

Maryland

June 5, 2012 Tuesday

The train arrives in Harpers Ferry. As I traveled from DC, watched out the window as terrain changes from tamed suburban Maryland, adding creepers, then steep hills, then river and wildness.



Historic district, Harpers Ferry

Walked to Teahorse Inn hostel, 5:45PM. A few guys lounging, but I feel the outsider with clean clothes and feet not beat up. Go down the hill for a sub, back up to shower and whatever is next. Wow, I feel awkward and uneasy. Pre-hike jitters.



Bunkhouse at Teahorse Inn

Dakota Dan, John, and an ATC volunteer, Peter Pan AT94, who stays in the hostel are in the lounge, but others are pretty quiet. A chess game starts. Through an open window I hear songbirds so different

from New Mexico but similar to Haverford campus that I just visited. So loud it will take several days to keep from getting wakened, even inside. Ten double bunks for the guys, probably almost all filled up. A smaller womens bunk room, with indeterminate small number. Nicely appointed hostel as a good start for the adventure. I pumped the ATC volunteer for recent news about the trail. He hiked south-to-north twice. Says 90% of trail has changed, with more switch-backs, and less steep scrambles. Also, he caught Lyme disease while working on a trail crew, and required a second round of antibiotics after a blood test, although he did not have symptoms the second round. Laurel, hostel owner, comes up to chat with us. Teahorse Inn was a place she stayed in China, and she liked the name. Former teacher here. *Moonwatcher* sleeping already. *Mad Hat* still down at Italian restaurant. *Skunk Ape* on phone outside. In Florida Sasquatch is known as "Skunk Ape", hairy biped that emits an odor. Named himself.

Long discussion on trail names with examples:

1. *Uno*.
2. Pat, Pat-So-Far becomes *Pants-On-Fire*.
3. *Kittens* (If you don't give yourself a name someone might name you. I like kittens.)
4. *Precious*.
5. *Broadsword* carries a foam rubber sword.
6. *Animal* carries a five pound bucket of food for strength training.
7. *Machete Mitch*. *Honey Badger* (watch famous [clip](#) on YouTube.)
8. *Connect-Four*.
9. *Tickle-Monster*.



My bunk at Teahorse Inn

June 6, Wednesday, *Harpers Ferry to Rocky Run Shelter, 16.1 trail miles*

Another hiker, *Honey Badger*, arrived at the hostel in the night, bring the total to eleven, plus one female cyclist He slept on a cot out in the lounge (since the bunk room was full). Laurel had three waffle makers (motel style) going at once, offering thick Belgian-style waffles and watermelon and bananas. With such a fine meal we were bound to accomplish great deeds today.

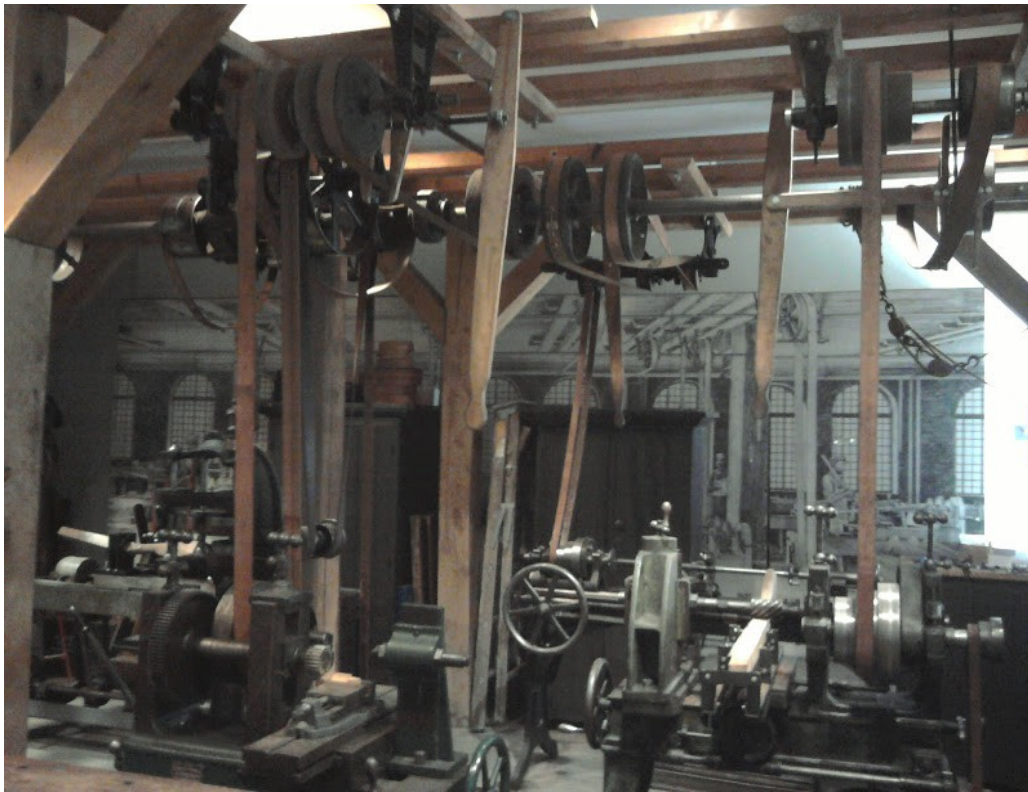


Breakfast at Teahorse Inn



After breakfast I said my goodbyes to Laurel. Turns out she had been running the hostel for just two years, and yes, she knew she was not on the AT Companion 2012 map yet. I will heartily recommend the spot to other hikers.

Took my pack and strolled to the historic district to wait for post office and Appalachian Trail Conservancy office to open, and *quelle surprise*, all the history museum buildings were open early. Particularly enthused over the industry building, with belt-driven machinery to make a rifle, lock, stock and barrel... though none was actually operating.



Got post office package with no issues, though I did forget minor items in the box like an envelope to send missives to my beloved. At the ATC *Peter Pan* took my photo to put in the notebook of all registered hikers. I was section hiker 109, just after *Mad Hat* thru-hiker 367. Had two photo postcards to send to family, and got alcohol fuel at office. Showed Peter Pan my photo in front of the ATC office from twenty four years ago. They keep notebook/albums going far back, so he pulled 1988 to see if I had a polaroid made, and apparently I had not. (Since I was no longer a thru-hiker when I reached the office back then, I probably did not see a need to register. Or when I took my photo the office might have been closed.)

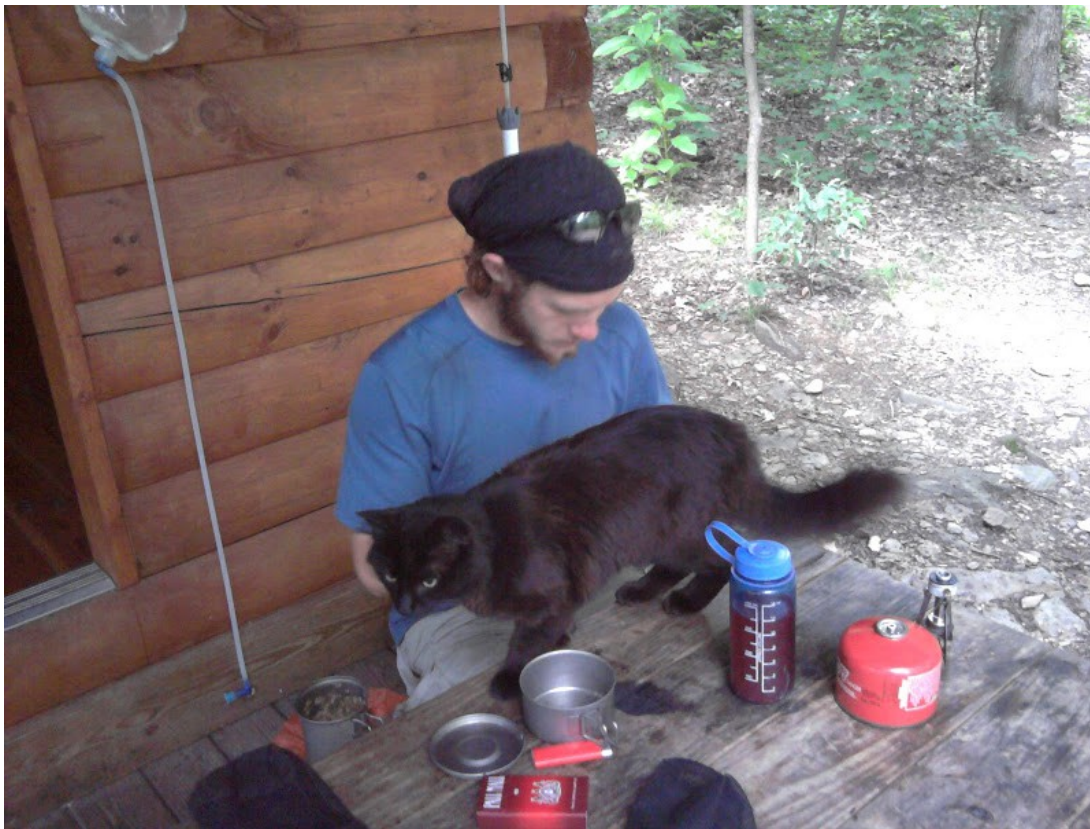


ATC 2012 photo

Departed, passing once more through the historic/tourist section of Harpers Ferry. Do I get an early lunch snack on my way out? Naawww, time to hike! Crossed the B&O (Baltimore and Ohio) trestle. Hiked for a couple of miles along the remains of the B&O towpath, which of course is flat without rocks. Oh, if only the rest of Maryland is this easy (foreshadowing).

Climbed up Southern Mountain, which had Civil War significance, like most of the area. Had to stop at Ed Garvey Shelter and climb down a long path for water. Mostly ate lunch while hiking. By the time I got to Compton Gap Shelter, my scheduled stop, it was only 4PM, and I feared idle hands, so determined to try another five miles to Rocky Run Shelter. Almost immediately I found out why it had gotten that name, ans the Trail filled with softball-to-basketball-size rocks spaced together too close to avoid. My feet were getting hammered, and I even felt a twinge in the knee. Adjusted my stride somehow, and the knee stopped bothering me. Finally the last mile was down a steep incline, still filled with bruising rocks. Easily passed by last hiker from night before.

Wearily pulled into Rocky Run Shelter, joined by *Honey Badger* and another long distance hiker named John, 50-ish, no trail name, plus a cat! The black cat sneaked off with *Honey Badger's* cheddar cheese, and he had to chase it down and get back the rather sizable quantity. Cat was a pest with begging, and threatened to steal all our dinners.



Cat ninja thief

Dinner number one on the Trail was curry, beans, and rice, and was the best meal I have fixed in ages. There is something about a hot meal while backpacking that justifies the extra gear and time. Both shelter mates turn in early and are asleep by 8:30. I try a cold sponge bath which feels amazingly good to boost my spirits, so may do that regularly when weather is not bad.



First trail dinner



Pinch test at start of trip, in imitation of 1988 photo

Now at 9PM, really too dark to write, so I will try sleeping on my tiny tiny mattress pad.

June 7, Thursday, Rocky Run Shelter to Raven Rock Shelter, 20.6

Woke up early, started stirring around 6AM, decided to no-cook and eat breakfast on the Trail. No bad effects from yesterday's long-ish day, though I know for the the second day is where muscle pain hits.

The dried Logan bread was just barely able to be bitten into chunks without dunking-- but just barely. Would be pretty embarrassing if I had to get off the Trail with a broken tooth. Though tough, the Logans were tasty and filling, and kept me going throughout the morning.

At the next highway crossing I tried to send a text to "Base Support". I could see the battery drain as the poor cell phone transceiver struggled to send text to a distant cell tower. The phone did not think the text was sent, but a later reply confirmed it made it.

Near the Washington Monument (not the famous one, the older one in Maryland) I stopped at a picnic pavilion to top off the cell phone battery for a few minutes while taking advantage of a nice restroom. My rest stops this trip will tend to be near AC power.



Washington Monument

John (*Just John*) caught up and passed me, but was going to stop a bit at Pine Knob Shelter. I had enough water still, so keep going. At Pogo Memorial Campsite I met an Appalachian Trail Land Ranger picking up trash, who observed the campsite was a mess and needed a resign. John must have passed by while I was getting water at a spring at Pogo. Ate lunch while hiking with no stopping to put in some miles. Some part of the Trail easy going, but other sections were hell-a-rocky. By afternoon thighs and shins were complaining, forcing a 3 mile/hour pace down to 2 miles/hour. Around 2PM near Ensign Cowal Shelter. It threatened rain. Stopping at two would be rather early, so I pulled into the shelter to make cocoa and snacks and have a real rest. Eventually the rains abated, so I proceed on. Around 5PM passed by *Honey Badger*. By 5:45PM rain started, big heavy drops with thunder, too much to ignore. Got a chance to try out my umbrella, which I had been carrying in a front pocket for the last couple of hours because of threatening clouds. The bumbershoot worked a treat-- keeping my dry while easy to carry, and no sweating or claustrophobic feeling from drops on a hood.

Finally around 6PM, moving slowly, I pulled into Shelter at Raven Rock, up high on a hill/mountain. *Just John* and *Honey Badger* were there, along with a couple of two teenage girls, and a guy from Connecticut (who sounds like LH). He happened to tell me they no longer lock people into shelters at Smoky Mountains. (*My info on southern part of AT is now out of date.*)

At shelter was a strange pulley system for hanging food bags, first I have seen of that type. Late, and dark, 9PM before dinner, hanging food bag, cleanup, and journal. Time to figure out sleep system again.

June 8, Friday, Raven Rock Shelter to Tumbling Run Shelter PA, 13.2

Waited to stir until 6AM because of the crowd. Out by 6:30, no cook, and shortly encountered a huge steep downhill boulder field. As *Just John* zoomed past, he commented that anyone doing the Four State Challenge (hiking VA, West VA, MD, and PA in one day) would encounter that rock field late in the day, exhausted, with the sun going down.

Further down, more downhill, my right shin and left big toe start hurting. Worried about the shin. Usually muscles loosen up after an hour and do not bother you until the next time your rest and start up again. This seemed to mostly hurt going downhill, and the AT has plenty of uphill. I had already planned to do a short day.

Pen Mar County Park was closed, including restrooms. (But another hiker thought they were open about the same time or shortly after.) Nice view, relaxing park, just opens late.



View from Pen Mar County Park

Mason Dixon Line. Foolish me, thinking it was between Virginia and Maryland.



Mason Dixon

Found the road to hike 1.2 miles for Box 1, mostly through protected wetlands along a fast highway with guard-rails the whole way. Found the post office easily, and the clerk said I was the only one with a package waiting. She also handed me a box of snacks, toiletries, and assorted knick-knacks the local Girl Scout Troop put together to assist hikers. I was genuinely touched. Mailed trip journal letter and postcards. Hot dog, first 3G reception, so I found a chair in front of a nearby business and caught up on e-mail. Spied a convenience store and got a snack, and a couple of hikers who just finished their section offered me a ride back to the trail-head. Sweet! This sort of thing happens all the time along the Trail. Saw *Papa Rose* at trail-head.

Stopped at Deer Lick Shelters for a little leg rest. When I am ready to start, *Honey Badger* comes around from inside the shelter and greets me as he zooms up the Trail. A late starter, but he might to 3.5 to 4 miles/hour.

Finished at 4PM at Tumbling Run Shelter, the first day as per schedule at 13.2 miles. *Papa John* was already there, and a couple of thru-hikers who moved on. Also a Ridge-Runner was there, *Calculator* AT2011, whose job is to patrol a section of Trail and teach "leave no trace". Nice guy, volunteers at the ATC office on Thursdays.



Papa Rose at Tumbling Run Shelter

Four young thru-hikers arrive, including *Lady Forward* from Wisconsin,

Sweet, 3G at shelter. No civilization sights or sounds. I look up "shin splints" on Wikipedia. Hypochondriac much? Did not like learning that stress fractures have similar symptoms-- that would be a trail ender. Of course, treatment for all kinds of athletic injuries involve huge amounts of rest-- not terribly practical for a long distance hiker.

Massaged my legs a long time with lotion and olive oil, which seemed to help. Hard to understand how massage will relieve a stress fracture, so hoping for a less serious type of injury.

Will do a short day tomorrow, massage beforehand, and see how that goes.

Lady Forward and Joss come back to the table and crack everyone up.

Pennsylvania

June 9, Saturday, *Tumbling Run Shelters to Quarry Gap Shelter, 11.5*

Keeping to a short hiking day to ease leg pain.

Massaged my leg with lotion for a few minutes, and set off around 7AM with a slow deliberate pace, never greater than 2 miles/hour, with emphasis on low impact, low impulse force. After a while I realize on big steps I tend to land on the right foot unconsciously, to protect previous injury to my left knee, which is curiously not complaining.

Because of the early start and a light breeze and no clouds, and plenty of shade, the temp was so very fine. Brought a smile to my face just walking by myself. At a time like this, minor problems like a bum leg seem possible to overcome.



First parts were gentle uphill and level. Then some boulder fields, which I took slow. Long steady gentle downhill to Caledonia State Park. Swimming pool has a water slide, though swimwear is required. This was the first day of the year that the snack bar is open! *Nokey* and *Sprinkles* were ordering when I arrive. I got a hamburger and chocolate ice cream cone, and they fill my water bottle with ice and water for free. They even started charging some thru-hikers electronics. Enjoyed a real rest-room, then back for another ice cream and ice water. Joss arrives, and later *Papa Rose*. I see kids playing in the stream, so I go in for a quick dip.



Snack bar at Caledonia State Park



Swimming pool, Caledonia

Instead of staying in Caledonia State Park, *Calculator* had suggested we go to the next shelter, so I carefully climb a few miles, and pass a couple of women who say I am about to enter the "Taj Majal of shelters".



Decoration at Quarry Gap Shelter

Quarry Gap Shelter has potted flowers decorating the site, a bench, skylight over the roofed dining area, a babbling brook next to a spring, clotheslines, bear box, and more. The caretaker Jim Stauch, *Innkeeper*, greeted me and described how he cared for the shelter and nearby trails on behalf of PATC. *Papa Rose* arrives and chats, and Innkeeper eventually leaves. A few tenters arrive, then *Calculator* comes and says several thru-hikers are expected to arrive.



Calculator at Quarry Gap Shelter

Several 20-something fast thru-hikers trickle in. *Golden* introduces herself and asks if I need a real pen (I am writing journal with my skinny ink refill.) and starts a round of questions about ultralight gear. *Crash*, *Peppaboy*, *Lance*, and *Willie Raisin King* (new trail name, might not last) joke around the table while preparing dinners, and crack everyone up with banter. (Like my nephews and niece when they get together.)



Prepping dinner at Quarry Gap

In conversation *Calculator* says he is responsible for 37 miles, which he patrols five days with two off.

One of the guys hides a chocolate milk in the stream and asks *Golden* to go look and find a prize.

Papa Rose plans to go to a hostel tomorrow near a road we will cross, then another hostel the next night near Pine Grove Furnace State Park. Later I realize this might cost me a day of hiking, but my leg complains enough I better take a healing day.

Papa Rose has 8 grandkids, will finish final section, Katahdin, in August.

The AT Guide by *Awol* seems to be what most thru-hikers use now, not the AT Companion. The Guide shows elevation graphically. (Later entries will refer to the AT Guide as *Awol*, as thru-hikers do in conversation.)

June 10, Sunday, Quarry Gap Shelter to Tom's Run Shelter, 14.3

I leave Quarry Gap Shelter early as I can without waking people too much, then along an easy rolling or level trail most of the day. Lined almost all day with mountain laurel in bloom. No views, few rocks or steep downhill to speak of until the last couple of hours. In the cool early morning air I was not able to make out distant traffic noise or aircraft noise for the first two hours, just birds calling.



Passed by *Golden* on a brief steep downhill section, which she jogs down with a huge pack. Also passed by other young thru-hikers, of course. Still being careful with leg. Even on an easy level grade where it is oh so tempting to stretch out and turn up the speed.

At one point *Golden* and *Wildflower* stop and make a sign on the ground proclaiming this the "real" Appalachian Trail Halfway Point, according to *Awol*, not the halfway marker they will see later (and I will not quite get to today). Pictures are taken: *Golden*, *Willie*, *Lance*, *Wildflower*, *Peppaboy*, but not *Crash*, who has not caught up yet. I wait for the festivities to complete so they will not need to pass me. *Crash* passes me later, and is still resting at Tom's Run Shelter when I arrive. This crowd of thru-hikers will perhaps take the Half-Gallon Challenge and then waddle off to Ironmasters Mansion Hostel. While it might be fun to join them, I decide to stay at the neglected shelter for quiet time, then wander around Pine Grove State Park tomorrow, hopefully see the AT Museum, then spend one night at the hostel.



Wildflower and Golden mark unofficial half-way point



Wildflower and Golden at unofficial half-way point

Shawna and Terry arrive later and pitch a tent.

But I sense the reader grows weary of these details of who met whom when on the Trail. So let us divert to the odd feelings I encounter where my AT information is incorrect and out of date in so many odd places. All the shelters I have visited this trip have "bear poles" or some other system of hanging food. Hikers are not longer shut into shelters in the Smokies with chain link doors to keep bears out. Bears can now wander into the shelters but do not mess with humans because the food is not there. Some hiker made a comment about all the small towns in Georgia the Trail passes through. I remember Georgia as being pretty remote, but perhaps some businesses sensed an opportunity and moved close to the Trail. It is like a role playing game, and half my experience points are no good, and I do not know which points. My strategy has been to select knowledgeable kind people and be willing to ask plenty of dumb questions, so thank you *Peter Pan*, *Calculator*, and *Papa Rose*, and there will be others.

I hesitate to draw too many broad comparisons between the AT then and now, because now is only a few days. I was chatting with a day hiker and observed I hadn't seen a pump filter during this trip, then an hour later I notice that Shawn and Terry might be using a pump filter.

June 11, Monday, Tom's Run Shelter to James Fry Shelter, 10.9

The *Noodleheads* stop by, the first people I've seen on the trail where I'm certain they are ultralight backpacking. Seem real nice, though walking so fast I may never see them again.

A short easy walk down from Tom's Run Shelter to Pine Grove Furnace State Park, with a small grocery and nearby hostel. The grocery has the "Half-Gallon Challenge", where thru-hikers try to eat a half gallon of ice cream in one sitting. Typical times for thru-hikers who had come just ahead of me was 31 minutes, and many took the challenge, in celebration for completing the "official" half-way point on the Trail. The Pine Grove General Store has a large shady front porch, and although not open until

9AM, they had AC plugs for charging phones, which is a good thing. The Ironmasters Mansion Hostel did not open until 5PM (the Companion said 4PM) so I would explore the park, take in the nearby AT Museum, rest, and relax. The thru-hiker group from yesterday came down from the hostel. I mentioned to *Golden* how I had seen her float down a steep rocky trail with huge pack, and asked if she had done cross country. She smiled yes and said, "Downhill is my super power". *Lance*, *Willie*, and others depart up the Trail.



Ironmasters Mansion



Lake at Pine Grove Furnace State Park



Official half-way marker

Someone comes by and says, "Hi, I'm *Tubesocks*." I remember being asked if I had met *Tubesocks* yet, and here he is. Picture a 300 pound man, around 35, heavily tattooed on legs (and stomach, but that is a story in itself), lugging a really huge pack with a hammock visible-- not a camping hammock, but one you would by to set up in the yard. Now picture this as a perfectly friendly voluble guy, willing to sit down and talk with you all day about anything and everything-- and reality seems to warp around him just a bit. He is a grad student at some university in Pennsylvania, and conceived the idea of going on the Trail this summer collection stories, for a communications major. He only can hike three to five miles a day right now, but is dropping poundage and learning skills.



Tubesocks, Terry, Shawna, and Papa Rose, Pine Grove General Store porch

Papa Rose comes by, slack-packing, and says he has decided to keep slack-packing more today and skip the hostel. I give him my e-mail and ask him to send a photo of his climb to Katahdin, which he plans to do in August to complete his 2000. The (pair of section hikers) stroll in, also plan on staying at the hostel. Terry (dad) and Shawna (daughter) got inspired to start section hiking after she read "A Walk in the Woods" and got him to read it also. "Let's do that!"

Another thru-hiker comes by, *Steamer*, also planning to hostel. He took a couple of weeks off at Harpers Ferry when he discovered his body was a mess. "The trail can kick your butt." *Steamer* looks just like "John Locke" from "Lost".

Earlier another hiker starting from Harpers Ferry this year to complete his AT hike started last year, will thereby complete his Triple Crown, since he already did the CDT and PCT. Tall, and long legged, his pack appeared ultra-light.

Tubesocks notices a partially erased tattoo on Terry's lower leg. Turns out it used to have his wife's (Shawna's mom) name on it-- before they divorced. *Tubesocks* talks about a friend he trades tats for photo/website/miscellaneous services, and says that koi tattoos are very often used to cover an old tattoo-- presumably because of its bold lines and colors. I burst out in amazed laughter. "That's the great thing about the trail", I exclaim. "All this knowledge you would never have been exposed to in normal life." *Tubesocks* could go into detail about a great many thru-hikers, which is a lesson to me: You do not have to keep pace with anybody if you can put yourself out there and share deeply during that moment of passing.



Tubesock's tummy tatt



Appalachian Trail Museum



Iron Furnace at Pine Grove Furnace State Park

I discover that the local hostel does not have laundry facility, so go on to the next shelter.

June 12, Wednesday *James Fry Shelter to Alec Kennedy Shelter, 8.1*

Last night I asked *Steamer*, "What about your rain gear? Have you ever seen any hiker on the AT with an umbrella?"

He scowls like there's an unpleasant taste in his mouth. "Two. (pause) One wouldn't listen to anyone; had to go his own way. (pause) Generally I just take a rain day for an all day rain."

This morning sky is threatening, but hasn't started rain yet. Getting all the way to Boiling Springs gets me to grocery store that might, just might, have ace bandages, possible relief for knee. I wore an ace bandage every day for 1988 AT trip, and seemed to help. The town might also have a hotel with laundry. No such amenities for a week now. About twenty miles away, high for my injured condition, but possible if I walk slowly and carefully. This terrain is some of the gentlest on the AT, passing through farm fields... once you get down the mountain.

Steamer and *Poet* are in tents, so I am alone in the shelter. Able to quietly leave by 6AM, eating my Logan bread breakfast while hiking.

After a bit drizzling begins, and I pull out my umbrella. Still another shelter, with some rocks I seem to remember, then easy down to Boiling Springs. The rain comes down harder, my boots start to look slightly damp on the outside. First the toe guard, then the front suede stripes, then the next suede

stripes, progressing backwards. I remember *Steamer* pointing out the shoes cost two days of wet feet when soaked; I assume because of the extra cushioning. He speaks from experience as he still wears his original Moabs from when he started the Trail. Wet feet, and partially wet shorts at the edges where umbrella does not always extend. I hit the rocks on the run before Alec Kennedy Shelter, and discover a maze, where the trail playfully threads its way zig-zagged through rocks, huge boulder outcroppings on an exposed ridge. Not so playful now. A cross-breeze as I hit the exposed area make umbrellas not possible, even if you did not need both hands for trekking poles. Insane to go back, insane to go forward, worse to stay put. Water resistant wind shirt goes on, then rain mittens to keep hands from freezing. Vibram soles on Moabs perform superbly, clinging to soaked limestone with uncanny tenacity. Finally through the maze, and a long several miles down to the shelter while thoroughly soaked. Luckily no one is in the shelter to witness my stupidity. As I quaff multiple hot chocolates and an extra hot dinner, I vow to heed thru-hikers' advice attentively, and definitely take rain days when all-day-rains are forecast.

Couple of hours later *Papa Rose* strolls in from the rain like it was nothing, has a quick unheated lunch snack, and plunges back into the maelstrom. "Wanna finish this section and see family!" Then *Mad Hat* and a young local section hiker named Terry arrive. They hiked even further in the downpour. *Mad Hat* says, "I love hiking in rain; get some of my best mileage days."

Later I learn *Steamer* hiked on into Boiling Springs that same day. So I hear.

June 13, Wednesday, Alec Kennedy Shelter to Darlington Shelter, 18.2

Easy 3 or 4 miles from Alec Kennedy down to Boiling Springs PA. *Mad Hat* and I get an early start for a funny reason: Terry lights up a cigarette while still inside his sleeping bag, at 4:20AM, then falls back to sleep. I'm not mad in the slightest, for I have another anecdote and know another eccentric character. (Wait until Coco reads about this.) I am truly surprised at the percentage of 20-something thru-hikers that light up a fag first thing when pulling into a shelter for the evening. How can they still perform as well as they do? Why?



Pennsylvania farmland

Down to a lovely bucolic town, with centerpiece a lake with unlikely degree of transparency, with fish, ducks, and even a swan. An ATC office is already open, and a welcoming staff person points me to the AC outlet. My philosophy is, if you're waiting or resting, you might as well be charging. *Mad Hat* goes in

search of breakfast. The post office no longer opens at 8, so I hike a mile out to a supermarket in search of: 2 ace bandages, watch battery, mole foam, and spare pen. They market only has one ace bandage and no watch battery. (Small town people must really appreciate Amazon.) On way back stop into a convenience store and find a single ace bandage on the shelf. Score! Find mile foam at fisherman's outfitters near ATC office, but no runners shorts, alas. Get mail box and take back to office to organize.



Lake at Boiling Springs

A mom and two little girls, flanked by an even smaller brothers, comes to drop off some fresh grapes for hikers. The girls are too shy to get near us, and designate Mom as their agent. A "trail angel" is someone who bestows a kindness on hikers. This mom is teaching her little girls to be angels at an early age, and I testify the grapes tasted the sweeter for it.



Boiling Springs

Meat and *Aeolus* (spelling?)(formerly Austrian but now South Carolinian) are other hikers getting ready. I wrap my shin and knee with high hopes, then call Coco on her 18th birthday.

Finally get ready for a long 15 mile hike on very level farmlands and "hedgerows" (really tree-field boundaries) with no water source until the shelter... and of course soggy feet. Fields of corn and clover. Silos, paths winding through mulberry trees ripe with fruit, some kind of cherry tree with dark fruit, wild strawberries, and nearby traffic noise all day from turnpike and/or other freeways.



At one place *Aeolus* taking a break and invites me to join him. He sees the trouble I am having with my leg and kindly offers detailed advice and mini lesson in biomechanics, based on his experience after breaking both ankles and studying properties of shoes very closely. While unwrapping my two bandages I am shaken to discover a swollen ankle. Were the wrappings too tight? More tendonitis? Will probably require hiking down to nearest town and staying there until I have answers.



Hmmm

Lightning bugs frolic outside the shelter. Why indulge in depressing thoughts when lightning bugs are about?

June 14, Thursday, Darlington Shelter to The Doyle, 11.4

In Darlington Shelter for the night with me was *Mad Hat* and *Just John*. *Aeolus* and *Meat* tented. All were planning to spend a night in The Doyle, a hotel dedicated to serving hikers. From *Calculator* I got the impression that if you are thru-hiking and haven't done The Doyle, you have really missed what the AT was about.

After a week on the Trail, my injuries, probably tendonitis, threaten the entire enterprise. The Doyle is super-inexpensive, hostel rates, so I plan on at least two nights in town healing, and have my beloved "Base Support" overnight equipment replacements.



Downtown Duncannon PA

Six hour hike down to town, with the typical large elevation change, but after five hours I had not lost any elevation. And now the trail is getting rocky. I am last into town but I made it. *Steamer* is found at the bar in The Doyle, also stayed two nights. But first about town: Duncannon is a huge contrast with Boiling Springs, run-down wood buildings instead of stately field-stone, railroad line blocking access to waterfront, working class town, once beaten down, trying to pick itself up and reclaim downtown buildings. The Doyle is over 100 year old, one of the original Anhauser-Busch hotels. Lots of bars and pubs on main street.



The Doyle, Duncannon



Vicki and Pat at The Doyle

The Doyle... well for normal people you might hesitate to stay there. Looking around the inside, you definitely wouldn't stay there. But to a hiker, a chance at a shower and soft bed and chance to relax with fellow hikers, well you are willing to overlook a crumbling old structure, communal bathrooms, and

no sign of anything to code anywhere. To sign-in I walk into the bar, see hikers with beers, know I'm in the right place. Vicki greets me and signs me in, Pat is in back handling cooking. Up to my fourth floor room by stairs, find the shower, wait in the common area until it's unoccupied, then shower. Next a choice of food or laundry. I go down and ask Vicki if the duct tape on the coin washing machine in the bathroom means what I think. But a laundry is just two blocks down; I passed it coming in. Yet I see someone at the bar being served a real cheeseburger, and I gotta get one. Then laundry while charging, rest, talk to "Base Support" who is really helpful on medical issues.



The Doyle

Later for dinner I see *Mad Hat* at an Italian joint, Zeiderelli's, and join him. I had a cheese steak sandwich. He was trying to finish a "small" sausage pizza. I helped a little. *Mad Hat* was a conductor for the Union-Pacific Railroad, retired at sixty, now hiking in early sixties. His was a union job, now part of the teamsters. He is also a volunteer firefighter, which I later learn he started in his twenties.

With his beard and Minnesota accent, I have to ask him if he knows "The Red Green Show", and that he looks and sounds something like Red Green, which he takes in good humor. The beard is just for the hike, so I might not recognize him afterwards.

Sleep comes readily. My cell phone recharges, and so do I.

June 15, Friday, *The Doyle, Duncannon PA, zero*

Waking in an actual bed indoors, clean and with clean clothes, was a delightful experience after a week on The Trail. Even better is spending time in an official "trail town" that makes an effort to cater to hikers. I stumbled across the road to Goodies, and found *Mat Hat* finishing the French toast special. I join him and had the same. *Hat* was on his way up The Trail. Also said farewell to *Aeolus* and *Just John*. *John* had repaired his boot (yes, boot, not shoe) with shoe goo he found at the local hardware store. His foot was also giving him trouble, but he was hiking on.

Later saw *Sprinkles* and *Nokey* at The Doyle. *Sprinkles* had an appointment with a doctor about her ankle. They had a possible side trip with thirteen members of his family in a cottage on the outer banks

of North Carolina shore. His family would be driving through town today, so they would have to decide soon which path to take. Later she tells me the doctor diagnosed bursitis of the ankle, gave some recommendations, knowing she wouldn't be stopping hiking but given methods of reducing pain and damage. For anti-inflammatory meds the doctor recommended Aleve, perhaps because of fewer doses(?).

Juan Solo is the new trail name of an eighteen year old thru-hiker with southern Californian valley accent who I met at Tea Horse Inn hostel at Harpers Ferry. He is with *Wall-E* as they are ordering The Doyle's chicken strips in buffalo sauce. In walk Terry and Shawna! They were ending their section hike in Duncannon. This is their first AT section, though they hiked a lot on other trails. Their car was only a couple of blocks away to take them back to civilization, but the *have* to stop at this hiking institution known as The Doyle. They order; I get a salmon burger. *Nokey* and *Sprinkles* let me know they are going to North Carolina. After repast I give Terry and Shawna a tour of the hotel, with particular attention to eccentric details I have discovered.



Terry and Shawna end their hike at The Doyle



Tour of The Doyle rooms

I bid Terry and Shawna a hearty farewell. Will be strange not seeing them turn up unexpectedly. Maybe they will do some day hikes just to mess with my mind.

The trail runner *Coach* comes into the Doyle, polishes off a pork chop and baked potato feast, and gives some advice on the upcoming trail and treatment of my leg. He also says Rausch Shelter is closed but alternatives exist. Later, looking at the Companion, I do not see good options. No tenting at the Rausch is allowed, and other shelters are already too far away from it for the slow stately ramp-up I had planned.

Suddenly no buddies around. But I have some equipment to modify, an item to order, and leg to ice. And at 4PM I take the free shuttle to the large-ish supermarket, along a busy road too dangerous for hikers to make by foot; get some extra food since I plan to ramp mileage up slowly this week. I am joined on grocery outing by *DW* (which stands for "Dog Whisperer", since he was bitten by a dog).

The rest of Pennsylvania is reputed to be seriously rocky, real training for New Hampshire and Maine. If I can just make it through "Rocksylvania"...

June 16, Saturday, *The Doyle to Peter's Mountain Shelter, 11.2*

Two days of rest&relaxation at The Doyle were good for the body, but white blazes are calling! After treating myself to a last cooked breakfast at Goodies across the street (open at 6AM), grab my pack and bid a fond farewell to Duncannon, a real trail town. Starting at 6:45AM, the town was quiet with a few joggers out. My plan is to try a slow majestic ramp of mileage until Port Clinton, while getting used to inserts. (*Nokey* said the Superfeet may hurt the first two weeks, but you may notice your knees, ankles, and feet lining up straighter over time.) Also plan continuing analgesics and cat meds (oral steroids), knee brace, and cold packs at the end of the day.

The first day is pretty easy, climbing up to a ridge and enjoying views on both sides of the valleys below. I fear my modest cell camera will not be able to capture the essence. Sure, the trail is rocky, and I am prepared and expecting rocks for the rest of Pennsylvania.



Soon I am passed by *DW*, but chance to catch up and chat while he stops for lunch snack. Youngish, he was a journalist in Indiana but expects never to work for a newspaper again. He is currently blogging for a small press website, and blogging his trip by sending entries to his girlfriend from Louisville. He expects to leave Indiana, possibly for a location with more outdoor recreational choices.

Just John comes by and greets. I thought he was already way down the trail. I explained my slow ramp, so he might know I won't bump into him on trail for a few days. Although The Trail continues to surprise...

My hike is already finished at 3PM at Peter's Mountain Shelter, a mere eleven miles. Here is a vast twenty-person structure with a loft. I am joined by a father and teenage daughter and schnauzer, though eventually they retire to a tent. I think they are bothered by the prospect of mice scurrying around at night, even though I explain that my snoring usually drives them away. The family is section hiking the AT in Pennsylvania in small chunks.

Being a weekend, I see many day hikers and expect lots of company in the shelter, but I might be the only one.

The distance to the next shelter, Rausch, is 17.8 miles, which strikes me as excessively distant. Rausch is closed, with signs posted warning northbounders. We will all have to tent in primitive campsites at least one night.

I am currently at the site of the original AT Shelter, built by Shaffer, later removed and put in the AT Museum, which I already viewed. When he originally build the shelter, it was without a floor. Later named in his honor. A floor was later added, and he asked that his name be taken off the shelter, as he felt that wood floors would attract vermin. Three hundred stone steps down to the spring, not a trip I wish to repeat.

Very late, after my journal entry, *Whistles* makes her entrance. Here is only the second young woman thru-hiker I have seen walking long distances alone, after *Lady Forward*. She normally travels with

Crush, Peppaboy, and that extensive group, but is doing this part of Pennsylvania north-to-south after attending a friend's wedding in Philly and soon another in Virginia. Then back with friends on trail. We end up talking of many things: her volunteer work for rape crisis and teen sex education, getting EMT certification. I ask the impertinent and borderline-forbidden question about plans after the AT. "Well, 'Dad' ...", she responds with a sarcastic tone, which cracks me up. Well played.

June 17, Sunday, Peter's Mountain Shelter to Rausch Shelter, 18.0

Whistles and I bid fond farewells and hopes of future trail meeting. Dear reader, you must understand how uncannily often that happens on The Trail. Four miles down, I remember that last evening *Whistles* observed that she accidentally left her fuel bottle in the previous shelter, and that would have been a good time for me to offer hot water-- and me with extra fuel. I am so dense... well, a guy and a geek.

Today will be a walk in solitude. I continue to travel along the narrow ridge, trees blocking all but glimpses of farms and towns on either side, then down a thousand feet to a road, back up a thousand feet. Weather stays cool and clear all day, but not enough breeze to blow away gnats intent on getting in eyes and ears for their own nefarious ends.

Gradually the trail leaves a ridge and follows a meandering stream, with ground more level though still pretty high up. A few miles further than planned, I hike all the way to Rausch Shelter to take advantage of the cold spring water used for cold packs to help my leg at the end of the day.

The shelter is in the middle of reconstruction and has no roof. The shelter platform is still extant, so I could sleep cowboy style. On the other hand, my latest forecast is for rain tomorrow, so I practice setting up my tent-tarp for first time on this trip. Hmmm, it doesn't look like it offers much protection in a blowing downpour. Well, I may find out soon.



Rausch Shelter being reconstructed

My leg and feet seem to be getting better a little. I should still keep mileage moderate for a few days. Knock on wood.



First use of tent-tarp, near Rausch Shelter

Quiet day. Saw almost no thru-hikers the entire time. I may be traveling in a bubble.

June 18, Monday, Rausch Shelter to 501 Shelter, 17.5

One advantage of tenting by myself is being able to break camp with disturbing anyone. Out by 6AM-- huzzah! On the way out, notice the lone southbounder's tent was joined by another. The sky looks gray, very likely rain later. Pretty smooth trail without rocks for a while, then ridge walking again, down to roads, including underpass for I-81, the only man-made structure to shelter from rain until Penn's Shelter hours from the highway. Shortly after, a light rain starts, and I find the umbrella can be twined through my pack straps and slightly rest on my head, leaving both hands free for trekking poles on the copious rocks. Slowly, inexorably, the shoes go from damp to wet to soaking, and I stop to wring out socks about five times during the day.



Swatara Creek footbridge

The rain starts around 9:30AM and only lasts an hour or two-- not the afternoon rains I am used to at home-- but extra grass magically appears to capture and release moisture onto my shoes. Hmm, should I try low-cut water resistant gaiters? Anyway I already proved that wet feet will not harm me permanently, so on to William Penn Shelter by 1PM. One mystery guest sleeping in the shelter, so I sit at the picnic table, eat and wring socks a last time.



William Penn Shelter

Descending down to a highway, I discover trail magic! A trail angel has left a cooler of iced sodas and bags of Doritos and assorted snacks for hikers. The angel, *Zig Zag*, includes a book to sign like a shelter journal.



Trail magic by Zig Zag

Finally reach 501 Shelter around 3:30PM. This shelter is completely enclosed, with a polygonal sun-roof, twelve bunks, and "solar shower" completely covered by tree cover so the solar gain is negligible.



501 Shelter

The people inside are unfamiliar to me, until *Peppaboy* enters a few minutes later. *Peppaboy* laughs a lot, so I can tell he is in a shelter before I see anyone there. He thru-hiked the AT four years ago by flip-flopping. Twenty-eight, he saved up, quit his job, and is now thru-hiking again where he ends at Katahdin.

Big Sky and *Diesel* are a couple at the shelter. She never hiked or back-packed before starting the AT. She is now getting really bored with hiking each day.

Sitting at the central table, I ask *Peppaboy* and *G-Bird* about future stops I should not miss, since they both hiked the northern sections of the AT recently. They pull out Awols, and *Big Sky* and *Diesel* join in and listen. I make note of several hostels, snacking opportunities, and other locations to definitely visit.

Zig Zag, the trail angel, comes in and takes a bunk above me. Later she becomes ill, but thinks it is food poisoning since her husband is having the same symptoms. *Slingshot*, Kelly, and a kid seem to be hiking together. *G-Bird* is section hiking from Harpers Ferry to Maine, starting on June 9, so she is faster than me on average. She already did the same section last year! Age twenty-two, from Sweden, majoring in international business, she only has the summers to hike, and does not want to hike southern AT in heat of summer. She has hiked the Camino de Santiago three times! Her plan upon graduating in a year or two is to thru-hike the Pacific Crest Trail. On her AT trip last year her trail name was Trauma. Got giardia and only did not treat water one time. Banged a clavicle and had several other mishaps.



G-Bird hikes with -12C sleeping bag!

Zig Zag tried to thru-hike last year, got 70% complete, but had to quit because of medical complications. She had hypo thyroid that switched to hyper (or vice versa) and lost a lot of weight. Now she is giving back by being a trail angel. Which is a lesson on how to gracefully switch from a bitter defeat to constructive public service. Her living example makes her a trail angel in more ways than she knows. Thus endeth the parable of *Zig Zag*.

June 19, Tuesday, 501 Shelter to Eagle's Nest Shelter, 15.1

The huge central skylight at 501 Shelter acts as an acoustic amplifier for rain drops, making a small drizzle seem a torrent. People seem slow to rise, so I do not start moving until 6:45AM, and on the trail by 7:30AM.



Skylight at 501

A wet feet day, and early light rain insures a wet-foot day tomorrow. Luckily, the day starts with lots of rocks! You read that right. Rocks mean less grass, and grass means wetter feet, so Pennsylvania rocks have toughened me up to appreciate their advantages.



Dewdrops on spider web

The path is more or less level, with few view opportunities, no people in sight, and a moderate fifteen mile day, so it is possible to zone out and be in autopilot mode. Later the blazes become scarce, and the fog does not light until 2PM. Light-blue blazes look rather white in the fog.

I'm on track for 3PM arrival and promise of dry feet. *Diesel* passes me at 2PM, and *Peppaboy* and *G-Bird* zoom by at 2:30. I can hear them chatting back and forth down the trail-- they seem to be having a good day together. *Big Sky* catches up, and I push my speed up a little higher than safe for my legs. She says go ahead-- she didn't want to pass.

After the arrival at Eagle's Nest Shelter, some relationship drama ensues, and *Big Sky* and *Diesel* move on.



Eagles Nest Shelter

A father and two teen join us to dry out and tent-camp nearby. They are from Florida, section hiking the AT in order, three weeks at a time: *Just Dad*, *Pyro*, and *Blazer*. (I later learn this charming family has been written up in AT Journeys magazine.)



Blazer, Just Dad, Pyro, G-Bird, and PeppaBoy

June 20, Wednesday, Eagle's Nest Shelter to Port Clinton Pavilion, 8.6

In Eagles Nest Shelter were *G-Bird*, a late arrival southbounder (sobo), and myself. In tents were *Peppaboy* and the trio *Just Dad*, *Pyro*, and *Blazer*.

Short day today, but long enough, and hot enough. Rocks on the steep climb down were damp even though the leaves and ground were dry. It was hot enough the rocks were "sweating".

Down into Port Clinton, a tiny town with loud traffic and few services, though the people were friendly except for the staff at the Port Clinton Hotel, where I procured a shower and laundry. By the time I walked back to the pavilion I needed another shower, it was so hot.



Port Clinton

Big tactical error when doing laundry: forgot to bring my charger! No electricity at pavilion or anywhere else, until the kind postal clerk pointed out one free plug in the post office later.

When doing laundry, *Just Dad* came down, saying the kids were parked in the motel room upstairs while he does chores like laundry and replace a leaky sleeping pad. He, like I, was disappointed to find there was not a regular shuttle service to Cabela's (outdoor superstore) as guides and trail lore would have one believe. Back at the pavilion, *G-Bird* was skipping the next section (superfund site) and would rejoin the AT in a couple of days, presumably synched to *Peppaboy's* hike. Her friend *Book-Smart* from last year's hike rented a car and they will zero around for a couple of days. He offered rides to Cabela's since *G-Bird* needed boots there. I joined up and asked if *Just Dad* could come. We found him in the hotel laundry room, and he got ready to come with us super-fast.



Cabela's super-store

I had never gone to Cabela's. Life-size animals are displayed with toy guns the kids can use to practice shooting. Huge floorspace. Desk at front where you checked your guns. I scored a few key items, but forgot two because I did not make a list, but a good trip. The last time I was in a big-box store seems ages ago.



Kids can shoot at critters inside Cabela's

After returning to the pavilion, *G-Bird* said her good-byes and pointed out we might not meet each other on The Trail again: She hikes fast. On to the post office to get food drop, mail back some items, send letters, and recharge a little. Then back to pavilion to pack food in new dry bag and sort out equipment.

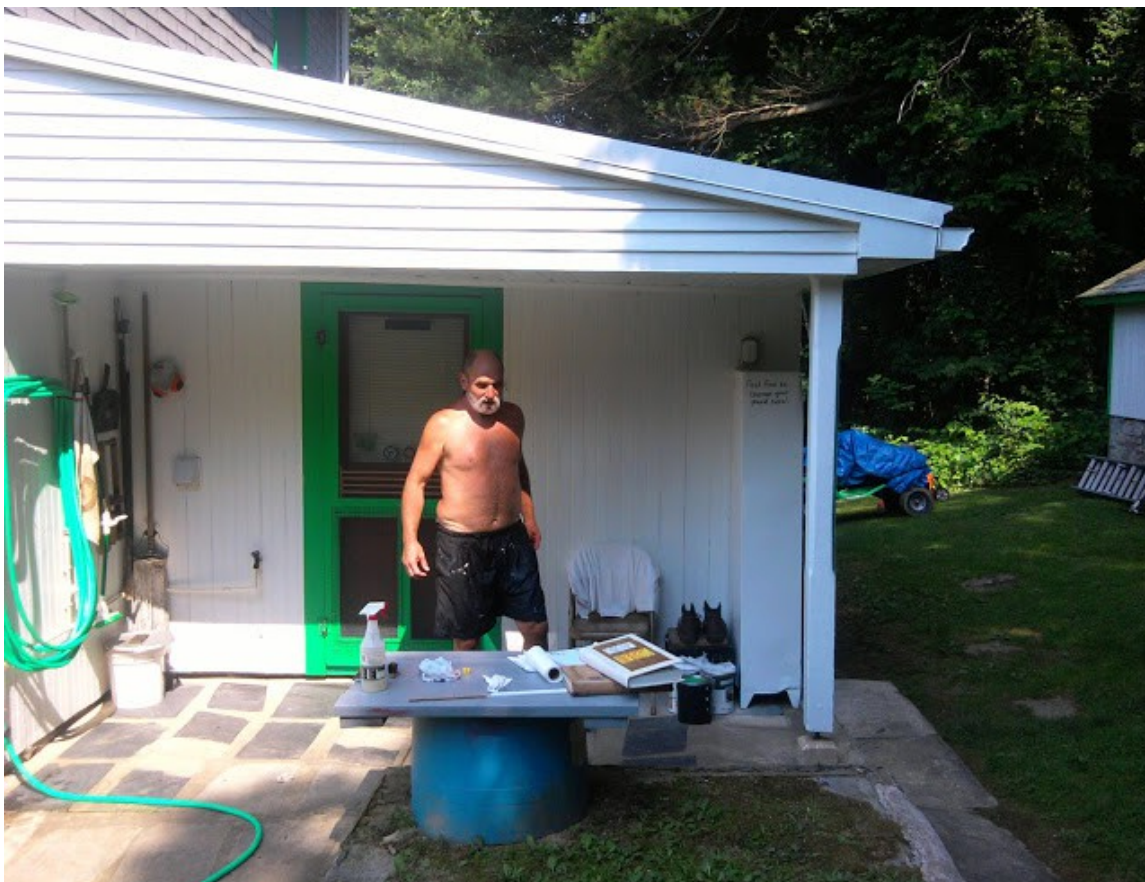
Joiner and *Progress*, from outside DC, come by and go out in search of sustenance. *Slingshot* and *Frenchy* come by and looked at pavilion dubiously, and will likely try tenting in the park across the street.

June 21, Thursday, Port Clinton Pavilion to Allentown Shelter, 22.6

Port Clinton was perhaps not the best choice for the night. Although well-hidden by trees, the road was close-by and high with truck traffic, noisy with "jake brakes". Close by the river, it was quite buggy. The good-hearted citizens installed a nearby street light that stays on all night. And did you know Pennsylvania is hot in the summer? So imagine me sleeping on a couple of hot benches pushed together, with a bandana tied over my eyes as sleep mask, a bug net over the head, ear plugs, sometimes flipping over the sleep pad because it is so sweaty, and often fanning the sleeping back to disperse the heat.

If only I had headed out even as late as 6PM, would have hit a spring and potential campsite, and it doesn't get dark until 8PM. Out in the morning at 6AM, and find trail magic at the first water stop! The trail offers high ridge with some views, and a few rock fields and roadways, gratefully accepted. Keep

being passed and passing *Just Dad* and crew. Finally reached Eckville Shelter at hot mid-day, situated a short distance down a residential street The shelter was behind a caretaker's residence, and this well-aged hearty individualist with thick German accent was perpetually on the move with outside chores: power washing the shed, trimming bushes, painting the porch, on and on, never stopping.



Caretaker at Eckville, always busy

Eckville is known for having a solar shower, and after that hot hike (rumored to 100F) I planned to do that first thing, BUT, who do I see waiting in the shelter area? *Peppaboy*! Seems he had heat exhaustion that really knocked him down, and could only hike 6 or 8 miles the previous day.

The shower was refreshing, and I allowed the water to soak my day-clothes and wore them during the heat of the afternoon. *Just Dad* and crew arrive and seek out the tenting area, a grassy shady lot across the street. I alternate chatting with them and the crew nearer the shelter, including *Peppaboy* and *Bobcat*.

Eckville Shelter has a charging station for visitors to use without having to ask. I really appreciate that, and could even call Coco and e-mail "Base Support", since 3G is available. I am having an equipment problem they could solve. My trekking pole tips were wearing out, and if they wear any further it would destroy the tip screw mechanism, making the poles unusable. They could send me spare tips quickly to the next post office.

This is one of the hottest days yet, and I drink double the amount of water. The plan was to start early, hike until hot, then rest until the heat breaks and hike some more. So at 4PM I start the three to four hour hike to Allentown Shelter, about the same time as *Peppaboy* and *Bobcat*. Finally arrived at 7:45PM, quickly get water and hang a bear line, and set up my tent-tarp. I planned to use it instead of shelter so I could sleep with fewer clothes on without grossing anyone out. Also joined at site by *Progress* and *Joiner*.

June 22, Friday, Allentown Shelter to Palmerton hostel, 17.7

Shower in the middle of the night. Packed tent after wiping it dry. Not out until 8AM-- scandalous! Today would be a no-trekking-pole day due to tip problem mentioned earlier. Lots of huge boulder jumping where trekking poles could be handy. About the time *Progress* and *Joiner* pass me I slip once, unharmed, and try to keep up with them of a bit so they can render first aid if needed. :-) *Progress* has a spare pole and kindly offers, but I am in rhythm of using hands. Who carries a spare pole? Not understanding.



Progress, Bobcat, and Joiner on PA rocks

Several more boulder runs during the day, mixed with some dirt roads. I'm not too proud to hike on dirt roads, nosiree. Some trails indifferently blazed, and Pennsylvania wildlife area marker looks too much like a white blaze. Later in, I discover the white reflective marker used for power transmission line right-of-way looks remarkably like a white blaze, and spend a pleasant hour on a false trail, including the most technically challenging boulder hopping of the day, which everyone else missed. Yet I was only twenty feet from the real trail, and was not too proud to ask a local on a smoke break on some back road where to go.

Stopped shortly after mid-day for water at Bake Oven Knob Shelter. The closest spring was dry, so had to go down another several hundred feet for spring number 2. *Peppaboy* arrived at the shelter to rest, and brought back a few black raspberries to share after his water run. While he rested, I took off. Several miles to next shelter, and I was undecided about staying in shelter or going to free hostel hosted by town government of Palmerton.

Up high on a ridge, a thunderstorm struck, with discharges rather close by. Just had to keep walking and hope trail gets off ridge soon... which it did. Rain followed, only thirty minutes worth. First time using my rain jacket, since I sent umbrella home. Finally got to last shelter of the day, George W. Outerbridge Shelter, and was happy for the piped spring nearby. *Peppaboy* shows up, resting a bit, and I decide to plunge on into town and he follows soon. Everyone else we had walking around during the day had by-passed the mid-day shelter and were already in town.

As I started to get to the blue-blaze trail into town, *Peppaboy* catches up, and I follow him, since he had gone through town a few years ago. We (he) decide to skip following blue blazes up a steep hill, reasoning the trail must drop down to the road we are following and cross some bridge over the river we are paralleling. We walk way too far. Apparently a foot bridge with a short-cut has gate closed after 4:30PM, so we had to take the hard way.

Nice clean hostel, with laundromat and useful businesses nearby. We arrive around 6:30 or 7:00, and I quickly gather stuff for things at once: shower, start laundry, leave phone charging, get Chinese takeout (including potstickers) and eat on steps of town hall, make a run to pharmacy for sundries, back to laundry to finish up.

Doors locked and lights out at 10PM. Relaxed easy vibe among all the hikers, nearly all who I have met on trail before. Saw *Saunter*, who I haven't seen in a while, and *Lady Forward*, who I have been a day behind for a long time. Good mix of people, easy conversation.

June 23, Saturday, *Palmerton hostel to primitive camp 2 miles past Wind Gap, 22.4*

When is it acceptable to start stirring in a hiker hostel? The oldest guys move earliest for old guy urgent morning business, *Saunter*, *Croc*, and then myself. I go upstairs to the empty gym to finish a trail journal entry, and when I get back a few minutes later nearly everyone is already gone. this is a problem for me, because I came into town on an unconventional route, and have no idea of correct way back to the AT. And *Peppaboy* seems to be sleeping in. I did get a hint from *Dog Whisperer* to try Third Street, so I follow that until a friendly older couple out on a porch point me further towards the correct way. Odd this route doesn't have a physical blue blaze. I'm about to climb up to the Trail when I join *Saunter* and *Croc*. We see a blue blaze next to a white blaze, and Saunter is certain we should take it-- I am less sure after yesterday's detour. As we climb he realizes it is the old AT, closed for EPA remediation, and will join back up with the current AT at the top, but our route is in the shade and shorter than the official trail. Sure enough, at the top we meet Jerry *Not Bad* who started before me. Also see *Lady Forward*, who is walking similar pace but behind and mostly out of sight all day. The climb up the ridge of the remediation offers some of the best views of my trip. Clear vistas of old industrial sites and small towns and fields laid out for our appreciation. I seem to be hiking in a bubble the rest of the day. I have to take a break at a water spring that involves a long off-trail hike, and I assume any trailing hikers near my bubble pass me at this point.



Blue Mountain as seen from Palmerton



Old industrial sites as viewed from Blue Mountain



The placement of shelters is not so great for my situation. Leroy Smith Shelter is a 16 mile day, which would make the next day a twenty mile hike into town, so I would arrive late and not be able to enjoy town as much. Going beyond Smith to the next shelter is 29 miles, clearly too long a hike.

When I finally arrive at Leroy Smith at 5PM I look around, and decide to walk on. Perhaps I will dry camp tonight somewhere in the middle between the two shelters. My guidebook documents a friendly hotel owner just five miles down the trail who gives hikers free water and sells sodas. I buy a couple to show gratitude, get extra water from hose. Back on The Trail I begin looking for campsites north of Windy Gap. Finally settle on a spot around 7:30PM, throw a bear line, set up tent, use remaining wipes to clean off for tick inspection, and cook double hot dinners. I hiked a long day and do not want hunger pangs at 3AM, particularly inconvenient when your food bag is hanging way up in a tree. All finished by 9PM, read a little e-book, and sleep with satisfaction that I should be able to get to Delaware Water Gap by next early afternoon and have a town day.

The night was a little cooler than before, so briefly I could crawl into sleeping bag nekkid instead of staying on top of it all night.

June 24, Sunday, *primitive camp 2 miles past Wind Gap to Church of the Mountain Hostel, Delaware Water Gap, 13.6*

I awake and break camp at my location a couple of miles trail north of Wind Gap. Head out by 6AM, doing a fourteen mile short day, not expecting to stop much. Should be in town by 2 or 3.

Pennsylvania is not done with us as far as hiking on rocks. Bouldering, little ankle-crunching rocks, mixed with little bits of smooth trail. Gnats start buzzing early today, 9AM instead of after noon the day before.

Getting to Kirkridge Shelter seems to take a long time, though I appreciate the water faucet on a short blue blaze trail. For a lot of the day we would be taken along a ridge that was one of the least frequently blazed in my experience, and I had to re-walk a fifteen minute segment to convince myself I was really still on The Trail. Then a long descent on rocky path all the way down to town, lovely in places lined with mountain laurel, passing many dozens of locals out for a day hike, all seeming to be walking much easier than I am, especially the 4-year-old kids that just went by.

I decide to do an emergency field repair on one trekking pole to help me get down. I am noticing shin pain that has not been present for several days, and new locations for pre-blisters where my feet should now be all toughness. Anyway, a piece of old rubber trekking pole tip I find on the trail plus some molefoam and seam sealer make a half-way durable tip to give me a pole for the downhill.

Finally, finally the trail enters a parking lot and then civilization. Oh, there is the famed ice cream shop that is located directly on The Trail! Just a little ways down is Church of the Mountain Hostel. I walk in, and no one is around at 3PM, though packs are scattered. Looking at the register I see *Not Bad* walked directly from Palmerton Hostel to here in one day, over thirty miles! I also notice *Big Sky* and *Diesel* are registered. I find the towel closet and enjoy a shower. One hiker, just leaving, tells me about milkshakes at the ice cream place and hot dogs and pie for \$2.49 special at Village Farmer and Bakery. I go out to partake of both. Much bloating. Also walk by two tiny outfitter shops and establish they do not carry what I need.



Ice cream shoppe right on The Trail



Carbs

Back to hostel and a few hikers who tend to always be well ahead (*Frodo, Pancake, ...*) are soon leaving. *Diesel* and *Big Sky* come in and chat, and move on, apparently to a hotel room. *Peppaboy* shows up. Then *Lady Forward* and *DW*. And a section hiker southbound, *Mountain Ann*.



Church of the Mountain hostel

Conversation in shelter, paraphrased:

Sagebrush: During long hiking days I've been trying to envision "Appalachian Trail the Video Game" for Wii Fit. The nunchuk controllers could be trekking poles. Leaning on the balance board controls which rock you step on next. A little status window shows your water, agility, food, and so forth.

Peppaboy: You know, I've also been imagining the AT Video Game. Like the way you think

DW: [comes in from other room] I've been thinking about this as well. Simply hiking would be too boring. You have to have options like Grand Theft Auto. While thumbing a ride, you can car-jack and cause general mayhem.

Imagining the video game of the AT, while hiking the AT: It's a guy thing.

New Jersey

June 25, Monday, Delaware Water Gap PA to primitive camp 0.5 miles before Crater Lake, 19.4

The post office didn't open until 8:30, so I figured I might be one of the last to leave this comfortable hostel, but several decided to go to the nearby outfitters, which opens at 10-- definitely not hiker-friendly hours. A brief thunderstorm and downpour at 7:30-- what's with these storms at odd hours? At the nearby post office got my food AND trekking pole tips, mailed back some minor items. Went back and repackaged food, and tried an equipment experiment. Ever since Harpers Ferry I have been carrying my cell phone in a front pocket, because I grab it frequently to take photos and refer to the e-book version of "Companion". A shorts pocket is less than optimal for hiking, because the significant weight is moving back and forth with your leg movement, wasting energy and feeling awkward. I had hoped a nearby outfitter might have a case that strapped on a pack strap; alas they did not. Just in case I bought a cheapo camera case at Rite-Aid in Palmerton. So I set out to modify it to fasten on my pack strap, which already had d-rings and straps sewn on for this purpose.



Delaware River Bridge

Finally out by 10AM. Sadly the ice cream shop was closed, or I would have grabbed one last chocolate cone on my way out of Pennsylvania. I met several people on this stretch of trail. *Phoenix Rising* tried to thru-hike a couple of years ago but had to quit because of Lyme, and wants to complete this year. She is traveling with *Angry Bird*, on her first section hike. I saw *Dog Whisperer* (Not DW, this is a woman) who is hiking with two dogs. She stopped to chat when a ranger wanted to meet her dogs. Also met *Jaws*, who hikes with *Big Sky* during the day and then *Big Sky* and *Diesel* meet back up in the evening. *Jaws* is working on his master's degree in aero-astro in Florida, and is using thru-hikers for his human factors design thesis. He has to be finished with The Trail in late August when school resumes.

After a climb we followed a level high ridge with views of water on either side, with lots of high grassland and comfortable forest. After an early social mix, I ended up walking in solitude and beauty most of the day. *Peppaboy* passed me around the lovely Sunfish Pond. No sign of our other companions from the hostel.



Sunfish Pond

I get to Mohican Outdoor Center at 3PM. I'm scheduled to stop here, but the Trail is really nice today with cooling breezes and no gnats. I take advantage of their snack shop and down a couple of sodas and bag of Doritos, and snag wifi to catch up on e-mail and fill water. I walk for a few more hours, then see a sign near Crater Lake "No camping next 3.5 miles", realize I cannot get past that zone in time, and backtrack one-half mile to a primitive campsite. *Phoenix* and *Angry Bird* mentioned they were only going as far as Mohican. They seem fun, and I may have missed a chance to know them better. *Jaws* might have stopped there too, and I would like to talk to him more. The Trail beckons, but so do new friends.



Mohican Outdoor Center

June 26, Tuesday, primitive camp 0.5 miles before Crater Lake to Mashipacong Shelter, 17.8

The temperature dropped dramatically overnight. Being only dressed in camp clothes and mummy bag, it was a little hard to stay warm for once. (But now I will be prepared: optionally wearing daytime clothes, double socks, rain jacket, and wind jacket.) Broke camp at 6AM, wondering if I could attempt a twenty-plus day to get to High Point Shelter, one long hiking day from my mail-drop and next hostel in Vernon, New Jersey.

Scored my first known tick around 9:30AM, when one of the large black non-Lyme ones bit me on the shin. He did not have a good hold yet, so I just lightly brushed him off. We are encountering a lot of tall grass that might have been trimmed back in other states. Will need to be extra paranoid during nightly tick checks.



Culver Fire Tower

Got to first water at Brinks Road Shelter around 10AM. The first couple of hours hiking I had to wear the wind shirt, which would normally be too hot to hike in after a few minutes. I am encountering more rocks than expected for this section, but manage to set a pretty fast pace.

In early afternoon my feet begin hurting to a considerable degree, and no other body part is complaining, apart for an unusual degree of tiredness for this time of day.

For this next bit of trail shelters are spaced closely, which is a help. At Gren Anderson Shelter around 2PM I see a note in the journal that *Peppaboy* had passed by that morning. I did get passed by *Frodo*, but do not see much sign of my regular thru-hiker bubble during the day.

At 4PM I am really flagging, going much less than 2 miles/hour. I meet a couple of ladies with a huge white dog, and that cheers me up when I stop to take its picture.



Doggie

Finally around 5PM I get to Mashipacong Shelter and know I have to stop for the night. Two other hikers are there. One older gentleman, *Smiling Jack*, also started at Harpers, but he calculates he is going 50% of my pace. *Miles* (not really a trail name, but most hikers assume it is, so will be italicized) is three days into a section hike from Maryland to New Hampshire.

During tick check, found another tick hiding in sock, laying in wait for the next time I put it on. Showed it to *Miles*.

Tomorrow will listen to my body and not push distance. We are not far from a state park that offers free showers and a snack bar. I will gladly rest there, then try to get to a shelter close to town, to maximize my town day.

PS: Strange commotion last night: *Miles* was tossing and turning through the night, then at one point jumped up and grabbed a flashlight. Later I learn he felt a tick crawling around, and speared it with a ballpoint pen.

PPS: *Smiling Jack* showed me the evaporative cooling rig for his insulin. Heavy with the water. He said on his AT attempt last year the doctor told him he could stop monitoring after a certain number of days--guessing that by that time he should be considered fit and healthy. But that turned out to cause problems.

June 27, Wednesday, Mashipacong Shelter to Pochuck Shelter, 19.6

Miles and I pass each other off-and-on during the morning, arriving at the same time at Highpoint State Park. The nice woman at park headquarters offered us free sodas, a benefit of "Friends of High Point State Park. We go down to the beach and snack bar area, and for a beautiful immaculately maintained park with water and beach it seemed odd so few people were there yet, but it was mid-week. I waded in the cold clear water, which seemed to benefit my feet quite nicely. While charging (of course), supported the local economy to the tune of an Italian ice, pizza slice, small Doritos, and soda. *Smiling Jack* came down, and we all chilled until noon.



High Point State Park



Smiling Jack

After an initial rocky climb back to the high point of New Jersey, the Trail led through pastoral fields, old stone property boundary markers, patches of forest, and finally, around 5PM, through a wetlands preserve. Lots of flat trail, few rocks, and I was careful all day not to push speed except for some brief conversations with *Miles* before he zoomed on.



view of High Point marker

Followed a sign "to well water" which brought me to the "Jim Murray Property", a lovely little spot that offers a private shelter for hikers. Lots of cool maps on the walls. Met *Mac* there, who I expect to see later down The Trail.



Jim Murray cabin

My goal was Pochuck Mountain Shelter, about a twenty mile day. Normally after the rough day yesterday that would be unrealistic, yet in this instance I knew about the flat smooth terrain. *Smiling Jack* and *Miles* were headed a few miles short of that-- Unionville New York, which offered camping and lodging.



Liberty Loop Trail wetlands

Around 4PM, knowing I still had four miles and a couple of hours to go, and hiking alone, I tried listening to a few podcasts during the hike. this seemed to give an extra boost for a moderately long hiking day, helping me to forget any aches and pains for a bit, and I enjoyed it so much I'll probably put on audio again in late afternoons when I am hiking alone. After three weeks on The Trail I can still appreciate the beauty around me... but not all day.



Pochuck Boardwalk

I arrive at Pochuck to see a large Scout troop section-hiking, from Ohio. Also there in the shelter were *Semper Fidelis* and another, and *Miles* showed up, explaining no good camping at Union City. *Mac* showed up later, and a few guys were tenting or hammocking that I do not know yet.

June 28, Thursday, Pochuck Shelter to Vernon hostel at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, 6.5

Miles and I left the shelter around 6:30AM, for an easy half-day of hiking and rest&relaxation at the hostel. Not so flat as yesterday, and more rocks, but quite bearable for three and a half hours. *Miles* hikes faster, so we often are out of sight of each other, but I take fewer breaks, so it all evens out.

We pass through a swamp with long boardwalk, another protected refuge. A couple *Miles* talks with advises him to try the farm stand on the highway to Vernon, and "Companion" concurs. Around 9:30AM we go into the large farm store to support the local economy, and I acquire fresh peaches, cherries, and an ice cream cone.



Heaven Hill Farm

We are just about to start the two mile highway walk into town when a van pulls up to let out a hiker. It is the hostel van. "Would you like a ride into town?" Score!

The hostel is very nice with a computer, WIFI, free laundry, shower, refrigerator for cold drinks, and plenty of comfy chairs. But no bunks and only two cots, so we sleep on the carpet. A television with dvds and cable is provided, and some hikers are glued to the tube, and little conversation takes place near the seductive device-- a very different vibe from the social atmosphere at the last hostel.



Hostel at St. Thomas Episcopal Church, Vernon

As other hikers trickle in I notice a lot more older hikers, and hikers who started at Harpers Ferry. *Miles* and *DW* are in twenties; older hikers include myself, *Dakota Dan*, *Semper Fidelis*, probably *Irish Charm* and *Falling Turtle*, ... Later *Progress* and *Joiner* come to the hostel, increasing the youth percentage. I notice the younger crowd going into the area further from the television-- which gives me some hope for the future.

Miles and I go out to a nearby Italian restaurant, and I ask about his grad school work. As an undergrad at a liberal arts college he studied psychology. For grad program he is concentrating in social work, in a program heavy in practical experience. Previously, he had spent two years working for a bicycle touring company. (He biked the Bikecentennial Trail and likely passed by my grandparents house.) He envisions doing social work with teenagers, possibly in challenging neighborhoods. He worked with the Americorps program as a volunteer coordinator. Section hiking the AT adds to his skill set, along with the cycle touring experience, that could be applied to youth programs. Cool.

June 29, Friday, Vernon hostel to Wildcat Shelter NY, 17.1

Through various delays I was not able to get to the trail-head until 9AM. I did get a ride while walking the 2.7 miles back from town to Trail, and I did stop at Heaven Hill stand for another cone to support the local economy.

Immediately hit with a long climb over boulders up Wawayanda Mountain. Already oppressively hot. At Wawayama Shelter, met a trail angel who was stocking fresh water and cookies in the bear-box. His son just finished the Hundred Mile Wilderness in Maine, and he felt like paying forward his gratitude by being an angel for the shelter. His brother had thru-hiked in 1988 (same year I did the southern half of AT), and tells of a terrible heat spell around New York that year. The angel is considering doing the thru-hike next year, and is about my age.

Down, around twisting and winding with no ridges and no views, but some final rocks. Like New Jersey was resisting our leaving.



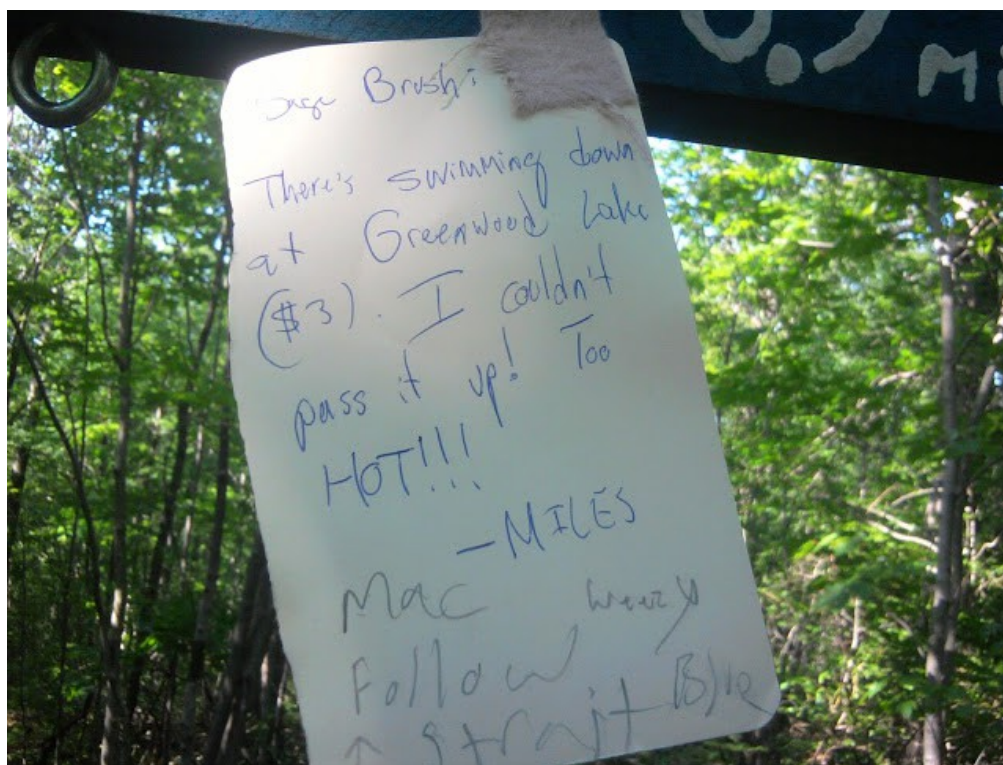
Starting walking a lot on rock, not split into boulders, but smooth flows or glacial layers as outcroppings. Reach the New Jersey-New York line, which is a big lift. Very little water on an extremely hot day on The Trail, and I could wish for more water being carried just-in-case. New York, please have more water sources.



The Trail leads around a veritable maze of rock outcroppings. I see no long distance hikers all day until almost the end of the day. The path goes up a very high rock that gives a view of waterfront properties below, though most of the time the rock offers no view and I am scrambling because of some sadistic trail designer.

My foot slips on a ledge and I bang down on the left knee hard. They can likely hear my yell at the next shelter. A shallow cut right on the knee cap is tricky to bandage. I make butterfly closures out of duct tape, and wrap everything with a tissue paper pad to absorb any blood. Tied with an ace bandage, then knee brace over everything. (Should have carried super glue, often used by emergency rooms to close cuts.)

Now at 4PM I know the shelter and water are at least two hours, maybe more because of all the technical climbing that slows my pace. I've encountered no trail landmarks for a while so actual distance is fuzzy. I come upon a blue blaze trail marker (showing a side trail) with a note for me by Miles. He has changed his plans and is going down the blue blaze trail to a lake to cool off. Now I know where I am, and I know someone is thinking about me and keeping me informed.



Miles leaves a note

My spirits boosted, I hike a little faster, knowing that water and yummy treats are a known distance away. *G-Bird* told me back at 501 Shelter not to miss Bellvale Creamery on a road just before Wildcat Shelter, so I stop for much-appreciated water and a cone. Two cones in one day! I meet two long-distance hikers at the outside picnic table that I saw at the hostel but didn't get a chance to speak with at the time. *Irish Charm* and *Falling Turtle* met thru-hiking last year, and are hiking again this year with some complications like skipping Pennsylvania. He finishes his pint of cherry vanilla ice cream while talking of doing PCT next year.



Bellvale Farms



Falling Turtle and Irish Charm

Refreshed and with enough water for the night, I cruise another hour listening to podcasts. Before now I couldn't listen because of so much technical climbing, and even now I am lead over a last rock climb before finding the shelter.

The Scouts from Ohio doing a Hundred Miler we met at previous shelter are here. Everyone tents because it is too hot and buggy for shelter. *Miles*, *Progress*, and *Joiner* are already there, and we share conversation, and Neosporin, over dinner.

New York

June 30, Saturday, Wildcat Shelter to William Brien Memorial Shelter, 19.6

Left Wildcat Shelter around 6:30AM and walked with *Miles*, who likes to start early. I had to make a pit stop and end up walking with *Progress* and *Joiner* for the morning. More technical climbing over huge rock outcroppings, with lots of trail ups and downs, with no ridgelines to speak of. Would hate to be attempting in rain or post-rain with wet rocks! We met a couple of thru-hikers, *Sunshine* and *Rocky*, who said their hiking bubble was already in the White Mountains. *Progress* started in April, joined later by *Joiner*. *Golden*, *Peppaboy*, and that crowd started mid-March by comparison. We talked about meeting again at William Brien Memorial Shelter after visiting Lake Tiorati for cooling, swimming, water, vending machine, and rumors of ice cream sandwiches.



Rocks

My left knee is hurting quite a bit on downhill. The cut is staying closed, but I must have bashed something inside the joint. The pain is very much in location and degree like my left-knee-troubles on southern AT trip. No problems with that knee before the bash.

It is HOT, but not quite as bad as previous day. I double amount of water consumed and carried, and take advantage of occasional trail magic where an angel leaves water on this dry section of trail.

In early afternoon I am with *Progress* and *Joiner* when we meet the Lemon Squeezer, a huge rock outcropping with a narrow passage underneath, in places easier if you take off your pack to scramble through.



Joiner at Lemon Squeezer



Squeeeeeeeeeze

Finally get to Fingerboard Shelter, no water, around 3:30PM, and I am pretty dry by then. We climb down to the road for Tiorati Lake, eventually joined by *Miles*, then walk along the road searching for "official" swimming area with restrooms,, cold showers, vending machines. Rumors of ice cream, so I

hoped for concession stand. Finally got to destination and I drink two liters of water and two 12-ounce sodas before going down to "beach" to dip toes. With cut knee no lake swimming for me, but water feels good on the toesies. No concession stand but ice cream vending machine. Everyone in my party is treated to an ice cream from the machine. We meet *Sunshine* and *Rocky* as we are leaving.

We try taking a road shortcut but cannot find necessary blue-blaze trail We have to back-track a mile and take another road we know crosses the AT. By this time I am lagging well behind. My knee and feet claim it has been a long day. We find sweet white blazes and climb up to William Brien Memorial Shelter, a stone structure with massive thick walls. Right next to it is the big cliff we need to climb in the morning. All in our party tent because of heat. *Rocky* and *Sunshine* come by but move on. A group of young reprobates are camping nearby, and *Miles* yogis some beer in exchange for flammable liquid. The group is actually pretty quiet at night. I am tired, but really enjoyed the easy conversation among friends all during the day.



William Brien Memorial Shelter

July 1, Sunday, *William Brien Memorial Shelter to primitive camp one mile past Bear Mountain Bridge, 11.1*

Out of William Brien Memorial Shelter campsites by 6:30AM with *Progress*, *Joiner*, and *Miles*. *Miles* and I climb to the summit of Black Mountain, the first of three mountains on our morning schedule. *Miles* points out traces of the New York skyline; one glass building is catching the sun just right, barely visible over a rise and through the haze.



A glint of the NYC skyline seen from Mombasha High Point

When I descend down to the road (Palisades Interstate Parkway) I see a sign: "N Y City 34 (Miles)". At the next brook I take water instead of waiting for a spring as in other states. In the morning we meet *Sunshine* and *Rocky* and walk together most of the way to Bear Mountain summit, with conversation ranging from cycling, half-marathons, hiking equipment. The pair had camped on top of Black Mountain to see NYC skyline at night. Since they are using hammocks and few trees are at the summit, this presented a challenge.



We encounter a large number of fitted steps leading to the summit, and marvel at the effort involved.



Fitted rock steps up Bear Mountain

On up West Mountain and down, then up to the summit of Bear Mountain, where we find vending machines but NO WATER... unless you want to pay three bucks for a small bottle of Dasani. Many

cyclists are at the summit, exercising the vending machines and also searching for water. At the summit is a tower commemorating the history of the park, which we explore.



Perkins Memorial Tower at summit of Bear Mountain

Descending down to Bear Mountain Park we meet more fitted steps, a wide groomed trail, many day hikers. I'm not making this up: I can smell charcoal lighter fluid wafting from the picnickers below.

Finally we get down to the part. First order of business is water, so *Miles*, *Rocky*, *Sunshine* and I trek over to distant restrooms and partake. Slightly brownish, but drinkable. I soak hat, bandana, and shirt to ward off heat. *Miles* is taking a bus from Bear Mountain Lodge to visit parents in Long Island, so I bid him a warm farewell. *Sunshine* and *Rocky* are working on some issues-- I hope to see them up the Trail. At the zoo I meet *Progress* and *Joiner* lunching in the cool shade of the trees. I only go as far as Hemlock Springs Campsite and backtrack a couple of miles in the morning for post office drop. They are going on to Graymoor Spiritual Life Center a few miles further. I hope to see them up The Trail again in a few days.



Miles departs at Bear Mountain State Park



Bear Mountain Lodge



Path along Hessian Lake, Bear Mountain State Park



Bear den, altitude 120 feet, lowest point on the AT

I walk into Fort Montgomery in heat of mid-day and get a few refreshments. ATM is out of order. Next two ATMs are inside businesses closed for Sunday. Finally I locate a Mobile Mart and get cash-- just in case. Back to part and find an AC plug to charge while I journal. In walks the Scout troop I've met several times, celebrating the end of their Hundred Miler. Finally, just before the gates close at 4:30, I cross the Bear Mountain Bridge and head up to campsite and prep for tomorrow.



Bear Mountain Bridge

July 2, Monday, *primitive camp one mile beyond Bear Mountain Bridge to primitive camp past Dennytown Road, 13.5*

I was camping at a primitive site with water a mile up The Trail after the turn-off to Fort Montgomery. I headed down around 6:30 with only pack and foodbag and mesh bags. I tanked up on a half liter of water, saving two liters of water for later. I left the tent up like it was occupied.



Hudson River viewed from Bear Mountain Bridge

The post office opens at 8AM, so I arrive at 7:30 and plug phone into hidden outlet I had previously located. Got package as soon as office opens and proceed to repack some items.

The term for driving around looking for an open wifi connection is war-driving. I was "war-hiking", and managed to upload some blog posts written the previous night. Connection was slow, but I did manage to post some content. On way back I need a restroom real bad, so asked a ranger in Bear Mountain State Park for permission even though back entrance not officially open until 10:30AM. By the time I get back to camp and packed up, it was already 11:30, and the best hours for hiking were gone. Hard to get into a good long hike rhythm. Finally started clicking around 2PM. Then came across a trail-adjacent deli mart, so I got a cold soda and looked in vain for bandages. For some reason both feet were developing blisters in unusual places that had not acted up before. Used molefoam as best I could. A group of thru-hikers were hanging out at a picnic table at the deli. *Flash*, who recommend several good places to eat previously at Delaware Water Gap, just as he was leaving hostel as I entered. Also present were hikers new to me: *Coffee-to-Go*, *Foster*, and *Einstein*. I asked if they had seen *Sunshine* and *Rocky*, and they said the pair had spent from 9 to 12 at the picnic table. I continued on after apparently breaking a tooth on a tortilla. Strange, right?

I hike on, and rhythm gets better or trail gets easier. When *Flash* catches up I ask him where he is from, since accent sounds like some of my relatives. He is from Winchester, Kentucky. The three others hikers catch up and pass me, but then take a break and I keep moving. This pass and catch up happens several times in the afternoon.

I was hoping to hike on to Clarence Fahnestock State Park and arrive late, but the group points out that one mile off the trail is two extra miles hiked. They mention camping areas should be nearby when trail crosses Dennytown Road. When I reach that spot around 6:30PM, I know I cannot hike much further. I am beat.

Almost Awesome and *Possum (The Ape Team)* show up and pepper me with questions about ultralight gear. They are a married couple; she is always bubbly and lively; he is quieter but tells great stories. They move on down to camp a few miles in.

Exhausted, I follow *Coffee* and crowd as they find a nearby campsite and ask to camp with them. *Coffee-to-Go* has a ZPacks tent like mine, but next larger size with an extended beak. *Foster* plays a mean blues harmonica and tells tales of following a band and encounters with "hippy chicks". He also bursts out singing a country tune I've never heard before. he says he bought a pack of Indians (cigarettes) at last deli and already finished it: two cigs/mile?



Coffee-to-Go has Zpacks tent-tarp with extended beak option

Coffee is quite careful to make me feel welcome, part of the group. *Flash* is traveling with them, but seems an odd fit.

Somehow they found a campsite with no rocks or roots. When *Coffee* and I look for rocks as a weight to throw a bear line, we have trouble finding one! My bed is unusually soft as a result, and I have a good sleep.

July 3, Tuesday, *primitive camp past Dennytown Road to Morgan Stewart Shelter, 19.7*

I head out around 6:30AM, and find *Rocky* and *Sunshine* up The Trail about two hundred feet way camping. They give a sunny wave as I pass by.



An AT blaze being born

Go by Clarence Fahnestock State Park, looking at the lake and thinking of the beach. Maybe they have a place to charge, but it is early, the concession stand not open, and early is the best time to hike. Maybe I can charge at the deli later, if they are nice.



Canopus Lake, Clarence Fahnestock State Park

Hike. Hike some more.

Stop for short lunch break and water at RPH (Ralph's Peak Hikers) Cabin , which is fully enclosed with chairs and niceties. Used the hand pump but SteriPEN water just in case. A thru-hiker arrives, *Tamir*, with his sister section-hiking with him.



RPH Cabin

Around 2PM I reach Highway 52 and hike down to deli. *Almost Awesome* and *Possum* are at the picnic table, and tell me deli people are really nice, and the pizza place next door less so. I support the local economy with a dirty rice dish and snacks, and the clerk tells me I can charge at the outlet outside next to a faucet. Now I'm staying a while!

The *Ape Team* are from Knoxville Tennessee, and she went to University of Tennessee. Delightful conversation, rich in stories. I am energized just being i their presence. But not energized enough to move yet. They go up; *Tamir* and sister come down.

Eventually, around 4PM, I head up to Morgan Stewart Shelter. Chance of rain. So *Ape Team* and *Milk-Jug* are in shelter, and I join them.

Possum launches into story about *Noodleheads* in Shenandoahs, finding a luggage cart along the Trail, and *Rigatoni* is determined to use it. I was laughing so hard thought I would strain something.

Good honest twenty mile walk. How about tomorrow?

July 4, Wednesday, Morgan Stewart Shelter to Ten Mile River Shelter CT, 20.6

Left Morgan Stewart Shelter around 6:30AM, soon passed by the *Ape Team* (*Almost Awesome* and *Possum*) and soon by everyone except *Tamir* and his sister. Soon I meet *Rocky*, *Sunshine*, *Flash*, and another couple. There were slack-packing. They went to the Fourth of July Party advertised by flyers around the trail. They said the couple hosting the party were really nice, helping them to slack-pack today, and were probably just down at the road if I wanted to join the party. I said I'd just go ahead and hike on, grumbling a little to myself since I avoided any of the parties just so I could put in some miles.

The trail is relatively flat and non-technical, so I do put in some miles. Around noon or 1PM I get to the Appalachian Train Station, a tiny platform with no charging opportunity. I look at the nearby nursery that has a good reputation with hikers and might let me charge. But it is Fourth of July, so probably closed.

As I am crossing the road to head up The Trail, somebody up the road waves me over with trekking poles as signals. It is *Possum* with *Almost Awesome*! They are standing next to a pizza truck and introduce me to Anthony, who actually has a wood-fired oven on his truck that gets up to 900 degrees F. I ask how many slices they ordered-- *Possum* got two. *Awsome* started with one and then had to order another. So I get two with hot Italian sausage. Their ride arrives-- this section of trail is kicking *Possum's* posterior. I take one last photo and bid farewell, and concentrate on my 'za.



Possum and Almost Awesome at Anthony's pizza truck

Who drives up? Guess? "Sagebrush!", says G-Bird. She, Peppaboy, Willie from Vermont, and another guy just got picked up a few days ahead on the trail, and staying with guy's family tonight. "It's an Independence Day Miracle!" I exclaim. They stopped here for pizza, so I tell them what I learned, and then fondest farewells, since one of us needs to hike for a living.



G-Bird, Peppaboy, and Willie from Vermont, July 4 surprise

Energized from two chance meetings with two fine groups of trail-buddies, I hike easily in the heat of the day with sweat pouring off me. At a road crossing I meet *Jason*, a thru-hiker who started in early March. Also at the road is trail magic: ice water (with ice still floating in container), cookies, and a first aid kit. And *Jason*, who is just back from visiting New York City, offers me a Snickers.



Trail magic, with cookies

We meet again at Wiley Shelter when I stop for water, and decide we are both headed to Ten Mile River Shelter. I get to the shelter at 6PM, plenty of time to get clothes rinsed and clean myself up before dinner.

Jason comes shortly afterwards. Earlier he had said he was not sure of the cultural reference of why he was named *Jason*, and though it might be connected with the horror movie franchise. I ask if perhaps the reference is to Jason Alexander, actor on *Seinfeld*. They have the same general look and even similar speech mannerisms. He graciously agrees that might be a better explanation.

We talk most of the evening, often about trail people we know in common, but also about himself. He works for Liquor Control Board in Pittsburgh, and saved vacation days to do this adventure. He moved to Key West in his youth for a few weeks, until a best friend stabbed him. His father also thru-hiked the trail many years ago.

We fall asleep to the sound of fireworks and thunder. Happy 4th everyone.

Connecticut Massachusetts

July 5, Thursday, Ten Mile River Shelter to Stewart Hollow Brook Shelter, 15.7

Jason was also getting an early start, but I got out first. Along the Ten-Mile River, I could see rapids as I walked. Insects were already a problem, and gnats would torment all day, so I had to deet-up early.

Next was the climb up Schaghticoke Mountain, one thousand feet up, and when you thought you were on top and on the way down the trail goes right back up again. Hard climbing. Then a thousand feet down was not much fun either. Because of the elevation change I made much less than two miles/hour progress in the morning, which would be a taste of what we find in New Hampshire.

I take the road into Kent, around noon, planning four hours in town during heat of the day to thoroughly recharge cell batteries, then walk fast and late to next shelter, Stewart Hollow Brook seven miles away. One of the first shops in town is a combination outfitters and ice cream shop. They did not have replacement merino wool socks in my size :-), but cone was fine. Actually two separate businesses in same building, and ice cream was from their own creamery.



Kent, CT

Further into town I paused at library to use facilities. They had wifi, so flushed the rest of my accumulated blog posts, then went to post office, but they were closed 2 to 2:30 for break. Fortunately laundry was nearby, so charged and washed and finished some journal entries. Then post office was open, so got my food box and repacked in lobby. Out back on way to trail, I am out of time to use library computer, so will have to do that next time, as I need to research and order some items.

One of my cell phone batteries does not appear to be in good health. After charging to 70% and unplugging, meter reads 30%. Jason had showed me an external rechargeable battery pack he picked up at an Apple Store, with name "morphie". Perhaps I need to accept the extra weight and get one of these devices instead of a replacement cell battery.

What with being inefficient and getting a final soda at the creamery, I do not leave town until 4:30PM. An initial 500 foot climb makes my freshly laundered day clothes not quite so fresh, alas. Meet a hiker at the top, *Scrabble*, who just recently resumed a thru-hike from 2008 to complete. We walked together a bit, then I need to fast-walk because I do not really want to arrive at shelter later than 8PM. After a feature named St Johns Ledges the trail takes a mildly terrifying descent on boulders to get to river level. We follow a river a long way, with a long distance between blazes that almost makes me turn around.

At 8PM I find the campsite, with several tents and hammocks. Follow the trail to the shelter, I am directed to a final campsite, where I discover *Progress and Joiner*. They had stayed at a hotel, and were forced to resupply from a convenience store, which is expensive. They said somebody was by with trail magic, promoting a new hostel, and they would offer pickup and delivery anywhere on Massachusetts trail. Sounds like a good option if I can stay at shelter when trail friends are also there.

Scrabble comes later to same campsite.

July 6, Friday, Stewart Hollow Brook Shelter to primitive camp near Limestone Spring Shelter, 22.3

One month on The Trail!

Started early and followed the river for a mile. Then the climbing started. Soon passed by *Progress and Joiner*, who invited me to join them for brunch in town tomorrow.

I knew by the trail profile that I would not have one big thousand foot climb like yesterday, but several 500 up-and-downs that could be even harder. No following ridgelines, and no real views to offer once we reached the heights.

In one narrow deep notch between rocks that hikers had to climb through, I way on a nearby ledge a huge bird, that may have been a vulture, just perched there, perhaps ready to feed off the broken carcasses of hikers who get into trouble in that notch.

Arrive at Pine Swamp Brook Shelter at noon, and write this entry:

Happy one monthiversary to me!

6/6/2012 HF to ME

6/6/1988 GA to HF

Sagebrush

PS: Thanks to all the long distance hikers answering my newbie questions in June, and not whapping me upside the head when I got obnoxious. You know who you are. Actually, most of you are north of me and cannot read this.

Hear this tremendous roar of engines. A race is underway on a track far below. Even though my batteries are low I need to listen to podcasts to keep going. Arrive at falls just after the generating plant, around 5:30PM, where many teens are swimming. I find a nice cache of trail magic: brownies and tea, fresh fruit, snacks. Not just nice, but essential boost to get up the mountain. A couple swimming down in the fall pools sees me, waves, and comes up. It is *Ducky and Crazy Goose*, trail angels who provided the magic. They were thru-hikers last year, live in Hartford CT, 1.5 hour drive, and come out some days to do trail magic.

They passed on a message from *Joiner and Progress* that they wouldn't go the 0.7 mile side trail into Limestone Spring Shelter, but would camp out near the AT by the side trail. Good to know. Less hiking.

Still, with talking to the angels, I do not head up from the falls until 6:30PM, and wonder if I will have to night-hike at the last.

Up the trail loose dogs come near. One is friendly, but the other, a golden retriever (!) barks aggressively and is not willing to let me pass. Finally the owner comes down the trail, a woman, fifty-ish, who gives the standard dog owner "The dog is friendly" salutation and expresses the standard dog owner amazement at why her precious is acting out.

On up the trail, not too punishing for a change.

Arrive at 9PM and find *Progress and Joiner* in their tent. I set up a tent nearby, wipe off, and fall asleep after a challenging day. I do not even fix dinner, but trail magic was apparently enough.

July 7, Saturday, primitive camp near Limestone Spring Shelter to The Hemlocks Shelter MA, 17.5

Left camp at 6AM, made Salisbury Connecticut by 8AM, cute little expensive quaint village with bistros and movie star residents. *Progress, Joiner*, and I have several choices but settle on the Country Bistro and eat *inside* but away from less smelly patrons and near the air conditioning. The breakfast burrito seems to be the value selection, which I tried.

Joiner was accepted to George Mason MBA program this week, with a direction in corporate or international corporate studies. Great news.

After the meal I go to charge, but the phone does not recognize a battery is inserted. Oh no, a battery died, and that was the *good* battery! I am in trouble.

Progress has news: *Golden* and *Wildflower* may be in Salisbury right now. They were texting. Seems like they had taken a couple of days off.

Steamer sees me through a coffee-shop window. He is staying across the street in a lady's house for \$40/night, waiting for days to get cooler. A "cold" front is expected to pass through today, with scattered showers. As a big guy he overheats easier than us small people. He has all kinds of shops within a three block distance. I should take the bunk next to his, because his room rate is a steal for such an up-scale tourist spot, but stubbornly I am determined to put in some miles.

Progress and Joiner resupply at the up-scale grocery, where protein bars are rather more expensive--hiker world problems. I charge a little more and journal, but realize my one remaining battery is crying for an overnight recharge. I do not realize it yet, but so is my body.

I leave *Progress and Joiner* and head up the Trail, planning on getting water at the cemetery out of town. Trouble is, faucet broken, if that piece of pipe used to be the faucet. Oh, well. Another four miles. I am so glad the waitress at lunch kept refilling our ice water. I see *Milk Jug* preparing to thumb into town. He holds his American flag he got for the Fourth while hitchhiking. Not a bad idea...

Very shortly I water at an unlisted stream, and start the thousand foot climb to Lions Head. I am joined by *Progress and Joiner*, and fall in behind them at their challenging pace that is still within my comfort and safety limits. We fall into easy conversation to take our minds off the rigors being imposed on our bodies. I know she started the AT several weeks before and then he joined her. Was this planned all along? No, they had section hiked for a week together, and he definitely decided long distance hiking was not for him, while she was even more certain she wanted to thru-hike. But after a few weeks on The Trail, she was lonely, so he quickly got ready and joined her. Wow!



Joiner and Progress

Also asked about her involvement with horses (knowing that would pass the time, since horse people have a lot to say about their passion.) She participates in eventing, which is scored rather than judged like, say, Western Pleasure. She dreams of owning her own riding stable someday, and maybe keeping ten horses for lessons, but will not board horses. She has researched and believes you cannot make money boarding, while letting yourself in for a continuous stream of complaints. She also sees in the near future the difficulty of justifying the expense of her activity where she lives in northern Virginia.

At Lions Head we meet *Runner*, a 60-ish thru-hiker, who started mid-march, though none of us had met him before. In discussion he learns I did chip design and describes being part of an in-house CAD group in the 90s, before shifting to another job at Martin. With pardons to *Progress and Joiner*, we geek out for a while as the four of us descend down to shelter. I do not get to talk geek much on The Trail, so enjoy thoroughly.

We get in early enough at The Hemlocks Shelter, 6:30PM, that I can find water, rinse off day clothes, and myself, which I hadn't been able to do for a couple of days. Spacious shelter with bunks. A loft is used by *Progress and Joiner*. We are joined by *Lorax* (18, talks like surfer dude) and a couple of actual thru-hiker southbounders who seem lean and hungry, like they have been through an ordeal. Hmm.

July 8, Sunday, The Hemlocks Shelter to hotel at Great Barrington, 16.4

I am noticing people are more likely to get out of shelters early compared to near Harpers Ferry, where even starting to move before 6AM might wake people. Now we want to be on the Trail while still cool. *Runner* and I head out early, me leading. Each of us have a son and daughter, though his are married and out in the work force, and we compare notes while climbing up and down. At Massachusetts Highway 41 we are about to go down the road for a grill place *Joiner* found in *Awol*, but first *Runner* spots trail magic: a cooler full of cans of cola, covered in ice. We each enjoy a can, and move on. A half-mile road walk and we see no sign of a grill. I decide to go on three more telephone poles, and we

see something. Sure enough, it exists. Bad news though, does not open until 4PM on Sundays. I don't think we will want to wait five hours. We pause for me to charge and we eat lunch snacks and get water under a shady pavilion with picnic tables for outdoor dining. As we are about to leave *Progress and Joiner* show, and we deliver the bad news.

Back to the trail crossing and we see a trail angel tending the cooler. She thru-hiked toe AT in one direction, here now-husband thru-hiked in the other direction, and they met on the John Muir Trail. They share trail angel duties.

On the Trail and a sharp ascent, with *Runner* in front. Soon he outdistances all of us, and we do not see him again! We get to Highway 23, and I decide to get off the Trail and bid them farewell. *P&J* hike long days and are not due to take off for more than a week. But will eventually stop and meet her dad. I will not likely see them for a long time, and thank them warmly for the good trail conversation.

I am headed four miles along a highway in the heat of the day to Great Barrington, which has motels and a K-Mart and Radio Shack. My goal is to find a place with wifi, charge up thoroughly, order equipment for the weeks ahead, improve the battery situation, and enjoy a real bed.

I am not comfortable with hitchhiking. However, after a couple of miles I resort to no-thumb hitching from advice I overheard from other hikers: hat off, big smile, look them directly in the eye, walk backwards facing traffic. I am not good at the technique, but a teen soon stops and gives me a lift and shows me the "cheap" hotels in town. My phone is completely dead, so I cannot look at prices on "Companion", so walk to a few and settle on Lantern House Motel, at \$100/night, which injures my sense of cheapness. However when I ask about wifi and the manager admits reception is spotty in some rooms, and I explain I cannot go out to the good reception area because my phone battery is at zero, he takes me around to a couple of different rooms for me to plug in and try for best reception. Bemused, I do settle on this motel.

I do not shower because a soaking bath is better. Limp out to K-Mart and Radio Shack and they actually have stuff I can use. I send off a flurry of messages to "Base Support" and order items online. "Base Support" acted on my previous plea for help and went to Apple Store for an external battery pack and will send to Dalton MA food drop.

I work on the "dead" cell phone battery, and by plugging and unplugging the charger fifty times I convince the cell phone to recognize it as a real battery again.

Now for some deep recharge, both for the batteries and myself.

July 9, Monday, hotel at Great Barrington to Upper Goose Pond Cabin, 19.1

Free continental breakfast isn't until 7AM, for forget an early hiker start. I scarf a huge pile of bagel sandwiches and assorted pastries. Up the road by 8AM; no kindly teens offer me a ride to the trailhead, but a good night's sleep gets me to the trail by 9:30AM.

Getting to Mount Wilcox South Shelter for late lunch and water break, I find the water not good. Sigh. I go further and find an unlisted stream with better water.



Beaver sign

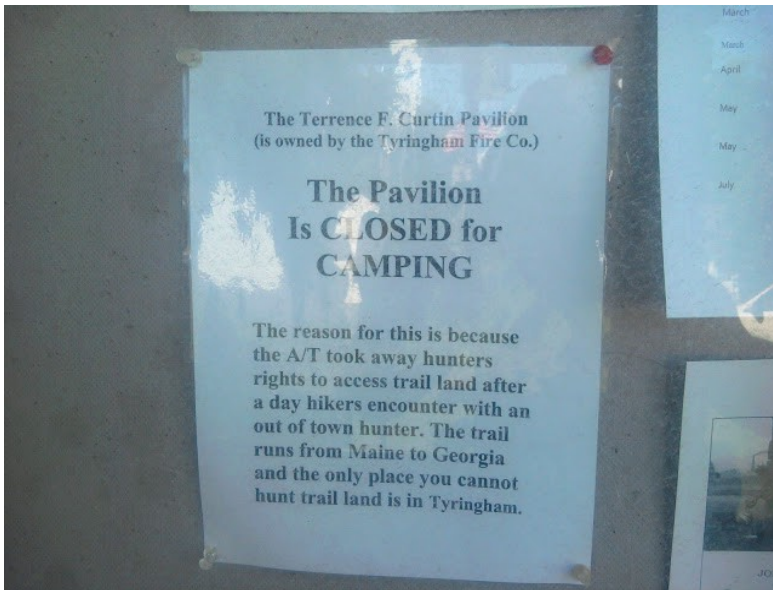


Beaver den

I need to stop at Tyringham post office for a package, but that presents a problem: The office closes in early afternoon until 4PM, which makes me late to the nearest shelter opportunity, Upper Goose Pond Cabin, a really nice stop recommended by hikers. By 4:30PM my food is arranged and letters mailed, and I go across the street to a bed and breakfast to inquire about rates. Unfortunately the proprietor is nowhere to be found. Hmmmm, what to do? No camping at non-official campsites along the Trail in this

state, no campsites until Upper Goose Pond, which I "might" reach at 8:30PM on my best day. Tyringham used to allow camping in a public pavilion, but this notice is posted in the post office community bulletin board:

The Terrence F Carrin Pavilion (is owned by the Tyringham Fire Co) The Pavilion is closed for camping, the reason for this is because the A/T took away hunters rights to access trail land after a day hikers encounter with an out of town hunter. The Trail runs from Maine to Georgia, and the only place you cannot hunt trail land is in Tyringham.



Tyringham MA

Great, now I am caught up in factually dubious politics. Climb on. Assisted by podcasts, yet the way is hard, and I flag, and my pace reduces. At 7:30PM I notice how dark the forest interior becomes. I can still navigate fine at 8PM. Finally the headlamp comes out. I've heard of hikers making great progress on night hikes. They must have bigger heavier headlamps and younger eyes. My pace slows to a crawl. Around 8:45 I encounter the Goose Cabin Tent Area, with no food bags in the bear box. Of course, everyone went to the much nicer cabin.



Upper Goose Pond Cabin

Now I make an error of judgement brought on by fatigue. I should stay at the tent site, on the wooden tent platform. Instead I press on to the cabin. Everyone is already asleep upstairs, and I slip in as quiet as a mouse and put my bedroll next to the hearth downstairs and close my eyes.

July 10, Tuesday, Upper Goose Pond Cabin to Kay Wood Shelter, 17.6

Some hikers slipped out of Upper Goose Pond Cabin early, around 6AM. I gather up my bedroll from the floor quickly and pack my gear. Twenty-two hikers and the caretaker stayed overnight. Several familiar faces, including some I did not see in a long time: golden, *Roadhouse* and *Chesty* (from Kentucky), *Pacemaker* and *Buckeroo*, *Wildflower* (normally hikes with *Golden*), *Meat* (last seen in shelter with *Mad Hat*) *Z*, *Runner*, *Lorax*, *Houdini*.



Upper Goose Pond

Although my body feels fine after the previous long day, my brain is fuzzy. I do not think I was coherent when asking *Golden* about text *Progress* received in Salisbury CT, saying we were in town at the same time.

The caretaker makes pancakes and we are all invited to partake. Afterwards I volunteer for dish washing duty, and *Golden* joins, with *Meat* "supervising". As we wash, they each tell tales of the food service industry. A lot of fun and laughter makes washing dishes a high point of the day.



Golden and Meat clean dishes at Upper Goose Pond

Plenty of up and down hiking, hemlock and pine alternating with deciduous, mixed with bogs, plenty of bugs. We start seeing roots in the Trail outnumber rocks. One root catches my toe as I am bringing the foot forward, hyper-extending and causing injury that slows me the rest of the morning.

I limp into October Mountain Shelter and say "hello" to *Roadhouse*, *Chesty*, and others I do not recognize. I get water to ice down my calf, then cook two dinners and eat each! My body is telling me to get more protein and calories, and fast! Has not hit me like this before. *Roadhouse* points out a new hostel, free, in Dalton that has a good rep, but not much is known regarding laundry, wifi, facilities, etc.

When I leave shelter and resume hiking at 2PM I realize I would not get into Dalton until 8PM, too late to shower and bed down in a hostel without disturbing someone. Do NOT want to repeat last night's risk venture!

I need podcasts to keep me going. Fortunately batteries are good. Keep hiking until I run out of 'casts and then hike some more. Several times run into *Buckeroo and Pacemaker*. Each are retired teachers, in late 60s, from Virginia, who have done several AT section hikes and are out again. Very friendly and easy to talk to.



Pacemaker and Buckeroo

Kay Wood Shelter appears finally at 7:30. Already arrived are Marissa and Michael, recent Cornell grads, out their second day of the trail, southbound. He did a biomechanics degree but hopes for masters to be mechanical engineering for more options. She majored in agricultural science (!) but plans to switch to landscape architecture. They are loaded down with gear, but older model SteriPEN failed, so water is a problem, though they have tabs as backup. Michael peppers me with questions enthusiastically. Marissa is a runner, which must help in the beginning days of a backpacking trip.

Buckeroo and Pacemaker come and set up their tent. Michael and Marissa will take the loft of the shelter. *B&P* arrive too late in the evening to safely make the steep climb down to water in the lessening light. Marissa offers to go, but *B&P* have enough for tonight. I offer SteriPEN for anyone tomorrow as long as my charge lasts, since I only have a couple of miles to town in the morning.

As we settle into the shelter, Marissa asks me if the presence of mice is normal. Both are wearing headlights, and the little eyes must reflect. Michael comes up to the loft, also sees an excess of rodents, and they vote to put up tent.

Now that they mention it, the mice are particularly noisy tonight. I remember the horrible feeling of having a mouse run across my face at night, on an earlier trip, and put on my head net... and sleep, and leave the mice to their games.

July 11, Wednesday, Kay Wood Shelter to Birdcage Hostel in Dalton, 3.0

The mousies may have scurried and scampered through the night, but I slept. Since I have a "nero" (near-zero mileage, as compared to "zero") planned, I wait until 7AM to rouse the young sobos (southbounders) to help them with water. Marissa climbs down and quickly fills containers, and I irradiate the water liter by liter. I am using one of their wide-mouth containers with the steriPEN, but cannot help thinking about the device falling from my grasp while stirring, and becoming totally immersed. Maybe my narrower bottle helps prevent this failure mode, hmmm? After the water processing, I begin the short downhill morning hike.

The Birdcage Hostel does not list an address, just a phone number. Rumor is the guy running the hostel can be found at a Shell station. I notice the person offering water at a faucet along the Trail in town also allows camping in the backyard. I could have stayed here and arrived late and not worried about disturbing hikers. At the faucet place, I see Z talking to some other hikers (and bikers). Apparently the guy of the house was off helping some hiker slack-pack!



Thomas Levardi house for faucet and tenting



Dalton MA

Watered, I proceed further into town. An ice cream place does not open until noon. The library also opens late. I go to the post office, and find *Roadhouse* and *Chesty*. They stayed at the Birdcage last night, and *Roadhouse* gives precise directions. Problem solved! I hear the owner will not be back to the house until 11AM, but I carry my food box to the hostel, see who is around (only one sobo: *Old Bay*) and do a thorough amount of food repacking while waiting. *Roadhouse* and *Chesty* will stick around for a poison ivy foot doctor appointment, and they tell me about the hostel. The host Rob comes in, takes my pic-- what a great guy, but crazy to open his entire house to hikers.



Birdcage Hostel



Rob Bird

I go to the library to find cell signal and converse with "Base Support", write a post or two, then a blog comment mentions ice cream, and I have to find the shop I passed before. Hershey's brand ice cream again, and I eat and catch up on posts. Then go to the general store and grab a sub and catch up on journals.

Returning to Birdcage, close to the general store, I learn that Rob does laundry in batches, mixing people's stuff to get a full load, so I give out my dirtiest. Later I discover Rob actually has a big stack of "town clothes" for us to wear, so I could put everything in the wash. Also hear that Rob will take any who want to come to an all-you-can-eat place at 7PM. AYCE is a magic word to hikers. Several familiar faces trickle in all afternoon: *Possum & Almost Awesome, Houdini, Steamer, Sticks and Metric*, and more. Out in the back yard, *Roadhouse* and *Possum* start telling tales. I know *Possum* tells funny stories, but did not realize *Roadhouse* had similar talents.

The big white van pulls up at 7PM and is filled by *Steamer, Houdini, Almost Awesome & Possum, Sticks & Metric, Roadhouse, Chesty*, me, and sobo *Old Bay*, who is along for errands since he did AYCE yesterday. We go to Country Buffet. *Roadhouse* wishes they had biscuits for biscuits-and-gravy (essential southern food) but it is not to be. We do not lack for other choices, though, and you never saw skinny people go through so many plates. And *Possum* and *Roadhouse* really get warmed up and keep us all laughing.

Back at the Birdcage I am getting lots of comments on how swollen my feet have become. Maybe going in sandals and stopping analgesics when I'm not hiking make it worse. I elevate feet overnight on my cot on the screened porch. Big feet or not, tomorrow I will be energized and ready for big miles.

July 12, Thursday, Dalton to Wilbur Clearing Shelter, 20.5

Since I was sleeping on a cot on the screened porch of the Birdcage Hostel, it was easy to make a quiet exit by 6AM. I needed wifi for some final e-mails, so made my way to library,. Fortunately wifi remains on after-hours. Made way back to AT at 7AM.

The morning hike did not seem too difficult after a "nero". Shortly after 11AM I arrive at Chesire, a cute little town with really nice widely-used bike path. At the entrance to town is a tiny ice cream and sandwich shop, which is closed. :(As I am filling my water bottles, someone comes to open the store :-). I get a sandwich and cone, and wave over *Almost Awesome and Possum*, who just arrived. I eat at the nearby shady picnic table, when *Possum* comes over with a banana split served in a pie plate with six scoops-- enormous. They go on to the general store for resupply, while I hike on.

Mark Noepel Shelter is only a fourteen mile day, so I commit to climbing Mount Greylock and going on the Wilbur Clearing Shelter for a long day.



Gore Pond

Podcast help. The *Ape Team* soon pass, but no one else yet from the hostel, which is odd.

Finally I get to the top of Mount Greylock. *Joiner and Progress* had written in a blog comment that Bascom Lodge up on the peak had ice cream. I find the *Ape Team* preparing to go down, and they did not find much to snack on. I go in, find only two tiny containers of homemade ice cream in the freezer, plus some popsicle treats and sodas. I get a few items and down them quickly, the start down.



War memorial at Mt Greylock



View from Mt Greylock

A while later I come to a sign for another minor summit. I take some photos and prepare to move on. Oops, a problem! Coming off the viewpoint I discover the northbound and southbound trail are right next to each other and look identical, with no signs. I cannot tell which way I came in!

Well, I choose a trail and follow it for a while. I convince myself I am seeing new trail, when I meet *Sticks and Metric*. I sheepishly explain what happened, then follow them down to the shelter.

I choose to sleep inside the shelter, since it is so late. *Chesty* and *Roadhouse* arrive late, and *Chesty* sleeps in shelter. Too late to hose off, or rinse out clothes. Quick wet wipe clean up, then ready for nighty-night.

I turn my wrong way mishap into a funny story for my shelter-mates. Sometimes you have to laugh at yourself, before someone else does first.

Vermont

July 13, Friday the thirteenth, Wilbur Clearing Shelter MA to Congdon Shelter, 17.1

Lots of hikers seemed to be leaving Wilbur Clearing Shelter early, then I discovered my watch had switched time zones in the middle of the night, so it was really 6:15AM, not 5:15AM.

Almost Awesome and *Possum* were already down the Trail, headed for a breakfast at Friendlies. I decided to bypass the spending opportunity to go a little faster. I may regret that when we reach Vermont, today, where there are fewer towns near road crossings, and possibly fewer snack opportunities or trail magic. On the way out of North Adams, MA I follow a lovely stream with clean water, part of the town's public water supply.

Climbing a bit, I soon enter Vermont. It seem I am running out of states.



Some water sources are barely flowing, so I skip until the next when I get to Seth Warner Shelter at noon I am thirsty and ready for a good source. A couple of thru-hikers I hadn't met before but keep seeing this morning, *Sugar Plum* and *Jeff Davis*, are also struggling with water flow. It takes me twenty-five minutes to get two liters, and I forget about the third liter for now. While I am eating a bonus lunch and catching up on journaling, *Possum* and *Almost Awesome* also arrive for lunch. They are going to one shelter further than me today, and I will actually plan to hike slightly less than twenty miles for once to get in camp at a reasonable hour and rinse out day clothes and have time to write journal. The *Ape Team* tell me what they have heard about next hostel in Manchester Vermont: includes laundry and town clothes, get everything done in town and then give a call for a shuttle since they are a long walk

from town, and reservations would be a good idea for once, since they recently had to turn people away because of popularity. Also, wifi and computer were available.

For me, making a reservation once I am sure of the day could be tricky, because I have Sprint as cell carrier, with much less coverage compared to Verizon.

Possum wanted to get more of my thoughts on ultra-light next time we share a shelter. I showed them a few things, then extended lunch was over.

Several trail climbs and descents. I discover they do indeed have gnats in Vermont. I need podcasts early to make up for low energy level, then run out of podcasts by 5PM. Note to myself: download a lot more audio next time I have wifi.

I arrive at Congdon Shelter at 6:30PM and see *Sugar Plum* and *Jeff Davis* submerged in pools in the stream below the shelter. That seems like a good idea to me. After putting up tent and hanging bear line, I make way down to the stream and soak my footsies, entire bod, and day clothes.

Sticks and Metric are arriving at the shelter just as I climb back to the AT, so I pretend to be lost and have lost all my equipment.

The shelter has an odd arrangement, with a table for cooking inside. I prepare dinner, joined by *Sticks and Metric*, and an older couple long hiking who will stay in the shelter. Also joined by a sobo who tells us scary stories of the trail ahead.

Clean, and in bed, all settled at a decent 9PM, to write a little.

Good night all.

July 14, Saturday, Congdon Shelter to Kid Gore Shelter, 18.7

Good early start, with climb first thing in morning. Then descend to cross a road heading to Bennington VT. Wish for trail magic. Given the remoteness of northern states, will trail magic be scarce.

Into Melville Nauheim Shelter for early brunch and water. My body seems to be telling me to consume extra calories today. A couple of hours later I encounter a lookout tower, which hikers are allowed to climb. Up above the "green tunnel", I enjoy the view.



Glastenbury Mountain firetower

Podcasts get me through the afternoon. Water is increasingly difficult to find. We really need a rain.

Arrive at Kid Gore Shelter around 6PM. Water is not good, so I get by on what I carried in. Really want to go to next shelter, 4.6 miles away, but my feet will not go.

For a long while it looks like I am only one at site. I cook two dinners again, showing my body really has the munchies. A British couple on holiday hiking a section of Long Trail arrive and begin cutting up fresh vegetables for dinner. Yum!

Fresh Step arrives. He is thru-hiker who started in February, the earliest I have met. He is determined to walk his own pace, and does NOT want to finish before September. I ask if he misses hiking with a consistent group of friends. He says the planning for that would just stress him out. In his words, he is the sort of personality groups form around, and he is determined to hike his own hike.

Though the water source is undrinkable, I can use it to wipe down. Cannot get enough to rinse out clothes.

A note on the flying insects in Vermont: We have long had to deal with gnats that hover near ear and eye, but we seem to be adding some other types-- one buzzes past noisily like a housefly, and keeps passing back-and-forth like a fighter escort. Not sure what benefit this critter finds in buzzing us. The same fly seems to follow for several minutes. Then we have a squadron of hovering-around-head insects-- consider them a helicopter escort.

I write in a shelter journal:
Shoo, fly, don't bother me.
Shoo, fly, don't bother me.
Shoo, fly, don't bother me.

So I can hike some more AT!

July 15, Sunday, Kid Gore Shelter to Spruce Peak Shelter, 22.9

I get out of Kid Gore Shelter at a record 5:30AM, hoping to make some early miles to have the option of walking out at the end of the day to Manchester Center and getting the shuttle to my hostel. The chances of actually getting to town this evening is pretty slim-- more likely I would end up at the closest shelter, Spruce Peak Shelter, then hike three miles and hitch five mile for a nero (near-zero) day tomorrow.

At four miles I hit Storm Spring Shelter, which has nice water. I had been almost dry, since the shelter I slept at had no good water, leaving only the liter I brought in for dinner and to start the day. On the climb up to Stratton Mountain I meet *Quicksilver*, who started thru-hiking in the April 20s, the latest yet. I draft behind him and another new face, *Falling Rock*, which seems to make my climb faster and easier. Almost 4000 feet high.



Firetower steps, Stratton Mountain

At the top is another observation tower. I see *No Sweat*, who is planning on taking a gondola ride. I climb down, and the trail is not bad. Stratton Pond Shelter has a caretaker, who I see trimming vegetation along The Trail as I come in. The pond has swimming. I wasn't going to spend any time there, but I see *Jefferson Davis* and *Uncle Spider*, and another new face, *Skyline*, who is hiking the long Trail (same as AT for first 100 miles) who already hiked the AT a previous year. I soak feet and get clothes wet to clean off some trail fragrance. The water is surprisingly clear, and I see tiny baby catfish hiding near rocks on the water's edge.

The next two or three miles go easy because of the refreshing dip. Around 2PM we get some sprinkling, and by 4PM a sustained rain.

Have I had any real rain since 501 Shelter?

About an hour away from the final shelter the rain comes down hard. I am cruising and listening to a podcast, when I am passed by *Sticks and Metric*. Looking at trail journals, I thought they were ahead of me. I try keeping up with them, but eventually they are out of sight. Nevertheless, at 6PM I reach Spruce Peak Shelter in the pouring rain. The shelter is perfect for this weather, with front porch, fully enclosed cabin with bunks, and a sliding door. Lines are rigged, clothes are hung to dry. Dinner fires up on the porch.



Spruce Peak Shelter

More hikers arrive. Along with *Two Step and Payman* (a German thru-hiker couple) and *Sticks & Metric*, we get *Jefferson Davis*, *Skyline*, *No Sweat*, *Uncle Spider*, *Falling Rock*, most all who seem to know each other.

Somehow I have fallen in the middle of another bubble. It is unclear to me where this bubble falls in relation to mid-March bubble I normally travel with. Will ask around later.

Word of mouth tells us that Green Mountain House Hostel needs a reservation. *Sticks & Metric* already have a spot reserved. *Skyline* also plans to go, so *Metric* makes reservations for each of us and asks some questions about the shuttle.

Good Day. Lots of new faces.

July 16, Monday, *Spruce Peak Shelter to Green Mountain House hostel in Manchester Center, 2,8*

Some of the guys were out on the porch late at night, talking with their "outside voice". *Sugar Plum* arrived late and climbed up onto my loft, where I was the only sleeper tucked into a corner. I could sense her surprise as she accidentally touched my finger and realized someone else was there.

I have to get up early for call of nature, and remain sitting at picnic table until others stir. *Two Steps* comes out, wrinkles her nose, and says "Bad air!" I go inside the shelter, and indeed, the air is bad. That number of gassy hikers in an enclosed space is not good. Perhaps that is why shelters are normally three-sided.

By the time I hike three miles down to the road, *Sticks & Metric* have passed and are gone-- probably caught a ride. I am well aware the thru-hikers have had plenty of hitching practice by now, and are rather good at it, compared to me. I put on a clean shirt and my best smile. The traffic is really fast and the shoulder to pull over is tiny. I have no luck, using all my meager tricks hitching.

Oh well, reluctantly start the five mile road-walk into town. At mile one I find an American flag along the road, and carry it while thumbing, *Milkman's* hitching method. At Mile 2, amazingly, I find an iPhone that still has charge and works somewhat. I do not find anything at Mile 3, especially rides, or Mile 4.



Goats along road to Manchester Center

Getting into the large-ish touristy town I find a *Friendly's* and order breakfast with milkshake. They give the extra in the blender cup, which is the only civilized way to serve a shake. At the post office I get food drop and find *Skyline* at a desk, writing up a trail journal and pictures for his five-year-old kid. I notice he has an Apple phone and show him what I find. After some fiddling he finds a number and calls it with his phone. The wife of the phone owner is nearby and comes to the post office to get it. They assumed the phone was stolen, but based on where I found it the iPhone must have fallen out of a pocket during a walk.

Skyline's feet are sore, but we walk to nearest good spot for lunch, which happens to be *Friendly's*. We have burgers; I have another shake. *Runner* comes and sits at the table next to us. He is staying at a different place.

We have a plan: *Skyline* and his feet rest and I run to drugstore for rubbing alcohol for him and micro-sd card for me. My phone is running out of storage space for photos. No micro-sd at first store, but a *Radio Shack* is near, so I score a 16Gb card. I return and we call for a shuttle.



Green Mountain House

The hostel guy, Jeff, is really nice, and the hostel is immaculate and well furnished. The *Ape Team* are here zeroing, so I know it will be a fun stay. *Sticks & Metric* caught a hitch literally as they were crossing the road and hadn't started thumbing yet. They are amazed I walked five miles. S & M have a private room, *Skyline* and I share, and *Possum* and *Almost Awesome* are down the hall.



Possum, Almost Awesome, Skyline, Metric, and Sticks

The *Ape Team* are watching a PCT video, and parts are hilarious, unintentionally.

After shower I wear street clothes provided by the hostel, and share laundry load with *Sticks&Metric*. The pair make oatmeal cookies, and later a cheesecake to share. Skyline finds an electronic piano and does some impressive improvisation. Later he offers to use some mushrooms I brought and some eggs provided by the hostel and make omelettes for both of us. I am actually getting full today.



Skyline's mushroom omelette

Plugging my phone into the hostel computer, I am able to back up all photos to Picasa AND to move all data to a bigger micro-SD card without any technical headaches. Now I have loads more storage space. Amazed nothing went wrong during backup and transfer.



Hostel shoe display

Good company, good hostel, good night.

July 17, Tuesday, Manchester Center to Little Rock Pond Shelter, 19.8

Tonight Falling Rock's windup radio is playing "Dust in the Wind". The time is 8:30PM at Little Rock Pond Shelter, where *Falling Rock* and I had a dip in the pond earlier. In the spacious shelter, with bunks and a covered picnic table and benches, *Blazer* (former thru-hiker, section hiking) is joining us as we hear thunder and the roar of rain on the tin roof. *Falling Rock*, a section hiker doing Vermont, got inspired to make "Funfetti" pancakes and generously shares with both of us, and the real maple syrup is yummy. Now the rain is coming down even harder, making it tough to talk over, with plenty of lightning and thunder grace notes. Sometimes it starts to slow down, and comes back even harder. What will this do to the Trail tomorrow?



Falling Rock makes Funfetti pancakes in the dark

This morning Jeff offered us early or late shuttles. Everyone except *Sticks and Metric* elected for early, so we were at the trailhead by 6:45AM. *Ape Team* zoomed out, and *Skyline* and I hiked most of the day together and often talked about whatever as we walked. He is a lawyer, in a startup firm doing environmental and business law, and has a month or so until the real work begins, so is doing the Long Trail. His five year old son misses his dad, but dad is sending photos and making phone calls to son. *Skyline* and wife *Sunset(?)* thru-hiked a few years ago, and he wanted to hike some more to get into shape. Instead of gradually ramping up, he tried some big miles at the beginning. Sound familiar? Now his feet are a mess with blisters.

We climb Bromley Mountain and descend Mad Tom Notch, where my foot slips and I come heavily down on the right-hand trekking pole, causing it to bend at the top joint between sections. I am unhurt. I am also inwardly upset, thinking of the expense of replacement, how I can get new poles quickly, how soon I can communicate with "Base Support". The rest of the morning and afternoon I am probably not the best conversation partner.



Trekking pole breakage

At one of the closely-spaced shelters we stop for foot break and snacks, and chat with sobo *Snake-Eyes*. His phone is out of order, so both *Skyline* and I commit to call Green Mountain House when we get a signal to get him a reservation. *Skyline* has a better phone, but I am hiking a little further today.

At Big Branch Shelter *Skyline* and I part company. He is wisely going easy on feet, and I want to do twenty miles today.



Skyline

I pass *Sugar-Plum*, *Uncle Spider*, and *Jefferson Davis* sunning and napping after a dip in the stream.

At Little Rock Pond Shelter I meet *Blazer*, and another fellow who camps several nights at a shelter tent site for solitude. The shelter is a beauty, with roof covering the picnic table and extended deck. *Falling Rock* arrives and we decide to go for a dip in the pond, but first I need to cook some dinner. Then we experience crystal clear water, and watch salamanders swimming. I go in with my day clothes to rinse them off, and float around. In the distance we hear thunder, but anywhere near the pond.



Little Rock Pond

Back to first of this journal entry...

July 18, Wednesday, *Little Rock Pond Shelter to Governor Clement Shelter, 19.4*

After a thorough drenching last night, I can still hike with dry feet, as vegetation does not lean over trail and soak shoes as in other states. Today I am hiking a little slower, cruising, not putting effort into speed.

Soon passed by *Sticks & Metric*, but do not see many other nobos. Starting to see several sobos during the day.

Eventually climb to a vista view of an airport below. Later spend an extended lunch catching up on journals. Descend down to suspension bridge for hikers that is very high over the water and offers a lot of movement. Then a really steep technical climb on rock boulders a long way up, before moderating to a mere steep climb.



Rutland Southern Vermont Regional Airport

I begin to see several young people doing trail maintenance. One was pounding rock into gravel, others moving stones.

In late afternoon I come to sign for trail re-route, along roads, due to severe hurricane weather last year. From sobos I know that the old blazed AT is still passable, and a mile or so shorter, but I elect to respect the re-route after thinking of those trail workers: I do not want to walk and cause erosion on a trail that still needs repairs. Also, I do not mind the reduced grades of road walking. After several sections and turns of country road I am about to catch up with an older thru-hiker when we both meet a couple beside the road with a cooler. Trail magic on a re-route! They are both hikers, but knee problems limit her to shorter hikes, but they do quite a lot of different locations. I enjoy a cold soda and cracker snack while chatting. They have a secret shelter, which the other guy gratefully accepts. I plan to go on to Governor Clement Shelter, and the couple walk with a a short distance and show where the regular AT blazes begin.



At 6:30PM I wonder if I will be the only one at shelter, and then Sticks and Metric appear and tent behind the massive walled stone shelter. I go down to nearby stream and cool feet while rinsing off myself and day clothes.



Governor Clement Shelter

Back at shelter, we are eating dinner and talking together, when I accidentally knock over my alcohol stove with my shoe. "Umm, your left shoe is on fire." Tiny cool alcohol flame, easy to extinguish. "Funny, I've never had to say that sentence to anyone before." Sign. It seems my role is comic relief for *Sticks & Metric*.

July 19, Saturday, Governor Clement Shelter to Mountain Meadows Lodge at Kent Pond, 14.6

The weather turned cold last night, and I actually needed the mummy function of my sleeping bag.

The day begins with a two-thousand foot climb, but the grade is not too bad. Nice to do it fresh, in the cool air. At Cooper Lodge I see *Sticks & Metric* left their packs, and understand they are taking the short steep rock climb up to Killington Peak. I join them as we take photos. Safely returned to pack, I take trail down that is too steep and full of rocks and roots to make good speed with a "lope". During the morning I am eating an extra meal. I have been doing this the past couple of days, but hiking faster than scheduled, so I have the food.



Killington Peak, second highest point in VT

In the afternoon the Long Trail finally splits off. I choose not to take a side trail to Inn of the Long Trail. At Gifford Woods State Park I stop at HQ for snack opportunity. They are out of sodas, but I get Ben&Jerry's ice cream on a stick.

In late afternoon I could go to Killington post office, but with low energy I hike on a mile to Kent Pond and to Mountain Meadows Lodge. I have option of staying on tent site for only \$10, no shower, but indulge myself with a room and dinner. The lodge is huge, with farm animals, dock, kayaks, more amenities than one could use, but almost empty before the weekend rush.



Mountain Meadows Lodge

For dinner I sit at a table with three hikers: *Sculler*, who I met a long time ago, and two sobos. Another table holds non-long-distance-hikers. The sobos tell us the methods they use to score leftovers at AMC huts and score work-for-stays. This involves a bit of luck and social engineering I do not have, so I might be paying the expensive rates for a couple of nights, since it does not seem practical to get through the White Mountains without staying at a hut at least once or twice. Well, worry about that later: I have an actual bed to enjoy.



Kent Pond, near lodge

July 20, Friday, Mountain Meadows Lodge at Kent Pond to Wintturi Shelter, 16.6

Sculler and I have breakfast scheduled for 6:30AM at the inn, eggs and pancakes.

I make my way backwards on the Trail a bit and go to Killington, and find the post office after a couple of wrong turns. Nearby is a general store/deli, so I pre-order a sub for first lunch and pack it.

When the post office opens, I am presented with news that three boxes arrived, not the four expected. Oops, the replacement shoes do not arrive in time. "Base Support" had the Amazon reseller ship directly to the post office, and Amazon delivery dates sometimes get a bit slippery. I ask the post office guy if he can forward the box another couple of mail drops, to Glencliff NH, and he readily agrees. Hiker lore warns that some post offices are much more reluctant to forward general delivery boxes and require special paperwork, so I feel fortunate. The current shoes seem to be holding fine with "shoe goo", so I am not worried. I eat "first Lunch" early so I do not have to pack trash. I realize that a local outfitter, Base Camp Outfitters BCO, has a shortcut trail to the Inn, but first I need a new shirt. The current one, merino short sleeve, is looking ratty because war is making little fuzz balls. It does not get all the way clean anymore, and I had to cut off sleeves in blazing hot Pennsylvania. I am thinking of getting a polypro shirt like most of the AT hikers use. The woman helping me expresses a clear preference for merino, and says that even with modern odor control measures incorporated into polypro they had to ask an employee to stop wearing his poly shirt to work because of the stink. I express

concern that my merin wasn't holding up well. She said the fuzzballs go away if you wash the shirt with jeans. (Not very practical for the AT, but a fun random fact.) She calls her husband over, who expresses a firm opinion that a quality merino shirt should last the entire trail. I tried on shirts of both materials, and on impulse choose the wool.

(skip anecdote on obliviousness)

I stop by the inn to grab wifi and inform "base support" about the shoe shipment delay. Then finally I am on The Trail at 11AM. Big climb up Quimby Mountain, then up and down all afternoon. Perhaps it is my perspective after resting up at the inn, but the woods are more lovely and enjoyable. Certainly not an easier trail, but I get more out of walking it after a brief break.



Private cabin lookout



Finally arrive at Wintturi Shelter late at 7:30-ish, quickly get water and fix dinner. *Sculler* is also there, and we get a chance to talk a bit before I close my eyes and welcome sleep.

PS: My new shirt has a label to let me [track the sheep my wool came from](#).

July 21, Saturday, Wintturi Shelter to Happy Hill Shelter, 20.4

Today I had several grazing opportunities, but what about hiking, surrounded by the serene beauty of Vermont northwoods. Or perhaps you agree with *Jefferson Davis*, "Avoid towns; They just want to take your money." Well, we must hike our own hike, and feel a duty to support local economies.

I leave Winturri shelter and descend down to VT12, where a grocery is nearby. Well, a closer reading of *Companion* would explain that the expanded farmer stand does not open until 10AM, hardly hiker-friendly hours. *Payman and Two Step*, who pass and are passed seemingly a dozen times during the day, are similarly disappointed, but we have another couple of chances.



Maple syrup tubing

Companion does not show much elevation change during this section of The Trail, but that is deceptive, since it is only listing the roads and not the hilltops in between. All day is an up-and-down roller coaster, but it is Vermont, with serene farm scenery and tall northwoods. Up and down I travel to Cloudland Road, where a restaurant sells pints of ice cream and locally bottled soda. I am enjoying my pint of cinnamon ice cream (very lightly flavored, almost vanilla) and raspberry rhubarb soda, out on the porch, when *Payman and Two Step* arrive and get their own pints and bottles.



Cloudland Farm Country Market

On to some afternoon hiking, up and down, not insufferably hot or full of hostile flying attackers as past weeks, mostly fighting gravity and friction. I begin to see trees connected by plastic tubes-- sugar maples! Sometimes a few isolated trees in the forest are connected by long stretches of tubing, in turn connected to more trees. The modern sugar maple industry, unlike the Internet, is a series of tubes.



A series of tubes

Around 4PM I arrive in West Hartford, Vermont, among several people out for rafting and other watersports. I stop at the general store/deli for a sub and soda, early first dinner, while *Payman and Two Step* skip this stop. Hiking on, I soon see them camped at a stream, having gotten word that Happy Hill Shelter is now dry. I take on extra water and soak feet, and choose to go on the shelter anyway.

I finally arrive around 7PM at a fairly unusual shelter, sized three across with a loft for a snug six persons. A couple of section-hikers come and tent, and finally *Sculler* arrives and joins me in the shelter.

And, yes, I do have dinner, second dinner, after all these trail-side snacks.

New Hampshire

July 22, Sunday, Happy Hill Shelter to Norwich VT trail angel home, 4.3

Although I expected an easy near-zero day, I started early to get the most out of it. A gentle mostly-downhill hike in cool air among tall trees, leaving from Happy Hill Shelter, I arrive in 2.5 hours to Norwich, Vermont, along a quiet street where I spy trail magic (a hiker exchange box) then trail magic again: nut bread and watermelon. Betsy Maislen, trail angel, invites me to sleep over at her house when I get done in town! I decline politely, and a little voice in my head reminds me that I decline help too quickly. She says I am about to hit longest stretch of road-hike on the AT.



Bridge over Connecticut River, viewed from NH side



Piano for public art project

A lovely small Vermont town is bounded by a river and bridge, at the end of which is New Hampshire... and a piano. The piano on the sidewalk is part of an art project where anyone is encouraged to play. I pull off into a riverside park for an important cell phone update with "Base Support", then continue, near a large group of nobo hikers, into Hanover, New Hampshire. Past a bit of Dartmouth and into the student-ish retail part of Main Street. Hiker word-of-mouth told of several freebies to be had in town, so I search around, aided by a local guide the trail angel Betsy had handed me earlier.



Downtown Hanover

But first I called Betsy to see if I could still take her up on her generous offer, and she graciously assented. See, I eventually learn... slowly. Then I go to Bagel Basement for a free Everything Bagel with cream cheese, toasted just right. At a bench near the outfitters I see *Willy from Vermont* and asked him to pass on greetings to *Peppaboy*. Then I went by CVS for compression socks (on the recommendation of family for my swollen foot issue) and see *Payman* and *Two Step*. We chatted, and they are staying the night in a motel to wait for shoes for her.



Thank you Bagel Basement

I go to the library, closed until later, for wifi and charge. I need to get close to the entrance for signal, so a kind librarian lets me into the lobby and even opens a door so I get air conditioning-- even though the library is not open yet.

I try to go to Lou's Restaurant and Bakery, but it is way too popular; I try another couple of times during the day. Ramunto's gave me a free slice of cheese pizza, and I also order a drink. *Sculler* is there, so we chat over 'za. Then it's over to Mountain Goat Outfitters for a free Snickers bar.

Enough food! Time to walk around Dartmouth, and I also scout the AT trail, leading out of town, so I have an easy time tomorrow after post office. I waste some time walking around Dartmouth athletic buildings before discovering the main campus and quad. Based on a hiker's advice, I go to the (Howell?) Art Museum, which is small but excellent. The special exhibit on photos from a Vermont quarry are mind-blowing. The section on European post-Renaissance art had a quality of high color contrast that was unusual, but I don't know what I'm talking about.



Baker Library tower, Dartmouth



The Quad



Hood Museum of Art

Around 3:30PM I call the Maislen-Schults to say I am done with town, and will accept a ride or walk as they prefer. *Gray Beard* picks me up at Hanover Inn, and I return to their home to see gear for several other hikers. Soon I have a shower, "town clothes", laundry, and chocolate chip cookies to the precise degree of softness while being firm and not too crisp.

In a burst of energy Betsy makes dinner for three, including fresh sweet corn from the local farm stand, pasta salad, and bok choy. *Gray Beard* arrives and we eat out on the porch, looking for hummingbirds. Yes, there is dessert. Betsy assures me her energy burst is normal, and she is not safe with caffeine.



Trail angels Maislen & Schults

The Runaway Train hiking group also show, and join me sleeping in the basement.

July 23, Monday, Norwich to primitive camp two miles short of Firewarden's Cabin, 22.9

Betsy drives me into Hanover around 6:30AM and drops me off at the post office. First I go to Cafe/Bakery, for once not crowded, and order a ridiculously huge "hiker breakfast". On to post office at 7AM to get my packages. Companion was right: the post office lobby is not open but the clerk will give you packages by 7AM, a big help to hikers who like to start early. Still it takes a while to repack food and mail letters, so I am on the trail at 8AM.

Someone in the cafe had mentioned a big rain last night. I do not see evidence on The Trail-- must have missed this area.

New Hampshire has plenty of gnats, but not the advanced insect squadrons in first part of Vermont.

Too much city food, so I'm a little slow. Lots of up and down, not too technical yet, few views. Water is dry at most of the shelters. I am able to get a liter at a trail magic road crossing from an almost empty container. A sobo tells me about the "Ice Cream Man" who gives out water and an ice cream to hikers, and lets them rest and talk on his porch.



Bill Ackerly, the Ice Cream Man

I get to Trapper John Shelter around 4:30. Could call it an early day, but decide to go down to the Ice Cream Man house. About ten hikers are on the porch, including *Sticks & Metric*. I talk with Bill(?), a real character. *Sticks & Metric* are going another ten miles to camp near a brook-- either they will be fast or night-hike.

I hope to get to Firewarden's Cabin before dark, but the three-thousand foot altitude climb is tough, and I fall short by a couple of miles. I pitch a tent, string a bear line, and eat a no-cook meal, just before the rain starts.

Maybe the rain sounds harder in my tent-tarp because the tent wall is so close to my ears, but it had to be a huge downpour that lasted hours. I got some splash-back around the edges, but remained basically dry and warm. This was the toughest test yet of my shelter.

July 24, Tuesday, two miles below Firewarden's cabin to Glenclyff Hikers Welcome Hostel, 21.9

I hiked the remaining couple of miles to the cabin on now-treacherous slanted wet rock. No water, and now view because of fog. I am told I could see the Whites from here on a clear day. The climb down is much gentler than the way up. Rain threatens, and I am not quite able to make it to Hexacube Shelter before a downpour hits. a sobo couple (rare so far) Driver and Pitstop are there, and shortly move on when the rain abates. I cook a dinner meal to warm up, then start the big climb up Mount Cube with lots of flat rock on top and some views.



Firetower on Smarts Mountain Summit

The afternoon is occupied with up-and-down hiking that can wear down a hiker.

The hostel at Glenciff could be reached if I make a big push. I just have to watch out for wet rocks, which could cause a fall. I cut my shin on one fall, but nothing permanently damaged.

Around 6:30PM I meet some sobos who ask where I'm heading and I mention the hostel, but worry I might get in too late for check-in. They came from there and say lights-out is 10PM, so I should get there in time. I turn on the speed and arrive at the hostel at 8PM. Quickly I am registered, catch a van ride into Warren for sundries, then shower. Oh, and Sculler is here! Most of my other trail-buddies are a day to several days ahead of me, estimated from shelter journals. I miss their advice and knowledge, because I will need it for the Whites.



Hikers Welcome Hostel, Glencliff

July 25, Wednesday, Glencliff to Beaver Brook Shelter, 8.0

The Glencliff NH post office opens at 7AM, which is hiker friendly. I get two packages (food, trekking pole replacement) but expect two more: warm clothing and replacement shoes. I return to mail old poles and letters and ask when today's packages arrive, and my warm clothes box just arrived! Now I can hike and do not have to take a forced zero day, waiting for equipment.

Sculler and *Mr. Burns* are slack-packing, towards the hostel, so I should see them today.

I still need to repack food and make other preparations, so I am not on The Trail until 10AM, very late for me. A long section of climb seems to go straight up the mountain with no switchbacks, then advances to boulder hopping. The trees along the trail seem tightly packed, with no flat spots anywhere. Gradually we transition to alpine growth. Even surrounded by trees, the cool breezes become cold winds. I see southbounders coming down bundled in long pants and jackets.



Fungi

I meet *Sculler*, who described how she wasn't prepared for cold with clothing near the top and *Fat Chap*, the owner of Hikers Welcome Hostel, literally gave her the shirt off his back.



Sculler

I reminded her of her comment in the morning about bending trekking poles when the tips get stuck in the ground. I said it was the hiking equivalent of "crabbing", which she appreciated since she coaches crew.

Near the summit I am surrounded on both sides of the trail by a windbreak of short trees. Here I meet *Mr Burns* slack-packing, then I reach the treeline, and the wind is fierce, making me thankful my wind shirt works so effectively.



A somewhat rocky trail

On and up to the summit, where a few rocks are piles as windbreaks. Some day hikers, including children, are huddled in the sheltering stone, under-dressed for the conditions.



Leaving treeline to Mt Moosilauke



Summit

The trail descends over large rocks, difficult and slow to traverse. I arrive at Beaver Brook Shelter at 4PM, too early to stop under normal circumstances, but the next shelter is just too far away to reach in daylight, nine miles away.

The shelter is already full! I put up my tent on a nearby tiny platform. Like others, I eat early, put on warmest clothes, and snuggle in.

Advice I hear for the Whites is "don't rush it." Still, I hope to hike a little longer tomorrow. The fewer shelters and approved tent sites mean more people have to stop early, unless they plan and execute carefully, and the weather cooperates.

July 26, Thursday, Beaver Brook Shelter to Kinsman Pond Shelter, 13.0

Leaving Beaver Brook Shelter, I have a long rock-hop descent down to Kinsmans's Notch, then a still climb to Mount Wolf and down. At various times pass or am passed by *Fetch & Topsy*, and another couple.

After water and short lunch break at Eliza Brook Shelter, start climb to Kinsman Ridge. Imagine a bouldering gym two thousand feet high, and narrow. Finally I put away my poles and adopt three-point climbing style. It just keeps going... Sky is overcast but does not rain. Imagine if it did!



Eliza Brook Shelter

I get to the ridge around 4PM, but no view, completely clouded in. Oh well, I do not require a view each day in the Whites.

I see a southbounder headed the other way and am tempted to warn her: do not start this treacherous descent so late in the day, when you are tired and might make mistakes. I am reminded of a hiker who heard that all the Whites were designed for northbound hiking except for the first one we hit, Moosilauke.

Another tricky careful-I-might-die-or-be-injured-if-I-mess-up descent, but not too bad, and finally limp in to Kinsman Pond Shelter six-ish.

Also joining me in the shelter are *Fetch & Topsy*, and another couple. *F & T* had inquired about work-for-stay option for the shelter, which I had assumed was only an option for huts. They decided against, since there were two hours of work in the morning, when they planned to start early hiking.

As we sat around and talked about the huge climb we had just done, I worked on repairing my pack, where the seam split in a couple of places. *Fetch & Topsy* were planning on resupplying in Lincoln tomorrow.

I survived the day, with another planned tomorrow just as challenging.

July 27, Friday, Kinsman Pond Shelter to Garfield Ridge Shelter, 15.1

Tonight I am in Garfield Ridge Shelter with *Dos* (started February 28), *Achy Breaky* (from Germany) and *Fish Man* (section hiker day 9, of last section to Katahdin). Also met *Magpie*, thru-hiker who is in hammock and skipping shelter and tent sites.

Started early at Kinsman Pond Shelter because I knew I had a long day: 15.3 miles and a lot of elevation change. Got to my first AMC hut, Lonesome Lake Hut, around 8AM. Too early to beg for breakfast leftovers. Following down the brook for a mile, I startle a moose in the stream, who wheels around and dances up the opposite bank on those thin spindly legs. I was so happy at seeing this unexpected creature that I teared up a little.



Lonesome Lake Hut



Hut interior



Lonesome Lake

Down to the highway, *Fetch & Topsy* would go into Lincoln for supplies. Past Franconia Notch and back up another 2400 feet to a tent-site with good water. Then an extended climb, though not as bad as yesterday, to past five thousand feet elevation, finally along the long Franconia Ridge. The weather had been overcast as usual, but cleared up just as I got onto the ridge above treeline. I walked over a mile

along ridge with stunning views 360 degrees. I and all others hikers nearby ambled along the ridge, in no hurry for it to end. In the middle I met *Magpie*, and she commented how we both had giant smiles on our faces.



Franconia Ridge



Another view of Franconia Ridge

Finally down off ridge, around 4PM, and difficult climb up and down Mount Garfield, and down to Garfield Ridge Shelter by 7PM. Empty tent-sites, unusual for a Friday.

Long tough walking day, with big rewards.

July 28, Saturday, Garfield Ridge Shelter to Ethan Pond Shelter, 14.5

I am in a totally full shelter at Ethan Pond, just before Crawford Notch. Along with *Achey Breaky* I met yesterday, is *Machine*, who started in late April and is very fast. He says doing the AT fast is fun, but he would also like to redo AT at a regular pace. Also met Luc, who is French and section hiking for several days to see if he wants to do the entire AT. After today's rain, he does not. there is also a family with sketchy tent who already went to sleep, who decided to stay in shelter.

I got up not quite so early, because I had a plan. The day starts out overcast like it has been for several days. Lots of rock-hopping after starting from Garfield Ridge Shelter. White Mountain trail builders love using rock. If I do not write otherwise and am not on top of a beautiful ridge, I am rock-hopping.



Rock hopping in the Whites

I get to Galehead Hut at 9AM, long after breakfast is finished, and as I was coached to do, asked if there were leftovers they need help disposing of. The hut staff have to cart leftovers down the mountain on their backs, so better to use thru-hikers' indomitable hunger and feed the leftovers to them. The hut staff person was very nice, and offered me 3/4 liter of oatmeal in a huge mixing bowl, and said I was welcome to a large chunk of crumb cake as well (sold for \$1.00 to rich vacationing day hikers). He also helped me make a reservation at Highland Center at Crawford Notch, where I also have a food drop. Unlike the huts, I can get a hot shower there, and it is cheaper than list price at the huts since I am staying in the bunkhouse.

On to a climb to almost 5000 feet at Twin Mountain, where I just missed a clear view by a minute. *Maggie* was also there, and mentioned she just arranged to meet a friend who lives in New Hampshire at Zealand Falls Hut in the afternoon. She presses on to make her rendezvous, since distances are hard to estimate with hiking times in the Whites. I linger and appreciate the view.

Down, rock-hopping, clouds darkening, about thirty minutes before the hut, it starts sprinkling, then harder and I have to put on a raincoat. Finally reach shelter at 3PM amidst a buzz of activity, as hikers mill around and put on rain gear and go on their day hikes.

A hut volunteer asks me if I was staying at the hut and was interested in work-for-stay. I reply I was moving on to next campsite, and he advised it was very flat trail for five miles, easy to get to. Indeed, it was like a trail in Maryland (like they brought in a trail designer who knows more tricks than throwing *more rocks* on the trail).

Downpour starts on the flat stretch; luckily there is room in Ethan Pond Shelter so I do not have to pitch a tent in the rain. Achy arrives soon afterwards. Luc was already here. We are not permitted to cook near shelter, for bear control, and have to go to dining fly, where a large group is playing gin rummy.

Now, having journaled, will snuggle in and listen to rain dropping on the metal roof through the night.

July 29, Sunday, Ethan Pond Shelter to Crawford Notch AMC Highland Center, 2.9

The rain seemed to come down all night at Ethan Pond Shelter, and I had no reason to leave early. Finally could not lie still any longer, so left at 7AM, with Machine getting ready soon after. Easy trail down.

Shortly before getting to highway to turn off for Highland Center is a small parking area, and *Rock Dancer* is parked next to his tarp, giving out trail magic. I stop and have a soda and munchies, joined by *Machine* and *Keeper* and his young dog Duke. (I saw *Keeper* back at Glencliff: He has a cap that reads "USA: Back to Back Winner of World Wars").

Rock Dancer offers to give me a ride if I have trouble with hitching, but for once I have no trouble. A dad with two young daughters and older son give me a ride in their extended pickup. They are out camping, and headed to Highland Center anyway to go to the playground.



Highland Mountain Playscape at ACM Highland Center

Check-in is not until noon-1PM, so I hang around in the lodge and catch up on e-mails, journal, etc. I have a room reserved in the bunkhouse, less expensive than the main lodge.



AMC Highland Center



Shapleigh Bunkhouse at Highland Center

My food package addressed to Highland Center did not arrive, assumed lost. I will need to buy food. I overheard *Dos* needing a ride to the gas station to resupply, so I asked to tag along.

One of the AMC staffers helped *Dos* find a ride, which helped change her opinion of AMC somewhat. She had a bad experience last night doing work-for-stay at a hut, where the thru-hikers were set out on the porch while the paying customers ate; it felt very divided-classes to her. Anyway, a desk staffer identified another bunkhouse guest who was willing to give us a ride to a convenience store.



Mount Washington Hotel, viewed from grocery run

I am not used to estimating food at short-term resupply stops (since I usually pre-package and mail all my food) and might not have made optimal choices. Live and Learn. On our way back, the driver pulled over when he spotted a bear. Then *Dos* and I see it, and he let us look through binoculars. Yeah!

After a pint of ice cream from the gas station and a large cookie, I suddenly did not feel well. Exploded both ends. Assume stomach flu. I went to the lodge office to see if I could get a private room so as to not disturb or infect other hikers, but nothing was available. I was able to move into the smaller back room of the bunkhouse, with an older couple sharing with me, and a separate bathroom, and I warned all hikers present of my malady.

Felt crummy, absolutely exhausted, and fell asleep listening to podcasts.

July 30, Monday, AMC Highland Center zero day

I still feel rotten, so arrange for another day at Shapleigh Bunkhouse at Highland Center.

Though having an upset tummy, I still have hiker hunger, so had breakfast (included with room) but did not take full advantage of the all-you-can-eat part.

Then napped, rested on bunk, recharged electronics, made minor repairs, updated e-mail and blogs, and rested some more.



Sunset at Highland Center

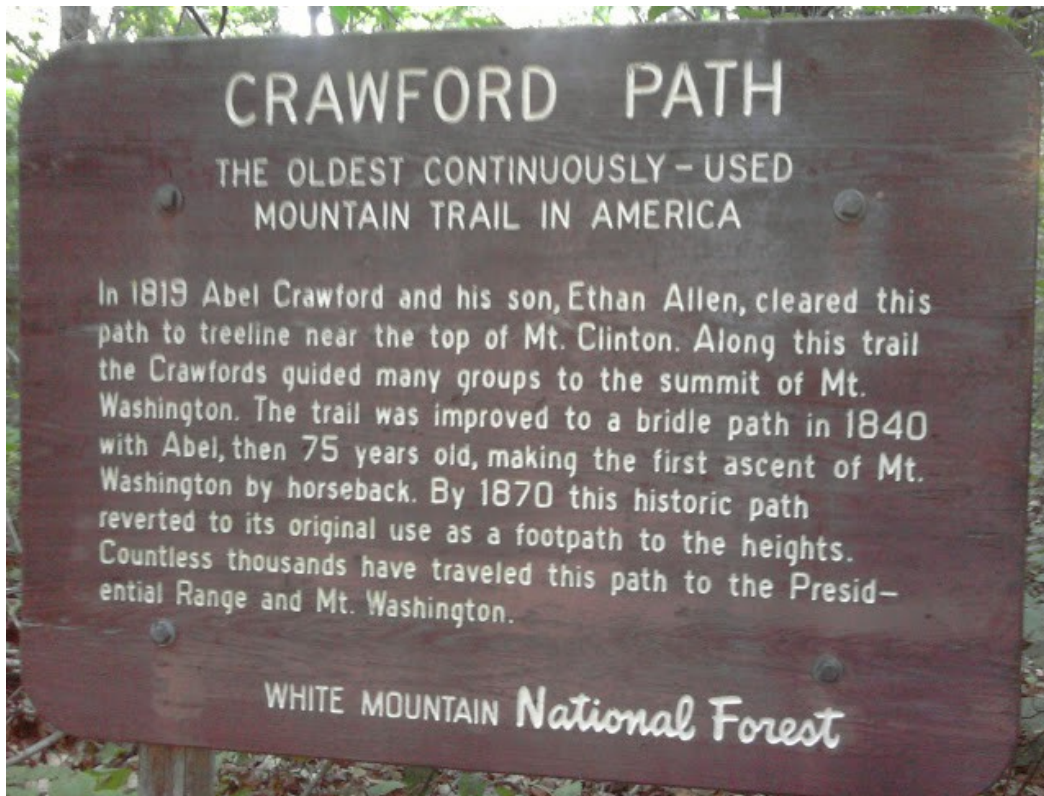
A forced zero after a nero is NOT my idea on how to spend the day. I imagine trail friends two or three days ahead getting totally out of reach. Oh well, rest, rest, rest, ...

July 31, Tuesday, *Crawford Notch to RMC Gray Knob Cabin, 17.3*

Perhaps I wake up feeling not one hundred per cent, but eighty per cent is OK. I just hope I do not end up getting carried down the mountain puking (or worse).

I have another AYCE breakfast without the AYCE part. Sadly, breakfast begins at 6:30AM, so allowing a half-hour to cram in food puts me behind my favorite starting time. But the day starts with clear skies. I take Crawford Path from Highland Center, which soon rejoins the AT.

The climb to Mount Franklin was not tough. Crawford Path was a bridal path at one point, so no hand-over-hand work was needed.



Crawford Path history

Lake of the Clouds was serene, and the hut provided water. I did not ask for leftovers because of the big breakfast earlier.



Lake of the Clouds



Lake of the Clouds Hut

As we leave sub-alpine and go above treeline, more hikers become visible at greater distances.



Above treeline, ascending to Mount Washington

We can see Mount Washington summit as we hike through the morning. I reach the summit around 12:30, visit the snack bar. I get chocolate milk and Doritos, and notice at a nearby table with thru-hikers that each one gets a chocolate milk and one gets double.



On summit of Mount Washington

Out again to appreciate the view, and enjoy the crowds from the cog railroad and passenger cars, and hiking groups. I resume hiking after only thirty minutes break, hoping there is some way of getting beyond Madison Spring Hut for the night. I would really prefer not negotiating a hut stay if possible.



Cog railway

The way down crosses the cog railway, and I get a good view as one goes by. Then onto scree for most of the afternoon. (Maybe I am using the term wrong, because it is not from a rock fall.) We hike on vast fields of jagged boulders on several peaks. This really slows down my pace to around one mile/hour.



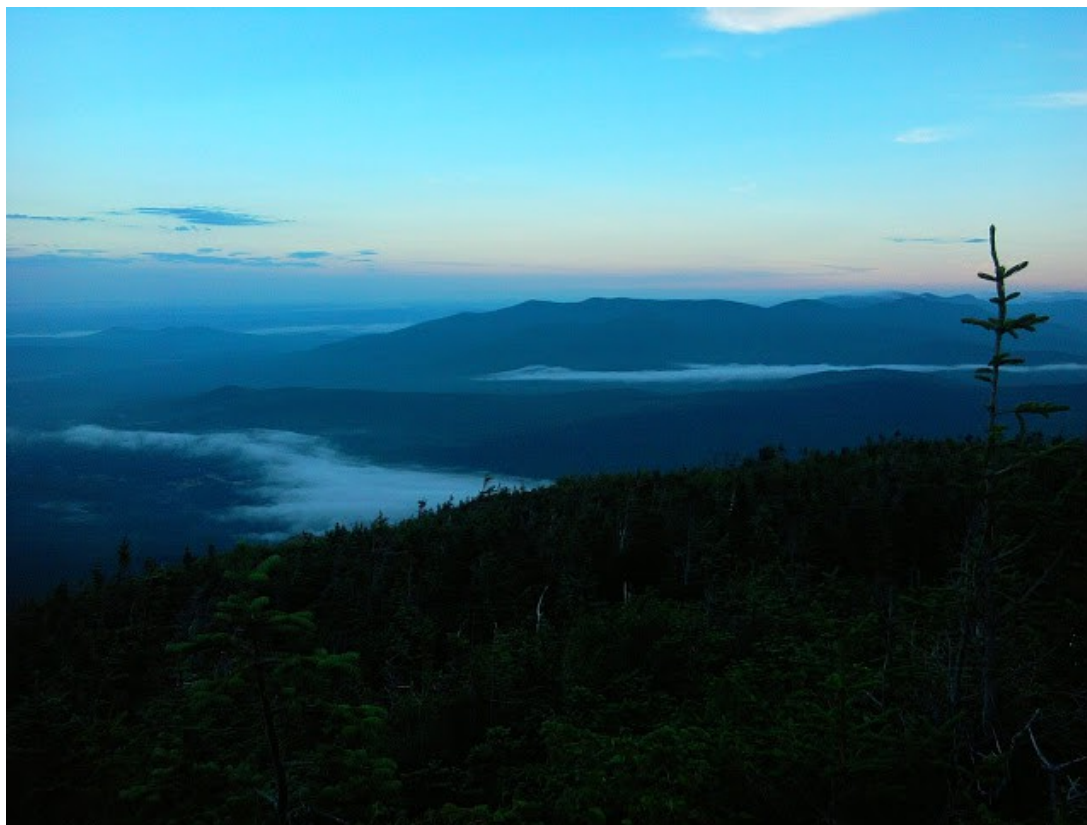
Approaching train on cog railway



Jagged rocks make a challenging hike.

It looks like I would get to Madison Springs Hut at 5PM, after thru-hikers would have grabbed any work-for-stay slots. I might have negotiated a discount, but did not want to risk it. The Valley Way Tentsite alternative looks like a steep thousand foot climb down at the end of the day.

Instead, I turn off one mile prior to the hut to walk a little over a mile to Gray Knob Cabin, run by the Randolph Mountain Club. I think Companion is wrong on distance and elevation; I seem to go down further than estimated. Finally arrive at a large two-story cabin with a reclusive caretaker, who did not expect any visitors. Fetched water (Companion seemed wrong on distance to spring) Ate quick dinner, and get to enjoy the entire upper floor to myself tonight.



View near RMC cabin

Gotta hike back up again in the morning.

August 1, Wednesday, *RMC Gray Knob Cabin to Pinkham Notch for White Mountain Hostel in Gorham, 8.7*

Upon reflection the RMC cabin choice is not one most hikers would make, since they want to avoid any fee. Most would take chance with huts. I am unduly cautious with uncertainty of dealing with AMC huts.

Anyway, I hike back to The Trail and arrive at Madison Spring Hut at 8:30 for water, then up Mount Madison. I quickly put away trekking poles, because this is another scree field with three-point climbing. Lots of day hikers from the hut are climbing just behind me.



Approaching Madison Spring Hut

From the summit of this last White Mountain above tree-line, you can see several smaller peaks all the way down to Pinkham Notch, and see hikers from far away. Suddenly a pair way in the distance hiking towards me yell "Sagebrush!" It is *Progress & Joiner*!! They came down with same symptoms as me, and report knowing other hikers experiencing the same. Their location was less convenient than mine; Lake of the Clouds Hut. So, weak, they hike to Mount Washington and bum a ride down by car, and make their way to White Mountain Hostel in Gorham. Today they were making up the section they missed by hiking the other direction to Mount Washington Summit and getting a ride down to hostel again.



Joiner and Progress on Mount Madison

Energized by meeting trail friends, I continue down. I look forward to reaching Pinkham Notch by midday for a snack at the visitor's center, and I can see it in the distance, so I should be able to reach that. I should have looked at Companion more closely. At 2:30PM I still have a way to go, when I meet *Skunk Ape*, who I met at the hostel at Harpers Ferry on June 54, and introduce myself. Soon a really hard downpour drenches me, sadly several minutes from the visitor center.

Finally there, I seek refuge in the cafeteria and find *Skunk Ape*, *Little Pot* (German), and sobo *Blueberry*. The rain does not let up anytime soon, so I will have trouble finding a place for the night. The thru-hikers mention getting a shuttle to nearby Gorham, which would not have occurred to me. *Little Pot* already has a spot reserved at White Mountain Resort hostel, where *Progress and Joiner* would likely be tonight. and the shuttle would arrive in an hour. I acquire quarters for the pay phone and make a call.



Skunk Ape at Pinkham Notch visitor center

Skunk Ape joins us in the shuttle, but he is going to a different hostel in town. By the time we get clothes into laundry and then shower, most of the hostel occupants have already left for a shuttle to a restaurant. I order pizza take-out, and catch up with *Progress & Joiner*, and chat with *Little Pot*... and she shows me her pot.



White Mountain Lodge & Hostel

August 2, Thursday, Pinkham Notch to Imp Shelter, 13.1

When I heard breakfast at White Mountain Resort hostel consisted of a burrito, I imagined a small microwavable yuchhy thing. Instead, we were treated to fresh homemade breakfast burritos, freshly baked blueberry muffins, and all the oatmeal you might want. Very nicely done, served whenever a hiker was up and ready for it.



Trail completion cards at hostel

The shuttle back to Pinkham Notch was scheduled for 7:30AM, so I was back on the Trail by 8AM.

Also starting there from the hostel was *Pile o' Dudes: Johnny Rocket, Knief, Messenger, Bod Bin, Metric* (a different *Metric*) and *Blue Skies*. Their trail conversation tends toward Star Wars trivia, gamer nerdism, etc. Very funny dudes. They say when they get to shelter they like to play their own Dungeons&Dragons type game. They expressed a keen interest today in finally meeting *Lady Forward* today. Their rendition of "Oh Canada" last night was a riot.

2500 foot climb to Wildcat Mountain right off, then steep descent with some wet rocks to Carter Notch. The skies darkened, and I got a little rain just before stopping at Carter Hut around 2PM for water and break. The caretaker of this small, oldest, and last hut was baking bread and cooking dinner, while answered my questions about the trail ahead.

t



Pinkham Notch from Wildcat Mountain



Carter Notch Hut

Taking a chance on weather, I head out, destination Imp Shelter, expecting a late arrival, 7PM or later. Somehow I get energy and rhythm and put in a good hike, up Carter Dome and down Zeta Pass (ouch), up Carter Mountains and finally down to the shelter. The weather cleared and changed several times, but somehow did not rain. Had not had a chance to really stretch legs and hike full speed for a few days, and there were places on the Carter peaks where I could zoom along.



Carter Dome

Arrived at shelter, tired but satisfied, at 7:30AM, later joined by *Butcher* and *Oak*, thru-hikers starting in late April (which means they be fast).

This might be my last AMC shelter. I am not entirely comfortable with the AMC hut system, so will be glad to get to Maine.

August 3, Friday, *Imp Shelter to Trident Col Tentsite, 14.9*

From Imp Shelter, I needed to hike eight miles to US2, right at White Mountain Hostel. I knew they had a shuttle leaving for town and the post office at 10:30AM, but I could not get there in time at White Mountain hiking speed. I would need to hitch-hike four miles to town.

Started a thousand foot climb to Mount Moriah, with plenty of bare rock climbing. Three thousand foot descent had my left knee complaining about yesterday's downward climb. Along Rattle River was a nice easy downward sloping smooth trail, allowing downhill-lope gait not used much in New Hampshire.

Down near the intersection to the highway, I meet a father saying goodbye to three sons heading up the trail. He asked me about my AT trip, and when I mentioned needing to hitch to Gorham, he offered to give me a ride. He also offered to return me to the trailhead when I was finished, since He did not have any obligations all day. I suggested we meet at pizza place across road from post office at 2PM (Mr. Pizza) What luck for me to get a ride.

The post office had my food package, which was a relief. After processing food and supplies I went to Mr. Pizza for meatball sub and shake. I had weighed myself at hostel yesterday and was down to 148 pounds, down from normal 155, so need to work on eating more in towns, when I do not have to carry

food. I also updated journal while eating, and looked at e-mails. Later I walked to library for faster reliable wifi and downloaded podcasts and finished e-mail. I returned to Mr. Pizza at 1:50PM and waited until 2:25PM, but ride back was a no-show.

I walked to edge of town and stuck out my thumb. I was picked up by an eccentric lady who brought me back to her stealth hostel, where she picks up four hikers, before stopping at trailhead.

Before starting hike stop by White Mountain Hostel and leave some excess supplies in hiker box. Also get my picture taken. They forgot to take it yesterday and asked me to stop by today to get photographed.

The Trail starts with a road walk past a small hydroelectric generation building and spillway, then up a thousand(?) foot climb on a path that is pleasant, not too rocky, not too steep, more like Maryland instead of New Hampshire except for the large elevation change. A brief shower made the rock climbing on the next mountain more challenging.

Arrived at Trident Col Tentsite, empty, around 7PM, but soon files up. The tent site next to me is taken by a young woman section hiking New Hampshire and Maine on weekends, who lives in Montreal. We listen as a pack of coyotes with pups sets off a terrific series of howls and yips.

Echoes of home.

August 4, Saturday, Trident Col Tentsite to Full Goose Shelter ME, 14.5

From Trident Col Tentsite I spend much longer in the morning than expected in grinding up and down elevation changes not reflected in Companion, and a climb up Mount Success for one last finale for New Hampshire before crossing into Maine.



Last state line of the trip

For the afternoon I climb Goose Eye Mountain, following along a soft of ridge line, with lots of balds, but also with jaggies, so you come to places where you put away your trekking poles, rock climb down forty feet, rock climb back up fifty feet, then resume along ridgeline. My energy level is somehow lower today, so lots of podcasts help in the afternoon.

I finally arrive at Full Goose Shelter around 7PM and find all tent sites full. Of course, it it a weekend, with a large group. The shelter initially looks full but makes room for me. Staying there are *Expeditor* &

Instigator, an older thru-hiker couple, with very similar equipment to mine: other Gossamer Gear packs, Caldera stove, and bubble-wrap insulation for cooking. Hope to meet them on The Trail and talk more.

Also see *Magpie*, who I haven't seen in a while, who usually hammocks and does so again tonight. Also see the young woman from Montreal, who is quite a fast hiker for sectioning on weekends. Also there is *Grok* (Heinlein literary reference I recognize!)

So how do I get to Andover for a nice nero, and how do I get a ride into Andover, eight miles from trail, with infrequent traffic for a difficult hitch? Sleep on it.

Maine

August 5, Sunday, Full Goose Shelter to Baldpate Lean-to, 12.0

Expeditor and Instigator had said they would leave super-early, but I get out of Full Goose Shelter just before them. Quickly passed by a couple of thru-hikers, but as I enter Mahoosac Notch Trail I hike alone and in quiet.

Imagine great blocks of stone, from the size of a refrigerator to that of a Mack truck, scattered in piles like some giant's Lego toy box. Quickly I put away trekking poles and keep them stored all morning. The first climbs down and up are not too bad, sort of like yesterday, but not broken up by bits of regular trail, and then getting larger and more fantastical climbs, and more challenging. You look for alternate routes, and soon notice the placement of white blazes is giving suggestions.



Mahoosac Notch

The position of huge stone blocks in the notch create little caves where cool air can settle. Sometimes you can hear water running below, also cooling the air, out of reach.

The climbing is relentless; you settle in a pattern of geometric thinking, neither rushing or hesitating, fully concentrating on the challenge. Later I look at the trail guide: 275.4 to 274.3 miles from Katahdin about a mile, takes me over three hours to complete. I survive the hardest mile on the AT.

And I am hungry, and stop at Speck Pond Shelter for a second lunch. Been doing that often lately, eating more than planned.



Speck Pond

The sky threatens rain, but I hike on.

I would like to get to Frye Notch Lean-to, just before Andover, for maximum nero the next day. Alas, I get to the next closest shelter, Baldpate Lean-to, around 6:30PM and am done. Joined by southbounder *Jerseybob*, Britisher *Chez11*, *Grok*, and *Magpie* hammocking nearby.

August 6, Monday, *Baldpate Lean-to to Andover Pine Ellis Hiker Hostel, 8.0*

Two month Trail Anniversary today! Started at Harpers Ferry on June 6.

Chez11 next to me in the shelter had a bad night of vomiting, starting suddenly. I thought it was the illness running through hikers like a scourge, that I refer to as "stomach flu" generically. He thought it might rather be due to drinking water untreated-- perhaps his filter failed.

A torrential rain was magnified by the lean-to's metal roof to become a sonic cataclysm.

I hit the trail early from Baldpate Lean-to, swiftly climb over a thousand feet via rock steps, and emerge onto a large mostly smooth rock dome, Baldpate, in two peaks. The cold wind, surrounding clouds, and smooth rock in alpine region, with a view of Maine mountains to the north, make an exciting memorable morning hike while still fresh.



Baldpate



Baldpate cairns

Coming down from Baldpate were few places where I needed both hands for three-point climbing, yet I had to beware of wet inclined rock faces and roots, narrowly avoiding falls several times. Finally I slipped sideways on a root, torqued a trekking pole handle in order to break my fall, but alas, the pole bent at the handle.

The transition back to one pole was, sadly, automatic.

The hike down to the road was mostly free of White Mountain-type challenges, so I maintain a satisfying two miles/hour and arrive at noon, just as *Grok* caught up with me. He had planned on hiking further to the next Andover access point, but changed his mind and decided to come in with me at "Lower B Hill" trailhead. Unfortunately his cell phone did not get signal, nor mine, so he need to thumb on an infrequently traveled road. After only five vehicles and ten minutes, we get a ride in back of a pickup.

The Red Hen restaurant is closed on Monday, so I get a sandwich at the general store with *Grok*, then bid farewell since he was just resupplying and I wanted to nero at the hostel. I find my way to Pine Ellis Hiker Hostel, and see *Fozzy* and *Dos*, both recent hiker flu victims. I make my rounds to post office and mail back broken trekking pole. Library serves for wifi and e-mail to request replacement pole, then back to general store for more snacks.



Porch of Pine Ellis Hiker Lodge

The hostel has a nice large porch on a quiet street, a good spot for hikers to sit and chat.

August 7, Tuesday, Andover to 4 miles short of Bemis Mountain Lean-to, 14.8

Andover, Maine is a tiny bucolic town at the intersection of two roads with stop signs. At the intersection is the general store, and the Little Red Hen restaurant. Having tried the grill at the general store yesterday, I wanted breakfast at the Hen, open at 6:30AM. I watched the cook prepare loaves of bread while making my "hikers special", another breakfast too big for me. I liked the way they baked their own bread, even including burger buns. Recommended.

The Pine Ellis Hostel is on a quiet residential street with ample porch. I really liked sitting on the porch, writing journal entries or just watching and talking to hikers.

No one was watching the Olympics, possibly because several hikers were recovering from stomach flu, including *Dos*, *Fozzy*, and *Lasagna*.

My shuttle back to The Trail was at 8AM, joined by sobo Mark. The next bit of trail included a climb up Wyman Mountain, but did not seem very exciting, then a not-exciting climb down to Sawyer Notch. Then an unexpectedly challenging climb up Old Blue Mountain after passing the other road into Andover. The climb is difficult enough that I know I cannot reach my target of Bemis Mountain Lean-to. Luckily I find a high mountain spring to replenish water, where many springs at shelters are going stagnant or dry.



Quail

Around 7PM I spot a stealth tentsite and ask the one occupying hiker if I can share. *DudeManBro* bids welcome, but he is suffering a recurrence of hiker stomach flu, and advises I keep my distance. I am four miles short of Bemis Mountain Lean-to, with a challenging climb on Bemis Stream Trail and Bemis Range first thing in the morning. I only get fifteen miles today, but started two hours late.

Western Maine is challenging, it appears.

August 8, Wednesday, 4 miles short of Bemis Mountain Lean-to to Little Swift River Pond Campsite, 16.9

Broke camp 4.5 miles short of Bemis Mountain Lean-to. I should mention the forest is extremely dense in this area, so if the stealth tentsite had not existed camping would be tricky.

Intense climb up Bemis Mountain, then a lot of hiking on bald solid rock areas connected by narrow trails, bordered by blueberry plants. Cairns and blazes help make the twisty turny maze on balds.

Stopped at Bemis Mountain Lean-to for breakfast snack, joined by *DudeManBro*. We keep passing each other much of the day.

At Maine 17 Highway had a good view of a large lake below. After the highway no giant climbs or descents, just lots of little ups and downs, and some gently sloping trails with few rocks that allow me to finally stretch out and hike at two miles/hour again like before New Hampshire.



Long Pond

Finally ended at Little Swift River Pond Campsite around 6:30PM. A little frustrating that I could not hike more than 17.5 miles in a really long day with some easy trail in places. This may indicate problems getting to Stratton before post office closes early on Saturday.

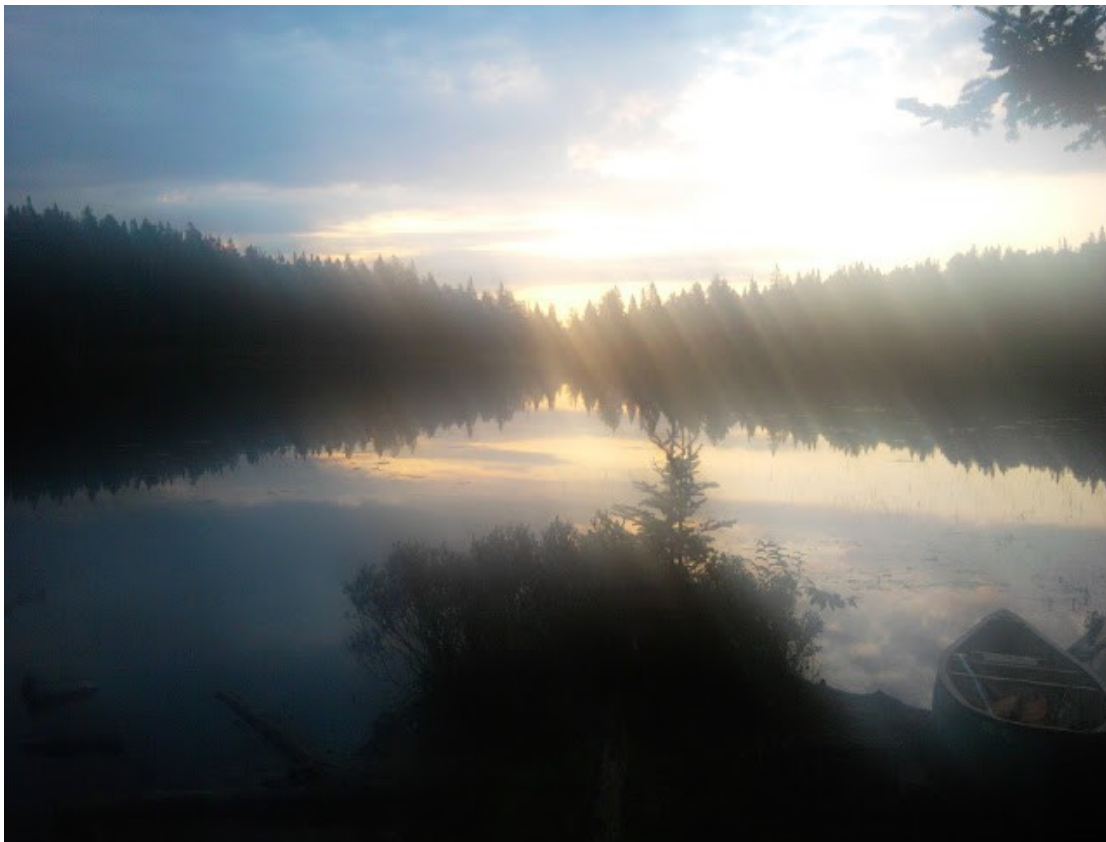
The campsite is near a large lake, and one camper spotted a moose in it earlier in the evening. A canoe with paddle and lifejacket was tied nearby and unlocked, so I took it out for a quick paddle after dinner. The wind was zero, so the surface of the lake was glassy and made a lovely reflection.



Canoeing on Little Swift River Pond

If I get up early and go down to the lake, perhaps I will spot a moose.

August 9, Thursday, Little Swift River Pond Campsite to Lone Mountain primitive camp, 21.3



Reflections, Little Swift River Pond

No moose spotted in the pond in early morning. On the five miles to Maine Highway 4 to Rangely, I mentally will trail magic to be found at the intersection. Maine has few highway crossings, so not much opportunity for trail magic. When I get to the road I see *Dos* and her friend "Base Support" get out of a car and her "Base Support" planting cans of soda for trail magic. She offers me one, and a couple of bars, which I gratefully accept. My hiker hunger is having me eat extra food, so I look out for any snacks offered.

Dos and her "Base Support" had been slackpacking and "Base Support" came down with stomach flu. Dirty rotten shame that someone nice enough to come out and join a thru-hiker friend on the trail should suffer this malady.

The afternoon offers a climb up Saddleback Mountain, with lots of bald unbroken rock, connected by trails through areas where little islands of plants are trying to grow. So it is a bald with comb-over :-). Lots of good views on both sides following the ridgeline. I can see long distances along the trail where I am the only hiker, walking in my own personal bubble. The sky is clear... for now.



Saddleback



The Horn

I reach Poplar Ridge Lean-to around 5PM, and clouds and a shower passed a little earlier. I could stop in shelter, or push on to make next day's hike shorter so I might get into town, Stratton, before post office closes. Maybe. If everything goes well.



Marker

I might even try for a late 8PM arrival at the next Lean-to. However, the trail up Lone Mountain is difficult enough I have trouble maintaining steady two miles/hour pace. Then the sky darkens and the promise of heavy rain is near. When rain starts, even if I had a strong headlamp I could not go on to shelter because rain cuts visibility. I need to pitch a tent fast in rain before I have to do so in darkness. The slope is steep and the trees are thick, so I have a tough time finding a spot. Finally I find a mediocre spot and set up. Even able to open tent during lull in rain to cook a meal.

The rain in Maine

falls likelier on the hiker.

August 10, Friday, Lone Mountain primitive camp to Stratton Motel and Hostel, 15.7

It was a dark and stormy night. Ha, ha. Rain fell off and on all night at my stealth camp near the summing of Long Mountain, only a couple of miles shy of the comfort of Spaulding Mountain Lean-to. I break camp and started hiking, discovering I was only two hundred feet from a summit and much more level potential primitive tent sites.

The morning climb to Spaulding Mountain does not bring any views, due to fog. No balds-- I am spoiled from previous day. I notice for the past few days that The Trail is well-blazed and maintained, with signs of fresh work by MATC (Maine Appalachian Trail Club). Today's trail, at least, does not have a lot of short up-and-down segments where a level path might serve.

Ran into *Magpie* again near a river ford midday (South Branch Carabasset River) and we started the steep climb of South Crocker Mountain about the same time.

Planning ahead, it seems doubtful I can hike to Maine Highway 27 and hitch into town before the post office closes at 4PM. This means I have to wait around Saturday morning and cannot get back to the trailhead early.

Aside from a few really steep beginning sections, I can hike South Crocker and North Crocker at a steady two miles/hour. Early afternoon rain, again, so I have to pull raincoat on and off multiple times. No views on the Crockers due to clouds.

Finally the long steady climb down to the highway, that always seems to take longer than expected. I meet a couple day-hiking who ask if I have seen *Magpie*. They are friends going to surprise her.

I reach the road at 4:30PM, with light rain, and am able to catch a ride in a relatively short time. They take me directly to Stratton Motel and Hostel, where I treat myself to a private room, so I can spread everything out to dry. *Magpie* and her friends the Finns, who live in Maine, also arrive and get rooms.



Stratton Motel and Hostel

The hostel section of the building only has a few hikers so far: *Willie from Vermont*, *Fugitive*, and a couple more, watching television. *Willie* asks if I would like to join him for dinner, which is great because we have barely had a chance to talk in a couple of brief meetings, and we know and hike with a log of the same people. I have been following him for many days, based on shelter journals, just a day or half-day behind.

In real life *Willie* is an engineer working at a small firm of five people, designing water systems for small municipalities in Vermont. He asked for leave to do the trip, but is not completely certain if his job will still be there when he returns.

August 11, Saturday, Stratton to Little Bigelow Lean-to, 15.3

Having treated myself to a private room, I had plenty of space to dry gear. I had planned to take an extra long bath in morning, but ran out of time. I got my food box and replacement pole and came back to arrange food bag, then visited the hostel section of the building to see when people would schedule a shuttle back to the trailhead.

Willie from Vermont said he needed some time to prepare, so I suggested 10:30AM, which was agreeable. *Indiana* would also take that shuttle. While waiting I found fresh strawberries and a pint of cream left on the "free shelf" of the hostel fridge, so I made strawberries&cream. Also found some cream cheese, which is slapped onto two remaining bagels I got at grocery the night before for midday snack on the trail.

Sue, hotel/hostel owner, came to this community immediately after finishing her own thru-hike a few years ago with her dog. She started a hostel, but then the hotel came on the market, which she was able to acquire for hiker use.

DudeManBro arrives at the hostel as we are leaving. On the shuttle Sue's dog put head on my lap.

The weather was, in a word, crummy. We would get no views from the Bigelow Mountains, and rain was likely.

The two thousand foot climb to the first section had some trail that I could maintain at two miles/hour, but near the top had some technical climbing up/down that slowed the average. No view due to clouds, as expected, and covered in a light mist that was not uncomfortable. By 2PM I reached Horns Pond Lean-to where *Indiana* and *Willie from Vermont* were waiting. We figured if we did five miles in three hours, and if trail conditions were similar ahead, we could theoretically press on to Little Bigelow Lean-to ten miles away and get there in six hours at 8PM, just time enough to fix quick dinner before total darkness. It is a gamble, and if it rained and slowed us down we would have trouble finding stealth campsite nearby. *Willie*, fresh from stay at hostel, declares he is going for it. *Indiana* and I also commit, though I have fresh memories of an unsuccessful attempt.

Some afternoons your body finds the rhythm and you just keep going. I had packed two bagels with cream cheese back at the hostel, and they went a large way in keeping my body fueled, added to the huge reserves I ate when at civilization. I did enjoy climbing up on balds on unbroken rock, even with no view.

About a mile away from our destination I pass *Indiana* cooking dinner along the trail so he doesn't have to at the shelter in darkness. I press on, and near darkness he passes me and I can see him easier than I can see the trail, which helps me choose my steps... if I can keep up. Just barely before 8PM we reach Little Bigelow Lean-to after a great hike exertion for such a late start.

The shelter is already full. I have to tent in back. Rain falls during the night. Sigh.

August 12, Sunday, Little Bigelow Lean-to to West Carry Pond Lean-to, 7.7

I left the Little Bigelow Lean-to a little achy from the big hiking day yesterday. It rained last night, but not enough to drown the tent-tarp.

Midway through the 7.5 miles to next lean-to I had a bout of diarrhea. Intestines rumbled. Oh, no! I had heard of hiker stomach flu usually involving sudden vomiting and diarrhea, but I did hear of some hikers only getting the runs. Was it two varieties of hiker flu, or something else?

The miles to lean-to seemed to stretch further, and I had another bout on the trail. Got to West Carry Pond Lean-to in late morning and spread out sleeping bag and tried to rest. I was wiped out and expected to be down for twenty-four hours. The privy was nearby and visited frequently.

When people came by to stay at the lean-to, I let them know I was ill, so they could keep their distance if they chose. A few decided to tent just in case.

Indiana stayed at the shelter. *Willie* was passing on, and I let him know what was going on. *Blues Clues* decided to tent, out of caution. Steps stayed.

We also had a sobo couple who were new enough to have startup problems, and no trail names as yet.

At night, I only had to get up once. Yay for me...

August 13, Monday, *West Carry Pond Lean-to to Pleasant Pond Lean-to, 19.7*

When I woke this morning the runs seemed to be gone. I tested by cooking and holding in ramen, a mild test meal. My endurance was only at 60%, but that might just be enough for today's easy "level" trails. I wanted to get to the Kennebec Ford (a free canoe ferrying service for hikers) before 4PM, and planned to go on the next shelter if I had the energy. I left the West Carry Pond Lean-to at 7AM. Other people, like *Indiana* and *Steps*, are thinking about stopping at Carratunk. If my body cooperates I would like to get to the canoe ferrying hikers across the Kennebec River (free service to hikers) which ends at 4PM.

Around lunch-time I join *Steps* and *Indiana* at Pierce Pond Lean-to, where a memorial observes a hiker died from drowning recently.



Pierce Pond

When I get to Kennebec River *Indiana* and *Blues Clues* are already loading in the canoe. *Steps* joins me to wait for canoe return. I get to paddle in bow, but as a result cannot take photos. The current is

strong at the far side, so our guide has to steer far upstream to hit the target. My canoe merit badge comes in handy again, even with simple box strokes.



Kennebec River Ford



Steps and guide prepare to cross Kennebec

I leave Steps thumbing for a ride to Caratunk, while I press on to the next lean-to at Pleasant Pond. *P-Squared* shows up, after calling a guy at Caratunk who drives out and sells him hiking supplies instead of him having to go into town. He chooses to hammock nearby, leaving me sole occupant of the shelter. As darkness falls I listen to the calls of loons at the pond.

August 14, Tuesday, Pleasant Pond Lean-to to Horseshoe Canyon Lean-to, 22.0

Awake, my body feels like 70% of normal energy-- perhaps enough?

I leave as lone occupant of Pleasant Pond Lean-to to begin climb of Pleasant Pond Mountain. Sounds nice, huh? But Noooo, the path starts straight up at a challenging incline, followed by difficult rock scramble, then a couple of false summits, before hitting the real summit sign. Then several grinding up-and-down oscillations, false summits for the sobos. I do meet a sobo couple that tells me the next mountain and the rest of the trail into Monson is very easy. This gives me heart, as I wanted to get as close to Monson as possible to maximize my day in town tomorrow. Also, if I required another day to get to town I would be looking at the bottom of my food bag.



Maine trail has plenty of tree roots

Moxie Bald Mountain is much easier, with a lot of path on narrow stripes of bedrock. Somehow it went by faster than expected. The AT does not ascend the other peak of this mountain, though it looked more interesting to hike. Based on my speed I would hit Horseshoe Canyon Lean-to just before 8PM-- if it did not rain (now threatening), and if my energy held up (Getting close to town is a good incentive,

though it might sound shallow), and if the lean-to doesn't fill up before I get there, and if my bowels cooperate.

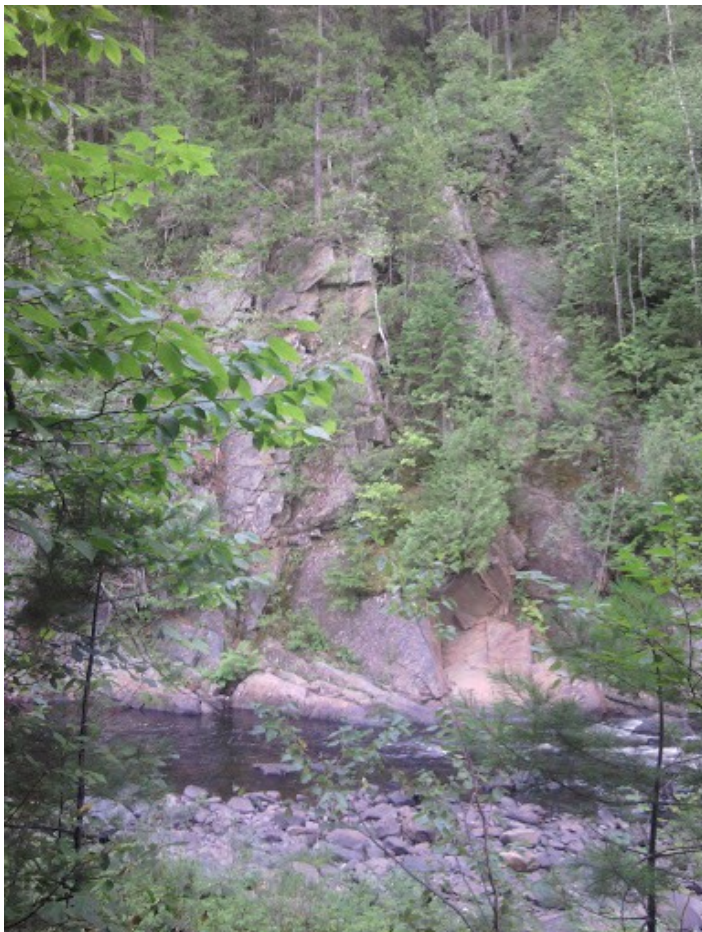
I meet a couple of sobos that warn that fords are in store, real must-get-wet fords, not rock-hops. The serious ford is at the West Branch of the Piscataquis River, the landmark that tells me I am on schedule to get to the lean-to before dark. The river is about fifty feet wide, "bridged" by a rope tied to trees on either side for holding with a hand to help prevent falling. As part of my ultra-light system I do not carry extra shoes, so I just walk in. In retrospect, it would be better to remove inserts and socks first, to aid in the drying process. The water comes up to my knees, and I wonder if mid-thigh will be deepest, and the current seems very swift. On the other side I squeeze water out of shoe padding as much as possible and wring out socks, and walk on.

Four sobos in lean-to at 7:45, with one already asleep. Another older sobo flip-flop couple tent nearby: *Fidget* and *Dot-Com*. It is strange to see sobos in this stage of early start-up, with major foot, knee, and energy problems.

Somehow I had a good hiking day even though I do not feel 100%, but this easy stretch of Maine trail surely helped.

August 15, Wednesday, Horseshoe Canyon Lean-to to Lakeshore House at Monson, 9.0

I left Horseshoe Canyon Lean-to with most sobos still sleeping. Did it rain last night or was I dreaming?



Horseshoe Canyon

Shortly I come to another wet-foot ford at East Branch of Piscataquis River, slower current without needing a rope hand-hold. This time I ford a little smarter by removing socks and inserts first.



Wet-foot ford of Piscataquis River

Trail is flat, for Maine, but still takes some work because of my long hiking day yesterday. As I near the road to Monson, rain falls hard enough to need a raincoat. Didn't it rain the last time I needed to thumb a ride?

As I arrive at the highway a sobo comes out from the other side, *Man-Down* (trail name from the PCT), who is doing Maine the hard direction. He has cell signal, so we arbitrarily choose Lakeshore House over Shaw's for choice of accommodation and call for a shuttle.

Shortly we get an offer for a ride from a kind driver, but we need to decline since we already called the shuttle. After waiting in the rain for what seems like a long time, a huge truck finally pulls up, driven by a hiker doing his work-for-stay!



Lakeshore House, Stratton

Man-Down and I had thought to get private rooms, but decide to share a room at bunk rates after getting the vibe of the place-- barely controlled chaos. He is staying an extra night due to start-up problems on the knees-- which I can definitely identify with.

Routine hostel stuff: get shower first, don street clothes, go to post office, mail away another hiking pole :-), get junk food at convenience store, start recharging electronics, do laundry, dry out gear if possible, catch up on journal, eat something rich in protein and fat, rest when possible.

Responding to vibe of this place, I expect to stay only one night, even though some rain is forecast for tomorrow.

Some of *Pile O' Dudes* are here. I saw *Metric*. *Little-foot* departed as I came in. *Lady Forward* arrived, who I had not seen in several days.

Had dinner at the tavern downstairs-- excellent food. While there I saw several hikers who were staying at Shaw's: *Indiana*, *Willie from Vermont*, *P-Squared*, ...

August 16, Thursday, Monson to Leeman Brook Lean-to, 3.0

Upon waking, I do some more quick tasks to get ready to depart Lake Shore House, then walk with roommate *Man-Down* to Shaw's for breakfast, through a light drizzle.

Shaw's has a notable ordering system for breakfast: Choose a number between 1 and 5; I picked 3. Three slices of French toast are served (on alternate days pancakes), then three eggs how you like them, bacon, sausage, hash-browns. Then they ask if you want more of all or any item. All for \$8.00, served at a lovely table setting. Shaw's was much less crowded for lodging than Lakeshore, less boisterous, probably a better fit for me as a place to stay.

Willie from Vermont intended to start hiking in spite of predicted showers, and possibly *Indiana*. I could have zeroed, but the end of the Trail is calling to me. I dash back to my room, pack gear, settle the bill, and arrange for a 9:30AM shuttle to the trail-head.

Three sobos share the shuttle, two with the same Golite rain-gear as me. Speaking of rain, it is still coming down light but steady as I start on trail just before 10AM. My pack rides well at the start of the "Hundred Mile Wilderness", though at six days nominal food rations the pack is at its heaviest for the entire trip this summer. The Trail is soaked. One even wishes for more rocks to step on instead of puddles to dodge. A "ford" must be crossed almost immediately, undocumented, but a huge step onto slick rock is enough to keep dry feet.

But my poor feet gradually become soaked, and dodging puddles becomes pointless. I mostly continue dodging the worst parts anyway, out of habit. Slick rock with no nearby handholds gradually increases to a steep angle in one spot where I fall hard, cell phone skittering away. Luckily it is undamaged, but I imagine with horror dealing with a cracked screen or non-functional phone near the end of my journey.

P-Squared passes by, and a thru-hiker I may not have met before, *Just Scott*. Only three miles to first lean-to, but that now seems a far distance as the rain comes down harder.

Suddenly I see *P-Squared* on the trail: He just realized he forgot his water bottle. H calls Shaw's; no one else is coming out soon that can bring it, so he has to turn back!

I come to a stream with heavy water flow and no obvious way across-- an undocumented ford resulting from heavy rain. The flow is too heavy to safely wet-foot across. I search up and down the bank, and see a narrow log that does not seem possible to cross. I can spy the shelter way up on the far bank,

mocking me. How did *Just Scott* get across? Finally I figure out that a different log stripped of bark was high enough above the water that I can sit-straddle it and slide across, with ankles resting on the log behind me. With flash-flooding changing water levels rapidly, perhaps previous hikers did not have to cross via my method.

Several are at lean-to, but four are sobos leaving soon for town. Staying are *Dutchman*, *Just Scott*, and myself, each realizing to our chagrin that we had to stay here, only accomplishing a three-mile hiking day!

August 17, Friday, Leeman Brook Lean-to to Cloud Pond Lean-to, 16.1

Left Leeman Brook Lean-to before 6AM; *Dutchman* likes to start out even earlier than me! The two thru-hikers leave me in the dust, intent on a twenty-plus mile day. I will be happy with fifteen-plus, but hoe for twenty-plus on later days with a lighter food bag and weather that cooperates. After the rain yesterday I expected lots more boggy spots than I got in the morning. This part of trail seems to handle water gracefully.



North Pond

For some reason I am really able to admire the rugged beauty of the Trail this morning, which lulls me into walking a bit slower. I hear the call of the loon from a nearby pond. The ford at Little Wilson Stream is exciting, but not too bad. Big Wilson Stream was also manageable. I guess the water came down some recently; still came as high as mid-thigh.



Little Wilson Falls

The sky is clear blue.

I get a couple of extra fords not documented in Companion. Perhaps only with high water?



Log ford, water at flood stage



Ford at Big Wilson Stream

After a late lunch I try to pick up the pace and get to two miles/hour. Climb up Barren Ledge for cool views of pond below. Climb up along Barren Mountain presents several bog problems: Given a bog and certain rocks, roots, and decayed bog-bridge timbers, what is the fast, safe dry path through the obstacles? Similar to wet rock geometry problems in the Whites.



Triple blaze???

The sky becomes overcast. I know that look. Head to Cloud Pond Lean-to, a little off the trail, instead of cowboy camping. Very pretty near the pond. Joined at the shelter by a mother and daughter out for three days. I did not expect to encounter three day trip people in the "Hundred Mile Wilderness".

Starts to rain as I finish this journal entry at 8:50PM.

August 18, Saturday, Cloud Pond Lean-to to Carl A Newhall Shelter, 16.8

After rain during the night, glad I slept under a metal roof. I left Cloud Pond Lean-to and have lots of mountains to climb up and down in the morning-- Fourth Mountain, part of Third Mountain, Barren Mountain, Columbus Mountain, Chairback, etc. It is as though they were trying to cram some peaks in our last days on The Trail.



Long Pond viewed from the heights



Barren Mountain lookout tower



Monument Cliff near Third Mountain

After lunch notice some day-hikers on the trail, which I don't expect in the "Hundred Mile Wilderness". When I ford West Branch of Pleasant River I see more day hikers, including small children making the ford.



Family fording West Branch of Pleasant River

One lady gives me a devils food cake sandwich I think she makes herself because of the extra filling. She passes them out to thru-hikers because her daughter thru-hiked.

Frenchy and I meet shortly after the ford, and I follow him at his considerably faster pace up to Carl A Newhall Shelter, where *Michigan Mike* has already arrived-- a section hiker doing his final section to Katahdin.

Frenchy trains horses in San Diego for a living. Someone will come to him who is having problems with a horse and he will ride and diagnose communication problems.

Late in evening a fourth hiker comes and builds a large campfire to cook.

Out of all the views from mountain tops today, no angle is right for seeing Katahdin. It is as though the trail designers want it to stay a mystery. That should change tomorrow.

Looked like rain earlier, but eventually cleared.

August 19, Sunday, *Carl A Newhall Shelter to Cooper Brook Falls Lean-to, 18.9*

Several mountain peaks early in the morning, but no views. Then finally I get to White Cap Mountain Summit with my first view of Katahdin, crowned with clouds, no other peaks nearby, dominating the scene. One also sees panoramic view of lakes in several directions. The trail stayed well-maintained with fitted steps in several spots, as this is a popular day hike as part of Gulf Hagas trail.



Near summit of Gulf Hagas Mountain



My first view of Katahdin from White Cap Mountain summit

On the way down I run into *Sharkey*, tall, clean-shaven, with a big smile on his face, who is yo-yoing: He finished the AT going north and is now headed south to Springer! My mind boggles.

I run into a couple day-hiking who give my chocolate chip coolies and peanut butter crackers. Cokes were back in their car, so if I were willing to wait...

The ford at East Branch Pleasant River was low enough for a rock hop.

Fairly easy trail the rest of the day, ending at Cooper Brook Falls Lean-to, where *Frenchy* already arrived. Later *Metric* and *Wall-E* arrive, and *Wille* and *Lady Forward*, all tenting. Because of that rain a few days ago it looks like a big pulse of a dozen thru-hikers (including more *Pile O' Dudes* catching up) will summit on Thursday, when I was planning to finish, same as *Frenchy*. *Frenchy* points out to me that I do not have to camp the evening after summit, but can catch a ride on perimeter road to park entrance, and then thumb to Millinocket.

Weather was good today. Will it hold through Thursday? Looking forward to Abol Camp Store on Tuesday, and probably camping at nearby state campground.

August 20, Monday, *Cooper Brook Falls Lean-to to Rainbow Stream Lean-to*, 29.6

Frenchy and I leave Cooper Brook Falls Lean-to and walk pretty much together, having trail conversation, over nice sweet easy trail to the next shelter in 11.4 miles. We meet one sobo who thinks the weather will be bad on Thursday, when we plan to summit. We are feeling pretty good, so conceive of the idea of a thirty mile day to put us a little ahead of the large group just behind us, and give us the option of a Wednesday summit if we can do a twenty-five day on Tuesday.

The second stretch from Potawadio Spring Lean-to to Wadleigh Stream Lean-to, 10.1 miles, is also relatively flat, though with a few more roots and narrow trail.

As part of trail conversation I learn how *Frenchy* got horse riding instruction daily while working at Medieval Times from a horse master from Spain, and explore some of the difference in jousting shows at M. Times versus ren-faires.

The final 8.1 mile push to Rainbow Stream Lean-to I walk in solitude, as *Frenchy* pulls way ahead. I finally, finally arrive at the shelter at 7:45PM and cook double dinners to replace all the energy I expended today. This last segment sure seemed to have some highly unnecessary up-and-down just so hikers could get a view and see some unusual rocks on top.

Frenchy and I are alone in the lean-to, with two tents nearby. The stream is close to the shelter, perhaps twenty feet in front, and lulls me to a well-earned sleep.

August 21, Tuesday, Rainbow Stream Lean-to to The Birches, 24.9

Last night I heard the stream in front of our shelter at Rainbow Stream Lean-to and thought it was raining.

This morning as I first walked out, I felt fine misty drops like we were in the middle of a cloud. *Frenchy* started out first. I walked along Rainbow Lake when a light rain started, enough to eventual put on rain gear. When rain stopped, the rain jacket got too hot, so I took it off, and rain started again. Repeated this game several times.



Clear water of Rainbow Lake



Frenchy at lake, viewing Katahdin

Just before Rainbow Ledges ascent *Frenchy* caught up from behind, as a stopped at an overlook off the trail. We climb to ledges , areas of exposed rock at the summit, and discover a vast amount of large tasty blueberries. We also enjoyed huckleberries, their blacker tart cousin. Never had I seen so many large ripe blueberries on a single small bush. Yummy.



Blueberries

On to Hurd Brook Lean-to for a late morning snack, but we wanted to save room for Abol Campground Grocery. From sobos we learn they serve good hamburgers and pizza, and we had thought a lot over the Hundred Mile Wilderness how fine it would be to finally arrive. We get to Abol Bridge, which we had imagined as some impressive structure, but was actually a simple bridge along a dirt logging road. Selection at the grocery for resupply was tiny (no chocolate milk, a hiker's favorite, and no cocoa packets or bagels or tortillas). But they did make their pizza fresh and cooked burgers outside on a grill, and served ice cream in cones. *Frenchy* got a burger, we split a large 'za, and I got a cone with blueberry and chocolate. And we settled in to a nearby picnic table while my electronics charged a bit at the grocery. *Frenchy* was not able to get their phone to work to notify his father, who had an RV somewhere in the area.



Abol Bridge



Katahdin viewed from bridge



Abol Campground grocery



'Za at Abol Campground

At the AT entrance to Baxter State Park, we meet a volunteer, Jonathan, who explains the procedure for long distance hikers, and we get the weather forecast and reserve a place at The Birches. Based on weather, we had both decided to ascend tomorrow without waiting. *Frenchy* would try an early (3:30AM!!) hike to experience the sunrise and I would hike at regular starting time and come back down and catch a ride to the hostel in Millinocket, AT Lodge. Jonathon points out that we can follow the AT up to The Birches Shelter, or take the 4.1 mile shortcut Blueberry Trail. Of *course* we stay on the official trail, but arrive at the shelter in amazingly good time, full of blueberries. We are in one of the two small shelters, a couple of section-hikers are in the other, and *Dutchman* tents nearby. The campground site is pretty nice, with a picnic table and sitting logs around a campfire site.



Baxter marker

Frenchy and I go to the nearby ranger station to pay our \$10 fee, get more weather info, observe the screen porch at the station where we can leave the gear we don't need to carry up the mountain. Then we walk along the AT a bit to understand the approach. *Frenchy* will be doing this part with a headlamp.



Katahdin

Back at the campsite we sit at the picnic table with other occupants for dinner. *Dutchman* and *Frenchy* compare notes on all the thru-hikers they know in common-- odd that they had not met before today.



The Birches

I spend some time sorting what gear goes up the mountain and what gets left at the ranger station. Big day tomorrow. Get some rest.

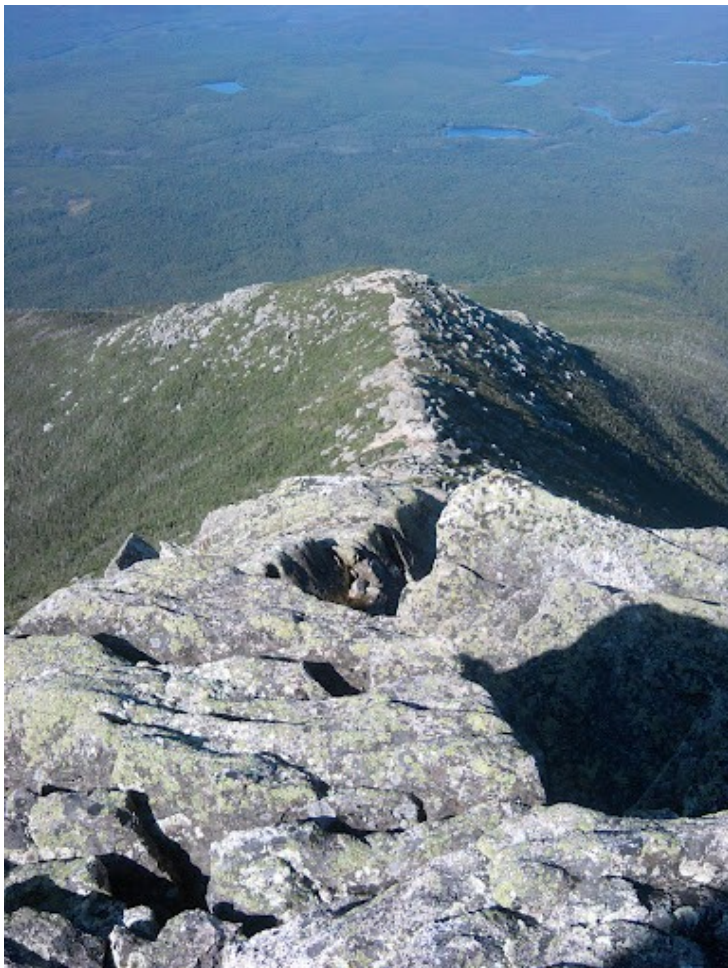
August 22, Wednesday, *The Birches to Katahdin, 5.2*

For this final day on The Trail, words and facts are not equal to the task to describe my mountaintop experience. Enjoy the photos.



Katahdin Stream Falls









August 23, Thursday



Noodleheads in Millinocket



Almost Awesome sharing hotel room with Noodleheads



and Possum



Appalachian Trail Lodge hostel, Millinocket



P-Squared at hostel



and Just John



and Dutchman



Bus to airport182