

Captain Blue On The Blue Blazes

Andy "Captain Blue" Niekamp

On March 20, 2011, the first day of spring, I began a hike on the Buckeye Trail in my hometown of Dayton. I got dropped off at Deeds Point, a mere four miles from my house. I carried a fully loaded backpack with gear, clothing and several days of food. I wasn't sure how long of a hike it would be. My goal was to hike on the Buckeye Trail for as long as it was fun. Would this be several days, several weeks or several months? I did not know. Just in case though I had cleared my calendar for three months and purchased all 26 section maps of the Buckeye Trail. I had hoped for an early spring and a mild spring. My wish was not granted. It turned out to be the rainiest spring in Ohio on record.

It was sunny and breezy that day as I headed north out of Dayton on the Buckeye Trail. From the start it did not feel like a typical hike to me. I am no stranger to long distance hiking. Over the last twenty years I've hiked 7,500 miles on the Appalachian Trail including three end to end hikes where I got my trail name of Captain Blue. In the previous year I had backpacked over 1,000 miles in 16 states on 15 different trips. Little did I realize that hiking the Buckeye Trail would be anything but typical?

My destination for the first night was Tipp City which was a 17 mile hike. I spent the evening with a friend of mine who lives there. I made arrangements to stay with friends and family along the way for the first few nights of my journey.

Captain Blue starting at Deeds Point with Dayton in the background.



Other than that I did no planning on where to stay or where to resupply. I was told that finding campsites would be difficult and obtaining food and groceries would be easy.

On the second day I continued hiking through Troy along the Great Miami River. The views of Troy and the courthouse were strikingly beautiful to me. I'd been to Troy many times but I never saw the city from this viewpoint. I told myself that if I continue to see pretty sites such as this then I am going to like this trail. I started doing daily updates

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 Does the person make the journey or
 does the journey make the person?
 I believe the journey makes the person.
 Captain Blue

to my online trail journal and added photos to my online photo album. This proved to be invaluable as were people were able to following along on my hike and offer me assistance along the way.

By the fifth day I had hiked 70 miles and was in New Bremen. New Bremen is a charming town along the Miami-Erie Canal and was settled by German immigrants in the mid 1800's. Like several towns in the area the canal and Buckeye Trail go right through the center of town. I took a long break from the cold and wind at the local coffee shop. The staff was so polite to me even though it was clear I wasn't "from around here" and I tracked mud all over the place. I sat in a lounge chair in a corner by myself. But not for long as a group of five people joined me. All five were very cordial and welcoming. It was then I started to realize that the people of Ohio were very nice to hikers.

In Paulding County, in northwest Ohio, a farmer had erected a fence over the route of the canal towpath and the Buckeye Trail. I didn't feel like backtracking so I decided to climb over the fence. When I had straddled the fence I felt this tremendous electrical shock on my inner thigh and quickly realized I was standing on an electric fence. Instinctively I dove head first, backpack on and all, over the fence and did somersault on the ground. It was quite a jolt but I was unhurt. I realized that you can't hike on the Buckeye Trail without some surprises.

On March 29 and after 165 miles of hiking I camped out for the first time. Up until then I was still staying friends and family each night. This was not my plan but it turned out this way. The weather had turned cold, windy and rainy and turning down an offer to sleep inside was hard to do. My first campsite was on a bluff along the Maumee River outside of Napoleon. It had a makeshift bench of boards and concrete blocks. It was a fine place to camp after a 21 mile day. The temperatures dipped into the mid 20's that night and my water bottles and muddy hiking shoes froze. In the morning the sunrise was beautiful. By now I had developed a deep appreciation for the Buckeye Trail and the people who maintain it.

I thought I knew what hiking the Buckeye Trail would be like before I left home. I was born in Ohio, grew up in Ohio, went to school in Ohio and worked my career in Ohio. I thought I had a pretty good idea of what Ohio was about. I didn't think that hiking the Buckeye Trail would be as fun as out of state trails. I had been on the Buckeye Trail in many places before like Caesar Creek State Park, Hocking Hills State Park and Shawnee State Forest So I began this journey thinking I knew what the Buckeye Trail was about. I was so wrong! It was a much more rewarding and rich experience than I could have ever imagined.

After a 20 mile day I arrived in Pemberville and met a man quite by accident. He was the general manager of the local opera house and gave me a tour of the magnificent place. He had friends at the American Legion in town where they let me camp in their out building. A guy from the American Legion brought out an electric heater to make sure I would stay warm that night. He offered me money for dinner. I declined. In the morning at a local breakfast café a man paid for my breakfast. My stay in Pemberville was truly magical made special by the people. Pemberville gets my vote for the Friendliest Town on the Buckeye Trail.

Trail Slang

Blow Down – A tree or shrub that has fallen across the Trail. A problem for both hikers and trail maintainers.

Twelve by Twelve – Hiking 12 miles by 12 noon. Example: I was really moving fast today. I did a twelve by twelve!

Stealth Camp – Camping in a manner or fashion where you wish to remain undetected.

Slackpack – Hiking without a fully loaded backpack. This makes hiking less strenuous.

Trail Magic – Random acts of kindness bestowed on hikers by strangers.

Trail Angels – People who perform trail magic.

Trail Name – A nickname adopted by or given to a hiker.

Thru Hiking – Attempting to hike a long trail in a single, continuous journey.

Yogi – A verb meaning to acquire something from strangers by asking or implying. Example: I yogied a hamburger from some people who were having a cookout.

Zero or Zero Day – A day in which no miles are hiked usually to rest or because of bad weather. Example: After ten days of hiking I decided to take a zero day.

I came to realize that hiking the Buckeye Trail was rich in Trail

Magic. I was the lucky recipient of it. Trail Magic is defined in many ways but it usually means unexpected generosity from a stranger. These random, unplanned acts of kindness usually happen at a time when it is most needed by people called Trail Angels. Trail angels show up, help out and then disappear. Trail magic is one of the great joys of hiking on the Buckeye Trail.

On April 10 and after 375 miles of hiking I reached the junction of the Little Loop where the Medina, Bedford and Akron sections meet. I had finished what I call the "Great Road Walk" from Toledo to Akron. In the round numbers the last 180 miles had all been on roads except for about 20 miles. (Note: This will change soon with the completion of the North Coast Inland Trail.) Reaching this area was a milestone for me. The weather had turned unseasonably hot. I found the steep hills of Brecksville very difficult in the hot weather. I ran out of water and was very thirsty. At Blue Hen Falls I encountered some day hikers who offered me three bottles of water. They could see that I was sunburned and parched. This kindness appeared when I need it most and it touched me. The trail magic continued throughout my hike and never let up. In all my hiking on the Appalachian Trail I had only experienced a tiny fraction of the trail magic I received on the Buckeye Trail.

On April 27 I finished the Little Loop with help from BTA board member and vice president Debbie Zampini. Debbie, who had never met me, graciously invited me into her home. She helped me slackpack some of the Little Loop. I stayed five nights with Debbie.

On May 4 after 722 miles and 45 days of hiking I reached my half way point near Salt Fork Wildlife Area. It was a bitter sweet moment. I was glad to be in the second half of my journey. But the realization that I still had a long way to go was a bit overwhelming. By now spring had sprung and the trail was getting overgrown in areas. I was no longer in the flat part of Ohio. I was hiking up and down hills now.

My friend Mike Fanelli joined me for ten days of hiking starting in the Whipple Loop. Mike was no stranger to long-distance hiking, as he had hiked the entire Appalachian Trail and much of the Pacific Crest Trail. Mike had hiked with Brent and Amy Anslinger for a week on their 2003 Buckeye Trail thru-hike. I told Mike that if wanted to hike with me had "to hit the ground doing 20-mile days." He agreed. Little did I know that this would be impossible to do in the Whipple Loop. The Whipple Loop is the 110-mile loop in southeast Ohio off the main loop. It's a 30-mile stretch in the Wayne National Forest. Most of the trail here does not have a maintainer, and as a result is overgrown and needs a lot of work. Mike and I got lost many times in this area. We only averaged about 10 miles per day because of confusing or missing trail markers, downed trees and an obscured footpath. After finishing this section it was another 40 miles of road-walking back to the main loop. Now I know why it is called the Stupid Loop.

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I am fortunate that I had a hiking companion in this area.

On May 20 we reached Murray City where Mike and I parted ways. I was met by Andrew Bashaw who is the executive director of the Buckeye Trails Association. I rode with Andrew and his family to the BTA Annual Meeting at The Barn on Tappan Lake. I enjoyed meeting everyone and taking a weekend off from hiking. It was great to be among the people who make the Buckeye Trail possible.

On May 24 I crossed to the west of SR-33 near Logan marking the 1,000 mile point on my journey. I looked forward to hiking through Hocking Hills State Park and several state forests. By now I wasn't real concerned about where I would end up each night. Early on I would want to know in advance what lodging options were available to me each night. Now I just hiked all day and found a place to camp each night sometimes stealth camping. I camped at churches, in cemeteries, picnic shelters, yards or wherever I could find a place to stay. It was easier finding places to camp and stay than I expected. The hiking on the back roads was very enjoyable. Many people frown on the Buckeye Trail because it uses roads for its path in areas. But the road walking was some of the highlights of my journey. It gave me a chance to see how people lived and to meet people along the way.

Near Richmond Dale I stayed with Mike and Connie Snyder for several nights. Mike and Connie are trail angels who host long distance hikers on the Buckeye Trail, American Discovery Trail and North Country Trail. They are delightful people to stay with and are very helpful. Look the up if you are hiking though the area.

On June 4 and after 1,200 miles hiking I was in the West Union section. I noticed the hills were starting to flatten out. For the last six weeks or so I endured hill after hills sometimes very steep. But now the hills were disappearing and I was back in flat farm land. This was a welcome relief to me as I could hike over 20 miles per day again. I noticed the water quality of the streams was deteriorating. I no longer obtained drinking water from the creeks. I filled up my water bottles from the faucet on people's houses.

On June 9 I reach Milford and Eden Park. Eden Park is the southern terminus of the Buckeye Trail. The hike from Milford to Eden Park is an urban trek and a different hiking experience. I felt out of place carrying a backpack through Cincinnati.

On June 15 I was back in my hometown of Dayton. I stopped at Eastwood MetroPark, a mere three miles from where I started, and took a long break. I was met by a reporter from the Dayton Daily News. I talked with the reporter for about an hour so he could do a story on my thru hike. A dozen of my friends showed up to hike the remaining miles of the Buckeye Trail with me. A camera crew from our local ABC new station showed up to get footage for evening news. We hiked the last few miles together. With a quarter of a mile to go I could see that a crowd of 20 people had gathered at Deeds Point to celebrate my arrival. It was



Andy Niekamp of Kettering returned to Deeds Point in Dayton Wednesday June 15 after a four month long trek on the Buckeye Trail hiking more than 1,400 miles. Niekamp started his journey at the statue of Orville and Wilbur Wright located at Deeds Point and returned to the same spot for the finish. Photo by Lisa Powell. Courtesy of the Dayton Daily News.

a welcome site. The last 100 feet of my journey involved crossing a pedestrian bridge over the Mad River. Midway on the bridge I did a celebratory jump into the air and kicked my heels. This victory pose was caught on film by a Dayton Daily News photographer. To finish the loop of the Buckeye Trail I walked over to the statues of Orville and Wilbur Wright and gave them a hug. Tears came to my eyes as I realized that I had completed a thru hike of the Buckeye Trail. The crowd was waving flags and congratulating me. It was a fitting finish to an amazing hike!

Afterthoughts: My hike on the Buckeye Trail was much richer and rewarding than I had ever imagined. There is so much to see in Ohio. The people of Ohio are incredibly nice. There are places to camp or stay along the Buckeye Trail. You can rely on the generosity of strangers to help you find places to stay. Resupplying is easy. Hiking on the roads turned out to be an enjoyable experience for me. My advice is to leave your car behind and go for a long distance hike on the Buckeye Trail. People in Ohio are very kind to travelers on foot. Hospitality is not strictly a southern term. Northern hospitality and trail magic are alive and well in Ohio. If given the choice of hiking the Appalachian Trail again or the Buckeye Trail again which would I choose? The answer is easy—*The Buckeye Trail*.

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Come see Andy Niekamp presentation titled *Thru Hiking The Buckeye Trail—A 1,400 Mile Journey Around Ohio*. The presentations are free and open to the public.

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