

Mar 2005 Grand Canyon Day Hikes **by Darin Kerr**

This is a report up of my third Grand Canyon Hike. To date, here are the hikes I've accomplished so far:

- 1) The first hike I made was in Aug 2003. I day-hiked down the South Kaibab to Phantom Ranch, then back up to the rim using the Bright Angel trail.
- 2) Second hike was in Nov 2004, going on another day-hike down the BA trail to Phantom Ranch, then back up the BA. The South Kaibab trail was closed due to washouts.

On this third set of day hikes I planned on taking the Grandview Trail down to Cottonwood for some exploring, then on the second day I wanted to tackle a rim-to-river-to-rim day hike using the South Kaibab trail in both directions.

Day 1: 03/01/05 Grandview Trail to Horseshoe Mesa

Couldn't sleep much the night of Feb 28th. Ended up getting up around 3am and began driving from Phoenix at 3:30am. Is there ever a time there isn't a traffic jam in Phoenix?

I stopped for fuel in Flagstaff... I thought the rental company was doing me a favor by giving me a free upgrade from a Camry to a Ford Expedition – but the fuel expense was tremendous! Also stopped by the McDonald's in Flagstaff, then took Hwy 180 winding through Flagstaff (gotta love those highway planners – I'd hate to miss any side street in Flagstaff...haha) and past the ski resort. Pretty drive through the snow in that area, but in one spot, there was an open area with ice fog and blowing snow that forced me to slow down to about 20mph. The road itself was in pretty decent shape. I thought that drive was more scenic than taking the other highway north from Williams.

Arrived at Grandview Point at 7:00am on 03/01/05. Parked my rental car in the area designated for trail hikers. I took about 30 minutes getting all my stuff packed and organized in my daypack for the hike. I wanted to make sure I wasn't forgetting anything, as backtracking to the car wouldn't fit into my limited time schedule.

Walked around to the trailhead, and guess what I see? A 'TRAIL CLOSED' sign! Grrr... would be nice if they had trail conditions posted and updated on a website somewhere to check beforehand, instead of having to call the NPS. I had called the National Park Service a week or so before, but didn't call back to reconfirm. Guess they had some severe weather that washed out a section of the trail. The

Grand Canyon was created by erosion, so I guess that is to be expected. It was totally my fault for not calling ahead.

A sign at the park entrance or one by the entrance for the Grandview access road would have been nice. This sign below can't be seen until you walk right up to the trailhead.



Grandview Trailhead

So... had to decide on a backup plan. Since my Grandview hike was a no-go, I decided to drive back to the Bright Angel lodge and hike down the Bright Angel Trail to Plateau Point and back. I figured this would be a nice 12 mile round-trip hike, and one that would help acclimate me to the altitude. And in retrospect, I got to see some things I might have missed had the Grandview trail been open.

I put my backpack in the car, and drove over to Bright Angel lodge, arriving there around 7:45am. It only took me a few minutes to get everything ready since I had already packed everything at the Grandview parking lot. I then locked up the car, and walked the short distance to the trailhead.

When I got to the trailhead, I started talking to a volunteer who works for the Science Dept that studies the movements of the California Condors. I only caught his first name, Greg. He was getting ready to head down to Indian Garden. He said he was planning on staying down there until Sunday. I asked if he minded if I tagged along for the hike, and we got started.

Since I've already taken a stack of pictures along the BA trail during previous hikes, I kept my camera stowed and just followed him down the trail. We talked pretty much the entire way, and I found out a lot of interesting information about the California Condors. They are not hunters like eagles or hawks; they are scavengers that rely on other birds making or finding kills, then swoop in to eat the leftovers.

I parted with my new friend at Indian Garden. He had to setup his camp, but said he would be out on Plateau Point in an hour. I had planned on spending about an hour out there, so I told him I'd see him out there later.

The hike from Indian Garden to Plateau point is about 1.5 miles and is relatively flat and easy. You have to cross a small stream near Indian Garden. I could see that in summer this trail could be a hot 1.5 mile walk, since it is totally exposed to the sun all day long.



Plateau Point Trail

I passed the Tonto trail that heads west towards the junction with the Hermit trail. Perhaps this fall, I can talk my wife into taking a multi-day backpacking hike and see more of the Tonto.



Tonto west junction

It only took about 20 minutes to make it out to Plateau Point, so I took off my pack and shoes, and ate my lunch. Before long, a couple of ravens were attracted to the food I was eating, and began circling. The ravens kept their distance, but kept circling and landing a good distance away from me in the hopes that I would either throw some handouts to them. I resisted that urge, as park literature warns that this would make the birds dependent on humans for survival. They didn't look like they've missed too many meals, however.

I'm glad I wore my dorky safari hat. The flaps on the sides and back helped to shade my neck and ears. You're supposed to look at the great scenery and not be fashion conscious, anyway :)



Posing at the rail - Plateau Pt

Greg made it out to the point about an hour after I arrived. He was carrying a radio receiver and large directional antenna. It didn't take him long to get a signal on a few condors, and not long after acquiring the signal, along comes 3 Condors! The birds are indeed impressive with their 8 foot wingspans. They only flew a few feet overhead, but you couldn't hear a sound from them as they rode the thermals, hardly flapping a wing.

Two of the condors had tags and radio transmitters, but the third did not. Greg said this bird was an adolescent bird about 6 months old. It was darker in color and you could tell it was a bit less adept at flying as the other 2.

I had walked maybe 50 yards away from my pack in order to take some pictures from the point, and the ravens that were flying around then landed near my pack. Spying an open invitation, the youngest condor landed in the vicinity. Greg told me to go retrieve my pack, as the condors are known to tear into packs in search of food. I scrambled over to my pack, and Greg tossed a few rocks in the vicinity of the adolescent bird in order to drive him off. No free handouts for this guy!



Calif Condor adolescent

The young bird quickly took off, so I sat back down and had a chance to just sit and think. Having that massive canyon laid out in front of you does make you feel somewhat insignificant in the world.

There were a few other hikers out there enjoying the view as well. I didn't realize that there are mule rides that go to Plateau Point. I also ran into a group of those folks back at Indian Garden with their box lunches. While I realize that Phantom Ranch wouldn't exist without the mules, I think I'll stick with transporting myself on my own 2 feet while in the Grand Canyon.



Plateau Point looking at N Rim

It was nice to get a chance to take off my shoes and relax for a bit... minus the dorky hat :)



Relaxing at Plateau Point

After taking a few more pictures of the inner canyon, I said farewell to Greg, and started back on the Plateau Trail towards Indian Garden.

I didn't get a chance to hike the Tonto Trail this trip, but will plan that for a future hike. Here's a picture standing by the Tonto trail that heads west towards the Hermit's Rest:



Darin at Tonto West / Plateau Pt fork

After taking a few more pics, I hiked back to Indian Garden, then began the long, arduous climb back towards Bright Angel Lodge. The weather was picture perfect, and I was having no trouble at all climbing back out.

I left Indian Garden at 2:07pm, and arrived at Bright Angel Lodge at 4:30pm. It took me no longer to climb back out as it did to come down. I felt a bit tired, but ready to tackle to rim-river-rim hike tomorrow after a good nights' rest.

Day 2: 03/02/05 Rim-to-River-to-Rim via South Kaibab Trail

Slept soundly that night at the hotel in Tusayan. Got up a little after 5:15am to get things ready for the big hike. Should have planned on getting up even earlier, as I had to scrape ice from my rental car. Side note: sure would be nice if rental agencies put an ice scraper in the glove box. How many of us that live in warm climates think to pack an ice scraper when flying somewhere? My plastic card room key worked ok as a makeshift ice scraper. Seems like I never get up early enough... next time I'm getting up at 2am! Haha.

Drove the car over to the Backcountry Office parking lot in order to catch to bus to the Kaibab Trailhead. There were only 4 of us on the bus that morning. It took about 15 minutes to get over to the trailhead, so I was dropped off and ready to hike at approximately 7:40am. There was a small amount of ice along the first few switchbacks on the trail, but not bad enough for me to put on the ice spikes that I purchased. Glad I bought the cheapies that were \$20.



Looking up at SK Trailhead

It only took about 20 minutes to reach Ooh-Aah Point. This is the first place along the Kaibab trail where you get a view looking both east and west into the canyon.



Darin relaxing at Ooh Aah Point

Here's a view looking down towards the river with O'Neil Butte in the center of the frame. You can see parts of the Kaibab Trail if you look closely.



O'Neill Butte

I think this next picture is one of my favorite. It was taken just a bit past Ooh Aah point on the way down to Cedar Ridge.



Near Cedar Point

Maybe it's the early morning shadows on the rocks along the trail, or the vegetation that somehow manages to grow in such a tough environment, or just the magnificent backdrop? This has to be one of the most scenic pictures of all my Grand Canyon shots.

The next stop along the way down was Cedar Point:



Cedar Point - O'Neill Butte center

This is a large flat plateau that has great views in all directions. There is an outhouse and a place to tie up the mules. I stopped for a few minutes, ate a snack and drank some Gatorade mix, along with plenty of plain water. I learned my lesson from an August 2003 hike I made on this exact trail, and that is to keep your body hydrated and fed. Temps this morning were below freezing, so I felt assured I wouldn't be putting myself through the ordeal that I did back in August 2003.

The next stop was Skeleton Point. There was a fairly long, flat section of trail up to this point, but just after this sign the trail starts a dizzying set of switchbacks.



Skeleton Point

I only stopped here long enough to drink some more water and eat some trail mix, then it was down the switchbacks. In my opinion, this set of switchbacks is the toughest section of the trail, as it is fully exposed to the sun with absolutely no shade whatsoever. I can't imagine going uphill on this section in the hot summer months.

After completing the switchbacks, I found myself on the Tonto Plateau. Here's a shot of the outhouse near the mule hitching area:



Pitstop at tipoff

By my best guess, I'm probably a little over an hours' hike from the bottom. This is the place where the Tonto Trail bisects the South Kaibab trail. As always, the views are magnificent!



Tonto Trail West at Tipoff

It was nice on the legs to have a flat section to deal with, but that didn't last long, as the trail drops another 1500 feet in the last mile or so.



Just below Tipoff on SK Trail

As you wind down the seemingly never-ending switchbacks, you are provided with brief glimpses of the river. It seems so close but it much farther away than it looks. This picture shows the black bridge that I'll be crossing shortly.



Black Bridge Colorado River

The Black Bridge was built in the 1920's, and the cables were spooled out and hauled down by men, as the spools were too heavy to haul down by mule. The bridge is still in excellent shape, although the thick rubber mat along the flooring of the bridge is well-worn and could use replacement. There is a short tunnel to walk through to get on the bridge itself. The bridge is about 500 feet long, and about 5 feet wide.

Here's a different view of the Black Bridge. The view is looking towards the east and upriver. The Colorado was its usual silty brown color. I've never seen the river the clear green color like I've seen it upriver near Lee's Ferry.



Black Bridge looking upriver

I continued up another half mile or so to Phantom Ranch, where I ate my lunch and took a 30 min nap. My legs felt refreshed and my body recharged for the long hike back up the South Kaibab trail. Since the temperatures were only in the 60's at the bottom, I figured heat would not pose much of a problem to hike out on a waterless trail. I was carrying a 3 liter hydration pack, and a 750ml bottle of water in one side pocket, and a 500ml of Propel fitness water in the other side pocket. I filled up the 750ml water bottle at the faucet near the cantina. I guess I'm used to drinking bottled or filtered water, as this water has a bad aftertaste to it.

Although the temperatures were mild, being in the direct sun did feel pretty warm, so I decided to cut across the silver bridge, then take the River trail that intersects the South Kaibab. This would put me on the shaded south side of the river instead of walking across the black bridge and up several switchbacks in direct sunlight on the SK trail.

Here's a picture of Bright Angel creek emptying into the Colorado. Bright Angel is crystal clear compared to the muddy Colorado.



Bright Angel creek flowing into Colorado River

Funny, this trail didn't seem that steep going down. Sure seems different going up. All the running and weight training I've been doing lately really does help out. I made great time going back up to the Tipoff, although I kept thinking, "do I have enough water?" Funny things go through your mind when you have such a long, steep climb ahead of you.

I stopped at one switchback, drank half of my Propel water, then topped it back up with plain water from the other bottle. A 50/50 mix seemed to quench my thirst better than drinking Propel water straight. Elevated my feet, and felt totally recharged in about 10 minutes.



Climbing up on SK Trail

After leaving the Tipoff, I headed up the switchbacks that lead back up to Skeleton Point. This part of the trail would be the section that would be extremely tough in the heat of summer, as it has very little shade and is exposed to direct sunlight much of the day. I met a few hikers on their way down, but never was passed or passed anyone heading up on the Kaibab. Some of them looked really tired, and they were headed down!

Other than the sun exposure and no water, in retrospect I didn't think the Kaibab trail was any worse than the Bright Angel trail. As a bonus, the Kaibab is several miles shorter than the BA going back to the rim. The views from the Kaibab are superior as well, and is not as heavily traveled.

I was pushing myself pretty hard, as I had it in my mind that if I got to the rim too late, I'd have to walk back to my car instead of riding a shuttle bus. Ended up taking a breather just below Cedar point, and had a squirrel beg me for food.



Looking for a handout

Of course, I didn't feed him.... 😊

I made it from Phantom Ranch to the Kaibab trailhead at the south rim in approximately 3.5 hours, which matched the time it took me to walk down. And I ended up with plenty of water. The hydration pack was still half full.

The weather was picture perfect, and other than a few brief sections at the top with some ice, the trail conditions were just as perfect. The maintenance crews here have been doing an excellent job keeping the trails open during a very stormy winter. I could see many sections of the trail had seen recent work. Hats off to the maintenance crews.

What will I do for a future trip? Well, next time I want to plan and do a 4 or 5 night backpacking hike. Hiking down Grandview Trail and catching the Tonto trail over to the Kaibab trail, then down to Phantom Ranch and over on the Clear Creek trail would be my preferred trip. Another good alternate would be to drive to the North Rim and take the Kaibab trail down to Phantom Ranch, with an overnight stay at Clear Creek.

It will require more planning than what I've done on the first 3 trips, that's for sure. A full size pack and a lightweight tent and sleeping bag will be on my shopping list.

But I admit, I've got the Canyon fever.