



## Yosemite Volunteer Trip September 7-13, 2025 Trip Report



### OVERVIEW

Conservation Volunteers International Program (ConservationVIP®) led a volunteer trip to Yosemite National Park September 7-13, 2025. We returned again to Yellow Pine Campground located in Yosemite Valley. This beautiful and isolated campground is reserved for volunteer organizations and is essentially off the grid to tourists. The Yellow Pine area is naturally beautiful with a stunning view of granite walls and has the Merced River running along the side of the campground which provides easy access to swimming locations including Sentinel Beach and Swinging Bridge. Our catering partner, Willow Creek Catering, returned again this year to prepare gourmet breakfasts and dinners and hearty sandwiches for our pack lunches throughout the week. They are a meaningful part of our camping experience and have become like family, greeting us with coffee at sunrise and ending our days with delicious dinners and dessert at sunset.

On this trip, we were a group of 13 volunteers, including trip leaders Nancy Hartsig and Tom Riley. Under the supervision of our NPS Trail Crew Leader, Eamon Schneider, the group completed 304 volunteer hours on projects which included:

- Split rail fencing repair and social trail reparations at the Lower Yosemite Falls trail area
- Picking up trash in several picnic areas near Swinging Bridge
- Replacing the old-style double rail and hardware fence with the new, split rail cedar fencing on the Tuolumne Grove road trail
- Trail maintenance on the Tuolumne Grove Loop trail including improvements to swales, berms and water drains, and elimination of obstructions to water flow.

#### Tools used during work week:

- Shovels, rakes, loppers, tamping bars, fence post diggers, and log clamps.

## DAILY RECAPS

- **Arrivals** – The leaders, Nancy and Tom, arrived on Saturday (9/6) to set up camp for the week at the Yellow Pine Volunteer Campground. We were assigned Site E which is a beautiful grassy meadow interspersed with tall evergreens and glimpses of the granite cliffs on both sides of the Valley. The Merced River flowed gently by and provided a refreshing place to rinse off in the afternoons or just enjoy the sunrise before breakfast. Our camp host, Patty, was enthusiastic and accommodating, providing us with firewood, drinking water, the occasional forgotten necessities and expert suggestions for how to get around the Valley and places to explore.

The volunteers arrived on Sunday afternoon, went about setting up tents and organizing camping gear and introducing themselves to the other team members. When everyone was settled in, we had our orientation meeting. During the meeting we covered the following topics:

- Introductions and expectations
  - Emphasis on priorities for the week; 1) safety, 2) fun, and 3) volunteer projects
  - National Park Service leadership
  - Camp rules / food storage / quiet times
  - Mealtimes, snacks and hygiene
  - Volunteer project hours, basic duties, travel, lunch prep, morning routine and travel to worksite(s) and showers
  - Free time available for exploration and sign-out sheets
  - Contact cards distributed and photo release forms for volunteer signature
  - Individual and group conversations around expectations and what volunteers are most looking forward to during the week
  - Evening debriefings after dinner around campfire
- **Monday, September 8<sup>th</sup>** – introduction of Eamon Schneider, NPS Trail Crew Leader and first workday
- Unfortunately, we woke up to smoke in the air from the wild fires down in the Kings Canyon / Sequoia National Park areas to our south. Masks were offered to volunteers to minimize health concerns.
  - Eamon came to breakfast to give us the news that our trail work this morning would need to be cancelled as the AQI level (air quality) was above the threshold for which the NPS will allow their crews and volunteers to work. However, we took the time to introduce ourselves to and to visit with Eamon as he explained the project options that he was considering for us for the remainder of the week and fielded questions. We agreed to take the morning as personal time during which we were to minimize excursion and regroup at lunch to determine if the AQI level would drop sufficiently to do a half day of fence repair nearby in the Valley. Eamon returned and shared that the AQI had not sufficiently dropped but was hopeful that Tuesday would be better. Most of us were seasoned volunteers/hikers/campers and while all were disappointed, everyone was understanding and remained positive.
  - Half of the group wanted to use their rest time this afternoon on a low excursion activity by walking the nearby picnic areas and removing trash. This included the Sentinel Beach area and the areas around Swinging Bridge. The other half was interested in

reaching the higher elevations and hiking back down to the camp. Nancy drove these volunteers up to Glacier Point where the air was clear and the view was impressive. After finishing their lunches while embracing the view, the group hiked back down the Four Mile Trail which ends just outside of the campground.

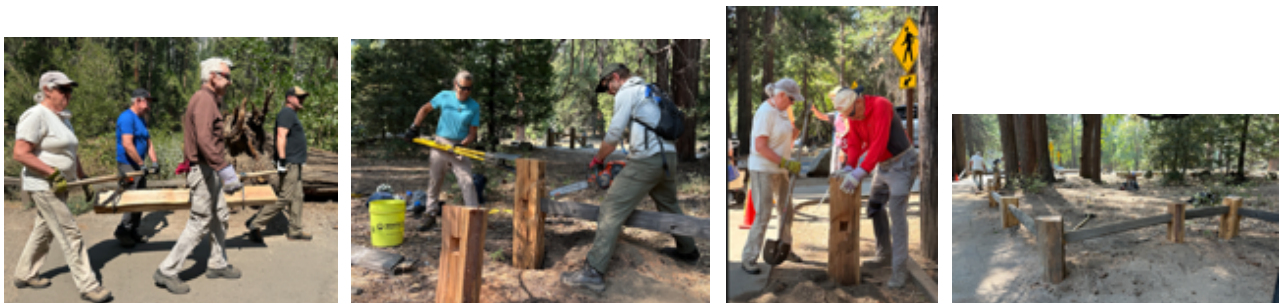
- By late afternoon the air had improved significantly in the Valley and we all shared our adventures of the day over dinner and around the campfire. We had a visit from a couple of rangers who were tracking one of their tagged bears who was traveling through the Yellow Pine area and they shared with us how they track and manage the 300-500 bears around the park and fielded our questions. No bear sightings that evening!



➤ **Tuesday, September 9<sup>th</sup> - Fence repair at Lower Yosemite Falls.**

- The smoke had fully cleared overnight and we were able to accomplish a lot today with our crew of 13.
- We were replacing the rotted fence posts with new ones and refitting them with rails at Yosemite Falls across the road from the Lodge. 25 post holes were dug to a depth of 36". That is deep! New posts were inserted and then Eamon helped (chainsaw) to refit the rails to the posts.
- We also disguised a social trail of about 40 ft in length. Roughly 160 sq.ft. of area.

It was a great day to enjoy the beauty of the park around us as we accomplished our first tasks and built our team relationships.



- **Wednesday, September 10<sup>th</sup>** - Today we left the Valley and drove to Tuolumne Grove, a lesser-known trail loop to the North with many beautiful giant Sequoias. These included Big Red, the Tunnel Tree (that Stagecoaches used to drive through in the 1890s) and several fallen Sequoias that are impressive to walk alongside.
- We conducted fence repairs along the road between Big Red and the Grove Loop. Some fencing was the old style that required hardware removal (threaded bolts, nuts, washers), some was newer fencing that had been damaged by a fallen tree. In total, 10 new posts and 124.5 feet of rails.
  - At the Loop entrance we removed storm wash debris at the base of the fence line and then created new berms and swales for water diversion along 102.5 feet of trail.
  - We did additional trail clean up along the 0.40 mile loop by lopping brush and branches away from the trail edges, brushing scattered bark pieces away from the center of the walking trail, and created a drain under a fallen tree to enable water flow off the trail.

It was another inspiring day in Yosemite National Park.



- **Thursday, September 11<sup>th</sup>** - Today we returned to Tuolumne Grove to continue the projects from Wednesday.
- We learned the differences between steps, log checks and water drains as we did trail repair on a sloped section of the Grove Loop.
  - We inserted 5 log checks below a water bar that had been undercut by water flow. This involved digging trenches to half bury the log perpendicular to the trail and adding material to reduce the grade between adjacent logs.

- One group created a swale above the water bar to divert water and debris under the fence and off the trail. Then narrowed the width of the trail by adding material along the sides to discourage foot traffic on the edges. This was all done along a 42-foot section of the trail.
- A second group cleaned up a 57-foot section of the trail that involved removing broken fence rails and rebar, adding or improving 3 swales and berms, and pushing a couple of large sections of tree trunks (36 inches in diameter!) off the trail. Fallen bark and dead branches were brought to the sides to provide a natural appearance.
- The third group dedicated themselves to finishing the fencing along the road by Big Red. This involved removing 10 double post sections and 18 rails along a 72-foot section of the road. Then digging 36-inch-deep holes for the 10 new posts and resetting the rails. This completed the replacement of the older style fencing (double post and hardware) in that location.

It was another rewarding day in Yosemite National Park.



- Other activities during the week and rest day on Friday, September 12<sup>th</sup>
  - Our end of day free time was spent in a variety of ways including exploration of the river around camp and Sentinel Beach, roaming across Swinging Bridge to enjoy views of the Valley, exploring Yosemite Lodge, Yosemite Village and Curry Village. There was a rowdy game of National Park Yahtzee one evening after dinner and then a game of 5 Crowns another night.
  - Many of our volunteers had previous experiences hiking and camping in Yosemite and shared their experiences with those of us who were here for the first time, giving everyone ideas for our rest day. Some hiked up to Nevada Falls and Vernal Falls; some drove out of the valley to hike in Toulumne Meadows, Porcupine Flats or to May Lake.
  - Thursday evening, we were joined by Edith Lopez, Community Volunteer Ambassador, an employee of Yosemite's Volunteers in the Park (VIP). She thanked us for volunteering and shared her experiences with working in the park and her role with volunteers.
- A debrief of our week on Friday afternoon offered many insightful and appreciative comments:
  - In a word: "Great!" The food, the campground, the variety of tasks, project locations AND the people!!
  - Our caterers, Dawn and Kearey, were outstanding! They nimbly navigated any dietary restrictions and impressed us every day with the delicious meals they prepared.
  - Exploring the Valley on our own during rest times was easy and relaxing.
  - The projects were satisfying and it was nice to have options to suit all levels of ability/strength, and to be able to switch off to learn new skills.
  - The people were "awesome" and we all worked well together, often swapping tasks to help each other out.

- The leaders allowed us to be who we are, by leading from behind and in service to the group, allowing us to choose the tasks that we were most interested in and comfortable with performing.
- Yosemite National Park and the ConservationVIP experience “blew me away”. “So proud to go back and tell everyone what I did here!”

## THANK YOU!

We thank all of our volunteers who dedicated their time toward the projects in Yosemite National Park this September. We came together, some of us very familiar with Yosemite and ConservationVIP and some of us who were experiencing the park and ConservationVIP for the first time. We all left with a treasure of new friends and rewarding experiences. Thank you also to NPS Trail Crew Leader, Eamon Schneider who single-handedly kept up with us and the many fence posts that we placed as well as his tutelage regarding proper storm wash diversion techniques on the trail. We are thankful for the coordination with the Yosemite Volunteer Office to make our campground and project experiences rewarding and for the visit from Edith Lopez, Community Volunteer Ambassador. Finally, a heartfelt thank you to Dawn and Kearey of Willow Creek Catering for their excellent meals and welcoming comradery.

## SUMMARY OF PROJECT STATS

- ✓ **304** volunteer hours this trip!
- ✓ Day 1 – Project day cancelled due to poor AQI conditions
  - About 20 pounds of picnic area trash picked up
- ✓ Day 2 – Lower Yosemite Falls fence rebuilds
  - 25 post holes dug, filled with cedar posts, and rails reset.
  - Disguised 160 sq.ft. of social trail
- ✓ Day 3 – Tuolumne Grove
  - 10 new posts installed and 124.5 ft. of rails.
  - 1230 ft. of trail improvements including storm wash debris removal, 2 new berms and swales, sweeping fallen bark to the edges, and creating a drain under a fallen tree to enable water flow off of the trail.
  - Lopping brush away from the trail edges along the 0.40-mile loop
- ✓ Day 4 – Tuolumne Grove
  - 5 new log checks inserted along a 42-foot section the Loop trail
  - Narrowed the trail width along same section of loop trail to discourage foot traffic
  - Repaired a water bar by creating a swale to redirect water off the trail and then backfilling material below the bar where it had been undercut by water flow
  - Cleaned up a 57-foot section of trail by removing 3 broken rails and rebar, improving 3 swales and berms and rolling two large logs (36” diameter) off the trail. Added fallen bark and branches to enhance the natural appearance of the trail.
  - Removal of 10 double-post sections and 18 rails along a 72-foot section of the road between Big Red and the Loop.
  - Dug 10 36-inch post holes, installed 10 new posts and reset the rails in place of the old double post sections above.