Willis Creek Narrows

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Overview

This is an excellent hike for families and casual hikers. The hike takes you down a sandy/gravelly wash bottom with a shallow stream and through several beautiful narrows. Hikers should be able to keep their feet dry with a little effort but, depending on recent floods, there may be places in the narrows you have to get your feet wet. The hike is typically an out and back, 2.2 miles round trip, to see the best narrows, but it could be made into a longer hike.

Driving directions

Accessed by a dirt road – check with the visitor center for current road conditions
From Cannonville, high clearance and four wheel drive not typically required. From Kanab, high clearance required but not four wheel drive.
The hike leaves from Skutumpah (Skoot-um-pa) Road, closer to Cannonville than Kanab. If coming from Kanab it will be faster to drive to Cannonville via Highways 89 and 12 than to take Johnson Valley and Skutumpah Roads. Both routes are beautiful but if you've already driven the highways and want to see more country, Skutumpah Road from Kanab shows off the Grand Staircase section of the monument nicely.
From Cannonville pass the GSENM visitor center on Main Street. Leave town and turn right onto Skutumpah Road, about 3 miles from Highway 12. Continue about 6 miles to the Willis Creek Trailhead, there will be a sign.
From Kanab head east on Highway 89 toward Page, AZ, 8.5 miles past the Kanab GSENM visitor center. Turn north onto Johnson Valley Road and when this road ends (16 miles) choose Skutumpah Road heading northeast. Pass Lick Wash and Bull Valley Gorge. There will be a sign at the Willis Creek Trailhead 35 miles along Skutumpah Road.

Hiking route

Easy hike over gravel and sand
4.5 miles round trip, minimal elevation change
To start, cross the road and either follow the stream and navigate around a small waterfall or take the trail on the left/north side of the creek for a short distance before descending into the creek. The rest of the route is very straight forward, just stay along the creek. The most common turn around point is at the confluence with Averett Canyon, making for a 2.2 mile round trip hike. The mouth of Averett Canyon has a pour off, but an adventurous person with scrambling experience could get up this. For a longer hike, one could continue down Willis Creek to the confluence with Sheep Creek making for a roughly 4.5 mile hike.

Hazards

Heat

While this is called a creek, I am not sure how reliable of a water source this is, it may run dry in the summer/dry season. Call the Cannonville Visitor Center for current conditions on water if you're relying on its presence. This hike is at a higher elevation than most other common hikes in GSENM, but not by much. Elevation is correlated to temperature so this hike may be 5-10 degrees cooler than Zebra Slot Canyon. There is frequent shade, but still frequent exposed stretches.

Flash floods – Check with the visitor center for the daily flash flood rating

While flash floods are an obvious danger in narrow canyons, this can be a relatively safe canyon to explore despite possible flash flood danger due to how frequently it opens up and allows escape.

Regulations and considerations

Human waste disposal

It is possible to find a way up and out of the canyon to get 300 feet from the canyon, but it would be difficult. Bring a wag bag along just in case!

Dogs should be on a leash, and make sure to pick up after them!

Along the trail

No collecting of any object other than trash is allowed. Do not build cairns. Bikes are not allowed off road in GSENM. If hiking around the narrows it is suggested but not required to stay on the trail, just be considerate of the biological soil crust!

Camping and fires

This is not a common place to start a backpack trip, but overnight camping permits can be acquired at the visitor center. No fires are allowed in the canyons. If having a fire elsewhere, be aware of any active fire restrictions.

Area restrictions

Amenities

There are no bathrooms, drinking water or trash facilities at the trailhead. The nearest bathrooms would be in Cannonville. Escalante and Tropic have small grocery stores (closed Sundays) and Cannonville has a convenience store. For medical issues Escalante has a clinic (Kazan Memorial Clinic, open M 9a-8p, Tu-F 9a-5p, closed Sat-Sun) and the nearest hospital is in Panquitch (Garfield Memorial Hospital, 200 N 400 E). For search and rescue and non-emergency evacuations call the Garfield County Sheriff's Office: 435-676-2678. For emergencies call 911 or hit the SOS button on your inReach.

Geology

This hike takes you through alternating sections of narrows (narrow canyons with very confining, tall walls) and sections of more open canyons (canyons more generally provide a feeling of confinement). Both types of sections are cut into the Navajo Sandstone. The gravel along the stream, a diverse array of beautiful stones, come from many different geologic layers from the Navajo Sandstone to the Claron Formation, spanning about 130 million years.

Narrows

Purist would say slot canyons have to be so narrow you cannot walk normally through them, instead they require walking sideways or contorting through them. Narrows sometimes refer specifically to a section of stream where the flowing water extends across the whole width of the canyon like The Narrows in Zion National Park. These are considered narrows, though maybe not the same kind as The Narrows in Zion, as they are narrow with tall walls but still easy to walk through for the most part, and despite they may not have significant sections of wall to wall flowing water. Narrows and slot canyons are created by the same forces. They are formed over millions of years where water rushes through exposed bedrock. Sandstone and limestone are the most prone to forming this type of canyon because of how they are eroded chemically and physically by water. Add to this the flash floods caused by monsoons over the desert and this is one recipe for slot canyons.

The Navajo Sandstone (about 185 million years old) formed on top of the Kayenta when the sand dunes overtook the streams. Sand dunes piled on a shallow water table as the water table rose. Frequently the sand dunes would blow away down to the water table creating a break in the cross bedding. Imagine ridges of wandering dunes on a damp surface. Crossbedding here is a layering of sand at an angle that shows how the sand dunes were formed. Within the Navajo there are lenses of limestone formed by oases and ponds. Lenses are sections with limited width and thicker in the middle than the edges. The colors of the Navajo are formed primarily by iron in different forms.

Flora

The elevation of this area is at the higher end of where pinyon/juniper dominates, making it somewhat dense for this type of forest. Tall ponderosa pine trees, which prefer even higher elevation, sometimes find a niche they can survive in here, such as canyons that provide a sheltered environment. With a relatively reliable source of water, it may be expected to find a more robust riparian zone at the canyon bottom. One reason we don't may be that this drainage is both fairly confined and drains an area with a high percentage of poor soils like the Claron Formation. These factors along with monsoons combine to create severe floods that rip out riparian vegetation periodically.

Riparian

Riparian areas are defined by a soil type and plant community that is strongly influence by the presence of water. Here you'll see coyote willow, tamarisk and rushes that indicate a steady supply of water.

Biological soil crust

Biocrusts are complex communities composed of cyanobacteria, green algae, lichens, fungi and mosses that form a living cover. They can be identified as a dark, reddish or brown bumpy surface on otherwise barren ground. When first developing it can be nearly invisible. These crusts help stabilize soil, increase soil's water absorption and provide nutrients for other plants. They are extremely fragile and it can take decades, even centuries to recover from trampling. Stick to trails, washes, rock and other's footprints to avoid damaging this important part of the desert.

Salt desert scrub and pinyon-juniper woodland

Here you'll find a high desert community of plants capable of withstanding the fierce baking sun of the summer as well as freezing temperatures in winter. This region gets about 11 inches of rain per year, and supports pinyon and juniper trees as well as big sage and sand sage, all woody plants. Prickly pear (a group of species that all look similar) and claret cup are the most common cacti found here. Narrow leaf yucca, another succulent, is related to agave. Common grasses include needle and thread grass, Indian rice grass, cheat grass and blue grama. In this high desert, flowers typically bloom from April to June, potentially with a second showing following monsoons. Some common flowers are globe mallow, penstemon, evening primrose and hoary aster.

Fauna

Mammals, fish, reptiles, birds and even amphibians all make their home in the desert and the streams that course through it. There are many species of birds in GSENM, some of the more notable ones include turkey vultures, ravens and pinyon jays. Mammals that roam these parts include coyotes, foxes, bob cats, mountain lions, badgers, mule deer, bighorn sheep and many species of mice. Some insects you may encounter are the creepy Jerusalem crickets and sand trap-building antlions. Likely you will see collared lizards, with a black band around their neck and you may see whiptail lizards with tails up to 2.5 times as long as their body. Some poisonous animals to watch out for are rattlesnakes, scorpions, black widows, and velvet ants.

Rattlesnakes are not common and not aggressive but they will stand their ground. If they are rattling they're agitated and if they're also coiled up they are ready to strike. They can strike a distance 2/3 the length of their body. If someone is bit, request a medical helicopter evacuation immediately.

Scorpions hide under rocks during the day and come out mostly at night. Their sting is painful similar to a bee sting. No medical attention is necessary, but if it's the first time someone has been stung, watch out for anaphylaxis. Just like with bee stings some people have severe allergic reactions. If their throat starts to swell administer Benadryl and, if possible, find an EpiPen in case its necessary. Get to a clinic unless the situation resolves itself.

Female black widow spiders have a distinct red hourglass shape on the back of their black body. They are not aggressive and build very sticky webs in nooks of canyon walls. Their bite may require medical attention, drive to the nearest medical facility.

Velvet ants look like fast moving ants with a brightly colored patch of hair, however these are not ants. They are wasps and should be treated as such because they do have a powerful sting.

Ravens look very similar to crows but ravens are significantly larger. Their distributions' overlap but crows are very rare in GSENM. Ravens often hang out in pairs and they are scavengers so don't leave your snacks unattended!

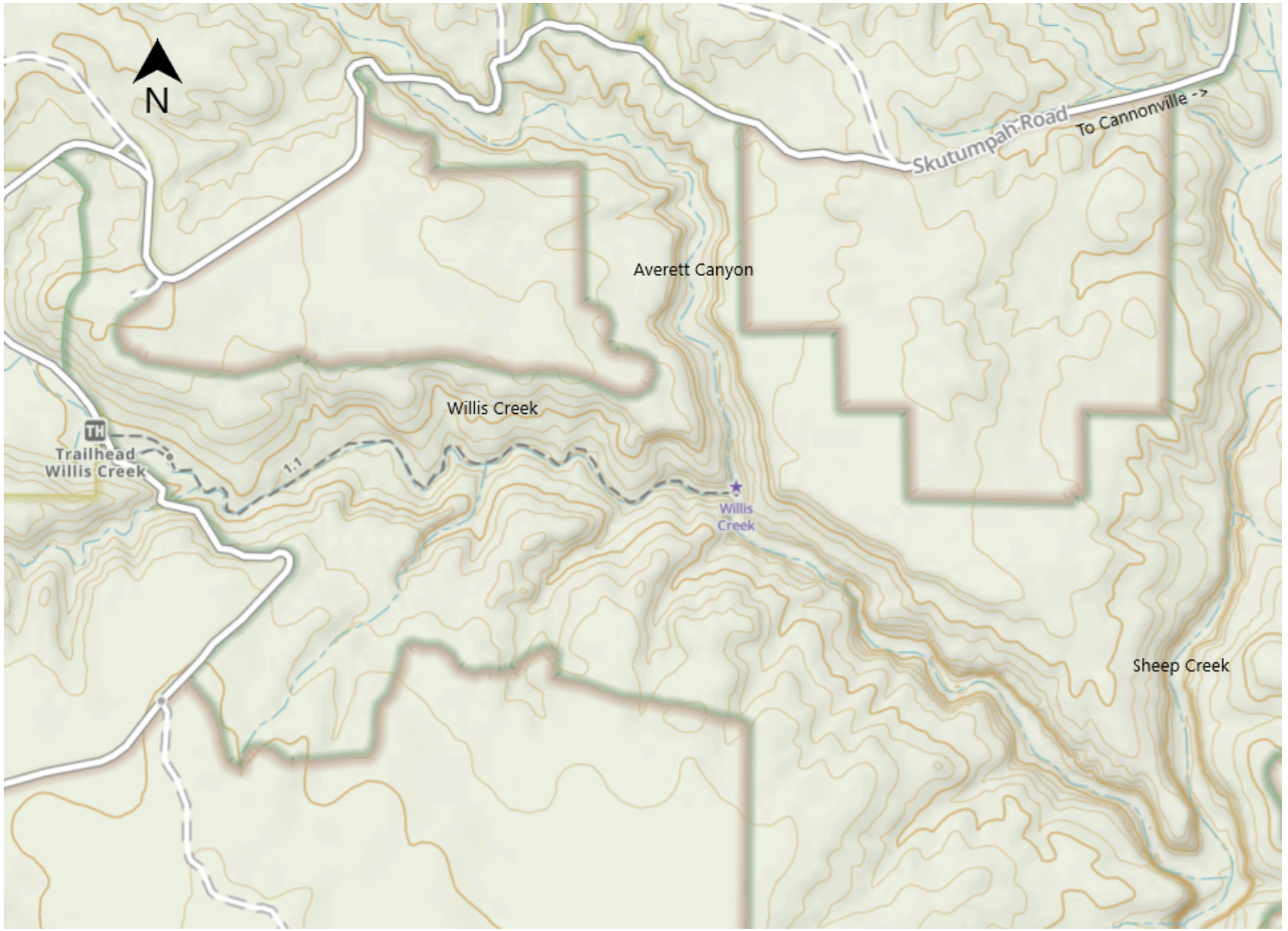
Turkey vultures have a wingspan of up to 6 feet and do not flap their wings very much. They are expert at finding rising warm air currents and gliding in circles all day as they look for carrion.

Pinyon jays, related to blue jays, like to hang in large flocks in pinyon/juniper forests. This species of jay is endemic to the Colorado Plateau, it doesn't exist anywhere else!

Mountain lions, like all large predators, were hunted and poisoned almost to extinction. Today, the best place to see one is in the desert southwest; however, you will be very lucky if you do.

Mountain lions range far to find prey, mostly mule deer, and kill efficiently with a bite to the back of the neck. If you do encounter a mountain lion, make sure you don't have it cornered. Make loud noises and raise your arms, fight back if necessary, and do not run away!
Bighorn sheep make their home in rugged rocky areas it would seem were impossible to navigate. They are excellent climbers and use this to their advantage to avoid predators. The males have very large horns which grow longer every year. They use these to establish dominance over other males during mating season. They charge each other at over 20 mph, the loud crack can be heard for miles. One nearly wiped out, bighorn are making a comeback.

Nearby attractions
Grosvenor Arch is an interesting arch, and a short approach.
Cottonwood Narrows is a cool short through hike with towering walls.
Cottonwood Wash and Skutumpah Roads show off the geology of GSENM. Skutumpah Road offers excellent views of the Grand Staircase section of the monument while Cottonwood Wash Road takes you along a dramatic monocline (steeply angled geologic strata) that defines the separation of the Grand Staircase and Kaiparowits sections of GSENM.


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Skutumpah Road
To Cannonville ->
Averett Canyon
Willis Creek
TH
Trailhead
Willis Creek
1.1
Willis
Creek
Sheep Creek