



Peaks to Park 2016

by Sabrina Carlson

Day 1: An Eventful First Day

On the morning of June 6, 2016, eight young mountain bikers from Flagstaff, Payson, and Mesa assembled in the parking area at Aspen Corner to wave goodbye to their families for the week. This is where they would begin their adventure – pedaling all the way to the Grand Canyon!

Before launching on their ride, each student was instructed and given tools on how to clean and lube their drive train and fork. Our resident bike mechanic, Richard May, looked over each bike in detail to fix any obvious problems that might cause any breakdowns and delays along the trail. While bike checks were completed, the other adult leaders and I gave the students an introduction to trail etiquette, wilderness bathroom use, sanitation, general trip expectations, and an introduction to mountain biking skills. We gave a basic overview of gears and shifting, and practiced riding in “ready” position. We discussed how to shift your weight for uphill or downhill riding. And although this was a basic review for some riders, for others, it was all new information.



Richard demonstrates how to check a bike.

With lunches packed, water filled, and bikes tuned up we were ready to roll! We descended the short but rubbly connector trail to the Arizona Trail and turned north under the tall aspen trees, in the process of leafing out their green leaves for summer. Excitement was high and one of the most beautiful sections of trail was just ahead of us!

Unfortunately, only two miles into our ride, I came upon Hannah on the side of the trail, bike akimbo, holding her ankle. Hannah is one of our returning riders and a 2016 youth leader. This was not a good sign as she is one tough cookie, and if she didn't jump right back onto her bike she must be really hurt.

Sure enough, an assessment of her status revealed a rapidly swelling ankle that she could not put pressure on. She had just taken a tumble off her bike and landed awkwardly on her ankle. Coconino Search and Rescue and Guardian Medical transport sent a team to help us carry her out where her parents were waiting to take her to the doctor to be treated.

While I was attending to Hannah, the rest of the group rode on. They descended through young ferns unrolling their fiddleheads in the morning light, lavender-colored Rocky Mountain iris, bright orange paintbrush, and fuchsia calypso orchids. On the final descent to Cedar Ranch, the trail follows an old road that becomes rocky and challenging. Everyone rolled into camp talking about their teeth chattering final hour.



Jasmine finds her confidence on the Peaks!

Shortly before dinner, we received a text from Hannah. Fortunately her ankle wasn't broken but it is sprained badly enough that she wouldn't be able to finish the ride. She could, however, join us along the way to camp and enjoy the wilderness. We were all glad to have the whole group together again!

Day 2: Hot Sun and Happy Cows

After last year's mud fest, we were thrilled to see sun and clear skies in the forecast. But we also knew that on the Babbitt Ranch (Passage 35) landscape, with no clouds it would mean a lot of hot sun with minimal shade. We advised packing extra water for everyone and did our best to pack up camp, check bikes, and get riding as soon as early as possible.



Beautiful views on the Babbitt Ranch!

As we climbed the first big hill up to Tub Ranch, we were all delighted to see some of the grazing cattle very close to the trail. Many mama cows had calves nearby, who romped and frolicked away from us. One of the youth riders shouted "They look like cute little dogs!" For the rest of the trip all baby cows were then referred to as "dog cows."

As we rode under the high-tension power lines, one of the students asked if it was true that if you touched your bike frame while under the lines would we get a shock? I told him I didn't know, since I hadn't really tried it. Just then, three people, with myself included, came leaping off of

our bikes in surprise feeling that something was stinging our inner thighs! Apparently, it is true!

By our first snack stop, Richard, one of our adult co-leaders, noticed a crack in his rigid fork. As everyone rested in the shade it provided a great opportunity to explain why we do bike checks daily, and how being aware of how your bike feels is important. Thankfully, Wendy, our van driver

extraordinaire, was heading back to Flagstaff for resupply that day so we were able to get a message through for her to pick up one of Richard's other bikes.

After riding past gorgeous views of the entire San Francisco Volcanic Field and swaths of unseasonably green grass we stopped for lunch under some juniper trees at the cattle guard where the last few miles of singletrack diverge from the road. Everyone was red-faced and hot, and a few riders had run out of water despite packing extra. Thankfully there was enough extra water scattered through the group to make sure everyone had a few more ounces to finish the ride.



Luke nailing the bunny hop!

Three of our more experienced riders seemed to have boundless energy, and spent a portion of their lunchtime practicing bunny hops over the cattle guard.

That evening, as we relaxed at camp near Moqui Station, Richard recounted part of the historical story of the Flagstaff to Grand Canyon bicycle "runs" led by the Coconino Cycling Club from 1894-1897. He had already told them the previous evening of the historic stagecoach route, and explained that both Cedar Ranch and Moqui Station had been stops along the route. Now the history of bicycle travel along the route began to unfold. Imagining the heavy bikes they would have ridden at the time, it was impressive to note that many "wheelmen" made the journey in eight hours! Of special interest to the ladies in our group, we learned about Edith Brooks, the first woman to ride the stagecoach route on a bicycle. She apparently made the trip with "comparative ease and was frequently compelled to slow up her speed to allow the wagon to catch up." We felt a certain kinship with the cyclists of 120 years ago, and couldn't help but sense our place in this long and proud tradition of riding bicycles to the Grand Canyon.

Day 3: Route Finding and Forest Health

As we began our day riding from Moqui Station onto the trail toward Grandview Tower, we were happy to bask in the shade of pines and oak once again. The morning was cooler than the day before, though the dry heat of the previous days left some sections very dusty.

For those of us who had ridden this section in the thick mud last year, the distance between Moqui Station and Russell Tank seemed to shorten considerably! What had taken us countless hours



Inspecting the water tank!

the year before was done in just over an hour this year! We crossed Forest Road 310 onto the Coconino Rim Trail. The first three miles were fast, fun and flowing! We whooshed along through the trees, wondering when we might catch even the tiniest glimpse of canyon splendor!

Shortly after following the signs for the bike route on the trail, we encountered a series of downed trees that not only blocked the trail but also had completely obliterated it. There was no sign of the trail anywhere in sight past the dead trees. While Nelson, another all-star co-leader) and I consulted maps and the databook to consider our best alternate route, Richard rode out through the pine needles to see if any hint of trail could be found further ahead.



Alana, ripping down the Coconino Rim!

Just as we were beginning to think we would have to backtrack to the road and ride into Grandview on the road, Richard came riding back and had found some doubletrack that would reunite us with the trail. He taught us all the term “routen-biking” to describe the frequent necessity of route finding when bike touring.

When we reemerged from the trail to road once again, we were greeted with a cheery sign put out by Wendy pointing the way to our camp and indicating that “salty snacks and cold lemonade” awaited us. A joyful sight indeed!

That evening before sunset, we all took a walk past the Grandview Tower where we could barely see the red spires of the canyon in the background. We discussed the signage around the area that explained dwarf mistletoe and how it can cause damage to forests by increasing the fire danger in this unnaturally dense forests. We talked about the thinning on the 4FRI restoration area, and the progressive forestry policies in Arizona that are beginning to reshape fire management policies everywhere.

Just as the sun was slipping down the sky, Richard concluded the tales of the Coconino Cycling Club by describing several folks on the ride in 1896 who were unable to complete the route by bike due to “tremendous mud” encountered at Moqui Station. We all laughed and groaned a bit, in solidarity with the wheelmen of so long ago.

Day 4: Into the Canyon...But First, Some Trail Work!

As we prepared to ride the final passage from Grandview Tower into Grand Canyon National Park, it was tempting to celebrate. We had made it through the sections that gave us trouble last



Dexter and Slade enjoy the sunset

year, we had already glimpsed the canyon, and it would have been all too easy to declare victory before the day had even begun. Instead, we reminded ourselves that we had another day of riding ahead to truly finish this adventure, and not to jinx it with premature congratulations.



Impromptu trail maintenance

Not long after riding away from the tower on singletrack, we encountered a huge field of “pick up sticks” where trees killed in a recent fire had fallen in a crisscrossed pattern over the trail for large sections. The only sensible thing to do was to get off our bikes and begin clearing the trail. We moved any logs that seemed safe and sensible to remove for 45 minutes. We talked about the challenges of maintaining an ever changing 800-mile trail, and the importance of volunteerism to protect these wonderful recreational resources.

Shortly after riding away from the downed trees we hit a patch of seemingly endless bicycle problems – two broken chains, numerous flat tires, and some gears that were reluctant to shift.

As we left the singletrack past Watson Tank, we agreed to keep the group pretty close together since that route was a series of turns from singletrack to dirt roads all the way into the town of Tusayan. Despite our precautions, the first turn onto singletrack from Watson Tank was somewhat obscured and the sign resembled a branch. When we realized we had missed a turn, we were 2.5 miles off course. By this point, halfway through the fourth and final day of riding, the news that we would need to backtrack uphill was met by understandable groans and protests. No bike tour would be complete without some bonus miles. But this knowledge provided minimal comfort to tired teenagers, and even adults.

By the time we reached the greenway path in Tusayan, the delays from bike issues, downed trees and bonus miles meant that nearly everyone was out of water. A few riders had been out for several miles already. It was another 5.5 miles to Mather Campground in the June heat, so we rode into Tusayan in search of water.

Once we were back on the greenway, the ride took on a distinct “horse heading for the barn” feeling. Everyone was excited and proud of their efforts and 100% ready to be done. For the last mile or so, winding along the rim, I asked everyone to slow down, enjoy the view, and make sure we finished together as a team.



We made it!

Rolling into the South Kaibab Trailhead we all had an incredible sense of accomplishment. We had all put forth tremendous physical effort and could now rightfully celebrate as we gazed out over one of the world's most spectacular sights.

Day 5: Into the Grand

With a projected heat index in the 90's at the South Rim, hiking Bright Angel Trail, which has water and shade, seemed like the best choice. It was a fun and pleasant day of hiking below the rim, taking in the sights, and experiencing the canyon from below.

Along the way, Wendy, our resident Grand Canyon expert, taught everyone about the geologic layers of the canyon, and told stories of Grand Canyon history and trail construction.



What a view!

That evening, all of the participants were presented with some fantastic Arizona Trail gear to celebrate completion of the event, and each person was celebrated for their unique contribution to the group. Alana, one of our 2016 youth leaders, created little paper medals for everyone with superlatives for each person like "Best Sense of Humor," "Best Smile," and "Best Camp Cook." She did this all on her own and it was a total surprise to us all.

Day 6: The Trip Home

After five days and four nights with no rain, imagine our surprise when around midnight, we all began to hear the gentle sounds of a light sprinkle. There was some rustling around the camp as rain covers were put on the tents for the first time the whole trip, just in time before heavier rainfall began. Several of our campers had chosen to sleep *al fresco*, relying on a bivy sack or tarp in case of rain. Two campers learned that their gear was much less waterproof than they thought, and one tentless camper somehow slept through the rain only to rise at 5 a.m. soaking wet!

The rain had us up and moving, ready for hot coffee and tea earlier than usual. We all agreed over breakfast that it almost felt like Mother Nature was reminding us that she can arrive at any time and could have halted our trip.

The worn out crew slept almost the whole way back to Flagstaff where we parted ways and agreed that we couldn't wait until next year. See you 2017!



Gratitude and Special Thanks!

This amazing opportunity wouldn't be possible without a whole lot of help!

Hermosa Tours: For once again entrusting us with your van and rooftop bike rack! Many thanks!

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Mother Nature: For granting us safe and mud-free passage on the Arizona Trail!

