

Dayton Daily News

Dayton's Captain Blue completes milestone Appalachian Trail Get Active

By [Debbie Juniewicz](#) - October 27, 2016
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Andy Niekamp on September 3, atop Katahdin, the AT's northern terminus. CONTRIBUTED

Captain Blue is in elite company.

Kettering resident and Dayton Hikers founder Andy Niekamp – aka "Captain Blue" – recently completed the 2,189-mile-long Appalachian Trail for a fourth time. Less than a dozen people have reported completing the AT as a thru-hike or a section hike four or more times since the Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) began its official reporting system in 1938.

Niekamp, who has logged more than 9,000 miles on this Georgia to Maine trail, shares his experience and offers advice to those who might want to hit the trail themselves.

Q: Hiking the entire AT just once can be a major bucket list item for some people. How have you managed to do this four times?

A: I've managed to do it four times because I've done the trail in sections over a period of 25 years. I'm a chronic section hiker – it works for me. Twenty-five years ago, I had neither the time nor the money to thru-hike the AT. I was working full time, so I had to do it in sections. Whenever I could take vacation, I'd be out on the trail. Sometimes, I would even take unpaid leave in order to hike. Over the years, it became my passion.

Q: How long did it take you to complete it this time and in how many sections did you break it up?

A: I started this hike six years ago, dividing it into eight long hikes of between 100-500 miles. But, I also did a lot of hiking in between my AT hikes. I completed several other long-distance trails all across the country: the Buckeye Trail, Colorado Trail, Long Trail, Ohio-Erie Trail, Ozark Highland Trail, Sheltowee Trace, Superior Hiking Trail, Bartram Trail and the Foothills Trail four times. So, over the past six years, I've long-distance hiked more than 5,600 miles. What's coincidental is that I completed my other three hikes also at six-year intervals: 1998, 2004 and 2010. My AT hikes just seem to work out that way.

Q: The thought of logging 2,189 miles can be a bit intimidating. What advice do you have for people who have this goal?

A: My advice is to get out there and take the first step. There's a quote that originated from a Chinese proverb that says, "A journey of 1,000 miles begins with a single step." It's practical wisdom for people who want to hike long distances. The first time I hiked the AT, I had no intention of completing a thru-hike. In my mind, it was too big, too long, too far. But one step followed another, then another, and a weeklong hike was followed by a longer one until I was spending several weeks at a time on the trail. Hiking is a little more complicated than just putting one foot in front of the other, but if a 2,189-mile trail is too intimidating for you, chunk it down into section hikes and pace it so that it's comfortable for you.

Q: What keeps you going back hike after hike, year after year?

A: Hiking is my personal fountain of youth. I've said that for years. On the AT, I lose weight, gain muscle, sleep well, eat well and drink lots of water. I feel young and strong. The AT for me is like an old friend, familiar and comfortable. I enjoy visiting the trail to experience again and again what I have grown to love.



Andy Niekamp in the White Mountains in New Hampshire. CONTRIBUTED

Q: Is it ever too late to get started?

A: It's never too late. Grandma Gatewood was the mother of 11 children. In 1955, she solo hiked the entire AT at the age of 67. She hiked it two more times after that. She's really an inspiration for anyone who enjoys hiking and nature. So, don't wait until you have more time or you lose weight or get into better shape. Don't make it a "bucket list" thing for sometime in the future. Do it now.

Appalachian Trail By the Numbers

14: States that the AT traverses

2,189.2: Total length of AT in miles

15,600: Total number of hike completions of the entire trail reported to the ATC

3,000,000: Visitors each year

5,000,000: Adult footsteps to hike the entire trail

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WANT TO GO?

What: Andy Niekamp presents "9,000 Miles On A 2,200 Mile Trail. Lessons Learned From An Appalachian Trail Long Distance Hiker"

Cost: All talks are free and open to the public

* Nov. 13, 4 p.m. at Minster Middle School, 50 E. 7th Street Minster,

* Jan. 19, 2017, 6:30 p.m. at Franklin-Springboro Public Library Franklin Branch, 44 E. 4th St. Franklin

Appalachian Trail Conservancy Membership Drive

A good time for a good cause – the Dayton Hikers and Five Rivers MetroParks are hosting an Appalachian Trail Conservancy membership drive on Nov. 17, at 6 p.m. at Cox Arboretum MetroPark. While none of the 2,189 miles of the Appalachian Trail winds through the Buckeye State, Ohio has a large number of Appalachian Trail hikers and Appalachian Trail Conservancy members including 446 recorded 2,000 milers, referring to those who have completed the entire Appalachian Trail. Ohio has more ATC members than any other non-AT state and Ohio has the second highest number of 2,000 Milers of any non-AT state. "For me, being an ATC member is the best way to stay connected to the Appalachian Trail when I'm not out hiking the trail," Andy Niekamp said. Members receive the AT Journeys magazine, the ATC online newsletter, discounts on merchandise and clothing in the AT Store. "But the main reason I am an ATC member is to support the organization that has the responsibility for maintaining the trail," Niekamp said. Appalachian Trail Conservancy Membership Drive

When: Nov. 17, 6 p.m.

Where: Cox Arboretum MetroPark

What: Dayton Hikers and Five Rivers MetroPark host an evening of socializing, food, drink, a movie and raffle. The Grandma Gatewood Memorabilia Collection will be on display.

Info/tickets: Visit <http://www.bit.ly/atcdayton>