



Thunder River Trail and Deer Creek

The huge outpourings of water at Thunder River, Tapeats Spring, and Deer Spring have attracted people since prehistoric times and today this little corner of Grand Canyon is exceedingly popular among seekers of the remarkable. Like a gift, booming streams of crystalline water emerge from mysterious caves to transform the harsh desert of the inner canyon into absurdly beautiful green oasis replete with the music of water falling into cool pools. Trailhead access can be difficult, sometimes impossible, and the approach march is long, hot and dry, but for those making the journey these destinations represent something close to canyon perfection.

Updates and Closures

Climbing and/or rappelling in the creek narrows, with or without the use of ropes or other technical equipment is prohibited. This restriction extends within the creek beginning at the southeast end of the rock ledges, known as the "Patio" to the base of Deer Creek Falls. The trail from the river to hiker campsites and points up-canyon remains open. This restriction is necessary for the protection of significant cultural resources.

Locations/Elevations

Indian Hollow (6250 ft / 1906 m) to Bill Hall Trail Junction (5400 ft / 1647 m):
Monument Point (7200 ft / 2196 m) to Bill Hall Junction:
Bill Hall Junction, AY9 (5400 ft / 1647 m) to
 Surprise Valley Junction, AM9 (3600 ft / 1098 m):
 Upper Tapeats Camp, AW7 (2400 ft / 732 m):
 Lower Tapeats, AW8 at Colorado River (1950 ft / 595 m):
 Deer Creek Campsite, AX7 (2200 ft / 671 m):
 Deer Creek Falls and Colorado River (1950 ft / 595 m):

Mileages

5.0 mi (8.0 km)
2.6 mi (4.2 km)
4.5 mi (7.2 km)
6.6 mi (10.6 km)
8.8 mi (14.2 km)
6.9 mi (11.1 km)
7.6 mi (12.2 km)

Maps

7.5 Minute Tapeats Amphitheater and Fishtail Mesa Quads (USGS)
Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)
North Kaibab Map, Kaibab National Forest (USDA)

Trailhead Access

Leave the pavement on Forest Service Road (FSR) 22. FSR 22 can be accessed from either Highway 67 a couple miles north of the Park entrance station or from Highway 89A a few miles east of Fredonia. Take FSR 22 to the junction with FSR 425. There are two potential trailheads: Monument Point (Bill Hall trail) and Indian Hollow (Thunder River trail). For Indian Hollow take FSR 425 to FSR 232, for Monument Point, take FSR 425 to FSR 292 and then 292A (see the road map for the North Kaibab Ranger District, Kaibab National Forest). Winter and Spring access is unreliable. Get a road update from the Fredonia Forest Service field office or the Backcountry Information Center prior to leaving home.

Trail Description

The historical point of access to the esplanade was via the gentler but longer Thunder River Trail. Now days many opt for the more challenging Bill Hall Trail, which shaves 2.5 mile off the hike. For the first ½ mile, the Bill Hall Trail contours on the rim, actually ascending a bit before entering the canyon on the east side of Monument Point. The trail drops steeply through the Kaibab and Toroweap Formations north of Bridgers Knoll, then contours northwest to the Coconino descent west of Monument Point. Many steep switchbacks provide passage through the Coconino Sandstone and on to a small drainage leading down to the Esplanade and the junction with the trail from Indian Hollow. A short rope may be useful to lower the packs at a short (15 feet) scramble. The descent from Indian Hollow is less demanding. It was originally designed as a stock trail and features a more reasonable gradient but requires extra walking

Take the Thunder River Trail generally south across the Esplanade. The trail crosses expansive slickrock sections as it works around several small drainages, so hikers need to be alert for cairns that mark the route ahead. Try to locate the next cairn before the last one is lost from view. About 2.5 miles of reasonably flat walking brings hikers to the southern edge of the Esplanade, a wonderful canyon view, and the top of a series of steep switchbacks through the Supai and Redwall Formations to the floor of Surprise Valley. The descent is long and rough and the southern exposure makes the entire area infamously hot. Avoid hiking in Surprise Valley after 10 a.m. during warm weather. A large cairn marks a fork in the trail – east (left) to Thunder River and Tapeats Creek, west (right) to Deer Creek.

The trail to Thunder River and Tapeats Creek winds east across the floor of Surprise Valley, crossing shallow drainages and low hills for about a mile before dropping down steep switchbacks to Thunder River. After so many hot, dry miles the cascades of Thunder River seem almost too good to be true and the place demands a stop for rest and relaxation. The designated Upper Tapeats campsite (AW7) is about ¼ mile below the confluence of Thunder River and Tapeats Creek on the west side of the creek. Hikers headed for the Colorado River can cross to the east side of the creek either just below the campsite or about ½ mile downcanyon and continue about two miles to a second creek crossing back to the west side. A short rope may come in handy to lower packs at a little downclimb (8 feet) above the lower crossing. **Snowmelt or heavy rain may make creek crossings impossible.** Spring warming trends and intermittent high creek levels are more likely after mid-March with the peak flows often in May. During periods of high water hikers must use a sketchy, seldom used trail that stays west of the creek all the way to the river. This option is narrow and exposed and should be used only as a last resort, but when Tapeats Creek is in flood it may be the only possibility. Lower Tapeats (AW8) is a designated campsite, please look for the tent symbol sign and camp on the west side of the creek.

Go west at the trail junction in Surprise Valley to reach Deer Creek. The trail becomes rocky, loose and somewhat exposed as it descends into the arm of Deer Creek. Deer Spring is a wonderful respite, enjoy the water, and celebrate that camp is only 20 minutes away. Below camp, Deer Creek slides over a promenade known as The Patio before gracefully plunging into the famous Narrows. Carved from the hard, resistant Tapeats Formation, the Narrows are, in a word, enchanting; though they are closed below the patio, a trail on their west side leads to the Colorado River, affording the opportunity to experience one of Grand Canyon's most spectacular waterfalls.

Water Sources

Thunder River, Tapeats Creek, Deer Creek, and the Colorado River are permanent water sources. Immediately after wet weather temporary pools might be found in potholes along the Esplanade. Many hikers choose to cache water on the Esplanade or Surprise Valley for the return trip. Caches should be dated, hidden from view, and carried out at the end of the hike.

Campsites

At-large camping is permitted in the Esplanade (AY9) and Surprise Valley (AM9) Use Areas whereas designated sites exist at Tapeats Creek (AW7) and Deer Creek (AX7) Use Areas. The designated campsites at Deer Creek accommodates two groups and Upper Tapeats accommodates three groups; both have toilets. The designated site at Lower Tapeats (AW8) accommodates two groups and does **not** have a toilet.

Side Notes

Between Lower Tapeats Camp and Deer Creek Camp, a rough, but established route has created the possibility of a loop hike from Surprise Valley. At the mouth of Tapeats Creek start downriver near the shoreline to the obvious dark, almost black, granite-like obstruction. Follow the cairned route up the steep, decomposing face to the top and traverse the outcrop to the precarious descent back to river level. This passage involves genuine hand and toe climbing and a light 25' rope for the packs will prove invaluable. Continue downstream for about 1/2 mile to a distinct trail marked by cairns that provides access up and away from the river. Follow this to a saddle east of Deer Creek, and then descend to the drainage and the nearby designated campsites.

Bill Hall was a seasonal park ranger on the North Rim who was killed in the line of duty (automobile accident) in 1979.

River trips often stop at Tapeats Creek and Deer Creek so be prepared to encounter large groups of day hikers, especially May through September.

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