



Crane Flat

The western gateway to Tioga Road is the last chance to buy gas and food before setting out for Yosemite's high country.



Gas and spotless windows prepare David Cummings of Yorba Linda for a trip on Tioga Road with his Yorkshire terrier, Buddy. Crane Flat is the gateway to Tioga Road.

Fueling up at the flat

For some, it's a summertime goldmine. For others, it's an oasis. But for thousands of motorists bound for Yosemite's high country, the Crane Flat gas station is the gateway to Tioga Road.

"Our business is extremely seasonal," says Jim Webb, 46, grocery manager and buyer for Delaware North Companies, the Yosemite National Park concessionaire that runs the store. "In the summer, everything is bustling. The parking lot is packed. We're open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., and we'll use seven to nine employees. But once the road closes, we're open 9 to 5 and only need one person. In the winter, we might go an hour between customers."

The store, just outside the gate to Tioga Road, is where travelers stop to purchase cold drinks, stock up on food and buy things they forgot to bring, such as sunblock and camping supplies. It's also a good place to find free information.

"People want to know if there is anywhere to eat on Tioga Road," says cashier Candy Moody, 49, who has worked at the store for five years. "They also want to know what they can do and see around here. I tell them about the sequoias in Tuolumne Grove [off Tioga Road not far from the store]."

While humans keep the cash register humming, they aren't the only ones who visit the store. One year, a squirrel tried to turn the place into a personal cafeteria and had to be trapped and transported to another part of the park. The store also has a pair of ravens that live there. "I call them Miss and Chief," Moody says. "We don't feed them, but they're always around."

The ravens live on roadkill and other food that falls to the ground around the store. They can become annoying when snowflakes fill the air and tourists disappear.

"That's when I hear the tap-tap-tapping," Moody says. "They start pecking on the glass."

The lonely ravens contribute to the winter mood that sets in once snow drops a quiet blanket over Tioga Road. Snowplow drivers stop for coffee and residents pop in for milk. Otherwise, all is still. If a blizzard sweeps into Crane Flat, Webb may telephone Moody and tell her to go home early — before the store gets snowbound.



Jim Webb manages the gas station.

What you might see

■ Ravens were not seen in Yosemite before 1950 but now are common. They mate for life and are adept at finding food where humans live, especially along roads.



■ The Giant Sequoia, the world's largest living thing, can reach a height of 275 feet and live for thousands of years. The Tuolumne Grove, one of three sequoia groves in Yosemite National Park, is at the end of a mile-long trail off Tioga Road.



Forest woodlands

Trees line both sides of the road as it rises slowly past isolated meadows and trailheads to the Sierra's rocky shoulders.

Wildlife warning

Tall trees and deep shadows give Tioga Road an air of mystery as it rises from Crane Flat and leads drivers east toward the park's high country. Posted speed limits — 35 mph in some stretches, 45 in others — are constant reminders that animals suddenly can appear, sometimes with fatal consequences.

The road is an interruption to their environment, says Steve Thompson, the park's branch chief for wildlife management. Some animals are unwilling to cross the road's open space. Others cross often and even learn to stay back when cars are coming.

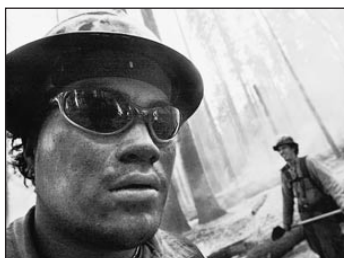
"It's not uncommon to see mule deer along the road, and occasionally a bear," he says. "In the park, we lose up to a dozen bears in collisions with automobiles every year, and that doesn't include those that are struck and crawl off and we don't know their fate."

Animals are most active in the twilight of early morning and late evening, Thompson says. Meadows are good areas to spot wildlife, but animals can show up anywhere on the road without warning.

"Whenever a bear appears, it can create a traffic jam," he says. "It tends to bring cars to a screeching halt. Some bears flee at the sight of people, but others show no fear, although we wish they would."

Deer migrate to the high country in summer on a route that parallels the road. Bears also move about, eating grass in the spring and berries and acorns later in the year. They also rip apart dead trees in search of termite and ant larvae, and are attracted to dead animals on the road.

"We try to locate roadkills and drag them off as soon as possible to keep bears off the road," Thompson says. "The number of roadkills could be reduced if people would slow down."



Firefighter Kit Ostonu of Samoa works a controlled burn east of Crane Flat. These burns promote a healthy diversity of plant life.

What you might see

■ Mule deer forage in morning, late afternoon and evening. They spend the rest of their time bedded down under sheltering bushes. They migrate to higher elevations as food becomes available in spring and move back down with the first winter snow.



■ The Steller's jay is a common sight in the forest. It nests in pine trees and eats seeds, nuts, acorns, insects and food from camps.



■ The black bear is the largest carnivore in the Sierra, reaching a length of 5 feet and weighing up to 300 pounds. It will eat almost anything, including small mammals, berries, nuts and garbage. Cubs, weighing 8 ounces or less, are born in winter and nursed in the den until they are old enough to hunt with their mothers.



Bear cubs aren't road scholars when it comes to avoiding automobiles.



Olmsted Point

The road curves around a massive granite dome to a lookout point that beckons travelers to take in a spectacular view of Tenaya Canyon.

Beauty and danger

Ed Appling pulls his National Park Service pickup to the side of the road a few hundred yards east of Olmsted Point. Solemnly, he points to a small brass plate fastened to the granite wall on the opposite side of the road.

The memorial marks the place where Barry Hance was crushed by an avalanche while clearing snow on June 13, 1995. It's too small to be noticed by passing motorists but, for Appling, it's a reminder of winter's powerful grip on Tioga Road.

Cars fill the Olmsted Point turnout every summer as people stop to marvel at how ancient glaciers carved out the walls of Tenaya Canyon, which leads the eye west to the rear side of Half Dome. But as the sun's heat radiates from surrounding granite, few think of how the snow and ice, which created the stunning vista, also create danger for snow-removal workers who labor for weeks and sometimes months to clear the road each spring.

Olmsted Point is the most dangerous of 23 avalanche chutes in the park, says Appling, 53, a roads supervisor for Yosemite National Park. To reach the viewing area, engineers carved the road into the side of a granite dome.

Heavy, wet snow clings to the dome in winter like cookie dough, often reaching a depth of 12 feet. During the spring melt, water collects under the snow and forms ice on the granite. Cutting through the snow at road level, which starts in April, removes support for the snowpack on the dome and tons of snow can slide down without warning.

Workers follow strict safety guidelines. Spotters watch the snow for signs of danger. Crews may use explosives to loosen unstable chunks of snow or melt it with applications of charcoal dust or water.

Appling takes pride in clearing the road, just as his father, Aldon, took pride in building it. The 21-mile middle section, from the White Wolf turnout to a point about 3 miles east of Tenaya Lake, was a dirt road until it was rebuilt in 1957-61 on a new alignment. The old route passed north around Olmsted Point, where there is no avalanche danger. The new alignment follows a southerly path across solid granite to reach Tenaya Canyon.

"My dad was a driller for the blasting," Appling says. "The worker lived in Tuolumne Meadows all summer, and we'd drop my dad off at the work site every morning."

While playing with the children of other workers, Appling often was reminded of work on the road.

"The explosions," he says, "sounded like sonic booms."



Rocks left by ancient glaciers are a reminder of Yosemite's geological history.

What you might see

■ The pika, also known as the cony or rock rabbit, lives in rock slide areas at the base of mountains or cliffs at 7,700-12,000 feet in elevation. It eats plants and gathers up to a cubic yard of "hay" to eat during winter.



■ The rosy finch lives in rocky terrain at 9,500-14,000 feet. Its adaptations to harsh conditions include a mask of feathers that covers its nostrils. It lives on seeds and insects, some of which it finds frozen near snowbanks.

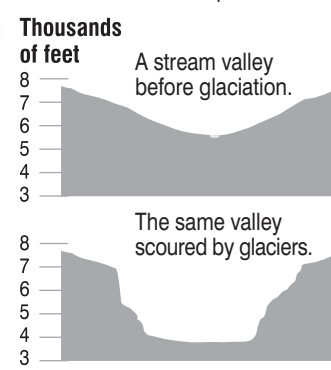


Of note

■ The point is named for Frederick Law Olmsted, a conservationist and landscape architect who would go on to design New York City's Central Park.

Glaciers

Yosemite is a glaciated landscape. Often glacier-carved valleys have a characteristic "U" shape.



Tuolumne Meadows

Driving becomes less worrisome as motorists enter a stretch of flat land and sprawling open space, surrounded by protective mountains thick with trees.

Margaret's meadows

Yosemite National Park Ranger Margaret Eissler walks along Soda Springs trail in Tuolumne Meadows and remembers how Tioga Road used to follow the same route as it meandered toward Tioga Pass.

"You can still see signs of the old road," she says, pointing to a raised roadbed hikers now use to reach Parsons Lodge and the site of an old Sierra Club campground once managed by Eissler's parents. The campground is gone now, but the lodge, acquired by the National Park Service in 1973, serves as a high country nature center.

Fred and Anne Eissler took care of the campground from 1956 to '61 and brought their two daughters with them every summer. Back then, Tioga Road was single-lane for much of its length, with wider areas here and there for cars to pass.

"For me, this was the finest of playgrounds," says Eissler, 52, her eyes sweeping over the largest sub-alpine meadow in the Sierra.

At 8,575 feet, Tuolumne Meadows is a roomy bowl of grass and wildflowers surrounded by mountains thick with trees.

Hiking and rock climbing are the primary activities. People also come for bird watching and to enjoy the night sky, which is free of the light pollution found in cities.

As a child, Eissler played in the mud along Tuolumne River and made sparkling lemonade with carbonated water from Soda Springs.

"I was too young to be scared going over Tioga Pass," she says. "But I can remember looking out the window and seeing the powerhouse at the bottom of Lee Vining Canyon. I also learned that cars going uphill had the right of way. If you were going downhill and met another car, you had to back up until you found a place to turn out."

Eissler was a flutist for the Santa Barbara Symphony Orchestra for 18 years, but she never lost her love for Yosemite's high country, and became a park ranger in 1987. She lives and works in Tuolumne Meadows during summer and is assigned to Yosemite Valley the rest of the year.

Winter is the mother of beauty in Tuolumne Meadows, she says. "Because winter is so long up here, you have three seasons compressed into three months. Things are constantly changing."



Above: A tranquil moonrise over the Tuolumne River prepares hearts for a magical evening in Yosemite's high country.

Left: Aging ruts are all that remain of Tioga Road's former route through Dana Meadows, west of Tioga Pass.

What you might see

■ Elephant's Head, whose pink-purple blossoms look like flying Dumbos, is one of many wildflowers that bloom in Tuolumne Meadows every summer.



■ Brook trout thrives in the cold water of mountain lakes and meadow streams at 5,000-9,000 feet. It lives on a diet of small insects, frogs, mollusks, crustaceans and small fishes.



Of note

■ John Muir called Tuolumne Meadows "the most spacious and delightful high pleasure ground I have yet seen. The air is keen and bracing, yet warm during the day; and though lying high in the sky, the surrounding mountains are so much higher, one feels protected as if in a grand hall."