



Tonto Trail: Bright Angel Trail to Hermit Trail

The dynamic interplay of soft and hard layers of stone created an open benchland at the rim of the Inner Gorge called the Tonto Platform. Easily visible from several South Rim overlooks, the greenish Tonto rocks have eroded into an obvious exception to the striking vertical cliffs that characterize most of Grand Canyon. The Tonto Trail follows this natural transcanyon route for 95 rough, unmaintained miles, from Red Canyon on the east to Garnet Canyon on the west. All of this makes the Tonto Trail unique among Grand Canyon pathways. Most descend from the rim towards the Colorado River, but the Tonto Trail offers passage by foot up and down the canyon, parallel to the course of the river. Because of its length, most hikers approach the Tonto Trail not as a single unit, but rather as a series of installments, breaking the route down into four or five sections defined by rim-to-river trails and the natural lay of the land. A notable lack of reliable water makes most of the Tonto Trail a daunting, possibly dangerous, proposition, but the section between Bright Angel Trail and the Hermit Trail is blessed with three water sources hikers can count on. As a result, this segment of the Tonto Trail offers a degree of civility not found elsewhere along the trail, and it is here that most hikers get their first exposure to the unique nature of this singular transcanyon route.

Locations/Elevations

Bright Angel trailhead (6860 ft / 2091 m) to Indian Garden, CIG (3800 ft / 1160 m):
Indian Garden (3800 ft / 1160 m) to Horn Creek, BL4 (3550 ft / 1082 m):
Horn Creek, BL4 (3550 ft / 1082 m) to Salt Creek, BL5 (3550 ft / 1082 m):
Salt Creek, BL5 (3550 ft / 1082 m) to Monument Creek, BL7 (2995 ft / 913 m):
Monument Creek, BL7 (2995 ft / 913 m) to Hermit trailhead:
Monument Creek, BL7 (2995 ft / 913 m) to Hermit Creek, BM7 (2900 ft / 884 m):
Bright Angel trailhead to Hermit trailhead (6700 ft / 2043 m):

Mileages

4.8 mi (7.7 km)
2.5 mi (4 km)
4.8 mi (7.7 km)
3.4 mi (5.5 km)
9.3 mi (15.0 km)
3.5 mi (5.6 km)
24.8 mi (39.9 km)

Maps

7.5 Minute Grand Canyon Quad (USGS)
Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)
Sky Terrain Trails Map, Grand Canyon (Sky Terrain)

Water Sources

Purified water is available at Indian Garden. Occasionally water can be found in Horn and Salt Creeks, but neither is recommended. Horn Creek is radioactive and Salt Creek highly mineralized. Cedar Spring is unreliable and can be difficult to collect. Good water can always be obtained at Monument Creek at or below the Tonto Trail crossing. Hermit Creek is also reliable, but requires a one mile detour west from the Hermit Trail junction. The Colorado River can be accessed at the mouth of Monument or Hermit Creeks. With the exception of the treated water from Indian Garden, all water must be purified.

Campsites

Increasing popularity has created a need for a system of designated campsites along the Tonto Trail between Indian Garden and Hermit Creek. These designated campsites are the only legal places to camp within this area. Campsites are located at Indian Garden Campground (CIG), Horn Creek (BL4) toilet, Salt Creek (BL5) toilet, Cedar Spring (BL6) no toilet, Monument Creek (BL7) toilet, Granite Rapids (BL8) no toilet, Hermit Creek (BM7) toilet, and Hermit Rapids (BM8) no toilet.

Trailhead Access

See the Bright Angel and Hermit Trail descriptions for access information to this section of the Tonto Trail.

Trail Description

Walk down the Bright Angel Trail to Indian Garden and head west on the Tonto Trail. The Plateau Point spur diverges north about 3/4 miles beyond Indian Garden. Plateau Point directly overlooks the Colorado River and is perhaps the best single viewpoint within the Bright Angel Trail system. If time and energy allow it is a worthwhile detour.

Meanwhile, the Tonto Trail continues west toward Horn Creek. The Tonto Trail could be compared to a contour line on a topo map. The trail much prefers to maintain a consistent elevation, gaining or losing height only when there is no other option. It can seem infuriatingly indirect but, when evaluated with benefit of hindsight, it almost always represents the line of least resistance.

There is water in the bed of Horn Creek about half the time, but unfortunately it is radioactive so don't drink it unless death by thirst is the only other option. The source of the radioactivity is a deposit of high quality uranium contained within a collapsed cave system geologists call a breccia pipe. The odd yellowish stain on the rocks near the rim at the head of Horn Creek testifies to the presence of unusual minerals and a claim predating the park allowed the deposit to be actively mined as late as 1969. Some of the individual loads of ore that were taken from the Orphan Mine were among the highest grade uranium ever recorded from a North American mine. Percolating ground water picks up traces of the radioactivity and carries it to the surface in the bed of Horn Creek.

A small ridge north of Dana Butte forces the Tonto Trail up for a short distance, but soon the path resumes its predictable progression toward Salt Creek. The designated campsite at Salt Creek is located directly upon one of the most common types of archaeological sites in Grand Canyon. Archaeologists call them mesquite pits or roasting pits and they represent the remains of slow cooking mechanisms employed by native people to prepare the hearts of agave plants. The plants were trimmed down to a fibrous core, buried and roasted. When the cooking was complete the people broke open the pile of stones to retrieve the food, thus creating a distinctive, crater-like circle of stones. Mesquite pits are found throughout Grand Canyon, sometimes in the most unexpected of places.

The trail wanders west, past the little seep at Cedar Spring, and on to Monument Creek. Monument is the largest of the drainages between the Bright Angel and Hermit Trails, and the only one that allows passage through the Vishnu Formation to the Colorado River. Granite Rapids at the mouth of Monument is steep and impressive. The view upriver from the beach at Granite Rapids is a classic canyon scene that has attracted photographers since the days of the Kolb brothers.

The Tonto Trail winds on, turning the corner north of Cope Butte. Soon after entering the Hermit Creek drainage watch for the Hermit Trail junction west of Cope Butte. The intersection is marked with a sign and large cairn. Follow the Hermit Trail to the rim or continue along the Tonto Trail to the Hermit Creek campsite.

Important Notes

The Tonto Trail is a rough, unmaintained wilderness route. Washouts and narrow, eroding sections are common. Hikers must be prepared, mentally and physically, to deal with the harsh realities of inner canyon hiking outside the cross-canyon corridor.

The army surplus food storage boxes at Monument Creek (BL7) and Hermit Creek (BM7) were removed. Bring some type of animal-proof food container to protect your food.

The entrance to cave systems can occasionally be seen in the cliffs above the Tonto Trail. These inaccessible caves in the upper part of the Redwall Limestone have provided nesting sites for California Condors for thousands of years before they disappeared from Arizona skies in 1924. Captive breeding has produced sufficient numbers of birds to support re-introduction to the wild, and today the Grand Canyon hosts 30 or so of these magnificent animals. New nesting pairs have adopted the same caves used by past generations of condors, so hikers along the Tonto Trail are occasionally treated to a sight some experts predicted would never again be seen: a wild, free-flying California Condor riding the thermals of Grand Canyon.

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