



Tonto Trail: Boucher Trail to South Bass Trail

As canyon hikers gain experience many seek to broaden their wilderness horizons and inevitably thoughts turn to the Tonto Trail west from Boucher Creek to the South Bass Trail. This segment of the Tonto Trail is notorious, regarded by canyon experts as the most difficult and potentially dangerous section of this long transcanyon trail system. Main reason: It is almost 30 rough, unmaintained miles from the permanent water in Boucher Creek to the South Bass trailhead, and throughout that entire stretch there are no reliable water sources near the Tonto Platform level. None. Another thing: Once started, hikers are committed. The complete lack of bail-out routes to the rim between Boucher and South Bass means the only possibility for help is at the end of the trek. Combine these factors with the usual selection of Tonto Trail hazards (such as narrow, eroding trails, numerous passages near the brink of sizable cliffs, and a notable lack of shade) and it all adds up to a serious undertaking.

Locations/Elevations

	Mileages
Hermit trailhead (6640 ft / 2024 m) via Boucher Trail to Boucher Creek (2760 ft / 841 m):	9 mi (15.2 km)
Boucher Creek, BN9 (2760 ft / 841 m) to Slate Creek, BO9 (3100 ft / 945 m):	5.25 mi (8.4 km)
Slate Creek, BO9 (3100 ft / 945 m) to Turquoise Canyon, BO9 (2950 ft / 899 m):	9.3 mi (15 km)
Turquoise Canyon, BO9 (2950 ft / 899 m) to Ruby Canyon, BP9 (3100 ft / 945 m):	5.8 mi (9.3 km)
Ruby Canyon, BP9 (3100 ft / 945 m) to Serpentine Canyon, BP9 (3100 ft / 945 m):	4.8 mi (7.7 km)
Serpentine Canyon, BP9 (3100 ft / 945 m) to Bass Canyon, BQ9 (3200 ft / 975 m):	3.8 mi (6.1 km)
Serpentine Canyon, BP9 (3100 ft / 945 m) to South Bass trailhead (6646 ft / 2026 m):	9 mi (14.4 km)

Maps

7.5 Minute Grand Canyon, Piute Point, Shiva Temple, and Havasupai Point Quads (USGS)
Trails Illustrated Map, Grand Canyon National Park (National Geographic)

Water Sources

As previously stated, drinking water is the essential issue along the western Tonto Trail. There are no permanent springs, only unreliable, unpredictable, seasonal trickles here and there. Sometimes it's there, sometimes it's not. The Backcountry Information Center occasionally receives and files water reports from hikers or patrol rangers, but the utility of these reports is limited because what was there two weeks ago might not be there today. The only way to obtain accurate water information before departing is to talk with someone who walked the route very recently, but that is easier said than done. Under these circumstances, hikers have no choice but to assume the worst. It is the responsibility of the trip leader to always have a backup plan if anticipated water sources come up dry.

The most critical step you can take to protect yourself and your group is: **Schedule your hike for the cool months**, November through April. This is when water is most likely to be found in the side canyons, and cool weather means hikers can cover the ground most efficiently. Secondly, get water when you can! Fill your water containers, and your belly, every chance you get. Heavy water loads and dry camps are almost inevitable.

Water records indicate (predictably) that best chance for water occurs during cool weather in the larger drainages, Ruby, Turquoise, Sapphire, and Slate. Water is sometimes found above or below Tonto Trail level but you will have to decide if it is worth the time and effort to check. There is relatively easy access to the Colorado River at the bottom of the South Bass Trail and via the beds of Serpentine Canyon and the unnamed side canyon east of Serpentine. There are rugged scrambles to the shoreline from the rim of the Inner Gorge west of Turquoise and via the drainage bottom in Ruby and Slate, but all routes to the river are major detours off the Tonto Trail and the latter three require well developed climbing and route finding skills.

Campsites

The Tonto Trail between Boucher Creek and the South Bass Trail is contained within "at-large" use areas BN9, BO9, BP9, and BQ9. Decent sites can usually be found where the trail crosses the side canyons and occasionally near the trail between the drainages. As usual, hikers are requested to utilize established sites to minimize impact on a pristine part of the canyon.

Trailhead Access

Access from the east is typically via the Hermit or Boucher Trails. From the west the South Bass Trail is the usual starting point. Please see those route descriptions for further information on reaching the trailheads and accessing the Tonto Trail. Driving directions to South Bass trailhead are also available.

Trail Description

Follow Boucher Creek down to the confluence with Topaz Canyon and look for where the trail climbs the slope west of the drainage bottom. Climb the trail to the top of the Tapeats Formation and start around Marsh Butte, headed for Slate Creek.

Progress west of Boucher is generally straightforward for an experienced Tonto Trail hiker. The Tonto is like a contour line on a topo map. The trail much prefers a consistent elevation, climbing or descending only when there is no other option. The route stays relatively close to the top of the Tapeats so hikers can generally guess about where the trail is likely to be. Crossing the side canyons can be tricky. The trail usually goes more or less directly across the cobble-filled beds of the drainages to the far side before continuing, but not always. Should the trail seem to vanish when crossing a side canyon back up and look up or down the drainage for the proper exit. The trail gets a bit vague when rounding the points between the side canyons, and occasionally seems to disappear altogether. Remember the Tonto Trail is seeking that theoretical line of least resistance between the Tapeats rim and the steepening talus slopes above. Stay on that line and the trail should reappear shortly. To say the Tonto Trail is indirect represents masterful understatement. Map study does not adequately prepare one for all the ins and outs and roundabouts, but given the time, water, and energy, it is mostly just a question of slogging out the miles.

Important Notes

The Tonto Platform provides the only convenient route between the side canyons for almost 40 river miles but it falls far short of traversing the entire length of Grand Canyon. West of the South Bass Trail the Tonto Trail starts pinching down until it disappears entirely at Garnet Canyon. West of Aztec Amphitheater the Esplanade, a new platform system at the top of the Supai Formation, becomes the main playing field for transcanyon walkers.

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