

# Dayton Daily News

## Kettering man discovers a new side of Ohio on 1,444 mile hike

By Chris Rizer, June 18, 2011  
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*Andy Niekamp of Kettering returned to Deeds Point Park in Dayton Wednesday June 15 after a four month long trek on the Buckeye Trail hiking more than 1,400 miles. Niekamp started his journey at the statue of Orville and Wilbur Wright located at the park and returned to the same spot for the finish.*

DAYTON — “Ohio ... so much to discover.”

It’s the official slogan of Ohio’s Division of Travel and Tourism and it’s something of which Andy Niekamp is keenly aware.

On Wednesday afternoon, Niekamp, 50, of Kettering, took the final steps in a four-month journey that covered more than 1,400 miles of Ohio trails.

“What I’ve learned is that the journey makes the person,” said Niekamp, who decided to hike the Buckeye Trail around the state while he was in between jobs.

“I’m at a place in my life where I can pursue my passion for long-distance hiking,” he said.

Niekamp, who became interested in backpacking during his days as a Boy Scout, walked in February to prepare for the trek. But those were small steps for a backpacker who had hiked all of the Appalachian Trail's 2,180 miles, stretching from Georgia to Maine, over the course of five treks.

When Niekamp's Buckeye Trail journey began on March 20, he was in it, "for as long as it is fun," he wrote on his blog, "Captain Blue on the Blue Blazes." The blog title comes from the motto of Ohio's Buckeye Trail: "Follow the blue blazes" — a mantra that refers to the swatches of blue paint marking the path, which sprawls through forests, parks and along city roads.

The journey was completed at an average of 20 miles per day with only 10 days of rest — a pace that Niekamp says made him stronger and more confident by testing his limits.

Niekamp thought the trip might only last three days because he didn't think Ohio would be as interesting as his Appalachian adventures, but the hospitality and scenery he discovered along the way kept him going.

"When you leave your car behind and you walk in Ohio, you see things that the motorist or the bicyclist won't experience," he said.

A "grapevine" of people on the trail often offered Niekamp a place to stay in response to updates of his whereabouts posted on his blog. On other days, he found places to sleep without plans, camping in places like parks, churchyards, cemeteries and alongside the Miami River Bike Path.

The trail's proximity to civilization made it easier to manage his supplies than it was on the Appalachian Trail, where he had to carry five to six days worth of food. Some people provided him with meals, and he also experienced a lot of mom-and-pop restaurants along the way — his favorite being Minster's Wooden Shoe Inn.

Janet Bolton, Niekamp's mother and only family in Dayton, along with her husband, Jim Bolton, sent much of his food to local post offices for general delivery.

He cooked freeze-dried meals and grocery store goods on a portable stove made out of an old beer can and a piece of metal. A smart phone helped Niekamp update his blog and find his way with Google maps when he got lost.

The Sport Rack, Inc., a store in Chardon, opened its doors on an off day to custom make a hat identifying Niekamp as a recreational hiker so people did not think he was homeless as he passed them with his backpack.

Niekamp says he took great pleasure in the natural beauty of places like Old Man's Cave in Hocking Hills, larger cities such as Akron, and many small towns he wouldn't normally have visited without a reason.

"We don't have the mountaintop or the volcanic peak or the Grand Canyon, but we do have beautiful history and scenery that we're celebrating as one of the points of pride of Ohio," said Andrew Bashaw, executive director of the Buckeye Trail.

Niekamp is now on the Buckeye Trail Board of Trustees and supervisor of the section of the trail that passes through Dayton.

“The sad part of it is that the trail has come to an end and there’s no more left for me to do,” he said.

“My ‘what next?’ is to get involved in the Buckeye Trail Association.”

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