

ALTERNATIVE THRU-HIKES

BY MICHAEL JOHNSON

"TWO ROADS DIVERGED IN A WOOD, AND
I — I TOOK THE ONE LESS TRAVELED BY,
AND THAT HAS MADE ALL THE DIFFERENCE"

—THE ROAD NOT TAKEN, ROBERT FROST

HE HAD A HUNCH, A GUESS REALLY. SOMETHING FAIRLY SUBTLE WAS CHANGING

within the culture of Appalachian Trail hikers. As the chief ranger for the A.T. unit of the National Park Service, Todd Remaley had seen changes — some good, some not — over his 23 years in uniform. "A few hikers were starting to talk about thru-hikes that didn't always have to start at Springer, compete with all the other hundreds of hikers for shelters and hostels, and beat up the first 300 miles of the Trail. I had a feeling something was changing."

That was more than a decade ago, and the years since show Ranger Remaley's hunch was actually perception. Today, alternative thru-hikes are offering options to hikers, are the passionate subject of blogs and websites, are supported by every friend-of-the-Trail organization, and are indeed taking some of the overuse pressure off the first 300 miles north of Springer.

In the most common version, a "flip-flop," hikers start somewhere mid-Trail, head north to Katahdin, then return to their departure point and hike south to Springer. But there are many others, each with a colorful name — leapfrogs, head starts, wraparounds, cool breeze. And each year hikers create new strategies for an alternative thru-hike that completes the entire Trail in 12 months. Says Shanelle "No. 5" Dugan, who completed a flip-flop last year: alternative thru-hikes "are an example of actually living the hiker motto of 'hike your own hike.'"

The continuous hike from Georgia to Maine (nobo — short for northbound) is still the king, to be certain. And the numbers are pretty clear: about 2,500 hikers start from the southern terminus at Springer and 80 percent of the hikers who complete the Trail in 12 months are nobo hikers. But those same numbers also suggest another story, one that Ranger Remaley would appreciate. Until about 1999, alternative thru-hikes were almost unknown; today they are eight percent and climbing. While only eight successful alternative "thrus" were recorded in 1993, when the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) started keeping count, last year there were 52.



By choosing a "flip-flop" hike, Joshua Stacy enjoys the perfect weather at Franconia Ridge in New Hampshire.

ALTERNATIVE NOMENCLATURE

"YOU MAY THINK I'M AS MAD AS A HATTER WHEN I TELL YOU, A CAT MUST HAVE THREE DIFFERENT NAMES."

— THE NAMING OF CATS, BY T.S. ELIOT

OF COURSE, NEW IDEAS NEED NEW NAMES, AND there are some who view a continuous hike north from Springer or south from Katahdin as the only "true" thru-hike. About a decade ago the ATC proposed a practical compromise: a thru-



Shanelle Dugan "hikes her own hike" with hiking partner Josh Randall.

hike is a completely hiked Trail — done in 12 months — regardless of direction or starting point. "Marmot" — "just Marmot, please" — hiked the A.T. northbound in 1991, and then went on to hike the Continental Divide Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail. "I got on the Trail and headed in one direction until I got to the end," she remembers. "That was the right thru-hike for me at that time. What's right for you, or right for me now, may be different."

Says veteran A.T. hiker, Joe "Cool Breeze" Fennelly: "There are pros and cons to each hiking [strategy] and

what I tell people is, think about what's right for you." In fact, one of those strategies is credited to Cool Breeze — a three-part thru-hike that optimizes the chance of good weather. "With the web and blogs there's just much more information about flip-flops and leapfrogs and all that," observes Laurel Drake, owner of the Teahorse Hostel in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, where she sees about 1,000 hikers each season. "There's more and more interest in and acceptance of non-traditional hikes."

Indeed, the future of the Trail itself may rest in part with acceptance of alternate thru-hikes, suggests Morgan Sommerville, the ATC's southern regional director and a 1977 thru-hiker. "We're asking hikers to just think about other starting points or other starting times," he says, pointing out that half of the Trail through Georgia passes through federally designated wilderness. "The Trail in Georgia north from Springer during March and early April is overcrowded and sort of loved to death. Shelters get full, people spread out, the surrounding area gets trampled down, and we have a management problem." The idea of a quota system comes up occasionally, he notes, but is contrary to the A.T. value of voluntary stewardship.



Bart Viner approaches the middle of his thru-hike in Maine.

A sense of responsibility motivated another veteran hiker and Trail volunteer, Bart "Hopalong" Viner. He chose a flip-flop hike in part to "give back to the Trail" by not adding to the crowds leaving from Springer. "For me, I would never ever do anything but a flip-flop," he says. "I think a lot of hikers who really think about it would do the same. That's not to say there's anything wrong with the nobo from Springer, it's just that [an alternative thru-hike] helps in so many ways for the hiker and for the Trail." Viner is proud of his volunteer work — repairing Trail and constructing shelters — and is equally proud of hiking his own hike by starting from mid-Trail and saving southern Georgia for later in the season. "I made a wise choice," he says.

OPEN ROAD

"HEALTHY, FREE, THE WORLD BEFORE ME, THE LONG BROWN PATH BEFORE ME LEADING WHEREVER I CHOOSE."

— SONG OF THE OPEN ROAD, WALT WHITMAN

APPROPRIATELY, THE IDEA OF AN ALTERNATIVE thru-hike has alternatives of its own: seven general variations of alternative thru-hikes have become recognized by the hiking community and recorded in some detail on the ATC's website (appalachiantrail.org/hiking). The most common, as mentioned earlier, is unglamorously called a "flip-flop" — the approximate 2,185-miles of the full Trail is broken into two or more stretches and walked in different directions. The advantages are significant. For example, a northbound hiker starting mid-Trail in late spring may be able to skip the cold weeks along the high southern mountains, take more time getting Trail conditioned and sorting out equipment, hike through New Hampshire and Maine when they are most likely to have good weather, and not constantly worry about reaching Katahdin before its official closing on October 15. That hiker then returns to Harpers

Ferry and starts south, hiking through fall color and reaching Springer in October, November, or early December. An alternative thru-hiking strategy allows the hiker, as one put it, "to hike north with the spring and south with the autumn."

Perhaps the biggest advantage is the gift of time. Records kept by the ATC show alternative thru-hikers take 207 days to finish the entire Trail, compared to 172 days for north bound hikers who often have to rush in the last month or two to get to Katahdin before the October 15 closure. A nearly universal comment from alternative thru-hikers is: "It allowed me to slow down and smell the roses." One example among many is from Glen "Sabi" Enzfelder and his hiking partner Rebecca "Ripple" Haines, who used an alternative thru-hike strategy to see the Trail through more than nine months and all four seasons.



Bobby and Lee Thompson are in top shape as they near the last part of their hike.

Alternative thru-hikes can also allow for an easier and safer introduction to Trail life. Starting in Wingdale, New York, and hiking north "definitely, definitely made our hike better," notes Bobby "Kermit" Thompson. He and his father, Lee, were both fit, but not Trail tough. Even with the relatively easy hiking in New York their early days sometimes stopped at eight miles. However, by the time they had summited Katahdin and were moving south from Wingdale they were averaging more than 20 miles a day.

This style of hiking creates a more custom-tailored journey. "I wanted to see the whole Trail in all its ways," says Avery "3Hats" Forbes, who had been dreaming of hiking the A.T. since she was nine. This led to starting at Springer, jumping ahead to Katahdin from Harpers Ferry and then hiking back to Harpers Ferry in late October. "I got the unique experience of being a north boulder at the peak of the season and hiking with the pack, and then being a south boulder and having a lot of the Trail to myself and seeing what the off season felt like." And there is more flexibility. In their early 50s, with extensive family responsibilities, Laura "Freethinker" Kasko



Avery Forbes — at the Vermont and New Hampshire border — enjoyed the best of both worlds.

and Bruce "Firehawk" Illausky, chose a complicated flip-flop that allowed them to conveniently get off the Trail to attend a college graduation and other family events.

Solitude is yet another perk of alternative thru-hikes. With 35 hikers per day leaving Springer, the north bound "bubbles" of hiking groups become a significant part of the hiking experience. "I like people and hiked a few miles with other hikers now and then," Charles Chandler recalls. "But that's not what I was on the Trail for." Chandler started in the middle of July and the middle of Connecticut, hiked north to Katahdin, then back to Connecticut and south to Springer. He often hiked 17-mile days and spent 156 days by himself as part of what he refers to as a spiritual journey. "I needed the Trail to just listen to my own voice," he explains.

And then there is the allowance for better weather. Alternative thru-hikes can be structured to work around the cold of winter and heat of summer. Joshua Stacy's experience, hiking a flip-flop, is one example: "I had great weather in both New England and the South," he says. "The fall colors in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee were incredible! The finish [at Springer] also fit the seasons ... it felt right to be alone and introspective at the end of a long journey."

Many years ago the ATC advocated toward traveling the Trail a section at a time, leisurely, and with ample time for enjoyment. Then, over time, the ATC took the best from the debate between advocating short or long-distance hikes — and what actually defined a thru-hike — and developed a reasonable compromise: anyone who hiked the entire Trail, no matter how long it took, would earn the title of 2,000-miler, and the definition of a thru-hike would be a completely hiked Trail done in 12 months. Straight forward, simple to apply, and inclusive; thus capturing the generosity, open-mindedness, and supportive character of the hiking community itself. ♡