

Ontario Peak via Falling Rock Canyon

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by Bob Oppermann

Falling Rock Canyon travels south to the top of the ridge that connects Ontario Peak and Bighorn Peak, west of Cucamonga Peak, and on the south side of Icehouse Saddle. From the trailhead (5040') to the summit (8693') it's about 2-1/2 miles and a gain of around 3650', all but about 200' of it within the walls of the canyon.

Being a North-facing canyon, the snow coverage is much better than the South-facing canyons and gullies we saw. And being a North-facing canyon, it got limited exposure to the direct sunlight. Therefore, an excellent alpine climb was awaiting us, as this was our objective for the day! And yes, we did have our helmets on, just in case the canyon decided to live up to its name!



The Approach Through Falling Rock Canyon. Photo: Bob Oppermann

I picked up new CMC member Anne Anglim at her home in Pasadena enroute to our meeting place: the Icehouse Canyon trailhead. Upon our 6:18a arrival, co-leader David Hankins was already there, enjoying a cup of joe with Tom Ritchie. After introductions and a sip of joe myself, we were off. We were hoping to hit the trail by 6:45, and it was 6:48 already; damn, late again!

We warmed up on the Icehouse Canyon trail for about a 1/2-mile or so before angling off on a use trail to cross the creek. We found a nice little 3-rock crossing that posed no problems, and skirted the creek for 150 yards before hanging a right (South) to enter the mouth of Falling Rock Canyon.

Here I asked the group which approach they preferred; a crappy use-trail or a crappy slog up the rocks. They enthusiastically declined to decide, so we did both. At the top of the first waterfall we put on our crampons and got ready for the compacted snow to come to grips with the talons under our boots. We immediately stepped into the mushy snow and wondered if we were maybe a little premature in putting on the crampons. But twenty yards later, after successfully breaching the first obstacle (a small void requiring a high step and a bit of a lunge) we were rewarded with hard snow, and on up we went.

We were lulled into a false sense of security though, as all of us had post holed at least once within the next 100' of vertical gain. The snow was alternately soft and firm, and in many places very thin, so we took many precautions and eased our way on up. Everyone made sure to warn the others if they saw a thin spot. In spite of this, we were making decent time.

Someone had been courteous enough to leave a veritable stairway up the fairly steep slope that bypasses the second waterfall. We went up it no problem, brushing some large pieces of bark out of our way as we did so, and then kept on truck'n.

At about 7800' we took our first organized break to down some calories and rest a bit. Shortly after, Dave and I put on our snowshoes, as it had gotten considerably softer towards the top, where the snow was more exposed to direct sunlight.

At the top of Falling Rock Canyon you enter a bowl that is a little eerie; we called it Dead Tree Bowl, as it is full of standing trees, all dead. The contrast of the bright white snow, dark blue sky, and dull gray trees, is very cool indeed. We hiked along the bottom of the bowl, climbing gently until we accessed the ridge that would take us to our destination.

From there we followed some tracks that had been left the previous week, and they took us straight up to the main ridgeline. We stood there for a few minutes, enjoying the view of the Inland Empire, which included San Jacinto/San Gorgonio to the east, Saddleback Mountains to the south, and planes taking off from Ontario airport. Ten minutes later we were on the summit, enjoying our various lunches. (David's appeared to be the best, with his canned peaches and deli sandwich!)

We spent about 35-minutes on top before finally heading down. For the most part, it was an uneventful decent. Oh sure, we continued to post hole here and there, but we all made it back to the cars safe and sound. The only casualty was that, upon arrival at the parking lot, David's GPS unit was not amongst us. We backtracked to try and find it, but it was to no avail. Perhaps it will be a nice little find for some treasure seeker in the future.

All in all, a nice day's work in the local mountains.



Summit Team; Anne Anglim, David Hankins and Tom Richie. Photo: Bob Opperman