

Detour leads to tranquil falls near Markleeville

By Kathryn Reed

MARKLEEVILLE – Closing my eyes I'm taken some place more distant than the 1.5 miles I hiked. The rushing water makes hearing difficult unless one speaks in a loud voice. It's one of those times when listening to Mother Nature seems like music that can never be replicated.

Nothing on my iPod sounds so wonderful.



Waterfalls in
Grover Hot
Springs State
Park.

Photos/Kathryn
Reed

Opening my eyes it's a sea of blue. The sky above seems to be tickled by some of the distant pine trees. Leaves dance in the, oh, so gentle breeze.

The crystal clear water makes me want to lap it up as though I were a canine.

Granite boulders of all sizes beckon to sit or lie upon. Completely vertical, I don't want to move. I am so incredibly relaxed.

The few people in the opposite direction along this trail outside the campground at Grover Hot Springs State Park all had smiles. I now understand why.

Others are also dipping their toes into the icy cold and ironically named Hot Springs Creek and her pools that sit above the magical falls.

Our destination for the day came with a detour thanks to Linda, the extremely friendly State Parks employee. If it weren't for her, we may have never gone to the falls. The \$8 entrance fee was worth the trek to the falls, let alone the rest of the hike.

The state park is best known for the hot springs that are 4 miles from the heart of the town of Markleeville. As the county seat for California's least populated county, Markleeville is a blip on the map. This outdoor mecca is a short drive from South Lake Tahoe via Highway 89 over Luther Pass, with a left on Highway 88. Then, just follow the signs.

Driving into the park, go to the end of the day use area. Start the hike by making a left at the gate. The falls are an easy 1.5 miles up mostly a wide path. Getting closer to the falls, the trail has several offshoots. Just listen to the roar of the water to find them.

It's easily one of those places where you could spend a lazy afternoon. Unfortunately, that was not on our agenda. We were there to get in a more ambitious hike.

After what I considered a way-too short of a stay by a little wading pool above the falls, we made our descent only to begin our real climb.

Linda, the park employee, didn't exaggerate when she said the hike to Charity Valley is steep.

Markleeville is at an elevation of 5,500 feet; Grover is at

5,800 feet; we went to 7,267.

The soft, single-track trail is not gradual. It's vertical. Without the shade of the massive pines and cedars, it would have been unbearable on this Sunday in July.

Surprisingly, it wasn't that far up for the evidence of the September 2008 Burnside Fire to show its blackened remains. Trees are forever scarred.

A smattering of wildflowers dot the landscape, bringing color to the forest floor – Indian paintbrush, lupine, tiger lilies and snow plants are in abundance. Ferns are at the lower part of the trail.

Butterflies flit about, seemingly oblivious to the only two people on the trail. Hawks soar overhead. A solitary deer stands still between the trees, making me wonder where her family is.

The trailhead had a warning about mountain lions. I didn't think twice about it until seeing some unfamiliar scat on the trail.

Up, up and away the trail goes, until it's above the tree line. Then views of the valley below and beyond open up. They make the sweat and heat bearable.

Finally, it's decision time. Right for 2.5 miles to Burnside Lake, left into Charity Valley or a U-turn to complete an 8-mile day? The latter was the answer. The ridge we came to and the vistas along the way brought us views we are still talking about.

Going down it was a coin toss to know if a beer at the Wolf Creek Saloon in Markleeville or soaking at Grover Hot Springs sounded better.

We experienced both.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photo to enlarge.)