



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 falling water and 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.

Locations/Elevations

Indian Hollow (6250 ft / 1906 m) to Bill Hall Trail Junction (5400 ft / 1647 m):

Monument Point (7200 ft / 2196 m) to:

Thunder River / Bill Hall Trail Junction, AY9 (5400 ft / 1647 m):

Surprise Valley, 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 mi (8 km)

2.5 mi (4 km)

7 mi (11 km)

9.5 mi (15 km)

11.5 mi (18.4 km)

9.5 mi (15 km)

10.5 mi (17 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 (good for roads)

Water Sources

Thunder River, Tapeats Creek, Deer Creek, and the Colorado River are permanent water sources. During or 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. Camping is limited to the designated campsites in the Tapeats Creek and Deer Creek Use Areas. The designated campsite at Deer Creek (AX7) accommodates two groups per night. Upper Tapeats (AW7) campsite accommodates a maximum of three groups per night and Lower Tapeats (AW8) takes two. River trips often stop at Tapeats Creek and Deer Creek so hikers should be prepared to encounter large groups of river runners in the general vicinity.

Trailhead Access

Jumping off point is Forest Road (FR) 22 located off of Highway 89A, just few miles east of the small town of Fredonia, AZ. From FR 22 you will be turning onto FR 425. If you are heading to Indian Hollow and the Thunder River trailhead, then turn onto FR 232 (this road ends at the trailhead). If you are heading for Bill Hall trailhead, then continue further down FR 425 until you come to FR 292. FR 292 turns into FR 292A and ends at the Bill Hall trailhead. Alternate access to FR 22 is from Demotte Park off of Highway 67. During the winter and early spring deep snow and mud on the North Rim might close access roads and cut off vehicle access to the trailheads.

Trail Description

Hikers originally accessed Thunder River, Tapeats Creek, and Deer Creek via the trail from Indian Hollow, but the Bill Hall Trail east of Monument Point offers a 2.5 mile shortcut and, as a result, has become the primary trailhead. Pass through the gate at the end of FR 292A and follow the rim west toward Monument Point. As the trail rises toward the point watch for cairns marking the place the trail

leaves the rim and enters the canyon. 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 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.

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. **Spring snowmelt or heavy rain may make creek crossings impossible.** During periods of high water hikers must use a narrow trail that stays west of the creek all the way to the river. This trail is strenuous and exposed, requiring detours up and around steep talus, and should only be used as a last resort, but when Tapeats Creek is in flood it may be the only option. The trail stays west of the creek below the lower crossing, eventually leading down a talus slope to the Colorado River at the mouth of Tapeats Creek and the designated Lower Tapeats campsite (AW8). Decent spots can be found on either side of the creek.

Go west at the trail junction in Surprise Valley to reach Deer Creek, perhaps the most beautiful side canyon of all. The trail becomes more rocky and eroded as it descends into the unnamed arm of Deer Creek containing Deer Spring. Deer Spring is a wonderful place to stop, enjoy the water, and smell the proverbial roses. The trail follows the drainage down toward the river, passing the designated Deer Creek campsite (AX7) west of the stream en route. Deer Creek enters the narrows about half a mile above the river. Carved from the hard, resistant Tapeats Formation, the narrows are, in a word, enchanting; Grand Canyon at its finest. The climax of a visit to Deer Creek comes at the end where lovely Deer Creek Falls plunges into the Colorado River.

A rough, informal trail near the river between Tapeats Creek and Deer Creek has created the possibility of a loop hike from Surprise Valley. At the mouth of Tapeats Creek start downriver near the shoreline to the first outcropping of the dark, granite-like Vishnu Formation and follow the cairned route up and across the slopes about 100 feet above the river. Traverse at this level to the steep and precarious descent to the mouth of Bonita Creek and stay near the shoreline for the next ¾ mile to the end of the beaches. Cairns lead up and away from the river to a narrow bench at the top of the Tapeats Formation. Follow the top of the Tapeats downcanyon around several small drainages, cross the saddle east of Deer Creek, and descend to the bed of Deer Creek near the designated campsite.

Important Notes

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

Revised 2/08 MJS