

Vermilion Cliffs Region of Arizona
Bonol Springs Hike – March 18 & 19 2020
Evan Rose

For this hike I used the guidebook “Hiking and Exploring the Paria River” by Michael R. Kelsey (6th edition), starting on page 360. In this report I include only my own photographs and maps that I generated using Google Maps with my waypoints.

I carried two liters of water, a waterproof camera, a cell phone with GPS (Backcountry Navigator), extra battery for the phone, two headlamps, lunch, hat, gloves, knit cap, fleece and waterproof jacket.

March 18 – Scouting Hike

Drive west from Marble Canyon on US 89A to just east of mile marker 561. Drive through a gate and north on a dirt track about 1.5 miles to intersect Mormon Wagon Road. Park here at the boundary of the wilderness area.



At 15:30 I hiked north on a dirt track to some old water troughs and the end of the road. I continued hiking along a trail marked by a PVC pipeline – black plastic tubing of a couple inches diameter. This led to a dry fall with a steep gully leading to the left (west).

I retraced my steps to explore a drainage south and west of the dry fall. I hoped to find an alternate route around the dry fall, but found nothing obviously better than the steep gully mentioned in Kelsey’s directions.



Start of hike along the road to the springs.
This is a service road for maintaining the PVC pipeline to the springs.



Here is a water trough past the end of the road.
The black PVC tubing at the left of the photo leads onward to the springs.



The trail encounters a cliff / dry fall straight ahead.
To the left is a steep gully that gives access to the next level.



Retracing my steps to the south and west revealed this landscape.
There was not an obvious second path around the cliffs to the north.



There were deposits of petrified wood in this area to the west of the main trail. These boulders may have rolled down into this area from a source higher up.



View looking south at 18:30.

March 19 – Hike to Bonal Springs and the Sand Hills Plateau

I studied the photographs in Kelsey’s guidebook on pages 362 and 363, which are marked with yellow dashed lines and labels to illustrate the path up the cliffs to the Sand Hills Plateau. I took pictures of the two pages with my phone, as well as the written directions, so that I could refer to them during the hike without carrying the heavy guidebook.

I took my own photo of this area from near the trailhead and started hiking at 9:00. The touring objectives were to ascend the cliffs to visit a small stand of cottonwoods and a “square spring,” which is an excavated tunnel that contains the spring. A pool within the tunnel collects the spring water and directs it into the network of PVC pipes. Then the objective was to work around a cliff band to enter a “steep crack” just below the red arrow. That crack leads to the top of the Sand Hills Plateau, where there is a large ruin.



My photograph of the Bonal Springs trail.

I hiked the route that I had scouted the day before, rapidly arriving at the dry fall and the steep gully. I climbed up the gully and cut to the right, as per instructions. The terrain was rugged. I found myself trying to follow the general path of the water line, first in the gully, then on a ridge, and finally following a cliff band. I did some class four climbing at several points. This was uncomfortable, because the rock is often loose and of poor integrity. (It falls apart or pulls out from the matrix.)

I gained a relatively level area and proceeded toward the cottonwood trees. There is a cliff band below the trees, and I chose to proceed left, counter to guidebook directions. I would proceed right instead, if I were to do this hike again, because there is a sketchy part with some exposure on the route I took. I arrived at the cottonwood trees. There are only a half dozen cottonwood trees in this stand. The soil here is loose and unconsolidated. It slips

downhill easily, making it difficult to walk and keep one's balance. I visited the square spring and took a photo. There was some creature in the water, which I could hear splashing about. I did not see the creature, nor did I so desire.

I proceeded to the right (east) to find the steep crack. My directions were to work my way east, generally following a contour, then to ascend to a cliff face (rock panel) covered with black desert varnish. Attaining this, I was to work my way west and ascend into the steep crack. I had a general idea of where to go, but once again I found myself doing some fourth class climbing on poor quality rock. I made a mental note of this and decided to attempt a different route back down. There were some sections that I ascended, but would not descend by choice



.Waypoints on my hike to Sand Hills Plateau.

Shown from south to north are the road's end, the cliff / dry fall by the steep gully, the cottonwood stand, the entry to the steep crack, and the top of the route. The square spring is just east of the cottonwoods. The ruin is just east of the top of the route.

A section of road is visible at the north edge of this diagram. One could drive to the top of the Sand Hills Plateau by taking House Rock Road north from US89A west and then drive east and south across the sandy terrain.



View ascending the steep gully, looking generally south.



Part of the ascent of the steep gully, emerging on a cliff band.



The flat area above the steep gully.



Cactus garden in the flat area above the steep gully.



Looking back at the steep gully (to the right).
This photo is documentation for finding my way back.



The view south from the flat area above the steep gully.



The cottonwoods.



Inside the square spring.

Once I reached the rock panel with the desert varnish, I walked uphill to the left (west), staying close to the rock panel. This led me naturally to a spot partway up the steep crack where I could enter the crack and proceed up it. There was a small rock placed at the entry point. I ascended the steep crack. It was a reasonable fourth class climb that presented low difficulty.

Emerging at the top, there was a cairn. The Anasazi ruin was just to the right of the exit from the steep crack. It consisted of a series of low walls and a circular area that might be the remains of a kiva. There was also a large concrete watering trough, associated with the section of road, mentioned earlier. I walked around for awhile, had something to eat and descended again.



Views looking back down the steep crack.
There was some snow remaining from the previous night's mild storm.



Stone walls at the Anasazi ruin.



Another section of the ruin.



View looking west from the top of the Sand Hills Plateau (south rim).



View looking south to Saddle Mountain – U shaped feature on the horizon.
I was in that area in May 2019 on a backpacking trip to Nankoweap Canyon
with Dennis Brandt and Don Krier.

For the descent, I had spotted a ridge that led from the rock panel with desert varnish to a drainage that was east of my original path. To get to the ridge I needed to navigate the cliff bands. This was difficult, because there was no established path and no cairns, except for one that marked the spot to begin the descent from the rock panel. I avoided climbing, but I did need to retrace my steps at one point, because I began to traverse before I had fully cleared the bottom of the steep crack. The bottom portion of the crack appeared very difficult to climb down, and I certainly would not attempt it while hiking solo.

I did descend the ridge and entered the drainage. I was worried that I might encounter a dry fall and need to retrace my route or make a long detour, but this did not happen. The walk down the drainage started with a considerable amount of boulder hopping that was not difficult, followed by a stroll on a smooth surface. I followed the drainage into the flat pasture area at the base of the plateau. It led generally southeast. I ducked under a fence and continued in the drainage until I grew apprehensive that I was trending too far eastward from the trail head. I went back to the fence and followed it in a more southerly direction, then walked southwest. I struck the Mormon Wagon Road. That led me back to the trail head. I returned around 18:30.

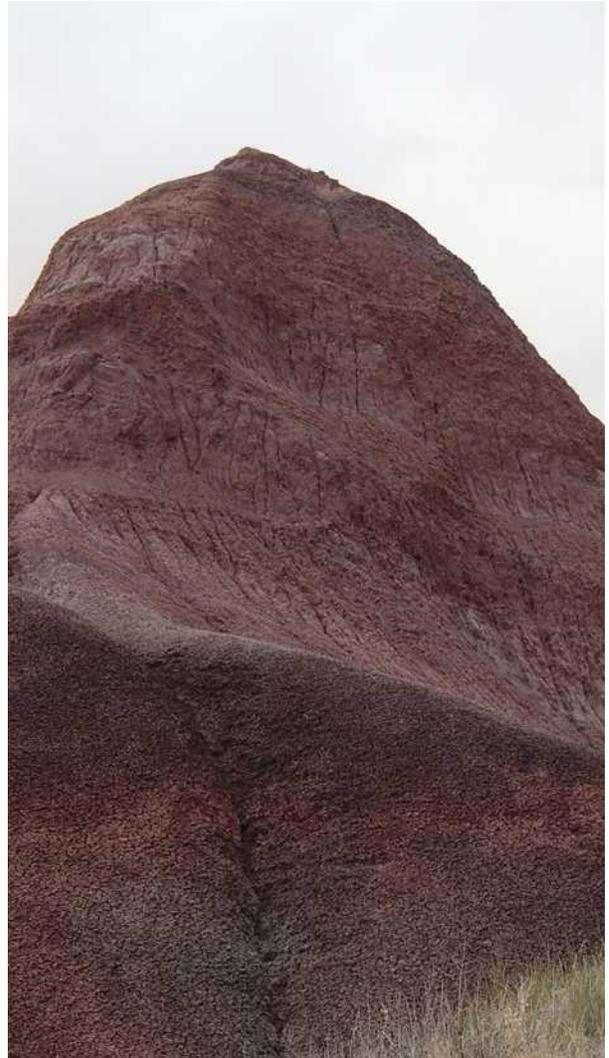
This route was preferable to the route I hiked going in, especially as it avoided the steep gully. It also gave me a tour through some lovely geology. I later contacted Michael R. Kelsey and sent him my waypoints. Mike told me that I had walked through the Death Tanks region on my return hike. He was interested in the petrified wood that I found while scouting the route on March 18.



In the drainage at the base of the ridge during the return hike. Looking generally northwest.



Walking the drainage on the return hike.



Some interesting "clay layer" geology.



Smooth surface in the drainage on the return hike.

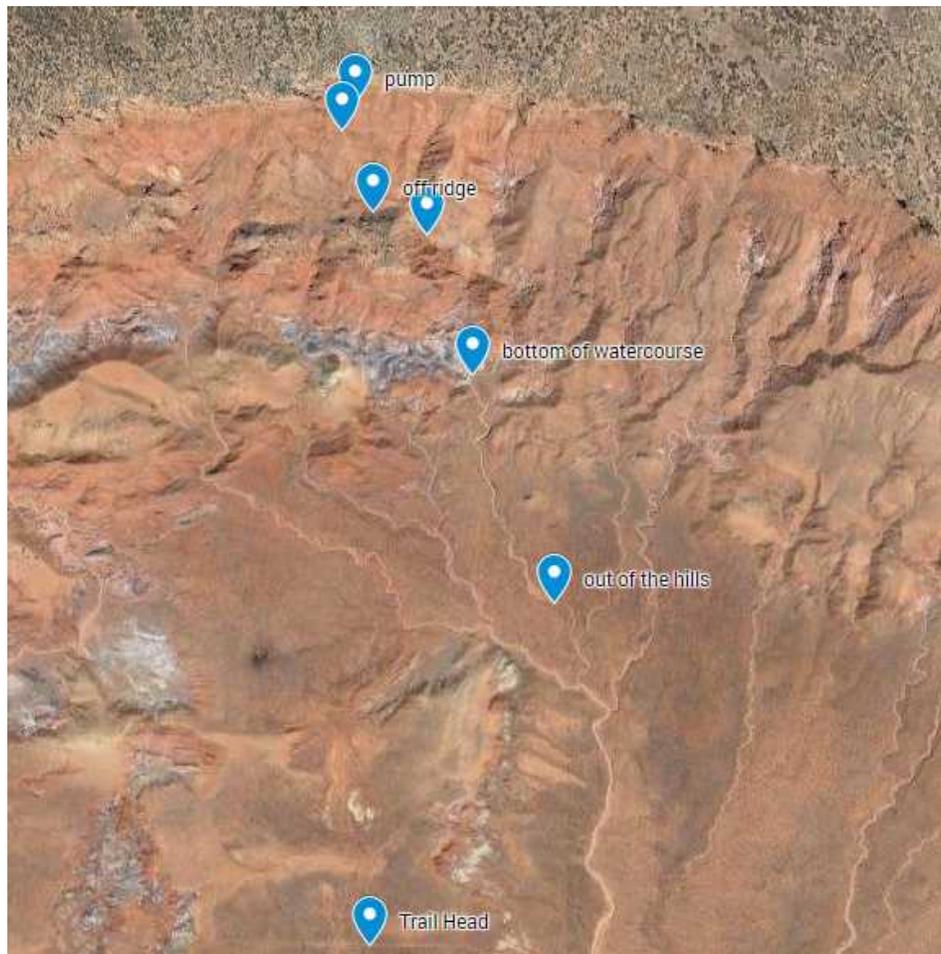


Multi-colored layers in the drainage on the return hike.



Waypoints on my return hike.

Shown from north to south are the site of an ancient pump, the top of my descent ridge, the bottom of my descent ridge, the watercourse (dry) and the bottom of the watercourse.



The return route.

Wrap-Up

I was very pleased with this hike, despite some difficulties with route finding. There is no established trail to follow and cairns are rare. The PVC pipeline does provide guidance, so that it is difficult to get lost on the leg of the hike that leads to the square spring. After that, one needs to feel one's way, guided by Kelsey's marked photos. Much of the described route is over steep and crumbling terrain. I found it useful to climb certain portions of the route, although one might find a way to avoid climbing with more careful scouting of the route. I was very happy with my choice of return route. This route would also work on the outbound hike.

This was a full-day hike for me, and I was glad that I had spent several hours scouting the route on the previous day. This is a lovely area, and the weather in mid-March was a lucky combination of light night-time precipitation and cool day-time temperatures.



Sunset at the trailhead.