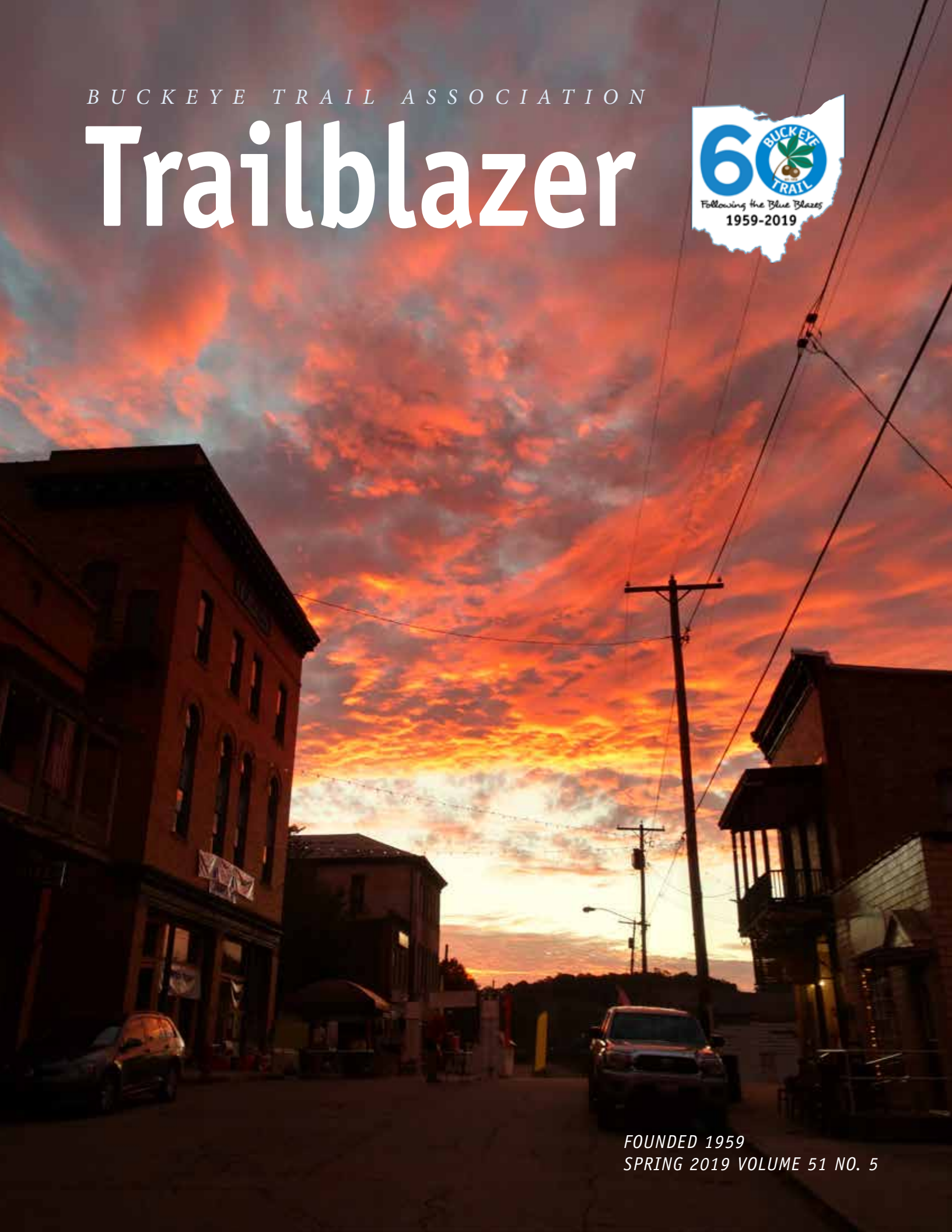


BUCKEYE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Trailblazer



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Buckeye Trail Member Honored by the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association

Karen Power

Andy “Captain Blue” Niekamp received the Ohio Parks and Recreation Association (OPRA) Outstanding Citizen of the Year Award for 2018. Nominated by Montgomery County’s Five Rivers MetroParks, Andy was honored for his excellence in outdoor recreation leadership and trail stewardship.

Leadership awards like this one take a lifetime of involvement and impact to come to fruition. Over the years, Andy has organized or effectively contributed in some way to numerous activities and projects that have positively impacted trails and those who use them. He is most proud of Dayton Hikers, his support of Five Rivers MetroParks, and his promotion of the Buckeye Trail.

Andy started Dayton Hikers almost 10 years ago using MeetUp.com. In 2009 when his hiking club began, MeetUp was a little known social networking site. The MeetUp platform and Andy’s dedicated vision for providing free hiking opportunities for the local community has grown Dayton Hikers to 5,000+ members.

Dayton Hikers is the most active outdoor group in the Miami Valley, typically scheduling nearly 1,000 events a year. One Dayton Hiker project involved recording live outdoor imagery using a 50-pound backpack loaded with cameras. Andy and Dayton Hikers partnered with Five Rivers MetroParks’ Google Street View Trekker project which recorded 600 miles of Dayton area trails, including the parts of the Buckeye Trail that traverse Montgomery County. This virtual tour of the trails went live in 2017.

Andy continued his volunteer efforts by coordinating the helpers needed for the biennial International Trails Symposium held in Dayton in 2017. Andy used his IT skills to implement very successful volunteer sign-up software. Many of the 138 volunteers were Dayton Hikers. They worked a total of 1,011 hours, filling 229 slots.

Another noteworthy Dayton Hiker project for 2017 was the Warrior 150 Challenge Hikes. Andy organized five, 25-mile hikes to honor our veterans and to celebrate 150 years of Dayton’s VA Medical Center. Veterans, active duty military, and the public participated.

In 2018, using hiking as a forum, Dayton Hikers raised and donated almost \$2800 to Ohio Sate Nature Preserves, Five Rivers MetroParks Foundation, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Pink Ribbon Girls, and St. Vincent DePaul, Dayton.

Currently, a very popular hike series is the Passport to Adventure Program. Andy designed a booklet and created stickers using park logos for 25 local parks, state parks, and the North Country Trail and the Buckeye Trail. Borrowing the idea from the National Parks Passport Program, this program encourages the public to visit local and state parks on Dayton Hikers’ organized hikes.

As Troy section supervisor, Andy is also proud of his commitment to the Buckeye Trail. In 2018, he gave 25 presentations on the Buckeye Trail in venues all over Ohio. His book about the Buckeye Trail, *Captain Blue on the Blue Blazes: The First Solo Thru Hike of Ohio’s 1,444 Mile Trail*, released in December 2017 currently has 1200+ copies in circulation.

Andy was pleased and proud to describe his experiences hiking the Buckeye Trail as an invited speaker during an Ohio Legislative Trails Caucus meeting at the state capitol in 2018. In addition, Andy and other BTA members, thanks to the



Photo credit to Five Rivers Metro Park

coordinating efforts of BTA President Steve Walker, visited members of the Trails Caucus at the state house.

As a follow-up to his state house visits, Andy organized and invited local outdoor leaders and local state representatives on a hike in the Five Rivers MetroPark area. He even managed to recruit his local representative to sit on the Caucus!

This year's Dayton Hikers' 2019 Buckeye Trail Winter Hike at Caesar Creek State Park set a record for the highest number of participating hikers in its six-year history. It continues to be the largest winter hike on the Buckeye Trail in southwest Ohio.

Andy is not only a leader in outdoor adventure and a steward of the trails, he is also an avid trail user. He began his fifth end-to-end section hike of the Appalachian Trail in 2017. He completed a thru-hike of the John Muir Trail in 2018, and by the time of this publication, will have completed a thru-hike of the 1,100 Florida Trail.

Awarded for significant and positive impact on promoting and sustaining trails, Andy continues to dedicate his life to providing opportunities for others to get exercise, explore nature, live a healthier lifestyle, and make Ohio a better place to live. Congratulations, Andy. It's an award well deserved.

The Florida Trail

Karen “Tagalong” Power

On Christmas day, I hiked on a road in a quiet residential neighborhood in a small town. I saw sidewalks, kids, fences, trees, cars and bikes in driveways, homes, grassy yards. It could have very well been a section of road on the Buckeye Trail in Hartville or Stockport.

A few steps in front of me was Andy “Captain Blue” Niekamp. Andy thru-hiked the 1,444-mile Buckeye Trail in 2011. This winter, he decided to thru-hike 1,100 miles of the Florida Trail. I’m a Buckeye Trail circuit hiker and hope to finish in 2019, but I planned to tag along on this Florida Trail adventure with Captain Blue for as long as my feet and my motivation would sustain me. The Florida Trail is not considered a wilderness trail. Like the Buckeye Trail, it utilizes forest paths, sidewalks, bike paths, paved roads, gravel and dirt roads. What sets it apart from the Buckeye Trail, are the various sections that follow along a path through a swamp. Yes, a swamp. In the 1,000 miles of Buckeye Trail I’ve completed, I have yet to hike through a swamp. Naturally, I had a list of concerns: venomous snakes, poisonous plants, panthers, pythons, bears, alligators, ticks and other insects.

We arrived at the southern terminus at Big Cypress National Preserve to begin our journey north. We were only three miles on trail when I realized I needed to re-do my list of concerns (plus some): venomous snakes, sink holes, no water sources,

mud as thick as slime, muddy water and sludge up to the calf, no dry campsites; an ill-defined trail which had its own subset of worries: getting lost, getting off trail, being unable to find the campsite, losing Andy, Andy losing me.

I was in the lead when we encountered the first cotton mouth. It poised to strike. I froze. The snake was not about to give up ground. “Andy. Snake. Cotton mouth!” I gasped. In his fearless, frontiersman-like spirit he responded, “Get behind me!”

“No problem.” I managed to squeak out, and leaped behind. Andy carefully moved a stick under the belly of the snake and flicked it as hard as he could. The force sent the snake flying through the air and into the grass. That’s when I decided it was *probably* better to let Andy be in front. Good thing, too. The next encounter with another venomous snake came soon after. Needless to say, we survived the swamp of Big Cypress. When we crossed a stretch of I-75 known as “Alligator Alley,” we knew we had made it. We hiked 30 miles of swamp in two days and three hours. We were wet and muddy, but feeling good. Good enough to keep hiking.

Andy and I parted ways after 12 days. He continued his journey northward. I flew back to Ohio, glad to have had this adventure. Now it’s time to finish the Buckeye Trail.



Photos credited to Karen Power and Andy Haag

