

Buckeye Trail Thru-hiker Completes the Appalachian Trail for the Fifth Time

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Another adventure is complete and in the books for Andy “Captain Blue” Niekamp of Kettering, Ohio. On August 17, 2021, Andy summited Katahdin in Maine, the northern terminus of the 2,193-mile Appalachian Trail (AT), finishing the trail end-to-end for the fifth time. He is one of the select few - out of millions who have set foot on the AT since 1937 - to have embraced and completed the challenges of this wilderness trail five times. Most are satisfied to hike the AT at least once. Five times takes an exceptional measure of perseverance, hard-core dedication, and unequivocal love for the AT.

How does anyone sum up hiking the AT once, let alone five times? In terms of time, Andy’s journeys span five decades—the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s, and 2020s; 1,000 nights, and three years on trail. In terms of distance, he’s hiked 11,000 miles, 25 million footsteps, and 500 miles of vertical ups and downs. Andy compares the elevation change to hiking a roller coaster of continuous ups and downs over hundreds of miles. Some have compared a single AT hike to climbing from sea level to the summit of Mt. Everest 16 times. Five end-to-end hikes translate into 80 climbs. While Andy’s accomplishment is easy to summarize by the numbers, it’s harder to condense all of the experiences over 32 years and 11,000 miles. Andy’s most dangerous and, subsequently, most memorable experience was surviving a lightning strike in 2015 (AT hike number four) on Black Mountain in Harriman State Park on the AT in New York.

Andy described his experience:

I felt a tremendous electrical surge hit my entire body. My back arched. Every muscle in my body clenched. The intensity of the contracted muscles could have broken a bone. I gasped for air. I was blinded by an orange flash of light and lost most of my hearing. The jolt knocked me backwards on my backpack down an incline. I smelled a whiff of something burning. The excruciating pain lasted a brief millisecond. Yet, in the aftermath, I had no pain except for a sensation of complete numbness in my feet. I lay sprawled on the ground fully conscious of what had just happened.

Luckily, he was able to make it safely down to the EMT members waiting for him at the road. It took a couple of weeks to regain feeling in his feet, but he completed the hike in 2016 and began another the following year. Needless to say, changes in technology and innovation in gear and packaged food over the past 32 years as well as new knowledge about the health benefits of

being outdoors have propelled hiking into the fitness limelight.

In 1989, when Andy began his first AT hike, he wore an old cotton shirt, cut off jeans, and heavy leather hiking boots. His hiking pole was a stout wooden stick. He always carried a quarter in his pocket so he could call his mom whenever he found a pay phone at a crossroad. Losing the white blazes could mean hours of backtracking or bushwhacking. Today, smartphones with downloadable trail maps apps, cell service, and instant communication make hiking and navigating the AT much easier and safer. The conveniences of modern backpacking make the trail more accessible to a wider demographic. Over the years, Andy has seen a significant increase in the number of hikers on the AT, including solo women, families, and retirees, some in their 80’s. Whatever his next adventure is, hiking is in his future.



Andy thru-hiked the Buckeye Trail in 2011, after his third AT hike, and is credited with the first solo thru-hike of the entire Buckeye Trail at its current length of 1,400+ miles. Andy is the author of the popular book, *Captain Blue on the Blue Blazes*, a chronicle of his historic Buckeye Trail hike. For more information about his Buckeye Trail hike and book visit www.buckeyetrailhiker.com

(Left) Andy Niekamp on the Appalachian Trail in 1990 in the Great Smoky Mountains.

(Right) Andy Niekamp completes a thru hike of the Buckeye Trail at Deeds Point in Dayton in June of 2011.

(Background) Andy Niekamp on the summit of Katahdin, Maine on August 17, 2021, completing the Appalachian Trail a fifth time.

