



SAN GORGONIO MOUNTAIN VIA VIVIAN CREEK

- Hike Length:** 17 miles round trip; 5500' elevation gain
Difficulty: Moderate (2 days), Very Strenuous (1 day)
Season: June–October
Topo maps: *Forest Falls, San Gorgonio Mtn.* (both 7.5'),
San Gorgonio Wilderness (Tom Harrison)
Permit: San Gorgonio Wilderness Permit required

Features

The Vivian Creek Trail is the shortest way to climb San Gorgonio Mountain, but also one of the steepest. You start from near the head of Mill Creek Canyon, climb into the verdant hanging valley of Vivian Creek, cross a high ridge into High Creek, and finally ascend gravelly slopes to the barren summit. En route you pass three beautiful trail camps—Vivian Creek, Halfway Camp, and High Creek. Any one of the three makes a pleasant overnight stop if you are doing the mountain in two days.

The Vivian Creek Trail was the first one up the mountain, built shortly after the creation of the San Bernardino Forest Reserve in 1893. For years it was known as “The Government Trail” and was the only one to San Gorgonio’s summit. Today it is just one of many but, in the opinion of many hikers, it remains one of the best.

Vivian Creek is a good way to climb San Gorgonio in the winter or spring. An ice axe and snowshoes or crampons are usually necessary. This is a serious route when covered in snow and has recently claimed the life of a solo climber.

Description

From Redlands drive east on State Highway 38 to its junction with Valley of Falls Drive at the huge switchback 20 yards before mile marker 038 SBD 15.00. Turn right and continue east up Mill Creek Canyon to a new parking area on your left, just before reaching closed Big Falls Campground, 4.5 miles. Park at the Vivian Creek Trail sign (**GPS SB54**). Walk on up the dirt road, through the closed campground, to the old trail head parking area, about 0.75 mile.

Follow the trail down across the boulder wash of Mill Creek, then up the mountainside. The first mile is a sharp pull through oak woodlands—unpleasant going if the day is hot—to the secluded hanging recess of Vivian Creek. Here, nestled in a green forest of cedar, fir, and pine, is Vivian Creek Trail Camp, 1.5 miles from the start. The welcome campsites are spread out for several hundred yards near the bubbling creek. Camp at least 200 feet from the water. Beyond, the trail follows the creek, switching from bank to



San Gorgonio summit plateau

bank, for another 1.2 miles through miniature meadows spotted with wildflowers and shaded by tall ponderosa pines and incense-cedars, to Halfway Camp, 3 miles out. This new trail camp has year-round water and many little flats for sleeping. Beyond, your trail climbs across a ridge to a high-perched, grassy cienega threaded by a small stream of cold, tumbling water. Here is High Creek Trail Camp (**GPS SB54A**), 4.8 miles out, a favorite with backpackers, but the altitude is 9000' and nights are apt to be cold. The pines, cedars, and firs have been left below, and the slopes are covered with almost pure stands of weather-resistant lodgepole pines. The view across the head of Mill Creek Canyon to the saw-toothed wall of Yucaipa Ridge is reminiscent of the Sierra Nevada. Above High Creek, the trail winds up through silent lodgepoles to timberline at about 11,000'. Ahead looms the massive crown of San Gorgonio, stark against the deep blue sky. Just below the summit you meet the main trail from Dollar Lake Saddle (**GPS SB54B**); turn right (east) and cross gravelly slopes, passing a few wind-flattened limber pines and diminutive alpine flowers, to the 11,502-foot summit, 8 miles from the start (**GPS SB43A**).

Return the way you came. A popular option is to take the trail west to Dollar Lake Saddle, then descend the Falls Creek Trail back to Mill Creek Canyon (see Hike 52).