

Deep in the Grand Canyon: A Dream Realized

— Dan Styer

In about 1970, when I was 15 years old, I read the book *Grand Canyon of the Living Colorado* (edited by Roderick Nash, Sierra Club - Ballantine Books, 1970). That book emphasized boating through the Grand Canyon along the Colorado River, but it also mentioned hikes away from the river. Among the several hikes described, the most desirable seemed to me the five-mile Thunder River/Deer Creek loop (pages 53-60, 70-71, 80-81). I dreamed of taking that hike.

I held this dream in the back of my mind while I attended college and then graduate school, and then while I established my career as a physicist at Oberlin College in Ohio. I held it while I became a runner and finished two marathons; while I hiked in New England and North Carolina and West Virginia and Idaho; while I got married, adopted two children, and reared them; while I explored northern Ohio in search of waterfalls and rock outcrops; while I made arrangements with my younger son Colin for, as a high-school graduation present, a float trip down the Colorado River in Grand Canyon; and while we floated down the first 132 miles of the Grand Canyon.

On Wednesday, 30 June 2010, our group of seven passengers and four boatmen camped just above Dubendorff Rapids. The trip leader, Matt Herrman, guided me and Colin and two other teens on a hike of several miles high up along Stone Creek past several waterfalls.

That evening, after a dinner of turkey stroganoff, Matt outlined his plan for the next day: Passengers who wanted to could just float down the Colorado five miles to the mouth of Deer Creek. But those who wanted a challenge could take a hike: Matt would row them two miles along the Colorado to the mouth of Tapeats Creek, where he would beach and secure the boat. Then Matt would guide those adventurous passengers on a steep hike up Tapeats Creek and its tributary Thunder River to its source at Thunder River Falls. After this, they would walk across the hot and level Surprise Valley until they reached Dutton's Spring, the source of a tributary to Deer Creek. Finally, they would follow the tributary and Deer Creek down to the waterfall where Deer Creek plunges into the Colorado. Meanwhile Jay, another boatman, would row his boat to the mouth of Deer Creek, secure it there, and hike in the opposite direction. He would untie Matt's boat and then row it down the Colorado to Deer Creek.

All three of the teens on the trip were athletes – football players, or wrestlers, or both – so I thought they'd jump at the chance for adventure. But they all declined (perhaps having been tired out from the Stone Creek hike). And the three other adult passengers thought themselves too old, or too tired, for the hike. So I would be the only passenger taking this hike, the one I had dreamed of for 40 years.

Early the next morning, Matt and I got in his boat and left before anyone else. We ran Dubendorff Rapids, then rowed for two miles. Matt left me at the mouth of Tapeats Creek and then went off to tie up the boat. While waiting for him to reappear, I saw a Water Ouzel.

The trail immediately left the riverbank of the Colorado and switchbacked steeply up a talus slope. From the top, we could look down hundreds of feet to the creek and to the great green Colorado. Then the trail led away from the Colorado, paralleling Tapeats Creek but on a two-foot wide ledge high above the stream. The creek – far down its steep-walled side canyon, plunging over waterfall after waterfall – seemed almost to be in a different world. The ledge was nearly level while the creek had a steep gradient, and before long they met in a grove of cottonwood trees full of green light and birdsong.

I thought about water in the desert. In my home state of Ohio (named after a river) the ample water – whether in the form of snow crystal, ice plate, vapor cloud, stately river, wave-tossed lake, or prancing waterfall – is beautiful and miraculous. But in the desert the water is something more. Its rarity renders it sweeter and more delicious. Walking a mile in the desert, I might encounter a dozen plant species whereas walking a similar mile in Ohio I would encounter more than a hundred. But then I would come across a desert creek or spring, and all the variety that would, in Ohio, be spread out over a mile would be compressed into a few desert yards.

We walked through the narrow band of vegetation, crossed the creek, then passed through the opposite band and into the desert again. I normally guide myself along trails, but I was glad to be following Matt. Short, wiry, 46 years old and with a full beard, Matt Herrman is a Grand Canyon legend, with more than 200 canyon float trips under his belt. More than once the faint trail seemed to just disappear, but Matt always knew which rock pile to scramble up so that the trail reappeared at the top. Once he led me off the main trail to the rock foundations of an Indian pueblo abandoned centuries ago.

More rock. There was brown rock, and red rock, and rock splotched with maroon and white like a giant marble cake. (This last formation is called Shinumo Quartzite, despite the fact that it's a sandstone rather than a quartzite.) I had been here once before, on a float trip with my sons Greg and Colin in 2005. That trip had a larger and less experienced group of passengers (and a more timid group leader) so we didn't make the hike from Tapeats Creek to Deer Creek, but instead just walked up to Thunder River Falls and then back down to the Colorado again.

The trail recrossed Tapeats Creek and then switchbacked up near its steep tributary, the Thunder River. Matt is a real desert rat, and nine years younger than me as well, and he began to pull ahead. I looked after him and saw Thunder River Falls.

The initial view had lost none of its power in the intervening five years. Water springs from a cave high in a limestone cliff, then tumbles down walls, along ledges, in and around talus in a riot of foam and spray. The water-in-the-desert phenomenon means that the waterfall is edged with verdant growth. The legendary hanging gardens of Babylon

could not have been half as beautiful, a quarter as delightful, or an eighth as unexpected as Thunder River Falls.

By now Matt was ten or twenty yards ahead of me. I glanced up and saw him stopped, gazing to his left. My eye followed his gaze to a Bighorn ram, with three-quarter curl horns, 20 yards away. The three of us watched one another in silence. Ahead of me were the magnificent Thunder River Falls. I turned a third of a circle to see a ram. Another third of a circle showed me the sublime wild upper canyon of Tapeats Creek. A third of a circle and I was back to viewing Thunder River Falls. We waited for the ram to move on, but he never did, so Matt and I walked on.

We stopped by the base of the falls to drink copious water, eat lunch, and fill our bottles. The air was abuzz with darting dragonflies, while the water's edge held plentiful Monkey Flower in red bloom. We cooled down in the mist.

Eventually we needed to leave. There was more trail climbing on hot switchbacks. We met Jay going in the opposite direction. Just a bit more uphill walking and we popped out at the edge of Surprise Valley. Despite the name "valley," this land was much flatter than what we had been seeing. There was also less shade. We walked about a mile to "Shade Rock" where we paused to cool down and I ate an apple. There was one more mile of bright hot trail, level then sloping down, before we looped around to the right of a cliff and Dutton's Spring came into view.

When I heard the name "Dutton's Spring," I imagined some water flowing out of the ground, like our eastern springs. I was looking forward to it only because I wanted something to drink. It surprised me to find a powerful jet of water shooting out of a cliff to form an 80-foot waterfall. The waterfall was surrounded by redbud and maidenhair fern, and at its base was a plunge pool lined with delicate gray limestone pebbles, up to the size of an egg. Don't tell the National Park Service, but I picked up a smooth, gray, heart-shaped stone. Just beyond the waterfall, resting in the cliff-provided shade, where our passengers Kiyomi and Sharon, and our boatman Dudley. They congratulated me on realizing my four-decade-old dream (although I wasn't quite finished yet). Kiyomi has a special place in my heart – I met her during our 2005 float trip – and I gave her the heart-shaped piece of limestone.

Matt napped. The other four of us chatted. We heard and then saw a Canyon Wren, so close that we watched its throat move as it sang. Three hummingbirds flew around.

Matt woke up and we walked down the Dutton Spring outlet stream, past a delicate pink cactus bloom. Soon, some of our group went ahead and some dropped behind, and I found myself alone. The outlet merged with the main stem of Deer Creek, which I again followed downward. I met the three teenaged boys, and passenger Gary, at the "patio" of Deer Creek. They had been napping for four hours.

Below the patio is the sinuous box canyon of Deer Creek, where the creek cuts deep vertical walls into the yellow and purple banded Tapeats Sandstone. I cannot describe

this place – you’ll just have to visit it for yourself. All I can say is that if I flew across the country, boated for 134 miles, and hiked for five miles through the desert only to see this box canyon, I would consider myself amply rewarded.

The trail traced a convoluted path to arrive at the base of Deer Creek Falls at the Colorado riverside, and there our party eventually reunited, launched, and floated further down the river. I felt simultaneously satisfied and yearning for more. John Muir felt similarly at the end of his first long trip into the Sierra Nevada, and he wrote (at the end of *My First Summer in the Sierra*) “Here ends my forever memorable first High Sierra excursion. I have crossed the Range of Light, surely the brightest and best of all the Lord has built; and rejoicing in its glory, I gladly, gratefully, hopefully pray I may see it again.”