

Grand Canyon Hike: 7-14-07

I started this year's Rim-River-Rim excursion with very high confidence. My stated goal for the day was to complete the hike in less than 5 hours. However, I thought that 5 hours would be easy to achieve and that the real test would be to see whether I could beat 4 hours elapsed time.

My confidence seemed reasonable because last year I completed the circuit in 6:11:37 and felt strong at the end. Also, I took 58 minutes worth of breaks, carried a pack and hardly ran at all in August of 2006. This time I determined to greatly abbreviate the breaks, carry virtually nothing and run as much of the course as possible.

I prepared well for the trip. My fitness was very good and I constructed pace sheets to keep track of my 5 hour and 4 hour goals. Having done the route twice before, it felt familiar and friendly. I knew the distances between the stages and, based on past experience, had a good idea of where the tough parts were. I knew where I could coast and where I'd have to work hard. I was absolutely certain that enough water is available on the trail for me to rely on just one water bottle in my kit. I felt particularly good about equipping myself with a supply of GU to provide energy for the trip. In short, I felt that conditions were perfect for a record-smashing run.

In keeping with my intention to go light and fast I wore racing clothes: nylon briefs, short sleeved shirt, light socks and running shoes. I thought about using trail running shoes but chose the lightest equipment I had instead. The only things I carried in my fanny pack were six GUs and a water bottle. I was well prepared for an all-out assault.

Rim to River Leg

I left the South Kaibab trailhead at 5:45am. It was pleasantly cool (low 70's) and the sun was high enough at that hour for visibility to be excellent. I started out at a comfortable jog and in the first half-hour passed a dozen hikers, most of whom must have started out at daybreak 20 minutes before me.

I made it to Cedar Ridge in 16:54, well ahead of a 5 hour pace but far behind the 4 hour standard. I was a bit disappointed because the trail was in excellent condition and I thought that I was going at better than a 10 minute per mile pace. I didn't fret about this long because I had other problems at that point. Where's the trail??? I forgot that Cedar Ridge ends in a plateau with trails leading right, left and center, each of which looks as good as the other. I dithered, first running right, then center, backtracking and then asking other equally-confused hikers. No help. Finally, after going a ways out on the center trail I looked back and spotted the true path winding its way down a defile on my left. I ran back and dove back down the right hand trail that I first chose then abandoned! For future reference, the correct trail is the one that goes to the right just beyond and below

the Cedar Ridge restroom structure. Needless to say I was bemused at having gotten lost on the South Kaibab super-highway! The diversion cost me 5 minutes, which I factored out of my final time statistics.

Continuing down the route to Skeleton Point, my time continued to disappoint. At 18:12 it was a bit slower than the Cedar Ridge pace. However, I still felt very good and attributed the slowness to a gradual deterioration of the trail. The deterioration became pronounced on the leg to Tonto Trail junction. While on the way to Tonto Trail I stopped for a moment to eat a GU and drink a few slugs of water. I was glad I had the water along because it was becoming warmer by the minute. I had actually considered saving weight by carrying an empty water bottle down and was very glad that I had the good sense to scratch that notion.

The route to Tonto Trail junction was a mess. Mule traffic ruts the trail terrifically and makes running very difficult. While I kept to the balls of my feet, my pace was little better than a walking pace. I cleared the junction in 22:31 for the leg and 57:37 elapsed time, comfortably ahead of a 5 hour pace but nowhere close to 4 hours. I had one very minor slip along the way which resulted in no harm done.

The leg to Black Bridge is the longest (2.3 miles) of the downhill portion of the course and I knew that I'd have to hurry to make Bright Angel Camp within 1:30:00 elapsed time. The route is steep in places but also boasts a couple of sections that are perfect for running. It was thrilling to make smart time on these. Perhaps owing to incaution but certainly partly attributable to tiredness, I slipped twice on this leg, again with no harm done.

It was wonderful to hit Black Bridge and know with certainty that I'd be at Bright Angel Camp in less than an hour and a half elapsed time. While I was decidedly leg-weary I temporized that I was better going uphill than down and that I'd be able to make up time and finish the route in closer to 4 hours than 5. As I was thinking this, I stumbled yet another time on a perfectly flat section opposite the Beach just outside of the Camp. Embarrassing!

I arrived at Bright Angel Camp in 1:29:45 and was very happy to have the downhill part of the trip over with. I was well ahead of a 5 hour pace but 19 minutes behind the time laid out in my 4 hour pace sheet. I decided then that 4 hours is much faster than I'm capable of. This is not a case of "maybe next year". For me, it's just not in the cards.

I was surprised and dismayed by how thoroughly shot my legs felt. I had budgeted for a 5 minute stop but wound up staying for 14 minutes. During that time I used the wonderful facilities, had a couple more GUs, downed a quart and a half of water and began to fret about my physical condition. The darty, balls-of-foot downhill running had really taken its toll and my thighs were achy. I didn't have anywhere near the snap to my step that I had when starting. For some

reason, this came as a shock to me. While I had no fear of the uphill trek, I was mortified that my plan for aggressively attacking it was on the rocks. Pre-trip I had imagined running the leg to River Rest House, now I knew with certainty that I'd be walking.

River to Rim Leg

It was already hot at Bright Angel Camp and I wanted to start gaining altitude as soon as possible. I hoped that my legs would continue to recover on the relatively flat stage to River Rest House and indeed they did, at least to some extent. I made River Rest House in the shockingly quick time of 23:26. Clearly the distance is less than the 2 miles I estimated. Still, this was encouraging and gave me additional minutes-in-hand versus the 5 hour pace sheet.

It was good to pass the rest house and begin the pull up to Indian Garden, the longest single leg of the trip. I knew that there were many shady places on the route and that the sight and sound of Pipe Creek would entertain. It was apparent that any opportunity for cooling would be welcome as the sun was relentless. After River Rest House the true upward journey starts and I was pleased with my pace and physical condition for most of the way to Indian Garden. In the event, I finished the stage in 1:00:07, fully 11 minutes better than a 5 hour pace and just 4 minutes behind a 4 hour one. This was excellent even if I was feeling a bit stretched when I finally pulled in for a break.

I limited the break to about 6 minutes, just enough to down another quart of water and two more GUs. I was frankly beat when I left Indian Garden. Though I had a good cushion of time versus 5 hours, I was realistic enough to know that finishing within that time was not a certainty. This thought was underscored by the memory that last year I was cheered to have a couple of young guys to compete with on the leg to 3 Mile Rest House; this time the thought of competition dismayed me. Clearly, I was not feeling so well at this point this year as last.

The drag to 3 Mile Rest House seemed endless. For my money, this is where the trail is at its worst, steep and miserably rutted. Amazingly, I completed it in a time slightly better than the 5 hour pace sheet allowed and a couple of minutes faster than in 2006. Even though I felt wretched I performed well. However, at this point danger signals abounded. It was on the trip to 1.5 Mile Rest House that the wheels fell off.

The heat was bad all the way to 3 Mile Rest House and it continued so for the duration. So much for the cooling benefits of higher altitude! While I did not stop at 3 Mile Rest House, I certainly stopped going fast thereafter. The pull to 1.5 Mile Rest House was very, very difficult for me. It brought to mind the feeling of hopeless exhaustion and incapacity that I've experienced on Aconcagua and Denali; the feeling that the body is all used up and just can't take any more. I actually began thinking about the trip to Vinson Massif and considered that if I'm this wasted after only 4 hours here, how will I cope with the headwall and a 12

hour summit day there? After what seemed like an eternity, I finally pulled even with 1.5 Mile Rest House and plopped down on a rock to try to recover.

As usual, there was a perfect gang of people at the rest house. I watched them in a bit of a daze while I re-hydrated and forced down my last GU. I was not feeling peppy at all. Consulting my watch, I saw that I had taken 42 minutes to do a stage I had budgeted only 33 minutes for. For the first time all day my elapsed time (4:29:46) lagged what I needed for sub-5 hours (4:25:48). This was infinitely disheartening because I knew I needed a lengthy break and that I had no hope of finding speed on the last mile and a half to the rim. It was painfully obvious that I had blown my 5 hour goal.

After filling my water bottle and hanging around for 14 minutes at 1.5 Mile Rest House I bit the bullet and began the final leg to the top. My only objective was to finish and the time be damned. It took an exquisitely long 46 minutes to top out. Along the way, despite vastly improved trail conditions, all I could do is put one foot in front of the other and trudge at a snail's pace. My legs were shattered and I could not have done better if my life depended on it. When tantalizingly close to the top (Kolb Studio was visible in the distance) I began to get heat cramps in my thighs and had to walk stiff-legged the rest of the way to avoid seizing-up. What a glorious way to finish!

I hit the Bright Angel trailhead at 11:15am and the hike was officially over in an elapsed time of 5:30:03. On the top there was the customary throng and I drew admiring comments from several people. I suppose I looked better than I felt. In any event, I was gigantically happy to be done and just a short walk away from the air conditioned comforts of the Maswik Lodge!

Post Mortem

Pace: I'm convinced that I can do this route in less than five hours. The biggest reason why I missed this time is that the weather was uncharacteristically hot. It is big news when it is over 90 degrees on the rim but that is just what we had this trip. It is not surprising that the heat finally caught up with me just three miles from the end. If I could have swapped last year's performance from 3 Mile Rest House to the rim for this year's, my finishing time would have improved by almost 27 minutes. I know that I'll be able to push harder in better conditions. It is worth noting that my 5 hour pace sheet only required a 22 minute per mile pace from River Rest House up to the top of Bright Angel. On Pikes Peak in 2005 I kept a 19:35 pace over a course that is 4.6 miles longer and 7000 feet higher.

Running: There is no doubt that I've got to run the South Kaibab Trail to have any hope for a quick time. Despite the fact that running downhill is very stressful and left me rubbery-legged at the bottom, I saved 18:32 versus last year (ignoring last year's 20 minutes in rest breaks) and this is gigantic for a 7.1 mile

course. You pay a price for the speed improvement but it is unquestionably worth it.

Rest Stops: I had 33 minutes of stops this time versus 58 minutes in 2006. Stops of 10 minutes at Bright Angel Camp and 5 minutes each at Indian Garden and 1.5 Mile Rest House seem about right. The unscheduled 14 minute layover at 1.5 Mile Rest House was the only real disappointment I had this trip and even with it, 33 minutes is not outlandishly excessive. My goal for next time should be 20 minutes in total stopping time. This will create a nice improvement opportunity.

Clothing, Equipment and Food: Doing the course racing-style is the only way to go. It encouraged me to know that I had no luggage on my back and was wearing my fastest shoes. While the route thoroughly destroyed my running shoes, they held together long enough for the damage not to get in the way. I'll think about using light trail running shoes next time but I've proved to myself that true running shoes are certainly feasible. On the food front, GUs are just fine. Next time I'll take 10 along and try to get one down every half hour. This time I only had 6 and that was only marginally sufficient.

Physical Status: Rim-River-Rim is a major physical undertaking that cannot be taken lightly. When I got back to the hotel room it took me 10 minutes to remove my shoes. Untying the laces was a huge effort because I cramped every time I tried to bend my leg. I spent the entire rest of the day lounging in bed. Now, four days after the event, my calves and thighs are still quite sore. I'm hiking with moderate weight but won't begin running again until tomorrow, at best. The good news is that my feet are perfect, I've got no blackened toenails and no significant battle scars. For me, that's a success in itself. I'm looking forward to doing this again!

