

When bad weather hits, Yosemite's storm chasers head to the park

Winter storms are part of the draw for a select few Yosemite enthusiasts



When a big winter storm is forecast for Yosemite National Park, visitors often cancel their reservations and rebook for another time, and if they're already in the park, they head home. But for a handful of intrepid photographers, videographers and adventure fiends, a storm has the opposite effect. The second they learn it might snow in Yosemite Valley, they start loading up their four-wheel drive vehicles.

"We're like migratory birds," says [Sapna Reddy](#), a professional photographer and radiologist based in Pleasanton. "Storms in Yosemite are what we wait and hope for. There will be a lot of photographers who want to make their way over there."

Reddy and other Yosemite storm chasers obsessively checked the National Weather Service site and [Yosemite's webcams](#) over the weekend, and were excited to find out that the [park was opening back up](#) at noon on Sunday. They prefer to arrive before the storm, just when all the other visitors are clearing out. But showing up during or immediately after a snowstorm can also work, they say.





In early February, April Sim and her family set out from Sacramento for Yosemite specifically to experience the park during a snowstorm. “Excited and bundled up in cozy clothes, we can’t wait to explore the cold air and snowy scenes ahead,” Sims wrote as part of a YouTube video she created entitled [“Yosemite | Chasing a Snow Storm.”](#) “We’re looking forward to the magic of seeing everything turn into a snowy paradise.”

As it was her first time visiting the park during a winter storm, Sim has become one of the newest members of an unofficial club of Yosemite storm chasers. There are dozens of other members — many of them seasoned photographers — who have been visiting the park in winter conditions for years.

[Bruce Getty](#) is one of them. The self-taught photographer lives in San Francisco and has been chasing storms in Yosemite for more than a decade. He initially specialized in climbing fences and stationing himself in the ocean to get crazy shots, he says. But after joining a service called [Escayne](#) that alerts photographers to weather conditions, and learning what conditions were optimal for winter photography in Yosemite, he got hooked. Getty’s probably been in the park 100 times during snowstorms, he estimates.



“When there’s a big snowstorm, if you’re there at the right time, they’ll close the park and you’re just there,” Getty says. “There’s no footsteps. There’s no trails in the snow. Everything’s fresh and quiet.”

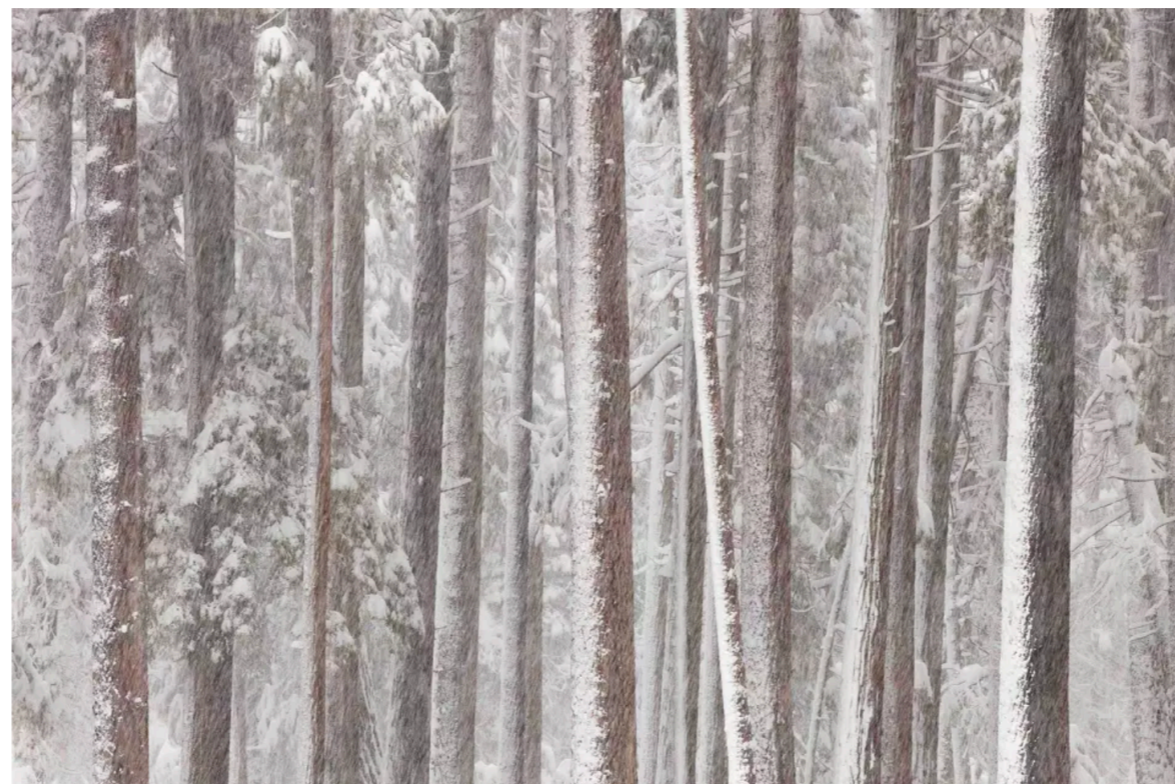
Sometimes he’ll camp, other times he’ll sometimes stay the night at the Yosemite Valley Lodge. Usually he’ll run into other photographers he knows, and there have been a few instances when a bunch of them go together and share a room. Getty likes to get there as early as possible and stay as long as he can, even venturing out during the actual storm to take photographs. He’s got a few different spots he returns to again and again, including a place behind Tunnel View, and a nameless meadow where he likes how the trees look when covered in fresh powder. He does some snowshoeing, but also enjoys just walking around the roads as the snow melts, because the puddles offer striking reflections of the clouds and mountaintops, including Half Dome.

Another photographer who makes regular trips into the park during storms — and at plenty of other times, too — is [Robb Hirsch](#). Based in the gateway town of Groveland, Hirsch was a naturalist for the first 20 years of his career, then transitioned to photography. His work is featured in the book, [“The Nature of Yosemite: A Visual Journey,”](#) and Hirsch’s next project is a book about Yosemite’s wildlife.



During a storm, one of Hirsch’s favorite scenes to photograph is El Capitan. “From any direction or any angle, from the road or from a meadow, you just can’t go wrong,” he says. “It’s like the curtains, the veils of the clouds, are opening up. It’s pretty spectacular.” He also gravitates toward less obvious places, which he keeps secret. When photographing wildlife, he says, it helps to be alone — and very quiet.

Of course, there are also some hazards to be aware of, particularly when venturing out solo. In a heavy snowstorm, Hirsch avoids cliffsides or any areas where rockfall could become an issue. Forests can also be dangerous, because limbs can come down without warning. “Big branches have fallen and almost hit me,” Hirsch says.





The roads can also become unsafe for regular vehicles or drivers with little experience in winter conditions, which is why Hirsch, Getty and Reddy all have sturdy four-wheel drive vehicles. Reddy tries to avoid driving when roads are especially slick or at night, she says. But when she really wants to catch the sunrise in Yosemite, she'll leave Pleasanton at 3 a.m. to make sure she's there.

Reddy also leads photography workshops in the park, and some of her clients will actually fly across the country for an impromptu session when the forecast predicts snow in Yosemite. "It's the best time to be there. It's like you own the park," Reddy says. "Nobody's there, and it brings a kind of serene silence to the park. It's just so beautiful that once you experience it, you're like, 'Oh my God, I don't want to miss it ever again.' The photographs you get are out of this world."



For anyone who wants to chase a storm in Yosemite, it's important to consider whether you are prepared for winter driving in the mountains. Having tire chains or cables — and knowing how to install them — is crucial, says Tony McDaniel, the director of communications for the Yosemite Mariposa County Tourism Bureau. "Take it slow and don't put yourself or others in danger on the road," he says.

For tire chain info for Yosemite, visitors can call 209-372-0200 and dial 1, then 1 again. It also helps to watch [this video](#) on winter driving safety.

Over the weekend at Rush Creek Lodge and Spa, some guests actually extended their stays to experience the magic of the snowfall firsthand, according to Teri Marshall, director of marketing and communications.

"Some of the best feedback we get all year is from guests who hunker down with us during a snowstorm," Marshall says. "Between the cozy fires, hot toddies, games and socializing, guests are surprised to find it's one of the best vacations ever."

