

The Falls Trail

Trailhead: end of Regency Dr., off Marsh Creek Rd., eastern edge of Clayton. Follow Ygnacio east to Clayton Road, turn right on Clayton; follow it past downtown, where the road rejoins Marsh Creek Road. Turn right on Regency Dr., to the end. **Route:** Donner Canyon Rd. to Cardinet Oaks Rd., to Falls Trail, to Middle Trail and back
Distance: 4.8 miles round trip **Change in Elevation:** 1200 feet each way
Difficulty: Some steep areas on Donner Canyon. Road, but the Falls Trail is relatively easy. Mitchell Canyon does not have big falls, but is easier going and streamside.
Best Time To Go: After a heavy rain; expect mud in lower Donner Canyon, January – April.

The calls come every winter-especially after a local newspaper runs a vague article and a bad map: "How do you get to the waterfalls?" (See above) "Are dogs allowed?" (No) "Are they close?" (about 2.5 miles each way) "How hard is it?" (If you have to ask, it's probably too difficult) "Is it muddy or wet?" (Yes, and that's the best time to go).

Mount Diablo has a forbidding image to many, in part because of its name. While creeks may dry in summer, the reality is that there are always cool canyons, and even on hot days cool breezes cross upper elevations. On the north side of the mountain are three large, wooded canyons. Because they're protected from the sun most of the day, Donner, Back and Mitchell Canyons have among California's best wildflower shows. The waterfalls in the upper reaches of Donner Canyon are icing on the cake. Save Mount Diablo worked with the State to preserve most of the three canyons in the mid 1970s, and helped acquire North Peak's summit in 1980.

Starting at Regency Drive, (1) you immediately cross Donner Creek just above where it merges with Back Creek in Clayton's Open Space. It looks as though the creeks had carved a gorge between Regency and Mountaire. The streets dead-end immediately across from each other leaving the creeks un-culverted, testimony to creek protection efforts in Clayton. Both creeks were very full and the lower reaches of the canyon somewhat muddy. Mud is a good sign that the waterfalls are booming in the canyon above.

Follow Donner Creek across the lower foothills with their big valley oaks and non-native eucalyptus and up into the Canyon for the first mile and a half. You'll pass the charred remains of the old Hetherington cabin (2) and soon after leave the creek bank to begin climbing more seriously. Before long, views will open up to the Mt. Zion quarries to the west, to Mitchell Rock a little to their south, and to the urbanized Clayton valley below. Turn around and stop often to see the quickly expanding view. You'll pass the Tick Wood and Hetherington Loop trails (3) before reaching the Cardinet Oaks Rd.

The wildflower show will really get going in March and April, but in the winter the signs of the 1977 fire that burned across this section of the mountain are more visible, from blackened tree trunks, to the ghostly groves of dead gray manzanitas surrounded by the red-trunked, new growth that issued forth after the fire.

At the Cardinet Oaks Rd., (4) Back Canyon is to the west. In the distance the Keller Ranch (Oakhurst) development is visible east of Clayton Rd. After climbing, the Cardinet Oaks Rd. heads downhill and crosses Donner Creek (5). Just past the creek, older manzanitas show the lovely red veins of living tissue twining around otherwise dead gray branches. You'll double back up-slope in a short, steep section. The Falls (6) trail cuts off steeply uphill and to the east (right) just above a turn in the road, near the 1400' contour, but quickly levels out.

As the trail crests, the water falls become visible, and the view stretches back all the way to Martinez and Benicia. On a good day the water and falls will be clearly visible on three different branches of the creek, crossing the many layers of sedimentary and metamorphic rock visible the length of the trail. The twisted, rocky landscape appears almost volcanic. The first fall sometimes drops more than 25 feet. Even in December, the green fronds of the polypody ferns are visible on the rocks and one of the season's first blooms, the pink racemes of wild currants, can be spotted.

Be sensitive. The slopes are steep and erosion prone. Stick to the main trail and avoid the temptation to climb down to the falls. It's dangerous and it's damaging. Depending on the season, you'll cross the creeks several times, before joining the Middle Trail (7) and taking the down slope back to the Donner Canyon Rd (4). Throughout the hike you'll enjoy the roar of the creeks.

Variations:

1. Consider climbing up to the Meridian Ridge Road (8), and then down the Meridian Pt. trail (9) into Back Canyon (10). The Back Creek Trail ends where you parked, after passing through more wildflowers & thicker chaparral.
2. Consider starting at the Mitchell Canyon Trailhead (11) and ascend using the Coulter Pine Trail (12) to the Back Creek Trail (13) and enjoy an easier ascent on the Tick Wood Trail (14) to reach the Donner Creek Trail (3). Remember there is a fee to park at Mitchell Canyon.
3. Consider following the Middle Trail (7) and the Falls Trail (6) in a counter-clockwise direction to avoid the steep ascent on the Cardinet Oaks Road (4).

