

Marin County's most dramatic winter hike



The Cataract Trail and its surrounding areas come alive in a rainy winter season. (Photo by Jim Holden)

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Let's start the young new year by taking what I believe is Marin's and the Bay Area's most spectacular and dramatic winter hike. The Cataract Trail, a top hike in any season, is particularly magnificent now after some winter rain. The trail climbs up Cataract Gulch with Cataract Creek running fast and feral through waterfalls and cascades below and solemn Douglas firs and redwoods standing tall above.

The portion of the Cataract Trail containing most of the best sights is relatively short — only 1.2 miles round trip — but it's quite steep with many steps climbing up (or on the return, down). For those wanting more, we will continue to view Cataract Creek's marvelous winter show on the strenuous climb to Laurel Dell.



The Cataract Trail area is magnificent after some winter rain. (Photo by Jim Holden)
If you're willing and able to undertake the trail's steep climb under generally wet and slippery conditions, this hike is truly one of Marin's wonders. Bring your sticks – your hiking poles – if you have them.

- Hike summary: From the trailhead described below for the Cataract Trail, we hike a strenuous, steep .6 miles up Cataract Gulch along Cataract Creek to the wooden plank bridge with handrails crossing the creek. Here, you will have completed the most spectacular portion of the hike and can retrace your steps back to the trailhead to finish the hike.

If you wish to extend the hike, you can climb, sometimes steeply, from the bridge up and to the right on the Cataract Trail and continue along the creek for an additional 1 mile to Laurel Dell before returning the same way for a round-trip hike from the trailhead of about 3.2 miles. Since we are taking an up-and-back hike, you can return from any point.

Dogs are allowed on leash, and a port-a-potty is available near the trailhead.

- Getting there: Take Bolinas Road out of Fairfax some 7.5 to 8 miles, passing the Meadow Club, traversing many curves, and continuing beyond two separate stop signs until you arrive at the Alpine Lake Dam. There, you and the road turn left across the dam and continue for about 200 yards or so to a sharp hairpin turn uphill to the right. Park there in the open areas or spaces adjoining the road. The trailhead with a sign for the Cataract Trail is at the bottom of the hairpin.

- The hike: The trail begins easily with Alpine Lake in view, providing you with beauty immediately. Soon the sound of moving water breaks the silence. As you progress – often steeply – the cataracts, torrents and falls become larger and more impressive. It almost seems that you're in a Hawaiian tropical rainforest. But the openness and towering height of the Douglas fir and redwood forest and the coolness of the air tell you that you're somewhere else – in a totally unique place that fortunately is located in our extended backyards!

Up we go into this watery, ferny, mossy, tree world to railed-in view areas. Take your time – for here in the gulch, far removed from the day-to-day world, time is deep and still.

When you arrive at the bridge, catch your breath and enjoy the view upstream and all around.

If you wish to go back from here, just retrace your steps. On the climb down, the railroad ties are particularly slippery, so step on the dirt behind them. Or if you need to step on the ties, plant part of your foot on the dirt.

For those continuing to Laurel Dell, climb and turn to your right, following the Cataract Trail. After the first 60 yards or so you cease climbing and turn to the right, following the trail. Look back and remember the turn down to the bridge, which is easy to miss on the return.

We travel on, enjoying the creek's play and watery plummet. Once in a while, we pass by a California nutmeg tree with needles ending in sharp points that differentiate them from Douglas fir needles and were used by Native Americans to create tattoos.

A short way before arriving at Laurel Dell there is a frenzied cataract. A quarter mile or so farther, an open area and sign welcome you to Laurel Dell and its picnic tables.

We return the same way, but the scenery in reverse looks and appears fresh and different. Remember to turn sharply left down to the bridge, a turn easy to miss from the path as the bridge is hidden for a while. Descend slowly and enjoy to the very last the singular and astounding Cataract Gulch.

Next column, we will take a moderate hike on Mount Tamalpais that offers classic sites and terrific views.

A longtime avid hiker and Marin resident, Jim Holden is the author of two nonfiction books: "It Happened in Marin" and "Adventurous Lives, Daring Acts." He can be reached at MarinhikingJim@gmail.com