

Tuweep Airstrip

The Grand Canyon Secret

by Mike Sidders



©David Coppedge

Few things are more disappointing to pilots than an enormous white “X” marking the threshold of their favorite recreational airstrip. Such is now the case at Tuweep Airstrip (L50) on the north rim of the Grand Canyon (featured in the Spring 2000 issue).

Midway between the coniferous forests of the North Rim and the sweltering canyon bottom, Tuweep lies at an elevation of 4,600 ft. on the western, red-sandstone shelf known as the Esplanade. This is high desert country with mild winters and light snows. Paiute for “barren valley,” the Toroweap Valley offers a variety of plants including juniper, pinyon pine, and, of course, sagebrush. Cacti and agave are more prevalent as you approach the canyon rim, and during the wet years, wildflowers paint the ground and surrounding hillsides. Wildlife is also abundant and the area offers some of the finest habitat in the nation for heavy antlered mule deer. Coyotes keep the jack-rabbit population in check and the occasional rattlesnake adds excitement to day hikes.

The Toroweap Overlook of the Grand Canyon allows an experience vastly different than the south rim. Unfettered by guardrails, signs, and crowded trails, there is nothing between you and a dramatic 3,000-ft. drop to the Colorado River below. The serpentine trail of green water is slowed by massive lava flows before it cascades over Lava Falls, the most famous rapids in the canyon. On a still day, the roar of the falls can be heard at the canyon rim.

Visiting Tuweep requires self-sufficiency and an adventuresome spirit. It’s just the type of remote destination recreational pilots look for.

Just a few years ago, nearly twenty airstrips dotted the landscape north of the Grand Canyon. They have been methodically plucked one by one from the charts and just a few remain today. The state of Arizona cites liability concerns and lack of pilot interest for these random closures. Tuweep is the most essential remaining public strip offering access to the unspoiled areas of this vast national park.

Without History We’re History

On January 11, 2000, a gaggle of helicopters including Marine One and four Hueys descended on the Toroweap Valley. President Clinton stepped forth and announced the formation of the new Grand Canyon-Parashant National Monument. In a symbolic gesture, wearing a brown suede jacket and cowboy boots, Mr. Clinton sat at the dusty airstrip and signed four Presidential Proclamations on the kitchen table of Tuweep Ranger Clair Roberts. The section of state school-trust land containing Tuweep Airstrip is also encompassed within the new National Monument.



©George A. Kounis

The purpose of the executive order was to prevent mining and future development and to preserve the rich history of the area. Mr. Clinton was acting under the Antiquities Act passed by Congress in 1906 to protect “objects of historic and scientific interest.”

That history should certainly include the life of John Riffey. For 38 years, Riffey served as the National Park Service ranger at Tuweep. He and his beloved Super Cub, “Pogo,” aptly named for the short hops it took, served the visitors of the Arizona strip and the park as only a pilot and his airplane could. Aviation was important to Riffey. Not only for the enjoyment he felt while flying, but also for the access it offered to remote areas of the park.

Ironically, just yards away from the table where the president signed the executive order, lies the grave of John Riffey. His date of birth and date of death do not appear on the gravestone. When he lived wasn’t important to him; *how* he lived was. The stone bears the image of his trusted “Pogo” and his epitaph: “The man who could spend a lifetime on the rim and not waste a minute.” Nothing else was necessary.

There Is Still Hope

Tuweep sees an average of three private aircraft landings per week during the busy season, and has been used extensively by the Bureau of Land Management as a staging area during firefighting operations.

Mike Ebersole, former Tuweep ranger, commercial pilot, and airport manager for the Tuweep strip, contacted State Land Department Manager Chuck Hudson. When asked if it was too late to reverse the closure, Mr. Hudson stated that “they (the state) would not be averse to resurrecting the project and trying to keep the airstrip open.”

Although he was transferred to Sitka, Alaska, in 2002, former Tuweep ranger Clair Roberts’ love for the Toroweap Valley has never waned. Like Riffey, he also flew his own airplane out of Tuweep. Roberts believes the short-term solution to keep the strip open is by generating a grass-roots effort to mount a writing campaign on the state of Arizona and the FAA. He remains committed

to spearheading this effort because he believes it is worth saving and that proper notice was not given to the public. Ultimately, a land swap may be the best long-term solution for keeping the airstrip open. Interest in the strip among pilots has always remained high. There has been no history of noise complaints, and aircraft encroachment into the Grand Canyon Special Flight Rules Area has been rare and largely unintentional.

Letters protesting the closure of Tuweep (L50) should be directed to the FAA and Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano with carbon copies to Ray Boucher of the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) Aeronautics Division and Charles Hudson of the Arizona State Land Department.

The Recreational Aviation Foundation is a non-profit organization using tax-deductible donations to protect existing airstrips like Tuweep and acquire new facilities for public use, (406) 587-5166, www.recreational-aviationfoundation.org. ■

We pilots should not let Tuweep fade away without a fight. The Arizona State Land Department is “not averse” to reopening the airstrip. By writing letters to the addresses below, you can do your part to save this Arizona treasure. You can download sample letters at www.pilotgetaways.com/speakout.html.

Clair Roberts
liznclair@att.net

The Honorable Janet Napolitano
Governor of Arizona
1700 W. Washington
Phoenix, AZ 85007
www.governor.state.az.us/global/contact.htm

Charles Hudson
Environmental Resources & Trespass
Section Manager
Arizona State Land Department
1616 W. Adams St.
Phoenix, AZ 85007
chudson@land.az.gov

Ray Boucher
ADOT Aeronautics Division Program
Analyst
255 Osborn Rd. Ste 101
Phoenix, AZ 85012
rboucher@azdot.gov