deep turquoise pools in the white rock. It was a piece of paradise. We ended up hanging out for about an hour, taking pictures in every direction, having a snack, and getting people down the next drop.

We were at a place where a giant 25-foot boulder choked the canyon, and a deep turquoise pool was just on the other side. On one side of the boulder, you could carefully down climb down to the pool, but you would have to swim about 50 feet - you couldn't touch the bottom. The other option was a 25-foot rappel down a waterfall, but then you would only have to wade across the pool up to about

your waist. We all knew the temperature of the water and all opted for the rappel and wade option.

We took turns rappelling the drop - it looked like a fairly straightforward rappel. However, when Elizabeth started the rappel, she slipped while trying to cross the lip on the top, and she managed to get her long hair trapped in her rappel rack! She wasn't in pain, but she was stuck. Rappelling further would get the hair stuck even worse, and she didn't have scissors to cut the hair or prussiks to ascend and try again. With a little squirming, she got her head free, but a few seconds later, a tuft of blonde hair blew over past me.

It ended up being anything but a straightforward rappel - for many of us, this was our first bare-foot rappel, and for some, our first rappel in nothing but swim trunks. The bottom of the rope was in about 3 feet of water, and you had to wade about 50 feet to get back to dry land. Plus, the rappel was through the waterfall - both climbers and water took the easiest way down. Additionally, the rocks were slippery like ice - as soon as your foot touched them, you would slide right off, and the force would send you twirling around on the rope. It was a unique experience being right in the middle of the waterfall, having a brilliant double rainbow in front of you forming a complete circle.

The interesting part of this drop was getting the packs across the lake. Since it would be tricky to rappel with them through the falls and across the lake, we decided to zip-line them down the rope. A few people had already descended, and they pulled the rope tight down and across the lake, forming about a 30-degree angle downward. We clipped our packs to the tight rope, and for the most part, they shuttled down the zip line nicely, crossing the lake and making it down. However, it took a little trial and error to get the line right. The first pack got stuck about half way down, and we tried bouncing the line to get it to move. However, with the force of the bounce, the pack got unclipped from the line, sending it hurtling straight in the middle of the pool! Fortunately, our first test runs were with the waterproof packs that could withstand a splash. The next pack was a little too light and took a bit of coaxing to get across. We found that sending heavier packs worked better. Two lighter packs clipped together also worked. Some of us wrapped our packs in garbage bags just for extra security. I was just happy when my pack (with my camera and GPS and cell phone) made it safely down!

It probably took an hour and a half to get everyone and their packs down this 25-foot drop and pool, but it was probably the most scenic portion of the whole day. Continuing down the canyon, we reached the next drop, when the canyon deepened even further. The down climbing was tricky in places, and we would sometimes realize we were on the wrong side of the creek. We'd have to go to the other side where the down climbing was more manageable. In one place, the easiest way was through a cave formed by some large boulders, which formed a perfect window facing Half Dome in the distance.

At one point, the canyon was too steep, and we found another set of rappel rings where we would rig the next rappel. Sam had actually already down climbed this part and complained that he couldn't find the rappel anchors, but he didn't realize he was already at the base of the rappel! I didn't trust my down climbing abilities as much as he did, and decided to go with the rappel instead.

At the base of this 70-foot rappel was another short drop that many of us were able to down climb. Conrad and Leon down climbed it without too much difficulty, and they were able to spot me down. The others did a rappel over a large boulder with a cave behind it. It was interesting to sit in the back of the cave and be able to watch people in front of me go down.

One of the most memorable parts of the day was just after this point, where the canyon dropped about 40 feet. A sloping waterfall cascaded down some smooth granite, plunging into a really deep blue pool. I wanted to just slide down and splash into the pool - if only the water was just a little warmer!

What was interesting about this area was a giant round hole carved in the rock. A smooth hole about 4 feet wide, 8 feet long, and 6 feet deep had formed next to the waterfall. Again, it was like a giant ice cream scoop had dug out this hole.

This part looked downclimbable, and Leon had already down climbed it, when I saw the next rappel point. This would be our fifth rappel. The rope was still rigged on the previous rappel point and the last person was still on rope. I decided to follow Leon so I carefully inched my way down next to the waterfall, avoiding the wet and slippery parts, where I was able to cross over into the giant hole. Thanks Leon for helping me place my feet in the right places. It was quite enticing to see where this deep hole went or if there was treasure inside or something - it was so out of the ordinary. Climbing around the hole, and traversing a steep ledge by wedging my hands and feet into cracks, I made it down and avoided a cold swim. It was fun to sit on a rock and watch some people rappelling straight into the hole later on! In order to avoid the hole and the pool, you had to rappel at about a 45-degree angle to the left. You had to do it carefully since if you slipped, you would pendulum all the way across the rock slope and into the waterfall!

Shortly after this last rappel, we could put away our climbing harnesses and fill our water bottles. Apparently just one drop of bleach per liter of water was enough to clean the bacteria (but you had to wait 30 minutes). And you could barely taste the bleach. It had been a long day already - it was probably about 4:00 now, and when I checked my GPS, I realized we had only covered about half the distance to reach Mirror Lake at the bottom!

Fortunately, all the technical parts were done, but we still had a lot of rough going yet to go. The deep canyon ended, spilling out into a broad forested valley, where we followed the rocky streambed. Up and to our right were the mighty Watkins Pinnacles, and the Quarter Domes loomed high to our left. Half Dome and Glacier Point were still in front of us. We finally spotted a use trail weaving through the forest. The late afternoon light was starting to wane as we continued descending toward Yosemite Valley. Unfortunately, the flies started to come out, swarming around our sweaty bodies incessantly. But I didn't care too much - I was so tired and eager to get back home!

The use trail disappeared and reappeared several times, and when we ended up in rough boulders or patches of poison oak, we knew we were off the trail. Often, the trail would be just a little above us and we picked it up again. It was such a relief to see a footbridge across Tenaya creek - we knew we were home free now. We followed the wide graded trail past Mirror Lake, catching the vivid evening alpenglow on the face of Half Dome in front of us. It felt like an eternity, but we finally reached the paved road and headed toward the nearest bus stop. The sign said it was 1.3 miles to Housekeeping camp - probably a 30-minute walk, but I'd rather wait 30 minutes for a bus than walk!

We just missed the bus, and we were wondering when the next one would come, and when one finally did come, it was full (probably of half-domers coming back from their hike - maybe some from YAF were on that bus...). We should have walked! At least I got to laugh when I took off my hiking boots and put on my comfy sneakers again! Having the sneakers was finally all worth it!

It was only a minute or two after when another bus showed up and took us back to Housekeeping, where we eagerly jumped into the hot showers and enjoyed some great tri-tip BBQ and smores and songs around the campfire.

What a day - we had traversed 10 miles of rugged canyon and dropped about 4100 feet, all in about 12 ½ hours. The guide said 10 hours - we were pretty close. We still had 2 vehicles parked by Tenaya Lake - thanks Conrad, Matt C, and Sam for going back the next morning to get the cars - it was over an hour drive each way!

Well, Matt C's adventures get more interesting every year - we have now done Echo Ridge, Tuolumne Peak, Tenaya Peak and Mt Conness (same weekend), and Tenaya Canyon. Matt is talking about doing a 50-mile dayhike starting in Yosemite Valley, crossing over 11200 ft Red Peak Pass in the Clark Range and looping back to the valley - will this be Hike V?