

- INTRODUCTION -

So you want to thru-hike the *Appalachian Trail*? You're taking all the steps necessary to prepare yourself. You'll leave no stone unturned. You've reached out to former thru-hikers. You've already picked up other AT prep books. You've spent more time on whiteblaze.net¹ than you can recall. You've lost sleep over whether you should bring a down or synthetic sleeping bag. You've mapped out every location where mail drops will be sent.

And then somehow you stumbled upon *this* book.

"A psychological guide? *To hiking?* Let me guess, one foot in front of the other. Do this approximately 5 million times and you have successfully walked from Springer Mountain, Georgia to Mt. Katahdin, Maine. It's as simple as that, right?"

Right. Except for one thing, *the five million part*.

You might assume that the most difficult aspect of walking the length of the eastern United States would be *purely* physical. Undoubtedly thru-hiking the *Appalachian Trail* is a physical feat on par with few other challenges in life. You will push your body to new extremes. You will sweat. You will struggle. You will wake up and fall asleep sore. With that said, the physical challenge is *not* why seven in ten aspiring thru-hikers ultimately fall short of their goal.²

In no uncertain terms, the psychological and emotional struggle is what drives people off the Appalachian Trail.

It's the unpredictable and daunting psychological impact of your *Appalachian Trials*. It's the homesickness, redundancy, and loneliness. It's the thick, sweltering heat while scaling a shadeless, rock-face mountain. It's trying to sleep through sub-freezing temperatures, hoping that wearing every damn article of clothing in your pack and wrapping your sleeping bag over your head will provide enough warmth to grant a few hours of sleep. It's the constant swarm of mosquitoes, flies, and gnats. It's the boredom that comes from another day of walking through lackluster terrain. It's the pain that strangleholds every muscle of your body upon waking. It's putting on sweat soaked clothes for the fifth morning in a row. It's trying to sleep next to that snoring asshole six inches from your face. It's waking up in a shelter to sound of a mouse eating his way through your backpack. It's pooping in the rain; *have fun trying to wipe*. It's drinking discolored stream water. It's wandering a mile off trail before realizing you have no idea where you are. It's checking your nether regions for parasitic and disease carrying ticks at the end of an exhausting day. It's living in a constant coat of filth. It's walking consecutive days with a set of throbbing blisters between your toes and on the sides of your heels. It's veering off trail to go to the bathroom, only to look down and notice that you're standing in poison ivy. It's rocks eating through your boots and insoles, making it feel as though you're hiking barefoot. It's running through a storm while hearing lightning crash down on every side of you. It's the rustling of an animal

¹ For those who might *not* know, whiteblaze.net is the biggest *Appalachian Trail* related forum online. I suggest checking it out.

² *2,000 Milers*. Retrieved from <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/about-the-trail/2000-milers>

prowling outside of your tent just moments before you were *going* to fall asleep. *These are the reasons people throw in the towel, not because a climb is too daunting.*

That's why all the *how-to* advice in the world regarding logistics and terrain, while important, will do nothing to keep you inspired enough to stick with your goal. Going through the hassle of devising an elaborate re-supply schedule -a conventional pre-trail suggestion- gives the illusion of essential preparation, but in reality, 70% of aspiring thru-hikers won't make it to all of their re-supply locations. *If a mail-drop is sent, but no one is there to receive it, does it really exist?* Let's be clear, if finishing the Appalachian Trail is your goal, your time could be better spent.

My time could have been better spent. For the first three months on the trail, I had a total of five mail-drops sent, and that's *only* because conventional AT wisdom suggested that I purchase supplies before leaving. In hindsight, when factoring in the cost of shipping, I didn't save a dime. Not only did my supply preparation not contribute to my progress on the trail, it was actually counterproductive. I added hassle to my day by having to be at drop-off locations during *their* business hours. As you will soon learn, a life without schedules is one of the true pleasures of the Appalachian Trail.

So who am I to challenge mainstream advice about hiking the AT?

First off, as I'm sure you've already guessed, I am an Appalachian Trail thru-hiker. I accomplished the feat in 2011 in five months and one day. From the months leading up to my hike all the way through my summiting Mt. Katahdin, I kept a running diary on my blog: theGoodBadger.com. I went into the AT as an outsider to the backpacking world; I had literally backpacked zero times before stepping foot onto Springer Mountain.

What was interesting to me about the trail were the mind games, the AT culture, the roller coaster of emotions, and the personal metamorphosis that comes from living in the woods for half a year. On my blog, I detailed not only the struggles within myself, but the larger trends I noticed among my hiking peers. Before I knew it, I was getting more traffic and positive feedback to my website in a single month than I had *in the previous year*. Apparently I had struck a chord.

When I finished the trail, I wanted to find a book detailing the psychological component of hiking the AT to see how it compared to my experiences. What I found baffled me. *This book didn't exist*. There are a plethora of how-to books, none of which deal with the most challenging aspect of the trail?!

Fine, I'll do it.

I wasted no time. I dug through my personal notes, old blog posts, and talked with fellow thru-hikers about their experiences. I wanted to know what separated those who finished from those who failed.

In this process, I found that there are three categories of AT hikers:

- 1) Those who succumb to the mental challenges and quit
- 2) Those who rely on sheer determination, grit their teeth, and press onto Katahdin despite being at odds with the process
- 3) Those who enjoy most, if not all, of their experience while successfully thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail

This book will put you in the third category.

One dirty secret amongst “successful thru-hikers” is that only a fraction of them actually enjoy the *vast majority* of their experience. I’m confident in the years to come, as the Appalachian Trail becomes more popular, we will start collecting more data on hikers’ psyches. After all, this is a psychological experiment unlike any other. Without this data, I can only speculate, but I would venture to guess that as many as one in three hikers dislike trail life by the time they reach the latter half of the trail. In reality, Katahdin couldn’t come soon enough for them. They finish solely due to persistence.

While their determination is admirable, I don’t want you to fall into this second group. It’s important to keep in mind that the Appalachian Trail is a half-year unpaid vacation. How determined would you have to be to sit on a beach for the same time span? The trail should be enjoyed, and when joy is difficult to achieve, personal growth should become the focus.

Still, you might be skeptical. Perhaps you’re thinking, “People who would love a half-year backpacking trip possess a rare and inherent quality; they’re wired differently. It’s built into their DNA, and I just wasn’t bestowed with those attributes.”

I understand why you might feel this way, but allow me to explain why you’re wrong. *I* successfully thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, and genuinely enjoyed the experience.

In theory, there was no one more ill-prepared to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail than me. I’m a computer guy, not a camping guy. I owned *none* of the gear necessary for a half-year backpacking trip. I had never set up a tent or built a campfire. The *only* thing I had going for me was that I was in decent shape and good health. But as you will learn in Chapter 5, even that was taken away from me. Now that I’ve completed this task, I look back at my experience with only fond memories, even when sober.

The bottom line is this: not only can you achieve your goal of hiking from Georgia to Maine, you *can, and should*, enjoy the process. This book will show you how.

Since you picked up this book, *I feel responsible for your success*. Your summiting Mt. Katahdin and enjoying the process sincerely matters to me. I’m convinced the rest of the book will help you accomplish just that.

But there is another reason you should read *Appalachian Trials*. You’re not the only one who will be presented with psychological hurdles. Family and friends who are clueless about your upcoming adventure may be anxious as well. And trust me on this one, calming their fears benefits you. They’ll get off your back. They’ll join your team. They’ll applaud your seemingly *idiotic* journey instead of questioning it. Because after all, knowledge assuages fear. So when you’re done reading this book, pass it on to the anxiety-ridden people in your life. Better yet, tell them to get their own copy.

Here’s another reason reading this book should be on your short list of things to do before leaving for the trail. Perhaps you’re someone who isn’t yet convinced traversing the world’s oldest mountain range is something you want to do. The fact that you’re reading this book tells me that you’re sufficiently curious about it. With a little nudge, you might just decide to leave behind the comforts of home and embark on this journey of a lifetime. At the very least,

you'll get a sneak peak into the psyche of a thru-hiker. Knowing what's in a thru-hiker's pack is nice. But if *finishing* is your concern, knowing what's inside a thru-hiker's *mind* is what matters.

I'm convinced that for every person who actually embarks on the AT, there are countless others who talk themselves out of it for one reason or another. Don't be one of those people. Not only will I provide that friendly nudge to pack your pack, I'll be with you every step along the way.

This book is divided into four sections. The first three- pre-trail, on-trail, and (*you guessed it*) post-trail- will both prepare you against the common pitfalls aspiring thru-hikers fall into, as well as provide you the tools necessary to keep a strong mindset when you're confronted with your own *Appalachian trials*. The fourth section is a collection of *bonus* material including a detailed gear chapter, how to avoid the AT's greatest and most downplayed risk, and a thorough FAQ, including how to save money before and during your thru-hike.

One final note- throughout *Appalachian Trials*, there is an emphasis on the challenges associated with thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail. My objective with this book is to prepare you for the obstacles that you can expect to encounter during a half-year in the woods. The *only* way I can properly accomplish this is by shining a light on these darker regions.

For this reason, however, it could be interpreted that I have a negative perspective of the AT. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. My thru-hike was the best five months and one day of my life to date. That said, a large reason I was able to not only finish the trail, but sincerely enjoy it, was due to my honest and open confrontation of the obstacles ahead. This book will require you to do the same.

So whether you're already planning your journey into the woods or you're still straddling the fence, join me in Chapter 1, where you will glimpse my pre-hike self, convincing you evermore that if *I* was able to triumph over my *Appalachian trials*, you too will prevail over yours.

If you want to read more woods from this book, check out the Appalachian Trials Amazon Page:

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