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Appalachian's end



By Acey Harper, USA TODAY
HEADED NORTH: Eric Olson of Rocky River, Ohio, (left) and Bruce Berlin of Cleveland, along Appalachian Trail.



By David Miller, USA TODAY

COVER STORY

2,100 miles of challenge, hardship, fun

End of trail from Georgia to Maine 'is what it's all about' — almost

By Richard Price
 USA TODAY

STRATTON POND, Vt. — Stripped to his hiking shorts, Eric Olson basks in the sunshine on a grassy knoll tucked between the pines and a spring-fed lake rippled by an afternoon breeze off the Green Mountains.

"This," sighs the 23-year-old from Rocky River, Ohio, "is

what it's all about."

Olson is hiking the length of the Appalachian Trail, from Georgia's Springer Mountain to Mt. Katahdin in Maine. He is an "AT thru-hiker," one of several hundred hardy adventurers who each year challenge the 2,100-mile footpath.

But his journey is about more than sunshine and breezes.

No crowds cheer hikers on

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Since starting 60 miles north of Atlanta on April 1, he has hiked 10 to 30 miles a day with a 35- to 60-pound backpack.

For 10 days in Georgia, he shivered into soaking clothes at 6:30 a.m. to hike under heavy rain. On April 19 in North Carolina mountains, he trudged through three feet of snow and howling winds that drove the wind-chill factor to 30 degrees below zero. After the melt, he marched through a half-foot of icy water.

In July in Pennsylvania, he battled insects, razor-sharp briar and the trail's rockiest stretch. He sweltered through 90- and 100-degree temperatures for weeks, fighting off heat stroke — one hiker died of it this year — and stomach cramps from lack of water.

He has walked on feet so blistered that new layers of flesh peeled off faster than he changed socks.

And the heaviest hardship of all: He went on even after his fiancee, Julie Settle, dropped out of his hiking party.

Having made it to New England, Olson seems sure to be one of the 100 or so who finish at Mt. Katahdin.

They'll find no cheering crowds. Their only tangible reward will be an iron-on patch from the Appalachian Trail Conference, the organization that oversees the trail. But to hikers, people like Olson are something special. Says Debbie Sears, 31, of Cape Cod, Mass., on part of the trail in Vermont when Olson passed through: "I hold them in awe."

Many wonder why they bother at all. Average time is 25 weeks, and the bill for the trip ranges between \$1,000 and \$2,500 — depending on dining habits — plus equipment, which averages around \$800.

Why do it? For the challenge. For good health. Because it's there.

Olson, a biology graduate from Duke University last year, needed time alone to finally decide to enter law school. John Beckstrand, 24, resolved that he was going nowhere working on a ranch in Oregon: "I decided to go back to college after one last adventure, so I sold my motorcycle and here I am."

All are hiking the brainchild of Benton MacKaye, a New York forester and philosopher who in 1921 proposed a wilderness sub-civilization as an alternative to city life. His dream was a trail linking a series of log shelters, communities and farm camps. The idea caught on; by 1935, the route was blazed with white paint.

Maintained by 31 trail clubs in a loose coalition under the ATC, the trail still isn't MacKaye's dream — there are no farm camps — but it's close to the civilization-in-the-wilderness he envisioned.

In addition to youngsters in their 20s, this year's pack includes retired admiral Harry Train, former commander of the Atlantic Fleet; "Gretta," a Doberman pinscher who lugs her food in a 10-pound

dog pack; and Louis and June Gallagher of Texarkana, Texas, both 63 and hiking the trail for the fourth time since 1976.

Many shell out over \$100 for trail boots; Louis Gallagher calls that "nonsense." He hikes in Army-issue high-lacers. Fred Tomaro of Delray Beach, Fla., has been hiking in deck moccasins.

And a hundred theories exist on what to eat. Olson dried all his meats, vegetables and fruit beforehand, then had them shipped to post offices in towns along the route. Others shop as they go; favorites are peanut butter, sandwich spreads, honey and pasta.

The look of long-distance hikers is far more uniform. All have steel bands for leg muscles, and are wiry thin; one man lost 55 pounds this year. They are pale, having spent most of the summer in what Tim Platts, 24, described as "the long green tunnel." And they startle outsiders with their gamy odor, going days, and even weeks, without a shower.

Their society centers on the campfire. Hikers prefer to walk alone, but they camp together and talk trail trivia — about Earl Shaffer, who became the first thru-hiker in 1948; about the hikers who set out for the trail and wound up expending themselves climbing 3,782-foot Springer Mountain to the starting point; debates over the fastest hiking time (The favorite: 67 days by Warren Doyle of Pipestem, W. Va.)

"Southbounders" are a recurring topic, the 50 or so hikers who begin each year at Katahdin in June and finish at Springer in November. Northbounders, whom the weather favors, are perplexed by them, but Ron Bruschi, 33, from Buffalo, explains simply, "I got started too late to go the other way."

No one here entirely escapes civilization's irritants. For hikers who rely on post offices, there are delays. Olson and traveling companion Bruce Berlin, 23, of Cleveland, waited five days in Williamstown, Mass., for a food package.

On the trail outside Damascus, Va., this year a "Dusty Boots Flasher" lurked behind trees, dressed in nothing but dirty hiking boots. On rare occasions incidents are more serious; there is an annual average, says the ATC, of one violent episode — rape or assault.

But for every sin there are a thousand kindnesses. Legendary is Bonnie Shipe, the Ice Cream Lady of Cumberland Valley, Pa., who has handed out more than 500 cones to thru-hikers.

At Dicks Creek Gap, N.C., a couple named Weed (known to hikers only as the Tumbling Weeds) give hikers apple sauce and "mobile home-made bread."

In other towns are church-run hostels where thru-hikers can rest up and shower. Says Betty Clayton in Manchester, Vt.: "After 20 years, I can tell them from anyone else. They have a look of dedication about them you can't miss."

