MarkHitsTheRoad
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California Parks (C18A-2)

After I left Los Angeles I headed north with plans to visit some California parks, including Carrizo Plain National Monument, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (technically two national parks, but they're administered together), and Yosemite National Park. I spent about a day apiece at each of these three stops after having to cancel most of my hiking plans – all of my Los Angeles city walking did a number on my left leg. ☹

Most people haven't heard of Carrizo Plain National Monument, a park administered by the Bureau of Land Management (I made a short visit in 2016 during my move from Seattle to Las Vegas). It protects the largest swath of native grasslands surviving in California, and it also features a petroglyphs site, a dry lake and a segment of the famous San Andreas Fault.

Driving into Carrizo Plain

The San Andrea Fault runs for about 750 miles through California and marks the boundary between two major tectonic plates: the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate. The Pacific Plate is sliding north whereas the North American Plate is sliding south, resulting in a change relative to one another that averages about one inch per year. Stand on the eastern edge of the Pacific Plate at Carrizo Plain and in about a million years you'll have a nice view of the Golden Gate Bridge.

I'm standing near the eastern edge of the Pacific Plate. Those ridges in the distance are on the North American Plate.

Here I'm at what passes for the park's visitor center looking out at Carrizo Plain's most accessible petroglyphs site. But the center was closed, and a permit is required to hike out to the site, something I'd have to apply for online. So I missed one of my two primary goals for this visit.

Soda Lake dry lake bed. Before it dries out in the late summer, the water here provides valuable wetlands for migrating birds.

My second big goal was to get a closer look at the San Andreas Fault. Here I'm standing on the western edge of the North American Plate next to Wallace Creek looking downstream. You can see that the creek takes a sharp turn to the right, and then turns back to the left onto the Pacific Plate.

That middle segment between the two turns follows the San Andreas Fault. The first and third segments used to be lined up, but they have been separated as the plates have slid past each other. Given how much they have separated, scientists estimate that this creek is about 3800 years old.

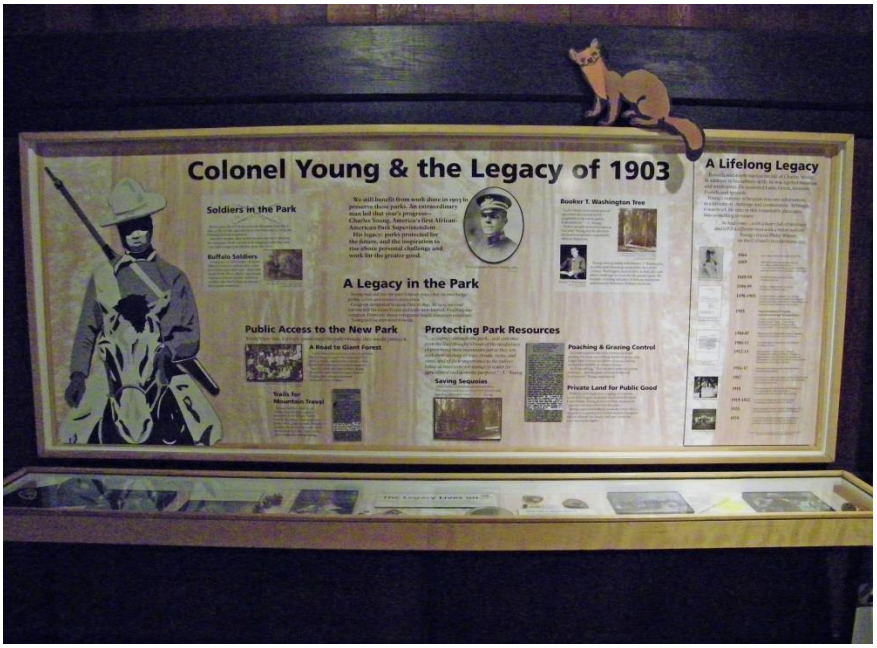
A trail follows the fault and crosses a handful of these now misaligned creek beds.

Sequoia National Park, Kings Canyon National Park and Giant Sequoia National Monument feature Giant Sequoia trees, the largest single trees in the world (there are taller trees, but it is the combination of height and bulk that make Giant Sequoias the largest trees). I've been to this area a few times over the years, but not for quite a while. And each trip, including this one, I chopped a couple plans off the list due to fall construction/temporary road closure-related delays. I made mostly photo stops here.

The Tunnel Log. Drive under a fallen tree!

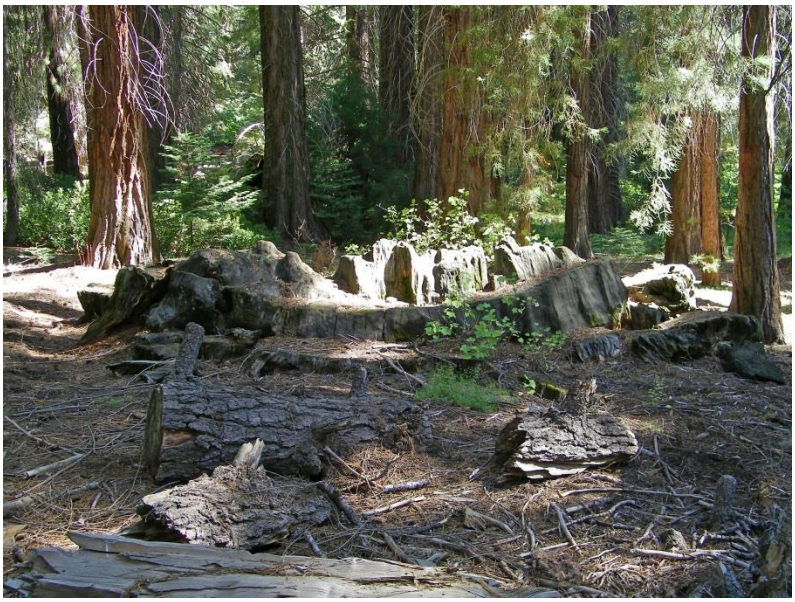
There's a staircase/trail leading to the top of Moro Rock which features some great views. I was up there my last visit here.


The tree on the left is a relatively young Giant Sequoia. You can tell due to its tapered top. On the right is a mature Giant Sequoia, whose crown is more rounded.



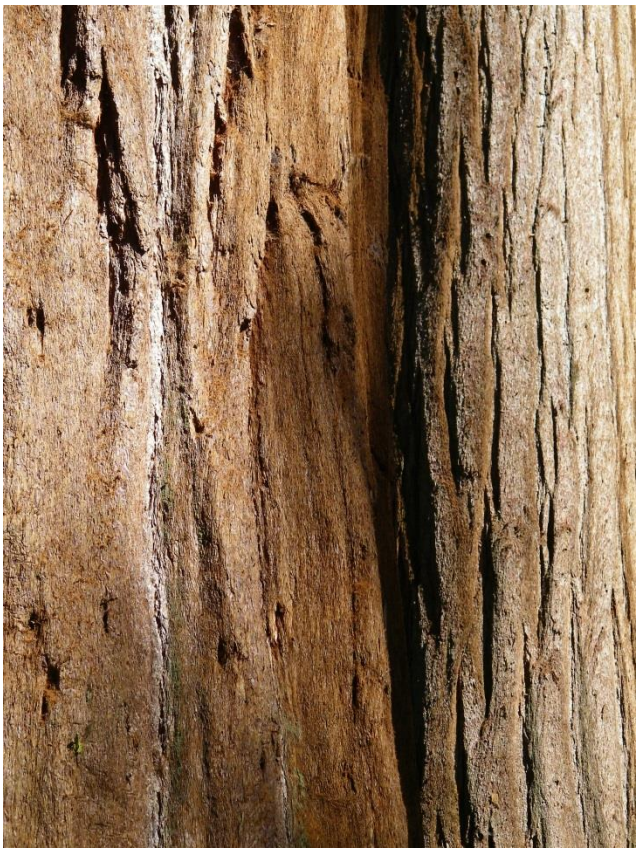
A display on Charles Young, a colonel with the US Army's Buffalo Soldiers who went on to become the first African American superintendent of a national park, albeit briefly. I first learned of Col. Young at the Charles Young Buffalo Soldiers National Monument near Xenia, Ohio.

The General Grant, believed to be over 1600 years old, is the second largest tree in the world.



The stump of the “Centennial Tree”, cut down more than 100 years ago. A section of the trunk was disassembled and shipped east in an effort to impress skeptical easterners with the size of Giant Sequoias. But skeptical easterners figured that the pieces assembled together were from multiple trees. So the Centennial Tree was cut down for no good reason.

Looking through a hollow fallen Giant Sequoia. And, yes, there are people standing in it. These trees decay very slowly. This tree today doesn't look much different than it did in a 100-year-old photo of it.



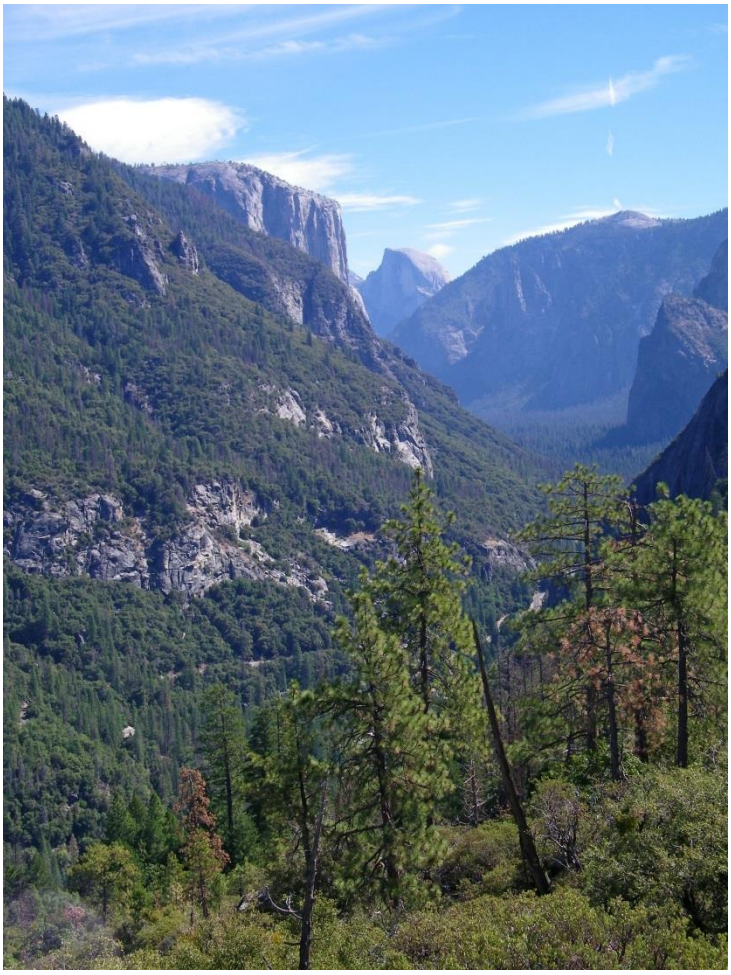
Giant Sequoia bark is very thick, helping the tree survive forest fires and avoid disease.

(This is two trees; the one to the left is closer and partially blocks the one to the right.)

I've been to Yosemite National Park a handful of times, mostly in the upper, Alpine portion of the park. I have had one good visit to Yosemite Valley on the park's west side, but for most visits my time was too limited or the place was too crowded. I ran into crowds this time – a September Wednesday when the kids were supposedly back in school. Like a handful of other well-known western national parks Yosemite Valley has been overrun with tourists and their cars, making it hard to get away from it all.

I made a handful of photo stops while I was in Yosemite Valley, but skipped some destinations on my list due to the lack of available parking. I ended up doing more sightseeing in the alpine area of the park than I had planned because I left the valley a lot earlier than expected.

As I entered the park there was plenty of evidence of this year's forest fires along the road. Yosemite Valley had been closed for a time just a month earlier due to fire.



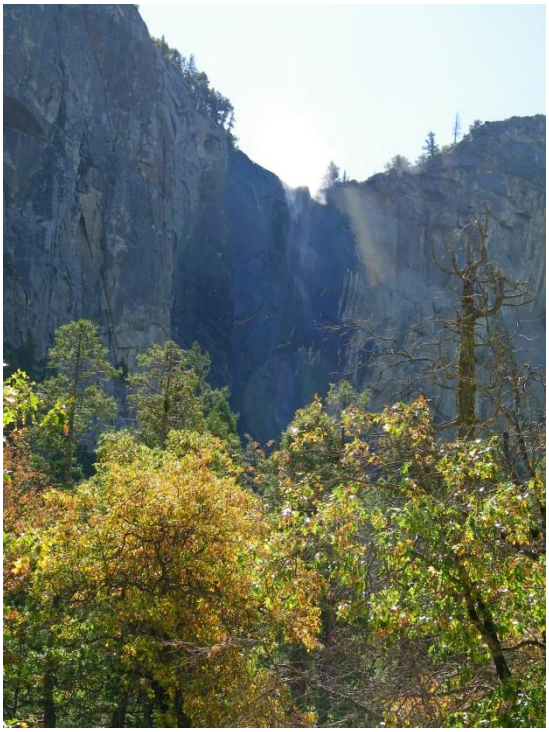
Beginning my descent into Yosemite Valley, El Capitan (left) and Half Dome (center) come into view.

El Capitan

Yosemite Valley (above) and El Capitan (below)

I didn't see the climber when I took this picture of the face of El Capitan. But I took a zoomed look when I noticed an odd-shaped shadow (red arrow, upper left). Maybe I'll try this next time I'm here. ☺

El Capitan again



A little water was coming over Bridalveil Falls, but the sun and I weren't at good angles for this picture.

Yosemite Falls was completely dry, not unusual this time of year.

Half Dome

Tioga Road leaves Yosemite Valley, heading up to and crossing Yosemite's alpine area as it leads to the east side of the Sierra Nevada range and the Great Basin. It is the highest elevation road crossing in the Sierra Nevada.

Using a bear-proof food locker is required for people who park at trailheads for overnight hiking trips. Bears have figured out how to break into trailhead cars if they smell food in them.

Olmsted Point with Half Dome in the distance.

A massive “batholith” consisting of several “plutons” underlies much of the Sierra Nevada mountains. This is a huge intrusion of igneous rock into upper levels of rock – think very large bulges of magma that head for but never reach the surface. This hardened into granite.

Over time those upper layers of rock eroded away, exposing the granite. But this also allowed the granite to expand, leading to surface fractures. The fractures makes it easier for the surfaces to erode away, but they do so in a way that results in the rounded shapes of granite “domes” found in Yosemite and other parts of the Sierra Nevada.

You’re seeing evidence of that surface fracturing in this picture.

View of Half Dome from Olmsted Point along Tioga Road

Tenaya Lake along Tioga Road

Pothole Dome at Tuolumne Meadows

Lembert Dome at Tuolumne Meadows

Leaving Yosemite National Park towards the east, the highway descends into the Great Basin via Tioga Pass. I am routinely impressed by the engineering that goes into creating roads like this.

And that finished three days of exploring some of California's parks.