



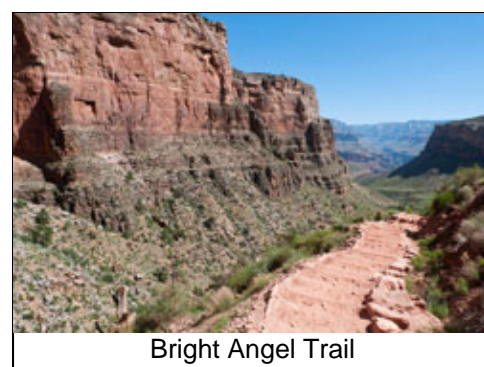
Plateau Point

## Background

It was not the adversity I did not suffer on my six day, May 2010, outing into the Grand Canyon that I will remember, but the wild, maybe feral, adventurers I crossed paths with on that journey. These included about two dozen rim-to-rim-to-rim runners, two traversing the Canyon as part of the 750 Mile Arizona Trail bike race, a guy hauling a kayak down from the South Rim, and a young gal who accused me as being a paparazzi.

Otherwise, my trip was graced with fine weather, clear skies, mild temperatures, and about 20 sprinkles of rain during the last hour of my climb out. The kind Winter rains made the Colorado River flow hard, Bright Angel Creek surge with torrents, and waterfalls scream in surges. With all that rain, the desert landscape was coaxed into a lush Spring bloom.

I do not find it odd now, but it was not too many years ago I would never suspect I would be a Grand Canyon guy. It was a 14 day rafting trip through the Canyon with Arizona Raft Adventures ([www.azraft.com](http://www.azraft.com)) in September 2008 that hooked me. The following Spring I completed my first walk in the Canyon with a four day tramp from the South Rim to Bright Angel Camp near Phantom Ranch. This trip in the Spring of 2010 was similar but lengthen to six days with an itinerary from the South Rim to Bright Angel Camp, Cottonwood Camp (2 nights), Bright Angel Camp again, Indian Gardens, and out at the South Rim.



Bright Angel Trail

## Just Before

Certainly my two day drive to the Grand Canyon was not exciting, but what is worth mentioning are the few good eats and a worthwhile place to stay. From Northern California, I always enjoy stopping at Margie's Diner ([www.margiesdiner.com](http://www.margiesdiner.com)) in Paso Robles, CA. along highway 101 and then the next day at the Pine Country Restaurant ([www.pinecountryrestaurant.com](http://www.pinecountryrestaurant.com)) in Williams, AZ. along I-40. If you have time, Williams is a nice tourist stop, while it is also a gateway to the Grand Canyon. On this trip I spent one night at the Maswik Lodge in Grand Canyon NP. Its locale adjacent to the Backcountry Office made it an ideal spot for staging my trip into the Canyon. At the Backcountry Office were free shuttles to the North Kaibab and Hermit trailheads, and in the morning some of these shuttles, I

understand, are direct to make a morning start easier. The Bright Angel trailhead, where my trip began, was less than a 10 minute walk away.

## **Thursday, May 6**

An early start to beat the impending heat, it was 7:15AM, the temperature on the rim at 6860 feet was in the mid 40s. The sky was clear, it was going to be a brilliant day. Just like last year I chose to descend the Bright Angel Trail, and at this morning hour the trail was just starting to buzz with activity. We were the wise ones.



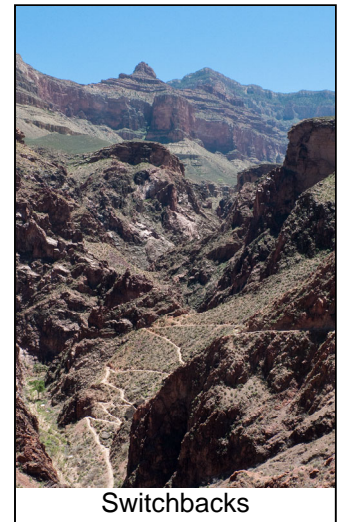
Collared Lizard

With the cool temperatures I needed light weight fleece gloves to keep my hands warm. I otherwise delighted in the temperature, I knew as I descended it would turn much warmer. I completed each of the three segments of the trail to Indian Gardens in about an hour, and while at the way points, located at 1-1/2 and 3 mile, I took advantage of their always useful pit stops.

Along the way while navigating the expansive arm of Bright Angel Canyon were glimpses of the North Rim. The trail descended through repetitive and monotonous stairs often made of juniper laid steps. Just as last year, I found the Canyon's pageantry come alive upon reaching Indian Gardens, the time was 10:30.

It was easy to find a picnic table under the shade of cottonwood trees, it was time for an early lunch. Of course the squirrels said *handouts*, but they somewhat lost interest by my stingy ways. Rather they romped the grounds of their not so private oasis.

As my replenishment progressed more day hikers appeared turning my short lived private lunch into a public gathering. It turned out to be quite a crowd, people from all corners of our spinning rock, obviously the word had been favorably spread of this majestic place. So after an hour I refilled my water bottle and was on my way. The temperature now was 81°, it was 11:40, and the elevation was 3760 feet.



Switchbacks

Just past the campground I entered the Indian Gardens drainage, a riparian paradise, a place of dramatic beauty. It thrives from Indian Gardens Creek as the track follows its path. In the gorge where the creek flows are plentiful cottonwood trees. I suspect it supports a teeming variety of wildlife. It is, in my opinion, the highlight of the journey down.



Soaptree Yucca

Shortly thereafter the trail departs the riparian drainage to a track of switchbacks and open views. I was just below the Tonto Plateau, 2000 feet below and beyond the last of Bright Angel Canyon's walls is the Colorado River. It was certainly a lot of elevation loss, but the views made the journey pleasant. As I approached the River I once again met up with Indian Gardens Creek as it joined Pipe Creek, and then the trail followed that creek to the River with a few easy fords along the way.

Once at the Colorado River another 1-1/2 miles of undulating trail took me to the suspension bridge. Then across the bridge to the north side I walked another 1/2 mile to Bright Angel Campground. There I was lucky to find a premium creek side campsite which happened to also be bathed with shade from several cottonwood trees, it was campsite 10. I will certainly remember





Bright Angel Canyon

this campsite, it was one of the best. The temperature now was 91°, it was 2:15, and the elevation was 2550 feet.

After setting up camp I relaxed in my camp chair to watch the rushing waters of Bright Angel Creek and I also read a few pages of a book. Certainly a pleasant finish to my day's wanderings. Later I hob knobbed with my neighbors, we had much in common and easily bonded. Two of their packs were the same Dana Designs model, the Terraplane, that I use, and we agreed it was one of the best packs ever made. They were seasoned Canyon travelers and had visited numerous Canyon terrains over many years. All in all a fine day.

### **Friday, May 7**

My routine for the next few days was to get up at 5AM, complete my morning chores of breakfast and packing, and be ready to journey by 7AM. It turned out to be a good routine because I was able to meet the day at its coolest.

On this day I journeyed an easy 7 miles to Cottonwood Camp with an elevation gain of 1500 feet. From the Bright Angel Campground I traveled north past Phantom Ranch and through Bright Angel Canyon. Along the way the creek was roaring with torrents of water, no doubt the Winter rains were kind.

While enjoying the canyon solitude I observed another adventurer ahead of me, it looked as if he was hauling a kayak. My imagination instantly focused on the wild ride down the now unforgiving muddy torrents of Bright Angel Creek, and I wondered where he was going to put in. But as I walked to overtake him I realized the strange object he was carrying, which I naturally correlated to the creek, had nothing to do with water, rather it was a trail bike. Why in hell would anyone carry a trail bike you are forbidden to ride in the Canyon.



Hoofing the Racing Machine

I approached him at 9AM as he was taking a break, he introduced himself as Mark Caminiti, and he had an amazing story. He was in the 750 mile Arizona Trail bike race ([www.topofusion.com/azt/race.php](http://www.topofusion.com/azt/race.php)). That trail race runs from the south near Mexico's border to the north at Utah's border. This segment through the Canyon had to be walked with the bicycle carried per strict National Park Service rules. I would learn more of his incredible escapade when he stopped at Cottonwood Camp for a lunch break and then learn more from others and the web later on.



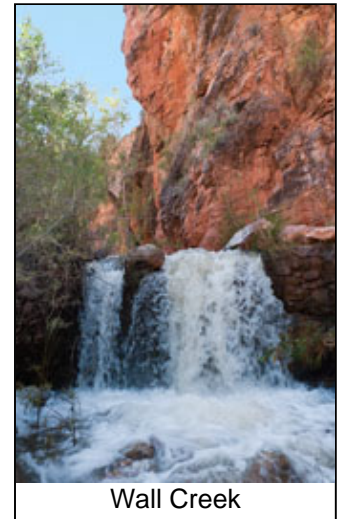
Brittlebush

My meeting with Mark at Cottonwood Camp was at the place I made home for two nights. It was shortly after noon when we chatted more of his feat. I learned there were five official entrants in the race, that he was one of two remaining, and that he was leading. Each racer was self sufficient, having to fend for their own food, water, sleeping arrangements, etc. Along with his trail bike, Mark was carrying a light weight sleeping bag, a bivy sack, food, lots of water, all in a small pack that he was able to attach his bike to. Mark said his walk through the Canyon was more difficult than any other segment of the race, and of course he was walking in his trail bike shoes. He hoped to

walk the 14 miles and 5700 elevation gain from Bright Angel Camp to the North Rim by days end.

As we talked, Mark mentioned another person on the Arizona Trail, a Kurt Refsnider. He referred to Kurt as a professional racer, someone who had not signed up for the race but was otherwise doing the track. Mark learned Kurt started the track a few days after the formal race onset, and that he was making first-rate time.

It was 7:40PM when I chanced another person hauling a trail bike through the Canyon, a meeting that didn't last long. As he was rambling past my campsite I yelled "are you in the same race as Mark," but he was too far along the trail to hear me, he just kept on going, and going in a strong determined manner. His bike was a clever design, it literally folded into a shape that made it easier for him to carry strapped to his pack. As I suspected, I later learned this was Kurt.



Wall Creek

The next morning and then after I returned home to research the web I learned more of this remarkable race. At 8:15AM while I was on my morning outing and about to ford turbulent Wall Creek I met two guys traveling from the North Rim to the South Rim. They saw someone in a bivy with a bike about 2 miles below the rim. I assumed (and later learned I assumed correctly) that this was Mark.

After the trip and back home I queried the official race results posted on the web and also contacted Mark by email. Mark came in first with a time of 15 days, 15 hours, 37 minutes. Kurt, although not officially in the race, posted a time of 7 days, 6 hours, 37 minutes. I also learned that Mark briefly spoke with Kurt as he lumbered by on his way to the Rim "late in the night."

Certainly not the kind of adversity I would put myself through, mine is a different kind of pain. But I enjoyed the excitement of being at its near periphery. More power to these guys.

## **Saturday, May 8**

My favorite, a layover day. The day's first activity was an early morning jaunt to Ribbon Falls to catch it in morning light, and along the way to view, also in morning light, the falls near the ford at Wall Creek. Then in the afternoon a diversion to Roaring Springs.

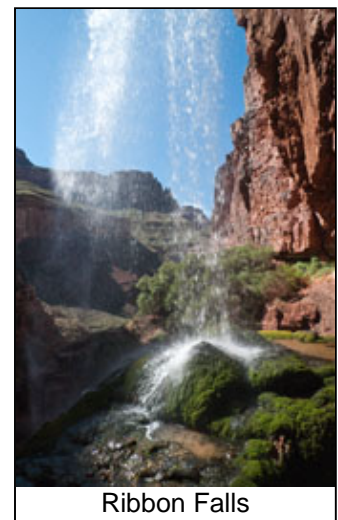
But already in the early AM Cottonwood Camp was beginning to buzz with day trippers. I would never have guessed that the adversity of running in the Canyon would include a journey from rim-to-rim-to-

rim, a distance of 42 miles all accomplished in one day (and fortunately it was someone else's pain). Cottonwood Camp was a good place to catch their stories as they paused for a short respite to replenish water.

The first two runners passed at 6:30AM, I just assumed they were an anomaly. Shortly thereafter at 7AM another pair passed. They said they began at the South Kaibab Trailhead at 3AM, now 4 hours later they had covered 14 miles. I saw them once again at noon as I was preparing for my afternoon outing - at that time they had completed 28 miles, 5700 feet of elevation gain, 8900 feet of elevation loss all in 9 hours, and had another 14 miles to go. Ouch!



Ribbon Falls



Ribbon Falls



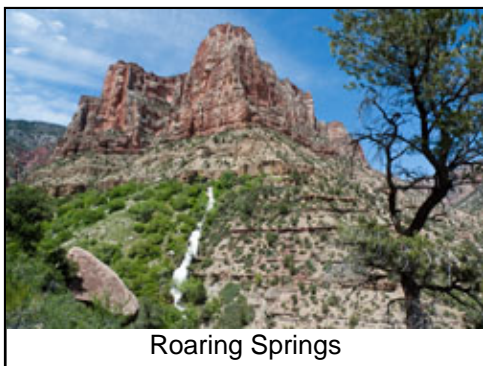
Shortly after 7:30AM I began my morning journey towards Ribbon Falls. At nearby Wall Creek I scrambled to a nice perch to photograph its falls in morning light. While perched I watched many groups stop somewhat perplexed at how to cross the turbulent muddy waters without getting their footwear wet. All came to the same conclusion, go through with naked feet. By 8:15AM I had finished my photography of Wall Creek Falls. I saw somewhere around two dozen rim-to-rim-to-rim runners.

As it turns out I reached Ribbon Falls a bit too early for best photographic lighting. Nonetheless, I climbed the trail that leads to the tiny amphitheater behind the falls. While there waiting I enjoyed the views through and past the falls, and I also enjoyed the lush flora display within the amphitheater. Brilliantly red Cardinal Monkey Flower was prolific in this riparian environment. By 9:30 the lighting bathed both falls and its moss covered *stalagmite* below, it was my time to play photographer. The recent rains made for a fine display.



Golden Crownbeard

I returned to Cottonwood Camp for an early lunch before setting out for my afternoon expedition. Now, with lots of shade at my campsite, I appreciated being the lucky one from the previous day who had his pick of any of the then 15 empty campsites. Scouting all of them, my consensus as best was site 10.



Roaring Springs

Most of Cottonwood's campsites had no shade, a few had a smattering, but site 10 was bathed in shade. Only the group campsite was better.

It was a fine trail up to Roaring Springs. Although it had a few rocky steps, the great majority of the trail had excellent footing. At about 1-1/2 miles from Cottonwood I crossed the footbridge to the west side of Bright Angel Creek. After the bridge I took a short break at a picnic table at what is some kind of residence with a nearby heliport. There was potable water there, but it like much of the other potable water along the corridor is often seasonable.

I continued uphill over the finely graded trail. Shortly thereafter Roaring Springs Canyon joined Bright Angel Canyon, the trail followed the former. I gained elevation, the awesome canyon views were a delight. Then bursting through a canyon wall was Roaring Springs. The tumult of water tumbled 300 feet for its primary fall and probably a bit more for the companion springs. It was an amazing sight, observing this gush of water emerge from nowhere. But of course nowhere was actually water from snowmelt pouring through a muav limestone cave.

## **Sunday, May 9**

It was another simple and easy day, a 7 mile stroll back to Bright Angel Camp. Along the way I once again enjoyed this desert trail region which was landscaped with this week's flavor of wildflowers. The dominate color was yellow from prolific Brittlebush, but yellow poked its head from Golden Crownbeard, and numerous sunflower varieties. This week's cactus bloom were the pinks from Engelmann Hedgehog and Engelmann Prickly-Pear, although when I was along the Colorado River a few day's previous I viewed yellow blooms from Common Prickly-Pear cactus. The violet Desert Four O'clock was now at its peak, whereas my visit a year and two weeks earlier it



Hedgehog Cactus



Century Plant

was mostly just starting to bud. But the opposite was the case for Apache Plume. Although flower and its more attractive fruit were both prevalent, it seemed to me that the fewer blooms of the previous year yielded larger and more dramatic fruit - maybe the abundant rain this year created more but less interesting blooms.

On my journey to Cottonwood a few days earlier, I viewed many century plants with flower stalks thrust skyward but still budding. Now many of these were blooming in prolific glory. I observed pollinators, maybe drunken with happiness, flying from bud to bud to bud of its many hundreds of yellow flowers.

At Bright Angel Campground rather than make home at one of the available creek side campsites, the ones with aromatic fragrances from the mule corral, I chose a site with lots of shade and clean air, it was campsite 20. Once again I set up camp, then sat down for a relaxing lunch.

In early afternoon I strolled to Phantom Ranch. There I spent time writing postcards to friends and branded them with the "Carried out by mule from the bottom of the Grand Canyon" stamp. I also took advantage of the *iced* lemonade. I further relaxed by taking in a few more pages of a book.

That evening I attended a Ranger led talk on nocturnal critters of the Canyon. As these always are, it was informative and enjoyable. The Ranger told us to keep an eye open for a gray fox which had been seen in the area at dusk. So keeping a vigilant eye I piped a delightful exclamation when I thought I saw the mirrored reflection of light coming from its far away eyes, but as it turns out the light was from a solar powered walkway light that had just turned on - my mistake was only mildly embarrassing.

## **Monday, May 10**

Another early morning start, it was 7AM, I wanted to hit the trail while the day was still cool, it was 55°. My journey out to Indian Gardens turned out to be an pleasant climb, my conditioning along with my wanderings of the previous days had proven themselves. But of coarse the favorable weather helped.



Sunflower

Shortly after I reached the base of the Bright Angel Trail at the Colorado River I was passed by a mule train taking out lots of trash, people's gear, and mail, possibly even my postcards. The climb up provided great views of Bright Angel Canyon. Further along the way a downward mule train passed loaded with all sorts of food and various people's gear. It must be an interesting way to earn a living, being a wrangler to lead these sure-footed steeds.



Mule Train

Further up along the trail I crossed paths with numerous day hikers going down from Rim to River and back in one day. It is not something I would do, my body wouldn't tolerate that much distance in a day let alone the elevation gain and loss. But most of the hikers I saw were fit, and by getting an early start they had time on their side. No doubt their climb out would be slower.

Then my earlier imagination of visualizing a kayak came true. A guy was hauling one down to the River. He had no intentions of playing in turbulent Bright Angel Creek, rather he planned to enjoy the Colorado near its placid sections.





Cottonwood along Indian Gardens

Soon I was along the Indian Gardens Creek drainage, and again I was impressed by the diversity in this riparian environment. I particularly enjoy the impressive display of cottonwood trees: Strong, massive, and shade giving.

By 11AM, after a 4 hour saunter, I reached Indian Gardens Campground. The Park Service had done a fine job configuring the campsites, each had an awning for shade, a table for

relaxing, and ample flat ground to pitch a tent. Most sites also had an assortment of shade trees. Best of all, the overnight camping area was segregated from the very busy day area.

After lunch I packed water and a few snacks and took a jaunt to nearby Plateau Point. It was a short 3 mile round trip with 100 feet of elevation change. At the Point I enjoyed a panoramic view of the Colorado River set with a backdrop of the North Rim. The Point was a popular place, it was a fine destination for many South Rim day hikers. At the Point I crossed paths with a fantastic geology school teacher leading a group of young students through numerous National Parks in Utah, Arizona, and California.

Later I met an athletic young gal who scrambled up a nearby free standing pillar. It was probably no more that 20 feet down, across, and then up, but from my point of view it could have been a mile. Her friend snapped her picture, then I followed suit. She then accused me of being a paparazzi. My quick response quenched her comic disgust when I said "I'm going to Photoshop in my head," and to that she laughed and danced a jig.

## **Tuesday, May 11**

One last early morning rise to beat the heat that did not come. It was an uneventful exit to the South Rim. With morning temperatures in the low 50s and knowing that my impending altitude increase would likely bring more cool temperatures, I began my exit with an extra shirt and a pair of light weight fleece gloves. The morning also brought numerous clouds, but the latest forecast I was aware of indicated there would be wind but no rain. As it turned out, it sprinkled 20 drops.

I rambled up the trail. I reached the 3 mile and then 1-1/2 mile way points in under an hour each. With a short rest stop at each I arrived at the Rim in 3 hours. Along the way I passed many day hikers starting on their outings down.

Just before I reached the South Rim trailhead, 25 vertical feet below the Rim, the mild breezes within Bright Angel Canyon suddenly increased to chilly gusts. Some gusts were as strong as 20-30 mph. By the time I reached the Rim, my sweaty body was blasted with 40° winds. Burr! Fortunately, the walk to my car was less than 10 minutes while my elevation-gained-internal-heat kept me comfortable.

A most enjoyable outing. What remained was the long drive home. But what I was looking forward to then was a real meal. In an hour I was in Williams at the Pine Country Restaurant refueling. I spent that night on the road in Barstow, then the next day after another real meal at Margie's in Paso Robles I drove the remaining three hours home. It would take several days for my metabolism to slow down, but during that period I enjoyed many large meals - a first-rate benefit to an active life.



Hmmmm