

The Community Post

Serving our communities since 1896

November 22, 2011

Ohio man completes Buckeye Trail

The Minster Community Post

NEW BREMEN — On Nov. 15, an Ohio man came to New Bremen to discuss his recent 88-day journey on the Buckeye Trail.

“My passion is long-distance hiking. That’s what I like to do,” said Andy Niekamp. “I’m currently in-between jobs, or semi-retired, so I can pursue my passion.”

The Kettering native began his trek on the 1,444 mile long Buckeye Trail at Deed’s Point in Dayton on March 20. He completed his journey at the same spot on June 15.

“I’m no stranger to the area. I have a lot of family in the area,” Niekamp said of Auglaize County.

Around 80 people came to Niekamp’s discussion at the Lockkeeper’s House, many of whom were related to him.

- The Man: Allison Brady of the Heritage Trails Park District said Niekamp first became interested in backpacking as a Boy Scout.

Since 1994, Niekamp hiked over 7,500 miles on the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine, completing the entire trail three times. In 2010 alone, Niekamp traveled nearly 1,600 miles while backpacking on 16 trips through 15 states, according to Brady.

“I tell people that long-distance hiking is my personal ‘Fountain of Youth’ because it does make me feel young again,” said Niekamp. “You can’t hike all these miles and not get strong physically and not get strong mentally and not feel young again.”

Niekamp’s hiking nickname is “Captain Blue.”

“I got that name on the Appalachian Trail when I was hiking on it years ago,” said Niekamp. “Hikers usually adopt a trail name. Mine just happens to be Captain Blue.”

Niekamp also founded the Dayton Hikers, Dayton's largest and most active hiking organization that includes nearly 700 members.

- The Buckeye Trail: The Buckeye Trail was founded in 1959 and designated Ohio's official state trail in 1967. It was completed in 1970. The trail is divided into 26 sections and enters 49 of Ohio's 88 counties. It is also the longest circular trail in the United States.

"The trail uses footpaths through the woods. It uses bike paths. It uses roads. It uses canal towpaths. It uses just about whatever Ohio has as far as its footpaths," said Niekamp. "It's kind of comprised of one large loop with two smaller loops and a little spur trail down to Cincinnati."

The Buckeye Trail is marked by 2 by 6-inch blue blazes that hikers follow to know they are still on the trail. The theme of the non-profit Buckeye Trail Association, which built and helps maintain the trail, is "Follow the blue blazes."

The trail goes through all sorts of land, including: Private, county, state or federal property, such as the Cuyahoga National Park, Wayne National Forest and Wright Paterson Air Force Base.

"A lot of the Buckeye Trail is on private property. It's the generosity of landowners allowing the trail to come across their property," said Niekamp.

The northern terminus of the trail is at Headlands Beach State Park on Lake Erie in northeast Ohio, while the southern terminus is at Eden Park in Cincinnati.

Of the 26 sections of the Buckeye Trail, most of the local area is located in the St. Marys Section. This section starts in Lockington and works its way past Houston to Newport, where it merges with State Route 66. The Buckeye Trail then follows the Miami-Erie Canal Towpath Trail and State Route 66 through Fort Loramie, Minster, New Bremen and eventually St. Marys.

- Gear and Lodging: Niekamp brought 30 pounds of gear for his trip.

"There wasn't really anything special that I needed to bring or anything that I didn't need to bring," said Niekamp, noting that some of his main items were: a tent, a sleeping bag, clothes and a portable stove. He also brought his cell phone, which he frequently charged in restaurants and stores along the trail.

Niekamp wrote an online blog and uploaded photos along the way to his website at www.buckeyetrailhiker.com. He took 2,047 photos during the course of his journey and put 850 of them online.

Niekamp brought his ID's and business cards, in case anyone was interested what he was doing. He had no problems with local police.

Niekamp was able to purchase most of his food in the towns along the trail. He spent around \$2,500 on the hike, although it would have been a lot more expensive if not for the generosity of others, according to Niekamp.

As far as self-defense, Niekamp brought nothing more than a small pocketknife that was buried in his backpack.

"The number one thing that long distance hikers can bring for self-defense is common sense," said Niekamp, who said he never had any real problems along the trail.

Niekamp stayed in a variety of places on his trip, which helped him cope with the extreme dampness of this past spring.

He stayed in 20 different homes on his trip during a total of 42 nights.

These homes were owned by: family, friends, acquaintances or strangers.

"People who had never met me before opened up their house to me to let me stay in their house and I thought that was really, really nice of them because they'd not met me before. They didn't really know who I was and now we've become great friends," said Niekamp. ... "That's what really amazed me about hiking the Buckeye Trail because it's not a wilderness adventure. It was the generosity of the people of Ohio," Niekamp added. "I really underestimated how nice people were."

He also spent 27 nights in his tent, 11 nights in a cabin and seven nights in a hotel, motel or bed and breakfast.

- The Trip: "My goal when I left Dayton was I was going to hike the Buckeye Trail for as long as it was fun," said Niekamp, who said he really wasn't sure if he'd be back in three days or three months.

After leaving Dayton, Niekamp reached Ft. Loramie in four days, where he continued his journey on the Miami-Erie Canal Towpath Trail, which overlaps part of the Buckeye Trail.

"I really enjoyed hiking on the canal towpath because it goes right through the towns. I mean it was really, really cool," said Niekamp.

Niekamp then spent a rest day in Minster and reached the Lockkeeper's house in New Bremen on the fifth day of his journey.

"It was a delight to be able to follow the canal right through neighborhoods," said Niekamp.

Soon, Niekamp reached Lock 8 North, which is located just south of St. Marys.

"To me, this is the most pretty, most majestic lock still on the Miami-Erie Canal," said Niekamp. "It's not been refurbished. It's not been rebuilt. It's like it once was."

After several more days, Niekamp made it to a junction near Defiance, where the Miami-Erie Canal connected with the Wabash Canal from Indiana.

"The two canals combined to flow northward to the Maumee River and then onto Lake Erie," explained Niekamp.

Niekamp then continued his route, heading north towards Toledo then east towards Cleveland.

He called the portion of the Buckeye Trail between Toledo and Cleveland the "Great Road Walk" because all but 20 miles of this 180 portion of the trail were on a paved road.

"I got so tired walking on the roads ... my left leg was constantly just a few millimeters longer than my right leg and I developed a (real) soreness in my ankle just because I was not walking on a level surface the whole time," he said.

Niekamp made it to the northern terminus at Lake Erie on April 19. He then continued on and reached his self-created halfway point on May 4, which signified that his starting point was 722 miles away in either direction on the trail.

"I made a point to stop and create this little halfway marker for myself," he said.

- Second Half: Niekamp occasionally got lost in portions of the trail in southeast Ohio that were ill-maintained and overgrown. Whenever he got lost, Niekamp was always able to eventually find his way back to the blue blazes.

"On the Buckeye Trail, I felt more remote and more alone than I ever did on the Appalachian Trail," said Niekamp. ... "On the Appalachian Trail, if you get lost or you're not sure where you are or you get hurt, you just sit down on the trail and by the end of the day, 10 hikers will have come by and you don't feel alone. On parts of the Buckeye Trail, you can tell people don't hike this and you're very alone and very remote in some of these wooded hillsides."

Although he hiked most of the Buckeye Trail by himself, a friend luckily joined Niekamp for a portion of his hike in southeastern Ohio.

Due to the overly wet spring, many portions of the trail were a muddy mess.

"It's the lesson that you learn in life, you just kind of have to make the best of it," said Niekamp. "If you end up with a muddy trail, you just kind of plow through it and get to the other end and keep on going."

Hiking through southeast Ohio eventually brought Niekamp to southwest Ohio, where he came to a junction in Milford on June 9.

"If I go left, I follow the American Discovery Trail out to Eden Park in Cincinnati and eventually onto the west coast," said Niekamp. "If I turn right, I follow the North

Country Trail and the Buckeye Trail heading straight north for Michigan and onto North Dakota. So this is a very famous junction here.”

(The North Country Trail stretches 4,600 miles from eastern New York to North Dakota, while the 6,800 mile American Discovery Trail stretches coast-to-coast from Delaware to northern California.)

Niekamp took the left junction and reached the trail’s southern terminus in Cincinnati’s Eden Park nine miles later.

Niekamp’s trip soon ended to much fanfare and support in Dayton on June 15.

Post-Trip Statistics: Niekamp hiked on 76 days of his 88-day trip. He rested on the remaining 12 days. His average miles per day were 16.4 including rest days or 19.0 not including them.

“So if there was a hiking day, I was doing 19 miles,” said Niekamp. “I stayed moving. I wanted to get this hike done in about three months.”

The longest distance Niekamp covered in one day was 27 miles along the canal towpath from Defiance towards Toledo.

“The only reason it was that long was it was cold and windy and miserable and there was no good place to take a break,” he said.

The coldest temperatures he experienced along his trip was in the mid-20 degree range, while the hottest temperatures were well into the 90s.

Niekamp also lost 15 pounds of body weight during his journey.

“Since that hike, I’ve worked really hard to gain all that weight back,” Niekamp said with a laugh.

Niekamp encourages anyone who is interested in hiking to join the Buckeye Trail Association.

“What the Buckeye Trail needs most is hikers,” said Niekamp. “We need hikers. So my advice to you is leave your car behind and discover Ohio on foot.”

Visit www.buckeyetrail.org for more information on the Buckeye Trail and the Buckeye Trail Association. More information on the Dayton Hikers can be found at: www.daytonhikers.org, while Niekamp’s personal website can be found at: www.buckeyetrailhiker.com.

Article courtesy of The Minster Community Post

<http://www.minstercommunitypost.com/content/ohio-man-completes-buckeye-trail>