

## **Grand Canyon Hike: 6-28-08**

This year's Rim-River-Rim excursion was all about redeeming my very disappointing failure last year to complete the course in under five hours. Based on experience I knew that 1) making the time would be very tough and 2) I'd need a bit of luck with the weather to have any shot at all.

I carefully considered the ups and downs of my 2007 hike and was satisfied that all the elements for success were present. Hence, the plan was to go light and fast with racing clothes and a fanny pack, run the entire rim-to-river leg and strictly limit my break time. The only tweaks were to carry a bit more food (nine GUs instead of six) and use trail shoes instead of regular running shoes.

### **Rim to River Leg**

I left the South Kaibab trailhead at 5:30am. It was pleasantly cool (about 70 degrees) and based on the latest weather report I was optimistic that temperatures would stay below 90 degrees. However, I knew that I was racing the sun and that the key was to finish the course before it had a chance to get too high in the sky. Upon departing it struck me as extraordinary that if I accomplished my time goal I'd be done before mid-morning!

There were far more people on the trail than I'd ever seen. It was not by any means crowded but I didn't pass the last of the early-risers until I cleared Tonto Trail Junction. Maybe the traffic was attributable to it being Saturday. I'd never done the route on the weekend before. It was cheering to see so many people out for some serious exercise. Most were carrying packs and headed for an overnight at Bright Angel Camp or Phantom Ranch.

I pulled into Cedar Ridge in 18 minutes flat. This was okay but a bit less fast than I had hoped for because, coming down, I had judged the trail to be in better-than-average shape. It is amazing how a 12 minute per mile pace, going downhill every inch of the way, can feel "fast." Trail running has surprisingly little in common with flatlands running, both in terms of pace and the effort required. It struck me forcibly what a different experience South Kaibab was to running the Barr Trail on Pikes Peak. There you could settle into a pace and cruise. Here you are constantly stepping down, up over and around obstacles and it is literally impossible to keep to a regular pace for more than a few yards at a time.

In keeping with my long-standing tradition of route finding confusion at Cedar Ridge, I once again lost the thread and had to poke around for a couple of minutes before discovering the trail to Skeleton Point. In last year's trip report I identified the trail as the one breaking off to the right just below and beyond the restroom structure. Let me modify that: it is the one breaking off to the right 10 yards beyond and below the restroom structure. I wish the National Park Service would invest \$20 in a sign to eliminate the confusion!

The trip to Skeleton Point was slower still (19:38) and I rated the trail as average. Despite the fact that I knew I was a couple of minutes pokier than last year, I was confident that I'd make up the deficit by the time it hit Bright Angel Camp. Frankly, I was fully satisfied with my 2007 time to the bottom and was not looking for any material improvement this year.

I continued to pass lots of other hikers on the way to Tonto Trail Junction. The route was the usual mess of ruts, stones and gullies. Owing to inattention, I tripped twice within 150 yards and managed to get my legs and hands covered with red grit. Happily, I managed to stay on my feet all the rest of the day.

I found the 2.3 mile leg to Black Bridge agreeably pleasant. Perhaps the reason is that my pace (31:07) was extravagantly slow, fully 4 minutes off last year's. Since my elapsed time upon reaching the bridge was 1:30:07, I was mildly disappointed that I wouldn't equal my 2007 time to the bottom. However, upon pulling into Bright Angel 5 minutes later I took stock and realized that I had a lot to be happy about.

First and foremost, I felt good. Last year my legs were like jelly; this time they still had a bit of snap. Second, the heat was definitely less intense and third, I felt very comfortable about abbreviating my break to 9 minutes. I figured that by keeping to my plan of an ultra short stop at the bottom, I'd erase most of my deficit versus last year and position myself well for a sub-5 hour finish.

I could have taken an even shorter break but for the fact that I had to sort out my gear a bit. On the way down I carried my green sipper bottle rather than stowing it in my pack. This proved a mistake because 1) swapping it back and forth between hands was a waste of energy and 2) I never needed to drink anything until I got to the bottom. While it is probably prudent to bring a full bottle along for the downward journey, there is no problem about stowing it away even if it drips a bit. I was overly paranoid about leakage. As it turned out, when stowed, the leakage was minor.

### **River to Rim Leg**

I was feeling confident when I left Bright Angel Camp, crossed the beautiful Sliver Bridge and hit the River Trail. I took the conservative approach and hiked the whole distance to River Rest House. In the future, if the day is cool enough I might run this leg. This represents a good improvement opportunity.

The long 3.1 mile drag up to Indian Garden came off without incident and in excellent time (57:27). The Devil's Corkscrew section was tougher than I remembered it but my legs still felt in reasonably good shape. That is, they complained but still did their job.

It is always fun to get to Indian Garden and enjoy the shady trees, ramadas, company of other hikers and abundant water. My stay was a little more than the

5 minutes I budgeted but well within reason. In that time, I tanked up on a couple of bottles of water, ate another three GUs and used the very-civilized facilities. I was very conscious that my hike was going well but that I needed to keep pushing the pace for my hard work to be rewarded with a sub-5 hour time.

The trip to 3 Mile Rest House was markedly less stressful than last year's. I plowed ahead very aware that I was working close to my limits but with no sense of impending collapse. While I rather dreaded this leg of the hike, conditions on the trail were better than I remembered and reaching the Rest House was something of an anti-climax. On the way, I lost a couple of minutes to descending mule trains. While they were passing it occurred to me that swaying and lurching down the canyon atop a mule was the last thing I'd ever want to do. The kids on the mules seemed happy to be there, the parents much less so.

My time to 3 Mile Rest House was adequate (36:03) and reinforced my confidence in a sub-5 hour finish. However, I was by then thoroughly sick of working so hard and I longed for the comforts of the rim. I focused my efforts in order to arrive at 1.5 Mile Rest House with as much time in hand as possible. Despite what seemed the worst trail conditions of the entire day, I made it to the rest house in an admirably quick 32:16. Once again progress was delayed by two mule trains. I stopped at the rest house only long enough to slug down a quart of water and refill my bottle. When I looked at my watch I was overjoyed to see that I had 45 minutes to make it to the top within goal. At that point I was absolutely positive that I'd have a happy outcome to the day. While joyfully reflecting on this, I bumped into Cathy who had arrived at 1.5 Mile Rest House a couple of minutes before. After assuring that she was feeling good enough to make the trip to the rim unassisted, I struck off for the top.

The final leg of the journey seemed endless even though my pace was fine. The trip up from 1.5 Mile Rest House is especially difficult because of the large vertical gain (1130 feet) and altitude (about 7000 feet at the top). Despite the fact that trail conditions in the last half-mile are great, these factors and the toll of the previous hours always make topping out a big physical challenge. I gritted my teeth, pushed the pace and continued to pass people all the way to the trailhead at Kolb Studio where I finally punched the "stop" button in an elapsed time of 4:49:37. Done and thank heaven for it! Ten minutes later I was enjoying the manifold comforts of the Kachina Lodge. It was barely 10:30am and my day was well and truly done.

### **Post Mortem**

**Pace:** I did this hike as well as I'm physically able to do. This was a well-planned, concerted effort that allowed no slacking off. I stayed focused every inch of the way because I knew from last year's experience that to do sub-5 hours there is no room for error. That I got the job done is an absolutely wonderful achievement. I'm delighted that I earned this notch in my belt!

However, there is still room for improvement. Under ideal conditions I think I might be able to do the course sub-4:30:00. It all boils down to the weather. While vastly cooler than in 2007, it was still 83 degrees when I finished. Temperatures in the 70s and 80s are fine for most pursuits but are far too hot for running and hiking. If I come back to the Grand Canyon in April or October a high/low range of 60s/30s can be expected at the rim. By starting out early, I'd be right in my sweet spot of about 50 degrees and could potentially shave a half hour off my time. While water is not available at 3-Mile and 1.5-Mile Rest House outside of the May through September high season, that's okay because it is available year-round at Bright Angel Camp and Indian Garden. I'd really like to try this hike in crisp and cool weather conditions and don't think that water will be an issue.

**Rest Stops:** My 16:48 of total resting time was better than expected and pretty close to perfect.

**Clothing, Equipment, Water and Food:** I was glad I used my Nike Pegasus Trail shoes. They are supportive, well-cushioned and durable. Unlike the running shoes I used last year, the Nikes were unblemished at the end of the day.

I've decided that it doesn't make a lot of sense to carry a full water bottle down the South Kaibab trail unless the day is particularly hot. I'm used to going without water for an hour and a half at a time and think that there is a real benefit to making the descent as lightly loaded as possible. Also, after drinking a couple of bottles of water at 1.5-Mile Rest House, it was completely unnecessary to refill the bottle and carry it full up to the top. Unless I'm bonking at that point, the possibility of drinking anything in the last bit of the route is very small. Once again, pounds saved translates into minutes gained.

I ate only six GUs during the trip and this is not enough. I have got to get on a more regular program of eating. One idea is to squeeze eight or ten GUs into a small sipper bottle before starting so they'll be more readily accessible on the route. It is always a minor nuisance to open the packets, squeeze out the contents and carefully stow the remains. While I can't say that I was hungry this year, I'm convinced that I'll be stronger longer with more food inside me.

**Physical Status:** Now, four days after the hike, I'm feeling reasonably sound. However, my legs are still quite sore and the thought of running is very unappealing. Rim-River-Rim is a gigantic physical challenge. If someone offered me a million bucks to repeat the course the next day I would have declined without a second thought. For me, the downhill is a killer and the uphill an exercise in character-building. It is great to have this trip successfully behind me.

## Grand Canyon Hike: Rim-River-Rim (6-28-08)

<u>Waypoints</u>	<u>Cum Mileage</u>	<u>Altitude</u>	<u>Stage Miles</u>	<u>Alt Change</u>	<u>Stage Time</u>	<u>Rest Time</u>	<u>Hiking Pace/mi</u>
South Kaibab Trailhead	0.0	7200	0.0	0			
Cedar Ridge	1.5 Cedar Ridge	6060	1.5	-1140	0:18:00		0:12:00
Skeleton Point	3.0 Skeleton Point	5200	1.5	-860	0:19:38		0:13:05
Tonto Trail Junction	4.4 Tonto Trail	3890	1.4	-1310	0:21:22		0:15:16
Black Bridge	6.7 Black Bridge	2470	2.3	-1420	0:31:07		0:13:32
Bright Angel Campground	7.1 BA Camp	2461	0.4	-9	0:04:54	0:09:14	0:12:15
River Resthouse	9.1 River RH	2550	2.0	89.0	0:23:53		0:11:56
Indian Garden	12.2 Indian Garden	3800	3.1	1250	0:57:27	0:06:33	0:18:32
3 Mile Resthouse	13.8 3-mi RH	4760	1.6	960	0:29:30		0:18:26
1.5 Mile Resthouse	15.3 1.5-mi RH	5720	1.5	960	0:32:16	0:01:01	0:21:31
Bright Angel Trailhead	16.8	6850	1.5	1130	0:34:42		0:23:08

**4:32:49**      **0:16:48**      **0:15:58**

Cumulative ET=>

**4:49:37**

**0:13:14**

<=Down

**0:18:43**

<=Up

