

Road Romp 2004

Day 12: Monday, 21 June 2004

FOCK 1: North Kaibab Trail, Downbound

This was the first full day of summer. Wow. All that high heat across the southwest was just springtime. Oh my.

Wake up was at 5:30, with the world still a dull pre-dawn gray. It's funny how colors sleep at night, too, and wake up gradually in the morning.

My thought process clicked into place surprisingly quickly. I recognized that I was in a campground. I remembered that I hadn't paid. I reasoned, "Hmmm, Mr. Ranger Sir is gonna show up soon, and he's gonna want \$20."

ZOOM! UP, OUT, GONE!

By 5:37, Moby and I were on the road again. Another free night of accommodation had been swung. Ranger Smith was just arriving at the campground HQ shack when I pulled out, too.

It was a cool morning. I guessed that the temps had fallen into the mid-40's last night. The heat was on again, and it was officially summer. That was OK, though. I may well have been runnin' the AC on the first day of winter in Key West, so it all balances out.

One of the first roadside signs that I passed said, "Don't Drink and Drive." OK, good advice. It's 5-fucking-30 in the morning. WHY would I be drinking now? What pathetic loser is that sign for??

It did make me feel a bit thirsty though. And I knew my beers were cold.

The road south to Grand Canyon National Park is great: 40 miles of tall trees, with plenty of cedars and aspens -- though I like to call them "birrrrch" in a British accent. It's much more fun, and much more woody sounding.

The elevation hit 8840', which was pretty close to what it was at Tioga Pass at Yosemite. We would begin dropping down to the Canyon itself from here, losing nearly 1000' of elevation before the big plummet.

It always strikes me as odd when you have to go high to get to someplace that you picture as being low. It was true at Carlsbad Caverns, and it's even more true here. The Big Hole is a mile deep, but its North Rim (the higher of the two rims) is nearly 8000' feet above sea level. It's a significant climb.

One of the very best parts of the ride, though, is the long series of lush green meadows that line AZ-67 as you enter the National Park. With the low angle of the rising sun, the Meadows looked even better.

There was a sign that said, "Do Not Drive Across Meadows." Well, the road I was on went across the Meadows, did that count? Should I have stopped and gone back?? Why the hell did they put the damn road there if I wasn't supposed to use it?

The Meadows are huge. Miles long, and over a quarter-mile wide in places, they give a feeling of health and well being to the area. This is not arid ground, and it is not dominated by rock. Despite acres and acres of available grass in the Meadows, I saw no deer there; the only



deer were creeping out of the wood at the very edge of the road. Why weren't they creeping out of the trees at the edge of the meadows? Why risk their lives for a few struggling blades of grass, when they could feast on as much as they wanted in the huge fields? What was wrong with the meadow grass? And what was so special about the roadside grass? I hoped that it was not due to human litterings that the deer were scrounging for, but I suspected it was.

The roadside also was home to a lot of baby aspens, just three inches thick in the trunk and some only about six feet high. They were making a go of it there, but they didn't seem like



they were gonna make it much longer. They need to be replanted. There were many of them in bunches, like there had been a great shake-out of seed and they all took. The youngest ones looked squiggly at the bottom, as if they had been squashed by snow when they were really young and flexible, but just strong enough to shake it off when the snow melted (looking almost like a half-smoked cigarette that had been squished out in an ash tray). There was sunshine and open air here at the roadside, and that is probably why they lasted as long as they did. If allowed to grow to maturity, all those white-barked trunks will look great lining the road.

I reached the gate at precisely 6:26, which seemed like a good omen, and Grand Canyon NP was not even open for business yet. I would have gotten in for free, even without the pass. I cringed a bit when I saw a hint of a light smoky haze in the sky to the west.

It was a long slow descent towards the rim. The road stayed really nice, though the Meadows gave way to forests. Coming the other way were a few cyclists. They were riding with a purpose; they had a long uphill way to go, and they clearly knew it. They must have gotten up really early, because I still had quite a few miles to go to reach their likely starting point. How ambitious these people were! Very athletic. Made me feel like a damn slug.

But I was a damn comfortable slug.

There were a **lot** of bikers: all on road bikes, no mountain bikes. I bet they had loved this stretch as they came into the park -- just let gravity take you for miles! -- but now, they were paying the fiddler.

There were a few who had already fallen way behind. A couple of middle-aged women were peddling along pretty slowly. And even further back, another woman had dismounted and was looking with chagrin at her bike. An elderly man was slowing to help her out.

I roared right on by. Hey, I didn't tell them to ride their freaking bikes.

Then I came to North Rim. I had deliberately bypassed the turn for the North Kaibab Trailhead and had gone down to the Village to see the view from Bright Angel Overlook area first, and to let sun come up a tad. I admit that I was foolish to do that. I was a bit daunted by the "cool" temperatures, but probably should have "suffered" through a little "chill" for the sake of less time in the "peak sun hours" on the way back up. [Enough quotes for you yet?] Still, the early a.m. views brought back memories from the '84 trip. That was **two decades** ago?? My, oh, my, how time doth fly.

The canyon views only served to get me psyched for my stroll, though, so I traded dallying for rallying and started sallying thither. After all, I got up early so I could start hiking early, and now I was stalling. What a douche.



THIS was where I needed Nate as a catalyst. With him to fan the fires, we would have been a mile down the trail by now. Maybe. Maybe we would have come here to check out the low sun view anyway; it was pretty peaceful and very impressive.

The trailhead parking area was big. There was room for dozens of cars. And there was a corral full of mules at the end of it. I did a decent job of planning ahead: while I was at North Rim Village, I bought ice for the cooler so my bevs would be really cold when I got back. Believe it or not, my Gatorade was my prime concern, even more than beer. Rehydrating and replenishing electrolytes seemed to be a tad smarter than taking in some dehydrating alcohol. Oh, the beer needed to be chilled as well; I knew I'd get to that in short order too.

Looking to minimize workload, I packed light. In my green shoulder bag, I carried: four half-liter waters, eight crunchy granola bars, my digicam and mini-tripod, and a dozen batteries. I wore the good running shoes (i.e., not flat and worn out, like the ones I killed at the Narrows last year), light and comfortable shorts, a sleeveless green cotton Key West shirt, and a floppy straw cowboy hat. The Luckless Log, *of course*, completed the ensemble

The Plan was to go to Roaring Springs and back. The chart that I got off nps.gov said: Distance and hiking times vary. This is the only maintained trail into the canyon from the North Rim. Even a short hike to Coconino Overlook (1.5 miles round-trip) or Supai Tunnel (4 miles round-trip) can give you an appreciation for the canyon's rich natural beauty and immense size. A hike to Roaring Springs and back is extremely strenuous and takes a full day (7-8 hours) - begin your hike before 7 a.m. Roaring Springs lies 3050 feet /930 m below the canyon rim and is 10.0 miles/16 km round-trip. A day hike beyond Roaring Springs is not recommended. Many years of experience have shown that hikers who proceed beyond this point during the hottest parts of the day have a much greater probability of suffering from heat-related illness, injury, or death. This trail is also used by mules. NOTE: Round trip to the Colorado River is 28 miles/45 km and trail descends almost 6000 ft./1829 m. Under no circumstances should you attempt to hike from the rim to the river and back in one day! Do not hike during the hottest part of the day.

Before 7 a.m., huh? Oh well. Missed that by a little. And "7-8 hours" seemed like a lot for a ten-miler. I assumed they were doing that Least Common Denominator thing.

It was 7:50 a.m. when I took the first step on the North Kaibab Trail. I really had very little idea what to expect.

Immediately, I found myself in a confrontation with a horse-and-mule tour group that was just starting out. The guide rushed me past them so I could get a lead and not spook the horses. I dutifully moved on with a quickened pace.

To my surprise and delight, the trail itself was made of soft, dusty sand, giving excellent cushioning to each footfall. My knees were very grateful for that. The trail started out in shady woods, and began dropping dramatically almost right away.

The woods didn't last long, and soon I was looking straight ahead at the steeply angled and even sheer vertical walls of the canyon. They were already real high.

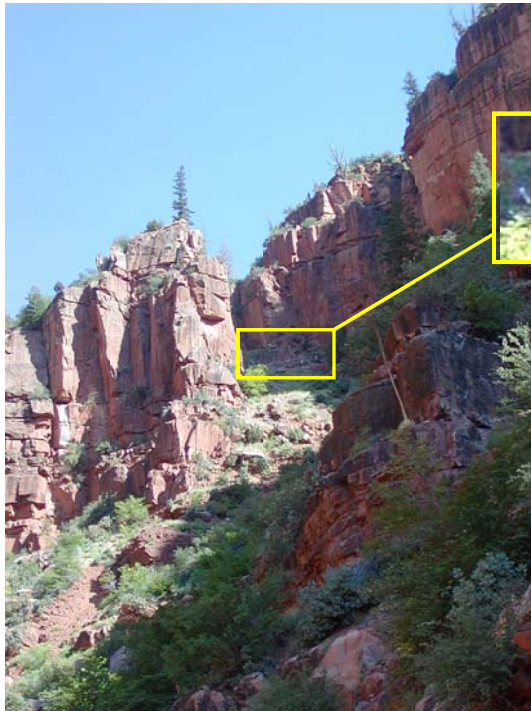
It looked different from within, and it became obvious early that the hike itself was the attraction, moreso than any impressive scenic vistas. If it's scenic vistas you want, stay on the rim. It still looked good down here, though, definitely.

I had no trail map. Why bother? It's one trail with no forking options. It goes down and up. No controversies. A map would have given me clues as to where I was going and how far I had to go based on reference points and such, but I figured I'd just find them as I went along anyway. The trail description above had been printed out, along with a chart of distances and landmarks, but it never even crossed my mind to bring it along.

I don't know what it is with me and trails like this. Maybe it's all those years of running seven, eight, or ten miles without stopping and without water. Whatever it is, I tend to look at these things and say, "Ehhhh, ten miles, no big deal."

But I did treat this one with respect, and paced myself prudently. I was astute enough to recognize that early-steep-downs make for late-steep-ups, so I kept my own horses reined in as I walked deeper and deeper down the trail.

The first real landmark came at a place called Supai Tunnel, where the trail actually did lead through a short and narrow tunnel in the rock for a couple dozen yards. There was no going around it, as it was a solid block of rock, with a sheer face that dropped quite a ways and stuck out pretty far. Going over wouldn't have worked either; the only way to continue the trail was to go through. It was a piece of cake for a walker, but I imagine that riders would have to dismount and walk their steeds through.



There was also running water! A pipe and water bubbler, like you might find in the public park, had been set up there. Where it originated, I cannot tell. I was almost disappointed at this aspect of civilization, but I took a sip anyway, just to rinse some of the dust out of my mouth.

So far, I had saved my bottled water. I wasn't sweating much, and I wasn't that warm yet. The sun had been hidden by trees for the first ten or so minutes, and even now it hadn't climbed very high in the sky. It was still a gentle morning sun.

A small rest room building had been built off to the side too. A few of the earlier starters were takin' a break there, but after less than two miles of walking, I needed no such respite.



I did, however, hit the split button on my watch as I went through the tunnel. Getting an interval time (42:42) was not totally frivolous: since I had to return via the same trail, the time would help me gauge how much longer I would have to walk.

Once I went through the tunnel, the trail began to drop faster again, zigging back and forth down the steep acclivity. After quite a while more, I looked back up and could barely make out the tiny dots of people who had just come through the tunnel. [See inset and photo above. The tunnel is to the left of the people through the gap between huge blocks. At the top of the inset, there are two park workers repairing the trail. In the bottom half, there are four people on horseback; the one in blue and white is most visible.]

Something that had been hard to ignore so far – and showed no signs of diminishing – was the almost non-stop smell of horse and mule dung, which was especially pungent in the places where they also augmented it with liquid. In places it seemed that you no sooner got out of range of one such malodorous plopping than you found yourself within a strong whiff of the next one. Footing required some degree of focus anyway, but these droppages provided extra incentive to watch where you stepped.

Luckless was a **big** help on some step-down spots. I would let him go first, then I'd lean on him as I eased my weight down one foot at a time. I felt like an old man, having to brace myself with my cane before lowering myself to the next level. I was a tri-ped. But it saved a ton of strain on my knees, which pretty much ache every time I bend them anyway, thanks to all this healthy running crap that I do.



How the hell do the horses and mules negotiate the narrowest spots in here? Some of those trails are barely wide enough for me. And these horsies have people on their backs! Those drop-offs would look a whole hell of a lot more perilous on horseback. All you'd see is the open air; the horse's body would block your view of the trail itself. I'd be terrified to move for fear of knocking my ride off balance. No, thank you! I would **definitely** feel better trusting my own legs than being perched precariously on some possibly-suicidal horse.

[That light-colored line that separates gray rock from red in the photo at left is the trail. Would you ride a horse along that?? NFW.]

Red Wall Bridge, which is the only non-natural footing of the hike, was reached in a solid 1:10:08, giving a split of 27:25. It seemed like less. In fact, the whole thing seemed like a lot less. Time was flying, so I reckon I was having fun.

The bridge is about 100 feet long and ten feet wide (see next photo). It's wooden, with steel railings, and it spans a rough and rocky gully that would be bitch to have to pick your way through. Plus, I'm sure it sits comfortably above the

runoff from thundershowers and snowmelt. It was another perfect split point. I wouldn't have to be saying, "Hmmm, was it *this* bridge?"

About halfway to Roaring Springs, there was a shady recess in the rock as the trail hit another switchback. There was a small family clustered there, taking a rest stop. They all had their trendy retractable hiking canes with them, making them look like they had gone cross country skiing without skis or snow.

"Going up or down?" I asked cheerfully. The dad said blandly, "down." The mom was taking a long pull off a water bottle. The daughter was grumpy, sitting there pouting in the sand. The ten-year-old son was itching to go, and gave me a rolly-eyed look that had *c'monnnnnnnnnn, mommmm* written all over it. I couldn't tell if the mom was already that tired or just overreacting to the warnings about water and frequent rests. I strongly suspected the latter. Mom was clearly calling the shots, though. The other three didn't seem to be happy with what I assumed was yet *another* stop.



Just around the bend from them, I met two Asian women hiking up. They were in their twenties, of sturdy build, and carried very large backpacks. When they saw me, the front one asked, "How much further to the rim?" There was a hint of eagerness in her voice.

I told them, "It's taken me ninety minutes to get here." [A 20:10 split – though I spared them that info.] They reacted with a stoic look. I asked, "Are you coming all the way up from the river?" They nodded. "What time did you leave??"

"About 6:30," said the front woman. The back one made no attempt to speak.

"Whoa," I said, clearly impressed. It was 9:20 now. They had made it that far in just three hours, with big heavy packs. The map's description aside, I had heard estimates of five hours down, and nine hours back up, so they were kickin' tail. If they kept that pace up, they'd complete the ascent in just over five hours. Wow. Go, you crazy Asians! I gave them a verbal pat on the pack and told them they were doing great. I'm sure it meant a lot coming from the Bearer Of The Luckless Log.

As I walked on, it made me think about the extent of my own endeavor. I hadn't really determined how far I was going to go; I was just going to "walk a while and see." I was sensible enough to know that "walk till you get tired, then turn back" would be a stupid approach, but I wasn't the least bit weary yet, so I kept at it. When I set out, I had loosely planned to go an hour, and then bumped it up to an hour-and-a-half. I was now at that point, and began to wonder if a turnaround was The Thing To Do.

I'm sure if Nate had been here, we would have been two-thirds of the way to the Colorado River in a vain (and probably vain) attempt to prove that down-and-up in one day was really no big deal. Heat exhaustion and death are, after all, for pussies.

The canyon walls and chasms had been throwing quite an array of views and sights my way, and I wasn't especially eager to push the Stop button on that show. Then I saw something down below. It looked like the very top of a peaked roof, and there were a couple of wires running down to it from waaaaaaay up above. Investigation made for the perfect reason to go on, so that's what I did.

That turned out to be the restroom building at Roaring Springs, and it looked like the perfect area for a late morning brunch break. There was a grove of short leafy trees here, flanking a bubbling brook. I found a nice big rock in the shade, and sat my fanny down. There was a light cool breeze that was hiding in the shade with me. It didn't seem to be out in the sunshine anywhere. I said hi and made friends with it.

The soft light sand had made for cushy footing, but it was also fine enough to seep through the mesh of my shoes and the cotton strands of my socks. Quite a bit had accumulated in there. I bared my feet and dipped them in the chilly water. It felt goooooood.

The infiltrating grains had become a little bit of a problem. The grit created a sandpaper effect, scraping the toes when they jammed forward on all those downbound footplants. The water cooled the friction nicely. At least I knew that the uphill steps would not have the same effect.

Going back up figured to be a lot different. For one thing, it would be a lot **harder**. I had not drawn a single strained breath on the descent, despite the mile-plus elevation. The pace had been steady and easy. I had no doubt at all that I could have kept going to Phantom Ranch and felt fresh as a daisy when I got there. [Are daisies fresher than petunias, or gardenias, or geraniums? Why do we never say "fresh as a chrysanthemum"? Too many syllables? Why not "fresh as a rose" then? Research that for me, will ya?]

Anyway, Phantom Ranch wasn't on today's itinerary. I had tried to reserve beds there for Nate and I, but my four-months-out phone call was about a year too late. Today's plan now called for a literal 180° shift. The five miles of trail, and the 3050' of elevation would have to be retraced, yielding a net gain of zero, just like almost every run I've ever done. Run like an idiot to get back where you started. Ohhhh kayyy. No wonder people think it's dumb.

I was wishing this was a loop trail, so I could see different stuff on the way back up, but at least my familiar split posts would help me pace my efforts.

But I didn't have to leave right away. This shade and water thing was serving me quite well. I opened up my pack and had myself a little picnic. I downed two bottles of water and chowed four of the peanut butter granola bars. The extent of my hunger and thirst surprised me. It shouldn't have; it's not like I had had any breakfast or anything.

I had arrived at Roaring Springs at almost exactly 10:00. It had taken me 2:09:08 to get here. My final split, from the Asian Babes to the bubbling brook, was 38:50. I wondered how much slower the climb would be. I decided to take a half-hour break and begin the ascent at 10:30. I set a rough goal of 2:30, making the Up just about double the Down. Seemed reasonable.

I was upset about one thing, though. I had put sunscreen everywhere but on my lips, damn it, and I had that awesome herbal lip balm in Moby too – the good stuff leftover from last year! My lips were already feeling a bit hot, and I knew the next few hours would cook and crisp them good. Oh well, I'd just have to spend the next few days keeping them wet by drinking lots and lots o' fluids.

About a third-of-an-hour after I arrived, the horse and mule entourage hoofed into Roaring Springs. I heard a couple of the greenhorns moaning and oooof-ing as they climbed off their mounts. You damn wussbags, I felt like shouting, it's your horses that should be groaning,



carrying your fat lazy butts down that trail! But I kept quiet. This was not a place for such hostility.

For a while I just sat in the shade, let my bare feet dry in the breeze, and savored the aura of the Grand Canyon. I tried to picture where I was if it were viewed from the rim. I hoped that this walk would look more significant than the Vernal Falls hike had appeared from above. I suspected not, though. Five miles in this place is pretty puny.

Then I just thought about nothing for a while. It was good. It's something that should be done a lot more often.