

GENERAL PLAN

My initial plan called for five to six months on the trail. This was based on hiking north from Springer Mountain in Georgia and getting to the vicinity of Roanoke, Virginia prior to an extended break for our family reunion in Colorado in early July. The restart would begin in Maine and continue south back to where I left the trail in Virginia.

The hike north worked out well. I arrived in Daleville, Virginia on June 22, and flew home on June 24. After the reunion I flew to Bangor, Maine on July 16, and began hiking south, completing the hike on November 4. I flew home on November 5. I had hoped to finish by mid to late October, but the increasingly shorter days resulted in fewer miles a day than I had hoped. So the entire trail was hiked in five and a half months when the break time is not counted.

I had planned to hike alone, occasionally meeting and hiking with others on the trail that were proceeding on about the same pace. I was fortunate that I linked up with Dan (Tucker) after only three days on the trail and we hiked together through May and June until I flew home for the reunion. It was a big plus having someone to share experiences with and to talk with each day. It also reduced expenses when we stayed in motels, etc. On my hike south from Maine the plan was to have Bob G. hiking with me over the first few weeks. Bob ended up hiking with me for two days in Maine and about a week in New Hampshire. The remainder of the trip I hiked alone except for a few days with Trashman and occasionally hiking for a few days with a small number of others along the way. The south bound trip was far lonelier due to the much lower numbers of southbound hikers and the fact that I was far behind most other hikers heading the same way. I frequently spent the night in shelters by myself and occasionally saw no hikers at all throughout the day.

From the beginning I had planned to hike every day and take off (zero days) only when it was absolutely necessary due to physical needs, injuries or for some other requirement. Even when having to resupply in towns, I believed that I could hike a short day, complete my tasks (e.g., buy groceries, do laundry, send email, get clean), spend the night in town and leave town by around noon the next day. In this way I would hike fewer miles on short days (zero days), but still get in some miles each day. In fact, that is what I did and it generally worked well. As a result, I had only four zero days the entire hike.

EQUIPMENT

I carefully researched my equipment decisions prior to starting the hike. When I was ready to start the hike I felt very comfortable with what was absolutely needed and what I bought. I truly believed that I had culled out everything that was not necessary to the success of the hike.

When I arrived in Georgia at the Hiker Hostel, I requested that my pack be checked to identify items that were not required. The person that checked my pack found over four

pounds of excess (e.g., head net, Nalgene bottles, and toiletries). That exercise saved me some energy as well as wear and tear on my body. When I started the hike my pack still weighed about 38-40 pounds so it could have been a lot worse.

As I hiked the first few weeks the weather began to get warmer. I sent home long underwear and other cold weather gear fairly quickly. As I continued I was able to send home extra pants and underwear. When I began phase 2 of the hike in Maine I basically started with what I had finished phase 1 with in Daleville.

As I hiked through Maine and New Hampshire, my Gregory Keeler **pack** began to cause me problems because of my loss of weight. The waist belt could not be tightened adequately and my shoulders were bearing all of the weight of the pack causing an ugly open sore to develop on my right shoulder. When I met with Bob G. he took me to the EMS store in North Conway, New Hampshire and I purchased a new Granite Gear Vapor pack. It fit me much better and weighed over three pounds less than my Gregory Keeler pack. I also bought an alcohol stove to replace my MSR Whisperlite stove to save another pound. The new pack had only 3800 cubic inches of storage and my old pack could hold 4900 cubic inches. When I loaded my items in the new pack, everything I had been previously carrying (with the change of stove) fit. Both backpacks suffered damage from the extended use. The Gregory pack aluminum stay ripped through the pack fabric inside the sleeping bag compartment while the Granite Gear pack hip belt ripped badly. I sent the Granite Gear hip belt to the company for replacement under the warranty and they sent me a new belt.

My Asolo **hiking boots** performed well until the soles began to wear thin. The wear was much more rapid than I would have expected, but the boots still carried me through an estimated 150-200 miles of training in Fort Worth as well as the first 715 miles on the trail. I purchased some low cut Lowa hiking shoes to restart my hike in Maine. Those shoes held up well for the first 300 miles through very difficult terrain. From that time on they began to break down from inside and by the time I got to Manchester Center, Vermont, at around the 450 mile mark, they were toast. I went to the Eastern Mountain Sports store there and bought my third pair of footwear. The mid-high EMS brand boots served me well through the remainder of the hike or approximately 1000 miles. They had to be glued a couple of times to keep the soles on, but they are still in good shape and could go a few hundred more miles. I also went through at least 12-15 pairs of Smart Wool socks. They were great, but would get the typical holes in the toe area after a few hundred miles. I kept wearing them because of the comfort. Finally, I used special insoles in my boots. For the first 400 miles New Balance insoles were used. They ultimately fell apart and I replaced them with Superfeet insoles. The Superfeet were superior to the New Balance insoles and lasted 600+ miles. I replaced them when I purchased the third pair of boots in Vermont and they lasted to the completion of the hike (1000 miles). I believe these special insoles are indispensable as they provide support, help prevent blisters and reduce foot fatigue.

My Big Agnus SL2 **tent** was a great piece of equipment and held up well. However, I only used it 35-40 times the entire hike. It was waterproof and kept me dry and warm in

the blizzard and six inches of snow in Shenandoah National Park. The weight was very acceptable and I feel I would make the same purchasing decision again.

My comments on other equipment are summarized as follows:

***Sleeping bag**—My Kelty Light Year 3D Polarguard bag was selected based on temperature rating (30 degrees), light weight and relatively small bulk. The bag was warm enough until late October when I had to supplement it with a silk liner. The half length zipper was used to help keep the bag weight down, but it makes it more difficult to get in the bag and the zipper stuck on many occasions. All factors considered I would probably buy the same bag again.

***Sleeping pad**—The Therm-a-Rest Prolite 3 was a super pad. Each night I had to blow additional air in it to ensure that my hip bones didn't hit on the floor or ground, but it was light and comfortable. It also served as a seat for eating supper and breakfast as well as just relaxing. I was surprised that it never leaked despite some fairly hard wear.

***Trek poles**—I bought the cheapest poles offered by REI and they worked fine. After about 1000 miles I had worn off one of the tips and needed to replace the poles. I think that the wear would have occurred regardless of the brand or type of poles I used.

***Water treatment**—I considered filters and purifiers, but ultimately used chemical treatment for my water. Aqua Mira worked great and weighed only a fraction of an ounce. There were only a couple of occasions on the entire hike that the quality of the water was so poor that I would have liked to have had a filter. I would make the same decision to use Aqua Mira again.

***Camera**—Kirk loaned me his Canon Powershot A75 for the duration of the hike. I took approximately 400 pictures with the camera and the quality of the shots was excellent. The camera proved to be durable (I fell on it numerous times) and the batteries only needed to be charged twice over the six months I used it.

THE TRAIL

Having hiked the AT in Georgia and North Carolina in the 1970's, I had a general idea of what the trail was like, at least in those states. Unfortunately, the trail in those states bear little resemblance to what it is like in several other states.

As I hiked through the southern states the trail was largely dirt with occasional rocky areas such as around Blood Mountain in Georgia. The trail became much rockier in North Carolina and into the Smokey Mountain National Park. It remained more difficult into parts of southern Virginia.

When I began hiking south in Maine, I expected more rock beginning at Mount Katahdin. I was shocked by the fact that it was virtually all rock throughout the state. It continued almost all rock through New Hampshire. In Vermont there were mixed trail surfaces and that continued in Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York and New Jersey. Pennsylvania had a lot of rock, but there were areas of smooth trails. All in all, the trail in the north was far more difficult on the body than what I had experienced in the south.

I have read that Maine was once interlinked sheets of rock. When the ice ages impacted on this area, the rock sheets were fractured by pressure coupled with repeated freezing and thawing. The advancing and retreating glaciers moved the fractured rock for many miles, pushing up mountains and carving out lakes and ponds. Long Island, New York is composed of rock pushed from Maine and other areas to the north and west. Today the rocks, some bigger than houses, are everywhere. In the far north the rocks prevent trees from establishing deep root systems so the roots are always on or near the surface. This slows hikers and puts the trees at risk whenever there are strong winds. Blown down trees are a common obstacle all along the AT, in part, because of this factor.

When I think back on the rocks, the boggy areas and the steep ups and downs, I realize what a challenge the trail has been to me. After completing the hike in Maine, I was physically exhausted. The rocks continued to impact on my knees throughout the hike causing aches and pains. I just took Ibuprofen and continued hiking. That worked well, but as I neared the end of the hike I could tell I was losing strength and energy and it became more and more difficult to complete the miles necessary to progress on the schedule I had established.

RESUPPLY

When reading about resupply options I was impressed at the extensive efforts some hikers made for their entire hike. On one extreme there are hikers that prepare all of their food and other supplies in advance and have it packed in boxes ready to ship on a set schedule prior to their departure. On the other extreme some hikers make no preparations in advance and buy all of their food and supplies along the route.

Most thru-hikers pursue a combination of having some items shipped and buying some along the way. The location of the resupply points drives this to some degree as it may be easier to get items from a post office than from stores. The increased cost of purchasing groceries near the trail may be offset to some degree by the cost of shipping it through the mail.

I decided that I could get virtually all my supply requirements met by purchases along the trail. That meant that I needed to get to a store about every 4-7 days as I could not carry more than a week supply because of the weight. That plan worked out well and I only needed to have a couple of packages sent to me throughout the hike. There was only one occasion (Delaware Water Gap) when there were very limited grocery options and I could not get items that met all my requirements. Even there I could have taken a zero day and purchased items in an adjacent town—I simply didn't want to take the time.

PHYSICAL DEMANDS

I originally believed that my physical training was adequate to begin the trail. I was wrong. Although I had hiked up to 15 miles during training with a full pack, the training

was conducted on terrain was relatively flat. When I got on the AT the mountain climbs quickly made me realize that my aerobic capacity was not up to the level necessary to comfortably get up the hills. That problem remained an issue for at least a month as I gradually improved my conditioning.

During the first few weeks of the hike the daily mileage generally ranged from 8-12 miles. As conditioning improved the daily mileage increased to 12-18 miles. The three week break in July caused a slight dip in daily mileage, but it increased back to the prior average after a couple weeks.

As I continued hiking past the 1400-1500 mile point and I continued losing weight, it became more difficult to maintain a high energy level throughout the day. I was eating everything I could get my hands on, but it seemed it was not enough. One particular concern was the lack of adequate protein. I ate as much packaged tuna, peanut butter, Cliff Bars and other items with protein as I could, but lost a significant amount of muscle in addition to the fat loss. I commented to Kirk and to Chick that if the trail was 300-400 miles longer, I don't know if I could have completed it without a significant break (a couple weeks) from the trail.

When I started the hike I weighed approximately 230 pounds. When I took the break in late June my weight had dipped to 210 pounds. I probably gained several pounds during the three plus weeks I was off the trail. When I began hiking in Maine the extreme physical demands caused me to lose weight fairly rapidly. By the time I got to Andover, Maine I was already in the 180's. I increased my food intake as much as possible and kept my weight above 175-180 pounds the remainder of the hike. However, I continued to lose some muscle from my upper body until the very end.

INJURIES / ILLNESS

I am very thankful that I had no injury or illness serious enough to cause me to delay or stop my thru-hike. Having written that, there were a few times that I was concerned.

One of the potential hazards to all hikers on the trail is lyme disease. I talked to several hikers that had either been diagnosed with lyme disease or knew other hikers who had been diagnosed and had to leave the trail. The disease is particularly threatening in the area from Massachusetts through Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia and Virginia. Many hikers mentioned seeing a large number of deer ticks in Virginia. Fortunately, I went through Virginia both before and after the peak season for the ticks. I did treat my clothing with insect repellent on three occasions and wore a Buzz Off shirt and long pants through what I was informed were the worst areas. I also checked myself as often as possible for ticks and worried through the final few weeks.

On several occasions I had hard falls that caused some minor injury. Scrapes and bruises were almost continuously present on my legs through the hike. There were a few times

when a fall caused a more serious problem. I fell twice on my right knee in New York and Pennsylvania causing intense pain, prolonged swelling and stiffness. In Maine I fell and hit my left shin causing major swelling and pain. All of these setbacks slowed me for a few days, but were walked off with no medical attention.

I do have a long-term chronic problem with my left knee. At the first of my hike the problem was very minor. As I went over 1500 miles I had more problems and pain with the knee. By the time I finished in Virginia the knee was sore almost all of the time, but did not prevent me from getting reasonable miles every day, even in more difficult terrain. Now that I am home, the knee is still painful at times and I am trying to use exercises to increase the strength of the muscles around the knee to reduce or eliminate the problem. I am also taking pills with glucosamine and chondroitin in an effort to assist healing. It will take some time to determine the results.

Finally, I did have minor foot problems. Blisters developed on my feet when my hiking boots got wet or when I hiked an abnormally long distance. They were easily cared for and caused little or no problem. I also had continuous numbness from the ball of my feet to the tips of my toes. That is just now (after almost three weeks home) beginning to go away. Apparently, this is a fairly common problem with thru-hikers.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEMANDS

When I told one of my neighbors that I was going to hike the entire AT, I indicated that I was most concerned about physical fitness and potential injury. He looked at me and pointed at his head and said, "The real key to success is up here." I thought he might be exaggerating, but I found that his comments were right on target.

Thinking back about all the hikers I met who said they were thru-hikers I can recall many who were not successful, but did not stop due to injury or other physical problems. They would go into towns and end up staying there for several days, hike a few miles and stop early in the day or find other reasons to not make reasonable progress on the trail. Within a few days or weeks they were off the trail and heading for home. Only a few hikers left because of physical reasons and then only after gutting it out hurt for as long as they could.

I would estimate that 80-90% of the effort of completing a thru-hike is mental. Continuously demonstrating the discipline, dedication, perseverance, mental toughness and consistency necessary to get up and hike a reasonable distance day after day is the key to success. There are many hikers who do not possess these attributes and they generally fall out along the way. Usually they simply talk themselves into quitting by referencing minor injuries, loss of interest, etc. I believe that is the primary reason that the completion rate of thru-hikers is less than 25%.

CULTURE

One of the most fascinating and enjoyable aspects of the thru-hike was the gathering of hikers at the end of the day. Virtually all hikers gather in shelters or hostels when the hiking is done. The social interaction in these locations provides the opportunity to meet people from a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences. The result is getting to know about many people through the shared experience of the hike.

I can recall meeting a bartender from Brooklyn, a pastry chef, a folk singer, an artist, several teachers, a number of retired military personnel and many others from a variety of occupations. I talked with hikers from Ireland, Great Britain, Germany, Israel, Australia and Poland as well as virtually every state in the union. The ages of the thru-hikers ranged from about 10 years of age to those in their 70's. From my observations the bulk of thru-hikers (60-75%) were 18-25 years of age. They were the ones who had recently graduated from high school or college or had no job. There were also a significant number of thru-hikers (15-20%) that had retired from their careers or were between careers and they were generally 50-65 years of age. Very few thru-hikers fell in the age group of 25-50 as they are presumably out working and supporting families. Finally, about 90% of the thru-hikers were men.

The differences between the younger and older hikers were often visibly obvious. The younger men almost all had beards and tattoos and many had body piercings. The older men were clean shaven and free of body ornamentation. Sometimes the only thing we had in common was our desire to enjoy the experience of hiking the AT. Therefore, the conversations most often involved the merits and shortcomings of equipment, information about the trail, who had been seen and where they were, who was having problems, what to eat, the best places to eat (eating was a top priority topic) and where to stay in town.

The opportunity to interact daily with people possessing a variety of backgrounds had a positive impact on me. My military / educational administrator life limited me to interacting for over 40 years with individuals who had values similar to mine and who looked and acted like I did. I found that the interactions I had with all people on the trail were positive and I quickly learned not to judge hikers by their looks. Some who looked like they couldn't string words together to form a sentence were among the most intelligent and articulate people I have ever met. Some individuals who I suspected were extreme radicals in their beliefs turned out to be more aligned with my conservative philosophy than most other people my age. In summary, I learned that I had far more in common than in conflict with almost everyone I met. It was a real mind opener for me and I came to be more openly accepting to all with whom I came in contact. I believe that I'm a better person for that experience.

FEARS

Kirk once asked me if I had any fears about hiking in the wilderness alone. I indicated that my only real concern was that I would become ill or injure myself to the point that I could not continue and complete the hike.

There were a number of potential threats to my well being that I was aware of and took precautions to avoid. I've mentioned the injury and illness issues previously. The other issues involved beasts (animals including other humans). Only bears and mountain lions were a direct threat to hikers on the AT. Bears are as anxious to stay away from humans as humans want to stay away from bears. They generally are not a threat. Mountain lions are very rare and very unlikely to attack a hiker. Other humans are different. There was no threat of harm from other hikers as they generally did all they could to support each other against outside threats. The greatest potential of harm comes when hikers are in town and exposed to non-hikers. I tried to be with other hikers when in town or to stay where other hikers were commonly accepted. At no time during the hike did I feel threatened from another person or persons.

RESULTS

The ultimate result is that I completed the thru-hike. The projected time was five months, but it took me about two more weeks than I anticipated. The extra time was mostly due to the very dry conditions over the last few months and the shorter and shorter days near the end of the hike. The lack of water in certain areas resulted in having to stop early on several occasions to take advantage of water availability. The shorter days caused a similar problem. Unless I wanted to start or finish my daily hike in the dark, I had to frequently stop before I physically needed to in order to set up and eat before dark.

I have a great sense of achievement for completing the hike. I was challenged to the limit both physically and psychologically for the entire time on the trail. I viewed natural beauty that was beyond anything I had ever seen before. I met hundreds of interesting people that I never would have had the opportunity to meet in any other way. I found that those people, whether they were hikers or residents of towns I passed through, were a very important part of the hiking experience. The support and kindness of everyone I met is something for which I will forever be thankful.