

# MATURE LIVING

## Dayton Hikers founder completes fourth 2,189-mile trek along Appalachian Trail

Dayton Hikers founder Andy 'Captain Blue' Niekamp in September completed the 2,189-mile-long Appalachian Trail for the fourth time with a summit of the trail's northern terminus, Mount Katahdin in Maine. Niekamp is one of a dozen people worldwide who has reported completing the entire Appalachian Trail four or more times. Since 1989, Niekamp has logged over 9,000 miles on the Georgia-to-Maine trail.



Appalachian Mountain range. The Appalachian Trail, part of the National Park system, is also one of the oldest hiking trails. It was completed in 1937. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy reports that somewhere between 2 and 3 million people hike some part of the trail every year. Of the 2,500 to 3,000 hikers who attempt to "thru-hike" the trail each year, only about 25 percent succeed.

The 2015 release of the movie, *A Walk in the Woods*, has done much to romanticize the Appalachian Trail. What many people don't realize is that the Appalachian Trail, especially in New Hampshire and Maine, can be brutal and unforgiving. Geraldine 'Inchworm' Largay perished while hiking the Appalachian Trail in Maine three years ago. Her body was only recently found. Niekamp himself experienced some of the trail's hardship when he was struck by lightning in 2015 while hiking the trail on Black Mountain in New York. He was lucky to have survived. He knows its chal-



Andy Niekamp atop Mount Katahdin in Maine after completing his fourth trek of the 2,189-mile-long Appalachian Trail in September. Niekamp is the founder of Dayton Hikers, an outdoor recreation group active on local trails, including Hills and Dales park in Oakwood.

lenges and yet keeps returning. Niekamp views the Appalachian

Trail as an old friend - enduring and predictable.

"The physical challenge draws you to the trail; winning the mental game keeps you there," said Niekamp. Sleeping outdoors, drinking water from streams, hiking 12 to 18 miles a day, eating pre-packaged, freeze-dried or dehydrated food, and basically living outside in wilderness conditions for weeks on end can wear a hiker down mentally. Niekamp says that the trick is to know yourself as a hiker. Understanding your limits and your strengths - how many miles you can do in a day, how much food to pack, when to give yourself a break from the trail to recharge - make the difference.

Niekamp has witnessed changes over the years as the trail has become increasingly popular. And he's seen how technology

has revolutionized hiking as a sport. Advances in the design of daypacks and backpacks, clothing, maps, poles, shoes, and smart phones have made hiking safer and more efficient. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy has also worked hard to make the trail more accessible to - and safer for - hikers while preserving the natural beauty and fighting to protect the surrounding environment.

Niekamp's many miles on the Appalachian Trail has made him something of an expert: he's a popular presenter, and he volunteers his time with several hiking organizations including the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Buckeye Trail Association, and Five Rivers MetroParks. Will Niekamp take on the challenge of a fifth hike? Right now, Niekamp's "what's next" is to continue to inspire others to "get out and hike."

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