

RICK ON THE TRAIL

2/16/2005

Introduction

— Rick @ 3:42 pm

Dr. Richard J. LaRue, Associate Professor in the Department of Exercise and Sport Performance at the University of New England (UNE) will begin backpacking northward on the Appalachian Trail, on or about February 27, 2005, in Georgia. This thru hike trip is part of his spring semester sabbatical leave from the University, and is intended to provide additional material for a book comparing and contrasting the 2005 trip with his 1972 trip (when he was one of the first 100 to ever hike the entire AT). Dr. LaRue will be on this year's trek for approximately six months, and plans to capture the experience both in writing and photographs, as he focuses upon how this type of sport experience is life-changing. Rick will also be visiting schools in several towns along the way to promote creative and physically active lifestyles across the lifespan and environmental stewardship.

2/19/2005

Excerpt from the Prologue in “On the Trail, Thirty Years Later”

— Rick @ 8:28 pm

August 31, 2002 Excerpt from the Prologue in “On the Trail, Thirty Years Later” by Rick LaRue (work in process).

We are at Katahdin Stream Campground, trailhead for the Hunt trail; and, for many through hikers, the final challenge of the Appalachian Trail (AT). Aimee, my 16 year-old daughter and Michael, my 12 year-old son, have joined me on this trip. The morning is cold for me, cold so that I'm feeling guilty about asking my children to get ready to hike. I am 30 years older, and more than 60 pounds heavier [I was 135 pounds when I finished the AT in 1972]. This will not be an easy hike. I am excited about the trek, but wary of the effort needed to make the summit and return. With an implicit understanding Michael and Aimee respond to my wishes and together we begin our deliberate ascent of this mighty peak.

Thirty years ago, this same place represented the beginning of my last day on the Appalachian Trail; a journey that began some 150 days earlier atop Springer Mountain in Georgia. More than five months later and over 2000 miles...in a single day, I would bring to closure one segment of my life and begin yet another. On August 31, 1972 I summited Mount Katahdin and became the 93rd person [recorded] to hike the entire trail from Georgia to Maine. Together, with a growing number of other through hikers, we continued the legacy of Earl Shaffer, the AT's first end-to-end.

This day, August 31, 2002, I am with my two children. I can't help but reflect on how it felt some thirty years earlier, to take these steps toward the end of my journey. Each step drew me

closer to the beginning of the rest of my life. Little could I know what impact the Trail's experience would have on me, or my world..."

2/27/2005

Airport Security

— Rick @ 7:38 pm

I really did try to think of EVERYTHING... So what do you do when your pack fails the standard Airport Security screening? You stand helplessly and watch as your pack is deliberately unpacked and inspected for all the things you are not allowed to carry on a plane. Then you stand and watch, a tiny bit relieved, as everything is as carefully repacked nearly as nice as it was, and in just half the time!

Only not everything made its way back to my pack. Everything was put back except for a small lighter, a waterproof container of matches (these two things I was allowed to carry on) and of course, my gas stove... The GAS STOVE that I rather hoped to use to cook all those delicious dinners of Mac 'n Cheese! Now, for those of you who don't know me well, let me try and give you a brief visual image of this traumatic event.

I arrive at the airport in plenty of time for my flight, thanks to my good friend Matt Gerken, and in spite of the fact that I was, as usual, running behind schedule. Matt dropped me off in front of the Portland, Maine airport terminal, and the first essential leg of my journey began. Just inside, at the United counter, I was greeted by a genuinely friendly and helpful United representative, who had hiked the AT in 1976! Feeling like everything was going smoothly, I proceeded to the Airport Security screening station and reluctantly parted ways with my pack.

Then... everything began to move in slow motion. I watched as my pack was carefully loaded onto the belt that would allow the TSA screeners to almost forensically visualize all that I had. The pack went through a first time, then a second time, and then it was repositioned for a third time. All the while I sensed a heightened level of interest among the screeners. This was not to be just another ordinary questionable bag....

By the fourth time through the scanner, my pack had caught the attention of a supervisor and earned a more thorough inspection by two of the TSA's finest. All the while I endeavored to remain calm (after all I wasn't hiding anything) and patiently I remained the observer. Honestly, I was cautioned only twice not to touch the pack, as I anxiously tried suggesting easier ways for the screeners to access the inner sanctuary of my most precious belongings.

My feelings sank from low to lower as first the lighter, then the matches, and then my stove were permanently removed from my pack. With due diligence, every decision to extricate an item was "by the book" and admittedly, the screeners we're just doing their job...very well!

More to come...

3/4/2005



First 4 days on the AT

— Rick @ 3:30 pm

Here's a brief update regarding my locations:

Monday, Feb. 28

Dropped off at Amicalola Falls State Park (at the lodge) and walked first to Springer Mtn. 7.6 miles and on to Three Forks (USFS 58) another 4.1 miles, where I tented. Fog to rain to sleet on Springer and back to mostly light rain. Temp. 40 degrees down to below freezing overnight.



Tuesday, March 1

Packed up in light snow and hiked 15.8 miles to Woody Gap (GA 60). Took shuttle into Hiker Hostel with shower and bunks plus breakfast. Snowed on and off all day with the wind picking up towards evening. Temp. Below freezing, wind chill in teens. However little snow accumulation.

Wednesday, March 2

Hiked from Woody Gap to Neels Gap over Blood Mtn. (US 19).





Wednesday, March 2

Hiked from Woody Gap to Neels Gap over Blood Mtn. (US 19). Strong winds and temps. Below freezing when in the wind. Gaps and top especially cold as the leaves aren't on trees yet (mostly broadleaf trees). Great 10.6 mile hike otherwise. Took shuttle back to Hiker Hostel for second night and caught up on some more sleep.





Thursday, March 3

hiked from Neels Gap to Low Gap Shelter for another 10.6 miles. Weather dry, temps in the 40s except tonight. I've met a number of nice hikers... Many headed north. Will forward pictures when possible. Total distance on AT: 41.1 miles plus 7.6 approach equals 48.7 miles in four days!

My trail name: Doc Holiday 'cause I'm on college professor on sabbatical leave...
More later...

3/8/2005

Monday Night Update

— Rick @ 1:58 pm

It's tough getting a strong enough signal to send or call in the evening. So, I'm writing this update on Monday night and hope to get it sent off sometime on Tuesday. Elevation is not the problem, but more tower placement and the location I end up at, be it tenting or in a shelter.

There is a clear advantage to a shelter with regard to several offerings. At a shelter I've always had fine company, I don't need to set-up my tent (or take it down in the morning), I have a place

(at most shelters) to hang my food bag in case there are bears, and it's easier to cook off a table or shelter platform than on the ground.

Camping in a tent affords more privacy, you can have a much softer surface to lay on than the shelter platform, and your daily distance is not as constrained by the staggered distances of shelters.

But, when a shelter is in the right place on your walk, there's no better option to stay, especially in the rain (or snow). While writing this update the tin roof on the shelter here at Big Spring has sounded like popping corn... The rain began only about 15 minutes before OPa and I arrived (OPa is also from Maine) to the shelter having hiked another 14+ miles. Bayley (a Vermonter attending Colby College) arrived only a few minutes later. And, Train, from Virginia rolled in last, much wetter and colder, but happy to be here.



It's about 8:15 p.m. And soon time for bed. The weather is still iffy for tomorrow. Possibly snow overnight and slippery conditions in the morning. We all plan to hike to US 64 9.1 miles and get a ride into Franklin, NC for an evening in town...to resupply, get cleaned-up and have some real food, and perhaps have some more contact with friends/family via the telephone and internet.

Now for the latest data from the hike:

March 4: Friday

Hiked from Low Gap Shelter to Cheese Factory Campsite for a distance of 13 miles. I hitched in and out of Hiwassee, GA because it was a secondary PO Drop (in case I had any mail...which I didn't). As it turned out I had enough food through Franklin, NC (not on my list), but also knew I could not make the Hiwassee PO unless I went on Friday (Saturday pm the PO would not be open). Good weather and nice place to camp(with several other thru hikers: OPa, JBird, Tim & Erica, and Bayley).



March 5: Saturday

Left hiking with OPa at 7:30 am from Cheesecake Factory to Cowart Gap for 14.3 miles. We both have a complimentary pace and get on well with each other. We experienced high winds, but a bit milder temperatures for our efforts. We managed to cover 9 miles before we stopped for lunch at Deep Gap Shelter (a great shelter with good water and two privys! One privy was even handicapped accessible. In the evening we camped-out just off the ridge in the gap to avoid as much wind as possible. OPa uses a hammock, which is a nice alternative to a tent and weighs nearly 4 to 5 pounds less than my tent...



March 6: Sunday

OPa and I are off again by 7:30 am and manage to hike to Standing Indian Shelter for 14.7 miles. This, my sixth day hiking, saw me reach the GA-NC border at 74.5 miles on the AT. In 1972 I camped in this gap at it's 3840 ft. Elevation. As near as I can recollect without my '72 notes, I'm one to two days ahead of my pace back then! Not bad for 33 years later. Georgia has been kind considering the time of year. I expected snow and cold, and have enjoyed the right equipment regarding this aspect of the trip. I still want to ween my pack of items I believe (now) I can do without, and substitute some of my necessary equipment for lighter options. Otherwise, I am eating well and my body is managing the necessary break-in period.



Our Sunday hike involved a steep climb out of Bly Gap but then OPa and I were to enjoy some of our first graded trails of the Nantahala Wilderness. Snow from earlier days made some walking slippery. And, considering the way the trails can slab the side of a mountain, you needed to manage both your footing and balance. However, the trails really were enjoyable.

At Standing Indian Shelter OPa and I joined Bayley and were later joined by Train. The sunset was spectacular over an adjacent ridge of mountains! Such beauty is difficult to capture in pictures or words, but leaves lasting memories. Most nights we are all in our sleeping bags by 7:30 or 8:00 pm. However, I found it necessary to escape my sanctuary of slumber and warmth at the unfortunate time of 1:00 am for a brief excursion into the woods. Though not the most enjoyable time to be out of bed on a frosty night...my unexpected reward was a sky so clear and thoroughly populated with stars that the view overcame any remorse associated with the task at hand.

March 7: .Monday

Off again by about 7:35 AM. OPa and I maintained an average, with stops, of two miles per hour. Again, slippery footing in some places could not be avoided. But, the day was quite nice through 2:00 pm and offered us some of the most spectacular views to date. We had only a few really rugged sections (including a 500 ft. climb in three tenths of a mile up Albert Mtn. during our last nine tenths of our hike).



We arrived at Big Spring Shelter having covered 14.4 miles, for a current total of 97.5 miles on the AT. Tomorrow we should easily cross over the 100 mile mark, thus attaining another important milestone!

Kindest Regards,
Doc Holiday (and Dad)

3/14/2005

Arrived at Fontana Dam

— Rick @ 10:57 am

As planned, the four of us were able to walk out the six miles from Big Spring Shelter to Wallace Gap (Old US 64) on Tuesday, March 8. The rain had fallen hard most of the night; then, it turned cold enough to snow one to two inches by morning. We (OPa, Bayley, Train, and I) settled for some warm breakfast (oatmeal, coffee, etc.) And were on our way towards Wallace Gap by 8:00 am.



By 10:00 am we were at the gap and using my Blackberry I was able to arrange a shuttle to Franklin, NC. While waiting approximately an hour for the vehicles to arrive (they brought a 4x4 truck and a van in case the road to the gap was icy), among other warming strategies we did a most energetic Hokey Pokey!

Once in Franklin we checked into Haven's Hotel where hot showers were an immediate blessing. From showers to food... We walked to a heavenly All You Can Eat restaurant where we spent the better part of an hour consuming a pot porrie of wonderful delights, uncommon to the trail. I still have fond memories of a garden fresh salad, two gigantic homemade bisquits, sausage, chopped sirloin, and corn; along with a soda that was kept filled the entire meal! The meal still makes my mouth water.

Other tasks in town included a trip to the local outfitter, laundry, grocery store and post office. We walked at least a couple miles between some of these locations and the hotel. Dinner that night was at an excellent Mexican Restaurant.

Our shuttle back to the trail the next day was slated to leave at 9:00 am. Since Train had decided to stay another night, he made arrangements to "slack pack" from Wallace Gap to USFS 69, 10.8 miles; where the shuttle would retrieve him for a ride back to Franklin. Given the unique opportunity, the balance of our group of four also decided to slack pack the 10.8 miles and have the shuttle bring our packs along when it came to get Train! For this to work we all had to cover the 10.8 miles in just three hours and 45 minutes from our drop-off. But without our packs we managed with a few minutes to spare! Then, putting on our pack OPa, Bayley and I spent the balance of a blustery day hiking an additional 8.1 miles for a total of 18.9 miles on this Wednesday, March 9.

Thursday, March 10

The three of us walked from Cold Spring Shelter to Sassafras Gap Shelter for 18.4 miles. This day included being as high as 4,627 ft. (Wesser Bald) at about 10:30 am to 1,740 ft. (US 19, US 74, Nantahala River) at 12:30 pm and then after lunch heading back up to over 4,000 ft. to camp at Sassafras Gap.

After two big back-to-back days, we still had the energy on Friday, March 11 to hike from Sassafras Gap Shelter to Cable Gap Shelter for 15.2 miles. Having met up with yet another hiker "Alan" a 19 year old from Mississippi; Alan, Bayley, OPa, and I experienced everything from sunshine and smooth walking to gusting winds (at least 40 mph) and snow/sleet! When we arrived at the Cable Gap Shelter I used the fly portion of my tent to mitigate the shear chill of the wind as it blew into the shelter. Again overnight we experienced a shift in the weather, but this time it was to awaken to 40 degrees rather than the below freezing temperatures of the past few mornings! Saturday, March 13 found OPa and I off by 7:15 am; covering the 5.5 miles to NC 28 at Fontana Dam by 10:00 am in spite of the strongest winds yet! My goal was to reach the PO at Fontana Dam in time to collect my mail, organize a few things and send off at least one package home. With an assist from a "local", OPa and I got a ride into the village and completed my immediate tasks. From there we contacted the owners of The Hike Inn who in about 30 minutes had us on our way to a shower, clean clothes, a great meal in town, some more groceries for our next section (the Smokies), and a good rest before the challenging climb from 1,800 ft. At the dam to 4,520 at Doe Knob; on our way to our next destination: Mollies Ridge Shelter in the Smokies (10.6 miles into the Smokies).





Total distance on the AT since February 28: 161.5 miles plus 7.6 (Approach trail) equals 169.1 miles in 13 days. Just think...if only I had done a little more conditioning...

It is important to note that on Wednesday, March 9, prior to our last 500 foot climb to the Cold Spring Shelter, we met our first official "Trail Angel." A gentleman from Texas had put up a large dome tent structure in Burnington Gap (about 30 minutes from our final destination); where he gave away free food and a warm place to rest. Such is the nature of these extraordinary people known to thru hikers as Trail Angels!

Doc Holiday (and Dad)

3/22/2005

Smokies

— Rick @ 4:16 pm

Today is Saturday, March 19. I began writing this latest update while waiting for breakfast at Mountain Mama's just 1.3 miles from Davenport Gap on the northern end of the Smokies, Friday, March 18.

OPa and I were discussing a couple of options, as he'd injured his left knee with all the slipping and sliding in the Smokies.



We had arrived at Mountain Mama's on Thursday afternoon, March 17, to get a meal, hot shower, clean laundry, and a place to stay for the night.



Mountain Mama's is well known in hikin' circles as the place to get a great cheeseburger with all the fixin's, and their reputation is still intact! The showers and laundry were great too...I guess we just didn't count on the bunk house not being heated. However, once we were cleaned-up and in clean clothes, our sleeping bags kept us plenty warm. After all, what do you expect for fifteen dollars per person. Anyway, come the next morning (Friday) it was clear to both OPa and I that he wasn't hiking anywhere for the next few days.

We decided over breakfast (which is exactly why I had to stop writing) that I would continue to hike toward Hot Springs, NC and he'd get a ride to Hot Springs, as there was a clinic where he could have them check out his knee.



So, this was Friday, March 18 (or at least the beginning of the day). However, to better understand how four nights and five days in one of our Country's most famous National Parks could be so challenging I have to take you back to Sunday morning, March 13.

OPa and I had enjoyed an evening at The Hike Inn (see last entry) and Jeff (Jeff and Nancy Hoch own the Inn) was kind enough to shuttle us at 7:15 am to where we had gotten off the trail, the day before; so we could take-up hiking where we'd left off. The Sunday sunshine and warm temperatures had us both in shorts (for the first time on the trek) and raring to go!

As we walked towards the dam (Fontana) we met "Moonpie" (a thru hiker from 2004) who was actively serving the thru hiking community that day as a trail angel...providing fruit and other great treats for hikers. After spending about 20 minutes with Moonpie, we were off toward the dam, where we spent ample time posing for pictures and checking-out the dam scenery (no pun intended). About two hours later we were standing inside Shuckstack Firetower (no longer in use, but accessible to anyone who takes the short spur trail to the summit from off the AT).



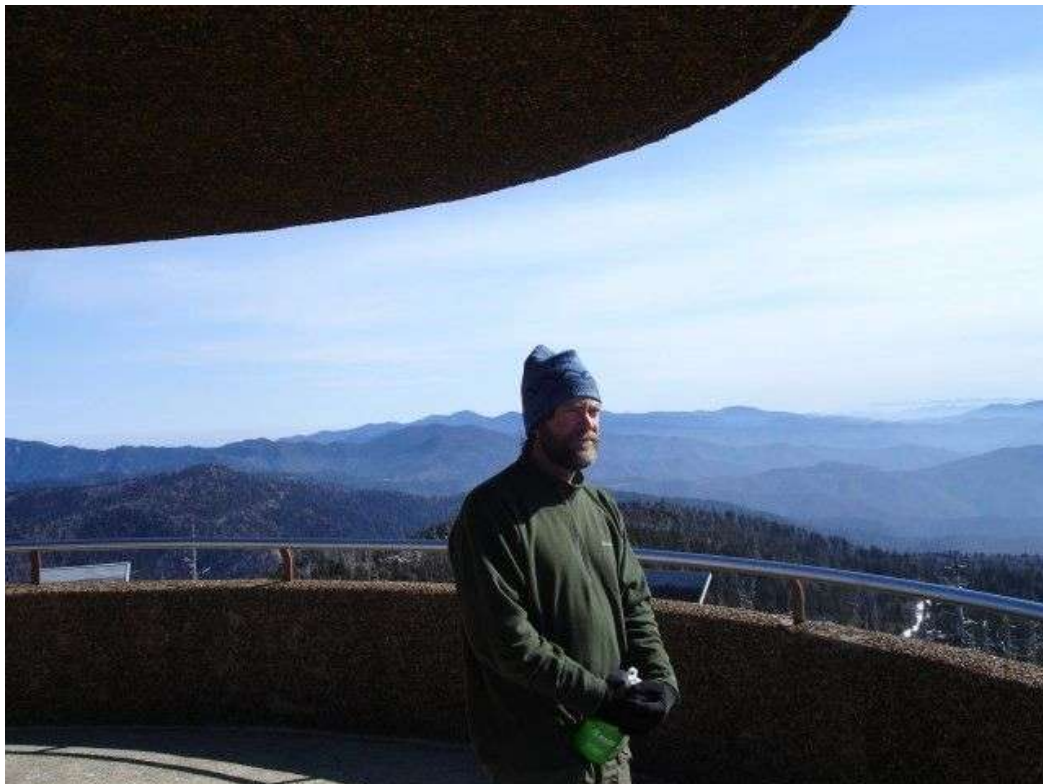
At this point the day could not have been better! As we continued to gain elevation we began to see a little more snow. We also found the trail a bit wetter and sometimes pretty muddy. In 1972 I found the trails in the Smokies to be some of the nicest on the AT.

Thirty-three years later the AT through the Smokies is showing evidence of serious and irreversible damage! The combination of foot travel, some horse travel, and constraints on trail maintenance have taken their toll. From my point of view the situation is very critical.

With regard to my hike this year vs. 1972, beginning a month earlier has meant the following difference. Whereas I began hiking in early spring in 1972, my first two weeks this year have been winter camping...and, the hike through the Smokies was winter camping and winter hiking for all but the first and last few miles on either end! Although I have been adequately prepared for the winter camping, the winter hiking was most challenging because of the snow on the trail, wet boots after the first day, the inability to have enough dry socks (so you used the socks that were the driest), cold temperatures (as the AT is for most of the Smokies over 4000 ft. Elevation, rain and/or snow on both the third and fourth nights and fourth and fifth days, etc.

Now since I don't pay anything for weather, I really can't complain. But, the combination of these challenges made walking more difficult, and at times more dangerous! When the trail was muddy or had soft snow, each step required careful placement to avoid losing forward momentum, slipping back, slipping forward, or slipping off the trail (down some pretty serious slopes. When the snow was crunchy or packed-down, it meant that the temperature was also colder, the footing was ankle twisting and knee wrenching uneven (thus the primary reason for OPa's injured knee.

We did manage to cover the distance of the Smokies (71.5 miles) in five days: Sunday, 03/13 (including some mileage prior to the park and across the dam) 14.9 miles staying at Russell Field Shelter; Monday 03/14 14.7 miles including Rocky Top (5441'), Thunderhead (5527') and staying at Silers Bald Shelter; Tuesday 03/15 15.5 miles including Clingmans Dome (6643')



and staying at Ice Water Spring Shelter; Wednesday 03/16 12.6 miles including four peaks over 5650' feet and staying at Tri-Corner Knob Shelter;



and, Thursday 03/17 15.7 miles with elevations averaging 6000' until we finally began to head down the last five miles to Davenport Gap (2600').

Once we reached Davenport Gap (around 3:00 pm) we walked the 1.3 miles to Mama's, had cheeseburgers with all the fixins (and of course french fries) and that's basically where this update began...

My next update will pick-up with my two-day hike to Hot Springs and my first "zero" day on Sunday, 03/20.

Regards,
Doc Holiday and Dad

Ps: I have to tell you that a significant highlight of the trek through the Smokies was our evening at Ice Water Spring Shelter. At the shelter when we arrived was a group of four trail angels out of West Virginia. These three men and a woman packed in pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables, cooked turkey and other great treats and spent the evening making sure every hiker in the shelter went to sleep with a full stomach. I personally enjoyed the steamed broccoli with cheetos for a topping. This kind of generous behavior on the part of four strangers is no doubt the most extraordinary happening on the Trail! Their caring touched each of us.

3/30/2005

Davenport Gap...

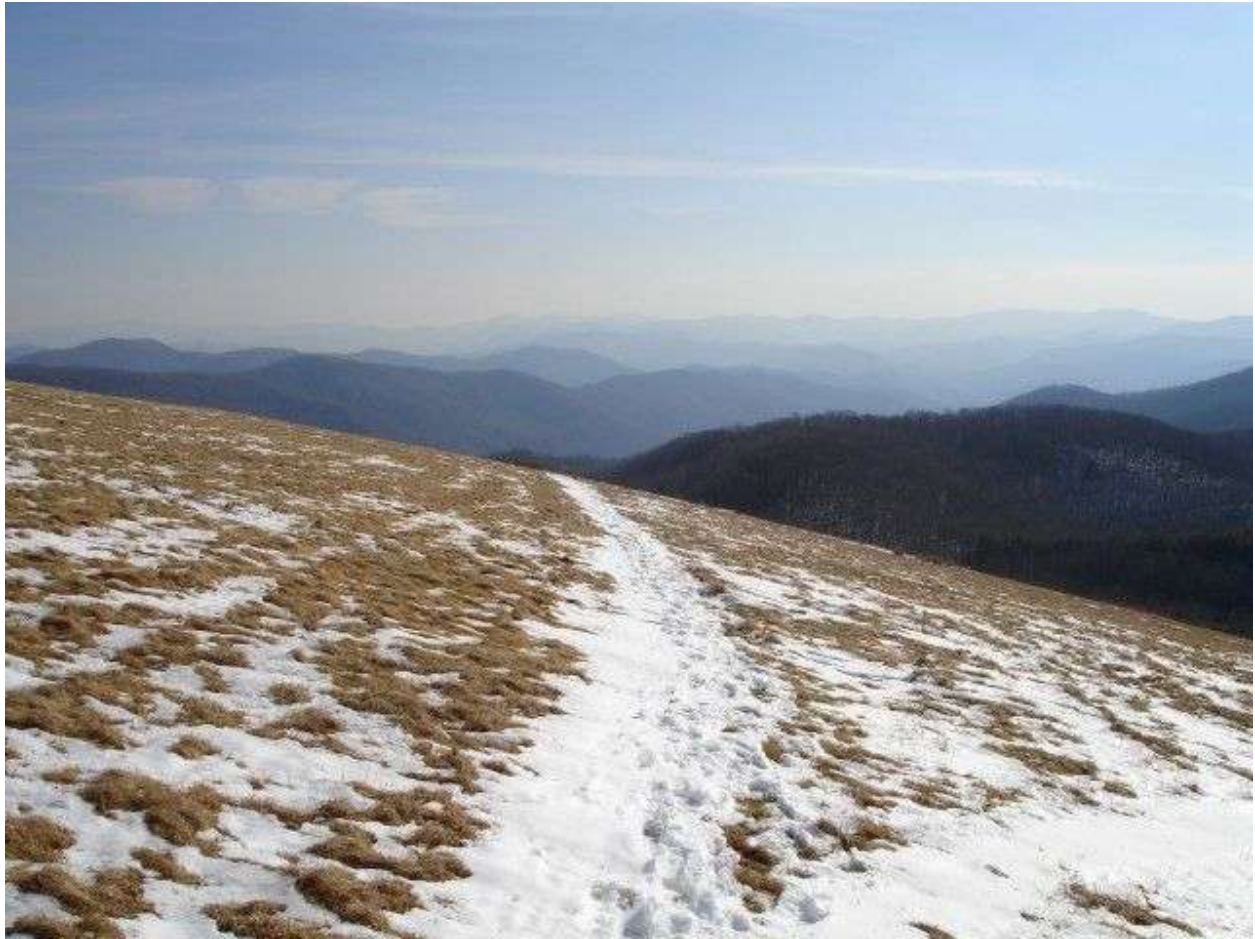
— Rick @ 11:13 am

My last blog had me heading back to Davenport Gap (north end of the Smokies) alone 'cause OPa needed to head directly into Hot Springs, NC to see about his knee injury.



After picking-up just enough food and fuel to make it to Hot Springs myself (on foot), I got a ride back to the trailhead in Davenport Gap. Once at the gap, I switched to a short sleeve shirt and unzipped the leggings on my pants, and I was off at about 10:10 am.

I really can't explain my energy level that day (Friday, 03/18) except it was a nice day, I was out (finally) of the Smokies, and I was on my way to Hot Springs! By 6:30 pm I was 20.9 miles further on the trail. The distance included estimates of 3500 ft. Down and 5100 ft. Up! Highlights of the day included my best day so far for hiking, and two really extraordinary "bald mountains": Snowbird and Max Patch.



I spent that night at Roaring Fork Shelter.

Saturday, 03/19 I was off a little earlier than usual (about 7:00 am) with a slight hope that if I walked quick enough, I might make the Hot Springs Post Office by noon. I did manage to cover the 14.9 miles by noon, only to discover the PO closes at 10:30 am. Now this wasn't all bad news because it meant a "zero" day on Sunday as I needed to wait around in Hot Springs for my mail which would not be available until Monday am.

So I set about finding Elmer's Sunnybank Inn and OPa who was planning to stay at Elmer's while in Hot Springs.

I ran into a great group of hikers who pointed me in the right direction. The thru hikers included Scarecrow, and Kollege Boy & Sleeping Beauty (KB & SB attend U Maine - Orono (when not on the AT)).

At Elmer's I was able to begin the transformation from stinky-sweaty hiker, to clean human again. I also immediately set about getting everything ready to head back on the trail (one of my several idiosyncratic "needs" (I don't feel like I can relax until I have everything ready), e.g., my food bag contents are inventoried to determine what's needed for resupply, my sleeping bag gets thoroughly dried and aired-out on a line or porch rail, all my dirty clothes (if I still have something clean in my pack to wear) get put into a stuff bag for the laundry, I clean my cooking pot and utensils, and I replenish the water in my Nalgene waterbottle and pack bladder.

Just before I was able to get in the shower, OPa returned from a doctor's appointment (arranged the day before during his visit to the local Clinic). Ironically the doctor he saw had thru-hiked the AT and was therefore in a great position to offer both a diagnosis and advice on how OPa could carefully return to his hiking. OPa now planned on remaining in Hot Springs through Monday before getting a ride back to Davenport Gap where he could continue his trek north at a more conservative pace, until his knee was feeling normal again.



After my shower OPa and I headed up the street, to the Paddler's Pub for a great lunch. Once again my first choice was a cheeseburger and fries. These tasty treats were supplemented by a plate of appetizers that included hot wings, poppers, and fried mushrooms (which I shared with OPa) and a couple of beers.

Just a quick note on alcoholic beverages... And the AT. In the southern counties about the trail there are some that are "dry" and some that are not (dry counties don't allow alcohol to be sold at all though I understand that "moonshine" may still exist in these parts). Even if a county allows places to sell or serve alcohol, it is frequently limited to wine or malt beverages. So if one needs to drink (alcohol) with any regularity, the trail is not very conducive.

After lunch we headed over to the Bluff Mountain Outfitters where I spent some money on among other things, a new rain cover for my backpack (my old cover was not adequately protecting my pack from moisture), a pair of "Crocks" (very light weight footwear for the end of the day after hiking), and a Hennesy Hammock (which I intend to use instead of my tent). The hammock weighs less than two pounds whereas my tent weighs closer to seven. Anything that

makes your pack lighter can make hiking easier. I had used my tent only three times to date, and the hammock would be an adequate option when a shelter was not available.

After my equipment purchases, it was back to Elmer's to get my laundry and do some writing. With laundry done I continued writing until dinner was ready at Elmer's. Meals (breakfast and dinner are available to guests at very reasonable rate). These meals are gourmet in nature, delightful in both presentation and flavor, and of a quantity that ensures no one leaves the table wanting.

Dinner at Elmer's also begins with a question...that each person at the table responds to as the also share their name and hometown. The individual responses and subsequent conversation, throughout the meal, completes the dining experience.

Not only is Sunnydale Inn a wonderful historic house, richly decorated with antiques, art, and the unusual...it is a home away from home; a place that instantly makes you feel comfortable. The fact that Elmer Hall has opened his home to hikers is evidence of his sincere warmth and kindness. Staying at Elmer's was truly an important part of my AT experience.



Sunday, 03/20 was my first "zero" (miles) on the AT. I enjoyed an excellent breakfast at Elmer's, resupplied my food, wrote some more, got on a computer (for about an hour) to check email and my website (this is the only way I have an opportunity to read comments to my

updates), and enjoyed some rest. I have, at this point, completed 270.7 miles on the AT in my first 20 days of hiking

Monday, 03/21 I checked-out early from Elmer's and headed to the post office where I retrieved my packages and a couple of letters (smile). Included in my packages is my stove...the one that could not fly south with me, was retrieved and forwarded by Jill (who is housesitting while I hike). I now have my Svea 123 cooking stove! After all the mail is opened and my pack is put back together, I mail my tent, substitute stove, winter gloves, etc. Back home, and I'm on my way up the trail!

4/10/2005

To Erwin, TN

— Rick @ 1:19 am

Leaving Hot Springs behind (March 21) meant leaving OPa again. However, I knew that he was doing what he needed to do and I needed to head on up the Trail. We both also know there is a good chance we'll hook-up sometime after I return to the AT from the AAHPERD Convention in Chicago; as I'll be off the Trail from April 12-15.

My plans to hike to Spring Mtn. Shelter 11.0 miles, meant a later start was not a big concern, so I took my time and enjoyed a beautiful day, hiking in shorts and my short-sleeved shirt. The hike included a steep climb up and around some cliffs north of Hot Springs where looking "back" meant some great views. By evening the shelter included thru hikers Robin, Gel, Cat, north-bound "section hiker" 20-20 (a 2000 miler from '04) and south-bound section hikers Ice and Chief (from Florida). Jack (dog) and Jill (his male owner...such is the sometimes unusual nature of trail names, also a thru hiker) arrived after the shelter was full and decided to hike on a bit and set-up his tent.

The evening was uneventful other than the wind began to pick-up overnight, making it cold getting up the next morning (Tuesday, 03/22). Of the group at the shelter, Robin, Cat, and I decided we'd try to make Flint Mtn. Shelter, some 21.3 miles. Getting started by 7:00 am meant I had a pretty good chance of covering the distance (my longest to date). And, I hiked the first 3.6 miles by 9:00 am.

However, at Allen Gap (NC 208/TN 70) I was greeted by a sign inviting thru hikers to enjoy the Trail Magic of Fal and Hercules (GA-ME '99) at their home some 300 yards from the trail crossing. Though it was early in the day, the promise of homemade stew and something hot to drink sounded really good.

The side-trip was worth both the minor extra effort and the hour I spent with a most enjoyable couple! Fal's excellent stew provided a savory and filling break from commercially prepared on-trail food. And, with both the stew and a large cup of hot chocolate, I warmed-up quickly. Cat arrived about 9:30 am and Gel at 10:00 am. By then I had also downed a huge piece of Reeces Ice Cream Pie (also homemade).

Shortly thereafter Cat and I headed back to the trail and caught-up with 20-20, and Jack & Jill (who had regrettedly missed the Trail Angel sign). Cat and I went on-and-on enthusiastically about the great food at Fal and Hercules' home (not really meaning to "exerbate" their misfortune). Cat and I then continued on our way knowing we still had two shelters to pass and serious distance to cover. Sometime around 4:00 pm, with about 4.5 miles left to go, it began to rain. This time of year rain is still the bane of the hiker 'cause it turns a person cold really quickly. We picked-up our pace and closed-in on the shelter.

By 6:00 pm or so we arrived at Flint Mtn. Shelter, happy that there was room for us both and still enough daylight to change into dry clothes and fix dinner before nightfall. Robin was able to

arrive before the rain and KB & SB (Kollege Boy & Sleeping Beauty) had arrived even earlier from one of the two shelters we had skipped over, and had built a fire.

Though I had plenty of time to sleep, it was interrupted by a thunderstorm around 3:00 am. I awoke again fairly early and enjoyed hot oatmeal prior to leaving the shelter. Wednesday, 03/23 would be a challenging day for me, as all of us had decided to hike another big day: 18.8 miles (for a back-to-back total of 40.1 miles). I dare say the best comparison I can think of, given the distances, changes in elevation, and our pack and boots weight would be doing a marathon two days in a row (not necessarily to win, but to finish each day)!

For me the morning went quite well until I began to grow increasingly concerned about the potential for both rain and a thunderstorm. Shortly after passing through Sams Gap I-26/US 23, there were sprinkles. Then, within a mile and a half I sensed that a thunderstorm was imminent... Looking around for any kind of natural shelter, I pulled my hammock fly from its bag and leaning against my pack (which was leaning against a tree), and sitting on the balance of my hammock rolled up in its bag; I covered my pack and myself with the fly (holding on as tightly as possible). I estimate the worst part of the storm came and went in only a few minutes. But, I was in this position for at least half an hour.

Cat, in the midst of all the storm, came upon me while I crouched under my fly. He paused for several minutes crouching near me in his rain gear. As the frequency and intensity of the lightening flashes and thunder booms began to dissipate, Cat decided it was safe to move on and I decided to wait until the rain eased-up some more.

Shortly thereafter KB & SB also stopped briefly, inquiring with regard to my status... Realizing that as long as I remained in my protective "cocoon" I was wasting the time I might need to get to Bald Mtn. Shelter; I mustered the will necessary to repack my hammock, and get back to hiking!

The last five miles that day required a real effort to complete, especially as I needed to climb up to Big Bald at 5516' prior to dropping down to Bald Mtn. Shelter at 5100'. I caught up with KB & SB (trading places at various times) until eventually as we neared the shelter it was all four of us: KB & SB, Cat, and me. Robin arrived ahead of us all again, but not without his own run-in with the nasty weather.

Fortunately, though there were already four hikers at the shelter, there was still plenty of room for the five of us.

Thursday, 03/24 had me up (though not before Robin) and ready to get into Erwin, TN. Arriving at Bald Mtn. Shelter the evening before left me only 16.9 miles to hike into Erwin. I pressed on and arrived in the early afternoon. After crossing the Nolichucky River at 1700' (see note below), I waited for Cat and the Bs to arrive so we could all be shuttled to Miss Janet's house together. Note: My "The Thru Hiker's Handbook" (Bruce, 2005, p. 104) states: "Nolichucky River, Chestoa Bridge ... at a site where young Davy Crockett and young Andrew Jackson attended frontier gatherings at the river."

Miss Janet's House on Elm Avenue in Erwin was yet another wonderful "home away from home" for thru hikers. I am coming to find that such places attract members of the current "Class of 2005" hikers as well as others from earlier years, who drop by to see Miss Janet or talk with this year's hikers.

Unfortunately, Miss Janet was away a few days... Fortunately Miss Janet left a willing and very capable former thru hiker "Sunrise" in charge; so order was maintained and great "hiker meals" were also available to those who wanted them. As you can probably tell by now... thru hikers find there are several incentives for getting off the trail and into a town, even if only for an evening. Nearly all such trips are to hostels where the several amenities include a bed or bunk, a real pillow, a shower, laundry (either on site or very nearby), and sometimes hiker meals, or most certainly a choice of different places to eat. And, hikers really love to eat! Of course town visits allow hikers to pick-up mail drops, re-supply food and replace or repair equipment.

Such an oasis from time-to-time can actually move the hiker along, providing they don't get "sucked-into" remaining longer than an evening or two. Towns are sometimes tough to leave. Such temptations require discipline to keep a balance.

Because I seem to be able to hike a bit faster now, I'll be sending this update off as soon as I can get a signal (on my Blackberry), and I'll begin my next blog attempting to bring you up to date at my current location, some 48 miles north of Damascus, VA (508.7 miles on the AT)..

4/11/2005

On to Virginia

— Rick @ 10:34 am

No sooner did I leave Erwin (the morning of Friday, 03/25) than my pack began to feel strange. A whole group of us: Robin, the Bs, Alan, Shorts, and I left 1700' and steadily climbed to Curly Maple Gap Shelter at 3070' (over 4.2 miles). While resting briefly at the shelter I noticed that one of sides on the pack frame had sheer-fractured just below the second cross bar. I used a piece of duct tape to secure the two ends of the side bar and put the pack on again.

Sticking close to Robin, as he has a great (steady) pace, we continued up and over both Beauty Spot at 4437' (wonderful vistas from this bald mountain) and Unaka Mtn. 5180' before arriving for the evening at Cherry Gap Shelter (for a total of 16.3 miles).

The next morning, Saturday, 03/26, I took off a bit before Robin and covered the first 13.7 miles past Clyde Smith Shelter (at 8.8 miles) and on to Ash Gap where I stopped to get some water from a spring. (Some 500' down the gap from the AT). Frustrated at the water quality, and additionally tired by the extra distance, I was happy to see Robin had caught-up!

With yet another 810' up, in eight tenths of a mile, I desperately needed Robin's steady pace to "pull me up" to Roan High Bluff at 6150'. There had been plenty of earlier climbs that day...

None felt better when they were over than when we arrived at Roan High Knob Shelter (at 6285' this is the highest shelter on the entire AT). The shelter is the reconstructed fire warden's cabin from when a fire tower stood tall atop this prominent peak. Total distance for the day: 15.2 miles.

The next morning (after an evening of some heavy winds and rain) was Easter Sunday, 03/27..

Robin and I left early and headed "mostly down" toward US 19E (Roan Mountain, TN is 3.4 miles from the AT road crossing). To our surprise we were greeted by some pretty icy conditions to begin with (there had been a few inches of snow all about the highest parts of Roan High Knob and on the summit trail). Then, arriving at Carvers Gap 5512' we progressed over Round Bald and Jane Bald (both at 5826' but with Engine Gap 5600' in between); all the while coping with extremely strong winds and poor visibility due to the cloud-like mist being thrown at us. Then it was over Grassy Ridge 6050' and down to Stan Murray Shelter 5050' for a 10 minute rest. After a bit more up-and-down we went by the spur trail to Overmountain Shelter 4682'.

Thinking our "down" was surly going to outweigh our "up" hiking... We climbed up over Little Hump Mtn. 5459' and Hump 5587' with Bradley Gap 4960' in between. We had gone nearly ten miles at this point and not made it below 4250'! And, our best estimate was that the wind was blowing at a sustained speed of 75 mph (not just gusts) over these several bald mountains. The last four or so miles to Apple House Shelter we finally dropped to 3000'. Robin and I reached US 19E 2800' (for 15.2 miles) ready for warm showers, etc. at Mountainside Harbour, a B & B and bunkhouse (for hikers) owned by Terry and Mary Hill (just three tenths of a mile down the road towards Roan Mountain, TN, from the AT crossing).

Mountainside Harbour was just what we needed! Terry got us set in the bunkhouse and took our dirty clothes up to the house to be washed. Mary offered us up a bunch of choices for a "hiker lunch" and Robin and I settled on chili with cornbread. After showers and a huge lunch, we

started feeling normal again. Several other thru hikers came along, one or two at a time to share the bunkhouse, including Alan, Shorts, Wellsley, and Kado.

As it was Easter Sunday, Mary had a enormous baked ham with scalloped potatoes, green beans, hot breads, and a wonderful apple dumpling desert all ready for dinner at 6:30 pm. With everything that we'd experienced up on the Trail, we all felt really lucky to be warm and dry, have clean clothes, a great place to stay, with extraordinary food!

The weather for that night and the next day (Monday, 03/28), called for heavy rain. We all decided to have breakfast the next morning and then complete our hiking plans. I had mail to pick-up in Roan Mountain, TN and a few food supplies to buy; so Terry ran me into town and dropped me off at the Post Office. Then he ran Alan to Elk Park, NC (the other side of the gap down from the AT), then picked me back up in Roan Mountain and brought me back to Mountainside Harbour.

Within a half hour or so all six of us had our packs ready to go... We also couldn't help noticing that the rain was coming down even harder!

At about 10:00 am we agreed that Monday was going to be a zero day. Given the weather and the temperature, it was just the right thing to do. Several of the guys spent some of the morning watching The Price is Right. I was satisfied to work on my on-line journal. I also skipped lunch as the breakfast was so huge!

By dinnertime we were all back up at the house for an unforgettable dining experience. Mary had put together roast beef, mashed potatoes with gravy, corn, a huge tossed salad, hot breads, etc. And, no one left the table the least bit hungry! Before returning to the bunkhouse, we all confirmed that we would be skipping breakfast the next morning, and taking off early.

Tuesday, 03/29, had us all up by 6:00 am and leaving by 7:00 am or so. Though a bit cool at first, the weather was dry and as predicted by the weather channel, it proved to be a beautiful day! We were on our way to Virginia!