

Grand Canyon National Park Backcountry Information Center Winter 2009 Trails Update Podcast Transcript: December 7, 2009

Hello again from the Backcountry Information Center on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon. I'm ranger Lon and today is Dec. 7, 2009. Today, we find ourselves in the middle of our first major winter storm. The park has closed the Hermit Road today – but it will be reopened after the storm clears. Be aware that in wintertime inclement weather can cause Hermit Road to close with little notice as storms move through the area. Always check with the Backcountry Information Center regarding the wintertime status of Hermit Road.

As of this date there are no long-term road or trail closures in effect that require specific discussion, but there have been a couple of changes worthy of note. The North Rim has shut down for the winter and that means Highway 67 has also been closed south of Jacob Lake. The other big story revolves around the undeniable arrival of winter along the rim. It's cold, cold even on the canyon floor and we've seen our first big snowstorm of the year so the gradual fading of fall into winter seems complete. Stay tuned as we say a few more words about these and other factors that are affecting backcountry travelers and finish up with the current situation out along canyon trails. As always, anyone needing additional information about these or other concerns is welcome to contact the Backcountry Information Center directly, by phone at 928 638 7875 Mon-Fri, 1-5pm local time, by email at grca_bic@nps.gov, or in person upon arrival. The Backcountry Information Center is open 8am to 5pm every day, weekends and holidays included. We close for the lunch hour from 12-1pm

As just mentioned, the first big story of the day is the closing of the North Rim for the winter. All commercial facilities on the North Rim of Grand Canyon National Park are closed for the winter. Highway 67 south of Jacob Lake is closed to auto traffic as well. These facilities will re-open for the 2010 operational season on May 15, 2010. The campground will remain open throughout the winter for the occasional snow machine operator or cross country skier. Obtain a camping permit for the North Rim campground through the South Rim Backcountry Information Center before starting. The Administration office, located north of the campground, offers the only public point of contact on the North Rim or source of drinking water during the winter. Potential North Rim campers be forewarned: the North Rim is at elevations between 8 and 9 thousand feet. It's cold over there, and in some years snow depth reaches spectacular proportions. The North Rim has already received significant snowfall and more is in the forecast. North Rim hikers should assume that vehicle access to any of the remote trailheads has been shut down for the winter.

The other big deal of the day involves the arrival of true winter throughout the park. The weather service says it's an El Nino winter and that usually means a tough winter in the southwest. The last couple of weeks have seen a few nights with lows on the South Rim hovering around 0 degrees F and even on the canyon floor campers have been dealing with lows well below freezing. The first major winter storm has put down a foot or so of snow and more is forecast for the next few days. The upper mile or so of canyon trails are snowpacked and icy. The Bright Angel, Grandview, New Hance, and Tanner Trails are usually the worst, the South Kaibab and Hermit Trails might perhaps be a little better, but, to one extent or another, slick trails will be an issue. Over the next few months prudent hikers should plan to make a last-minute check on the current situation before starting. When winter rules the canyon, weather and good quality, proven gear are the name of the game. Interaction between the weather and your gear will largely determine the quality of the backpacking experience. Hikers will find themselves packing more of everything, more layers of warm-when-wet synthetic clothing, proven rain gear of good quality, warmer sleeping bags, and backpacking stoves and tents. Adequate supplies of hot food and drink will become critical for maintaining bodily warmth. As the trails assume their armor of hard, slick ice, traction devices such as instep crampons and trekking poles become critical to the preservation of life and limb. Conditions can, and will, change rapidly during the course of the winter. Generalizations about potential conditions are nothing more than generalizations so hikers need make a point to check current conditions prior to departure. Winter hikers will do well to keep an eye on the National Weather Service website, "weather.gov" which offers daily 7-day forecasts for both rims as well as the canyon floor.

Next up today we'd like to bring you up to date on the drinking water situation along the corridor trails. The drinking water piped into sources in the upper section of the canyon has been turned off for the winter. This shutoff includes the Mile-and-a-Half and Three-Mile resthouses on the Bright Angel Trail as well as Supai Tunnel, Roaring Springs Picnic Area, and Cottonwood Campground along the North Kaibab Trail. The only year-round sources of purified drinking water below the rim are Indian Garden Campground on the Bright Angel Trail, Bright Angel Campground on the canyon floor, and the pumphouse residence between Roaring Springs and Cottonwood Campgrounds on the North Kaibab Trail. Potential problems with the pipeline remain an ongoing possibility so hikers are urged to make a last minute check to confirm availability of drinking water prior to starting down. As always, the South Kaibab Trail is bone dry-no water of any kind.

And next we'd like to update hikers on the current situation out there below the rim along canyon trails. I'll deal with the commonly used cross-canyon Corridor trail system first, then we'll turn our attention to the more remote sections of the canyon.

All three Corridor trails, that is the Bright Angel and the South and North Kaibab Trails, are open, but snowpacked, icy, and slick in the upper couple of miles so caution and proper footwear is certainly indicated. Instep crampons may be required. Trekking poles are always a good idea but when the trails are slick they are invaluable. Steep, rocky, unrelenting descents that seem to go on forever mean constant attention to your footing is required. If you want to admire the view, stop walking. Trying to walk and look at the same time is a sure way to a nasty fall. Even with the availability of piped-in drinking water, Corridor hikers still need to carry extra water. We recommend at least 3 quarts per person during the cooler months. This should be adequate to get you between the water sources and allow a little extra against the unforeseen. Hikers are encouraged to carry some form of water purification as a back-up system against the possibility of water pipeline problems or in case natural water from creeks is needed to supplement the supply in your pack. And, last but not least, we want to be sure and mention the potential critter problem in the campgrounds and urge hikers to be sure to use the provided food storage boxes. There's nothing there that will hurt you-it's just small mammals of various sorts-but they are ruthless and relentless in pursuit of your food. Each campsite will have a couple of these boxes, use the boxes or incur certain damage to your gear and the loss of your food.

The South Kaibab Trail is currently closed to stock use to allow much needed trail maintenance work. All horse and mule traffic in and out of the canyon is being routed along the Bright Angel Trail so expect unusually rough going. Hikers using the Bright Angel should be prepared to yield the right of way when horse or mule operations are encountered.

I'll shift your attention now to the more remote part of the canyon.

As of this date all wilderness trails are open but as the winter snowpack develops conditions near the rim will, of course, degenerate. Deep snow might make foot travel difficult and at the very least you should assume slick, icy going in the upper canyon and be prepared to deal with it. Access to all dirt backcountry roads to remote trailheads on both canyon rims will range from difficult to impossible depending on recent snow or rain and daytime high temperature. Changing conditions make it impossible to generalize about the condition of specific roads or trails. Hikers considering traveling dirt roads to remote trailheads should contact the North Kaibab Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest at 928 643 7395, the Tusayan Ranger District of the Kaibab National Forest on the South Rim at 928 635 4061 or the Backcountry Information Center for current conditions. There is one good thing to report about winter at the canyon: the ephemeral, seasonal springs that only produce water when it's cool are flowing, so water issues have temporarily receded into the background until next spring, with one important exception: we have received no reports of water in the side canyons between the South Bass and Boucher Trails, those sources remain suspect. Hikers entering this area should make every effort to obtain recent confirmation of availability and become familiar with routes to the river before starting the hike.

And finally today I'll mention a couple of other factors that might influence your visit to the Grand Canyon.

The Hermit Shuttle has shut down for the winter. The Hermit Road, its spectacular viewpoints, and the Hermit Trailhead are accessible by private vehicle through the end of Feb 2010. The Hermit Shuttle Bus will resume operation on March 1, 2010.

Hikers using the South Kaibab Trail can access the trailhead by two different shuttle systems. The most efficient way is to use the Hiker Express bus. The Hiker Express departs the Bright Angel Lodge at 8 and 9 AM. The Hiker Express picks up passengers at the Backcountry Information Center about 5 minutes after leaving the Bright Angel Lodge and before going on to the South Kaibab trailhead. Hikers can also get to the South Kaibab trailhead via the regularly scheduled Kaibab Trail shuttle that departs Canyon View Information Center every 15 minutes throughout the day.

If you want to hit the trail before the shuttle routes began service you can arrange taxi transportation 24-7. Call 928 638 2631.

We normally update this message only as significant changes occur. If you need more immediate information the best source is the park website: www.nps.gov/grca. Look for the "Backcountry Updates and Closures" section in the Backcountry Hiking section marked by a red exclamation point. You can phone the Backcountry Information Center directly at 928 638 7875, Mon-Fri, 1-5pm local time, but be forewarned: you may have to try more than once to get through. Or contact by email at grca_bic@nps.gov. A response to emails may require a few days. And as always, the Backcountry Information Center staff extends an open invitation to visit our office to chat about your canyon hiking experience when you arrive. Happy Trails to All!