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# MOUNT DIABLO STATE PARK: DONNER CANYON WATERFALL LOOP



## KEY AT-A-GLANCE INFORMATION

**LENGTH:** 5.7 miles

**CONFIGURATION:** Balloon

**DIFFICULTY:** Moderate

**SCENERY:** Chaparral, grassland, oaks, waterfalls

**EXPOSURE:** Mostly exposed

**TRAFFIC:** Light

**TRAIL SURFACE:** Dirt fire roads and trails

**HIKING TIME:** 3 hours

**SEASON:** Best in winter and early spring

**ACCESS:** Free

**MAPS:** None at this trailhead; buy the map published by Save Mount Diablo (\$12.50; [savemountdiablo.org/lands\\_map.html](http://savemountdiablo.org/lands_map.html)) in advance, or download a free map at [tinyurl.com/mtdiablo\\_smap](http://tinyurl.com/mtdiablo_smap).

**FACILITIES:** None

**SPECIAL COMMENTS:** No dogs allowed

**CONTACTS:** 925-837-2525, [tinyurl.com/mtdiablosp](http://tinyurl.com/mtdiablosp)

**DRIVING DISTANCE:** 27.5 miles from the Bay Bridge toll plaza



## GPS INFORMATION

N37° 55.319' W121° 55.591'

## IN BRIEF

This hike on Mount Diablo's northeastern slopes is the perfect antidote to winter doldrums. Spring seems to visit Donner Canyon very early, gracing the rugged hillsides with fresh grass and blooming wildflowers and shrubs, even in February. Choose a clear day after a series of storms, and you may see Donner Canyon's waterfalls.

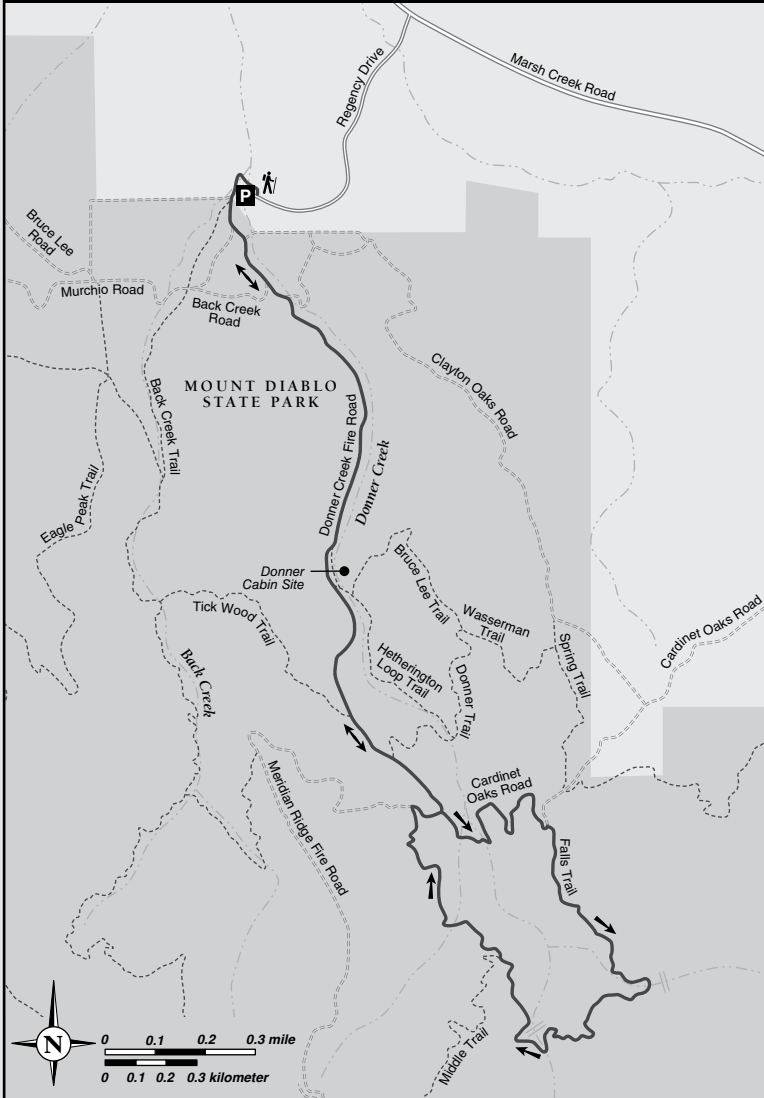
## DESCRIPTION

Rugged Mount Diablo, where temperatures soar to uncomfortable heights in summer, seems an unlikely host to waterfalls. Most of our Bay Area cascades are tucked back in forested canyons, but these falls run out in the open, dropping down rocky, steep, chaparral- and pine-covered hillsides. Although the falls aren't massive, they are pretty, and you can see them from several different perspectives along this loop. If you can arrange it, drop everything and head for this hike when snowfall accumulates on Diablo's peaks. The road to the top of the mountain is usually closed then, but since snow rarely makes a dent on the

## Directions

**Depart San Francisco on the Bay Bridge and use the toll plaza as your mileage starting point. About 0.5 mile past the toll plaza, bear right onto I-580 East. Drive 1.5 miles, then take Exit 19B onto CA 24. Drive east 12 miles on CA 24 to the I-680 split, then take Exit 15B onto Ygnacio Valley Road. Travel east on Ygnacio Valley Road about 8 miles, and turn right onto Clayton Road. Drive south on Clayton Road (which becomes Marsh Creek Road in Clayton) about 3 miles, then turn right on Regency Drive. Drive to the trailhead (with side-of-the-road parking), at the end of the road.**

# Mount Diablo State Park: Donner Canyon Waterfall Loop





Hikers on Falls Trail

lower reaches of Mount Diablo, you can enjoy views of dusted peaks without having to trudge through snow.

The end of Regency Drive serves as a bare-bones trailhead for this hike. From the right side of the street, walk down a gated dirt fire road that ends at a T-junction. Turn left. You'll soon reach the gated park boundary and a junction. Stay to the left on Donner Canyon Road (you can choose either of two side-by-side paths, which converge down the trail). The fire road ascends just slightly, through grassland dotted with oaks and buckeye. At 0.3 mile, a trail heads right toward Back Creek Road. Continue to the left on Donner Canyon Road.

Along Donner Creek you have good views uphill to Diablo's highest peaks. Paths split off to the left (crossing the creek) and right (a path not on the map) at 0.4 and 0.5 mile—ignore these and stick to the fire road. You may see buttercups along the trail in February, as well as fresh leaves on buckeye trees. At 0.9 mile, a path breaks off to the left, heading to the Donner Cabin site, and a few steps later there's a junction with a path to Tick Wood Trail on the right. You'll reach another junction just around the corner, this one with the Hetherington Loop Trail on the left. Continue straight each time on Donner Canyon Road.

The fire road begins to climb earnestly. After heavy rains, the ascent through loose mud seems exaggerated as sticky clumps of mud cling to your boots. Trail-side vegetation changes to include manzanita, yerba santa, ceanothus, poison oak, and pine. Shooting stars bloom in the understory in winter. There's another sequence of junctions from 1.1 to 1.3 miles. First Tick Wood Trail veers right,

then Hetherington Loop Trail goes left. At each junction, keep going straight on Donner Canyon Road. Finally, at 1.6 miles, you'll reach an intersection that matters: Cardinet Junction. A trail to the right sets off toward Meridian Point—turn left onto Cardinet Oaks Road.

Revealing its true colors right away, the fire road descends somewhat steeply to cross Donner Creek. There's no bridge, so even though the creek is pretty small, when it's full you'll be forced to either get your shoes wet or plunge through barefoot. When I made the crossing on one February hike, the water was shockingly cold and rose up to my ankles. On the other side of the creek, Cardinet Oaks Road starts to climb at a steep grade. Switchbacks offer little relief, so if you get winded, take some time to stop and look around. There are still pines and chaparral plants along the trail, but patches of grass become more common as the trail ascends, and views back out of the canyon get better with each step. The junction with Falls Trail is quite a welcome sight at 2.1 miles. Turn right.

This is where an already scenic hike becomes spectacular. Falls Trail, just a little slip of a path, angles at a slight incline across a hillside of sagebrush, bush lupine, toyon, poison oak, pine, oaks, and grassland. The initial view of the waterfalls, even at a distance, is dramatic; water seems to appear out of thin air and gush out of creases in the hillside across the canyon. As you progress farther along the rocky trail, you'll have nice views uphill of several falls running down the side of steep Wild Oat Canyon. When Falls Trail dips to cross the creek at Wild Oat Canyon, check out the broad but short waterfall just a few feet upstream. The trail ascends sharply but then returns to a more moderate grade. Ceanothus, cercocarpus, and pines are common along the path.

Here, at the hike's highest elevation, look north for an ideal overview out of Donner Canyon and beyond. The trail descends to cross another creek, just below a small cascade (the water continues downhill to the last fall, but you have to get past it to see it). Climb uphill on the far side of the creek, then look back for my favorite view of the falls—a sheer, frothy drop that's breathtaking when the water flow is heavy. You'll cross one last creek and ascend a bit to a grassy area where hound's tongue blooms in late winter. At 3.6 miles, Falls Trail ends at a signed junction. Middle Trail heads uphill to the left, climbing steeply toward Prospector's Gap. Continue to the right on Middle Trail toward Meridian Ridge Road.

Middle Trail descends a little, through a thicket of manzanita, which fails to obscure views of the opposite side of the canyon and Mount Diablo's summit. You'll pass through an area with more dense vegetation, including toyon, chamise, and California bay, where chaparral currant blooms along the trail in February. After one last sunny stretch, Middle Trail ends at 4 miles. Turn right onto Meridian Ridge Road.

Your time on this fire road is brief—less than 0.1 mile down the trail you'll return to Cardinet Junction. Turn left and return to the trailhead on Donner Canyon Road.