

# **HIKING ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL**

## **A PICTORIAL**

**Key Point: Everyone needs a break from a busy and hectic lifestyle.**

**For Christmas in 2005, I received Bill Bryson's book "A Walk in the Woods." It was about the history of the Appalachian Trail (AT) and his experiences hiking it. Reading this book energized me to hike part of the AT. So in the summer of 2006, I took my 12 year old son and cajoled one of my brothers to accompany me on a 20 mile section of the trail near Hot Springs, NC for 3 days and 2 nights. Afterwards, my son said "Dad, if I had known all I was going to do was hike all day long, going up one hill after another, I would have never come. Don't ever ask me to do this again!" My brother thought it was "OK." But I was hooked!**

**In the summer of 2007, I did another 20 mile shake-down hike in Shenandoah National Park with both of my brothers.**

**Then in the summer of 2008, I decided to start at the beginning, in Georgia, and hike north, a section at a time. I went alone, since I couldn't find anyone else who wanted to hike with me. I did 65 miles in 8 days. Since then I have section hiked 412 miles from the start, and have also done another 166 miles of trail further north for a total of 578 miles. The trail is 2180 miles long, so I still have a long way to go, but my goal is to hike the whole trail within the next 10 years.**

**The Appalachian Trail is a 2100+ mile public footpath that extends from Springer Mt. in Georgia to Mt. Katahdin in Maine. It was conceived in 1921 and completed in 1937. While under the administration of the National Park Service, the trail is maintained by private citizens, volunteers, and local hiking clubs in 14 eastern states, through which it traverses. The landscape is scenic, wild, wooded, and mountainous.**

**As a veterinarian, I am a workaholic. Anyone who looks at my schedule knows I must be crazy to travel like I do. But I love my job. I enjoy working with birds and exotic animals and meeting so many interesting people from all over the country. I am blessed with good health, and a wife who allows me to pursue my dreams. But everyone needs a break from time to time. For me, long-**

distance hiking has become my hobby and an outlet that provides much needed down time and a chance to reenergize my batteries.

In the following photographs I would like to share a glimpse of what the Appalachian Trail is like and why I have come to love it so.



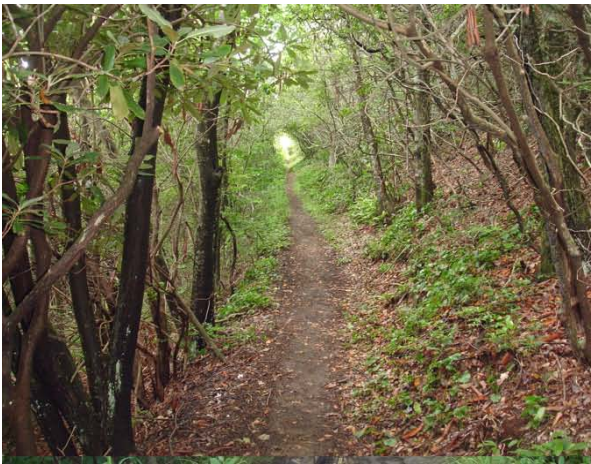
**Figs 1 and 2:** The book that started it all. Springer Mountain, GA, the southern terminus of the AT. This plaque, showing a map of the trail, is embedded in the rock at the summit.



**Figs 3 and 4:** The Appalachian Mountains begin in northern Georgia and continue northeast for hundreds of miles. This is looking southward in Georgia to the plains beyond. The trail is marked by white "blazes", either painted on trees, boulders, or fence posts, which guide the way.



**Fig 5 and 6: Springer Mt, 2008. The first blaze and my first steps hiking north. Trekkers are known by their “trail name” when they hike. Mine is “Birdman.” Most of the time the trail traverses through woods under a canopy of green. The trail here is smooth and flat...easy to walk on.**



**Fig 7 and 8: Sometimes the trail is covered over by Rhododendron shrubs and trees...it’s as if you were walking through a natural tunnel. Northern Georgia is mountainous terrain. The trail builders wanted trekkers to experience going up and down as many mountains as possible.**



**Fig 9 and 10: Rocks! Stone steps! Your lungs burn as you hike uphill, sometimes for miles at a stretch. You are exhausted. If it's hot, dehydration can set in quickly. Then when you go downhill, your legs begin to hurt, your joints ache, and your feet are prone to blisters. Are we having fun yet? Blood Mountain is the highest point of the trail in Georgia. The rocky summit affords a good view.**



**Fig 11 and 12: Long distance hikers have to take everything they might need in a backpack. My pack is the one in the middle. It weighs about 28 pounds when fully loaded. The pack on the left was almost 50 pounds. The less you have to carry the better! Trekking poles make walking much easier and lessen the strain on your knees. Either hiking boots or trail sneakers are worn. Clothing is lightweight and mostly polyester. No cotton...it absorbs moisture from sweat or rain, thus gaining weight and inhibiting ventilation. Always wear a hat.**



**Fig 13 and 14: Every 10 miles or so, there is a “shelter” and designated camping site. This is one of the original shelters build during the 30’s. They are usually 3-sides structures with a raised, wooden platform for sleeping. As some shelters age and deteriorate, newer, more appealing ones are built to replace them.**



**Fig 15 and 16: A luxurious stone and wooden shelter with fireplace in Smoky Mountain National Park. A sleeping bag, with air mattress or cushion, and a ground cloth, is mandatory equipment. Note “bear repellent” in foreground.**



**Fig 17 and 18: Most shelters can sleep between 6-14 people, depending on size. However be prepared to contend with resident mice who think nothing of walking over you at night or trying to get in your pack looking for food crumbs. And the snoring!! Tents are mandatory equipment for a long distance hikes. Shelters may be full or undesirable. There are many lightweight, 1 or 2 man tents available which are roomy.**



**Fig 19 and 20: A “tarp tent” is another alternative which is lightweight and provides ample protection from rain. Food should always be kept out of tents and shelters at night to discourage unwanted visitors, including bears, wild pigs, raccoons, porcupines, mice, etc. Some campsites have bear poles to hoist packs or food bags 15-20 feet off the ground. Or packs can be attached to string and hoisted over a high branch.**



**Fig 21 and 22:** There are numerous hiker hostels in trail towns or near crossroads that provide bunks and showers. They can also serve as a place to have food or supplies mailed ahead for pickup. A shower is a wonderful thing after a few days in the woods! Hikers have to carry their own food...usually enough for 3-6 days at a time. Dehydrated foods that require boiling water, such as rice and noodle dishes, are mainstays. Food items can't be bulky. Other common foods include oatmeal, nuts, candy, energy bars, beef jerky, peanut butter, crackers, etc.



**Fig 23 and 24:** I carry one small pot for boiling water and a tiny stove to cook on. Fuel can be gas, alcohol, or ignitable cubes. Silverware is plastic and I have two small cups....and that's it. Water is obtained from springs, creeks, or streams. It is purified by filtration, ultraviolet light, or chemical pills.



**Fig 25 and 26: Clothing is dependent upon the weather. I now always wear long pants to lessen insect bites and poison ivy. In warm weather, dress light and comfortable. View from a rocky outcropping in northern VA on a warm, sunny day.**



**Fig 27 and 28: Rainy days are common, so a good rain coat, rain pants, and a waterproof pack cover are essential. All too often the weather is overcast and foggy, especially at higher elevations.**





**Fig 29 and 30: Winter hiking requires warmer clothes and more layers. Pack weight goes up in cold weather! Winter hiking has the additional challenges of snow and ice on the trail. With no leaves on the trees, you certainly get a different perspective of the woods and hillsides.**



**Fig 31 and 32: Wildlife is rarely seen. The woods are quite. You hear birds from time to time, but they're hard to see. Deer are common...this one certainly wasn't shy about getting close to the shelter. This black snake wasn't cautious enough and got nabbed. It was released right after taking this picture. I have seen one rattlesnake on the trail.**



**Fig 33 and 34: Millipedes of several varieties are plentiful. There are many bees. I thought there would be lots of mosquitoes and other biting insects, but not so, at least not at the times and places where I have hiked. This is the only bear I have seen while hiking. It's a mother with her cub (black spot to the left of mamma bear). She's 100 yards away, but it was still nerve-racking because she's focused directly on me. At least I had enough foresight to take this picture before she scampered away.**



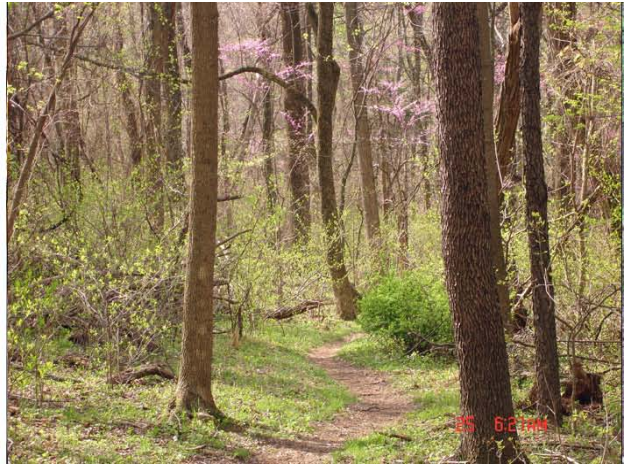
**Fig 35 and 36: The floor of the woods is moist and wet. Fungi of all types abound everywhere. The shapes, colors, and sizes vary tremendously. I don't think I've seen anything that looks edible though. A Rhododendron flower in bloom. These shrubs and trees, along with Azaleas and Mountain Laurel are common in the Oak forests of the Eastern United States.**



**Fig 37 and 38: You are never completely alone on the trail. There are always others hikers, but not many. Chuck and John were from New Jersey and I met them in Georgia. We hiked together for the next 5 days. Chuck was finishing the last leg of the entire trail...he had been section hiking for 9 years. Dinner at a restaurant at Nantahala Outdoor Center in Georgia with Chuck, John, and Stanley (far right) whom we added to our group a few days earlier. I have continued hiking with Stanley on and off for the last 4 years. The camaraderie among hikers contributes much to the experience of the AT.**



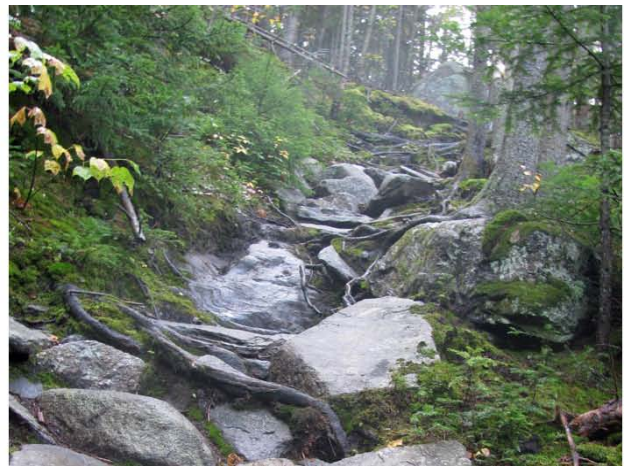
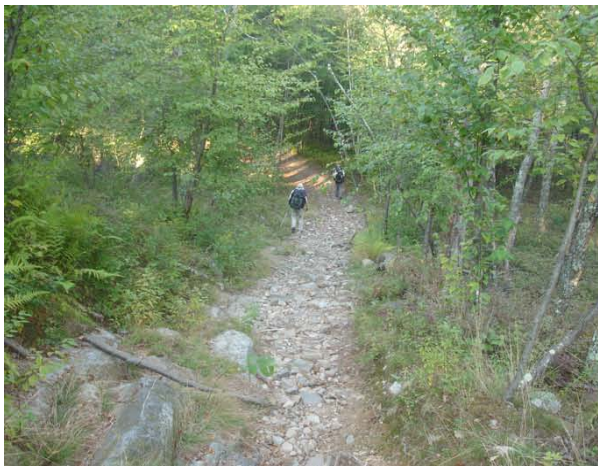
**Fig 39 and 40: I am now part of a group of hikers in Chicago, of similar age, that continues to do section hikes on the AT as well as traveling to some international destinations. Weekly gatherings at a nearby pub have helped solidify friendships with fellow hikers. It's also nice to have good friends that don't own birds or are veterinarians!**



**Fig 41 and 42: Trail Signs along the way indicate points of interest and miles to go. The trail looks enticing on a warm spring day in northern VA.**



**Fig 43 and 44: Boardwalks are placed over swampy, wet terrain. On a fall day in southern VA, the smooth trail on this hillside stretches out a long way.**



**Fig 45 and 46: Unfortunately the trail is very rocky in many places.**



**Fig 47 and 48: This isn't hiking...this is more like rock scrambling up a wet granite slab. This can be dangerous and one needs to be very careful to avoid falls. The trail here in Maine goes straight up the side of a rock face on the mountain. Metal hand holds are necessary to pull yourself up.**



**Fig 49 and 50: Hiking up Big Hump Mt in NC. That's me at the bottom of the hill. Despite all the hardships of uphill hiking, it's worth it when you get to the top...assuming the weather cooperates. A view from on top of Charlie's Bunion in Smoky Mountain National Park.**



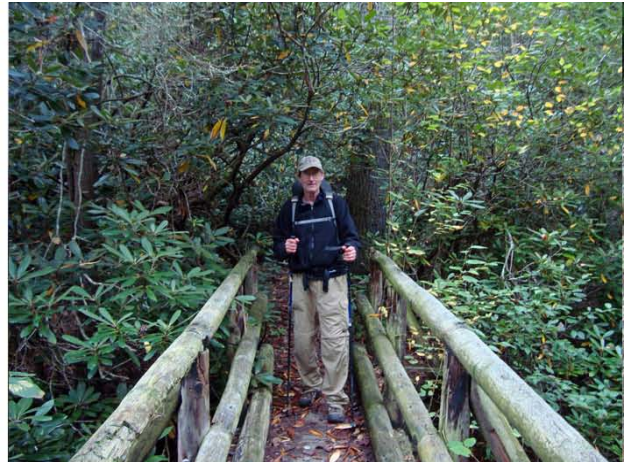
**Fig 51 and 52: The view from the top of Mahoosuc Arm Mt in Maine. Big Bald Mountain in TN...looking south toward the Smoky's.**



**Fig 53 and 54: A winter view looking back toward Roan Mt in TN. That's over-mountain shelter where we stayed the night before. It's a converted barn. Hiking doesn't get much better than this!**



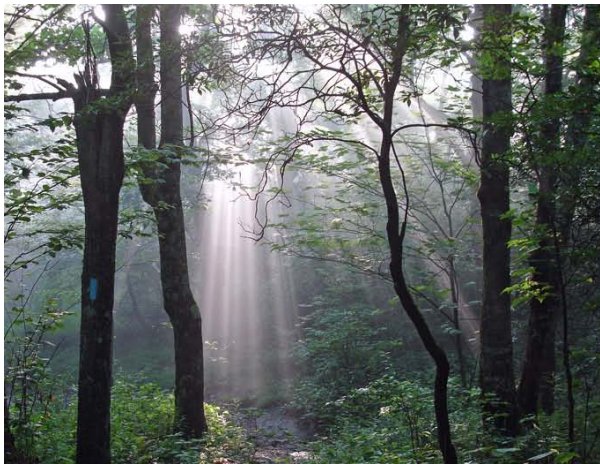
**Fig 55 and 56: While the trail passes through several National Parks and lots of National and State forests, occasionally it traverses open fields and cow pastures. Specially build wooden ladders gets hikers over fences.**



**Fig 57 and 58: Some local inhabitants wondering where the heck we are going. The trail crosses many creeks and streams with the aid of wooden foot bridges.**



**Fig 59 and 60: The beauty of the mountainous regions of the eastern United States can be stunning. To see all this without city noise and the sound of cars provide tranquility not often experienced anymore...especially when it's for many days in a row.**



**Fig 61 and 62: The pace of life slows down to the speed at which you walk. There are no worries except for the weather, your physical needs, and where to camp at night. No phones, no computers, no TV. When the sun goes down, you go to sleep. Life, for a while, is defined in simple terms. For the next few years you can follow my hike northward. You'll see on the calendar section of my web site when I'm off again on the AT.**



