

# Running 1,000 miles in the Grand Canyon



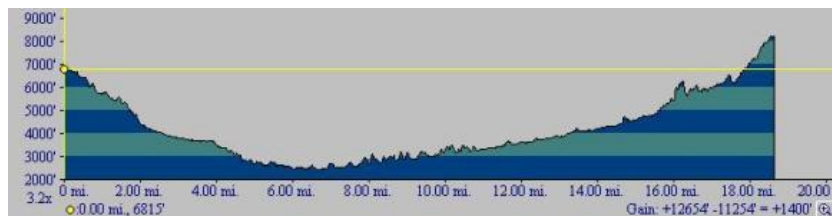
**Note:** *I write this section with some trepidation. The number of Rim-to-Rim-to-Rim (R2R2R) runs have exploded in the past couple years and I observe on the Internet large groups being formed to run in the Grand Canyon. Ill-prepared and naïve R2R2R runners are experiencing serious problems in the canyon and I just hope anyone reading my adventures, and wish to do the same, will be very careful. Some runners have had to be airlifted and others finishing have been hospitalized afterwards. The main culprit is the heat.*

*I offer these recommendations and reminders: 1. Don't organize large groups to run R2R2Rs. Stay small (four or less). 2. Don't include strangers in your group. Don't get into the tour-guide business. (Permits are now required in this case.) Be very familiar with those you bring and their abilities. 3. Stick to the safer months for R2R2Rs, April, October, and November. Remember that the inner canyon can be 20-30 degrees warmer than temperatures at the rim. 4. Don't attempt an R2R2R if you are not in good running condition. At a minimum you should be in good marathon shape, able to finish a 4:00 marathon easily. You should also have very good hill training. If you do not meet these requirements, you may still make it fine, but it could take more than 17 hours of hiking. 6. Remember that the inner canyon is not Disneyland, it is for advanced long-distance runners/hikers.*

*Why do I run mostly solo? Isn't that dangerous? When I started running the Grand Canyon, there were far fewer ultrarunners and thus hard to find anyone willing and able to do such an adventure. In later years with good experience, familiarity of the trails, and understanding what times of years to run, the risks decreased for me. If I bring someone with me who hasn't run in the Grand Canyon before, the risks go up because I become responsible for that person who is unfamiliar with the trail and conditions. I would rather not put another person in any danger, especially since I really don't know their capabilities. So, I usually run alone.*

## My first R2R2R

When I was a boy, my family visited the Grand Canyon in the early 1970s. I was fascinated with it and begged my parents to let us hike down into the canyon. Wisely they didn't give in, but that desire stayed with me for years. In 2005 very few runners had run a R2R2R, but my friend Todd Holmes had. He encouraged me to do it, that it was a truly epic run. I was finally in shape to do it and made plans for an early May trip. Todd cautioned me that it was likely too late, too hot to do it, but a cold front came in and it rained pretty hard the evening before. My run would be solo and started at 1:30 a.m. from the South Rim on the Bright Angel trail. Since I had never been on the trail before, it was truly an adventure and I had to trust the directions that I brought with me.



Elevation profile rim to rim

As I started to descend steeply down the canyon, I felt a rush of excitement. I was having a blast! I was cruising down into the most famous canyon in the world, all alone in the dark. I was astonished how fast I lost elevation. I could see a few lights from the lodges on the rim high above me. No one else was on the trail.

I crossed the Colorado River on the Silver Bridge in the dark and it was awesome to hear the power of the river below. Running through Phantom Ranch for the first time was fascinating; a little village at the bottom of the canyon and everyone was asleep.

A sign worried me as I started running on the North Kaibab trail. It strongly discouraged hikers from going up the trail because of the significant runoff going on. That season the snow had been deeper than it had been for years. I knew that a couple weeks ago a small group went up and the Wall Creek crossing was thigh deep and very scary. I was nervous but continued on. I would turn back if it was dangerous. Dawn arrived and the canyon came alive.



Crossing Silver Bridge in the dark



Roaring Spring

At this writing I have been up or down the North Kaibab trail 30 times but this, my first time, was the most memorable because I was experiencing the beauty for the first time. I was relieved that Wall Creek was only calf-deep and I went through it fine. Roaring Spring was truly roaring. The heavy runoff caused water falls to be pouring out of the side of the mountain from everywhere. I would never again see it roar like that.

As I reached the top of the rim, there were snow banks about three feet deep and there I was in shorts. I didn't hang around long and started my return trip. The trip back was tough but I finished in the afternoon with a time of 14:43 feeling great. I had found my all-time favorite place to run, the Grand Canyon.



Deep snow at the North Rim

I wrote up my experience and published it on the Internet and as far as I could tell was perhaps the first R2R2R report to be published in that much detail. My report received a ton of traffic, and for years was the top article found with Google on the subject. I received some negative emails about it. I recall one guy from Flagstaff, Arizona, pretty upset that I had written about it, perhaps because I "let out the secret." [Read the details of this run.](#)

In the years to come, more and more runners would run R2R2Rs each year. By 2013, dozens can be found running down and up the corridor trails each weekend in the spring and fall. Unfortunately, many of these runners have a lack of respect for the canyon and others on the trails. Backpackers who have hiked the canyon for years have grown to despise ultrarunners and see it as a real problem that they wish would be banned. More trash is appearing on the trail. Because of the actions of a few careless runners, it wouldn't surprise me if the NPS bans this activity someday soon.

Other problems arise when runners ignore warnings to never run R2R2Rs from mid-May on into the summer. I've been asked a lot for advice. I ask, "When are you running?" "June." My reply is always, "don't do it!" I'm ignored at times and the runners usually regret it. It is never a fun experience running a R2R2R in temperatures of more than 100 degrees. And these are usually runners who have no experience running in the desert west.

### Many more R2R2Rs

The Grand Canyon kept calling me back. Later that fall I returned twice, running R2R2Rs this time starting at the North Rim. One trip was with my brother who was also starting to take up ultra-distance running. He had a rough time on the return trip, but he made it back up slowly. [Read details of this run.](#)

A few weeks later I was back again for my third R2R2R and accomplished it in 13:45 and for the first time saw a couple other R2R2R runners. I would get a kick out the reaction of the hikers. As I ran back down, a guy asked me what was wrong, "Did you leave your wallet at the bottom?" I laughed. That is now my favorite response to people when they ask me why I am going back down. [Read details of this run.](#)



My brother Bob, making his way back up to the North Rim

I was truly hooked on running the canyon. In 2006, I ran seven R2R2Rs including a [quad, R2R2R2R2R](#), to be just one of five runners to accomplish that feat up to that time. On that trip, I ran extra miles on the rim and on the Tonto trail to complete a 100-mile run, perhaps the first person to do that in less than two days. One of my R2R2Rs was "[by the light of the silvery moon](#)." I ran all night to a full moon. That was an unforgettable experience to see the canyon in that amazing light. It was incredible to hear desert bighorn sheep crying out as they stood on the walls of sheer cliffs. Their eyes would reflect from my flashlight.

On one trip, I almost ran right into a beaver in the marsh area below Ribbon Falls. On another trip that year, as I was running down from the South Rim to start my run, I laughed when I ran into buddy Phil Lowry coming up finishing his R2R2R. Neither of us knew the other would be there.

### [More R2R2Rs](#) (15 as of 2016)

### Running ultra long R2R2Rs using the Tonto Trail



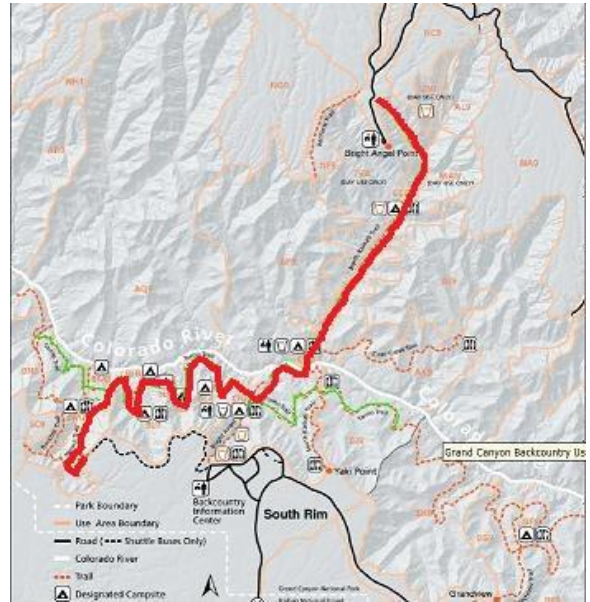
Grand Canyon beaver



After nine R2R2Rs, I had gained enough experience in the canyon that I was ready to start exploring the backcountry trails, away from the mules and day hikers. I decided to do a first, an R2R2R from the North Rim to Hermits Rest and back. A double crossing from North Kaibab to Hermits Rest and back is about 77 miles. About 39 of those miles are on “unmaintained” backcountry trails outside the heavily traveled corridor trails. The Tonto Trail and Hermit Trail are much more remote and rough. The risks are higher for a solo adventure like this. I understood the dangers well. But with Thanksgiving weekend, I ran into several backpackers on the Tonto Trail so I was not alone. This R2R2R required filtering water in creeks and springs, and I had to carry all of my food.



rock is gorgeous as the sun starts to cast light this way. Looking down is an amazing sight! The gorge, the cliffs with water stains, the contrast of green and red. This is amazing!”



I experienced my first dawn away from the busy trails and it was spectacular. I commented into my audio recorder, “I’m nearing Horn Creek. Boy, running on this Tonto Trail is just like heaven! It is so good to get away from the corridor trails with their mule stuff. This trail is soft and technical. There is a lot of brush on the side, but because I have my long pants on, it isn’t a problem. It gives you a desolate feeling. There is nothing here. The Tonto Trail weaves in and out of drainages and rolls up and down. The red

As Granite Rapids came into view, I pulled out my camera to set up for a picture. To my delight, a desert bighorn sheep appeared on the trail ahead. It didn't fear me at all and started to approach me. It circled around me and came into position with the river in the background. I snapped the amazing picture above. Wow! I thanked the sheep for the great photo and it pranced away on the ridge.



In the afternoon I saw plenty of backpackers as I approached the Hermit trail. I received very curious looks so I would stop and explain what I was doing. The Hermit Trail was an interesting experience. I can't say that I really enjoyed it. It was a lot of work. The trail was very rugged and unmaintained. There was plenty of boulder hopping

and route-finding, looking for the next cairn. Some sections were nice, but there wasn't much running happening. I eventually made it to the top, Hermit's Rest and I rested for a while in the little lodge there.

Darkness fell by the time I reached the Tonto Trail again. The return trip was great fun but I did lose the trail for some time near Salt Creek that took a while to figure out. On this trip I did do 10 extra miles doing out and backs on other trails, but I finally returned back to the North Rim after an 34-hour adventure. It was cool to be the first person to accomplish this type of crossing. [Read details of this run.](#)



Plateau Point at night

Other very long distance R2R2Rs would follow on Thanksgiving weekends of the following years. Next up was a double crossing from the north rim to Grandview Point and back. After reaching the Tonto Trail, I headed upriver to the east to the Grandview Trail



For this adventure, I came well prepared and even brought a satellite phone for any emergencies. The run was incredible and I enjoyed exploring new portions of the canyon that I had not yet seen. As I ran through Cremation Canyon I thought of the marathon runner, Margaret Bradley who died there several years earlier when she was running 27 miles from Grandview Point on the Tonto and then up South Kaibab trail. She ran in July and only brought two water bottles. At Cremation Canyon, probably in dehydration distress, instead of doing the uphill to reach South Kaibab trail where she could have obtained help, she tried to make it down to the river for water and died. Her body was found two days later.

I was running in the cool of November and springs were flowing. I came upon a backpacker near Lonetree Canyon. She said I was the first person she had seen in two days. I reached Grandview Point at dusk and ran the return trip through the night, arriving back at Phantom Ranch, at dawn. The climb back up to the North Rim was

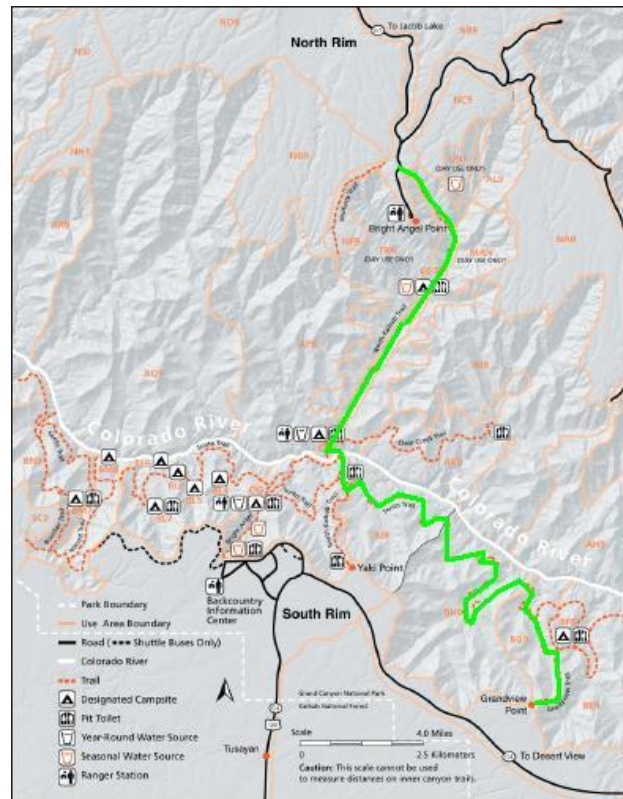


long and slow as usual, but my 83 mile adventure was complete in 34 hours. [Read details of this run.](#)

A couple years later I returned and repeated this trip, this time taking the time to take pictures and record audio so I could make a [video record](#) of the adventure. It again took me about 34 hours. My bad knee swelled up a little and gave me trouble on the return trip.

On another Thanksgiving weekend, I tried to repeat the R2R2R to Hermits Rest, but this time head up the rugged Boucher Trail. Friends at home tracked my progress from my SPOT tracker and sent me text messages on my rented satellite phone. But once I reached Boucher Creek, I was way behind schedule and decided to head back rather than up to the rim.

Before turning around I ate my dinner with a backpacker. He could not understand where I had come from and kept asking if I took a shuttle and if not, how did I get across the river? After resting and eating, I bid goodbye and then went to talk with his buddies. They



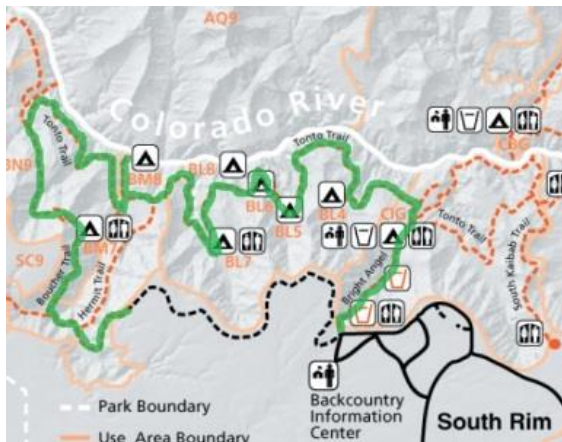
[Running down into Boucher Creek](#)

invited me to camp with them, but I explained that I was going on. They were stunned as I explained that I had come about 40 miles since the early morning and was now turning around to head back. I waved goodbye and they all watched me climb quickly out of Boucher Canyon.

The run through the night by the moon was amazing. At 1:00 a.m., I recorded a very, very tired, funny message. [Listen to the audio recording.](#) While running back up to the North Rim, I stopped near Cottonwood Creek to call into the KSL outdoors show, a radio station in Salt Lake City, and had a fun interview. Continuing on, I slowly reached the top. That turned out to be a 78-mile adventure that took about 33 hours. [Read details of this run.](#)



[Moon over the Grand Canyon](#)



For Thanksgiving weekend 2010, as I neared the North Rim, the temperature at the national park entrance was -20 F. I turned around at that point, feeling it was too dangerous to finish a long R2R2R in dangerous temperatures, so I drove around to the South Rim where it was warmer and instead ran down Bright Angel, took the Tonto trail all the way to the Boucher Trail and ascended to Hermits Rest. I loved climbing the Boucher Trail. I reached Hermits Rest at dusk and took the last shuttle back to Grand Canyon village. This all-day 39-mile adventure took me 12 hours. [Details of this run.](#)

### **Running the Tonto Trail end to end**

My greatest Grand Canyon adventure as of 2016 was my attempt to run most of the Tonto Trail end-to-end. I had dreamed of running the length of Grand Canyon National Park. The Tonto Trail goes from Garnet Canyon on the West, to Red Canyon (Hance Rapids) on the East. Trails continue on either side but on each end they become remote “routes” instead of established trails. To avoid doing any out-and-backs, I decided to start my run where the South Bass Trail (coming down from the rim) intersects with the Tonto Trail. I would then head east (up-river). I thought that no one had ever attempted this run, but just one year earlier, elite runners, Scott Jurek and Joe Grant accomplished it.

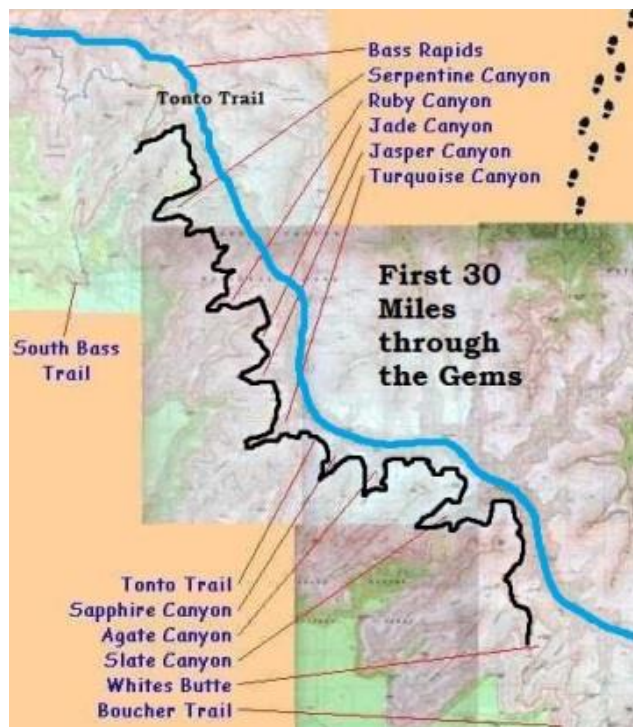
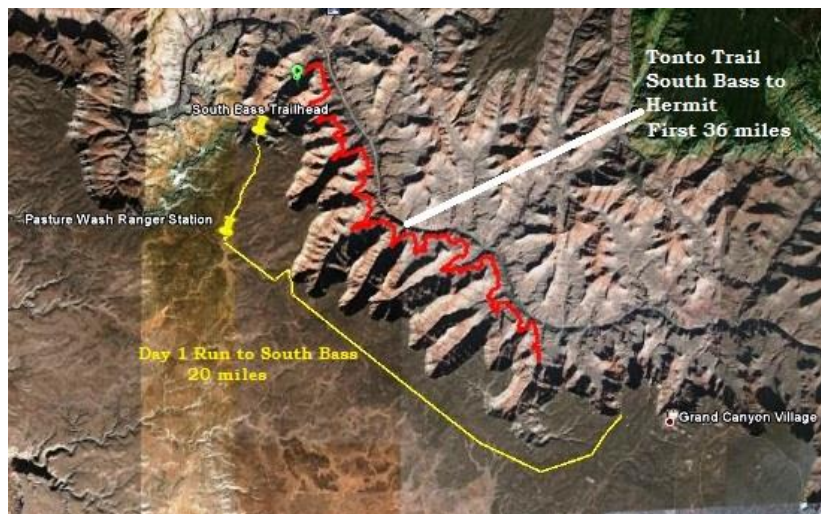
### **What dangers are there running the Tonto Trail?**

- Falling off cliffs. There are only a few short sections that exposed near huge cliffs. They don’t last very long. There is less exposure on the Tonto than on the corridor trails used by R2R2R runners. So falling off some cliff at night really isn’t much of a worry.
- Getting Lost. Getting lost for hours really isn’t possible because the trail stays on the Tonto Platform above the river. But, you certainly can lose the trail for many minutes which can be very frustrating. Skill needs to be developed how to find the trail by making circles or other such techniques.
- Getting injured. This is really the biggest thing I worry about. If I busted an ankle on the trail, it would be many hours or maybe a day or two before help would arrive.



- Running out of water. You don't want to do this on the exposed Tonto Trail. You need to know where the water sources are. Once heat stroke starts setting in, hikers on the trail do stupid things like trying to go down canyons to reach the Colorado River for water. They end up getting stuck on a cliff and die.
- Exhaustion. This is the other realistic danger. 100-mile race fitness can teach you what to do. Along the way there are bail-out points to climb out of the canyon. Knowing when to bail out is the key. For my run I would be passing by five exit point opportunities to climb out of the canyon.
- Snakes. I have yet to run into a snake in the Grand Canyon.

The right time of year to accomplish this run is in April. The temperatures are cool and most of the seasonal springs are running that may not be running during the cool Fall months. I ran on April 15, after a big snow storm a week earlier. To get to South Bass Trail requires a long shuttle of vehicles. Since I was alone, I ran 20 miles on the rim the first day and camped for the night in South Bass Canyon near the Tonto Trail (with a back country permit).

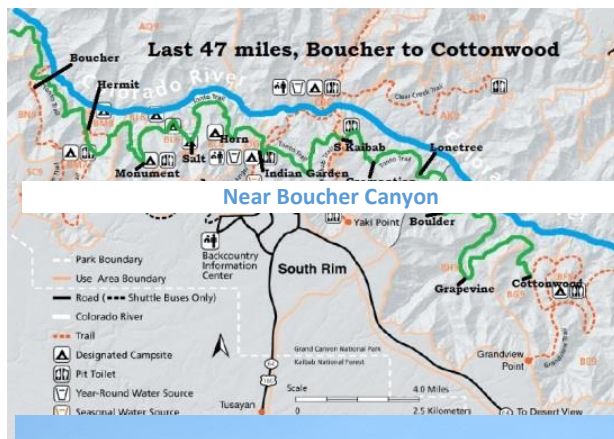


The next morning before dawn, I started my run on the Tonto Trail. I had never run this first 30-mile section before through the “Gems.” Its contour was the same as other sections of the Tonto but there was one huge difference. The trail was much, much fainter. It just doesn't receive much boot traffic. I had to pay careful attention in order to not lose the trail and as usual my pace was slow on the weaving trail.

Another thing that really slowed me down is the beauty of the canyon. One would be stupid to keep their head down looking at the trail. This is probably a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so I made sure I took in the sights along the way. This meant that I had to stop to take pictures, take some detours to peer down to the river. I only ran into two people during this first long stretch of trail.



I reached Boucher Canyon in the afternoon at 3:50 p.m. Now I was on familiar trail and it was much easier to follow. I also ran into many more backpackers, some who were stunned to learn I had started that morning at South Bass. Dusk arrived at Monument Creek. I had traveled 40 miles during the day. I hoped to at least go 30 more miles during the night.



Morning between Boulder and Grapevine Canyon

In 2015, I ran a new 100-miler held on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. It is common to feel some disappointment at the views on the North Rim as compared to the South Rim. But the Grand Canyon 100 took us to spectacular viewpoints outside the park, that tourists miss and opened my eyes to a section of the canyon I had never seen before. I struggled with altitude and had to stop and rest during the night but still finished in 28:38



The night was cooler and peaceful with nearly a full moon lighting up the canyon. Morning came as I approached Grapevine Canyon. I had run only about 65 difficult miles during the first 24 hours. As the morning lit up the canyon, I took stock, realizing I was way behind schedule and low on food. I decided to cut my run about 10-15 miles short and head up the Grandview Trail. At Grapevine I ran into backpackers breaking camp and they were very kind and friendly to me. They were very knowledgeable about the canyon, knew where I had started, and were very impressed. After a long lonely night, it was nice to talk to friendly people.

The final climb out of the canyon was long and hard, but I made it. My total run, including the run on the rim was 110 miles. I hitched-hiked back to Grand Canyon Village, tired but very satisfied about my accomplishment. [Read the details of this run.](#)



## List of Grand Canyon runs

Date	Adventure	miles
May 5, 2005	South Rim R2R2R solo (cold front)	48
Oct 21, 2005	North Rim R2R2R with brother Bob	48
Nov 2, 2005	North Rim R2R2R solo	48
Apr 21, 2006	South Rim R2R2R solo	48
May 12, 2006	South Rim R2R2R (too hot) solo	48
May 29, 2006	North Rim R2R2R (cold front) solo	48
Oct 12-13, 2006	R2R2R2R2R plus extra miles solo	100
Nov 3-4, 2006	Moonlight R2R2R solo	48
Nov 24-25, 2006	R2R2R – North Rim to Hermits Rest solo	87
Oct 12-13, 2006	R2R2R – North Rim to Grandview solo	83
Nov 23-24, 2007	North Rim to Boucher Creek and back solo	78
Nov 21, 2009	North Rim R2R2R with three others	48
Nov 26, 2009	R2R2R – North Rim to Hermits Rest solo	83
Nov 26, 2010	Bright Angel to Boucher to Hermits Rest solo	39
Apr 15-17, 2010	Rim run, South Bass to Grandview solo	110
Nov 29, 2013	North Rim R2R2R in inversion solo	46
May 16, 2015	Grand Canyon 100	100
Nov 20, 2015	North Rim to South Kaibab R2R2	46
<b>Total</b>		<b>1156</b>