

Dayton Daily News

Kettering's 'Captain Blue' treks Appalachian Trail for a third time

By Tom Archdeacon, August 8, 2010
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Unlike Mark Sanford, Kettering adventurer Andy Niekamp actually was out on the Appalachian Trail.

Last year when the married South Carolina governor disappeared for four days, his office said he was hiking the Appalachian Trail. Instead, he'd slipped down to Argentina to be with his mistress.

Now if you know the 49-year-old Niekamp, you might say the trail is his paramour — after all, he's had a love affair with it for more than two decades — but he simply calls it “my old friend.”

Regardless of the terms of endearment, the two spend a lot of time together.

Ten days ago, Niekamp finished trekking the 2,179-mile trail for the third time — something only 30 people in the world have done in the 73 years since the famed wilderness passage was completed.

While some 11,000 people have completed the trail one time, few have done it more than once.

Although the effort offers breathtaking views from mountain trails, lush forests and river valleys, glimpses of everything from elk, moose, bobcats and bears to fields of blooming mountain laurel and rhododendrons — and, of course, a great sense of personal accomplishment — there are lots of reasons folks don't repeat.

It takes a long time — typically five to seven months — if you're making the trip non stop. In trail parlance that's a thru-hiker. Sectioners, like Niekamp, make the passage in segments — his last one was a six-week, 500-miler through the rugged terrains of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine — often separated by years.

And hiking the trail — which traverses 14 states, Georgia to Maine — can be tough work. According to the Wingfoot trail guide, there are 91 vertical miles of climbing and ascents. Some 25 percent of the people who start the trail quit 30 miles into it. The reasons can be everything from aching knees, blisters and more serious injuries to fatigue, self doubt and homesickness.

“In long-distance hiking there’s a transition from a physical journey to a mental journey,” Niekamp said. “You need staying power because not every day is fun, not every step is joyful.”

But when you make the transition, he said, you are rewarded. “I don’t have any kids, but I see nieces and nephews grow up, parents and relatives pass away and careers change.

“But going back to the trail is kind of like being somewhere that never changes. It’s comfortable. It’s like, ‘OK, old friend, I’m back. Let’s go.’

“And it’s a great way to blow out the cobwebs in one’s life. It’s a good physical exercise. It’s good mentally. Out there I feel younger, stronger.

“I call it my personal Fountain of Youth.”

Path less traveled

Niekamp’s first backpacking experiences came when he was involved with Boy Scouts Troop 813 in Kettering.

After graduating from Fairmont West and Bowling Green State University, he began a 26-year career with Electronic Data Systems.

In 1989 a friend introduced him to the Appalachian Trail and he spent a week hiking a 35-mile section in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. “That whupped me ... and it hooked me,” he said. “Looking back, it wasn’t that challenging, but I had heavy gear and I was out of shape. But I loved it and the next year I went back and did all 70 miles of the Great Smokys and then did 105 miles of the Shenandoah National Park.”

A couple of years later he hiked the trail’s southernmost 160 miles and for the first time envisioned completing the whole thing.

Because trail hikers take on nicknames the way truckers adopt CB handles, he became known as Captain Blue — a tag that originated with teasing friends who noticed his blue long underwear.

He completed the trail for the first time in 1998, then did it again in 2004. Most of it he did solo. His latest passage ended when he reached the summit of Maine’s Mount Katahdin after making the grueling trip over Vermont’s Green Mountains, New Hampshire’s White Mountains, where a part of the trail is above the tree line, and finally through the rugged alpine regions in Maine. Along the way he dropped 15 pounds.

The pack he now carries weighs just 18 pounds. Loaded with water and food, much of it freeze-dried, it may be 25 to 30 pounds. Many of his provisions he picks up along the way.

Before leaving Kettering he prepares boxes of food and other essentials and mails them general delivery to post offices near the trail. Then he hitchhikes into those towns, picks up his waiting parcels and sometimes mails home other things he no longer needs.

He sleeps in a pup tent or, when it’s raining, a lean-to along the trail.

Twice he said he's had medical predicaments along the way: "In 1998 I was in Connecticut and temperatures were in the mid 90s and I got heat exhaustion.

"I was a little delirious. I had spells of vomiting and falling down and finally I collected my wits and found a farm house where they rented me a room and I sat in air conditioning until I was better."

In 2003 he had to end his trip early when — after days of walking in rain and mud — he had a Manchester, Vt., doctor check his infected toe and was told he had trench foot.

When he got back to Kettering a few days ago, he had blisters on his feet, but not from his final climb up Mount Katahdin. It came from the unlikely thing he did afterward. Last Monday, Aug. 2, he drove from Maine to Harper's Ferry, W. Va., met up with Dayton hiker Yvonne Entingh and they did the Appalachian Trail's one-day, Four-State Challenge, tromping for 17 hours and 45 miles through Virginia, West Virginia, a very rocky stretch of Maryland and Pennsylvania.

They started before dawn wearing head lamps and finished that way, too.

"It was a long grueling day," he smiled, "but that was my way of celebrating my 500-mile hike."

Backpack full of memories

The first thing Niekamp did when he got back to Kettering was head to the barbershop to rid himself of his mountain man look. Other things he wasn't ready to shed:

"As I wrote in my journal, 'I'll be glad when the hiking is over, but sad when the hike is done.' " He took out his computer and showed a fascinating collection of trail photos he's taken over the years. There were shots of black bears and rattlesnakes, Revolutionary War and Civil War battle sites and a plane wreck he found in the Smoky Mountains. On Brush Mountain in Virginia he photographed the monument erected on the site where Audie Murphy — America's most decorated World War II soldier and later a movie star — was killed in a 1971 plane crash.

And then there's the photo he took at a North Carolina laundromat where a sign warns hikers who, like Niekamp, travel with just one change of clothes: "Please keep clothes on when doing laundry. ... Wearing a blanket does not count."

Back home here, he's looking into different business pursuits, is involved in caving, runs the Dayton Hikers club (DaytonHikers.org), is thinking of traversing the 1,400 mile Buckeye Trail that loops Ohio and he's actually one-quarter of the way through a fourth Appalachian Trail hike.

"I'm not sure what's next," he said. "Just getting back home, I'm trying to adjust. After sleeping on the ground all these weeks, it was a little difficult last night on a soft bed with nice pillows."

Not that he had to worry about that for long.

Saturday morning he and five other Dayton folks left for a week-long back-packing trip through Colorado.

Appalachian Trail by the numbers

3 Times Kettering's Andy Niekamp has hiked entire AT.

6 National parks the AT crosses.

14 States the AT crosses.

30 Estimated number of hikers who've completed AT three times.

73 Years since AT was completed.

124 Lowest elevation (in feet) of AT.

2,179 Length in miles of Appalachian Trail.

4,000 Volunteers who help annually with AT upkeep.

5,000 Times blind hiker Bill Irwin estimates he fell completing AT with his seeing eye dog Orient in nearly 9-month trek.

6,625 Highest elevation (in feet) of AT.

11,000 Number of people who have completed the AT one time.

5 million Adult footsteps to hike entire AT.

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