

Thru-hike the A.T.

Notes on an Unintended Adventure

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I did not set a "goal" to hike the **Appalachian Trail**. Having reached a ripe enough old age, my goal in life is to have no goals, and I'm pretty good at it.

I hiked my first few sections of AT totally unintentionally: on local club day hikes led by the old timers, some of them long gone, some still hale and hardy and still leading hikes.

On a spring road trip to a wedding in Florida, I decided to visit a college friend in Georgia and realized, hey, Springer Mountain, the AT starting point, is down there, why not take a look. Hubby *Bob* and I camped in the park and then planned to backpack the eight-ish-mile Approach Trail from Amicalola Falls State Park, spend the night up there, and then return. Due to a confluence of issues, the backpack trip was nixed. I figured, well then I'll never see Springer, because I've never hiked even 10 miles in one day, let alone 15. But let's at least set out for a hike and see how far we get.



Those who know me know how much I must stop to huff and puff on all the uphill. And our hills in Vermont are steep. But down there, the grades are much less steep, and they don't go on for very long, so instead of stopping to huff and puff, I could recover on the flats or downhills. I kept looking at my watch and noting landmarks and realized I was making much faster time than I'd ever done, so we decided to go for it. We realized we might be forced to spend an unplanned night in the woods, but the night was to be mild, we had extra snacks, water, and layers of clothing; the goal was not comfort but survival, and we knew that would not be an issue.

As it turned out, we had left camp at 10:00 a.m. and returned before sunset. I thought gee, this is easy (recognizing fully the difference between "easy" and "easy for me"; not much is actually easy for ME!), certainly compared to trails I was used to in Vermont and New Hampshire.

So *Bob* and I became habitual travelers, in April and September or October, to southern parts of the AT, doing about a week at a time of our short-mileage days (about 8 miles).

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In August 2011, when they were holed up in a cheap hotel in Vermont wondering what to do about trail closures after Tropical Storm Irene, I met two flip-flop AT thru-hikers who were heading south at that point, to finish in southern Pennsylvania. We somehow bonded, and they invited me to join them later on after gardening season was over. I wondered how I'd ever keep up with seasoned thru-hikers, especially on northern Pennsylvania's notorious "Rocksylvania" terrain. They insisted they were doing "little miles" (translation: 15 per day for them, but I still only did eight). I headed down there with food in my pack for nine days. They were due for a food drop at a post office a few days hence, so offered to carry most of mine. I wasn't too proud and joyfully accepted their offer. They also spent time in their tent in the morning,

reading aloud to each other, in order to give me a head start. It was a magical trip that, in any logical part of the world in which I live, never should have even happened. But it did. In November, right after "Snowtober", that huge Halloween snowstorm that left a foot of snow on the trail they had called to tell me not to come. But of course it wasn't really winter yet so I knew it would melt. That trip was probably the gateway drug for me to the AT.



The following spring, the Connecticut Section of GMC was offering a backpacking trip on the section of Pennsylvania contiguous to what I had done with the thru-hikers. So I joined, and the leader *Carol* and I hiked many more sections together.

But still: I'll never hike the whole AT because I'll never hike Katahdin. Not only is Katahdin *hard* (over 4,000 feet of climbing in just over four miles, and about one mile of that is almost flat, so you can imagine the rest...), but you have to navigate the reservations hurdles to even enter Baxter State Park (where Katahdin is located) and I hate dealing with logistics, especially advance planning. I'm much more interested in just getting in the car and going, when the mood strikes. So no, forget about it. Not interested.



But then the Connecticut Section offered a trip to Baxter State Park and Katahdin. All I had to do was show up, bring (very little) money for a lean-to accommodation, and hope for good weather and strong enough legs. It was by far

the hardest thing I had ever done, but a resounding success on all accounts.

I continued to enjoy many years of hiking different sections of the AT in spring and fall, with a variety of companions who were willing to put up with my slow pace. Still, I had no expectation of doing the whole thing. I just liked backpacking, and the AT gave me easy trip planning, without having to think about other venues. Just do the next section.



The Long Tunnel.

There are many like that in the VA, NC, and TN

There are those who believe "you can do anything you put your mind to." That is not my mindset, perhaps because the things I like to put my efforts toward do not involve bigger/longer/faster/farther, except insofar as the experience can be enjoyable for me. I am no athlete, so my expectations are appropriately modest. I have always been well aware that neither the wide world nor my own personal microcosm would be any different or better whether I did or did not hike the whole AT.

Besides, there was the problem of New Jersey: when to hike it? Due to a very large vegetable garden, my only options are April and late September to early October. But New Jersey is too cold (and/or buggy) for me to camp in April; by autumn, all the water sources are likely to be dry, and trail angels are no longer leaving water caches since it's no longer thru-hiker season down there. No water, no hike. Water weighs two pounds per quart and you need about one gallon (four quarts) per day, so if there's no water en

route, you have to carry it. Carrying eight pounds of water alone is distinctly unpleasant! So I dithered, for years, wondering what to do about New Jersey.

Another strange confluence of events: one April in southern Virginia (an unusable tent, snow and rain and 35 mile per hour winds in the mountains) sent us scurrying back up north, figuring we could at least kill time driving while waiting for the bad weather to pass, and the weather in New Jersey was to be the same as down south anyway. So we drove up, acquired a serviceable tent at the brand new REI in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, (thank you internet for providing us with useful info!) and were positively charmed by the landscape of western New Jersey, so much so that we returned two weeks later to finish New Jersey.

That was fun, but there was still no plan to actually finish, just to enjoy hiking sections I hadn't yet hiked. My friend *Frank*, himself a former thru-hiker, had other ideas. He and I set out last fall to complete my last section in southwest Virginia. Until, halfway through the trip, I turned my map over (yes, I'm a lover of paper maps!) and saw, penciled in on the other side "Still need to do" on another 39-mile stretch. Oh, no! So much for finishing the AT!

I was definitely ready to throw in the towel. That 39 miles was a challenge to plan, as there was a 15-mile section with no shelters (remember, I'm still and eight-mile-a-day backpacker; 10 is a stretch but I can occasionally do it if the terrain is easy enough). While I don't usually sleep in shelters, I often camp near them: if there is rain, you at least have a dry place to sit, and more importantly, they usually (but not always) have a reliable water source. I can see what had happened: that stretch was hard to plan, and then the pandemic halted all my plans, and when I resumed planning, I just forgot about it.

That night, *Frank* put on his thinking cap and planned it out. For early October, after the

gardening season, but before it became too cold for me to camp. But *Frank's* schedule went awry and he wasn't available till mid-October, which would have meant cold weather and being gone on dates when I had already committed to leading club hikes.

In a last-minute Hail Mary move, I decided to go for it, and let dear husband *Bob* lead the club hike without me. We planned a four- or five-day trip, and as always with long-distance driving and shuttling, a very short first day. But the shuttler, scheduled for 10 a.m., needed to shuttle us at 8 a.m. We hit the trail at 9 a.m. It was *very* cold. It was uphill. The foliage was prettier than the lackluster stuff we had left behind in Vermont. We knew we'd go further than the first shelter four miles away, but I certainly didn't plan on reaching it in a mere two hours. Broke my own previous land speed record! Got to the next camping spot (7.5 miles total) at 1:30. Too cold to hang around for the entire afternoon and evening, so then we (!!) really had to push hard to get to the next reliable water source and hopefully find a place to camp at a total of 12+ miles. OK, so I did it, and survived it. But the real problem was that, no matter how we sliced it and diced it, a four-day trip was going to involve a long last day in positively hypothermic weather (rainy, 40s). Definitely not a good way to end the journey. Long story short, we did three long days (12 to 13 miles a day), ending in good weather. It was definitely not the leisurely end I had dreamed of, moving slowly and savoring it all, but it did prove that the terrain really *is* much easier down there (I'm still dead with backpacking eight-plus miles a day locally!), but I did slow down and savor the last four miles. In those four miles we finally got to see some wildlife: a four-inch toad, two deer that were not at all afraid of us, and a four-foot long black rat snake. And I got home in time to co-lead the club hike to one of my favorite destinations.

So now that I've completed the AT, what am I gonna do in April and October?????