

The Adventures of Ho & Hum Our Long Trail & Appalachian Trail Journals: 2009 – 2015

Introduction

My brother Hum (Bob Ash) and I (Jerry Ash) identify ourselves as “geezer hikers Ho & Hum”, because we are just that: I’m 73 and Hum’s 75, that is, geezers, and indeed we are quite Ho-Hum. Below please find our hiking journals for 2009 to 2015, the first 7 years of our hiking together, representing a grand total of 717.7 miles of hiking. Still undocumented is an additional 100-mile AT hike in 2016, and we’re not done yet, for sure.

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Prologue

Hum (Bob Ash) and I (Jerry Ash) begin to seriously plan for our Long Trail (LT) hike starting in February, when Bob, Pat, their son Keith's family, and our daughter Debbie's family spend a week skiing in Killington and come to our house one night for dinner. We have a good old Ash family reunion that night, with lots of guffawing, as usual, and Hum and I begin to map out our August LT hiking adventure. We look over the [Long Trail waterproof map](#) (http://www.greenmountainclub.org/product_detail.php?sku=2216) and [Long Trail Guide](#) (http://www.greenmountainclub.org/product_detail.php?sku=2200) I purchased from the Green Mountain Club (GMC), and I loan him my DVD [Vermont's Hiking Trail - The Long Trail: A Footpath in the Wilderness](#) (<http://www.longtrailhike.com/>), which provides a nice overview of an end-to-end hike on the LT.

In the coming months we both do a considerable amount of preparation in researching equipment and training for the hike. In March Hum puts together an equipment list for our hike and I seek out the GMC's 'mentor' program. The GMC puts me in touch with 2 excellent mentors, 'Rough' and 'Tumble', who provide great, detailed help, including

1. a detailed, day-by-day journal of their 2003 LT end-to-end thru-hike, which answers many of our initial questions (<http://www.trailjournals.com/roughandtumble>)
2. podcasts on a) end-to-end planning and through hiking, and b) preparing trail meals (<http://www.longtrailpodcast.com/>)
3. equipment suggestions (<http://www.trailjournals.com/gear.cfm?trailname=1561>)

Rough and Tumble also give us immediate detailed answers to our many specific questions. Overall, a great program from the GMC.

A visit to Katy & Tim Chew's in April (on the occasion of the Baptism of Lea and Jarrod on Easter Eve) gives me a chance to discuss and learn about backpacking from Tim, who is a very experienced hiker and who once climbed Mt. Mansfield. Tim also kindly loans me many items from his backpacking gear, which include a self inflating Thermarest sleeping pad and a Minipro water filter, both of which I use extensively on our LT hike.

In the spring and early summer, we both do a number of training hikes. Hum takes a 4-mile hike every other day, around his neighborhood, with 25 pounds on his back. I do 79 miles in 8 training hikes (16.7 miles, 14.8 miles, 16.2 miles, 11.7 miles, 4.8 miles, 4.8 miles, 4.2 miles, and 6.0 miles, respectively), including 53 miles on the LT (from Brandon Gap to Big Branch/USFS 10), initially carrying 25 pounds and later 30 pounds on my back (I wrote a separate journal on these training hikes).

Hum arrives in Vermont at about 3 PM on Sunday, August 9, the day before the hike begins, while I'm finishing up mowing and weed-whacking the lawn. We spend several hours checking equipment and weighing everything the night before. Hum has about 45 pounds total with much extra weight in miscellaneous odds and ends and extra food weight. I encourage him several times to shed some of the 'extras' and kid him about bringing 'extravagant extras' like his butane lighter 'match', but Hum at first does not shed any of the items. But shortly after saying goodnight, Hum has second thoughts and comes back downstairs and reevaluates his cargo. Fortunately, he removes almost 10 pounds of extra stuff and food weight, bringing his total weight down to about 36 pounds. My total weight is 33 pounds, about 3 pounds more than the maximum 30 pounds I trained with. This makes me a bit more apprehensive about carrying that much weight. Will I be able to do it, I worry to myself?

We agree that our trail names will be Ho and Hum, and together we'll be Ho-Hum. My nickname derives from the fact that I've always liked to sound off with a lot of 'ho-ho-ho's' through an empty Christmas wrap

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tube at Christmas time, and Hum, well, has always been known as 'Hum' for most of his life. Hum's nickname derives from being called 'Roberto Humberto', or the 'humble one', from way back when during our summers in Awosting on Greenwood Lake, New Jersey. People we met along the long trail were sometimes amused by our choice of trail names.



**The Famed Ho-Hum Motel
Named After the World-Renowned Hiker-Mountaineer-Adventurers**

Johnson/Route 15 to Sterling Pond Shelter – 8/10/09

Start Time: 7:30 AM, gate at West Settlement Road off Route 15
End Time: 6:45 PM, Sterling Pond Shelter
Total Miles: 9.3 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2850' gain/2240' loss

Distances:

Johnson/Route 15 to Bear Hollow Shelter; 3.9 miles; 880' gain/0' loss
(1.7 mile drive on West Settlement Road to reach parking area and gate across trail)
Bear Hollow Shelter to Whiteface Shelter: 3.6 miles; 880' gain/1150' loss
Whiteface Shelter to Sterling Pond Shelter: 3.5 miles; 1090' gain/1210' loss

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 39,409
Calories: 1037
Steps/minute: 87
MPH: 2.48
Timer: 7 hours, 30 minutes, 58 seconds
Miles: 18.66 miles (9.3 actual miles)

As per our plan, we arise at 4:00 AM on Monday, August 10. I did not sleep well this night, probably reflecting my apprehension about what lay ahead in the morning: a lot of unknowns and the possible dangers I've already heard about on the trail ahead.

After breakfast and last minute checks we're on the road by 5:00 AM. It takes 2 ½ hours to reach Johnson, and along the way there is quite a bit of rain and gloomy weather. The forecast is for showers and thunder showers for just about every day throughout the week. Our spirits are subdued by the bad

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weather and our apprehension grows as to what to expect on our very first long distance backpacking hike. Neither of us has carried a heavy pack for so many days on a rugged trail like the LT. We had both done a lot of overnight camping throughout our lives, in boy scouts and on family camping trips, but not the backpacking adventure we are about to undertake.

By following the good description in the [Long Trail Guide](#), we have no trouble finding our way to Johnson and West Settlement Road and the head of the LT going south. We arrive at the parking lot and starting gate at about 7:30 AM and after a few photos and goodbyes to Lysie Pie, we're off into the woods on our grand LT backpacking adventure.



Ho & Hum Start LT Backpacking Hike Just South of Johnson

Not more than 5 or 10 minutes into our hike, Hum spots a bear crossing the trail (which is still a 10' wide road). I too see the bear but it quickly disappears into the woods before any pictures can be taken. We regard this as a very good omen, because seeing a bear in Vermont is quite rare.

We reach Bear Hollow Shelter by 9 AM, after passing 2 hikers from Florida shortly before reaching the shelter; they are bound for Johnson. The pace to Bear Hollow is rapid, although the trail to this point is not particularly difficult, with only 2.2 miles of hiking and a gradual 800' elevation gain. We immediately, incorrectly, assume that our pace will be much faster than our recent estimate of 1.5 mph average – 2.5 mph in fact. Our error is because we calculated the 2.5 mph average based on a 3.7 mile hike rather than the actual 2.2 miles from the gate.

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After a brief rest at Bear Hollow Shelter, we set off up Whiteface Mountain, which quickly turns into a very rugged and steep and extremely difficult trail. We meet 'Norway' on the upslope, who advises us that there are several steep ledges to climb ahead. We learn that Norway carries about 40 pounds with a full load of food, which makes us feel a bit better because we are carrying less.

We soon find that Norway is quite right about the ledges, there are many long slippery rock faces that we often need to crawl up, and down, to avoid slipping on the rocks. It is on these rock slides, both here on Whiteface Mt. and many other places on our hike, where we both manage to rip the back of our pants. While Hum's pants eventually get to a 'beyond repair' status, mine are badly ripped but miraculously healed later on (that's a story I'll tell you later).

It is on this arduous and difficult climb up Whiteface Mountain that Hum experiences a significant shortness of breath. Hum relates that this extreme shortness of breath has happened to him on only one

previous hike up Old Rag Mountain in Shenandoah National Park in Virginia. He also speculates that his condition of chronic untreatable anemia is also contributing to his problem. This shortness of breath causes Hum's pace on the uphill hiking segments to slow dramatically from then on, but that of course is the only way to deal with the issue. My concern for my brother's well being is immediately raised to a high level.

A little further up the Whiteface Mountain climb, we're passed by ['Windtalker: \(Randy Motz\)](http://www.rmghadventures.com/Windtalker.htm) (biography at <http://www.rmghadventures.com/Windtalker.htm>) and ['Mom' \(Georgia Harris\)](http://www.rmghadventures.com/Mom.htm) (biography at <http://www.rmghadventures.com/Mom.htm>) who are also headed south on the LT. Randy and Georgia had given a seminar 2 days earlier entitled ['Care and Feeding of the Long Distance Hiker'](http://www.rmghadventures.com/pages/presentations/care.html) (<http://www.rmghadventures.com/pages/presentations/care.html>) at the [Rutland Long Trail Festival](http://www.longtrailfestivalvt.com/) (<http://www.longtrailfestivalvt.com/>), and both Lyn and I attended their seminar. It was an excellent seminar covering a wide range of topics, including preparation, health, foot care, rest, nutrition, stoves, and food. In the discussion with them after the seminar I learned of their plan to hike south on the LT starting in Johnson the following Monday, just as Hum and I had planned. I told them that was our plan as well and that we would very possibly meet them on the trail. And so now we did.

As they approach us coming up the trail, I immediately recognized them and mistakenly blurt out to Georgia, who is always in the lead for the pair, "I know you, you're Anita." I had erroneously assumed that Georgia's name was Anita, since she had talked about and handed out the recipe for 'Anita's Power Cookies' and sample packages of the cookies at the seminar (and I in fact had several of these cookies in my food pack). Georgia replies that her name isn't Anita, but adds that her mother is named Anita, so I then realize that in fact the power cookies are her mother's recipe. We chat briefly to learn their trail names and that they had started at about 8:30 AM after a night's stay at a Johnson motel. Indeed, it is immediately obvious that Randy and Georgia are much faster hikers than we are, but somehow we will be able to reach the same 4 daily destination shelters as they do in coming days. This is extremely fortunate for Ho and Hum, and tremendously enhances the enjoyment of our first week's hike on the LT.

A little further up the Whiteface Mountain climb we meet a father and daughter hiking with virtually no provisions or packs bound for Johnson. They are day hiking from Smugglers' Notch to Johnson, an extremely difficult 15 mile hike. They advise us that the Whiteface Mountain peak is shrouded in fog, so there would be no view when we finally reach the summit. Before we confirm that these folks are indeed a father and daughter, Hum speculates (with his sometimes lack of PC awareness) that this man is robbing the cradle with a much younger girlfriend.

We reach Whiteface Mountain peak at about 12:50 PM and it is indeed all socked in – no view. We rest and snack for about 15 minutes so Hum can recover his normal breathing. This also includes a map and trail guide check; in fact our stops ALWAYS include map checks, and on a few occasions when Hum misplaces his map in his pack, or momentarily can't find it, he goes into an immediate panic and declares with great alarm that he has 'lost his map'. It is always a tremendous relief when, by digging a little deeper in his pack, he finds his map and is happy again.

We then hike on down Whiteface Mountain over the very steep and dangerous decent on slippery rocks and rugged trail, although we are occasionally rewarded with some beautiful views across to Madonna Peak along the way.

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We reach Whiteface Shelter at about 1:45 PM, to find Randy and Georgia just finishing up their lunchtime break. As we spy the Madonna Peak ski area across the valley, Georgia advises us that the LT hike ahead includes some of the Madonna Peak ski trails now visible across the valley. We also discuss meeting the father /daughter along the way. But before Georgia confirms that the girl is in fact the man's daughter (she had heard the girl address him as 'dad' and saw their entry in the shelter log confirming they were father and daughter), Hum again blurts out his un-PC theory that the man is robbing the cradle with an inappropriately too-young girlfriend.



Hum & Randy Do Lunch at Whiteface Shelter

At this point we are undecided as to whether we will go on to Sterling Pond and do not make that decision until after Randy and Georgia depart. We had not read the [Long Trail Guide](#) carefully enough to learn that there is a water source very near the Whiteface Shelter, so we incorrectly assume that there is no water there and unfortunately do not refill our water bottles. This proves to be a big mistake and, worse, the perceived lack of water at the Whiteface Shelter is in part a reason to proceed on to Sterling Pond Shelter. Hum for some other reason – perhaps because it was still too early in the day to stop -- is also keen on going on, so we do. We speculate that we will find streams in the valleys ahead between Whiteface Mountain and Madonna Peak. But once again, this assumption proves to be wrong; there are often no streams or water available at such high elevations. I estimate that at the rate we are going, it is not at all guaranteed that we will reach Sterling Pond Shelter by dark. So our tentative plan is to tent along the way, if necessary, assuming that we will find water en route (which we don't).

So off we go on the remaining 3.3 miles to Sterling Pond Shelter. We reach Hagerman Overlook at about 3:30 PM and Madonna Peak (3668') at about 5:30 PM, after the almost straight-up final ascent along the Madonna Peak ski trails, as Georgia had advised earlier. However, upon reaching the summit, Hum is exhausted and declares that he is 'completely out of gas'.



Hum Ascends Madonna Peak on the Almost Straight-Up Ski Trails

Hum is always honest and open and hides nothing, so my concerns only grow more intense with his declaration and I begin to think that we will have to reevaluate our whole plan at the next opportunity, which will be Route 108, Smugglers Notch (we will reach Smugglers Notch sometime tomorrow).

There are beautiful views from the top of Madonna Peak, which includes clear views of Mt. Mansfield across Smugglers' Notch. In addition to the ski lift, there are also warming huts at the summit, which are open for use by hikers. We don't consider staying on Madonna Peak because we now know we will likely reach Sterling Pond Shelter before dark, which is now only 1.2 miles down the other side of Madonna Mountain. After a good rest and taking time for Hum's pack adjustment, we are off down the mountain after a brief search to verify the LT routing on the downhill ski trail. It will still take us well over an hour to reach the shelter – it is still very rough going, and dangerous, especially on the downhill stretches.

We finally reach Sterling Pond Shelter at about 7 PM, happy to find Randy and Georgia, who had arrived there hours earlier. There is also a family of 3 from Dallas – father, mother, and daughter Ripley, age 12. The family has hiked up to the shelter via the Sterling Pond Trail from Smugglers Notch, which they describe as a pretty easy ascent. The caretaker has taken leave of the shelter for the evening, so there is just enough room for the 7 of us to fit our sleeping bags and pads across the narrow shelter, stacked closely together like sardines in a can. Georgia suggests that it will be refreshing for us to wash off in Sterling pond below the shelter, where of course we can also find water. We are pretty much out of water, not having filled our water bottles all day. This is a dramatic lesson to both of us: take every opportunity to fill up on water, wherever possible, and carefully read the [Long Trail Guide](#) as to where water is available. On the trail, water is by far the most important item to have, at all times.

I take off my hiking shoes and socks and put on my new cros, which were given to me by Debbie for my birthday a week earlier. Boy does that ever feel good! Georgia and Randy suggest hanging our packs, poles, and hiking shoes on the available hooks in the shelter. This is to protect from any invasion from porcupines, who love to gnaw on anything that has human salt imbedded in it. There is some evidence of porcupine damage in the shelter, and the caretaker's spot has a pile of rocks, presumably to throw at invading porcupines to send them back into the woods.

After setting up our sleeping bags and pads in our designated spots in the row of sardines, we quickly make our way down to Sterling Pond for water. It is a beautiful, rather large pond, with brownish colored water from the tannin in the pond. Hum uses his new Katadyn Pro filter and I use my borrowed (from Tim Chew) Katadyn Minipro filter, and both work great. The water is delicious; in fact, all the lake and stream water we filter and drink along the way is delicious, never having any tang or unusual taste whatsoever. I

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carry iodine pills as a backup (with extra pills to kill the iodine taste), but we never need to use them. Since Hum's filter pumps water really fast, we tend to use that one the most.



Hum Washes Up & Filters Water at Sterling Pond

Upon returning to the shelter, I find Hum in the midst of a cell phone call to Pat, right in the middle of the shelter with everyone there listening. He keeps the call brief, but when I later remind him that the [Long Trail Guide](#) suggests that other hikers prefer cell phone calls to be made out of earshot, Hum takes the advice immediately to heart and HUMbly confesses his transgression and assures everyone it'll never happen again. That is vintage, good hearted Hum.

We make our dinner by boiling water in Hum's jet-boil (which he borrowed from son Keith). Hum has rigged a clever way to set a pot on top of the jet-boil, by placing 4 short copper supports around the flame and resting the pot on top of them. Randy is impressed with Hum's invention, and I suggest that Hum can make his next fortune by patenting and selling his cooking breakthrough product.

Randy advises us on how to set up a bear-proof sling to hang our food bags: 12' off the ground and 6' out from any tree trunk. We soon launch our rope tied to a rock over a nearby tree limb, and hang our food bags as Randy advised.

This first day has been amazing and beautiful. We had an arduous hike over several very difficult mountain peaks on an extremely primitive and rugged trail. We learned that we could carry 35 pounds this far, although not without getting very tired and winded. There was fog, but also a lot of sunshine and beautiful long range views. We saw Mt. Mansfield majestically looming before us, to the south, and in the direction we are hiking the next day. Ho and Hum have already learned much about long distance backpacking, the LT, and, most of all, about ourselves and what we are capable of.

It is soon dusk and at sunset another amazing event is about to unfold before us. Randy it turns out is an accomplished musician, we learn, and he has brought his Native American flute with him to play each night at sunset. He has no set music, he makes up the melodies as he goes along. The sounds are like heaven out in the wilderness - haunting flute music, mountains, stars, and all that silence.

We all turn in at about 8:30 PM, when it became dark, all voices are now silent, there are only night noises – some of them human night noises (e.g., Hum's snoring) -- breaking the silence. The row of 7 sardines often roll over to kick a neighbor, but all manage to sleep pretty well after a tiring day. The

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wooden floors are hard, but the sleeping pad I borrowed from Tim Chew and my warm sleeping bag (good down to 25 degrees) make me quite comfy.

[Sterling.Pond.Shelter to Taft Lodge – 8/11/09](#)

Start Time: 7:30 AM, Sterling Pond Shelter

End Time: 4:00 PM, Taft Lodge
Total Miles: 5.7 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2070' gain/1450' loss

Distances:

Sterling Pond Shelter to Taft Lodge: 5.5 miles; 1850' gain/1230' loss
Elephant Head Cliff Spur Trail: 0.2 miles; 220' gain/220' loss

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 29,322
Calories: 771
Steps/minute: 92
MPH: 2.63
Timer: 5 hours, 15 minutes, 39 seconds
Miles: 13.88 miles (5.7 actual miles)

Randy is up at about 5:30 AM, daybreak, and Georgia, Hum, and I soon follow. The family of 3 lingers a bit longer in their sleeping bags, but are soon up and out as well. Hum gets the jet-boil going for our morning coffee, and we both partake of dry food for breakfast (breakfast bars for me, of which I will soon tire).

I chat a bit with the family from Dallas and learn that the father is a business consultant and is aware of Id Software where Stephen works. Daughter Ripley, now 12, has been taking ballet lessons since she was 2 (and of course doesn't remember lessons back that far), and was in Johnson earlier for a ballet workshop or competition of some sort.

We're all packed up and depart the shelter by 7:30 AM, which is fairly efficient progress for our first morning departure. The trail out of Sterling Pond over Spruce Peak down to Smugglers Notch is steep and wet and treacherous in places. At one point Hum has a close call where he slips on a ledge but fortunately has a firm handhold on a tree atop the ledge. Had he not had that firm grip he would have fallen straight back and hit the rock ledge on his head, probably severely injuring himself.

A little over a mile from the shelter we accidentally go straight ahead onto the blue-blazed Elephant's Head Cliff Trail, rather than turning sharp left onto the LT. The turn is poorly marked, especially in the southbound direction we are going. The Elephant's Head Cliff Trail descends 220' down from the LT to a magnificent view of Smugglers Notch. We only realize our mistake when reaching the Elephant's Head Cliff, where it is pretty obvious that the trail goes no further (it is straight down 100's of feet off Elephant's Head Cliff). Although we are upset for having ventured onto the wrong trail, causing extra hiking distance and climbing, the reward of the stunning view of Smugglers Notch is breathtaking.

We reach Smugglers Notch at about noon and fill our water bottles in Notch Brook, just below the Smugglers Notch Picnic Area.

I now bring up my concerns for Hum's well being and my feeling that, given Hum's extreme fatigue and shortness of breath on the hike so far, that it would be wise to go to Stowe and reevaluate our plan for more hiking. Hum is adamant that he will hear nothing of the sort. He declares several times that he is 'not a quitter' and has 'never quit at anything'. I know my brother well, of course, and know that to be true for his whole life. Hum says that he has come on this adventure to summit Mt. Mansfield and hike onward, just as we had originally planned. And that's exactly what he is going to do, no matter what. He emphasizes that we should continue to take it very slowly on the upcoming 2050' climb up Mt. Mansfield

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and also plan to have Lyn pick us up in Jonesville (Route 2), rather than Appalachian Gap (Route 17), for our rest and resupply ('zero day') in North Clarendon.

And so it is decided: onward. There is a brief thunderstorm in Smugglers Notch and luckily we are able to take shelter on the porch of the rest room building in the picnic area for the brunt of the storm. After about 15 minutes the storm subsides so we don our ponchos for the first time and head south on the LT for the next 1.7 mile, 2050' climb to Taft Lodge, which is still 750' below the summit of Mt. Mansfield. We take the arduous climb very slowly, stopping every half hour or so for a 5-10 minute rest.



Climbing the First 2000' of Mt. Mansfield En Route to Taft Lodge

On this day, as throughout the entire 2-weeks of hiking, Hum and I talk about just about everything under the sun as we mosey along the LT: lots of personal stuff, our families, politics, books, movies, songs, the trail and hike (of course), scouting, skiing, how much we love our wives, on and on. Naturally there are many and sometimes long periods of silence, but I learn a lot of new things about my brother. Yes I've known him all my life, and it's hard to know anybody better than that, but new things – yes I learned new things. Like how great he is at navigation, how completely he thinks things through before deciding anything, like how completely honest he is with himself and others.

In the silences there is lots of time to think and reflect and for the mind to wander all over the place, and it always does. Sometimes the reflections can be sort of like prayer, like good thoughts of loved ones here and gone before, counting life's blessings, visualizing the better person I want to be, and unbounded thanks for the love in my life. These conversations and thoughts are time-shared and intermingled with the constant mental gyrations of planning your next steps. Together they are like parallel paths --spiritual and physical paths – being traced out together through the woods.

Along this arduous climb up Mt. Mansfield we meet many day hikers who were making the trek to the summit and back in a single day. We also meet many hikers, with whom we usually stop and chat for a few minutes. Among these hikers are 'Cascade' from the Pacific Northwest, who warns us against carrying our heavy packs up to the summit, but rather advises us to leave our packs at the base and hike up without them (we do not do this). We meet Jaffa, who is hiking the entire LT and is anticipating getting to Whiteface Shelter or Bear Hollow Shelter by nightfall (she is young and fast, and will probably easily make it that far). Several people advise us that they are '45 minutes' from Taft Lodge, although at widely dispersed points along the way, which is a bit discouraging. I also chat with a young man with a 'Princeton Geology' shirt both on his way up and his way back from the summit. I suggest on the way up

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that this is a good chance to study the geology of Mt. Mansfield, and on the way down I ask whether he knows my Computer Science Professor friend, Jennifer Rexford, formerly of AT&T Labs (he doesn't).

Not too far below Taft Lodge, Hum slips and falls on one of the uncountable steep slippery rock ledges, and lands sprawled directly across the ledge pretty much blocking the LT at that point. He is unhurt but extremely tired and professes that he just wants to 'rest for a bit' before getting back up. Coincidentally at the very same time a large number of day hikers (10 or more) are making their way down the mountain and come upon Hum sprawled out across the trail, in their way, blocking their path. Each one of them asks in turn and in a very concerned voice 'are you SURE that you're all right?' So now there is a large audience gathered waiting for Hum to get up and prove that indeed he is all right. Finally one young woman says 'we'd all feel much better if you'd get up'. So tired Hum reluctantly picks himself up off the trail, whereupon another young man in the audience quips 'look at all those footprints on your back'. Everyone has a good chuckle over Hum's supposed trampling by day hikers.

At around 4 PM, just as we reach Taft Lodge, Randy and Georgia catch up to us. They have spent much time in mid-day shuttling their 2 cars (one a rental) to their next destination in Jonesville, and also resupplying themselves in Stowe.

Beautiful Taft Lodge is like a little paradise, with a very comfortable enclosed cabin, a good nearby water source, and a gorgeous view to the East, off its front porch, down the valley to Stowe and beyond to New Hampshire and the White Mountains. While in the other direction there is the dramatic summit of Mt. Mansfield looming majestically 750' above the shelter to the west. The porch has benches facing the valley and gorgeous views up and down Mt. Mansfield.



**Taft Lodge with Mt. Mansfield Summit Looming in the Background
Hum & Randy Working on Hum's Pack, Georgia Going Down the Steps**

Caretaker Jenny Poland ('Peanut') soon arrives, as does David ('Downhill'), who started in Middlebury Gap and is headed to Canada, for a total of 6 people in the lodge that night (it has room for 24, so it is mostly empty). As it turns out, 5 of the 6 people there that night are from Maryland: Hum from Timonium, Randy and Georgia from Germantown, and Jenny and David from Baltimore.

Jenny gets a good chuckle out of our trail names, and usually addresses us as Ho and Hum rather than by our real names. We learn that Jenny treks up to the summit every morning before 9 AM, and does the climb in about 30 minutes (about half the time it takes the rest of us). One of her duties is to count people who make it to the summit. Today 77 people had made it up, and on some weekends 500-700 people

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summit Mt. Mansfield. She is a fifth grade teacher and will be returning to Maryland the coming weekend to continue her teaching duties.

David advises us of his struggle to get past a very tight squeeze on the Forehead cliffs of Mt. Mansfield. He also had to divert and take shelter during the brief thunderstorm. It is extremely dangerous to be on the summit of any mountain – especially one as high as Mt Mansfield – during a thunder and lightning storm.

Hum's pack is proving to be a problem: too loose, swinging around on his back, and heavy. I had kidded him about his "World War II vintage pack" on the way up the mountain, somewhat in retribution to much kidding he is constantly heaping on his little brother. Hum, however, proved to be a little sensitive about this and quite defensive of his pack. Hum enlists Randy's assistance to help adjust his pack, and together they spend quite a bit of time doing that.

Randy and I get to discussing his and Georgia's book [Solemates: Lessons on Life, Love & Marriage from the Appalachian Trail](http://www.amazon.com/Solemates-Lessons-Marriage-Appalachian-Trail/dp/1440453659/), which I had learned about from their seminar in Rutland the previous weekend. He coincidentally has self published the book on [CreateSpace](https://www.createspace.com/), as have I in publishing [Katy's Astonishing Adventures with Tortulus T. Turtle](http://www.amazon.com/Katys-Katys-Astonishing-Adventures-with-Tortulus-T-Turtle/)

[Astonishing-Adventures-Tortulus-T-Turtle/dp/1442103930/](https://www.amazon.com/dp/1442103930)). Randy has also done a great job in promoting his book, and managed to get several publications to review the book and even landed a [TV interview](http://picasaweb.google.com/GeorgiaLHarris/KarenAllynForwardMotion#5341595405546248994) (<http://picasaweb.google.com/GeorgiaLHarris/KarenAllynForwardMotion#5341595405546248994>) to discuss the book. He says that as a result of his promotions and advertizing that the book is doing quite well. This is good food for thought in promoting the Tortulus book.

I call Lyn soon after we get to Taft Lodge to give her an update and to advise her that our progress is much slower than anticipated and that we will likely plan to be picked up in Jonesville rather than Appalachian Gap. We are unsure at this point when we will reach Jonesville, but will advise her of that as our hike progresses.

Dinner is especially good tonight; I have my spaghetti and tuna, quite delicious. Other favorite dinners of mine are black beans and rice (Fantastic Foods, suggested in Tumble's podcast), chili and rice (Fantastic Foods, suggested in Tumble's podcast), and red beans and rice (backpacker's trail meal). All my meals are dehydrated and only require adding boiling water. They are very easy to prepare and, best of all, are very lightweight; I tried all meals in advance of the hike to make sure I liked them, and they taste even better on the trail.

David has an old fashioned white gas stove, and manages to set the table ablaze with some spilled fuel. At that point Jenny comments that she normally asks for food preparation to be done outside, but we had already started before she noticed so she let it go. Randy and Georgia kid Hum about bringing along a butane fire starter to light the jet-boil (I had also kidded Hum about this extravagance before we embarked on our hike). Hum's consistent answer to this kidding is always 'it only weighs one ounce'; we'll take his word for it, but it still seems a little much and begs for some kidding, which we are all happy to dish out.

There is much discussion among Jenny, Randy, and Georgia about people they met on their AT end-to-end thru-hike. One character is 'Babu Simba', apparently an elderly gentleman (like geezers Ho and Hum) who is featured in a National Geographic documentary about the AT. At one point Babu Simba is shown summiting Mt. Katahdin, which had to be reshot many times to get it right, unfortunately for Babu Simba who had to do a lot more finishes to his AT thru-hike than are normal. We'll have to keep an eye out for this movie, which is being released in the fall.

There are cute mice scampering about foraging for little morsels of food. Unfortunately for them Georgia finds and sets some traps, but the little mouse deftly eats the cheese off the trap with nary a scratch to his little body. I could hardly watch the poor little mouse take the bait, though, and definitely did not want to see a live execution of this adorable little creature. So I didn't watch; however, after retiring to our

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sleeping bags a loud 'snap' rang out in the darkness scoring 'one for the hikers versus zero for the mice' as Georgia puts it.

There is a brief rain shower that places a beautiful double rainbow above the valley to complete the gorgeous picture we all marvel at from the porch. At sunset Randy again plays his haunting music creations on his Native American flute. What a fabulous setting this is for his music: a perfect combination of beauty in sight and sound that cannot be and probably will never be matched again in my journey. Our spirits are vastly lifted.



Randy Plays His Native American Flute at Sunset on the Porch of Taft Lodge

Taft Lodge to Taylor Lodge – 8/12/09

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Sterling Pond Shelter
End Time: 5:30 PM, Taylor Lodge
Total Miles: 6.9 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1100' gain/2900' loss

Distances:

Taft Lodge to Butler Lodge: 3.5 miles; 900' gain/1450' loss
Butler Lodge to Taylor Lodge: 3.3 miles; 200' gain/1450' loss
Spur trail to Taylor Lodge: 0.1 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 36,126
Calories: 950
Steps/minute: 88
MPH: 2.52
Timer: 6 hours, 46 minutes, 48 seconds
Miles: 17.10 miles (6.8 actual miles)

We arise again at 5:30 AM to a beautiful morning on Mt. Mansfield. The valley now has a low lying cloud cover and the air is brisk. We are more efficient on this our second morning with eating, packing, filling out water bottles, and getting under way. We are off at 7 AM on our 750' climb to the summit and are the

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first to leave the shelter. We soon pass the 'Profanity Trail', which is the bad weather bypass of the summit. Fortunately there is no need to take the bypass this morning.

The climb is vertical in many places and often downright dangerous for those carrying a full backpack (as Cascade had warned). Fortunately for us, Randy and Georgia soon pass us, having gotten a slightly later start than we did. On many of the vertical ascents where one had to find the right handholds in the rocks – sometimes minimal and slippery – Randy is there above us to coach us and sometimes take our packs and walking sticks so we can more easily climb the rocks without them.

On this ascent the real problem with Hum's pack shows up clearly. On several of the vertical rock climbs his pack swings wildly back and forth and could have too easily, it seems, catapulted him right off the cliff! Randy and I will both later say that Hum's pack 'freaked me out!' I would never again kid Hum about his pack, only encourage him that should we do this again he should get a new and better pack.



Randy & Hum Climb Mt. Mansfield Cliffs to Reach the Summit

The 4 of us, Randy, Georgia, Hum, and I, all reach the Mt. Mansfield summit (4393'), otherwise known as the 'Chin' (of the man's profile), at about 8 AM. The views are truly spectacular in all directions, with multiple layers of clouds and some occasional mist from passing clouds at the summit. Interesting shadow patterns appear on the lower layer clouds making for good photography. After snapping a few pictures, Randy and Georgia continue on while we rest and snack a bit.

Although there is weak cell service on the summit, I successfully call Lysie at 8:12 AM and excitedly report our ascent of Mt. Mansfield, the beautiful views we have, and what a glorious start it is to our day. She is happy that we're having a great adventure. Unfortunately, neither Hum nor I could reach Pat from the summit (Hum later calls her from the visitor center).

Jenny arrives at about 8:30 AM, having made the trek from the shelter in about 30 minutes, as advertised. She comments right away on the cloud and shadow patterns and how unusual that is. We snap more pictures of each other and chat about the trail ahead. We have been warned repeatedly about the difficulty of the Forehead stretch of Mt. Mansfield. Some hikers have implied that the going is dangerous and the rock climbing almost technical. Jenny, however, did not go that far, and only advised us that in some places we should take our packs off to more easily negotiate the rocks.

On the summit there are some rare wild flowers growing, including Mountain Sandwort. I point these out to Hum and note that they are especially rare and grow only at high elevations (I had remembered this from hikes years ago with our friend Bill Roach in the Blue Ridge Mountains).



Ho & Hum on Summit of Mt. Mansfield Highest Point in Vermont (4393')

The walk along the Mt. Mansfield ridge line is beautiful on a gorgeous sunny day, with continuous views in all directions. It is also relatively easy hiking since it is fairly flat. There are many glacial erratics and cairns (Hum calls them 'trols') along the way, one marking the spot where a hiker was killed by lightning years ago. We can see down to ski lifts as well as the visitor center, and across to the antennas atop the Mt. Mansfield nose, which for now is closed to hiking (because of antenna radiation level being too high).

We meet 'Halt Measure', a Brit, who is bound for Canada and ask him about the hike up the Forehead. His comment is something like 'there is one place where if you slip you're going to die'. That gives us pause; one of my continuing dark visions is one of us falling off Mt. Mansfield or some other cliff along the LT, and his comment doesn't help allay that fear.

We descend to the visitor center and arrive there at about 10:15 AM. We take a relatively long break to chat with the 2 caretakers, partake of some candy they hand out only to hikers, and peruse the exhibits inside the visitor center. The caretakers already knew that we were coming, having learned from Randy and Georgia, who had passed by earlier, about the 5 out of 6 hikers being from Maryland at Taft Lodge the night before (one of the visitor center caretakers is also from Baltimore). Hum also chats at length with some day hikers who are avid skiers, as is Hum, who loves to chat about skiing and different ski places he has been. We are amused by the caretakers suggesting to one woman, who is going to climb to the summit (still a good hike from the visitor center) in flip-flops: 'you really need to have better hiking shoes'.

The caretakers bid us farewell and 'be careful on the Forehead' and off we go, only to return 5 minutes later to ask directions. We had come to the 'TV road' where it is not marked as to which direction to head on the LT (although it is clear in the [Long Trail Guide](#)).

By 11 AM we reach the Forehead summit (3940') and begin our treacherous, precarious decent.



Hum on Forehead Summit (3940') About to Begin the Perilous Climb Down the Forehead Cliffs

There are a series of 3 ladders, one of which you have to reach by crawling more than a short distance across a slippery cliff edge to the top of the ladder: scary!



Hum Descends Ladder on Forehead Cliffs After Negotiating Slippery Cliff Edge to Reach Top of Ladder

Just above the Needle's Eye (an opening created by two large boulders at the base of the Forehead) is a straight-down squeeze between rocks on several layers, too tight to fit through with your pack on (this is

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the place Jenny had warned us about). So off come our packs after which I negotiate the squeeze through the rocks and Hum then hands down our packs and poles; then Hum follows by making his tight squeeze through the rocks. There are 2 levels to negotiate and on the second level I leap -- blindly -- over a large rock holding onto a root. I can't see on the other side of the rock and consequently fall into a crevasse; had I not held onto the root I would have slipped through the crevasse with a very long way to the ground.

We finally reach the lower end of the Forehead bypass trail and the Needle's Eye, which thankfully marks the end of the Forehead descent. There we meet 'Legal Beagle', a trail name I suggest since he has just completed his bar exam and is taking a celebratory hike.

A little further on I had just taken a picture and am putting the camera back into my pocket when I slip on a rock, fall backward, and hit the camera very hard on another rock. I am OK but the camera is badly scraped up and I fear that it is now broken: it hit the rock really hard! On a trip to Ireland years ago I had experienced dropping my digital camera on the pavement whereupon it ceased to work – what a bummer that was. Fortunately, my Canon PowerShot A1000 continues to operate perfectly after this very hard bang on the rocks.

And amazingly, shortly after that incident I have another fall, and again I'm unhurt, but somehow my camera, wrapped in a soft white sock, falls out of my pocket. Fortunately Hum sees the camera lying on the ground; otherwise I would have lost my camera and what a disaster that would have been! I'm very happy with my new camera: the pictures are excellent, it has a 4X optical zoom, it's easy to use, and best of all I purchased a 2 Gb chip which allows me to store an almost unlimited number of pictures on the camera.

We had originally thought we would stay at Butler Lodge this night, but somehow we miss the sign and later learn that Randy and Georgia also missed it (the sign only faces south so southbound hikers will likely miss the sign, as did we). Since we pass the Wallace Cutoff to Butler Lodge shortly after noon, it is unlikely that we would have stopped in any case.

Enroute to Taylor Lodge we encounter about 10 adventure hikers bound for the Twin Brooks Tenting Area and stop to chat. These young guys are happy to hear that the Forehead will present some difficult, if not almost technical, climbing and that there may be some dangerous ledges to negotiate on the descent from the Mt. Mansfield Chin. These guys are indeed looking for adventure. They also advise us that 'there is someone waiting for you at Taylor Lodge', and we immediately (but we later learn incorrectly) assume that message is from Randy and Georgia.

About a half hour before reaching Taylor Lodge, it begins to rain pretty hard, with thunder and lightning, and we again don our ponchos. While we get quite wet and muddy on our legs and feet, the ponchos work well in keeping our upper body and packs dry and it's not a problem to see my feet over the poncho as some folks have suggested it might be.

Fortunately we bypass the Clara Bow Trail to Taylor Lodge, which is marked 'rough trail'. We later learn from Randy and Georgia that it is a VERY rough trail, with ladders and technical climbing, and that's just what we didn't need at the end of this long day of hiking, especially in the rain. After some dead end trips down a wrong side trail, we finally find the Lake Mansfield Trail and arrive at Taylor Lodge at about 5:30 PM. We're very happy to see that Randy and Georgia are there as well. When we mention the 'message' from the adventure hikers, they profess to have not seen the adventure hikers at all, so it becomes a mystery as to whom this 'message' is from that 'someone is waiting for you at Taylor Lodge'??

We settle in and try to get comfortable after our drenching in the rain, which soon stops after we reach the shelter. We are both extremely dirty and our clothes soaking wet. After I change my shirt and socks, I raze Hum about his extremely dirty, used-to-be white shirt. Neither of us has clean dry pants to change into so we just tough it out.

A little while later 'Nips' and 'Shoop' arrive, 2 sisters from Plattsburgh, New York, who are hiking from Appalachian Gap (Route 17) to Canada. They come in drenched, apparently not having worn any rain gear in the rain, so they immediately change their shirts.



Hum & Nips & Shoop Settle in at Taylor Lodge

Unsure as to whether the girls will stay at Taylor Lodge or hike on, Hum suggests that he saw some 'cute boys' on their way to the Twin Brooks Tenting Area and wouldn't they like to go socialize with them, as if these boys are hot prospects. Apparently Hum realizes his mistake right away: these boys are probably more than 5 years younger than the girls and at these girls' ages (20-21), that many years younger is an insurmountable age difference, tantamount to suggesting the girls rob the cradle. Hum tries to change the subject and gloss over his PC error, but the girls fire back and say they already met these boys on the trail and how young they are. Case closed, the girls decide to stay at Taylor Lodge this night.

These girls are definitely interesting, and a bit unusual, as we will continue to find out over the course of several more days. A few notes on these two:

1. 'Nips', whose real name is Julie, is the older sister and takes her trail name from her propensity and liking to run around with her shirt off. We later find out she likes to run around with even more than her shirt off. Nips has completed college and hopes to have a career in creative writing; she spends most of her time at the shelter either writing in her journal or in the shelter's log book.
2. 'Shoop', whose real name is Stephanie, takes her name from a rap song by the rap group Salt N Pepa. This is a rather risqué rap video that I later watch on YouTube ([Salt N Pepa – Shoop \(Classic\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKaVBVikysw)) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UKaVBVikysw>). Shoop apparently likes to 'sing' the lyrics as the sisters hike along the trail. Shoop is still attending college.
3. Nips lights up a cigarette shortly after arriving at the shelter and we are all surprised and instantly engulfed in smoke. Randy immediately tells the 'girls, none of us in the shelter smokes, so please take it outside'. Right away and from then on Nips takes her smoking a good distance away from the shelter. She has no complaint about this, but we all wonder how someone can endure the tremendous physical exertion it takes to hike the LT and also smoke at the same time; not a good combination.
4. Before preparing their dinner, both girls polish off what's left of a 1 liter bottle of whiskey they have brought with them. They both clearly enjoy their little libation and get even more chatty as cocktail hour, for them at least, wears on. They relate that they got their drinking inspiration for booze on the trail from their frequent family camping trips, upon which their father always brought and enjoyed his manhattans. We have a long discussion about how our dad's love of manhattans got us to also liking manhattans, and before long this whole discussion makes my mouth water for same, not having
18 partaken of a manhattan in years. Oddly, neither of these girls has even tried a manhattan nor do they even know what is in one, which Hum and I are glad to describe our own personal manhattan formulas.
5. They use an alcohol stove to cook their dinner, and spill quite a lot of alcohol on the table, which

starts an inferno going all over the table when they light their stove. This is exactly what Randy described in his lecture at the Long Trail Festival in Rutland the previous weekend. I comment on this coincidence to Randy, but the girls are unfazed and continue to tend to their conflagration (unfortunately this is exactly what burns down shelters).

6. We learn several more interesting tidbits about Nips and Shoop from reading the logs at the shelters in days ahead (more to come).

After dinner I break out the 2 Ice Cream Sandwiches Debbie has given Hum and me for our dessert. These of course are dehydrated and not cold, but otherwise taste exactly like an Ice Cream Sandwich. Yummy.

Randy once again plays his Native American flute at sunset, and it is a beautiful sunset behind Bolton Mountain, which rises majestically to the south directly opposite the front porch of Taylor Lodge. This, unfortunately, is the last time we'll hear Randy's beautiful music. We have a long discussion about Native American flutes, handmade and manufactured flutes; 5 hole flutes and 4 hole flutes; that Randy is self taught on the flute; that he might be part Cherokee (based on 'oral family history'); that he collaborated with a Native American man who plays the flute and several other instruments at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

His playing against the beautiful sunset is a perfect end to a truly magnificent day, hiking over Mt. Mansfield and all that this trek encompassed, on this glorious day.

Taylor Lodge to Buchanan Shelter – 8/13/09

Start Time: 7:30 AM, Taylor Lodge
End Time: 5:30 PM, Buchanan Shelter
Total Miles: 8.4 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1275' gain/1945' loss

Distances:

Lake Mansfield Trail to Taylor Lodge water source: 0.4 miles
Spur trail to Taylor Lodge: 0.1 mile
Taylor Lodge to Puffer Shelter: 3.4 miles; 1750' gain/400' loss
Puffer Shelter to Buchanan Shelter: 4.2 miles; 525' gain/1415' loss
Spur trail to Buchanan Shelter: 0.3 miles; 130' gain/130' loss

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 42,538
Calories: 1119
Steps/minute: 96
MPH: 2.74
Timer: 7 hours, 19 minutes, 58 seconds
Miles: 20.14 miles (8.0 actual miles)

As usual, Randy, Georgia, Hum, and I are up at daybreak, 5:30 AM. Nips is up, and writing again, about 15 minutes later, but Shoop lingers in her sleeping bag for at least another half hour or more. When they are both finally up and preparing breakfast, there is yet another eye opener. Not only are they boiling a full pot of coffee, in a regular (heavy) coffee pot, but they are spiking their coffee with some Bailey's Irish Cream... and one begins to wonder.

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I discuss the trail ahead with Nips and Shoop, who inform us of a rather large beaver pond not very far south. We also ask them about the trek over Camels Hump, which we'll be doing next week. They say there is nothing particularly dangerous about the hike over the hump, and are rather indifferent as to whether the north side or south side is more difficult. Later we will find that the south ascent of Camels Hump on the LT is far more difficult than the north.

After breakfast and packing up, Hum and I make our way 0.2 miles down Lake Mansfield Trail to get water, so this additional necessary jaunt delays our departure a bit to about 7:30 AM. By the time we get back to Taylor Lodge, Randy and Georgia have already left. It is unclear whether Randy and Georgia will be staying tonight at Buchanan Shelter, which is our plan, because they still are trying to reach

Appalachian Gap by Tuesday, and that plan will require them to go much further today. Additionally, they have a standing rule, they say, to not hike more than a short way off the trail to reach a shelter, and Buchanan Shelter greatly exceeds that rule by being 0.3 miles off the LT on a spur trail. So sadly, we expect we'll not see them again, at least not on this hike.

After an easy first half hour of hiking, we reach the very large beaver pond and momentarily lose the trail. As usual, Hum's keen navigation skill gets us back on track. From then on, the trail goes back to its usual extremely difficult challenges: ladders, ledges, huge roots, and very slow going.



Hum Negotiates a Large Root on Rugged Trail Section En Route to Puffer Shelter

We climb Mt. Clark, Mt. Mayo, and finally reach Puffer Shelter a little after noon. We settle down for lunch and a good rest and enjoy the beautiful long range views before heading up another 525' to the summit of Bolton Mountain (3725'). The trail is indeed 'rugged', as accurately described in the [Long Trail Guide](#).



Rest & Obligatory Map Check on Bolton Mountain Summit (3725')

On the down slope of Bolton Mt. we meet Jrzy, from Poland, who is doing the entire LT and headed to Puffer Shelter tonight. He attended the University of Pennsylvania (but apparently didn't know Professor Keith Ross), and had worked briefly at Bell Labs on a research grant from Bell Labs, working on Ethernet adaptive routing. This sounded all too familiar so I asked him if he'd ever heard of DNHR, which he hadn't.

Along the way on this gorgeous day we get superb views to the south of Camels Hump and beyond. We pass side trails that led to the Trapp Family Lodge near Stowe, which Lyn and I have often visited and once even saw Maria von Trapp in the gift shop. By 4:30 we make it to Harrington's View, with its beautiful and perfectly clear views of Mt. Mansfield to the north and Bolton Valley ski area to the east.

Beyond Harrington's view I take 2 bad falls in quick succession. On the first I fall hard off the trail onto my back into a bush, almost stabbing myself in the juggler with a sharp branch. I'm not immediately sure I am OK, as I tell Hum when he asks. On the second fall I trip over a high rock in the middle of the trail, which somehow I don't see, and land flat on my face, scraping my forehead. Luckily there is no rock where I land and I only get a small bruise as a result. On one of these 2 falls I put a gash on my right shin, which I don't discover until much later. Hum declares all these falls are from being too tired and careless, and he's probably right on target with that observation.



At Harrington's View on a Crystal-Clear Day

Exhausted and finally on the spur trail to Buchanan Shelter, we cross a small brook just before reaching the shelter and I suggest that we fill up our water bottles. Instantly Hum declares 'nothing doing, you can fill yours if you want but I'm going on to the shelter!' Actually, Hum thinks that reaction is pretty amusing: he is really, really tired and just wants to get to the shelter where he can sit down, take off his pack, and rest. Good thing, because there is a good water source just 100' from the shelter.

We finally reach Buchanan Shelter by 5:30 PM, where Randy hears us coming and waves from the shelter door, giving us a hardy and happy welcome and yells out as we approach 'manhattans are ready!' We are really happy to see Randy and Georgia, especially since this is not expected and will be our last chance to enjoy their company. They decided to end their hike in Jonesville since they now feel it would be nearly impossible to reach Appalachian Gap by Monday – it is just too far at this point.

No one else shows up at Buchanan Shelter and we have a really nice evening and discussion with our good hiking friends. Randy brings some interesting entries to our attention from the shelter's log. In particular, Nips and Shoop had been there on August 10 and Nips put this entry in the log:

"Nip's Tips:

Mental weight is just as heavy as weight in your pack. If it ain't getting used, toss it."

We all think that entry is pretty astute, as did other hikers who commented in the log on "Nip's Tips". This will not be the first time we find various "Nip's Tips" in shelter logs – more to come along the way.

We all note that we have seen much moose evidence along the trail today, mostly between Bolton Mountain and the shelter, beside trees as if the moose's (meese?) are marking out their territory along the trail. Randy says that based on all this evidence he was sure he would see a moose on this leg, but sadly he didn't. We tell him that we hadn't seen a moose either, but did see that bear back on the very start of our hike; Randy is genuinely pretty excited about that, as, of course, were we.

Randy tells us of some of his wishes on his bucket list (e.g., an archeological dig) and some of the items already checked off the list. These included a Nascar training camp he attended in Atlanta, which was a present from Georgia, where he drove race cars that maxed out at 168 mph. At one point he rode the jump seat in the trainer's racecar full bore down the racetrack, where the trainers were racing each other

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fender to fender full out. I tell him about Stephen's similar racecar training experience in California, which coincidentally was a present from his wife Kristin.

Georgia tells us a bit of her odyssey, which started in Germany and took her to many places in the U.S. including some dog sledding in Minnesota. She also tells us how she had once hit and killed a mooley

(milk) cow – oh how sad for us mooley cow lovers. Georgia had also traveled the entire length of the Mississippi River in her family's houseboat, and along the way she gave her own personal name to every bend and special place on the river, kind of like a modern day Mark Twain. We talk about her job at NIST (National Institute of Standards and Technology), where she works on 'metrology'. I had mistakenly thought she worked on weather (meteorology), but rather she works on measurement science.

Randy is too tired this evening to play his flute, one can't blame him for taking a rest from those wonderful concerts he imprinted beautifully into our memories on the 3 previous nights. How I wish I had recorded those sessions; his CD [Windtalker – Native SoundScapes](http://www.amazon.com/Windtalker-SoundScapes-Randy-Alan-Motz/dp/B000MXP9MO/) (<http://www.amazon.com/Windtalker-SoundScapes-Randy-Alan-Motz/dp/B000MXP9MO/>), however, will serve as a vivid reminder. We find out later that Randy and Georgia have their own web-site with lots of good information and useful links at <http://www.rmghadventures.com/index.htm> and have also published their trail journals at <http://www.trailjournals.com/windtalkerandmom>.

Buchanan Shelter to Jonesville – 8/14/09

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Buchanan Shelter
End Time: 3:45 PM, Jonesville Post Office
Total Miles: 7.6 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1100' gain/2654' loss

Distances:

Spur trail to Buchanan Shelter: 0.3 miles; 130' gain/130' loss
Buchanan Lodge to Duck Brook Shelter: 5.6 miles; 770' gain/2410' loss
Duck Brook Shelter to Jonesville: 1.7 miles; 200' gain/244' loss

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 32,984
Calories: 869
Steps/minute: 101
MPH: 2.86
Timer: 5 hours, 26 minutes, 37 seconds
Miles: 15.61 miles (7.6 actual miles)

Up at the same time again, 5:30 AM, the crack of dawn, and Hum and I are now becoming pretty efficient at having breakfast, getting packed up, filling our water bottles, and setting off on the trail – old hands already. We say our goodbyes and sincere thanks to Randy and Georgia for having so tremendously increased the sheer enjoyment of our first long distance backpacking hike. Their company was truly fantastic and made our experience so much more memorable and fun. They set off shortly before we do, bound for Jonesville and planning to find a nice motel with a spa where they can relax and unwind before returning to Germantown, MD.

We're on our way by 7 AM. The trail on this stretch is still very rough and steep all the way to Duck Brook Shelter. Along the way we pass a picturesque beaver pond where we stop for water, snacks, and a rest before we make the steep climb to the top of Oxbow Ridge. Along the ridge line we get some spectacular views of Camels Hump to the south and snap a few pictures.



On Oxbow Ridge with Spectacular View of Camels Hump

Soon we meet a young couple bound for Smugglers Notch and we exchange respective impressions of the trail ahead. They advise that it's a 'good trail' ahead with a few up's and down's, but nothing major, and that there is a nice stream where we can get water just before reaching Duck Brook Shelter. They also tell us about their swimming experience at the base of the waterfall below Duck Brook Shelter, but warn us that the swimming hole and waterfall are far below the shelter and a big hike down.

We reach the stream by about 1:00 PM, fill our water bottles, and shortly thereafter we stop at Duck Brook Shelter for lunch and a rest. By now I'm completely sick of trail mix for snacks and lunch, and breakfast bars for breakfast. Ugh! Hum kindly gives me one of his pb&j sandwiches for lunch, and I find that to be simply delicious. Yum! So I immediately decide that's what I want for lunch next week.

We can hear but cannot see the waterfall, which, as advertized, is far, far below the shelter down a very steep embankment (essentially a cliff). We do not even consider hiking down to see it, although it does sound very inviting. We peruse the shelter's log, and find this rather interesting entry from Nips and Shoop, dated August 11:

"We noticed that no one was around so we discarded our human forms and allowed our true woodland goddess spirits to roam the forests and waterfalls for some time. Man it feels good to be naked."

Aha, just as we suspected, Nips. Not only do you like to parade around with your shirt off, but you also like to 'roam the forests' in the altogether!

We also leave our own entry in the log, to the effect that 'geezer brothers Ho and Hum (67 and 69, respectively) stopped by for lunch, and are only a short hike away from Jonesville and a zero-day rest before undertaking our second week of hiking over Camels Hump. It's been a beautiful hike so far and a fantastic experience'.



Rest & Lunch at Duck Brook Shelter Where Nips & Shoop Ran Around Naked A Few Days Earlier

I call Lyn and say that we will be in Jonesville sometime around 3:30 to 4:00 PM.

We leave the shelter at about 1:30 PM, and although we're expecting a small upward 'bump' (as we call the little up blips we see on the topo map), we immediately climb what is at least a 300' straight-up mini-mountain. This unexpected climb now leaves us both pretty exhausted, especially Hum, who will need one and a half full days of rest and recuperation before getting back to normal. We both agree that it's really important to anticipate the trail ahead, especially the climbs, because it's much better to be mentally prepared for what's ahead rather than being caught by surprise, as we are with this final blow before getting to Jonesville. So from then on, we read the topo maps and trail guide even more carefully to fully anticipate every little and big 'bump' ahead, so we'd be fully mentally prepared for what lay ahead.

After the exhausting climb, the trail does get dramatically better and is almost all downhill to Jonesville. In the final stages we hike through some tall weeds and thick poison ivy patches along the path of some power lines before reaching the Jonesville local roads. There we meet 3 French guys with very light packs who are probably bound of Duck Brook Shelter. They don't speak much English and one of them is taken by my description of the Mt. Mansfield climbs as 'hairy'. He has not heard the term before and says he would be sure to remember that one. He explains the word 'hairy' to his friends, in French.

We arrive at our meeting point, the Jonesville post office, at about 3:30 PM. Hum calls Pat to report our arrival and Lysie arrives about 15 minutes later. All is well now. Lyn immediately comments on how dirty we are and how much weight we have lost, and indeed, I'm now down to about 175 pounds, 30 pounds below my weight only a few weeks earlier. Lysie drives, I'm too tired and dirty, and Hum and I sit on old army blankets because we're so dirty.



Arriving at Jonesville Post Office & Ending Our First Week's LT Backpacking Hike

A stop at nearby Ben & Jerry's is a bit disappointing: there are long lines for ice cream cones and they don't have my favorite flavor, coffee heath bar crunch. Bummer. Instead I have Ben & Jerry's version of mint chocolate chip and I don't like it very much (it's not even green). Hum is so tired that he rests on the lawn halfway up the small hill to the visitor center, for a long time, before climbing the whole way up to join Lyn and me. He is also too tired to eat ice cream.

A good hot shower, shave, and clean clothes feel SO good, and this is followed by a delicious manhattan that I fantasized about on the trail. Lysie fixes a yummy dinner of sloppy joes, fresh beans, and potatoes. Then early to bed in a comfy bed. Yes, Hum and I still very much enjoy our comforts.

Saturday and Sunday are spent going to the farmer's market and shopping for food and hiking items (e.g., a poncho for Hum) for the coming week. We had both ripped our pants during the first week and while in the EMS store I ask if there is any warrantee on the hiking pants I had bought the week before. I expect to hear 'no way' but instead I am advised to bring the pants in and talk to the manager. So I do, and lo and behold, the manager, pretty reluctantly ('just this one time'), replaces the pants. Hum thinks this is all so brash that it is very amusing. He promises that this will become 'jerry ash folklore' and fodder for much future kidding he will happily dish out. But Hum later sews up his own badly torn pants to provide me ammunition for the retort I'll happily dish out.

On Sunday Hum spends time making significant reductions in the equipment he plans to carry in the coming week and also making major adjustments to his pack. He takes off the upper bar on his pack and adjusts it so that it has much less side to side movement. He reduces his carry weight down to about 34 pounds, which is now about equal to my pack weight. He also tapes some sponges under his shoulder straps in an effort to stop them from bruising his shoulders (this works for a while but doesn't hold up for the whole second week).

Appalachian Gap/Route 17 to Cowles Cove Shelter – 8/17/09

Start Time: 7:30 AM, Appalachian Gap/Route 17

End Time: 12:30 PM, Cowles Cove Shelter

Total Miles: 5.9 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1095' gain/995' loss

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Distances:

Route 17 to Birch Glen Camp: 3.0 miles; 595' gain/995' loss

Birch Glen Camp to Cowles Cove Shelter: 2.9 miles; 500' gain/0' loss

Pedometer readings:
Steps: 24,807
Calories: 652
Steps/minute: 101
MPH: 2.61
Timer: 4 hours, 29 minutes, 27 seconds
Miles: 11.74 miles (5.9 actual miles)

We get up at 5 AM and are off by 6 AM and get to Appalachian Gap by 7:30 AM. As opposed to last week's gloomy start weather-wise, today it is clear and sunny, and good weather is predicted all the way through Thursday afternoon, when thunder showers are forecast. After a few pictures off we go. The LT rises steeply over Baby Stark Mountain, then down and back up to the summit of Molly Stark Mountain and Molly Stark's Balcony (2700'), where we get a (hazy) view of Camels Hump in the distance. Along the way we hike over some humungous tree roots, some of them taller than Hum.



Rugged Trail Over Huge Tree Roots Up to Birch Glen Camp

We reach Birch Glen Camp by 10 AM, far ahead of our expectation, and it is clear that we'll continue on to Cowles Cove Shelter. This is a very picturesque, rather old, shelter, built in 1930, that is fully enclosed with separate sleeping and porch areas. We take a half hour rest, snack, read and sign the shelter log book, and fill our water bottles in the nearby stream. An elderly day-hiker gentleman wanders by having come up to the shelter on the Beane Trail and is headed for Appalachian Gap. He seems quite tired and a bit disoriented and takes a long rest; he's still there when we depart for Cowles Cove Shelter.

The 2.9 miles to Cowles Cove Shelter is relatively 'level' and not especially difficult; we make good time and arrive at the shelter at about 12:30 PM. While this is the earliest we've ever arrived to a shelter we intend to stay, we judge that Montclair Glen Lodge, 5 miles away, is too far to reach today. So we stay, with more than 18 hours ahead of us to spend there before taking off on the next segment of our journey. But as we find out, there's plenty to amuse us this afternoon with the people we meet.

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I enjoy a good lunch of a pb&j sandwich, Pringles, and cookies. This is a huge improvement on the trail-mix non-lunches I had last week.

The privy is unusual in this particular shelter area. The shelter area map labels it as a 'privy with a view'. Indeed, there were 2 privies, and neither has any enclosure whatsoever, just 2 toilet seats mounted on platforms out in the woods. Hum thought the 'view' would be a beautiful mountain view; it wasn't, I explained that the 'view' is a view of the woods, which is also a rather unusual view from any toilet one might encounter :-)



Two Privy's with a View at Cowles Cove Shelter

The shelter log contains another 'Nips Tips' entry from their stop here on August 10. Its advice concerns Nips' advice on how to execute a perfect 'snot rocket' (plug up one nostril, don't miss and get it on your foot, etc.). Actually, this is the second time I've seen this particular 'Nips Tips' entry in a shelter log; not one her more esthetic pieces of advice.

Before long a troop of 5 boy scouts in their early teens and 2 adults arrive (the leader, also the scout Committee Chair, and another father of one of the boys). They've come from Hump Brook Tenting Area this morning and are on their way to Birch Glen Camp tonight. The leader arrives a little after the others, soaking wet, almost as if he'd been swimming somewhere – we could not figure out why he is so wet. Their arrival puts Hum in hog heaven, because he just loves to talk about scouting and we do that for more than an hour. These are really nice folks from the south of Boston, and we enjoy an interesting, wide-ranging conversation. Hum relates his long experience as scout master and philosophy on being a good scout leader. We hear that this is the second time these boys have hiked over Camels Hump and that they are now training to go to Philmont Scout Camp in New Mexico next summer.

The scout leader talks about the 'huge rock' scrambles ahead over Burnt Rock Mountain, both on the upslope and down slope. He also mentions how he suffered dehydration the previous day and had cramping as a result. This is the first I realize that the very unusual cramping I've had in my fingers and legs, especially at night, is probably the result of dehydration.

The scout leader tells us the amazing story of the B-24 plane crash site they saw on Camels Hump, and where the wreckage is located. This gets us very interested in making our way to the crash site.

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The full story of this October 16, 1944 crash is given at www.waterburyvtfire.com/wbrt/cap.doc (I find this link in the hiking blog at <http://fivebeforechaos.com/2008/10/13/camels-hump-weekend-08/>). The B-24J bomber with a crew of 10 was on a training mission out of Westover Field in Chicopee, Massachusetts. It was an extremely cold night and the pilot descended below 4000' to seek out warmer air: this was a big mistake. Here are excerpts from the full story of what happened next:

"The plane continued to cruise at approximately 215 mph as Camel's Hump rose to meet it. For several hundred feet it skimmed over the bare rock and scrub spruce trees. Seconds later, the plane struck the bare rock 100 feet below the summit. The left wing and belly scraped first. (PFC James) Wilson woke to the sound of searing, scraping metal. The crewmen, even at this point probably had no idea of what was happening.

The impact forced the right wing to dip. Immediately, the plane clipped off several small trees and struck again. This time the plane impacted on the right wing and nose at the same instant as it nose-dived against the mountain side. Wilson was knocked unconscious, the nose of the bomber disintegrated and the tail assembly was ripped for the plane and flung against a tree. Most of the crew were killed instantly. The instrument panel clock stopped. It was 1:58 a.m.

The plummeting plane bounded back into the air, parts scattering as the bomber disintegrated. One crewman was thrown clear and

landed, curled in death, around the base of a small tree. Some of the bodies were thrown out of the plane where the nose and cockpit has once been. The plane then bounded and skidded over their remains, mutilating them. The plane crashed down again. Finally, the remains of the fuselage were catapulted into the air, falling back to the ground and skidding several yards to a stop at the bottom of a steep embankment. Still inside, was the unconscious top turret gunner Wilson."

"Due to the extraordinary efforts of the CAP under Wing commander William Mason, PFC Wilson was saved from a certain death in the freezing mountain air. Although his injuries in the crash were minor, he received severe frostbite which required the amputation of most of both arms and legs. He was the first of two soldiers in World War II to undergo such radical surgery. Four years after the crash, he returned to Vermont to thank his CAP rescuers personally. He was a practicing lawyer, retired in 1989, and lived in Florida (until his recent death)."

The scout leader says that he read that PFC James Wilson had recently died, but I could find no record of this on the Internet. Most of the plane was salvaged and removed; portions of the wreckage (principally a wing section) still remain on the Alpine Trail. After hearing this story, Hum and I definitely plan to visit the crash site on our forthcoming hike over Camels Hump.

After the scouts depart, Ryan and Collin ('Tuna') arrive next. Ryan is in the Air Force National Guard, Collin attends the University of Rhode Island as a history major; both are from Rhode Island. They are very nice guys doing the whole LT and have already done 20 miles today, including a resupply stop in Waitsfield. They've been on the trail for 13 days and plan to be picked up at Journey's End (Vermont/Canada border) on August 25, 8 days from now. They are quite interested in our saga as well, amused by our trail names and by our plans to start the 'LT Geezers Hiking Club'. They advise us that a group of 6 'kids', 4 guys and 2 girls, are right behind them, and sure enough, this large group soon passes by, say brief hellos and move on (fortunately, because this is a pretty small shelter). Ryan and Collin depart for Montclair Glen Lodge, another very difficult 5.1 mile hike, at 5 PM. That they will get there before dark is pretty amazing; these are robust hikers!

We have our supper around 6 PM, and this is becoming a special happy time of our day where, in preparation, and only when we're alone, we briefly sing 'suppertime, suppertime, suppertime, suppertime', and dance around a bit, copying Snoopy's happy dance at suppertime. Dinner tastes especially good tonight; I've packed chocolate chip cookies and Pringles for dessert and consume a good portion of those, sure to run out before the hike ends.



Suppertime, Suppertime, Suppertime, Suppertime

Two guys from Harrisburg, PA, arrive at about 6:30 PM. They started at Duxbury Road, Jonesville, and are headed to Route 4, Killington. One is outgoing, I call him 'Mr. Talker', who gratuitously tells us his brief life history, sort of like this: did some hiking, then got married, has a 2 ½ year old daughter, is now back to hiking, etc. The other is withdrawn, I call him 'Mr. Quiet'. Neither seems especially interested in learning about us, and go about their business of having dinner.

Two boys and their Dad arrive at around 7 PM, say a brief hello, and then go right to the tenting area. We can hear quite a lot of talking back and forth 'Dad, should we pitch our tent here'; 'Dad, should we hang the bear bag now'; 'Dad, should we ...' The discussion about hanging the bear bag goes on for a good half hour or so. Apparently it does not go smoothly, but is finally achieved. It is all quite amusing. But the tent area quiets down as dusk approaches.

As per usual Hum and I hit the sack at dusk, about 8:30 PM. But oddly, Mr. Talker and Mr. Quiet ignore the fact that we are now in the sack and are trying to go to sleep: they talk, and talk, rather loudly, only a few feet away from us. I keep thinking they will soon stop talking and hit the hay as well – surely they will be considerate of others in the shelter. All the hikers we have met before, or since, have been very considerate. But they are not considerate, they are rude, inconsiderate, and keep on talking, loud. I get increasingly frustrated and irritated. Finally, at around 9 PM, with no sign that they will stop talking, ever, I finally blurt out "Would you guys stop talking thanks."

They did stop talking, fortunately, with no response or apology, now or in the morning, when they did not talk to us at all.

I think to myself 'Where are you Randy and Georgia, we miss you!' I knew we would, more than ever now.

After the noise stops, the sleeping is good; the air is cool this night, perhaps in the low 50's or high 40's.

Cowles Cove Shelter to Montclair Glen Lodge – 8/18/09

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Cowles Cove Shelter

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End Time: 2:00 PM, Montclair Glen Lodge

Total Miles: 5.1 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1520' gain/1370' loss

Distances:

Cowles Cove Shelter to Montclair Glen Lodge: 5.1 miles; 1520' gain/1370' loss

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 25, 505

Calories: 671

Steps/minute: 83

MPH: 2.37

Timer: 5 hours, 5 minutes, 22 seconds

Miles: 12.07 miles (5.1 actual miles)

Up at 5:30 AM and per usual, we are quiet, no talking; the 2 noisemakers arise slightly after we do. I have hot beef noodles for breakfast, which are really good and a huge improvement over the breakfast bars.

We're off at 6:45 AM and the trail is rough going: huge roots and the 'huge rock scramble' up Burnt Rock Mountain is just as advertized but actually quite a bit of fun. Burnt Rock Mountain (3168') has magnificent 360 degree views, if a bit hazy, where in the far distance we see Camels Hump and Mt. Ethan Allen ahead of us to the north. There are several precipitous ledges we climb to the rather large summit area, where there are many other smaller 'peaks' we climb over on the trail. Hum tries to call Pat from the summit, as he has several times now for the past 2 days, once again without success: no cell service in this area so far.



Scaling the Cliffs of Burnt Rock Mountain



**On the Summit of Burnt Rock Mountain (3168')
'Tis a Beautiful Day with Gorgeous Views & Lots of Wind Up There**

The top of the ladder leading down into 'ladder ravine' is reached only by crossing over a slippery cliff edge, which is a bit daunting but we negotiate the maneuver without slipping off the cliff. A shelter log entry we read later at Montclair Glen Lodge tells of the owner of an 80 pound yellow Lab named Zoey, who somehow found a way to get his dog around the ladder down into the ravine. For sure, that is much easier than for Zoey to climb down the ladder.



Descending into Ladder Ravine After Traversing Slippery Slope to Reach Top of Ladder

We pass an older (like us), southbound couple coming from Canada bound for Maine junction (where the AT and LT diverge). They intend to head into Waitsfield to buy a fuel canister; theirs had broken the previous night.

We eat lunch at the summit of Mt. Ethan Allen (3680'), and this time we're able to call both Lyn and Pat. I ask Lyn to look up the current weather forecast for the area, which, she reports after searching the Internet, is still the same: good weather for tomorrow with thunderstorms predicted for Thursday afternoon.

In searching out the Camels Hump weather, however, Lyn also finds out that 6 people have been rescued so far this year hiking on Camels Hump (perhaps a cause for alarm). The latest rescue occurred only 3 days ago, on August 15, and is reported in the Burlington Free Press ("Sixth Camels Hump Rescue After Hiker Breaks Leg"):

"For the sixth time this summer, rescuers spent most of a night bringing an injured hiker to safety off the network of trails on Camels Hump. An experienced 65-year-old female hiker from Londonderry fractured her left femur in a fall Thursday afternoon about half a mile south of the Montclair Glen Lodge on the Long Trail and about 2 1/2 miles south of the peak's summit, according to a news release from Waterbury Backcountry Rescue.

Rescuers received a call for help at 5:30 p.m., and 30 rescuers from six agencies responded. The first EMTs reached the injured hiker just before 7 p.m. A temporary splint already had been applied with guidance from the hiker, who is a paramedic on a Vermont volunteer ambulance squad.

Working by headlamp in the darkness, rescuers from the Camels Hump Backcountry Rescue Team, Colchester Technical Rescue, Green Mountain Club, Mad River Valley Ambulance Service, Stowe Mountain Rescue and Waterbury Backcountry Rescue worked until nearly 1 a.m. to carry the hiker to safety.

A Richmond Rescue ambulance stationed at the trailhead transported the patient to Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington. The hiker's identity was not released."

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I later learn that the unidentified hiker who broke her leg is none other than Marge Fish, the current president of the Green Mountain Club! She is also a registered nurse, an EMT paramedic, and secretary of the Londonderry Volunteer Rescue Squad. I found her description of the accident at [The New England Hiking Meetup](http://www.meetup.com/New-England-Hiking-) (<http://www.meetup.com/New-England-Hiking->

"i was backpacking up north, about 5 miles south of camel's hump i took a slip where one foot stuck and the other and the rest of me didn't and i broke my femur and had a full scale backcountry rescue and a plate and 11 screws and i am told i will be back to backpacking next summer - there was a lot of greasy rock all day and at least it was near a side trail so the carry out was just under 3 miles - could have been much longer and much worse. marge"

Still later, Marge Fish fesses up to her accident in the September issue of e-Blaze, GMC's online newsletter:

"Just a quick reminder of the importance of always having your safety gear with you when ever you go out on the trails, even for a quick leg stretcher. Even the most experienced hiker can have a mishap. The difference between an 'oh my gosh this is awful' and a 'life threatening' experience can be the safety gear you have with you.

The key things you should always have for the simplest hike in beautiful weather are: a whistle, a space blanket, an extra layer of clothing, a hat, food, water, a small first aid kit, a neckerchief, some cord. Depending on weather (current and forecast) and where you are going you will want to add map and compass and guidebook and more clothing, especially rain gear. I know from firsthand experience, having broken my leg in August just south of Montclair Glen cabin, that in the best circumstances back country rescue takes a long time and these items make a huge difference in survival. With my accident close to a shelter with a caretaker, who was available to get a 911 call placed once my partner had contacted her, and a side trail shortening the total distance to only just under 3 miles to get in to me and to get me out, and professional expert backcountry rescuers available, the terrain and number of people required to effect a safe rescue with a carry out still meant a 3 hour wait from time of accident to arrival of first responders and another 5 and 1/2 hours until I was out and in a front country ambulance. Having that survival gear was definitely critical.

After miles years of hiking, carrying my pack with at least minimal survival gear and passing folks enjoying 'unencumbered' hiking, I am truly glad i have always followed the guidelines for minimal gear on even the simplest woods walk."

We arrive at Montclair Glen Lodge at about 2 PM, after a 7 hour hike from Cowles Cove Shelter. Montclair Glen Lodge is really nice, fully enclosed with room for 10, windows all around that open inward, and a nice picnic table eating area.

We peruse the shelter log and find one entry that reports 'last night there was a full house + 1'. That means that all 8 of the northbound people who passed us late in the day at Cowles Cove shelter, plus 3 others, packed Montclair Glen Lodge last night: crowded shelter! Several log entries speak of the 7 or 8 hours hike from Cowles Cove Shelter and the difficulty of the trail, so we're not alone in taking that long to hike this stretch. There is the entry about Zoey the yellow lab getting around the ladder at ladder ravine and also another of 'Nips' Tips' (from 8/10) with advice this time on hiking over slippery rocks, and that 'you're a human, not a mountain goat, so be careful!'

Soon caretaker Lila returns from her day on Camels Hump, pokes her head through the window by the picnic table, where Hum and I are sitting, and introduces herself. Strangely, Lila has no trail name, which we find more common with long distance hikers we meet in this latter part of our hike. Are trail names going out of fashion with younger hikers, per chance? Lila then quickly disappears and does not return for a very long time: we wonder where she could have gone. The mystery is finally solved when we look carefully at the site map for Montclair Glen Lodge and see that caretaker Lila resides in a tent in the tenting area near the shelter.



Ho & Hum's Digs at Montclair Glen Lodge

Two brothers from Cleveland, Jesse and Daniel (Williams), who also have no trail names, arrive next. Jesse has sustained a bad cut on his right shin this day, and the brothers immediately tend to bandaging and treating his wound. They started in Massachusetts, the beginning of the LT, and are bound for Smugglers Notch. They want to make it there by Thursday, or Friday at the latest; it's a very long hike to do in 2 or even 3 days, but they move fast (maybe too fast, hence a bad injury today for Jesse).

The father and 2 boys we met at Cowles Cove Shelter last night arrive next, at about 5:30 PM. They head straight to the tenting area, as they did the previous night at Cowles Cove. I say hello to them through the window; the boys say that they got a late start that morning and the Dad says that they prefer the tenting area because he snores ('it's a public service' he says).

Two women and a very cute little 4 year old boy arrive next, having come to the lodge up the Forest City Trail, and intend to hike over Camels Hump the next day (a very tough hike for a 4 year old). The women say they wanted to stay in Gorham Lodge on the other side of Camels Hump, but that shelter had been torn down in 2001 to allow that alpine area to recover after overuse (actually the very out-of-date GMC guidebook in Montclair Glen Lodge still shows Gorham Lodge). The 3 of them also will tent this night, because that's what the 4 year old wants to do, they say.

Benny (no trail name either) arrives last. He owns a restaurant in Boston, [The Savant Project](http://www.thesavantproject.com/) (<http://www.thesavantproject.com/>). According to Benny, his restaurant serves 'Latin and Asian' food; all he mentions specifically is sushi. He says the restaurant is breaking even, which is probably OK in these hard times. Here's what it says about Benny on the web-site:

"Ben began his foray into entertainment and nightlife as a DJ while in college in Southern California. After graduating with a degree in Russian Literature, he soon understood the futility of a liberal arts education. He made the choice so many recent grads do which ends with the question, would you like curly or straight fries with that?"

While on a trip to Holland to visit a dear friend from hippy naked camp, he and his friend decided to get tattoos. She had a design, but Ben did not. He wanted a tattoo that represented not only who he was, but who he wanted to be. And that is how he ended up with a martini glass tattoo on his left forearm. Six years down the road, it seemed only natural to dedicate his life to building a lounge empire."

Benny seems far more conservative than one would surmise from this bio.

After dinner, Hum and I chat with caretaker Lila (Warren); she is quite interested in our adventure and enthusiastic about 2 brothers doing this adventure together. We find out that she climbs Camels Hump 3

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times a week to record the number of people coming to the summit, and to advise people to walk on the rocks and not on the fragile alpine areas, as did Jenny at Taft Lodge; the other 2 days she does trail maintenance. She will stay on at the shelter until October.

Lila graduated recently from the University of Virginia with majors in Environmental Science and Environmental Policy, and a minor in Urban Planning. She wants to get into environmental law and hopes to return to UVA to get a law degree. She is excited to learn that one of Hum's family members ('Jimbo') works in that field. Hum offers to send Lila's information to Jimbo to see if he has any advice or leads to suggest.

After dinner Benny and Lila play a few hands of rummy, while we try to answer Jesse's query as to what is the definition of a glen (prompted by 'Birch Glen Camp' and 'Montclair Glen Lodge'). I say I should know because I grew up in Glen Rock, but I'll have to wait until I return to see that a glen is defined as a 'mountain valley'.

Jesse and Daniel cook and burn popcorn after we retire to our sleeping bags. They are very quiet in this effort but afterwards it smells like the shelter is burning down. I don't know what this smell is until the morning when Hum clues me into the late night popcorn burning.

We're all in our sleeping bags by 8:30 PM... everyone is quiet, no rudeness tonight or any other night on the trail except last night. Good sleep again tonight.

Montclair Glen Lodge to Bamforth Ridge Shelter – 8/19/09

Start Time: 7:10 AM, Montclair Glen Lodge
End Time: 3:45 PM, Bamforth Ridge Shelter
Total Miles: 6.0 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1610' gain/2380' loss

Distances:

Montclair Glen Lodge to Bamforth Ridge Shelter: 5.4 miles; 1410' gain/2180' loss
Alpine Trail to B-24 bomber wreckage: 0.4 miles round trip; 200' gain/200' loss
Spur to Bamforth Ridge Shelter: 0.2 miles;

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 27,251
Calories: 717
Steps/minute: 79
MPH: 2.25
Timer: 5 hours, 43 minutes, 08 seconds
Miles: 12.9 miles (6.0 actual miles)

We're up again at 5:30 AM; Jesse, Daniel, and Benny arise at about 6:00 AM. We finish breakfast, water run, packing, and are out by 7:10 AM.

It's only 1.7 miles to the Alpine Trail turnoff, where we'll divert to search out the B-24 bomber wreckage. The morning is cool and misty, but the mist is lifting making for interesting light and cloud patterns. The trail ascends very steeply over 1100' before reaching the Alpine Trail turnoff.

Jesse and Daniel pass us at about 9:00 AM and Benny just a little while later, just before we reach the Alpine Trail turnoff. They are all traveling amazingly fast over this steep, relentless uphill climb; but then again, hey, that's what we expected to see from these strong young guys. As Jesse passes he responds to my 'be safe' comment that there have been a lot of rescues on Camels Hump this year and that 'even the president of the Green Mountain Club broke a femur just a few days ago' (perhaps he heard this from caretaker Lila?). This amazing piece of information inspires me to later verify that indeed GMC president Marge Fish broke her femur on Camels Hump.

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We reach the Alpine Trail turnoff, where it will be down to the wreckage on the Alpine Trail and then back up to rejoin the LT. We decide to hide our packs rather than carry them on this jaunt, so Hum suggests hiding them a little way down the Alpine Trail. That way, he proposes, if someone steels them we can pounce on the heinous thieves as they pass us carrying our stuff. We pick a hiding place under a ledge just off the Alpine Trail and I cover the packs with a small bit of brush (Hum thinks this feeble camouflage attempt quite amusing since the packs are still easily visible).



B-24 Wreckage on Camels Hump from the October 16, 1944 Crash

We descend to the wreckage in about 20 minutes. Indeed the wing section is impressive, about 40 feet long with the landing gear mechanism still intact within the wing. The metal is ripped like paper where the wing once attached to the fuselage. One can imagine from this graphic display the horror that took place on that very cold October night almost 65 years ago.

We hike back up the Alpine Trail, recover our packs, rejoin the LT, and ascend the remaining 0.2 miles to the summit of Camels Hump. We skirt around the nearly vertical south wall of Camels Hump, which is a cliff with undulating rocks sticking out, almost as if a huge piece of the mountain broke off and left an enormous tear in the remaining cliff face. The trail ascends sharply over sheer cliff faces and we crawl a bit on these intimidating ledges.



Hum Climbs the Final 413' to the Camels Hump Summit

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The 4083' summit is soon reached: the cloudy mist rises and falls in every direction allowing occasional glimpses of the beautiful views and affords unique lighting through multiple layers of clouds. The wind and cold are such that our warmer clothes are sought out and hat straps are battered down.



**Ho & Hum on Summit of Camels Hump (4083')
Windy & Cold on Top**

There are many day hikers on the summit, most coming up the Burrows Trail, which one hiker describes as an easy 2-mile hike from the parking area. I call Lysie a little before 11 AM to report on our thrilling conquest. Once again, Hum is unable to reach Pat. After snacking and chatting with other hikers we start down the LT on the north side of Camels Hump at about 11:30 AM having spent a little over an hour on the summit.

We hike down to the 'hut clearing', a large open area where there once stood a hotel that operated more than a century ago. One wonders how the guests got up to the hotel; perhaps on horseback as one person suggests, or maybe that's why it failed financially: guests can't get there from here.

The hike down Bamforth Ridge is beautiful but seemingly endless and extremely challenging. The weather has turned sunny and crystal clear and there are stunning views the whole way, both ahead to Mt. Mansfield and dramatic views looking back to Camels Hump. There are many straight ups and downs on the ridge with some rather dangerous places. One place in particular occurs on a split rock with no hand holds available and a 20-30' crevasse in the large split in the rock and a sheer cliff to the left. One could not sit without falling into the crevasse so 'tight rope walking' on the narrow inside ledge is all one could do. I declare this to be one of the scariest places so far on the LT; Hum later says that he didn't think this quite as scary as I did.



Hiking on Bamforth Ridge with Camels Hump in Background

After more than 4 hours of hiking down Bamforth Ridge, Hum and I are becoming increasingly concerned that we somehow missed the turnoff for Bamforth Ridge Shelter; it is taking much longer than expected to reach the spur trail. Besides that, we now hear thunder booming in the distance and want to reach the shelter before we get drenched. We consult our topo maps numerous times to try to infer our exact location by noting locations of ups, downs, and level sections and matching these to recent LT topography we've been over. This is far from an exact science, and sometimes falsely convinces us further that the turnoff was missing. But finally, to our great relief, we reach the turnoff to Bamforth Ridge Shelter at about 3:45 PM.

We pass a GMC caretaker on the spur trail, just before reaching the shelter. He is there planning a trail maintenance project for the coming weekend. We ask about the layout of the shelter area and the location of the parking area on Duxbury Road (so I can give Lyn more specific directions for tomorrow).

The shelter is relatively new (built in 2002) and very nice. We settle in and seek out the water source, which is quite a way downhill from the shelter, but hey, it's good delicious water. After a little 'supper time' happy dance, we have dinner at about 6 PM, as is now usual,

[Kira Rashba](http://www.myspace.com/kirakr) (no trail name, <http://www.myspace.com/kirakr>) shows up at about 7 PM, very exhausted from the hike down Bamforth Ridge, coming all the way from Birch Glen Camp today. She speaks of how endlessly 'up and down' and 'up and down' the hike is going down the ridge, and how she was intimidated by the same split-rock crevasse that freaked me out (she says she crawled along the narrow part of the split rock).

Kira has previously hiked from Smugglers Notch to Canada and this time is doing the whole LT. Right away Hum notices a 6 inch hunting knife fastened to her belt, but doesn't mention it to Kira (we both speculate later that it could only be for self defense, i.e., a woman hiking alone). She laments that no friends were available to hike with her this time, but has hiked with people she met on the trail, including Jesse and Danny for several days (she notes that she is now 1/2 day behind them).

Kira hails from Baltimore and works at Johns Hopkins Hospital as a chemo therapy oncology nurse specializing in leukemia. Hum and Kira discuss her nursing work in some detail because Pat also worked for many years as an oncology nurse in Baltimore. Kira is obviously an intelligent, highly independent, if somewhat unusual, woman. Her enunciation and voice modulation remind me of the snooty secretary character 'Miss Jane' from the Beverly Hillbillies. When Kira and I get to discussing food at the Long Trail Inn, it comes out that she is a long-time vegetarian. Hum immediately chimes in with his opinion -- a

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strongly worded denunciation of being a vegetarian -- and I chide him for using too strong words to express what is only his opinion, and not fact. But Kira is unfazed by this and retorts that she doesn't plan to make any changes based on Hum's opinion.

We turn in at the usual 8:30 dusking hour; Kira reads in her sleeping bag for a while and listens to her

iPod (she also uses the iPod earplugs all night to dampen the snoring sounds :-)

Bamforth Ridge Shelter to Duxbury Road – 8/20/09

Start Time: 7:15 AM, Bamforth Ridge Shelter
End Time: 9:30 AM, Duxbury Road/Long Trail Parking Area
Total Miles: 2.9 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 0' gain/1574' loss

Distances:

Spur to Bamforth Ridge Shelter: 0.2 miles;
Bamforth Ridge Shelter to Duxbury Road: 2.7 miles; 0' gain/1574' loss

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 12,390
Calories: 326
Steps/minute: 91
MPH: 2.6
Timer: 2 hours, 14 minutes, 49 seconds
Miles: 5.86 miles (2.9 actual miles)

I call Lyn at about 7 AM, just before we leave Bamforth Ridge Shelter, to alert her that we're leaving and that I'll call her again when I estimate she should leave to come pick us up. We start out with a near vertical drop over 'banister ledge', but after that the descent is more gradual and we make good time on this Bamforth Ridge section; it is far easier than the section south of the shelter that he hiked yesterday. Today it is crystal clear and there are outstanding views of Mt. Mansfield off to the west.



A Nearly Vertical Drop Over Banister Ledge With Huge Boulders at the Bottom

We reach 'Duxbury window' by 8:15 AM and I call Lyn to say she should leave now. We rest on the bench there that is dedicated to 'Nutsy' Notte, and take some pictures of the outstanding views through the 'window' into the valley below.

We arrive at the Long Trail parking lot at about 9:30 AM, much sooner than we expect, and have more than an hour wait for Lyn to arrive. I peruse the sign in/sign out log at the head of this LT section, and note that the scout troop of 7 we met at Cowles Cove Shelter, from Norwell, Massachusetts, signed in on 8/15 and Kira signed out this morning with a mysterious comment 'no hats anymore'.



Ho & Hum Complete the Birch Glen to Camels Hump to Duxbury Road Section of the LT

On the way home we stop at [Liberty Hill Farm](http://www.libertyhillfarm.com/) (<http://www.libertyhillfarm.com/>) to visit the cows and newborn calf's; it's Lyn's and my favorite farm visit and we stop there often. Today there are 20 or more calf's living in individual little shelters – all are very cute and we chat with each one using our finest moo talk.



Lynsie Chats with a Cute Newborn Mooley Cow at Liberty Hill Farm

Hum and I decide to do the Lincoln Gap to Appalachian Gap section either tomorrow or Saturday, depending on the weather. When we check it out, the forecast for neither day looks very good, so we decide that tomorrow we'll complete that unfinished business with a two-car day hike. Today is wonderfully warm, however, and we spend the afternoon in the pool and then putting together our day packs for tomorrow.

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[Lincoln Gap to Appalachian Gap/Route 17 – 8/21/09](#)

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Lincoln Gap
End Time: 5:30 PM, Appalachian Gap/Route 17

Total Miles: 11.8 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2346' gain/2350' loss

Distances:

Lincoln Gap to Battell Shelter: 1.8 miles; 816' gain/0' loss
Battell Shelter to Glen Ellen Lodge: 6.4 miles; 1120' gain/930' loss
Spur to Glen Ellen Lodge: 0.6 miles; 180' gain/180' loss
Glen Ellen Lodge to Theron Dean Shelter: 1.6 miles; 230' gain/340' loss
Theron Dean Shelter to Route 17: 1.4 miles; 0' gain/900' loss

Pedometer readings:

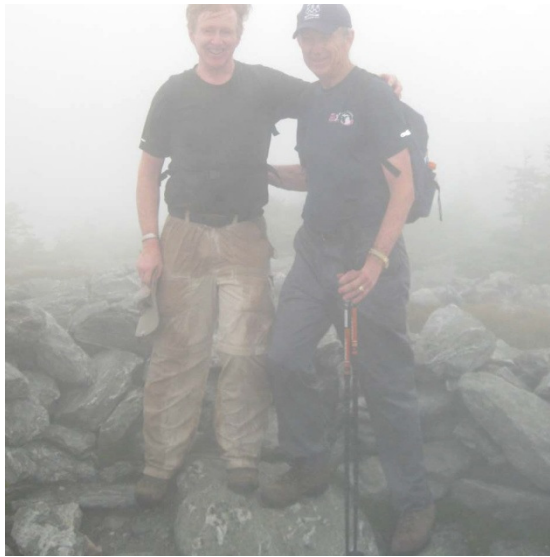
Steps: 44,553
Calories: 1172
Steps/minute: 91
MPH: 2.59
Timer: 8 hours, 8 minutes, 5 seconds
Miles: 21.09 miles (11.8 actual miles)

Up once again at 4 AM, we depart North Clarendon at 5 AM and encounter lots of morning fog on the trip north, but no rain. We park Hum's car at Appalachian Gap and my car at Lincoln Gap, and are on the trail at 7 AM – overall a very efficient start to the day.

The hike up to Battell Shelter is relatively easy and we do the 1.8 mile 816' climb is less than an hour and a half, arriving at the shelter a little before 8:30 AM. There we chat with a hiker from Hinesburg, Vermont, who stayed the night at Battell Shelter after somehow missing Cooley Glen Shelter more than 6 miles to the south. 'Battell' (as I'll refer to him) started in Brandon Gap en route to Canada and is carrying about 50 pounds of gear: this is Battell's first backpacking hike and is overwhelmed by the weight of his pack. Hum relates his saga of reducing his pack weight and advises him to shed any unused gear at the first opportunity. We get a demonstration of Battell's ultraviolet water purifier, which seems pretty cool, but we realize that it's missing the pre-screening step to remove sediment, which could be substantial when scooping up a jug of water (especially from still water).

As we depart the shelter to continue our ascent of Mt. Abraham, we meet a day hiker who advises us that the rock ledges on the trail are wet and slippery (he has descended each ledge on all four's) and that the peak is totally socked in. What a bummer! The climb is indeed wet, slippery, and steep, but we make good time and summit Mt. Abraham (4006') a little after 9 AM.

Mt. Abraham is one of 3 Vermont peaks with alpine zones above the tree line, Mt. Mansfield and Camels Hump being the other two. The treeless summit area here is much smaller than the other two, however. As advertized, the peak is completely fogged in and we can see nothing. This is especially disappointing since the GMC [Long Trail Guide](#) states that Mt. Abraham 'offers one of the best panoramas on the entire Long Trail'. Oh well, this section will definitely have to be repeated in better weather. Two 'cute young girls' (as Hum describes) from Burlington arrive at about the same time and we snap each others' pictures in spite of the fog and lack of any view whatsoever.



**Ho & Hum on Summit of Mt. Abraham (4006')
Completely Socked In; No View Whatsoever; Bummer!**

We make the long slog over Little Abe (3900') and then to Lincoln Peak (3975'), where there is a viewing platform. But alas, once the thick fog sets in on Mt. Abraham it is practically unbroken for the whole rest of the day. There is no view from the platform and one can hardly see the antennas on the peak, which are only about 20 or 30 feet away from the platform.

We reach Mt. Ellen (4083') summit at about noon, where Sugarbush ski trails begin, and rain for us also begins, so we don our ponchos. While Mt. Ellen is the same altitude as Camels Hump, it is dramatically different: it is treed with a rather gradual summit that is not at all rocky like Camels Hump.



Hum Dons His Poncho on Mt. Ellen Summit (4083')

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We descend the 0.3 mile spur on the Barton trail down to Glen Ellen Lodge because Hum needs to use the privy. This short descent is particularly rocky and slippery but Hum is wasting no time in doing this section and is practically running down the spur: he leaves me in the dust. It reminds me of the old saying '20 yards to the outhouse by Willie Make-it'. When Hum encounters a ladder at the very end of the spur, which he must negotiate to reach the lodge, he is very unhappy and loudly expresses his dissatisfaction forthwith with the difficulty of this part of the hike. We both finally make it OK to Glen Ellen Lodge, a charming 75-year-old rustic cabin built in 1933.

We take time for a good lunch and enjoy the view of the Mad River valley to the east after, thankfully, the fog clears briefly to present us with a beautiful view. I make a final entry in the log book, to the effect that 'the Ho-Hum geezers have enjoyed their lunch here at Glen Ellen shelter on a very foggy and rainy day on the LT; we will need to repeat this section in better weather sometime in the future; we have now come to the end of our fantastic hiking experience for this year and hopefully will be back for more next year.'



Hum Takes Care of Business & Does Lunch at Glen Ellen Lodge

As we ascend the Barton spur trail back to the LT we meet 'Battell' (our Battell Shelter friend), who is just starting to descend the spur to Glen Ellen Lodge for the night. He inquires about how far/difficult is the spur trail and quickly turns around when we tell him that the spur is 'way down', slippery, and even has a ladder on the way. Battell decides to hike on to Theron Dean Shelter when we tell him we saw a sign saying that the shelter will be open until August 29, after which it will be closed for a month of repairs. He is a fast hiker in spite of his heavy 50-pound load, and soon leaves us in the dust, but we meet him again a half hour later at the warming hut for the Mad River Glen ski area at Stark's Nest (3644') on General Stark Mt. Battell has kindly waited for us to show us the trail, since it gets a bit tricky to follow when crossing the ski trails.

The warming hut is large and Battell decides to stay there for the night since it is raining pretty hard and thunder is booming in the distance. Before we depart, Hum asks Battell about the relative difficulty of the Mad River Glen ski area and finds out it's one of the most difficult in the east: no grooming, super hard. With Hum's interest now greatly piqued, a much broader extended discussion of skiing ensues, but I cut it short because the thunder is now booming louder and closer. As we beat a hasty retreat, Battell speaks admiringly of the Ho-Hum brotherly hiking adventure and muses that he should hike with his brother too.

We don our ponchos and reenter the rain storm but fortunately encounter no thunder boomer lightning coming down right on top of us. We find out later that there are some very severe thunder storms in the area (this has Lyn worried but we don't know it yet).

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Beyond the Stark's Nest the LT becomes extremely difficult with many very steep descents, some with 30-40' vertical drops and no ladder to help. On one of these cliffs Hum falls after stepping on a root that gives way (I had stepped on the same root but it held for me). He also sheds his poncho, in spite of the rain, because he says he can't see his feet on the descents and that makes hiking really dangerous (I didn't have that problem).

We finally make it to Theron Dean Shelter a little before 4 PM. Theron Dean is indeed falling apart and tilting badly to the right; it is the most crude and primitive shelter we've encountered so far on the LT. It's good that repairs are being made starting in only a few days. The fog has again lifted and there are impressive pretty views to the north from the 'Dean Panorama', a grand overlook right by the shelter. Below the shelter we explore 'Dean Cave', which is formed by several huge boulders.

The 1.8 mile slog from Theron Dean Shelter to Appalachian Gap takes us another hour and a half, with a brief stop at some more Mad River Glen ski huts. The weather is still clearing and there are excellent long range views down the valley. It's a relentlessly downhill and slippery trail to the end; we finally arrive at Appalachian Gap at 5:30 PM, after 10 hours of hiking.



**View of the Mad River Glen Ski Area
Thankfully the Weather Clears a Bit Toward the End of the Day**

We try to call Lyn from Appalachian Gap and Lincoln Gap but there is no cell service. Hum continues to try on the way south and is finally successful in the Pittsfield area. Lyn is relieved to know we are OK, she has been worried because there have been severe thunder storms throughout Vermont and in the area we are hiking and she has not heard from us all day. Rutland itself has been hit by an extremely severe storm that has flooded the downtown area.

Epilogue

Summary statistics for the 10-day hike:

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Total Miles: 69.6 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 14,966' gain/19,858' loss

Total Steps: 314,885

Total Calories: 8284

On the very warm Saturday following the completion of our 10 days of hiking, we enjoy the farmer's market in the morning and cooling off in the pool in the afternoon. And then in the evening Hum treats us to a delicious dinner at the Sirloin Saloon. But I have to note one classic Humberto moment that occurs on this outing. Upon receiving the bill, Hum shouts out in his trademark booming voice "this is highway robbery!!" This not only gets our attention but the attention of everyone else in the restaurant; folks at all the other tables turn their gaze upon us to see what can possibly be the matter. We soon find out that Hum actually is referring to the extra tourism tax that is levied on every restaurant bill in Rutland, which in his estimation is completely outrageous. We all get a good chuckle out of this classic Humberto moment.

Over breakfast on Sunday we recount and reminisce on all that has happened:

Truly this was an epic journey and phenomenal life experience. There is no way of knowing what it will be like other than to actually do it. So we did it. And now we know.

I count it as one of the greatest experiences of my life.

In this journey we savored an awesome and gorgeous stretch of our natural world, enjoyed the company of interesting and highly friendly people, tested ourselves to the limits of our endurance, overcame many dangers and 'impossible' challenges, increased even further the strong brotherly bond that already existed between us, and took away unbelievable memories of this astonishing adventure.

We make plans for another Ho-Hum long distance LT backpacking hike on the LT in August 2010

After breakfast we give Hum a big hug goodbye and bid our brother farewell; he departs taking all those amazing Ho-Hum memories with him.

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2. August 2 – 8, 2010 **Bennington/Route 9, Vermont to Mad Tom Notch, Vermont** **Mt. Abraham, Vermont & Lincoln Peak, Vermont**

Prologue

My brother Hum (Bob Ash, trail name Hum) and I (Jerry Ash, trail name Ho) began planning our 2010 Long Trail (LT) hike immediately following our grand 2009 LT adventure in August 2009. Together we identify ourselves as "geezer hikers Ho & Hum", because we are just that: I'm 68 and Hum's 70, that is, geezers, and indeed we are quite Ho-Hum.

Over the intervening year between hikes we both added to our equipment store. I bought a Therm-a-Rest ProLite sleeping pad and a Katadin Hiker Pro water filter from Amazon.com, both of which I had borrowed from my son-in-law Tim Chew for our 2009 hike. I also bought a Coleman Exponent PowerBoost stove from the Coleman store. Hum bought a new Cuscus backpack, identical to mine except in color, which was badly needed to replace his Civil War era frame pack that proved to be dangerously unstable in scaling the high peaks in 2009. Hum also bought a Jetboil from his son Keith, which he had borrowed in 2009 but subsequently damaged and had to buy his son a new replacement. He also added a sleeping bag fashioned out of blankets by wife Pat.

In the spring and early summer, we both do a number of training hikes. Hum climbs Old Rag Mountain in Shenandoah National Park (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Rag_Mountain), and a local peak in the Rochester, NY area with his son Keith, where the latter hike included a harrowing bush-wack decent down a near-cliff-like face of the peak. He also does several local hikes around his neighborhood carrying nearly his full pack weight. I do 83 miles in 9 training hikes, including 39 miles on the LT (from Brandon Gap to Lincoln Gap and Big Branch/USFS 10 to Mad Tom Notch), carrying about 30 pounds on my back (I wrote a separate journal on these training hikes).

However, partly negating all my extensive preparation, only one week before departing on our LT hike, my wife Lyn and I return from a fabulous two-week trip to Russia, celebrating our 45th wedding anniversary. This magnificent trip includes a river cruise between Moscow and St. Petersburg on the Moscow and Volga Rivers (<http://www.gct.com/Trips/2011/Russia-Revealed-Moscow-to-St-Petersburg-2011/Itinerary/Moscow-to-St-Petersburg.aspx>). There is only one big problem with the timing of that trip: as could be expected, I gain a large amount of weight – 15+ pounds – and fall miserably out of shape. To compensate, I take 3 of the 9 training hikes the final week before our grand trek. It helps but I'm still not back to tip-top condition before the start of our adventure.

Hum arrives in Vermont at precisely 2:01 PM on Sunday, August 1, only one minute past his predicted arrival time. Hum would prove to be uncannily accurate in predicting arrival times on the trail as well. This is the day before our LT hike begins and also my 68th birthday. We spend several hours in final checks of equipment and weighing our full packs: we both weigh in at close to 35 pounds each with 5 days of food packed away.

I enjoy a wonderful birthday celebration orchestrated by my dear wife Lynsie, and savor a delicious barbecued lamb shish kabob dinner, my very favorite meal, chosen by me on all such occasions even though I have to do the barbecuing. This is a wonderful start to a fabulous week of hiking and sharing with brother Hum and many folks along the trail

Bennington/Route 9 to Goddard Shelter – 8/2/10

Start Time: 7:00 AM, route 9, Bennington
End Time: 1:30 PM, Goddard Shelter
Total Miles: 11.3 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 3040' gain/1185' loss

Distances:

Route 9 to Melville Nauheim Shelter: 1.6 miles; 940' gain/0' loss

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Melville Nauheim Shelter to Goddard Shelter: 8.5 miles; 2100' gain/1185' loss

Goddard Shelter to Glastenbury Mountain fire tower and return (2 times): 1.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 34,218

Calories: 900

Steps/minute: 102

MPH: 2.90

Timer: 5 hours, 35 minutes, 05 seconds

Miles: 16.2 miles (11.3 actual miles)

As per our plan, we arise at 4:30 AM on Monday, August 2. And as is usual before these hikes, I do not sleep well this night, probably reflecting some apprehension about what lay ahead in the morning, although I gained enough LT hiking experience from the previous year that the unknowns and possible dangers ahead do not loom quite as large as they did in 2009.

After breakfast and last minute checks we're on the road by 5:30 AM. Along the way I tell Hum the strange and disturbing story of Paula Welden, a Bennington College sophomore who set out on the Long Trail on December 1, 1946, from the same starting point and in the same direction that we would soon set out from ourselves, and was never heard from or seen again. She apparently hiked at least as far as the Glastenbury Mountain fire tower, where we would also hike this day, and perhaps beyond. As told in the book *Vintage Vermont Villainies: True Tales of Murder & Mystery from the 19th and 20th Centuries* (<http://www.amazon.com/Vintage-Vermont-Villainies-Mystery-Centuries/dp/0881507490/>):

"About 2:30 that Sunday afternoon (12/1/46), Paula (Welden) announced to (her roommate) Elizabeth (Johnson) that she wanted to take a hike before resuming her studies. Elizabeth thought nothing of her announcement; she knew Paula was an experienced, enthusiastic hiker, and the two of them had recently endured a rain-soaked night out camping in the Manchester area... Minutes

later, Paula left Dewey Hall forever. Although it was chilly, with a possibility of snow forecast for the higher elevations, Paula was lightly dressed for her expedition. Clad in a red parka with a fur-trimmed hood, she was wearing blue jeans and heavy-soled Top-Sider sneakers...she was carrying little if any cash...

"It would seem that Paula Welden made her way successfully to the Long Trail, for there were quite a number of witnesses who later stated that they had seen a striking-looking blonde of her description pass that way...including Stearns Rice, Miss Mary F. Rice, and Lyman Royce, who saw a girl matching Paula's description as she entered the Long Trail and began walking north toward Glastenbury Mountain... It was gloomy – just starting to snow... By Monday morning that area of the Long Trail was covered by three inches of snow over a bed of ice.

"Paula Welden did not return to her room in Dewey Hall that Sunday night. When she didn't show up for her Monday morning classes, ... the search for her began immediately... the hunt for Paula Welden soon did encompass much of the mountainous and even desolate terrain of the Long Trail area between Glastenbury and Bald Mountains. By Wednesday, December 4, there were as many as five hundred searchers looking for Paula along the Long Trail, some of them assisted by experienced woodsmen and accompanied by bloodhounds. Not a single significant clue was found."

I suggest to Hum that wouldn't it be astonishing if we were to uncover some evidence along the LT to solve this 64 year old mystery – hey, you never know. But not surprisingly, we find no such evidence to help solve this longstanding vintage Vermont villainy.

Strangely, there is an oddly similar missing person event and mystery unfolding at the same time as our hike begins, which could also involve the geezer hikers' help in solving as well. Danny Goldstein (33) of North Main Street, Rutland, Vermont, left all his possessions, except the clothes he was wearing, and disappeared after having last been seen leaving his home on July 25. This new mystery is first brought to our attention by numerous "missing person" posters identifying Danny posted at the August 7 Long Trail Festival we attend. At the time there is some suspicion that he might be hiking somewhere on the LT and that hikers, like us, attending the festival might actually remember seeing Danny. In fact, an August 14 article in the *Rutland Herald* states that hikers had possibly seen Goldstein on the LT south of Route 9 in Bennington and that dogs had picked up Goldstein's scent at the Route 140 LT trailhead. The timing of these 'sightings' is such that had Goldstein actually been hiking the LT during this time, going south on the LT from the Rutland section to the Bennington section, it is very likely that we would have met him along the way on our hike going north from the Bennington/Route 9 area. But we encountered no such person and realize that we could help negate the theory that Danny Goldstein was hiking south during this time on the LT. But our witness proves to be unnecessary, for sadly, Danny's body is found on September 4 in a nearby Rutland woods, less than two miles from his home. The cause and manner of

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his death is still pending and it may be some time before that is determined (<http://projectjason.org/forums/index.php?topic=9234.15>).

It takes us about 1 ½ hours to reach the LT parking area on Route 9 in Bennington, after one slight mishap where I overshot the destination by a few miles on the first pass (there is apparently no familiar "hiker" sign marking the trail and parking lot going East on Route 9, as there is going West, which we easily find when we double back after recognizing the mistake). Along the way there is a bit of rain and gloomy weather, which dampens our spirits just a bit; the forecast is for showers and thunder showers each afternoon through Wednesday, and then clearing on Thursday and Friday. We arrive at the parking lot at about 7:00 AM and after a few photos and goodbyes to Lyn we're off into the woods on our grand 2010 backpacking adventure.



Ho & Hum Start LT Hike at Bennington/Route 9 Trailhead

We reach Melville Nauheim shelter, 1.6 miles up the trail with an elevation gain of 1000', by 8:00 AM, after only one hour of hiking. It is already clear that our pace will be much faster than in 2009, where we averaged one mph or less on most sections, especially on the sections going uphill.

We encounter 3 young hikers going north on the AT at the stream just north of the spur junction to the shelter. We briefly chat and tell them they will likely pass us going north, since we geezers are really very slow hikers, but alas, we never see this threesome again. Another unsolved mystery.

We pass LT landmarks in quick succession: the power line on Maple Hill (2.1 miles) at 8:15 AM, Hell Hollow Brook (3.2 miles) at 8:50 AM, and Porcupine Lookout (4.4 miles) at 9:30 AM. We get several decent views along the way, particularly of Bennington in the valley below, but the air is heavy and quite hazy today. At Porcupine Lookout we meet a Dad and his two young sons, who tent-camped here last night at a nice tenting site. We find that this is one major distinguishing aspect of the Glastenbury Wilderness section of the LT; there are several very nice tent campsites along the way, large flat clearings, most with established fire pits, but some without any nearby water sources. Dad tells us their farthest point north was Goddard Shelter, where they also tented, and they also camped at several other of these campsites in the Glastenbury Wilderness. Now, he tells us, they must decide whether to go visit grandma or go home – a dilemma for which we will not know the answer.

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We lose track of our location for some time after this encounter with Dad and sons, until we reach a sign marking the boundary of Glastenbury Wilderness, which also has a map showing us that we're less than one mile from Goddard Shelter. This stretch of the LT has few obvious topological features to help us locate ourselves on the map. These features are usually up and down "bumps" that we can identify on the trail to coincide with features shown in the LT Guidebook. But this section has few such features to help us locate ourselves and alas our primary navigation system, AKA *Hum's Spot-On Navigation Service*, has been foiled

After this experience of getting somewhat 'lost', *Hum's Spot-On Navigation Service* adopts a new policy of relying primarily on hiking time to estimate our current location and arrival time at our next destination. Of course, the new methodology still involves constant obsessive/compulsive "check-the-map" steps, but from this time forward *Hum's Spot-On Navigation Service* is done with uncanny accuracy. As a side note, it is widely known, especially in Ash family circles, that Hum provides a host of valuable services he has developed over the years, including *Hum's Money-Saving Tips Service*, *Hum's Friendly Escort Service*, *Hum's Tennis-Star Incubation Service*, *Hum's Emergency Tax Filing Service*, *Hum's Expert Home*

Improvement Service, Hum's Dog & Cat Training Service, and many more. But Hum's Spot-On Navigation Service is not so well known, so Hum hereby announces this new service for anyone, anywhere, to hire, for a (somewhat inflated) fee.



**“Hum’s Spot-On Navigation Service” Gets Underway on our 2010 LT Hike
An Obsessive/Compulsive “Check-the-Map” Step is Shown in Progress**

After lunch by the Glastenbury Wilderness boundary sign, we embark on the final one mile stretch to Goddard Shelter. Along the way young Funk passes us as if we are standing still. Funk is a Georgia to Maine AT thru hiker, who today is slack packing up to meet his Dad at the Long Trail Inn in Killington, Vermont (<http://www.innatlongtrail.com/Home.html>). He plans to do some hikes around the area together with his Dad and friends, after which he’ll pick up his hiking stuff and continue on to Maine. Funk has done the AT before and knows Mt. Washington and the Whites well. We will meet Funk again at Goddard Shelter as well as Stratton Pond Shelter in two more days.

We reach Goddard Shelter (10.1 miles) at 1:30 PM, after about 5 1/2 hours of actual hiking, when we adjust for the time taken for our rest stops and lunch. That means that so far we’re doing about 1.8+ mph, and that with more than a 3000’ of total elevation gain. Geezers Ho and Hum have suddenly become much faster! In 2009, we averaged less than 1 mph, and were much slower on the climbs, but

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this year Hum’s pace and stamina, especially on the climbs, are clearly much greater. Our hiking time to Goddard Shelter is a little more than half of our original estimate of 10.1 hours. And this faster pace will dramatically reduce our actual hiking times relative to our estimates on all sections in the coming days. This is really nice, we find, because this allows us to have a really good rest and more time to enjoy conversing with the other hikers we meet at the shelters.

At the shelter we meet Zhivago, who is just preparing his lunch, and Funk, who has stopped briefly for a rest. Immediately upon arriving, there suddenly are strange noises coming from behind the shelter that to me sound like a porcupine (porcupine sounds recorded at <http://www.junglewalk.com/popup.asp?type=a&AnimalAudioID=10999>), and I ask Zhivago if he hears the porcupine too? This elicits no reply, but he does look at me as if I’m some kind of nut. When I go behind the shelter to investigate, I discover that the noise must have somehow come from Funk, who is there gathering his stuff. This gives an amusing start to our Zhivago encounter.

Zhivago is a lone southbound hiker doing the entire AT. We find he is a very quiet and introverted, and that conversation has to more or less be dragged out of him, which is rather unusual among the hikers we meet along the way. He has recently sold his house and retired after working 35 years as an electrical engineer out of Rochester, NH, where he worked for “many companies” but didn’t identify any in particular. Mentioning that I worked as an electrical engineer for Bell Labs for 35 years and Hum worked as a nuclear engineer for Baltimore Gas & Electric for his whole career sparked no interest on Zhivago’s

part. I later tell Hum that Zhivago reminds me of “Mr. Peepers,” a role played by Wally Cox in a 50-year-old TV show about a teacher with a similar very withdrawn, introverted personality.

Zhivago grew up in New Rochelle NY, where Hum recalls our Aunt Maybelle and Uncle Billy also lived (I thought they lived in Pelham, NY, but then again these two towns are right next to each other). Strangely, I mentioned going to a fancy restaurant in the area, “Patricia Murphy’s”, ages ago, with our parents and aunt and uncle, and Zhivago knew it as well; he says it closed 50 years ago. He also lived in W Palm Beach FL and his mother now lives nearby in Jupiter Beach, FL; he hopes to surprise his mother for Thanksgiving after finishing his AT hike. When Hum brings up scouting and his experience as a scout master, Zhivago proudly announces “I’m an Eagle Scout”, the only gratuitous comment he offers to us the whole time we talk.



Goddard Shelter; Zhivago Preparing His Lunch

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Zhivago says he is hiking southbound rather than northbound in order to “follow the weather”; he averages about 10 miles/day and carries 32 pounds maximum. He last resupplied in N. Clarendon, but couldn’t recall where. This I found rather strange because I live in N. Clarendon and there are virtually no stores to be found there (he probably resupplied in Rutland, just a little farther north). He ate at the Whistle Stop Café on Route 103 near Clarendon Gorge, a favorite stop for AT/LT hikers, and asserted that “all AT hikers should stop there”. He uses bleach to purify water (1 drop/pint), a method I had previously not heard about, and is very exact in distinguishing purifying versus filtering water (he filters his water with coffee filters). He is also a bit pedantic when he tells us his trail name, where he wants to know “have you read the book or seen the movie”. I tell him I saw the movie and particularly remember the boring parts with the long train rides through Siberia. He is clearly unimpressed with my comment and doesn’t respond; *Dr. Zhivago* must be a great favorite novel for some reason, a reason that will also remain unknown. When I asked about hiking alone and if he tried to get someone to hike with him, he said flatly that he “didn’t want to hike with anyone”; aha, case closed.

Hum and I decide to make our way up to the Glastenbury Mountain fire tower, which Zhivago estimates is 0.2 miles up the trail (actually its 0.3 miles). We expect that Zhivago will have left Goddard Shelter heading south for Melville Nauheim Shelter by the time we return, so we bid him farewell to which he makes no reply...

We reach the fire tower in short order and get a good if somewhat hazy 360-degree view from the top; Somerset Reservoir is clearly in view to the east and the Taconic Mountains, Stratton Mountain, and Mt. Equinox are visible to the west.



Glastenbury Mountain Fire Tower & Hum Descending Tower

When we return I meet a woman, Zephyr (Janet Robbins, 53), who has just arrived at the shelter and is hiking alone with her dog Ashby. Ashby is a nice looking dog with reddish hair, a mixed breed and a bit smaller than a lab. Zephyr informs me that Ashby is her protector and will attack me if I approach, so she advises me to please keep my distance. Of course I oblige this warning not only on this first meeting but on all subsequent meetings to come over the next four days. But Ashby never once growls or barks at me the whole time we are hiking together with Zephyr, who will become a good friend over the coming days.

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Surprisingly, Zhivago is still finishing up his lunch when we return from the fire tower but soon leaves for Melville Nauheim shelter. As he departs he asks us to tell "Cool Shoes" that he has moved on when she arrives. This time we say nothing as he leaves and all he says in parting is that he can "see the sun" but no goodbyes or anything normal like that.

Cool Shoes (Sharon Malone) arrives at about 3:30 PM, and is obviously very disappointed that Zhivago has moved on to Melville Nauheim shelter. She immediately and emphatically blurts out "Cool Shoes not going to Melville with Zhivago!" Cool Shoes is a very outgoing, middle age black woman, with an infectious and explosive laugh that rivals Hum's trademark explosive laugh. She is also hiking alone and Hum and I think it a bit unusual to meet two women hiking alone in quick succession.

Cool Shoes is an unmarried school teacher from Greenville NC who grew up in Baltimore MD, where her mother and brother still live. She teaches "special education" to students who are actually juvenile delinquents; Cool Shoes says they will go to jail if they make a single infraction of the rules. To Hum and me it sounds like a tough job. Her mother lives on Oliver Street in downtown Baltimore, which Hum says is a very bad section of town, and Cool Shoes agrees. So bad in fact that her mother was assaulted and raped there when she was 70 years old; Cool Shoes wants her mom to move but is glad that her brother lives with her now to provide protection. Two other brothers are dead (perhaps murdered, Hum speculates, but Cool Shoes doesn't say); she also has one sister.

Cool Shoes tells us an interesting story about meeting up with Warren Doyle on the trail in the Manchester area a couple of days ago. Warren Doyle (<http://www.aldha.org/doyle.htm>, <http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1006961/index.htm>) is something of a legend on the AT, having hiked it 10 times or more, perhaps more times than anyone else. Warren Doyle, who Cool Shoes says has a white beard, white hair, and a hat like mine, is leading a hike with about 20 followers. She speaks of him a little irreverently, sort of as if he may be something of a hustler in what he might be (over)charging these followers of his. Cool Shoes says that when he saw her on the trail he just

looked strangely at her, as if, she interprets, “he had never seen a lone black woman hiking the AT”, she says with her trademark booming laugh. To me this is really a telling story about Cool Shoes. Coincidentally, when Cool Shoes hitched a ride into Manchester to resupply, she got a ride from Warren Doyle’s resupply person, who is also from NC.

Cool Shoes tells us how she got her trail name. It seems that she crossed one of the many deep water crossings up in Maine, and, as is often the case, became immersed up to her waist. When she emerged from the frigid water with dripping hiking shoes, socks, and clothes, one hiking companion exclaimed “hey, there’s cool shoes!”, and her trail name was hatched. Actually, Cool Shoes’ trail name was given to her the way a trail name is supposed to be given, that is, by her fellow hikers on the trail. I later learn this fact about trail names by reading the trail journal of the Canadian Geese (Richard and Carol Robinson), whom we later meet at Stratton Pond Shelter (see their journal at <http://trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=264780>). I suspect that this is not usually the case, however, and that most trail names are self inflicted, as in the case of Ho and Hum.

Cool Shoes speaks with a little trepidation about crossing Maine’s “100 mile wilderness” just south of Mt. Katahdin, where hikers are advised to carry at least 10-days of food and supplies; there is no resupply available along that stretch. She tells us she bought expensive Keen hiking shoes in Manchester, and after only 3 day’s use they are now falling apart; she plans to complain. In coming days we will hear at least 3 other such reports from hikers with similar problems with Keen shoes. She will be ending this year’s hike in two days at North Adams, MA, to return to Greenville and her job. She has trouble pronouncing some of the proper nouns, such as the shelter names and “Zhivago” in particular, which comes out sounding a little different every time, usually something like “zavana”. She readily admits she can’t pronounce his trail name, once again with one of her big booming laughs. We laugh too. Zhivago and Cool Shoes are polar opposites, but are clearly good friends and to me that’s a redeeming fact in Zhivago’s favor.

Zephyr is from Henryville in the Poconos, which is very near to Pocono Pines where Hum and Pat own a vacation home. Hum and Zephyr therefore have much in common to discuss: it turns out that she teaches child development and food courses at a high school that Hum passes all the time. Even though

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she teaches food, she says she’s not really into cooking. Ed, her husband of 31 years, works for the Department of Defense in a classified assignment that takes him to either Afghanistan or Iraq for a 6-month tour every year (Zephyr does not even get to know where Ed is exactly on these tours). Stateside Ed works at Tobyhanna Army Depot (<http://www.tobyhanna.army.mil/index.html>), which is also familiar: Hum and I have often hiked the trails in adjacent Tobyhanna State Park (<http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/stateparks/parks/tobyhanna.aspx>) and always pass the army depot en route to the park and often wonder ‘what do they do at Tobyhanna Army Depot?’ Janet and Ed have three grown children; their older daughter (28) is enrolled in Navy Warrant Officer Training and is going through the same extremely rugged training given to Navy Seals. Older daughter and son (23, who she also describes as “rugged”) have hiked extensively with Zephyr on the AT (all states except TN), but younger daughter likes hiking less, she says. She spoke of how difficult the AT is in Georgia, constantly up and down, up and down, ...

Zephyr says she needs to get her AT hiking “fix” this year and has plans for a one or possibly two-week excursion on the Vermont AT. Husband Ed doesn’t want to hike “this year”, but they have hiked together on other occasions. She started yesterday (Sunday) on Route 9, the same place we started this morning, and stayed last night at Melville Nauheim shelter. She plans a “very slow schedule”, which overlaps with our (slow) schedule so we realize we will likely meet up each night, and we do. Husband Ed is meeting her on Friday wherever she is. At that point either a) they shuttle cars so Zephyr can continue hiking to Rutland next week, b) they shuttle cars for a Rutland continuation hike and Ed takes dog Ashby home, or c) all go home and Zephyr ends her AT hike.

Dog Ashby is Zephyr’s protector, and was found on the AT between Ashby Hollow (<http://www.hikingupward.com/OVH/AshbyHollow/>) and Ashby Gap (<http://www.hikingupward.com/OVH/AshbyGap/>), in Virginia, hence Ashby’s name. She was one of 5 pups in a litter Zephyr and her son found on the trail. Apparently Ashby followed them for 40 miles on the AT, and also right into their hearts, and thereupon they decided to adopt her.

Zephyr and Ashby stay every night in the tent site at each shelter. Because Ashby will be aggressive to anyone approaching Zephyr: she stays at the furthest point away from all other tenters, so that no one will have to cross paths with Ashby, who may in fact bite them if they cross paths. Zephyr tells us that Ashby has in fact bitten people on the trail.

I tell Hum that Zephyr reminds me a lot of his daughter Laurie, both in her hair color and facial features. Hum disagrees but the following Saturday my wife Lyn, with no prompting from me, makes the same comment to Hum when she meets Zephyr, but Hum still remains unconvinced.

Two others are tenting right beside the shelter; one of them is Runner (Sam Merriman), who at just 14 years old and is doing a long distance backpacking hike on the LT, supported by his parents. He says that his folks will be meeting him on Route 11/30 out of Manchester on Friday. He is, in fact, the son of Charles Merriman, an attorney who is at the time a candidate for Vermont Secretary of State on the Democratic ticket (<http://merrimanforvt.com/>), but later we learn that Merriman loses the August 24 primary election. Runner has done a lot of hiking and outdoor stuff with his dad, including climbing 14,000' mountains and paddling the Green River in Colorado, hiking in Canada's Algonquin Provincial Park (<http://www.algonquinpark.on.ca/>), and running up 6288' Mt. Washington in the Mt. Washington Road Race (<http://www.mountwashingtonroadrace.com/>). It's the latter accomplishment that gives Runner his trail name. At first Sam says he had no trail name, but then Zephyr encourages him to choose one, so he chooses "Runner" because that's what one of his hiking companions called him on learning of his feat on Mt. Washington. So once again this is a proper trail name, given to Runner by someone else. After that Zephyr makes it a point to address him frequently as Runner, so he gets used to the trail name idea. Runner is a well spoken, well rounded, and quite mature 14 year old, but as with any teen, obviously prefers to talk to folks his age rather than old geezers like Ho and Hum. We will meet him several more times going north on the LT, and that too will lead to one more mystery, yet to come.

Zephyr tries to call her husband, but none of us can get cell service at the shelter. She suggests that we try the fire tower for a better shot, so once again we hike the 0.3 miles up to the tower. We find the views are good but still a bit hazy, but alas there is no cell service for Zephyr or me. Hum manages to leave a "we got here and all is OK" message for Pat, although he's unsure if it took or not (it did, he finds out days

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later). Zephyr and I also notice that the power bars on our phones are unexplainably down 50%, even though we both have our phones turned off the whole time.

Dinner time, dinner time, the time finally arrives for that most favorite time of a hiking day. I try out my new Coleman lightweight stove and it works great. It heats two cups of water very rapidly, only problem being that the pot handle gets too hot to pick up with my fingers and even burns a cloth I try to use as a potholder. Hum has a handy pot lifter that he loans me and that does the trick. Only other problem is that my pot is a bit small and I often spill water, especially in the first few days before I get the knack. Hum is relentless in pointing out that my boiling pot is too small! Dinner is really good, pasta and tuna for me, my favorite dinner planned for first and last dinners; Hum has Mountain House lasagna with meat sauce, which he says is delicious. Actually Hum eats two dinners each night, according to the Mountain House package it is enough food for two people, and I warn Hum that consuming two dinners is driving up his hiking expense. This gets a good booming laugh from Hum, which warms the dinnertime fun.

We turn into our sleeping bags at dusk (8:00 PM or so), as per usual. As the sun sets, I tell Cool Shoes about the beautiful Native American Indian flute music that Windtaker (Randy Motz) played each night at sunset on our last year's LT hike. This triggers Cool Shoes to recall how she has heard many other hikers provide gratuitous free concerts with their ukuleles, harmonicas, etc., and said she even heard of a hiker who played the tuba (if one can believe that anyone carries a tuba on the trail :-). I also relate how Funk, apparently, was able to sound like, or perhaps purposely imitate, a porcupine earlier in the day, and how I mystified Zhivago with my pointing out the 'porcupine sounds' coming from behind the shelter. I comment that "some hikers play their ukuleles, and other hikers make sounds like porcupines". This gets one of Cool Shoes bursting laughs. Cool Shoes has to be one of the more fun people we've ever met on the trail.

We all soon drop off to sleep, and the sleeping is very cool this night, with temperature probably dropping into the 40's. Hum's blanket sleeping bag is not warm enough for such nights, he says in the morning. Tonight will not be at all peaceful or restful, however. For one thing, the usual 'extreme night sounds' (AKA loud snoring) are emanating from a certain person beside me, who just might be my brother; these emanations have enough force to launch the shelter roof into outer space. Next, the mouse brigade is out in force tonight at Goddard Shelter. Every few seconds one of the little critters scampers loudly along the 'mouse freeway' right above our heads. This, to say the least, is disconcerting as one never knows when one of these devilish foragers might wind up in ones sleeping bag.

Then, on top of all this mayhem, a nighttime drama is about to unfold. Sometime around midnight, I wake up to Hum holding his flashlight and madly flailing his arms at his food bag, which as usual is hung on one of the 'mouse hooks' in the shelter. Mouse hooks are lines hung from the shelter ceiling that have a little baffle (usually a tin can) to thwart a mouse from getting access to your food bag. But evidently the mouse

hook that Hum has chosen is too close to the side of the shelter, thus allowing a rogue mouse to leap over the baffle directly onto his food bag and then proceed to attack his food bag. I see Hum battling the rogue mouse that has actually already eaten into his M&M bag and consumed M&M's before Hum could swat the mouse and knock it to the ground. I imagine that in taking on the mouse in hand-to-mouse combat Hum valiantly exclaims "take that you pusillanimous, thieving, freeloader mouse!" After the food bag attack, Hum rises many more times to very noisily defend his backpack, which is hung on a pack hook above his head, all the time shining his flashlight, flailing his arms, beating his backpack, and vigorously defending against further mouse attacks on food items in his backpack.

Hum says in the morning that he didn't get a good sleep; no wonder after all the mouse encounters. I suggest one additional factor to explain Hum's sleeplessness: that his continuous 'extreme night sounds' might also have disturbed his own peaceful beauty sleep in between the mouse drag races and hand-to-mouse combat forays.

Goddard Shelter to Story Spring Shelter – 8/3/10

Start Time: 7:30 AM, Goddard Shelter
End Time: 1:15 PM, Story Spring Shelter
Total Miles: 10.9 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1010' gain/810' loss

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Distances:

Goddard Shelter to Kid Gore Shelter: 4.1 miles; 190' gain/950' loss
Kid Gore Shelter to Story Spring Shelter: 4.8 miles; 610' gain/600' loss
Spur to Kid Gore Shelter & return: 0.2 miles
Story Spring Shelter to Beaver Pond & return: 1.8 miles; 210' gain/210' loss

Pedometer readings (excludes hike to beaver pond):

Steps: 33,003
Calories: 868
Steps/minute: 96
MPH: 2.73 (1.59 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 42 minutes, 24 seconds
Miles: 15.62 miles (9.1 actual miles)

The geezers arise at 6:30 AM, which is a bit late for us, and, as always, we try to be silent so as not to awake others. But alas, we wake up Cool Shoes, who immediately signals "you guys are up early".

We're getting quite efficient with our breakfast and packing routine, so we're ready to be off at 7:30 AM. We say our goodbyes to Cool Shoes and "see you later" to Zephyr, but as we depart, there is a slight mishap as Hum's backpack sideswipes and knocks over Zephyr's cook stove on the shelter's outer ledge and immediately starts a conflagration. Luckily, Hum instantly reacts and bravely picks up the stove with his bare hands, snuffs the flames, and saves the day.

Compulsively perhaps, we stop once more, a third time now, to climb the Glastenbury Mountain Fire Tower. This morning, however, the view is completely socked in, but we still enjoy the invigorating climb to the top, view or no view.

Another mishap soon befalls us, as I trip and fall and cut my left shin on a rock, which then bleeds profusely. I apply Neosporin and a band aid from my first aid kit, but the band aid soon falls off. I then apply a heartier bandage consisting of gauze held on by a lot of duck tape, but that also soon falls off. It seems that my leg is too wet from sweat for these bandages to hold, so Hum suggests that I wrap adhesive totally around my leg. That works and the bandage holds for the rest of the hike.



Hum Does Lunch & “Checks the Map” at Kid Gore Shelter

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We do lunch at Kid Gore shelter (4.2 miles), taking in the nice view recommended to us by Cool Shoes. At this point Hum and I are contemplating going beyond Story Spring Shelter, because we know that we'll arrive there quite early, and tent near Kelley Stand Road, picking up on the advice from Cool Shoes that there are good tenting sites by Kelley Stand Road.

As we get underway again, we meet a teacher going Southbound. He is from Richmond, Vermont and is doing the entire LT in 15 days, which is a pretty fast pace. He reports the sighting of 2 moose near Kelley Stand Road. We ask him also about tenting in that area, but he responds vaguely and suggests that we “can be creative around the beaver ponds” but offers nothing specific about possible tent sites he might have seen.

Soon after, we pass Poiboy, whom I had met on Bear Mountain (about 50 miles to the north) 4 days earlier (July 29) on one of my training hikes. He immediately remembers me and I him and we chat for a few minutes. He suggests that we are “about 1 mile south of Story Spring shelter, but actually we are still about 2-3 miles south and it takes us another 2 hours to reach the shelter. Hum notes that Poiboy is a little ‘different’, as I had also noted in my training hikes journal: “a bit flighty red head, but very enthusiastic and nice.”

The 4.8 miles from Kid Gore Shelter to Story Spring Shelter seems long, and along the way we pass two picturesque beaver ponds with nice beaver lodges but alas, no beavers are in sight. We finally arrive at about 1:15 PM after 6 hours of hiking including stops, maintaining our 1.5+ MPH average speed. There we find Runner (Sam Merriman) already settled in the shelter having arrived considerably earlier than the geezer hikers. He tells us that his Dad is resupplying him in a couple of days on Route 11/30, so he needs to slow his pace to properly time the planned rendezvous.



A Fine Beaver Residence Just South of Story Spring Shelter

White Fox stops by for a rest on his northbound trek to Mt. Katahdin. He took a six-month leave-of-absence to do his AT thru hike from a wastewater design job near Manassas, VA, and holds a civil engineering degree from MIT (he was accepted from MIT's wait list, which is quite rare). His wife hiked the first 400 miles with him but was forced to quit after suffering a hairline fracture in her ankle. As had Cool Shoes the day before, White Fox complained about his new Keen shoes; in his case he paid \$125 for them and the sole detached after only 70 miles of hiking; he will complain.

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Hum & Runner Settle in at Story Spring Shelter

Since I had attended Caltech, I am well aware of the rivalry between Caltech and MIT and of the

numerous Caltech “pranks” that are often directed against MIT as the butt of a new joke. So I raised one recent prank that occurred in 2009, while White Fox was still attending MIT, where Caltech staged an elaborate and pretty hilarious prank that MIT had actually been “sold” to Caltech, and as a result MIT would be converted from an engineering school into a humanities school and that all of MIT’s majors would be remapped to new majors (e.g., Physics majors would be remapped to Women’s Studies), (see <http://east.caltech.edu/>, especially the “newspaper”; http://pr.caltech.edu/periodicals/EandS/articles/LXXIII1/2010_Winter_MITSold.html). However, White Fox was unaware of the Caltech prank, but muttered something about MIT superiority. He departed for Kelley Stand Road and planned to tent there tonight and resupply tomorrow in Manchester.

Zephyr and Ashby show up at around 3:30 PM, and quickly seek out a tent site. Stump passes en route to Goddard shelter and is in a huge hurry, saying that he needs to get to a wedding in Massachusetts in 2 days time. To do so he is hiking 30 miles/day and travelling at night. To top it off he takes off running southbound to Goddard Shelter.

A young couple from Washington DC, Mt. Pleasant area, (I’ll refer to them as “DC”) arrive next and settle into the shelter. He works for USAID on Africa consultancy issues and she is a teacher in the DC area. At this point Runner decides to move out of the shelter and pitch his tent nearby the shelter; this move apparently in consideration for making room for adults in the shelter. Another southbound AT thru hiker arrives and takes his place in the shelter. He reports seeing a moose just north of the shelter, and came within 15’ of the moose before it bolted (apparently the moose did not hear him coming and was surprised; fortunately the moose did not bolt in his direction, which is a distinct possibility). He says he is not enjoying his AT hike as much as expected, but will still finish. Oddly, he is also having trouble with his Keen shoes, just like White Fox and Cool Shoes, and will also complain.

Attention Keen shoes Quality Assurance: this third report of major Keen shoe problems in less than one day is disturbing. It also ensures that I will not buy that brand when replacing my hiking boots.

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Bleemus (he says his name refers to a rock song) and his white lab Bongo arrive. He lives on Mad Tom Road in East Dorset, VT, and is doing a few days section hike on the LT. He sets up an elaborate hammock with a huge rain fly, and this proves to be extremely robust in the incredibly violent storm soon to come.

I set up my tent about 100 yards from the shelter with the intent that I’ll try tenting on the LT for the first time if it doesn’t start to rain before it’s time to hit the hay. It takes me a while to find a level spot and set up the tent because I hadn’t done so for about a year (when I tried it out in our back yard one night soon after it arrived from Amazon). The tent is really small and only about 3 feet high at the tallest point, which makes it necessary to crawl into the tent and impossible to stand let alone even to sit up. And on top of that, I mistakenly set up the tent with the rear of the tent going uphill, which means that my head will also need to be toward the rear of the tent to be in the uphill direction. Because the rear is considerably smaller than the front, my ‘rolling around space’ will be completely inadequate. Even so, Bleemus admires my little Wenzel one-person pup tent, which is set up not far from his hammock.

After dinner Zephyr invites Hum and me to hike about 1 mile down to the beaver pond we passed on our way to Story Spring Shelter in search of moose and beaver. It is a nice walk but unfortunately we see no moose, beaver, or any wildlife at all for that matter.



Zephyr at the Beaver Pond in Search of Moose & Other Critters

Rain has not started by dusk, so at about 8:30 PM I make the fateful decision to use the tent and take my sleeping bag and pillow there for the night. **BIG MISTAKE.** Very soon after I settle into the tent, however, light rain starts. I figure that it will be a lot of trouble to move now, so I just stay put. Besides, I rationalize that the rain will probably die down soon. **WRONG.** Also, I'm very uncomfortable with my head confined in the rear of the tent, because as I mentioned the space at the rear is so confined. So I turn myself and sleeping bag around: this is really difficult in this extremely small tent, but I manage somehow. The problem then becomes that my head is downhill and is now lower than my body: **VERY**

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UNCOMFORTABLE. I 'solve' that problem somewhat by propping my head up under my hiking shoes, which I place under my sleeping pad.

But it's not long before the wind begins to pick up and then more rain comes, and then still more wind comes, and still heavier rain. This acceleration of the storm happened several times and each time I rationalize that it would soon be over. **NOT.** The wind becomes such a gale, howling through the trees in such huge gusts that I imagine a tree falling on the tent and crushing me. This is a fierce storm. Worse yet, the tent is leaking everywhere, not just on the seams but dripping from every part of the fabric! Little did I suspect that the tent would leak: after all, what is the main purpose of a tent if not to keep you dry? I tried to solve the leaking problem by wiping down the inside of the tent with my washcloth, and then squeezing it out through a small opening in the door to the outside of the tent. But soon the water begins to seriously puddle on the floor of the tent.

The raging storm keeps building and building, I'm getting soaked and so is my sleeping bag. I finally realize that I must do something drastic to escape my untenable place in this completely inadequate tent. At about 11 PM, after having braved the storm for more than 2 hours, I decide to escape back to the shelter and abandon the tent. I fold up my sleeping bag, pick up my hiking shoes and pillow, and crawl out of the tent into the teeming rain and hurricane force wind. This is really hard to do with no room to maneuver, and I get muddy and soaked as I crawl onto the ground outside the tent I have just escaped.

I put the sleeping pad over my head to try to keep the rain at bay, but still get very wet en route to the shelter. I'm barefoot and just squish and splash through the deep puddles and extensive flooding on my way to the shelter. As I pass Bleemus' hammock, Bongo growls at me from his comfy fleece bed under

the hammock; I hear Bleemus tell Bongo to quiet down as I keep on going toward the shelter. When I reach the shelter I'm glad to find that there is still an empty sleeping space next to Hum (the one I had given up earlier when I moved to my tent). But as soon as I climb into the shelter I accidentally drop my soaking sleeping pad right on Hum's head; he awakens in a start with water dosing him all over from my sleeping pad and my flashlight shining directly into his eyes. His now wide open eyes show complete surprise, deep puzzlement, and a bit of anxiety by this rude awakening. I imagine in reading his facial expression that he envisions a mouse – this time a GIANT mouse -- is attacking his M&M's, just like the attack of the rogue mouse last night at the Goddard Shelter.

I also slightly disturb DC's wife, who stirs briefly but goes right back to sleep. I'm quite soaked after this ordeal and use my washcloth to wipe off the major water on my sleeping pad, but my clothes and sleeping bag are wet and remain so throughout the night. A little while later I see that Runner has a light on in his tent, so I suspect that something is also amiss in Runner's abode. The raging storm continues thru the night, with the raging wind and drenching rain pounding the metal roof of the shelter. I'm glad now to be inside and protected by the shelter and to have made my escape from possible disaster in the tent. But with the wet clothes and noisy night sounds in the shelter, I get very little sleep this night. Story Spring shelter will remain as a lifelong memory of one of the most horrific, scary, wet, traumatic, but also laughable nights (given the attack of the GIANT mouse on Hum's beauty sleep) so far on the LT.

Story Spring Shelter to Stratton Pond Shelter – 8/4/10

Start Time: 7:30 AM, Story Spring Shelter

End Time: 3:00 PM, Stratton Pond Shelter

Total Miles: 13.5 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2050' gain/2240' loss

Distances:

Story Spring Shelter to Stratton Pond Shelter: 10.5 miles; 2050' gain/2240' loss

Hike around Stratton Pond: 3.0 miles

Pedometer readings (includes 1.8 miles hike to beaver pond on 8/3/10 and 3.0 mile hike around Stratton Pond):

Steps: 45,942

Calories: 1209

Steps/minute: 95

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MPH: 2.72 (1.91 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 7 hours, 58 minutes, 59 seconds

Miles: 21.75 miles (15.3 actual miles, including beaver pond & Stratton Pond hikes)

I arise at 5:30 AM, a bit before Hum, and right away make my way back over to my tent to dry it off as much as possible (inside and outside) and pack it up. By the time I return Hum is up and fixing breakfast. Zephyr soon appears looking a bit shell shocked and relates a little forlornly that "Ashby got soaked" in the storm and that all her stuff is soaking wet as well. Runner reports that water flooded into his tent (that's when I saw the light go on in his tent last night) but he was able to move his sleeping bag to a dry side and avoid catastrophe. Very impressively, Bleemus managed to stay completely dry in his hammock through this incredible storm, but his trusty lab Bongo's fleece got wet as the dog slept under his hammock. Bleemus and Bongo get off first at about 7 AM, heading north.

We're off at 7:30 AM and keep a good pace, reaching USFS 71 (1.6 miles) after 40 minutes and Kelley Stand Road (3.6 miles) after 1 hour 40 minutes. We pass two large open tent sites along the way, which are also near streams, just as Cool Shoes had told us two days ago.

As we ascend Stratton Mountain – a 1700' climb that we do rather handily for two geezer hikers -- Runner passes us at a near running pace, reminding us that we're still relatively slow, but definitely much faster than we were last year. We also meet southbound hikers Wasabi and a young couple (Coyote and Hobbit), who tell us about finding running water in the open ski facilities at the top of Stratton Mountain.

We reach the summit of Stratton Mountain (7.4 miles) at about noon and find DC and Runner near the base of the Stratton Mountain Fire Tower. It is extremely windy on the summit and blowing with gale force on top of the fire tower. I put the chin strap on my hat so as not to have it blow off as I ascend the tower; a note in the log by Wasabi says that his hat did blow off when climbing the tower, couldn't find it, and anyone who does find it is welcome to it. The view is clouded over at first but the winds are such that the view periodically clears and becomes perfect now and then, revealing Stratton Pond to the west and

Somerset Reservoir to the south in a beautiful view.

We have lunch on the summit and Hum and DC engage in an extensive discussion of many ski areas they both have skied, covering a host of ski area from west coast to east coast. Indeed, this is one of Hum's two favorite discussions (the other being anything related to scouting). DC is from Idaho and went to school at UC Santa Barbara and Washington University and says that his wife opted to rest at the campsite we passed near Kelley Stand Road rather than hiking with him to the summit.



Stratton Mountain Fire Tower; Looking Down on DC & Hum

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It is here in 1909 that James Taylor conceived the idea of the Long Trail that eventually led to its creation. Amazingly, Benton MacKaye, who was responsible for the creation of the Appalachian Trail, said the idea to create the AT also was born one day in 1921 while sitting in a tree atop Stratton Mountain. See the picture below showing the plaque beside the fire tower commemorating Taylor's and MacKaye's visions:



Stratton Mountain Commemorative Plaque

It is also here that the "three musketeers" (see their picture below) passed in 1927 putting the LT into the national limelight. As related in Vermont Public Radio (http://www.vpr.net/news_detail/88487/):

All of the founders and most of the leaders of the Green Mountain Club in its earliest days were men. But it took three young women to make the club and The Long Trail nationally famous. Their names were Hilda Kurth, Catherine Robbins, and Kathleen Norris, and their nickname, "The Three Musketeers," stuck because their adventure -- hiking the entire route of The Long Trail, from Massachusetts to Canada - was bold, daring -- and completely unheard of for women in the 1920s. It was the era of the Charleston, the flapper, and bathtub gin.

Ms. Norris, 18 years old, had just graduated from high school. Ms. Kurth and Ms. Robbins were both 25 and schoolteachers. Catherine Robbins remembered the trip years later for the Vermont Historical Society. Their hike took a little over three weeks in the late summer of 1927 and they became an immediate sensation. Newspapers throughout the country pounced on their story and ran photos of the three togged out in knee-high boots, knickers, bandannas, --and winsome smiles.

The Musketeers quickly became media darlings: It was national news! It was a big deal that these three young ladies were out there, hiking the entire Long Trail, unaccompanied, that is to say, without male companionship. And that was thought to be quite a daring, flapperish thing for young ladies to do at the time. Part of their appeal, obviously, was that they were the epitome of the young, liberated women who were at that very moment in history shedding the confines of Victorian clothing and manners, striking out on their own and proclaiming their rights and their individuality. The Musketeers were obviously bright young women with minds of their own and plenty of spunk. They were also the first women to hike the entire length of the trail. And they were young and pretty.

The press loved them. There was media coverage of the hike as they walked north. A clipping from The New York Times, September 4, 1927, shows the three musketeers and says that they're the only three women to have hiked the famous path over the Vermont hills. The story was very quickly splashed across front pages all across the United States. In bold type, The San Francisco Examiner's headline gasped, "They Carried No Firearms and Had No Male Escort!" And other newspapers were similarly incredulous.

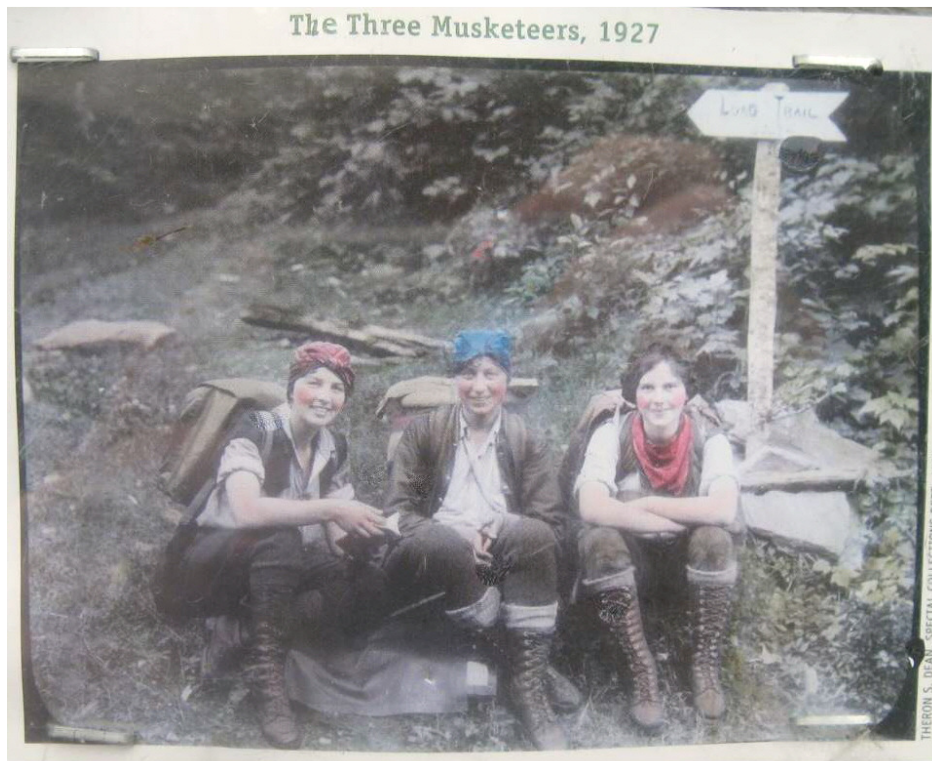
They kept their packs to 25 pounds apiece and somehow managed to avoid blisters. But their hike did not start auspiciously. On their first day, the trio got lost and had to find their way by luck and by compass into Bennington. Part of the problem was that southern sections of the brand-new Long Trail were poorly cleared and even more poorly marked. But the Musketeers were not about to let a little thing like a sketchy trail deter them. They pushed through the underbrush, found a blaze here and there, and made their way northward. Ms. Kurth had packed along a 4 oz ukulele, and when the trio got tired, they would plunk themselves down at trailside and sing what one newspaper described as "the peppiest songs they could think of." Then, refreshed, they would

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walk some more. Near Bourn Pond, they found their path blocked by a rain-swollen trout stream. They forded it by inching across a crumbling railroad trestle, packs on their backs and 60 feet above the rushing water.

But they encountered their share of trail magic, too. Approaching Hazen's Notch, near the end of their trip, they looked over a cliff and saw a man far below in white slacks and a white jacket. In an interview years later, Catherine Robbins Clifford remembered what happened next: "And he says, 'I'm looking for the three musketeers.'" I said, "Oh, you are? Well, here we are." The others were behind me. "Well, come on down, I have a gallon of ice cream for you." Boy, did I go down that mountain fast. And sure enough they had a whole gallon of ice cream, and did we sit down and eat it. We all shared it, 'til we ate it all up, you know. It was terrific."

The Long Trail was not even blazed north of Jay Peak, so the three walked the final miles to the Canadian border on dirt roads and ended their historic hike on Sept 4, 1927. Catherine Robbins summed up their adventure: "I just loved it. Being away from the mob. You know, a chance to be alone. A chance to do some thinkin'." The three women had become celebrities, but even more important, they had triumphed over their adversities and had turned the attention of the nation to the Long Trail and the mountains of Vermont.



Runner makes his way to ski slope and back before we leave and says that he'll "hang out" on the summit for a while before heading down to the Stratton Pond camping area. However, he didn't show up there, leading to a third mystery on this LT geezer hike, this time as to where Runner went (more on this later).

Just as we're leaving Zephyr and Ashby arrive on the summit. Zephyr decides to forego climbing the tower because of the fog and reluctance to leave Ashby unattended in view of his 'attack dog' role. After a brief visit we bid her farewell and 'see you later at Stratton Pond'.

On the way down to Stratton Pond the clasp on my belt gives out suddenly and for no apparent reason: I immediately realize that a crisis has arisen, my belt is broken! Under normal circumstances this would not be serious, just replace the belt, but on the trail, without a backup belt, it is a show stopper: it would be impossible to hike without a belt. An on-site repair is essential. Hum lends me his pliers but I'm unable to bend the clasp back into position with the pliers. I need something more formidable for the on-site repair so I grab a rather large rock and use it as a hammer to bend the clasp back into position. Fortunately this works and the belt is repaired and remains so throughout the hike. In the meantime Hum fashions a backup belt made from rope; this is a great idea but now unnecessary, thank goodness.

Runner soon passes us again going very fast, something like the Road Runner, and as he zooms by I comment to him that perhaps he'd rather be known as 'Road Runner'. He quickly disses that idea as he zooms by without stopping. We assume that he's going to Stratton Pond shelter or tenting area, based

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on what he told us on the summit. But we later learn that Zephyr had a conversation with Runner after we left the summit where Zephyr tells him about the \$5 charge for staying at Stratton; Runner responds that he's 'not going to pay that', but it remains unclear where he goes instead. This is the last we see Runner.



Zephyr & Ashby on the Summit of Stratton Mountain

We arrive at Stratton Pond Shelter (10.5 miles) at 3:00 PM. No one is there yet so we have our choice of any bunk in the shelter. According to the *Long Trail Guide*, this shelter has the heaviest overnight use of any shelter on the LT: there is room for 20 people and later there will be 14 people staying the night, a pretty full house.

Funk (who we first met at Goddard Shelter) passes by a bit later with a buddy. They're on their way south on the Stratton Pond Trail to Kelley Stand Road and then plan to hike back north again on the LT over Stratton Mountain (Funk had told us earlier that he planned to do some hiking locally before resuming his AT thru hike to Maine).

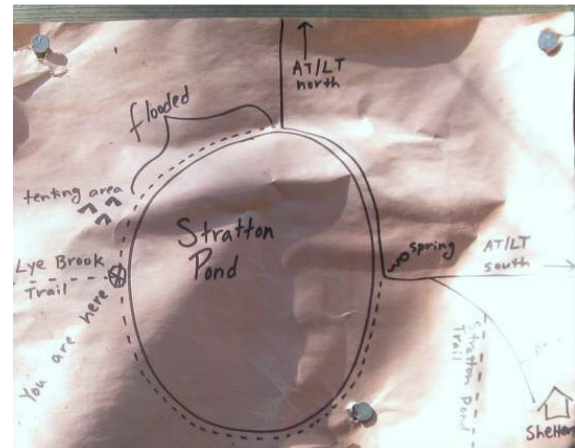
Ninja, the Stratton Pond Shelter caretaker, from York, PA, shows up next, apparently doing some brush cutting on the Stratton Pond Trail. She doesn't seem especially friendly at first, or very talkative, but she warms up and gets much friendlier later on when she comes back to collect \$5 from everyone staying the night. She also hikes to the tent camp every night to collect \$5 from tenters. I ask her if there are GMC member discounts on the overnight fee, which I thought someone told me were available, but she says there are no discounts; Hum generously pays for me later. She says the caretaker job is "OK" but is clearly not overly enthusiastic.

After settling in we decide to hike around Stratton pond. I take a minimum pack, Hum carries nothing but his poles. On the way out we meet Ottawa Lou, who plans to stay the night and says that he expects several young hikers he passed earlier to be at shelter since they took the shorter and easier Stratton Pond Trail rather than going over Stratton Mountain; he is surprised to find out that they are not there at the shelter.

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Soon we arrive at a large clearing by the pond (Willis Ross Clearing on the Lye Brook Trail). We check out Bigelow Spring, the water source nearby the clearing, and see that someone has left four Long Trail beers there to cool in the spring. In the clearing we meet a very friendly and knowledgeable former forest service person, who is resting in a lounge chair, sunning himself, and busily writing (a book perhaps?). We later learn that he is also a Trail Angel, because it becomes pretty obvious that he is one who left the beers in Bigelow Spring, not for himself, but rather for the enjoyment of hikers passing by Stratton Pond. We ask Trail Angel about loons, because that is of special interest to us based on reports we heard from Downhill at Taft Lodge on last year's LT hike over Mt. Mansfield. Trail Angel advises us that there is one family of loons living at the pond, and tells us where there are other families of loons and other wildlife around the pond. He advises us that the last 25% or so of the trail circumventing the pond is impassable, but that he has managed to do it; I later find this astonishing – seemingly impossible -- because that portion of the trail is completely impassable.

Soon after resuming our hike around the pond, Hum quits the trek, saying he's too tired and going back to the shelter. Hum talks to Trail Angel further after he quits the hike and I continue on, finding it a very pretty walk around Stratton Pond. The weather has completely cleared, so Stratton Mountain and the fire tower are now in clear view. I pass by the tenting area and do a quick search around thinking I might see Zephyr, but to no avail. I continue on in hopes of completing the full loop trail around the pond rather than turning back on the same, much longer, trail that I just did. I recall that Trail Angel said he managed to get through the 'flooded section' (see the map below), in spite of his dire warnings about this section. So, I figure, if Trail Angel can do it then surely Ho can do it, too. NOT SO. I find this final section of the loop trail to be extremely muddy, wet, and precarious as I continue on, and it just keeps getting worse and worse. I hope to hike out of this mess but it's not going to happen. I finally reach a point – probably about 90% of the way around the loop trail -- where it is simply a deep lake of nothing but mud and swamp in every direction: there is zero chance of crossing this swamp so I have to turn back. I don't see how Trail Angel possibly made it around. I later advise other hikers in the shelter log that the last 25% of the lake trail is impassable, don't even bother to try it. So I did the full loop trail hike almost 2 times.



Stratton Pond Hike: Stratton Mt. View & Walkway across Swamp Area, West Side; Beaver House, North Side; Map Showing Impassable Flooded Area

I hear loons at this furthest point around, which gives my spirits a bit of a boost at what is otherwise a low point in having to give up and turn back. I wonder if Hum can hear them from the shelter (I later learn he did hear them). On the way back I meet Zephyr and Ashby heading to the tenting area. She has also tried to negotiate the other (shorter) way around to the tenting area, through the flooded area, but also found it impossible, and is now a little upset that she needs to hike the long way -- one full mile -- to get to the tenting area. As I reach the clearing once again, where Hum and I first met Trail Angel, who is no longer there, I'm told by a girl standing there with several guys that some folks are skinny dipping in the pond and in fact one man is hiding behind the bushes, naked. She warns me that 'naked men are in the vicinity' and I posit that I'm 'not interested in seeing any naked men', which evokes some laughter in response, and move on to nearby Bigelow Spring to fill my water bottles. Later on I meet some of these same folks back at the shelter.

Back at the shelter Hum introduces me to Richard and Carol Robinson, the Canadian Geese, from

Charlotte, NC, and Ottawa Lou, from Ottawa, Quebec, Canada. They are all evidently taken by our trail names and right away Ottawa Lou comments that they all thought “Ho” meant the derogatory slang term (for “whore”). At first I’m a bit taken aback by this, no one has ever interpreted my trail name as such, but I just let it bounce off.

The Canada Geese, two seniors, like us, but a bit younger than us, are doing the whole AT and today are celebrating their 31st anniversary. They say their children are a little worried about their major AT undertaking, so they’re keeping an on-line journal (<http://trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?trailname=8813>) to keep everyone posted on their progress; they update their blog every time they get into a town for rest and resupply and can find Internet access (usually at a library). Their journal is interesting and highly

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readable; the daily entries are short and to the point and give a good sense of what it’s like to thru hike the AT. They start their trek on March 17 and finish on October 5.



**The Canadian Geese (Richard and Carol Robinson)
Celebrating Their 31st Anniversary at Stratton Pond Shelter
(Picture from Their Trail Journal <http://trailjournals.com/photos.cfm?id=571306>)**

Both are originally Canadian (Richard also has Australia connections), but became US citizens long ago. Richard is 65 and Carol 66. Both are pretty thin, and speak of their significant weight loss from hiking in their journal. Richard has scruffy long hair and beard, also par for being on the trail for months and months. As noted in their journal, apparently he agrees about the scruffiness, and gets a “makeover” haircut and beard trim when they stop in mid August to visit their daughter Andrea in Hanover, NH. Both are recently retired nurses. Richard says he changed jobs “in crisis” from community planner to nurse; I’m not sure what that meant but don’t pursue it.

They tell us of record snow in the Smoky Mountains and how they had to post hole through the snow on Clingman’s Dome (4/9); many hikers got stranded and had to be rescued. They encounter extremely difficult hiking over all the incredibly arduous ‘rock trails’ in PA. They speak of all the endless up and down boulder climbs in Harriman Park, NY, the “lousy” NY shelters, and recall the stairs descending Bear Mountain, NY (we also recall these same stairs alongside Bear Mountain’s ski jump area on family trips ages ago).

Carol says she is a bit apprehensive about what is to come; I assume her concerns relate to the White Mountain sections and perhaps other sections in Maine. Their journal entries bear this out: White Mountains (8/24 → 9/3); Muhoosuc Notch (9/7); Mt. Katahdin (10/5). “We were told the toughest hiking would be in Maine and that is true”, 9/17 journal entry.

They are strong hikers, especially considering their ages, and on many days do 20 miles or more and even 25+ miles on some days. Richard admires Carol’s abilities in this 10/3 journal entry:

"Hiking the A.T. is supposed to be a life changing event through personal growth and introspection. I can't really see this in myself but I sure can in Carol. She started out the hike being afraid of crossing a stream on a 8 inch wide board when the board was 6 feet long and the stream was 18 inches deep. Eventually she was free climbing 35 to 50 foot high rock walls at Webster cliffs and other places. If she had fallen she would have been seriously injured or worse. In the Wilderness she was fording some deep streams despite being afraid of water because she does not swim well. She never complained about any obstacle we had to face."

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Their prowess is even more amazing given that Richard has a left knee and hip replacement, which keeps him in constant pain and need of medication, and thwarts his ability to climb and descend mountains; a real handicap on the AT for sure, as captured in this 10/5 journal entry:

"Again my knees were absolutely aching and as I watched others take giant steps up to the next location on the rock, I always had to figure an alternative way. I usually could throw my straight leg out and pull myself up with my arms. Sometimes I could brace one leg on a rock and with the other leg elevate my body. The problem with this is that it is a much more tiring way to hike as it uses total body strength. I have been hiking this way for much of the hike and knew I would become very tired by the time we finished going up."

They fight the psychological fight to maintain their determination to finish their quest, in spite of all that confronts them:

"We got up early and silently got ready to hike. We have a set routine now but today was different. Carol finally asked if something was wrong. I finally told her I was feeling depressed. It is not unusual for hikers on the trail to feel this way according to many of the journals I have read. It usually happens in Virginia because there are so many miles in the state. I was feeling it now and Carol confessed she was also feeling down." (7/9)

"Carol and I have decided the hike is not fun anymore. Somewhere between the 1000 mile mark and now the fun disappeared. It may come back in retrospect; we will wait and see. It probably disappeared in the heat and humidity. "The hike now is a quest. This quest we will see to the end, or as long as our bodies take us. We carry with us a mineral marble given to us by Anne,(a professor at Radbun University). This marble, she told us, would give us strength on our quest. We also have a small piece of Katahdin in a small metal cylinder. This was given to us by former thru hiker Rainbow when he met us in Port Clinton PA. This serves as inspiration. The cylinder is kept in the top pocket of my pack and I hear the small chip of rock rattle at times. This reminds me to keep plugging." (7/30)

"We have 220 miles left to hike and each day it is a real struggle. I seem to be getting weaker, Carol seems to be about the same. We both agree that we are very tired most of the time." (9/12)

But in the end they celebrate their triumph after summiting Mt. Katahdin, completing their great quest:

"We have been asked what part of the hike we enjoyed the most and we both agree. It was the people we met. The trail angels that helped us out and the other hikers we met.

"We particularly want to thank Ann and Rainbow (thru hiker 1988). Ann gave us a mineral marble when we met her on the Blue Ridge Parkway at the hiker feed. She said that the marble would give us power and strength when we needed it. Rainbow met us in Port Clinton and gave us a small piece of Katahdin in a metal cylinder for inspiration. Carol and I put this in the top of our packs and during tough times we could hear it rattling in the cylinder. It really helped. Both the mineral marble and the piece of Katahtin were carried up the mountain and will remain with us." (10/5)

Ottawa Lou is a Canadian government employee and is thru hiking the whole LT. He tells me that this is his second try: he tried last year but stopped in Stowe to see his wife and wound up staying there 4 days. This was not according to plan and the hike was over after that. So this year he's trying again, but this time with no stop in Stowe to visit his wife. He's planning to stay at the Long Trail Inn in Killington in a couple of days and go there by way of the Sherburne Pass Trail; says he doesn't like the LT reroute. I tell him about the LT Festival to be held in Rutland this coming Saturday 8/7 (http://www.nvnohi.com/ltf/Rutland_Long_Trail_Festival/Home.html): he displays a bit of interest but says he probably won't go.

I mention that years ago Lyn and I camped in Gatineau Park just north of Ottawa (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gatineau_Park) and were so enthralled with the loon calls we heard that it inspired us to buy a tape with music set to loon calls in the background. Ottawa Lou's response is that he doesn't like the sound of loons anymore; "too much too often". But he does like skating on Ottawa's Rideau Canal during their annual Winterlude Festival (<http://www.ottawa-information-guide.com/2011-winterlude-activities.html>), which Lyn and I also enjoyed a few years ago while on a skiing trip to Canada's Calabogie Peaks.

According to Ottawa Lou, the US is "invading" the Canadian homeland under the Arctic Ocean; he concludes that Canada needs to build nuclear subs to enable them to go under the ice in order to thwart the Americans. Is Ottawa Lou suggesting that Canada should start a nuclear war against the US, Hum and I wonder?

One of the guys I met earlier in the clearing by Stratton Pond -- a big man I call Hurlly Burly -- retrieves the

3 beers from Bigelow Spring I had seen earlier. He concludes the beers are Trail Magic, and I'm pretty

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sure they were left by Trail Angel (the Forest Service guy Hum and I also met in the clearing). Richard has one on the beers and says he will pack out the empty bottle, Hurly Burly has the second, and the third is offered to Ninja, who is there collecting \$5 from everyone staying the night at the shelter. Ninja says that she has to "think it over", but apparently decides against it (some unknown person consumes it). Hurly Burly also smokes, I suspect marijuana but it isn't.

Interestingly, Ninja reports that Runner's mother came to Stratton Pond shelter looking for him yesterday, apparently not knowing he was at Story Spring shelter and about to endure the horrendous storm that struck there last night. Perhaps she heard that this terrible storm was on its way and was worried (for good reason). We mention that we last saw Runner "running" past us on the decent to Stratton Pond, about 2:00 in the afternoon, and thought he was heading to the Stratton Pond camping area. However he didn't show up there according to Ninja, and we later learn from Zephyr that the reason is that he didn't want to pay the \$5 fee. So this becomes yet another LT geezer hike mystery: where oh where did Runner go??

The Canadian Geese, Ottawa Lou and others all going to Manchester tomorrow to resupply (there is an EMS store there) and all are staying at the Green Mountain House hostel (<http://trailplace.com/forums/showthread.php?p=6026>), a private residence with room for four hikers; \$15/night; free pint of Ben & Jerry's ice cream; free sodas; free shuttles to and from the trail; owned by Jeff and Regina Taussig, AKA Flashback, who did the AT in 2001 and 2006; reservations 802-768-8088). I mention the Northshire bookstore as a good stop, some are interested. Everyone is in bed and quiet by 8:45 PM, good hiking decorum this night. Richard has long coughing spells during the night, he attributes it to allergies but it sounds worse than that to me.

Stratton Pond Shelter to Spruce Peak Shelter – 8/5/10

Start Time: 7:15 AM, Stratton Pond Shelter
End Time: 12 Noon, Spruce Peak Shelter
Total Miles: 7.9 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 155' gain/445' loss

Distances:

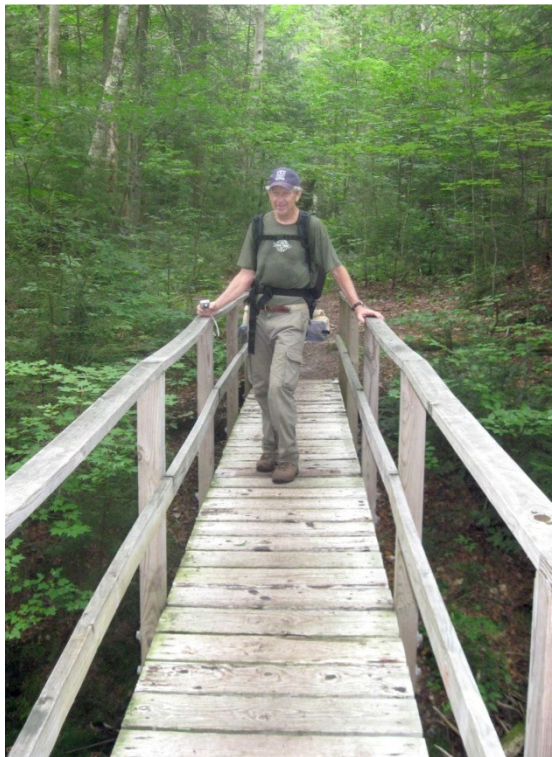
Stratton Pond Shelter to William B. Douglas Shelter: 4.8 miles; 105' gain/445' loss
William B. Douglas Shelter to Spruce Peak Shelter: 3.0 miles; 50' gain/130' loss
Spur to Spruce Peak Shelter: 0.1 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 24,115
Calories: 634
Steps/minute: 97
MPH: 2.75 (1.91 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 08 minutes, 24 seconds
Miles: 11.41 miles (7.9 actual miles)

Most everyone is up at 6:30 AM and quickly organized as is usually the case with very experienced hikers. Ottawa Lou takes off first, and that's the last we see of him. We depart at about 7:15 AM. We're anticipating a very easy hike today, with only about 8 miles and virtually no climbing to do. We tentatively plan to proceed beyond Spruce Peak Shelter to Bromley Shelter, which would add about 5 more miles to our hike today.

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Hum Crossing Winhall River Bridge (2.0 Miles)

The hiking indeed is easy and we maintain a fast pace to Spruce Peak Shelter, almost 2 MPH. We quickly reach the Winhall River bridge, pass the Branch Pond Trail to William B. Douglass Shelter, and set a brisk pace along Old Rootville Road for about a mile to where the LT leaves the road opposite the spur to Prospect Rock. Unfortunately, we miss the turn off to Prospect Rock, which is one of the nice vistas along this section that overlooks Manchester and Mt. Equinox; I plan to do this section again next summer on one of my training hikes and will make sure not to miss Prospect Rock.



Hum on Old Rootville Road near Prospect Rock Spur (Which We Missed)

⁷⁰ Further along we pass a young couple Annie, Matt and dog Kaya; they had just bought new hiking poles in Manchester at the EMS store and are very pleased with their purchase.

Believe it or not, we spot an ancient Egyptian sarcophagus, right on the LT; how it got there is yet another

deep, deep mystery and anyone's guess:



Ho & Hum Discover King Tut's Sarcophagus (Found Mummy Inside!)

As we get close to Spruce Peak Shelter we hear thunder rumbling in the distance, and soon the brewing thunderstorm is upon us. We decide to don our ponchos at about 11:50 AM and with rare supreme luck arrive at the shelter only 5 minutes later, avoiding a 3 hour torrential downpour in the comfort and safety of a large dry shelter. In spite of the storm, we still contemplate going on the additional 4.8 miles to Bromley Shelter, but decide after about 2 hours of rain that it is now better to stay put at Spruce Peak Shelter.

There are some hiking magazines to keep us amused and the shelter log is quite interesting. There are many accounts of winter snowshoe hikes to the shelter. This is quite practical because the shelter is less than 3 miles from the Route 11/30 parking lot, and there is a pot belly stove here that provides heat for a comfortable winter stay: many hikers have taken advantage of that.



Spruce Peak Shelter, After the Three-Hour Rainstorm

I take time to plan our 2011 hike from the Canadian border down to Johnson/Route 15. We plan a 6 day hike that anticipates taking it quite easy because this section is reputed to be pretty rough, as confirmed by various trail journals I've read. We also plan to do the southern-most section of the LT, from the Massachusetts border north to Route 9, probably as a two day hike starting somewhere in Massachusetts on the AT.

Soon after the rain lets up, Hopscotch and Hubert Cumberland stop by for lunch. They are northbound LT thru hikers who stayed with us at Stratton Pond Shelter last night, but for whatever reason get a very late start this morning on today's hike. "Hubert Cumberland" is a really unusual trail name that certainly wasn't invented by someone else. The name refers to one of the finger puppet friends of the "Salad Fingers", (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salad_Fingers); quite why he chose this trail name is anyone's guess.

Hopscotch sets right to work to start a fire to make some tea, but starting a fire is now quite impossible given that everything is soaking wet after the driving rain. After trying for quite a long time, they finally give up on starting a fire. This is my cue to give it a try. I stick with it for an even longer time, being a very persistent sole and not one who gives up easily on anything, but I'm also having very little success. 'Bummer!' to my way of thinking, because I want to be a hero and think it would be nice to have a fire in camp one night. So now Hum comes forward to the fire starting mission and brings decades of scoutmaster prowess to such matters. He shaves some wood from larger logs and finds small sticks to build a starter teepee; he sets it afire and blows heavily. This very nearly works and it appears that a fire will indeed be had at last. But noooo, not to happen, it falters and dies out and again no fire. By this time Hopscotch and Hubert Cumberland have had their tea after resorting to their more conventional propane stove.

Next on the task list is to fix the zipper on my sleeping bag, which came apart the previous night. I try to fix it but can't; Hopscotch says he's 'good with zippers' and tries for a while, but he can't fix it either. Finally Hum goes after it and succeeds; good ole' big brother Hum can fix almost anything.

Zephyr and Ashby arrive at about 3:00 PM. As she steps onto the porch to hang her wet things, Zephyr exhorts Ashby 'you know these guys now so don't attack them OK?' But Ashby is still clearly not

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comfortable with Ho and Hum so we maintain our distance and make no attempt to pet Ashby or anything like that. Zephyr tells a tale of taking shelter under a large rock for 3 hours to get out of the rain

After their lengthy break, Hopscotch and Hubert Cumberland set out heading north for Bromley Shelter

and the rest of us start the happy task of making dinner.

This is our final dinner night and for the second time I'm having my favorite dish of angel hair pasta and tuna: yum, yum. When Hum brags about how he's economizing and 'saving money on the trail', presumably because there are no lodging fees, or any other fees for that matter, to pay along the way, I remind him about how much money he's losing by eating the entire Mountain House dinner every night, which is intended to 'serve 2'. This gets Hum's uproarious laughter going really good, heard I'm sure all the way over to Zephyr's tent site, and she soon joins us for dinner.

Over dinner we have a good wide-ranging discussion with Zephyr about everything under the sun. She has decided to end her hike tomorrow and will meet husband Ed at the Route 11/30 crossing and stay in Rutland over the weekend. I mention the Long Trail Festival on Saturday and Zephyr says that she might come. We also invite her to join us on our 2011 hike; she is possibly interested so we exchange email addresses and promise to be in touch next year as the hike approaches. She advises us that one constraint is that she needs to get back home by August 17 for her mother's birthday.

We keep expecting more folks to arrive at Spruce Peak Shelter for the night, but hope that no one else comes, because it's nice sometimes to have a shelter to ourselves once in a while. No one arrives, we have it to ourselves; we're in bed by dusk, a little after 8 PM or so, and soon to sleep.

Spruce Peak Shelter to Mad Tom Notch – 8/6/10

Start Time: 7:30 AM, Spruce Peak Shelter
End Time: 2:00 PM, Mad Tom Notch
Total Miles: 8.4 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1760' gain/1014' loss

Distances:

Spruce Peak Shelter to Bromley Shelter: 4.8 miles; 700' gain/400' loss
Bromley Shelter to Mad Tom Notch: 3.5 miles; 1060' gain/614' loss
Spur to Spruce Peak Shelter: 0.1 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 31,196
Calories: 820
Steps/minute: 93
MPH: 2.66 (1.51 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 32 minutes, 47 seconds
Miles: 14.77 miles (8.4 actual miles)

After bidding farewell to Zephyr and Ashby, with hopes of seeing them tomorrow at the Long Trail Festival in Rutland, we're off at about 7:45 AM. We soon stop for some views off of Spruce Peak at 8:00 AM (0.5 miles). There is some momentary trouble finding the blue-blazed trail to the peak -- the blue blazes on the rocks are severely worn -- but soon find our way to the top. There's still a bit of early morning haze in the air but otherwise there are pretty clear views of Manchester and Mt. Equinox across the valley below.



Ho Enjoys Nice View of Manchester & Mt. Equinox from Spruce Peak

From Spruce Peak it is an easy 2.4 mile descent to Route 11/30. Along the way we meet Yoyo, who is somewhat of a character and is thru hiking the AT southbound from ME going to GA. He tells us he restocked in Manchester, as do, it seems, almost all thru hikers we meet. He got a ride into town from a young man with “similar interests”, he tells us, but we can only guess what these similar interests might be... The young man carts Yoyo all around town and allows him to take a shower in his house. Yoyo speaks a bit obscurely about some “naked men running around in a store” they were in, but didn't say why or what they were doing running around naked, but again one could only surmise... Not too surprisingly, he tops it off by telling us he even bought marijuana from the young man.

This final comment leads to an extensive discussion with Hum about Vermont's lax laws and seemingly letting its criminals get off scot free. I tell him of a quite recent example of this: the rape and murder of 12 year old Brooke Bennett by a known, convicted pedophile, Michael Jacques (<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,380541,00.html>). Jacques, 42, served more than four years in prison and was then supervised for eight years for kidnapping and sexually assaulting an 18-year-old woman in 1992. But despite his criminal track record, the Vermont Department of Corrections released Jacques from probation in 2004 on the recommendation of probation officer Richard Kearney. Vermont Governor Jim Douglas said that the Corrections Department's recommendation was a mistake and that the state needed to reevaluate its procedures. Quite so: a huge, state-wide public outcry soon led to the Vermont legislature passing Jessica's Law, which as is typical of Vermont was one of the few states that had failed to adopt the law previously. Rutland, I further point out in my little diatribe, has a huge problem with New York drug dealers coming to Vermont to sell their wares, knowing of the lax laws and lack of penalties and making it the best possible place to do their business. There have been recent drug-related murders and shootings, and constant widespread drug dealing in Rutland. Vermont's extremely liberal, left-leaning 'protect our criminals' mentality, and the resulting lack of strong enough laws and enforcement, give us this unfortunate mess, I sum up to Hum.

We discuss Vermont's nuclear reactor, Vermont Yankee, which these same liberal folks in charge of crime prevention want to shut down in 2012. My frustration, I tell Hum, is that there is no basis to shut down this multi-billion dollar asset; its closing is driven by activists and liberal politicians citing dangers that simply don't exist. Wimps I say they are, fearing a nuclear disaster around every corner, and Hum agrees with all this: after all, he's an expert on this topic, having spent his career as a nuclear engineer for Baltimore Gas & Electric (now Constellation Energy Group). He was even involved in evaluating the possible purchase of Vermont Yankee by Constellation, so he knows the plant well.

Ho and Hum have continuing discussions on just about every conceivable topic: we agree on just about everything and rarely disagree on anything. We have similar viewpoints, politics, philosophies, and beliefs. We are talking most of the time, even going up the mountains, and that can be a little difficult.

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Constant talking requires a lot of wind power and so does climbing mountains – it keeps you thoroughly winded and constantly out of breath – so therein lies a serious conflict but we talk while we climb anyway.

There are also long silences allowing for deep contemplation: to listen and think big thoughts. There is no

better place or more abundant time for contemplation than walking all day through beautiful forests and astonishing nature. I think about a problem in cosmology I'm working on – why are galaxies accelerating outward and the universe forever expanding rather than galaxies slowing down and the universe eventually collapsing – and recalling memories about people I love and those who have gone before. I also speculate on what Hum might be contemplating: while I can't be sure I suspect that Hum is devoting his contemplation time to what his next new service might be, and how much money that might put in his pocket. I imagine that new service might well be 'Hum's Rogue Mouse Protection Service' to be offered to fellow hikers at each shelter along the trail, for a (perhaps exorbitant) fee, where he capitalizes on the expertise he's gained in defending against (sometimes giant) mouse attacks on his M&M's. But this is only speculation; I can't be sure what big thoughts Hum is contemplating.

We cross Route 11/30 (2.9 miles) at about 9:30 AM and spot the Canadian Geese (Richard and Carol Robinson) in the AT/LT parking lot on the north side. Carol immediately recognizes us and enthusiastically shouts out "Hi Ho and Hum!" They seem in great spirits after their zero day in Manchester and really good stay at the Green Mountain House hostel. They enthusiastically tell us about the very nice rooms, free ice cream, free sodas, and free shuttle service: in fact, they have just been delivered there by the hostel owner, Jeff Taussig, whose license plate reads "HIKER1". Jeff is extremely nice and asks us about our hike. We tell him we're headed to Mad Tom Notch and right away he offers to pick us up at the end of our hike and take us wherever we need to go, but we tell him we're already set with Lysie picking us up there. We snap a picture of the Canadian Geese (see below) and get on our way up the 3 mile 1500' climb to the peak of Bromley mountain, assuming these two will pass us on the way up (they're going to Peru shelter tonight), and indeed they do.



**Canadian Geese (Richard & Carol Robinson) at Route 11/30 Parking Lot
Relaxed & Refreshed After Restful Zero Day at Green Mountain House in Manchester**

We arrive at the spur to Bromley Shelter (4.9 miles) a little before 11 AM. At the junction we meet Hopscotch and Hubert Cumberland who are just getting started for their day's hike. This is another very

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late start for them, just like at the Stratton Mountain shelter. Such late starts for thru hikers are unusual, but it seems they hike fast enough to still make adequate headway each day.

The Canadian Geese also pass us at the junction to Bromley Shelter. As we expected, they are strong hikers and making good time, having already caught up to us on this rather big uphill climb. They are headed to Peru shelter for the night, another 8.1 miles, and tell us where to find their trail journal on the Internet. We bid them farewell and wish them a great AT thru hike.

We take a break at Bromley Shelter, have a snack, and sign the log:

"8/6

Ho & Hum Geezer hikers (68, 70, respectively) in for a break. Last mountain on a 5-day NOBO trek from Bennington/Route 9. Met great folks along the way, some signing in above. Onward, upward, & slow going for us with walkers & all.

*Peace,
Ho & Hum"*

We see from the log that Bleemus and dog Bongo also stayed the night, joining Hopscotch and Hubert Cumberdate.

The rest of the climb to the Bromley Mountain summit (5.9 miles) is not too bad, although the last bit of hiking up the ski trail is pretty steep. We arrive at 11:45 AM. Views are beautiful – the best we've had so far – and the wind is blowing at gale force. As opposed to the weather forecast we have heard from other hikers, some dark storm clouds are rolling in and rain seems imminent, but luckily it doesn't rain.



**Hum Makes Final Push to the Bromley Mountain Summit (Stratton Mountain in View)
Wind Blowing Hard, Storm Clouds Gathering, But It Doesn't Rain**

As usual, upon reaching the summit I immediately climb the Bromley Mountain observation tower, now the third observation tower on our backpacking hike this week (Glastenbury Mountain Fire Tower and Stratton Mountain Fire Tower being the other two). As I ascend the tower the wind picks up to brutal force: hold onto your hat! But the long range views are clear and beautiful, in spite of the storm clouds.



**Ho & Hum On Top of Very Windy Bromley Mountain Observation Tower
Bromley Mountain Ski Lift & Warming Hut**

We have our lunch in the warming hut with about five other hikers, among them are the brothers we met at Stratton. A group of southbound AT thru hikers, Black Eagle and others, reflect on their experiences so far on the trail. They say their favorite section so far was Mahoosuc Notch (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahoosuc_Notch) on the Maine/New Hampshire border, where they had to negotiate some intensely difficult boulder climbs. They decided to go southbound rather than northbound to get less congested shelters and hostels. They tell us a funny story about a hiker they met with a 70 pound pack; he had everything including axes, saws, assorted tools, etc. etc. As is typical, they like the social interactions a lot, but say they met some 'bad' northbound hikers without saying exactly what was bad about them. We would meet one of the lunchtime hikers – who is wearing a tie dye shirt – another three times before our hike ends, including our next snack place, rest place, and Mad Tom Notch, our final destination.

I call Lysie and ask her to meet us at 2:00 PM, which turns out to be a perfect forecast of our arrival time at Mad Tom Notch. I remind her that the road up to the parking area is very rough and to take it really easy.

We set out again at about 12:45 PM expecting an all downhill easy hike from here on in, but are soon climbing again, several hundred feet up to Bromley Mountain north peak. We take a brief rest on a perfectly formed natural rock bench.

We descend 600' and 2.5 miles down to Mad Tom Notch (8.4 miles) and arrive at just about 2 PM. Lyn arrives at about the exact same time. The road it turns out has just been re-graveled and all the ruts and bad sections are now smoothed over.





Heading North Down Bromley Mountain to the North Peak



Hum Takes a Rest on Natural Rock Bench – Summit of Bromley Mountain North Peak

We take pictures of course to mark our achievement. Hum needs to make several iterations with his camera to get a shot, since his camera makes no sounds nor gives any indication of when a picture has been taken. I comment yet again (way too often, should keep my mouth shut on this) about the 'really poor human factors' on Hum's camera. Hum, rightfully so, is tired of me saying this, and gets more than slightly irritated, and always rises to strongly defend his camera, as he does again on this occasion. Eventually Hum's picture gets taken (I guess :-)



Ho & Hum Finish LT Hike at Mad Tom Notch

On the way home we make stops at D. Lasser pottery (<http://lasserceramics.com/>) and the Whistle Stop Café for some ice cream. The Whistle Stop is famous with hikers and is practically a must stop for anyone hiking the LT or AT. I had mentioned it to the Canadian Geese at Stratton Pond Shelter, and they stopped there on August 8, as recorded in their journal (<http://trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=324794>):

"We hiked off the trail half a mile to go to The Whistle Stop Cafe. There we devoured a massive (an Australian term meaning large) amount of food. It was delicious. We rested about an hour and then yogied a ride back to the trail by another patron of the café."

After a very welcome shower, shave, and sprucing up we have a very relaxing and enjoyable evening. I enjoy a manhattan before dinner (Hum says he'll wait to enjoy his manhattan tomorrow night); we savor Lysie's (as always) delicious dinner; and enjoy some of my old LPs on the stereo.

I also play Windtalker's (Randy Motz's) CD for Hum: [Windtalker – Native SoundScapes](http://www.amazon.com/Windtalker-SoundScapes-Randy-Alan-Motz/dp/B000MXP9MO/) (<http://www.amazon.com/Windtalker-SoundScapes-Randy-Alan-Motz/dp/B000MXP9MO/>). We hiked with Windtalker and his wife Mom/Georgia Harris last summer on the Johnson to Jonesville Section of the LT. Windtalker brought along his Native American Flute, which he played for us each night at sunset. These wonderful concerts imprinted beautiful musical memories of that fantastic hike (see our 2009 LT journal at <http://www.longtrailhiking.info/webboard/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=167>), and Windtalker's CD serves as a vivid reminder. Hum loves it and vows to purchase the CD when we visit Windtalker and Mom tomorrow at the Long Trail Festival.

Zero Day in North Clarendon & Rutland Long Trail Festival – 8/7/2010

We spend the morning at the farmer's market, held each Saturday during the summer at Depot Park in downtown Rutland, and then make our way to the fairgrounds for the Long Trail Festival (http://www.nvnohi.com/ltf/Rutland_Long_Trail_Festival/Home.html). There are interesting audio-visual presentations, including a set of old slides taken in the early days of the LT (1920's vintage). Hum and I could recognize many of the sites and scenes – very enjoyable. There is also a Q&A panel discussion with 4 expert hikers answering questions and giving advice.

It is wonderful to reconnect with Windtalker and Mom, who are running a booth at the festival. They have just finished a hike from Duxbury Road to Appalachian Gap, which for them completes their quest, begun in 2007, to hike the LT end-to-end (see their trail journal of this year's hike at <http://www.trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?trailname=11105>). We enjoy exchanging trail stories of our respective LT hikes from this year. Windtalker also presents a fantastic Native American Flute concert in

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which he combines background synthesizer music: the extremely relaxing, ethereal sounds are like those found on his CD, thoroughly enjoyable. Hum promptly buys the CD.



**Windtalker Plays His Native American Flute
Sunset on Porch of Taft Lodge on Mt. Mansfield
(2009 LT Hike from Johnson to Jonesville)**

I purchase their recently completed book *The Walk: Reflections on Life and Faith from the Appalachian Trail* (<http://www.amazon.com/Walk-Reflections-Faith-Appalachian-Trail/dp/1449940773/>). This is an excellent read and totally inspirational book based on Windtalker and Mom's AT thru hiking experiences in 2006. They relate pathways through life to learning's and concepts acquired in thru hiking the AT, and tell many wonderful stories from the trail -- parables that make their book come alive -- especially their personal stories stemming from the trail *Family* they meet along the way. They speak vividly about *The Path*, how the trail's path twists, turns, challenges, confuses, frightens, and exhilarates, just as does life's path, and show the many parallels based on their hiking experiences. Regarding *Prayer* they make the analogy that the trail can be like a cathedral, where within its marvelous natural beauty one is inspired during periods of silence to think, reflect, and pray: pray good thoughts of loved ones here and gone before, count life's blessings, visualize the better person one wants to be, and give thanks for the love in our lives. Such reflections intermingled with the constant mental gyrations of planning next steps are again like parallel paths -- spiritual and physical paths -- being traced out together through the woods. They show us how wonderful is the *Simplicity* of the trail; the peace of being away from the daily harangue of (often bad) news inundating us each day; and how better to illustrate *Perseverance* than with hiking 2175 miles to conquer the AT. Their discussion of *Family and Community* kindly mentions meeting Ho and Hum:

"Even to this day, as we hike other trails, our trail family continues to grow. In 2009, as we hiked from Smugglers Notch to Jeffersonville on Vermont's Long Trail, we spent several wonderful days traveling with two brothers, "Ho" and "Hum." Thrown into each other's company by time, the weather, and a mutual passion to conquer the ruggedness of this oldest of long-distance trails, we shared each other's lives, assisted each other up steep and dangerously slippery precipices, and grew to become friends."

During that 5-day LT hike in August 2009, we learn that Windtalker and Mom are wonderful people who are especially great to hike with, as we recount in our trail journal (<http://www.longtrailhiking.info/webboard/viewtopic.php?f=11&t=167>; their trail journal at <http://www.trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=319145>). They are mentors, teachers, helpers, and friends; they are clearly religious and spiritual people, with an infectious zest for life. Windtalker has Native

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American roots and is an accomplished musician on the Native American flute, which we hear him play each night at sunset -- haunting flute music sounding like heaven in the wilderness, piercing the mountains, stars, and all that silence. This kind of mood is created in their book, which is liberally sprinkled with passages from the bible, from Native American wisdom, and from the pages of their AT journal.

It's getting late and we've pretty much decided that Zephyr, for whatever reason, couldn't make it to the

festival, but just as we're about to leave, Zephyr and husband Ed show up. It turns out that they've enjoyed a full day of touring in the surrounding area and visited the Maple Museum in Pittsford. We have a great conversation; Ed is a really nice and very big guy. We talk again about next year's LT hike: maybe Zephyr will join us, maybe Ed will join us. But that's all left TBD and to be coordinated in future e-mail exchanges we'll have during 2011. We bid them farewell and head back to North Clarendon.

In the evening Hum enjoys his manhattan postponed from last night, and I feel compelled to join him as it's not nice to let someone drink a manhattan alone. Hey, what a guy I am, anything for my brother! We enjoy Lysie's delicious dinner, play some more of our favorite LP's from days long gone by, and plan our next day's hike to the summit of Mt. Abraham. The weather forecast is for perfect weather tomorrow, so we're enthusiastic about repeating this hike, which, last year, was a total wipe-out weather-wise: last year Mt. Abraham was completely socked in with fog and we endured severe thunder storms in the late afternoon.

Lincoln Gap to Mt. Abraham & Lincoln Peak – 8/8/10

Start Time: 9:00 AM, Lincoln Gap

End Time: 2:30 PM, Lincoln

Total Miles: 6.8 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1582' gain/1582' loss

Distances:

Lincoln Gap to Battell Shelter: 1.8 miles; 816' gain/0' loss

Battell Shelter to Mt. Abraham: 0.8 miles; 766' gain

Mt. Abraham to Lincoln Peak: 0.8 miles;

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 32,984

Calories: 869

Steps/minute: 101

MPH: 2.86 (1.25 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 5 hours, 26 minutes, 37 seconds

Miles: 15.61 miles (6.8 actual miles)

Up at 6 AM, we take off in Hum's car at 7 AM, and arrive at Lincoln Gap at about 9 AM. In the parking lot a lady in a car with Florida license plates pokes her head out of the window and asks if this is the trail head for Mt. Abraham, and we confirm that it is. We'll see her again, several times today..

We keep a really fast pace – almost 2 MPH -- up to Battell Shelter (1.8 miles) arriving at about 9:50 AM. It's an even faster pace than on the previous five days' hike, because of our lighter packs: Hum is carrying a really light day pack and I'm carrying my regular pack, but with many items removed that are not needed for a day hike, such as my tent, sleeping pad, etc. This is a mistake on my part, because even with these items removed, my pack is considerably heavier than need be, and it shows. On the way up to Battell Shelter, Hum is outpacing me and practically walking on my heels; I'm unable to stay comfortably ahead of him as I usually am.

We take a short rest at Battell Shelter and while there are passed by a couple of fast moving day hikers. We'll see a large number of day hikers today: this is a relatively short, highly rewarding day hike and extremely popular, especially on weekends during the summer when the weather is warm and clear, just like today.

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It takes us about a half hour to climb the remaining 0.8 mile, 766' to the summit of Mt. Abraham (2.6 miles), arriving at about 10:30 AM. Somehow the climb seems longer than last year's ascent: false memories, last year the climb was slippery and treacherous, this year it is dry and safer. On the way up the views are spectacular; this is especially rewarding given last year's total wipe out weather-wise: no views whatsoever as the summit was completely shrouded in fog.



Ascending Mt. Abraham with Spectacular Views to the South

Mt. Abraham is one of 3 Vermont peaks with alpine zones above the tree line, Mt. Mansfield and Camels Hump being the other two. The treeless summit area here is much smaller than the other two, however. GMC's [Long Trail Guide](#) states that Mt. Abraham 'offers one of the best panoramas on the entire Long Trail' and today it certainly lives up to this accolade. From the summit the views are stunning in all directions, it is almost totally clear although haze is starting to creep in and gale force winds are starting to blow: Lake Champlain and the Adirondacks are in clear view to the West.

As we reach the summit we see a couple hugging, who, as it turns out, are celebrating their 23rd anniversary. They are from Middlebury and left their teenage children at home while they did their celebratory hike.

Florida girl, who we met in the parking lot, arrives next. She is hiking with a young India guy, who we presume she just met along the way. Florida girl lives part time near Hanover, NH, perhaps, I speculate, she's a Dartmouth professor. She kayaks in the Florida everglades and comments that the alligators and crocs stick more to the surface now, rather than swimming mostly underwater as in the past; she finds that much more scary. India guy is from Seattle, working for Microsoft perhaps; he's on the phone constantly, speaking Hindi with someone, a strange way to hike. They inquire about what lies beyond Mt. Abraham and decide they too will hike on to Lincoln Peak.





**Above the Tree-line on the Summit of Mt. Abraham (4006')
Stunning Views to the South, North, & West**

We reach Lincoln Peak (3.6 miles) at 11:30 AM, where we have our lunch. Lincoln Peak is one of the two mountains at the Sugarbush Ski Resort, the other being Mt. Ellen, also on the LT, which we hiked over last year. Florida girl and India guy are right behind us. A Sugarbush maintenance man arrives next, riding to the top on the Sugarbush chairlift. He grooms the Sugarbush trails in winter and maintains the chairlifts and other equipment the year round. He says this Lincoln Peak chairlift is their original, oldest chairlift from the late 1950s. He tells us that Mad River Glen is famous for their lack of grooming and really difficult moguls; they only groom one green trail from the summit.

It's very windy and cold on Lincoln Peak. I put on my sweatshirt, however, Hum has no room in his day pack for his coat or fleece, so he's very cold and takes shelter in the small hut at the top of the chairlift where we have our lunch.



**Summit of Lincoln Peak (3975') & Sugarbush Ski Resort
Views to the North of Mt. Ellen and Camel's Hump in Far Distance**

Understandably, Hum is anxious to start back. On the way we meet two cute kids and their shirtless dad on the Lincoln Peak viewing platform. Dad is ordering them, quite harshly and on the verge of being belligerent, to climb up some rafters above the railing and benches on the platform, and to hang there, so he can take their picture. It is so windy on the summit that the kids are really scared of being blown off, and they plead with their Dad to let them get down. But he -- a scrawny, shirtless, and ill kempt looking doofus -- orders them around like a drill sergeant and insists they stay up on their perch for a rather long time while he snaps several shots until, finally, he deems one of them a "keeper" and allows them to come down. It is still really cold and I kid shirtless doofus that without his shirt he must be really cold; to which he replies, 'who me, I'm just out of shape', acting like he's really tough: not.



**Lincoln Peak Viewing Platform on Very Windy Day
Against Vigorous Protests, the Two Young Kids are Forced by Drill Sergeant Dad
to Stand on Rafter's on the Right for a Long Photo Session**

We pause once again on Mt. Abraham to behold the view and take a brief rest before our descent. On the way down we meet a huge number, perhaps more than 100, day hikers and find the parking lot overflowing at Lincoln Gap. This particular hike is very popular and on a clear, dry, weekend day such as today attracts hordes of day hikers. It detracts from the peacefulness of the day and the hike; there is just too much traffic. Fortunately we had a very peaceful and uncrowded hike in the morning on our ascent of this glorious mountain paradise.



**Pausing on Mt. Abraham on Return Hike
Lincoln Gap Parking Lot Jammed with Day Hikers' Cars**

We arrive back at the parking lot (6.8 miles) at about 2:30 PM and in North Clarendon before 4:00 PM. We enjoy a leisurely evening of swimming, guffawing, imbibing, and savoring Lynsie's delicious dinner.

Epilogue

Summary statistics for the 6-day hike:
Total Miles: 58.8 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 9,597' gain/7,276' loss
Total Steps: 201,458
Total Calories: 5300

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Over breakfast on Monday we recount and reminisce on our epic journey and phenomenal life experience. Once again we were awestruck by another gorgeous stretch of the Long Trail that took us through peaceful forests and over the magnificent summits of Glastenbury, Stratton, Bromley, and Abraham mountains. We felt great satisfaction in overcoming and ultimately conquering the enormous physical challenges we encountered.

We were stupefied by several mysteries on the jaunt:

- Unsolved: what became of the Bennington co-ed, Paula Welden, who disappeared more than 60 years ago on the LT section we just hiked?
- Sad ending: what became of the young man, Danny Goldstein, who wandered off from Rutland, and was rumored to have hiked south at the same time and on the same LT section we just hiked north?
- Unsolved: where oh where did Runner (Sam Merriman) go after we last saw him descending Stratton Mountain presumably headed to Stratton Shelter?
- Unsolved: how did King Tut's 3000 year old sarcophagus and mummy make it onto the LT atop the north summit of Bromley Mountain?

We relished the brotherly banter, sharing, bonding and boisterous guffawing that broke the silence of the trail. We especially savored the company of the diverse, interesting, and friendly people we met along the way. We'll never forget the vivid interactions with Zhivago, Funk, Cool Shoes, Zephyr, Runner, DC, Bleemus, Canadian Geese, Ottawa Lou, PoiBoy, Black Eagle, and the whole gang, for their priceless individuality.

Many hikers have commented that life on the trail is a microcosm of 'real life', where the people you meet become your family. In their recently completed book, *The Walk: Reflections on Life and Faith from the Appalachian Trail* (<http://www.amazon.com/Walk-Reflections-Faith-Appalachian-Trail/dp/1449940773/>), Windtalker and Mom comment on that topic:

"We all began this miraculous journey as strangers, each one striving to make sense of the personal reason that brought each of us to this point in our lives. The enthusiasm for the adventure we shared was contagious and the adventure became the common ground on which relationships quickly grew. In a spiritual sense, we were all foreigners – struggling to get the lay of the land, to understand the language, to fit into the culture without losing our own sense of identity and to become productive members of the community. We soon learned that being a part of the trail family of thru-hikers was not only enjoyable, providing an added dimension to the adventure, but was essential in guaranteeing safety and success. Our communally shared dream of conquering the Appalachian Trail and standing triumphantly atop Mt. Katahdin was the glue that bound all of us together. Our mutual mission and vision overshadowed our differences in age, background, personality, ethnicity, education, financial status and marital status. We were all on the same path, following the same guidebook and with the same goal in mind."

Many hikers believe, as do we, that communing with this 'trail family' is the best part of the whole experience. Upon reaching the summit of Mt. Katahdin and completing 2,175 miles of the AT, as told in their trail journal (<http://trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=331195>), the Canadian Geese comment:

"We have been asked what part of the hike we enjoyed the most and we both agree. It was the people we met. The trail angels that helped us out and the other hikers we met."

We make plans for another Ho-Hum LT hike in August 2011, this time on the most northern section from the Canadian border south to Johnson and the most southern section from the Massachusetts border north to Bennington.

After breakfast we give Hum a big hug goodbye and bid our brother farewell. Our wonderful saga has come to an end, but what still remains -- our takeaways -- are the unbelievable Ho-Hum memories of this astonishing adventure. These we both take with us and happily keep.

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3. August 7 – 19, 2011

LT Hike: Journey's End, Vermont to Johnson/Rt. 15, Vermont

LT/AT Hike: Bennington/Rt. 9, Vermont to Cheshire/Rt. 8, Massachusetts

Prologue – 8/7/11

My brother Hum (Bob Ash, trail name Hum) and I (Jerry Ash, trail name Ho) identify ourselves as "geezzer hikers Ho & Hum", because we are just that: Hum's 71 and I'm 69, that is, geezers, and indeed we are

quite Ho-Hum. A primary goal for me this year is to complete the Long Trail (LT), which requires hiking 53.7 miles from the Canadian Border to Johnson/Route 15, hiking 14 miles from Bennington/Route 9 to the VT/MA border, plus completing two short road walks (1.2 miles on West Settlement Road south of Johnson, VT, and 3.2 miles on Duxbury Road from the Duxbury road LT parking lot to Jonesville, VT).

In the spring and early summer, we both do a number of training hikes. Hum climbs Old Rag Mountain in Shenandoah National Park (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Old_Rag_Mountain), completes a 14-mile hike on the Appalachian Trail (AT) near Harrisburg, PA, and takes several local hikes around his neighborhood carrying nearly his full pack weight. I do 86 miles in 13 training hikes, carrying about 35 pounds (I wrote a separate journal on these training hikes). I scope out places to stay in North Troy, because that will be a 3 hour drive and too far to make on the same day as a long hike on the LT. Jennifer Donley of the Green Mountain Club kindly provides several suggestions and I zero in on a good B&B, the North Troy Inn (<http://northtroyinn.com/>), and John Selmer (802-744-6319) who shuttles hikers in the area.

Hum and his wife Pat arrive in Vermont at about 12 noon, as always very near Hum's predicted arrival time (Hum is uncannily accurate in predicting arrival times on the trail as well). Pat is going to spend the coming week visiting my wife Lyn while Hum and I hike. We have lunch, do last minute preparations (e.g., make PB&J sandwiches for lunch), make final checks on all our equipment, and weigh our full packs: we both weigh in at about 35 pounds each with 6 days of food packed away.

Hum and I leave at 1:30 PM for North Troy, VT, with a plan to stop in Johnson, VT, for me to complete the first 1.2-mile road walk on West Settlement Road.



Ho (Left) & Hum Ready to Leave for North Troy, VT to Begin 6-Day LT Hike

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We arrive at the West Settlement Road parking lot at 3:45 PM and Hum drives to the Lamoille River suspension bridge parking lot while I complete the 1.2 mile road walk by 4:10 PM:

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 2,948

Calories: 77

Steps/minute: 103

MPH: 2.92 (2.52 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 28 minutes, 43 seconds

Miles: 1.39 miles (1.2 actual miles)

We continue on to North Troy and arrive at the North Troy Inn at 5:00 PM, one hour earlier than I had predicted. We meet Sam Leary, the proprietor, and also Ferguson T. Cat, the resident cat, and find the accommodations very satisfactory. Sam's husband Norm is mowing their very large 2 acre lawn at the moment (with a hand mower). Norm works in Williston as a graphic artist and has a 1.5 hour commute

each way. There is no one else staying at the B&B at the moment, and for only \$32.70 per person we find this a more than wonderful beginning to our journey.

We discuss the schedule for the next day with Sam; I was of the impression after our phone conversation that she could provide breakfast and drive us to the Journey's End trailhead by 7:00 AM. However, I soon realize that this is clearly not the case: Sam states flatly that she is "not a morning person" and after some discussion we agree to have breakfast starting at 7:00 AM and have her drive us to the trailhead as soon after that as we could.

We walk around North Adams a bit, a typical small Vermont town (1 store, 1 restaurant, 1 gas station), and, back in our room, then partake of a couple of beers and delicious submarine sandwiches that Lyn has kindly provided. We watch 60 minutes and retire early in anticipation of the first big day of hiking ahead of us the next day.



North Troy Inn B&B

Journey's End Trailhead to Laura Woodward Shelter – 8/8/11

Start Time: 8:20 AM, Journey's End trailhead, North Adams
End Time: 4:30 PM, Laura Woodward Shelter
Total Miles: 10.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2660' gain/1950' loss

Distances:

Journey's End Road trailhead to Journey's End II Camp: 0.8 miles;
Journey's End II Camp to Shooting Star Shelter: 5.2 miles; 1540' gain/830' loss;
Shooting Star Shelter to Laura Woodward Shelter: 4.3 miles, 1120' gain/580' loss

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Pedometer readings:

Steps: 37,414
Calories: 984
Steps/minute: 98
MPH: 2.78 (1.62 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 6 hours, 21 minutes, 49 seconds
Miles: 17.71 miles (10.3 actual miles)

As per our plan, we arise at 6:00 AM and sit down to breakfast at 7:00 AM in the beautiful Victorian dining room at the North Troy Inn. Sam Leary has prepared a delicious repast including eggs, breakfast meats, and trimmings; an assortment of muffins (including blueberry muffins), yogurt with cranberry (yummy), oranges and apples, coffee, and OJ. We have a nice conversation with Sam, who is an excellent Inn Keeper. Sam drives us to the Journey's End trailhead by 8:20 AM; she actually drives us further along the crude, narrow, bumpy, dirt access road than she usually does, as she says, "for young guys", since she obviously has observed that we are indeed not young guys at all but geezer hikers without a doubt.



Beginning our 6-Day LT Hike at Journey's End Trailhead

The trail rises gradually from the parking lot (1350', 0.0 miles) to Journey's End Camp (1720', 0.8 miles), which we pass just before 9:00 AM, and arrive at the LT trailhead (2100', 1.3 miles), Northern Terminus of the Long Trail, on the US-Canadian border, at about 9:15 AM.



Northern Terminus of the Long Trail at the US-Canadian Border

The climbs to the summits of Carleton Mt. (2670', 2.7 miles) and then Burnt Mt. (2608', 4.1 miles) are not too arduous, however, after summiting Burnt Mt. we're quite happy to hike downhill for a while to Shooting

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Star Shelter (2260', 6.7 miles), arriving there just after 12 Noon, where we take a short 15-minute break for lunch. We try to find the water source at the shelter, which the Long Trail Guide describes as "a shallow well with a hand pump, located on a short spur leading west off the LT." We find the spur, but after walking in quite a distance on the spur we find no hand pump and give up. We later learn that there is no hand pump; rather there is a rather deep well where no water currently can be obtained due to lack of rain. Indeed, we find that water on this section of the LT is nonexistent.

We spend no further time at Shooting Star Shelter knowing that we have a 2.4 mile, 1200' climb to the summit of Doll Peak ahead of us. Indeed, Doll Peak is a bear of a climb: it is extremely steep in many places (i.e., straight up), and incredibly rugged, representing, in my opinion, some of the hardest hiking on the LT. This would be just the beginning of many such incredibly difficult peaks, all rating at least a 15 out of 10 in difficulty, over the next 6 days. Reaching the Doll Peak summit (3409', 9.1 miles) by 3:50 PM, after a 3 ½ hour climb, leaves us both exhausted and somewhat dehydrated, especially Hum:



Hum is Pooped after Summiting Doll Peak

After summiting Doll Peak, we're happy again that we have another rare descent (for this mostly uphill day anyway) as the final leg of today's journey to Laura Woodward Shelter (2800', 10.3 miles), arriving at 4:40 PM. Initially we find ourselves alone in the shelter after having met no one this day on the LT. There is a good spring near the shelter where we are delighted to wash up and have a really good drink, after having essentially no available water the whole day. This is a big problem: we both suffer a bit of dehydration on this part of the LT, and this would especially take a toll on Hum's stamina in coming days.

We just relax until dinner and read the shelter's journal, where Hum makes the first entry for the geezer hikers on this adventure:

"8/8/11: The hiking geezers are on the trail again, watch out!!! Ho (age 69) and Hum (age 71) started our 3rd year of hiking the Long Trail. Started at Journey's End this morning and will finish in Johnson on Saturday. Plan to do the southern end of the LT next week."

As is our custom, we wait until 6:00 PM to have our dinner: indeed this is one of the highlights of the day, that is, the opening of "Chez Humberto's Gourmet Restaurant". Hum splurges by consuming one of his very favorite Mountain House meals, which, according to the label "serves two", but Hum ignores that advice and consumes the entire package, as he does every night in fact. I warn Hum that such hoggerly is running up his hiking tab, but Hum retorts that daughter Laurie came to the rescue and generously

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funded these meals when Hum's miserly side first rejected their purchase. I have tuna and pasta, which is one of my favorite meals as well.



Laura Woodward Shelter Hum Prepares to Open “Chez Humberto’s Gourmet Restaurant”

At around 6:15 PM, while we’re still finishing dinner, a father, Rich Maynes (56), and his two sons, Jeff Maynes (28) and Matt Maynes (25), arrive and immediately seek out a tent site, leaving us still as the only ones residing in the shelter. They are exhausted and happy to rest, as are we, and immediately comment on what an incredibly arduous climb it was up Doll Peak. We agree that no truer words were ever spoken. Rich is carrying a really heavily loaded pack, maybe 50+ pounds; he says that his tent alone weights 6 pounds, and he’s carrying all manner of pots, pans, Coleman stove, and other equipment.

Rich (“Unity Man”) is from Unity, NH; he works for Ing and recently retired from Hartford Insurance after a long career. He graduated from the University of Connecticut and maintains a strong interest in the NCAA basketball tournament each year, especially when UConn wins. Jeff (“Baltimore Phil”, <http://www.jeffmaynes.com/>) is married and lives in Sparks, MD, not far from Timonium, MD where Hum lives. He is completing his PhD in Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University and is also an instructor at Gettysburg College (from which he received his BA), where he teaches Logic, Ethics, Critical Thinking, and Contemporary Issues (<http://www.gettysburg.edu/academics/philosophy/faculty/>). Matt (“Radio”) graduated from Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY, with a degree in Communications. He works in theater arts and also leads a rock band called “Johnny Mainstream” (<http://johnnymainstream.com/>). He writes original music, plays lead guitar and is lead singer; he and his band have produced MP3 Media available for sale on his website and on Amazon.com. Matt is planning to thru hike the whole LT whereas Rich and Jeff will return home after 5 days of hiking.

We have an excellent conversation with these guys; they share their experiences on many previous outings together such as a kayak trip down the Connecticut River, where Rich relates an interesting and amusing story of losing his camera on the Connecticut River jaunt when they dared to go over a waterfall in their kayaks. I’m very interested in their stories of hiking in the North Cascades, WA, especially since I’m planning to also hike in the Cascades on Lyn’s and my forthcoming RV trip to the west coast in the fall. Happily it looks like we’ll be staying at the same shelters with these guys in the coming days: good company.



L. to R.: “Baltimore Phil”, “Radio”, “Unity Man” (Jeff, Matt, & Rich Maynes)

The three-some pitch their tents and soon set out to enjoy an elaborate dinner. They bring their own freeze dried food for the main dinner, and then enjoy hot tea and cider. After dinner they have an organized dishwashing ‘assembly line’ routine, where each person knows exactly what to do, and they get all the work done very efficiently.

We call Lyn and Pat after dinner; for once the cell service is good here. I ask Lyn “what happened in the stock market today?”: it is down more than 500 points after the downgrade of the US credit rating. Everyone in camp seems to overhear that discussion and all groan loudly, wishing I hadn’t asked... To my chagrin, I found today that I still have the room key to the North Troy Inn, and ask Lyn to call Sam Leary to let her know I’ll return it on Saturday.

We retire as usual at dusk (around 8:30 PM), while Rich, Jeff, and Matt enjoy a unique and sometimes uproarious card game (forgot the name of the game) in the light of their tent. All is quiet by about 9:10 PM.

Laura Woodward Shelter to Hazen’s Notch Camp – 8/9/11

Start Time: 6:40 AM, Laura Woodward Shelter
End Time: 4:00 PM, Hazen’s Notch Camp
Total Miles: 9.6 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2970’ gain/3730’ loss

Distances:

Laura Woodward Shelter to Jay Camp: 3.1 miles; 1060’ gain/1620’ loss
Jay Camp to Hazen’s Notch Camp: 5.4 miles; 1910’ gain/2110’ loss
Spur to Hazen’s Notch Camp: 0.1 mile
Hike to water source on LT and return: 1.0 mile

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Pedometer readings:
Steps: 41,911
Calories: 1102
Steps/minute: 95

MPH: 2.69 (1.30 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 7 hours, 21 minutes, 08 seconds
Miles: 19.84 miles (9.6 actual miles)

We arise at first light, about 5:00 AM, as is our custom on these backpacking hikes. We are reasonably efficient in making breakfast, packing up, and getting off on the day's adventure by 6:40 AM. We're not enthusiastic about the immediate horrendous climb we face: 1000+ feet straight up over 1.5 miles to the summit of Jay Peak, and oddly this type of right-out-of-the-box big climb will happen several times again in coming days. It takes a little while for our bodies to warm up and adjust to the huge physical stress this engenders, but soon the heart is racing, the lungs are panting, and the blood is flowing hotly, and we're fully in gear...

We get glimpses of the Jay Peak summit as we climb – there is a large building with antennas on top – and sometimes the trail is a bit hard to follow, especially when it crosses and/or follows the ski trails. Reference to the Long Trail Guide is most helpful in making the correct turns and helps keep us on track on the LT with nary a wrong turn.



Climbing Jay Peak with Summit in View

We stop frequently on the ascent, observing our normal protocol of stopping every half hour for a water break and brief rest. It is a gorgeous day for hiking, with nice temperatures, dry weather, and very clear views. However, we are definitely feeling the aftermath of yesterday's extremely tough hike and the partial dehydration we suffered from lack of water along the way. This is especially being felt by Hum. The final push to the summit is on a really steep ski trail; just take a look at Hum making this final push to feel how arduous this is:



Hum Makes Final Push to the Summit of Jay Peak

We reach the summit of Jay Peak (3858', 1.5 miles) just after 8:00 AM. It is really beautiful on top and given the early hour, we have the summit entirely to ourselves (we will learn on our decent that many day hikers are on their way up Jay Peak but we are ahead of them). The summit is interesting to explore, and we spend some time taking in the excellent views: Mt. Mansfield and Camel's Hump are readily visible to the south, as is Lake Champlain to the west and the White Mountains to the east in New Hampshire. We take several pictures and note the gravesite of Alan Jones and the memorial bench dedicated to Dick Meunier, both on the summit ridge of Jay Peak.



On the Summit of Jay Peak



Looking South from the Summit of Jay Peak Mt. Mansfield (Left) & Camel's Hump (Center) in View on the Distant Horizon

We begin our descent off Jay Peak at about 8:30 AM and right away we lose the trail. We immediately realize this when we come to a sheer cliff, clearly with no way down. Quick reference to the Long Trail Guide gets us back on track, as we then realize that we missed a right turn about 50 feet north of the cliff. On rocky summits, such as on Jay Peak, the white blazes painted on the rocks are sometimes hard to spot, since they are sometimes worn and faded after years of severe weather wearing them down.

We're soon back on our way down off the Jay Peak summit ridge, below which we cross a ski trail and then on the other side of the ski trail negotiate our way over some rather formidable water pipes that supply the Jay Peak snow making machines. The trail down is rocky and we take it slow, always stepping very carefully to avoid any mishaps for one false step can end the hike for good, as, sadly, many an LT hiker has found out. Along the way we meet about 20 day hikers making their way up to Jay Peak. This seems like a rather large number of day hikers, but on this beautiful day to scale this summit it is quite understandable.

As we press on, Hum is becoming more and more pooped and his pace slows way down, even though we are on a down slope, where we usually make faster progress than on the up slope. I have longer and longer waits for Hum to catch up, and I'm getting increasingly concerned for Hum's physical condition. Then Hum pretty much completely "poops out" at Jay Pass, where the LT crosses VT Route 242, 1.7 miles down from Jay Peak, and he says his legs are "failing" him and he feels excessively tired and "completely out of gas". On our rest at Jay Pass I tell Hum that we're going to have to consider aborting our hike: there are bad signs now regarding his health and risking one's health definitely isn't worth it. I say we could abort the hike now since we're currently at a road crossing where we can hitchhike back to North Troy and won't have another such opportunity for two more days. Hum says that he wants to go on for now, but we'll have to reevaluate when get to VT Route 58 at Hazen's North, which we will reach in two days.

We attribute Hum's physical condition to the dehydration we suffered on the previous day. Dehydration can be very debilitating physically, causing exhaustion, cramps, and all kinds of other physical problems. If taken to the extreme, of course, it can even be deadly. Today matters will get even worse regarding

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lack of water along the route and as a result we'll suffer even worse dehydration. Unfortunately, on our way down from Jay Peak to Jay Pass, we skip the Jay Loop trail to Jay Camp, and in retrospect this is a big mistake because water is available there for us to refill our water bottles. Our rationale for skipping Jay Camp is that it is still early in the day and we have not yet drank that much water and assume, very mistakenly, that there will be other opportunities to refill our water bottles before we reach our destination at Hazen's Notch Camp. Wrong: there are not any other opportunities. Jay Camp is the only such

opportunity, and in this most northern region of the LT, there appears to be a significant drought at this time and no water available anywhere along the LT.

To make matters worse on the dehydration front, after we cross Jay Pass, we meet several thru hikers who advise us that there is no water before reaching Hazen's Notch Camp. Furthermore, they say that the "spring" at Hazen's Notch Camp – the normal water source -- is dry, but that there is a small source of water about 0.2 miles (10 minutes) south of the Hazen's Notch Camp spur trail. This turns out to be good information. We have learned to always ask other hikers about the availability of water.

This experience with dehydration over the past two days teaches us a good lesson and makes us much more cautious in the future about taking advantage of available water to refill our water bottles. While it takes a lot of time, effort, and delay to drop our packs, get out the water filter, and pump for quite a few minutes to refill our bottles, it is far, far better to have ample water available on such an exhausting hike than to risk dehydration ever again. It is much better to err on the side of stopping perhaps too many times for water than to run out.

I note from the Long Trail Guide that we'll be passing "Chet's Lookout" along the 5.3 mile section from Jay Pass to Hazen's Notch Camp, and I advise Hum that we definitely don't want to miss it! I remind him that we have missed some pretty great lookouts and views in the past – perhaps the worst of which was missing Prospect Rock overlooking the town of Manchester, which is reportedly a really great view, on last year's LT hike.

Maybe I've become a bit obsessed with beautiful views on our hike now, but to me these are some of the big rewards of hiking and for sure I don't want to miss any more views. Hum kids me a little about this obsession for views: he likes the views, too, but maybe not with quite as much enthusiasm as I've developed for them. Surprisingly, and perhaps it's a big "ha ha" for Hum, the view from "Chet's Lookout" is non-existent. It seems that over the years the trees have grown up to completely obscure any view that surely existed in the past. On hearing this news, Hum passes on climbing the short ladder to ascend to "Chet's Lookout", and chuckles under his breath I suspect.



"Chet's Lookout" and "View" from the Top

The ascents up Gilpin Mt. (2920', 4.0 miles), Domey's Dome (2880', 5.0 miles), and finally Buchanan Mt. (2940', 6.2 miles) are increasingly difficult with rugged Buchanan Mt., again rating a 15 out of 10 in difficulty, leaving us both exhausted, especially Hum.

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We arrive at Hazen's Notch Camp (2040', 8.6 miles) at 4:00 PM, very happy to finally have a good rest. The "spring" on the spur to the camp is indeed dry, as reported by the other hikers we met earlier in the day. We poke around camp for quite some time, snacking a bit, enjoying the long range views from the shelter, and reading the journal, and then make our way back to the LT and head south in search of the water source reported by the other hikers. We find some pretty dismal puddles that might suffice in a bind, but I continue on to find what is probably the "stream" reported by the other hikers earlier in the day. I walk back to Hum's location, report my findings, and we both return to the pretty good water source to refill our water bottles.



Hazen's Notch Camp & Hum Contemplating the Exhausting Hike Today

On our return to the shelter we find Baltimore Phil, who had arrived along with Unity Man and Radio at about 5:45 PM; he is filling their water bottles from one of the lesser sources we passed up. We tell him about our discovery further south but he is content with the water source he has already found.

Unity Man, Baltimore Phil, and Radio again opt to pitch their tents rather than stay in the shelter tonight. They tell us that they got a rather late start from Laura Woodward shelter at about 9:15 AM and apparently veered off the LT going up Jay Peak; instead they followed the Jay Peak ski trails to the summit. I recall, when crossing the ski trails earlier today, that it is rather easy to miss one of the re-entry's of the LT back into the woods. That's apparently what happened to them and it almost happened to us as well, until we consulted the trusty Long Trail Guide to find our way and stay on the LT. Radio, however, is a bit concerned that he didn't completely follow the LT up Jay Peak, which may be necessary to receive recognition from the Green Mountain Club for completing the LT end-to-end.

We enjoy our dinner, again starting promptly at 6:00 PM, and enjoy a good conversation with our 3 hiking companions after dinner. There is no cell service from here, which we find to be the norm on the LT, so the girls will have to wait to hear from us.

This time I make our daily entry into the journal:

"8/9/11 Brothers Ho & Hum 'geezer hikers' (69, 71 resp.) checking in for the night after arduous 10 hr. hike from Laura Woodward shelter. We're pretty slow, but steady, haven't won any races yet but happy with our lot. Very happy for pretty good water source in stream about 10 min. walk south on LT. Tillotson Camp tomorrow. Nice visit with Unity Man, Baltimore Phil and Radio.

*Peace, Ho & Hum
(We are quite Ho-Hum)*

P.S. Jay Peak spectacular this morning, 360° views to ∞."

Hazen's Notch Camp to Tillotson Camp – 8/10/11

Start Time: 7:15 AM, Hazen's Notch Camp

End Time: 3:00 PM, Tillotson Camp

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Total Miles: 6.5 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2100' gain/1580' loss

Distances:

Hazen's Notch Camp to Tillotson Camp: 6.1 miles; 2100' gain/1580' loss

Spur to Haystack Mt. summit & return: 0.4 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 29,556

Calories: 777

Steps/minute: 88

MPH: 2.51 (1.17 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 5 hours, 33 minutes, 41 seconds
Miles: 13.99 miles (6.5 actual miles)

We're up again at 5:00 AM, first light, as usual, after a heavy rain pounded the shelter overnight. All is well with the 3 guys in tents; their tents hold up just fine in the downpour. The rain continues while we eat breakfast and pack, but, no problem, there is a table and plenty of room inside the shelter to finish our early morning chores and stay dry. We're off at 7:15 AM when, luckily, the rain stops.

We find that the heavy overnight rain has now filled the stream/spring on the spur to the camp, so we opt to fill our water bottles there rather than at the small stream we used the night before.

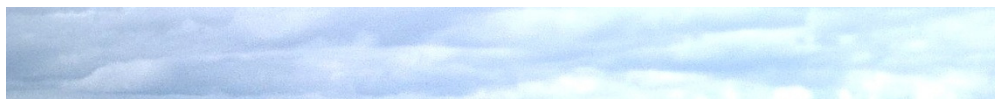
When we reach unpaved VT Route 58 at Hazen's Notch (1780', 1.5 miles), after a mostly downhill hike this morning, I again raise the issue of whether or not we should abort the hike and hitchhike back to North Troy. Hum won't hear of it; he says he's feeling a lot better and more energetic after rehydrating somewhat and a good rest last night. We press on.

I am deeply chagrined to find out that my camera batteries and 2 sets of backups are all, apparently, dead! Bummer! After much trying I can't get my camera back on-line, so Hum kindly offers to let me use his camera as the primary.

The climb up Haystack Mt. is, once again, extremely arduous – another 15 out of 10 in difficulty. I take the short 0.2 mile spur to the summit to snap a few pictures, where the long distance views are clear and beautiful this morning. Mt. Mansfield and Camel's Hump are clear on the horizon and Belvidere fire tower, which we'll climb tomorrow, also comes into view in the distance. The cell service is OK from here and we call the girls to report our status and to check in on their activities.

The hike down Haystack Mt. is treacherous, very slippery, and even with the normal great care on my footing, which is always the case; I slip and fall 3 times, one time bruising my shin. Hum, on the other hand, loses his footing on a slippery ledge, slides down the ledge and by some miracle gets caught by a log on the edge. Had the log not been there, Hum would have fallen another 30 feet or more over the edge. Providence.

The hike up and over Tillotson Peak (2980', 5.5 miles) is extremely steep – in fact, the steepest climb so far – and on the way down we also encounter our longest wet slippery ledge (actually a cliff), which we negotiate mostly on our bottoms.





**View from the Summit of Haystack Mountain
Mt. Mansfield (Left) and Camel's Hump (Center) Visible on the Horizon**

We arrive at Tillotson Camp at about 3:00 PM, where we find a very nice shelter with a great 'picture window' out the front that affords really pretty, long range views. It is a really beautiful, clear day and there are even some huge wind turbines visible on the distant ridge. It is too soon for the Lowell wind turbines to be up and running, so I'm wondering where these wind turbines are located?



Tillotson Camp & Beautiful View out the "Picture Window"

Our 3 hiking friends arrive at 4:00 PM, and this time they decide to stay in the shelter rather than tent tonight. There is room for 8 in the shelter: Unity Man (Rich) takes the double bunk above Hum (he doesn't want to sleep next to anyone), while Baltimore Phil (Jeff) and Radio (Matt) will sleep in the double bunk above me. Accordingly, they move their gear into the shelter, and all is fine.

That is, all is fine with that plan until, not long after, a woman and her 14-year-old daughter poke their heads into the shelter. 'Uh oh', I think to myself. Right away the woman, whose voice sounds amazingly like Donald Duck (hence we assign her "Ms. DD" as her trail name), inquires, in perfect duck speak, "how many spaces are there?" and then quickly concludes "oh, there's room for three", in effect announcing to the 5 of us already in the shelter that 'we are now going to disrupt everything!'

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Right after that, Ms. DD's husband arrives with their 10-year-old daughter, and, realizing that there is only space for 3 of them in the shelter, he immediately announces "I'll sleep on the floor!" So, we realize, this family of 4 is going to occupy the 3 sleeping spaces remaining in the shelter and, even worse, he plans to sleep on the floor, when there is clearly no room for anyone to sleep on the floor without completely blocking the door and disrupting/endangering everyone else. Hum immediately pushes back hard on Mr. Obnoxious Jackass (hence we assign him "Mr. OJ" as his trail name, for we 5 already know he's a complete OJ) and says "There's no room to sleep on the floor. We're all going to have to trip over you in the dark? No way, that's a little much!" But Mr. OJ is not about to give in and shoots back "it's done all the time".

Obviously this family, after arriving last with not enough room in the shelter to accommodate them, should pitch their tent. First come, first served, is the rule on the LT and hiking trails everywhere, and virtually all hikers observe that rule. But that's not what Mr. OJ and Ms. DD are going to do: they are going to be extremely rude and obnoxious. They are going to disrupt everyone else who has arrived there ahead of them. This kind of behavior, thank goodness, is unknown to us in our experience on the LT. In fact, in 3 years of hiking on the LT, we have never encountered such rude and thoroughly despicable behavior.

Given the new situation, Rich has already decided he's not sleeping next to anyone and quickly concludes the three of them will have to tent this night after all. So they now have to remove all their gear from their already established sleeping quarters in the shelter, pitch their tents, and then move all their gear into their tents. For all this disruption, neither Mr. OJ nor Ms. DD utters a word of thanks. They merely take up the two top double bunks above Hum and me. Unbelievable! As we will find out in the morning, Mr. OJ is not done with his obnoxious behavior.

Tillotson Camp to Spruce Ledge Camp – 8/11/11

Start Time: 6:15 AM, Tillotson Camp
End Time: 1:30 PM, Spruce Ledge Camp
Total Miles: 9.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1080' gain/2125' loss

Distances:

Tillotson Camp to Spruce Ledge Camp: 8.4 miles; 1080' gain/2125' loss
Spur to Belvidere Mt. Fire Tower & Return: 0.4 miles
Spur to Tillotson Camp: 0.2 miles
Spur to Spruce Ledge Camp: 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 32,034
Calories: 843
Steps/minute: 89
MPH: 2.53 (1.54 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 59 minutes, 39 seconds
Miles: 15.16 miles (9.2 actual miles)

We arise again at 5:00 AM and are extremely quiet in getting our breakfast and packing up, for Mr. OJ and family are still sound asleep in the upper bunks. This is usually the scene at the shelter in the early morning: we are getting ready to move out as others are still sleeping, we are quiet, no problem. But just as we are about to leave, at 6:15 AM, Mr. OJ appears outside and Hum relates the usual line that we hope we did not disturb them. This always bounces off normal hikers, but Mr. OJ says "most hikers take it outside". Right, we're going to take everything outside the shelter, where there is no picnic table to eat at or pack up on, and have breakfast and drag our gear all over the ground on the rocks and dirt. Certainly this is reasonable in Mr. OJ's opinion. What a complete and utter OJ! Unbelievable.

We pass a nice beaver dam, house, and pond early on and have a pretty easy climb to the Belvidere Mt. summit (3360', 3.0 miles), which is 0.2 miles off the LT on the Forester's Trail, and arrive there at about

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8:30 AM. There is a fire tower on the summit affording a beautiful 360° view, with Mt. Mansfield and Camel's Hump clearly in the view.

There is an old abandoned asbestos mine on Belvidere Mt., and a huge pile of asbestos dregs from the mine is prominent on the slope of the mountain. This aspect of Belvidere Mt. is of constant concern to the residents in the area, a fact that is often quoted in news stories in the Rutland Herald. There is a fierce wind that adds a bit of bitterness to the already cold morning air; a rain cloud is moving in quickly and it will soon rain. We call the girls but the cell service is not reliable and we are cut off after a bit and can't reconnect.



**Forester's Trail to Belvidere Mt. Summit; View from the Summit;
Belvidere Mt. Fire Tower; Radio & Baltimore Phil Enjoy the View from Top of Tower**

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After about 30 minutes on the summit we begin our descent. The Forester's Trail back down to the LT seems longer than on the way up, and we briefly think we may be off track: luckily we are not. It starts to rain on our way down Belvidere Mt. and we meet an 'older' woman day hiker making her way up to the fire tower; we chat for a bit and she inquires as to the view and weather on the summit. Talk about the pot calling the kettle black; I imagine that the 'older' woman day hiker wrote in her journal:

"Met two geezer hikers coming down from Belvidere Mt. summit; they reported great views from the top. Felt a bit sorry for them, so wrinkled and gnarled they were, hobbling along so slow, my they were old."

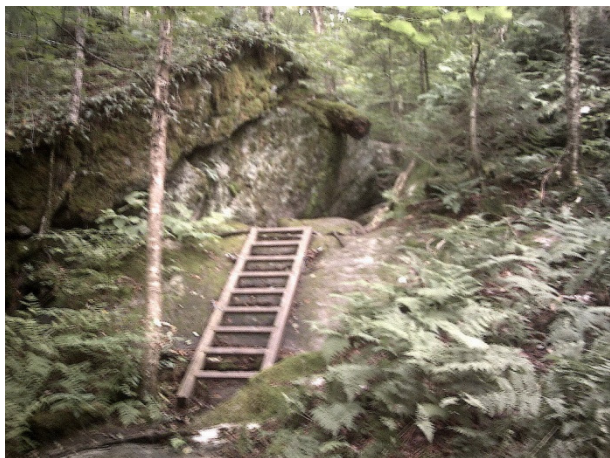
The bottom of Belvidere Mt. is very easy hiking: mostly on an old road; it's flat and fast all the way to VT Route 118 at Eden Crossing (1320', 5.4 miles). We recall an entry in the journal last night at Hazen's Notch Camp that humorously referred to Mt. Belvidere as "Mt. TRex" and its "reputation as the worst hike on the LT." Not to us: we agree that Doll Peak, Jay Peak, Haystack Mt., and Tillotson Peak are all much harder, all a 15 out of 10 in difficulty.

We meet a thru hiker (no trail name) as we cross VT Route 118, who advises us that Spruce Ledge Camp is a really nice shelter with a great view and a fine water source. Good news! He also advises us that there is another thru hiker taking a zero day at the camp.

As we hike past Route 118 toward Rittenhouse Lookout, we pass 3 women day hikers who look like they're out for a stroll in the park rather than taking a hike on the LT. They carry no backpacks and have no trail map, but say they're going to Devil's Gulch, a 2.6 mile hike from Route 118. They inquire as to where the trail went, and when we say it goes all the way to Massachusetts they look shocked! They inquire about the distance to Devil's Gulch and how we would suggest that they return to Route 118 after exploring Devil's Gulch? Hum checks his map, gives them the distance to Devil's Gulch, and advises them that they could return to Route 118 on the "Big Muddy Trail" rather than the LT, but he actually means the "Babcock Trail", which passes by "Big Muddy" Pond. As we pass them by, we wish them well and hope all will be OK for them, especially regarding the navigation.

Our next brief stop is Rittenhouse Lookout (1300', 7.1 miles), a rocky cliff that affords a nice view of Rittenhouse Pond and the valley to the south. After descending a long set of stone stairs down from the lookout, we meet a bearded thru hiker and chat a bit. He advises that Corliss Shelter is a "super shelter" and we should go there today if we can (not possible, too far). When I ask his trail name he says an unusual name: I hear "In and Out", Hum hears "On and Off". We ask him to repeat that a couple of times, but give up after not getting it. We later read his entries in trail journals that his trail name is "Annunak". Regarding the meaning and origin of his trail name, he says "it's a long story". We speculate from his looks and behavior that he is a modern day hippie: seeing his "Peace & Love" journal entries later on tends to prove us right. A search on-line gives no insight into what "Annunak" might actually mean.

Devil's Gulch (1260', 8.0 miles) has very interesting geology, with very high vertical walls on either side of the gulch and an amazingly challenging rock scramble up through the bottom. It is also somewhat dangerous as one can easily slip off some of the high boulders and fall a long way down onto more jagged rocks. Ominously, Hum's pack at this point is totally out of adjustment and, in spite of repeated urging on my part, he rather adamantly refuses to adjust it for now, but, fortunately, he gets it properly adjusted days later (but not now). His pack swings around wildly as he scales the big boulders, and this swinging weight on his back nearly catapults him off the top of several of the high boulders, very much like what happened when he scaled the Mt. Mansfield high cliffs two years ago with a much older (Civil War era :-)) pack that also swung around wildly.





**Devil's Gulch: Entrance; Rock Scramble; Natural Tunnel;
Negotiating the Rocks; High Steep Walls**

We arrive at Spruce Ledge Camp at 1:30 PM: again we're the first to arrive and are delighted with the facilities in the camp. It is a large, enclosed, shelter; there is a separate outside, covered, picnic table; and the awesome view from Devil's Perch Outlook encompasses Rittenhouse Pond, Belvidere Mountain, and the huge 'mini-mountain' of asbestos mine dregs. I quickly discover that Devil's Perch Outlook sits atop a dramatic vertical cliff, which surrounds 3 sides of the outlook. There is no protection and no warning signs, and the edge of the cliff is disguised, in fact, by weeds that an unaware person could inadvertently step on and fall off the cliff! It is dangerous I think and feel I need to warn others of that fact. So I warn Hum and everyone else as they arrive: "watch out for the hidden edge to the cliff on the lookout over there".



**Devil's Perch Outlook with Cliff on 3 Sides
Cliff Edge at Weeds Growing In Front of & Behind Bench
'Is There Rock Underneath the Dirt' We Wonder?**



**View From Devil's Perch Outlook:
Rittenhouse Pond Bottom Right; Belvidere Mt. & (White) Asbestos Dregs Pile on Horizon**

Before others arrive, two day hikers wander by. We chat awhile and one of them comments that "I've not been here since I was 8 years old." They head over toward the Devil's Perch Outlook (I warn them about the cliff) but then we never see them again. This is strange because there really is no way back to the LT where we won't see them pass by again. Where the day hikers disappeared to is a big mystery.

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Ms. DD and their 14-year-old daughter arrive at 3:00 PM, Rich, Jeff, and Matt arrive at 3:30 PM, but Mr. OJ and their 10-year-old daughter don't arrive until 5:30 PM. Given that long delay, Ms. DD gets worried so she and the older daughter go back in search of the other two. It seems that the 10-year-old had a lot of trouble getting over the rock scramble in Devil's Gulch. This is not at all surprising: some of the

boulders in Devil's Gulch are much bigger than she is, so she would have to be lifted and carried over them. Fortunately she makes it OK.



**Spruce Ledge Camp
Hum, with Food-Bag in Hand, Prepares to Open
“Chez Humberto Restaurant” at the Covered Picnic Table**

We visit with Ted (no trail name) who is the thru hiker taking a zero day; he has his tent pitched not far from the covered picnic table. He is from Poughkeepsie, NY, and is thru hiking the LT southbound and continuing on the AT into New York State. As I usually do, I inquire about how he likes his tent, how waterproof it is, etc. He gives a glowing recommendation for the [“Sierra Designs Clip Flashlight 2”](#), says it’s very lightweight (about 2.8 pounds) and completely waterproof, which is my primary requirement given the very bad experience I had with my badly leaking Wenzel tent on last year’s LT backpacking trip. (I subsequently buy the Sierra Designs tent and suggest that Lyn give it to me for Christmas :-)

We and our 3 hiking friends sit down for dinner at the covered picnic table. Mr. OJ is unwelcome and he knows it, besides, there is no room for 4 more at the picnic table so they eat at the table inside the shelter. Perhaps as a peace offering, Mr. OJ offers some soup with meat in it, and Matt takes him up on his offer. Mr. OJ says he’s a vegetarian and therefore doesn’t want the soup; quite why he brought the soup in the first place is a mystery. We hope that Ted joins us, but he doesn’t: strangely, he spends almost his whole time at Spruce Ledge Camp inside his very small tent, which couldn’t be all that comfortable; very odd.

Unity Man, Baltimore Phil, and Radio take up residence again in their tents, while Mr. OJ and family take the top bunks in the shelter. A bearded hiker, who sleeps only under a tarp, joins the Spruce Ledge Camp crowd as well.

Spruce Peak Camp to Corliss Camp – 8/12/11

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Start Time: 7:05 AM, Spruce Peak Camp

End Time: 12:30 PM, Corliss Camp

Total Miles: 6.8 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1600’ gain/1215’

Distances:

Spruce Ledge Camp to Corliss Camp: 6.6 miles; 1600’ gain/1215’ loss

Spur to Spruce Ledge Camp: 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 26,941
Calories: 708
Steps/minute: 97
MPH: 2.77 (1.48 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 35 minutes, 35 seconds
Miles: 12.75 miles (6.8 actual miles)

We're up at 5:30 AM, having overslept after tossing and turning all night. But after 4 days of practice, we're getting the knack of eating breakfast and packing up quickly and get off just a little after 7:00 AM, which is about our usual departure time. The bearded hiker who slept only under a tarp is off by 6:30 AM. He says it's a 'late start' for him and has 'no particular destination'; he speeds away, a fast hiker it appears.

Once again, the very first thing we face in the morning is an immediate steep climb, 700', up Bowen Mt. (2290', 2.6 miles), but after our bodies get 'warmed up', it's not all that bad compared to the horrendous climbs we conquered over the past 4 days. After Bowen we face an additional 500' climb to the summit of Butternut Mt, (2715', 5.6 miles). Hum scales these like a mountain goat and is feeling a lot more agile now after a tough first 2 days of hiking and dehydration.



Hum the Mountain Goat, Feeling a Lot More Agile & Energetic, Summits Bowen Mountain (2290') & Then Butternut Mountain (2715')

In between the two peaks I suddenly encounter a bear right on the LT; it's only about 20 feet in front of me when it finally hears me and runs madly into the bush, then stops, and does a low growl for quite some time. It is still growling by the time Hum catches up to me and Hum agrees that this is indeed a bear growl.

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Along the way we meet some other hikers. First we meet Justin (23, no trail name) from Colchester, VT, who is hiking from Johnson, Route 15, to Route 118, about 21 miles. Last night he was alone at Corliss Camp, says it's a really nice shelter and advises us that there is a good water source (a spring). I inquire about the damage to the Burlington bike path from the severe spring flooding of Lake Champlain. The bike path runs through Colchester and onto a multi-mile causeway into Lake Champlain; it's a great bike ride that I've done many times. Sadly, Justin reports that the flood destroyed the bike path and causeway, but it's gradually coming back to health.

Next we meet "Flyboy", who is thru hiking the LT, but needs to finish by Sunday. To us this seems almost impossible: 40+ miles of extremely tough hiking in less than 3 days? Whew! We tell him how hard we think the hiking is going north, "the hardest hiking on the LT" we tell him. He says the hiking going south over Laraway Mt. is easier. Flyboy works for IBM in Raleigh/Durham, NC, and holds a degree in Computer Science from Rochester Institute of Technology ("RIT", which he wears on his shirt). Hum, I believe, somehow mistakes "RIT" for "RPI" (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute), which Hum attended back in the 60's, and starts to tell Flyboy all about his experiences at RPI, Navy Scholarship, etc., the whole story. But Flyboy, given the distance he still needs to cover in way too little time to finish his hike, politely

excuses himself and moves on, quickly.

We make it to Corliss Camp (1600', 6.8 miles) by 12:30 PM, which is a good hour ahead of Hum's estimated arrival of 1:30 PM. Such inaccuracy is very unusual for 'Hum's Navigation Service', which is usually spot on with ETA's, but we probably erred by not correcting for Hum's extra energy and speed of late. A man and woman day hikers come by, hiking south, and we chat for a bit. They warn us of a big poison ivy patch that is overrunning the LT between the Lamoille River suspension bridge and Route 15: "wear long pants" they advise (we always do).

Corliss Camp is really nice; it has a large shelter with bunks for 8 and an upstairs 'attic' area that can sleep 8 or more. It has a nice porch area and both an inside table and an outside table. But in spite of all these pluses and contrary to Annunak's opinion we heard yesterday, we feel that Spruce Ledge Camp is just as nice as Corliss Camp, if not better, especially given the covered picnic table and great view off Devil's Perch Outlook.



Corliss Camp

We peruse the shelter journal as we always do, and find Annunak's entry:

*"8/10/11 Spent the night alone here – never slept so good! Picture perfect.
Peace and Holy Love!
Annunak"*

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Yes, we confirm, this bearded young man is a modern day flower child... I also note several entries from folks we met two years ago on our 2009 LT hike over Mt. Mansfield.

We met "Norway" on the way up Whiteface Mt.; he writes:

*"8/12/09 Spent the nite. Almost to Canada. Strange animal noise in the nite, about 10 PM and 4 AM, could be moose... spooky
-- Norway"*

We met "Downhill" at Taft Lodge on Mt. Mansfield; he writes:

"8/17/09 Downhill heading to Canada. 5 guys in the loft."

We met "Nips" and "Shoop", who are real characters and loads of fun, at Taylor Lodge on Mt. Mansfield; Nips writes:

*"8/16/09 Nips & Shoop here – in for the night. Had a fire all night while I waited for the boyfriend and some friends. So, so happy to see them, even though they didn't arrive until around 3 AM. Took a well-needed relaxing day, moving now to Spruce Ledge. Hope we get there before dark.
-- Nips"*

Nips Tips

- always give yourself one more day to rally your spirits – that might be all you need

- have sex in the woods at least twice”

Rich, Jeff, and Matt are next to arrive, and, given that the attic space is available for Mr. OJ and family, they decide there is room for everyone and take the upper bunks this night. As usual, the family of 4 arrives last and indeed the girls are happy, in fact excited, to take the attic area; this is probably something of an adventure for the girls I surmise. A young lady southbound hiker, “Tree Hugger”, arrives later yet and, given the full shelter, decides to set up her tent. We’ll see more of Tree Hugger on our hike tomorrow.

Hum and I and our 3 hiking companions have dinner at the inside table, while the family of 4 uses the picnic table just outside the shelter. Tonight Rich has some trouble getting his Coleman white-gas stove to work; it’s dated and maybe has a stoppage in one of the lines. He fiddles with it for quite some time, but can’t get it to work. His sons, however, carry a more up-to-date butane stove and that serves them all just fine.

After dinner Hum and I watch the 3 of them play their own unique card game they play every night. They teach us the rules and as always have great fun in a very spirited game that has lots of strategy. Rich is triumphant as the overall winner of the 5 days running competition; one can tell that this is a very competitive family and they poke constant fun and jabs at each other. They’re having enormous fun and enjoyment in their family. After the game we bid them all farewell: tomorrow Rich and Jeff will hike out the Davis Neighborhood Trail to Cross Road, where Rich’s wife will meet them, while Matt will continue on to thru hike the LT.

Since this is our last night out, I sum up our experience in our journal entry:

“8/12/11 Last night out for Geezer Hikers Ho (69) and Hum (71). 6 days hike from Journey’s End to Route 15. Some amazing, incredibly difficult hiking on these sections; we think hardest of whole LT with super rewards along the way (Jay Peak, Belvidere Mt. fire tower, Devil’s Gulch) + great company with Unity Man, Baltimore Phil, & Radio each night, same shelter. Fun times.

Ho & Hum signing off”

Corliss Camp to Route 15/Johnson – 8/13/11

Start Time: 6:00 AM, Corliss Camp
End Time: 3:45 PM, Route 15/Johnson
Total Miles: 11.4 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1990’ gain/3390’ loss

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Distances:

Corliss Camp to Roundtop Shelter: 8.1 miles; 1990’ gain/2240’ loss
Roundtop Shelter to Lamoille River: 2.9 miles; /1150’ loss
Lamoille River to Route 15 Parking Lot: 0.4 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 39,332
Calories: 1035
Steps/minute: 98
MPH: 2.81 (1.72 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 6 hours, 37 minutes, 37 seconds
Miles: 18.62 miles (11.4 actual miles)

We’re up at 5 AM, but this time Hum has to wake me. Neither of us wants to cook; I’m very tired of my ramen noodle breakfasts, they don’t taste good anymore, so I just have some nuts and a few cookies. We’re off at 6 AM and pack up outside on the picnic table so as to not disturb our 3 hiking buddies, who are still sound asleep in the upper bunks.

Once again, our very first hiking task of the day is a 900’, 3 mile climb to the summit of Laraway Mt. This has been the case almost every day: on day 1 (Northern Terminus of LT), day 2 (Jay Peak), day 4 (Belvidere Mt.), and day 5 (Bowen Mt.). It’s kind of hard to take every morning, but once your body warms up and gets into the zone, you can do your thing: climb! The trail is extremely steep for the first hour – at times straight up – but then becomes more gradual. We reach the summit of Laraway Mt. (2790’, 2.7 miles) by 8:30 AM, which is good time for us, and a short distance beyond the summit is an expansive ledge, Laraway Lookout, which affords some of the most spectacular views on the LT.



**Beautiful Sweeping View from Laraway Lookout
Note the Unusual “Double Hump” View of Mt. Mansfield on the Horizon**

The day is crystal clear, and there are sweeping panoramic views of the valley below, Mt. Mansfield, and the Green Mountains. The view of Mt. Mansfield is from a unique angle, where the mountain appears to have two equal humps.

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The descent off Laraway Mt. is very steep and rocky, and as always we take it very slow and careful: no room for any mistakes or dangerous falls. There is most interesting geology on this mountain: we pass by a huge cliff area, with giant rock walls that go on and on.





Interesting Geology Descending Laraway Mountain Giant Rock Walls Go On and On

After exiting the giant rock wall area, the trail becomes much easier, until we cross Coddington Hollow Road. Beyond Coddington Hollow Road we encounter a large marshy area where there are lots of ducks and many other birds. Ho and Hum try out their large repertoire of bird calls and get many different responses. It's very interesting! We're not sure what we said in duck-speak, but we certainly hope it's something nice.

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We meet John (60) and his bearded hiking companion (65) (no trail names), who are hiking from Smuggler's Notch to Coddington Hollow. Last night they stayed at Roundtop Shelter and had it all to themselves. They tell us the water source at the shelter is a 450' climb down a muddy slope, and that John slipped in the mud and got hurt. They also say there is "no other water" in this section.

That is a great warning for us to be extra vigilant for any possible water source and not long after meeting John we find a small water source and fill our water bottles. This is good because other than the water source at Roundtop Shelter, which John says is hard to access, there is no other water source today until we reach the Lamoille River at the end of our hike.

After hiking over 2 more, rather hard, 500+ foot 'hill' climbs, and crossing Plot Road in between hills, we reach Roundtop Shelter (1650', 8.1 miles) at around noon. Roundtop Shelter has a rather unique log construction, with a completely open front; there are no bunks, rather, there is a rather large open floor space with room for 10, according to the Long Trail Guide. There is a great view from the overlook behind the shelter, where there is also a bench to sit on and enjoy the view.

I call John Selmer, who I had arranged to pick us up at the Route 15 parking lot in Johnson, and tell him that I estimate we'll be there by 3:45 PM or so. It turns out to be an accurate prediction.

While we're having lunch at the picnic table, a woman day hiker from Hyde Park, VT, arrives with her son, 2 daughters, and dog. She is very chatty regarding all things hiking and is very interested in our hikes, both our current hike and all the others in the past. She has an extensive knowledge of the LT, and has done all the hikes in these northern sections many times.

Then Tree Hugger (Holly) arrives: she is the one we met briefly last evening at Corliss Camp, where she tented for the night. She is a young, rather cute, vet assistant from Massachusetts; she started 3 days ago (i.e., going twice as fast as us) to thru hike the LT in 16 days (very fast), and is headed to Bear Hollow Shelter tonight. Hum immediately goes into his full flirtation mode and pulls out all the stops: bragging about his hiking prowess and navigation skills; offering valuable tips from his extensive knowledge base; and showing his muscles and vast brain power. Tree Hugger stops for lunch and we move on, but we'll see her again later on at Prospect Rock and the Lamoille River suspension bridge.

Prospect Rock (1040', 10.0 miles) affords beautiful views of the Lamoille River Valley, especially on this

wonderfully clear sunny day.



Prospect Rock & Sweeping Views of Lamoille River Valley

We've been extremely lucky with weather on this hike; almost all the rain we've had has been at night, and almost every day has been sunny and crystal clear, allowing us to enjoy the many excellent views on this section of the LT. We meet a retired couple from Wallingford, VT, who are originally from Fairlawn, NJ, the next town over from Glen Rock, NJ, where Hum and I grew up. I call John Selmer again to confirm our 3:45 PM arrival time at the Route 15 parking lot.

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Tree Hugger arrives, enjoys the view from Prospect Rock, albeit briefly, and helps us locate the LT heading south, which we've been looking for over the past several minutes. Hum goes into his flirtation mode again and we hike and chat with her for a while until we stop for a water break and she goes on ahead. The hike down to the Lamoille River suspension bridge (500', 11.0 miles) is easy, although Hum is moving a little slower after the long and strenuous hike today.

Once again we meet Tree Hugger at the Lamoille River suspension bridge, where she is setting her camera to do a self portrait on the bridge. We offer to take her picture, and we do, and she kindly offers to snap our picture, and she does. Hum goes into flirtation mode again as he chats with her a bit beyond the bridge; I pass on the warning about the poison ivy beyond the suspension bridge, which we learned about yesterday from the day hikers we met at Corliss Camp.



Lamoille River Suspension Bridge Ho & Hum Complete 6-Day Backpacking Hike From Northern Terminus of the LT to Route 15/Johnson, VT

Tree Hugger passes us again and disappears as we stop briefly to examine an usual rock formation. A

fork in the trail is unmarked and we make the wrong choice, briefly going off the LT.

We arrive at the Route 15 parking lot at 3:45 PM, just as we had told John Selmer we would. John is there already, chatting with Tree Hugger, who has advised him that we are close behind her. We bid Tree Hugger farewell and depart in John's well worn Honda Accord stick shift, which he proudly tells us has 170,000 miles on it.

John is very chatty and entertains us with his stories all the way back to North Troy, about an hour's drive. He is a photographer, and has an absolutely top-of-the-line Nikon digital camera in the front seat; he says he's taken over 30,000 pictures with it. One of his most famous, he says, is a picture looking straight up a waterfall, which he had to walk to for a long way up the stream. He says he wants to publish a book of pictures of waterfalls, and knows of many 'secret' waterfalls that no one else knows about. He shows us one picture he took of a restaurant; the picture along with an advertisement for the restaurant is mounted on the side of a truck beside the road we are driving on. John says this is a way around Vermont's 'no billboards' law, since this is a privately owner truck and apparently this isn't illegal, at least not so far. John in the past was an avid hiker along with his beloved dog, but now his legs don't allow him to do any more serious hiking.

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John tells us his first wife "left me for another woman" after 20 years. When he met his second wife, who is from New Hampshire, he says that he knew within 5 minutes that he would marry her. On their first date to the movies, he proposed and John said "she thought I was crazy" but told her "to think about it; we'll eventually get married", and they did. They've been together for 30 years and are very happy.

Sam Leary is waiting for us at the door to the North Troy Inn, and the first thing she says is "you have a key for me?" I give her the wayward room key and she gives me back my car keys. Then she asks "how do you like my new haircut (she has gotten it cut shorter)?" I compliment her on that and again rave about our wonderful stay at the North Troy Inn; I tell her we'll recommend her place whenever we can. Hum gives John Selmer \$60 for the ride, including tip, after John asks for \$50, even though he had quoted me \$45 over the phone. All the same, we feel it's very reasonable and great service from John Selmer.

The ride down to Waterbury is very slow. It seems that there is an antique car show in Stowe this weekend; consequently Route 100 is one big jam and Stowe is mobbed. We see 100's of antique cars along the way; it is really a very big event!

We arrive at the Duxbury Road LT parking lot a little after 6:00 PM, after taking longer than expected to get there and Hum warns, several times, that "we missed it", but we hadn't. I hike the 3.2 miles to Jonesville in one hour, which is slower than I hoped. There are lots of up's and down's on the road, and one group even offers me a ride, which of course I refuse.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 7,136

Calories: 187

Steps/minute: 98

MPH: 3.34 (3.17 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 1 hours, 00 minutes, 33 seconds

Miles: 3.37 miles (3.2 actual miles)

We arrive back in North Clarendon by 8:45 PM, and we're so happy to kiss and hug out wives. They're surprised that we're so late; we had neglected to inform them about the extra road walk to Jonesville, which wasn't planned until after we started our hike 6 days ago.

Hum is famished so he has dinner immediately, before even taking off his dirty clothes: delicious BBQ pork sandwiches that Lyn has made. I instead shower, shave, change into clean clothes, have a couple of beers, and then have the delicious dinner Lyn has prepared. We all chat for quite a while about our great hike, and tell all the war stories contained herein.

We're all in bed by 11:00 PM. I have a great sleep after such a remarkable 6 days.

Summary statistics for the 6-day hike (not including 2 road walks):

Total Miles: 53.7 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 12,400' gain/13,990' loss

Total Steps: 207,188
Total Calories: 5449

Zero Days in North Clarendon – 8/14-15/2011

Sunday is a day of resting up and hanging around and enjoying the swimming pool. We also go shopping at EMS for AT maps, but postpone purchasing any until the following Saturday.

While we were hiking this week, Lyn and Pat visited the Poultney, VT Historical Society in East Poultney, where they were displaying the purple wedding dress of Lyn's great grandmother, Hattie Burdick Rogers. Lyn had years ago tried on this wedding gown, and it fit quite well. Lyn's father took movies of the event, but unfortunately the movies are double exposed. Lyn has an on-going communication with Andrea Mott, the director of the Poultney Historical Society, and Andrea advised Lyn that the dress would be displayed

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this week. Evidently people were waiting for Lyn's arrival at the historical society, having learned that she is the great granddaughter of Hattie Rogers.



**Lyn Standing beside Hattie Burdick Rogers' Purple Wedding Dress
at the Poultney, VT Historical Society
(Lyn Had Once Tried on this Dress; it Fit Perfectly)**

On Monday morning Pat takes a small single-prop plane on Cape Air from Rutland Regional Airport (in N. Clarendon, VT) to Boston's Logan Airport, where she will board another flight to return home to Timonium, MD. She asks for and gets to ride in the co-pilot seat of the single-prop plane, and expresses great excitement about that ride on her call to Hum from Logan Airport.

Later in the day on Monday Hum and I square away our equipment and get ready for next 4 days hike.

Bennington/Route 9 to Seth Warner Shelter – 8/16/11

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Bennington/Route 9
End Time: 1:45 PM, Seth Warner Shelter
Total Miles: 11.7 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2195' gain/1355' loss

Distances:

Bennington/Route 9 to Congdon Shelter: 4.3 miles; 965' gain/245' loss

Congdon Shelter to Seth Warner Shelter: 7.2 miles; 1230' gain/1110' loss

Spur to Seth Warner Shelter: 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 37,469

114

Calories: 993

Steps/minute: 99

MPH: 2.83 (1.82 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 6 hours, 18 minutes, 07 seconds

Miles: 17.88 miles (11.7 actual miles)

We're up at 4:30 AM. It is a rainy, dreary day and the forecast is for all-day rain, but given the great weather we had last week we can't complain too much. Lyn drives us to the Bennington/Route 9 LT parking lot and we're off by 6:45 AM. There's been a lot of rain yesterday and overnight – a deluge in this area -- and the river ("City Stream") just north of the parking lot is running ferociously: we hope there are no torrential rapids to cross going southbound. We bid Lyn goodbye and quickly don our ponchos, it's raining and will be doing so most of the day.



Ho & Hum Start 4-Day LT/AT Hike at Bennington/Route 9

Strangely enough, we are once again faced with a huge climb as our first challenge of the morning, a 1000' climb, up the so-called "thousand steps", to the summit of Harmon Hill. "Sunset" is also getting ready to hike south at the same time. He's from Sunset, SC, near Clemson University, and is quite a fascinating guy. He has hiked the "triple crown", that is, he hiked the AT (3 times, AT trail journal at <http://www.trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?trailname=1904>), the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT, trail journal at <http://www.trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=132490>), and the Continental Divide Trail (CDT, trail journal at <http://trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=219397>). He started his LT thru hike on July 13 and says his wife had to quit because of physical issues; yesterday he hiked 3 miles but quit the trail after a deluge hit the area. We chat on the way up the thousand steps but near the top Sunset excuses himself – today he is finishing the LT, almost 18 miles to go -- and leaves us in the dust hiking southbound at a very fast pace.

The "thousand steps" is an exceptionally long rock staircase; however, I didn't count the steps to check the accuracy. We reach the top of Harmon Hill (2325', 1.8 miles) just after 8:00 AM, where because of the dreary fog there is no view. At Congdon Shelter (2080', 4.3 miles) we find a teenage boy, "Speedy", who has taken over the entire shelter with tarps draped in front to prevent the heavy rain from pouring into the shelter. He says he's waiting for the rain to stop and gives Hum a message to deliver to his mother ("going to town"), who Speedy says is somewhere further south.

With the heavy rain continually pounding us, we're completely soaked and dirty; the LT is like a river and mud is everywhere. It's really cold and we have 'mud feet' through and through.

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It's a Rainy/Foggy/Muddy/Dreary Day

A little after 11 AM we reach the summit of Consultation Peak (2810', 7.3 miles), and there we meet Speedy's mother, "Lion Queen", and his younger brother. She had stopped and tented there yesterday after the torrential rain set in, but she managed to keep a fire going in spite of the weather. Everything is wet, she says, and wished that Speedy "could help carry the wet stuff down"; quite how he could do that is far from clear. After Consultation Peak we meet a hiker with a pacemaker, who advises us that he left Seth Warner shelter about 4 hours earlier: we make the shelter about one hour faster than Pacemaker's time.

We arrive at Seth Warner shelter (2200', 11.7 miles) at about 1:45 PM; we've made excellent time and averaged almost 2 miles per hour, very fast for Ho & Hum. This is a minimal shelter facility: there is no table or mouse hooks, but there is one very surprising, totally unusual and unexpected item right there in the shelter: a full, unopened bottle of "Bacardi 151" Rum, trail magic left there by some fabulous trail angel named "Spearman". Resourceful Hum gins up a mouse hook using his own rope and the plastic cup left with the Bacardi 151 Rum; very clever.

We are not about to consume any Bacardi 151 rum, at least not yet. But soon a trio of southbound AT thru hikers arrives: Bullwinkle, Japhy, and Avalanche. We suggest that we have no interest in the 151 rum so they are welcome to it, and they immediately, happily, agree. Bullwinkle is just out of high school, not 21 yet, but says – after a joking comment from Hum that he's 'too young to drink' – that he's 'old enough to die for my country' and therefore old enough to drink the Bacardi 151. Japhy, from Atlanta, who seems like the natural leader of the trio, says that after their dinner break the group should continue on a night hike to the summit of Mt. Greylock and consume the Bacardi 151 there. All seem to agree with the plan. While they eat, Hum engages them in a discussion of scouting, after Japhy mentions that he is an Eagle Scout (and so is Avalanche).

While we chat with the trio of hikers, a father and his son Alex (15), from Philadelphia, arrive going northbound. Regarding Japhy's plan to hike at night, the father warns the trio about a long and difficult rock scramble that would be dangerous to negotiate in the dark. This does not phase the threesome, who depart south according to the plan. As they depart, Avalanche hands Bullwinkle the bottle of Bacardi 151 for him to carry.



Seth Warner Shelter; Bottle of Bacardi 151 Rum Left by Trail Angel Named "Spearman"



**Resourceful Hum Fashions a Clever Mouse Hook
Using his Rope & the Bacardi 151 Plastic Cup**

In the next 2 days we'll piece together from journal entries the saga of their night hiking and consumption of the Bacardi 151 Rum:

It seems that the trio split up, presumably after consuming most of the bottle of Bacardi 151 in the vicinity of Wilbur's Clearing Shelter (we found about 1/3 of the bottle left for others to consume near Wilbur's Clearing Shelter). Wilbur's Clearing Shelter is another 9.6 miles from the Seth Warner Shelter. An entry from Japhy at the Wilbur's Clearing Shelter suggests he tented this night near the shelter:

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*"8/17 Stayed at the clearing just North of here last night after a late-start 21 mile day out of Bennington. Night-hiking + Bacardi 151 + Greylock = fun? Dalton today!
Japhy SOBO '11"*

However, an entry from Avalanche at Mark Noepel Shelter suggests that he made it all the way to the summit of Mt. Greylock this same night (a hike of 12.7 miles from Seth Warner Shelter) and slept on the couch at Bascom Lodge on the summit:

*"8/18 Very lazy day after drunk night hiking. The summit is great, the couch in the lodge is too!
Avalanche SOBO '11"*

There are no entries from Bullwinkle so his whereabouts on this drunken night are a mystery.

There is an Appalachian Mountain Club map of the AT section through Massachusetts that someone has left in the shelter. Since we have no detailed map of the Massachusetts AT, we are tempted to just acquire the map, but resist that rather dark temptation. Rather, I photograph the section we are about to do over Mt. Greylock, and these photos serve us well for the next 3 days of navigation. Hum is at a complete loss having no maps to do his very frequent, and somewhat compulsive, 'map check' anytime we stop.

The father and son Alex are a bit agitated that the bear box near the shelter is actually locked and a note on the box says it is locked because hikers have been using it to discard trash. A number of entries in the shelter's trail journal purport to give the combination to the lock on the box, but none seems to work. Father and son decide to pitch their tent rather than sleep in the shelter after learning that Hum snores and also because of a concern, the father says, about bugs in the shelter. But at about 9 PM, the father comes crashing loudly back into the shelter, disrupting everything, and his son joins him in the shelter a little later. Father says he got claustrophobic in the tent, but this sounds strange because they are presumably experienced hikers who have tented before. Furthermore, the father is an extremely restless sleeper, constantly tossing and turning all night, very noisy. His frequent turning on his headlamp is also disruptive. Not a great night's sleep this night.

Seth Warner Shelter to Wilbur's Clearing Shelter – 8/17/11

Start Time: 6:30 AM, Seth Warner Shelter
End Time: 2:00 PM, Wilbur's Clearing Shelter
Total Miles: 10.3 miles

Distances:

Seth Warner Shelter to MA-VT State Line: 2.8 miles; 130' gain
MA-VT State Line to MA2 North Adams, MA: 3.8 miles; 1670' loss
MA2 North Adams, MA to Wilbur's Clearing Shelter: 3.0 miles
Spur to Seth Warner Shelter: 0.2 miles
Spur to Wilbur's Clearing Shelter: 0.3 miles
Spur to Sherman Brook Campsite & Return: 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 36,998
Calories: 972
Steps/minute: 97
MPH: 2.76 (1.62 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 6 hours, 19 minutes, 53 seconds
Miles: 17.49 miles (10.3 actual miles)

We're up at 5:15 AM, first light. Father and son are totally in the way – they are sleeping in the middle of the shelter and we have to step over them many times to gather all our stuff and pack up. We skip making coffee to speed things up; just eat a cupcake and are off by 6:30 AM. Hum is rather slow this morning; says his legs are not good – "normal for my legs" he says – as opposed to yesterday's burst of energy and record speed of almost 2 miles per hour.

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We reach the Vermont-Massachusetts border (2330', 3.0 miles) at a little after 8:00 AM. I am ecstatic and triumphant, because this crossing now completes all sections of his LT hike over the past 3 years. Ho &

Hum exchange high 5's and Hum snaps a few pictures of me raising my hiking poles in triumph beside the sign:

“WELCOME TO VERMONT
THE LONG TRAIL
A FOOTPATH IN THE WILDERNESS”



Triumphant Ho Ecstatic Upon Completing the Long Trail End-to-End After 3 Years of Section Hiking

A bit further on we reach “Eph’s Lookout” (2330’, 3.8 miles), but there is nothing to see, the view is blocked by trees.

I reach the Pine Cobble trailhead (2010’, 4.2 miles) a few minutes ahead of Hum and find 2 or 3 woman hikers either camping there or perhaps resting. One lady seems to reposition herself behind a bush so that she is out of my view; I’m not sure whether this is intentional (hiding) or happenstance, but she quickly emerges from behind the bush perhaps after realizing that I have already seen her. I surmise that perhaps she was hiding because there now commences a strange conversation. I’m interested in finding out about Wilbur’s Clearing Shelter, and especially about the availability of water at the shelter. So I first ask about her route to figure out if she passed the shelter; i.e., whether she was following the AT or Pine Cobble trail, but she responds vaguely “do you want directions”, and doesn’t really answer the question. I get the impression that she doesn’t want to reveal her route; quite why, who knows. But I persist and tell her that I’m interested in the availability of water at Wilbur’s Clearing Shelter, but again she doesn’t tell me whether or not she was at the shelter but again deflects the question and says “these are very popular with hikers.” What she meant by that, again who knows, so I then give up on this inquiry, shrug my shoulders, and say “OK, never mind”. Very strange.

A bit later we negotiate the rock slide that the father from Philadelphia had warned the Bacardi 151 crew to not try to negotiate in the dark; he was right, it is very rough going, and one has to be very careful to skip from rock to rock and not to twist ankles, even in broad daylight.

Hum’s backpack fails after the Velcro on his pack height adjustment pulls off completely. We stop at Sherman Brook Primitive Campsite (1300’, 5.5 miles) for a repair, where Hum ties the height adjustment with rope and that resolves the problem. Hum is great with creative field repairs.



Hum Negotiates Rock Slide, Using Caution Not to Twist Ankles or Fall off Rocks

We reach North Adams, MA (600', 7.2 miles) around noon; it is hot but a beautiful clear day. The hike through North Adams is interesting; at one point the AT actually follows a private home owner's driveway onto the city streets. Mt. Greylock looms very prominently to the south: it looks massive and high. We actually miss one turn on the North Adams street walk, but pick up the white AT blazes again a little further on where the (wrong) road dead-ends. Problem is that we get going the wrong way on the AT, i.e., north, but soon realize our mistake when the trail goes downhill rather than going uphill, since we are now climbing Mt. Greylock. We are sorry to lose some ground, that's always a bummer when you have to re-climb a section.



Following the AT through North Adams, MA; Mt. Greylock Looms in the Background

Mt. Greylock is actually a 15-mile long conglomerate of a number of other smaller mountains; the first one we scale is Mt. Prospect, a full 2000' climb from North Adams. The trail is extremely steep much of the way; it goes on and on and on and is extremely tiring. At one point we encounter an AMC trail 120

maintenance crew who are rerouting the AT to a less steep but longer route "to make it easier" they say. They tell me "you are the last person to follow the old trail" because soon afterward they close that section for good and enable the reroute. To Hum and me this seems a bit futile given the extremely steep climb most of the way up Mt. Prospect.

At last we reach the summit of Mt. Prospect (2500', 9.5 miles) where we get a sweeping view of the valley

below and Taconic mountains in the distance to the west.



Sweeping View from Mt. Prospect; Taconic Mountains in the Distance to the West

We reach Wilbur's Clearing Shelter at 2:00 PM (2300', 10.3 miles), exactly on Hum's projected arrival time. Along the way Hum asks me to check the pictures of the AMC map of the MA AT; this in part feeds his obsession to "check the map" and, along with other data he collects (e.g., signs), Hum is able to make his very accurate ETA predictions.

On the 0.3 mile spur to Wilbur's Clearing Shelter we find, to our great surprise, the bottle of Bacardi 151 rum, now 1/3 full. The trio of southbound thru hikers (Bullwinkle, Japhy, and Avalanche) we met at Seth Warner Shelter did not consume the entire bottle of Bacardi 151 but rather left it as a Trail Magic kindness or perhaps wanted to avoid carrying out the empty bottle, or, most likely, for both reasons. Anyway, this find is very timely, because I especially am in a celebrating mood, just having completed the LT end-to-end this very morning.

Before dinner we each consume several swigs of the Bacardi 151 and toast Ho's completion of the LT; the rum definitely gives a hot burning feeling going down but we both agree it is actually pretty tasty and gives a nice buzz. We don't finish it up, however, but leave a few shots for the next lucky hikers.

We are the only ones in the shelter tonight, although there are about 12 young (< 20 years old) volunteers camped nearby, who are maintaining the AT over a 3-week period. We again meet the guy and girl who we met earlier on the Mt. Prospect upslope (who were rerouting the AT). Actually they pass by the shelter on their way to get water and we chat a bit. The guy is the group leader and says volunteers get paid \$600 for the 3 weeks of work; the rest of the cost is covered by donations. One rather cute female volunteer catches Hum's eye on her way to get water, whereupon Hum prepares a flirtation plan to impress her on her return with his hiking expertise and muscle flexing, although he worries that his grubby Grandpa appearance may not make a great impression. In any case, his plan is thwarted when she returns to the tenting among a whole group of volunteers.

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A northbound thru hiker arrives at about 8 PM, but decides to tent behind the shelter. He is very quiet and says he is behind schedule because he got hurt and that slowed him down. On the other hand, the young volunteers in the tenting area get very noisy until about 8:30 PM or so; we suspect underage drinking.

Ho makes this day's entry in the journal:

*"8/17 Weary geezers Ho & Hum happy to reach shelter & rest after 7 hrs. trek from Seth Warner + arduous 2000' climb up Mt. Prospect. Ho completed LT this AM after 3 yrs. Section hiking. Will celebrate with shot of 151 tonight. Greylock our last summit tomorrow to wrap up our 10-day LT/AT fun hike.
Enjoy, Ho & Hum"*



Bacardi 151 Rum on Spur Trail to Wilbur's Clearing Shelter



Wilbur's Clearing Shelter

Wilbur's Clearing Shelter to Mark Noepel Shelter – 8/18/11

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Wilbur's Clearing Shelter

End Time: 12:15 PM, Mark Noepel Shelter

Total Miles: 6.9 miles

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Distances:

Wilbur's Clearing Shelter to Mark-Noepel Shelter = 6.6 miles

Spur to Wilbur's Clearing Shelter: 0.3 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 24,966

Calories: 657

Steps/minute: 90

MPH: 2.58 (1.51 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 34 minutes, 39 seconds

Miles: 11.82 miles (6.9 actual miles)

We're up at 6 AM after a good night's sleep, and off by 7 AM. We reach the summit of Mt. Williams (2951', 0.8 miles) at about 8:00 AM after a 650' climb, but the climb doesn't seem so arduous. There is a limited view; it's a bit hazy this morning. We momentarily lose the AT shortly beyond the summit, but after running into a sheer cliff we realize our mistake and quickly find the AT again. At the summit, the AT

makes a sharp right turn to follow the long ridge toward Mt. Greylock.

There is a rather long ridge hike to the summit of Mt. Greylock (3491', 3.4 miles), but the 500' additional climb to the summit is not too bad either; it didn't really feel like 500'. The final push is up the Thunderbolt Ski Trail, and we make it to the top by 9:30 AM.



Hum Makes Final Push to Mt. Greylock Summit; Mt. Greylock Summit Observation Tower

The first buildings we see on the summit are the impressive 92' tall summit observation tower and the rather large Thunderbolt Ski Trail warming hut (the hut can only be used by hikers in emergencies). There is a plaque on the front of the warming hut that reveals the story of the Thunderbolt Ski Trail:

"In the 1930s, skiing meant trudging uphill for two hours carrying equipment, all for the thrill of a two minute run. Still, the new sport quickly gained popularity, and in 1932, after studying all the hills in the area, local skiers chose this spot

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for an expert ski trail. Thirty men from the Civilian Conservation Corps, armed with 300 pounds of dynamite, cleared the trail and built this warming hut in 1934.

The trail's maximum gradient is 35 degrees, with a vertical descent of 2,175 feet. The course winds across three bridges, many bumps and turns, and the harrowing "Needle's Eye." Orin McCarty of the Mt. Greylock Ski Club chose the name "Thunderbolt" because the thrill of the ride reminded him of another – the Thunderbolt roller coaster at Boston's Revere Beach."



Thunderbolt Ski Trail Warming Hut

There are impressive views from the top of the observation tower, even though it is rather hazy this morning. In view are the Hudson River Valley, the Berkshires, the Taconics, the Catskills, the Adirondacks, and the Green Mountains. There is a spotlight at the top of the tower that can be seen for 70 miles. There is a memorial to Massachusetts war dead at the base of the tower.



Bascom Lodge from the Top of the Mt. Greylock Summit Tower

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Outside we tower we chat with another hiker on a 2-day jaunt, who says he tried to find Bellows Pipe Shelter last night in the dark, but couldn't (the shelter is just south of the Mt. Greylock summit on the Bellows Pipe trail). So he tented instead. He advises us that the current weather forecast is for rain both this afternoon and tomorrow; fortunately, the forecast turns out to be wrong.

Next we visit Bascom Lodge, an impressive building with impressive stonework, sweeping views of its own, a porch picnic area, and large fireplaces in the lobby and dining room. It was also built by the CCC and is open to hikers, skiers, and sunset-seekers, and accommodates 34 overnight guests. We ask the proprietor about the Overlook Trail, but, strangely, he says the trail has no views; it is just up and down so we decide to skip it and move on. He also has no knowledge of the Mark Noepel Shelter and advises us to call the park service for info.

I call Lyn and suggest that she leaves for Cheshire, MA tomorrow morning at 8:30 AM. I also give her some detailed directions regarding the AT crossing on Route 8 in Cheshire, MA, where we will meet her.

On our way south once again, we meet 2 groups of northbound thru hikers but no one has knowledge regarding Mark Noepel water availability. We also encounter several day hikers, all of them coming in on Jones Nose Trail, which doesn't pass the shelter. We arrive at Mark Noepel Shelter at 12.15 PM in time to have our lunch; no other hikers are there yet, it is too early for that. We have a good, relaxed lunch; it is a nice roomy shelter with a loft, bunks, and picnic table. Hum takes the opportunity to enjoy a little nap time.



Mark Noepel Shelter; Roomy with a Loft for Additional Hikers

A father and his 15 year old daughter Valerie (trail name "Little Kitten") arrive and take up residence in the loft. They are from Ann Arbor, Michigan and are hiking from Dalton to North Adams, MA. They are meeting their wife/mother tomorrow for lunch at Bascom Lodge. These two are very quiet, however, and don't engage in much conversation, which is quite atypical for hikers in our experience.

Two brothers tent nearby the shelter; they are northbound AT thru hikers from near Tallahassee, FL. Brother #2 joined the hike after the buddy of brother #1 quit somewhere in PA. Brother #1 uses a hammock, and says he can hang it between poles or in a shelter. He also says he met "Cimarron", an 88 year old thru hiker. Cimarron has hiked the AT several times, and in 2011 tried to set the record as the oldest AT thru hiker; he didn't make it, but hiked over 1100 miles on the trail. His 2006 trail journal is at <http://www.trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?trailname=11864>, and the first entry says the following:

"Hi...I'm CIMARRON 83yr old pushing what comes after that. I started the AT in 03 and finish it in 04. They say I am the oldest guy to do it in 2 yrs and the second oldest to do the trail. I plan on doing it in one year. Wish me good luck and I pray I stay healthy this time. Will start at Springer on Mar 5/6 and leave the trail on Mar 19 and return on Mar 27 at Franklin. Please go by me slowly."

He didn't finish the whole AT in 2006, or on retries in 2007 and 2011, but this guy is to be greatly admired for his courage and stamina, especially at an advanced age (his 2011 trail journal is at

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<http://www.trailjournals.com/entry.cfm?id=337584>). I guess Ho & Hum have a ways to go to set any records as oldest geezer hikers out there.

A retired couple who are southbound AT thru hikers arrive at about 7 PM. They started their hike in June and hope to finish before Thanksgiving. They also tent nearby.

We note a couple of entries in the shelter journal, one of them from "Cool Shoes" (Sharon Malone), who we met at Goddard Shelter on the LT/AT in 2010:

*"7/11 Sharon Malone trail name Cool Shoes headed to NYC. The Williamstown Motel is a great place to stay. If you call them they will pick you up and bring you back to the trail.
Cool Shoes"*

There is also an entry from "LadyPants", a lone woman thru hiker that I met on Killington Mountain a couple of weeks earlier:

"7/28 In for water then north, north, north! Molehill & Stinkbug – can't wait to see you guys again soon!"

Hum makes our final journal entry for this year:

*"8/18/11 Geezer hikers Ho (69) & Hum (71) are here for our last night on the trail this year. We have hiked 80+ miles in two sections – the AT here and the northern LT in Vermont in ten days. Met lots of thru hikers on both trails and had a great time. Only one morning of bad weather. We're off to 100 miles of the AT in NC next year. Take care and best of luck to all hikers in meeting their goals.
Ho & Hum"*

We fill up our water bottles before sack time to save time in the morning. Father and daughter retire in the loft quite early, about 7:30 PM. Hum and I talk quietly, trying not to disturb them. It is a colorful sunset tonight; I snap a few pictures. We retire a little after 8 PM, after the sun has nearly set. All is quiet, except for occasional snoring sounds from Hum's side of the shelter.

Mark Noepel Shelter to MA8 Cheshire, MA – 8/19/11

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Mark Noepel Shelter
End Time: 9:15 AM, MA8 Cheshire, MA
Total Miles: 4.4 miles

Distances:

Mark Noepel Shelter to MA8 Cheshire, MA = 4.4 miles
Lyn picks us up at MA8 and 9, Dalton, MA and drives back to North Clarendon

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 17,027
Calories: 448
Steps/minute: 88
MPH: 2.51 (1.37 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 3 hours, 12 minutes, 10 seconds
Miles: 8.06 miles (4.4 actual miles)

We're up at 5:30 AM and off by 6:45 AM. It's all downhill this morning except for a brief climb out of Mark Noepel Shelter. The morning mist creates an eerie foggy scene as we cut through it on our descent. We reach Reynolds Rock, a Hoodoo-like rock outcrop (perhaps 25' high) jutting up mysteriously out of a farm meadow area. We spend time climbing to the top and snapping a few pictures to record our conquest.

We meet one northbound hiker in the farm meadow shortly after Reynolds Rock, and after exiting the meadow there is a steep descent down to Route 8 in Cheshire, MA; we arrive there at 9:15 AM. We call Lyn, but she is not yet past the VT-MA line.



Conquering Reynolds Rock

In the meantime, while we are waiting for Lyn to arrive, Hum gives me the titanium hiking poles he has loaned me to try out on this second week of hiking; I have just loved using them and this is a great gift: THANK YOU HUM!!

The retired couple we met at Mark Noepel Shelter last night also pass by. We chat briefly but they are in a hurry to get to the Cheshire Post Office to claim their resupply package. They briefly lose the AT on the other side of Route 8, but with Hum's expert navigation assistance they are soon back on their way.

Lyn takes a bit longer than expected to arrive and finally gets to MA8/Cheshire at about 10:30 AM, after, we learn, she takes a wrong turn on MA Route 2 and goes about 10 miles west before turning around. As usual, Lyn takes great care of her hikers and gives us cold sodas and washcloths to get some of the dirt off. Lyn snaps some pictures by the hiker sign to document the completion of our 2011 LT/AT hike.

We get back home at 12:30 PM, where Lyn has put up a "Congratulations" sign to commemorate my completion of the LT. We enjoy swimming in the afternoon and "Chicken Weinerschnitzel" for dinner, which Hum is ecstatic about in recalling that this is his favorite in Austria. At cocktail time, when Hum and I enjoy our long awaited manhattans, we celebrate with champagne that Lyn has also provided to toast the occasion. What a sweetie!

Epilogue – 8/20/2011 – 8/21/2011

Summary statistics for the 4-day hike:

Total Miles: 33.3 miles

Total Steps: 116,460

Total Calories: 3070

Summary statistics for the 6-day hike (not including 2 road walks) and 4-day hike:

Total Miles: 87.0 miles

Total Steps: 323,648

Total Calories: 8519



**Ho & Hum Complete 2011 LT/AT Hike at MA 8, Cheshire, MA
Ho is Triumphant in Front of Congratulations Sign Provided by Lyn**

On Saturday morning we enjoy the Rutland Farmer's Market in downtown Rutland, VT. In the afternoon, we once again visit EMS where Hum purchases the North Carolina/Tennessee AT maps and also the southern Virginia AT maps. These will be essential for planning our 2012 and beyond hikes on the AT. In the evening Hum treats us to a delicious dinner at the Trak-In in Castleton, VT, where we also enjoy the company of Lyn's cousins Jolly and Roz Rogers, who own the Trak-In and who know just about everyone in Vermont and what they're up to lately.

On Sunday morning we reminisce about the third year of Ho and Hum's backpacking adventures on the LT/AT. For the "geezer hikers" it was a great success: 54 miles over 6 days from the Vermont-Canada border hiking south, climbing 7 mountains, including Jay Peak, for a cumulative elevation gain of over 12,000', over some of the most rugged, straight-up terrain on the LT. Then 33 miles over 4 days, hiking south from Bennington, VT, to complete the LT, and into Massachusetts on the AT over the enormous, 15-mile long Mt. Greylock.

This completes my 3-year quest to hike the entire 273-mile LT and receive the Green Mountain Club's 'end-to-end patch' and certificate. I reflect on what 3 years of backpacking the LT has meant and what lasting impressions it would leave. Surely this was an outstanding life experience. To me the LT had met and far surpassed all expectations. We were enchanted by this 'footpath in the wilderness', which brings Vermont's great beauty into perfect harmony with nature. We were awed by its stunning beauty, which in fact had great power – hypnotic power – that I could see again and again and not tire of its impact. The LT is where we had challenged great dangers – ventured into the true wilderness – and had been frightened by the unknowns and unexpecteds and the enormous physical and mental challenges. In conquering these wilderness adventures and challenges our spirits were lifted to heights not felt before, but in looking back can somehow be felt again. We relish our backpacking trips together, the brotherly banter, and the company of the diverse, interesting, and friendly people we meet along the way. To us, communing with this 'trail family' is the best part of the whole experience. This 3-year quest to conquer the LT was a milepost in destiny, one that marked a later passage, and now in all its splendor the milepost had been passed.

We plan yet another Ho-Hum backpacking adventure in August 2012; this time we're planning to hike about 125 miles on the AT in Tennessee/North Carolina, from Erwin, TN to Damascus, VA.

After breakfast we give Hum a big hug goodbye and bid our brother farewell. Our wonderful saga has ended but we take away the unbelievable Ho-Hum memories of this astonishing adventure.

4. **May 21 – 23, 2012**
Delaware Water Gap, Pennsylvania to Little Gap, Pennsylvania

Prologue – 5/20/12

Geezer hikers Ho & Hum engage on 2 Appalachian Trail (AT) hikes this year, after my completing the VT Long Trail (LT) in 2011. The first hike is a 30 mile, 3 day backpack on the Pennsylvania AT and the second hike is a 125-mile, 15-day hike on the Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia AT.

In the spring and early summer, we both do a number of training hikes. Hum has gotten religion in completing all of the PA AT and now has set his sights on completing the entire AT. As such, he does extensive training on numerous day hikes and gets in great shape for our forthcoming AT hikes together in PA, TN, NC, and VA. I do 73+ miles in 10 training hikes in Vermont, carrying about 25-30 pounds (I wrote a separate journal on these training hikes). Hum plans the 3-day PA hike and I scope out the entire TN/NC/VA hike including hostiles, zero days, moving 2 cars around, etc.

On May 20, 2012, Lyn and I drive our RV to Hum and Pat's Pocono Mountain's home in Pocono Pines, PA: we are en route to an RV vacation with daughter Deb and family (Bill and Jessica and Lauren) in Parsons, WV and then onto Palm Coast, FL to close on our new FL home in Palm Coast. We arrive at Pocono Pines in mid-afternoon and park our RV in the lot by the tennis courts (Hum has arranged that in advance). Hum and I spend much of the afternoon preparing for our hike the next day. As always we have a great visit with Hum and Pat including a delicious manhattan, compliments of Hum.

Delaware Water Gap to Kirkridge Shelter – 5/21/12

Start Time: 10:15 AM, Delaware Water Gap Trailhead

End Time: 2:00 PM, Kirkridge Shelter

Total Miles: 6.4 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss:

Distances:

Delaware Water Gap, PA to Kirkridge Shelter, PA = 6.4 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Not recorded; pedometer not working

We miss the turn to the town of Delaware Water Gap (DWG), so we proceed over the bridge and stop at the DWG Visitor Center to get directions. It is closed so we have to turn back and find DWG town and AT parking lot after several more wrong turns.

After photos, Hum and I venture forth on the AT but immediately are in doubt that we have proceeded in the correct direction (south) on the AT. At this point the AT takes wide circuitous turns in the vicinity of the DWG so it's not so easy to verify the correct direction. Because the AT goes every which way, reading a compass doesn't help either. In addition, since the trail is relatively flat for some distance at this point, we can't verify that we are headed up the Blue/Kittatinny Mountains as we should be.

But eventually we do in fact see clearly that our climb up the PA Blue/Kittatinny Mountains had commenced and thankfully we verify that we were headed in the right direction on the AT after all.



**Ho & Hum (Left) at Start of Pennsylvania AT Hike
Delaware Water Gap, PA**

It seems like a harder climb than expected up Mt. Minsi (1461') in the Blue/Kittatinny Mountain range. I'm not in great shape although several recent training hikes in Vermont should have prepared me well. Hum is in much better shape having done extensive training hikes on the PA AT. But after much huffing and puffing and several rests we finally reach the summit. There is a morning fog and a light rain so our views are very limited.



**Foggy Day in the Blue/Kittatinny Mountains (Left);
Nice Tent Site Overlooking Farm Below (Right)**

Along the route to Kirkridge shelter we meet 3 northbound hikers; we ask the last NOBO hiker – who has a Swiss accent – how far it is to Kirkridge shelter. The answer, “20 minutes”, is the answer almost invariably given to any such “how far” question, no matter how far or how long the remaining hike actually is. Hum and I have found this out after rather extensive testing of this question at various times, on various trails, with many different hikers.

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In this same area we pass a nice tent site overlooking a beautiful farm at the base of the Blue/Kittatinny Mountains (see picture above). This tent site is about 15-20 minutes from Kirkridge shelter.

En route to the shelter I begin to have a serious problem with my hiking boots. The right side wall of the

left boot has broken through, as a result of the intense pressure exerted by my very wide feet on the sides of all my shoes, not just these boots. This boot failure, however, needs to be addressed immediately; hiking in broken boots is not only ill advised, it is essentially impossible. I anticipated such an event, having brought back-up (work) shoes that I used extensively in hiking with Bill Roach over many years in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. The problem, however, is how to get the replacement shoes delivered to the trail: they are in Lyn's car back at Pocono Pines.

We arrive at Kirkridge Shelter at around 2:00 PM and are greeted by 2 other elderly hikers: a 78-year-old man with trail name "Scout 78" and an unmarried lady, probably in her 60's, with trail name "Distracted by Rocks" (DBR). DBR immediately greets us with 'glad to see other elderly hikers on the trail'.



Kirkridge Shelter

DBR is a very chatty person who took her unusual trail name because she is a sculptor by trade. Scout 78's wife has recently died of cancer; he and DBR became friends and are planning to hike the entire AT together by doing one hike per month. So far they have hiked 125 miles; on this hike they are doing the same 35-miles that we plan to do in 3 days – from Lehigh Gap to Delaware Water Gap -- in 6 days. Scout 78 had quadruple bypass surgery and as such is a particularly slow hiker who stops frequently for long rests. They tell us about hiking over Wolf Rocks, describing it as really difficult and as an optional side trail (tomorrow we find Wolf Rocks not particularly difficult nor optional; it is right on the AT). Scout 78 and DBR prefer to tent at night rather than stay in shelters so we tell them about the nice tent site we passed about 15-20 minutes further north. They soon head north, presumably to stop and stay at the tent site, but before leaving, chatty DBR engages me in a rather deep discussion and even asks about my beliefs on what happens beyond death.

Dave from Iowa arrives next. He worked in the Iraq security force as a contractor and enlightens us about how the US has not really 'pulled out' of Iraq; he says that extensive security forces remain in Iraq as contractors, at enormous expense to US taxpayers. Dave is an interesting guy who is doing about 700 miles of the AT: from southwest Virginia to Bennington/Route 9 in Vermont. He also did about 700 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail, and only quit when he ran into snow too deep to navigate. Dave uses a

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hammock for sleeping and only stays in shelters when bad weather hits. Dave moves on; not staying at Kirkridge shelter tonight.

"Irish" arrives next; he has an Irish brogue and has just hiked in from Route 191, which is about ½ mile south of the shelter. Irish is totally unprepared: he has no map and lacks basic equipment. He inquires as to where is the next shelter, which is 31 miles north so he decides to stay at this shelter tonight (he has no tent). More strange is that Irish disappears for more than an hour after dinner; who knows where he went?

After lunch I scout out Nelson Lodge, a retreat facility that is only about 200 yards from the shelter. I realize that Lyn could bring my backup shoes to this place, so I need to find out the address and driving directions to the lodge. A woman who is just arriving and parking her car gives me directions from Route 191. Inside the lodge I find that there is a conference going on, and a gentleman who is taking a break in the lobby is kind enough to look up the address of Nelson Lodge on his smart phone.

We call the girls and I ask Lyn to bring my backup shoes to Nelson Lodge, advising her that she can program the Nelson Lodge address into our GPS. Fortunately this plan works just fine and the girls arrive at about 5:30 PM with my shoes, although the car overheats a bit on the steep climb up the mountain to Nelson Lodge. They also bring us a pecan bun treat for dessert, which is quite delicious (and thoughtful).

We hit our sleeping bags at dusk, as per usual, planning to arise at first light, as usual.

Kirkridge Shelter to Leroy A Smith Shelter – 5/22/12

Start Time: 6:30 AM, Kirkridge Shelter
End Time: 4:30 PM, Leroy A. Smith Shelter
Total Miles: 13.9 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss:

Distances:

Kirkridge Shelter, PA to PA33-Wind Gap, PA = 9.2 miles.
PA33-Wind Gap, PA to Leroy A Smith Shelter, PA = 4.6 miles.
Side trail to Leroy A. Smith Shelter = 0.1 miles

Pedometer readings:

Not recorded; pedometer not working.

We arise as planned at first light, 5:00 AM and after cup cakes, coffee, and packing up we're back on the trail at 6:30 AM. We keep quiet because Irish is still sleeping and doesn't awake before we leave.

There is again a light rain so we don our ponchos. We get to Wolf Rocks at 7:45 AM and immediately realize that Scout 78 and Distracted By Rocks misled us a bit: Wolf Rocks are not an optional hike, they are directly on the AT. We step carefully along the rocks because they are wet and somewhat slippery; the rocks provide an interesting scramble along a steep cliff.

After Wolf Rocks the AT turns extremely difficult. There are continuous boulder fields to navigate so progress is very slow, difficult, and dangerous. It is not easy to skip on top of the rocks nor go around them; the danger of falling is very great. Each step presents a new challenge, and the rocks go on and on, mile after mile, without letup.

We had heard about the "PA rocks" on our 2011 Long Trail hike from the "Canada Geese", an elderly, retired, married couple who were doing the whole AT. Without a doubt, Pennsylvania was their least favorite hiking, by far, because of the continuous rocks. Now Hum and I know what they meant.

I, in particular, have extreme difficulty on the rocks, not just because I'm a bit out of shape, but also because my backup hiking shoes are very heavy and digging into my ankles. These shoes are work shoes, not hiking boots, so they have no ankle support and in fact are causing much abrasion and pain to

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my ankles. As such, Hum is moving much faster and frequently has to wait for me to catch up. This situation is the exact reverse of 3 previous years of backpacking wherein I always led and had to



Wolf Rocks: Wet and Slippery

frequently stop and wait for Hum to catch up. Hum's extensive training hikes this year have put him into tip-top shape.

At around noon we reach "Hahn's Lookout", a rock outcropping with good distant views. I think it's a good place for Hum to take my picture, so I set out to reach the edge of the rocks for the picture, still with my backpack on: big mistake. I lose my balance and as I fall on the rocks I catch one of my poles in the rocks breaking the end off (with the bailer). I'm not badly hurt but deeply lament breaking my pole, even though it is still usable. I also break the crystal on my watch: it still runs but not for long.



Hahn's Lookout; I Break My Hiking Pole When I Fall on the Rocks

I get somewhat of a second wind after the stop at Hahn's Lookup and for the next hour or more I keep pace with Hum for quite some distance. Hum estimates that, for perhaps an hour or more, we are

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averaging 3+ miles an hour, an extremely fast pace, especially on the PA-Rocks trail. Hum is very adept at estimating speed, arrival times, etc., so his speed estimate is probably right on target.

It doesn't last, however, and I tire and slow once again. Doing 14 miles in one day is well above our average distance and doing that much on the "PA rocks" is beyond extremely difficult and tiring. By the time we reach Leroy A. Smith shelter I'm pretty much exhausted. There is nothing like the relief of reaching your destination shelter, putting down your pack, taking off your hiking boots, and enjoying a

long, long, rest.

We find that “Rocky”, who is an exceptionally fat (for a hiker), and a smoker, has already arrived and staked out his space on the right side of the shelter, by the wall, a space that I like best in any shelter and will typically occupy, if available, but not this time. Rocky is a nice enough guy but is practically a chain smoker and being so overweight we both wonder how he can possibly be doing any serious hiking.

Next to arrive is “Laser Legs”, a 63 year old hiker, who just retired, from Lynchburg, VA. He says his wife likes to hike as well, but she is not retiring for 7 more years. Laser Legs says a friend from back home named him this because his legs are so bright white that it’s like looking at lasers. When he signs the trail journals he draws a little caricature of himself with lightning bolts for legs. Last year Laser Legs hiked from Springer Mountain GA to Duncannon PA. And this year he is “flip flopping” by hiking the remainder of the AT from Duncannon PA to Mt. Katahdin, ME.

Laser Legs is perhaps the most highly organized hiker on the trail. He uses a spread sheet to plan every meal – exactly what he will eat and how much -- and also works out the exact distance that he will cover each day. He rigidly sticks to the plan and uses a printout to determine just what he’ll eat and exactly where he’ll go, that is, the details of each meal and hiking plan each day. His meals are all put in packages and labeled, but sometimes the extreme planning fails him: on this particular occasion he mixed coffee in with rice as part of his dinner. This is quite humorous and Hum and I snicker under our breaths. Laser Legs doesn’t see any humor in it, however. A well-known lesson is learned once again: if you really want to mess things up use a computer!

Laser Legs is a former scout master and still active in scouts. A fact such as this is usually the start of a lengthy conversation between Hum and another hiker with a common interest on the subject of scouting. Hum has been a scout master for perhaps 25 years, and because he obviously loves scouting he loves to talk about scouting. Unfortunately, in this case, Laser Legs shows no interest in Hum’s scouting experience, he is very happy about talking more about himself, but that seems to be the limit of his interest.



Leroy A. Smith Shelter “Rocky” Raises the Rafters with Extreme Snoring

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Rocky tells us he is hiking south, as are we, and that he will be getting an early start, and is, he says, surprisingly, a pretty fast hiker. So we will likely see him on the trail tomorrow he says. But that will not be so, we never see fat Rocky – the chain smoker – on the trail again.

As usual we hit the hay at sunset -- about 8:30 PM – but all is not quiet on the Western Front. Rocky sleeps on his back the entire night and snores incredibly loudly. His snoring is much louder than Hum’s, and that’s really saying something, because Hum’s snoring typically vibrates the entire shelter. Hum and Laser Legs complain bitterly in the morning about the intense noise and lack of sleep. Hum vows that in the future he will always use ear plugs. I have much less problem: for a long time ago I started using ear plugs every night in order to get some sleep under the usual, intense, rafter-vibrating, ear-popping, snoring conditions.

Leroy A Smith Shelter to Little Gap – 5/23/12

Start Time: 6:30 AM, Leroy A. Smith Shelter

End Time: 1:30 PM, Little Gap

Total Miles: 10.9 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss:

Distances:

Side trail to Leroy A. Smith Shelter = 0.1 miles

Leroy A Smith Shelter, PA to Little Gap-Danielsville, PA = 10.8 miles.

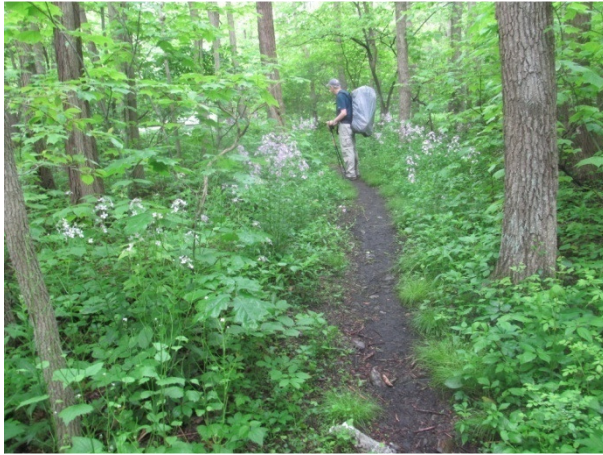
Little Gap-Danielsville, PA to Lehigh River Bridge E, PA = 5.2 miles (didn't do this leg)

Pedometer readings:

Not recorded; pedometer not working.

We arise as planned at first light, 5:00 AM and after cup cakes, coffee, and packing up we're back on the trail at 6:30 AM. We keep quiet because Rocky and Laser Legs sleep in, that is, after laser Leg's complains to us about Rocky's intense snoring the previous night.

The trail is again an endless, continuous boulder field. Each step is a challenge that must be placed carefully to avoid spraining one's ankle. There is no let up, almost no "dirt trail" respites on which one can (relatively) sort of relax a bit, enjoy the environment, and enjoy the hiking. The PA rocks become the total focus, and such hiking is both physically and mentally exhausting.



**A Rare Break from the "PA Rocks" on an "AT Dirt Patch"
with Some Pretty Wildflowers along the Way (Left);
One of Several Nice Overlooks on a Beautiful Clear Day (Right)**

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I am severely tired from all this rock hopping and besides my ankles are very sore from the constant rubbing of my work shoes. So reluctantly, I suggest we bail out of the hike in Little Gap, 5 miles short of the intended destination in Lehigh Gap. It is too bad because Lehigh Gap is almost a sheer cliff and would have been a real adventure to end this "warm up" hike preparation for our much bigger TN/NC/VA AT hike in August. (However, it is likely that because of rain and slippery rock conditions, we probably couldn't have negotiated the Lehigh Gap cliffs anyway, and would instead have to opt to use the bypass trail around the Lehigh Gap cliffs.)

So Hum calls Pat and arranges to have her meet us in Little Gap.

The hike down Little Gap is really interesting and challenging. It is an intense rock scramble, not unlike all the other "PA rock" scrambles, except that it is a steep descent making it all the more challenging. At the road crossing in the gap we notice a thunder storm brewing in the west.



Little Gap
A Challenging Boulder Field Not Unlike the Rest of the “PA Rocks” AT
(Except that it is a Very Steep Descent making it All the More Dangerous)

And soon after that, we meet a couple just coming back down from the south side of Little Gap. They tell us they have turned back and are bailing out of their hike today because of lightening. They say it is very exposed on top of the Lehigh Gap trail and very ill advised to hike that section in a thunder and lightning storm. This makes me feel a bit better, in that perhaps we would have had to bail out anyway (in spite of the other reasons).

Pat has a bit of trouble finding the turn to Little Gap, because the road is not marked “Little Gap Road” as indicated on Hum’s map. But eventually Pat and Lyn find us and all is well. Hum drives us back to Pocono Pines; it is still quite a distance, 25+ miles, from Little Gap.

Epilogue – 5/23-25/2012

Summary statistics for the 3-day hike:
Total Miles: 31.2 miles

We get back to Pocono Pines in the late afternoon. Hum and I take showers, shave, clean up, and then just relax. Over manhattan’s and drinks before dinner, we show Lyn and Pat the pictures of our hike and tell them all about our wonderful and exciting adventures, which of course they thoroughly enjoy and find most interesting. We enjoy games after dinner and retire early after a grand but tiring hiking adventure now concluded on the PA rocks.

On Thursday we spend the morning at the nearby outlets in Stroudsburg, PA, mostly in search of beads. In the afternoon Hum and I spend considerable time re-planning our TN/NC/VA AT hike. Based on our PA Rocks experience, we decide that our current plan is far too ambitious and needs to be toned down.

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Furthermore, we now plan to each take our car making for far greater flexibility on our hike (e.g., we can pack food supplies in the car, can drive to meals, no need to hire shuttles, etc.). We come up with our revised plan, trying to keep our distance each day on the order of about 10 miles or less, which we find quite doable and comfortable in our backpacking experience over the last 3 years, and make the necessary reservations at various hiking hostels along the way. In the end the next Ho-Hum backpacking adventure is set for August 2012; this time we plan to hike 125 miles on the AT in Tennessee/North Carolina, from Erwin, TN to Damascus, VA.

In the late afternoon we all take a walk around Pinecrest Lake in Pocono Pines. We visit Laurie and James’ future house in Pocono Pines, which they have just purchased, and where they will move in the near future from their current house in Mt. Tabor, NJ, which they have lived in for a relatively short time after moving there from a house they built in Milford, PA, which is not far from Pocono Pines (Laurie and James move a LOT!).

In the early evening there is a glorious reflection at sunset off of Pinecrest Lake, which is right off of Pat and Hum’s deck.



**Reflection at Sunset off of Pinecrest Lake
Pocono Pines, PA (from Hum and Pat's Deck)**

On Friday we have a delicious breakfast and then bid Pat and Hum farewell, with hugs and A Big Thank you!. We navigate our RV, with Lyn's car in tow, to Parsons, WV, where we will meet Deb and Bill and Jess and Lauren for an RV vacation over Memorial Day Weekend, in celebration of Deb's happy birthday.

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**5. August 11 – 27, 2012
Erwin, Tennessee to Damascus, Virginia**

Prologue – 8/11-12/2012

Our granddaughters Jessica (14) and Lauren (12) Slevin visit us in North Clarendon, Vermont, during the week of August 4-11. Deb and Bill bring the girls to Vermont on Saturday August 4 and they stay over until Monday August 6 before returning home to Parsippany, New Jersey. We enjoy a really fun week with the girls that includes visiting the cows and calves at [Liberty Hill Farm](#) in Rochester, VT, them climbing the 30 or so rock climbing walls, with Lyn and me serving as their belayers, at the [Rock Climbing Gym](#) in Rutland VT, riding the roller coasters and other great rides, as well as frolicking in the water park, at [Great Escape](#) in Lake George NY, playing miniature golf (until rained out) at [Okemo Mountain Adventure Zone](#) in Ludlow, VT, and playing various games each night after dinner.



**Visit from Granddaughters Jessica and Lauren
 Mooing at Calfs at Liberty Hill Farm (Top Left)
 Great Escape Thrill Park & Water Park (Top Right)
 Rock Climbing Gym (Bottom)**

On August 11 I drive the girls back home before moving on to Hum and Pat's house in Timonium, MD, to kick off Ho & Hum's second 2012 AT backpacking adventure to Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia. We leave Vermont at 8:00 AM and stop for lunch along the NY State Thruway. I was thinking we would partake of McDonald's type fare but Jessica immediately requests that we instead partake of quesadillas at [Moe's Southwest Grill](#). I was unfamiliar with Moe's but the quesadillas turned out to be delicious, so Lyn and I have since made Moe's one of our favorite places to eat, whenever it is available.

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We arrive in Parsippany, NJ at around 12:15 PM. I stay for a short visit and then am soon off again to Hum and Pat's. I run into really bad traffic on the NJ Turnpike and then again on Route 95 south of the Delaware Memorial Bridge, but still make it to Timonium by 4:30 PM.

Before dinner I admire Pat's brand new red Toyota Camry, which has all manner of extra features, snazzy gizmos, and extreme fanciness; a really nice car. Hum demonstrates his new "spot transponder", which he purchased at Pat's insistence to provide some degree of tracking on the trail, especially when cell phone service is unavailable (which is often the case). The transponder communicates via satellite to the Internet and when the transponder is activated it sends an email message via the satellite, perhaps to several email addresses, identifying the time and GPS coordinates of where the message originates. He adds Lyn's email address to the list of recipients and then proceeds to originate a spot message on his front lawn. Hum retrieves the resulting transponder message from Pat's email and I call Lyn to advise her of this wonderful service. She also receives the message OK.

Hum and I enjoy manhattans before dinner and wine with dinner, which gets our spirits off to a great start in anticipation of our forthcoming adventure. Pat makes us a delicious dinner of Italian Sausage and fixin's on hard rolls, one of my very favorites, and then we savor yummy ice cream for dessert. We retire early and I enjoy a sound sleep after a long day.

We arise on Sunday August 12 at 6:00 AM. Pat fixes us out-of-sight blueberry muffins and eggs for

breakfast. We bid Pat farewell and are off for Roan Mountain, Tennessee, a 457 mile trip, by 7:00 AM. The trip is pretty easy, not much traffic; I lead because I have a GPS to guide us. We stop for lunch and gas about 15 miles short of Wytheville, VA, my intended goal, but Hum is nearly out of gas and desperate to stop. We make it to [Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel](#) in Roan Mountain, TN, by about 3:00 PM, where we plan to park Hum's car for the first 7 days hiking.



**Mountain Harhour Hiker Hostel; Roan Mountain, TN
Main House on Left; Hiker Hostel Barn on Right**

We first check out the barn in the back, which is used as the hiker hostel. It looks quite nice; has a loft with several bunks for sleeping and is neat and clean. I then go inside the main house and find Terry Hill

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(co-owner with wife Mary Hill) in the dining room. I advise him that we are leaving Hum's car in the parking lot for a few days while we hike north from Erwin, TN to Roan Mountain and will stay at the hostel on Sunday August 19. I tell him we have a reservation and ask if we should pay for the parking now. Terry acts rather strange and a bit gruff and merely says that we'll "settle later". OK, I say and leave it at that. (I had spoken several times on the phone with his wife Mary, who is very pleasant on the phone and also very pleasant in person, as we find out later).

We're then off to drive my car to [Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel](#) in Erwin, TN, about a 45 minute drive mostly over back country roads. My trusty GPS does a good job getting us there.



Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel, Erwin, TN

I've spoken with manager Griff several times on the phone to arrange our stay but unfortunately Griff is currently off in Ashville, TN so we have to deal with a new guy at the desk. The new guy is not very familiar with Erwin and particularly not with the restaurants in the area, so we're pretty much on our own to find one. Fortunately we spotted a McD's on our way to the hostel so after unpacking our gear and cleaning up a bit, we make our way to dinner. Big Macs for everyone tonight, and these can be very delicious for hungry hikers.

After dinner we walk out over the nearby bridge spanning the Nolichucky River and spot several tubers enjoying the rapids; the river is still a good height and flow and is very popular for tubing and kayaking. We get bottom sheets for our bunks but no blankets are available so we set out our sleeping bags on the bunks as well; towels are also available.

We're the only ones staying in the bunkhouse section of the hostel; however, there are also individual cabins and we meet "Hinton James" (trail name) from High Point, NC, who is staying in one of the cabins. This is a young man who is currently attending the University of North Carolina (UNC) with a double major in Environmental Science and Math. His trail name is taken from the first UNC student, Hinton James, who in 1795, when UNC-Chapel Hill opened its doors, was the first student to enroll. James had walked all the way from his hometown of Wilmington, NC, some 90 miles away, arriving on February 12, 1795. It is said that his feet were so sore that he had to stay in bed for a while to recuperate before he could start classes. He turned out to be an enterprising student whose name often appeared on the honor roll. In 1798 James graduated and started a career in Civil Engineering and later became a state legislator. While a student, James founded the UNC Debating Society and, appropriately, the dorm located furthest away from classroom buildings is named in his honor.

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Hinton James the AT hiker tells us he started his hike at the GA/NC border. He is hiking for another week or so, before UNC classes start, and wanted to finish in Damascus, VA, but given his slower progress than anticipated this is in doubt. His Dad will pick him up wherever the final destination turns out to be.



tubing on the Nolichucky River, Erwin, TN

He tells us he had all his food stolen at a shelter near Allen Gap, NC. Apparently he hung his food bag on the elaborate bear hooks provided in this area and during the night someone took the food bag: unbelievable! He also met a so-called "homeless hiker" who used a trash bag for a pack, had no tent or sleeping bag. At one point, Hinton James somehow mistook a cell phone tower --- 300 feet high -- for a fire tower marked on his maps. First he had to scale a security fence to access the cell tower and then climb the 300' all the way to the top: what a dangerous climb that must have been (he later showed us pictures of same). Normally workers hook onto these towers for safety when they climb, so Hinton James' free style climb sans safety harness must have been very dangerous. Hinton James is also an eagle scout and wants to be a scoutmaster later on after he graduates: he and Hum have a good conversation on scouting. His home town, High Point, NC, is where several furniture manufacturers are located. Both his parents, now retired, worked for Thomasville Furniture until the crash during the great recession.

We retire peacefully at about 9:00 PM, but at about 9:30 a woman bursts into the hostel, wakes me up, and says something, quite incoherent, regarding a fire (perhaps she wants to have a campfire outside?). She may have been a bit inebriated but after much confusion on my part as to what she wants she apologizes for waking me up and departs. All is quiet after that; we're the only 2 people in the bunkhouse.

Nolichucky River, Erwin, TN, to Indian Grave Gap, TN – 8/13/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Nolichucky River, Erwin, TN
End Time: 12:30 PM, Indian Grave Gap, TN
Total Miles: 8.3 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1900' gain/300' loss

Distances:

Nolichucky River-Erwin, TN (1700') to Curley Maple Gap Shelter, TN (3080') = 4.2 miles
Curley Maple Gap Shelter, TN (3080') to Indian Grave Gap, TN (3360') = 4.1 miles

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Pedometer readings (these readings seem off; pedometer not working right):

Steps: 25,211

Calories: 663

Steps/minute: 108

MPH: 3.08 (2.14 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 3 hours, 51 minutes, 51 seconds

Miles: 11.93 miles (8.3 actual miles)

Up at 5:15 AM after a very good night's sleep (no noise after fire-woman encounter). We drive to

McDonalds for a yummy burritos breakfast and are off on the AT by 6:45 AM. We begin our AT backpacking hike by crossing the Nolichucky River bridge and then following the white blazes into the forest. It's a very nice trail through the rhododendron forests, by a stream, with some occasional long range views. The weather is cool and nice.



**AT/Nolichucky River Bridge, Erwin, TN
Bridge Marks the Start of our TN/NC/VA 2012 AT Backpacking Adventure**

We climb 1300' over 4.2 miles to Curley Maple Gap Shelter and make very good time, averaging about 2 MPH and arriving at the shelter a little after 9:00 AM. This shelter is our original intended goal for the day but stopping now and hanging out for 12+ hours seems unappealing to both of us, especially since we're not at all tired yet. I check out the water source 250' downhill and find the water flowing pretty well from the pipe coming out of the spring. However, after some debate we decide to push on to Indian Grave Gap by Route 395 and set up our tents for the night. One major factor we consider is the availability of water at Indian Grave Gap; we must always have a water source. Our maps show a stream near the AT crossing on Route 395 so that's the deciding factor; at about 9:45 AM we trek on.

We arrive at Indian Grave Gap/Route 395 at 12:30 PM, again making good time. I'm struggling a bit, however, with the extra weight of carrying 6 days of food; I resolve to shed some 'extra' weight in my pack on our zero day at Mountain Harbor Hiker Hostel this coming Sunday. We first check out the water situation and Hum finds a water source just east of the gap, where the stream crosses under the road. That's good!

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We find a nice campsite just south of the road and proceed to pitch our tents. This is actually the first time in 4 years of backpacking that Hum and I have not spent the night at a shelter and must, of course, sleep in our tents. Hum has always carried a small "kids tent", as Hum calls it, and as such, given his 6'3" height, must sleep in the tent on a diagonal in order to fit.

I, on the other hand, have just purchased a new tent for this backpacking hike, a Sierra Designs "Clip Flashlight 2" tent that I have set up only once, in my backyard in Vermont. This new tent replaces my former Wetzell "Current Hiker 2-Person Tent", which leaked like a sieve during a raging, drenching rainstorm with high winds, thunder, and lightning on our 2010 backpacking hike from Bennington to Mad Tom Notch on Vermont's Long Trail (a separate journal of that hike and 2 other LT hikes are posted on Long Trail Podcast.com). I have some real difficulty getting the tent up -- stupidly, I am reversing the roles of the fly and the main tent -- until I finally rediscover the directions affixed to the main tent. After I finally get the tent in place, I find this a nice, roomy tent, and, later on, that it stays mostly dry in the overnight rainstorm. But alas, I immediately discover a hole in the mesh on this brand new tent and resolve to return the tent to Sierra Designs after the hike (I do that and Sierra Designs makes good on their

warranty, replacing the damaged tent with a brand new tent).



Ho & Hum's Campsite at Indian Grave Gap, TN

After the tent erections I survey the area around the campsite and happen upon a dirt road down the hill from the campsite where I see a man go by in a truck, then back up and park. I immediately sense that the truck driver is acting a bit strangely so I stay hidden behind the trees to observe the goings-on further down the hill. The driver gets out of the truck and pulls a large amount of material off the bed of his truck onto the dirt road; I can't quite distinguish what the material is but suspect, quite rightly, that the driver is up to something no-good, illegal. A later investigation by Hum takes him to the dirt road and he discerns that the driver has dumped some dirt contaminated by tar or oil; definitely an illegal dump.

Later that afternoon a southbound hiker passes by the camp; he's the only hiker that we meet today. He tells us he started in Harpers Ferry (Hum double checked that point :-)) and is headed to Ashville, NC. He quickly says "have a nice day" twice, rather pointedly the second time. Obviously he didn't want to talk; you can usually sense that in advance by just reading a hiker's body language.

I have a heavy dinner of red beans and rice: it's very good but too much food so I give some of it to Hum, which Hum gladly devours.

We hit the hay at about 8 PM. It rained several times overnight and some water leaked into the bottom of my tent. This was not leakage through the tent material itself, thank goodness, as was the case with the Wetzel tent in 2010. Rather, the leakage came into the bottom because I failed to stake the tent sufficiently to form a 'lip wall' around the bottom to keep water out. I do this in all future deployments of the tent and have no further problems with leakage. Hum's tent had no leaks and served him just fine (and most happily for Hum it was extremely inexpensive).

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Indian Grave Gap, TN (3360') to Cherry Gap Shelter, TN (4000') – 8/14/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Indian Grave Gap, TN
End Time: 12:50 PM, Cherry Gap Shelter, TN
Total Miles: 8.7 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2500' gain/1900' loss

Distances:
Indian Grave Gap, TN (3360') to Cherry Gap Shelter, TN (4000') = 8.7 miles

Pedometer readings:
Steps: 28,608
Calories: 752
Steps/minute: 100
MPH: 2.85 (1.83 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 44 minutes, 56 seconds
Miles: 13.54 miles (8.7 actual miles)

We're up at 5:15 AM while it's still dark; then breakfast and morning chores: 2 zebra cakes and black

coffee for me, and similar for Hum. Unfortunately, most AT shelters in TN/NC have no privies; a shovel is supplied at each shelter in order to dig an appropriate “cat hole”, but to us this seems highly surprising and a far from optimum way to go, so to speak, for many reasons we can think of.

After packing up we're on the trail at 6:45 AM. After a short climb we pass some power lines where I swat some wildflowers aside and immediately get stung by a bee on my right arm. It itched tremendously all day (and all night). Our 1100' climb to the summit of Beauty Spot Bald (4437') isn't too difficult and there are nice views from the top. Hum, however, who is some distance ahead of me, just zooms on by the summit, seemingly without even taking a look at the view. I call ahead for Hum to 'stop and let's take a look at the view', and so he does. Hum, at times, is so focused on completing our ultimate daily objective that stopping to see views and/or note points of interest are secondary. On occasion he describes our views from our hard-won summits as just 'mountains and more mountains in the distance'. To me it is the huge reward, always different and inspiring, for the usually arduous summiting of the mountain.

On the summit we see a sign that says there is a problem with cars (and parties) coming up to Beauty Spot and that the road will be closed to cars. We see evidence of the parties with quite a bit of trash strewn around the summit thanks to the low life's that would do such things. There is also an apparent gravesite at the top with a pile of rocks and marked with a cross, but otherwise no identification as to who might be buried there, if anyone.



**Ascending to the Summit of Beauty Spot Bald (4437')
Pretty Wild Flowers along the Way (Watch out for Bees!)**

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Our next challenge is to climb another 1100' to the summit of Unaka Mountain (5180'), a very tough slog especially the first half mile up to the point where the AT passes just east of USFS 230, a gravel road. We make it to the summit by 11:00 AM, exactly matching Hum's prediction. We find a beautiful Christmas Tree forest on the north side of the mountain that is dramatic and memorable. We descend to the northern base of Unaka Mountain, Low Gap (3900'), arriving at 12:05 PM after a stop at a spring to fill our water bottles. We decide to continue on another 1.1 miles and 400'-500' climb to reach Cherry Gap Shelter (4000') before having our lunch.





**Views from Summit of Beauty Spot Bald (Top)
Hum “Checks the Map!” and Garbage from Partiers; Unmarked Grave (Bottom)**

After 40 more minutes hiking Hum alerts me that he sees a “car” ahead. As we get closer to the “car” it becomes clear that the “car” is indeed Cherry Gap Shelter. We make it to the shelter at 12:50 PM and, as usual, we are the first ones to arrive. We pick our usual sleeping spots (I on the right wall, Hum on the left wall) and again there is no privy, just a shovel to dig “cat holes”. We find very good water at the spring 250’ from the shelter. Hum and I have a pool as to when Hinton James/Eric will arrive: I say 4:30-5:00 PM; Hum says 3:00 PM. We’re both quite wrong. Hinton James/Eric, who is now hiking with Sailboat/Joe, don’t arrive until 6:30 PM. Hinton James hiked from Curley Maple Gap Shelter (12.8 miles); Sailboat from Erwin (17.0 miles). Sailboat we will learn is a very fast hiker; Hinton James, we have already learned, also hikes fast but is apt to get a late start in the morning (likes to sleep in).

Sailboat is from Cape Town, South Africa, and has sailed around the world (hence his trail name). In his sailboat he ventured from South Africa, to Brazil, to the Caribbean, through the Panama Canal, across the Pacific Ocean, to Tahiti, to Fiji, to New Zealand, to Australia, then back to South Africa. He has toured the U.S. twice: the first time in an RV rental on the West Coast, where among many other travels he ventured to Yosemite National Park in the winter. On this occasion he decided to hike the AT and

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bought all his very high-end hiking gear in the U.S. When he reaches New York State he is planning to take a bus to NYC for a break. He questions us as to where might be a good place to catch a bus to NYC: we speculate that Bear Mountain might be such a place (the AT passes right through Bear Mountain Park). This is quite an amazing person: he has traveled the world and is only 19 years old.



Cherry Gap Shelter

(Note the Shovel on the Right for Digging “Cat Holes”)

Hinton James/Eric is 21 and, as stated earlier, attends the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, NC. He was accepted at Annapolis and earlier studied to be a doctor, but after doing an internship in Boston he decided he ‘didn’t want a stressful life as a doctor’. So he took a year off to travel to South America. There he did some hiking, traveling from North to South on buses. Among his stops were the Atacama Desert and Machu Picchu.

I make the first entry on this hike into the shelter journal:

8/14/12

Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (70, 72, resp.) on the trail again. Erwin to here in two 8⁺-mile days; not bad for geezers. Tented at Indian Grave Gap last night, in some rain. Trail so far is beautiful. On to Damascus in 16 hiking days: yeah we’re pretty slow, but steady and may just win the race. So watch out! Peace, Ho & Hum

We retire at dusk, as usual, about 8:30 PM. Hinton James is next to me and reads until 10 PM using a head lamp; unfortunately this keeps me awake. He then snores a bit but not as bad as Hum. I wake up a few times with my right hip aching very badly. I decide I need to buy some Advil or Celebrex for relief. Tough night.

Cherry Gap Shelter, TN to Clyde Smith Shelter, TN – 8/15/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Cherry Gap Shelter, TN
End Time: 12:05 PM, Clyde Smith Shelter, TN
Total Miles: 9.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2100’ gain/1700’ loss

Distances:

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Cherry Gap Shelter, TN (4000’) to NC226-Iron Mountain Gap, NC (3723’) = 3.1 miles
NC226-Iron Mountain Gap, NC (3723’) to Clyde Smith Shelter, TN (4500’) = 6.1 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 27,187

Calories: 775

Steps/minute: 105

MPH: 2.14 (1.83 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 18 minutes, 05 seconds

Miles: 12.87 miles (9.2 actual miles)

We’re up at dawn, 5:30 AM, eat breakfast, pack up, and are ready to go by 6:30 AM. We wait for first light and are off by 6:45 AM. Hinton James is sleeping in; Sailboat is up and about and trying, without success, to get Hinton James out of the sack.

I lead today and we average > 2 MPH – a fast pace -- including stops to admire some very pretty views along the way.



Pretty Early Morning Views En Route to Iron Mountain Gap

We reach Iron Mountain Gap (3.1 miles; 3723') by 8:20 AM and Iron Mountain summit (5.4 miles, 4426') at 9:50 AM where we find an impressive rock formation. Our guidebook says that the rocks formed 1.1 billion years ago when continents collided to form a supercontinent, in particular, when the west coast of South America collided with North America. I of course feel compelled to climb the rocks.



Impressive Rock Formation on Summit of Iron Mountain (3723')

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Sailboat and Hinton James overtake us at Greasy Creek Gap (7.2 miles; 4200'). They started at 7:45 AM, one hour after we started, and are averaging 3+ MPH versus our 2 MPH; they are very fast hikers, especially Sailboat, who also has enormous stamina.

We also meet a father and son (21) in the gap, who have section hiked the AT for 13 years, and now have only 300 miles to go before completing the entire AT. They are southbound; the young son hikes way ahead of Dad and will resupply today in Erwin, TN, while Dad catches up. Last night they stayed at Greasy Creek Hostel (\$10/night). Dad says the hostel feels like Appalachia; the owner he says is a nice, very talkative lady. Her evil neighbor, however, who really doesn't like the hostel it seems, puts up signs on the AT indicating that, in reference to Greasy Creek Hostel, "Death in family – hostel closed". The neighbor also revs up his truck at 5:00 AM, right by the hostel, and threatens to burn down the hostel. Dad says it is a tough 0.8 mile hike to the hostel and he "wouldn't go there again".

We arrive at Clyde Smith Shelter at 12:05 PM, just behind Hinton James (Sailboat went ahead). After some discussion, Hinton James and Sailboat decide to stay at the shelter tonight and hike to Overmountain Shelter tomorrow (some 13.2 miles distant). Later that day it gets considerably colder, in the 40's perhaps, and very heavy rain drenches the area; it's good to be in the shelter and all the better that Hinton James and Sailboat decided to stay.



Clyde Smith Shelter; Sailboat and Hinton James Settling In for the Night (Right)

Hinton James shows us his pictures of his climb up a 300' cell tower, thinking it was a fire tower marked on his map. He tore his shirt when he scaled the fence protecting the tower, where surely there were "no

trespassing” signs although he didn’t say as much. Normally workers use climbing hooks for safety when scaling these enormous, dangerous, towers. Hinton James says from the top he could see the fire tower far below :-). He carries a top-end Canon Rebel camera with a super zoom lens; it must weigh more than 4 pounds – a lot of camera to carry – but is super nice.

A marine from South Carolina stops around 6:30 PM for dinner, he says. He attends the University of South Carolina, “the real USC” he says. He is there at USC on a Marine Corps scholarship and will be commissioned when he graduates. Hum also attended the University of South Carolina, also on a Navy Scholarship, so the two of them have an extended discussion regarding their alma mater. He speaks about how tough Roan Mountain is to hike – that’s ahead of us tomorrow – and that extensive weed cutting is underway on the southern slope of Roan Mountain by the [Tennessee Eastman Hiking & Canoe Club](#), which maintains the trail in TN. Marine is a huge gorilla; he leaves without having dinner and just tosses his heavy pack over his back as if it were a paper clip. He says he’ll hike in the dark and tent at the next shelter, the Cherry Gap Shelter, another 9.2 miles south, a very long and difficult way to go in the dark (but, after all, he is a marine!).

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There is no cell service here so we send a spot message to the girls via satellite. We turn in as usual at dusk.

Clyde Smith Shelter, TN (4500’) to Roan High Knob Shelter, NC (6285’) – 8/16/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Clyde Smith Shelter, TN
End Time: 4:00 PM, Roan High Knob Shelter, TN
Total Miles: 10.1 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 3200’ gain/1800’ loss

Distances:

Clyde Smith Shelter, TN (4500’) to Roan High Knob Shelter, NC (6285’) = 7.0 miles
Hiking to Rhododendron Gardens and Roan High Bluff (6267’) + Return to AT = 3.0 miles
Side trail to Roan High Knob Shelter = 0.1 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 37,494
Calories: 986
Steps/minute: 96
MPH: 2.72 (1.59 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 6 hours, 30 minutes, 34 seconds
Miles: 17.75 miles (10.0 actual miles)

We’re up as usual at 5:30 AM. Sailboat is up at the same time, but Hinton James sleeps in and moans “I’m getting up later; going to Overmountain Shelter; slow up the mountains.” We suspect that Sailboat may be too fast for Hinton James (who is fast but not as fast), and that Hinton James will bail, but who knows.

Right off the bat we face a 0.9 mile, 900’ near straight-up climb to the summit of Little Rock Knob (4918’). It is really difficult, but thankfully quite short; Hum leads the climb to the summit and leaves me in the dust. Hum is an aspiring mountain goat! Sheer cliffs drop precipitously on the north face of the mountain, and the views from the top are long, sweeping, and beautiful: a good reward for such an early morning challenge.



**Early Morning View from the Summit of Little Rock Knob (4918')
Roan Mountain is Prominent on the Horizon**

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We enjoy a relaxing 2.2 mile, 900' descent down to Hughes Gap (3.1 miles, 4040'); I lead on descents since I tend to outpace Hum going downhill. We cross Hughes Gap Road, which marks the beginning of our 3.3 mile, 2245' climb to the summit of Roan Mountain.

We first summit Beartown Mountain (4.4 miles, 5481'), an arduous hike we find. Sailboat passes us about 1 mile up the mountain; he left Hinton James still sleeping at the shelter but they plan to rendezvous later in the day to resupply in Elk Park, NC. At these high altitudes Hum is beginning to have oxygen/wind problems again, similar to what he experienced at similarly high places on Vermont's Long Trail. We take frequent rests to the summit and venture out on a narrow ridge to a good viewpoint.

Here I proceed to tell Hum that "I want to correct something I said about Steve and Kristin" (my son and his x-wife). "The truth is that they are divorced." Hum winces at the news. For some reason Stephen wants to keep this information under wraps, but Lyn and I decide it makes no sense to hide the truth (I had discussed this with Lyn on our cell phone call the previous night).



Sights along the Way on the Trek up Roan Mountain

From the summit of Beartown Mountain we descend 150' into Ash Gap (4.9 miles, 5240') – not named for us we assume -- giving us a needed 'downhill rest hike' through the gap. From then on it is slow going with a steep uphill climb to the summit of Roan Mountain (5.5 miles, 6150'), which we reach at about noon.



Summit of Roan Mountain (6150') and View from Roan High Bluff (6267')

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We spend considerable time exploring the Roan Mountain summit area. Remains of the former Cloudland Hotel, which was closed in 1910, are marked by signs in a wide field with excellent long range views. Next we explore the nearby picnic area with a large parking lot and rest rooms. We both take full advantage of the rest rooms, with sponge baths, filling water bottles, flush toilets, and general cleaning up after several days without running water. How enjoyable that is!

In the parking lot we encounter Sailboat riding in the back of an SUV. He stops and gets out to say goodbye. Apparently he has befriended some tourists and gotten escorted around Roan Mountain in an air conditioned car. What a wheeler dealer he is!

After the Sailboat encounter we explore the extensive 'rhododendron gardens', made up of natural Catawba rhododendrons, with paved foot paths through the gardens. Here we have lunch at one of the many picnic tables in the area. After lunch we venture out to Roan High Bluff (6267'), probably 1-2 miles distant off the AT, but first we hide our packs to make the trek more restful. On the bluff there is a viewing platform affording nice views. We decide it is well worth the extra time and effort to get there.

Back on the AT we finish the remaining 0.8 miles to Roan High Knob Shelter (7.1 miles, 6285'), arriving there about 4:00 PM. This shelter is the highest on the AT and was originally a fire warden's cabin; the concrete foundation of the fire tower is nearby as is the summit of Roan High Knob.



Roan High Knob Shelter

At the shelter we meet two southbound hikers who tell us some hair-raising tales about the Overmountain Shelter and Apple House Shelter, our intended next shelter destinations for tomorrow/Saturday and the Sunday, respectively. They tell us they encountered a rather shady 'homeless guy' of questionable honesty and intentions, who apparently is making the shelter his temporary home. This homeless guy has little equipment and tells many lies, for example, that he hiked the AT in record time, that he parked his 'Mercedes' in the parking lot on Route 19E, that he will give them food. Then they tell us they encountered RATS, large RATS, which ran over them during the night completely freaking them out. These tales give us pause about staying at Overmountain Shelter; later we decide not to stop there and rather tent tomorrow night in Bradley Gap at the base of Hump Mountain.

Regarding Apple House Shelter, the two SOBO hikers say that shelter has been torn down because of problems with homeless people living there. On top of that, there is apparently a homeless person living there in a tent on the former site of the shelter; that person evidently asks all passers-by for food, cell phone use, etc. Given the unavailability of Apple House Shelter, I concoct an alternate plan for Sunday

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that entails hiking an additional 0.8 miles to Route 19E and Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel, picking up Hum's car parked there, driving to Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel in Erwin, TN, and picking up my car parked there, and finally driving both cars to Kincora Hiking Hostel in Hampton, TN, where we will spend Sunday night. Then on Monday we will leave Hum's car at Kincora Hostel and drive my car back to Mountain Harbour Hostel, where we will spend a zero day, as previously planned. Hum likes the new plan.

Before leaving Roan High Knob Shelter, the two SOBO hikers write a message in the dirt for 3 hiking friends who will arrive a bit later at the shelter.

We find the shelter is a bit dirty and has no bunks, but does have an upstairs loft; we opt for the ground floor and sweep out the shelter to tidy up a bit. Outside there are hordes of horseflies circling the fire pit; we suspect there may be some food in the fire pit that is attracting the flies perhaps. I build a fire from some cardboard and other junk left in the fire pit, but the smoke does little or nothing to ward off the flies. Many birds are swooping down and gobbling up the flies. After sundown the flies alight on some nearby bushes and just stay there while the birds continue to pick them off; odd behavior.



Summit of Roan High Knob (6285')

The 3 hiker friends arrive at about 5:30 PM: Ed is the oldest, perhaps in his 50's; Kyle is about 25 and 6' 8" tall; Mark is also young and an avid fire builder who climbs trees to gather fire wood and quickly gets a good fire going. All are from Clearwater, FL, and are hiking from Damascus, VA to Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel (our same hike in reverse). This is Kyle's first backpacking trip and says he 'took too much' but didn't pack a tent (big mistake). Mark is an Eagle Scout so he and Hum strike up a good conversation on scouting. Ed didn't realize that Uncle Johnny's is not on Route 395, but another 8.3 miles south at the Nolichucky River crossing. I show him the AT map to pinpoint the correct location of Uncle Johnny's Hostel.

There is no cell service at the shelter so we send a spot message to the girls via satellite. We turn in at about 8:30 PM; the other guys are noisy by the fire but thankfully hit the sack by 9:00 PM. Ed and Mark settle upstairs in the loft; Kyle stays downstairs with us because he 'needs to get up at night'. It's a cold night and my stomach is a bit upset. I decide that the ½ dinners are not sufficient; I need to supplement

with Ramen noodles. I'm doing OK with black coffee; so there is no need to pack cream and sugar in the future, which are a bit of a pain and a mess to dig out of baggies. The zebra cakes are fine for breakfast and I really enjoy the PB&J sandwich for lunch; M&M's and nuts are really good along the trail.

Roan High Knob Shelter, NC (6285') to Bradley Gap, NC (4960') – 8/17/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Roan High Knob Shelter, TN
End Time: 4:50 PM, Bradley Gap, TN
Total Miles: 9.5 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2000' gain/3400' loss

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Distances:

Side trail to Roan High Knob Shelter = 0.1 miles

Roan High Knob Shelter, NC (6285') to TN143-Carvers Gap, TN (5512') = 1.7 miles

TN143-Carvers Gap, TN (5512') to Stan Murray Shelter, TN (5000') = 3.9 miles

Stan Murray Shelter, TN (5000') to Overmountain Shelter (4682') Side Trail, NC = 1.9 miles

Overmountain Shelter (4682') Side Trail, NC to Bradley Gap, NC (4960') = 1.9 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 24,775

Calories: 651

Steps/minute: 92

MPH: 2.61 (2.11 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 28 minutes, 59 seconds

Miles: 11.73 miles (9.5 actual miles)

We're up at 5:40 AM; Ed and the others soon join us and after the usual morning routines we're back on the trail by 6:45 AM. It starts out to be foggy and cold, so we both don warmer outer clothing and knit hats. For once we start the morning on a very nice, 1.8 mile downhill stretch to Carvers Gap; we get there in less than 1 hour.

Next we ascend two more of Tennessee/North Carolina's spectacular bald mountains. First we summit Round Bald (5826'), where the views are awe inspiring in the early morning. Next we ascend Jane Bald (5807') for even more beautiful scenery.





**Early Morning Views from Summit of Round Bald (Top, 5826');
Summit of Jane Bald (Bottom, 5807')**

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Essentially no trees or shrubs grow on the summits of these balds, but no one is sure as to exactly why that is. This phenomenon, however, allows for long range 360° views and we're both eating up the beauty of it all, especially Hum who has not witnessed these before (I have, having hiked extensively on these TN/NC AT balds with my friend and former boss, Bill Roach, who for several years invited Lyn and me to his cabin in Boone, NC, for a week of day hiking).

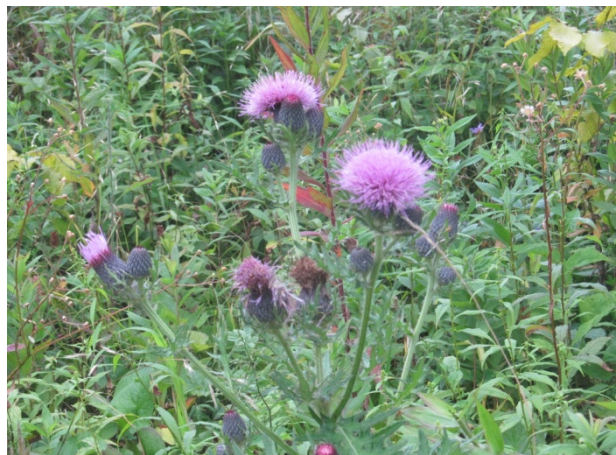
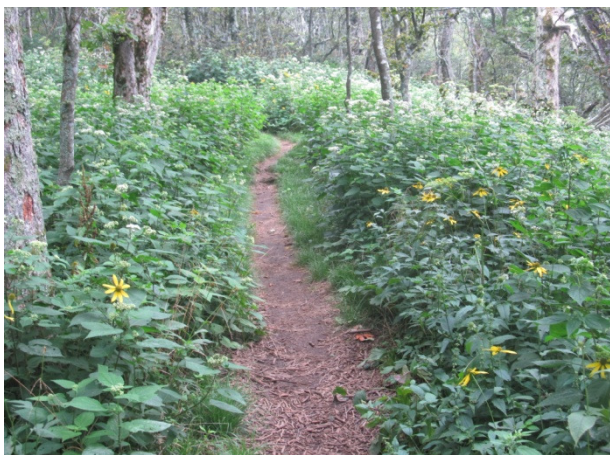
Our AT guidebook gives an interesting account of how Jane Bald got its name:

The name memorializes an 1870 incident in which a woman died after crossing the ridge here. North Carolina sisters, Harriet and Jane Cook, were returning home from visiting other sisters in Tennessee, when Harriet became ill with a recurrence of milk sickness, a disease caused by drinking cow's milk that has been poisoned when the cow ate certain kinds of snakeroot. With Harriet unable to continue, the sisters spent a very cold November night on the ridge. The next morning, Jane went for help, and Harriet was brought by wagon to her home in Dogwood Flats, where she soon died. She was 24 years old.

We reach Stan Murray Shelter (5.7 miles) at about 10:00 AM for a brief rest, water, and snack. We go on the blue trail to make a difficult, 0.1 mile descent to the spring to fill our water bottles. Here we decide to skip the Overmountain Shelter completely, having been warned about the homeless kook and rats on the premises, and rather forge ahead another 5 miles or so to Bradley Gap, where the guidebook says there are campsites and water available.

Just beyond Stan Murray Shelter we encounter a group of about 10 hikers escorted by a professional hiking leader. Most of the hikers are quite young, and we wonder what they might be thinking of us geezers making this trek on our own; they probably think us rugged mountaineers who are as tough as we are handsome, I imagine :-). We take the opportunity to inquire about the weather: 60% chance of rain tonight, bummer. Hopefully it will clear by tomorrow for our hike over Hump Mountain.

Along the way we admire the many blazes of colorful wildflowers, seemingly everywhere. Identifying every one of these multitudinous wild flower varieties was my friend Bill Roach's specialty; unfortunately I don't retain his huge encyclopedia of floral facts.



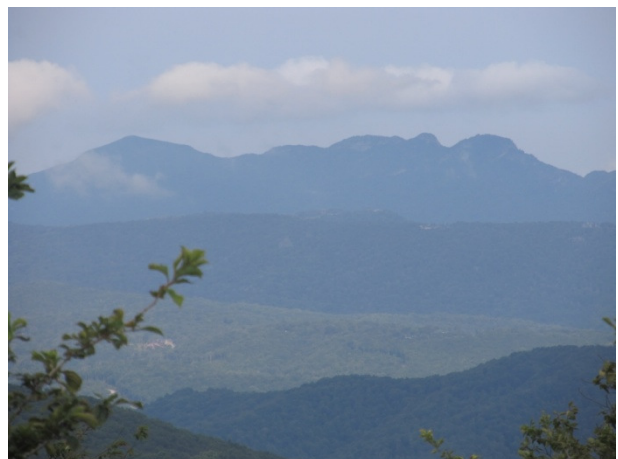
Along the Way, Admiring the Wild Flowers

We continue up the 800' climb to the summit of Little Hump Mountain (5459'); there is fog at the lower elevations but it clears up at the top. It is very steep going at first but eases off some near the summit. There are spectacular views at the top including great views of [Grandfather Mountain](#) in the distance. Back in the 90's Bill Roach and I hiked over 5946' Grandfather Mountain and Lyn and I took the road to the summit to enjoy the "mile high swinging bridge", among other attractions, on one of our Bill-Roach hiking vacations.

We have a quick lunch among some rocks on the summit of Little Hump Mountain and while we're there a fog blows in and the temperature plummets. We don our knit hats and warmer outer clothing and press

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on to Bradley Gap, which is an easy 400' 1.3 mile descent. Just before reaching the open area of Bradley Gap, we pass a nice campsite and a nearby spring. We don't realize it at first but this is the campsite referred to in the AT guidebook; so we press on into Bradley Gap in search of the campsite we don't feel we've found quite yet. We arrive there just before 5:00 PM.

Bradley Gap and Hump Mountain in the distance offer an incredibly beautiful sight in the late afternoon; the grandeur of the expanse is almost overwhelming. We can clearly see Grandfather Mountain in the distance as well; the weather gives us crystal clear views in every direction. I well recall hiking this area with Bill Roach and Lyn many years ago and it was by far my favorite hike among the dozens of hikes guided by Bill in the Blue Ridge over the years. As I gaze upon this beautiful sight, I recall the views from the summit of Hump Mountain and the vast expanse as one descends down the mountain on the AT, which includes a magnificent view of Grandfather Mountain. These in my opinion are among the most beautiful and exhilarating sights on the entire AT. I can't wait until tomorrow, I muse, for Hum to experience this beautiful, exhilarating hike over Hump Mountain.



View of Little Hump Mountain (Top Left, 5459')
Bradley Gap and Hump Mountain (Top Right 5587')
Views of Grandfather Mountain from Bradley Gap (Bottom)

Not having found the supposed campsite in Bradley Gap, we return to the campsite we passed a little while back and set up our tents. Now it begins to drizzle and continues to do so for about an hour, but then lets up.

We get dinner and after dinner I set out on a hike up a hill to the west in hopes of catching a view of a dirt road and a large house on this road with an expansive view into the valley to the west. These landmarks

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were on the route into Bradley Gap led by Bill Roach on our hikes back in the 90's. The large house was owned by a blind doctor (psychiatrist) who installed guiding ropes around his property, which allowed the blind man to feel his way around his property. Bill Roach told many fascinating stories about this man, which included tales of sexual advances by the not-so-good doctor on some of his patients; rather hard to imagine for a blind psychiatrist but I'm sure it's true given the source.

At the top of 'west hill', which is also a bald and actually a bit of a trek, I don't find any view of the road or the house but there are many more inspiring views of Bradley Gap, Hump Mountain, and Grandfather Mountain. On the return back to our campsite I take a wrong turn into a large briar patch. Realizing that I'm definitely off course, I double back and find the landmarks I had noted on the ascent of the hill, which thankfully leads me back to the campsite.



**Views of Bradley Gap and Hump Mountain from Top of 'West Hill' (Left)
Our Campsite Just South of Bradley Gap (Right)**

We call Lyn and Pat; this is the first cell service we've had in 3 days. We catch up on all our various escapades – theirs and ours – and also get a weather report, which isn't so great:

Tonight thunderstorms 57-65
Tomorrow slight chance of showers 52-70
Sunday slight chance of thunderstorms 52-70

We retire at dusk and find the forecast is spot on for tonight: it rains all night with many periods of thunder.

Bradley Gap, NC (4960') to US 19E, Roan Mountain, TN (2880') – 8/18/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Bradley Gap, TN
End Time: 2:30 PM, Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel on Route 19E, Roan Mountain, TN
Total Miles: 7.6 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2000' gain/3400' loss

Distances:
Bradley Gap, NC (4960') to Apple House Shelter, TN = 5.8 miles
Reverse Hike Back to the Summit of Hump Mountain = 1.0 miles
Apple House Shelter, TN (3000') to US 19E, Elk Park, NC (2880') = 0.5 miles
Walk to Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel on Route 19E = 0.3 miles

Pedometer readings:
Steps: 24,999
Calories: 657

Steps/minute: 94

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MPH: 2.67 (1.72 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 25 minutes, 17 seconds

Miles: 11.83 miles (7.6 actual miles)

I didn't sleep well last night; besides all the noise from the rain and thunder there was a lot on my mind. Fortunately the rain has stopped by 5:45 AM when we get up. We push through our now locked-on one hour morning routine of up by 5:45 AM, breakfast, pack up, and off by 6:45 AM.

It is cold and wet this morning and the fog is so thick we can see absolutely nothing: bummer weather for the best trek of the hike :-)

The grass is high and soaking wet on the deeply eroded trail. As such our pants, socks, and shoes also become soaking wet making the hiking pretty uncomfortable. Our 700' climb from Bradley Gap to the summit of Hump Mountain – the first event on today's itinerary – is arduous and stressful: we take frequent rest stops.

Our continued searching for any sign of 'Bradley Gap Campground' or a side trail leading to said campground proves totally fruitless. It later dawns on us that we had actually found and stayed in Bradley Gap Campground last night! That it's not quite located in the middle of Bradley Gap throws us off.



**Bradley Gap and Hump Mountain Totally Socked In (Top)
Waiting for the Weather to Clear on the Summit of Hump Mountain (Bottom)**

After we pass the summit of Hump Mountain and are well down the north side of the mountain, the weather begins to clear, so I encourage that we should backtrack and retake the summit, in hopes that we can still get the spectacular views from Hump Mountain. So back up we go to the summit and at the

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top Hum breaks out some summer sausage he has brought – several packages in fact -- which magically requires no refrigeration, and is that ever delicious!

We hang around at the summit until lunchtime and the weather continues to improve. By 11:30 AM we are back on our way down Hump Mountain, again, and the views have cleared enough for us to appreciate how beautiful and expansive they really are.

On the down slope we meet “J. D. Glock’d” (according to the nametag he is wearing and journal he signs at Kincora Hostel), a southbound end-to-end AT hiker who is at least one week ahead of all other southbound end-to-end hikers. He is in a hurry, he says, to get to Greasy Creek Hostel in order to get on the Internet and settle the subletting of his New York apartment. J. D. speaks highly of Bob Peoples, the owner of Kincora Hostel in Hampton, TN, where he stayed last night and where we plan to stay tonight.

As we exit the open fields of the Hump Mountain bald back into the woods, it becomes a tough 6 mile hike down the mountain on wet, slippery rocks, reminiscent of our ‘PA rocks’ experience. In the valley below we see an expansive Christmas Tree Farm, one of many such farms in this NC/TN area. At Doll Flats, where the AT crosses the border from North Carolina back into Tennessee, we meet a woman from Bristol, VA, hiking with a poodle. She asks us how far any water is, quite why we wonder, for the dog perhaps? She passes us a bit further down the mountain, where we stop briefly for a water break and where Hum takes a pee (she pretends not to see Hum do that). She tells us that her daughter is 9 ½ months pregnant, expecting a boy named Bradley, and that delivery will be induced before next Friday if need be. She hikes past us and clearly she is a very fast hiker, much faster than the Ho-Hum geezers. Along the way we pass a natural staircase in the rocks.



**Christmas Tree Farm and NC/TN Border at Doll Flats (Top)
Natural Staircase on the AT (Bottom)**

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One half mile before reaching US 19E, we pass the former location of the Apple House Shelter, which, as stated earlier, has been torn down because of problems with homeless people living in the shelter. Also, the reported homeless squatter woman, purported to be living in a tent on the site of the former shelter, who reportedly asks passersby for food and to use their cell phones, thankfully is nowhere to be found.

We reach US 19E at 2:10 PM and walk the 0.3 miles down to the Mountain Harbour Hiking Hostel. We pick up Hum’s car and drive to Uncle Johnny’s Nolichucky Hostel to pick up my car and then proceed to

drive both cars to Kincora Hiking Hostel in Hampton, TN. Dennis Cove Road leading up the mountain to Kincora Hostel is twisty and steep: we will drive this road very many times.

When we arrive at Kincora we find no one at home or in the hostel, so we take up residence in the main 2-story hostel building (there is also a smaller, single story hostel building in the back with more bunks). We drop our stuff on the bunks behind the kitchen, on the first floor, but I soon move into the “master suite”, a separate room with its own door, also on the main floor.



**Kincora Hostel (Top Left); Bob Peoples' House (Foreground, Top Right)
Living Room Area (Bottom Left); “Master Suite” Bedroom (Bottom Right)**

We take showers in the very challenging teeny-tiny shower room, where the floor is rotting and giving way, the door does not fully close, and there is not nearly enough room to maneuver. But it's the first shower in 6 days and it feels great.

Kincora (which means, in Japanese, “kinship of the heart”) Hostel is huge and well equipped, but is spartan and probably has not had a good cleaning in years. However, it could not be more economical, \$5 per night “donation”, with free laundry, free parking, kitchen, free towels, shuttles to town, and much more.

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After showers, shaves, and settling into Kincora, we drive back into town to check out the restaurants. Hampton, TN, is a really small town and we don't find much choice in the way of restaurants, so we settle on a McDonalds and both enjoy yummy Big Macs. Cell phone service is passable in town so we call the girls and have a good chat and update each other on our mutual adventures.

After returning to Kincora, Bob Peoples, owner of Kincora Hostel and an AT legend himself, stops by to say hello and engage us in what turns out to be a fascinating two-hour chat. Bob has had a truly amazing range of experiences that in many ways parallel and overlap Hum's and my experiences. Here are a few excerpts from our extensive conversation:

- Bob Peoples is Irish and Scottish. His mother is a “Doyle”, from Ireland, and his father is from Peoples (Peebles?), a town near Edinburgh, Scotland.
- He is from South Boston (Irish neighborhood) and has much in common with Pat McAuliffe Ash,

- Hum's better half, who also grew up in the Irish neighborhoods of Boston.
- Bob got his masters (and PhD?) at the [University of Massachusetts Amherst](#) and is 68 years old. His wife Pat died of cancer about 2 years ago.
- He is a retired Air Force Lt. Colonel, who participated in the 15 April 1986 attack on Libya called [Operation El Dorado Canyon](#), specifically ordered by President Ronald Reagan to target [Muammar Gaddafi](#) in retribution for Libyan terrorist attacks targeting the US including the 5 April 1986 attack by Libyan agents on the "La Belle" nightclub in West Berlin. Bob told a gripping account of the top secret nature of the operation.
- His role in the Air Force was to conduct electronic jamming operations and said that his electronics capabilities included cancelling out enemy radio transmissions and overlaying our own radio transmissions. This capability was used, for example, to direct the terrorists who hijacked the [Achille Lauro](#) in 1985 to a US base in order to arrest them.
- He served in Vietnam from 1969-1970 and flew out of Na Trang and Phu Cat. I also served in Vietnam in the same timeframe and was in Na Trang and Phu Cat during that period.
- In the Air Force, at times he managed 700+ people.
- Bob lived in Brookfield, VT, and did maintenance on Vermont's Long Trail, including Clarendon Gorge bridge and Little Rock Pond Shelter. He is very familiar with the entire LT.
- He attended the Vermont Long Trail festival that Hum and I had also attended; he knows Wayne Krevetski (Mad Hatter) and Dave Hardy, prominent members of the Green Mountain Club, who Hum and I also know.
- He taught at Norwich University in Northfield, VT.
- In 2009 he hiked the [Camino de Santiago](#) (the "Way of St. James") in Spain, the pilgrimage route to the cathedral of [Santiago de Compostela](#), where tradition has it that the remains of the apostle Saint James are buried. This hike was recently portrayed by actor Martin Sheen in the movie called "The Way"; Sheen also hiked the trail in 2009.
- He hiked the [Big Cypress Swamp](#) in Everglades National Park, part of the 1400-mile long [Florida Trail](#), where the trail actually goes through sometimes knee-deep water. Along the way he encountered highly poisonous cottonmouth snakes and a 9' alligator.
- He also hiked the [Florida Trail](#) along the levees of [Lake Okeechobee](#), where he encountered an electrical worker who inquired about what he was doing out in the intense heat, etc. Bob later found out that the worker described him to a friend, who happened to be hiking with Bob, as a "crazy old man".
- He has hiked extensively in Central America, South America, and Europe.
- Oddly, he has no trail name.
- He says he bought the site of the future Kincora Hostel "over the phone", sight unseen, and built the hostel with his own hands 16 years ago. He has hosted over 12,000 hikers, including many famous hikers, including [Cimarron](#), who at 83 years old is said to be the oldest hiker to complete the AT. Bob said Cimarron would try again this year (I later found out he didn't make it) and plans to do the [Camino de Santiago](#) in 2013.
- He and his many other helpers are the lead maintainer's of this 125-mile section of the AT, where the primary maintainer is the [Tennessee Eastman Hiking & Canoe Club](#). Bob organizes an annual maintenance extravaganza held in mid-May, right after the [AT Trail Days in Damascus, Virginia](#),

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called "Hard Core", which Bob talks about in this [You Tube Video](#). He points out that Vermont maintains the longest section of the AT, 128 miles.

- He told us that Laurel Fork Shelter has 3 big rats and that fire burned the floor. Our original plan was to stay at Laurel Fork Shelter but, given this information from Bob, our revised plan now is to go further. This is fortunate because neither Hum nor I have any interest in sleeping with the rats.

Backpacker Magazine recently ran the following article on Bob Peoples:

Heroes: Bob Peoples, 68

This tireless trail angel is firing up a new generation of backcountry stewards.

by: Nathan Pipenberg



Bob Peoples (Center) is Friend and Inspiration to All Hikers

Northbound hikers on the Appalachian Trail start to see them as soon as they leave the Smokies. Scrawled across shelter walls and in trail registers, "Most Interesting Man in the World"-style jokes tout the virtues of a hostel owner and trail maintainer living near Hampton, Tennessee. "Bears hang Bob Peoples' food bag for him," reads one. Another: "When Bob Peoples builds a switchback, an angel gets its wings."

There's good reason that the AT faithful see Peoples as a superhero. First, there's his generosity as a host at Kincora Hikers' Hostel, his rustic lodge 414 trail miles from Georgia's Springer Mountain. A mere \$5 donation buys a bed, shower, laundry, kitchen, and shuttles into town. Thank-you postcards plaster the walls.

Then there's Peoples' tireless work as a trail steward. He's logged 7,000 hours of maintenance since 1988 (an average of 300 a year), and every May, he gathers 100 current and past thru-hikers for an intensive two-day trailwork bonanza he calls "Hardcore Kincora." In 2006, he and his Hardcore trail crew erected the 14-person-capacity, two-story Mountaineer Falls Shelter in a day and a half. At the May 2013 event, Peoples will lead the crew in building new switchbacks on Roan High Knob, the third highest peak on the AT.

"It's inspiring to see how devoted Bob is to the trail," says John Carpenter, a 2011 thru-hiker who took part in Hardcore during his northbound trek. "Working with him convinced me to do trailwork in the Tetons." Peoples became engulfed in thru-hiking subculture after retiring from the Air Force in 1988. He helped maintain Vermont's Long Trail for the Green Mountain Club while in transition to civilian life. "The trail offers the same fast friendships as the military, but also grants you solitude," he says.

In 1994, he decided to open a hikers' hostel, partly to stay close to trails himself. He spent weeks scouring backroads along the AT, looking for a plot of land within a mile of the path. Near Hampton, Tennessee, he purchased a country home and, in 1997, opened Kincora. Since then, he's welcomed more than 19,000 guests and played an instrumental part in creating the AT's culture of camaraderie and solidarity.

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Peoples only admits he's doing more than just enjoying his retirement when he talks about spreading his commitment to trail maintenance. As Hardcore Kincora ends every year, Peoples has each volunteer paint a blaze along the AT. The crew members, mostly thru-hikers who'll pass more than 80,000 blazes between Georgia and Maine, sometimes get emotional about this symbol of their connection to the trail. "Do we over-blaze in a few places? Sure," Peoples says. "But we're also creating the next-generation of AT stewards."

Hum and I saw many of the shelter-wall scrawlings about Bob Peoples that they quote in the above article, shown here:



Shelter Wall Scrawlings Regarding Bob Peoples

Our initial interpretation is that these scrawlings are vile criticisms of Bob Peoples. However, based on the Backpacker Magazine article, I now think we were probably mistaken, and what we first thought were vile criticisms of Bob are instead strangely phrased, good hearted joking and praise.

More interesting stories about Bob Peoples can be found at [Bob Peoples AT Legend](#) and [WhiteBlaze.net Kincora Stories](#). The story in WhiteBlaze.net near the end of page 1 -- about the hiker using a paint bucket as a backpack -- is really interesting and right on the mark as far as Bob Peoples' kindness.

"JD GLOCK'D", who we met on Hump Mountain yesterday, left the following message in the Kincora Hostel journal, confirming the deep admiration held by many hikers for Bob Peoples:

8/17/12

Bob you are a legend but I think the greatest thing is that you are so human. Thank you for the stay, the talk, the help but most importantly, inspiring me to live life like it should be.

"JD GLOCK'D"

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Hum left the following in the Kincora Hostel journal:

8/18/12

We are brothers hiking the AT from Erwin to Damascus. This is our 4th year hiking together, mostly in Vermont (Long Trail) and AT in Mass. The trail for us has been great so far – great views, well maintained trail, the Balds, and talking to other hikers at the shelters. Talked to Bob last night and found we had a lot in common – Boston, VietNam, Vermont LT and AT in PA. Will be back later next week.

Geezer Hikers Ho (age 70) & Hum (age 72)

Zero Day at Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel on US 19E, Roan Mountain, TN – 8/19/12

Hum is up at 6:30 AM, I sleep until 8:30: what a great sleep after 6 days of pushing on the trail! We pack up and are soon on our way in my car (leaving Hum's car at Kincora) to the Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel (MHHH) in Roan Mt., TN, with a stop along the way at McDonalds in Hampton for a yummy burrito breakfast.

MHHH is really clean and well kept; while we're there Shannon and her son clean the place thoroughly. We drop our stuff in the hostel/barn (working barn with 3 horses in residence) and make our way up to the main house to meet and pay Mary for our stay. We have a nice chat with Mary; she is a really nice lady as I have already learned by speaking with her several times on the phone. Each morning she prepares a fabulous full breakfast, which is extremely popular with hikers, but for us it is served too late in the morning: we like to get going on the trail at the crack of dawn. Mary tells us that last May she cooked breakfast for 40 hikers, most of whom had to put up tents in their vast lawn area; so populated she tells us that it looked like an encampment, not to mention the convenience of all of them sharing a single bathroom and shower!

We spend the whole morning and until 2:00 PM getting our food and packs organized for the next hiking days, making sandwiches, etc. Along the way I somehow lose some Zebra Cakes. I search high and low but alas the Zebra Cakes are gone: Hum is the culprit! I conclude, that is, before finding them much later buried in my food bag :-)

On one of several trips up and down the ladder to the loft area where the bunks are located, the rope hung from the ceiling (see picture below), used to steady oneself on the ladder, gave way and I very nearly fell 6 feet onto the floor below!



**Mountain Harbour Hikers Hostel/Horse Barn (Left)
Living Area (Right); Note the Steadying Rope Beside the Ladder to the Loft Area
(It Gave Way and I Nearly Fell Off the Ladder!)**

For lunch we find "Bob's Dairyland" down the road and enjoy a delicious BBQ lunch. We return there for dinner and I have the half pound of ground round, which is one of my very favorite dishes.

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After dinner I call Lysie from the porch of the hostel. She tells me she is packing my knick knacks, in preparation for our move to Florida, and that somehow gets me a little upset because I'm much too attached to my knick knacks (and have too many of them to boot). She called back later and left a message saying 'don't worry about the knick knacks everything is going to be fine': it was the sweetest message ever from my precious wifey.

In the evening we take advantage of a VCR player and numerous movie choices. We start with "American Pie", which we both agree is just awful, and soon bail out of that one. We follow that with "City Slickers", which we both find is a really good movie, even the second time around. We hit the hay at about 10 PM and soon after 2 people come to the door wanting to know how to get to the AT trailhead. They say they want to go to Apple House Shelter tonight! Hum advises them regarding "no shelter" and homeless squatter issues. It is late and dark and this is a very strange and disconcerting encounter to say the least. Are these robbers, or what, we wonder, and lock the door and close the curtains.

US 19E, Roan Mountain, TN to Mountaineer Shelter – 8/20/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, US 19E, Roan Mountain, TN
End Time: 12:00 Noon, Mountaineer Shelter, TN (3300')
Total Miles: 9.3 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2200' gain/1900' loss

Distances:

Walk to Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel on Route 19E = 0.3 miles
US19E-Elk Park, NC (2880') to Mountaineer Shelter, TN (3300') = 8.8 miles
Jones Falls Side Trail = 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 27,111
Calories: 713
Steps/minute: 102
MPH: 2.67 (1.94 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 24 minutes, 25 seconds
Miles: 12.83 miles (9.3 actual miles)

Up at 5:45 AM; Hum makes coffee and we're off by 6:45 AM, first light, as usual. In the parking lot we meet the tall red head and his sister, who were the ones who knocked on the door last night to get directions to the AT. They didn't go to the AT; instead they camped by their car in the parking lot in the same small tent (brother and sister, a bit weird). The sister is tall and extremely thin (anorexic or cancer?) They are very apologetic about coming after 10 PM to ask directions to the trailhead. Unexplained is why they chose to tent rather than bunk in the hostel? They are headed to Roan Mountain today and will shuttle back to Mountain Harbour Hiker Hostel on Wednesday.

We make our way up US Route 19E but miss the AT north trailhead and have to backtrack. It's pretty easy hiking today compared to the Roan Highlands, with fine views, beautiful wildflowers, and unusual mushrooms along the way.

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**Fine Views, Beautiful Wildflowers, and Unusual Mushrooms along the Way
From US Route 19E on AT North to Mountaineer Shelter**

Jones Falls, just 0.1 mile off the AT, presents a “not-to-be-missed” setting, even though the falls are not quite full this time of year.

We arrive at the Mountaineer Shelter at Noon. It’s a very nice 3 level shelter with a carved bear on the second level. Bob Peoples says the third level was created when a woman slept on some loose boards; she thought they were the third level but actually were not. My PB&J sandwich tastes especially wonderful for lunch; I must be especially hungry.

In the afternoon I read a book left at the shelter entitled *Travels through the Middle Settlements in North America in the Years 1759 & 1760 with Observations Upon the State of the Colonies*, by Rev. Andrew Burnaby, A.M. It is particularly interesting in its coverage of Passaic (Paterson) Falls, Great Falls, Philadelphia, Boston, New York, Jerseys, Princeton, etc. and its comments on the political atmosphere prior to the revolution.



Jones Falls (“Not-to-be-Missed”) just off the AT



Hum Does Lunch at Mountaineer Shelter; Resident Bear on Second Level

I also spent much time replanning the remainder of our hike, and propose that we shorten the hike by 2 days: this entails hiking next to Kincora Hostel in 1 day's time, taking a zero day at Kincora Hostel, and then hiking 4 more days to Damascus, VA with one night tenting in a camping area. Hum likes the new plan.

I leave the following entry in the Mountaineer Shelter journal:

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*8/20/12 Seventh hiking day for Geezer Hikers Ho & Hum's trek from Erwin → Damascus. Greatly *accelerating* pace now with stop at Kincora and then 4 days to Damascus. Yeah we're slow but enjoying fantastic hike: Roan Highlands and balds outstanding. Brothers enjoying their 70th and 72nd year, and looking forward to more of same. Peace, Ho & Hum*

P.S. Chez Hum's restaurant filled to capacity this evening

Mountaineer Shelter (3300') to Kincora Hostel (2500') – 8/21/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Mountaineer Shelter, TN (3300')
End Time: 4:15 PM, Kincora Hostel, Hampton, TN (2500')
Total Miles: 16.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 3000' gain/3800' loss

Distances:

Mountaineer Shelter, TN (3300') to Moreland Gap Shelter, TN (3813') = 9.6 miles
Moreland Gap Shelter, TN (3813') to USFS50-Dennis Cove, TN (2500') = 6.0 miles
Side Trail at Moreland Gap Shelter to Water Source and Back = 0.4 miles
Dennis Cove Road to Kincora Hostel = 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 45,850
Calories: 1,206
Steps/minute: 105
MPH: 2.98 (2.22 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 7 hours, 15 minutes, 42 seconds
Miles: 21.71 miles (16.2 actual miles)

We're up at 5:50 AM after a spotty sleep; noisy as always and an earache in my right ear prevented use of earplugs. As usual, we're back on the trail by 6:45 AM. We make good time averaging 2 mph (1.5 mph on uphill, 2.5 mph on downhill).

Just beyond the Mountaineer Shelter I'm stung by yellow jackets. It's especially unfortunate because people had written in the journal warning of same. It's a pretty big hurt for a while and then itches all night tonight.

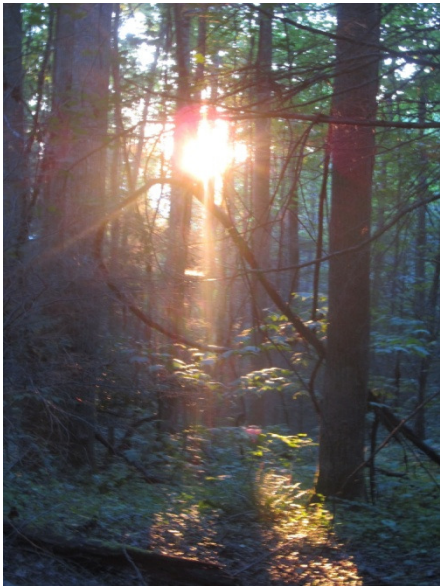
We get some good views along the way; it's a very clear day with no haze. We reach Moreland Gap Shelter just after 12:00 Noon (9.6 miles). We have lunch and debate as to whether or not we should keep going to Kincora Hostel, another 6 miles north. In the meantime, I make a big 0.2 mile descent to the spring, which is the shelter's water source, and find it to be a steady trickle. Finally we decide to keep going and onward we hike.

The remaining 500' climb up White Rocks Mountain is arduous, but there is an excellent view from the top, which encompasses Roan Mountain, Hump Mountain, Little Hump Mountain, and Grassy Ridge. We find a series of three 50-100' "humps" to navigate on the summit more than a little annoying. Descending the mountain is very steep and not quick and in fact a bit dangerous.

We reach Dennis Cove Road by 4:05 PM. We drop our packs and I wait in the parking area while Hum walks up the road to Kincora Hostel to get his car. On the way he encounters two vicious dogs that attack him, baring their teeth. Hum doesn't have his poles to swat them away but manages to narrowly escape without injury.

We move into Kincora, no one else is there at the moment. We both take the same bunks as before, I'm again in the "Master Suite", a separate room with a double bed off the living room area.

Soon Bob Peoples and his helper/friend Roman return from a day of maintenance on the Beartown/Roan Mountains. They are being helped by a group of 11 Wright State University students, who are here to help after a 5-day hike from Hughes Gap to US Route 19E.



**Sunrise at Mountaineer Shelter (Top Left); Crossing Laurel Fork (Top Right)
View from Summit of White Rocks Mountain Showing
L. to R. Roan Mt., Hump Mt., Little Hump Mt., Grassy Ridge (Bottom Left)
Weathered Kincora Hiking Hostel Sign at Dennis Cove Road (Bottom Right)**

We chat with Bob and Roman for a bit and then drive to Mountain Harbour Hiking Hostel to pick up my car and pay Mary for 7 nights of parking (\$14). We hope to eat again at Bob's Dairyland in Roan Mountain, TN, down the road from the hostel, but we're too late, Bob's closes at 6:00 PM, so we eat instead at nearby Hemingway's Restaurant, which also has BBQ and is quite excellent as well.

Back at Kincora we meet the 11 Wright State University students, who are very polite and considerate of us geezers (e.g., giving up their seats for the elderly :-). These students are participating in the [Freshman Outdoor Orientation Trip \(FOOT\) Group](#), which is described on the Wright State web-site as follows:

The Freshmen Outdoor Orientation Trip (FOOT) is a unique wilderness experience which will take place the week before school begins. Trained upperclassmen will lead backpacking trips along the Appalachian Trail. The trips are designed for all levels of experience. F.O.O.T. offers an amazing opportunity for incoming students to meet a small group of new classmates and establish relationships with older student leaders. You will hike, camp, cook outdoors, play games, swim in waterfalls, and spend a day giving back to the mountains by learning how to build and maintain hiking trails. This week of outdoor adventure with a small group of new classmates will be an incredible introduction to the Wright State community; it will get you started on the Wright FOOT!

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Roman tells me the story of how in February he saved Grim (the manager of Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel in Erwin, TN, where we stayed our first night) from the Nolichucky River, when Grim's kayak got pinned on a rock. Roman, a hero after saving Grim, says he told Grim that he's "crazy for going on the river; it's extremely dangerous". Apparently Grim was not very grateful to said hero for saving his life.

The Wright State University students leave the following message in the Kincora Hostel journal:

8/22/12

Thanks again, Bob, for another wonderful year! We all learned so much and we greatly appreciate this amazing experience. We will never forget you and your guys and we look forward to coming back and working on the trail in the future :-)

*Wright State University (F.O.O.T. group)
(The Appalachian Avengers)*

Roman and students retire about 9:30 – 10:00 PM; Roman to the separate building in the back and the kids all go to the upstairs bunks leaving the downstairs entirely to Ho & Hum. Everyone is very quiet and considerate. I have a great sound sleep with no noise and snooze away blissfully until 7:30 AM the next morning.

Zero Day at Kincora Hiking Hostel on Dennis Cover Road, Hampton, TN – 8/22/12

A long restful sleep is followed by coffee, zebra cakes, shower, shave, and an altogether big cleanup: hooray! We chat with Bob and Roman outside; Bob is off for a brake job on his jeep and Roman is helping a friend on a farm nearby. Roman says his friend grows corn and ginseng and protects the ginseng by using video surveillance and embedding microchips in the plants to track them if stolen. He says they have caught ginseng thieves (“senger’s” they’re called), who are “usually locals” he says.

Taking both cars, we first hit McD’s for breakfast then drive on to Damascus, taking Route 19E to Route 91 to Route 133 to Damascus, a very nice ride through some beautiful Tennessee countryside. Along the way Hum spots a bear in a field; unfortunately I don’t see it. We find Mt. Rogers Outfitters in Damascus where we leave Hum’s car in the parking lot (\$2/day).

We chat with owners Dave and Chris about trail conditions between Hampton and Damascus, especially the availability of water. They warn us that water is very scarce on this AT section, and advise us that we’ll need to seek springs lower on the mountain, sometimes necessitating hiking all the way down to the base of the mountain and then back up again. Let’s hope not! Earlier, Bob Peoples advised us that he places a water cache near the intersection of the AT and Route 91. We plan to seek out the cache on our return trip to Hampton.

On our way back to Hampton we take time to explore [Backbone Rock](#) on Route 133. A tunnel was carved through the rock in 1901 and a staircase carved into the rock takes you to the top.



Exploring Backbone Rock on Route 133 in Cherokee National Forest, TN

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We next stop at the intersection of Route 91 and the AT and look for the water cache Bob Peoples told us he provides in the area. After much searching we can’t find the cache, and later learn from Bob that we are looking on the wrong side of Route 91. We check out the city of Elizabethton for restaurants and find several and plan to return later to try one of them.

We have the Big Mac special for lunch at McD’s in Hampton (\$3.50) and return to Kincora to make sandwiches and ready ourselves for the next 4 days of hiking to Damascus. Later in the afternoon we chat with Bob Peoples for a while; he is most entertaining and a great story teller with an incredible range of experiences. His positive outlook is off the charts. Hum comments as to how nice and polite the kids are from Wright State University. Bob is obviously very pleased with Hum’s comments and

wholeheartedly agrees and then in fact requests that Hum write a letter to Wright State University FOOT administrator commending them on same. Hum later does send a letter, as follows:

August 31, 2012

Wright State University
Dean of Students
3640 Colonial Glenn Highway
Dayton, Ohio 45435-0001

Re: Letter of appreciation – FOOT Trip Group

My brother and I are senior citizens (ages 70 and 72) and have been hiking various sections of the Appalachian Trail for the last several years. As such, we very much appreciate the work that trail maintenance folks do year in and year out to keep the trail in tip-top condition. This year in August we encountered 11 college students of Wright State (FOOT Trip Group) who spent a day maintaining the trail in Tennessee after a several day hike adventure. We understand that his group (different students) does this maintenance work every year. We would like to thank the students and the University for supporting this effort.

Our meeting with the group occurred at the Kincora Hiking Hostel in Hampton TN owned and operated by Bob Peoples. We were taking a break and staying there. The students were very considerate of us old guys, had excellent manners and quieted down at a time when the party is usually just starting for young people. They were great kids and a credit to your University.

If possible please share this letter with the leader of the group. Thank you.

Sincerely,

*Robert Ash
Timonium, MD*

Copies: Bob Peoples, Gerald Ash

Now dinner time, we make our way back to Elizabethton and chose the Southern Café, which indeed is quite wonderful, delicious, and reasonable. We both have the meatloaf, gravy, salad, bread, vegetables, along with pecan cobbler and ice cream for dessert, all for \$7! On the way back to Kincora we buy some laundry soap for Bob, which he earlier mentioned is in need of resupply.

Kincora Hiker Hostel (2500') to Watauga Lake Shelter, TN (2000') 8/23/12

Start Time: 6:40 AM, Kincora Hiker Hostel, Hampton, TN
End Time: 2:15 PM, Watauga Lake Shelter, TN (2000')
Total Miles: 10.6 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2100' gain/2700' loss

Distances:

Kincora Hostel to Dennis Cove Road Trailhead = 0.2 miles
USFS50-Dennis Cove, TN (2500') to Laurel Fork Shelter, TN (2000') = 1.9 miles
Laurel Fork Shelter, TN (2000') to Pond Flats Tent Area (3700') = 3.7 miles
Pond Flats Tent Area (3700') to US321-Hampton, TN (2000') = 3.1 miles

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US321-Hampton, TN (2000') to Watauga Lake Shelter, TN (2000') = 1.8 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 37,336
Calories: 932
Steps/minute: 106
MPH: 3.03 (1.82 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 49 minutes, 20 seconds
Miles: 17.68 miles (10.6 actual miles)

Up at 5:40 AM. Coffee, zebra cakes, off by 6:40 AM. No vicious dogs this early morning to attack us like they did Hum last evening.

The trail down to Laurel Falls is steep and rugged, perhaps having "1000 steps", somewhat reminiscent of the LT Section going south from Route 9 in Bennington, VT. I remember the falls quite well, which I hiked

to years earlier with Bill Roach and Lysie, and also recall climbing to the top of the falls on a very steep embankment to the left side of the falls.

The 1800' climb to the summit of Pond Mountain plays arduous, as usual. By now, I've started hiking a bit faster than Hum so I take the lead for most of the rest of the hike to Damascus.

About ½ hour before we reach the summit we meet "Ruby Vermonter" from Montpelier, VT. She is section hiking the AT, this time from near Roanoke, VA to US Route 19E, Roan Mountain, TN, and says she got the hiking bug by doing the White Mountains in NH and staying in the huts. She plans to stay at Moreland Shelter tonight and then go on to Mountain Harbour Hiking Hostel to end this hike. She says she'll skip Kincora Hostel because of bad things she read into the graffiti on the walls of Vandeventer Shelter, which implied to her that Bob Peoples is a low-life sex maniac. (Note: To the contrary, as discussed earlier, this graffiti is sometimes very strangely worded banter aimed at Bob Peoples. We had the same strong reaction until we found out otherwise).

We question Ruby Vermonter about water availability; this is a particular concern for us because of numerous warnings we received regarding the scarcity of water on this AT section. She says she's had no problem; she found the water cache provided by Bob Peoples a bit south of Route 91. She stayed at Vandeventer Shelter, but didn't go down the 0.5 mile, steep and difficult side trail for water, as mentioned in the guide book. Rather she found a spring just south of the shelter.

We don't get a very good view at a point marked as a "vista point" in the guidebook because the view is now obstructed by vegetation growth over the years. Further north on the Pond Mountain trail, however, we do get an excellent view of Watauga Lake and Watauga Dam (see picture below). We find the trail to be quite nice going down the north side of Pond Mountain; smother than the ascent on the south side where we encounter many switchbacks. Hum is stung going down the mountain; painful.

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**Crossing Koonford Bridge over Laurel Fork above Laurel Fork Falls (Top Left)
Descending “1000 Steps” Down to Laurel Fork Falls (Top Right)
Ho & Hum at Laurel Fork Falls (Bottom)**

We stop at Watauga Lake for lunch; it's a very pretty man-made lake, thanks to the Watauga Dam, built by the TVA in 1948. Conveniently there is a shaded picnic table by the lake where we settle and a water fountain nearby where we fill our water bottles. We chat with a very friendly and very fat lady who is swimming and sun bathing near us. She lives near Erwin, TN, and says that yesterday she took a 14-mile hike (which her daughter estimated as only 1 mile, a huge disagreement). While on the hike, she exclaims, she saw a **BAR!**, and was extremely fearful because there were 3 kids along with her. She has no knowledge of the AT and comments, incredulously, “for real?” when we tell her of our plan to stay at the Watauga Lake Shelter tonight and hike the AT to Damascus over the next 5 days. She bids us farewell and says “God Bless” as we depart for Watauga Lake Shelter, a very nice lady.

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View of Watauga Lake and Watauga Dam (Left); Lunch by Watauga Lake (Right)

It takes us another 45 minutes to hike the 1.6 miles to Watauga Lake Shelter; we arrive there at 2:15 PM. As usual, no one is there when we arrive. There is a good phone signal at the shelter so we call our brides before other hikers are bound to arrive.



Watauga Lake Shelter and Bear Pole

Two young college girls arrive at about 6:15 PM and immediately seek out a tent site. They are hiking from Route 91 to Dennis Cove Road but seem inexperienced; e.g., they don't know about mouse hooks and other hiking stuff. They both attend East Tennessee State University and are nutrition majors; one has a job starting on Monday (this is Thursday) as a hospital dietician. They ask about starting a camp fire by the shelter, but Hum advises them to build their fire by their tent since we retire early (good move Hum). They join us at the picnic table by the shelter for dinner and Hum turns on the "Humberto charm" to maximum setting, especially as the girls get giggly after consuming wine with their dinner.

After dinner we go to fill our water bottles, intending to fill 2 extra 20 oz. bottles each (about 1 liter) in anticipation of the 19 mile dry section. It's an extra 2 pounds of water: heavy! But half way through the pumping action the handle on Hum's pump breaks, rendering the pump completely useless! Unfortunately I have left my pump behind in order to reduce my pack weight so we have no backup pump. On the other hand, I am carrying Potable Aqua water purification tablets, enough to purify 25 liters

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of water, which is sufficient to get us to Damascus. Instead of using the tablets now, however, we borrow the girls' pump to finish the job.

We retire at 8:00 PM as usual. At 10 PM, though, the girls decide to very noisily hang their food from the nearby bear pole, waking us up. I'm still suffering from an ear ache that has persisted for several days now: painful.

Watauga Lake Shelter, TN (2000') to Iron Mountain Tent Site, TN (3900') 8/24/12

Start Time: 6:40 AM, Watauga Lake Shelter, TN (2000')
End Time: 2:45 PM, Iron Mountain Tent Site, TN (3900')
Total Miles: 11.0 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2800' gain/1400' loss

Distances:

Watauga Lake Shelter, TN (2000') to Vandeventer Shelter, TN (3510') = 7.2 miles.
Vandeventer Shelter, TN (3510') to Iron Mountain Tent Site (3900') = 3.8 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 36,906
Calories: 971
Steps/minute: 102
MPH: 2.92 (1.84 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 58 minutes, 38 seconds
Miles: 17.47 miles (11.0 actual miles)

Up at 5:40 AM. Coffee, zebra cakes, off by 6:40 AM. The extra 2 pounds of water feels heavy and is very noticeable.

We're first greeted this morning with beautiful vistas at Watauga Lake Dam. There is a deep rocky gorge beyond the dam and the lighting on Watauga Lake is particularly outstanding in the early morning. It is a very uplifting beginning to our day.

We meet a section hiker at the crossing of Wilbur Lake Road, who has a motor scooter in the bed of his pickup truck; he does a self shuttle with motor scooter and truck, very clever. He doesn't backpack, just does day hikes.

We find it an arduous 2000' climb up to the Iron Mountain ridge and once on the ridge it is constant up and down: 75% of the time the going is up, or so it seems. Our difficult climb is interrupted by some spectacular morning sunlight beaming in shafts of brilliant light through the trees; we take more awesome inspiration from mother nature to keep us going.

We finally reach the spring that Ruby Vermonter had told us about yesterday. It's a pool of muddy water but all that's available: we filter the muddy water with a head scarf then treat the water with Potable Agua.

A runner jogs by us in both directions. He's preparing for the 30 mile [Iron Mountain Trail Run](#) (IMTR) to be held a week from tomorrow, the Saturday before Labor Day. According to the web-site, the actual IMTR does not use the AT, but rather a series of other trails including the Iron Mountain Trail. There are

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Early Morning Beauty and Inspiration at Watauga Lake Dam

16, 30, and 50 mile options for the runners; the 50 mile option ascends over 8000'! It looks like an extremely arduous and potentially dangerous endeavor, given many opportunities to fall, etc.



We Take Inspiration from the Early Morning Glory of Mother Nature

We arrive at Vandeventer Shelter about noon, which has a nice but somewhat hazy view of Watauga Lake; a good place to have lunch. As discussed earlier, we note the considerable graffiti on the shelter

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walls concerning Bob Peoples. At this point our interpretation is that this is dastardly, most unwarranted, cutting criticism of a really good person. So in his defense I write next to one of the offending inscriptions:

"Whoever wrote this graffiti RE Bob is a real jerk. Get a life! Bob is a good guy."



View of Watauga Lake from Vandeventer Shelter Lunch Spot

We read in the shelter journal of a tragedy that occurred on July 4 to 2 AT hikers, father and son, who drowned in a whirlpool at the base of Laurel Fork Falls, which we passed by just yesterday. The son got caught in the whirlpool and was trapped under a ledge. He was not found until later when rain drove his body out. The father died trying to save his son; still had socks on when his body was found.

The journal entries read:

7/6/12

Today I learned that my friends, Whitey & Red Headed Stranger, were the 2 hikers found in Laurel Fork Falls this past Wednesday morning (July 4).

They must have been pulled by the undertow...

I had been trying to catch up with them for about a week and was keeping up with them via the shelter books. I looked for their handwriting in Watauga's log book & was surprised not to see it. They were going to stop in Damascus, so I'll walk these next miles for them. They were kind, & funny, & loved that they had the chance to be in the mountains.

Please send a prayer or positive thought their way.

Rest in peace.

- Triscuit

7/7/12

It is tough to know how to follow the entry appropriately & we tiptoed around the journal all evening. At 3 am, it was on my mind & I had to get this down before I could rest.

All of us out here can identify in one way or another with the story of a father & son out on the AT for an adventure. It is especially poignant for me, out here with my daughter of a similar age. The story is a cruel reminder.

We hear thundering all afternoon but luckily no rain. Hum is slow today; very tired after 10 days of hiking. We take many rests along the way and finally arrive at the tent site at 2:45 PM. There is a very muddy 'water source' not far from the site, but we opt not to use it: it's way too dirty to scoop up. We decide to have a dry dinner meal of PB&J sandwiches and no coffee in the morning, in order to conserve our water. Hum gives me 1/2 of his summer sausage, which again is absolutely delicious!

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Our Tent Site on Iron Mountain

A completely ridiculous bee buzzes our tents for 5+ hours, from the time we arrive all the way to 8:15 PM, when, as Hum predicted, the dumb bee quits its quest when it gets dark. But the incredibly persistent bee again buzzes Hum's tent at the crack of dawn. How annoying! I attempt to swat the highly elusive bee with my map a number of times but didn't do him it. How I would love to kill him but he gets the upper buzzing hand, so to speak.

The wonderful music of the Katydid is extremely loud tonight and drowns out any snoring noise, which is minimal anyway given the distance that our tents are separated. It's wonderful cool sleeping from 8 PM all the way to 5:30 AM, when I wake Hum from his slumber.

Iron Mountain Tent Site, TN (3900') to Double Springs Shelter (4080') 8/25/12

Start Time: 6:40 AM, Watauga Lake Shelter, TN (2000')

End Time: 2:45 PM, Iron Mountain Tent Site, TN (3900')

Total Miles: 10.6 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2200' gain/1700' loss

Distances:

Iron Mountain Tent Site, TN (3900') to Iron Mountain Shelter, TN (4000') = 3.0 miles

Iron Mountain Shelter, TN (4000') to Double Springs Shelter, TN (4080') = 7.6 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 31,333

Calories: 824

Steps/minute: 104

MPH: 2.98 (2.13 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 58 minutes, 31 seconds

Miles: 14.83 miles (10.6 actual miles)

Up at 5:30 AM. I have zebra cakes but no coffee (to conserve water); off by 6:45 AM. We make a faster pace today, but still there are frequent 2-3 minute waits. About 5 minutes out of the tent site I trip on a rock obscured by grass; I fall forward and am not hurt but sorry to spoil a perfect record of no falls up until now.

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We pass the grave of Nick Grindstaff. According to the AT guidebook

"The grave of Nick Grindstaff, a hermit, buried here before the Trail came through. The monument bears the inscription "Uncle Nick Grindstaff – born Dec. 26, 1851 – died July 22, 1923 – lived alone, suffered alone, and died alone." Orphaned at age three, Grindstaff traveled west at age 26 but was robbed and beaten there. Disillusioned, he came back east to the mountains and lived the remaining 45 years of his life on Iron Mountain with only a dog as a companion. When he was found dead in his shanty, the dog reportedly had to be overpowered before the body could be removed; it had kept watch for three or four days."

"So long Nick" we say as we depart.



The Grave of Nick Grindstaff

About 2 more miles further north we meet "Hopalong" having a smoke break. He's "flip flopping" an AT thru-hike: he already did Damascus, VA to Mt. Katahdin, ME, then took a bus back to Damascus, and is now doing Damascus, VA to Springer Mountain, GA. He told us he saw the water cache by Route 91 but no other water sources he could use (doesn't have a pump so shallow water sources are no good for

him). Says he's going to Watauga Lake Shelter today, a very long hike, and will stop at Kincora Hostel tomorrow. He vehemently disagrees with the Bob Peoples graffiti he saw, as do we.

We reach Route 91 at about 11 AM and finally find the water cache placed by Bob Peoples: there are two 1-gallon jugs of water, both half full. We fill our liter bottles and one backup bottle. Nearby a young kid is having target practice with his rifle; it's a bit intimidating as we don't know where the bullets are going. According to Hopalong, squirrel season starts today and he says he will buy orange clothing in Erwin to protect himself.

We cross Route 91 and immediately enter the ½ mile so-called "handicap-accessible section". It is actually a rocky dirt path and in my opinion wouldn't be particularly friendly to someone in a wheelchair or using a walker. There are great views of Shady Valley, a former cranberry bog center but not anymore;

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**Hum Hikes "Handicap-Accessible Section" Just North of Route 91, TN (Top)
Taking in Views of Shady Valley; Climbing into Cow Pasture on Osborne Farm (Bottom)**

we see Mt. Rogers in the distance, it's a very clear day. Lyn and I and Bill Roach had climbed Mt. Rogers on one our numerous day hikes in the 90's. We climb over a 'cow stile' into a cow pasture. In the pasture we pass a young couple with a ~3 year old exceptionally adorable, beautiful little blond girl; mother is also carrying a baby in a pouch. Dad tells us about the Shady Valley view, but isn't sure that the view includes Mt. Rogers.

We take our lunch on the northern 'cow stile' leading from the cow pasture back into the woods; it provides a convenient place for both of us to sit (on opposite sides of the fence).

We're not far into the woods when we meet John, Ed, and Bob from Memphis, TN, who are day hiking

and staying in Bristol, TN for the upcoming NASCAR auto races at [Bristol Motor Speedway](#). They are quite interested on our hike and impressed that 70+ geezers can hike 125 miles.

Along the way we are both stung by White Face Hornets, a very painful bite that itches like crazy for 3 days and then creates a blister for another 3 days.

We get to the Double Springs Shelter at about 1:15 PM and have our lunch.

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In the afternoon Dylan Mullins (10 years old), "Polar Bear" (Dylan's grandpa), and Dylan's dad (Polar Bear's son-in-law) stop by on a day hike from Route 421, about a 3 ½ mile 600' climb to the shelter. Dylan is very tired and grumpy, a bit overweight, and clearly not anxious to return to their monster truck parked on Route 421. Polar Bear tells us he comes here in the winter and post holes through the deep snow; he warns us once again about the lack of water between here and Damascus, VA, except at Abington Gap Shelter, our next shelter stop tomorrow. They live in Bristol, TN, and don't like the Bristol auto racing much because it increases the Bristol population 3 fold. Three other day hikers stop by and leave quickly; the old guy talks with a mouth full of marbles; the others don't talk to us at all.



Double Springs Shelter; Hum Takes His Usual Afternoon Siesta

We find a mostly empty journal for once; there are entries from Hopalong and Ruby Vermonter. Hum leaves this entry:

8/25

Geezer Hikers Ho (age 70) and Hum (age 72) are in for the night, early as usual (2 pm). We are brothers and Yankees (VT and MD) nearing the end of our trek from Erwin to Damascus. Passed 100 miles today. This is our 4th year backpacking together and hope for many more years. Totally enjoyed Roan Mt., the Balds, Watauga Lake Dam, Laurel Falls and many other sites. Weather has been great.

I have Mountain House Beef Stroganoff for dinner: very good; my favorite.

Double Springs Shelter (4080') to Abington Gap Shelter (3773') 8/26/12

Start Time: 7:05 AM Double Springs Shelter (4080')

End Time: 12 Noon Abington Gap Shelter (3773')

Total Miles: 8.9 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2200' gain/2300' loss

Distances:

Double Springs Shelter, TN (4080') to US421-Low Gap, TN (3384') = 3.5 miles

US421-Low Gap, TN (3384') to Abington Gap Shelter, TN (3773') = 4.8 miles

Searching for Fire Tower Foundation on McQueens Knob = 0.2 miles

Water Run at Abington Gap Shelter = 0.4 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 26,302

Calories: 692

Steps/minute: 103
MPH: 2.95 (2.11 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 13 minutes, 16 seconds
Miles: 12.45 miles (8.9 actual miles)

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Up at 6 AM, a bit later than usual, after 10 hours of sleep from 8 PM to 6 AM. It was a peaceful night, with lots of very pleasing Katydid sounds. During the night Hum is attacked by a mouse that ran across his face going for Hum's M&M's in the plastic container beside him. It was also a very chilly night, in the 40's, the coldest so far.

We're off by 7:05 AM. The overlook of Shady Valley and Mt. Rogers is quite hazy. We reach Route 421 at Low Gap by 10:30 AM and a little further on we find water in the spring at Double Springs Gap (unreliable according to the AT guide). We ascend McQueens Knob (3885') and I diligently search for the base of the old fire tower mentioned in the AT guide; Hum has absolutely no interest in same and rests at a small log emergency shelter marked on top as the "Holiday Inn". I finally find the fire tower footing, hidden under some heavy undergrowth on the side of the trail.

We enjoy several stands of beautiful wild flowers along the way and pass under an unusual (upside down) U-shaped tree over the trail, which we dub "Damascus Gateway Arch".



Pretty Wildflowers along the Way; "Damascus Gateway Arch" (Lower Right)

We arrive at Abington Gap Shelter at 12 Noon and have our lunch and a very welcome long rest; Hum takes his usual afternoon siesta, I update my notes and read the shelter journal and joke book..

Two day hikers from Wisconsin arrive from Route 421. They're here to see the Bristol, TN, auto races and are now waiting a day until the RV's leave. It's a 12 hour drive home and that don't want to get behind any of those slow roadhogs that hold them up. Then 3 trail maintainers from Damascus arrive, dressed in camo, carrying picks to dig water byways on the trail.



**“Holiday Inn” Emergency Shelter on McQueens Knob (Left);
Abington Gap Shelter (Right)**

We refute several Bob Peoples comments in the Shelter Journal, still not realizing that these comments are made in jest, although some of them are in very poor taste. We also enjoy the “Shelter Joke Book”, a unique feature never before seen in any shelter we have been to; some of the jokes tickle our funny bone:

*Have you heard about the guy who lost the whole left side of his body? Well, he’s all right now.
Blueline*

A man was heading up into the Rockies of Canada for a weekend of camping. At the jump off town he walked into the ranger station to ask for advice. The ranger told him to be careful of black bears and grizzlies. “If you meet a black bear,” he said, “make a lot of noise and that should scare him off. But if you meet a grizzly, your only hope is to fall down and play dead.” The camper asked “Isn’t there anything I can do to avoid grizzlies altogether?” “Well” said the ranger, “most folks wear bells on their ankles and carry pepper spray just in case.” “But how can I tell when bears are in the area?” said the camper. “By their poop” replied the ranger. “What’s the difference between black bear and grizzly poop?” asked the camper?”

“Well, black bear poop is full of the residue of grubs, berries and roots.”

“And grizzly poop?” asked the camper.

“Oh grizzly poop is full of bells and smells like pepper.”

Ollie was sick. He lay on his bed, and knew he was dying. He sighed a sigh with what he expected to be his last breath, and he smelled something... Wonderful! Schnetzelgruberplätzenhavn! His very favorite dessert, the best of old-country cookery. His heart flooded with joy. He and his wife had their hard times, but now he had proof of her lasting love: In his hour of need, Laura was baking schnetzelgruberplätzenhavn, just for him. He was overwhelmed with joy and love, and slowly felt strength returning. He tried to sit up. He was able to sit up! He tried to stand. He was able to stand! He staggered down the hall, and the delicious smell grew stronger and stronger. Finally, he reached the kitchen, and saw the pastries laid out on a tray, just as beautiful as he’d imagined, these being physical proof of Laura’s love and caring, just for him. He reached for the tray, when suddenly he heard Laura’s voice: “Don’t you touch those! Those are for the funeral!”

So Ollie died, Laura called the newspaper to place a death notice. She said, “say, ‘Ollie died’”. The man at the newspaper said “you know, we charge for every five words. After spending a lifetime with the man, can you think of three more words to memorialize him and honor his memory? The price is the same.” Laura thought for a moment, then said “write” ‘Ollie died, Boat for sale.’”

So a dog wanted to sell his bone. He called the newspaper to place an ad. When they asked what he wanted it to say, he said “Woof woof woof. Woof woof woof. Woof woof woof.” The ad man said, “that’s nine ‘woofs’. I could add an extra ‘woof’ for no further charge.” And the dog said “But that wouldn’t make any sense.”

I have Mountain House Lasagna for dinner; one of my favorites. We have the shelter to ourselves again tonight, just as we have with all the other shelters on this final 5-day hike to Damascus. I leave this entry in the shelter journal on our final night on the trail:

8/26/12

Geezer hikers Ho (70) & Hum (72) checking out tomorrow after 13 hiking days, 2 zero days, 125 miles Erwin → Damascus. Fantastic section with Roan Highlands, balds, Watauga Dam, Laurel Fork Falls, and just beautiful trail all

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the way. Met great folks along the way: Hinton James, Sailboat, Bob Peoples and many others. Also enjoyed our

*Ho-Hum brotherly banter. You young guys who can only do ~20 miles/day – take heart – you can achieve 50+ miles/day like us when you reach your 70's (more years => more miles). Just kidding, our biggest day was 16 miles. We prefer to take time to smell the roses along the way. That slows us down a bit but it's what you do when you get old. Life is good but it goes fast. All the Best, Ho & Hum
P.S. Planning another ~100 mile section next year, maybe the Smoky Mts.*

We hit the hay at 8 PM. During the night I hear sounds on the metal roof; I wonder what they are, bears maybe? I'm always wary of bears roaming these woods. I shine my flashlight outside numerous times, but no bears are to be seen or heard. A mouse goes after Hum's empty M&M's and snacks in the plastic container beside his bed; in the process the mouse scampers across Hum's face: ugh!

Abington Gap Shelter (3773') to Damascus (2000') 8/27/12

Start Time: 6:45 AM Abington Gap shelter (3773')

End Time: 11:30 AM Damascus (2000')

Total Miles: 10.2 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1350' gain/3000' loss

Distances:

Abington Gap Shelter, TN (3773') to Virginia-Tennessee Line (3000') = 6.5 miles

Virginia-Tennessee Line (3000') to Damascus, VA (2000') = 3.7 miles

Pedometer readings (readings seem low; pedometer fell off in pocket):

Steps: 26,858

Calories: 706

Steps/minute: 96

MPH: 2.75 (2.21 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 37 minutes, 25 seconds

Miles: 12.71 miles (10.2 actual miles)

Up at 5:30 AM, off by 6:45 AM. Today is easy fast hiking: we do the 10.2 miles in a little over 4 ½ hours, including several brief stops; this is probably record fast hiking for us. We look for signs of holes drilled by tube worms in sand on the shore of an ancient ocean, now turned into rock on a quartzite ledge, as mentioned in our guide book, but find none.

We meet "Many Waters" at the TN/VA state line. He has done the AT twice: once south to north and again north to south; he hopes to do Vermont's Long Trail and the Pacific Crest Trail. Now he is en route to visit Bob Peoples and is stopping at Double Springs Shelter tonight. Before departing he takes our picture.

We also meet a well dressed lady day-hiker near Damascus. She complains that white blazes are missing in town leading to the AT and has trouble finding the trail. She has done all but 35 miles of the Virginia AT (from Front Royal south).

We arrive at Damascus by 11:30 AM and pick up Hum's car at Mt. Rogers Outfitters (\$10 for 5 nights). We discuss water availability with Dave and Hum mentions that the handle on his Katadin Water Filter broke. Dave says that Katadin puts a lifetime warranty on their filters and pulls out a grey pump handle and fixes Hum's filter on the spot, for nothing! What good luck to end our hike! Dave comments that the grey handles are stronger than the blue one that broke on Hum's pump, because the blue color die weakens the handle.

It's a one hour drive to Hampton, TN; we stop for Big Macs again at McDs: yum! In the afternoon we talk with Bob and Roman at length on all kinds of subjects. They are maintaining a Roan Mt. section tomorrow. Bob says that sometimes he supervises 100+ volunteers on his [Kincora HardCore](#), which is a super AT trail maintenance activity following [Damascus Trail Days](#).

We go once again to the Southern Café in Elizabethton, TN, and again it's excellent: I have brisket with gravy, Hum has chicken.



**At the TN/VA State Line (Top Left); Made it to Damascus, VA! (Top Right)
Getting Car at Mt Rogers Outfitters (Bottom Left); Goodbye Kincora (Bottom Right)**

I put a final entry in the Kincora Hikers Journal:

Geezer Hikers Ho & Hum checking out after 13 hiking days, 2 zero days, and 4 nights at Kincora (8/18, 8/21, 8/22, 8/27). Our journey has been tremendously enhanced by great visits with Bob and Co. We're extremely thankful and will never forget. Hope to return someday.

All the Best, Ho & Hum

Epilogue

Summary statistics for the 13-day hike:

Total Miles: 130.2 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 29,550' gain/29,300' loss

Total Steps: 399,970

Total Calories: 10,528

This has been a fantastic adventure; We, Ho & Hum, thoroughly enjoyed every minute of our 4th year backpacking together. What a beautiful hike through the rhododendron forests, over the stunningly beautiful balds, majestic Laurel Falls, incomparable Watauga Lake Dam, in our tents 3 nights out in the open, great folks along the trail, Bob Peoples, the brotherly banter and guffaws, on and on. What an adventure and we hope for more in years to come.

We leave Kincora Hikers Hostel at 6 AM the following day, Tuesday August 28, 2012. We caravan all the way up to Route 70 in Maryland. Hum splits off to head home to Timonium, MD. It is an 800 mile trip for 185

me to North Clarendon, VT. Hum and Pat have kindly invited me to spend the night in Timonium, but I opt instead to make the trip home to Vermont in a single drive. It's been a long 17 days with no Lynsie. It's been a wonderful hike and wonderful experience, but home is where I want to go now and I do.

6. July 30 – August 2, 2013
Vermont AT Hike: Norwich, Vermont to Route 100/Kent Pond, Killington, Vermont

Geezer hikers Ho & Hum undertake two Appalachian Trail (AT) hikes this year: the first hike is a 39-mile, 4-day backpack on the Vermont AT and the second hike is a 125-mile, 12-day hike on the Tennessee and North Carolina AT.

In the spring and early summer, we both do a number of training hikes. Hum continues his vigorous pursuit of completing the entire AT and finishes most of the NJ AT on many day hikes. As such, he gets in great shape for our forthcoming AT hikes together in VT, TN, and NC. I do 73 miles in 11 training hikes in Vermont, carrying about 25-30 pounds (I wrote a separate journal on these training hikes). I plan our 4-day VT hike and scope out the entire TN/NC hike including hostels, zero days, moving 2 cars around, etc.

On Sunday July 28 Hum arrives in Vermont, precisely at 12 noon, as he said he would. Hum is uncannily accurate in estimating travel time, be it by car or by hiking on foot. As always we have a great visit with Hum including a nice swim in our pool (it is warm), a delicious manhattan before dinner, and a wonderful dinner from Lyn.

The following day, Monday July 30, we do a 6-mile (up and back) training hike with 2000' elevation gain to the summit of Okemo Mt. It is a bit hazy so the views from the fire tower on the summit are limited; we complete the hike in about 4 hours. In the afternoon we partake of another swim in the pool and prepare ourselves for our 4-day AT hike starting the following day.

Norwich, VT/Newton Lane to Thistle Hill Shelter – 7/30/13

Start Time: 7:30 AM, Newton Lane, Norwich, VT
End Time: 3:00 PM, Thistle Hill Shelter
Total Miles: 11.0 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 3700'/2700'

Distances:

Road walk on Newton Lane to find AT crossing = 0.5 miles
Newton Lane to Thistle Hill Shelter = 10.4 miles
Spur Trail to Thistle Hill Shelter = 0.1 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 38,838
Calories: 1022
Steps/minute: 109
MPH: 3.70 (2.21 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 55 minutes, 57 seconds
Miles: 18.39 miles (11.0 actual miles)

Today is our mother's, Evelyn Howard MacPhail Ash's, 100th birthday. We said a little prayer last night to remember her with love and bless her on her journey through eternity.

We leave at about 6:00 AM; I have scoped out the route to get to the AT where it crosses Newton Lane in Norwich, VT. Starting at this point will shorten our hike to 10.4 miles versus the 14.1 mile trek we would have had if we started at the Connecticut River in Norwich. We make all turns recommended by Mapquest and my TomTom GPS without a hitch: Route 4 to White River Junction, cross the White River over to Hartford, right on Dothan Road to Dothan, right on Jericho St., then left on Newton Lane. Only trouble is that before we reach the AT crossing point Newton Lane turns into a class 4 road, which is impassable in my Toyota Sienna. Fortunately there is a house right at that point and a lady is outside the

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house, so we drive down the driveway and ask for directions to the AT. She says she is not entirely clear on the directions but advises us to hike up the class 4 road and keep to the right at various junctions. She says that if we come to a field we have gone too far. We also meet a jogger at the junction with the class 4 road and ask again about directions to the AT. She gives a similar description: keep to the right.



**Ho (Left) & Hum at Start of Vermont AT Hike
Norwich/Newton Lane, VT**

So we decide that we'll have to search out the AT and hope for the best. We ask Lyn to take a couple of photos, kiss her goodbye, and we're off in search of the AT. We probably walk about ½ mile, go past a couple of forks in the road and keep to the right, as instructed; we see a field off to our left (we wonder, is that the field the ladies referred to?) and are a bit concerned of being lost when we run into the "Cossingham Trail", which is marked by a sign. I had actually intended to get to Cossingham Road by car, as was programmed into my GPS; Cossingham Road connects with Newton Lane, and to me it seemed from the mapquest map that the AT perhaps crossed Cossingham Road rather than Newton Lane. There was no sign of Cossingham Road – maybe Cossingham Road is actually Cossingham Trail I speculate. So we follow Cossingham Trail for a short distance and hooray hooray! we find the AT. Hum is disoriented at this point and thinks we want to go right on the AT; I say I'm sure that the correct direction is left, and indeed it is. It only takes us about 10 to 15 minutes to find the AT; we reach the trail by 7:40 AM.

We are both feeling quite energetic all morning; the trail is excellent and mostly flat with essentially all dirt and very few rocks, which makes for the easiest possible backpacking. We meet 2 northbound AT thru hikers and then about 5 more NOBO thru hikers right behind them; they tell us that they are "ahead of the pack". They plan to make it to Hanover, NH tonight to resupply.

Near the end of June I sprained my left ankle, quite badly, playing tennis. It is not healing at all and is still very weak, and rather sore, so I have a lot of trouble with my ankle "rolling" on the angular side slopes, which occurs very frequently on the trail. There is one place along the way where I have to negotiate a downhill slope for perhaps 10 feet or more, where there is a big drop off downhill to the left, a cliff almost, that is quite scary and intimidating. Hum realizes my predicament and encourages me through the obstacle. But the left leaning downhill slopes keep bugging me for this whole 4-day hike.

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There is a lengthy road walk on Podunk Road, to Tigertown Road, under I-89, then south on VT 14, across the White River bridge, and finally back into the woods. We pass the Hartford Delicatessen on VT 14, which is heavily advertised and recommended by hikers as a good stop for ice cream and snacks, but we don't stop. After the road walk it is 4.4 more miles to the Thistle Hill Shelter. From that point on it is slow going with brutal ups; we're both getting pretty exhausted after fairly easy hiking in the morning. This section of the AT doesn't follow a ridgeline with more or less constant elevation, as is typical for much of the AT. Rather, this section is up and down and up and down over big hill after big hill after big hill.

We stop at noon for lunch and meet “Aspen” and “Eleven”, who started their NOBO thru hike in January! They ran into a lot of snow and winter weather, of course, especially in the Smoky Mountains, but somehow they braved all of it. They made numerous side trips to attend weddings and other events, so their overall progress has been slow. They hope to finish their thru hike by the end of August. “Eleven” was the 11th person to start a thru hike in 2013, as recorded every year by the Ranger Station near Springer Mountain, GA, so that’s where she takes her trail name. They liked the Smoky Mountains, Tennessee, and Vermont sections the best, but didn’t like New York very much (“too many big rocks to climb over”).

We pass 3 more NOBO thru hikers in a farm field, who tell us that there is good “trail magic” (soda and food) at the Cloudland Road crossing.

We arrive at the Thistle Hill Shelter at 3:00 PM and not long after arriving Paul Olson from Proctor, VT arrives. He is hiking from Route 12 to Norwich. Paul now lives in Springfield, VT, but while in Proctor he was good friends with Chuck and Pru Rogers, Lyn’s relatives (Chuck was her mother’s cousin). Chuck and Pru’s son Jolly Rogers, Lyn’s second cousin, played in sports together. Paul described Jolly as a one of the basketball “stars” on their team.



Hum Settles into Thistle Hill Shelter

Next 2 SOBO hikers arrive, “Flip”, from Naperville, IL, and “Pineapple”, from Lakeland, FL. I chat with Flip about memories of Naperville, where I travelled on many, many occasions while working on my dynamic routing project at Bell labs. Flip uses a hammock for sleeping/shelter; like all hammock users I’ve met, he swears by its advantages. They tell us that they plan to stay at “The Lookout” tomorrow night, a shelter

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with a great view on top of a mountain. Only problem they say is that they have to pack in extra water because there is none available at the shelter.

After Flip and Pineapple, many 20-something NOBO hikers arrive, including one rather good looking young woman, who was a totally boring airhead who rambled on and on about nothing at all; nonstop prattle. She apparently attracted the attention of the other young hikers in the group, who were flirting non-stop, which I’m sure she enjoyed. One of the guys was celebrating his birthday (he said “46” but he looked about 20), so someone had packed in 2 six-packs of 16 oz. beers. Party on; they were also rolling cigarettes, perhaps marijuana? They had the fire going until 9:45 PM and were noisy; kept me awake even with earplugs.

Hum leaves an entry in the shelter journal:

“Geezer hikers Ho & Hum on 4 day training hike SOBO to Rt. 4. Plan to hike the Smokies in Sept. The old guys hike

only 10-12 miles per day.”

Thistle Hill Shelter to Wintturi Shelter – 7/31/13

Start Time: 6:05 AM, Thistle Hill Shelter

End Time: 5:00 PM, Wintturi Shelter

Total Miles: 11.2 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 2500’/2900’

Distances:

Spur Trail from Thistle Hill Shelter to AT = 0.1 miles

Thistle Hill Shelter to Wintturi Shelter = 10.9 miles

Spur Trail to Wintturi Shelter = 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 33,769

Calories: 888

Steps/minute: 96

MPH: 2.74 (1.92 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 5 hours, 44 minutes, 01 seconds

Miles: 15.99 miles (11.2 actual miles)

We're up at 5 AM and stay very quiet while 2 others continue sleeping in the shelter. We have breakfast and pack up and are off by 6:05 AM. By about 8:00 we reach the summit of an open field with beautiful 360 degree views; it's an exceptionally clear morning and wild flowers are blooming everywhere. This lifts our spirits for a good start for today. Soon after we reach another open summit with similarly gorgeous views; we take a selfie photo of Ho & Hum with views in the background.

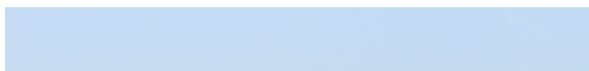
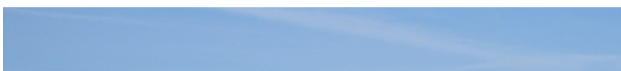
Pineapple and Flip soon pass us handily going about 3 MPH I would estimate; they have started at least 1 hour after us but are much faster.

We have also been warned – yesterday – by the NOBO thru hikers we met that there is a horrendous 100 yards of deep and continuous mud before reaching Route 12. Sure enough, we reach this nemesis and this gauntlet of mud is the worst we've ever encountered and there is absolutely no way around it.

We both get super “mud feet”, our hiking boots completely submerged in the mud up to our ankles, several times, before we get through this incredible punishment. This would certainly be a great place for some puncheons; Vermont maintainers are usually good at keeping the trail very passable and clear, but they sure missed this one this time... From now on we warn all NOBO hikers we meet about the muddy gauntlet they will have to endure.

We cross Cloudland Brook; I use a rope strung across the brook to steady myself but the crossing at that point has no rocks to skip on so it is wet shoes and socks in return for this choice. Hum finds a way across on the rocks and stays dry. As we have been advised, we do find some “trail magic” just on the other side of Cloudland Road. We help ourselves to a couple of candy bars but otherwise do not partake of the sodas and other goodies; it is still early morning and neither one of us is that hungry quite yet.

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Beautiful Open Summit, Wildflowers, Long Range View, Killington Peak in Distance, Selfie, Crossing Cloudland Brook (I Use Rope & Get Wet Feet; Hum Skips Rocks on Left)

We have our lunch by the stream but unfortunately the banks of the stream are too steep to go down for water, and we are getting low on water. I am pretty much completely exhausted at this point. This section of the AT is just continuous up and down and up and down and just wears you out. We have already hiked 7+ miles today, and to my chagrin, it is still another 3.8 miles and 1000' climb to Wintturi

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Shelter. At this point the mental barriers start coming up; this is actually the constant mental battle in meeting the challenge of hiking the AT. You just have to keep going to reach your goal each day, but sometimes your mind is telling you you're exhausted, you're completely out of gas, you're not going to make it. The challenge is to beat back the negative thinking like that and just keep going. But this time seems different; I don't ever recall being this tired on our 5 years of hiking together.

About 1.5 to 2 miles from the shelter we cross a muddy water source but we do manage to find a deep enough pool to filter the water and fill our water bottles. I tell Hum that I'm exhausted and want to tent here tonight, that I'm just too tired to make it to the shelter. Hum is clearly not happy with that plan and says that we're only about a mile from the shelter and that "I can make it". I say "congratulations, that's all well and good, but I can't make it". Hum offers to go ahead and reserve space in the shelter while I rest and make my way there as slowly as need be; I tell him that's not a good plan, I'm not sure I can make it at all. Clearly Hum isn't happy with setting up our tents but he goes along anyway; my big brother doesn't say anything negative at all and of course sticks with me.

Very soon, however, after clearing a little spot for my tent in the rather thick underbrush, I make a startling discovery: I haven't brought my tent poles with me! I quickly realize that I must have left them back in our house in Florida, under the bed! Bummer and super bummer! So clearly there is no choice but to go on and make it to the shelter. This obviously makes Hum happy but he doesn't say anything; we just quickly pack up everything and move on.

We ask a couple of NOBO hikers we pass along the way "how far is it to the shelter?" Hum mentions to one of them that I'm struggling at this point; he sympathizes as we move on: "I hope your day gets better" he says.

I do struggle, counting 50 steps between each breather -- a technique that Hum taught me -- and just

keep going. I have to keep going. On the way I'm telling Hum I want to bail out tomorrow and return to Route 12 and call Lyn. Hum is OK with that and says he will go with whatever I decide. And finally at 5:00 PM, we reach Wintturi Shelter; and low and behold, a gift, no one is there yet! We do a high five and Hum happily tells me "you made it!" It always feels good to reach the goal, to reach the shelter, and today it felt especially, especially good to just rest for a long time before setting up our digs for the night.



Settling Into Wintturi Shelter; Luckily No One Else There Yet

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After I settle in a bit in the shelter and have a good rest, I'm feeling much better and push back the mental barriers that almost stopped me today: there's no reason to quit now I decide and tell Hum that we should continue on as planned tomorrow.

We have our dinner at around 6:00 PM, as usual. Three NOBO hikers arrive around 7 PM; 2 of them arrive before the third: she is "Morning Glory" and I didn't catch his trail name, I'll call him "Beard" because he has one. Morning Glory and Beard make a very nice young couple who are hiking together and who met on the trail: we immediately realize that there is clearly a romance going on between them. They are both originally from IL and both quit their jobs to go hiking: Beard was in the restaurant management business in Ft. Myers, FL, and he and Hum have a long chat about restaurants Hum visited on Captiva Island this year. The third guy arrives much later – I'll call him "Slow Hiker" -- and decides to tent; Beard told us earlier "he likes to go 2 miles per hour and rest; Beard and Morning Glory are clearly much faster hikers.

Beard has collected birch bark along the trail and tells us he always cooks his meal on an open fire. The birch bark makes excellent tinder and he has his fire going in no time. His cooking pots, however, are almost black with char from all the times on an open fire.

Before we all hit the hay, Hum and Beard have an extended discussion about Colorado skiing. Hum also announces that it's my birthday tomorrow. All is quiet around 8:00 PM, but at about 8:30 PM, well after dark and after Hum and I have hit the hay, a lady, man, and dog arrive and chat loudly but briefly with Beard, Morning Glory, and Slow Hiker, who they already know. Fortunately this newest pair of arrivals decides to tent rather than stay in the shelter.

There is no log book in the shelter so no journal entry. There is no cell phone connectivity so no calls to our wives tonight. Hum tries to send a spot signal to the satellite but finds out later that the message didn't go through because he didn't wait long enough for the confirmation to come back.

My sleep isn't great tonight; my stomach is upset and I have a few cramps.

Wintturi Shelter to Stony Brook Shelter – 8/1/13

Start Time: 6:15 AM, Wintturi Shelter
End Time: 2:45 PM, Stony Brook Shelter
Total Miles: 10.1 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 3100'/2900'

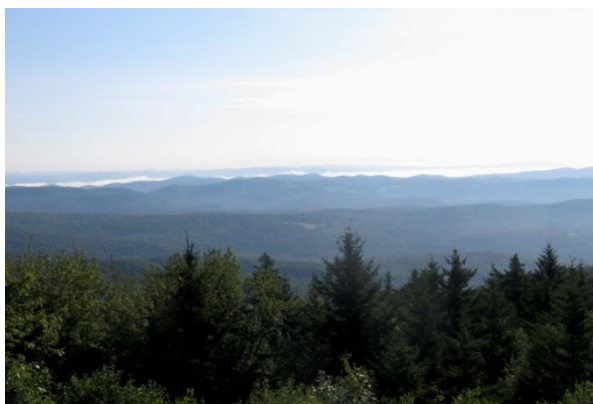
Distances:
Spur Trail to Wintturi Shelter = 0.2 miles
Wintturi Shelter to Stony Brook Shelter = 9.9 miles

Pedometer readings:
Steps: 23,089
Calories: 607
Steps/minute: 89
MPH: 2.53 (1.83 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 18 minutes, 51 seconds
Miles: 13.93 miles (10.1 actual miles)

We're up by 5:15 AM. 39 once again today, for the 33rd time. As always we go about having our breakfast and packing up as quietly as possible, but Beard rises from his sleeping bag at around 6:00 AM and immediately says "happy birthday". Morning Glory and Beard whisper sweet nothings to each other for quite a while before they rise and shine.

We're off by 6:15 AM and right away we have a big 500' climb up to "The Lookout", which we make by 8:00 AM, good time for 2.6 miles. It's a very nice shelter and looks almost new; it's very roomy inside and has a great lookout – a kind of widow's walk -- on the roof, which is reached by a ladder on the outside of

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the shelter. We climb up and enjoy a fabulous view all the way to the White Mountains in New Hampshire and to Camels Hump and Mt. Mansfield in Vermont.



"The Lookout"; Climbing up to the Widow's Walk; Long Range Views from the Top

There is pretty good cell service from this high point and Hum takes the opportunity to call Pat. She tells him that she didn't receive the Spot signal last night, which confirms Hum's suspicion that he didn't wait

long enough for the confirmation signal to come back. I call Lyn but she is probably still in bed so I leave a voice mail (there is no phone in the bedroom in Vermont any longer after our move to Florida). I do reach her later, at around 10:00 AM, from the top of a knob we reach after another big horrendous climb. Lyn also says she didn't receive any Spot message last night.

At around noon we stop by a nice stream to have our lunch. We choke down our PB&J sandwiches and both now decide that we don't like PB&J sandwiches for lunch any more, we'll have to find something else for lunch.

We cross the Stony Brook at around 2:15 PM and at that point discover that the shelter is another 0.8 miles and 400' climb ahead. I had misinterpreted the topo map in the guidebook that showed, incorrectly, the shelter at the same point as the brook. What a bummer! I immediately complain again and again until Hum gets tired of my bellyaching.

Along the way up to the shelter we pass the ladder that scales a small cliff that we had heard about from a couple of NOBO hikers we had passed in the days before. A little later we pass a sign giving various distances to points north and south on the trail, but for some strange reason it didn't give a distance to the Stony Brook Shelter. This immediately gets me to wondering if we had somehow passed the shelter and I encourage Hum that we should turn around and go back. I am getting a bit anxious about this because it is starting to drizzle and we desperately want to get to the shelter before the rain starts in earnest. Hum is quite sure that we haven't passed the shelter, even though he also wonders why the shelter wasn't mentioned on the sign. Fortunately Hum prevails – he is almost always right when it comes to direction --

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and we keep going. Hum indeed is right, as usual, we reach the shelter about 15 minutes later, by 2:45 PM, just before it starts to rain hard: lucky!



Ladder Scaling Cliff En Route to Stony Brook Shelter

There is a German couple from Berlin taking a break at the shelter: "Strawberry Donut" and "Whistler". Whistler gets his trail name because of his propensity to whistle on the trail. They tell us that they had started their hike on 4/3/2012 and need to finish by 9/23/2013 when their visas run out. They have come to the US specifically to thru-hike the AT and have a lot of very high end equipment, which they bought when they arrived in the US. They seem very organized and have experience hiking in Europe. We tell them our trail names but have to explain what "geezers" are and also what the significance of the words "Ho & Hum" might be.



“Strawberry Donut” & “Whistler”; AT Thru Hikers from Berlin, Germany

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They tell us about their experience at the Damascus, VA Trail Days celebration. They were right there when an 86-year-old man, [Deward Blevins](#), lost control of his Cadillac and plowed into a parade of over 1000 hikers, injuring about 50 hikers. Strawberry Donut jumped out of the way and the Cadillac just missed hitting her by about 1 foot. They also witnessed several of the hikers actually lift the Cadillac up off the ground to free a few hikers who were pinned under the car. One woman under the car had bruises but recovered OK they said. Strawberry Donut and Whistler set off in the rain and say they plan to tent tonight.

Next to arrive is “Woodstove” (age 30) from northern Minnesota. She comes in soaking wet out of the rain and right away changes out of, essentially, all of her wet clothes right in the shelter. Hum discretely looks away. She tells us that she stayed last night at the [Yellow Deli](#), a hostel in Rutland, which was started in the early 1970’s by a group of former hippies out of the 1960’s. This group now identifies themselves as [“The Twelve Tribes”](#). (Lyn and I have watched this group do folk dances, always in folk costumes, at street fairs in Rutland, VT.) Woodstove says she stayed there along with 2 other hikers – “Why Not” and “B-line” – who would arrive at the shelter shortly after Woodstove. “Great food” she says and tells us that she “worked for stay” by picking potatoes at the Yellow Deli’s nearby farm. Woodstove has an MS in immunology and worked at a prestigious NIH research lab, but says she was unhappy there and quit, in part to hike the AT, but mostly because she was treated more or less as a “gopher” among a staff of mostly PhD-level researchers. She is doing a “flip-flop” thru hike from North Adams, MA, meaning that she already hiked from North Adams to Springer Mt., GA, and is now doing the northern stretch of the AT starting in North Adams.

“Why Not” and “B-line” arrive and it gets even more interesting. Why Not, age 60, whose real name is Nancy Huber, is a retired dentist from Sacramento, CA, who has hiked the Pacific Crest Trail in 2009 – and the Continental Divide Trail in 2012. When she completes the AT this year she will become one of the few “Triple Crown” hikers who have completed the PCT, CDT, and AT. Why Not gives me her card, which identifies her trail journal at www.postholer.com/Nancy; this link also gives links to her PCT and CDT hiking journals.



**Chuppacabra, Pippen, Woodstove, Daddy Long Legs,
SirPantsALot, Danno, and OB.
Wednesday, July 24, 2013**



**RollinR, B-Line, Why Not, Invisible Man,
Buzz Saw, Jacko, Handstand, and Techie
Saturday, July 27, 2013**

Pictures of Woodstove, B-Line, & Why Not at Green Mountain Hostel in Manchester, VT

B-Line is from Nashua, NH, and he and Why Not have been hiking together for much of the AT. He is a computer developer and was given a 6 month leave of absence, until September 25, to hike the AT; he says he's sure he will make it (according to Why Not's AT Journal, link above, they make it to Katahdin on Friday, September 13, 2013, not an "unlucky Friday the 13th" at all).

B-Line and Why Not engage in a long discussion of their hiking plan for tomorrow, which will include a side trip to the "Pie Store" on Cloudland Road, checking out The Lookout, and a visit with CDT friends in 196

Woodstock, VT. For some reason they are concerned about what they should do if they arrive early at their CDT friends' house. We talk about a number of interesting topics until around 8:30 PM. B-Line expounds upon the pros and cons of water purification. He uses Aqua Mira because it saves weight in his pack, and warns against extended use of iodine pills (e.g., Potable Aqua), which can harm the liver. This is good information because I didn't know about the problem with iodine pills, which I carry as backup to my Katahdin water-filter pump.

Stony Brook Shelter to Vt. 100/Kent Pond, Killington, VT – 8/2/13

Start Time: 6:00 AM, Stony Brook Shelter
End Time: 12 Noon, Vt. 100/Kent Pond
Total Miles: 6.7 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 1800'/1800'

Distances:
Stony Brook Shelter to Vt. 100/Kent Pond= 6.7 miles

Pedometer readings (Not Recorded):

We're up at 5:00 AM, first light; Woodstove stirs at 5:30 AM but B-Line and Why Not just sleep on. We're off by 6:00 AM and immediately start a 1000' climb up Quimby Mountain. I have misread the topo map and say that we're on our way down after the first peak, but actually we have another 2 miles to hike to the second peak before the big descent down the mountain. I realize this mistake after not finding "take-a-break log" on the first peak; this is the moniker I gave to a nice resting place I found on a previous training hike up Quimby Mountain to Stony Brook Shelter and back. But I do find take-a-break log on the second peak, and indeed it still provides a nice resting place for a water break.

Going down Quimby Mountain is very steep; oftentimes it is even harder to hike down a mountain than hiking up the mountain. Going down is very tough on your knees and thighs because of all the braking action needed to hold you back; I slip once on a rock and fall, but am not hurt.

We cross River Road and find that the handicap walkway over the wetlands area to Thundering Brook Falls has been restored; it was destroyed by Hurricane Irene in August of 2011. We stop for a few pictures at the falls; it is a beautiful clear day. We soon cross Thundering Brook Road and reach Kent

Pond and [Mountain Meadow Lodge](#), which is right on the AT. Hum is very excited about the convenient location of the lodge/hostel and says he'll plan to stay there when he strives to complete the Long Trail in 2014 (he has about 100 miles left to go on the LT).



Handicap Walkway to Thundering Brook Falls; Thundering Brook Falls

There is a nice new bridge across Kent Brook, which feeds Kent Pond. This bridge is much closer to the pond itself than was the old bridge, which was also destroyed by Hurricane Irene in 2011; this bridge

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relocation probably cuts off about ½ mile of extra hiking up and back along Kent Brook that was required with the old bridge location.



New Bridge Over Kent Brook; Kent Pond; Duck Family & Kayakers on Kent Pond

We reach the Kent Pond parking lot by 12 Noon and I call Lyn, who picks us up at around 1:00 PM. While we wait we are entertained by a family of mother duck and 6 ducklings, who have learned to use

their cuteness to gain handouts of bread and perhaps other goodies. We have nothing to offer so they turn up their beaks and leave. There are also a group of young kayakers in brightly colored kayaks making their way up to the Kent Brook Bridge.

We stop at McDonalds on the way back for a delicious Big Mac lunch: yum! While there Jolly Rogers, Lyn's cousin, also stops in for his lunch: 2 Big Macs for this hungry guy. We have a nice conversation and we mention our meeting with Paul Olsen on our hike. Jolly tells us that Paul is the older brother and the younger brother, "Bunny" Olsen, is Jolly's contemporary who lives in Burlington, VT, and was a basketball star along with Jolly at Proctor (VT) High School. Lyn also mentions to Jolly that I have celebrated my birthday while on this AT hike. We tell Jolly we're planning to have dinner tonight at the Trak Inn, and will see him and Ros later; Hum has kindly offered to take us to dinner there tonight.

We do a bit a swimming in the afternoon and just relax. We have a wonderful dinner at the Trak Inn and a good visit with Jolly and Ros. They kindly treat me to free soup, dinner, and birthday cake! Hum gets off a bit easier on the tab because of Jolly and Ros's generosity.

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Ho & Hum at Kent Pond, Completing Our 4-Day, 39-Mile Vermont AT Backpack

Epilogue

Summary statistics for the 4-day hike:

Total Miles: 39.0 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 11,100' gain/10,300' loss

Total Steps: 95,696

This has been another good hiking adventure and training hike for Ho & Hum's upcoming Tennessee/North Carolina AT hike in September. I have now completed all but 3.7 miles of the Vermont AT. Hum leaves early on Saturday morning, after breakfast, for his trip back to Baltimore: we bid farewell to my brother until we meet again in September.

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7. September 15 – 29, 2013
Tennessee/North Carolina AT Hike:
Davenport Gap/Route 40, Tennessee to Erwin, Tennessee

Prologue – 9/15/13

Hum and I had originally intended to do the Great Smoky Mountain National Park section on this hike. However, because 2 shelters are closed in GSMNP, due to bear activity, it became impossible for us to do that hike because the shelters that remained open were just too far apart for us. It is required that hikers stay in shelters in GSMNP; you cannot just tent along the way as we sometimes do to make our daily distances more reasonable. Therefore we re-planned our backpacking hike to do the section north of GSMNP, from Davenport Gap/Route 40 to Erwin, TN.

On Sunday September 15 Hum and I drive to [Standing Bear Farm Hostel](#) on Green Corner Road in Hartford, TN. I leave home at around 6:00 AM and arrive at the hostel at 2:30 PM after a 560 mile drive. Along the way I stop at the Pilot station on I-26, Exit 56 to fill up and have my 2 hotdogs for lunch; I love the hotdogs at Pilot: they are big, delicious, and, best of all, cheap.



Standing Bear Farm Hostel, Hartford, TN

Just as I arrive at the hostel I meet Maria, Curtis's wife, who is just leaving, and she tells me she's on her way to go hiking. Before she leaves, however, she gives me the rundown on the layout of the various buildings at the hostel – bunkhouse, store, laundry, privy, etc. Hum arrives right after me, at 2:45 PM. We take a few minutes to decide where to best park his car and then head on over to Curtis's house to check in.

Curtis Owen (52) is sitting on the porch and we quickly find that Curtis is somewhat of a character. He right away tells us that he recently pulled a gun and almost shot a hiker who arrived somewhat late to his house because "he didn't say he was coming!" That doesn't seem like a good reason to shoot someone! When Curtis goes into his house to get something, I mistakenly think he wants us to come in too and so I begin to follow him in. Big mistake! He again mentions, rather threateningly, his intention to shoot anyone who comes into his house; I guess this time that would be me! After all, he has 2 teenage daughters he says; of course that's ample justification to shoot someone I suppose...

Curtis tells us that the hike from Max Patch to his hostel is 14 miles, while his assistant says it's 15 miles. It's actually 12.8 miles, according to AT Guidebook.

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We go over the directions to get to the Max Patch parking lot. Curtis confirms what I have already investigated on www.mapquest.com: Go south on I-40 to Exit 7; follow Cold Springs Creek Road to Harmon Den Road to Max Patch Road; turn left on Max Patch Road to the parking lot.

We both brought dinner along; I brought a sandwich from Panera's Restaurant, very large so I don't finish it and leave some for a later meal on a future zero day. I also brought a couple of beers for us to enjoy. At dinner we meet "Dave" (no trail name) from "Mid-Maine", but after asking a few times he won't say which town in Maine he's from for some obscure reason. Right off the bat he says "my life is boring, so tell me about you!" Truly weird. He does tell us, however, that he is doing 1000 miles on the AT going north, or at least we think he said north. He also says he's done AT section hiking twice before, and he likes to hike in the fall. We don't see Dave at all the next day, so maybe we misunderstood and he is actually hiking south? Or maybe he is just some weird guy who for whatever reason is making up a story?

We turn in early; the hostel is comfortable and we have it to ourselves (Dave has opted to stay in one of the cabins).

Max Patch Road, NC to Green Corner Road, TN – 9/16/13

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Max Patch Road Parking Lot, NC

End Time: 1:00 PM, Green Corner Road

Total Miles: 13.5 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2200'/4600'

Distances:

Max Patch Road Parking Lot to Max Patch RD, NC (4300') AT trailhead = 0.4 miles

NC1182-Max Patch RD, NC (4300') to Groundhog Creek Shelter Side Trail, NC (3000') = 5.6 miles

Groundhog Creek Shelter Side Trail, NC (3000') to Green Corner Road (1750') = 7.2 miles

Green Corner Road to Standing Bear Farm/Hostel (1750') = 0.3 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 42,476

Calories: 1117

Steps/minute: 114

MPH: 3.26 (2.19 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 6 hours, 09 minutes, 59 seconds

Miles: 20.11 miles (13.5 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and take our breakfast in the kitchen building, pack up and are off in my car by 5:45 AM. All goes OK in following our directions until we get to an unexpected T intersection on Harmon Den Road before reaching the T intersection with Max Patch Road. This throws us off for a bit when we reach the second T intersection at Max Patch Road, not knowing that it is the expected T intersection. I park briefly and check outside for any direction signs, but there are none. In the meantime Hum quickly figures out – by checking the map! -- that this is the expected T intersection with Max Patch Road because the first T intersection wasn't far enough along the route. Good going Hum!, but then he cancels out his great

realization by trying to send us in the wrong direction (right) on Max Patch Road; he has somehow gotten turned around on the extremely dark, pitch black intersection. Fortunately I am sure of the configuration and the direction we came from and make the correct (left) turn. We soon confirm the correct direction by finding Little Creek Road on the right a short distance up Max Patch Road; we will take Little Creek Road to Hot Springs later in the day.

It seems like a long distance up Max Patch Road before reaching the AT crossing; we pass a couple of places that look a little like parking lots and check them out, but decide we haven't found it yet. After passing the AT crossing it is still quite some distance to the parking lot, but we finally find it about 0.4 miles past the AT crossing.

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We are "slack packing" on this section; that is, we are only carrying items necessary for a day hike rather than our full backpack. This makes hiking considerably easier, to say the least. It is still very dark and I've forgotten to bring my headlamp; I've left it in Hum's car in my full backpack. Fortunately Hum has brought 2 headlamps so I borrow one of his. It is 6:45 AM when we begin our hike and will keep our headlamps on for about ½ hour.

The trail is very nice and gentle; there is not a lot of climbing all the way to Groundhog Creek Shelter, 5.6 miles into our hike. Along the way to the shelter we pass Brown Gap, and just 0.5 miles past the gap we miss the side trail to Hawk's Roost, a rock formation and view point just off the trail: be more alert in checking the guidebook Ho! We make it to Groundhog Creek Shelter in Deep Gap by 9:30 AM – excellent time averaging about 2 MPH – but we don't hike to the shelter because it is another 0.2 miles off the trail, so we skip it and move on.

Next we have a 2 ½ mile, 1300' climb to the double-peak summit of Snowbird Mountain, which we reach at 10:45 AM. Here we find an other-worldly, very large, white FAA homing beacon, completely enclosed in a rather low wooden fence but with lots of warning signs saying basically to "keep off". This facility in fact is a VHF omnidirectional radio range ([VOR](#)) antenna used for aircraft radio navigation; there are perhaps 1000 of these VOR antennas throughout the USA.



Summit of Snowbird Mountain; FAA Other-Worldly VOR Antenna

On the top of Snowbird Mountain we spot a red fox, which quickly scurries into the undergrowth; this sighting is definitely unusual, we've not seen a fox before in our 5 years of hiking.

From here on the hike takes another 5+ miles and nearly 3000' down the mountain to Green Corner Road. It is particularly difficult for me with my still weak left ankle, which has not healed from when I injured it playing tennis in June. There is almost continuous side sloping trail to negotiate and that puts extra stress on my ankle, particularly when the trail slopes to the left, which it often does. On the way down we meet two NOBO section hikers going from I-40 to Erwin, TN, just as we are doing.



Taking a Water Break & Distinctive Mushroom We Find Along the Way

We reach Green Corner Road exactly at 1:00 PM, just as ace navigator Hum has predicted we would. Back at Standing Bear Farm Hostel we have our lunch in the kitchen and there we meet and chat with a 55 year old hiker who just did the Great Smoky Mountain National Park section of the AT. We chat about the shelters that had been closed because of bear activity but had just opened in the last few days. He says he met a hiker who stayed in the closed shelters anyway. He mentions that he met a 78 year old hiker in GSMNP who was a "900 miler"; that is, this 78 year old man had completed all 900 miles of side trails in the GSMNP. Before we leave we chat briefly with Curtis's helping hand, who is lounging in the sun by his cabin. I think he is impressed that we did the 13.5 mile section so quickly, especially for old geezers!

After lunch we make our way back to Max Patch Road parking lot. There is no problem this time in finding our way, especially in the light of this beautiful day; so different from this morning's venture to make our way on back roads with virtually no signs in the pitch dark.

We pick up my car in the Max Patch parking lot, and knowing that tomorrow it's going to be misty and dark when we hike up to Max Patch in the early morning, we decide to take advantage of this beautiful clear day and make our way up the slopes of Max Patch for some great views of the surrounding peaks and south into GSMNP.





Max Patch & Long Range Views on a Beautiful Day

We make our way back to the turnoff on Little Creek Road and we follow that for perhaps ½ mile before my GPS says to take a left onto Poplar Gap Road. This is unexpected because, for one thing, Poplar Gap Road isn't shown on our trail map. I consult with Hum and he advises, rightly so, to follow the GPS.

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It is the better route, for sure, because it takes us on a paved road rather than continuing on the very rough, unpaved Little Creek Road. Poplar Gap Road actually takes us, after some steep climbs and descents, back onto Little Creek Road, briefly, then onto Meadow Fork Road, and finally onto Route 209, which takes us into Hot Springs, NC.

After about a 45 minute ride to Hot Springs, we find Elmer's Sunnybank Inn at 26 Walnut Street. It is a very big old Victorian house, but has no sign indicating that this is the right place so that throws us off a bit to start with. We park on the street and make our way to the front door of the big house. There are 2 guys working there painting the porch and tell us that indeed this is the right place. We knock on the front door and Elmer comes to the door, but immediately tells us we're at the wrong door!; the entrance is in the back. I get the impression that he thinks that we should somehow know that but how we are supposed to know that, with no signs, is anyone's guess. Anyway around to the back door we go and Elmer gives us a rundown on his hostel, meal plans, Hot Springs' restaurants, parking, etc., and shows us to our room on the second floor.

This is indeed a beautiful old Victorian house with ornate oak woodwork, numerous fireplaces, endless book shelves, and tons of attractive old antiques. Elmer tells us he has owned and operated the Sunnybank Inn since 1978 and thru-hiked the AT in 1971. He puts us into a room with a balcony looking out into the back yard, with a few rocking chairs and a roped off section of the porch that seems to be collapsing. There is a regular vegetarian dinner served every night but you have to sign up by 3:00 PM, so we are too late for tonight's dinner.





Elmer's Sunnybank Inn; Music Room; Living Room Earl Shaffer Plaque on our Bedroom Door

Elmer directs us to read the historical material and house rules placed on our beds. Here are excerpts from "A Brief History":

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"The Sunnybank Inn, standing at the corner of Walnut and Bridge Streets in Hot Springs, dates back to 1840. Originally the building was two smaller structures, a farmhouse and another building, which were later incorporated into the present building. Charles D. Merritt acquired the land where these structures stood, and, in 1875, he built the Italianate Victorian form, which stands today and named it Sunnybank.

In 1894, Sunnybank was acquired by a Rhode Island businessman, Mr. Frances R. Shaw, to be used as a family summer home. The Shaw family vacationed and entertained lavishly at Sunnybank throughout the summer seasons during the village's zenith as a fashionable Victorian Spa.

The turn of the century witnessed a sharp drop in the popularity of health resorts and began a steady decline of Hot Springs as a resort. Sunnybank changed from lavish summer home to a boarding house for travelers at this time.

During World War I, the Mountain Park Hotel, a large resort hotel which had been built next to the mineral springs, was leased to the government as an internment camp for 2,700 German Naval Officers captured at the beginning of the war. Some of their wives were allowed to board at local boarding houses including Sunnybank. Town legend has it that the only successful escape from the hotel-prison was planned by a German hausfrau from her room in Sunnybank. The wife, naval officer and their dog made good their escape, traveled to Mexico, and eventually back to Germany.

Sometime after 1912, the Gentry family took over the Sunnybank boardinghouse, and it remained in the Gentry family for over half a century. During this time, Sunnybank became associated with the now combined Dorland-Bell Institute, a Presbyterian school for Appalachian girls. Many of the Dorland-Bell teachers boarded at Sunnybank.

Mrs. Jane Gentry and her daughter, Mrs. Maude Gentry Long, were musicians and folklorists of national note, and they taught music and shared mountain food, song, and tales with hundreds of students, boarders, and travelers who passed through Hot Springs. The most famous visitor, Cecil Sharp, the English folklorist and noted authority on ancient ballads, was touring the mountain areas collecting 450 tunes for his famous volume titled English Folk Songs of the Southern Appalachians. He stopped at Sunnybank in 1916 and collected over 64 ballads from Mrs. Gentry for the book.

Mrs. Maude Gentry Long, an alumna of Dorland-Bell, presided over Sunnybank in the succeeding generation and carried on the Gentry tradition of fine music and warm mountain hospitality. In the 1940's and 1950's Maude Gentry Long was recorded singing a large repertoire of ballads and The Jack Tales (by Richard Chase), both at Sunnybank, and [the recording now] resides in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

After Earl Schaffer's visit in 1948, thousands of Appalachian Trail Thru-hikers have found shelter at the Sunnybank Inn. Elmer Hall bought Sunnybank from the third Gentry generation, Mrs. Jane Douglas Gentry, in 1978. He has continued the tradition of fine food and mountain hospitality.

In 1980, the Sunnybank Inn was placed in the National Register of Historic Places by the United States Department of the Interior in recognition of its significant role in American history, architecture and unique contribution to the tradition of balladry in the southern Appalachian mountains.

The Sunnybank Inn, having witnessed and shaped part of Hot Springs' 19th century glory, now shares a glimpse of that past with the passing traveler who comes seeking rest, relaxation, and hospitality in the midst of the mountain wilderness."

A sign outside of the Sunnybank Inn marks where Cecil Sharp collected ballads in 1916.

On the door to our room is a brass plate inscribed

**Earl Shaffer
Pioneer AT Thru-Hiker
Slept Here 1948 & 1998**

According to [Wikipedia](#),

“Shaffer enlisted in the army in 1941, was well along in his training at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, and did arduous and risky service as a forward-area radioman in the South Pacific into 1945. His friend Winemiller served in the Pacific Theater as well, and died in the Iwo Jima landings. Shaffer said he regarded completing the planned AT hike as a way of recovering from the stress of his combat experiences and from the loss of friends who died in the war.

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In 1948, he began the journey from Mt Oglethorpe, in Georgia (the trail's southern end at that time). With sparse equipment that would be regarded as grossly inadequate by most of the through-hikers since – he used worn boots, his army rucksack, and no stove or tent – he reached Mt Katahdin in Maine, in 124 days. Especially after he overcame the skepticism of Appalachian Trail Conference officials (who initially believed his claim of completing the route was obviously fraudulent), his trip raised public awareness of the Trail. He privately published his memoir of the experience; his title, “Walking With Spring”, reflects the experience of most AT hikers, that the project of making the whole trip in the northward direction (the most common choice), is furthered by a start timed to the weather in the Georgia mountains, and by continually taking advantage of the northward progress of milder weather.

In 1965 Shaffer hiked in 99 days from Maine to Springer Mountain, which had recently replaced Oglethorpe as the Trail's Georgia end, becoming the first person to complete a trip in each direction.

In 1982, the Appalachian Trail Conference published Shaffer's “Walking With Spring” commercially.

In 1998, he made another northward through-hike (at age 79) from May 2 to October 21 (six days past official closing of the state park), in 174 days, for the 50th anniversary of his first one, with David Donaldson (known as “The Spirit of ‘48”). He later developed his notes from this trip, under the working title “Ode to the Appalachian Trail”, into “The Appalachian Trail: Calling Me Back To The Hills”.

Shaffer was diagnosed with liver cancer, and died of its complications soon after on May 5, 2002. Donaldson, his most recent through-hike companion, was at his bedside.

On June 17, 2011, he was inducted into the [Appalachian Trail Hall of Fame](#) at the Appalachian Trail Museum [in Gardners, PA] as a charter member.”

We decide to try the diner across the street that we passed on our way into Hot Springs. I have the ground round, which is very good, although I would have preferred the meat loaf but unfortunately they were all out of it :-). Hum has the country fried steak with tons of gravy. We find the food is quite delicious at the diner, the portions are really large, and the prices very reasonable. What could be better we decide so we plan to return and I plan to reserve a meat loaf next time.

Elmer and guests have an extended dinner conversation until about 8:15 to 8:30. We offer to pay Elmer for our stay but since we plan to return he says we can pay at the end of our stay. We would like to try Elmer's breakfast, which gets rave reviews, as does the vegetarian dinner, but it's not served until 8:30 AM and we plan to leave way before that in the morning. Elmer advises us that we should park Hum's car in the driveway but that on our next stay, later in the week, we'll have to leave our 2nd car in the AT parking lot at the south end of town, because his parking lot will be full with cars from participants in a retreat being held over the coming weekend.

Our beds are very comfortable and we get a great night's sleep.

Max Patch Road, NC to Walnut Mountain Shelter, NC – 9/17/13

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Max Patch Road Parking Lot, NC

End Time: 11:45M, Walnut Mountain Shelter

Total Miles: 7.9 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1200'/1300'

Distances:

Max Patch Road Parking Lot to Max Patch Road, NC (4300') AT trailhead = 0.4 miles

NC1182-Max Patch Road, NC (4300') to Roaring Fork Shelter, NC (4000') = 2.6 miles
Roaring Fork Shelter, NC (4000') to TN107-Lemon Gap, TN (3500') = 3.6 miles
TN107-Lemon Gap, TN (3500') to Walnut Mountain Shelter, NC (4300') = 1.3 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 28,326

Calories: 745

Steps/minute: 104

MPH: 2.97 (1.75 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 30 minutes, 37 seconds

Miles: 13.41 miles (7.9 actual miles)

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We get up at 5:00 AM, have “breakfast” (cupcakes and zebra cakes) and are off by 5:45 AM. I check my GPS the night before and determine that it will route us on the same backwoods roads we came on to Hot Springs, which is a more complicated route to follow but much shorter than the alternate route on the main roads back to the Max Patch Road parking area. I ask Hum to make notes on all distances and road names of all the turns and roads en route so that we will have the information for when he drives his car back to pick up my car at the end of this section hike. We reach the Max Patch parking area by 6:30 AM. It is still dark and we find only one other car in the parking lot; it has a Vermont plate.

We're off by 6:45 AM with the help of our headlamps to guide us through the dark. We reach the Max Patch summit by 7:15 AM; it is only 0.8 miles and a 329' climb from the AT trailhead on Max Patch Road to the summit. There are dramatic clouds all about and the gorgeous, distant views come and go as the clouds rise and fall and move to and fro in their little dance. I take many pictures, as usual, probably too many pictures. But then again I can pick and choose later on which pictures are the best ones and which ones to keep. It is a truly beautiful scene on a beautiful morning. AT hikers generally consider Max Patch to be one the best, most beautiful highlights on the AT.

Our AT guidebook has an interesting description of Max Patch and how it got its name:

“The completely open, grassy summit provides outstanding views. It is said that a fine horse named Maximilian was able to escape to get to his favorite patch of grass on the mountain no matter what his owner did, hence the name “Max Patch”. The bald summit at one time was a landing strip for small planes.”



Max Patch Summit & Dramatic Long Range Views in Early Morning as Clouds Lift

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I step in a hole on the summit of Max Patch and fall on the grass hard on the camera in my pocket. A little further north on the trail Hum falls near the edge of a cliff; I am a bit freaked out but he's OK and fortunately not in any real danger.

We reach the Roaring Fork Shelter (2.7 miles) by 8:30 AM. There we meet and chat with a couple from North Carolina who are doing an up and back day hike from Max Patch Road. We get to Lemon Gap (6.2 miles) by 10:30 AM and finally to our destination at Walnut Mountain Shelter (7.5 miles) by 11:45 AM. It is a very small shelter with no picnic table or benches or any of the usual "extras". It was built by the CCC in 1938, as were many of the other shelters on the AT, as well as much of the AT itself. At 75 years old the shelter is just a little older than the geezer hikers and pretty beat up; just like the geezers. It only sleeps 5 and is a very basic, drafty, log shelter with none of the extras: very minimal. The privy is also extremely basic, just a toilet seat with no real enclosure, sitting by itself out in the wilderness.

It gets much cooler as the afternoon progresses and I find myself shivering all afternoon.



Wildflowers & Rhododendron Tunnel along the Way to Walnut Mountain Shelter

Larry and Linda from Peoria, IL, arrive about 5:00 PM. They had hiked south from Deer Park Mountain Shelter, about 9.9 miles, which takes them all day. They complain that this hike is even more difficult than the Smoky Mountain hiking that they had done just the week before, where they even had a 15-mile day because of shelter closings due to bear activity (which is also the reason that we didn't do the Smoky Mountain hike this year).

Larry tells us that he retired at age 55 from the Caterpillar Equipment Company purchasing department. He is 71; Linda doesn't give her age but I would judge she is about the same age as Larry. They've been married for 4 years; it sounds like they both came from previous divorces. I ask Linda how she likes hiking and her response is that she's "doing it"; a bit less than enthusiastic. They are doing 2 car hikes in Sections; we had actually spotted their truck in Brown Gap the previous day; that's where they'll pick it up tomorrow to set up their next section hike. When they ask us if everything looked OK with their truck we kid them that everything looked fine except for the broken windows and slashed tires. It is unclear if they hiked the section from I-40 to Brown Gap as yet.

Larry says his pack weighs 27 pounds and Linda carries 22 pounds; they have a lot of high end equipment, including a jet boil, Sawyer water purifier, and blow up mattress. They started at Amicalola Falls about 8 miles from Springer Mountain, GA and are headed to Hot Springs, NC. They have hiked about 50% of the time so far, taking one week off in Ashville, NC, and one week off in Gatlinburg, TN, to see her son.

We all turn in about 7:30 PM after hanging our food from the elaborate steel cable food hangers, to keep the food away from the bears and other critters. They have these cables at all the shelters we will visit

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this year, except the last (No Business Knob Shelter). At about 7:45 PM, after dark, the 2 NOBO hikers we met the day before arrive (the ones we met just before reaching Green Corner Road and Standing Bear Farm Hostel). They want to crowd into the shelter, very rude after we're all in the sack and there is only one available space in any case, with all my stuff piled there but they still want us to move it! Hum says "pitch a tent" and fortunately one of them says OK and they pitch a tent.

It is a really cold night, probably down in the lower 40's, maybe even the 30's. I pack myself tightly into the mummy hood in my sleeping bag to get OK warmth but it makes it very hard to turn over. Walnut Mountain Shelter is very drafty, with large gaps between all the logs, and the cold wind whips through the shelter as if it weren't even there. Sleep is not good as a result. Larry also uses ear plugs, but he also snores, quite loudly.

This might be a candidate for the Guinness Book of World Records: four 70+ year old hikers staying in the same AT shelter on the same night.



**Walnut Mountain Shelter; Very Basic, Drafty, Log Shelter Built in 1938 by the CCC
No Benches, No Picnic Table, Privy with a View**

Hum leaves the following entry in the Walnut Mountain Shelter journal:

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"9/17 -- Geezer Hikers Ho & Hum (ages 71 & 73) on our 5th year section hiking. Planning to end our hike in Erwin (100 miles). So far, so good."

Walnut Mountain Shelter, NC to Deer Park Mountain Shelter, NC – 9/18/13

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Walnut Mountain Shelter, NC

End Time: 1:15 PM, Deer Park Mountain Shelter

Total Miles: 9.9 miles

Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 1500'/3200'

Distances:

Walnut Mountain Shelter, NC (4300') to Small Brook, NC (2500') = 5.2 miles

Small Brook, NC (2500') to Garenflo Gap, NC (2500') = 1.3 miles

Garenflo Gap, NC (2500') to Deer Park Mountain Shelter, NC (2400') = 3.4 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 34,666

Calories: 972

Steps/minute: 108

MPH: 3.07 (1.85 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 5 hours, 20 minutes, 35 seconds

Miles: 16.41 miles (9.9 actual miles)

We're up at 6:00 AM and it's still pitch dark. We pack up, I consume one breakfast tortilla, we skip coffee to save time, and are off by 7:00 AM and use our head lamps for about 15-20 minutes until it gets light enough to see the trail.

I take the lead going up Bluff Mountain (4686'), now getting something of a second wind. After Garenflo Gap we meet 3 SOBO hikers who all look to be about 50 years old or so; they're hiking from Erwin, TN, to Davenport Gap/I-40, the opposite hike of what we are doing. We later spot their entry in the Deer Park Mountain Shelter journal, where they stop for lunch, and sign their names "Big Mac", "Piddles", and "Keith". They complain about the difficult climb out of Hot Springs in both directions; given our 2-car hike plan we avoid the climb by descending in both directions into Hot Springs :-)



Summit of Bluff Mountain (4686')

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Along the way we spot a few deer on the trail; surprisingly this is a bit unusual on the AT, at least in our experience.

We reach Deer Park Mountain Shelter (9.9 miles) by 1:15 PM, move in and settle down for lunch. This log shelter is the same design as Walnut Mountain Shelter: 75 years old, built by the CCC in 1938, sleeps only 5, and has no "extras" like a table or benches to sit on and the privy again has no enclosure, just a toilet seat in the wilderness.

We call our wives later in the afternoon and the cell service here is good.

Fortunately it warms up a bit as the afternoon progresses. There are annoying bees buzzing us constantly until it gets dark; my attempts to swat them a good one and send them into oblivion proves futile. Before dinner, as is our custom, we venture off to the water source to fill our jugs sufficiently to get us through dinner and breakfast and to still have full water bottles when we set off in the morning. This requires filling some extra bottles to provide the extra water needed for this plan to work. The spring is very near, only about .2 to .3 miles down an access trail.



Deer Park Mountain Shelter; Very Basic Log Shelter Built in 1938 by the CCC

We eat dinner a bit earlier than usual at about 5:30 PM and turn in at 7:30 PM, when it's already dark. There are no animals about and we hear no mice; sleep is good.

In the morning I sign the shelter journal:

"9/19/13 Ho & Hum spent a good night. This 75 year old shelter is just a bit older than us geezers (71, 73 resp.). Thanks CCC for building many shelters along the AT. On to Elmer's for good food & a bit of R&R. Enjoy"

Deer Park Mountain Shelter, NC to Hot Springs, NC – 9/19/13

Start Time: 7:15 AM, Deer Park Mountain Shelter, NC
End Time: 9:15 AM, Elmer's Sunnybank Inn, Hot Springs, NC
Total Miles: 3.2 miles
Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 500'/1400'

Distances:

Deer Park Mountain Shelter, NC (2400') to Hot Springs, NC (1326') = 3.2 miles

Pedometer readings (These readings seem low):

Steps: 12,800

Calories: 336

Steps/minute: 90

MPH: 2.55 (1.35 adjusted for actual miles)

211

Timer: 2 hours, 22 minutes, 03 seconds

Miles: 6.06 miles (3.2 actual miles)

Up at 6:15 AM; have our coffee and cupcakes, pack, and are off by 7:15 AM. We move quickly up the ½ mile and 300' climb to the summit of Deer Park Mountain in only about 20 minutes and make few stops. We reach the AT parking lot at the north end of Hot Springs by 9:00 AM. There we notice the Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel right by the parking lot and note, for future reference, that bunks are only \$15/night, a bit cheaper than Elmer's Sunnybank Inn.

The trail leads across the parking lot and down a long set of stairs onto the main street of Hot Springs. There are AT "blazes" sculpted right into the sidewalk all the way along Hot Springs' main street; that is the AT goes the entire length of the town. In fact, Hot Springs in the first town going north that is actually

right on the AT, so of course it is very popular with hikers. We reach Elmer's Sunnybank Inn by 9:15 AM and check back into the Earl Shaffer room, which is probably the nicest room in the whole hostel.

We drive Hum's car back to Max Patch following the turn-by-turn directions Hum noted 3 days ago when we drove my car to the Max Patch parking lot from Hot Springs. It is slow going because there is much paving construction going on at several places along the way, but we get to Max Patch without any wrong turns. This morning it is very hazy on Max Patch so there is no opportunity to improve on my pictures. We return to Hot Springs without a hitch, but to our dismay the diner where we had hoped to have lunch is closed :-)



Hum "Checks the Map!" Note the AT "Blazes on the Hot Springs Sidewalk (Hot Springs, TN is the First Town Directly on the AT Going North)

We spend the afternoon organizing our packs and relaxing and reading out on the porch adjacent to our room. It is a pleasant afternoon but unfortunately the forecast is for rain for the next 3 days... BAD! We sign up for the vegetarian dinner at 7:00 PM and later on in the afternoon we call our wives, very glad that we have good cell service all 4 days so far.

At dinner we meet a German lady from Berlin and an English gentleman from Yorkshire. They are hiking from Springer Mountain, GA, to Hot Springs and tell us that there weren't many views in the Smoky Mountains; it mostly rained while they were hiking there. Another guest at the table, from Winchester, VA, comments that the only view from the view tower on top of Clingman's Dome in the Smokies – the highest point on the entire AT – is to look at the picture of the view posted on the walls of the tower. Otherwise, he says, you can expect fog and haze to mostly obstruct the actual view.

Winchester (as I'll call him) is hiking from Erwin, TN, southbound. He says he met a very fat NOBO hiker just north of Hot Springs, who was totally unprepared for backpacking. He says he gave the chubby hiker 212

a few tips about how to be properly prepared for backpacking. Another lady at the table, Gillian, is from the Appalachian Trail Conference (ATC) and is hosting a conference at Elmer's hostel attended by 6 teachers. They had their closing ceremony this afternoon and her conference is the reason that we can't park in Elmer's lot for our next section hike. Gillian says her group hiked to Lover's Leap Rock, a favorite overlook on the AT just north of Hot Springs, which will be on our section hike southbound route in the next few days, or so we think (more on that laughable point later).

Elmer kicks off a discussion around the table by asking each of us to give our name, where we are from, where we work, and finally who would you like to hike with on the AT (can be anyone living or dead, real or fictional). I say I would like to hike with George Washington because he probably knew something about hiking. With that Winchester expounds at length about George Washington, his military career and his surveying exploits: very knowledgeable. I also mention that I retired from Bell Labs, which gets English/Yorkshire's attention: he is an electrical engineer working on integrated circuits in the UK. He says he doesn't like it much and will change jobs; he is curious about what I did at Bell Labs and knows that Bell Labs has done a lot of research, of course, in the areas of transistors, solid state physics, and integrated circuits. Hum relates his nuclear engineering background and says he would like to hike with John Muir, an interesting choice. I chat with Gillian about climbing Mt. Sinai; she climbed it as did I, years

ago, in the dark, to reach the summit in time to see the sunrise – a life experience par excellence. Elmer is fairly taciturn during the whole discussion and I learn later on that he is a former monk, which would perhaps explain his reticence.

Dinner is absolutely delicious: yummy carrot soup followed by a big salad with wonderful dressing, then Tunisian Stew on Couscous, and finally lemon meringue pie with a delicious crust for dessert. Yum!

Elmer says we can pay him next time we stop by, which is planned for 3 days from now but that will turn out not to be. We get to bed early, as usual, by 9:00 PM, and have a good sleep.

NC212-Devil Fork Gap, NC, to Hogback Ridge Shelter, NC – 9/20/13

Start Time: 6:30 AM, NC212-Devil Fork Gap, NC
End Time: 12:00 Noon, Hogback Ridge Shelter, NC
Total Miles: 6.2 miles
Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 2400'/1400'

Distances:

NC212-Devil Fork Gap, NC (3200') to Hogback Ridge Shelter Side Trail, NC (4200') = 6.1 miles.
Hogback Ridge Shelter Side Trail (4200') = 0.1 miles

Pedometer readings (These readings seem low):

Steps: 22,088
Calories: 581
Steps/minute: 101
MPH: 2.87 (1.70 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 3 hours, 38 minutes, 06 seconds
Miles: 10.45 miles (6.2 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and off by 5:30 AM. I park my car in the AT/USFS parking lot at the south end of town, in a more or less "private" space that is somewhat more lighted than the almost pitch black remainder of the parking lot. I wonder if this lot is really secure but have no choice but to leave my car there for the next several days.

Hum then proceeds to go the wrong way out of the parking lot and I immediately point this out and say he should turn around. But for some reason Hum insists that he is right even though I tell him I'm certain he's wrong because we crossed over this terrain yesterday and distinctly remember the road layout not to mention that we have just come up to the parking lot from the opposite direction so we both already know that we need to retrace our steps back to the main road. Even so Hum persists in going in the wrong direction and continues to insist that he is right saying "we did this yesterday," which of course I knew we hadn't. I continue to insist he is wrong and won't listen but Hum keeps on going. Finally this wrong way

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road eventually loops back to the main road, but takes us about a mile or so out of our way. Hum finally realizes where we are but is still very slow to admit any possible error on his part. This entire saga is actually rather comical: this is very unusual behavior for Hum, who is almost always willing to admit even minor issues and criticize himself. I suspect that because Hum prides himself on his wonderful navigation skills – which are indeed formidable and admirable, on or off the trail – it is perhaps more difficult for him to admit this minor but very unusual error in *Hum's Precision Navigation Service :-)*

We follow my GPS to Devil Fork Gap and it's good that we do. We follow Route 208 north out of town and plan to turn right on Route 212, which will take us to Devil Fork Gap. However when we reach the turn to Route 212, it is blocked off with a "Road Closed" sign. Uh oh! But for some reason the GPS does not route us onto Route 212 but tells us to continue on Route 208 and to turn right in 2 ½ miles; we're not sure what turn that would be? Our GPS routes us onto Franklin Mountain Road, which we see on our AT map is a bit more direct and connects to Route 208 in a few miles. Our only concern is whether Route 208 will still be closed at that point of intersection. Fortunately it is not closed and we continue north on Route 208 in search of Devil Fork Gap. We try to find a sign marking a 'trail intersection' or a 'caution hikers' sign often found at AT trailheads, but we find no such sign.

Near the summit of Devil Fork Gap we spot a small parking area on the right side of the road but continue on because there are no signs or blazes we can see marking the AT. We continue on for perhaps another mile and it soon becomes clear that we are now descending the other side of the mountain and have surely passed the AT trailhead. We decide that the small parking lot we passed a few minutes back must be the right place so we double back and park in the small lot; it's now 6:30 AM. A quick

reconnaissance of the parking area leads us to the AT crossing: on the south side of the road there is a ladder/stile that takes you over a barbed wire fence and on the north side of the road the AT just proceeds up the mountain.

We don our packs and head lamps (it's still 45 minutes to first light) and set off on the south side of the road over the ladder/stile. About an hour later we're both wondering how it is that the topography on the trail is not even close to matching the topography shown on the AT trail map: we keep going up seemingly forever when we should be going fairly level. Then it hits me! We're going north on the AT, not south as we intended! I now also remember reading in the AT Trail Guide about Devil Fork Gap:

"Note: The Trail between here and Big Butt Mountain [to the south] is oriented in such a way that southbound hikers (those bound toward the Smokies) are actually traveling compass-north, and vice versa for northbounders."

I kick myself for forgetting this point and making a really stupid if not embarrassing mistake. This is the first time we've actually gone the wrong way on the AT and we both feel a little red-faced. Hum immediately wants to turn back but given that we have come several miles already I encourage that we pause and think a bit about our options. I suggest that one option is to continue on our northerly trek to Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel in Erwin, TN. After all, this hike to Erwin is in fact planned anyway, the only problem being that my car is in Hot Springs and not at Uncle Johnny's. But I recall that Uncle Johnny's offers a shuttle service to just about anywhere in the area so I give them a call; fortunately there is cell service here, which is far from guaranteed on the AT. Sure enough, I speak to Clint at Uncle Johnny's and can arrange for a shuttle service back to Devil Fork Gap and it's only \$35 – not bad at all – so I make a reservation for the shuttle. Problem solved. Hum is impressed. We continue on; much better than turning back :-)

From here on it's very slow going; we encounter many 100'-200' knobs over the top of Lick Rock (4600') that are not shown on our topo map. We get to Hogback Ridge Shelter at 12:00 noon: it takes us 5 hours to do 6.2 miles, which is indeed very slow going. We take our usual spots: me against the right-hand (north) wall and Hum on the left-hand wall.

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Hogback Ridge Shelter; Steel Cables to Hang Food Bags to Keep Away from Critters

There is a group of 6 day hikers taking a rest at the shelter. At first we're worried they are staying at the shelter and will take all the available space. But right away we learn they only do day hikes and today they are hiking from Sams Gap to Devil Fork Gap (8.5 miles). One of the more goofy women immediately

asks me to take her picture posing on the picnic table; quite why she didn't ask one of her fellow hikers to take the picture is beyond me. A week later, on our final shelter stay at No Business Knob Shelter, we find their entry in the shelter journal, which gives all their trail names:

"9/21/13 Six day hikers doing Spivey Gap to Nolichucky River. 2nd of 6 days – yesterday we went Sams Gap to Devil Fork Gap, no register at shelter (Hogback Ridge). We are from Virginia's Shenandoah Valley and are Hikemaster, Mindflush, Sunbeam Tripper, AP Girl, HiFi Brain, Hopeful.

Hikemaster"

We find a ¼-full liter bottle of Makers Mark Bourbon in the shelter; very nice trail magic left by some kind trail angel. Hum professes not to want any so I am happy to consume a bit of the magic, which gives me a nice buzz before taking my lunch. I leave quite a bit of bourbon in the bottle for future lucky hikers, so I don't have to feel obliged to pack out an empty bottle.

An older NOBO hiker arrives next and stops to have lunch; he is headed from Hot Springs to Damascus. He goes for water and tells us "it's very far down". Then a husband and wife stop and she is carrying an injured Chihuahua dog in a kind of makeshift sling in front of her; the poor doggie looks dazed and perhaps blind with cataracts. They found the dog along the AT we had just hiked; somehow we didn't see the dog earlier. These kind soles intend to hike on to Sams Gap and seek out a vet to care for the poor little puppy. They are headed to Damascus. He tells us that he had to take off a week from the hike because of dehydration; now he drinks 3 liters per day from a bladder attached to his pack. They tell us they have gotten a recent weather report for the area: rain expected to start at 3 PM and to keep raining thru tomorrow. BAD.

Hum decides to hike up to High Rock a little over a half mile to the north. While he's gone I read in the AT Guide that there is a side trail to a viewpoint at High Rock, and when he returns I tell him about the viewpoint. It seems that Hum has somehow missed the viewpoint so he decides to hike back up to High Rock a second time to find it, and reports on his return that indeed he did find the viewpoint.

Because of our mistaken direction this morning Hum finds that he has the wrong topo maps for the northbound Devil Fork Gap to Erwin section we are doing, whereas he only brought the maps for our intended southbound Devil Fork Gap to Hot Springs section. Hum is so wanting to keep up with his ritual

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to "check the map" at every possible opportunity, he actually traces the topo map from the one I carry. Otherwise he feels completely lost without his topo map.

For dinner I have Chicken Vindeloo, which is very hot and spicy and gives me an upset stomach that lasts all night. After dinner we go for water and it is a long ¼ mile downhill trek to reach the spring, but it turns out to be a good source. Two SOBO guys, who are hiking from Damascus, VA, to Hot Springs, NC, arrive at 7:00 PM; today they hiked from Bald Mountain Shelter (10.6 miles) and say they got a late start. We hit the hay at 7:45, well after dark, but these guys keep talking rather loudly until 8:30; no couth these guys. One of them shines a light in my eyes and I sit up and wave. He says "thought you guys went to sleep." I reply "it's hard to get to sleep". Thankfully it gets quiet after that; it seems they got the message.

Sleep is not good with my stomach ache and the guy next to me tosses and turns all night.

Hogback Ridge Shelter, NC to Sams Gap, NC – 9/21/13

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Hogback Ridge Shelter, NC

End Time: 10:00 AM, Sams Gap, NC

Total Miles: 6.5 miles

Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 1500'/1300'

Distances:

Hogback Ridge Shelter Side Trail (4200') = 0.1 miles

Hogback Ridge Shelter Side Trail, NC (4200') to I-26/Sams Gap, NC (3800') = 2.4 miles.

I26-Sams Gap, NC (3800') to Turn-around point & return = 4.0 miles.

Pedometer readings (No readings, battery dead):

We're up at 5:45 AM and stay very quiet even though we both wanted to provide a little payback for all the uncouth noise last night from the two guys still sleeping soundly in the shelter. We set out at about 6:45 AM and get up to the High Rock overlook just in time to see a beautiful sunrise in the valley below.



Sunrise from High Rock

Despite the weather predictions we had heard the day before that the rain would start at 3:00 PM yesterday, the rain didn't actually start until 8:00 AM this morning. The rain and wind pick up dramatically after we pass under I-26 at Sams Gap, but we press on northward after donning our ponchos. We keep going for perhaps another 2 miles and all the while the rain gets heavier and heavier and the wind picks

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up to a gale with perhaps 40+ mph gusts. It is freezing and I'm sure I see sleet and small hail; I'm drenched and shivering and feel that hypothermia is starting to set in. At the summit of a small knob I call out to Hum to stop and when I catch up to him I say "this is nuts". Hum immediately agrees and we decide to turn back to I-26/Sams Gap and plan to hitchhike back to Hum's car parked at Devil Fork Gap.

When we reach the parking lot at Sams Gap Hum immediately engages a couple of young guys in a conversation and tells them of our plight. Just as I join the conversation Hum says that these nice guys -- Jason and Pike from Nashville, TN, who have just arrived here at the parking lot -- have offered to drive us to Hum's car: how great is that! Their car is pretty compact and there is no room for our packs in the trunk so we both squeeze into the back seat with our packs and poles on our laps. We can barely move but at least we're getting a ride.

I'm pretty sure I know the way back to Devil Fork Gap from Sams Gap, but the turn onto Route 352 from Route 23/81 out of Sams Gap seems longer than I anticipated. It is about 8 miles to the turn and I begin to want to check the map to make sure but of course that is impossible buried under our packs and poles. I try to consult Hum on the route, quietly because I don't want anyone to think we might be going the wrong way, but every time I try to whisper anything to Hum he bellows out in a very loud voice, "WHAT?" So I drop my query and fortunately we finally reach the turn onto Route 352. After another 4 miles we reach Devil Fork Gap and Hum's car and are home free! Thank you Jason and Pike! They say they had planned to hike to Big Bald today but are now unsure what to do given the lousy weather. We bid them farewell and thanks a million for driving us 12 miles back to our car!

On the way back Hum says to me that "you made the right call" on turning back and admits that sometimes he focuses way too much on the goal and ignores possible problems and dangers. En route back to Hot Springs we stop and call Pat to get a weather report for the next few days. Fortunately we get through and after Hum tells her that I suggested we turn back in the face of extremely bad weather Pat says to Hum, obviously in great relief, that "I love Jerry", which brings a huge smile to my face. She tells us that Weather.com forecasts good weather in the area for the rest of the week. Good news!

Back in Hot Springs we check into the [Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel](#) at the north end of town, which is the hostel we had passed 2 days ago upon arriving in Hot Springs from our hike from Max Patch and where I had parked my car. We call "Chuck Norris" (his trail name), the manager, and he comes immediately to the hostel to check us in. He gives us each a single room for \$15 each, which is the same rate he charges for the bunk room; very nice guy. Chuck says he is tied up at an outdoor wedding he's catering and predicts, based on forecasts he's heard I suppose, that the rain "will stop at 5:00 PM". And after an

afternoon of torrential rain what do you know that he is right, exactly on the mark!



**Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel (Left)
Laughing Heart Lodge (Right), Former Jesuit Residence**

After showering and shaving, we take a big lunch at the Smoky Mountain Diner: I have a huge and delicious turkey club sandwich and beef broth soup and (happily) declare “too much food”. Hum can’t

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finish his lunch and takes a doggie bag; I reserve a meat loaf dinner for tonight. I stop at the Dollar General next door to the diner and buy replacement batteries for my pedometer.

After lunch we go back to Elmer’s Sunnybank Inn and each pay \$52 for our 2 night’s stay and dinner. I inquire about getting the recipe for the delicious Tunisian Stew but Elmer is unwilling to give it out. He vaguely refers me to some “Vermont cook book” but that’s not much help.

Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel is pretty full now, in part because some wedding guests are staying in the cabin area adjacent to the hostel. We take seats in the covered area just outside the hostel and there we meet and chat with Natie, who has dread locks, and Mattie, both from Tennessee, who are hiking from Damascus, VA, to Springer Mountain, GA. Mattie says she has torn ligaments in her legs, knees, and feet, but is still hiking. She is 21, he is 24; a very nice couple. We meet “Panama Red”, a reddish dog with a red-headed master. The wedding guests residing in the private space emerge at 5:30 PM in their finest, all ready to go to the wedding. At their request we snap a few pictures.

I find a couple of 16 oz. Pabst Blue Ribbon beers in the fridge, and gladly oblige the sign on the door that says “take if you want”. Hum is not interested in drinking beer. It’s a nice addition to our afternoon of visiting with the other guests at Laughing Heart. We re-plan our hiking schedule and decide to hike the Devil Fork Gap to Hot Springs section starting tomorrow, Sunday. We will then drive to Erwin, TN, stay at Uncle Johnny’s Nolichucky Hostel, and complete the Sams Gap to Erwin Section to complete our hike by Saturday, September 28.

I have a delicious Meatloaf Dinner at the Smoky Mountain Diner: it’s a huge dinner and the real deal – homemade meatloaf -- all for \$7. Hum had his country fried steak once again.

We get the bed at 8:00 PM; it’s very noisy outside our room still but the air conditioner drowns out the noise.

NC212-Devil Fork Gap, NC, to Jerry Cabin Shelter, NC – 9/22/13

Start Time: 6:45 AM, NC212-Devil Fork Gap, NC

End Time: 12:15 PM, Jerry Cabin Shelter, NC

Total Miles: 8.6 miles

Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 2000’/1300’

Distances:

NC212-Devil Fork Gap, NC (3200’) to Flint Mountain Shelter, NC (3600’) = 2.7 miles.

Flint Mountain Shelter, NC (3600’) to Jerry Cabin Shelter, NC (4150’) = 5.9 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 26,061
Calories: 685
Steps/minute: 99
MPH: 2.83 (1.97 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 21 minutes, 28 seconds
Miles: 12.34 miles (8.6 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and meet Andrew from Flagler Beach, FL in the hallway; he is making fresh coffee and we're very glad to partake of same. Andrew works for the Fire & Rescue Squad in Flagler Beach, FL, (which is very near Palm Coast, FL, where I live), and tells us that he's hiking with two other guys who he says are "out of shape". They are hiking northbound from Hot Springs and we will undoubtedly meet them on the trail.

We leave my car once again in the same spot by Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel and take Hum's car to Devil Fork Gap; we arrive there at 6:30 AM and wait 15 minutes before departing. This time we make sure we depart on the north side of Route 212, which takes us southbound on the AT as intended. It's very dark in the woods and we use our headlamps for 30 minutes before we can see the trail adequately.

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We reach Flint Mountain Shelter (2.7 miles) by 8:30 AM and meet two girls hiking from Pennsylvania to Georgia, who are making breakfast. Their trail names are "Hummingbird" (Megan, 21) and "Moose on the Loose" (Kiersten, 24). Moose on the Loose says she wants to be a nurse and attended [Ursinus College](#) in Collegeville, PA, and Hummingbird attended [York College](#) in York, PA, not far from Baltimore. They both have severe rashes on their legs, which they suspect came from Poison Oak, and plan to see a doctor in Hot Springs to get treatment. We try to call Chuck Norris in Hot Springs to inquire about a doctor but there is no cell service at the shelter. They will be going next to Jerry Cabin Shelter, as are we, and bid them farewell and see you later.

By 10 AM we pass the Shelton Grave, which our AT Guide describes as follows:

"A single grave with military headstones at either end for "Wm. Shelton, Co. E, 2 NC Inf." And "David Shelton, Co. C, 3 NC Mtd. Inf.," killed here during the Civil War. These gravestones were erected about 1915 on this ridgecrest (elev. 4,500 feet) of Coldspring Mountain, just north of Green Ridge. David Shelton and his young nephew, William, left their mountain farms in the remote Shelton Laurel section of North Carolina and enlisted in North Carolina companies with other men from their state who were backing the Union cause. When the Sheltons returned for a rendezvous with their families in a crude mountain cabin on Coldspring Mountain, Confederates ambushed and killed them and a boy lookout, whose headstone was furnished separately."

Next we stop at Big Rocks on the summit of Big Butt on Coldspring Mountain. At first we hike to the summit and completely miss the overlook, but then we backtrack and find the side trail to the top of the big boulder. But there is little view, which is now obstructed by a lot of trees that have grown tall, although the huge boulder is impressive.

Later on we enter a huge open field where there are almost no blazes; for a long time we think we have lost the trail but fortunately after re-entering the woods we again find blazes. We reach Jerry Cabin Shelter at 12:30 PM; the girls get there only 15 minutes later, having left Flint Mountain Shelter at 10:00 AM, easily doing 2+ mph; fast hikers.



Shelton Grave (Top 4 Pictures)
Open Field, No Blazes for a Long Way, Did We Lose the Trail We Wonder?
“Big Tree Gateway Arch” to Jerry Cabin Shelter

The shelter journal contains many complaints from the “cleaner” (trail maintenance person) about tents left behind, junk in the fireplace, etc.; all true statements. We find the floors in the shelter to be not very level so it’s not going to be a restful night; I decide to sleep with my head toward the open front of the shelter (I’d rather not, normally), because that’s the only way to have my head higher than my feet and not sleep in a “downhill” position.

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Jerry Cabin Shelter

Two NOBO guys arrive about 6:30 PM. These are the same guys we met on our first hiking day just north of Standing Bear Farm Hostel, and we later met at Walnut Mountain Shelter, where they tried to horn into that shelter, after dark, which would have totally disrupted 4 of us who had already settled in for the night. At first it looks like they are going to stay in Jerry Cabin Shelter tonight, but after eating dinner they pack up and head north and say they will tent after hiking a bit further in the dark. Thank goodness for that good luck: a less crowded shelter.

A Shreveport, LA, man arrives about 6:45 PM and sets up a tent, but eats dinner in the shelter and we chat for a while; a very nice guy.

Hummingbird and Moose on the Loose start a fire around 7:00 PM. They are good at it and start with small kindling and build up to bigger logs and sticks; there is lots of smoke but it keeps us warm on a chilly night. They tell us they’re planning a 26.4 mile “marathon” to Hot Springs tomorrow; they’ve done 23 miles in the past but this will be their biggest day so far. They hope to see a doctor in Hot Springs to treat their Poison Oak skin breakout and plan to stay at Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel. Megan says she also has a hairline fracture on her foot, which she got after she fell in her camp shoes while getting water at one of the shelters. I retire and Hum chats with them by the fire until about 8:00 PM, when he retires. They then play video games on their smart phones; they are quiet and respectful.

Hummingbird and Moose on the Loose leave this message in the journal:

*“9/22 Very short hike today after taking a zero during all the rain last night/day. Prepping for our marathon Monday tomorrow 26.4 miles into Hot Springs! Beds & pillows await!!!
(Heart) Hummingbird & Moose on the Loose”*

And Hum leaves this message in the journal:

*“9/22 Had to change our schedule due to the storm yesterday. Turned around heading toward big bald and spent the night dry in Hot Springs. Heading back toward Hot Springs over next few days. Then back north to Erwin (two car Section hike). Enjoyed sharing the shelter with Hummingbird & Moose and their youthful energy.
Geezer Hikers Ho & Hum (Ages 71 & 73)”*

I don’t have a good sleep at all. Because the cabin is not level I sleep with my head toward the open end

of the shelter; something I don't like to do if only because animals will first encounter your head rather than your feet should they decide to have a quick meal. As such, my "pillow" (AKA my extra clothes stuff bag) falls out of the shelter onto the ground, several times, waking me up and necessitating that I retrieve said pillow in the dark before resuming my attempt to get some rest.

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Jerry Cabin Shelter, NC to Little Laurel Shelter, NC – 9/23/13

Start Time: 7:10 AM, Jerry Cabin Shelter, NC
End Time: 1:20 PM, Little Lauren Shelter, NC
Total Miles: 7.0 miles
Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 1200'/1800'

Distances:

Jerry Cabin Shelter, NC (4150') to Little Laurel Shelter, NC (3700') = 6.8 miles
Side trail to Camp Creek Bald Summit: 0.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 26,256
Calories: 690
Steps/minute: 91
MPH: 2.58 (1.41 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 48 minutes, 22 seconds
Miles: 12.43 miles (7.0 actual miles)

We're up at 6:10 AM; the girls are already up and quickly preparing for their 26.4 mile "marathon" hike today. They're off by 7:00 AM and we're soon behind them, leaving at 7:10 AM when it's already light out and therefore no need for our head lamps this morning.

After about 2 miles we begin to climb up to "Big Firescald Knob", which follows a high elevation (4500'), very narrow ridge for about 2 miles, with continuous rock scrambles. It is a challenging hike along the many rock scrambles, with one of the climbs being about 8 feet requiring handholds to pull oneself up but not really all that difficult. We exercise extreme care not to fall. Views along the ridge are truly outstanding and it is an especially beautiful, clear day with virtually no haze: we can see forever.

Evidently Big Firescald Knob was severely burned in the past and some of the openness is probably due to the severe fire. We can see 7 towers on Camp Creek Bald to the south, about 2 miles in the distance: 6 of the towers are communication antennas and the 6th tower is an old fire tower, which we hope to find later on for more incredible views on this gorgeous day. I have trouble with my camera, which is giving me continuous "low battery" warnings. I try my backup batteries but they prove to be no better; Hum carries no AA batteries that I can borrow, so I manage the situation by turning my camera on for as short a time as possible and barely get by with the nearly dead batteries.

We call our wives from the ridge (we couldn't get through last night, but tried to send a satellite "spot" signal) and they tell us they didn't receive the spot signal last night. Hum later decides that he might have hit the off switch too soon and says he will try again tonight.

After exiting Big Firescald Knob we look for a couple of side trails to two overlooks, both of which are noted in the AT Guidebook. I am now careful to note all the overlooks marked in the guidebook since we've missed a couple in the past because of my sometimes sloppy review of our daily hike. Today we actually get sucked into 2 or 3 false alarms because we follow blue-blazed trails that lead to nowhere (not sure why they are so marked). Eventually we do find the Blackstone Cliffs and White Rock Cliffs, which afford nice views but don't surpass the outstanding vistas earlier in the day from the Big Firescald Knob.

At the side trail to Blackstone Cliffs we meet "Mercury", who is from Oregon and has done the PCT 3 times. He was given his trail name because of his incredible speed on the trail. He started SOBO on the AT in June, and is currently number 3 in line to finish; he says that #1 did it in 58 days, setting a new record. He mentions that he met "Chuck Norris", the proprietor of the Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel where we stayed, and Chuck's wife "Tigger" (her trail name), on the PCT and is looking forward to meeting him again. Apparently "Chuck Norris" is the hostel owner's trail name, which we had not realized

before. Mercury also says he has met Hummingbird and Moose on the Loose a couple of times along the way. He is going to Hot Springs tonight (still another 24 miles ahead) and we tell him he is bound to meet the girls tonight at the hostel. Mercury does not seem in any hurry, even though he is reputed for his

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speed; a very nice guy. We also meet a rather chubby hiker with an ice ax on the end of his hiking stick, at the same location as Mercury; we recall that we've met him before on the trail.

We reach the side trail to the summit of Camp Creek Bald at about 12:45 PM, and I venture off in search of the lookout/fire tower that is noted in our AT Guidebook. Since there is no sign pointing to the fire tower we are unsure this is the right side trail so Hum stays behind to guard our packs while I scout out the summit. I find 3 very large communication towers, all enclosed in protective barbwire fences, but no lookout/fire tower. Bummer and super-bummer :-(-:(We could see the lookout tower from Big Firescald Knob, along with 6 communications towers, but somehow I could not find it on the summit of Camp Creek Bald! I also concluded that the tallest communication tower was the one that "Hinton James" told us he had climbed last year, as I described in our 2012 AT hiking journal:

"At one point, Hinton James somehow mistook a cell phone tower --- 300 feet high -- for a fire tower marked on his maps. First he had to scale a security fence to access the cell tower and then climb the 300' all the way to the top: what a dangerous climb that must have been (he later showed us pictures of same). Normally workers hook onto these towers for safety when they climb, so Hinton James' free style climb sans safety harness must have been very dangerous."



**Big Firescald Knob (Top Left); 8' Vertical Rock Scramble (Top Right)
Firetower (Bottom, Leftmost Tower) & 6 Communications Antennas on Camp Creek Bald
(Somehow We Didn't Find the Firetower on Camp Creek Bald, Bummer!)
300' Cell Tower "Hinton James" Climbed (Bottom Right)**

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Hinton James also told us he could see the lookout tower from the top of the cell phone tower; so we were not the only ones to miss this lookout tower!

We arrive at Laurel Creek Shelter at 1:20 PM; progress is very slow today while taking lots of time to enjoy the views, scout out the fire tower, chat with other hikers, etc. A young Asian woman, "Chigger Bait", and a much older woman, "Chicken Wing", arrive next. They have hiked up to the shelter from Allen Gap, which is 5 miles to the south, and are headed back NOBO to Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel, in Erwin, TN, where they stayed last night. They took a shuttle from Uncle Johnny's to Allen Gap, and apparently the driver took the back roads very fast, which tossed around poor old Grandma/Chicken Wing to the point of upsetting her stomach. Chigger Bait, who I first take for a man, because of the masculine demeanor and deeper voice, is extremely attentive to Grandma and trying to elicit some decision from her as to whether they should stay here or move on. We catch on right away that Grandma is a complainer and Chigger Bait is her gopher. They are both from Nashville, TN, and Grandma/Chicken Wing is a retired high school English teacher. They eventually decide to move on and camp on the summit of Camp Creek Bald.



Laurel Creek Shelter

We have a nice chat with "Rooster" AND "Danko", who arrive next; they are SOBO thru hikers: Rooster is the #14 SOBO hiker and Danko is the #13 SOBO hiker (numbers are given in order of start by the Forest Ranger at Mt. Katahdin, ME). Rooster is from Hilton Head, SC, and holds an MS in Computer Engineering from Duke University, and Danko is from Missouri and has a degree in geology. We tell them about meeting Mercury and this gets their attention; they hope to catch up to Mercury in Hot Springs. Andrew, from Flagler Beach, FL, who we met at the Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel in Hot Springs, and his 2 friends arrive and right away set up tent sites.

We're in the sack by 7:30 PM; all is dark and quiet. In the morning I leave this entry in the journal:

"9/24 Ho & Hum checking out after good night. No critters & good company with Rooster & Danko. Doing Davenport Gap → Erwin in zigzag fashion but getting it done. OK for 71/73 yr old geezer brothers."

Little Laurel Shelter, NC to Mill Ridge Pond, NC – 9/24/13

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Little Laurel Shelter, NC
End Time: 5:00 PM, Mill Ridge Pond, NC
Total Miles: 14.9 miles
Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 3700'/4700'

Distances:

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Little Laurel Shelter, NC (3700') to NC208-Allen Gap, NC (2300') = 4.9 miles
NC208-Allen Gap, NC (2300') to Spring Mountain Shelter, TN (3600') = 3.7 miles
Spring Mountain Shelter, TN (3600') to US25 and 70-Tanyard Gap, NC (2300') = 5.1 miles
Side Trail to Fire Tower on Rich Mountain = 0.2 miles
US25 and 70-Tanyard Gap, NC (2300') to Mill Ridge Pond = 1.0 miles

Pedometer readings:
Steps: 45,500
Calories: 1197
Steps/minute: 103
MPH: 2.93 (2.03 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 7 hours, 20 minutes, 51 seconds
Miles: 21.54 miles (14.9 actual miles)

We're up at 6:10 AM; Rooster & Danko are already packing. We're off by 7:00 AM and reach Spring Mountain Shelter (8.6 miles) by noon, which is exactly on target according to Hum's prediction.

Hum calls Pat to get the weather report: rain starting at 10:00 PM and lasting all day Wednesday through Thursday morning: another super bumme! We take lunch at the shelter and debate whether we can make it to Hot Springs before dark to beat the rain. It is still more than 10 miles to hike with lots of climbing still to go: we decide that it doesn't look good to make it to Hot Springs before dark, but we agree to press on as far as possible to minimize hiking in the rain tomorrow.



Lunch at Spring Mountain Shelter, Where We Decide to Continue on to Hot Springs Hoping to Beat the Coming Deluge

We get to the summit of Rich Mountain by about 2:30 PM, and this time we're determined to find the fire tower noted in the AT Guidebook. We have no problem finding the tower and the views from there are outstanding; it is extremely clear today and this somewhat makes up for missing the tower on Camp Creek Bald. I am still smarting from not finding that tower and Hum kids me incessantly whenever I mention it :-). There is a good spring near the fire tower and we take the opportunity to fill our water bottles.

We make it to Tanyard Gap (13.9 miles) by 4:00 PM and decide we cannot make it to Hot Springs before dark so we better find a campsite soon, to beat the dark. There are no good campsites in the Tanyard Gap area, besides it is very noisy by a busy road, so we push on a bit further. About a mile or so further on we reach a nice pond and concrete dam and a good campsite just beyond the dam. This is the place we decide and quickly put up our tents, have dinner, call the girls, and hit the hay.



Rich Mountain Firetower & Long Range View from the Tower

It is supposed to start raining at 10:00 PM tonight but it holds off until 4:30 AM, when it starts teeming cats and dogs. My tent doesn't seem to leak but I'm disturbed that there is water dripping from the top; I decide that it's condensation and not leaking but still unsettling.



Mill Ridge Pond & Campsite below Mill Ridge Pond Dam

Mill Ridge Pond, NC to Hot Springs, NC – 9/25/13

Start Time: 7:15 AM, Mill Ridge Pond, NC
End Time: 10:00 AM, Hot Springs, NC
Total Miles: 5.9 miles
Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 600'/1700'

Distances:
Mill Ridge Pond, NC, to Hot Springs, NC = 4.9 miles
Trail Down Lover's Leap Mountain (Wrong Turn) & Back = 1.0 miles

Pedometer readings:
Steps: 22,236
Calories: 585
Steps/minute: 102
MPH: 2.90 (1.62 adjusted for actual miles)

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Timer: 3 hours, 37 minutes, 41 seconds
Miles: 10.53 miles (5.9 actual miles)

I wake up before 6:00 AM, in the dark, it's raining very hard now. Moisture has collected on the roof of my tent, probably from condensation rather than leaking, but it is still unnerving. Fortunately everything in the tent – all my gear -- is still pretty dry.

Hum calls over to me “are you ready” and I yell back “yes”, knowing the very unpleasant task ahead of getting out of the tent in the rain, packing up, and getting back on the trail, pretty much soaking wet. I roll up my sleeping bag and pack all my gear back in my pack, have my breakfast of summer sausage tortillas – all this while still inside the tent. I dress, don my poncho, grit my teeth, and then finally step outside the tent into the teaming rain at 6:20 AM.

I immediately take out my backpack and poles and put them aside; and as quickly as possible remove the rain fly from my tent and put it over my backpack to try to keep it dry. I pull up the tent stakes, take down the tent support poles, and fold up the soaking wet tent – feebly attempting to shake off as much water as possible -- and put the tent in the stuff bag along with the rain fly and stakes, and place the whole package back in my pack. Everything is soaking wet making the pack extra heavy this morning. We’re back on the trail by 7:15 AM.

We encounter a lot of annoying ups and downs – a few hundred feet each time. Along the way this morning I sprain my left ankle once again, badly, rolling it severely to the left, the exact same way I had sprained it back in June. I am distressed by this and my ankle hurts a lot for the remainder of the hike. Immediately I begin to have doubts about completing the next 3 days of hiking.

We finally make it to the beginning of Lovers Leap Rock Ridge by 8:45 AM. Right away we see a sign saying “Lovers Leap” and a Blue-Blazed trail veering off to the right. While we didn’t read about a side trail to Lovers Leap Rock in the AT Guidebook, we drop our packs and follow the trail anyway. We probably descend about 300’-400’ and ½ mile before deciding that we’re not getting to Lovers Leap Rock. Apparently the Blue Blazed trail is not taking us to Lovers Leap Rock, and, now a bit disgusted about the poorly marked side trail and going the wrong way for quite some distance and elevation, we climb back up to the AT. We decide that the sign is marking a side trail and alternate route up Lovers Leap Mountain; but it is very bad labeling indeed! We always hate to go extra distance on a Blue Blazed trail that becomes nothing but a wild goose chase.

We continue on south on the AT and enjoy good views from Lovers Leap Ridge, even though they’re a bit misty from the still lingering rainstorm. There are dramatic outcrops on Lovers Leap Rock giving excellent views of Hot



Lover’s Leap Ridge & French Broad River 1000’ Below

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Springs and the French Broad River 1000’ below. Our AT Guidebook describes Lovers Leap Rock as follows:

“Lovers Leap, a rock face above the French Broad River, is visible from Hot Springs. It was supposedly named by the Cherokee Indians when a maiden of their tribe, Mist-on-the-Mountain, threw herself from the crag after her northern lover, Magwa, was killed by a jealous rival, Lone Wolf.”

Perhaps Mist-on-the-Mountain is responsible for the mist on the mountain we are seeing this morning.

It is a very steep and treacherous descent down to the French Broad River, which is very dramatic with significant white water rapids at many points along the trail that parallels the river for about one mile or so. We make it into Hot Springs by 10:00 AM, so it took us almost 3 hours to hike from our tent site to Hot

Springs. This tells us that there was not enough daylight left yesterday, when we decided to stop, to allow us to reach Hot Springs before dark. This gives us a little relief that it wasn't possible to avoid the drenching rainstorm after all.



Rapids on French Broad River

I offer to go get the car while Hum guards our packs. While I'm gone Hum hikes the extra bit of the AT through Hot Springs, which coincides with the main drag, Lance Avenue, which he hasn't done yet to insure that, in the end, he hikes every inch of the AT. Hum's behavior along that line is known by other hikers as an "AT purist". Hum also calls Chuck Norris to say that we won't be staying at the Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel tonight. Chuck is appreciative of our letting him know about the cancellation and tells Hum that Hummingbird and Moose on the Loose are going to the doctor today to get an antihistamine shot to treat the Poison Oak rashes on their legs. Unfortunately we never find out if this cured their rather severe allergic reaction: we hope it did.

We have lunch again at the Smoky Mountain Diner and I partake of the soup and turkey club sandwich, once again, which makes for a huge and delicious lunch, not to mention the very reasonable price. We love this diner! and are glad we went there in the first place even after Elmer didn't recommend it very highly.

After lunch we drive to Erwin, TN, and get there pretty directly on the back roads. We check in at Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel with Clint, the desk clerk, who is also almost deaf so that everything we say has to be shouted and repeated several times. I had also spoken with Clint on the phone several days ago to arrange the shuttle to Devil Fork Gap, after we mistakenly went north rather than south on the AT from Devil Fork Gap. Again I had to shout and repeat myself several times in order for Clint to hear me on the phone. It doesn't seem that desk clerk is the ideal job for someone who is almost deaf. Clint

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suggests that rather than stay in the bunk house, as we did last year, that we check out one of the private rooms for "only \$2 more". On the way to check out the private room we meet the actual "Uncle Johnny", the owner, who is sitting on the porch, and who gives us an enthusiastic sales pitch on the private room, which is "only \$2 more". Uncle Johnny is a real business man. So we go check out the private room, but don't like the bunk bed arrangement there so we opt again to stay in the bunk house. Hum tells Uncle Johnny that we don't like the beds in the private room (but that's "only \$2 more", he says once again – no sale this time Uncle Johnny).

Hum arranges for a shuttle with Sergeant to take him to Sams Gap tomorrow morning, anticipating that I'll decide to opt out of the rest of our hike because of my sprained ankle. My ankle is still hurting a lot but abating somewhat as time goes on, so later in the afternoon I decide to continue the hike and Hum cancels the shuttle. We both shower, shave, clean up, dry out our gear, and pack food for the next three days. It continues to drizzle all afternoon.

I get on the Internet via the computer in the bunkhouse and send email to Lysie. I also check out the weather on-line and learn that it is supposed to rain again tomorrow – too bad. Hum talks to "DD", and fills him in on our hiking escapades and who we met in the last few days. DD knows most of the thru

hikers we talked to, and expresses surprise that Rooster has caught Danko and that both of them have caught Mercury. All of them he tells us are staying at the Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel tonight. These thru hikers have an amazing grapevine and keep close track of each other.

We opt for the Hawg & Dawg restaurant in downtown Erwin, recommended to us by Hummingbird and Moose on the Loose (they had met Hummingbird's parents in Erwin and liked the restaurant). It's a small restaurant with a highly animated manager, who visits every table for a chat. He tells us that he remembers Hummingbird and Moose on the Loose and Hummingbird's parents. We have a good dinner but it's not nearly as filling as the Smoky Mountain Diner, so we stop for an ice cream sundae at McD's on the way back to the hostel. I call Lysie from McD's parking lot.

We're in bed by 7:30 PM; all's quiet and we have a good sleep.

Sams Gap, NC to Bald Mountain Shelter, TN – 9/26/13

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Sams Gap, NC
End Time: 3:30 PM, Bald Mountain Shelter, TN
Total Miles: 10.1 miles
Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 3400'/3100'

Distances:

I26-Sams Gap, NC (3800') to Bald Mountain Shelter, TN (5000') = 7.7 miles
Side trail to Bald Mountain Shelter = 0.1 miles
Bald Mountain Shelter to Big Bald Summit & Return = 2.4 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 27,886
Calories: 733
Steps/minute: 96
MPH: 2.24 (1.62 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 48 minutes, 31 seconds
Miles: 13.20 miles (10.2 actual miles)

We've up at 5 AM and off to McD's for burritos, a favorite breakfast of mine. After breakfast we follow I-26 to Exit 50 and find Route 81 to Sam's Gap, as directed by Sergeant at Uncle Johnny's Hostel. We're on the trail by 6:45 AM, again with our head lamps. It's drizzling off and on and we put on our ponchos to keep us warm and dry.

It's a 6.5-mile 3000' (cumulative) climb up to the summit of Big Bald. On the way the morning sun streams its piercing rays through the trees to create a dramatic morning masterpiece. Then as we enter into the open, treeless area of Big Bald and start to climb to the summit, the clouds are lifting and we get

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some dramatic views. On the summit Hum chats with a group of 5 ladies who are day hiking while I snap some pictures. We also meet 2 guys who are birding and chat with them a bit. They tell us they are there to offer help to the licensed volunteers in the area just north of the summit who are catching birds in nets in order to band them, count them, and then release them.





**Morning Sun Steams its Piercing Rays Through the Trees
Long Range Views from Big Bald as Morning Clouds Clear Away
Hum Chats with Lady Day Hikers; Ho Rests on Big Bald Summit**

We descend down Big Bald into a gap before climbing "Big Stamp". Near the bottom of the descent there is an extremely slippery section of mud, on a down slope, and just about everyone skids on the mud and
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some fall at this point. Hum warns me after he almost falls and I narrowly escape falling down myself on this treacherous slope. We find many other slippery muddy sections on the trail over the bald and it is very uneven, which really bothers my sprained ankle. In the gap we meet Kathy the birder and while we chat I back up a couple of steps into a ditch and fall down: very elegant, Ho! -- funny and embarrassing. Kathy explains that the intent of their birding activity is to monitor bird population health and is being done in cooperation with the U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey. Their informative website is at <http://bigbaldbanding.org>, which identifies the various songbirds and raptors that are being studied in the area and also gives statistics of songbirds and raptors that are captured, banded, counted, and released.



**Birders Ascend “Big Stamp”; Volunteer Kathy & Hum Chat;
Notice of Birding Activity; Song Bird Captured in Net;
Volunteer Releases Captured Bird; Recent Birding Statistics**

We climb up “Big Stamp” and at the top we meet Kathy’s colleague Mark. Kathy and Mark are 2 of the volunteers catching birds today. At first Mark seems very aggressive and challenges us with “who are

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you!?”, “what are you doing here!?”, “what is your name!?”, as if he has never seen hikers before. After a while, fortunately, Mark calms down and gets a bit friendlier.

We watch Kathy and Mark set out their nets, at least 5 nets, which are vertical black nets about 6 feet

high by 25 feet long. In a very short time the nets trap at least 10 birds, which fly into the mostly invisible net and get caught in its web. The volunteers then remove the birds very gently from the net, but sometimes the bird's wings and/or feet get very tangled and it takes quite a while to free them, perhaps a minute or more. Once freed from the net the birds are put in little brown bags, where they are later removed, banded, weighed, measured, molt evaluated, carefully examined, documented, and then released.

There is a separate activity where raptors are captured. Nearby is a blind where a live pigeon on a line is used to "lure" hawks into a net, where again they are trapped for banding, counting, and study. Mark pointedly insists, in response to my question, again rather aggressively, that the pigeons are not "bait", but rather a "lure"! His point of course is that the pigeons are not harmed and certainly not killed and eaten by the raptors. Mark says that they don't do the raptor activity when it's cloudy, because clouds somehow make it hard for the raptors to see the lure, and today it is cloudy so Mark says that there won't be any raptor activity until the clouds burn off.

We reach the Bald Mountain Shelter by 1:30 PM; it's only about 1 mile beyond the birding activity on Big Stamp and mostly downhill. Fireman (Doyle), who passed us earlier at the birders' tent, has already settled in, taking Hum's favorite spot by the wall in the shelter. Fireman is from Chattanooga, TN and employed by the city service waste management. He gets his trail name from his skill at making fires, which he soon demonstrates. He says that he has climbed Ben Nevis in Scotland in 3 feet of snow, with snow shoes and an ice ax.



Bald Mountain Shelter; Hum Takes Over Second Floor Digs (Right)

Chigger Bait (Asian woman) and Chicken Wing (Marilyn), who we met 3 days earlier at Laurel Creek Shelter, arrive at about 3:30 PM. They mention that they had observed hawk trapping back at the Big Stamp birding station, but say they couldn't get very close to the raptor blind for a close look (not allowed). This gets my attention because I really wanted to see them try to catch raptors. I also remembered that I had forgotten to search for "Greer Rock" at the summit of Big Bald, which is documented in the AT Guidebook as follows:

"Near the summit of Big Bald is Greer Rock, the home of David Greer in the early 1800's. Spurned by his sweetheart when living in South Carolina, he came to Big Bald to live as a hermit. Legend has it that he dug a 12-foot room under the rock, lined the walls with clay, and used a stone for a front door. He kept livestock there and dug a moat to keep the animals confined. He lived there off and on, much as his animals did, from 1802 to 1834, and was known as "Old Hog Greer." He killed one man in an argument and eventually was killed in one himself. His home under the rock is no longer evident, but remains of a moat can still be traced."

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So with these 2 motivations – raptors and Greer Rock -- at 4:50 PM I take off to hike the 1 ½ miles and 500' elevation back to the summit of Big Bald. On the way I stop at the birding station where Kathy, Mark, and 2 other volunteer ladies are very busily processing all the birds in the bags: there are many. Mark has now become very sociable, remembers my name, and introduces me to the 2 volunteer ladies. He also allows the volunteer ladies to release a few of the birds, which has to be done very gently of course and is rather exciting for them. Kathy says that they have too many small birds to process so there won't be time for any more raptor/hawk trapping/banding today.

I then continue on the rest of the way to the summit of Big Bald and encounter Andrew from Flagler

Beach, who we had first met at Laughing Heart Hostel in Hot Springs, TN and then again at the Laurel Creek Shelter. He says that he hiked ahead of his buddies, who are much slower and "out of shape"; he says he'd like to spend the night on the summit of Big Bald to witness the sunset and sunrise, but first needs to get water at Bald Mountain Shelter. On the summit I spend quite a lot of time scouring the area for signs of "Greer Rock", but find no large rocks at all and certainly none that would even come close to logically having a 12-foot room under it. I photograph several rocks in the vicinity in hopes that a later Internet search might confirm one of them as the actual Greer Rock.

Much later I search the Internet for information on Greer Rock, and in one tidbit from the Ft. Lauderdale, FL [Sun Sentinel](#) I find some confirmation that the actual location is probably unknown:

"On this particular day, the sky was a deep Carolina blue and clouds were few. But weather on Big Bald can be fickle. As we descended, I wondered if we'd be able to see "Hog" Greer's Cave, a 10-foot-by-10-foot den marked by an outcropping of rock that had housed the notorious hermit. I knew it was close but its exact location was still a mystery, residing in the gray matter of only a handful of locals.

In the early 1800s, a young German immigrant, David Greer, spurned by the daughter of a general, ascended Big Bald and made the cave his home. For 35 years he kept to himself, cultivated potatoes and raised hogs. Local folk also referred to him as "King of the Bald." When the local government tried to tax his land, he showed up in court with a shotgun and took out the judge. Later, he was killed by a blacksmith whose tools he had borrowed without permission."

I also found a most interesting "ghost story" about Hog Greer entitled [Cloud Walks](#):

*"In honor of Derby Day, I decided a story about a horse would be in order. I've never run across one about a ghostly racehorse (more's the pity) but this one, from Unicoi County in my beloved East Tennessee, is a favorite. I first read it in Randy Russell and Janet Barnett's collection of ghost tales and legends **The Granny Curse** (1999).*

Holland Higgins was an early settler of Unicoi County, an Irishman with ancestral love of the land and of horses in his blood. Higgins had a favorite horse: a whitish-grayish stallion, the color of ashes with a dark mane and tail, whom he called Cloud. The two were inseparable; if you saw Higgins, he was invariably on Cloud's broad back, riding around his acreage, passing the time of day with neighbors, and trotting home, man and horse tired but content, at day's end. On Big Bald Mountain, not far from Higgins' home, there lived a hermit in a jerry-built shack. The hermit's name was David Greer, but he was known far and near as Hog (which we pronounce Hawg) because of his exceptionally poor personal hygiene and the filthy state of his living quarters. He had come to the area as a paid cattle herder, and stayed on, much to his neighbors' disgust. Nobody much liked the hermit, who became infamous for his drinking habits and violent temper.

Hog Greer, despite his nastiness and surliness, was a man who appreciated a fine horse. He tried to buy Cloud, always without success. After Holland Higgins refused, one last time, to sell the horse to him, Greer resorted to murder. One day in late November of 1824, he ambushed Higgins as he and Cloud rode by, knocking Higgins to the ground and shooting him through the heart as he lay.

Cloud ran off home before Greer could catch his reins, arriving riderless and covered in foam. One of Holland Higgins's sons caught him, and Cloud led him to Higgins' dead body. The son, shocked and grieving, laid his father's body across the saddle, and for the last time, Cloud bore his beloved master home.

The neighbors knew of Hog Greer's obsessive desire to own Cloud, and blamed him for Higgins' murder. Greer prudently retreated to his shack on Big Bald Mountain and stayed there.

Cloud, meantime, deprived of his dearest friend, had gone flat mad. He refused to eat or drink, and paced his stall. On the night of Holland Higgins' wake, Cloud kicked his stall down and ran.

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Later, the family and neighbors would learn that he ran all the way to Hog Greer's filthy shack. He kicked down the door, knocked down the post in the middle of the floor that held up Greer's loft bedroom, and, when Greer fell out, almost trampled him to death. Greer managed to get his gun and fire one shot, but missed. In desperation, he grabbed a log out of the fireplace, and swung it like a club. Cloud, startled by an explosion of ash and embers, backed away, and Greer, badly burned about hands, forearms and face by his makeshift weapon, managed to escape. Before daylight, he left for other parts.

Cloud returned home. He wouldn't remain in his stall; he roamed the countryside, often pausing by the little cemetery where Higgins rested. He never ate or drank; he merely roamed. Lost without Higgins, he died, broken in heart and body, before Christmas.

But Cloud was not dead in spirit.



Cloud the Ghost Horse

For the past two centuries, there have been reports of a ghostly horse who roams the area of Holland Higgins' farmstead. Sometimes, he's seen, galloping madly along the route he took home that late November day in 1824 when Higgins was killed; other times, he has actually entered homes—including, for many years, the cabin, disinfected and occupied by others after Hog Greer's precipitate departure,—where, later tenants reported, the door Cloud kicked in would open on its own, and a ghostly horse would thunder through. Sometimes, they would hear the sound of a horse's hooves in the fireplace, and embers, soot and ashes would fly through the room. In Unicoi County, they think Cloud is still looking for Hog Greer, determined to kill him. Cloud never found him. Greer was shot to death during an argument with a blacksmith in the spring of 1834. I found the illustration of a ghost horse on the Internet; it was done in 2004 by Danielle Fekete. I hope she doesn't mind my using it; it reminded me of this story the first time I saw it."

The sky had almost completely cleared from the morning's overcast, and it is a beautiful sunny afternoon, so I take a lot more pictures of the magnificent views from the summit of Big Bald.

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Afternoon Return to Big Bald in Search of “Greer Rock” (No Can Find) “Big Stamp” from Big Bald Summit (Left); Long Range Views from Summit (Right)

I set out to return to the shelter, a bit frustrated after not finding Greer Rock, and in the saddle between Big Bald and Big Stamp I pass 2 people who are desperately looking for their car. They ask me where I'm coming from in hopes I might have seen a parking area. I have no idea where the parking area might be and my topo map is of no help in identifying any roads or parking area. I suggest they consult with the birding people at the top of Big Stamp because they have vehicles and would know where the parking area is.

I also encounter 2 guys hiking in orange; they say deer season has started so watch out! Actually Hum and I heard a very close gun shot near Sams Gap this morning, and moved away post haste.

I arrive back at Big Bald Shelter at about 6:15 PM and find that Hum has already had his dinner. I heat some water to have my Chicken Cashew Curry but find that it is simply awful: tasteless and crunchy – bummer! I can't eat it, Hum doesn't want it either, so I throw most of it in the woods and go mostly hungry tonight.

DD and Brightside (red beard), who have hiked SOBO together since NY state, stop to pack up water and return to Big Bald summit to tent for the night. Michael and his friends in the meantime decide not to go back to the summit but instead stay in a campsite a little further north on the AT.

I try to call Lyn and am cut off several times before the connection disappears completely and I can't finish the call. Fireman (Doyle) starts a fire and gets a good base going with several big logs. He decides to sleep outside on his tarp freeing Hum's space by the wall in the shelter. However Hum has decided much earlier to sleep on the second tier in the shelter. Surprisingly there is no ladder up to the second level but Hum shows everyone his climbing prowess by easily scaling up and down the post several times during the night, as necessitated by the call of nature. During the night Hum's snoring is amplified by the upper floor above our heads making for an extra booming snoring night.

Fireman and another lady talk until about 8 PM; Chicken Wing (Marilyn) is in bed at 7:30 PM and seems impatient with the noise. For me it's a restless night, and cold.

Hum writes in the journal:

“9/26 Geezer Hikers Ho & Hum coming to the end of our section hike, I-40 to Erwin. Met lots of other section hikers this year – great people. Did our best to avoid the rain and were not always successful. Overall a great hike. We love Tennessee.”

We also find this poignant entry dated September 1:

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“9/1 In from Hogback Ridge, partly in a deluge on the way up. Cleared as I broke out of the woods. Facing east at the summit, so first light will always shine on her, I scattered some of my beloved sister Jinny's ashes. It's an awesome, magnificent view. I hope you like it. Goodbye sis (broken heart). Paul from Wenatchee, WA.”

Bald Mountain Shelter, TN to No Business Knob Shelter, TN – 9/27/13

Start Time: 7:15 AM, Mill Ridge Pond, NC

End Time: 1:45 PM, No Business Knob Shelter, TN

Total Miles: 10.7 miles

Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 1700'/3400'

Distances:

Side trail to Bald Mountain Shelter = 0.1 miles

Bald Mountain Shelter, TN (5000') to US19W-Spivey Gap, TN (3300') = 5.7 miles.

US19W-Spivey Gap, TN (3300') to No Business Knob Shelter, TN (3000') = 4.9 miles.

Pedometer readings (includes hike back up to Big Bald summit from Bald Mountain Shelter):

Steps: 47,253

Calories: 1293

Steps/minute: 107

MPH: 3.04 (1.71 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 7 hours, 20 minutes, 29 seconds
Miles: 23.37 miles (10.7 actual miles)

We've up at 6 AM and on the trail by 7 AM; Fireman (Doyle) and others are still in bed. It's very cold this morning, probably in the 30's; I put on my gloves and have worn my wool bison's cap every night at the shelters.

A short way north we pass the campsite area and chat briefly with Anthony. Fireman passes us before we reach High Rocks (about 3 miles north of Bald Mountain Shelter); he's a very fast hiker. He tells us he hasn't decided whether to stay at No Business Knob Shelter or not (it turns out that he doesn't and we never see him again).

Our 200'-300' climb up High Rocks seems like much more than that; it's very steep and has a double hump that isn't obvious on the topo map and so is unexpected. Hum leads us up the Blue-blazed trail to the rocks but wanders off the trail to the wrong peak. Fortunately I discover the correct trail and find High Rocks. There is a good view but the view is being overtaken by a lot of tall trees.

A little further north we pass 2 girls day-hiking from Spivey Gap to Sams Gap, a hike of about 13 miles. One of them admires my poles and seeing the broken pole notes that Pennsylvania is a likely place to experience a breaking pole: right on sister.

It's a tough 700'-800' climb out of Spivey Gap and are thankful to reach what we deem is a "surprise summit". It's a happy surprise because we are sure there is much more climbing to come but find instead that we're over the top and on our way down. But the trail down is very rough with roots and rocks. I take a very hard fall onto a pointed (like a knife point) tree trunk and injure the right side of my chest and cut my hand and left leg. It really shakes me up because I thought I had done much more damage. Hum helps me up and I examine the damage: there is a bruise on my chest but no blood or black and blue. Minutes later I fall again but am not hurt. Hum is beginning to wonder about his brother... so he insists that I lead the rest of the way to keep a watchful eye on me.

We reach the No Business Knob Shelter by 1:45 PM, close to Hum's prediction. No Business Knob Shelter is a mess, with junk everywhere, no cables to hang food, no table, no privy, and no water anywhere nearby. We are now in the maintenance area of the Tennessee Eastman Hiking and Canoe Club (TEHCC) and what a difference that makes to what we find at the less well maintained shelters in the TEHCC zone.

"Righteous" is in the shelter on his way to Big Bald. He started today from Erwin at about 11 AM so obviously he is a very fast hiker and is planning to hike on to Bald Mountain Shelter. He says he is 1 day
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behind DD and Brightside and is trying to catch them; he hiked with them all the way through VA. Fireman/Doyle is not at the shelter so obviously he kept going onto Erwin and beyond. Chigger Bait and Chicken Wing arrive at about 4 PM and decide they will tent tonight. Hum suspects their motive is to avoid his snoring but they say it's because of the horde of mice in the shelter. Indeed, there are many entries in the journal regarding the abundant mice in the shelter. We also recall that Hummingbird and Moose on the Loose had earlier told us this is the worst shelter on the entire AT! We find this earlier entry from them in the journal:

"9/18/13 After a zero day in Erwin and two nights in a hotel, this mice infested shelter is the biggest disappointment in the world. Tarp tenting to avoid the rodents and very much missing the usual picnic table. Only bright side is tons of firewood so we'll be taking advantage of that! Here's hoping for better accommodations in the near future or we will be emptying our bank accounts on hostels from here on out :-)"
(Heart) Hummingbird & Moose on the Loose"

Andrew, Mike, and the chubby third hiker in the group arrive at about 5 PM and as usual decide to tent tonight.

Chigger Bait and Chicken Wing are setting up their tent not far from the shelter when Chigger Bait (Asian lady) comes to us screaming "Help, Help, snake!!" We immediately go over with our hiking poles and see a very large 6'-7' black racer snake, which is intimidating but not poisonous. Hum pokes the snake with his hiking pole and it immediately coils up and lunges at Hum: very aggressive!



No Business Knob Shelter 6'-7' Black Racer Snake Invades Chigger Bait's & Chicken Wing's Tent Site

That's enough for the ladies: they decide to abandon their tent idea and move into the shelter. Suddenly Chigger Bait gets very rattled, perhaps triggered by the stress from encountering the large snake. She starts muttering now about all the logistics of moving everything and starts rushing everything from the tent site over to the shelter. Evidently the Asian woman is the gopher for "Grandma" (Chicken Wing, the elderly partner); in fact she later testifies as to her love and admiration for Grandma: whatever.

Andrew kids the ladies that the snake lives in the shelter to eat the mice, which actually makes sense, but Andrew tells us that Chigger Bait gets mad at him for joking as such. Andrew and company move their tent sites to the place that the ladies abandoned, because it's the only level place in the vicinity to pitch a tent. They also start a fire and we have a nice conversation with Andrew about hiking in the Smoky Mountains. He tells us about a fire tower that is about 2.5 miles off the AT; he says you "can stay there but you need to take water". I doubt that we'll do that one next year.

We're in bed by 8 PM and Chicken Wing decides to read from her Kindle, which is very bright and lights up the whole shelter: very thoughtless of her. Soon Hum asks her "please shield your Kindle with your sleeping bag", which is what most people do to avoid bothering other people trying to sleep. But obnoxious Grandma replies "shut your eyes!" To which Hum says "not the right answer" and she says "is the right answer!" Grandma shows her true colors, but turns off her Kindle about 5-10 minutes later.

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Chicken Wing/Granny leaves the following note in the journal:

"9/27 Chicken Wing & Chigger Bait in for the night. We had a tent set up when a 6-7 foot black racer decided to come to the party. We left it with him and moved to the shelter (which leaves a lot to be desired). – CW –"

There's also an earlier entry from [Warren Doyle](#), a famous backpacker who has thru-hiked the AT 16 times and claims over 34,000 miles of backpacking:

*"6/26/13 10:40 am
On a stroll to another river.
(signed) Warren Doyle (34,000-miler)
working on my 17th traverse"*

I leave the following note in the journal:

"9/27 Geezer brothers Ho & Hum signing off: our last night on a 2 week backpack from Davenport Gap to Erwin, TN. Hiked every day for 105+ miles total. Particularly treasured outstanding views at Max Patch, Lovers Leap Rock, Big Firescauld Bald, & Big Bald + great trail company & brotherly banter along the way. We'll keep hikin' as long as our bods let us. Peace"

No Business Knob Shelter, TN to Erwin, TN – 9/28/13

Start Time: 7:00 AM, No Business Knob Shelter, TN
End Time: 10:30 AM, Erwin, TN
Total Miles: 6.3 miles
Cumulative Elevation Gain/Loss = 900'/2200'

Distances:

No Business Knob Shelter, TN (3000') to Nolichucky River-Erwin, TN (1700') = 6.3 miles.

Pedometer readings (includes hike back up to Big Bald summit from Bald Mountain Shelter):

Steps: 21,882

Calories: 575

Steps/minute: 94

MPH: 2.69 (1.64 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 3 hours, 50 minutes, 48 seconds

Miles: 10.36 miles (6.3 actual miles)

Up at 6:00 AM after a restless night; good thing is that it's not so cold tonight. We have to pack up in the shelter because there is no table, but we'd rather pack up outside to avoid disturbing people still sleeping in the shelter, with a slight caveat this morning that Grandma may be entitled to a little noise payback for her negative attitude last night toward Hum's request to shield her Kindle. In any case we're as quiet as possible and as always do no talking. But the ladies – Chicken Wing and Chigger Bait -- wake up anyway and actually Granny says "good hike" as we depart: maybe she feels bad about last night I surmise.

We're off before 7:00 AM with our headlamps and go very slowly in the dark among a myriad of roots and rocks with each step portending danger of falling. As usual it's light enough at 7:15 AM to take off our headlamps and hike much more safely on the highly uneven terrain. Hiking along the "Cliff Ridge" is very dramatic, with sweeping, long range, and extremely clear views of the Nolichucky River and city of Erwin, TN. Coming down off the Cliff Ridge to the Nolichucky River is a long and steep descent; we make it to Uncle Johnny's Nolichucky Hostel by 10:30 AM.

We pay Sergeant for our 2 nights of parking and chat with Andrew, who arrives at Uncle Johnny's ahead of us this morning. He tells us he is a lieutenant in the Fire & Rescue unit in Flagler Beach, FL, very near to Palm Coast, FL where I live. Andrew says that he and his buddies will be hiking for one more week and that 2 friends from Chicago are joining them today for the remainder of the hike.

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Views of Nolichucky River 1000 Feet Below from "Cliff Ridge"

Hum calls Chuck Norris at the Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel in Hot Springs, TN, and reserves 2 spaces in the dorm, since there are no free rooms available for tonight Chuck says.

We stop at McD's for lunch and enjoy delicious Big Macs, always a great treat after days of trail food. Then we're off to pick up Hum's car parked at Sam's Gap. I decide to follow my GPS back to Hot Springs instead of going our usual route over the mountain past Devil Fork Gap. This is a big mistake because as usual the GPS prefers to route via an Interstate even if that route is many miles out of the way. In the end it's probably twice as far and takes us twice as long to reach Hot Springs as compared to our usual route.



Ho & Hum Complete 13-Day, 110-Mile AT Backpacking Adventure Davenport Gap, TN to Erwin, TN

At Laughing Heart Lodge Hostel Chuck Norris upgrades us to a 2-person room, which has become available and is certainly much nicer than staying in the dorm. We take our showers and clean up and then relax outside on the patio for a while. A lady comes outside and tells us that she is missing her pack and purse and asks if we have seen anything. Chuck Norris comes by and after hearing of the missing pack and purse immediately undertakes a search of the hostel and surrounding area, but turns up nothing. It appears that the lady's pack and purse were stolen and that's very disturbing to say the least.

We chat with Chuck a bit more and he tells us he has done the Pacific Crest Trail 3 times, but has not managed to finish it yet. He starts the PCT in Mexico and once he got to the CA/OR border and twice to the Columbia River. He has also done the 1100-mile Florida Trail 5 times in the last 5 years, but says he

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had a heart attack 2 years ago that led him to take on managing the hostel and doing less hiking. He says his wife "Tigger" is in Florida visiting grandkids. Chuck gives us a tour of [Laughing Heart Lodge](#), which is a former Jesuit residence and now a lodge/hotel. It has an impressive interior.

We have our dinner one final time at the Smoky Mountain Diner: we both have our favorites, meat loaf for me and country fried steak for Hum; really good!

After dinner we watch a great movie about walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain entitled [The Way](#), starring Martin Sheen. As described on Amazon:

"The Way" is a powerful and inspirational story about family, friends, and the challenges we face while navigating this ever-changing and complicated world. Martin Sheen plays Tom, who comes to St. Jean Pied de Port, France to collect the remains of his adult son, killed in the Pyrenees in a storm while walking the Camino de Santiago. Rather than return home, Tom decides to embark on the historical pilgrimage to honor his son's desire to finish the journey. What Tom doesn't plan on is the profound impact the journey will have on him. From the unexpected and, oftentimes, amusing experiences along "The Way," Tom begins to learn what it means to be a citizen of the world again. Through his unresolved relationship with his son, he discovers the difference between "the life we live and the life we choose."

It is a most fitting way to end Ho & Hum's 5th annual historic backpacking adventure.

We're in bed by 8:00 PM. There is a concert tonight starring Willy Nelson's son, so there is a hubbub of activity around the hostel with a bit of noise, but the window air conditioner in our room is very effective at drowning out any of that noise as well as any snoring noise tonight.

Epilogue – 9/28/13

Summary statistics for the 13-day hike:

Total Miles: 110.7 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 22,800' gain/31,400' loss

Total Steps: 357,430

We're up at 5:30 AM and go to Smoky Mountain Diner for one more great breakfast by 6:00 AM. We

depart for home at 6:45 AM and I make it by 3:00 PM after stops for gas at Exit 52, I-26 in South Carolina and then again for gas and hotdogs at Exit 77, I-95 in South Carolina. I'm very sleepy on the way and very glad to reach home and back to Lysie Pie.

This completes yet another fantastic Ho & Hum adventure, our 5th year backpacking together, this time in 2 separate AT hikes in Vermont and Tennessee/North Carolina. It's been a beautiful hike in both cases, and we especially love the TN/NC AT, this being our second year backpacking here and hoping for a third next year in the Smoky Mountains.

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8. July 12 – 23, 2014 **Smoky Mountains AT Hike** **Fontana Dam, North Carolina to Davenport Gap/Route 40, Tennessee**

Prologue

Geezer hikers Ho & Hum undertake one Appalachian Trail (AT) hike this year, a 76-mile, 11-day hike on Smoky Mountains AT through Tennessee and North Carolina. This is our sixth consecutive year of backpacking together.

In the spring and early summer, Hum continues his vigorous pursuit of completing the entire AT and finishes the PA, MD, and NJ AT on many day hikes, and also finishes many sections at the northern VA AT. As such, he gets in great shape for our forthcoming AT hike together in the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee and North Carolina. Having moved to Florida from Vermont 2 years ago, I now have little opportunity to do any real training hikes given the totally flat terrain in Florida. Instead I do workouts in the gym facility in the community where we live in Palm Coast, FL. I plan our 11-day TN/NC hike including hostels, zero days, moving 2 cars around, etc.

Special Note

There are many references to Bob's wife, Patricia McAuliffe Ash, in the following account, and, for that matter, in all our previous hiking journals. Tragically on February 4, 2015, Pat suffered a terrible accident and died the following day. Her son Keith delivered a deeply touching Eulogy of Pat entitled "Touched by an Angel". Indeed, Pat was and is an angel in every sense of the word. Pat was a beautiful person in every way, who touched everyone with her love. She is deeply, deeply missed.

Travel Day – 7/12/14

On Saturday July 12 Hum and I drive to [The Hike Inn](#) on Fontana Road in the small town of Fontana Dam, NC. I leave home at around 6:00 AM and arrive at The Hike Inn at 3:10 PM after a 600 mile drive. Along the way I stop at the Pilot gas station on I-26, Exit 56 to fill up and have my 2 hotdogs for lunch; I love the hotdogs at Pilot: they are big, delicious, and, best of all, cheap. Later I run into an accident on I-26 and that holds me up for at least ½ hour. After exiting I-40 onto US-74 and then NC-28, it's still another 75 more miles to Fontana Dam, but the roads are good and the going is just fine all the way to The Hike Inn.

I go to the office and meet proprietor Nancy Hoch, who I had spoken to a few times on the phone to arrange our stay. She also has a couple of yappy dogs guarding the door; both of them greet me with much jumping but luckily they don't bite me. Nancy shows me our room, which is small but comfortable, and gives me a rundown on how to operate the satellite TV (quite a few buttons to push). There are no keys for the door; it seems you just leave the doors unlocked in Fontana Dam, NC. There also don't appear to be any other customers besides Hum and me staying here tonight. I pay her in cash for the room ("no plastic" she says); at \$44/night it's a pretty good deal for hikers.

Just as Nancy returns from the office with the receipt, Hum arrives at about 3:40 PM. Hum also has nearly a 600 mile drive, and after turning off I-40 he has about 50 more miles to Fontana Dam on US-129 and NC-28. Hum tells us that that last 50 miles is a harrowing drive over steep mountain roads with continuous sharp curves, on which he was terrorized by motorcycles tailgating him and zooming around him at every opportunity. Nancy says that is normal for that road and that motorcyclists seek it out to do they hair-raising speed demon tricks.

Nancy gives us directions to the Fontana Dam parking lot, right by the dam itself, where we plan to leave Hum's car. She also tells us about a nice Mexican restaurant in Robbinsville, where we plan to have dinner. First we drive to Fontana dam parking lot to park Hum's car. It's a beautiful evening and the view of Fontana Lake and the surrounding mountains is just gorgeous. I'm sorry I don't have my camera with me to capture the beautiful scene, but later on I do get some great shots of Fontana Lake and Fontana Dam at the end of the first leg of our hike (pictures below on 7/16/14 hike). We then drive to Robbinsville, which is again over mountain roads so the 20 mile drive takes us a bit longer than expected. We have a

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bit of trouble locating the Mexican restaurant but finally find it. I have a delicious enchilada dinner, my favorite, (for only \$7.50) and Hum has burritos and salad.

We're in bed by 8:30 PM. I have trouble charging my batteries; the charger keeps blinking red and I find out much, much later that this is caused by worn out rechargeable batteries. It keeps grabbing my attention with the blinking, whereupon I reset the charger just to be repeated a few minutes later: bummer. I'm also very restless: tossing and turning for hours and don't get to sleep until after about 12 AM; maybe I'm anticipating our hike the following day.

US441-Newfound Gap, TN (5046') to Double Spring Gap Shelter, TN – 7/13/14

Start Time: 6:00 AM, Newfound Gap Parking Lot, TN
End Time: 2:45 PM, Double Spring Gap Shelter, TN
Total Miles: 10.8 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2000'/1500'

Distances:

US441-Newfound Gap, TN (5046') to Mount Collins Shelter Side Trail, TN (5962') = 4.5 miles
Mount Collins Shelter Side Trail, TN (5962') to Clingmans Dome, TN (6643') = 3.4 miles
Clingmans Dome, TN (6643') to Double Spring Gap Shelter, TN (5505') = 2.9 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 34,241
Calories: 901
Steps/minute: 114
MPH: 2.80 (1.38 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 47 minutes, 06 seconds
Miles: 16.22 miles (10.8 actual miles)

I sleep through two alarms; Hum finally wakes me up. During the night I almost lose my earplugs but manage to find them buried in the covers.

We're off at 5:00 AM and hope to grab coffee and maybe something to eat at a restaurant I spotted on the way in yesterday, but it is too early and the restaurant is closed. It only takes us one hour to make it up to the Newfound Gap Parking Lot at the AT crossing on Route 441 in Great Smoky Mountain National Park (GSMNP). We make only one minor wrong turn en route, and arrive at the parking lot at 6:00 AM. Jeff and Nancy Hoch say it is safe to park here, and we follow Nancy's advice to park as far off the road as possible.

It is just breaking early morning light so we don't need our headlamps. We don our packs and poles and

after a very brief search to locate the AT trailhead going south, we are on our way. Hum notes that Ho is probably 15 pounds overweight: quite true.

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**Newfound Gap Parking Lot, TN (5046'), 6:00 AM, 7/13/14
Start of Smoky Mountain Hike**



**Left: Hum Sets Out on the AT South at Newfound Gap
Right: Wildflowers along the Trail to Clingmans Dome**

We reach Mt. Collins Shelter by 9:00 AM, averaging 1.5 mph, an excellent starting pace given 900 feet of climbing on our first day of hiking. We had initially planned a very conservative schedule that would have us stop for the day at Mt. Collins Shelter, but stopping at 9:00 AM and spending the whole day at this shelter is certainly not sensible.

So onward we hike to Clingmans Dome, another 3.4 miles and about a 1000' climb. We find this next leg rather brutal and our pace slows to a little over one mph; it seems to us like much more than a 1000' climb. We pass many day hikers along the way and near the top we finally break down and ask two men and a boy "how far?" Normally we don't like to do that because the responses are invariably inaccurate, as they were in this case. Their estimate is that we had another whole mile to hike to Clingmans Dome, which we find very discouraging because we think we have already gone the full 3.4 miles on this leg! Thankfully this time they are wrong on the high side (in our experience remaining distance/time estimates are always wrong on the low side): the remaining distance is certainly less than a mile.

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As we near Clingmans Dome we can hear a cacophony of voices: this we find is coming from the mass of people who drove up to Clingmans Dome and climbed up a ramp to the observation tower. We finally reach Clingmans Dome by about 12:10 PM, in good agreement with Hum's predicted arrival time; the observation tower is a very short walk off the AT.

We climb the observation tower with our packs on because we don't want to chance having them stolen. There are dozens of other people there with us, all of them having driven to the top on the access road. We meet a man on the way up the observation tower who is very taken with our Smoky Mountain backpacking adventure and asks us a lot of questions about our hike. He introduces us to his daughter and brother and twice recommends that we take the Chimney's Trail: he is very enthusiastic and nice and treats us like some kind of celebrities.

The view from the tower is quite hazy but not obscured, which is typical of the Smoky Mountains, and we had been warned that oftentimes the only view from Clingmans Dome is to look at the photographs posted in each direction showing the view from the tower on a clear day (rare). I snap several pictures from the tower and soon we're on our way back to the AT. At the bottom of the ramp Hum stops to chat with a Summer Ranger about scouting and the "No Trace Left Behind" policies.





**Clingmans Dome (6643'), Highest Point on the Appalachian Trail
Top Left: Hum Chats with Summer Ranger**

Back on the AT we soon stop for lunch and I really enjoy my summer sausage sandwich. The 2.9 mile trail remaining to Double Spring Shelter is all downhill but it is narrow, rocky, grassy, difficult, and very tiring.

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**Left: Trail Down from Clingmans Dome to Double Spring Gap Shelter
Right: Prolific Wildflowers at Shelter; Bee Balm (Red) & Black-Eyed Susan's (Yellow)**

We arrive at Double Spring Gap Shelter at 2:45 PM, exhausted. Soon two ladies, "Cricket" and "Hammy", from Seattle, WA, arrive at the shelter; they are hiking northbound from Springer Mt., GA, to Damascus, VA. Strangely they seem to carry no map and based on their discussion of their hike it is unclear if they hiked all sections from Springer Mt. up to this point. They decide to set up their Big Agnes single-person tents on a grassy area near the shelter and ask us to "fight any bears" who might appear for they are "deathly afraid of bears" they say. Both are kindergarten teachers and have classrooms side by side in the school where they teach.



Double Spring Gap Shelter

Cricket, who is the dark haired lady, asks a series of strange questions: Are there hillbillies around here? Do they walk to school? She is reading a book on Appalachian Hill People and wants to try some “real moonshine” when they go into Gatlinburg, where they hope to view some “real southern culture” she says. ‘Good luck’ I think, ‘you will only meet tourists in Gatlinburg’. Hammy, the light haired lady has a severe leg problem, which I observe is bloody and she wears a brace. How she can hike with that is beyond me. I mention that I’ve had a lot of trouble with a sprained ankle for some time now. After two years it’s still not fully healed.

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Two very tame deer are feeding near the shelter and are not disturbed at all by our presence. We also admire some beautiful wild flowers by the shelter: bright red Bee Balm and Black Eyed Susan’s.

Two more northbound hikers pass through and are looking for the privy. Earlier I discover that the nearby privy has wheelchair access: Seriously?? Can you believe the extra cost to do that?!?! So I pass that information on and they are both grateful and quite amused.



Privy with Wheelchair Access Most Privy’s in the Smoky Mountains Have this Feature, but Why?

Four more southbound hikers – 18 to 20 year olds from Tennessee – arrive and will all stay the night in their hammocks. Clay, who is the most talkative, is originally from Key Largo, FL, where he was an avid scuba/snorkel enthusiast but never did Sombbrero Lighthouse as I had done a year ago off of Marathon Key. He is a pre-med student at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) in Oxford, MS, and achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, which of course leads Hum into a discussion on scouting. They are hiking to Fontana Dam over a four day period and then returning to TN.

They tell us they all have reservations here in this shelter, as well as Russell Field Shelter on 7/14/15 and Mollies Ridge Shelter on 7/15/15. Regarding the GSMNP shelter reservation system, it is required to have reservations in shelters in GSMNP unless one registers as a “thru hiker”, which is defined as starting and ending one’s hike at least 50 miles outside the boundaries of GSMNP. A maximum of 7 consecutive nights (i.e., 7 shelters) is allowed with any reservation permit. Given our relatively slow pace, however, we could not plan on finishing the GSMNP-AT in 7 nights, especially considering that we planned to take a zero day in the middle of our hike, which is impossible to do with a reservation permit.

Therefore Ho & Hum have both registered as thru hikers, which is not correct according to the definition so we have to adhere to a stealthy “mum’s the word” protocol when we talk to other hikers and/or to so-called “ridge runners”. Ridge runners are employees of GSMNP who check the permits of hikers on the AT. Fortunately, we never run into any ridge runners, but for some reason Hum has a hard time concealing the fact with other hikers that we have registered as thru hikers and we are not thru hikers. Another problem is that people with thru-hiker permits must give way to people with reservations in shelters, if the shelter is full. Unfortunately, at least two shelters we plan to stay in on this hike are listed as full on the night we intend to stay there (this information is available on-line). It is not a problem this night since the Double Spring Gap Shelter is not full, but it does become a problem at other shelters along our path (more on this problem later).

After dinner we make our way down a steep, slippery, but thankfully short slope to the water source and fill our water bottles. The four southbound hikers set up their hammocks inside the shelter, which is actually against the rules but is OK with us, and play “BS” (the same game as “I Doubt It”) until about 8:30 PM and turn in at 8:45 PM: they are nice guys and respectful of the old geezer hikers. The two teachers, however, talk between their Big Agnes tents even after 11:00 PM.

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Hum leaves our first entry in the shelter journal, in which he adheres to our “stealthy” portrayal of ourselves as thru hikers:

7/13/14 Geezer hikers Ho and Hum (ages 72 & 74) started today on our 6th AT hike in the last 6 years. Our plan is to complete the AT in the Smokies plus portions on each end. Today’s hike was tough from Newfound Gap to Clingmans Dome to here.

During the night a mouse runs across my face: yuk! I don my knit cap to protect against the cool evening temperature and guard against other mice that might want to make their way over my head.

Double Spring Gap Shelter, TN to Derrick Knob Shelter, TN – 7/14/14

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Double Spring Gap Shelter, TN
End Time: 12:15 PM, Derrick Knob Shelter, TN
Total Miles: 7.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 800’/800’

Distances:

Double Spring Gap Shelter, TN (5505’) to Silers Bald Shelter, TN (5460’) = 1.7 miles
Silers Bald Shelter, TN (5460’) to Derrick Knob Shelter, TN (4880’) = 5.5 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 25,694
Calories: 676
Steps/minute: 97
MPH: 2.77 (1.64 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 4 hours, 22 minutes, 48 seconds
Miles: 12.16 miles (7.2 actual miles)

We’re up as usual at first light, 6:00 AM, as are the four southbound hikers in hammocks in the shelter. We have cupcakes but skip coffee to save time and trouble, pack up, and are off by 6:45 AM. Along the way we meet several day hikers and two northbound women thru hikers headed to Damascus, VA, who tell us they saw bears at both Spence Field Shelter and Russell Field Shelter. One bear even chewed through their tent to get baby wipes and Advil.

We arrive at Derrick Knob Shelter at 12:15 PM, completely exhausted from the last two miles of “roller coaster” like up’s and down’s. My stomach is upset and shoulder and leg quite sore, necessitating an

Ibuprofen pill along the way to the shelter.



Derrick Knob Shelter
Right: Hanging Food Bags from Bear Cables

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We find two women and one man from Columbia, South America, who are spending two days at the shelter, which is against the rules. They live in Miami and are hiking north as far as they can go until August 2. The four southbound hikers from Double Spring Gap Shelter arrive one hour before us, stop for lunch, and leave as we arrive; obviously they are hiking much faster than Ho & Hum.

“Bob” from Knoxville, TN, arrives in mid-afternoon, and says he is doing a “loop hike”, which includes Rocky Top and the Bote Mountain Trail back to his truck. He is 54 years old and a special education teacher for 34 years in Oakridge, TN. He is one of 14 children and has many family gatherings because of the large family. The 3 hikers from Columbia, South America, ask Bob for news about the results of the world cup. He tells them that Germany won 1-0 over Argentina in the final match and defeated Brazil 7-1 in the semi-final match. They are clearly upset by the news; obviously they’re rooting for a South American team to win the world cup and probably feeling a bit of humiliation at the devastating loss suffered by Brazil in the matchup against Germany.



Creative Entry in Shelter Journal: “Thru Hiker of the Future”
Beer & Pizza Delivered to Shelter by Drone; All-Terrain Hiker Transport

Bob tells us the weather report for the region: there will be a big storm tonight, which is right on target, and clearing tomorrow, which is not quite on target. He is interested in hearing about our jobs and careers and is quite a nice guy.

A young couple arrives after dinner and they decide to sleep in hammocks. Then three hikers out of a group of five arrive about 7:30 PM and say the other two hikers are more than "45 minutes behind". The two other hikers arrive after we go to sleep but cooking and loud talking until 10:00 PM wake me up: rude hikers! Fortunately rain drives them into the shelter and to their sleeping bags.

I leave a brief entry in the shelter journal:

7/14/14 Geezer brothers Ho & Hum (72/74) keep on goin' & goin' until they can't.... Peace.

There is torrential rain all night: Bob is right.

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I think to myself that this is the 30th anniversary of Dynamic Nonhierarchical Routing (DNHR) in the AT&T network, Bastille Day, July 14, 1984 to July 14, 2014.

Derrick Knob Shelter, TN to Russell Field Shelter, TN – 7/15/14

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Derrick Knob Shelter, TN
End Time: 2:15 PM, Russell Field Shelter, TN
Total Miles: 9.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1800'/1600'

Distances:

Derrick Knob Shelter, TN (4880') to Spence Field Shelter Side Trail, NC (4370') = 6.3 miles
Spence Field Shelter Side Trail, NC (4370') to Russell Field Shelter, TN (4370') = 2.9 miles

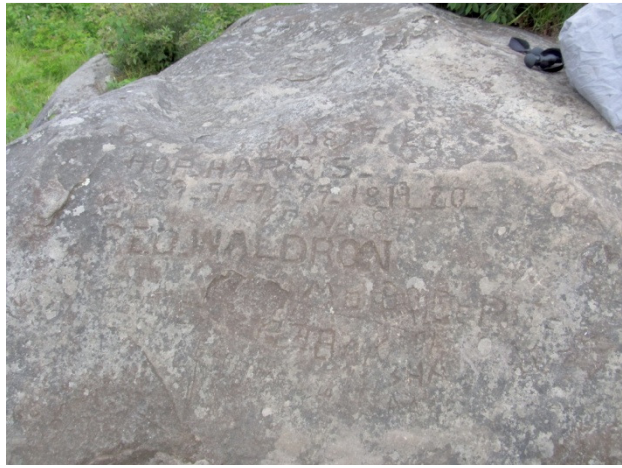
Pedometer readings:

Steps: 32,104
Calories: 844
Steps/minute: 95
MPH: 2.71 (1.64 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 36 minutes, 38 seconds
Miles: 15.20 miles (9.2 actual miles)

Up at 6:00 AM, off by 6:45 AM after cupcakes and packing. Bob is up also and dons an orange top to ward off stray bullets from hunters who might mistake him for a deer or bear or other animal they are hunting. He also carries bear bells to alert bears in his path to "please go away". Many other hikers, including us, want the opposite: that is, to see and admire one of the Smoky Mountain bears.

We get a good head start on Bob (maybe 30-45 minutes or so) but he passes us at Starkey Gap (1.9 miles from Derrick Knob Shelter), at the base of our first 700' climb up Thunderhead Mountain to Brier Knob and is obviously a very fast hiker. This is confirmed later by three teens hiking to Rocky Top, who we meet at the junction with the Bote Mountain Trail, and who say that they passed Bob on the Bote Mountain Trail two hours earlier!

After the first 700' climb to Briar Knob, we scale the second 500' climb to the summit of Thunderhead Mountain (5527'), where unfortunately there is no view. A short while and 0.6 miles later we summit Rocky Top, where once again there is no view, but there are numerous very old graffiti carved into the rocks, some of which date back 150 years.



On Top of Rocky Top (5441') Graffiti Carved in Rocks, Some 150 Years Old

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The Tennessee state song, "Rocky Top," written by the Nashville songwriting team of Boudleaux and Felice Bryant in 1967 and first recorded by the Osborne Brothers, is often associated with this summit, but, according to the Osbornes, the writers said they had no real mountain in mind.

We have our lunch just past the junction with Bote Mountain Trail, where we met the three teens. After we pass the Eagle Creek Trail junction the AT becomes wide, dirt, and smooth: on this kind of trail we can do 2-3 mph, much faster than our typical pace on the normal grassy, narrow AT with hidden rocks everywhere. Consequently we arrive at the Russell Field Shelter at 2:15 PM, 45 minutes earlier than Hum's prediction.

We meet a family of 4 from Orlando, FL, who started two days earlier from Fontana Dam. They tell us about a big party last night at Mollies Ridge Shelter: a bunch of rednecks cut down trees, built a big fire, and got drunk and very noisy. Worse yet, they got up at 5:00 AM and again made lots of noise and shined blinding lights waking everyone up.



Rhododendrons in Bloom on the AT Russell Field Shelter

Husband "Scratch" tells us that the climb from Fontana Dam to Mollies Ridge Shelter is arduous and they averaged less than one mph. This is the first backpacking trip for his wife, who remains very quiet and is a bit grumpy it seems. Both of them are Navy Corpsman; the wife is retired. Their children, Phillip Jr. and Laurel ("Duckie"), are in their 20's. Duckie is a 5th grade reading teacher who is engaged to a Navy jet pilot. Scratch says that Duckie has been engaged for 7 years and he wants her to get married. They are bound for Clingmans Dome, where they will end their hike and head into Gatlinburg for rafting, food, and fun.

Scratch is very talkative and tells us a number of stories:

Back in 1983 he had orders to go to Beirut, Lebanon, but his mother was diagnosed with cancer so he was able to get a replacement who went in his stead. His replacement was killed in the October 23, 1983 suicide bombing of the US Barracks, where 299 American and French servicemen were killed.

Scratch hiked the AT north in 2011 from Springer Mountain, GA to Marion, VA, which took him away from his family for 4 months. He ran into a huge storm in Franklin, GA, with freezing rain and ice conditions and says that along the way he took a misstep and bent his foot back almost 90 degrees, nearly severing his Achilles' tendon. It took 6 months to heal but he went back to hiking on it after 4 weeks, probably not smart.

He attends the Damascus, VA, "Trail Days" every year. He witnessed the accident that occurred there in May, 2013, when an 86-year-old man, [Deward Blevins](#), lost control of his Cadillac and plowed into a parade of over 1000 hikers, injuring about 50 hikers. Scratch was taking a photo at the time and says he saw about 100 people mowed over and being thrown everywhere: all he heard was "thump, thump, thump" as the car plowed through the parade. Someone dove into Blevins' car and put it in park: Scratch

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says that guy was a "hero". There were doctors everywhere (some were hikers) attending the injured and many people were evacuated to the hospital with broken limbs. He says they closed the whole town of Damascus for some time after the accident.

We warn them about the mice at Derrick Knob Shelter: they didn't like hearing that news. Fortunately there are no mice in this shelter: all the gaps in the boards are filled in thwarting the mice from scampering across our heads. It drizzles all afternoon but there is no big rain overnight, contrary to the Scratch's prediction.

Hum leaves an entry in the shelter journal:

7/15/14 Geezer hikers Ho and Hum in for the night. Heading toward Fontana Dam. Saw 4 wild turkeys today – no bear encounters yet.

We're all in bed by 7:30 PM and all is quiet; fortunately there are no more arrivals. Scratch and family all sleep under mosquito nets.

Russell Field Shelter, TN, to Fontana Dam, TN – 7/16/14

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Russell Field Shelter, TN

End Time: 4:00 PM, Fontana Dam, TN

Total Miles: 13.1 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2400'/4800'

Distances:

Russell Field Shelter, TN (4370') to Mollies Ridge Shelter, TN (4570') = 2.8 miles

Mollies Ridge Shelter, TN (4570') to Fontana Dam, NC (1727') = 10.3 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 47,306

Calories: 1244

Steps/minute: 105

MPH: 3.00 (1.75 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 7 hours, 26 minutes, 52 seconds

Miles: 22.40 miles (13.1 actual miles)

All are up by 6:00 AM. After saying our goodbyes to the family of four we're off by 7:00 AM. We reach Mollies Ridge Shelter by 9:00 AM, after 2.8 miles and an arduous 500' climb. We talk for about 2 minutes and decide to go on; it's very clear, cool, and we both feel pretty good (I'm getting more in the groove after 3 days of hiking).

Soon we pass "Steve" from Madison, WI, who is probably in his 60's and is heading northbound "as far he can" given that the weather remains OK. He says he had a kidney and liver transplant and is doing good: he's a very positive guy.

At the Birch Spring Camping area we meet 3 women who are southbound from Newfound Gap to Fontana Dam. One of them is "[Mamaw B](#)" (Barbara Allen from Knoxville, TN), the oldest woman thru hiker who completed the AT in 2012 at age 71. She says a 74 year old woman is trying to break her

record this year. We meet them again at the Shuckstack Mountain fire tower, a third time at a water break about half way down the mountain to Fontana Dam, and a final time in the Fontana Dam parking lot.

We spend some time at the Shuckstack Mountain fire tower: it is an exceptionally clear and beautiful day and there are outstanding views of Fontana Lake and the Smoky Mountains going north. However, the top platform of the fire tower is rotted and gives one an uneasy feeling when walking on it at such a great height.

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Shuckstack Mountain Fire Tower & View of Fontana Lake from Fire Tower

The trail down to Fontana dam is good and perfectly dry, as opposed to Scratch's warnings of severe mud that has clearly dried up since his ascent 2 days ago. There are lots of beautiful wildflowers and white rhododendrons in bloom along the way. Near the end of our descent I again sprain my left ankle; the pain is severe at first but gradually subsides. We reach the 0.6 mile road walk to the dam and then finally get to the car by 4:00 PM, one hour ahead of Hum's prediction.

The views of Fontana Lake, Fontana Dam, and the surrounding mountains are simply beautiful and I snap many pictures. Hum pushes on way ahead of me across the dam; he's anxious to see that his car is OK and it is.

We go to the Fontana Dam visitor center and chat with Glenn, a Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) volunteer from Tennessee. He tells us about the nearby "Fontana Hilton", one of the most well appointed shelters on the AT complete with showers. He also informs us about the "Road to Nowhere", a road on Fontana's north shore that was supposed to be built by the National Park Service, but environmental concerns and funding issues continuously stalled construction and just 7.2 miles of the road was completed; locals nicknamed the unfinished road "The Road to Nowhere". Glenn says that no visits are allowed to the dam itself ever since 9/11.



Views of Fontana Lake & Fontana Dam on a Beautiful Day

We set out for Standing Bear Farm Hostel in Hartford, TN, where we had stayed at the beginning of our 2013 hike from Davenport Gap, TN to Erwin, TN. We first take a quick tour of nearby Fontana Village and find little there of any great interest. We stop at McD's in Cherokee, NC, for Big Macs and hot fudge

sundaes: yum! We call our wives after 3 days of no cell phone contact on the AT; Lyn is going out tomorrow with some of the neighborhood girls for a luncheon. I call Curtis at Standing Bear Farm Hostel and leave a message that we are on our way and will arrive rather late.

My GPS routes us smack dab through the middle of Gatlinburg, TN. It is very crowded with 1000's of tourists, who are constantly stopping the flow of traffic at every street crossing. It is a very Honky Tonk town with seemingly endless tourist attractions. By coincidence, immediately following Ho & Hum's 254

Smoky Mountains backpacking adventure, Lyn and I will be returning to the area to join our entire family in Pigeon Forge, TN, to celebrate Lyn's 70th birthday. I had considered renting a motel room for Lyn in the area for the two weeks of Ho & Hum's hike, in order to avoid making the 600-mile drive twice in a matter of days. However, in the end we decided it was more desirable to just do the driving. Gatlinburg, GSMNP, and the surrounding area turned out to be a wonderful place to hold the family gathering.

We finally get through town and onto Route 321, whereupon the GPS takes us off the main road onto a very picturesque route on a one-lane road through numerous hamlets in the Tennessee hill country.

We arrive at Standing Bear Farm Hostel at about 8:30 PM and find a large gathering of hikers sitting around a big campfire, including Cricket, who is quite high and chatty at this point, and Hammy, who as always is very quiet. Cricket shouts "there are the geezers!" when she sees us, to the chagrin of manager Rocket, who tells her it isn't nice to say that but she retorts that that is exactly what we call ourselves!

Cricket tells us they did have their moonshine sampler in Gatlinburg. Lyn and I also found the moonshine sampler place in Gatlinburg during our family gathering the following week in Pigeon Forge, TN. We took home a couple of moonshine samplers. Cricket also tells us they took a taxi to Max Patch, but the driver got severely lost along the way.

Managers Rocket and Josh show us around the hostel, and, as usual, Rocket is doing some heavy drinking, and is also smoking pot, passing the pipe around, and laughing rather hysterically.

There are 15 hikers staying tonight, a very full hostel. We meet two brothers from Clearwater, FL, who are hiking northbound from Springer Mountain, GA, to Hot Springs, NC. The long haired brother is obviously very tired from hiking and very quiet: it's pretty clear he wants out. We also meet "Pick" from Virginia Beach, VA, a retired 60-70-year-old career Army veteran, who served 3 tours in Vietnam, as well as in Korea and Guam. He served in the Armor Division and rose to the rank of Sergeant Major (E8). He is very reserved and extremely quiet, doesn't smile and seems rather sad to me. Pick carries a number of army surplus items, including a poncho liner, which he uses as a sleeping bag, and a tarp, which he uses for his tent. He travels very light and doesn't use poles, which it turns out is a big mistake (more on this later).

We're in our bunks by 11:00 PM; the dorm is nearly full tonight. Hum sleeps in a top bunk, I take a bottom bunk. There are lots of snorers but I have a good sleep anyway.

Zero Day – Standing Bear Farm Hostel, Hartford, TN – 7/17/14

I sleep until 7:00 AM after a really good night's sleep. Hum is already up. Pick is the bed next to me and says I was snoring in concert with the guy across the way: rather unusual, I don't usually snore. I shower and shave and feel really good to be clean again.

We go to the nearby Citgo station for sausage biscuits and hash browns: this is truly delicious and fulfilling as compared to our breakfast cupcakes. We bring Rocket a sausage biscuit, which he requested in return for telling us where to eat (what a guy). For the rest of the morning we prepare our trail meals for the upcoming hike on the northern section of the GSMNP AT.

Most people have left and the hostel is now rather empty. Cricket and Hammy are heading north. The Clearwater brothers start hiking northbound starting at 2:00 PM, after the long-hair brother delays to the maximum, and actually disappears for a while, which is rather strange.

We invite Pick to join us for dinner at the Citgo station and before departing Hum and I consume a couple of beers from the well-stocked refrigerator in the kitchen building. We all have fish baskets at the Citgo station, which are very good but take more than ½ hour to prepare, which isn't that good.

After dinner we call our wives. Lyn had a nice luncheon with the ladies. Pat says that the weather forecast for our area calls for 4 days of rain: bummer! Pick also calls his wife who reports some bad

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news: the Ukrainian rebels shot down a Malaysian airline, killing all 298 people on board, and Israel has attacked Hamas in Gaza.

We sit around the campfire when we return. Rocket is very drunk as usual, and this night he's mocking people who don't smoke pot. He quotes a senator who stayed at the hostel in the past who said that "smoking marijuana is a gateway to start using even more insidious drugs". It appears that Rocket wants everyone around the campfire to start smoking pot, and it becomes uncomfortable as Rocket becomes more and more obnoxious.

"Loopy" is another assistant to Rocket tonight, in addition to Josh. While we sit by the campfire Loopy gets a text from his X who says she wants a divorce. Fortunately, Rocket, Loopy, and Josh all depart for a local bar, and they brag that all the woman in the bar will immediately be attracted to irresistible them.

We're in our bunks by 9:00 PM, anticipating an early rise tomorrow.

US441-Newfound Gap, TN (5022') to Pecks Corner Shelter, NC – 7/18/14

Start Time: 6:15 AM, Newfound Gap Parking Lot, TN

End Time: 1:10 PM, Pecks Corner Shelter, TN

Total Miles: 10.8 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2000'/1600'

Distances:

US441-Newfound Gap, TN (5022') to Icewater Spring Shelter, NC (5920') = 3.0 miles

Icewater Spring Shelter, NC (5920') to Pecks Corner Shelter Side Trail, NC (5280') = 7.4 miles

Side trail to Pecks Corner Shelter (5280') = 0.4 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 36,068

Calories: 999

Steps/minute: 93

MPH: 3.00 (1.75 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 6 hours, 27 minutes, 46 seconds

Miles: 17.08 miles (10.8 actual miles)

We're up at 4:15 AM and on the road by 4:45 AM. Pick wakes up as well and says it's OK with him to use our flashlights. We take a rather longer but what we hope will be a faster route this time to Newfound Gap. There is little traffic at this early hour, but it still takes us 1 ¼ hours to get to Newfound Gap by 6:00 AM.

We start hiking north at 6:15 AM and have a good, dry hike to reach Icewater Springs Shelter by 8:15 AM. We find the shelter completely full including the group of 3 hikers from Columbia, South America, who we first met several days ago at Derrick Knob Shelter. They have a fire going and Hum and I both take time to use the privy. At this point it begins to rain and so we don our ponchos.

We make our way north about one more mile to the turnoff to Charlies Bunion, a famous rock outcropping that rather resembles a large bunion, and which in clear weather offers extraordinary views. (I had hiked to Charlies Bunion a few years earlier with Debbie, Bill, Jessica, and Lauren, on a clear dry day). All the while the rain continues to increase and the visibility becomes essentially zero: every direction is all socked in.

At this point Hum and I have an unusual discussion. I suggest that in view of the terrible conditions and the forecast for 4 days of rain that we turn back and somehow wait it out. I point out that we are already soaking wet and cold and risk hypothermia in these conditions, which can be dangerous. I recall that on last year's 2013 AT hike in TN/NC I had suggested turning back in bad weather on our way to Big Bald, NC, and Hum went along with that suggestion and it worked out well since we largely avoided bad weather.

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This time, however, Hum would have no part of turning back. Maybe he thought I was suggesting to completely abandon the hike because he said, rather forcefully "I'm going to say something. I'm going

on, no matter what. I'm going to finish (the AT). It took 10 hours to drive here and I'm not coming back." I'm very surprised by Hum's response: this is completely atypical of my brother.

Further, Hum says it's OK with him if I want to abandon the hike; he'll still keep going in any case. I object to that statement and say that we should make a joint decision on what to do. I say I'll keep going, we should stick together.

Then we discuss whether to go out to Charlies Bunion on the short side trail or just move on. While any view from the rock is hopeless in the socked-in conditions, I feel that seeing the rock formation itself, which a famous sight on the AT, is still worth a short walk. But Hum says "I'm not interested in views". Unfortunately, I respond that his statement is quite right, that he is mostly interested in doing AT miles and not so much in seeing views or other sights along the way. Actually the opposite is true: Hum has learned to greatly appreciate the beauty presented by the Appalachian Trail, and I think his appreciation has rubbed off, at least in part, from me. I say I had already seen Charlies Bunion and the views so it's OK with me to skip it. But I also think and hope that Hum will return someday to see this very unusual geological feature.



Weather Turns Very Bad; the Beginning of Four Days of Drenching Rain!

We don't speak further about our disagreement until at least two days later. We have both said things that in retrospect we wish we had not said. In the meantime Hum thinks over his words, and when we again speak about this episode he is clearly the good-guy brother Hum I know. This is typical Hum.

Non-stop rain continues, we get soaked, and the trail has a lot of up's on a very long, narrow ridge – it's kind of like a continuous up and down roller coaster. It's really too bad the weather is so grim; I'm sure there would be continuous great views if the weather were only clear. We get to Peck's Corner Shelter by 1:10 PM, close to Hum's prediction.

When we arrive there are 3 teens in the shelter but they decide to move on to the next shelter (Tri-Corner Knob Shelter). We're able to take our favorite places on opposite walls of the shelter. Next three guys arrive who have reservations: two sleep outside in hammocks and one takes a place in the shelter. Then the 3 Columbians arrive and then 8 people from Knoxville, TN, arrive around 5:00 PM with several kids: the shelter is overflowing! I already knew from the GSMNP web-site that the shelter was scheduled to be full tonight and indeed it is, and more!

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"John" leads the party of 8. As he enters the shelter John loudly barks to everyone present: "we have 8 permits!" "Who here has permits?" "We need 8 spaces!" Hum and I are lying in our sleeping bags at this time and I think to myself "uh oh, we don't have reservations and he could kick us out of the shelter into the rain!" Hum and I stay quiet and don't say anything, hoping he'll just back off.

Three of the youngsters in the group of 8 are John's own kids. John is also hosting "Gregois", a visiting French exchange student who thinks himself a ninja warrior. By hoisting himself up on the rafters, idiot

Gregois keeps kicking the metal roof of the shelter with powerful ninja kicks. Gregois is obviously showing off his superior strength and agility to his American friends: this behavior is not appreciated by us. John's bald cousin and his son are also in the group of 8.

John is like a drill sergeant, constantly barking orders to his group. All the kids are in bed by 6:30 PM, per John's orders. A short time later John announces to everyone present that he "wants to talk" and "tell his life story". He starts to tell how he grew up in Philadelphia but no one seems to be listening so the story peters out and he goes to bed at 8:00 PM after surveying one of the hammocks in use outside. A strange character John is.



Mushrooms We Meet on the AT

Fortunately no more people arrive and somehow we all find space in the shelter, although we're very much squeezed together like sardines in a can. The shelter is designed to sleep 12; we manage to squeeze in 14 people.

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The rain does not let up; in fact, it keeps on getting more and more intense. It is really cold and I put on all the layers I have: I'm very glad I brought my jacket and knit cap along. I'm sufficiently warm inside my sleeping bag. Overnight the rain turns into a deluge.

Zero Day – Pecks Corner Shelter, NC – 7/19/14

I'm up at 6:00 AM and the rain is still coming down in buckets: it's a real deluge, as it has been all night. I nudge Hum and say "let's sit it out today in the shelter." In fact Hum says he has the same suggestion and adds "it's dangerous out there," which is music to my ears because I wholeheartedly agree. This is the good-guy brother Hum I know. We both go back to bed and sleep a bit longer.

The three guys leave a little before 7:00 AM. The threesome from Columbia, South America, push off by

8:00 AM, even though the lady in the group says she doesn't want to leave and hike in the rain: overruled.

The 8-some from Knoxville takes 3 hours to pack up and are finally off by about 10:00 AM. Before departing they take multiple group photos and give us their water before tossing the excess.

Two guys from Louisville, KY, actually arrived at about 8:45 PM last night, after everyone was asleep, and, finding no room in the shelter, they somehow manage to sleep on the benches, but move into the shelter when space frees up in the morning. They are hiking north from Clingmans Dome to Route I-40/Davenport Gap and soon depart in the rain headed for Cosby Knob Shelter, NC.

I read a mystery novel that Hum lends me and was borrowed by Hum from his daughter-in-law Katie Ash. Hum mostly just relaxes all day. It teems rain all day and is cold and miserable.

Later in the afternoon Hum suddenly comes forth with some reflections on our disagreement yesterday morning. "I should use my head more", he says, "we could easily get hypothermia, especially old guys." More music to my ears: this is my sterling brother Hum speaking.

Aron from Atlanta, GA, rolls in at around 3:00 PM from Newfound Gap. He's a Physical Therapist who tells us it takes 7 years of college training to become a Physical Therapist and is now a practicing therapist in a large Physical Therapy Group. He's doing an up and back from Newfound Gap to Pecks Corner Shelter and says he knew it would rain for 3 days, which leaves me wondering 'why do it??' He even takes a side hike to a mountain top where there is no view! He says he's done extensive hiking in GSMNP since he went to a school that is near the park. He tells us a group of 6 hikers he passed are moving very slowly and won't be here "for hours".

Actually the group of 6 hikers, 3 girls, 3 guys, all 18-20 year olds, arrive at around 4:00 PM, only one hour after Aron's prediction. They are all from Sturgis, Michigan, and are lifelong friends. They tried to pitch a tent last night at Newfound Gap but couldn't because of the extreme rain and wind conditions, so they all slept in their car (quite a squeeze). Some of them are in college now; one is a Mormon, Nick, who is attending Brigham Young University, majoring in biology, and participating on the cross country team. He says he may become a dentist but is unsure, because "biology is hard and requires lots of memorization". Nick has a very good sense of humor and tells us that Thomas, the blond kid, and his girlfriend, Lauren, are both engineers and that according to them "everything I say is wrong."

Thomas and Lauren are both studying Mechanical Engineering at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, MI. Lauren has a summer job with an engineering firm, but she says they made her the "secretary" because she is the only female there. Austin drove his Toyota Camry and parked it at the Davenport Gap parking lot. He is really worried about that because that parking lot has a reputation for vandalism and all the guidebooks firmly suggest not to park there. I don't ever learn the names of the other two girls. One is extremely quiet and always wears a wool cap covering her whole head and ears. She is constantly writing in her journal and reading, and says she is going to Oberlin College next year to become an environmental engineer. The other girl is the youngest in the group and just graduated from high school. She doesn't eat the same food; perhaps because of food allergies? They are all hiking to Davenport Gap/I-40 and the girls are all backpacking for the first time. The girls say that their packs are too big and they can't secure them around their waist.

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A group of 5 from north of Cincinnati, OH, arrives at around 6:00 PM and say they have reservations for 6, but one dropped out. There are 2 adults and 3 kids in their group. Zack, 15, is cold and crying, so his dad Joe gets him dinner and cheers him up. Joe is on the heavy side and says he is having trouble with swollen knees, perhaps stressed by his weight. Jamie, the other adult, has 2 kids with him, red-headed Evan is 11 and the other one, Evan's cousin, is blond. Jamie and Joe both work for Meijer stores, a family owned grocery enterprise with 200 stores. Jamie says he used to be a manager but took a demotion to work in produce in order to get more free time. He says he applied to become the union steward and thinks he will get the job

After dinner, when the rain lets up a little bit, we go for water; the water is way down a big hill. The privy is way up another hill.

It rains lightly all night. Aron snores as of course does Hum: Hum uses ear plugs to ward off Aron's snores: now there's a switch.

Pecks Corner Shelter, NC to Tri-Corner Knob Shelter, NC (5920') – 7/20/14

Start Time: 7:00 AM, Pecks Corner Shelter, NC
End Time: 10:30 AM, Tri-Corner Knob Shelter, NC
Total Miles: 5.6 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1800'/800'

Distances:

Side trail from Pecks Corner Shelter (5280') to AT = 0.4 miles
Pecks Corner Shelter Side Trail, NC (5280') to Tri-Corner Knob Shelter, NC (5920') = 5.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 21,595
Calories: 568
Steps/minute: 94
MPH: 2.69 (1.47 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 3 hours, 47 minutes, 43 seconds
Miles: 10.22 miles (5.6 actual miles)

We're up at 5:45 AM and off by 7:00 AM with our ponchos on: it's still raining! It drizzles all morning creating rivers on the AT with lots of mud. We have heavy rain on Mt. Chapman (4.2 miles) and reach Tri-Corner Knob Shelter at about 10:30 AM, a short day of hiking.

The three Columbia, South America people are still there, enjoying a warm fire and debating whether to move on or not (they do move on).

Pick is here also. He is hiking south and says he is stopping at every shelter; he spent the night here last night. He contemplates staying here another day but eventually decides to move on. He tells us that he fell 5 times in the last two days, one time he fell down a cliff and was only stopped from a possibly fatal fall by a log! I think to myself that this is the sad and hazardous consequence of Pick not hiking with poles, which is a dangerous choice to make on the AT. Pick says he's thinking of ending his hike early; he originally planned to hike from Damascus, VA to Springer Mountain, GA. He says the group of 8, led by John, was here last night and left for Cosby Knob Shelter in the morning. "They had stuff everywhere" he says and that Gregois caught a pet mouse. I think to myself again as to how sad Pick seems; he doesn't seem to be having much fun.

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Tri-Corner Knob Shelter; Hum & Pick Chat

"Narly Harly", the bearded hiker we met at Standing Bear Farm Hostel, stops by the shelter for lunch. He started from Mt. Katahdin, ME, last August he says.

Jamie and Joe and their 3 kids arrive mid-afternoon. Jamie notes that we always take the end position in the shelter. Jamie's 2 kids, red and blond, spend the afternoon trying to start a fire, assisted by Hum the master fire starter. Unfortunately the wood is very wet so a fire does not start.

The six high school friends from Sturgis, MI arrive last. They carry a message to us from Pick, who they pass on the way to the shelter. His cryptic message to us is "6", meaning, we immediately realize, that he fell a 6th time. Once again I think to myself that he should really use poles; they definitely help to prevent falls. I wonder if Pick is going to quit. Pick is not a happy camper, very glum.

The group of 6 has an elaborate dinner, using their wood burning stove, which, at 4 pounds, is ridiculously heavy and makes a lot of smoke. They give us some spam, grilled on the fire, which is smoky and delicious. One of them, Austin, says that he is going to hike more after they complete their hike at Davenport Gap. Hum contributes a GSMNP trail map to his cause, for which Austin is very grateful. The group of six enjoys a big fire after dinner.

It clears up in the afternoon but rains again around dinner time. Ho & Hum are on 1/2 rations because of the extra zero day spent at Pecks Corner Shelter. It's not really enough food to be satisfying after so much energy spent hiking.

Joe and Jamie and kids are noisy until 9:30 PM or so. Joe and Hum are snoring loudly through the night: ear plugs needed.

Tri-Corner Knob Shelter, NC (5920') to Cosby Knob Shelter, NC (4720') – 7/21/14

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Tri-Corner Knob Shelter, NC
End Time: 11:30 AM, Cosby Knob Shelter, NC
Total Miles: 7.7 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1000'/1800'

Distances:

Tri-Corner Knob Shelter, NC (5920') to Cosby Knob Shelter, NC (4720') = 7.7 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 25,778
Calories: 678
Steps/minute: 92
MPH: 2.63 (1.66 adjusted for actual miles)

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Timer: 4 hours, 37 minutes, 30 seconds
Miles: 12.20 miles (7.7 actual miles)

Up at 6:00 AM, cupcakes, pack, and off by 6:45 AM: efficient.

Finally we get some great views from "Hell Ridge", which is named because of devastation resulting from a forest fire along the four-mile section completely stripping away the forest, but also opening up beautiful, eerie scenes of the burned out trees silhouetted against the blue horizon in the spectacular long range views.



View from Hell Ridge, Scene of Huge Forest Fire

We consider going about 3 miles beyond Cosby Knob Shelter to the Mt. Cammerer fire tower; however, we don't know the configuration of the fire tower and whether or not there is a roof to shelter us in the tower. Last year Andrew from Flagler Beach, FL raved about this stopping point where he had stayed, and advised us that we need to take water, but didn't mention whether the fire tower had a roof or not. We meet one southbound hiker along the way and ask about the Cammerer fire tower, but he didn't go there so he couldn't tell us about the configuration.

We arrive at the Cosby Knob Shelter at about 11:30 AM. We call our wives and Pat tells Hum about Laurie staying at Debbie's and their discussions regarding Debbie's impending divorce from Bill. I haven't mentioned this to Hum yet so I fill him in on the situation. Pat also looks up the weather forecast for the area: 40% chance of thunder showers today, 60% chance tomorrow. This gives us some context in deciding whether or not to move on to the Mt. Cammerer fire tower or Davenport Gap Shelter or just stay put at Cosby Knob Shelter. Hum says "it's your call". I know that Hum wants to stay put at the shelter; he loves staying in the shelters and talking to everyone, so I say that it's OK with me to stay here.

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Cosby Knob Shelter; Evan, Hum, & Nick Try to Start Fire, Without Success

Later on, before others arrive, Hum reflects "you're a good brother"; "you came with me". We do a high five; makes me feel good.

About 2:00 PM in the afternoon the 6 high school friends and the 5-some from Cincinnati, OH, arrive at the same time. The 6-some make popcorn and share it with us. Evan and his cousin try to start a fire all afternoon, but with no success. Hum, Austin, and Nick assist but can't get the very wet wood to burn.

Hum and I are still on half rations. I have $\frac{1}{2}$ of a Chili Mac dinner, which is very good but not enough food; Hum has a rice dish.

Hum leaves an entry in the shelter's journal:

7/21/14 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (ages 72 & 74) in for the night along with two great groups. Tomorrow we will complete our end to end AT hike of the Smokies. Hiked some very challenging trails, saw some great views, had 3 straight days of rain, and met some fantastic folks. Maybe we'll be back to hike some of the other trails. Sadly, no bear encounters. Happy trails.

We're in bed by 8:30 PM. There are 13 of us sleeping in the shelter, which is designed to hold 12, 6 on the top floor, 7 on the bottom floor, so it's a bit cramped. All heads are to the back; sometimes people sleep opposite so as to not bump heads. The quiet girl with the knit cap bumps me many times in the night: very close quarters. Nick rolls into his sack and says "I love you Thomas", "I love you Lauren", and again, "I love you Thomas". Nick is funny.

Joe snores. Hum uses ear plugs.

Cosby Knob Shelter, NC (4720') to Green Corner Road, Hartford, TN (1750') – 7/22/14

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Cosby Knob Shelter, NC
End Time: 3:00 PM, Green Corner Road, Hartford, TN
Total Miles: 12.1 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 800'/3800'

Distances:

Cosby Knob Shelter, NC (4720') to Davenport Gap Shelter, TN (2600') = 7.1 miles
Davenport Gap Shelter, TN (2600') to TN32-Davenport Gap, TN (2003') = 0.9 miles
TN32-Davenport Gap, TN (2003') to I-40 Crossing, TN (1400') = 1.9 miles
I-40 Crossing (1400') to Green Corner Road, Hartford, TN (1750') = 1.0 miles
Mt. Cammerer side trail and return = 1.2 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 40,282

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Calories: 1060

Steps/minute: 94

MPH: 2.69 (1.71 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 7 hours, 04 minutes, 49 seconds

Miles: 19.07 miles (12.1 actual miles)

We're up at 6:00 AM and so is everyone else in the shelter. For once it is not raining in the morning and there is a nice colorful sunrise; I snap a few pictures of same.

We're off by 6:45 AM and begin the day with a rather grueling 700' climb. I'm leading today for once; I seem to have more energy than Hum at this point. We reach the side trail to Mt. Cammerer (2.8 miles) and the fire tower before 8:30 AM. We discuss whether to drop our packs and hide them but Hum warns about bears "stealing" our packs. That actually happened just this year at one of the shelters, according to a ranger that Hum talked with. So we take our packs for the 0.6 mile trail to the fire tower. There's a rock scramble at the end.

We find a very nice, roomy, fire tower with a large, fully enclosed room with a roof and a door. It would have been a great place to spend a night, just like Andrew from Flagler Beach, FL, did last year. There's one problem, however: there is no view, Mt. Cammerer is completely socked in! Bummer.



Cammerer Mountain Fire Tower Mt. Cammerer is Socked in but Weather Starts to Clear Later On

On our return to the AT we meet an Amish man at the trail junction. He is rather unfriendly but tells us he is going to Tri-Corner Knob Shelter. We find out much later, from Austin, that the 6-some passes us while we are out looking at the fire tower, and they all wonder why they haven't caught us and that 'boy are they fast hikers!'

We reach Davenport Gap Shelter (7.1 miles) by noon. We stop to have lunch in the fully fenced-in shelter, which presumably is for protection from bears; it actually resembles a "cage". I sign the journal for the last time:

7/20/14 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (72/74) stopped for lunch & break. This completes our E2E Smokies hike after 9 days hiking. Saw wonderful sights, met great people, endured drenching rain, saw no bears, had much fun. Maybe we'll do a 7th backpack in VA next year. Enjoy.

We pass out of GSMNP at Davenport Gap (8.0 miles) where there is a place to deposit one's hiking pass. We opt once again not to do that because of our slightly exaggerated "thru hiker" status claimed on our passes plus the exit date doesn't at all match what's on the pass.

As we cross the Pigeon River (9.5 miles) we see many people white water rafting and several of the busses carrying the rafts up river to the put-in point.

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Davenport Gap Shelter; Note that it's Caged in for Bear Protection

We cross under I-40 and go back into the woods after a very steep and long stair climb. Hum is a bit confused thinking that we were at the end of our hike. Not so! We have another 400'-500' climb to reach the point on Waterville School Road where we came out last year. I continue to lead. Climbing is now very hot and Hum is fighting mental block because he's really, really tired. Mental block is a major obstacle to overcome in backpacking because more often than not, when you're tired and stressed, your mind keeps telling you "you can't make it!" "Give up!" I've found ways in recent years to "think around" mental block and it seems to work OK.



Leaving Great Smoky Mountain National Park White Water Rafting on Pigeon River

We reach Waterville School Road exactly at 3:00 PM, which is Hum's prediction. Done! We drop our packs, snap pictures, and rest a bit. I hike the road, sans pack, for 0.1 mile to Standing Bear Farm Hostel to retrieve my car, while Hum guards the packs. I meet Rocket and Lumpy (no Josh today) and they kid me regarding "what, no back pack?!"

We shower, shave, have a couple of beers, and chat. I feel bound to tell Hum, since he plans to do a lot of solo hiking in the future, to please be careful, to think through his decisions and options especially in bad weather; hiking can be dangerous at times.

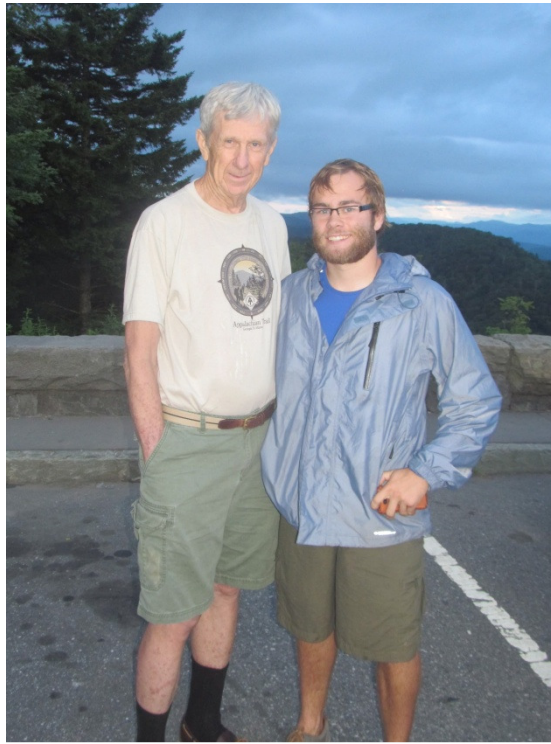
I have a chicken fingers dinner at the Citgo station, which is consumed immediately: really good. After dinner we call the girls and then drive to Newfound Gap. We follow the one-lane road once again, but

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Finishing Our 2014 AT Hike at Waterville School Road, Hartford, TN

this time behind a very slow truck with no opportunity to pass. We arrive at Newfound Gap at about 8:00 PM, where we meet Austin from the 6 high school friends we had hiked with for several days. He is doing his after hike and says that on beautiful today he hiked to Charlies Bunion. He plans to sleep in his car tonight and hike to Clingmans Dome and Silers Bald Shelter tomorrow, and then further south. After his hike he plans to visit his grandparents on his return to Michigan. He snaps our picture and asks us if it's OK to put our picture on his Facebook page; a very nice guy Austin is.



Hum & Austin at Newfound Gap

I set the GPS for our return to Standing Bear Farm Hostel but for some reason this time it routes us all the way on Route 32, which is extremely slow and curvy, especially in the pitch dark. We stop at one point to check that this is right and it is. We finally reach the Pigeon River Bridge where we crossed on our hike earlier in the day and arrive at Standing Bear Farm Hostel at about 10:00 PM after a very long day.

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We pay Rocket, and bid everyone goodbye, and get to bed in the dorm. It's not too crowded tonight: the 3 Columbia, South America people are there as is a lady thru-hiker who is headed north.

Epilogue – 7/23/14

Summary statistics for the 8 days of hiking:

Total Miles: 76.5 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 12,600' gain/16,700' loss

Total Steps: 263,068

We're up at 5:30 AM and go to the Citgo station by 6:30 AM for breakfast one final time. Our sausage biscuits are good as always. We say our goodbyes and depart for home. I make it by 4:00 PM after a stop at Exit 77, I-95 in South Carolina for gas and hotdogs.

When I arrive home Lysie is not back from the dentist yet. But I'm HOME. There are beers and a manhattan before dinner to celebrate. I find that I haven't lost any weight on this hike, how can that be I wonder??

I'm dead tired but happy after completing yet another fantastic Ho & Hum adventure, this being our 6th year backpacking together. Next year we hope to continue our backpacking adventures by going north from Damascus, VA, for perhaps as much as 160 miles into southern Virginia. We'll see.

9. August 22 – September 19, 2015
Southwestern Virginia AT Hike:
Damascus, Virginia to Pearisburg, Virginia

Prologue

Geezer hikers Ho & Hum undertake our Appalachian Trail (AT) hike this year, a 168-mile, 16-day hike in Southwestern Virginia, from Damascus, VA, to Pearisburg, VA. This is our seventh consecutive year of backpacking together.

In the spring and early summer, Hum continues his vigorous pursuit of completing the entire AT and finishes many sections in the northern VA AT and completes an arduous training hike in the Vermont AT/LT. As such, he again gets in great shape for our forthcoming AT hike together in Southwestern Virginia. Having moved to Florida from Vermont 3 years ago, I now have little opportunity to do any real training hikes given the rather flat terrain in Florida. However, I do discover a nearby 6-mile mountain biking trail that has quite a few up's and down's, but certainly no mountains to match the training hikes I used to do in Vermont. I hike the 6-mile trail many times, mostly in 90 degree heat, and I feel this provided me much better preparation for our AT hike than did the workouts in the gym facility in our Palm Coast community that I engaged in the previous year.

I plan our 16-day Southwestern VA hike including hostels, zero days, moving 2 cars around, etc. This year's plan proposes a 2½-week, 165-mile hike, which is far longer than hikes in previous years. One main reason to plan this longer hike this year is to provide Hum – who has recently and tragically lost his beloved wife Pat of 50 years – with some additional solace, relaxation, and diversion by engaging in something he loves doing, that is, hiking.

Travel Day – 8/22/15

On Saturday July 12 Hum and I drive to [Mt. Rogers Outfitters](#) on Laurel Avenue in the small town of Damascus, VA. Damascus was the end point of our 2012 AT hike from Erwin, TN, to Damascus, VA, a distance of 130 miles. Our intention this year is to continue north on the AT from Damascus all the way to Pearisburg, VA, for a distance of 165 more miles.

Hum arrives in Damascus first, at about 2:00 PM, after a 400-mile drive from Timonium, MD. He calls me on my cell phone while I'm still on the road, having left home at around 6:00 AM on the 625-mile drive to Damascus. Hum informs me that he has arrived and that we're staying in Room #1 at the Mt. Rogers Hiker Hostel. I opt to take a longer route, by about 50 miles, but because it is mostly on interstate highways rather than back roads it takes about the same amount of time as the shorter route. I arrive at Mt. Rogers Outfitters at around 4:00 PM. Along the way I stop at the last Pilot gas station on I-26 in South Carolina to have my 2 hotdogs for lunch; I love the hotdogs at Pilot: they are big, delicious, and, best of all, cheap. When I reach I-81 in Tennessee there are numerous electronic warnings posted and corresponding warnings on the radio regarding the expectation of extremely heavy traffic congestion in the Bristol, VA, area because of a big NASCAR race scheduled for today on the Bristol Motor Speedway: that's exactly where I'm headed! Great! Fortunately, it is still very early for fans to be arriving for the race so there is no congestion quite yet, thank goodness.

I move my stuff into the digs in Room #1 at the hostel, which is a small but perfectly adequate place to stay, and soon we meet Bill with the Big Beard, who is one of the managers of the Mt. Rogers Outfitters store across the street. Bill Big Beard lives in the hostel it turns out, and we observe he sleeps with the light always on: strange. We chat about our planned 14-mile hike the next day from VA-728/Creek Junction back to Damascus, a distance of almost 14 miles. He describes access to the parking area at Creek Junction, the route to follow from the parking lot to connect to the AT, and details about the reroute at VA-58 because of a washed out bridge from an earlier flood. Bill complains that the bridge is taking too long to put back in because, he says, it needs to be wheelchair accessible. It seems that all new government construction on the AT needs to be wheelchair accessible; we found this out last year when we saw that the privies by the shelters were wheelchair accessible! How one uses a wheelchair on the AT is apparently a nonissue for the government. At first Bill suggests that we "rock hop" across the stream since the water level is probably low due to lack of rain, but later changes his mind and suggests

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that we follow the reroute (maybe he worries that we'll fall into the stream and/or get hurt on the rocks because, after all, we're geezers).



Arrival at "Dave's Place" Hostel, Mt. Rogers Outfitters, Damascus, VA

Bill tells us quite a bit about his personal life. He is leaving Mt. Rogers Outfitters in two weeks and moving to Clarkeville, GA, near Amicalola Falls State Park, GA, which is the gateway to Springer Mt., GA, and the start of the AT, to rejoin his wife. He owns a camp in Damascus, near to where the AT emerges from the woods onto Route 58, which, he says, has no facilities, electricity, water, or otherwise, but he

has lived in those Spartan quarters for years. He takes long bike rides, even into the night, which we observed while staying there. Bill tells us that Dave, the owner of Mt. Rogers Outfitters, died recently of a heart attack while hiking on the AT. Dave's son Chris inherited the store; Bill mentions that Chris wants to close the store on Sundays for some reason; Bill apparently doesn't think that's a good idea. Hum and I met Dave at the end of our 2012 hike, when Dave repaired Hum's Katahdin water filter for free (the handle had broken off), since it carried a lifetime guarantee.

I ask Bill about Bob Peoples, a great guy who Hum and I met several times on our 2012 hike in TN/NC. Bob runs the Kincora Hostel in Hampton, TN, where we stayed 3 or 4 times. Bill says that Bob's health is deteriorating and that he is planning to close Kincora soon. It's probably just as well because Bill says that Kincora Hostel has been taken over by Bob's cats, which have used the whole place as their kitty litter box and deposited feces everywhere and that fleas have also infested the place. After Bob Peoples' wife died the hostel began to go to pot: she was the one who kept it clean and Bob did nothing to continue her effort that way. Bob Peoples is a tireless, extremely dedicated maintainer of the AT and Bill says that Bob's trail maintenance work does extend north of Damascus, and that Bob's legendary, rock-hewn switchback's are indeed present in the sections we will be hiking.

Hum and I enjoy two beers I have brought along, as is my usual custom, before going to dinner, but not without a little trepidation and attempts to hide same, since there is a large "No Alcohol" sign posted prominently on the porch of the hostel, right in front of where we are trying to discretely consume our beverages. Bill and other people, however, seem to be steadily flowing into and out of the hostel almost thwarting our little afternoon libation plan. But we manage to consume our beers without incurring any reprimands for doing so.

I call Lysie at about 5:00 PM to report our arrival and say that all is OK.

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Following Bill Big Beard's recommendation, we go across the street to Bobo McFarland's Restaurant at about 6:00 PM for dinner. It's a great little restaurant: I have a delicious Ground Round platter and Hum has the Fish & Chips. It's also very inexpensive; only about \$10 each including tip.

After dinner we get our packs ready for the next day and talk for a while on the porch. The room is very hot so we reverse the fan so it sends air into the room rather than out: it helps only a little bit. The hostel is pretty Spartan; there are no mattresses, blankets, or pillows, so we have to bring out pad, sleeping bags, etc. inside. I'm also very restless: tossing and turning for hours; maybe I'm anticipating our hike the following day and all the hiking yet to come after that.

VA-728/Creek Junction to Damascus, VA – 8/23/15

Start Time: 6:30 AM, Creek Junction Parking Lot, VA
End Time: 2:00 PM, Mt. Rogers Outfitters, Damascus, VA
Total Miles: 13.6 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2600'/3800'

Distances:

VA-728/Creek Junction to Saunders Shelter Side Trail, VA = 4.2 miles.
Saunders Shelter Side Trail, VA to Damascus, VA = 9.4 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 47,697
Calories: 1255
Steps/minute: 126
MPH: 3.58 (2.16 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 6 hours, 18 minutes, 06 seconds
Miles: 22.58 miles (13.6 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM, and because we don't know when sunrise will be (later we find out sunrise is about 6:45 AM), we allow plenty of time to drive to Creek Junction, a drive of about 8.8 miles on twisty mountain roads. We put all our stuff either into Hum's car or leave it in the hostel and drive my car to the trailhead. Route 58 is extremely slow given the many twists and turns through the mountains and then the access road to the Creek Junction parking lot is a very narrow dirt road on the edge of a huge drop off: thank goodness we meet no one coming in the other direction.

We get to the parking lot at about 6:15 AM while it is still dark; we tune the radio to try to get a weather report but there are no stations coming in at all. We wait until 6:30 AM to make our way under the trestle of the Virginia Creeper Trail, as Bill Big Beard described, on the ½ mile access path to join the AT. At this point the AT follows the Virginia Creeper Trail for a short distance, so the start of our hike is very easy on the broad, smooth bike trail with very few rocks to negotiate.

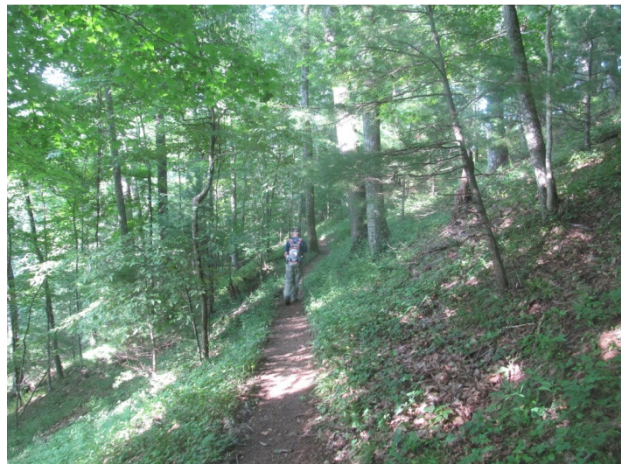
We get to the Saunders Shelter side trail (4.2 miles) at 8:45 AM, making great time and averaging more than 2 miles per hour. The sign says that the shelter is ¼ mile off the AT, so we opt to skip it rather than add another ½ mile to our already very long hike today. A little further down the AT we find another side trail to Saunders Shelter, so perhaps the combination of the 2 access trails would require less than ½ additional mile to our hike?

At the bottom of a 3-mile, 500' descent past Saunders Shelter we meet a father and son who say they are hiking for about 2 weeks from the Route 58 parking lot, where they had just parked, to Roanoke, VA. That is a very long, ambitious hike, which goes well beyond our goal of reaching Pearisburg, VA. We tell them that we will likely meet them again in the coming days, since we are doing a combination of backpacking and day hikes that will very likely intersect their northward journey.

Hum warns the father and son duo about some steep climbing ahead up to Saunders Shelter; this being the first of several Humberto warnings issued to the hiking duo in the coming days, which they will duly note. Actually, this is completely typical of Hum's way when meeting other hikers on the trail. Hum is eager to share his knowledge of what lies ahead for these other hikers he meets and so he usually

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focuses on what might be considered as helpful warnings, details of probable unpleasant aspects about the trail ahead: e.g., lots of dangerous rocks, 10,000' climb, impossibly steep, 5' deep mud, no water for 100 miles, etc., etc. This information is usually appreciated by the hikers but after repeated Humberto warnings the father and son duo saw Hum's information dumps as "you always tell us more bad news".



Top Left: Early Morning Start to our Hike at Creek Junction, VA
Top Right: Excellent Trail at First, Smooth with Very Few Rocks
Bottom Left: But It Doesn't Last Long, Rocky Ledges Get in the Way
Bottom Right: With Some Beautiful Views to Reward Us As We Go

We meet a lady with an aggressive barking white dog near the Route 58 reroute that Bill Big Beard had warned us about. I ask her if one can rock hop across the stream instead of taking the reroute; she replies, rather indignantly, that she doesn't rock hop. Actually the reroute is very short and does not seem much out of the way at all; in fact, it might even be a small short cut! Bill later tells us that because of the reroute we miss some nice stairs up the mountain south of the stream; too bad.

We make it to the summit of Cuckoo Knob by about 12 Noon, ½ hour earlier than Hum's prediction. We have lunch on the summit and I thoroughly enjoy my summer sausage sandwich, which I find much better than PB&J. I tell Hum about my delicious sandwich, who says he's dissatisfied with his PB&J menu and will change to summer sausage in the coming days.

Near the end of our hike we meet a lady with no backpack or water who says she's hiking up to the Iron Mt. Trail, which is a bit beyond the summit of Cuckoo Knob. She is totally unprepared.

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We reach Route 58 in Damascus at about 1:30 PM, where the AT again joins the Virginia Creeper Trail, and after a bit of confusion as to which way the AT goes through Damascus (surprisingly it is poorly marked) we reach Mt. Rogers Outfitters by 2:00 PM.

Along this final walk on the Virginia Creeper Trail we pass an interesting sign that gives some history of the trail:

Transition from Rail to Trail

The Virginia Carolina Railway which is now the Virginia Creeper Trail was originally built to haul timber cut from what is now the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area. It is estimated that between 1907 and 1930 approximately 15 million board feet of lumber were removed in a typical year. In 1912 National Lumber Magazine reported that Washington County, Virginia produced more lumber than any county in the United States and more than the entire state of Pennsylvania. The forest, unlike mineral resources, is renewable. As the once clear-cut forest regenerated into mature wood land, the recreation potential was recognized. The rail-bed which was the means of removing huge amounts of wealth from the forest is now returning ecotourism dollars to the region. The economy of Damascus was severely hurt when several factories closed during the 1960's. Tourism related businesses, based on the popularity of the Virginia Creeper Trail and the Appalachian Trail, have played an important role in the town's economic recovery. Today, the 17-mile portion of the Virginia Creeper Trail outside of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area is jointly owned by the town of Abingdon and Damascus. The US Forest Service manages the balance of the trail between Damascus and the North Carolina state line.

We were later told by a hiker we meet that the Virginia Creeper Trail is a continuous, gradual, all-downhill, beautiful ride from the embarkation station on Whitetop Mountain to its terminus in Damascus. He also said that the grade is so gradual that you can ride uphill without really noticing the uphill climb: I have my severe doubts about that statement!

Not long after returning to the hostel six 20/30-somethings, 3 men and 3 woman, arrive: we see them walking down Laurel Avenue, the main drag through Damascus, and hope they don't chose Mt. Rogers Outfitters for their night's abode, but they do. Actually last night 3 of them came by the hostel briefly and arranged for a shuttle to Creek Junction. They left so quickly last night that we didn't get a chance to chat with them.

We learn that they are hiking over a 3-day period from Creek Junction to Route 421, Low Gap, in TN. They have only another 14 miles to hike to Low Gap tomorrow. They tell us that the 3 others joined them last night at Creek Junction and from there they hiked a short distance south on the AT and camped. Apparently we hiked by their camp this morning and they saw us but we didn't see them, although I had heard some voices near the beginning of our hike today so it must have been them. They are from Hawthorne, FL, a small town east of Gainesville, FL. Two of the men, Chris and Alex, immediately introduce themselves. Chris's wife is by far the most talkative of the group, and talks endlessly about her two C-Sections and everything else under the sun. She describes the pain and medical details of the C-Sections in more detail than I would have requested, to say the least. She says, surprisingly, that she is very squeamish about medical procedures so why she goes on and on into all this medical detail is beyond me. She and Chris have a 5 year old and a 3 year old; the 5 year old apparently wants to start backpacking so they are going to comply soon. Her preference is some hiking trails in Ohio, which she mentions several times; why travel all the way from Florida to Ohio to hike isn't obvious but she seems set on that plan.

We return to Bobo McFarland's Restaurant again and this time we consume two of their delicious Ying Ling pints before dinner. I have the Meatloaf Dinner this time and Hum has the Ground Round: they provide huge portions and the food here is absolutely delicious.

Bill Big Beard says he rode to Backbone Rock, TN, today, which is not far from Damascus. It is an interesting geological site that Hum and I explored in 2012. Tonight he takes off on his bike to parts unknown, with a flashing red tail light hitched to the back of his bike, which hopefully will protect him in the dark.

We hit our sacks at about 8:45 PM; it is still very hot in the room but thankfully sleep for me is better than last night.

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VA-600-Elk Garden, VA to VA-728/Creek Junction – 8/24/15

Start Time: 6:50 AM, VA-600-Elk Garden, VA

End Time: 1:15 PM, VA-728/Creek Junction

Total Miles: 11.3 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 3000'/3800'

Distances:

VA-600-Elk Garden, VA to US-58-Summit Cut, VA = 6.9 miles.

US-58-Summit Cut, VA to Lost Mountain Shelter, VA= 1.1 miles.

Lost Mt. Shelter to VA-728/Creek Junction = 3.3 miles

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 45,472

Calories: 1196

Steps/minute: 120

MPH: 3.42 (1.79 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 6 hours, 17 minutes, 13 seconds

Miles: 21.53 miles (11.3 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and on the road by 5:30 AM. We turn onto Whitetop Mountain Road and take a wrong turn on the road leading to the Whitetop Mt. summit. We quickly realize our mistake and proceed to try to turn around. Turning around is difficult in the absolutely pitch black darkness on the narrow dirt road, so I have to guide Hum in making the tight maneuver. Soon after getting back on the main road we pass by the Elk Garden parking lot around 6:30 AM, but somehow miss the "Appalachian Trail" sign by the road. Instead, we see the "Birding & Wildlife Trail" sign and mistakenly conclude that the AT parking lot must be further down the road. We keep going for another 5 miles or so and almost reach Route VA-603, which is the turnoff to Troutdale, VA, before deciding that we have obviously passed Elk Garden and that the parking lot we saw 5 miles back is probably the right place. We turn around in the Konnarock, VA cemetery and head back up the mountain to the Elk Garden parking lot we passed about 10 minutes ago.

We only lose about 10-15 minutes because of our misguided navigation and get onto the AT at about 6:50 AM. It's very windy and quite cool so we keep our fleeces on for quite some time at the start of our hike. It is also very foggy this morning so we can't see Whitetop Mountain or anything else for that matter; too bad. This is especially unfortunate because I recall that Bill Roach, Lysie, and I had hiked over Whitetop Mountain many years ago, and I well recall the view to the summit of the mountain as we hiked the AT back then. We reach Buzzard Rock (3.7 miles) by about 9:00 AM, but unfortunately there is no view; actually it is impossible to see more than about 20 feet.



Buzzard Rock All Socked In: Bummer!

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In the meadows beyond Buzzard Rock we again meet the father and son duo, just as we had predicted to them yesterday. They tell us they spent last night at Lost Mountain Shelter, where at first they thought they had the shelter to themselves, but at 11:00 PM four young people come in, make lots of noise, wake them up, etc. Unbelievable! I ask if they complained and they reply that they chatted in the morning and found these to be nice people and did not complain: much more forgiving than I would be!

Hum then proceeds to deliver the bad news about the trail ahead: “lots of up” Hum says and “completely socked in, no view”. Here the father and son duo complain that we “give them bad news every time”. To appease them I say that the fog will probably burn off by the time they climb the mountain, and indeed, as we find out later, it does burn off and clears the view for them. They tell us they are headed to Thomas Knob Shelter tonight, and again we tell them we will probably meet them more times on our way north on the AT.

At about 10:00 PM Hum takes a bad fall. It is unclear what tripped him up, maybe a buried root, but in any case he cut his right arm and really hits very hard and bruises his hip, causing much pain over the next several days. He cleans the wound on his arm and puts on a temporary bandage, but will need to replace that with a more permanent dressing later at Lost Mountain Shelter.

We pass through a picturesque pasture where a small herd of black cows are enjoying their morning snack of delicious grass. But one renegade cow plants himself directly in the middle of the trail and refuses to budge, so I have to make my way around the large black obstacle. Some beautiful wildflowers also adorn the pretty pasture.





**Top: Hiking a Pretty Pasture & a Stubborn Black Cow Blocks the Trail
Bottom: Pretty Wildflowers Adorn the Pasture**

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Later in the morning it begins to rain and we put on our ponchos. It rains pretty hard for about one hour and we're reminded that there's nothing worse than hiking in the rain. But as it turns out this is the only rain we will have during the entire 2 ½ weeks of hiking. Now that's pretty lucky to say the least! We get to Lost Mountain Shelter (8.0 miles) by about noon, at which point the rain stops, we have our lunch, and Hum fixes the dressing on his wound.



We Stop at Lost Mountain Shelter to Dodge the Rain and to Have Our Lunch

We get to Creek Junction at about 1:15 PM. I had asked Bill Big Beard if there was any direct access to the parking lot at Creek Junction rather than walking the extra ½ mile past the Virginia Creeper Trail trestle to the junction with the AT access trail from the parking lot. Bill had suggested that maybe we could rock hop across the creek, but on close examination of the creek under the trestle it is obvious that rock hopping is impossible at this point: there are not nearly enough rocks to hop on.

Alternatively, Bill suggested that we could slide down the steep embankment on the south side of the trestle on our butts: it is very steep he warned but it avoids the ½ mile walk to the AT access trail. Hum is intent on walking the extra ½ mile and pushes ahead past the embankment. I check out the embankment and see that there are guide ropes installed to hold on to and avoid the butt slide. I call to Hum to come back but he ignores me and keeps going on the extra walk to the access trail. I easily get down to the parking lot by using the ropes: no butt slide required, no problem.



**Left: Crossing the Trestle on the AT/Virginia Creeper Trail
Right: I Descend the Steep Bank Directly Down to the Access Trail Below;
Hum Walks Another ½ Mile to Reach the Access Trail**

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I find lots of wet leaves covering my car after 2 days in Creek Junction: there has obviously been some big wind and rain during the past two days. Hum gets back to the parking lot after another 15 minutes or so. I ask him why he didn't come back, that there are guide ropes down the embankment; it's easy I tell him. Hum says he didn't want to risk getting hurt again, but I say there is no risk because of the ropes. Hum sticks to his guns anyway. I kid him that he's becoming "an old lady".

We drive back to Elk Garden via Route VA-600/White Top Mountain Road rather than on US-58/VA-91 since it is much shorter. We pick up Hum's car and then proceed to the Troutdale Baptist Church by backtracking on VA-600 to VA-603 to VA-16, about a 15-mile drive, and arrive at the Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel at about 3:00 PM.

It's a beautiful scene at the Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel location and I snap several pictures. The old church is a beautiful, classically built, tall, white, wooden clapboard church, but lacks a traditional steeple. It is no longer used as the main church, rather the main church is now a smaller brick building located on the opposite side of VA-16, but the old church is still used for various meetings and also has the hostel shower/bathroom facilities.



**Left: Troutdale Baptist Church, Old Church on the Right, New Church on the Left
Right: Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel**

We find the hostel has only 2 rooms with 4 bunks in each room, but luckily only one room is occupied, by "Twisted", so Ho & Hum settle into the other room. Hum immediately starts chatting with Twisted, who starts by saying that he "did 26 miles today and 31 miles yesterday". It's impressive but unusual for an opening statement. He also tells Hum a few things that indicate he is short on funds: this is a classic "Yogi-ing" gambit by an experienced career hiker and drifter, who basically lives on the trail and gets support from other people, many of whom offer him "help" (food, lodging, etc.) based on his perceived "need". Yogi-ing does not allow one to ask for anything outright: the objective is to establish a need by

relating various sob stories and then have the other person offer to “help”. Hum falls for this tactic, but only once (more on this later).

While Hum chats with Twisted, I chat with “Morning Star” (Rick), who is busy painting the picnic table by the hostel and tells me he is helping out for 4 days, actually he is “working for stay”. He gives me a brief rundown on the bath/shower facilities located down the hill in the old church building, and tells me how to get water from the nearby water spigot (it’s a gravity feed, “don’t pump” he says), and also tells me where the one and only eating place in Troutdale is located, the Fox Creek Café, which has “good BBQ” he says. Morning Star is staying in a tent up by the picnic pavilion on top of the hill. He prefers to do section hiking and says he did an AT thru hike in 1993, but didn’t like it at all; apparently it was too physically grueling for him. He appears to be an AT drifter, mostly living on the trail and supporting himself with odd jobs and work for stay: he talks about having done a kitchen remodel job and even contracted a car belt replacement job while we are there. Morning Star has a dog that looks mostly like a pit bull mix and barked at us very aggressively when we first arrived and later on that evening.

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In the afternoon we meet and chat with “Skid” (T. J. Forrester); he is an avid bicycle rider and is on his way on another one of his bike rides. Skid is a “triple crown” thru-hiker meaning that he has thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, and the Continental Divide Trail. He tells us that in March 1996, at the start of his AT thru-hike, he met Bill Bryson, author of [A Walk in the Woods – Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail](#), now a movie starring Robert Redford and Nick Nolte, on Springer Mountain, GA, trailhead of the AT. He says there was 2 feet of snow on Springer Mountain at the time and they were both starting AT thru hikes, although Bryson never finished. Skid tells us that the Continental Divide Trail is the most difficult of the three triple-crown trails, and that you definitely need a GPS to navigate the trail and find your way, because in many places the trail is either poorly blazed or not blazed at all.

Skid is also an accomplished author and tells us he stays at the Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel and frequently goes into the woods to get inspiration for his novels. So far he has produced two highly acclaimed novels: [Black Heart on the Appalachian Trail – A Novel](#) and [Miracles Inc – A Novel](#), both published by Simon & Schuster. We discuss Bryson’s book and Skid makes the interesting comment that “Steve Katz”, Bryson’s sometimes comical and unprepared AT hiking partner, played by Nick Nolte in the recent movie, is not an actual person but a character Bryson created to represent his alter ego. I have since read both of Skid’s novels and find them both very well done, but I also find “Black Heart” to be rather dark in that the main character has the bad habit of pushing other hikers off cliffs to their deaths.

I enjoy a nice warm shower and shave in the afternoon, in the washroom down in the old clapboard church, which feels really good.

Hum has invited Twisted to join us for dinner at the Fox Creek Café so we make our way there in Hum’s car. On the way we find out a lot more about Twisted and his hiking exploits. He says that he lives in Roan Mountain, TN, but spends about 9 months of the year in New Hampshire, mostly hiking. He is not working and says he collects unemployment after he gave up working as a truck driver. Apparently he is fully supported by his parents and by his wife, who works for an insurance company, and also by many good-hearted people who volunteer to help him in response to Twisted’s professional Yogi-ing techniques. Twisted says he is doing his 5th AT thru hike, he started from Mt. Kahtadin on May 10; he has 550 miles to go. He prefers to tent rather than stay in shelters and tells us he averages “3 to 4 miles per hour depending on elevation” and carries up to 60-70+ pounds of gear: it sounds almost impossible and we later speculate that Twisted is a great exaggerator! He says he knows [Warren Doyle](#), who holds the record of 16 AT thru hikes to date, but Twisted doesn’t like Warren Doyle’s hiking ideas. It is obvious that Twisted just loves talking about himself and has zero interest in much else: he did not even ask our names!

Troutdale, VA is a very small town to say the least. Years earlier Lyn and I had driven through Troutdale several times on our way to Bill Roach’s cabin in Boone, NC to do some hiking with Bill in the Blue Ridge Mountains. As we passed through town we always joked that “Mayor Trout” was the mayor of Troutdale and that “Chief Salmon” was the chief of police. It seems that Fox Creek Café is the only store in town in Troutdale, VA. It is a small store carrying a combination of food, supplies, and all manner of other items, plus a small restaurant. The whole operation is run by one woman who takes our orders for BBQ sandwiches; which we all have. At the same time she also runs the rest of the store. We ask her for a glass of water with our dinner but she ignores our request; rather she is adamant that we must buy bottled water. So she takes a large bottle of water out of the cooler and says we can share it and gives us each a Styrofoam cup; Hum volunteers that he’ll pay for the water.

Soon enough the sandwiches are ready; they are very tasty but don’t nearly provide enough food for

dinner, so we all go away a bit hungry. Hum offers to pay for Twisted's dinner, which I'm sure Twisted expects based on his expert Yogi-ing of Hum earlier in the afternoon. Twisted offers a rather bland "I appreciate it" in return. Later on, I clue in Hum that he had obviously fallen victim to Twisted's Yogi-ing scam, so Hum vows then and there that he will "never again" be taken in by any future Yogi-ing attempt (more on that later).

On our way back to the hostel we check out the parking lot at Dickey Gap/VA-16, which is the end point of our upcoming 3-day backpacking hike from Elk Garden to Dickey Gap. Twisted is very familiar with the

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area, having done the AT 5 times already, and guides us to the parking lot. He says that it's very safe to park there; Morning Star/Rick has told us the same thing earlier. My hesitation about parking there – especially for 2 nights -- is that the guidebook has warned about past vandalism at this particular parking lot. However, it looks OK to us, especially since we can park the car very near VA-16, so we decide it should be safe.

When we return to the hostel we join Morning Star/Rick, Twisted, Skid, and a few others in the picnic pavilion on top of the hill. It is a beautiful clear night and the stars and night sky are really gorgeous; it's really very dark in this area with minimal ambient light to hide the night sky. Hum and I go back and forth several more times on where to leave our cars. We finally decide to leave my car at Dickey Gap and drive Hum's car to Elk Garden. From here on to the end of our 2 ½ week hike, Hum's car will be our "supply wagon" containing all of our food and hiking stuff; my car will be parked in the remote areas.

We finalize our packs for the next morning and weigh them with Hum's scale, and both packs come in at about 35 pounds: heavy. We're in bed by 8:00 PM. All is quiet this night and the evening is much cooler tonight: sleeping is good.

VA-600-Elk Garden, VA to Wise Shelter, VA – 8/25/15

Start Time: 6:30 AM, VA-600-Elk Garden, VA

End Time: 2:00 PM, Wise Shelter, VA

Total Miles: 9.3 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1800'/1800'

Distances:

VA-600-Elk Garden, VA to Thomas Knob Shelter, VA = 4.2 miles.

Thomas Knob Shelter, VA to Wise Shelter, VA = 5.1 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 32,501

Calories: 855

Steps/minute: 93

MPH: 2.65 (1.60 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 5 hours, 47 minutes, 18 seconds

Miles: 15.39 miles (9.3 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM, pack up our stuff, and are off to first park my car at Dickey Gap and then drive to Elk Garden, where we arrive by 6:30 AM. It's a very cool morning, about 50 degrees, so we put on our fleeces for the first hour or so of hiking.

This is our first backpacking day with full packs on this hiking adventure so our packs – at least to me – feel much heavier than I remember from previous years. Right away my legs, back, and left ankle are hurting quite a bit, so I take some Advil and Ibuprofen, which help a lot to control the pain after the pills kick in. It is a beautiful clear day and the long distance views are outstanding. We reach the Mt. Rogers Summit Trail (3.8 miles) by 9:30 AM. It is a ½-mile blue-blazed trail to the 5729' summit of Mt. Rogers, the highest point in Virginia. Years earlier Lyn and I had hiked up this trail with Bill Roach, who was my former boss at Bell Labs and hosted us for many years for hiking vacations based out of his cabin in Boone, NC. I knew that this trail was not worth taking: there is zero view from the summit of Mt. Rogers.

We make our way up to Thomas Knob Shelter (4.2 miles, 1500'), where we arrive at 10:00 AM and meet the father and son duo, who have stayed at the shelter last night. This being our third meeting so far with these guys we decide that it's about time that we introduce ourselves. We have a nice chat with dad Benny and his son Jonathan. They are from Lakeland, Florida, and tell us they had a very tough, 12-mile hike yesterday from Lost Mountain Shelter, with an elevation gain of well over 3500'. They say that when they got to Elk Garden they had already climbed more than 2000' and were exhausted, but still had

another 4.2 miles and 1500' of climbing to go. This was truly depressing and apparently was especially hard for Benny.

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**Top Left: Elk Garden, AT Trailhead Across the Road
Top Right & Bottom Left: Beautiful Long Range Views of Grayson Highlands
Bottom Right: Thomas Knob Shelter, Bennie on Left, Jonathan on Right**

We learn that Jonathan just graduated from the University of Central Florida with a BS in Mechanical Engineering. He has already landed a job at a medical supply company, where he'll start when he returns from the hike. We also learn that Jonathan achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, which is a good entry into an extended discussion about scouting, since Hum is a long-time scoutmaster and is still deeply involved in scouting in his home town back in Maryland, and Benny is also active on the scouting board in his home town. They are by themselves in the shelter, which is probably fortunate since they have their stuff strewn all over the inside of the shelter and all over the ground outside the shelter.

We bid farewell to Benny and Jonathan and are on our way: "we'll see you later at Wise Shelter" we tell them; they will pass us there later on their way to Old Orchard Shelter, which is another 5 miles beyond Wise Shelter.

The trail has been very rocky so far today and gets far rockier as we move on. It's a tough hike over Wilburn Ridge, with big rocks to negotiate all the way, but the grand reward is that it's an absolutely beautiful, clear day with long distance views and a gorgeous rocky landscape to negotiate and admire: we are totally captivated by our surroundings. We cross over the summit of Pine Mountain, which is actually considered part of Mt. Rogers. At 5526' Pine Mountain is higher than Mt. Katahdin in Maine, the famed northern terminus of the AT.

It's such rough going on this rocky trail today, especially with a 35 pound backpack to boot, that Hum declares several times that this will be his "last backpacking section". He adds that he'll have to find another way to always slack pack (day hike) the rest of the AT. This is the end of backpacking for Hum, he asserts again and again. It sounds to me like he really means it, but the very next day Hum brags

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Spectacular Day & Gorgeous Long Range Views on Wilburn Ridge, Grayson Highlands

about taking 300 steps between breather rests and then a few days after that, as Hum is wont to do, all these statements are retracted, forgotten and Hum in effect declares himself once again to be Superman hiker, bounding over tall rocks and hiking the whole AT with ease, as if it's a walk in the park. Of course there is some exaggeration here about Hum's claim to being Superman – he didn't quite use that exact word in describing his hiking prowess. I like to kid Hum and he likes to kid me, and we are both very likely to do that, constantly. As brothers are wont to do, we enjoy it.

There are many day hikers coming up from the Massie Gap parking area and several of them are taking a break on top of a rocky outcrop we pass near Rhododendron Gap. Perhaps noting our geezerly ages and probably observing our struggle to carry our full backpacks, they kid us a little bit with "there's free cold beer being handed out just ahead".

A little further along we pass the "Fatman Squeeze", a narrow tunnel in the rocks that Ho & Hum both easily get through: fat men we are not! Actually Bill Roach, Lynsie, and I passed through the Fatman Squeeze on our hike many years ago. Both Lyn and I remember that squeeze quite well and Lyn also tells me that she recalls "hop skipping over the rocks" in this area, one of her favorite aspects of that particular hike with Bill from Massie Gap to Elk Garden.

At Massie Gap (7.1 miles from Elk Garden) we pass into Grayson Highlands State Park. There are a couple of herds of ponies roaming around Grayson Highlands and we do observe one lone pony, which seems to be shedding his coat, grazing along the side of the trail. He is undisturbed and takes no notice of my close approach to take his picture; he just keeps on eating his delicious morning repast, a grassy breakfast. There is another herd of ponies roaming in the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area, but unfortunately we don't get to see any of them, until dinnertime that is. Later on we see a sign telling about the ponies:

"WELCOME TO WILBURN RIDGE

The ponies you may see within Grayson Highlands State Park and the adjoining Mount Rogers National Recreational Area are managed by the Wilburn Ridge Pony Association.

Ponies assist in consuming negative vegetation such as briars, hawthorns, and cat green brier. Their grazing aids in maintaining open spaces and bald rock out cropping.

*For the safety of both you and the ponies please do not feed or harass them in any way. Do not walk or stand behind them. **They do kick and bite!***

Please feel free to observe and photograph them from a safe distance."

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We meet an older couple (although not as old as the geezer hikers) at Massie Gap and they immediately take a big interest in our hike and ask a long series of questions: where we're from, how far we're going, how much our packs weigh, how much of the AT we've done, etc. etc. He jokes with us a bit: "every year you'll find out once again why you live 1000 miles apart", and "I hope that you (Hum) can finish the AT in time" implying that there is only so much more time for Hum to finish the AT :-). It is a rare, very nice

encounter and conversation, that is, to find people who are actually more interested in the other people they're talking with rather than in talking only about themselves.



Left: Fatman Squeeze; Right: Lone Pony Feeding in Grayson Highlands

According to the AT Guidebook, it's only another 2.2 miles to Wise Shelter beyond Massie Gap but even though we keep up a good pace – probably between 1.5 and 2 miles per hour – it takes us about 2 more hours to reach Wise Shelter where we should have reached it in a little more than one hour, or so we think. (In retrospect, we do the 2.2 miles in about 1.5 hours, which is about right for our pace). In fact I think it's taking so long compared to our expectations that I say to Hum that the shelter should be renamed "the shelter you never get to". At this point Hum begins to think that I'm complaining a lot, "constantly complaining", he'll say later. Maybe he's right, maybe I am.

Since it seems to be taking so much longer than we expect to get to Wise Shelter, we decide, rather conclusively, that we must have somehow missed the sign and passed the shelter. This is further confirmed in our minds by the AT guidebook saying that the shelter is near a stream and we both recall that "way back there we crossed a stream and that must be where the shelter was". But that stream is way too far back now for us to consider backtracking. So we concoct a backup plan: we decide that we'll hike to the next water source, wherever it is, and plan to set up our tents and camp for the night.

Actually this kind of Ho & Hum "shelter location anxiety" has occurred a few times in the past, on previous hikes. Whenever our hiking time to the shelter far exceeds our estimate, we invariably conclude that we somehow missed the shelter and begin planning other options. Fortunately we have always found the "missing" shelter on every such occasion so no such backup plan has ever needed to be executed. And that indeed is the case again today. Soon after concocting our backup plan this time we run into two young day hikers who tell us they "just passed the shelter" and it is "close by". Thank God! we say!

We arrive at Wise Shelter at about 2:00 PM. It is mostly an ordinary shelter that sleeps eight, but this shelter has a couple of distinctions. One distinction is that Wise Shelter corresponds to the 500 mile mark for AT hikers who start their AT hike at Springer Mountain, GA, and we find many self-congratulatory notes in the shelter journal crowing about that milestone. A second distinction is that this shelter has two privies: one of the privies was constructed as an Eagle Scout Project in 2010, as noted by a plaque on the side of the privy.

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Benny and Jonathan arrive at Wise Shelter at about 3:00 PM, saying they left Thomas Knob Shelter at about 11:30 AM, which means that they hike a bit faster than we do. After locating the nearby water source and purifying some water, they leave for Old Orchard Shelter and say that they plan to resupply in Troutdale. We tell them about the Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel, about 3 miles from Dickey Gap, and the one store/restaurant in Troutdale, about 8 miles from Dickey Gap.

Hum and I talk about Twisted, who we expected to meet on the trail today but didn't. Twisted said he would continue his southbound AT thru-hike today from where he got off 2 days ago, at Fox Creek/VA-603, a little more than 7 miles north of Wise Shelter. However we don't meet Twisted and wonder why not: is this somehow another one of Twisted's fish stories?

During the afternoon I work on my journal and Hum takes a nap, as he always does after we reach the shelter to end our day's hike. It's truly amazing to me how fast Hum gets to sleep on his nap: it's always less than a minute and most times less than 30 seconds. I can always accurately tell when he's gone to sleep by the always reliable start of his snoring.

We have dinner at about 6:00 PM; I have my Mountain House Beef Stroganoff dinner, my very favorite: yum! We also have a very unusual dinner guest this evening. Our guest is one of the Grayson Highlands ponies; Mr. Pony first announces his intentions to join us for dinner with 3 very loud winnies from behind the shelter. After his announcements he then quickly trots around to the front of the shelter and right up to the picnic table, whereupon he puts his huge nose practically right into Hum's evening meal that he just prepared and is now ready to consume. Of course, this bold affront from our Mr. Pony friend is startling to both of us, and also extremely cute. I immediately react: I spring for my camera and desperately hope I can capture this remarkable moment on my camera. I realize it will be a classic, perhaps award-winning picture! But alas, it is not to be. I am not quick enough to get my camera ready before Hum is yelling "shoo!" "shoo!" "shoo!" and Mr. Pony immediately and politely obliges: he instantly backs off from his hope to share Hum's dinner and spends the next hour consuming the nearby grass around the picnic table. It is still a very cute and charming scene, and we are happy to share our campsite – but not our dinner – with Mr. Pony.



Mr. Pony Joins Us for Dinner at Wise Shelter, Grayson Highlands He Settles for Delicious Grass After He Tries to Eat Hum's Dinner at the Picnic Table

Later on I call Lyn and she has two sets of bad news to report. First, we received a bill for the taxes on our house in Vermont, which was sold back in June, and in talking to the tax collector in Clarendon, VT, Lyn is told that it is our job to forward the bill to the new owner and that we are responsible for any 282

penalties if the taxes are not paid! Unbelievable! I ask Lyn to forward the bill to the new owners and attach a note asking them to email us when the bill is paid.

Second, Lyn tells me that Eileen Parker, the chairperson of our HOA Architecture Review Committee (ARC), inspected our newly completed lanai expansion and claims that the white-framed screening that was installed is incorrect and that it should be bronze-framed screening. This is totally wrong; it is stated explicitly in the ARC approval and documented in the meeting minutes that the white-framed screening had been grandfathered and permitted. I ask Lyn to call our contractor Eric Phillips to let him know. Of course this news upsets me quite a bit. Lyn does call Eric, who confirms that the white framing was explicitly approved. Eric is not at all upset and thinks it's a non issue, which Lyn tells me when I call her back. I ask her to call Eileen Parker and give her this information. (In my conversation with Lyn the following day she says that she called Eileen Parker back and that Parker deeply apologized for her error. Actually during the regular ARC meeting the following day Parker had been corrected by the other ARC members who all knew that the documented agreement was for white-framed screening. Eileen Parker told Lyn she was extremely embarrassed by her big mistake.)

We're in the sack by 7:45 PM, at about dusk. We have the shelter to ourselves and hope against hope that no other hikers will arrive, especially after we are asleep. This is a constant worry since we have experienced such late-night intrusions and often hear others complain of such intrusions. Fortunately no one else arrives. It's a very cold night – probably in the 40's -- and I wear my knit hat and fleece. Actually I always wear my knit hat to guard against the possibility – as has happened to me in the past -- of a mouse running across my head during the night. Hum is snoring extra loud and often tonight, so sleep is difficult. In the middle of the night we both hear 3 very loud, very high-pitched screams reverberated through the forest. In the morning we decide it must be coyotes but it really didn't sound like the coyote howl to me.

Wise Shelter, VA to Hurricane Mountain Shelter, VA – 8/26/15

Start Time: 6:30 AM, Wise Shelter, VA
End Time: 3:15 PM, Hurricane Mountain Shelter, VA
Total Miles: 10.9 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1200'/900'

Distances:

Wise Shelter, VA to Old Orchard Shelter, VA = 5.9 miles.
Old Orchard Shelter, VA to VA-603-Fox Creek, VA = 1.7 miles.
VA-603-Fox Creek, VA to Hurricane Mountain Shelter, VA = 3.3 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 43,367
Calories: 1191
Steps/minute: 112
MPH: 3.19 (1.69 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 6 hours, 25 minutes, 43 seconds
Miles: 20.53 miles (10.9 actual miles)

We're up at 6:00 AM, pack up our gear, and are off by 6:30 AM; we use our head lamps for about 15 minutes or so since it's still pretty dark. It's a very clear day again and the long range views again are outstanding.

We reach "The Scales" a little after 8:30 AM. This is an interesting place where years ago cattle were weighed and sold. Lyn and I had been to The Scales back in the 1990's on one of hikes with Bill Roach. There are three explanatory signs describing the area:

LANDSCAPE HISTORY

The first pioneers to this area found much of the land thick with virgin forests except the "bald" areas on top of Whitetop and Elk Garden. It was not long before the commercial value of the timber was recognized and logging operations began. With all the open areas available after the logging, farmers soon moved in. Since the high country 283 offered difficult access and very short growing seasons, the lands were used for grazing livestock. To keep the fields from growing up, the farmers used fire to maintain the land for grazing. Today, the Forest Service uses fire and grazing to preserve the pastoral high country.

WELCOME TO "THE SCALES"

Farmers grazing cattle in these mountains used this area as a place to gather, weigh and sell their cattle. Because the cattle weighed less after walking down the mountain, farmers quickly learned that their animals brought the best price with their "high country" weight. Over time, this high country exchange became known as "The Scales".

HIGH COUNTRY PONIES

In the late 1960's, the Forest Service began buying land for the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area. Land managers found that, left unattended, the open high country soon re-seeded and began to fill with trees and shrubs. Ponies were introduced to graze the high country and keep the land open for both scenic and recreational uses. These ponies are hardy enough to survive the harsh winter and provide visitors with enjoyment. Each year the ponies are rounded up, checked to ensure good health, and some ponies are sold to manage the herd size.



Beautiful Morning Hike to “The Scales” (Right), Grayson Highlands

Shortly after exiting “The Scales” we meet two southbound hikers, a woman and a man, who are doing a “flip flop hike” out of Marion, VA. A flip flop hike is done in two parts. In this case these two hikers first completed the northbound hike from Marion, VA to Mt. Katahdin, ME and are now doing the southbound hike from Marion, VA to Springer Mt., GA. One advantage of a flip flop hike is that it is easier to avoid any winter weather conditions, which is not always the case on a strictly northbound or southbound thru hike. Flip flop hikes are most often centered at Harpers Ferry, MD, because this is the halfway point of the AT. Our lady hiker has a British accent and says that she doesn’t like the term “flip flop” to describe her hike because it sounds “derogatory”. I conclude that, not surprisingly for a Brit, she sounds rather snooty. We later find their trail names in the Old Orchard Shelter journal: “Green Fire” and “Top Fuel”, the latter moniker probably belonging to the gentleman hiker.

We ask if they have met Twisted along the way since we didn’t see him yesterday as we had expected. They say they hadn’t although she says she knows another hiker named “Twisted” from Wisconsin.

A little while later we meet an Aussie couple, “Smiles” and “Ghost Chili”, who are doing the southern half of their flip flop hike centered out of Harpers Ferry, MD. They describe the water source at Hurricane Shelter; it’s a stream across the AT a little ways beyond the shelter.

We stop at Old Orchard Shelter at about 11:00 AM for a water break and snack and to check out the journal, where we find entries from Green Fire & Top Fuel and also from Smiles & Ghost Chili.

A little before noon we finally meet Twisted about ½ mile south of Fox Creek/VA-603, where he has just gotten back on his southbound AT thru-hike. He says he was sick yesterday with a fever and stomach cramps – he speculates from unfiltered water he drank a day or two ago – so he just hung around the

284 Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel all day; that solves the mystery as to why we didn’t see him yesterday. He is carrying a huge pack, which he says weighs 70 pounds and somehow it looks like it might weigh that much: maybe his fish stories aren’t so fishy after all. He plans to take the Pine Mountain Trail, which he has never taken and which bypasses more than 5 miles of the AT. His goal is to get to Lost Mountain Shelter tonight, a hike of some 24 miles (later we find out he only got as far as Thomas Knob Shelter, a hike that is probably less than 8 miles considering the Pine Mountain short cut). He also plans to stop in Damascus to have a doctor look after his knee, which is giving him trouble.

At around noon Hum completes 1000 miles of the AT, according to his calculations, at Fox Creek/VA-603 so there we take some victory pictures to mark Hum’s big accomplishment.



Triumphant Hum Completes His First 1000 Miles of the AT at Fox Creek, VA

Just across the road we meet “Bourbon” and “Youngster” (my name for him). Youngster does look very young: he’s 29 and is insulted when Hum guesses that he’s in his 30’s. Youngster is carrying practically no pack at all: he has no tent, no sleeping bag, no extra clothing: almost nothing and says he doesn’t even know how much his pack weighs. What an idiot! He says he nearly froze and shivered all last night in the cold: this dumb-dumb risks hypothermia and death. Bourbon says he’s trying to catch Twisted, whom he has hiked with a lot, and also asks if we met Smiles and Ghost Chili, with whom he also hiked. We give him an update on these folks.

I try to read the topological map a little too closely to try and gauge our progress in climbing Iron Mountain. My attempt to find two little dips in the terrain shown on the topo map fails to match up with the actual terrain, thankfully, because, to my surprise and delight, we reach the summit when I think we still have another 400’ to climb. Instead, we have only another ½ hour hike left going down the mountain to the shelter rather than more climbing. That’s very unusual and a big relief: the usual surprise is that there is more climbing to do when you think the climbing is done (e.g., reaching a nearly infinite number of “false summits”). The 2 ½ mile, 1000’ climb up Iron Mountain is indeed a struggle, but we finally get to the summit at about 2:00 PM, where we stop for lunch.

I’m struggling a bit with my pack today. I keep tightening the waist belt in an attempt to take some weight and stress off my shoulders because the shoulder straps keep digging in and hurting. My hat strap also breaks along the way; I later fix it with a safety pin supplied by Hum.

We reach Hurricane Mountain Shelter at about 2:30 PM and meet Benny and Jonathan just south of the shelter at the water source, a stream that crosses the AT. Benny says that he’s not feeling well and that he probably overdid it the first couple of days out. He guesses that his “electrolytes are out of balance” and they’re heading to Marion, VA to get rested and will also stay at Partnership Shelter.

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It’s really cold again this evening; I quickly put on my wool cap and 3 layers: my hiking shirt, fleece, and waterproof rain jacket. We make a nice warm fire this evening; there is abundant, dry firewood around the shelter and Hum has brought a fire starter. It burns so well in fact that we have to put the fire out by the time we go to bed.



Hurricane Mountain Shelter; Hum Tends a Very Successful Fire Tonight

Hum leaves a short note in the shelter journal:

"8/26/15 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (ages 73 and 75) on our 7th section hike (starting in 2009). Finished the Smokies last year and plan Damascus to Pearisburg this year. Hum passed 1000 miles on the AT at Fox Creek."

No one else comes to the shelter tonight; it's a very cold night and cozy sleeping in my sleeping bag with 3 layers on.

Hurricane Mountain Shelter, VA to Dickey Gap/VA-16-Troutdale, VA – 8/27/15

Start Time: 6:30 AM, Wise Shelter, VA

End Time: 3:15 PM, Hurricane Mountain Shelter, VA

Total Miles: 5.2 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 700'/1800'

Distances:

Hurricane Mountain Shelter, VA to Dickey Gap/VA16-Troutdale, VA = 5.2 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 25,716

Calories: 676

Steps/minute: 109

MPH: 3.10 (1.32 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 3 hours, 55 minutes, 31 seconds

Miles: 12.17 miles (5.2 actual miles)

We're up at 6:00 AM and on the trail by 6:45 AM. On this section I begin to notice that the topological map in the AT Guidebook can be way off. Toward the end of our hike there is a 400' climb that is completely missing from the topo map in the guidebook. It does show, however, on Hum's "AWOL" topo map that he carries, so I am forewarned about the 400' up. (Note, "AWOL" is the trail name of the author of a very popular Appalachian Trail guide). We pass a nice waterfall shortly before reaching the parking lot at Dickey Gap at 9:45 AM. All is OK with my car, so no worries about parking here after all.

We return to Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel and put our sleeping bags down to claim the second, larger room and then head out to Elk Garden to retrieve Hum's car and then to ascend the Whitetop Mountain

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road we mistakenly turned on 3 days ago. Since we have a lot of extra time today, we've planned to drive to the summit of Whitetop Mountain to take in the view. Today is a clear day and we completely missed the view on our previous visit 3 days ago when the mountain was totally socked in with fog.

The Whitetop Mountain summit road is quite good most of the way up, there are a few ruts and tall rocks but it is better than most dirt roads we've been on. When we pass the intersection with the AT we find Twisted taking a rest there and talking on his cell phone with his mother (he says). We chat a bit and find out that he stayed at Thomas Knob Shelter last night. He says he found an "expensive" jacket at Old Orchard Shelter, which he believes belongs to Benny and Jonathan (actually it doesn't, as we find out

later from Benny and Jonathan). I have read in the AT Guidebook about a convenience store, which I mistakenly think is on the Whitetop Mountain road, so I ask Twisted about that. He doesn't know about any convenience store but he does point up the mountain road and tells us the Virginia Creeper Whitetop Station Trailhead is up the mountain road a little further. Obviously he is guessing because when we drive all the way to the summit, where many radio towers and antennas are located, we find no Whitetop Station Trailhead. We tell him that on the way back down the mountain. Later on I do an on-line search and find that the station is located a little south of US-58 on VA-726.



Left: Waterfall Near Dickey Gap, VA; Right: View from Summit of Whitetop Mountain

After picking up Hum's car at Elk Garden we return to the Troutdale Baptist Church Hostel, settle into our rooms, and then head north on VA-16 to Marion, VA. We're hoping to find a McD's in Marion in order to savor delicious Big Macs for lunch, but, finding no McD's, we settle for a Hardees burger, which is OK but no Big Mac for sure.

We discuss our plan going forward. Some of the backpacking plans made earlier seem too ambitious and we agree that we need to map out a simpler plan. E.g., one of the days ("Day 11") on the currently planned 4-day backpack has 14.4 miles of backpacking with 3500' of elevation gain. Reacting to that particular plan my daughter Katy wrote in an email "I want to hear about day 11. Looks like a haul!" Hum got a big charge out of Katy's comment.

I harken back to an earlier plan we had discussed over email that had more day hiking and less backpacking, but I didn't bring a copy of that plan. I check my smart-phone but those earlier emails seem to be missing for some reason. Hum checks his phone and gets one version of the earlier plan, which I copy down while we have lunch at Hardees. Through the rest of the day I keep working on a revised itinerary; it's pretty complicated and it will remain a work in progress to the end of our hike another 12 days from now. This is not unusual; we have made revisions to our planned hike every year we've hiked together.

I call Lysie from Marion but she must be out shopping or something; I leave her a voice mail update on our hike today.

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On the way back to Troutdale we check out a couple of restaurants we passed on our way to Marion, hoping to find something suitable for dinner. We'd rather not do the BBQ sandwiches again at the little restaurant/store in Troutdale. We check out a food mart next to the Exxon station in Sugar Grove, VA, and find that it has burgers, fries, and pizza, all at reasonable prices. This looks good for dinner so we'll be back.

We stop at the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area Visitor Center and check out the visitor center and the Partnership Shelter, which is just across the parking lot. It is a huge, two story shelter that sleeps 16, has a shower with cold water only (brrrr!) and a sink.

During the afternoon I continue working on revising our itinerary and we chat with Skid and Morning Star as they begin another bike ride. We go back for pizza at the Exxon station – half sausage and half pepperoni, with no extra charge for toppings – and bring it back to the hostel. It's really delicious pizza and I manage to save one slice for lunch the next day.

I continue working on the itinerary until about 9:00 PM whereupon I finally find a good plan for the remainder of our hike, which, in particular, avoids the notoriously difficult "Day 11" plan.

I use a fan to create some white noise in the night. I'm quite restless but finally get to sleep only to have a hiker come into the adjoining room at about 10:45 PM, make lots of noise, and wake me up.

Partnership Shelter, VA to Dickey Gap/VA-16-Troutdale, VA – 8/28/15

Start Time: 6:30 AM, Partnership Shelter, VA

End Time: 2:30 PM, Dickey Gap/VA-16-Troutdale, VA

Total Miles: 14.7 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 3700'/3900'

Distances:

Partnership Shelter, VA to Trimpi Shelter, VA = 10.6 miles

Trimpi Shelter side trail = 0.2 miles

Trimpi Shelter, VA to VA16/Dickey Gap-Troutdale, VA = 3.9 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 54,946

Calories: 1445

Steps/minute: 125

MPH: 3.56 (2.01 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 7 hours, 17 minutes, 22 seconds

Miles: 26.03 miles (14.7 actual miles)

We're up at 5:15 AM, pack up, and drive to the parking area on VA-16 next to the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area visitor center and the Partnership Shelter; we arrive there at 6:15 AM.

We make an initial search by the shelter for the AT south trailhead, but somehow fail to find it. We go back to the visitor center and find a lady there cleaning the visitor center; we ask her for directions to the AT south. She doesn't know where it is but directs us to a map on the bulletin board, which is of no help. Hum and I split up and thoroughly search the area again for the trailhead, and Hum finally locates it just beyond the shelter: very logical place for the trailhead. Every once in a while we miss some obvious things!

We're on the trail by 6:30 AM and use our headlamps for about 15-20 minutes, until it's light enough to see the trail without them. Today will be our longest hike, almost 15 miles with a tremendous amount of "up": 3700'. I lead most of the day since Hum is falling back into his somewhat slower pace, which I dub the "Humberto Shuffle". He says that his right ankle is hurting; he blames it on "not enough cushion" in his hiking boots.

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We make excellent time all morning averaging about 2 mph; it's mostly down to the Holston River and then a huge 2000' climb. On the way we cross a large cow pasture, which is plowed down to the dirt, but see no cows. Twisted has warned us about this particular place where we find no blazes marking the trail; maybe the stakes with white blazes have been plowed over. Anyway Twisted's advice is to "keep on going straight" and we do and we get back on the blazed trail after not too long.



Left: Holsten River Bridge; Right: Finding the Blazes Again in the Plowed Over Cow Pasture (Twisted Has Warned Us to “Stay Straight” in the Plowed Over Field)

I fall once and scrape my right arm and draw a little blood. Hum kindly provides me a wipe to soak up the blood and my wound soon stops bleeding. I catch my right foot repeatedly and nearly fall again; unfortunately my right hiking boot is starting to come apart at the toe and that is probably what is causing the tripping problem.

We stop at Trimpi Shelter for lunch, opting to take the 0.1 mile side trail to the shelter and at least an additional 200'-300' of climbing: it's not really worth all that extra hiking to get off the trail merely to be able to sit down at a shelter. In retrospect we decide that we'll skip any such side trails in the future. I'm already getting tired of my summer sausage sandwiches and can only choke down half a sandwich.

I leave a short note in the shelter journal:

“Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (brothers 73/75) in for lunch. Our 7th year backpacking together; this time Damascus → Pearisburg. A big day today for geezers, 14+ miles. Enjoy.”

Along the way we encounter a very tame deer that stops on the AT right in front of us and stares at us for quite some time. It's got a very sweet face and a look of curiosity. I take a few pictures before it wanders off and is on its way to wherever it's going today.

We reach Dickey Gap by 2:30 PM after making great time with a 2 mph average all day. We drive to the Relax Inn Motel on the Lee Hwy (US-11) in Rural Retreat, VA where the AT Guidebook says we can park our car (for a fee). My GPS takes us the wrong way on US-11 whereupon I park to check the map. Then a man, seeing us parked on the side of the road, kindly comes out of his house to give us directions and we soon find the Relax Inn. An Indian family runs the motel and the young son collects our \$3 parking fee and gives us directions back to Partnership Shelter, advising us to take the shortcut on VA-615 over the mountain back to VA-16.

There is cell service at the motel so I take the opportunity to call Lyn. By this time I've heard about Hurricane Elsie, which is threatening Florida and I'm hugely concerned. For some reason Lyn is not the least bit concerned and has not paid much attention to the weather news. This kind of ruffles my feathers a bit with worry and I tell her I'll call tomorrow at the same time to get some status. Hopefully there won't be an order to evacuate; for that I'd have to return to Florida immediately.



Left: Trimpi Shelter, Lunchtime Stop; Right: Very Tame Deer Looks Us Over & Moves On

We get back to Partnership Shelter but not until after a brief slowdown on US-11 to drive through a school zone. Hum and I had an earlier discussion on the evils, in Hum's opinion, of using local roads, because he had a recent major slowdown in North Carolina when using local roads. This school zone slowdown issue rattles Hum briefly and he expresses strong dismay: this is highly uncharacteristic of Hum who is usually very patient in almost any situation. After getting by the evil school zone, in the end the VA-615 short cut saves a lot of time: whew, close call!



**Partnership Shelter, Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area, Atkins, VA
Bottom Right: Very Popular Fishing Pond Just Down the Hill from Partnership Shelter**

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We opt for the Exxon Station dinner fare once again, this time for hamburgers and fries and sodas. Hum makes the food run while I guard our stuff in the shelter. This meal is again very satisfying to us: much preferred to our regular Mountain House freeze dried dinners.

No one comes to the shelter, although we do see some folks wander by on their way to a nearby, popular fishing pond. We're in the sack by dusk, a little after 8:00 PM. At about 1:00 AM 3 boys come by the shelter carrying a lantern; Hum wakes up but I sleep through it. We won't solve the mystery of who these boys are until tomorrow.

Snoring is very bad tonight so the sleep is not very sound, at least for me.

Partnership Shelter, VA to US11-Rural Retreat, VA – 8/29/15

Start Time: 6:45 AM, Partnership Shelter, VA

End Time: 3:00 PM, US11-Rural Retreat, VA

Total Miles: 11.6 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 3000'/3800'

Distances:

Partnership Shelter, VA to VA16-Sugar Grove, VA = 0.1 miles.

VA16-Sugar Grove, VA to Chatfield Shelter, VA = 7.0 miles.

Chatfield Shelter, VA to VA 615/Settlers Museum of Southwest VA = 1.8 miles.

VA 615/Settlers Museum of Southwest VA to US11-Atkins, VA = 2.7 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 48,759

Calories: 1283

Steps/minute: 117

MPH: 3.32 (1.67 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 6 hours, 56 minutes, 57 seconds

Miles: 23.09 miles (11.6 actual miles)

We're up at 6:00 AM and on the trail by 6:45. There's no driving this morning, we just walk across VA16 to the AT trailhead. There is lots of up all morning, about 2000' of it until we reach the summit of Glade Mountain. I'm not feeling so energetic today. We meet two guys, soon after we start, who are resting on the up slope of Brushy Mountain. They didn't say where they started but it couldn't have been on VA16 because there were no other cars parked there this morning. One of them is considerably overweight, which accounts for their early rest. I assign them trail names "Fat plus One".

After we summit Glade Mountain we have some extended discussion on a wide range of topics. Of course we are always talking as we hike but today is a bit different with really good discussion on many, many topics. Among a lot of other things, Hum says he would like to find a female travel companion who also likes hiking, but with no romance involved and where she pays her own way. (Hum later says he was kidding about that discussion.) We talk about his trip to Iceland in July 2016 with Tauck Tours. Hum wants to do more world travel and travel the US, especially out west; he even considered Antarctica for his trip next year. We talk about our youth and our Dad and how Dad always called Hum out for just sitting on the living room chair and doing nothing for an extended period of time. Hum says he still likes to just sit and do nothing for 2 hours or more, merely submerged in the depths of his own thoughts. We have an extended discussion about living wills and about making quick decisions during a medical emergency. This brings up Pat's accident last February and Hum tells me about how honest the hospital was about Pat's condition after her accident and how he had to make instantaneous, critical decisions. But there our discussion stops: Hum says he doesn't want to talk anymore because it is "too painful". Then there is silence for a long while.

We stop for a morning break at Chatfield Shelter and I leave a note in the shelter journal:

"8/29/15 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum stopped by for a break. What a beautiful day today, we love it. Enjoy."

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We pass under some ultra high tension electrical wires at around noon. These wires are buzzing so very loudly that I think of how stressful it would be to live within earshot of these wires. Five minutes later we reach the [Settlers Museum of Southwest Virginia](#) in Atkins, VA, a very interesting place indeed. Our AT Guidebook and the museum's web-site describe the museum as follows:

"Located in buildings that were preserved when the Forest Service acquired the land for the AT corridor as part of the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area. This museum, founded in 1987, includes a visitor center, a functioning 1890-era farm, an 1894 school, and genealogical resources. The visitor center features an exhibition, "The Migration Story". ...Hikers are welcome at no cost.

The Migration Story of the people who came to these mountains in the mid-1700s is told through a series of displays in the Visitor's Center. This is the tale of two groups, the Scotch-Irish and the Germans, who carved their farms from the wilderness and formed the mountain culture. Beginning as early as 1710, immigrants from Europe began starting new lives in America. Because Philadelphia was one of the largest ports in English holdings, many early immigrants initially settled in Pennsylvania. As their numbers increased, land in the valleys of Virginia became attractive, and beginning in the 1730's many moved into the region. Both the German and Scotch-Irish people left behind a combined legacy of culture and heritage that is unique to the Appalachian Mountains.

The restored 1894 Lindamood School is a prime example of this self-sufficient culture that created its own schools generations before the state claimed responsibility. Known by a variety of names such as field schools, subscription schools, and blab schools, the one room school house also served as both a place of learning and a community center. Often, town meetings, church services, dances and picnics were held there.

The farmhouse and nine outbuildings have the look and feel of an average farm in this area 100 years ago. Restored and furnished in the 1890s time frame, visitors to the farmhouse will better understand how the people of the area lived, worked and played. Visitors can see the many different household items and furnishings as well as a variety of farm tools common to the era."

Just as we reach the museum we witness a huge number of horseback riders – probably 50 to 100 riders – cross the dirt road in front of the Lindamood School. We surmise that this is a local riding club that we just happened to cross paths with today.

We take our seats at the traditional wooden desks of the 1894 Lindamood schoolhouse and have our lunch. There is a large "Hikers Welcome" sign on the door to the school and it is a charming place to enjoy our lunch. I leave a note in the hiker journal inside the school:

"8/29/15 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (brothers 73/75) stopped by. What a wonderful place to have our lunch. Reminds us of our school long ago :-). Thank you!"

Of course I plan to visit the Settlers Museum and hope that Hum will join me. However I know from long experience that Hum despises museums for being far too boring to suit his interests. I first observed this in 1958 on our Ash family western trip when we 4 kids were growing up: we were in Cody, WY and we all wanted to visit the Wild Big Cody Museum, that is, all except for Hum. He opted to sit in the car, alone, for about 2 hours or more while the rest of us enjoyed the museum. So as expected, Hum opts not to even walk to the Settlers Museum visitor center with me and says he'll wait in the old schoolhouse while I explore the museum.

I wander on down to the visitor center and meet George Hendricks on the porch. George is the museum director and a very friendly guy, although he tries to charge me \$5 admission before I tell him that I read that hikers are admitted free into the museum. He gives me a brief overview of the museum and the various outbuildings and offers an audio tour but realizes that all the headsets are already in use. He then provides a brief but very good rundown on the displays inside the visitor center, which tell the "Migration Story" of Scotch-Irish and German settlers making their way from Europe to Pennsylvania and then to these Virginia settlements over the Appalachian Mountains. Many of settlers were Pennsylvania Dutch from the Lancaster, PA area, who traveled down the Great Valley Trail to Southwest Virginia and to points further west.

When George and I come back outside onto the porch I'm surprised to find Benny sitting on the swing. Benny tells me that he's feeling better but that he is quitting the trail: it's been a bit too ambitious and he and Jonathan will be getting a ride back to Roanoke this afternoon. He says that he and Jonathan

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reached Dickey Gap from Hurricane Mountain Shelter, where we last saw them, and from there they tried to hitchhike to Partnership Shelter in Sugar Grove, VA. However no one picked them up and they wound up doing a 6 mile road walk to Sugar Grove. From there they caught a USFS shuttle to Marion, VA.

I go get Hum from the schoolhouse and he and Benny visit while I tour the farm ¼ mile away. The 100 year old farmhouse and many outbuildings are quite interesting, but this is no longer a "working farm" as described in the AT guidebook.



Top: Lunch Stop at 1894 Lindamood School, Settlers Museum, Atkins, VA
Bottom Left: Large Riding Group Pass Near Lindamood School
Bottom Right: Farmhouse, Settlers Museum, Atkins, VA

When I get back to the visitor center Benny and Jonathan have left and Hum says that "Fat plus One", who we met on the trail this morning, passed by (we don't see them again). We say goodbye to George Hendricks and set out on the remaining 2.7 miles and 600 feet of elevation gain to US11. We find the 600' climb, which is in 3 stages across seemingly endless open pastureland, to be tough going: walking through extra tall grass requires extra energy. On the positive side the wildflowers are really beautiful in the pasture.



Beautiful Wildflowers in the Pasture, Atkins, VA

By and by we cross some railroad tracks and there we meet Benny and Jonathan for the final time. I remember to ask Benny about the “expensive” lost jacket found by Twisted at Old Orchard Shelter, but Benny says that’s not his jacket. In fact, Benny says he left a jacket on the side of the trail a short way



We Meet Jonathan (Left) & Benny (Right) on the Railroad Tracks & Bid Them Farewell

back, which we had passed and I briefly considered picking it up but thankfully rejected the idea. We snap several pictures of each other on the tracks and bid them a fond farewell, saying how much we’ve enjoyed their company along the way.

On our return to US 11 we decide to check with the Sunoco Station person to see if it is OK to park in their very large parking lot (actually a truck stop) while we hike the next day. This parking lot is right next to the Relax Inn parking lot where we parked last night. After a long wait at the Sunoco Station desk, where no one appears, I go search out somebody and find a lady working in the large icebox in the back. After I manage to scare this lady half to death, I profusely apologize many times for startling her and ask for permission to park in their lot the next day. She immediately says that’s fine.

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Somehow I hadn’t noticed that Hum didn’t follow me into the Sunoco Station, so I spend a lot of time looking for him all over the place but to no avail. Finally I decide that he has left and find him outside on the other side of the large parking lot where he has waited all along. After retrieving my car from the Relax Inn I call Lysie and find out that she is paying no attention to the status of Hurricane Elsie, which

is threatening Florida and perhaps our home in Palm Coast. Of course I'm hugely concerned and strongly emphasize the need to check the weather forecast and let me know, which she agrees to do.

We stop by the Exxon Station Café on our return trip to the Partnership Shelter and decide that the cheeseburgers look like a good choice for tonight. Back at the shelter we plan our logistics for the next few days and decide to camp out at the Partnership Shelter until we reach I-77, still 3 days hiking away, and then use the Holy Family Hostel in Pearisburg, VA or maybe stay at a motel in Bland, VA.

We enjoy good burgers and fries from the Exxon Station Café, and agree that these make a tasty and rather filling meal; we'll plan to do this again. After dinner we hear a lot of noise near the shelter, which sounds like there are people drinking and having a party nearby. Later on 3 teens walk by carrying fishing poles, two lanterns, and a cooler (which previously held the beers perhaps?). This solves the mystery from the previous night where, at about 1:00 AM, 3 boys come by the shelter carrying a lantern waking up Hum. I say hello to the boys and ask them how's the fishing?: they report no catch in the nearby pond down the hill by the shelter.

We're in bed by 8:00 PM. It's really bad snoring tonight and I get little sleep.

VA42-Ceres, VA to US11-Rural Retreat, VA – 8/30/15

Start Time: 7:45 AM, VA42-Ceres, VA (O'Lystery Picnic Area)

End Time: 2:15 PM, US11-Rural Retreat, VA

Total Miles: 12.3 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 3000'/3000'

Distances:

VA42-Ceres, VA to Reed Creek, VA = 5.9 miles.

Reed Creek, VA to Davis Path Campsite, VA = 3.6 miles.

Davis Path Campsite, VA to VA617 = 1.8 miles.

VA617 to US11-Atkins, VA = 1.0 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 42,224

Calories: 1111

Steps/minute: 109

MPH: 3.72 (2.29 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 6 hours, 24 minutes, 22 seconds

Miles: 19.99 miles (12.3 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and off by 5:45 AM in both cars. We drop off Hum's car at the Sunoco Station Truck Stop in Rural Retreat and proceed to head back to Marion to pick up Route 16 to Ceres, VA. I set my GPS for Ceres, VA and it keeps telling me to "turn around". Clearly it wants to route me in a different direction and I later learn that back roads connecting to VA610 are the more direct route to Ceres. I miss Route 16 the first time and have to back track. Route 16 going north from Marion, VA is extremely curvy, mountainous, and slow. It passes by Hungry Mother State Park where our nephew Drew was married many years ago. At one point it crosses the summit of a steep mountain with beautiful long range views into the valley and beyond that there are several extreme hairpin turns around cliff ledges.

We finally reach the turnoff to VA42 at about 6:30 PM and proceed to try to locate the AT crossing. We know that it crosses about 4 miles before reaching Ceres but we find no signs indicating a trail crossing. We do pass a picnic area on the left, which Hum guesses might be the right place (it is) but unfortunately we don't check it out. We almost reach Ceres before we decide to turn around and check the AT map. At that point I notice that the map indicates the crossing is at the O'Lystery Picnic Area: voila, Hum was right! We head back certain that we will easily find the picnic area, now on the right, but what do you

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know we miss it again by several miles! We reverse course yet again and finally reach the picnic area and AT parking lot on the third try, by 7:45 AM, one hour late!

The trail is extremely arduous and uninteresting, with no views or items of note, although we did miss viewing Tilson's Mill near the beginning of the section and could not reach the Davis family cemetery near the end of the section because the path to the cemetery was too overgrown. We find Trail Magic, soda and cookies, near the start of the section: we both stock up on cookies but don't partake of the soda.

On this day Hum forgot his food – left in his car -- so I share some Trail Magic cookies, brownies, chips,

and sugar cookies with him. A couple of days later Hum surprises me by commenting to some hikers we were chatting with that I was a bit too slow in offering to share my food. Hey!

I fall very hard near the beginning of the hike hurting my hand and leg but draw no blood. My stomach has been hurting for the past several days; I suspect that I might be drawing the hip strap on my pack too tight. I have no appetite today and skip my summer sausage sandwich for lunch: I've quickly tired of eating those sandwiches, which in the beginning of our hike tasted delicious to me.

My batteries all went dead near the beginning of today's hike, so I get no pictures beyond the cow pasture we pass early in the morning on the hike. At about the midpoint of this section we pass the remains of Davis Path Shelter: it has burned to the ground. An earlier plan – the one that daughter Katy called a “haul”, the notorious “Day 11” hike – had us staying at Davis Path Shelter. Good thing we changed plans!



Crossing a Cow Pasture in the Early Morning Near Ceres, VA

We arrive back at the Sunoco station truck stop at 2:15 PM. We discuss going to McD's in Marion for some lunch, but opt to return to the Partnership Shelter, where Hum finally can finally partake of his lunch retrieved from his car.

Again there is no one else at the shelter; in fact no one has joined us in any of the shelters so far. We decide to have pizza once again from the Exxon Station Café; we split a large pizza half sausage, half pepperoni. Again it is very delicious and extremely reasonable; I save one piece for lunch the next day.

Around dinnertime a family with a cute little girl, 3-4 years old, and cute little boy, 2-3 years old, pass the shelter with fishing gear on their way to the pond down the hill. The little girl is very exciting about the fishing and we can hear her joyful excitement until 8:00 PM, when it starts to get dark and we go to bed. I comment that they are keeping their little ones up quite late but Hum disagrees that they “must conform to Jerry rules”.

Hum leaves a note in the Partnership Shelter journal:

“8/30/16 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (brothers 73 & 75) on our annual hiking trip. Have completed 100 miles so far and plan to end our hike in Pearisburg (160+ miles). Great shelter and good food at the Exxon station 3 miles south.”

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Walker Gap/Burke's Garden, VA to VA42-Ceres, VA (O'Lystery Picnic Area) – 8/31/15

Start Time: 7:45 AM, Walker Gap/Burke's Garden, VA
End Time: 3:45 PM, VA42-Ceres, VA (O'Lystery Picnic Area)
Total Miles: 12.8 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 3200'/3700'

Distances:

Walker Gap, VA to Chestnut Knob Shelter, VA = 1.3 miles.
Chestnut Knob Shelter, VA to Knot Maul Branch Shelter, VA = 9.4 miles.
Knot Maul Branch Shelter, VA to VA42-Ceres, VA = 2.1 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 50,873
Calories: 1337
Steps/minute: 120
MPH: 3.41 (1.81 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 7 hours, 02 minutes, 43 seconds
Miles: 24.06 miles (12.8 actual miles)

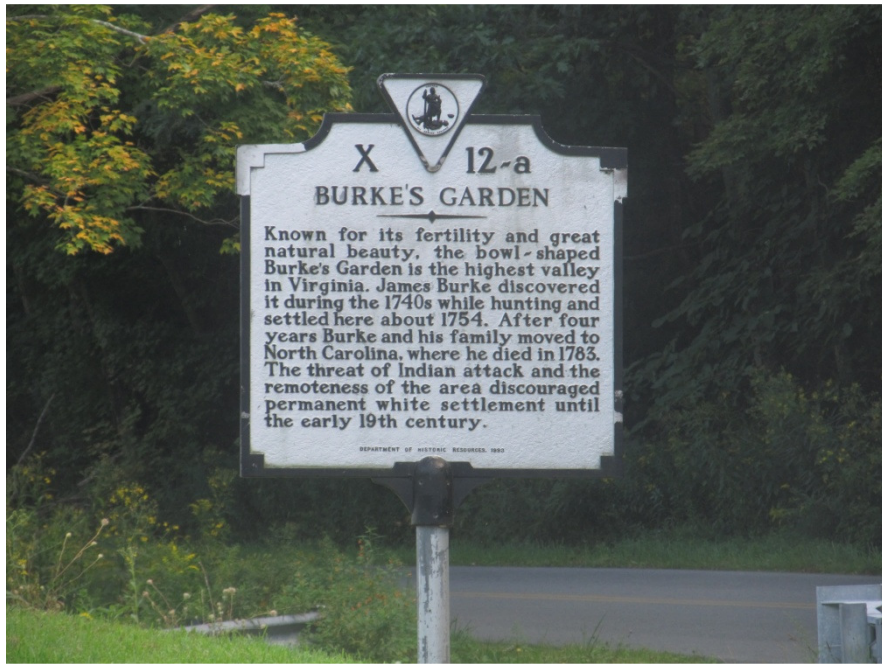
We're up at 5:00 AM and off by 5:45 AM in Hum's car. I discover that I can program Latitude and Longitude into my GPS and Hum's AWOL AT Guide gives the Latitude/Longitude for most parking areas. So we program the GPS to take us to the coordinates for the Walker Gap parking area. This is a very helpful feature that avoids problems like we had yesterday where we passed the AT parking area by the O'Lystery Picnic Area twice before finally finding it on the third try.

My GPS says that it's 50+ miles to Walker Gap on extremely slow, curvy roads all the way. It takes us two hours to reach the gap, where the last 0.3 miles is on an extremely rough road with huge ruts. Walker Gap is located in Burke's Garden, a very picturesque, historic area inhabited by some Amish farmers. Before we reach the gap we pass people in traditional Amish dress driving a horse and buggy. Here is how the AT Guidebook describes Burke's Garden:

"Over the years, this five-by-ten-mile valley has been dubbed God's Thumbprint, the Tranquility Bowl, and the Haven from Hubbub. Archeological evidence suggests that Indians lived here as long as 7,000 years ago. It was an important hunting ground for the Cherokee and the Shawnee. James Burke, a chain carrier on a crew surveying the area in 1748, was the first Euroamerican to discover it in the 1740s; he found it a lush spot, full of game. But, it was also full of Shawnees and Burke didn't stay long. During his first trip here, the story goes, he discarded dinner scraps and potato peelings in a hole and covered them with dirt. When he returned the next year, the peelings had sprouted, forming a potato patch. Friends joked that the place should be called Burke's Garden. Settlers, mostly of German descent, coveted the rich farmland and eventually drove the Indians out. Today, many of the landowners are direct descendents of the original settlers. During the Civil War, some were Union sympathizers, resenting powerful local "Secesh" landowners; one was hanged in Richmond for guiding Union troops through the mountains of Burke's Garden in 1863."

After we finally park the car at Walker Gap, we meet "Wayne", who has parked his truck at the gap and is dressed in camo. We quickly realize that Wayne is quite a character with a thick southern drawl, which I can understand just fine but Hum later says he could hardly understand a word that Wayne said. He is a local resident of Burke's Garden and a dairy farmer who raises Holstein cows. Wayne tells us that it's "chasing season" and that he's looking for guys chasing BARS. It's not hunting season yet and why people chase BARS is a mystery, he says, and what fun is it, anyway, he wonders?

Wayne says that to get gas and groceries he has to drive 20+ miles on very slow, curvy roads to Tazewell, VA, which we drove through on our way to Walker Gap. He tells us that the Amish are moving back to the area after moving out for many years, and jokes that they all have electricity and modern conveniences but still use a horse and buggy for transportation. He says that the Amish have a store in the area where they sell what they make, but not furniture; he doesn't go there. It sounds like he doesn't like the Amish all that much.



Commemorative Sign in Burke's Garden

Wayne asks where we're from and where we're hiking to today: "a pretty far hike" he says. We bid Wayne farewell and climb 1000' over a 1.3 mile stretch, with many stairs along the way, to reach Chestnut Knob Shelter at about 9:00 AM. The shelter is a very large stone house, which was a former fire warden's cabin, and probably sleeps 10-15 people. From the summit of Chestnut Knob there are spectacular views of Burke's Garden in the valley below. It is a very clear, spectacular day, lifting our spirits.

I leave a brief note in the shelter journal:

"8/30/15 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (73/75, brothers) stopped by to say hello. HELLO!"



**Left: Overlooking Burke's Garden from the Summit of Chester Knob
Right: Chestnut Knob Shelter, a Former Fire Warden's Cabin**

From the shelter south the AT goes downhill for about 6 miles, with the first 3-4 miles through open fields again offering gorgeous, crystal clear, long range views of distant mountains and clouds. Some parts of the 6-mile down are extremely steep: we're very glad that we're not going north and up!



**Left: Gorgeous Early Morning Hike Over Chester Knob, with Beautiful Long Range Views
Right: Lick Creek Bridge, Where We Stopped for Lunch**

Early on we meet a southbound hiker with a red beard who passes us and seems to be moving fast. He has a frisky pit-bull-mix dog on a leash that regales us with intensive barking and jumping. Red Beard says he is slow uphill and also smokes, which many other hikers seem to do as well, and this habit is obviously very bad for hiking stamina. He says he skipped NY and NJ and needs to get to GA before the cold/snow set in. Surprisingly, we pass Red Beard miles later where the AT crosses VA 625 and he asks about water, saying he has found none and desperately needs water for himself and his dog. We pass him and about 100 yards further along we cross a stream, which is actually listed in the AWOL Guide, which Red Beard uses but apparently doesn't consult very carefully. I shout "water up here" and he shouts back "thanks!" We don't see him again.

Along the way we see a 1' garter snake that slithered off before I could get a picture. We also see a 3'-4' racer snake, which curled itself into a defensive position ready to strike out (but is not poisonous) and I was able to snap a few pictures.

We reach Lick Creek at noon and have our lunch; there is pretty red Bee Balm growing on one bank of the creek. Hum announces that we have "1600 feet of up this afternoon!" somewhat ruining the atmosphere of a relaxing lunch. I say I don't want to hear any more such discouraging announcements please.

We stop at Knot Maul Branch Shelter for a break. According to the AT Guidebook this shelter derives its name from the fact that local settlers obtained knotwood from trees found in the area for making hammers (mauls) for splitting wood on their farms.

I write in the shelter journal:

"8/30/15 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (73/75 brothers) in for a much needed break. Lots of up, as usual, for our daily workout. Beautiful day, beautiful views from Burke's Garden. Enjoy."

At the top of Brushy Mountain beyond the shelter we find a sign by a tree saying "cell phone tree", where sure enough there is a good cell phone signal. Hum has earlier identified Woods Hole Hostel, which his AWOL Guidebook says, incorrectly, is located in Bastian, VA. We later find out it is actually located in Pearisburg, VA, and much too far away to drive to tonight but Bastian is much closer than Pearisburg and we thought it would be a good place to stay tonight. So Hum calls the hostel and talks to owner Michael, who tells Hum that Walker Gap is a two hour ride from his hostel and gives Hum directions. He warns Hum to "go back on Route 16 and Route 42", and not to follow the GPS routing over the mountains, because the "GPS will mess you up" and that he "wouldn't drive on some of the mountain roads the GPS will take you on".

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The last mile of this section is a steep down and punishing to my feet; my left little toe is really hurting on the way down. Along the way Hum is attacked by a swarm of bees but luckily (?) is only stung twice by yellow jackets (or maybe white faced hornets?); the stings leave big itchy welts. We finally reach the car at O'Lystery Picnic Area at 3:45 PM, close to Hum's 4:00 PM prediction.



Left: Large 4' Racer Snake Near Knot Maul Branch Shelter
Right: Knot Maul Branch Shelter, Where We Take a Break

It takes almost 2 hours to drive back to Walker Gap and, despite Woods Hole Hostel owner Michael's warning, I set my GPS for Bastian, VA, in hopes of reaching Woods Hole Hostel tonight. My GPS seems to guide us OK at first, taking us through many turns but heading generally east, which is in the right direction. So what's the big deal that Michael was referring to I wonder, until we get to the turn onto "Route 610", which looks more like a driveway and is marked "private" and "dead end", even though our local map shows it to be a continuous road heading east in the right direction. I make several attempts to get the GPS to route us around "Route 610", but it keeps returning to the same failed route. After several such failed attempts to follow the GPS, Hum gets rather frustrated and suggests that we take the now familiar long route back through Tazewell and stay at Partnership Shelter once again. However, I suggest that it's already 6:00 PM and too late for that plan, so I propose staying at the Relax Inn tonight, going to dinner at the nearby Mexican Restaurant, and taking tomorrow as a zero day. Hum agrees and we're on our way.

We make it to the Relax Inn by 7:45 PM. An old Indian couple runs the place, and they offer a special \$45.00 rate for hikers, a pretty good deal. This is a 1950's era motel, somewhat restored, but exhibits "shoddy workmanship" according to Hum, when he notes a big gap between the bathtub and wall. We get a brief clean up, change shirts and shoes, and go to the nearby El Burrito Loco Mexican Restaurant at the Exxon Station. It's a very delicious dinner and costs only \$9.00 each, including tip. I have the enchiladas and Hum has the burritos; it's really good! Our spirits are renewed.

After dinner we discuss our plan going forward. Since it's such a long drive to Burke's Garden and Walker Gap, I suggest a one night backpack from Walker Gap to VA Route 615 with an overnight stay at Jenkins Shelter. It would be a short, 4 ½ mile second day from Jenkins Shelter to VA 615, allowing plenty of time for travel back to Burke's Garden to get Hum's car and then to Woods Hole Hostel. Hum likes the plan, "brilliant" he says.

We're in bed by about 10:00 PM. It's a very good sleep with the A/C cranked all the way down on the coolest setting; I'm under the covers and sleep soundly until 7:00 AM.

Zero Day, Partnership Shelter, Marion, VA – 9/1/2015

We shower and shave and go to breakfast at the Barn, a nearby restaurant owned by George Hendricks' brother (George is the manager of the Settlers Museum, whom we met two days ago). We have a full breakfast, which is both delicious and filling and costs only about \$9.00 each including tip.

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We depart the Relax Inn and head for the VA 615 AT parking lot, using the GPS now programmed with the Longitude/Latitude coordinates given in Hum's AWOL Guide. It works perfectly and the GPS gets us to the parking lot exactly right. We park my car and then head for the Partnership Shelter once again, arriving there at about 1:00 PM. We get our packs ready for tomorrow; I remove my tent, which I don't expect to need on the 2-day hike, for a 4 pound saving in weight.

We relax all afternoon and both take trips down the hill to explore the nearby fishing pond. At dinnertime Hum goes for burgers and fries at the Exxon Station Café, which are thoroughly delicious as always. Yum!

At about 6:15 PM "Mule" from Oklahoma wanders in for the night. He says that he was in Marion, VA for the past 1 ½ weeks and that his pack and all his equipment were stolen. He reported this to the police and bought all new stuff, including a nice \$5.00 pack from Walmart. Mule carries about 60 pounds with a huge amount of food. He says he worked for a farmer in Marion and attended a Methodist Church gathering. He says he started from Springer Mountain, GA about 4 months ago (that's slow progress!) and works for stay. He describes the Georgia AT very well but somehow doesn't seem familiar with Grayson Highlands, which he had to hike through if he truly hiked the whole AT to this point. So we both begin to have doubts about his stories; what is he up to we wonder? Why did he go to Marion in the first place, for money perhaps? He smokes Marlboro cigarettes, an expensive habit for someone with no money. Better stay guarded about this guy we think.

Mule says he grew up on an Oklahoma farm where his family raised Dexter Cows, which can be either beef or dairy. He carries a really big walking stick adorned with a rock and nail, and into which he burned a cross signaling that he is quite religious, as we had already gathered. He worked for the National Forest Service as a firefighter, starting at age 18, until he was laid off along with 10,000 other NFS firefighters in an economic downturn. He is now 25. As Mule goes on and on with his stories, Hum and I aren't sure how much to believe.

I need no fleece tonight because it's a bit warmer, but I wear my knit hat as usual, if, for nothing else, for protection against mice scampering over my head in the middle of the night. Snoring tonight is not so bad and I'm very tired anyway, so sleep is fine all the way until Mule's alarm goes off at 5:00 AM.

Walker Gap/Burke's Garden, VA to Jenkins Shelter, VA – 9/2/15

Start Time: 7:45 AM, Walker Gap/Burke's Garden, VA
End Time: 3:00 PM, Jenkins Shelter, VA
Total Miles: 8.7 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1400'/2500'

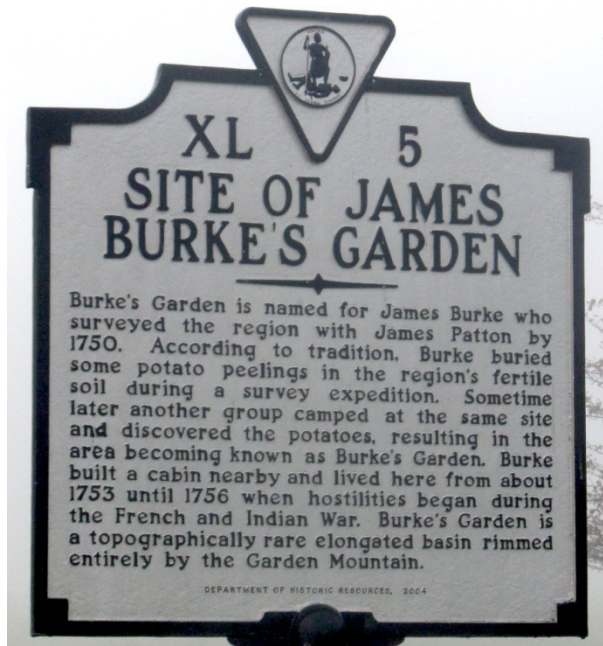
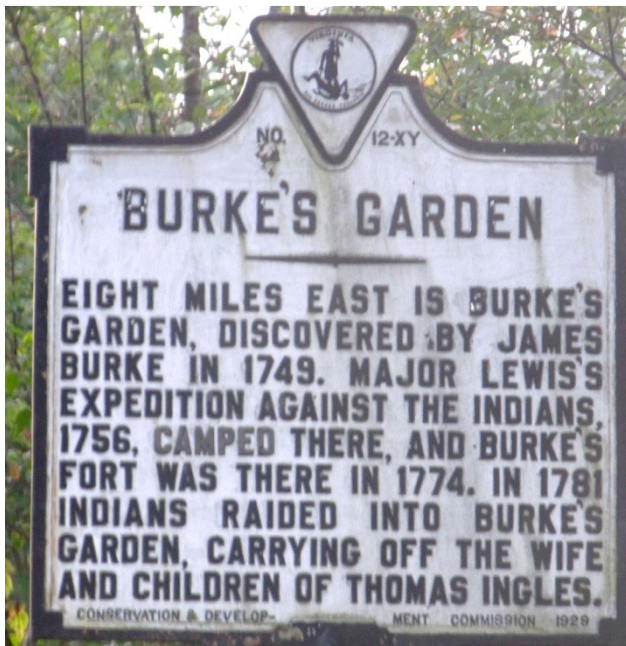
Distances:

Walker Gap, VA to Jenkins Shelter, VA = 8.7 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 37,539
Calories: 987
Steps/minute: 109
MPH: 3.10 (1.52 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 43 minutes, 35 seconds
Miles: 17.77 miles (8.7 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and Mule gets up also. We're off by 5:45 AM in Hum's car and reach Walker Gap by 7:45 AM. I snap a couple of pictures of commemorative signs in Burke's Garden.



Commemorative Signs in Burke's Garden

It's a beautiful morning with fog resting in the "hollers" as we ascend 500' heading north onto the ridge with sometimes very steep cliffs falling off on the north side of the trail. Early morning sunlight pierces through the trees striking the ground.

Soon we meet a father, son, and two hounds, who tell us they are doing a "training season" for the hounds. We infer that "training season" is the same as "chasing season" that Wayne told us about two days ago. They ask us "did you see our black dog?" Hum says he did. "Did he tree a BAR?" they ask. Hum says the dog was looking at the ground with no trees nearby. I didn't see the dog but heard his continuous and intense barking, as if he had treed a BAR; that's what I thought anyway.

We reach Route 623 at about 11:40 AM. This road is a much shorter route from VA42 to Burkes Garden and Walker Gap than the route we've been doing up until now. It is a very narrow, twisty dirt road with many switchbacks, but looks OK to us so we'll use it tomorrow to retrieve Hum's car. We meet two older guys near Route 623; they are hiking from Pearisburg to Damascus, the same route we are doing but in reverse.

The trail follows the ridge continuously on this section, with endless ups and downs and is extremely rocky, making the hike hazardous, arduous, and very tiring. We found the cliffs along the way to be interesting but the two viewpoints we passed yielded minimal views. We miss a sharp turn to the south by a rocky outcropping, but soon correct our mistake and are back on the AT.

Around 3:00 PM, just as we reach Jenkins Shelter, we meet Apollo, who is doing an AT thru hike flip-flop style. He asks us if we passed any water sources along the way today and we tell him there aren't any, so he retraces his steps back to Jenkins Shelter, where there is a reliable water source.



**Left: Early Morning Sunlight Pierces Through the Trees
Right: Missed this Turn Ascending the Rocks**

We settle into the shelter and do the usual: Hum takes his nap and I work on my journal. Around 4:00 PM two older southbound hikers from Oklahoma arrive. They call themselves “Deacon-1” and “Deacon-2”, because they are both deacons at their Episcopal Church back in OK. They are hiking from Route 52 near Bland, VA to Damascus, VA and say they saw my car in the parking lot by VA 615: all looked OK they say.



Jenkins Shelter Where We Meet “Deacon-1” & “Deacon-2”

Mike/Deacon-1 says this is his first long distance backpack. They are very well equipped seemingly with one of everything top-of-the-line, including a very nice LED lantern. They’ve been married for 21 years and both are on their second marriages. Mike worked for Bechtel Corporation as an independent contractor in radiation monitoring, so he and Hum have a strong work connection and engage in an extended conversation on same. Deacon-2 was a teacher; both retired early.

We go for water where a stream crosses the AT about 200 difficult yards downhill from the shelter, but I later discover that the same stream provides a water source only about 50 yards behind the shelter over mostly level ground: bummer!

I write in the shelter journal:

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“9/2/15 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (brothers 73/75) here for the night. Combining backpacking and day hikes: Damascus → Pearisburg. This our 7th year hiking together. Hum has 1000+ miles of AT covered already. Not bad for an old geezer => there is hope ahead for you younger hikers. Enjoy.”

We turn in as usual at dusk, around 8:00 PM. The deacons chat briefly and then turn in themselves. I’m

very tired and sleep soundly; snoring is a non-issue tonight. Around 4:00 AM we are awakened by extended, very loud, and extremely high-pitched howling: coyotes according to Mike.

Jenkins Shelter, VA to VA 615 – 9/3/15

Start Time: 6:40 AM, Jenkins Shelter, VA
End Time: 9:30 AM, VA 615
Total Miles: 5.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 1200'/1000'

Distances:

Jenkins Shelter, VA to VA615 = 5.2 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 23,166

Calories: 609

Steps/minute: 114

MPH: 3.23 (1.53 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 3 hours, 23 minutes, 11 seconds

Miles: 10.97 miles (5.2 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and Deacon-1 & Deacon-2 are up also. We're ready to go by 6:30 AM but wait until about 6:40 AM for more light: we still need to use our headlamps until about 7:00 AM. We have an 800' climb right off to the summit of Bushy Mountain (there are many, many "Bushy Mountains" in VA). I have good energy this morning and the climb isn't too bad. I'm in the lead for the past several days, except for some uphill yesterday. Fortunately the trail this morning is good and pretty much devoid of rocks, as opposed to yesterday on the ridge where the rocks were constant making for extremely difficult hiking.

We cross the bridge over Laurel Creek at 9:30 AM to reach the VA 615 parking lot and my car, one hour before Hum's prediction, a most unusual big miss.



Crossing the Laurel Creek Bridge to End Today's Hike

We drive over the mountains on VA 623, as we decided yesterday. It's about 7 miles up on a very narrow dirt road, in some places it's probably too narrow for two cars to pass each other. Beyond the summit it's 3 miles down to Burkes Garden on a much better and wider road. I snap a few pictures of picturesque Burkes Garden on the way down. We get to the VA 727 Parking Lot at about 10:30 AM after negotiating

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the last 0.3 miles on the extremely rough, deep rutted, unmaintained, almost impassable road, which we have now done 4 times, this time being our last.

We meet "Slim Jim" from North Carolina at the VA 727 Parking Lot. He has a "Deer Hound" with him (NOT a BAR Hound), which he says he found. He has done extensive hiking including Vermont's Long Trail and today is doing trail maintenance on the AT. He has stayed at the Standing Bear Farm Hostel in TN and is aware of owner Curtis's recent death, but says he didn't know Rocket. He says that Wood's Hole Hostel where we're headed next is a great place to stay.

It's about a 50-mile trip to Woods Hole Hostel, all the way to Pearisburg, VA, our ultimate destination.

Along the way we stop for a delicious lunch at the Subway Restaurant in Bland, VA. After lunch we check out the parking lot on US 52 just past I-77 where we'll start our hike tomorrow.

We follow my GPS to Woods Hole Hostel, and it routes us on some questionable back roads to Sugar Run Road/VA 663. The last few miles on Sugar Run Road are on a rather rough dirt road that continues another ½ mile past the hostel to a parking area by the AT at Sugar Run Gap.

We arrive at [Wood Hole Hostel](#) at about 3:00 PM and meet 3 southbound hikers in the bunkhouse (Brown, Monk and Mrs. Monk/Bearcat), who tell us that they stayed here yesterday and are going to Wapiti Shelter tonight. They are hiking with 3 other SOBO's who are slack packing from Pearisburg to the hostel. There is a young lady, Sarah, staying in the bunkhouse who has hurt her back and is now working for stay at the hostel. Sarah helps out with the cows, pigs, watering, and moving stuff around.

Woods Hole Hostel is a beautiful place, with a splendid rustic main house furnished with wonderful antiques. Here is how the AWOL Guide describes Woods Hole Hostel:

"A "Slice of Heaven, not to be missed." The 1880's chestnut-log cabin was discovered by Roy & Tillie Wood, who opened the hostel in 1986. Their granddaughter, Neville, continues the legacy with husband Michael, with emphasis on sustainable living through beekeeping, farming, organic gardening, yoga, & massage therapy."

We go to the main house and meet Neville, who charges us \$16.00 for the hostel; I pay with my credit card. We decline the dinner consisting of kale, squash, and a pork chop (the owners are vegetarians) and plan to partake of trail meals tonight. She says she is about to meditate for the next hour so she excuses herself. Woods Hole Hostel is seasonal, and has been open for only the last few days. It was closed for most of August, so we're lucky to be able to stay here tonight and take in this wonderful atmosphere. They have a backup generator and tractor; a completely self sustaining operation. There are charming swings to enjoy on the porch.

The house phone is made available to guests so I call Lysie, who tells me everything is OK, no significant mail, and that Donald Trump signed the pledge to not run as a 3rd party candidate, which is a relief.

There is a little afternoon shower and then the 3 SOBO hikers leave for Wapiti Shelter and the 3 slack-packers (brothers) arrive from Pearisburg. They tell us they'll join the other 3 hikers (Brown, Monk and Mrs. Monk/Bearcat) at Wapiti Shelter tonight. Sarah and Neville go out to tend to the cows and pigs, and later on Neville feeds the outdoor hot water heater with discarded paper and wood. Hum observes Neville doing Tai Chi on the porch of the main house.



Woods Hole Hostel; Main House (Left), Hostel (Right); Very Charming Place

We drive the ½ mile up Sugar Run Road – a very rough highly rutted dirt road with several high rocks in the way -- to check out the AT parking lot at Sugar Run Gap and find it very satisfactory, so we'll plan to use that parking lot as a starting point on our last two hiking days. We decide to stay in the Partnership Shelter for the next 3 days and then the Holy Family Hostel in Pearisburg, VA. Woods Hole Hostel is too far out of the way.

The 3 brothers hang around until 7:00 PM and then leave for Wapiti Shelter. One of them borrows Hum's duck tape to repair his pack. We can't figure out why they delayed so long to start, it will be dark long before they reach the shelter. We wanted to wait until they left to cook our trail meals but give up when they take so long to leave. I have the Chili Mac, which is spicy and delicious.

We're in bed by 8:00 PM, as usual, in the upstairs bunks. We have mattresses to use and I use blankets for a pillow. I have a good sleep but find it's too warm for my fleece. We hear Neville's husband Michael come in at about 1:00 AM; he has been out motorcycling all day.

Bland/I-77/VA612, VA to VA615, VA – 9/4/15

Start Time: 7:05 AM, US21/52-Bland/I-77

End Time: 10:59 AM, VA 615, VA

Total Miles: 7.4 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2400'/1000'

Distances:

Bland/I-77/VA612, VA to VA615, VA = 7.4 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 28,302

Calories: 744

Steps/minute: 117

MPH: 3.33 (1.84 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 01 minutes, 29 seconds

Miles: 13.40 miles (7.4 actual miles)

We're up at 5:30 AM, Hum overslept. We quickly get ready and make our way to Hum's car, where we find that owner Michael has blocked us in with his truck and motorcycle trailer! How could the owner be so stupid as to block in one of his guests?! It is still completely dark and Hum has to jockey his car big time, with my guidance, in order to get him out without hitting Michael's truck/trailer. All this takes a bit of time and creates enough noise to wake the owners up: we see their light go on upstairs in the main cabin: good we think, serves them right!

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We reach the Bland/I-77/VA612 parking lot at 7:05 AM. Our hike starts with a long uphill road walk for 0.8 miles, crossing over I-77, and then continues for another 0.6 miles on a gravel road before going back into the woods. It's an easy trail this morning that is pretty much devoid of rocks and follows the mountainside rather than taking us over every little summit/hump as the AT is too often wont to do. We

get to the VA615 parking lot and my car at 10:59 AM, one minute short of Hum's prediction, in keeping with the traditional extreme accuracy of Humberto's Time-Arrival Estimation Service.



Left: Crossing I-77 on the AT; Right: Fog in the Hollers This Morning

We drive my car back to the Bland/I-77/VA612 parking lot to pick up Hum's car and then proceed on to the AT parking lot on VA611, once again following the Latitude/Longitude coordinates given in Hum's AWOL Guide, which gets us to the parking lot with no problems whatsoever: what a wonderful application of GPS technology!

We then return back to Bland, VA in Hum's car and stop again at the Subway Restaurant to partake of a delicious meatball sandwich for me and a BMT sandwich for Hum. I check my email on my smart phone and call Lysie. Hum texts and also calls Laurie, and then we're off to the Partnership Shelter for the 4th time, arriving there by 2:00 PM.

The Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area Visitor Center closed early today (Friday) for the start of Labor Day Weekend. We settle into our usual spots in the shelter and relax a bit before 3 southbound hikers arrive. They are Betty, Blake, and John from Traverse City, Michigan, who are on their first backpacking experience they say. John (67) was a 4th/5th grade teacher before retiring and says his father worked for GM. Betty still designs window treatments and John is Betty's (younger) twin brother. Blake was a high school biology and physical education teacher. He coached football, baseball, wrestling, and other sports. He once rode his bicycle across the country from San Diego, CA to Portsmouth, NH in about 6 weeks. He did this in honor of his brother, who died of cancer, and was taken in by the kindness and generosity of people along the way. Blake is a very big, strong guy who carries their 3-person tent and Betty's sleeping bag.

In the course of our conversation Hum relates the story of how he forgot to bring his lunch a few days ago and how I was a bit too slow in offering to share my food. Thanks a lot Hum for the unmerciful kidding of your little brother!

We somehow get into discussing the forthcoming movie "A Walk in the Woods", starring Robert Redford, Nick Nolte, and Emma Thompson, which is about 2 guys hiking the AT and is based on the best-selling book by Bill Bryson. Betty and the others – especially Betty – go on and on about how I look like Robert Redford! It gets a little embarrassing as they persist along this line for quite some time.

I then tell them the story, which I think is quite humorous, about how my daughter Debbie's piano teacher, a long time back in the mid-1970's, remarked at how I looked a lot like Robert Redford. I immediately took this to be a great compliment because many (most?) people, I thought, consider RR to be very

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handsome, so I said "I think that's a compliment so thank you". However the piano teacher immediately responded to my "thank you" with "but not everyone thinks he's good looking!" "Gotcha and ha, ha!" I think to myself and smile.

Betty and the others don't laugh at my little story. Rather, they take umbrage that the piano teacher didn't think RR is handsome and Betty, especially, disagrees and says she thinks RR is very good looking. Betty then insists that she wants a picture with me to send to her friends??!! They take several pictures.

We notice that the parking area on US16 where we always park is rather full this afternoon and speculate

that if we move Hum's car to go get dinner the parking space may be gone by the time he returns. We speculate that perhaps many people are fishing in the little pond down the hill, given that this is the start of the 3-day holiday weekend? Fortunately the parking area clears out by dinner time.

After John takes a cold shower (brrrrr!), he and Hum leave at around 5:45 PM to get pizzas at the Exxon Station Café. It takes until 7:00 PM for them to return: there were 5 pizza pie orders ahead of them they say. Apparently the woman in the café got so frazzled by the onslaught that she puts pepperoni and sausage over the whole pizza rather than on separate sides as we ordered. John finishes his whole pie; Hum and I both finish our half's; Betty and Blake leave $\frac{3}{4}$ of their pie.

"Apollo" stops by for dinner and says he is moving on. He is another AT thru hiker doing the "flip flop" routine: he first hiking NOBO from NY to ME and now is hiking SOBO from NY to GA. He says he needs to arrive in GA by October by a specific date in order to get his ride. He says he averages about 20-25 miles per day and is pretty much faster than everyone else: thus the trail name "Apollo". He has high end equipment, including a Sawyer water filter, and carries a maximum of about 28 pounds, a relatively light load. He is doing the AT thru hike as a project for credit for his associate degree and says he will get his BS in agriculture later on. He uses a butane stove like mine and a small cup to boil water, and then cooks his trail meals in a freezer bag: this looks like a very good idea to save some weight.

Another hiker from West Virginia arrives and says he is meeting his girlfriend in Marion and then they are both hiking around Grayson Highlands. We discuss the fabulous WV parks where Hum and I and our families have vacationed in the past – Blackwater Falls, Canaan Valley, and Taggart Lake. He is sleeping nearby in a hammock. Betty, John, and Blake are sleeping in their 3-person tent behind the shelter, which is officially illegal around Partnership Shelter but no one is around to complain.

Hum and I are in bed by 8:00 PM, dusk, as usual. Snoring is about average, really loud at times.

Bland/I-77/VA612, VA to VA611, VA – 9/5/15

Start Time: 6:35 AM, Bland/I-77/VA612

End Time: 10:59 AM, VA 615, VA

Total Miles: 7.4 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2800'/2800'

Distances:

Bland/I-77/VA612, VA to VA615, VA = 7.4 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 34,616

Calories: 910

Steps/minute: 123

MPH: 3.49 (1.58 adjusted for actual miles)

Timer: 4 hours, 41 minutes, 07 seconds

Miles: 16.39 miles (7.4 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM and off in Hum's car at 5:40 AM. On the way to Hum's car I discover that the left hip strap on my full pack has pulled away at the stitching. This would make the pack unusable so it's good that we only have 4 day hikes left so I won't need my full pack anymore on this hiking marathon. I tend to pull the hip strap very tight in order to take weight off my shoulders, so perhaps this has led to the failure.

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This pack has been highly durable, however, and has survived 7 years and perhaps 1000 miles of sometimes punishing backpacking. Maybe it can be secured with some screws I'm hoping; I fixed the shoulder strap harness with screws 3 years ago and it has held fine.

We arrive at the Bland/I-77/VA612 parking lot at about 6:25 AM. It's still very dark so we wait about 10 minutes and begin our hike at 6:35 AM, but still need to use our headlamps until it's light enough at about 7:00 AM. My headlamp is now nice and bright since I replaced the batteries yesterday. We immediately have a 500' up with a very steep and rather dangerous drop off on the left, especially while negotiating the trail in the pitch dark with headlamps.

We meet Monk, Mrs. Monk/Bearcat, and Brown near Helveys Mill Shelter where they stayed last night. They complain that the water source is about 0.3 mile steeply downhill from the shelter, not to mention that the shelter is 0.3 mile off the AT to begin with (so we don't bother taking that lengthy diversion to the shelter). They are going back to Bland to resupply they say.

This section of the AT is pretty boring with nothing much to see, and as with most of the Virginia AT it constantly follows the ridgeline, with continuous and endless ups and more ups and more ups. Among my musings today I try some alternative meanings of "AT" and given today's rather punishing hike I decide an appropriate meaning for today is that AT = "Always Torture". It is of course a 90% mental challenge to do this much hiking over this kind of terrain.

We reach VA611 and my car at about 10:45 AM, making pretty good time this morning. We drive back to pick up Hum's car and then head back to VA606, once again using the GPS set to the Latitude/Longitude coordinates of the VA606 AT parking lot, as given in Hum's AWOL Guide. This time, however, when the GPS tells us we have reached our destination, there is no parking lot to be seen. We search the surrounding area and discover a small parking area nearby, down a steep embankment and very near Kimberling Creek. There is room for only about 3 cars in this small lot and we get concerned that we might get boxed in by another car if we try to park there. We opt instead to park another 0.3 miles to the east in a parking area alongside VA606: it's much safer even if a bit of extra hiking is needed.

We next make our way to the Holy Family Hostel in Pearisburg. This is a description given on whiteblaze.net:

"This hostel in Pearisburg is located a few miles from the AT, but there are blue blazes when you reach town that direct you from the grocery stores on the south side of the New River Bridge. It is hosted by the Holy Family Catholic Church in Pearisburg. The hostel has a pay phone, a shower, kitchen, and a loft for sleeping. There is also a nice yard for pitching a tent and a pavilion for eating outside. It is run from contributions and Bill tends it with help from the hikers staying there. Rules include no alcohol (it is a church), giving a contribution, and a two day limit on stays. Super Walmart is visible across a large field, and a good grocery store is about a 1 mile walk from the hostel. Bill offers rides and you can find his phone number at the pay phones where the trail crosses by town."

And we found this news article reproduced in the hostel:

"Corn crib in Giles County still serving Appalachian Trail hikers well"
By Robby Korth, *Giles County News, Outdoors, Community* on Monday, May 25, 2015

PEARISBURG — Pat Muldoon leans against the worn table inside the 40-year-old hiker hostel located next to the Holy Family Catholic Church. Muldoon, a church member, was there in 1974 when a former corn crib from a Giles County farm was hauled up the hill and plopped near the church in Pearisburg. And he's seen all the changes since. Hikers helped cut boards and put together various parts of the building. A former church member built on a porch. Muldoon has kept the plumbing working through freezes.

But one thing has remained the same at the hostel that's now a fixture along the Appalachian Trail in Giles County. "The parishioners just love this place and doing this service," 78-year-old Muldoon said. For the small church that once had as many as 200 members — now down to about 50 — the hostel is a source of pride in a town that sees its share of backpack-clad hikers making a pit stop as they journey between Georgia and Maine.

The hostel is a 3-mile trek through downtown and neighborhood streets from the Appalachian Trail. The hostel offered a chance for a shower — a rare activity for long-distance hikers — and a stove for a hot breakfast in the morning. Hiking into town is an opportunity to experience Pearisburg — one of 14 Appalachian Trail Communities

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The hostel started up in 1974 and has been running continuously since. It became a necessity because the church's pastor in the 1970s, Charles Beausoleil, would let the hikers sleep in rooms inside the church, which would sometimes delay Sunday school classes, Muldoon said. So, the parishioners moved the corn crib from a local farm up on the hill and hikers and parishioners helped outfit it over the years as a place to stay. Now, the establishment is a landmark that has seen as many as 60 campers in a single night and averages one or two most evenings while it's open from March through November, Muldoon said. The hostel's walls are lined with maps and other town resources for hikers. A scale gives hikers an opportunity to check how much they weigh and a log book is full of friendly messages thanking Muldoon for his hospitality during countless nights the guests have spent in the old shed. The desire to keep going with the hostel will be there as long as the church has parishioners. And the service will be worth it for Muldoon — who said he doesn't even really like to go hiking — because of the grateful words hikers give to him and other members of the church. "Hikers are very appreciative," Muldoon said."

Indeed the Holy Family Hostel has all the amenities so we easily decide to stay here for the next 3 nights while finishing out our 3 remaining hikes. It is only about 12 miles from Woods Hole Hostel and the

parking area at Sugar Run Gap, where our final 2 hikes will start.



**Left: Holy Family Hostel (A former Corn Crib), Pearisburg, VA
Right: A Sign in the Hostel**

Next we head into town and on the way we stop by McDs for a yummy Big Mac lunch. In town we check out the Mexican restaurant, where we plan to have dinner, and then explore the AT trailhead, which will be the endpoint of this year's hiking, 3 days from now.

In the afternoon 3 thru hikers arrive: 1 is a flip-flop hiker ME ← Harpers Ferry → GA on his last leg. The other 2 (Steve/Scuba Steve and Josh/Frogman) are also flip-flop hikers but are only on their HF → GA leg so far. Josh says he has webbed feet, thus his trail name. Steve and Josh just graduated from the University of North Carolina, Steve in business. They don't know when they'll do the HF → ME leg. They say they need to get jobs when they complete their current hike to GA. They do about 2.7 mph on the trail, very good speed.

A church parishioner stops by and says that he heard the hostel was closed; according to him they close the hostel for 3 days if there is any drinking or drugs.

I call Lysie and have a nice chat, and tell her I'll be home on Wednesday September 9 after 3 more days of hiking. I take a nice warm shower, shave, and change my shirt and underwear: I feel clean for the first time since Troutdale Baptist Church.

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We go to La Barranca Mexican Restaurant at about 6:15 PM. It's very crowded and busy. We enjoy a 40 oz. Bud but have a one hour wait for our meals. As usual I have the enchiladas: \$7.75 + \$4.25 beer; \$15.00 total including tip. Inexpensive and delicious, what could be better!

Steve and Josh are taking a zero day tomorrow and will head into town to resupply. Hum offers to drive them to the AT trailhead the morning after tomorrow when they resume their hike, which means that we have to rearrange Hum's entire car so that we can accommodate them. I complain a bit about the disruption and Hum chastises me for my lack of charity.

We're in bed by 8:15 PM. It's very hot in the upstairs bunkroom. At first there is zero ventilation and no fan, but then Hum discovers that a large window opens, which helps a little to cool things down.

VA611, VA to VA606, VA – 9/6/15

Start Time: 6:25 AM, VA611, VA
End Time: 12:00 Noon, VA 606, VA
Total Miles: 9.6 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2900'/2800'

Distances:

VA611, VA to Jenny Knob Shelter, VA = 3.1 Miles
Jenny Knob Shelter, VA to VA606, VA = 6.5 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 40,062
Calories: 1054
Steps/minute: 123
MPH: 3.52 (1.78 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 5 hours, 23 minutes, 23 seconds
Miles: 18.97 miles (9.6 actual miles)

We're up at 4:45 AM and off in Hum's car at 5:15 AM. It occurs to us, too late, that we should have stopped by McDs for some coffee. Oh well. We arrive at VA611 at 6:15 AM and set out 10 minutes later with our headlamps, which are needed until about 6:50 AM when it gets light enough to see the trail without them.

The trail gets interesting at the crest of a sharp ridge, which goes on for about 1 ¼ miles with heavy rocks, but then turns steeply downhill off the ridge. We arrive at Jenny Knob Shelter a little after 8:00 AM after descending about 200' and 0.1 mile off the AT, and take a break for a snack and some water.

About 3 miles from VA606 we meet 2 older SOBO hikers, who are backpacking for about 35 miles south of Pearisburg. They give us a severe warning about the bees (could they be the dreaded white faced hornets?) on the far side of the Kimberling suspension bridge. When we reach the bridge we observe a few bees in the air but don't see the nest, so no problem. We get to VA606 and my car by 12 noon, ½ hour past Hum's 11:30 AM prediction.

We drive back to VA611 to pick up Hum's car and then return to VA606 to park my car back in the same spot on the side of VA606, which is our endpoint for tomorrow's hike. Back at the Holy Family Hostel we claim our same spots in the bunkhouse. Stephen and Josh are taking a zero day at the hostel and went to town to resupply. They say the 3rd flip-flop thru hiker departed; he didn't want a zero day and said that Stephen and Josh were slower than he liked.

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Left: Stop at Jenny Knob Shelter for a Break
Right: Kimberling Creek Suspension Bridge (No Hornets Encountered, Good!)

We go to McDs for a Big Mac dinner and then check out the route to Sugar Run Gap/Woods Hole Hostel, our starting point tomorrow morning. Back at Holy Family Hostel I call Lysie and Hum texts Laurie and other family members. We have a long hike tomorrow so we plan to get up at 5:00 AM and tell Stephen and Josh that we'll shuttle them to the AT trailhead at 5:45 AM. We're in bed by 8:00 PM, as usual.

Sugar Run Gap, VA to VA606, VA – 9/7/15

Start Time: 6:35 AM, Sugar Run Gap, VA

End Time: 2:30 PM, VA 606, VA
Total Miles: 15.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2500'/3300'

Distances:
Sugar Run Gap, VA to Wapiti Shelter, VA = 7.2 miles.
Wapiti Shelter to VA606, VA = 8.0 miles.

Pedometer readings:
Steps: 57,075
Calories: 1501
Steps/minute: 126
MPH: 3.58 (2.01 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 7 hours, 32 minutes, 55 seconds
Miles: 27.02 miles (15.2 actual miles)

We're up at 5:00 AM. Steve and Josh are very sleepy to say the least, and just barely make our 5:45 AM deadline. We make a wrong turn on the route to the AT trailhead but luckily get there without too much delay. Our ride to the summit of Pearis Mountain and Sugar Run Gap is very rough, especially the last 2 miles or so on VA663/Sugar Run Road where there are very deep ruts and rocks jutting up threatening to rip the underside of Hum's car. We make it OK to the summit parking area at about 6:35 AM.

We hike with our headlamps on for about 15 minutes, until it gets light enough, and have to scale a cliff in the dark, right at the beginning of today's very long hike. We encounter a lot of rocks in the beginning, which always makes hiking much more difficult and dangerous. After about 5 miles we reach the southern summit of Pearis Mountain, but any possible views are obstructed by trees and vegetation. From there it is about 7 miles of mostly downhill hiking. Beyond the summit the AT descends a steep 1300' to reach the 0.1 mile side trail to Wapiti Shelter, which we opt to skip.

At the bottom of the long, 7-mile downhill run we meet a SOBO hiker who has a purebred husky with him: a beautiful dog. He says he's doing 200 miles from Pearisburg south; we don't see him again after that

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encounter. We skip the 0.3 mile side trail to Dismal Creek Falls and plan to drive there after we finish the hike, since the road is a much easier way to get us close to the falls. After Woods Road there is a series of 15-20 small bridges to cross.

Near the end of the hike I spot a 3' long Racer Snake, which I gently poke, whereupon it lunges at Hum, who chastises me for doing so. It seems like the trail goes on forever, with miles and miles of "Rhody Tunnels" long the way. We finish today's hike with a 200'-300' up and arrive back at my car at 2:30 PM, which was very good time for such a long hike.

We drive a short distance to the Dismal Creek Falls side trail, which is a very short downhill run to the very pretty falls, where we spend some time to enjoy its beauty and snap a few pictures.



Dismal Creek Falls, Giles County, VA

We make our way back to Sugar Run Gap to pick up Hum's car, and find that Steve and Josh have left us a thank you note for driving them to the trailhead this morning. Score another plus for Hum's kindness.

Upon returning to the Holy Family Hostel we meet "Wolfman" resting on the porch; he has a rather large dog with him. At first Wolfman seems quite normal. Right away he tells his dog to settle when the dog approaches us with a wagging tail as we enter the hostel. In an initial brief conversation I have with him he tells me he is from Front Royal, VA and that he lives on the trail. His mother lives in Bristow, VA, which I know is near Manassas, VA, because we always drive through Bristow on our way to daughter Katy and Tim's house in Manassas. His mother used to live in Manassas he says. Most of that conversation is pretty normal, but an initial red flag, of course, is that he "lives on the trail".

Soon thereafter, while I'm calling Lysie from Hum's car, some distance from the hostel, Wolfman starts "Yogi-ing" Hum, saying things like 'the dog needs food' and 'I need to call Mom', hoping that Hum will offer to buy the dog food and/or offer his cell phone for Wolfman to call his mother. Hum will have none of it, having learned his lesson about how yogi-ing works from Twisted, who successfully yogied Hum to pay for his dinner back in Troutdale, VA. So Hum moves his chair about 100 yards from the hostel, out to the adjacent lot where there is a hospital and where there is a nice view to the south. Problem solved for Hum.

When I return to the hostel I notice that Hum has moved his chair. Once I'm in the hostel Wolfman comes in and starts pacing back and forth as he delivers an incoherent rant. He becomes super weird and talks nonsense. Maybe he just took drugs? Among a lot of gibberish he says something like 'after the murder person started defecating by the side of the road'. He goes on to say that 'after the murder I was a person of interest, twice'. He says 'I don't want to scare anyone'. He says 'the feds are after me and I

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hope they won't catch me. They are planting food in shelters and the food spoils' (why, who knows??!!) His diatribe is totally incoherent. He refers to the Lord and on the back of his shirt he has a quote from the Book of Isaiah.

All the time I do not respond to Wolfman nor acknowledge I heard anything he said. Fearing the worst, I make my way out of the hostel to Hum's car and Hum follows. Hum tells me about Wolfman's yogi-ing and I tell him about Wolfman's incoherent rant, especially his references to 'the murder' and 'being a person of interest'. We decide that Wolfman is not only crazy but is potentially dangerous: neither of us has any desire to spend the night with a crazy, potentially homicidal Wolfman at the hostel. No way!

We quietly remove our stuff from the hostel, which Wolfman observes but says nothing. We seek out a motel room in town and call two motels. The Holiday Motor Lodge has no rooms, because there is a big football game between Virginia Tech and Ohio and they are full. The Plaza Motel still has \$55 rooms and we reserve one.

We opt for dinner at McD's: I have a Big Mac, Hum has the fish sandwich. Our room is very comfortable after we turn the A/C down to 64° which makes for nice cool sleeping and quiet sleeping where the A/C noise drowns out the snoring.

Sugar Run Gap, VA to Narrows Road, Pearisburg, VA – 9/8/15

Start Time: 6:25 AM, Sugar Run Gap, VA
End Time: 2:00 PM, Narrows Road, Pearisburg, VA
Total Miles: 13.2 miles
Total Elevation Gain/Loss = 2600'/4200'

Distances:

VA663, Sugar Run Gap, VA to Docs Knob Shelter, VA = 2.3 miles.
Docs Knob Shelter, VA to Narrows Road, Pearisburg, VA = 10.9 miles.

Pedometer readings:

Steps: 51,872
Calories: 1365
Steps/minute: 124
MPH: 3.53 (1.90 adjusted for actual miles)
Timer: 6 hours, 57 minutes, 28 seconds
Miles: 24.56 miles (13.2 actual miles)

We're up at 5:30 AM and after dropping off my car at the parking lot near the endpoint of our hike, we reach the trailhead at Sugar Run Gap at 6:15 AM. We wait for 10 minutes, don our headlamps, and set off at 6:25 AM. There is an immediate up of about 500' over the next 1 ½ miles to the first summit of the day on a very rocky trail. We reach Doc's Knob Shelter (2.3 miles) by 7:30 AM, where we stop to have our breakfast and sign the journal:

"9/8/15 Geezer hikers Ho & Hum (brothers 74/75) in for breakfast. This section completes our 165-mile Damascus → Pearisburg, and our 7th year hiking together on the AT. We'll keep at it so long as our bods allow. Enjoy."

Beyond Doc's Knob Shelter the trail continues to be very rocky with a lot of rhododendron tunnels. We meet a southbound thru hiker near the summit of Pearis Mountain, who tells us he thru hiked the AT northbound last year and this year will continue beyond Springer Mountain, GA, all the way to Key West on the Florida Trail. (I wonder to myself as to how he will hike across the 7-mile bridge on US1 beyond Marathon Key: I recall no pedestrian walkway?) He says that he stayed at the Holiday Motor Lodge last night in Pearisburg, in their hiker hostel, for \$20/day. There was only one other person in the hostel with him, a homeless man who he says is "down on his luck". Hum mentions our attempt to stay at the Holy Family Hostel and our encounter with Wolfman, who Hum describes as being crazy. Hum doesn't like my suggestion that Wolfman will probably seek brutal revenge on us if he hears that we're accusing him of being crazy. Hum has spoken the truth and always speaks the truth, even when he might be wrong. Humberto has spoken, so be it.

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Stop at Doc's Knob Shelter for Breakfast Break

Along the way Hum and I have a couple more discussions leading to more of our brotherly disagreements. Such disagreements are normal for us and an obvious sign that we're both getting older and turning into crotchety, grumpy, curmudgeons as we advance headlong into greater and greater geezerhood. After all, we are the self declared Geezer Hikers Ho & Hum! Another point is that Hum's vast mastery of facts comes into play when Ho stumbles into areas of dubious correctness, as measured against Hum's vast knowledge.

One disagreement has to do with the ["Oregon Vortex"](#) in Gold Hill, OR, where back in 1984 I snapped photos of my daughters Debbie and Katy showing the apparent "height change" phenomenon when the two exchanged places in a particular spot within the vortex. I clearly recall Hum verifying the rather dramatic height change by taking actual measurements on the photo images: the phenomenon was undeniable based on the actual measurements. But Hum evidently forgot that he took such measurements and completely discounted the effect AND the Oregon Vortex as an absolute, obvious fake. I think to myself: Humberto has spoken: so be it!

For some strange reason we also debated what caller ID appears on a call received from a cell phone. Hum contends that only the state information is sent; I say that the phone number and caller name are

sent. Actually both are correct and depend on the particular wireless carrier, local contacts information, and other call details.

We enjoy some beautiful wildflowers along the way. Near the summit of Pearis Mountain (3,770') we pass a rock ledge on top of a huge cliff with a sweeping view of the Wilburn Valley, which is a wonderful sight even if it is rather hazy. A little while later we take the side trail to "Angels Rest", which is touted to have a spectacular view of Pearisburg, but we find the view to be pretty much obstructed by the encroaching vegetation; the view from the rock ledge we judge to be far superior.

We have a huge 2000' drop down Pearis Mountain into Pearisburg over the final 3 miles of the day, which is very hard on the knees. My hiking boots are shot at this point, especially the right shoe which has developed a hole in the toe, allowing rocks, sticks, and other debris to come inside my shoe: very uncomfortable. On the way down I brush by some Stinging Nettle, which causes intense stinging, itching, and burning on my arms and fingers, which lasts quite a long time.

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**Top: Enjoying Some Beautiful Wildflowers Today Along the Way
Middle: Sweeping Views of Wilburn Valley, VA from a Rock Ledge
Bottom: Views of Pearisburg, VA from Angel's Rest**

There is one final 200' climb at the very end of today's hike, where the trail is very overgrown with briars and we both get pretty scratched up making our way through the briars. We get to the cemetery where Captain George Pearis is buried and we stop to observe his gravesite, which our AT guidebook describes as follows:

"Pearisburg is name for George Pearis (1746 – 1810), a Revolutionary War soldier and early settler who was buried on his property overlooking the river. Captain Pearis (called Colonel Pearis in some sources) was a South Carolina Huguenot who moved to Bluff City after being badly wounded at the Battle of Shallow Ford along the Yadkin River in 1780. He operated a ferry and owned a tavern near the current bridge. Bluff City was the site of Giles County's first court session in 1806, the year that nearby Pearisburg was first laid out."

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**Gravesite of Colonel George Pearis, Revolutionary War Soldier,
After Whom Pearisburg, VA is Named**

I nearly lose my canteen at the cemetery but fortunately I notice that it's missing from my pack and go back to pick it up where I dropped it by a bench I was sitting at. There are two trails beyond the cemetery: one is the AT and one is the side trail back to the parking lot and my car. I'm certain that the trail on the right is the one back to the parking lot; Hum is just as sure that the trail to the left is the correct trail. After a few minutes of debate, Hum prevails and insists we follow the wider trail to the left: I am very skeptical but Hum is right! A Humberto Triumph I declare. Hum doesn't gloat and I say that "I'll never doubt Hum's direction finding again!"

We snap victory pictures marking the completion of our 165 mile hiking achievement, in front of the sign describing the side trail to the cemetery and to the AT.



Triumphant Geezers Ho & Hum Celebrate the Completion of Our 165-Mile Hike

We drive back to Sugar Run Gap to pick up Hum's car and on the way we spend time enjoying a large group of pigs and piglets – owned by Woods Hole Hostel -- entertaining us by the side of the road. I snap several photos.

We return back to Holy Family Hostel hoping that Wolfman has left, but alas, unfortunately, Wolfman's pack is on the picnic table and his dog is asleep on the porch. No thanks, we're out of here! We both pay \$20 to the hostel collection point for the 2 nights we spent here and drive to the Holiday Motor Lodge. We

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check out the hostel room that the SOBO thru hiker told us about earlier, but find the drifter asleep in the chair in front of the TV. No thanks to that option also, we quickly decide, and opt for a \$50 private room, which we find is superior to the room last night at the Plaza Motel.

We shower, shave, Hum texts his family, and I call Lysie. We lounge for a while on the elevated deck overlooking a beautiful view of the mountains surrounding Pearisburg. This is a really beautiful place, Pearisburg is.



**Left: Resident Pigs & Piglets at Woods Hole Hostel Entertain Us Beside the Road
Bottom: Relaxing at the Holiday Motor Lodge, Beautiful Pearisburg Mountains in View**

We check out the Friends and Family Restaurant listed in Hum's AWOL guide but find that it doesn't serve beer, so we immediately reject that option. We opt again for the La Barranca Mexican Grill where we both enjoy 32 oz. beers and delicious enchiladas. The man at a nearby table apparently overhears our conversation and asks us about our hike: when we give him some details he salutes our stamina.

We're in bed by 8:30 PM for a very sound sleep with the A/C cranked all the down.

Postscript: Some Mushroom Friends We've Made Along the Way

I like to take pictures of mushrooms because a) they are very photogenic and like to be photographed,

and b) they have an astounding range of variation. Here are a few of the mushrooms we admired and befriended along the way:



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Epilogue – 9/9/15

Summary statistics for the 16 days of hiking:

Total Miles: 168.4 miles

Total Elevation Gain/Loss: 38,000' gain/44,100' loss

Total Steps: 664,187

We're up at 5:30 AM and go to McD's by 6:30 AM for breakfast one final time. My breakfast burritos are good as always. We say our goodbyes and depart for home. I make it by 4:00 PM after a stop at Exit 77, I-95 in South Carolina for gas and hotdogs. I call Lysie when I get past Jacksonville, FL and say I'll be home in less than one hour. Homecoming as always is joyous: there are beers and a manhattan before dinner to celebrate.

I'm dead tired but happy after completing yet another fantastic Ho & Hum adventure, this being our 7th year backpacking together. Next year we hope to continue our backpacking adventures by going north from Pearisburg, VA, for as we can go into central Virginia. We'll see.



Home Again After a Great Hiking Adventure