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Sixth person to hike Buckeye Trail to describe trip

Miami-Erie Canal corridor in Auglaize County part of 1,400-mile route

By Amy Kronenberger
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Andy "Captain Blue" Niekamp fords a creek on Newburn Road near Stockport during his 1,400-mile trek on the Buckeye Trail.

NEW BREMEN - Hiking long distances on the Appalachian and Buckeye trails has allowed one man to find his own "personal fountain of youth."

Andy "Captain Blue" Niekamp, 50, of Dayton, is the sixth person to hike the entire 1,400-mile Buckeye Trail. He also hiked the 2,179-mile Appalachian Trail three times.

He will share his story of hiking around Ohio during a public presentation Tuesday at the Lockkeepers House in New Bremen.

Niekamp began his 88-day journey on March 30 and completed it June 15. During that time he met a lot of amazing people and saw almost every form of wildlife Ohio offers, except a bear, he said.

"You can't hike in Ohio and not learn about its history, people and culture," he said. "The people were incredible and generous. They reaffirmed my faith that people are genuinely good."

Unlike the Appalachian Trail, Niekamp said the Buckeye Trail offers very few campsites. It's the longest circular trail in the country and spans the perimeter of Ohio in 26 sections. The Miami-Erie Canal corridor in Auglaize County serves as the western edge. The trail is marked by blue blazes 2-inches wide by 6-inches high on trees or poles.

"I slept on church grounds, cemeteries and in houses and yards of people who were willing to take me in," he said.

He took advantage of campsites when he found them and homes of the people he knew who lived along the way. Though he's never been bitten, Niekamp said his biggest fear was crossing the path of a dog protecting its property.

"The Buckeye Trail is a different kind of hike," he said. "It's not a wilderness trail like the Appalachian Trail. You hike through towns, farmers' fields and parks, but it also takes you to a lot of different places that many people don't get to see."

Niekamp called the Miami-Erie Canal an "incredible resource and amazing piece of history." He enjoyed seeing the locks intact and all the preserved history along the canal.

"New Bremen has really done great things with their portion of the canal," he said.

Niekamp packed winter and summer gear, a tent, sleeping bag and pad, alcohol stove, maps, compass, pocket knife, cell phone, hiking poles and food for his trip.

Another unique aspect of the Buckeye Trail is the amount of available food along the way. The Appalachian Trail has very few places to restock food supplies, he said. During those hikes, he would buy freeze-dried food boxes and mail them to himself at food drops along the way.

On the Buckeye Trail, however, he didn't need to carry more than a two-day supply of food.

"I could always stop to buy food at towns I hiked through," he said. "I also stopped at restaurants and a lot of locals invited me to their houses for dinner."

To keep up his energy, Niekamp said he consumed twice as much food and drank close to two gallons of water on hot days.

The longest stretch he had to carry food was seven days in southeast Ohio. In that area, the Buckeye Trail is at its most remote and rugged, he said.

"I felt more alone and isolated than I've ever felt hiking, far more than the Appalachian Trail," he said. "It was kind of a spooky feeling being so alone. You wouldn't think those places exist in Ohio, but they do."

Several people joined him on one-day hikes and a friend joined him for a two-week stretch, but Niekamp said he still prefers to hike alone.

"When you're alone, you set your own pace and schedule," he said. "It's a nice feeling of freedom when it's just you and the trail."

Of the 88 days, Niekamp spent 12 resting. Some were scheduled breaks for Easter or festivals he wanted to attend, others were unscheduled, due to fatigue or the weather.

"There were bad days of course, but I used my experience on the Appalachian Trail and knew the bad days would pass," he said.

Niekamp, who is semi-retired after working 27 years with Hewlett Packard, spent about a month preparing for the hike by getting his gear assembled and walking as often as possible. He became interested in hiking during his days with the Boy Scouts and Eagle Scouts and began long-distance hiking in 1989.

He would tell anyone interested in long-distance hiking to just go out and do it.

"Don't wait for the perfect time, you're ready for your first hike now," he said.

Presentation:

Title: Thru Hiking the Buckeye Trail - A 1,400-Mile Journey Around Ohio

Speaker: Andy Niekamp

When: 7 p.m. Tuesday

Where: New Bremen Lockkeepers House near the intersection of state routes 66 and 274.

Article courtesy of The Daily Standard

<http://dailystandard.com/archive/2011-11-14/stories/16511/sixth-person-to-hike-buckeye-trail-to-describe-trip>