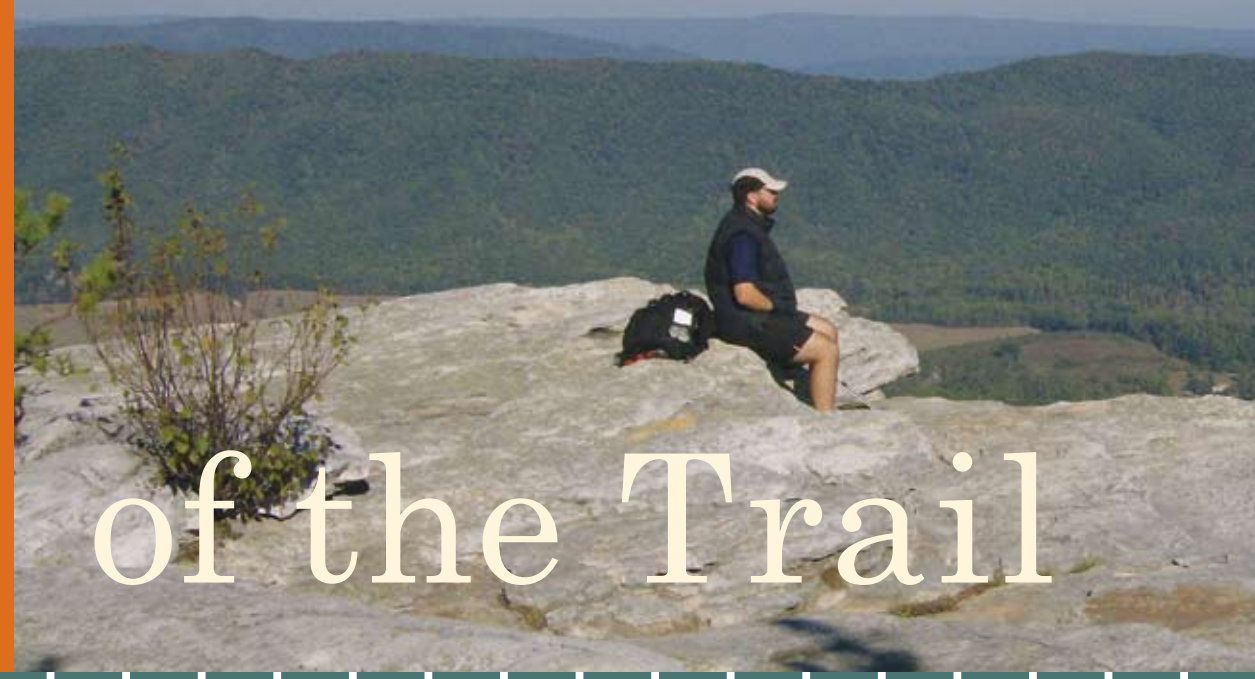


# Ambassadors of the Trail



TEXT BY WENDY K. PROBST

PHOTOS BY JULIO & AMANDA STEPHENS

In the 1970s and early 1980s as Trail use (and subsequent misuse) increased, Trail managers became concerned as they considered the negative implications of overuse and haphazard abuse by uninformed visitors. A plan was formulated to assign “ridgerunners” and “caretakers” to high use locations on the A.T. These “ambassadors of the Trail” would be sent out to interact with hikers and backpackers and provide information that would help hikers to reduce their impact. “ATC’s Ridgerunner/Caretaker program was created in response to degradation of the Trail as both a natural and recreational resource,” said Bob Sickley, Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s associate regional representative and ridgerunner coordinator for the Mid-Atlantic region.

## success and growth

The Ridgerunner program was initiated in 1986 on Catawba Mountain in central Virginia. Its success led to the addition of ridgerunners to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Maryland and the Cumberland Valley in Pennsylvania by the early 1990s, and to Georgia, New Jersey, and the Coolidge Range in Vermont by the mid-1990s. ATC also began assisting the Maine A.T. Club (MATC) with its caretakers in the Bigelow Range and at Piazza Rock Lean-to in Maine, programs that the club had started many years earlier. Due to the strains of thru-hiker, late-season arrivals at the A.T.’s northern terminus at Katahdin, MATC and ATC added a ridgerunner near Abol Bridge, at the south boundary of Baxter State Park several years ago. This ridgerunner coordinates hiker arrivals with the park on a park-provided radio. The ATC and MATC also have a ridgerunner at Gulf Hagas. Today, approximately 30 ridgerunners and caretakers work on high use areas of the A.T. from Maine to Georgia.



PHOTO BY SHELLY BOYD

“...the program exists to provide an educational presence and to inform Trail users about ways they can minimize their impact ... ‘This education may come in the form of encouraging users to follow Leave No Trace practices...’”

While working as a ridgerunner this past season, Julio Stephens volunteered to sample water and enter the results into the World Water Monitoring database. "I thought it would provide good information about water quality along my section of Trail responsibility," said Stephens.



McAfee Knob, Virginia

They make note of the condition of the Trail itself, campsites, shelters or other built structures, and report any conditions that need immediate attention to maintaining clubs and agency partners.

## education

The Riderunner/Caretaker program exists to provide an educational presence and to inform Trail users about ways they can minimize their impact while having a quality recreational experience. "This education may come in the form of encouraging users to follow Leave No Trace practices, providing information about the rules and regulations of an agency partner whose land the Trail is crossing, or updating hikers about conditions that they can expect on their hike," said Sickley.

Ridgerunners typically patrol designated sections of the A.T., usually between 40 and 100 miles in length, while caretakers are assigned to a specific location. "At trailheads they may discuss hikers' itineraries, potential campsites and the importance of using already impacted campsites in heavily used areas; at campsites and shelters they might talk about safe food storage in bear country or area campfire policy, and on the Trail they might point out the destructive nature of shortcutting switchbacks," said Sickley.

## reporting

Ridgerunners also provide a valuable service to maintaining club volunteers and land managing agency personnel by reporting back to them about the conditions they encounter while on the Trail. They make note of the condition of the Trail itself, campsites, shelters or other built structures, and report any conditions that need immediate attention to maintaining clubs and agency partners.



Occasionally ridgerunners become involved in emergency responses, including searches for lost hikers or efforts to provide emergency medical treatment to ill or injured hikers. Ridgerunners also act as an important "early warning system" if visitor problems are discovered.

These problems include vandalism, substance abuse, vagrancy, trespass by all-terrain vehicles, and other misuses. In these cases, incidents are promptly reported to local authorities, saving time for law-enforcement and resource agency personnel, and enhancing public safety.

## challenges

Being a ridgerunner can be rewarding, yet challenging, both mentally and physically. While patrolling the same section of Trail for several months, it's possible to experience a sense of redundancy. "Ridgerunners spend a great deal of time dealing with the same small set of problems," said Sickley. "Hikers that ridgerunners encounter often have plans that can't be changed easily; in this case, the hope is that users will take away information that will help them reduce their impact on the next trip."

## recruiting

From a management standpoint, finding experienced hikers and backpackers who are familiar with the A.T., comfortable working outdoors all day, have great people skills, and are interested in working part-time can also be a challenge. "Not surprisingly, recent thru-hikers make up a high percentage of ridgerunner applicants," said Sickley.

Like many programs that benefit the Trail, the ridgerunner program is funded from a variety of sources. Agency partners and Trail clubs provide ATC with an invaluable amount of funding and management support for the program. "ATC has been very fortunate to have some terrific partners [who are] willing to shoulder much of the burden," said Sickley.

Recruitment for each season begins during November of the prior year when information and applications are posted on ATC's Web site.

For more information or to apply to become a ridgerunner or caretaker visit:

[www.appalachiantrail.org/seasonaljobs](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/seasonaljobs)

Or call ATC's ridgerunner coordinator at (717) 258-5771 x203.

"I wanted to share in the experiences that so many people enjoy on the Trail, to help protect and to become personally closer with it and all it has to offer."

JULIO STEPHENS  
2007 RIDGERUNNER