

December 2005 GCNP Hike

Boucher/Hermit Loop by a Trio of Middle-Aged Oklahoma Geologists who should know better, but don't.

Participants: Kevin DaVee, Cliff Murray, and Jim Martell

Day 1 (Saturday, December 3): Drove from Tulsa to the Grants, NM/ Zuni Mountain area in New Mexico. What can you say? We left Tulsa at "oh dark thirty" and drove and drove down I-40. At least this time we took a larger vehicle (Ford Expedition instead of my 2 door Jeep Cherokee like last time), so we had lots of room for the gear and ourselves. Our exciting stop for the day was REI in Albuquerque. I exchanged a REI Minimalist Bivy for an Outdoor Research Basic Bivy and Jim bought one exactly like the one I exchanged. We walked about the store gawking at all the gear offerings and thinking, "Man, this stuff weighs a lot." We obtained the mandatory green chile cheeseburger at Blake's in Grants, NM and then drove into the Zuni Mountains. Our intention was to bivouac at Ojo Redondo Campground as we had the previous year (in October that time). Getting through the Zunis via snowy/icy dirt roads took some technique, as the Ford is a two-wheel drive vehicle. We arrived at the campground well after dark to find it completely covered in snow. The temperature was in the high teens. I was concerned we might get stuck so we literally went back out the campground road in reverse and still lost traction occasionally (guess we should have taken the jeep). The night sky at the high elevation and with the low temperature was ablaze with stars. We stopped in route just to enjoy it. Jim was not too upset about not staying the night given that the temperature was still dropping. After driving all the way through and over the Zuni Mountains, we emerged back onto I-40 and then backtracked to our contingency bivouac location (Bluewater State Park). Who would have guessed? Temperatures in the teens and plenty of campsites available. Suffice it to say that it was cold. I slept outside with a zero degree bag (for car camping not hiking) in the new bivy. Jim and Cliff were in a tent with Jim in one 20-degree bag and another on top of him like a quilt. He also slept in his down jacket and was still cold.

Day 2 (Sunday, December 4): Beautiful and cold morning at Bluewater State Park, which we appeared to have to ourselves. The lake is always small and was quite low with the on-going drought. We got back to I-40 and headed west. As we approached Gallup we saw tens if not hundreds of hot air balloons being launched. Jim claims that Cracker Barrel makes the best pancakes in the universe so we had to obtain some in Gallup. He gave us quite a dissertation about the intricacies of pancake technology. On the road again and into Arizona. We passed the various tourist trash on the interstate. We particularly enjoy the two-headed dinosaurs in the vicinity of Petrified Forest National Park. We stopped at "Peace Surplus" in Flagstaff where Jim purchased "toe warmer" packets. As usual, we got to the Tusayan before noon on the second day. We've visited the South Rim enough times that we don't feel particularly compelled to take in the sights. Given the day was short, we focused on setting up camp in Mather Campground (once again not much competition for sites as the forecast was for single digits) and

getting gear ready for the morning departure. We had our ritual pre-hike supper at “We Cook Pizza and Pasta” in Tusayan and returned to Mather. We encountered one more camper who joined us at our short-lived campfire (one bundle of wood from the general store and a can of charcoal lighter fluid). He had a very interesting camping rig. It was a Jeep Wrangler with a “pop up” camper on top...you kind of had to see it to know what I’m talking about. Once the fire went out we headed for our bedrolls as the temperature was falling fast. Jim opted to sleep in the back of the vehicle and volunteered for the job of periodically turning the engine on to keep our water, etc. from freezing. The coldest temperature during the night on the car’s electronic thermometer was 17 degrees. However, we suspect it was inaccurate (on the high side) due to the heat from the engine.



Gear mostly ready to go at Mather Campground.

Day 3 (Monday, December 5): Up early before sunrise. The nights are long in December so we had been in the bedroll as long as we could stand it anyway. We struck camp, loaded the Ford and headed for Grand Canyon Village. We knew there was no hurry to get on the trail prior to sun up so we decided to have breakfast in the restaurant at Bright Angel Lodge. I can highly recommend the huevos rancheros. Jim of course had more pancakes. We had a view out the window over the canyon and could see the formations lighting up as the sun started to rise. After finishing the high-calorie breakfast we drove out on the road to Hermit’s Rest. We stopped at Pima Point along the way to get a good look at the Hermit Trail and at least the area of the upper Boucher Trail (as you can’t

really see it from across Hermit Canyon). It was still quite cool and the only other person there was an early morning photographer. You can also get an excellent view of Monument Creek from this vantage point. We drove on to Hermit's Rest, parked the vehicle and began our last equipment and supply checks as we geared up. Another party was leaving for Hermit Creek at the same time. This was our second time down the upper Hermit Trail so we knew what to expect. The trail construction workmanship in this area is truly amazing with the long runs of "pavement stone" from over a century ago. At one of the switchbacks we saw a small dumbbell weight sitting on a rock. We could only surmise that a hiker was getting a joke played on them and had detected it before they hiked very far. We reached the junction with the Dripping Springs Trail fairly quickly and headed west across the head of Hermit Canyon. The trail in this area is a little rougher and more uneven, but has only slight elevation changes to negotiate. In short order we were at the junction between the trail going left and up to Dripping Springs and the Boucher Trail that runs roughly north along the west side of Hermit Canyon. The trail is easy to follow in this area and winds back and forth a little between the edge and farther in. There are some boulders here and there that you have to negotiate in the trail. This section has been described as "exposed", and while like anywhere in the canyon, you don't want to stop paying attention, the trail is relatively easy. We had our lunch along this segment trying to stay in the sun to keep warm as we cooled off rapidly when we stopped moving. Jim and Cliff had both elected to carry two summer sausages apiece as part of their primary lunch rations. It was only day 1 and Jim was already realizing he didn't like summer sausage that much...well at least it wasn't going to spoil in the heat. Our original target for the day was a dry camp at Yuma Point, but given the cold weather, we wanted to press on to a lower elevation. We were a little pressed for time due to the short duration of daylight, but were doing well.



Morning in the Canyon. White's Butte (one of our waypoints) is visible center right.



The great mystery barbell weight next to the upper Hermit Trail.



Upper Boucher Trail contouring on the west side of Hermit Canyon bearing NNE.

There are lots of accounts of the descent through the Supai on the Boucher Trail that sound fairly intimidating. I'm going to try to describe it accurately from my perspective.

After rounding Yuma Point, you begin a fairly level southbound course to the head of Travertine Canyon (we crossed it twice on this trip). The walking is straightforward until you reach the head of the canyon where the trail starts its descent through the Supai. As noted in various accounts, there isn't much evidence of trail maintenance in the last century or so and it is uneven and heavily eroded. The exposure though is mostly over drops of just tens of feet (not hundreds as in some places) so if solo you have a good chance of surviving the fall and being able to contemplate your gradual transition to coyote, condor and raven food. Make no mistake, this descent requires free hands and concentration and you could easily slip. Working down slowly is the key. Without a pack it wouldn't be that big a deal, but of course you have one strapped on. The area that people mention lowering their packs by rope is fairly obvious. We did keep ours on, but there was a lot of banging and scraping as we worked our way down through it...definitely foot and hand work, not walking upright. The old mule trail is pretty much gone in this area. You actually get through this section fairly quickly and then the trail gradually levels a bit as you are coming down on top of the Redwall. From this vantage point you cannot see how the trail makes it to Whites Butte as it appears to be sheer cliff all the way and you are in fact a little lower than the White Butte saddle at this point. However, you know the trail HAS to go there and it in fact does. Other than the annoyance of going back up hill a bit, the walk on to the Whites Butte Saddle is straightforward, i.e. just more occasionally rough trail.

We wanted to make sure we had plenty of daylight and we wanted to be fresh before we attempted the Redwall descent so the saddle was the bivouac of choice. We just hoped it would be significantly warmer than the rim as we had descended about 2000 feet in elevation. To save weight (and volume in my 2900 cubic inch pack) I was using a 30-degree down bag. While it only weighed 1.5 lbs, it wasn't going to be all that warm so I was committed to sleeping in all my clothes. For this trip I had opted for the bivy sack rather than a tent. Hopefully, the bivy and my clothes in addition to the bag would be warm enough. In any event, making camp just amounted to unpacking the bag, bivy, tyvek ground cloth and laying them out. Jim had been cold enough our two nights of car camping that he decided he wanted to hike with my zero degree bag instead of his 20 degree one. When we got to the bivouac I kidded him and said, "Hey man, that's my bag, I want it back." The views as the sun set from this point were rewarding. The only protection of our food from "varmints" was hanging it from our trekking poles stuck in the ground. During dinner prep, I managed to spill several ounces of my alcohol fuel...didn't need that weight anyway I guess. I was using a "Pepsi can" stove that performed well in the temperature and elevation conditions. Besides, if push came to shove, I could cannibalize my single malt scotch as stove fuel...or maybe I'd just eat cold freeze-dried food...hopefully it wouldn't come to that. Cliff actually erected a tent. This proved difficult in the loose rocky soil and he had to use several rocks for tie outs. Prior to losing all the light, we went over to the west side of the saddle to take a look at the Boucher Trail going down through the Redwall and on to Boucher Creek. It did look interesting. The night was clear, spectacular, cold and at this time of year, long.



Bivouac 1: White's Butte Saddle. Jim in his long johns, in his clothes, in his down jacket, in his 0 degree F synthetic bag, in his bivy sack...and still cold.

Day 4 (Tuesday, December 6th): The temperature (teens at least) forced you to get in your bedroll to stay warm (or at least not as cold), but we just weren't used to being in "bed" for 12 to 13 hours. Naturally, we were up before dawn, but hopping around to try and stay warm. I had slept with one water bottle (i.e. potable, not just the "pee bottle") in the bivy to keep it from freezing; it was slushy, but still pourable. Frozen granola bars are quite a treat. As always, coffee was a priority. Eventually, and thankfully the sun started to come up. The sub-freezing temperature only slightly diminished the appreciation of the show as the cliffs on the north side of the river gradually began to catch the light. We were in no great hurry today, as we didn't have to cover much distance. As the sun became fully up we were greeted both by ravens (wondered where they had been last night) looking for an easy score and by the steady drone of the helicopters above. The tours pass almost directly above this point on their north to south leg. I'm not sure what altitude they are flying at, but it is pretty high above you and they follow a straight-line route. One comes by every few minutes. I had thought about "mooning" them, but they were too high and I was too cold.



Morning on the White's Butte Saddle



Three of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' finest: Self-portrait of DaVee, Murray, and Martell on White's Butte Saddle prepared to descend through the Redwall to Boucher Creek. Note Jim's GoLite Gust somehow expanded overnight.

The Boucher Trail through the Redwall has gotten a lot of negative “press” as well. It is certainly different in character than the Supai descent due to the drastic difference in geology. The trail is steep as reported and covered with hard and sharp limestone scree. It is quite easy to lose your footing in this material and slip. I did a couple of times, but not much more than my pride was injured. Best advice is to go slow. What's the hurry anyway, you're on vacation. You are descending through a relatively narrow canyon reentrant so the sense of exposure isn't very great although as usual a fall of tens of feet is easy to find for the unwary or unlucky. Descending this route in the morning kept it in the shade, which would have been nice in say six months from now. However, the morning light on the monuments across from Boucher Canyon kept drawing our attention away from the trail beneath our feet. This descent isn't as “visually scary” as the one through the Supai, but due to the scree is probably really the most hazardous area of the Boucher Trail.



Looking down the Boucher Trail in the Redwall. Plenty of sharp scree to slip on in this steep section.



At the junction of the Boucher and the Tonto Trails...do you think the Tonto might be that way?



View generally to the north (downstream) along Boucher Creek. Precambrian rocks in the foreground and Tapeats outcrop just visible around the bend.

After coming through this the trail bends to the right (northward) and you work your way gradually to the contact with the Bright Angel. This made a good place to stop and rest as well as wait for all three party members to get back together. The top of the Bright Angel has a trail worn into it, but the trail to Boucher Creek continues down hill at this point. You might want to spend a few minutes on the side trip to take a look at an obvious fault displacement in this area. After a break we continued on down through the shale in this area that provides smoother steep slopes and as usual well eroded trail until we reached the junction with the Tonto West Trail. You can't miss this, as there are arrows and trail names etched in the rock. You take a sharp left at this point to descend into Boucher Canyon or a sharp right uphill to take the Tonto to the east. Another half hour or so brings you to Boucher Creek. There are lots of "social trails" and a number of well-used campsites. The ruins of Boucher's "cabin" are to your right as you head to the creek. He used large rocks already in place for part of the walls. The fireplace is still intact. What a place to have lived for an extended period of time. If there is any remaining evidence of his "gardening", we weren't good enough archeologists to figure it out. There are a fair number of "tin" can remnants. This area is where several drainages meet and has a relatively open feel to it with cliffs of the Tapeats Formation above and the creek eroded into the top of the Precambrian. Like most of the Grand Canyon, the invasive, but pretty, Tamarisk is all over the place even though you are still quite a ways above the Colorado River. The campsites are nestled in among rocks, Cottonwoods and other shrubs and trees with the usual "field expedient" chairs (i.e. carefully arranged flat rocks), etc. We had been running on water we hauled from the rim, so it was time to fill up at Boucher Creek. We filtered some water and enjoyed lunch (more summer sausage for Jim) and the view. The helicopter noise is a little less here, but still present. Boucher is at large camping and we had only used one night of the three in the area on our permit. After discussing it, we decided we would walk on down to the Colorado River and either spend the night there or if we wanted come back to the cabin area. There really isn't a trail as you just follow the creek. The only difficulty is the loose footing in the gravel/cobble bed of the stream. There are no pour offs or other difficult features to negotiate. Before you go very far you pass a very large cairn on the left bank. I assume this corresponds with the continuation of the Tonto West Trail, but we didn't go that way to verify it. It is a very pleasant walk with relatively steep Vishnu Schist walls on both sides of the creek bed. A highlight of this walk was encountering a "momma" Bighorn Sheep and her juvenile. The pair stayed ahead of us as we kept moving down to the river. At one point momma made a leap that the youngster balked at. They talked to each other a bit and then the juvenile followed via what looked like an impossible route, but not to them. You come upon the mouth of the creek rather suddenly. You hear it first, the roar of Boucher Rapids and then there the Colorado is framed in a narrow window by cliffs and vegetation. The creek is swallowed up by the river in just a few feet. There are fine-grained sand beaches both to the east and west. The latter is the largest. The water worn black metamorphic rock in the area takes on a variety of protrusions, ridges and fingers. There is always a variety of seemingly meaningless cairns in places like this. I think people are just so impressed they feel they have to build monuments. One of these cairns is an "A" in a circle on the dunes facing the river to the west of the creek mouth. Who knows what the "A" is for. We quickly decided we were going to enjoy the rest of the afternoon and the night here at the bottom of the Canyon.



The mouth of Boucher Creek and the Colorado River.

Since we had the entire area to ourselves we spread out a bit. Cliff chose a ledge over Boucher Creek. I went for the sand close to the river while Jim was between us. The space helped compensate for my alleged snoring. The fine sand made an excellent mattress and the noise from the rapids as well as the perceptible ground vibration created a unique sleeping environment. An added bonus was the warmer temperature at the bottom of the canyon. Sleeping a little apart also provided an experience of isolation where the setting took greater effect. This is a truly inspiring location in the canyon.



Cliff's idyll at Boucher Beach on the morning of Day 5.

Day 5 (Wednesday, December 7th). This was another short hike day so we had the morning to goof off. Our previous Grand Canyon trips had included such tight itineraries that we rarely had the luxury of enjoying a particular location for long. We spent some time exploring the area and just relaxing until late morning. As we were preparing to leave a pleasant surprise came down the river. A party of several rafts came into Boucher Rapids as we watched from the shore. Waves were exchanged as they passed by. Other than ourselves, we hadn't encountered any other people since leaving Hermit's Rest. We were surprised as we thought the river running mostly ended in October.



Looking down on my campsite from the previous night. View across Boucher Creek of Boucher Rapids.



One of the boats from the raft party that passed by.

We made good time back up to the Boucher Creek Camp area and had a quick lunch (more summer sausage for Jim...yummm). Jim and I chilled out in camp. Cliff thought he had lost a Swiss Army knife up on the Boucher Trail at the Bright Angel contact with the Red Wall and wanted to go look for it. We wished him luck, but didn't offer to go with him. Cliff is a strong hiker and returned fairly quickly, but not with the missing knife. Well at least he got some exercise. We rounded out the afternoon with some exploration up Boucher Creek. It reminded us in some ways of upper Clear Creek, but is generally narrower. We tried to not trample riparian vegetation, but if we did by accident aimed for the exotic species. This side trip reinforced the impression that the hermit Boucher had chosen quite a secluded spot to homestead.



Exploring up Boucher Creek.



Ruins of Boucher's Cabin.

Nightfall brought another exceptionally clear sky. At one point we could just see Venus above the western rim of the area while Mars was just above the eastern. While cold, it wasn't horribly cold and we sat up talking for a couple of hours. The rodents were quite active as soon as darkness fell and futile attempts to shoo them kept us occupied for a while. We had suspended our food bags as best we could and hoped it would be sufficient protection from the "critters". As we sat and talked, we would occasionally hear the "pop" and tumble of a rock falling from the surrounding Tapeats cliffs. I assume this was brought about by thermal stress delivering the coups de grace to an already loose fragment. Jim was a little unnerved by these sounds that echoed about us and what they implied for the ultimate stability of our surroundings. I decided to comfort him by pointing out the large blocks in the area that had obviously tumble a significant distance prior to coming to rest. "Who knows Jim, maybe a large mass movement will land on top of us tonight!" Jim was not amused. I'm always glad to help. All in all, another fantastic day and really long December night in the canyon.

Day 6 (Thursday, December 8th). Another glorious day in the canyon dawned clear, cold and bright. This morning's interesting incident was a "surprise" in one of my food bags. When I retrieved the stuff sacks I noticed one had a small "flap" chewed in it. A

“varmint” had managed to climb to it and chew into it. I opened the bag with trepidation to see what damage had been done. Loss of food is a big deal as we attempt to travel light and have very limited stores...good thing I’m carrying 20 extra pounds of body fat. The target had been my gorp stores. I had small snack size individual pouches that were enclosed in a large zip lock within the nylon stuff sack. The surprise was the deer mouse that was still in the large zip lock. Apparently, he hadn’t been able to find his way out. Even more amazing, he had helped himself to only one of the bags of gorp. The others were intact. I briefly considered whether it was “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” for this little fellow who had clearly been turned delinquent by human contact. I admired his pluck and set him free.



Fauna on the Tonto.

We had less time to “lollygag” today, as we actually needed to reach a particular destination, Hermit Creek. We backtracked up to the junction of the Boucher and Tonto Trails and began our ascent back onto our old friend the Tonto Platform. We encountered some mule deer on the way out and some other creatures silhouetted against the horizon that we assumed were deer. Later examination of some photographs actually proved these to be bighorn sheep. The stroll on this section of the Tonto is like elsewhere with seemingly long detours around drainages and minor ups and downs. Much of the trail hugs the edge of the inner gorge and offers excellent views up and down the river including Boucher Rapids and Hermit Rapids and even Granite Rapids (I think). Of

course on a clear day like the one we had, you are treated to the always-spectacular views up, down and across the canyon. Every time I'm on the Tonto I always think about how much you would miss if you only saw the canyon from the rim. The Tonto Platform is my favorite place to walk on the planet (so far). One of the high points of this particular trek is Travertine Canyon. It is renowned for its geologic similarity (i.e. the extensive travertine) to Havasu Canyon (minus the water of course). I was surprised to find some dwarfed Cottonwoods in this area given the absence of perennial water. Apparently they get enough to survive. I couldn't help but wonder how many years it had taken one of these trees to reach a trunk diameter of a few inches.



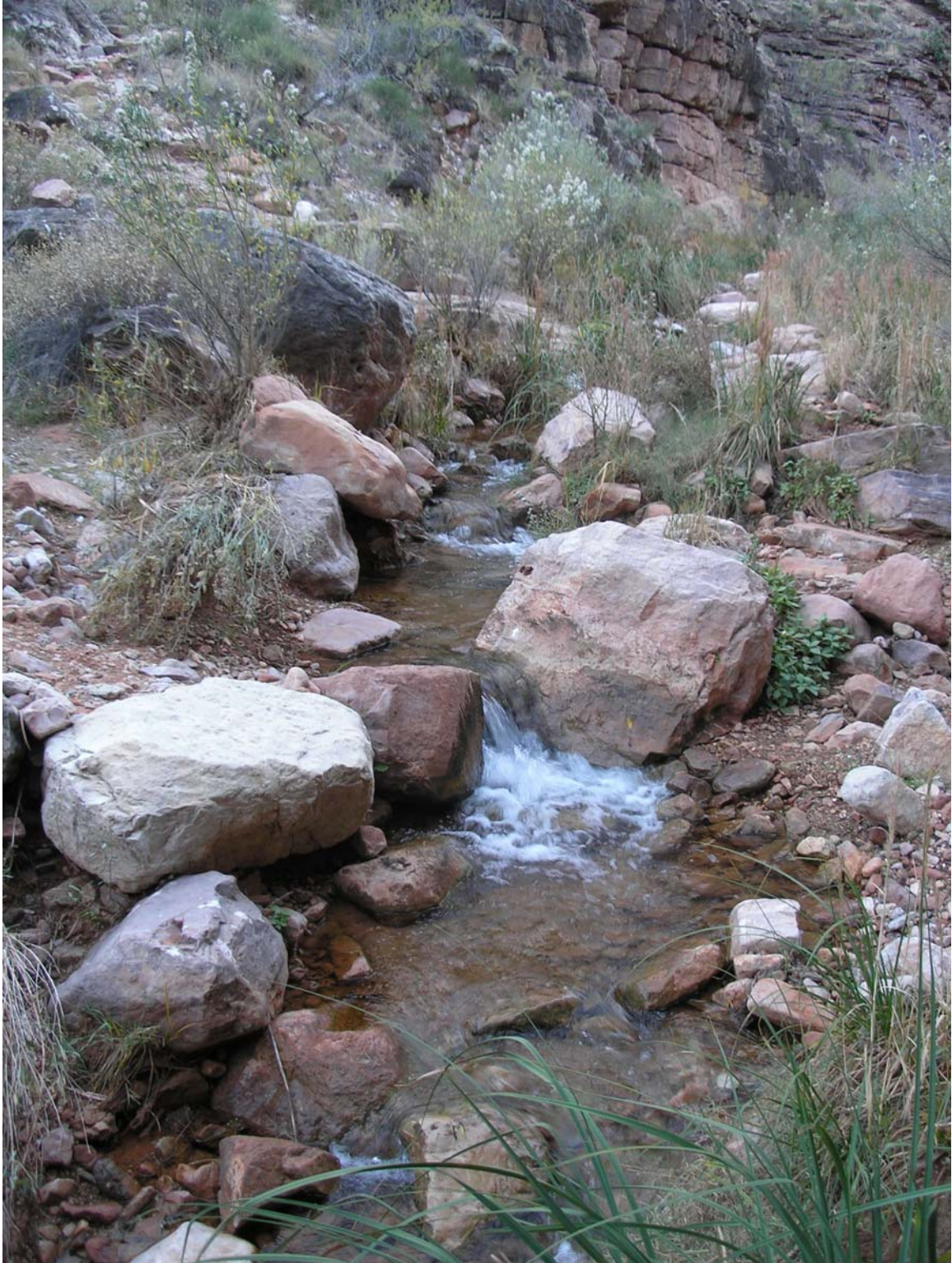
Looking down canyon on the Tonto Trail between Boucher Creek and Travertine Canyon.



“Drape-like” travertine deposits in Travertine Canyon.



Looking up canyon from the Tonto Trail between Travertine Canyon and Hermit Creek. Hermit Rapids is visible below.



Looking up Hermit Creek near the campsites.

None of us had been to Hermit Creek before. We were a little unique perhaps in having our first trip to this popular spot via the Tonto eastbound. The weather was clear, but with

a fair amount of wind. As is often the case on the Tonto, you do seem to curve around a lot of drainages that aren't even hinted at on the Trails Illustrated map. We eventually rounded Columbus Point and started contouring into Hermit Creek Canyon. As you approach you can see some of the trail work on the east side of the canyon from the Santa Fe Railroad days. When you finally make it into the arm with the developed campsites you drop fairly abruptly (but not very far) into the main arm of the canyon and to Hermit Creek. To be honest, I had often thought I would avoid this location due to it being notorious for crowding, etc. during popular times of the year. However, now that I was here I understood why it was so popular. This is certainly a spectacular area. The abundance of flow in the creek must really make this a great place to go to during the summer heat, as it is accessible after a ½ day hike from the rim. Two men were present when we arrived. We engaged them in a limited conversation (first folks we had spoken to since leaving the rim), but they were not very friendly. Hey we're from Oklahoma, we speak to everyone. They did indicate that they had left Monument Creek that day and were on their way to Boucher Creek. Given the short day, we thought they had a fair chance of arriving in the dark given their afternoon start from Hermit. However, the Travertine Canyon area offers some good campsite possibilities provided you aren't in dire need for water.

We had planned to spend the night in "the dormitory" as it was described in the late Sharon Spangler's book ("On Foot in the Grand Canyon"). This is a large site under a rock overhang. However, given the coolness and our desire for an early start in the morning we took full advantage of the choice of campsites (all of them), and located near the privy (a fine NPS pit toilet and no smell in sub-freezing weather and who wants to walk a long ways to the john in this cold) and near to the Tonto eastbound. Remarkably, or maybe not, we had Hermit Creek camp to ourselves. As usual, darkness was coming on fast and the temperature was dropping. We set up our simple camp and set a candle lantern on a rock. This night we bedded down close enough to each other to talk. We had the advantage of ammo boxes and pack racks at this plush developed spot so the abundant mice were only mildly annoying. I had an eerie experience down by a chute and pool in the creek. I had gone to down to get a bucket of water and I heard voices! I couldn't make out what was being said, but it did in fact sound like human voices. The acoustics of the spot and the gurgling of the water (along with the windless quiet of the evening) created this unusual effect. This is hard to describe, but quite real. We were able to look up from our campsite (approximately 3000 elevation) to see the overlook at Pima Point (elevation 6798). Our thought was, "We're walking all the way up to there tomorrow?" since we knew the elevation was similar to Hermit's Rest. Cliff had brought a small monocular. We took turns looking up at the overlook and could just barely make out people. No doubt some of them had high-power optics and were looking down at us. Modesty made us glad that the privy was shielded from their view, although the view from the privy was just the cliff face a few feet away. The night was once again clear and cool. I was a little sad to consider this being the last night in the canyon for a while.



“Camp Sweet Home” at Hermit Creek.



View of Pima Point from Hermit Creek Campsite.

Day 7 (Friday, December 8th). After our usual restful 12 hours in the cold and dark we were up before light and quickly made breakfast (instant oatmeal and the last of the tang..mmm). I never face the hike out of the canyon without anxiety. I was probably in the worst physical shape yet due to year at work that caused me to be inconsistent on exercise and gain weight. Other than being an overweight hypertensive 45 year old, I was the model of a Grand Canyon hiking athlete. By shortly after first light we were on the trail and heading east on the Tonto to the junction with the upper part of the Hermit Trail. On the way out we passed a pour off covered with ice and the NPS “corral” that is visible from the rim. I think this rock structure is a re-use of an old Santa Fe Railroad structure. I was feeling the strain even before we began the climb up from the Tonto...it was going to be a long day. I popped a power gel (caffeine, electrolytes and glucose...mmm). It probably didn't do that much good, but it made me feel better. We had been down the Cathedral Stairs (in 2003), but never up them. Surprisingly, we seemed to make it up through the Redwall pretty fast. The views were spectacular on this morning with high visibility. The real work began oddly enough on what I think of as the long “straightaway” of the Hermit. We were keeping a good pace and both Jim and I experienced something I hadn't before, a racing heart rate that we just had to stop to lower. This occurred several times so it was apparent we would just have to take our time. Going up the trail we noticed the periodic faded, but still visible, distance (and vertical feet) to rim markings on rocks along the trail. These are no longer maintained,

but are still legible. It was still cool enough the water in our exposed water bottles was turning to slush and we felt the cold in the shade whenever we stopped. Finally, we began to come to some areas where the trail was in the sun. It was hard not to just stop. We passed by Lookout Point without pausing this time, as we wanted to keep moving. By lunchtime we were at Santa Maria Spring and I literally finished off my food (a first on any of my Grand Canyon trips). Water running from the spring had made glaze ice on the trail in spots. A number of seeps in this area had formed large icicles and we saw the evidence of at least one illegal small campfire (almost understandable given the weather). We wondered aloud if they had also illegally bivouacked at this location. I suppose people get caught, but I have never seen a ranger except on the corridor trails. Most of the people I know obey the rules as much for the challenge as out of any fear of enforcement. Heaven knows hiking in the canyon is regulated enough and we don't want to precipitate more by abuse. Soon we were back at the head of Hermit Canyon and the junction with the Dripping Springs Trail. This area seems very "park like" to me. Of course, I've only been in it in November and December. I would imagine ill prepared day hikers have an entirely different view in July. Cliff was in great shape this time due to his regimen of cycling back in Tulsa. He is a "nurturer" and very considerate person and was more than willing to patiently wait on slow Jim and slow Kevin. We told him to go ahead. After satisfying himself that we would stay together, he reluctantly "sprinted" on up the upper Hermit Trail. About this time we started passing a few groups of day hikers descending the Hermit. A couple told us that the temperature the night before had been 3 degrees F on the rim...no camping in Mather tonight. Jim and I plugged valiantly along and shortly after 1 p.m. emerged into the Hermit's Rest Parking Lot.



Looking up towards the Cathedral Stairs area.



A rest break on the Hermit Trail.



Looking north from the Hermit Trail.



Jim catches his breath as he nears the rim.



One last look as this trip ends way too soon. View near the top of the Hermit Trail.

I was a bit concerned about some beer I had left in an ice chest in the truck. Fortunately, the ice chest insulation had been enough to keep an average temperature just above freezing inside. I opened a bottle of Fat Tire and celebrated another fabulous hike with two great fellow travelers.

That evening we stopped in Williams for the customary post-hike “gorge-fest” (double cheeseburger for me, thank you very much). I consumed it with gusto knowing that at least on this day I had burned more calories than I was eating. We enjoyed the festive Christmas decorations in Williams and hit I-40 eastbound spending the night in Gallup and then on the next long day on the interstate back to Tulsa.

This was my fifth GCNP backpacking trip. You should respect the terrain and the remoteness, but most people in reasonable health can succeed in hiking here and having a great time. Proper gear and preparation are essential as you may truly be completely on your own, but the reward is incomparable beauty and healthy separation from the world for a bit. Good luck on your next hike.

Kevin DaVee, Tulsa, Oklahoma