



G.E.T. Guidebook

Segment 13: Old Safford-Morenci Trail 15.8 miles

Segment Length	Segment Status	Season
15.8 mi.	finalized & accessible	fall, winter, spring
Resources		
		Additional maps: Safford 1:100K Topographic (BLM) Clifton 1:100K Topographic (BLM) Land management agency: BLM Safford Field Office
G.E.T. Topo Maps 38-39 Water Chart Image Gallery: Album 4		

Beginning access point

Old Safford-Morenci Trail west trailhead. From US 70 (Thatcher Blvd) at 8th Ave in Safford, head north on 8th Ave. In 1.5 mi. bear right at the fork onto Airport Rd. and follow it 4 miles to Aviation Way. Turn left here, then immediately left again onto (unsigned) Solomon Pass Rd (which becomes graded dirt) and continue 8 miles to the Solomon Pass-Salt Trap Road junction. Bear left onto Salt Trap Road and follow it 1.8 miles. Turn left (waypoint 12135; if you reached Salt Trap tank and corral you missed this turn) and continue ~4 miles to the signed trailhead, a dirt turnout with ample parking. A 4WD high-clearance vehicle may be needed for sections of the last 6 miles.

Ending access point

Old Safford-Morenci Trail east trailhead. From Clifton take US 191 (Coronado Blvd) north to the town of Morenci. Continue another ~5 miles and turn left onto signed, graded dirt Lower Eagle Creek Rd a short ways before ridge-top overlooks of the mine. The road descends to the flood plain of Eagle Creek in another 5.5 miles, where it turns left past a pumping facility, then right to cross the creek. A high-clearance 4WD vehicle is often advisable here and beyond. Now on unsigned Black River Rd (the same road changes names), continue ~1.6 miles, along the way ignoring a side road at right, to the signed Old Safford-Morenci Trail east trailhead. Parking for several vehicles is available along the roadside opposite and just beyond the trailhead sign.

SEGMENT OVERVIEW

This segment follows the historic Old Safford-Morenci Trail in its entirety. The BLM's Safford Field Office website offers the following description of the trail:

"Pioneer ranchers and farmers in the Gila Valley built this trail about 1874 to haul their products to the booming mines of the Clifton-Morenci area. After the advent of the automobile in the early 1900s, new roads were constructed along other routes. One was the Safford-Clifton Road (now called the Black Hills Back Country Byway). Decreasing use of the Safford-Morenci Trail resulted in little maintenance, and it became more difficult to follow. Today, the Safford-Morenci Trail is managed by the BLM as a recreation trail for non-motorized uses. Although the trail was originally used as a pack trail for supplying mining camps in and around Morenci it is now impassable in places for horseback riders.

"Hikers can enjoy a variety of desert and riparian environments along the trail. Bonita Creek, part of the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area, is crossed about midway and makes a good primitive camping spot. Javelina, black bear, mule deer, bighorn sheep, and mountain lions inhabit this area. Numerous birds, including raptors such as golden eagles and peregrine falcons, may also be seen. Riparian areas are especially good for colorful neotropical migratory birds. Hikers can encounter prehistoric cliff dwellings, remnants of early homesteads, majestic rock outcrops, and sweeping views of the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area, the Gila Mountains, and the high points beyond."

Thanks to the ongoing efforts of the BLM in Safford, the Old Safford-Morenci Trail is now well on its way to becoming one of southeast Arizona's premier longer-distance desert trails. Several miles of reconstructed and expanded trail make for easier, more enjoyable passage than was once the case, and more work is planned for coming seasons. The Old Safford-Morenci Trail follows a combination of foot trail, 4WD tracks, and cross-county drainages, and features occasional brown and (older) green metal signs marked "TRAIL," as well as carsonite posts and cairns.

With the exception of perennial Bonita Creek, only a spring in South Smith Canyon near the end of this segment should be considered generally reliable in drier times. Where the route follows drainages, expect an exceedingly rocky go of it at times, but also a wonderful sense of solitude and even the occasional section of scenic slot canyon to explore.

Please note that the "official" total mileage listed for this segment, while generally accurate, may feel a bit underestimated due to the rough terrain in places. Budget your time and energy accordingly.

ROUTE DETAILS

At the Old Safford-Morenci Trail west trailhead (waypoint 12200, el. 4700') sign the user register, then proceed north on trail tread. The well-defined trail soon turns east and climbs a bit to a low saddle, then descends north into a canyon among pinyon pines and junipers. At **0.9** of a mile, pass through a fence opening. The trail soon crosses the drainage several times as it continues downhill, eventually settling on its west side.

Emerge from the narrow canyon to cross a rocky wash at **1.3**. Cairns may assist in following the trail, such as where it turns sharply right less than 0.1 mi. beyond the wash. Cross the drainage again at **1.7** (waypoint 13030). The route now follows a wide track, soon passing a potential dry camp at right among the pinyons. The track crosses the drainage three more times, then climbs out on the left with rocks lining the sides of the meandering treadway. Passing over the berm of a dry stock pond (**2.2**, waypoint 13040) the trail contours into a little canyon, following along its west side, before joining the drainage itself just above an old mortar dam. Soon reach a 4WD road and wooden Safford-Morenci Trail sign at **2.4** (waypoint 13050). Turn left (northeast) onto the road. (*Westbounders, look for the wooden sign at right as the road reaches the drainage.*)

The 4WD road undulates northward in pleasant, open country, passing a couple of tracks that head off at right. The second track (waypoint 13060) leads over to the [corral and stock pond](#) partially visible eastward, an unreliable source.

Following a steep descent, reach the wide wash of Johnny Creek and a Safford-Morenci Trail sign at **3.8**. A de facto vehicle camping area is ahead a short distance along the

road, with live-oak shade. Our route turns right (east), rejoining foot trail, first in the wash then along its banks. 2010-2012 constructed trail now does a commendable job of keeping to the banks while avoiding much prolonged travel in the rocky drainage itself. But watch carefully for where the trail frequently crosses over the creek as well as where it occasionally climbs away for a short spell, for example to avoid a low cement dam across the drainage at **4.8**, apparently an artifact from the trade route's former heyday (the trail previously required an awkward decent of this dam, impassable for stock animals)..

As of this writing constructed trail continued to **5.2** (waypoint 13100). Eastbound, the Safford-Morenci Trail then proceeds entirely in Johnny Creek's wash for about a mile. The wash remains very rocky, so expect a sub-2mph hiking pace through here. Ahead, the canyon features several minor slots that occasionally hold **pools of water**. Beyond the slots, watch for a trail sign and cairn marking where foot trail leaves the drainage at left (milepoint **6.1**, waypoint 13110). The trail climbs around an impassable pour-off in the drainage below, while offering an interesting vantage of Bonita Creek's riparian corridor and the colorful ridge of Turtle Mountain beyond. Descend sharply back to the canyon bottom at **6.4** (waypoint 13120). Here a 2012-constructed section of trail avoids the rocky wash in favor of the more subdued north side of the canyon bottom, following the flood plain east. It passes an old 3-sided stone structure, where it enters a mesquite bosque and turns more northerly, then comes to a signed junction at **6.9** along the west bank of **Bonita Creek** (waypoint 13130, elev. 3780'). Here a side trail continues north to the historic Old Lady Gay Cabin, a pioneer-era homestead now restored by the BLM and located less than a half mile up-canyon (*you'll pass an old wooden corral chute, then cross Bonita Creek to the east side to find the cabin 100-200 yards farther upstream. The final jaunt to the cabin is more of a cross-country walk through the riparian forest*).

Continuing on the Safford-Morenci Trail, ford the normally gentle, ankle-to-shin-deep flow of Bonita Creek. The creek setting is very attractive in its corridor of cottonwoods, willows, and sycamores. Beaver activity has been increasing in this area, with dam construction frequently altering the creek's flow and making crossing (and perhaps refinding the trail on the opposite side) a little more challenging. As of this writing, a carsonite post marked the continuation of trail beyond the crossing (33.01285° N 109.55645° W) - this is located some yards downstream from where you first meet the creek, heading east. The trail then joins an overgrown roadbed, before entering a grassy, sycamore-shaded, camp-friendly flat. Continuing south, the trail corridor defined by logs in places, you'll re-enter mesquite bosque before returning to Bonita Creek's flood plain briefly. Here find a way through the brush, remaining at the edge of forest, to a confluence with the drainage of Midnight Canyon at a metal TRAIL sign (**7.2**, waypoint 13140). You may note a small cliff dwelling on the canyon wall to the northeast, actually a prehistoric granary; the cliffs are now too fragile to permit up-close inspection.

At Midnight Canyon's wash, the Safford-Morenci Trail turns left (east) and follows the wide wash up-canyon. The canyon eventually narrows to a slot and becomes quite dramatic, with red-rock conglomerate walls occasionally only a few feet wide. About half-way through the slot a series of mortared steps allows passage over a pour-off, presumably built to assist pack animals in the trail's early days. The steps also serve to contain **pools of water** in wetter times. Beyond the slot, turn left (north) where the drainage forks (waypoint 13150) and follow the wash to a 4WD crossing, at **8.5** (waypoint 13160).

The Safford-Morenci Trail now turns left (north) onto 4WD East Bonita Rim Rd, which crosses the drainage again at **9.1**. Keep straight at the junction with signed Christensen Rd at **9.8**. Toppo's Cave, named for the reclusive cattle rustler Toppo Johnson who once called it home, is located in the impressive volcanic cliff face high on Turtle Mountain to the east. Stay on E. Bonita Rim Rd to **10.4** (waypoint 13180), where recently reconstructed trail heads left.

The well-graded trail ascends with occasional switchbacks to the head of Midnight Canyon. Trail crews have done a commendable job in smoothing the way through this surpassingly rocky landscape, although the trail tread will be difficult to keep free of brush without more frequent use. Reach the broad ridge of Turtle Mountain by an open gate at **11.7** (waypoint 13190, el. 6060'). This is Bellmeyer Saddle, the literal and figurative high point of the Old Safford-Morenci Trail. Be sure to walk the short distance over to the saddle's impressive westward outlook; the panorama includes lower Midnight Canyon, upper Bonita Creek, the Gila Mountains, and beyond, floating like a vision on the horizon, the high crest of the Pinaleno Mountains. Nearby you may find the memorial to Albert Bellmeyer, a pile of rocks marking the spot where he was ambushed and killed in 1892 by Apaches for grazing cattle on Indian land. (Bellmeyer may have been killed by the legendary Apache Kid, whose own gravesite the G.E.T. passes at Cyclone Saddle in the San Mateo Mountains (Segment 28), a similarly remote, mountainous spot where the renegade "Kid" was allegedly ambushed by area ranchers in retribution for his many attacks.)

From the saddle, the Safford-Morenci Trail enters a remote corner of the San Carlos Apache tribe for the next half mile, where you shouldn't camp. The trail proceeds southeast into the head of South Smith Canyon, at first with views eastward toward Morenci Mine and the distant Mogollon Mountains. Initially the trail follows the south bank of the drainage, then meanders back and forth in the drainage bottom as it widens down-canyon. Although very cobbly (as elsewhere) and somewhat slow-going, the canyon bottom is enjoyable for its low, shady canopy of oak, pinyon pine, and juniper. A carsonite post may indicate where the trail reenters public lands at **12.2** (waypoint 13200).

The trail becomes a wide, rocky track soon before a side canyon joins from the left at **13.9**, (waypoint 13210). (*Westbounders, take the left fork, perhaps noting green metal TRAIL signs.*) Singletrack trail resumes below the fork, but ends back at the old road by a metal sign and cairn, just west of a metal **stock tank and trough** (which sometimes has a bit of algae- and insect-bespangled water). Another canyon merges, this time from the right, at **14.3** (waypoint 13230). (*Westbounders be sure to keep right here; don't mistake this fork for the one ahead at 13.9.*)

Mature cottonwoods and willows shade the little oasis surrounding **Smith Spring**. A metal pipe runs from the spring source in the cliff face above to the vicinity of an old wooden structure; listen for a trickle of water from the pipe's outlet, which is somewhat hidden by brush in the drainage here. You may also find pools and some flow where the trail crosses the drainage below. Just beyond, at **15.0**, the trail passes through a wire gate (not intact as of 2014), where a small trough, fed by the spring, often overflows with excellent water. This shady area would make for an ideal camp, if not for the ubiquitous rocks; thankfully for eastbounders there's better camping available not far ahead in Segment 14. Continue down the rough 4WD track, with views ahead to the Morenci Mine. Pass through a gate by a trail register, less than 100 yards before reaching the Old Safford-Morenci Trail east trailhead on Black River Road (milepoint **15.8**, waypoint 13250, el. 4100').