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Ohio hiker chronicles first solo thru-hike of Buckeye Trail in new book

By DAVE LAVENDER The Herald-Dispatch Jan 16, 2018



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What state has the longest loop trail in America?

If you guessed any state but our good neighbor to the north - Ohio - you would be wrong.

The fact that Ohio's 1,444-mile-long Buckeye Trail is America's longest circular trail - and that most folks don't know about it - is exactly why veteran Dayton-area long-distance hiker Andy Niekamp decided to take three months off in 2011 to complete the first solo thru-hike of the trail at its current length.

And why he now has chronicled his journey in his brand-new book, "Captain Blue on the Blue Blazes: The First Solo Thru-Hike of Ohio's 1,444-Mile Buckeye Trail" (\$15/BuckeyeTrailHiker.com).

You can hear all about his adventures at Carter Caves State Resort Park in nearby Olive Hill, Kentucky, where Niekamp will give a presentation about the book at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 25, as part of the ninth annual Winter Adventure Weekend.

Niekamp also will sign books at the Caveland Lodge from 1 to 4 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 25; noon to 2:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 26; and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 27. He also will host backpacking workshops throughout the weekend.

A long-time volunteer at WAW and webmaster for the WAW site, Niekamp said, like many other hikers, he for years had overlooked the Buckeye State's beauty, having chalked up some 14,000 hiking miles in 30 states and being one of only a dozen people to complete four Appalachian Trail thru-hikes.

"When I first started the Buckeye Trail journey I wasn't sure what I was getting into, and I had very low expectations," said Niekamp, who has completed other state trails such as Kentucky's Sheltowee Trace, Vermont's Long Trail, Minnesota's Superior Hiking Trail and the Arkansas' Ozark Highlands Trail. "I was born in Ohio, I went to school in Ohio, I went to college in Ohio, I worked in Ohio, and I thought Ohio was boring. I was comparing it in my mind to the Appalachian Trail, which I had done at that point three times, but I was pleasantly surprised as I made my way around the state."

Unlike the Appalachian Trail, which snakes its way along the mostly wild ridges and valleys of the Appalachian Mountains from Georgia to Maine, The Buckeye Trail is more like the Tri-State's 32-mile-long Kanawha Trace - a blend of hiking in woods and along roads. And The Buckeye Trail's blue blazes also go through some of Ohio's cities, such as Dayton, where Niekamp is founder of the Dayton Hikers, the city's largest outdoor recreation club.

Envisioned in 1958 as a 500-mile footpath from the Ohio River at Cincinnati to Conneaut on the shores of Lake Erie, The Buckeye Trail, now a loop around the four corners of Ohio, was completed in 26 sections and finally closed in 1993. The trail reached its current 1,444-mile-length in 2005, making it the longest circular trail in the U.S. to date.

Niekamp, who met Buckeye Trail founder Lee Kreider on his first day walking out of Dayton, and then on his second day saw not only a beautiful waterfall but found out Piqua was home to America's first nuclear power plant, said he quickly learned The Buckeye Trail had plenty to offer.

"The motto of The Buckeye Trail is that it links the four corners of Ohio, and it really does. As I like to tell people, it is not as much a wilderness journey as it is about discovering Ohio," Niekamp said. "I call it the four P's - People, places and the present and the past. Anyone who does a hike on The Buckeye Trail will go to a lot of different places they will not see from a car window going down the interstate. Ohio is such a beautiful state. We may not have the mountains that Kentucky and West Virginia have, but there are some very beautiful and interesting places."

And throughout the book, there are pictures of many of those interesting places, such locks on the Miami and Erie Canal, Whipps Ledges, Lake Erie, the Bridal Veil Falls (in Cleveland no less), the Cuyahoga National Park, Ash Cave and Upper Falls at Hocking Hills State Park, the Little Smokies (near Ohio Brush Creek) and Serpent Mound.

Niekamp said his experience with people he met along the trail contrasted quite a bit from the Appalachian Trail where the number of hikers on that popular trail has jumped from 1,460 hikers in 2010 to 3,735 in 2017 - a whopping 155 percent increase.

"Not many people hike The Buckeye Trail, so people were intrigued and wanted to know about this trail in Ohio," Niekamp said. "Hospitality is not just a Southern term. Northern hospitality is alive and well, and people extended many acts of kindness as I made my way across the state ... When you go through a town as a hiker on the AT, you are nothing new because tomorrow there will be a dozen more hikers and a dozen more the next day after that. The Buckeye Trail was a magical thing that I had totally underrated in my mind, and I was determined to commit to it and to be a part of it and to give back and support it."

Niekamp said the kindness was such that it has made him a more giving, thoughtful and kind person to strangers.

"I think the thing that surprised me most about hiking the trail was that generosity of Ohioans to a complete stranger," Niekamp said. "I was completely taken aback, and it has caused me to rethink my levels of generosity to strangers and to also rethink the scenic beauty in Ohio. So many people in Ohio, when they prepare for a big backpacking trip they leave Ohio to do that, and we all want to go to these great places. No one's thinking of the Buckeye Trail as a destination, but it really can be."

Feeling the support of the Buckeye Trail Association - whose members have, since 1959, helped maintain the 26-section trail - Niekamp has become a champion of the Trail.

After serving as a trustee for the Association for two years from 2011 to 2013, Niekamp has helped add more than 400 members to the Association, created an annual winter hike on the trail at Caesar

Creek State Park, helped make the trail better (eliminating the Springfield spur), and in 2017, assisted in planning and leading a number of hikes called the Warrior 150 Challenge.

But nothing is helping spread the love on The Buckeye Trail like the book, which was released in December.

Niekamp, who uploaded a short daily blog during the 2011 hike and who had chalked up 33 presentations about the trail before he wrote the book, said the book, his first, was a natural evolution thanks to guidance and help from Karen "Tagalong" Power, who is the assistant editor for The Antioch Review, and who helped him carve out the flowing narrative of the book.

"When I sat down to write the book, my primary goal was to get people interested in this trail that is underhiked, underappreciated and underused," Niekamp said. "I knew my story had to be one that not only reflected my actual journey but that inspired people to get involved, and it is starting to happen. People are buying it and realizing, 'Hey I need to experience this too.'"

On the Blue Blazes

WHAT: A new hiking book, "Captain Blue on the Blue Blazes: The First Solo Thru-Hike of Ohio's 1,444 Mile Buckeye Trail" by Andy Niekamp, detailing his 1,444-mile journey on the Ohio circular trail.

WHERE: The ninth annual Winter Adventure Weekend at Carter Caves State Resort Park in Olive Hill, Kentucky.

WHEN: Niekamp will give a presentation about the book at 7 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 25. He also will sign books at the Caveland Lodge 1 to 4 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 25; noon to 2:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 26; and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 27.

HIKING WORKSHOPS: Niekamp, who is the chief adventure officer for Outdoor Adventure Connection, a backcountry guide service, will also do a Backpacking 101 and A Dummies Guide to Water Treatment for Backpackers.

OTHER WAW PRESENTATIONS: At 8 p.m. Friday, the keynote presentation is "Ten Days, Five Volcanoes, The Trek to 17,000 ft." Listen to Dana Sutherland and Colin Gatland, who recently completed summitting five volcanic peaks in Ecuador. Go online at www.winteradventureweekend.com for more info on WAW.

GET THE BOOK: Books available for \$15/each. More info at BuckeyeTrailHiker.com.

GO TO THE BUCKEYE TRAILFEST: The next Buckeye TrailFest Celebration will take place in Athens, Ohio, from April 27-28.

Welcome to the discussion.

Keep it Clean. Please avoid obscene, vulgar, lewd, racist or sexually-oriented language.

PLEASE TURN OFF YOUR CAPS LOCK.

Don't Threaten. Threats of harming another person will not be tolerated.

Be Truthful. Don't knowingly lie about anyone or anything.

Be Nice. No racism, sexism or any sort of -ism that is degrading to another person.

Be Proactive. Use the 'Report' link on each comment to let us know of abusive posts.

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