

BT Thru-Hiker Completes the Arizona Trail

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Captain Blue at the Grand Canyon

“Going down is optional. Going up is mandatory” Andy “Captain Blue” Niekamp solemnly said as we stood on the Arizona Trail (AZT) at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. He was referring to a warning sign on the trail. A successful hike not only depends on a safe descent but also depends on a safe 4000’+ uphill climb.

Andy only had 14 miles to go as a northbound hiker on the AZT. He had started this adventure 87 days before at the US-Mexico border, and had successfully reached the Utah border, the AZT Northern Terminus. But there was a natural turn of unexpected events. And now he found himself on the AZT on the North Kaibab Trail, a steep corridor that descends to the Colorado River. This hike would be his second rim-to-rim backpacking trip down into the Grand Canyon in just 18 days.

Most AZT hikers only do the Grand Canyon once. Some AZT hikers this year didn’t do it at all. A record snowfall, which caused rockfall and landslides, made the North Kaibab Trail impassable, and the National Park service unexpectedly closed the trail to all hikers on April 7 until it could be properly repaired.

“All part of the journey,” as Andy says. He describes the Arizona Trail from A to Z in its diversity. From triple digit heat to a bitter cold that barely reaches double digits, extreme temperatures made for a dynamic relationship with the trail. Andy learned quickly how to adapt and adjust to the extreme temperatures and the rugged terrain. He began his journey on the US-Mexico border in the Sonoran Desert, a grassland environment where the iconic arms of the colossal Saguaro cactus grace the landscape. Within six miles, he ascended from the 5900’ at the border to 9000’ above sea level.

The Superstition Mountains and wilderness area, the Four Peaks Range and Wilderness Area, and the Mazatzal Range and wilderness area which began 400 miles into his northward-bound journey, were Andy’s most memorable treks. In this stretch, he discovered “sky islands.” They are what their name suggests: isolated areas that rise from the desert floor as islands rise from the sea. The climate with its cool air saturated with moisture provides a hospitable environment for diverse plant and animal life. Sky islands, unique to Arizona, are alpine oases, standing in stark contrast to the dusty, hot, sage brush-covered trail thousands of feet below. The cool, fresh air was a welcomed change from the dry desert air for Andy.

Andy reached the Grand Canyon just before Memorial



Captain Blue at Northern Terminus of the AZT (Utah - Arizona State Line).

Day, but the trail was not set to reopen until June 16. Fully aware of the trail closure but determined to finish, Andy completed what he could on the South Kaibab trail of the Grand Canyon and then returned to Ohio to wait out the repair. A journey that started 87 days prior was interrupted with a long 18-day hiking hiatus as repairs were completed.

It was a rough year for hikers. The record snowfall and saturated soil not only demolished part of the North Kaibab Trail but also created “miles of muddy slogs and washed-out trail” elsewhere on the AZT (Arizona Trail E-News, June 2023, par. 1). Hundreds of downed trees were a problem, not just for the hiker but for the trail maintainers. It was their job to keep the trail clear for the hikers, and they were anxious to get started. But before anything could be done about clearing the deadfall, the trail maintainers needed information. The trail director of the AZT realized he needed help.

He appealed to one of the AZT's greatest assets: the people with boots on the trail—the AZT hikers. He blasted a message via social media: "If you're on the Colorado Plateau, please help us locate downed trees!"

Andy has a knack for being at the right place, at the right time. As the former Troy Section Supervisor for the BT, Andy knew exactly what information the trail maintainers needed. He acted on the opportunity to help. As Andy hiked north, he created GPS waypoints of every deadfall tree and took pictures of trees that blocked the trail or had fallen dangerously onto fences or gates. Andy documented 160 trees. It was time-consuming and it slowed Andy's progress, but he was willing to help.

The next step was crucial. According to Arizona Trail E-news, using Andy's information, "[v]olunteers...worked in GIS software to create and share an interactive map of the 'targets' usable by Forest Service staff, passage stewards and other sawer-certified ATA volunteers. It not only help[ed] locate the downed trees, but allow[ed] notes to be left when an obstacle has been cleared to prevent duplication of effort" (June 2023, par. 2). In his email of thanks to Andy, the director acknowledged that knowing where the downed trees were "was a real game changer" by reducing the travel time and effort to locate the trees. Having a photo of the downed tree helped the volunteers know what tools to bring. It took one intrepid hiker to locate the trees and an army to clear them.

As I stood on the North Kaibab trail looking down, I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into. Joining Andy on the trail for his final miles so that I could write about his experience on the 800-mile AZT seemed like a good idea when I was in Ohio. Now I was uncertain. Sure enough, the descent was steep, and I found the repaired trail unnerving. Heavy gauge eyehooks and a rope tied around a large rock with a very thin sliver of a trail were the only things that separated me from imminent tragedy. I made Andy go first. Thankfully, the rope held. I was hot and tired, and the heat was relentless. As we made our way down, the temperature gradually increased by about 20 degrees. When we reached the bottom, it was over 100 degrees.

The Grand Canyon is considered the "crown jewel" of the AZT. Larger than the state of Rhode Island, the canyon is 277 miles long, 18 miles wide, and one mile deep. The canyon was formed by years of erosion. The Colorado River cut its way down through three sets of rocks, five geologic eras, and nine major geologic layers. Describing the Grand Canyon as spectacular is an understatement. Andy calls it the most beautiful and his most challenging leg of the AZT. The Grand Canyon is also considered the most deadly according to National Park Service statistics. The searing heat and low humidity lead to dehydration and heat exhaustion. The helicopter pad, the chest of emergency provisions, and a family we met in apparent distress seven miles into the Canyon on the North Kaibab Trail at a rest house were sobering reminders of how treacherous this trail can be. Andy had prepared me well when he instructed me to stay hydrated, wear clothing with UV ray protection and to carry a sun umbrella.

How does the AZT compare to the Buckeye Trail (BT)? Andy fondly refers to his trek around Ohio as encompassing the four P's: people, places, past, and present. He recalls the Buckeye Trail family who supported him with food, shelter, and encouragement. He discovered that his home state is rich with scenic beauty, major industries, and a colorful history. In comparison, Andy found that other hikers and designated trail angels were few and far between on the AZT. He came to depend on his hitchhiking skills to get to and from the trail. Some of his rides were 30 miles or longer.

When Andy began his hike on March 22 of this year, so did 20 other hikers. However, the three contiguous mountain ranges and three forest areas are 160 miles of strenuous and lonely trail, miles from any gateway communities. According to Andy,



Karen Power at the Grand Canyon, North Kaibab Trail. Photo credit: Andy Niekamp.



Andy descending down North Kaibab Trail. Photo credit: Karen Power.

this stretch was so tough that many hikers gave up after Superstition Mountain. As the trail difficulty, the unexpected trail closure, and the lingering snow thinned the number of hikers, solitude at times turned into loneliness for Andy, something he didn't experience on the BT.

The main difference between the AZT and BT and any other long-distance trail that Andy has ever completed is the scarcity of water. According to Andy, "That water is life is nowhere more apparent than in the desert. The hiker cannot survive on the AZT using only natural water sources." Streams are more available in Northern Arizona, but in the desert, Andy relied on community water caches placed in bear boxes or metal containers by trail angels. Often, however, he collected and purified water from cattle ponds, cattle troughs, wildlife tanks or cisterns that resembled UFOs (*pictured in the top right*). Sometimes Andy had to carry enough water to last an entire 20-mile day.

In the few miles I spent with Andy on the trail, collecting water from a water cistern gave me pause. Bugs and algae and other tree litter floated in the water. But we were thirsty and needed water. We filtered big chunks with a cheesecloth, purified with chlorine, and were on our way, feeling thankful that the source had been right next to the trail. Andy described using cow ponds for drinking water as much more of a challenge. Cattle ponds were usually in marshy areas with poor accessibility. Hoof prints in the mud and cow paddies in the grass were unwelcomed sights for him. Despite the challenges, Andy thrived on the AZT.

How did I fare on my first AZT hike? I am happy to report that I made the hike out of the Canyon Grand successfully. I left the Phantom Ranch Camp at 1:30 am to avoid the most serious effects of the heat and reached the South Rim by 10:30 am—a nine-hour hike. I compare it to hiking up a set of stairs for ten miles carrying a 20-lb pack on a hot day. Andy didn't leave camp as early as I did, and he reached the rim by 8:30 am, a quick 5-hour hike for him. As adventures go for me, I am glad for the privilege I had to hike a small piece of the AZT, but the BT will always be my favorite trail. As for Andy? His next adventure may be a southbound hike on the AZT, just for fun.



Rainwater Collector. Photo credit: Andy Niekamp



Saguaro Cacti during a super bloom. Photo credit: Andy Niekamp

AZT Fast Facts

- The AZT is 800 miles long. It runs north-south, the length of Arizona from the US-Mexico border to Utah.

- A thru-hike takes six to eight weeks to complete.

- Southbound (SOBO) hikers begin in September to avoid the snow and ice that collects in October and November on the Colorado Plateau. The advantage is that by the time SOBOs reach the Sonoran Desert, cooler temperatures prevail.

- Northbound (NOBO) hikers start in the Sonoran Desert. They begin in early March to avoid the intense spring heat the desert brings.

- The AZT is a young trail. The AZT became a national scenic trail in 2009. Its final section completed in 2011.

- The AZT traverses four national forests (Coconino, Coronado, Kaibab, Tonto) and four national park systems (Coronado National Monument, Saguaro National Park, Grand Canyon National Park, Walnut Canyon National Park).

- The highest point on the AZT is the Grand Canyon at 9,139 feet; the lowest point, the Gila River at 1,646 feet near Superior, Arizona.

--facts from *Your Complete Guide to the Arizona National Scenic Trail* by Matthew J. Nelson and the Arizona Trail Association. Wilderness Press, 6th edition, 2021.



Sunset at Bee Hive Well. Photo credit: Andy Niekamp