

Onyx Bridge

DISTANCE: 5 miles

ELEVATION GAIN: 300 feet

ROUTE TYPE: Out & Back

The Onyx Bridge trail is located in the Petrified Forest National Park near Holbrook, Arizona. The trail begins near the Painted Desert Inn in the northern section of the park. From there the trail drops down into the Painted Desert where it travels across Lithodendron Wash to the Onyx Bridge site. This post takes a slight detour en route that leads to some interesting petroglyphs.

The trail begins on the west side of the Painted Desert Inn. From there the trail follows a gravelly trail that takes it down a series of switchbacks. Most of the 300 feet of elevation change for this hike occurs along this section of the trail. At the base of the hill the trail follows a scenic route that takes it between some colorful red adobe hills.

Just past the 3/4 mile point there is a fork in the trail. For this post we followed the faint route to the left. After a short distance it leads past the ruins of a dam made out of hand placed stones that spanned the wash at one time in an attempt to retain a bit of the desert's precious water.

After passing the dam the trail is pretty faint. There are a few occasional cairns here and there. The trail comes to a shallow wash that you can either follow as it contours around the side of the hills or you can pick a straight line that heads toward a distance hill with a number of large boulders on the east side of it. This hill comes up before reaching the main bed of Lithodendron Wash. Nothing is labeled out here so a topo map can definitely come in handy. The slideshow at the end of this post should give a good idea of the route that we took and what to expect.

The petroglyphs are easy to spot from a distance before reaching the 1.5 mile point of the hike. We never counted how many images there are but there are a lot. There are actually quite a few boulders that have petroglyphs on them. Unfortunately the surface of some of the rocks has onion skinned and fallen away.

If you continue hiking north from the petroglyphs you will run into the main bed of the wash where you will want to turn right and follow it in the easterly direction. Eventually you will come to a cairn in the middle of the wash that marks the point where the Onyx Bridge trail enters it. Continue following the wash staying left at a fork that comes up and keep going until you come to a well marked turnoff where a smaller wash is on the left.

Follow the smaller wash as it heads north becoming deeper as it goes. There are a few cairns to mark the route but generally when it comes to a fork it tends to take the left branch each time. The trail eventually climbs out of the wash to higher ground and finds its way to a branch of the wash above a spillover where a long petrified section of tree has been made visible by the soil that has eroded away around it. Cracks can be seen in sections of the tree as it succumbs to the forces of gravity.

