

THE GREEN TUNNEL

A Hiker's Appalachian Trail Diary



PATRICK BREDLAW

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INTRODUCTION

The Appalachian Mountains meander through a substantial portion of the eastern United States, and extend from central Alabama in the south to New Brunswick, Canada, in the north. Benton MacKaye, a noted conservationist and outdoor enthusiast, promoted the idea of establishing the Appalachian Trail as a wilderness refuge that would offer an escape from city life and a retreat for World War I veterans. His proposed trail system called for an interconnected series of work, study, and farm camps to be situated throughout the Appalachian Mountains.

By 1922, the first miles of the new trail had already been completed in Bear Mountain State Park, overlooking New York City. With the help of countless volunteers and the Civilian Conservation Corps, the entire trail system was finally completed on August 14, 1937. The newly-created Appalachian Trail now ran all the way from Mt. Oglethorpe, Georgia, to Baxter Peak on Mt. Katahdin, Maine. Thirty years later, when the National Trails System Act was signed in October 1968, the Appalachian Trail officially received status as a national scenic trail.

In 1958, due to land development near Mt. Oglethorpe, the southern end of the Appalachian Trail was relocated to Springer Mountain, Georgia. Trail rerouting is an ongoing process. Every year changes are made to reduce the effects of erosion, provide greater access to the trail, and improve the quality of the

wilderness experience. By 2014, the length of the trail had increased from 2,044 miles to 2,185 miles.

During my thru-hike, I routinely encountered trail detours caused by hurricane damage, pipeline construction, washed-out bridges, floods, and erosion. Even though the Appalachian Trail was never intended to be the most efficient route between two points, it does generally follow a north-south course.

The goal of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) is to give the backpacker the best wilderness experience possible. By design, the Appalachian Trail avoids towns and cities and takes a circuitous route over and around the mountains, frequently changing direction to utilize federal and state lands and stay clear of private land.

All these factors work together to continually lengthen and alter the course of the trail. Today's Appalachian Trail meanders like a river through fourteen states. The chain of mountains in the entire range, measured north to south, is only 1,500 miles long. When traveling by road, the distance between Springer Mountain and Mt. Katahdin is 1,434 miles. By air, the distance is only 1,118 miles. And since the Appalachian Trail actually begins and ends on top of mountains, thru-hikers must hike an additional fourteen miles of rugged approach and exit trails in order to summit and descend both Springer Mountain and Mt. Katahdin.

Some paths chosen for the Appalachian Trail make sense to the designers, but they often confound me. This usually occurs when the trail follows a circuitous path through large expanses of undeveloped land, even though a shorter route is available. Sometimes, the path feels expressly designed to create a more strenuous trail experience. Hikers refer to sections such as these as pointless ups and downs, or PUDs.

The Appalachian Trail is the longest continuously marked trail in the world. Approximately 165,000 two-by-six inch white strips, called white blazes, are painted on rocks and trees. White blazed trails were developed to give the hiker a heightened sense of wilderness, even when civilization is close by. According to the Appalachian Mountain Club, on average, the A.T. crosses a road every four miles. Roads sometimes intersect the trail more often, and other times are spaced further apart. Occasionally the Trail skirts, or enters, towns and villages.

2000 MILERS

According to the ATC, an estimated two to three million people hike portions of the Appalachian Trail every year, but few attempt to hike the entire trail. Fewer still try to complete the A.T. in less than a year. Finishing the entire Appalachian Trail within twelve months is an enormous achievement, and is referred to as a thru-hike. In addition to the incredible length of the trail, the elevation changes required to scale the numerous mountain peaks have been compared by some to climbing Mount Everest sixteen times. A thru-hiker must contend with severe weather and difficult trail conditions while covering as many miles a day as possible and finding places to resupply food and water along the way. All these factors add extra miles to the journey, as much as three to five hundred unofficial miles.

A distinction is made between thru-hiking and section hiking. Section hikers cover large distances in a year, and may or may not hike every section of the Appalachian Trail over time. When a section hiker or thru-hiker successfully completes the entire Appalachian Trail, they qualify to become a “2000 Miler.” The term was coined in the late 1970s to recognize the emergence of this particular type of long-distance hiker.

According to the ATC, more than 14,000 hikers have received the 2000 Miler award. For the last three years, approximately twenty-six percent of all hikers attempting to complete the entire Trail have applied for the 2000 Miler award. As of December 31, 2014, twenty-six percent, or 756 of the 2,864 attempted thru-hikers that year, submitted paperwork for the 2000 Miler award. I have, however, met successful thru-hikers who are not listed as 2000 Milers. One in particular chose not to fill out the paperwork because he was a fugitive. I didn’t know this at the time, and only later became aware of his true identity when he was captured in the spring of 2015. Others are omitted because they are either unaware of the process, or are unwilling to put the effort into mailing a completed application back to the ATC.

Twenty-five percent of all 2000 Milers are women, and more than half of all successful thru-hikers are in their twenties. Five-year-old Christian “Buddy Backpacker” Thomas became the youngest 2000 Miler in 2014. In 2004, Lee “Easy One” Barry became the oldest successful thru-hiker at age eighty-one. Being

able-bodied is not a requirement. People with disabilities hike the Trail and receive the 2000 Miler award. International hikers, visiting the States with six-month visas, often hike long sections of the Trail; some even become 2000 Milers.

TRAIL MAGIC

I learned about trail angels and trail magic while preparing for my thru-hike. So when I encountered trail magic for the first time, I was excited and thankful, but not surprised. What did surprise me, though, was its all-pervasiveness along the trail. At first I didn't understand the important role that trail magic played in the success of long-distance hiking. People who offer trail magic are called trail angels, and they become welcomed allies of every thru-hiker.

I don't know when or where the term originated, but it's an apt description. My wife compares trail angels to people who love to feed the birds. Trail angels offer countless acts of charity, and their generosity goes beyond anything I have ever experienced or witnessed in my life. They provide trail magic all along the trail, and frequently, in the most surprising places.

Trail magic usually appears in the form of food, water, housing, transportation, slackpacking shuttle service, information, and first aid. It always boosts a hiker's spirit and restores their faith in mankind. Trail angels sometimes go to great lengths in terms of time, effort, and money in order to provide large amounts of trail magic.

Trail magic is unpredictable. It may appear several times a day, then vanish for days and weeks at a time. I grew to approach road crossings with anticipation, like a child on Christmas Eve, dreaming of the tantalizing possibility of trail magic. Early in the hike, trail magic usually appeared in the form of food. As I moved north, trail magic morphed into caches of clean drinking water, thoughtfully placed in the long, dry stretches on the trail. Further north, trail magic showed up as free transportation. In Pennsylvania, one particular trail angel provided vital spiritual and moral support when I had hit bottom and was ready to give up hope.



FOREWORD

This Appalachian Trail thru-hike account is based on the daily journals I maintained during nine months of preparation and training in Illinois, and six months of northbound A. T. hiking.

I hiked northbound from Springer Mountain, Georgia, and covered fourteen states: Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. Originally, I had hoped to complete the hike by September 5, 2014, but injuries forced me off the Trail for three weeks of recovery. Once healed, I headed back to the point where I had left the trail and continued hiking for more than two months. I summited Mt. Katahdin on September 29, 2014.

In the beginning, I used a trail plan to project daily hiking distances, and to pinpoint every stop and supply location. But the realities of the Trail, the weather, and physical conditions soon forced me to abandon this plan. I started using it instead as a rough guide to calculate a completion date that could assure summiting Mt. Katahdin while it was still accessible. Mt. Katahdin is located within Baxter State Park in Maine. The park officially closes every year on October 15th. Park rangers, however, constantly monitor Mt. Katahdin's weather and climbing conditions. When necessary, they close off the mountain to hikers, regardless of the date or time of year. Every

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northbound thru-hiker knows this by heart, and is driven by the call to summit Mt. Katahdin as soon as possible.



PREPARATION

The last time I backpacked was in 1996. It was a three-generation Father's Day trip with my 68-year-old father and 13-year-old son. We hiked for three days to the bottom of the Grand Canyon. Even though the climb out of the Canyon was rigorous, the experience left me dreaming of more backpacking adventure. Time passed. Over the next eighteen years, I jogged, exercised, occasionally camped, but never backpacked.

It wasn't until retiring in May 2013 that I started looking into repeating, or expanding on, the Grand Canyon backpacking trip. So, at age 59, after 38 years of working in a high travel, sedentary job as a federal bank examiner, I finally set my sights on hiking the Appalachian Trail. The A.T. had always interested me, even as a child. Here was my chance to hike it. I never thought about hiking the entire Trail. It was going to be a moderately difficult backpacking adventure.

The first thing I had to do was assess my physical condition. That spring, I hiked for a week in May near Boulder, Colorado. Out of shape and slightly overweight, I still hiked better than expected. During this trip I purchased my first new hiking gear, a set of Black Diamond trekking poles. I had never used trekking poles, so it took time to learn how to hike with them properly. When I returned home from Colorado, I began researching backpacking equipment and reading books about the Appalachian Trail.

The idea of completing the entire trail took hold while trying to decide which section of the Appalachian Trail to hike. I was retired now. Why not just go for it? During the summer months of 2013, I put together the first of what would be many trail plans using the newest edition of *The A.T. Guide*: a handbook for hiking the Appalachian Trail, written by David “Awol” Miller; and the *Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers Companion*, published by the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association (ALDHA), also known as *The Guide*. With these guidebooks, I calculated how far I needed to hike each day and where and how to find food and water. My plan seemed reasonable. It would take 171 days to hike an average of 12.75 miles per day. The plan included “zero days” (trail lingo for resting days) and “nearo days” (more trail lingo for low mileage days). I finally settled on a start date of March 18, 2014, my 59th birthday.

By adding 171 days to this date, I discovered the completion date would be September 5, 2014. My wedding anniversary is September 8th. My wife and I had never been to Maine or, for that matter, the Northeast coast. We could celebrate my hiking victory, and then leisurely tour this part of the country together. My wife was looking forward to seeing the New England fall colors.

I intended to use my old backpacking and camping equipment, which was still in pretty good shape. Back when I purchased the gear, I couldn't afford ultra-light equipment, so I bought the best in my price range. It seemed reasonable at the time since I wasn't hiking very far, or for very long, and someone was usually close enough to help in an emergency.

But now, as I read about the latest advancements in ultralight backpacking gear, my old equipment looked heavy, obsolete, and inadequate for an Appalachian Trail thru-hike. New equipment however, would cost more than the few hundred dollars set aside in my initial budget. Fortunately, my financial situation is more secure now than when I was a younger man.

With my wife's blessing, I started spending an incredible amount of time talking with staff members at REI, my favorite outdoor recreation store. Several of them had hiked the Appalachian Trail and gave me good equipment advice. I visited Moosejaw, another sporting goods retailer, and spoke with their experienced staff. They steered me in the right direction,

especially regarding Internet shopping. In the end, I spent nearly \$1,700 on new equipment at REI, Moosejaw, and other specialty outfitters on the Internet. Some of the gear is amazingly ultralight.

The most expensive items were the Big Agnes Fly Creek UL2, an ultralight two-man tent with a ground footprint, and the Sierra Design Zissou twelve-degree sleeping bag. Instead of choosing a lighter weight one-man tent, I opted for a heavier two-man tent with extra living space, since it would be my home for nearly six months. Would I regret this decision? Time would tell. I returned brand new backpacks and boots regularly because of poor fit. Now, all my equipment was new, except for a summer sleeping bag.

It took about a year to purchase everything, mostly because of the time required to try out, return, and replace much of the gear. I began to wonder if I was fooling myself about pack weight. Could I really fit all the necessary food, water, fuel, and equipment in a 28-pound pack? Twenty years ago, long distance hikers were lucky to reduce their pack weight down to 45 pounds.

By late September 2013, I was hiking several days a week in the Cook County Forest Preserves, carrying a range of 25 to 50 pounds in my backpack. By the end of the month, I had hiked 32 miles and my little left toe was in pain. Despite the pain in my toe, hiking wasn't too difficult, so I began adding stair climbing to my training routine.

My favorite place to practice is the Swallow Cliff Stair Climb in Palos Hills, Illinois. Carved into the side of a steep hill and originally built as a ski jump and toboggan run, the stairway is comprised of 125 irregularly spaced, steep flagstone steps. Walking up and down the stair climb is murder! The change in elevation is only ninety feet, but you feel it in every step. The first day I carried a 38-pound pack and completed ten laps in an hour. Afterwards, I couldn't walk for three days, and was sore for a week. On my second attempt, a week later, I carried a five-pound pack and was able to complete fifteen laps. I was tired, but not too sore.

During training, nearly everyone asked the same four questions: "What about bears? Aren't you going to carry a gun,

bear repellent, or big knife? Won't you be lonely?" And, "Why are you doing this?"

First, let's talk about bears. I discovered a list of bear attacks on the all-knowing website, Wikipedia. More people are killed by bears in major cities than on the Appalachian Trail. Those mangled city dwellers were attacked while doing things they shouldn't, like provoking bears in zoos or in captivity. I did find one instance of a bear attack near the Appalachian Trail at a campground in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Out west in the Rocky Mountains, people do get killed by bears, but it's still on a small scale.

My personal experience with bears has left me with this attitude: "Leave them alone, and they'll leave you alone." Black bears are small and prefer stealing your food, rather than fighting for it. You can drive them off by shouting. Besides, bears have a much easier time mooching food from roadside tourists. Like every careful backpacker, I planned to store my food inside a stuff bag lined with a plastic garbage bag. It would then be thrown over a tree limb or bear line with a rope while camping. I didn't plan on losing sleep over bears.

I decided not to carry a gun, bear repellent, or large knife. They're impractical, heavy, and illegal. Discharging a firearm could result in a lot of unwelcome trouble from law enforcement. Gun laws in the fourteen states and two national parks along the Appalachian Trail vary widely with differing requirements regarding firearm possession. I planned to bring a small pocket knife and use it for cutting and opening packages.

As for loneliness, thousands of hikers populate the Appalachian Trail during the spring, summer, and fall seasons. Most backpackers tend to congregate in the same places where shelter and water are located. I looked forward to the camaraderie of the trail and possibly forming new friendships, but realized there might be times when solitude would be preferable over company.

And the last question, "Why am I doing this?" I don't really know...yet. I've thought about it, but so far haven't found an answer. I hope to discover new insight about the deeper meaning of life, or my own purpose, but won't be surprised if, after hiking 2,185 miles, I am still no closer to a better understanding than when I started the journey. Stay tuned.



TRAINING LOG

OCTOBER 17, 2013

151 days before the hike. Today I completed one hundred miles of training. Last week, I hiked eight miles a day in less than three hours, on hilly terrain. This pace is much faster than I expect to hike in the Appalachian Mountains. I carried a 28-pound backpack, my target maximum pack weight. My little left toe still hurts. I may purchase a pair of expensive orthotic shoe inserts to help solve the problem.

While reading a forum on the Trailjournals.com website, I came across a discussion about Achilles tendon pain. The writer said that it can be caused by taking too long of a stride while walking. As an experiment, I shortened my stride, and most of the tendon pain diminished. The shorter stride doesn't slow me down, and seems to be more comfortable.

I'm still working on sock combinations in hopes of curing my toe pain. Liner socks prevent most blisters, but make my feet hot and sweaty. I'm going to try wool socks. So far, October is cold and rainy. As a result I'm testing the rain gear and cold weather clothing. The Frogg Togg rain gear is working out, and I don't get overheated in the 45-degree rainy weather. Clothing choice is still a challenge. A short-sleeved shirt and short pants work fine with rain gear, even in the low forties, but as soon as I stop hiking, I get chilled. When it comes to pack weight, clothing

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is heavy, sometimes too much. What to bring, get rid of, or switch?

As winter approaches, I'll continue to experiment with clothing combinations. I might replace the Dromedary hydration bag with a Platypus. The bag's drinking hose connection protrudes into my backpack, and it kinks and leaks if I'm not careful. Once while hiking, the hydration bag leaked an entire quart of water inside the pack. Everything was soaked. Worse, without any drinking water, I was parched by the end of the hike.

OCTOBER 18, 2013

Today was interesting, my first real day of cold weather training. I began hiking in the dark, using a new Black Diamond rechargeable headlamp, which works great. The temperature was about 29 degrees with a 24-degree wind chill factor. Hiking in cold weather clothes and carrying a 32-pound pack on fairly level ground soon had me overheated. I removed my gloves and peeled down to an outer shirt and tee shirt.

After an hour of hiking, it started to rain and snow, and the rain gear overheated me even more. I put on liner gloves and opted for a ball cap, because the fleece stocking cap was too warm. I need to find a middle ground on hats. Maybe I'm overestimating cold weather clothing needs.

After an hour of cold weather hiking, the hydration water bag tube was filled with ice slush. Freezing water in hydration bag tubes can be a problem. A tip posted on the Trail Journals hiker forum suggested blowing water back into the tube of the hydration bag after each drink. This worked just fine.

OCTOBER 22, 2013

I started an online hiking journal posted on Trailjournals.com today and began preparing menus. I've decided to go with an alcohol stove instead of a butane or propane canister stove. Many canister stoves weigh less than an alcohol stove, but their eight-ounce fuel canister weighs five ounces by itself, and thirteen ounces when full. Also, it's hard to use up all the fuel and you can't tell how much is left in the canister. Alcohol stoves are harder to use, potentially more dangerous, and slower to heat, but weigh less and are

inexpensive to operate, with fewer failure points. Alcohol can also be used for first aid, as well as a campfire starter. Multi-tasking is critical when selecting hiking equipment.

While testing the alcohol stove in cold weather, the time it took to boil water was impacted by increased wind direction and low temperatures. Alcohol stoves normally take three or four times longer to boil water than canister stoves. This doesn't bother me, because I only plan to cook at the end of the day's hike. Recently I learned that a bottle of Heet can also be used as fuel for an alcohol stove. It's supposed to be cheaper, faster, and easier to ignite than alcohol, so I've decided to carry Heet.

I've started tracking the calories, weights, and susceptibility to hot and cold temperatures of various store-bought food items. I've decided to buy food along the trail instead of relying on mailed food drops. Food drop deliveries force you to stop at specific post office locations at set times. I want the freedom to change trail plans at will. Too often, I've heard about hikers waiting around for post offices to open, in order to pick up their packages.

NOVEMBER 20, 2013

119 days to go. I just read about Jennifer Pharr Davis. In 2011, she set a speed record for hiking the Appalachian Trail in 46 days, eleven hours, and twenty minutes. She averaged 47 miles per day and was supported along the way by her husband. Davis may not have carried a pack, but I appreciate the physical demands of her accomplishment. I was a track and field athlete at Indiana University, a Big Ten school. Even in my prime, I could never imagine hiking or running 47 miles in a day, let alone 47 consecutive days on rough terrain. Jennifer Pharr Davis has written several books and is a proven endurance champion on other long-distance trails. And only 28 years old when she set this record, more than half my age, the same age as my youngest child!

My feet and legs hurt most mornings, and this is only pre-hike training. Here, I am still able to eat well, sleep in a bed, and limit my exposure to rough weather within training hours. I hike on hilly terrain approximately eight hours a day, carrying a pack that weighs between 30 and 50 pounds. In October, I completed 79 training miles. In November, I'm up to 78 miles so far. My

training pack is heavier than the one I plan to hike with on the Appalachian Trail. This is an adjustment for the minimal elevation changes found here in Illinois. During this winter season, I expect to push the limits of my equipment, clothing, and stamina before heading out on the A.T. in March.

I went to see a podiatrist for advice about the pain in my left little toe and Achilles tendon. He said the problems were caused by boots that were too tight. I switched to New Balance 1569, a wider and stiffer pair of new boots. He also fitted me for custom orthotic inserts.

I continue to practice outdoor cooking by using my alcohol stove to prepare Ramen noodles and Knorr packaged meals. The stove takes longer to cook in cold weather and will probably take even longer on the trail, where the water will be ice cold.

MID-DECEMBER TO MID-JANUARY

Training has been limited by bad weather, equipment problems, and injuries. In December, I was able to get in 60 training miles and several days of stair climbing. The snow isn't melting and is piling up. The forest preserve trails are turning to ice because of the high number of people using them. As a result, I've been walking on an indoor track lately, which makes me the center of attention. Everyone keeps asking me what the heck I am doing. Why am I carrying a backpack, and how much does it weigh? I meet a lot of nice people, but they think I'm a bit odd. The weather forecast is predicting extremely cold temperatures next week, a polar vortex. Looks like another week of zero outdoor training.

I am trying to find another option for replacing the hydration bag system. The bag is hard to fill in streams. Plus, I have to take off my pack, pull out the hydration bag, and physically examine it in order to find out how much water is left. The Sawyer Mini water filter system bags are also difficult to refill.

While shopping at the after-Christmas REI garage sale, I bought a Granite Gear Ultralight Crown V.C. 60 Liter backpack for only \$47. I've already managed to hike with it on the ice trails. I love the pack. This will be my trail pack instead of the Deuter pack purchased in the fall. Although the Deuter is easier

to load and carries more weight, the Granite Gear pack is much lighter. The weight savings are achieved at the expense of a support frame, but I still prefer the lighter weight. I'll just have to learn how to properly load the Granite Gear pack.

MID-JANUARY 2014

The New Balance boots are tough to break in and difficult to size. Cold weather is compounding the breaking in process and keeping the boots stiff. I've exchanged the boots twice already because they run small in size. Right now, I'm wearing a full size longer and wider than my normal shoe size. More toes continue to become injured because of the sizing problem and cold weather. I went to see my regular doctor today and he diagnosed the problem as cellulitis, a serious bacterial infection. He is treating me with penicillin. Although the doctor says I should be able to start my hike in March, I need to stop training for the next ten days. If there's such a thing as a good time to be injured with a serious infection, I guess now is the time. It hasn't stopped snowing since late December, and the temperatures remain frigid. Training has been limited to the Swallow Cliff stairs and the indoor walking track. Getting injured so close to my departure date is frustrating, but I'll use the next ten days to finish the planning details and research more food options.

JANUARY 20, 2014

Only 56 days before the hike. I'm writing this journal entry on my cell phone in an attempt to improve texting skills. January 3rd was the last time I accomplished any real training. The cellulitis is almost healed, and the doctor thinks I should be able to train again. It's surprising how well I have stayed in shape during this illness. The severe weather here in Chicago continues to make outdoor training difficult. All my gear is purchased except for a camera cell phone. I was going to buy a digital camera, but realized it is more cost effective to upgrade my cell phone. Using my cell phone to write and post journal entries is proving difficult, so I've decided to try talking into the phone instead of typing. This method is not perfect either. Too often, the words are misspelled, and the phrases and sentences that appear don't resemble anything I had in mind. As a result, my

journal entries are confusing and poorly written. I'll do my best to edit the mistakes when I upload the entries to my trail journal.

More people have asked to hike with me for short periods on the trail. My son and I have worked out the dates, along with a longtime friend. I've decided my trail name will be Road Warrior. That's what I used to call myself after travelling 38 years for a living.

FEBRUARY 3, 2014

Forty-two days left. The cellulitis is gone and my feet are fine, except for a sore Achilles tendon. Not being active for so long has weakened me to some degree, but not seriously. It's time to get back to training. January's injuries and cold weather brought the monthly training figures down to just a few days of stair climbing and no more than 35 hiking miles. Most of the training takes place at a health club now, because the snow is too deep, and the temperatures too cold. A few days ago, I walked 11 miles in less than three hours on an indoor track. Today I finished seven miles in two hours. Both times, I carried a 31-pound backpack without difficulty. It may only be a level track, but it's all I have to work with at the moment.

Equipment is nearly complete, just tweaking little things like first aid and repair kits, clothing, etc. I'm still shopping for a cell phone. Without consumables like food, water, fuel, and camp shoes, the winter pack weight is nearly eighteen pounds. I still can't decide whether or not to bring camp shoes. The Granite Gear 60L Crown Vapor Current continues to impress me. I tested a pair of Vasque Breeze 2.0 boots, and returned them because the toe box was tight. After a long search, I finally purchased a pair of Merrell boots in my size and width, and plan to wear them on the Trail. The Frogg Togg rain suit is already in rags. The pant cuffs are shredded and the jacket ripped. Still, they're cheap, disposable clothing, so I will buy another set. Frogg Togg: five stars for weight; one star for durability.

FEBRUARY 16, 2014

Health is good, with cellulitis a thing of the past. Training is going well. In the last two weeks, I completed several ten- and fifteen-mile training days on the indoor track, carrying a 35-

pound pack. I'm in maintenance mode now, so I'll only hike a few daily miles. Yesterday I purchased a small hip belt for my pack. Even though a medium hip belt fits fine right now, I'll lose weight on the trail. I've rigged up the pack with the smaller belt and expect to shrink into it over time. I finally purchased a new phone, a Samsung Galaxy 4, and plan to use it as a camera and for posting journal entries. It will take a while to learn how to use it properly.

FEBRUARY 17, 2014

Another polar vortex! Training is called off today. I hope the weather warms up by mid-March when I start hiking in Georgia.

My base winter pack weight is sixteen pounds, nine ounces. With three days' worth of added consumables, the pack will weigh 25 pounds. I could cut more weight by removing items like toothpaste, but prefer keeping it. Besides, the tube will shrink over time. I am packing a few luxuries: a two-man tent; twelve and a half ounce camp shoes; a pillow; toilet paper; deodorant; a well-stocked emergency first aid kit; and an Appalachian Trail Passport. I'm still struggling with the decision to bring camp shoes.

I like my inflatable pillow; it's a Cocoon and weighs three and a half ounces. It should be more comfortable than sleeping on a wadded bundle of worn, sweaty clothes, and it will smell better, too. I'm not sure how much toilet paper to bring, so I'll start off with a whole roll of double-ply tissue. TP weighs more than I thought. I could shave off more pack weight by leaving the deodorant behind, but at the expense of hygiene. Summer pack weight is expected to be fifteen pounds. Sunscreen and bug spray will be purchased as needed.

All of these estimated weights are based on dry, clean equipment. Water and dirt will add a minimum of one to two extra pounds over the course of the hike. To save weight, I'm carrying the minimum amount of warm clothing, and anticipate being cold at times. I'm bringing one pair of pants, and letting the rain pants double as a second pair. If I find that I don't have enough warm clothes, I'll buy some along the Trail.

My wife thinks I should change my trail name to "Ready to go!" I keep saying this over and over again. I am so ready to go,

and these last few days just seem to drag. I'm already planning to switch out my winter gear for summer gear in mid-May, just north of Damascus, when my son will hike with me for a week.

After reading some of the current hikers' journal entries, I'm happy with my decision to start hiking in mid-March. February weather on the Appalachian Trail is rough, and a surprising number of hikers have already called it quits within the first fifty miles, many with injuries. I wish them all the best, and hope they can try again. I'm starting to realize this adventure will be more difficult than I thought, regardless of my advance preparation. Expect to meet the unexpected at every step.

I recently talked to a thru-hiker who finished the A.T. a few years ago. He said the hike was going well until he was nearly at the end, next to Baxter State Park in Maine. His alcohol stove spilled, catching his clothes on fire. By the time he put out the fire, his arm and leg were burned, along with most of his trail clothes. The closest place to get medical attention was inside Baxter State Park, so he kept on hiking. Luckily, he was able to finish his thru-hike that year, burns and all. If I don't make it all the way, I'll be disappointed, but I especially don't want to be forced off the Trail before getting very far.

My stride measures between 24 and 30 inches. If a 24-inch stride covering 2,185.3 miles equals 5,769,192 steps, then a 30-inch stride would result in 4,615,354 steps. A big difference! This doesn't include the approach trail and exit trail distances, plus all the side trips to find water, food, fuel, and shelter, not to mention getting lost. This is going to be a lot of walking!

FEBRUARY 28, 2014

We'll drive to Amicalola Falls State Park in Georgia on March 16, check in at the Lodge, and then visit the Trail Fest taking place in nearby Dahlonega. On March 17, we plan to tour the state park and waterfalls, and scope out the approach trail to Springer Mountain, the southernmost terminus of the Appalachian Trail. On March 18, my 59th birthday, I'll start hiking after a hearty breakfast at the Amicalola Lodge.

Here in Chicago, winter is holding on. The current polar vortex was supposed to end today, but more snow is on the way. I can't wait to head south and see grass again. I uploaded a

photograph of my gear yesterday on my trail journal and the deodorant generated a lot more response than expected. Thanks, everyone, for reading my journal! Deodorant on the trail may be a lost cause, but surely there will be times when I will want to use it.

My rationale for carrying deodorant is the same as for carrying extra clothes. I plan to use deodorant and change into clean, or as clean as possible, clothing when heading into towns or places where people are less appreciative of trail perfume. I hope it will serve to create a kinder and gentler first impression. Spare clothes can also be used to layer up against cold weather and provide an opportunity to change into dry clothes if you get wet. They can also be used as pajamas, if I need the extra warmth. Maybe bringing deodorant makes me more of a renegade than a road warrior. Should I change my trail name to Renegade? I searched the list and couldn't find anyone from the Class of 2014 with that trail name.

MARCH 7, 2014

During my training months, I hiked a total of 354 miles carrying a pack, and climbed 300 laps on the Swallow Cliff stairs. There is nothing more to gain from continued training. Besides, I might end up hurting myself. My starting base pack weight is slightly over 16 pounds. Once again, I removed the camp shoes from my gear. I'll buy a pair of flip flops during the hike if I feel the need to get out of my boots.

Too many hikers are already discussing injuries in their trail journals. I'll be heartbroken if I get hurt right away. One hiker wrote about injuring his leg at a hostel the night before he was to begin the Trail.

The Illinois State Museum Lockport Gallery has recently agreed to promote my Appalachian Trail hike as a charitable fundraiser. For many years, my wife and I have volunteered at this wonderful museum, and continue to do so. The Lockport Gallery is a branch of the Illinois State Museum that focuses exclusively on Illinois art and artists.

On Tuesday, March 11, 2014, the Lockport Gallery presented my upcoming Appalachian Trail hike at an event open to the public. The museum director also published an article about my

hike, which is still available on Twitter, @ILStateMuseum. Please make a donation, and mention my name, by calling or sending an email through the website: museum.state.il.us/ismsites/Lockport.

Just realized the Sawyer Mini Water Filter doesn't fit the new design of the energy-saving cap on most plastic water bottles. After all the problems I had trying to use the Sawyer Mini with the hydration tubes and hydration bags, I decided to ditch the Sawyer water bags and carry a 24-ounce water bottle for unfiltered water. Filtered water would be poured directly into the hydration bag. Another water bottle, cut in half, will serve as a scoop for shallow streams, as needed.

Weather plays a big role in alcohol stove performance. In warm weather, the stove is easier to operate and boils water faster. In cold weather, it's tricky and slow. While testing my Esbit alcohol stove during winter, I found that cold weather makes the alcohol difficult to light. Once lit, it takes up to three minutes for the stove and alcohol to preheat sufficiently in order to operate properly. On a cold day, with temperatures ranging between 25 and 30 degrees, it took three minutes to heat up the stove, then ten more minutes to boil 16 ounces of cold water, a total of thirteen minutes. Altitude adds even more time to the cooking process. The Esbit cook set uses the cup as a lid. Placing aluminum foil over the top of the pot cut nearly two minutes off the cooking time. Even in the coldest conditions, only 1.1 to 1.3 ounces of fuel was needed to boil 16 ounces of water. I plan to carry no more than ten or twelve ounces of fuel, and store it in a water bottle with a different size and shape that doesn't fit my Sawyer Mini, in order to differentiate it from the one I'll use for drinking water.

I've switched to a non-scented antiperspirant deodorant. Thanks to everyone on the trailjournals.com trail forum for the safety advice. I should have realized the risks in carrying scented deodorant. After reading some posts about the prices at Mountain Crossing Outfitters at Neel Gap, I checked their website and found their prices to be less than, or comparable to, gear sold in Chicago, excepting for Walmart. No complaints, but hikers living in lower cost of living areas may think otherwise. FYI, alcohol costs 25 cents an ounce. Looking forward to warmer weather and hoping the polar vortices have ended. Snow is predicted next week.

Over the last few months, I've read several trail journals of hikers who plan to start the Appalachian Trail on the same day as me. After contacting several of them by email, I became friendly with a guy called Freedom. We have decided to meet up at the Amicalola Falls State Park and start out hiking together.

[Note for laughs]

My father met a guy in Indianapolis who claims to have hiked the entire Appalachian Trail with a rifle. Ha! Don't believe it. Common sense, trekking poles, and a pocket knife are more than enough protection.

MARCH 16, 2014

My wife and I left for Georgia on March 14th. On the way, we stopped over in Indianapolis for a kickoff party with family. We finally arrived at Amicalola Falls State Park in thick fog on Sunday, March 16th. After checking into the Lodge, we drove to Dahlonega to attend Trail Fest.

We arrived late and the festival was already packing up. We met a young woman whose trail name is Joe Cool. She had already been hiking on the Trail for a few days, but came back to Dahlonega for Trail Fest. Joe Cool is the first real hiker I've met.

The next day, we toured the state park and enjoyed the historic Amicalola Falls Lodge perched high above the falls. We couldn't see much of the falls that day because of continual fog. Amicalola Falls are the largest waterfalls east of the Mississippi River. The lobby of the Lodge buzzed, filled with excited and anxious hikers counting down the hours before they set out on the Trail.

I met Freedom, along with his wife and friends, who'd traveled with him to see him off at the Trailhead. Freedom was taller than me, and like many hikers starting out, a bit overweight. He was a member of a Christian motorcycle group and had retired from the food industry. Freedom said he hadn't completed as much training as he hoped.

I met other hikers at the Lodge who planned to head out on the Trail the same day as me. Before the evening was over, we had formed a solid group. We were all about the same age, in our late fifties to early sixties, and shared our thoughts on

equipment, hiking plans, and the adventure that lay ahead. We gathered together in the comfortable sitting area of the Lodge lobby, and our wives took group photographs of the five of us standing together in front of the huge stone fireplace.

Achin' was slightly older, taller, and heftier than the rest of us. He also carried the heaviest pack, weighing in at 39 pounds. Achin had never backpacked before, but had read more books about the A.T. than any of us. Chiggabite was also tall and sturdily built. He ran a hardware store and dreamed of completing an A.T. thru-hike. My Way was about my size, but wiry and fit, and embarking on his fourth thru-hike attempt. My Way was the ultralight winner, carrying next to nothing, and hiking in running shoes. He planned to hike at least twenty miles every day. Freedom and I considered leaving a day early, on the 17th, but the weather forecast looked unpromising.

MARCH 17, 2014

My Way set off on the trail early this morning. Again, the weather was foggy, with cold, increasing rain. Creeks were coffee-brown and swollen. I wasn't looking forward to drinking water out of those streams. Freedom and I studied the heavy, rain-soaked skies and decided to stick with the original plan, heading out tomorrow on March 18th.

The Dahlongega Trail Fest was rained out, so my wife and I drove around the Blood Mountain area, scoping out the sections of the trail I planned to cover in the next three days. We saw several hikers out in the fog and rain, trying to keep warm. I was filled with excitement, and even in these dreary conditions, I couldn't wait to start. After shopping for a few more food supplies, we headed back to enjoy our last night at the Lodge.

At the Lodge, some of the military personnel affiliated with the Wounded Warriors and Hiking for Heroes organizations were getting ready to climb up the approach trail to the top of Springer Mountain. These two hiking groups had been established to support wounded soldiers and veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress. Their goal is to help veterans hike off the war and follow in the footsteps of Earl V. Shaffer, the first thru-hiker who sought to hike off the effects of World War II, and uphold Benton MacKaye's vision of the Appalachian Trail as a refuge and retreat for war veterans.

By talking with them, I learned that many of the Wounded Warriors are assisted by a large support group who provide equipment, supplies, first aid, and transportation, when needed. My trail name, Road Warrior, was starting to sound like I could be a part of either one of these military groups. It would seem dishonest if people mistakenly associated me with them. I had never served in the military. So, I decided to shorten my trail name to simply RW. RW could now take on new meanings besides Road Warrior. It could be short for all sorts of things, like Right Way, Really Weird, Running Water, and so on.

Freedom and I registered as official thru-hikers at the Amicalola Falls State Park Visitor Center. I became Hiker 507, and Freedom was Hiker 508. We weighed our packs and took lots of pictures. At the very last minute, based on My Way's strong opinion that it's better to reduce weight than eat hot meals, I left my entire cook set and fuel container behind. And because of the heavy rain, I decided to switch out the Frogg Togg rain jacket with the more robust Marmot Precept, weighing an additional seven ounces. Now my pack weight, with a liter of water and two days of food, was 21 pounds. Freedom's pack weighed 31 pounds. We head out tomorrow!

During the evening I met Tic Toc, who had attempted to hike the entire Appalachian Trail several years ago. Tic Toc gave me one important piece of advice: Never quit on your worst day. This one piece of advice saved my hike.