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Dayton Hikers founder completes Appalachian Trail for fifth time

By Karen Power

A local man, Andy “Captain Blue” Niekamp completed yet another Georgia-to-Maine Appalachian Trail (AT) end-to-end hike. At 2,200 miles, the AT is the world’s longest pedestrian footpath. For Niekamp, summiting Mt. Katahdin in Maine, the northern terminus was the end of an 11,000-mile journey that spanned five different decades.

In 1989 when Niekamp began, he was a full-time IT professional. He realized that hikers need not quit their jobs to hike the AT and found his niche as a section hiker. His strategy was to pound out miles in sections of 100 to 600 miles, spacing his hikes as his schedule would allow. He successfully completed hikes in 1998, 2004, 2010 and again in 2016. Completing the AT on Aug. 17 for the fifth time is a record held by a select few worldwide.

Millions of people have set foot on the AT since its 1937 completion; about 20,000 have completed an end-to-end hike. The AT, along with the Pacific Crest Trail, was the first to be designated as a national scenic trail. Of the 2,000 to 3,000 thru-hikers who begin the trek each year, only 20 percent are successful. Some of these hikers have set AT records: the fastest speed was 41 days, 7 hours, 39 minutes; the oldest “2,000-miler” was 87; the youngest accompanied minor was 2; blind hikers and amputees also



Andy Niekamp atop Mount Katahdin in Maine, the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail.

joined the ranks of record-setters; two Pennsylvania sisters hiked almost all of the trail barefoot - twice.

Niekamp is a world record setter himself. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, no one has reported section hiking the entire AT more times than Niekamp. He is also the first person to have solo through-hiked the 1,444-mile Buckeye Trail in 2011, the largest circular trail in the US. His lifetime hiking miles total about 25,000.

What does it take to repeatedly take on the challenge of the Appalachian Trail? It takes an exceptional measure of perseverance, hardcore dedication, and unequivocal love for the AT. According to Niekamp, “It takes mental as well as physical energy. What gets you on trail, is not what keeps you on trail. It’s more the mental energy that moves you up and over the peaks day-after-day, year-after-year in the face of heat, humidity, frost, cold, rain, wind and an aching back and sore feet.”

It also takes time and money. In terms of time, Niekamp’s journeys span three decades, 1,000 nights, three years on trail.

In terms of money, Niekamp estimates that he has spent \$35,000 over the years. An end-to-end hiker spends roughly \$6,000; in addition, a section hiker adds transportation costs to and from the trail. Travel from Ohio adds up, considering the AT stretches 14 states.

In terms of distance, Niekamp calculates 11,000 miles, 25 million footsteps, 500 miles of vertical ups and downs. He compares the elevation change to hiking a roller coaster of continuous ups and downs over hundreds of miles. Some have compared a single AT hike to climbing from sea level to the summit of Mt. Everest 16 times. Five end-to-end hikes

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translate into 80 climbs.

What dangers has Niekamp faced on the trail? Illness and injury in the backcountry are any hiker's greatest fears. A hiker can experience hyperthermia on Mt. Washington in New Hampshire on a summer day or frost bite in Georgia in April. Dehydration and hyponatremia, a lack of electrolytes in the body, are common ailments. Niekamp collapsed on trail on his first AT hike when his electrolyte levels dropped dangerously low.

Norovirus, an infection in the digestive system, went viral on the trail in 2013. Pit privies from North Carolina to Maine were covered with vomit and diarrhea. Soiled clothing littered shelters. The bug was passed from hiker-to-hiker. Keeping clean, the best way to prevent norovirus on trail, takes dedicated effort especially for backpackers who don't have ready access to soap and water. Niekamp, who hiked without issue that year, saw fliers posted along the trail, warning hikers of the danger.

Niekamp's most dangerous and, subsequently, most memorable experience was surviving a lightning strike in 2015 (AT hike #4) on Black Mountain in Harriman State Park, New York. He surely would have perished if the strike had been direct. Lightning bolts that hit the ground and travel have less amperes of charge than a direct strike. Nonetheless, the jolt knocked him to the ground. He experienced intense pain as his muscles contracted violently. His feet were numb for weeks. Thankfully, he suffered no

long-term ill-effects.

What changes has Niekamp seen over the years? Changes in technology and innovation in gear and packaged food over the past 32 years as well as new knowledge about the health benefits of being outdoors have propelled hiking into the fitness limelight. In 1989 when Niekamp began his first AT hike, he wore an old cotton shirt, cut off jeans, and heavy leather hiking boots. His hiking pole was a stout wooden stick. He always carried a quarter in his pocket so he could call his mom whenever he found a pay phone at a crossroad. Trail magic was a cooler with water. Today organized hiker-feeds treat travelers to full meals.

Today smartphones with downloadable trail maps apps, cell service, and instant communication make hiking and navigating the AT much easier. Before GPS, losing the white blazes which designate trail could mean hours of backtracking or bushwhacking. The conveniences of modern backpacking today make the trail more accessible to a wider demographic.

Over the years, Niekamp has seen a change in demographic trends, especially among solo women, families, and retired people, some in their 80s. Other groups are still sorely underrepresented. In response, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy has made a commitment to justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion in serving these populations. It strives to make the AT a more welcoming place for BIPOC and LGBT communities.

As Niekamp once again scrambled over car-sized boulders spread

out over five strenuous miles, and ascended 4,000 feet to the summit of Mt. Katahdin, a peak 5,269 feet above sea level, he was struck with a feeling of elation. For Niekamp, an end of a hike is just a new opportunity to begin the next adventure.

Niekamp, an avid backpacker, founded Dayton Hikers in 1998. Today this local area hiking group hosts 7,500 members, including many Oakwood residents. Niekamp "through hiked" the Buckeye Trail (BT) in 2011, after his third AT hike, and is credited with the first solo through hike of the entire Buckeye Trail at its current length of 1,444 miles. He is the author of the popular book titled "Captain Blue on the Blue Blazes," a chronicle of his historic BT hike. For more information about his Buckeye Trail hike and book visit www.buckeyetrailhiker.com.

Niekamp regularly organizes group hikes in Oakwood's Hills and Dales MetroPark. All are welcome to become a member of Dayton Hikers www.daytonhikers.org and join him on the trail.

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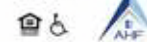


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