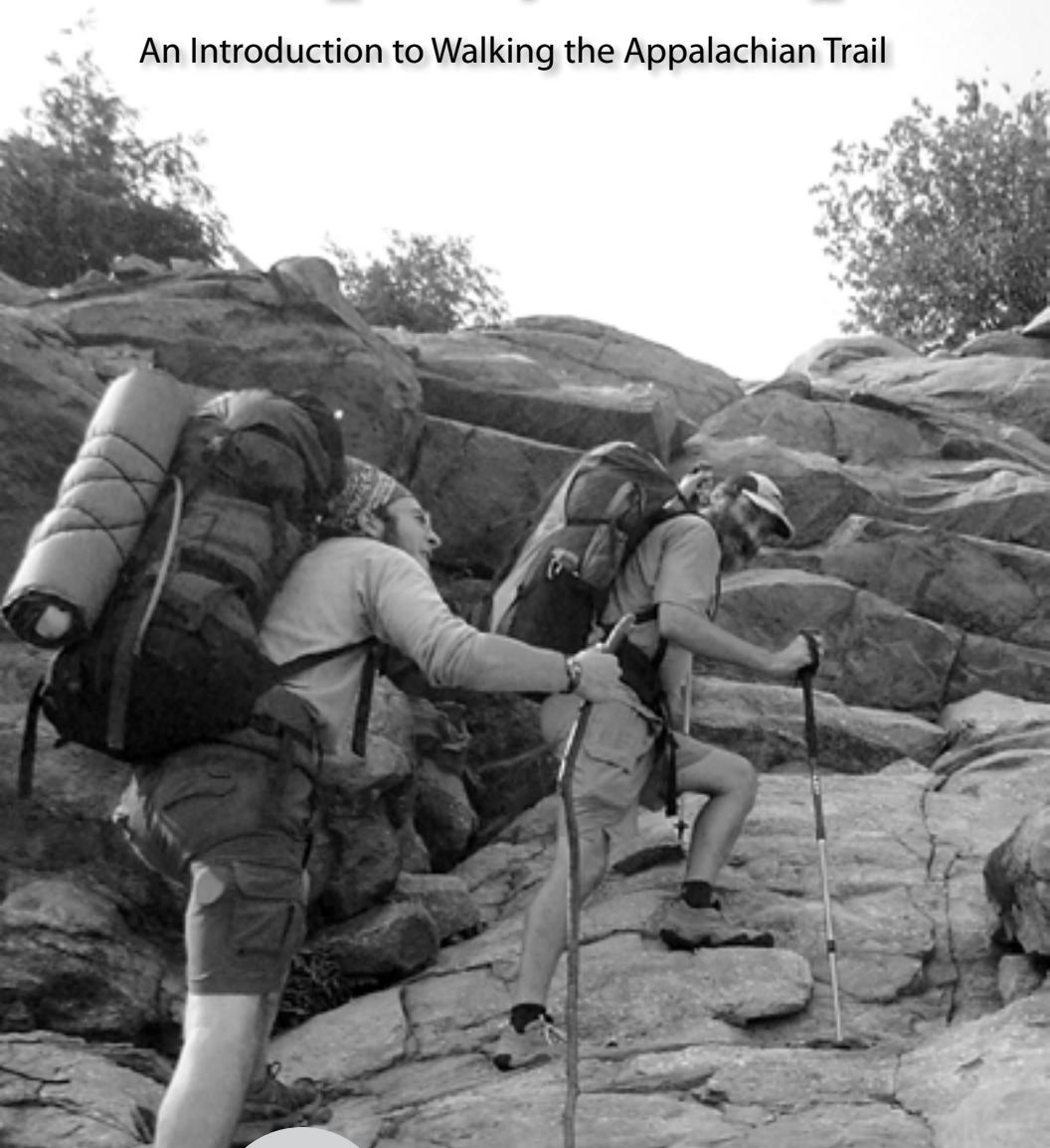


# Step by Step

An Introduction to Walking the Appalachian Trail



**APPALACHIAN TRAIL**  
CONSERVANCY®

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# Step by Step

An Introduction to Walking the Appalachian Trail

*By the staff of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy*

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Ninety years ago, a dreamer named Benton MacKaye imagined a trail running along the eastern mountains, from New England to the southern Appalachians. That dream became the Appalachian Trail, America's premier long-distance footpath, stretching more than 2180 miles between Maine and Georgia. Its terrain ranges from gentle woodland paths to near-vertical rock scrambles. It can lead hikers from areas with frequent road access to high mountain ridges where they won't cross a highway for days.

The Trail continues to inspire dreams. If you plan to visit or walk the Appalachian Trail, this booklet will answer some of your questions about the Trail and help you prepare for your adventure.

## **What is the Appalachian Trail?**

The "A.T.," as it's called by hikers, is a national scenic trail stretching across 14 states. It traverses many of the highest mountains of the Appalachian Mountain range, often within a few hours' drive of East-Coast cities. Though the A.T. most often traverses wooded slopes and ridges, it occasionally meanders across valleys and farmland. To keep its character as wild and primitive as possible, it avoids developed areas, and takes the hiker through only about dozen small towns. It passes through more than 60 federal, state, and local parks and forests. Between those protected areas, a corridor of land, averaging 1000 feet in width, has been acquired to protect it. Hundreds of roads cross it, providing many access points.

The A.T. was laid out and built by volunteers in the 1920s and 1930s. The

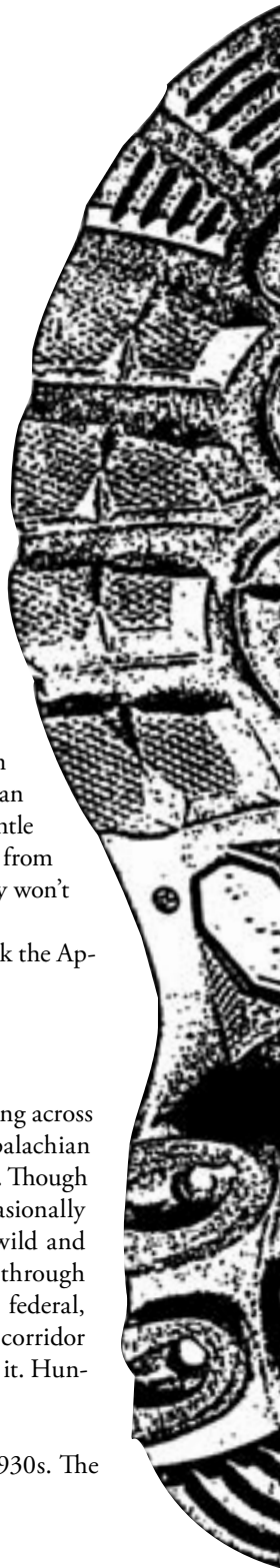
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trail was first completed in 1937, but significant portions of the route then were on private land or along roads. When the National Trails System Act was passed in 1968, the framework was created to re-locate the Trail onto more scenic areas and to provide for its permanent protection. Today, thousands of volunteers contribute hundreds of thousands of hours, working hand-in-hand with the staff of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the National Park Service (which has overall jurisdiction for the A.T. but has delegated most management functions to the ATC), and dozens of other federal and state agencies.

### What is the Appalachian Trail Conservancy?

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) is the only organization—a confederation of 31 local organizations of volunteers—focused solely on the protection and promotion of the entire Appalachian Trail and its surrounding lands. Since 1925, when Benton MacKaye convened a gathering to develop the long-distance trail he envisioned, we have worked to plan the route and relocate it to better areas; ensure that the footpath, shelters, and bridges are maintained; care for the land; and spearhead an unprecedented cooperative effort among hard-working volunteers, far-sighted government agencies, and generous benefactors of all sizes to establish and enrich a permanent corridor of protected lands. The efforts of the 6,000 volunteers are today supported by more than 42,000 individual members of the ATC and a small professional staff.

We invite you to join that membership and count yourself among those who help protect the Appalachian Trail.

For more information about the Trail, you can reach the ATC at 304.535.6331 between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. Eastern time, weekdays. Our Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry is open the same hours seven days a week.

Send e-mail to: [info@appalachiantrail.org](mailto:info@appalachiantrail.org). Our website, [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org), offers a wide range of information about the Trail, current conditions, and other sources of useful information.

Good luck, and good hiking!

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## Overview of the Appalachian Trail

*Northern New England*—Maine and New Hampshire offer the most rugged hiking and most challenging weather conditions of the entire A.T. The path is often steep, rough, and slippery. Parts are above treeline, where weather is especially severe. Maine includes Katahdin (the Trail’s northern terminus in Maine), the “100-mile wilderness” (a beautiful section not as remote as its name implies), the Mahoosuc Range, and the White Mountains.

*Southern New England*—Between eastern Vermont and the New York–Connecticut border, much of this section runs along glacier-scraped mountain ridges. It is far less strenuous than the northern section, with trail that wanders through forests revealing signs of man’s presence many decades ago. Stone walls are a common sight in the woods, and trail occasionally passes through farmlands or offers glimpses of pastoral landscapes in the valleys below.

*Mid-Atlantic* — Between eastern New York and the Potomac River at the Maryland–West Virginia border, the Trail is closest to population centers, with frequent road crossings and access points. Most often it follows long, rocky ridges only a few thousand feet above sea level—ridges that often seem like islands of remarkably wild country given that many portions are only an hour’s drive or so from some of the most heavily populated areas of the United States. Hiking is mostly moderate, but parts can be very rocky and strenuous.

*The Virginias*—Between Harpers Ferry at the eastern tip of West Virginia and the Tennessee border, the Trail runs along the Blue Ridge of Virginia and the Great Valley of the Appalachians. Virginia includes Shenandoah National Park, famed for its vistas, abundant wildlife and Skyline Drive, which offers more amenities close to the Trail than any other area from Maine to Georgia. The hiking in Virginia ranges from moderate to strenuous. The portion west of Interstate 81 includes some of the least-traveled areas of the entire A.T.

*Southern Appalachians*—The Trail runs between northeastern Tennessee and the southern terminus at Springer Mountain in Georgia. It penetrates several of the vast national forests of the South, and crosses the Trail’s highest mountain, Clingmans Dome, in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Though mostly well-graded, the Trail through this section is remote, with long, strenuous climbs. The high ridges along the North Carolina–Tennessee border are prone to winter weather similar to parts of New England.

# 1

## Planning Your Hike

*Before you commit yourself, know what you're in for. The A. T. will test you, both physically and mentally. It climbs steep, rocky mountainsides and often leads miles from the nearest road or dwelling. Yes, it can be hard. That's what makes hiking the Appalachian Trail an adventure. Even so, it need not be an ordeal. Proper planning and preparation will make your Trail experience easier, safer, and more enjoyable.*

---

### Basic Questions

#### How far should I go?

Start by deciding this. It will affect all your other plans. In general, your choices are:

*A short day-hike*—Most Trail users are day-hikers, their goal a few miles of hiking or a climb to an overlook.

*A weekend backpacking trip*—Many hikers plan a two- or three-day camping trip covering a dozen or more linear miles. This requires more preparation and overnight equipment (discussed on pages 11–13).

*A long-distance hike*—“Section-hikers” may plan hikes of a week or more. They need the same basic equipment as a weekend backpacker but must carry more supplies or resupply along the way. “Thru-hikers” attempt the entire A.T. in one continuous trip, a mammoth physical and logistical undertaking.

#### Am I ready?

Once you know where you want to hike, how much time you plan to spend, and how prepared you are, ask yourself tough questions. If you've never gone backpacking before, are you really ready to head into the mountains for a week? If you're out of shape, can you manage a three-thousand-foot climb? Are your goals too ambitious? Are your gear and clothing adequate for the range of temperatures you might encounter?

Be realistic about your conditioning and your needs. If you haven't carried a pack over mountainous, rugged terrain, don't expect it to come naturally. Backpacking on the A.T. can be an exhilarating experience, but it can also be a painful one if you push yourself too much, especially in the beginning.

## Choosing a Destination

#### Where am I going?

*First, identify the region you'll be hiking in.* The map on pages 4–5 shows the five major regions, each of which has different weather and hiking conditions. In northern New England, for instance, plan on lower mileage because of the harder terrain.

*Second, identify which state you're going to start in.* Consult the state-by-state descriptions beginning on page 29.

*Third, identify a destination or section along the Trail in that state.* The Appalachian Trail Conservancy and its member clubs publish 11 guidebooks with accompanying maps that cover the entire A.T. in detail. Other guidebooks focus on selected day or overnight hikes. These publications identify the scenic, historic, and natural highlights along the Trail, as well as practical information such as regulations and the location of campsites, shelters, water sources, parking, and access points.

*Fourth, study your route.* Use guidebooks and maps to learn as much as you can about the terrain and elevation gain and loss, so you can plan your mileage accordingly. Mileage options are determined by the location of road crossings. If you are parking a vehicle, be aware that any remote parking area may be subject to vandalism. See the ATC's website for tips on deterring vandalism.

#### When am I going?

Consider avoiding parts of the Trail that tend to be crowded, muddy, or insect-plagued at various times of the year. See the state-by-state listing on page 29.

#### Do I really need maps and guidebooks?

All hikers should carry a map and compass and know how to use them. Even though the A.T. is well-marked in most places, a map is important for good planning and essential in case of an emergency. All official A.T. maps also feature elevation profiles, indicating at a glance how much up and down each section contains. More information on A.T. publications can be found at the end of this book.

#### Is my mileage goal realistic?

With an appropriate guidebook and map and a sense of what to expect in terms of distance and terrain, you can intelligently reassess your original plan. Beginning backpackers should plan no more than seven to eight miles a day, and your first and last days should be shorter. On your first A.T. backpacking trip, expect to average no more than a mile an hour, even on moderate sections. A goal of “big miles” makes blisters and misery much more likely and may leave you stumbling in the dark or slogging through the rain when you are exhausted—a recipe for disaster. Rest your feet, and take time to enjoy the flora, fauna, and views.

# 2

## What All Hikers Should Know

*Different hikes require planning for different contingencies, but all A. T. hikers should keep in mind some basics as they prepare for the Trail: how to hike responsibly, where to camp, what basic equipment to pack, and how to handle essential issues such as food and sanitation.*

### Leave No Trace

As more and more people use the Trail and other backcountry areas, it becomes more important to learn to enjoy wild places without ruining them. The best way to do this is to understand and practice the principles of Leave No Trace, a seven-point ethic for enjoying the backcountry that applies to everything from a picnic outing to a long-distance expedition. For more information, visit the ATC's website at [www.appalachiantrail.org/LNT](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/LNT) and [www.lnt.org](http://www.lnt.org).



#### How do I "Leave No Trace?"

1. *Plan ahead and prepare.* Evaluate the risks associated with your outing, identify campsites and destinations in advance, use maps and guides, and be ready for bad weather.
2. *Travel and camp on durable surfaces.* Stay on trails, and don't bushwhack short-cuts across switchbacks or other bends in the path. Keep off fragile trailside areas, such as bogs or alpine zones. Camp in designated spots, such as shelters and existing campsites, so that unspoiled areas aren't trampled and denuded. See p. 14 "where are the restrooms?" for more details about disposing of human waste.
3. *Dispose of waste properly.* Bury or pack out excrement not deposited in privies, including pet droppings. Pack out all trash and food waste, including that left behind by others. Don't bury trash or food, and don't try to burn packaging materials in campfires.
4. *Leave what you find.* Don't take flowers or other sensitive natural resources. Don't disturb artifacts such as native American arrowheads or the stone walls and cellar holes of historical woodland homesteads.

5. *Minimize campfire impacts.* Campfires are enjoyable, but they also create the worst visual and ecological impact of any backcountry camping practice. If possible, cook on a backpacking stove instead of a fire. Where fires are permitted, build them only in established fire rings, and don't add rocks to an existing ring. Keep fires small. Burn only dead and downed wood that can be broken by hand—leave axes and saws at home. Never leave your campfire unattended, and drown it when you leave.
6. *Respect wildlife.* Don't feed or disturb wildlife. Store food properly to avoid attracting bears, varmints, and rodents. If you bring a pet, keep it leashed.
7. *Be considerate of other visitors.* Limit overnight groups to ten or fewer; 25 on day trips. Minimize noise and intrusive behavior. Share shelters and other facilities. Be considerate of Trail neighbors. Carry and use cell phones out of sight and sound of other visitors.

### Camping

If you've planned something longer than a day-hike, now is the time to anticipate where you might spend the night once you're on the Trail. On most sections, you have two basic choices: staying in a shelter or pitching a tent.

#### Where can I find shelters?

More than 270 backcountry shelters are located along the Appalachian Trail at varying intervals. A typical shelter, sometimes called a "lean-to," has an overhanging roof, a wooden floor and three walls and is open to the elements on one side. Most are near a creek or spring, and many have a privy nearby. Most shelters are available on a first-come, first-served basis. They are intended for individual hikers, not big groups. If you're planning a group hike, plan to camp out. Many shelters are near good campsites for tenting.

#### Do I ever need to make reservations at shelters?

In most places, you cannot make reservations. But, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park in Tennessee/North Carolina requires backpackers to have reservations at shelters (and a backcountry permit). Long-distance hikers are exempt from the reservation requirement but must have a permit. Changes to the reservation system were being considered in 2011; be sure to check the latest information at [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org) and [www.nps.gov/grsm](http://www.nps.gov/grsm) a couple of months before you leave for your trip. More details can be found on pages 22-23.

#### So, why stay at a shelter?

First, shelters are the best places to stay dry in wet weather; they fill up fast when it rains. Second, they are often a good place to meet and talk with other hikers, and most have privies and water sources nearby. But, third and more impor-

tantly, staying at shelters reduces hiker impact on the Trail environment and is a good Leave No Trace practice. It concentrates use in a relatively small area. Please be considerate: keep the grounds and fire pits litter-free, don't cut down trees, and don't carve or write your name in the shelter.

### **Should I carry a tent?**

Yes. You should always carry a tent or tarp in case the shelters are full or you find yourself behind schedule and can't make it to the shelter before dusk.

### **Where can I pitch a tent?**

Tenting regulations vary, so you'll need to check guidebooks for the area where you'll be hiking. In heavily used or fragile areas, you are usually required to use designated tentsites (often associated with shelter sites) in order to concentrate use and minimize impacts. In some areas, "dispersed camping" is allowed, but this method requires a good working knowledge of Leave No Trace practices. At a minimum, camp out of sight of the trail, if possible, and at least 200 feet away from any water sources. On the A.T. in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park or "smokies," tenting is not allowed except at the Birch Spring Gap camp site. (Those who meet the Park's definition of "thru-hikers" may tent in the immediate vicinity of the shelters when they are full.) See "Special Situations," p. 22 for more information.

### **Can I find my own campsite?**

In many areas, including the national forests of the Virginias and the southern Appalachians, "dispersed camping" is allowed. Dispersed camping means you can choose your own place to camp, but it carries with it a special responsibility of leaving no trace: you must be more careful to minimize your impact in pristine areas. In pristine areas away from designated sites, choose a site with no sign of previous use. Avoid places that show the beginnings of frequent use—those still have a chance to recover if left alone. Set up tents on durable surfaces, such as dead leaves or grass, well apart from each other and at least 70 paces from water. Avoid trampling plants. The ATC encourages hikers to use designated sites whenever possible.

### **Should I build a fire?**

Leave No Trace principles encourage you to go without a fire. Use a backpacking stove instead. Campfires create the worst visual and ecological impact of any backcountry camping practice. Building fire rings pockmarks pristine woodlands with blackened rocks, piles of ash and charcoal, and unburned wood. Vegetation disappears and soil packs down around the fire ring. Soil becomes sterile, which retards plant recovery. Hikers trample vegetation while looking for wood, and, when they find it, remove woody debris critical to a healthy ecosystem.

If you do intend to build a fire, check your A.T. guidebooks for fire restrictions along the Trail; some areas do not permit fires at all. Keep in mind that forest fires are always a potential hazard along the A.T.

Where fires are permitted, build them only in established fire rings. Don't add rocks to an existing ring. Keep fires small. Burn only dead and downed wood that can be broken by hand—leave saws and axes at home. Never leave a fire unattended, and never build a fire on a windy day.

Erase your campfire when you leave. Drown it with water, then stir the ashes. Feel for heat with your hand to ensure it is out. Remove unburned foil and plastic and pack them out. If you used an existing fire ring, scatter the ashes and camouflage the burned area with organic matter. Finally, scatter unused firewood you gathered in the forest.

### **Can I stay in a hostel or inn?**

Motels, B&Bs, and hostels tend to be clustered in towns near the Trail. Those towns may be up to 50 Trail miles apart at the northern and southern ends of the Trail, but are closer together in the middle regions. The best opportunities for "inn-to-inn" hiking on the A.T. can be found in Shenandoah National Park. Massachusetts and Connecticut have the highest concentration of B&Bs. A system of full-service huts can be found in the exceptionally rugged White Mountains of New Hampshire, but most are open only in summer. Contact the ATC for more information about "inn-to-inn" hikes. For up-to-date information about lodging and other services near the A.T., consult the *Appalachian Trail Thru-Hikers' Companion*, available from the ATC.

## **Equipment**

What you carry depends on how far you're going, where, and when. Camping and backpacking magazines may make it seem as if you're doomed unless you have the latest gear. But, new equipment for even an overnight hike can easily run \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more. Don't worry. You can plan a hike on the Appalachian Trail without bankrupting yourself in the backpacking store.

### **What should a day-hiker pack?**

Take time before you head out to pack the following items:

- Map and compass (learn to use them first!)
- Water (at least 1 quart per person, and 2–3 on longer hikes in hot weather)
- Warm clothing, raincoat, and hat
- Food (including extra high-energy snacks)
- First-aid kit, with blister treatments, pen and paper, and tweezers to remove ticks)
- Whistle (three blasts is the international signal for help)
- Garbage bag (to carry out trash)

- Sunglasses and sunscreen
- Blaze-orange hat or vest (in hunting season)
- Insect repellent (to deter biting insects and ticks which can carry Lyme disease)
- Trowel (to bury human and pet waste), toilet paper, hand sanitizer and sealable plastic bag
- Cell phone (expect areas of no reception)

On long day-hikes or in remote, rugged, or unfamiliar terrain, add:

- Flashlight (with extra batteries and bulb)
- Emergency shelter (such as heavy duty garbage bag or space blanket)
- Sharp knife
- Fire starter (a candle, for instance) and waterproof matches

### **What should a novice backpacker pack?**

If you're backpacking, we suggest you consult a good book for details about what to carry, or talk to an experienced hiker. We've listed some books inside the back cover. Renting gear or buying used equipment are low-cost options when you're first starting out.

Although we can't discuss gear in detail here, most A.T. backpackers carry the following items, in addition to the day-hike checklist and some method of treating water (see page 14). Some items can be shared with a partner to lighten the load:

- Shelter (a tent or tarp)
- Lightweight pot, cooking utensils
- Stove (a small backpacking model, with fuel) and windscreen
- Medium-sized backpack ("expedition-size" packs are usually overkill)
- A pack cover or large trash bag for rainy weather
- Sleeping pad (to insulate you from the cold ground)
- Sleeping bag of appropriate warmth for the season
- Food and clothing
- Rope or cord (50' to hang your food from animals)

### **Do I have the right clothing?**

Hope for the best weather; pack for the worst. Clothing to protect you from cold and rain is a must—even in midsummer and especially at higher elevations. Avoid cotton clothes, particularly in chilly, rainy weather, which can strike the mountains at any time of year. Wet cotton can be worse than nothing and can contribute to

hypothermia, a potentially fatal threat. Synthetic fabrics such as polypropylene and acrylic blends will help protect you against the dangers of hypothermia. Layer your clothes—a "wicking" shirt, synthetic fleece, and a coated nylon or "breathable" waterproof outer shell will keep you both warmer and drier than a single heavy overcoat in cold, damp weather.

Hiking will make you sweat, no matter the weather. Shedding thin layers enables you to regulate your body temperature more effectively than wearing a heavy coat.

### **What kind of footwear do I need?**

The most important thing is that shoes fit well and are broken-in. Nothing spoils the fun or ends a hike quicker than blistered feet. On a day-hike, broken-in tennis shoes can be a better choice than brand-new boots. When carrying a backpack or hiking on rocky terrain, more substantial hiking boots may be desirable, but some hikers walk the entire A.T. in running shoes or cross-trainers. Backpackers can expect their feet to swell; long-distance hikers should buy boots half a size too big to allow room for this.

### **Should I carry a cell phone?**

Many hikers carry cell phones for safety and emergencies. Be considerate of other visitors: carry and use cell phones out of sight and sound of other people. Keep them turned off until needed or left in a pocket on the "vibrate" or "silent" ringer setting.

Be self-reliant, whether carrying cell phones or not. Don't leave ill-prepared or engage in risky actions just because you have a cell phone to call for rescue. Remember that in many remote areas cell phone coverage is limited or nonexistent. Many people go to the out-of-doors to get away from technology. Please respect their desire for solitude and be discreet when using a cell phone.

## **Food, Water and Sanitation**

You should carry some kind of food and water on even the shortest A.T. hike, but anything longer than a short day-hike presents special considerations.

### **What sort of food should I take?**

If you're out for the day, you can pack along whatever foods you like best—even fresh vegetables and fruits. But since these spoil quickly and are heavy (due to their high water content), they're not good for backpacking trips. Whatever food you choose, be sure to pack out all your garbage, including items such as apple cores and orange peels. Don't burn garbage in a campfire; it rarely burns completely.

Backpackers generally carry dried foods such as pasta that they boil and prepare on their portable stoves. There's no need to carry more than a week's worth of food on most parts of the A.T. For hikes longer than a week, hikers typically leave

the Trail periodically to resupply in nearby towns. Some ship food parcels ahead to post offices, hostels, and businesses near the Trail; others buy food along the way. If you plan to do this, consult one of the books listed at the back of this booklet for addresses and locations.

Backpacking burns a lot of energy. Plan on a tasty diet of 3,000 to 4,000 calories a day, including high-energy snacks to eat while you're walking or during breaks. Thru-hikers may need to eat more—the typical male thru-hiker burns 5,000–7,000 calories a day. Backpacking food doesn't have to be expensive or specially prepared; many hikers get everything they need at the supermarket.

#### **What about water?**

Staying hydrated is an important part of safe hiking because it helps prevent both hypothermia and heat exhaustion. A.T. guidebooks and the *A.T. Data Book* list water sources. Usually these are springs or creeks, since rivers and ponds tend to be polluted. (Except in an emergency, please do not disturb nearby landowners with requests for food, water, or shelter.) Some sections of the Trail can be very dry during mid-summer, so plan carefully.

#### **Is the water safe?**

Plan on treating water in the backcountry. Drinking untreated water can make you vulnerable to a variety of water-borne diseases. Water that is clear, cold, and free-running and looks, smells, and tastes good may be contaminated. There are many different types of products available to treat water. Each has advantages and disadvantages, but it's important to carry something to reduce your chance of getting sick. Read the instructions and practice using whatever product you select before you are in the backcountry.

Equally important in staying healthy is proper hygiene. Just as many hikers get sick from inadequate hand-washing as from “bad” water. Use hand sanitizer whenever you defecate, and periodically wash hands with water and/or biodegradable soap (as little as possible, 200' away from water). When sharing food, do so in such a way that does not involve another person's hands touching your food.

#### **Where are the rest rooms?**

Few and far between. Many A.T. shelters have privies, but often you will need to “go in the woods.” Proper disposal of human (and pet) waste is not only a courtesy to other hikers, but is a vital Leave No Trace practice for maintaining healthy water supplies in the backcountry and an enjoyable hiking experience for others. No one should venture onto the A.T. without a trowel, used for digging a six- to eight-inch-deep “cathole” to bury waste. Bury feces at least 200 feet or 70 paces away from water, trails, or shelters. Use a stick to mix dirt with your waste, which hastens decomposition and discourages animals from digging it up. Used toilet paper should either be carried out in a sealed plastic bag or buried in your cathole. Hygiene products such as sanitary napkins should always be carried out.

## What to Expect on the Trail

# 3

*Expect the Trail to test you, both physically and mentally. Know your limits. Part of the joy of hiking the A. T. is learning to deal with and overcome its challenges, to feel resilient and self-sufficient in a wild, rough place that has few of the amenities of civilized life. Be prepared for the Trail's challenges and look forward to its many rewards.*

### Strenuous Climbs

Because most hikes start at the foot of a mountain, the first and last few miles of any hike are often the toughest. Ascents challenge your muscles and wind; descents challenge your knees and feet. Being in shape and having a good mental attitude go hand in hand. Even the best-made plans can be ruined if you're not in a position to enjoy where your physical efforts have taken you. Prepare yourself both physically and mentally, and be ready for what the Trail will throw at you.

#### **How fit should I be?**

Any physical edge you can bring to your trip will pay handsome dividends over the first few steep miles and help your attitude. Take a few training hikes, and get used to your boots and equipment. Identify non-essential items you can do without to reduce your pack weight. Work up to carrying a full pack gradually. The best preparation for A.T. backpacking is carrying a pack on the hilliest terrain you can find. If you live in very flat country, you're better off doing leg strengthening and aerobic training exercises.

#### **What pace should I set?**

On the first day of your hike, take it easy. Pace yourself on the first climbs. Hikers who overdo it always regret it the next morning—leg muscles simply will not stand up to such punishment. For longer hikes, allow two to three weeks to get into good shape. Going too far, too fast makes foot, knee, and leg problems far more likely.

## Fast-Changing Weather

Be prepared for sudden weather changes along the Appalachian Trail. This is particularly true of the higher elevations of the southern Appalachians, the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and the highest peaks in Maine - especially Katahdin. The Whites and Katahdin may be hit by snow during any month of the year. For ways to deal with weather-related health problems, see page 21-22.

### What do I need to know about lightning?

The odds of being struck by lightning are low, but you should take precautions. If a storm is coming, immediately leave exposed areas—an open ridge is no place to be during a thunderstorm. If you cannot enter a building or car, take shelter in a stand of smaller trees or in the forest. Boulders, rocky overhangs, and shallow caves offer no protection from lightning, which may actually flow through them along the ground after a strike. Tents and three-sided A.T. shelters may keep you dry, but they do not protect you from lightning. Avoid ski lifts, flagpoles, and powerline towers. Avoid clearings, the tallest trees, and solitary trees or rocks. If caught in the open, remove your pack, crouch with your feet close together, and put your hands over your ears. Do not hold a potential lightning rod, such as a fishing pole or metal hiking pole. If you are in water, get out. Disperse groups, so that not everyone is struck by a single bolt.

### Can I expect cold weather?

Sudden spells of “off-season” cold weather, hail, and even snow are common along many parts of the Trail. Winter-like weather often occurs in late spring or early fall in the southern Appalachians, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine.

A cold rain can be the most dangerous weather of all, because it can cause hypothermia (or “exposure”) even when conditions are well above freezing. Wind and rain chill the body so that its core temperature drops, and death occurs if the condition is not caught in time. Avoid hypothermia by dressing in layers of synthetic clothing, eating well, staying hydrated, and knowing when to hole up in a warm sleeping bag in a tent or shelter. See page 21-22 for tips on prevention and treatment.

### When is heat a problem?

Humid conditions are common along the Trail, in summer with the highest temperatures in the mid-Atlantic and low-elevation areas of Virginia southward. Water may be scarce, sweat does not evaporate well in humid conditions, and many hikers face the danger of heat stroke and heat exhaustion if they haven’t taken proper precautions such as drinking lots of water and replenishing electrolytes.

## Trail Markings

The Appalachian Trail is marked for daytime travel in both directions, using a system of paint “blazes” on trees, posts, and rocks. Above the treeline, and where snow or fog may obscure paint marks, posts and rock piles called “cairns” are used to identify the route.

### What is a “blaze”?

A blaze is a two- by six-inch vertical rectangle of paint in a prominent place along a trail. White-paint blazes mark the Appalachian Trail itself. Side trails and intersecting trails use blue blazes or other colors. Two blazes, one above the other, signal an obscure turn, route change, incoming side trail, or other situation that requires you to be especially alert. Where offset double blazes are used, turn in the direction of the top blaze.

### What if I don’t see blazes?

Distance between blazes varies. In some areas, blazes are frequently within sight. In areas managed as wilderness you may encounter only four or five per mile. Historic areas such as Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, or where the Trail follows the Chesapeake and Ohio Towpath in Maryland may have even fewer blazes. If the frequency of blazing suddenly changes and you haven’t seen a blaze, retrace your steps until you locate a blaze. Then, check to make sure you haven’t missed a turn. Often a glance backwards will reveal blazes meant for hikers traveling in the opposite direction. Reroutes (called “relocations”) completed since the latest edition of the maps and guidebooks will not appear in publications, but may be referenced on the ATC’s website.

### Does the Trail route ever change?

Yes. Although 99 percent of the Trail is located on protected public lands, each year small sections are rerouted to provide better scenery, better treadway or to move the Trail away from threats. Hence, the Trail’s total length changes each year. When blazing differs from your map, follow the blazes.

## Wilderness Areas

These special places, designated by Congress, are intended to be kept in their wild state, “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” (Wilderness Act of 1964)

Wilderness designation provides the broadest and most permanent protection for A.T. lands. To keep these places wild and pristine, they are managed so that observable human influence is minimal. That means that logging, mining, and the use of motorized vehicles is prohibited, as well as construction of roads, power lines, cell towers, and other intrusive developments.

That also means that the A.T. itself is intentionally built and maintained in a primitive manner in keeping with wilderness values. There are far fewer blazes—only four or five per mile. Signs are inconspicuous and there are fewer man-made improvements such as bridges and privies. Trail maintainers are required to use hand tools to cut down trees and clear vegetation, and typically must carry their tools long distances.

## Safety

The Appalachian Trail is safer than most places, but a few crimes of violence have occurred. Awareness is one of your best lines of defense. Be aware of what you are doing, where you are, and to whom you are talking.

### How can I protect myself?

Stay aware of what's going on around you and report all incidents. In this way, hikers can be a more effective "community deterrent." Be prudent and cautious without allowing common sense to slip into paranoia. Follow these rules of thumb:

- *Don't hike alone.* If you are by yourself and encounter a stranger who makes you feel uncomfortable, say you are with a group that is behind you. Be creative. If in doubt, move on. Even a partner is no guarantee of safety; pay attention to your instincts about other people.
- *Leave your hiking itinerary and timetable with someone at home.* Be sure your contacts at home know your "Trail name," if you use one. Check in regularly and establish a procedure to follow if you fail to check in. On short hikes, provide your contacts with the numbers of the land-managing agencies for the area of your hike. On extended hikes, provide the ATC's number.
- *Be wary of strangers.* Be friendly, but cautious. Don't tell strangers your plans. Avoid people who act suspiciously, seem hostile, or are intoxicated.
- *Don't camp near roads.*
- *Dress conservatively to avoid unwanted attention.*
- *Carrying firearms is strongly discouraged.* They are illegal in some areas, they could be turned against you, or result in an accidental shooting, and they are extra weight.
- *Eliminate opportunities for theft.* Don't bring jewelry. Keep wallets and money on your person rather than in your pack or tent. Leaving a pack unattended at trailheads is risky even when it is hidden, and may attract wildlife in search of food. Even at shelters, don't leave your gear unless you have a friend who can look after it. Don't leave valuables or equipment (especially in sight) in vehicles parked at Trailheads.
- *Use the Trail registers, the notebooks stored at most shelters.* Sign in using your given

name and "trail name," if you have one, leave a note, and report any suspicious activities. If someone needs to locate you, or if a serious crime has been committed along the Trail, the first place authorities will look is in the registers.

- *Report any crime or harassment to the local authorities and the ATC.* More information can be found at [www.appalachiantrail.org/incidents](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/incidents).

### What's the best safety tip?

Trust your gut. Visit the ATC's website for more tips.

### Is hunting permitted on Trail lands?

Hunting is allowed along more than half of the Appalachian Trail's length, including some part of each of the 14 Trail states. During hunting season, make sure you can be seen and heard. Wear a blaze-orange cap and vest and/or backpack cover at all times, including in and around camp. During deer season, avoid wearing white. During turkey season, avoid clothing that is blue, red, or white. For more information on when and where hunting is allowed, visit our Web site, [www.appalachiantrail.org/hunting](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/hunting).

## Etiquette

### What is good etiquette on the A.T.?

Thank volunteer trail maintainers when you encounter them working, and write words of appreciation in shelter registers. If you notice a trail-maintenance problem, contact the local trail-maintaining club or the ATC right away. Learn and follow Leave No Trace guidelines, which include carrying a map and other items so you are prepared in an emergency or can help someone else in trouble. Carry a plastic grocery bag so you can carry out extra trash. Arrive at shelters before dark, so you don't wake up other hikers. If you're an early riser, be quiet in the mornings around other people.

### What is good etiquette in town?

If you've been out for more than a couple of days, try to wash up in the woods (always 200' away from natural water sources) or find a shower in town. Be aware that after a few weeks on the Trail, you, your pack, and your boots may have acquired a stink you probably have become immune to. In town and on the Trail, consider yourself an ambassador for the Appalachian Trail.

### Can people ride or drive on the Trail?

Motor vehicles are illegal on all off-road sections of the Appalachian Trail. Bicycles and mountain bikes are not permitted except where the A.T. runs along the C&O

Canal towpath in Maryland, the Virginia Creeper Trail in Virginia, and in certain Pennsylvania state gamelands. Horses and pack animals are prohibited except in parts of the Smokies and at a handful of crossings by designated horse trails.

### **Can I bring my dog?**

Dogs are prohibited in Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Baxter State Park and must be leashed in many other areas. Required or not, leashing at all times is strongly recommended to minimize their impacts on wildlife and people. Dogs are not allowed in the Bear Mountain Zoo in New York, but an alternate route is available. Keep dogs out of springs and shelters and away from other hikers, their food, and their gear. The ATC's Web site, [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org), offers more details about hiking with dogs.

## **Wildlife**

Seeing wildlife is one of the reasons to hike the Trail. It is not uncommon to see deer, moose, wild turkeys, bears, foxes, and a wide variety of small mammals, reptiles, and birds. But, wildlife can pose problems for hikers, too.

### **Will I encounter snakes?**

Poisonous and nonpoisonous snakes are widespread along the Trail in warm weather, but they will usually be passive. Please don't kill them! Watch where you step and where you put your hands.

### **What other creatures are problems for people?**

Ticks, which carry Lyme disease, are a risk on any hike; check yourself for ticks daily. Carry tweezers to remove them. More information can be found on the ATC's website. Mosquitoes and other stinging insects may also be a problem. Porcupines, skunks, raccoons, and squirrels are common and occasionally visit shelters and well-established camping areas after dark; if they smell your food, they'll eat it if they can! Mice are permanent residents at most shelters, and may carry diseases.

### **What about bears?**

Black bears live along almost all parts of the Trail. Black bears are the only species of bear found in the eastern U.S.

While attacks on humans are rare, a startled bear or a female with cubs may react aggressively. The best way to avoid an encounter while you are hiking is to make noise by whistling, talking, etc., to give the bear a chance to move away before you get close enough to make it feel threatened. If you encounter a bear and it does not move away, you should back off, speaking calmly and firmly, and avoid making eye contact. Do not run or "play dead" even if a bear makes a "bluff charge."

The best defense against bears in camp is preparing and storing food properly.

Cook and eat meals 200 feet away from your tent or shelter, so food odors do not linger. Hang your food, cookware, toothpaste, personal hygiene items, and even water bottles (if you use drink mixes in them) in a sturdy bag from a tree that is 200 feet from your sleeping and cooking areas. Choose a limb 18 feet high. The bag should be 12 feet from the ground, six feet from the limb above and six feet from the trunk of the tree. Allow at least half an hour or so to locate a suitable tree and throw your rope successfully. Keep in mind black bears are crafty climbers and good reachers. Bear canisters also provide an effective alternative for food storage. Where bear boxes, poles, or food hoist cable systems are provided, use them. Never leave trash in bear boxes. Never feed bears or leave food behind for them. That simply increases the risks to you and the hikers who follow behind you.

In recent years there have been reports of bears on the A.T. ripping open tents and even grabbing a sleeping bag or bivy sack and attempting to drag it off with a hiker inside. A bear that enters a campsite or cooking area should be considered predatory. Yelling, making loud noises, throwing rocks, etc., may frighten it away, however, you should be prepared to fight back if necessary.

If you are actually attacked by a bear, you should fight for all you are worth with anything at hand—rocks, sticks, fists.

## **Health and First-Aid Issues**

### **What safety equipment should I carry?**

Preparation is the key for a healthy trip. Choose clothing and equipment carefully, and make sure you have adequate food, water, and shelter available. Carry a basic first-aid kit that can treat scrapes, blisters, sprains, and aches. Always carry first-aid information with you and make sure someone in your group has first-aid training.

### **How do I prevent blisters?**

Blisters are one of the most common ailments suffered by hikers. Break in new boots before you begin your hike. Try to keep your feet dry while hiking. When you stop for breaks, take your shoes and socks off to air out your feet; change socks. Don't wait for a blister to develop. As soon as you feel any discomfort, place duct tape, moleskin, or a blister-care product over areas of developing soreness.

### **How do I prevent hypothermia?**

Stay well hydrated, even when it's cold. Wear layers of warm, windproof, and water-repellent clothing in chilly, wet weather. Wearing a fleece cap or balaclava conserves valuable body heat lost through your head. Always keep dry, spare clothing in your pack, and take care to keep your sleeping bag and matches dry. Remember that wind chill or body wetness, particularly when aggravated by fatigue, dehydration, and hunger, can rapidly drain body heat. Shivering, lethargy, mental slowing, and

confusion are early symptoms. Left untreated, hypothermia can kill you.

To treat hypothermia, immediately seek shelter and warm hiker's entire body by putting him in a sleeping bag or wrapping hiker in warm clothing or space blanket. Offer warm liquids.

### **How do I prevent heat emergencies?**

During summer months, dehydration can occur on any part of the Trail. Be especially careful in low-elevation areas where temperatures are higher and areas with considerable elevation gain and loss. On hot and humid days, it's best to keep your mileage low, and take a break during the warmest part of the day. Remember to drink plenty of water throughout the day and don't wait until you feel thirsty to drink. Make sure your urine stays clear; dark yellow urine is a sign of dehydration. Also remember that while hydration is important, there comes a point where water alone may not be enough. To maintain a proper balance of electrolytes, include fruit or fruit juice or a very diluted sports drink in your pack.

## Permits and Fees

The Appalachian Trail is open for all to enjoy. No fees, memberships, or paid permits are required for walking on the Trail itself. However, the A.T. passes through numerous state and national parks, a few of which require their own permits and fees.

### **Where are permits required?**

Permits are required to camp in the backcountry in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Shenandoah National Park. Baxter State Park and the Smokies require reservations for overnight camping; different regulations govern thru-hikers in these areas.

### **Where are fees charged?**

Fees are charged to enter many parks by car, in some areas on some national forests, and to stay at certain shelters and overnight sites in heavy-use areas.

## Special Situations

### **What are the special situations in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park?**

Pets are prohibited in the backcountry; private kennels can board and shuttle dogs around the park for long-distance hikers. Contact the ATC for more information. Backpackers using the A.T. or its side trails in the Smokies must obtain a permit to stay overnight and are required to reserve space at designated shelters and camp sites. All except long-distance hikers must obtain the permit by mail or in person from a park ranger.

A.T. thru-hikers (defined by the park as those beginning at least 50 miles north or south of the park boundaries and continuing at least 50 miles beyond the other side) need a permit that allows them seven consecutive nights and eight days to traverse the park. Those are available at Fontana Dam, North Carolina, (southern end) or from Bluff Mtn. Outfitters in Hot Springs, North Carolina, (35 miles north). Only three spaces in shelters along the Trail are generally reserved for thru-hikers from March 15 through June 15. Other thru-hikers must yield their bunks and tent outside the shelters if additional hikers, with shelter permits, arrive. Only thru-hikers with permits are allowed to pitch tents outside a shelter. No more than one night may be spent at any one shelter. For permits and additional information, visit the park's website at [www.nps.gov/grsm](http://www.nps.gov/grsm) or call 865.436.1231 between 8 a.m and 6 p.m. Eastern time daily. Be advised that changes to the reservation system were being considered in 2011.

### **What are the special situations in Shenandoah National Park?**

Backcountry camping permits are required for backpackers. Northbound thru-hikers can obtain permits at the self-registration kiosk near the park entrance on Skyline Drive, 0.8 mile north of Rockfish Gap. Southbound thru-hikers can obtain permits at the self-registration station 0.1 mile south of the sign marking the park's northern boundary. There is no charge for hikers entering the park via the Appalachian Trail. A \$15 per vehicle fee is charged drivers on Skyline Drive. Visit [www.nps.gov/shen](http://www.nps.gov/shen) for information on permits and regulations, or call 540.999.3500. Dogs are required to be on a leash at all times in the park, and are prohibited on some trails other than the A.T.

### **What are the special situations in the White Mountain National Forest?**

The high, exposed peaks of New Hampshire's White Mountain National Forest offer a combination of spectacular scenery, difficult terrain, and severe weather. Because of these factors and those mentioned below, advance planning is critically important here.

The White Mountain National Forest and its many miles above treeline contain some of the most fragile ecosystems along the entire A.T. Twice as many people visit this area as all the rest of the Trail combined. To limit resource impacts of so many visitors, backcountry use is concentrated at developed overnight sites (campsites, shelters, and huts) with adequate water and sanitation facilities. Camping is prohibited in "Forest Protection Areas" (FPAs). They are designated to protect heavily used areas from overuse. FPAs are found above treeline, around shelters, huts, and all other places where overcamping could be a problem (roads, ponds, fragile ecosystems, etc.).

Unique to the White Mountains are a system of eight huts operated by the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) along the A.T., seven of which provide dinner, lodging and breakfast during the summer and fall season. Advance reservations are recommended; A.T. thru-hikers are given member discounts. A work-for-stay option is available on limited basis for thru-hikers. There are also shelters and campsites in the White Mountains, some of which have a fee. A few, especially

across the Presidential range, are as much as a mile off the A.T., and require a steep climb off the ridge. Know your options ahead of time!

For more information, read the “Thru-Hiker’s Guide to Facilities in the White Mountains,” on AMC’s Web site at [www.outdoors.org](http://www.outdoors.org).

### **What are the special situations in Baxter State Park?**

Baxter Park is a wilderness park generally open only from May 15 to October 15. Between those dates, the A.T. above treeline is frequently closed in May, early June and October due to winter-like conditions, and the park is at capacity in July and August. Park personnel exercise a high degree of control over the number of persons entering the park and their activities. Dogs are not allowed. A.T. hikers should read the park regulations before coming to the park. Because the gates close when the park reaches capacity, day users should plan to be at the park entrance by dawn to be assured of a parking spot, especially on weekends.

The A.T. up Katahdin known as “The Hunt Trail,” typically opens by May 31, later in years of heavy snow. Like other trails above treeline, severe weather can close it in any month of the year, but especially in September and October. Be forewarned: It is the toughest five miles on the entire A.T. and should not be attempted unless you are in good health. Those with fear of heights may be unnerved above treeline.

All persons entering Baxter Park, by car or on foot, must register at one of the three entry gates or at the nearest campground. Overnight hikers must have an advance reservation at a campsite and pay a fee (\$10 per person/per night in 2010). Individual hikers arriving on foot on a hike of 100 miles or more (including northbound thru-hikers, but generally not southbound thru-hikers or flip-flop thru-hikers) may stay at The Birches without advance reservations, space permitting.

For more information, visit Baxter State Park’s Web site [www.baxterstatepark-authority.com](http://www.baxterstatepark-authority.com), or call 207.723.5140. Two of their free publications, “A Thru-Hiker’s Guide to Baxter State Park Regulations and Policies” and “Katahdin Thru-hiker Alert” are available from the park or the ATC.

### **What are the special issues facing groups hiking on the A.T.?**

Groups are welcome on the Trail, but they need to do a few additional things:

- Take particular care to Leave No Trace (see page 8); this is vital because groups have a more concentrated impact on paths, campsites, and facilities.
- Plan to use tents and not shelters. Shelters are not designated for groups.
- Limit group size to no more than ten, or 25 on day hikes.
- Voluntary group registration programs are in place on the A.T. in Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. Visit [www.matc.org](http://www.matc.org), [www.outdoors.org](http://www.outdoors.org) and [www.greenmountainclub.org](http://www.greenmountainclub.org) for more information.

## Thru-Hiking

# 4

*A thru-hike is one of the most exciting and demanding outdoor adventures that America has to offer. Although the journey requires grueling physical effort, a willingness to endure deprivation and sometimes pain for extended periods, it offers an immensely rewarding and unforgettable experience.*

### **Who can attempt a thru-hike?**

Anyone in good health who can walk has the potential to complete a thru-hike. Being in good physical shape and having well-chosen, lightweight gear that you know how to use are certainly advantages, especially in the critical first few weeks of your hike. Knowing what to expect and being prepared is important, too. But an ability to enjoy the moment, a sense of humor in the face of frequent unexpected challenges, and a driving passion to complete the hike are perhaps greater predictors of success. Thru-hikes have been completed by those ranging from age 6 to age 81, and by people with a variety of disabilities, from all walks of life.

### **How long does it take?**

On average, a thru-hike takes just under six months. Most thru-hikers take between five and seven months to walk the trail, although four or eight months is not uncommon. Most of the longer hikes belong to “flip-flopsters.”

### **When should I start a thru-hike?**

Most thru-hikers start their trips between the end of February and mid April at Springer Mountain in Georgia. Most finish at Katahdin in Maine between August and early October. Northbound thru-hikers should plan to reach Katahdin well before October 15 because of weather conditions and Baxter Park regulations.

Each year, hikers start earlier and earlier in an attempt to “beat the crowd” of more than a thousand fellow “northbounders.” However, many are caught off guard by cold temperatures, snow, and ice in the high mountains of the southern Appalachians. The high elevations create conditions comparable to southern New England, with below-freezing temperatures and snow occurring well into April, occasionally even May. In March, daylight hours are short, and snow and ice can slow or halt your progress. If the snow is deep enough, you may even have to leave the Trail and wait for the snow to melt. Being prepared for these conditions means carrying a heavier pack. Unless you are not deterred by several weeks of winter hiking, it’s best

to wait at least until the end of March. Leaving then you'll probably still see some snow, especially in the Smokies, but you'll see spring a lot sooner.

### **What about starting in Maine?**

A few thru-hikers start in June or early July at Katahdin and finish in Georgia in November or December. Southbound thru-hikers must wait until the A.T. up Katahdin opens, usually by June 1<sup>st</sup>, but sometimes later. June starters can expect swarms of black flies and high stream crossings in Maine, but waiting much longer means additional weeks of winter hiking on the southern end. Hiking southbound is considered the toughest way to hike the Trail: you should be in seriously good shape before attempting this. A "southbounder" starts with the toughest mountain on the entire Trail on his first day, and spends his or her first month in the hardest state on the Trail.

### **What if I want to avoid crowds, cold weather, and tough hiking in the beginning?**

Then you might want to consider an "alternative" thru-hike. The most common variations are called "flip-flops." For example, starting in the middle of the Trail and hiking north allows you begin later than the northbounders but sooner than the southbounders. You can also start in easier terrain, and set off in spring weather. A word of advice: Get tips from the early northbounders who pass you in the beginning, but don't attempt to keep up with them. You'll set yourself up for injury.

Don't overlook the aspects that some consider major drawbacks, though. You'll be missing out on the dramatic finish on Katahdin, and you probably won't feel as much a part of the A.T. thru-hike community. (Couples may mind this less.) Some may not consider you a "real" thru-hiker, but the ATC, the body that officially records thru-hike completions, does. In fact, the ATC applauds "alternative" thru-hikers for helping reduce impacts caused by crowds of northbounders on the southern end of the Trail.

The ATC's Web site can give you information about this and other "alternative" thru-hikes.

### **Do I have to register?**

No. There's no formal registration system. But, let friends and family know where you are, what your itinerary is, and your "Trail name."

### **Do I need to carry maps?**

The Trail is well-marked, so many thru-hikers are tempted not to carry maps. In an emergency, maps are your best source of information on how to get off the Trail and find help. Maps also help you get a sense of where you are in relation to the land around you and can be helpful for locating water sources.

### **What books should I buy or carry?**

See the list of books and guidebooks inside the back cover.

### **How detailed should my plan be?**

Flexibility in your schedule is essential. Ignoring the warning signs of pain and forcing yourself to stick to a detailed, overambitious plan can lead to injuries that may end your hike. Lyme disease, if not treated promptly, can take you off the Trail for weeks, or worse. Snow or heavy rain can create conditions that will slow you down considerably. Allow space in your schedule for the unexpected.

### **What are my chances of finishing a thru-hike?**

One in four thru-hikers who start from Springer Mountain makes it all the way to Katahdin in Maine. Many quit early on, simply coming to a realization that a thru-hike was not what they anticipated. The trek may be harder than they expected, or they may be homesick. Others go through they money faster than expected and run out. Some are taken off the trail by injury, illness or a family emergency back home. But those with an optimistic outlook and a passionate commitment to the goal of finishing the Trail have a good chance of finishing. Attitude is far more important than physical ability or fancy gear.

### **How can I know if I'm up for the challenge?**

The smartest thing you can do is to take a practice hike that includes at least two nights out on terrain that approximates the part of the Trail you plan to start on. This will help you evaluate gear, physical conditioning, and mental readiness.

### **How much does it cost?**

A fair amount of money—typically about \$3,000 to \$5,000—to undertake a 2,175-mile, five- to seven-month hike, not counting \$1,000 to \$2,000 or more for gear. In budgeting for your hike, you'll also need to factor in expenses that will accrue back home, lost wages, and health insurance.

### **What costs so much?**

Most of your money will be spent in town. Few thru-hikers can resist the temptation of restaurant food, motel beds, and hot showers after days of deprivation. You will also need money for supplies, laundry, postage, equipment repair, and equipment replacement.

### **What about maildrops?**

Maildrops are not essential. You can either buy food along the way, pick up pre-sent packages, or some combination of the two. Another trick is continually forwarding a "bounce box." Sometimes hostels or businesses located close to the Trail and open seven days a week are more convenient than post offices for sending packages. For more details on choosing which method to use and how to mail packages to yourself along the Trail, see the ATC's *Thru-Hike Planner* or the ATC's Web site.

### **How do I find a partner?**

If you're starting a northbound thru-hike in March or April, you'll have plenty of

companionship from other thru-hikers. But, having a partner to plan your hike with and start out with can make the process more fun and less intimidating. Unless you and your partner are long-time friends, however, it's best not to make a commitment to stay together more than a few days or weeks. Chances are, you'll soon find others whose pace and temperament are a better match. Appalachian Trail Conservancy members may place ads for hiking partners in the *A.T. Journeys* at no charge. The following Web sites have a partners section or a forum where you can post a partner ad:

WhiteBlaze.net: [www.whiteblaze.net](http://www.whiteblaze.net)

TrailJournals.com: [www.trailjournals.com](http://www.trailjournals.com)

Trailplace: [www.trailplace.com](http://www.trailplace.com)

### **Are there alternatives to thru-hiking?**

Many hikers, unable to take six months off from their jobs, families, and financial responsibilities, walk the entire Trail in sections over a period of years. The advantage of section-hiking is that you can choose the best time of year to be in a particular area—fall in New England, spring in the South, Virginia when mountain laurel is blooming, and so on. You can set your own pace, take time to enjoy the scenery, and will not have to be consumed with “making miles” as many thru-hikers are. The disadvantage is that you have to walk yourself into shape each time.

### **What happens when I finish?**

The greatest rewards are personal ones—the memories, friendships, photographs, the sense of accomplishment, and the deeper appreciation of the eastern mountains. When you finish the entire Trail, either in one season or sections added together over the years, you become a 2,000-miler. Application forms are available on the ATC's Web site or by contacting the ATC. When you return the form, the ATC will send you a certificate of recognition and a “2,000-miler” rocker with an A.T. patch. Your name will be added to our roster of 2,000-milers. Forms are also available at Baxter State Park in Maine and Amicalola Falls State Park in Georgia.

### **Who is eligible to become a 2,000-miler?**

Anyone who has walked the entire A.T., whether as a section-hiker or thru-hiker, is recognized as a 2,000-miler. Our recognition policy does not consider sequence, direction, speed, or whether one carries a pack. More information is available on the ATC's Web site.

# The Appalachian Trail: State by State

# 5

## **Maine**

Throughout Maine, the A.T. is known for both its beauty and the ruggedness of its terrain. The Trail's northern terminus is located atop the spectacular mile-high Katahdin, the A.T.'s most challenging mountain. (See “Special Situations in Baxter State Park,” p. 24, for more information. Much of Maine is not recommended for novice hikers, especially backpackers; its more than 280 miles are considered the most difficult and remote of all 14 states. Even the strongest hiker may average only one mile an hour or less in places, where climbing, sliding and scrambling may be required. Bogs, streams, and lakes abound. While that makes the thrill of moose and loons sighting possible, it also makes for muddy, uneven, and slippery treadway. Fords of mountain streams can be difficult and potentially life-threatening when water is high. These conditions usually occur into June or after heavy rains. Often the only options are waiting for them to subside or back-tracking and finding a road to follow. At the Kennebec River, the widest unbridged river along the Trail, a free canoe service ferries A.T. users across. Forging the river is extremely dangerous, because the water level can rise rapidly and without warning. Swarms of black flies in June can make hiking almost unbearable; mosquitoes populate wet areas through the summer. The famed “100-mile wilderness” in the northern part of the route is crowded in summer months. Although remote, it is technically not a wilderness, but does traverse more than 100 miles between paved roads. Over the decades, availability of resupply has waxed and waned; check the latest edition of the *A.T. Thru-Hikers Companion* before planning a hike here.

## **New Hampshire**

The highlight of the A.T. in New Hampshire is the beautiful, rugged White Mountain National Forest, the dramatic scenery of which attracts more backcountry visitors than any other part of the Trail. Travel here requires intelligent planning and ample time; plan no more than five to eight miles per day. Be prepared for steep ascents and descents that require the use of your hands and, occasionally, the seat of your pants. Much of the Trail is above timberline, where

the temperature may change very suddenly; snow is possible in any season. The same severe weather conditions that prevent trees from growing on the high ridges also require a higher level of preparedness for a safe, successful hiking trip. Snow falls on Mt. Washington during every month of the year. High winds and dense fog are common. Most shelters and campsites charge a fee.

Between the White Mountains and the Vermont border, the Trail crosses broken terrain of alternating mountains and valleys. This area is noted for its fall foliage and is a good alternative to the crowds and steep scrambles of the Whites.

### **Vermont**

Between the Connecticut River and the Green Mountain National Forest, the Trail passes through high, rugged country with woods and overgrown farmlands. From “Maine Junction” (near U.S. 4) south, the A.T. follows about 100 miles of the famed “Long Trail” along the rugged crest of the Green Mountains.

The Trail approaches treeline at Killington and Stratton mountains, and parts feature strenuous ascents. But, in general, Vermont hiking crosses varied terrain, at lower to mid-range elevations with a fair amount of elevation gain and loss. It passes through forests of paper birch and white pine, wooded mountains, and farm valleys. Avoid Vermont trails in “mud season,” mid-April through Memorial Day. Hiking there in wet, sloppy conditions leads to serious Trail erosion.

### **Massachusetts**

The Trail here leads through the Berkshires. Pleasant stretches through wooded hills and valleys feature such outstanding peaks as Mt. Greylock and Mt. Everett, and the Trail passes through several small New England towns. Water is plentiful. Several summits and ledges provide views. Ascents, though sometimes steep, are seldom sustained.

### **Connecticut**

The route through the northwestern corner of Connecticut meanders across the worn-down remnants of a once-lofty mountain range. The Housatonic River Valley to the east and the Taconic Range to the west are particularly scenic, and one section of Trail near Falls Village is accessible for persons with disabilities. A few sections run along the banks of rivers. Hiking is mostly moderate, with steep, fairly challenging sections that are short in duration. Views are often pastoral.

### **New York and New Jersey**

Between Connecticut and the Kittatinny Range in New Jersey, the Trail is much less secluded—you can see the Manhattan skyline from some spots! The section through Harriman–Bear Mountain State Park, where in 1923 the very first new section of the Appalachian Trail was completed, gets a lot of visitors. The route along the Kittatinny Range in New Jersey is rugged and more remote, with abundant wildlife, including an active bear population. Elevation changes are generally moderate and vary from relatively flat and gentle to short, steep, rocky

itches. Other sections cross bogs and wetlands, including a National Wildlife Refuge that features a wide spectrum of bird species. Natural water sources are scarce and sometimes polluted. The Trail crosses the Delaware River at the picturesque Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

### **Pennsylvania**

The A.T. follows ridges of mountains east of the Alleghenies to the Susquehanna River in a long section of Trail notorious for its foot-bruising, boot-destroying rocks. The Trail north of the Susquehanna is characterized by long, flat, rocky ridges broken by fairly strenuous climbs in and out of gaps. About ten miles beyond the Susquehanna, the Trail crosses the Cumberland Valley. South of the Cumberland Valley, many sections are mostly gentle, making it one of the easiest sections of the Trail. This section crosses many roads, and some shelters are near roads, where scattered crime problems make extra safety awareness a good idea. Pennsylvania can be oppressively hot in summer, and water may be scarce. The ATC has a field office along the Trail in Boiling Springs.

### **Maryland and West Virginia**

The A.T. in Maryland follows a 40-mile route along the backbone of South Mountain, a north-south ridge that extends from Pennsylvania to the Potomac River. This section is great for three- or four-day trips and is easy by A.T. standards. There are many pretty views and convenient access from nearby towns and highways. It’s also a favorite with Scouts seeking the merit badge for a 50-mile hike.

The A.T. enters West Virginia at Harpers Ferry by way of a footbridge over the Potomac River. Only 2.6 miles lie in West Virginia here, passing within just a quarter-mile of the ATC headquarters, then crossing the Shenandoah River, ascending the Blue Ridge at Loudoun Heights, and straddling the Virginia–West Virginia border for the next 20 miles. Historic and scenic, Harpers Ferry is served by Amtrak and commuter trains that run into Washington, D.C. It makes an ideal location to start or end a hike. (The Trail also straddles the Virginia–West Virginia border several hundred miles farther south, near the New River.)

### **Virginia**

One-fourth of the Appalachian Trail lies in Virginia. It varies from easy hiking to very difficult rock scrambling, from busy national parks to isolated wilderness areas. North of Front Royal, the Trail follows a long, low ridge, including a notoriously strenuous “roller-coaster” section south of Snickers Gap. Shenandoah National Park, with 107 miles of well-graded and well-maintained trail, is excellent for beginning hikers and is noted for its many vistas and abundant wildlife. Side trails provide excellent opportunities for one- or two-day circuit hikes. Nearby Skyline Drive has many waysides and concessions for resupply stops. The park gets very busy during weekends and in late October, during peak foliage-changing season. Park facilities close from late November through March; when snow shuts down Skyline Drive, the entire park may become inaccessible by car.

# Resources

South of Shenandoah, the A.T. occasionally crosses the Blue Ridge Parkway. The treadway is well-graded, but includes a number of 2,000- and 3,000-foot climbs. Mature timber, high summits, and spectacular wilderness can be found in the George Washington National Forest, north of Roanoke. The Trail then leaves the parkway and travels west through the Jefferson National Forest, crossing a series of ridges and valleys. Throughout the Mt. Rogers National Recreation area in southwest Virginia, the floral displays of rhododendron and azalea in June are outstanding. The Mt. Rogers high country, an area of spectacular highland meadows, routinely receives snowfall from October to May, making it considerably colder, wetter, and snowier than other areas of Virginia. At the southern border is the quintessential “Trail town,” Damascus, Virginia.

## Tennessee and North Carolina

From Damascus, the Trail follows segments of mountain ranges in the Cherokee National Forest, ascending to the high country of the North Carolina–Tennessee state line, and the highest mountains along the Trail—several above 6,000 feet. Here lie the Roan Highlands, noted for their rhododendron gardens and the panoramic views of the open grassy “balds” such as Hump Mountain. The A.T. continues southward along the state line and through the Pisgah National Forest.

The Great Smoky Mountains National Park, with more than 70 miles of crestline Trail, features the highest elevations of the entire footpath, well above 6,000 feet. Permits are required for overnight stays; unless you are thru-hiking, you need reservations to use the shelters.

South of the Smokies come the long climbs of the Nantahala National Forest, with 4,000-foot gaps and 5,000-foot peaks. Cheoah Bald offers panoramic views of western North Carolina. The variety of forest growth and the beauty of the flowering shrubs, along with the many spectacular views, make this entire section of Trail memorable.

Like the White Mountains of New Hampshire, hikers on the high ridges and balds of the southern Appalachians can encounter dangerous weather conditions. Lightning is a particular danger in summer. Sudden snow storms are common as late as April, and can strand hikers.

## Georgia

The A.T. in Georgia traverses the Chattahoochee National Forest. This area features rugged wilderness hiking, and the Trail’s southern terminus, Springer Mountain. Hiking includes many steep ups and downs, but the Trail is lower here, mostly along ridges of between 3,000 and 4,000 feet. Those tempted by the southerly latitude to plan spring-break hikes in March will often be disappointed to find cold rain, sleet, and snow. The Georgia section is crowded with thru-hikers in March and early April, and spring-break crowds make this even worse. Heat and humidity can be oppressive in July and August.

## Appalachian Trail Visitor Center

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy’s A.T. Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia is open seven days a week from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Find more information about the center at [www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org).

## Recommended Publications

### DAY-HIKES

*Best of the A.T.: Day Hikes* (several hikes in each Trail state, no maps)  
A.T. Maps

### OVERNIGHT HIKES

A.T. Maps  
*Best of the A.T.: Overnight Hikes* (selected hikes along the entire A.T., no maps)

### EXTENDED HIKES/SECTION-HIKES

Guide sets (guidebook and maps)  
*A.T. Thru-Hikers’ Companion* (details on shelters and services)  
*A.T. Data Book* (optional, handy for mileage calculations)

### THRU-HIKE

*A.T. Thru-hikers’ Companion*  
A.T. Maps  
*A.T. Data Book* (optional, handy for mileage calculations)

### PREPARATION — GENERAL

*The Appalachian Trail Hiker*, by Frank and Victoria Logue.  
*Trail Safe: Averting Threatening Human Behavior in the Outdoors*, Michael Bane.

### PREPARATION — THRU-HIKE

*Appalachian Trail Thru-Hike Planner*.  
David Lauterborn.

### NATURE GUIDES

*Wildflowers of the Appalachian Trail*,  
Leonard M. Adkins.

### MAGAZINE

*A.T. Journeys*, the magazine of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, features great articles, stories, photos, and advice about the A.T., along with a “Public Notices” section, where members can post an ad to ATC’s membership of 39,000.

**NOTE:** All titles above and many more books, DVDs, and other A.T.-related paraphernalia are available from the ATC’s “Ultimate Appalachian Trail Store.” Shop by catalog, phone (1-888-ATSTORE), on-line [www.atctrailstore.org](http://www.atctrailstore.org), or at ATC’s Visitor Center in Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

## Useful Web Sites

### GENERAL

Appalachian Trail Conservancy  
[www.appalachiantrail.org](http://www.appalachiantrail.org)  
Appalachian Trail Home Page  
[www.fred.net/kathy/at.html](http://www.fred.net/kathy/at.html)  
Trailplace.com  
[www.trailplace.com](http://www.trailplace.com)  
WhiteBlaze.net  
[www.whiteblaze.net](http://www.whiteblaze.net)

### THRU-HIKING

Appalachian Long Distance  
Hikers Association  
[www.aldha.org](http://www.aldha.org)  
Thru-Hiking Papers  
[www.spiriteaglehome.com](http://www.spiriteaglehome.com)  
TrailJournals.com  
[www.trailjournals.com](http://www.trailjournals.com)

## Join the Appalachian Trail Conservancy

When you join the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), you become a member of the distinguished group of people dedicated to preserving and protecting the Appalachian Trail. Every dollar we raise goes to support the ATC and maintainer club efforts to conserve the footpath, viewsheds, and environmental and cultural resources along the approximately 2,180 mile Trail. To become a member visit [www.appalachiantrail.org/join](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/join).

## Become a Volunteer

Today volunteers not only maintain the footpath and backcountry facilities but partner with the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the National Park Service, the National Forest Service, and others to protect the surrounding lands that make the A.T. hiking experience so extraordinary. For more information about volunteer opportunities, visit [www.appalachiantrail.org/volunteer](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/volunteer).

## Trail Clubs

If you live within a few hours of the A.T., you can join the activities of one of 31 volunteer clubs entrusted with day-to-day care of the footpath and Trail corridor. A diverse array of activities range from clearing brush to building and maintaining shelters to monitoring rare, threatened and endangered species. For more information, visit [www.appalachiantrail.org/trailclubs](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/trailclubs).

## Trail Crews

When you join a trail crew, you'll learn trail-building and rehab skills, work side-by-side in the backcountry with other folks committed to the A.T., and will have the satisfaction of making a lasting improvement to a section of the Trail with your own hands. For more information visit [www.appalachiantrail.org/crews](http://www.appalachiantrail.org/crews).



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