

Walking the Entire Appalachian Trail: Fulfilling a Dream by Accomplishing the Task

By: Warren Doyle 34,000-miler (31st edition 2011)

This 'book' is based on my extensive observations on what helps a person complete their journey while so many others stop by the wayside. These words of wisdom are simple and based on four premises:

- a) Walking the entire trail in one hiking season is a challenging task;
- b) That many people when they start at Springer or Katahdin hope to complete the entire trail in one hiking season;
- c) That those who finish their journey at the place where they wanted to get to when they first started tend to have a more satisfying trail experience than those who stop; and,
- d) That although almost all of the learning is between Springer and Katahdin, the final chapter is more fulfilling when experienced atop those once distant summits.

My observations are based on my sixteen (16) hikes along the entire Trail and on my preparing close to 100 other individuals to plan and complete their treks (i.e., the eight AT Circle Expeditions).

Thirteen statements of wisdom:

- 1) Walking the entire Appalachian Trail is not **recreation**. It is an **education** and a **job**.
- 2) Walking the entire Appalachian Trail is not 'going on a *hike*'. It is a challenging task – a journey with deeper ramifications. Are you willing to accept them and learn from them?
- 3) Don't **fight** the Trail. You have to **flow** with it. Be **cooperative** with the Trail, neither **competitive** nor **combative**.
- 4) Don't expect the Trail to respect or to be sensitive to your man-made comfort level and desire to control your environment. In your avoidance of discomfort, you may become more uncomfortable. You can't make a mountain any less steep; a hot summer afternoon any cooler; a cold morning any warmer; and, daylight any longer. But you can actually. How?
- 5) Time, distance, terrain, weather, and the Trail itself cannot be changed. You have to change. Don't waste any of your energy complaining over things you have no control over. Instead, look to yourself and adapt your mind, heart, body and soul to the Trail. Remember, you will be a guest in someone else's house the entire journey.
- 6) The Trail knows neither prejudice nor discrimination. Don't expect any favors from the Trail. The Trail is inherently hard. Everything has to be earned. The Trail is a *trial*.
- 7) Leave your cultural '*level of comfort*' at home. Reduce your material wants while concentrating on your physical and spiritual needs.
- 8) Yes, one can wear one t-shirt the entire journey; you don't have to take any showers; you don't need to cook your meals; one does not need a roof and four walls around them at night; you don't have to carry a canteen of water with you all the time.
- 9) It is far better, and less painful, to learn to be a **smart** hiker rather than a **strong** hiker.
- 10) Leave your emotional fat at home as well. Feel free to laugh, and to cry, and to feel lonely, and to feel afraid, and to feel socially irresponsible, and to feel foolish, and (*most importantly*) to feel free. Relive your childhood and play the GAME of the Trail. Roll with the punches and learn to laugh in the shadow of adversity. Be always optimistic – things could always be worse; don't become mired in the swamp of sorrow. Don't blame your discomfort or depression on the Trail or the weather, but look at yourself for not being able to adapt.
- 11) If your goal is to walk the entire Appalachian Trail, then do it. People who take shortcuts, (i.e., *blue blazes*, *hitchhike*) do so because it usually is shorter, quicker, and/or easier. So where is the challenge/honor in that? We have enough of this in the real world.
- 12) Expect the worse. If after one week on the Trail you can say that it is easier than you expected, then you will probably finish your journey.
- 13) However, remember we as individuals have our own acquired temperaments, levels of comfort, and thresholds of pain. If these three areas are congruent with what the Trail requires, you should succeed on your pilgrimage.

Some logistical points:

Normally conditioned people should keep their pack weight to no more than 25% of their body weight. Your chance of injury is directly related to your pace and/or pack weight. People usually make the mistake of hiking too fast and/or carrying too much weight.

Weather? Expect 20% of the days to be wet; 20% to be dry; 20% to be hot; 20% to be cold; and, 20% of the days to be nice. So, expect only one out of five days to be 'nice'.

There are three (3) surfaces for walking:

1. **Uphill:** walking too fast can cause muscle pulls and getting 'burnt out'; heel blisters; Achilles tendonitis
2. **Downhill:** walking too fast or too slow can cause knee problems and shin splints; falls; sprained ankles; toe blisters. This is the most challenging surface by far.
3. **Level:** sore feet (*especially when walking on rocks*)

In high elevations, take advantage of good weather by hiking longer hours than normal. On level ground, take advantage of this surface to cruise long distances without taking a break. Starting your day right before or after sunrise gives you more flexibility during the day. More miles can be done, at the same pace, by starting at sunrise and hiking to sunset.

The southern 422 miles of the AT are 50% uphill and 50% downhill.

Springer to Watauga Dam Road 6 month schedule=8-12 miles per day; 5 month schedule = 10-15 mpd

The next 1,354 miles of the AT are 33% uphill, 33% downhill, and 33% level.

Watauga Dam Road to Glencliff, NH 6 months = 14-18 miles per day; 5 months = 15-20 miles per day

The next 227 miles of the AT are 50% uphill and 50% downhill

Glencliff, NH to Flagstaff Lake 6 months = 8-12 miles per day; 5 months = 10-15 miles per day

The northern 171 miles of the AT are 33% uphill, 33% downhill, and 33% level.

Flagstaff Lake to Katahdin 6 months = 12-15 miles per day; 5 months = 13-18 miles per day

Some thoughts to have in your head:

Upon reaching the top of a mountain: *'Gee, I'm here already?!'*

Upon reaching your campsite: *'Golly, that was a short day.'*

Upon reaching town: *'Great, I didn't have to rush to get to the PO before it closes.'*

Upon entering a restaurant: *'Hmm, let's check the leftover menu first before I order.'*

Upon starting your hike: *'It's going to hurt and be hard, but I'm still going to enjoy it.'*

After your first week on the Trail: *'Gosh, this isn't as hard as I thought it was going to be.'*

During your sixth straight day of rain: *'At least the springs aren't dry any more.'*

During your third week of drought: *'Good I don't have to put on wet socks in the morning.'*

During the second straight week of mosquitoes and/or black flies: *'At least they aren't wasps.'*

And when you are exhausted, bored, lonely, dehydrated, hungry, hyperventilated, or have the runs (hopefully not all at once!):
'Hah! Who cares? This is the song of the Trail!'

If you are planning to do the Trail, the best information you can receive is **not** from the equipment outfitters and catalogs, or even from reading books on the Trail. The best information is obtained from talking with an individual approximately your age, sex, and socio-economic level, who has recently completed (*and not completed*) the Trail. Most recent thru-hikers are more than happy to take a prospective thru-hiker under their wings. The best place to meet those people that live in your area is to join ALDHA – the Appalachian Long Distance Hikers Association (www.aldha.org). Also, read about folks who stopped their thru-hikes at www.trailjournals.com.

The best indicator of whether an individual can walk the entire Appalachian Trail in one hiking season is if that individual can complete Vermont's Long Trail between 21-25 days. Do not base your hiking 'prowess' on your hiking experience in Shenandoah National Park, northern Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey or New York.

Best Post Offices (Northbounders):

Hiawassee, GA 30546

Fontana Dam, NC 28733

Hot Springs, NC 28743

Erwin, TN 37650

Roan Mountain, TN 37687

Damascus, VA 24236

Bland, VA 24315

Daleville, VA 24083

Big Island, VA 24526

Waynesboro, VA 22980

Harpers Ferry, WV 25425

Duncannon, PA 17020

Port Clinton, PA 19549

Delaware Water Gap, PA18327

Unionville, NY 10958

Falls Village, CT 06031

Cheshire, MA 01226

Manchester Center, VT 05255

Hanover, NH 03755

Gorham, NH 03581

Rangeley, ME 04970

Stratton, ME 04982

Monson, ME 04464