



Tonto Trail: Bright Angel Trail to Hermit Trail

The dynamic interplay of soft and hard layers of stone creates 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 bench for 95 rough, unmaintained miles, from Red Canyon on the east to Garnet Canyon on the west. Famed as one of only two long pathways, the other being the Tuckup, that run lengthwise and are not anchored to the rim of the canyon. Most trails descend directly from rim to river, but the Tonto Trail offers walkers a footpath parallel to the course of the Colorado 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 starting and ending trail. Two of the more civil places to bookend a Tonto hike are the Bright Angel and Hermit Trails and it is here that most hikers get their first exposure to the unique nature of this south side singular route.

We Need Your Help

Keep a clean camp and use metal-mesh food storage bags to reduce rodent habituation. Never leave food unattended, as both ravens and squirrels will quickly find any obvious stash. Please share the campsites. At Granite Rapids, the large, multi-site camp is sometimes used by river runners. Hikers should use the smaller camps downriver of Monument Creek or be prepared to share with river trips. Over at Hermit Rapids, the upstream riverside camp is outside the designated area and thus not available to hikers.

Vital Statistics

Locations/Elevations

Bright Angel trailhead (6860 ft / 2091 m) to Havasupai Gardens, CIG (3800 ft / 1160m): 4.8 mi (7.7 km)
Havasupai Gardens (3800 ft / 1160 m) to Horn Creek, BL4 (3550 ft / 1082 m): 2.5 mi (4 km)
Horn Creek, BL4 (3550 ft / 1082 m) to Salt Creek, BL5 (3550 ft / 1082 m): 4.8 mi (7.7 km)
Salt Creek, BL5 (3550 ft / 1082 m) to Cedar Spring, BL6 (3329 ft / 1015 m) : 2.1 mi (3.4 km)
Cedar Spring, BL6 (3329 ft / 1082 m) to Monument Creek, BL7 (2995 ft / 913 m): 1.3 mi (2.1 km)
Monument Creek, BL7 (2995 ft / 913 m) to Hermit trailhead: 9.3 mi (15.0 km)
Monument Creek, BL7 (2995 ft / 913 m) to Hermit Creek, BM7 (2900 ft / 884 m): 3.5 mi (5.6 km)
Bright Angel trailhead to Hermit trailhead (6700 ft / 2043 m): 24.8 mi (39.9 km)

Mileages

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)

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 Havasupai Gardens and head west on the Tonto Trail. The Plateau Point spur diverges north about 3/4 miles beyond Havasupai Gardens. Plateau Point directly overlooks the Colorado River and 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 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 mescal 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. Mescal 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 until it reaches the intersection with the Hermit Trail. This is marked with a sign and large cairn. Head uphill and follow the Hermit Trail to the rim or continue along the Tonto Trail to Hermit Creek.

Water Sources

In general a notable lack of reliable water makes the Tonto Trail a daunting proposition outside of the winter/ spring season. The one exception is the purified water available at Havasupai Gardens. Additional water may 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. 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. Except for the treated water from Havasupai Gardens, all water must be purified.

Campsite Planning

Increasing popularity has created a need for a system of designated campsites along the Tonto Trail between Havasupai Gardens and Hermit Creek. These designated campsites are the only legal places to camp within this area. Campsites are located at Havasupai Gardens 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.

Important Notes

For hikers including a stay at Hermit Camp, it is 3.5 mi (5.6 km) from Monument Creek. See Tonto Trail distance for point to point mileage.

The Tonto Trail is a rough, unmaintained route. Access to the Colorado River is not possible in many of the side canyons. Lonely, hot, shadeless days are common May through September. Not recommended for casual hiking during this time of the year.

Caves can occasionally be seen hundreds of feet 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 their disappearance from the Arizona skies in 1924. Captive breeding has led to sufficient numbers to support the re-introduction of these birds to the wild. 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, providing lucky hikers along the Tonto Trail a sight some experts predicted would never again be seen: a wild, free-flying California Condor riding the thermals of Grand Canyon