

BEFORE YOU THRU

**HOW TO PREPARE FOR
THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL**



BRIAN CORNELL

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Hike at your own risk! The author encourages readers to pursue outdoor adventure, but he is not responsible for your hike, happiness, well-being, or safety. Please mind your health and consider consulting a doctor or getting a physical before attempting any long-distance hike.

While this guidebook is specifically tailored to aspiring Appalachian Trail thru-hikers, most of the content within can be applied to any long-distance hiking trail. Timing, gear, destinations, and milestones may vary, but the ideas and principles discussed are consistent with most thru-hikes.

*Quit your job
Sell your house
Rent out your car
Lose the spouse
Come with us
We're walking to Maine
Life will never
Be the same*

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INTRODUCTION

You've seen the pictures. Terminus photos of hikers posing with the Katahdin sign, finally at the end of their thru-hike. A 2,200-mile journey culminating in this one spectacular moment captured and shared on the internet for all envious eyes to admire. Their joy shines through the screen and slaps you in your stale face until you awaken from another daydream.

You've read the books. *A Walk in the Woods*, *Wild*, *Thirst*, *Becoming Odyssa*, and countless other inspirational hiking memoirs (mine included on this bottomless bookshelf). The tale of extended adventure is too captivating to ignore. The descriptions make it feel like you're walking in their shoes. Close your eyes, and you can feel the sun, taste the sweat, smell the trees.

This is not one of those books.

This is more of a manual for next season's thru-hiker. A pre-hike guidebook. Normal trail guides provide mileage, location of campsites, reliability of water sources, and details about nearby towns. *Before You Thru*

is a monthly map to assist aspiring thru-hikers who aren't sure how to take the first step. Or the second.

If you fantasize about hiking from Georgia to Maine on that long stretch of trail hidden in the woods of the east but don't know where to start, this guidebook is for you. If you desperately need a change of pace but only have six months to prepare for a thru-hike, this schedule is your map and compass. *Before You Thru* is here to help make the transition from your current life to the start of the Appalachian Trail as straightforward and painless as possible.

This is a northbound-oriented guide. Most thru-hikers travel northbound (NoBo) on the Appalachian Trail, and you should too. Why NoBo? Mainly to finish at Katahdin. There are other reasons, but this is reason enough in my book. End-of-hike summit photo with the Katahdin sign? Epic. Springer Mountain's backdrop? Eh, not so great.

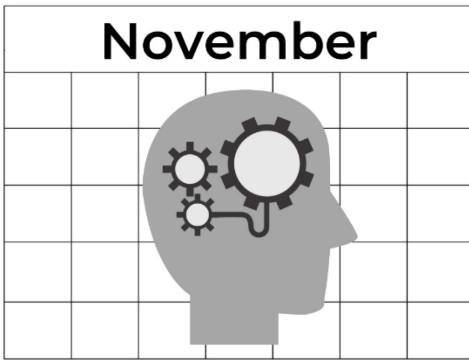
There are six chapters in this booklet. Each chapter addresses a topic that will prepare you for your upcoming thru-hike. From November to April, read each chapter at the beginning of its corresponding month. At the end of each chapter, there is a short checklist to summarize what actions need to be taken that month. As you prepare for your thru-hike, keep this manual within sight. Re-read and reference as needed. If you're ambitious and want to read ahead, I ask that you resist. Pace yourself. You're making big changes in your life. Don't rush the process.

This isn't a very long book. This was done on purpose. You have more important things to do with your time, like actually preparing for your hike, not just reading a book on how to prepare for your hike.

Throughout the text, I reference your thru-hike as a six-month journey. It may take you less than this to complete the Appalachian Trail, but let's say six months. This makes it easier when referring to your thru-hike as a whole.

If you have the desire to discuss any of these, or other, topics in further detail; if you have any questions about, or beyond, the information in this guidebook, please send me an email at bacornell92@gmail.com. I love corresponding with readers and am here to help you achieve your hiking goals. If you need support or a kick in the right direction, please reach out. Send updates with your progress, and I will do my best to point you north.

Your hike starts now. Let us begin.



MENTAL

Am I calling you mental for wanting to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail? No. But that doesn't make it any less true. The mental I'm referring to are the mind games we play within ourselves. It's the endless loop of possibility that plays out scene-by-scene during the duller parts of our day. Where the subconscious, unconscious, conscious, and somewhat conscious combine to overwhelm our normally manageable state of affairs.

If you're not disciplined mentally, you will struggle well before stepping foot on that long, narrow, dirt path we call the Appalachian Trail. If you constantly make excuses, get behind schedule, indulge in far too much sloth, or are terminally inconsistent, you will not have an enjoyable hike.

Some find thru-hiking difficult because they weren't mentally prepared. They set the wrong goals. Their expectations were different. They figured it would be

easier or lighter, and they don't enjoy it as much as they thought they would. They psyche themselves out before seeing a single blaze.

Thru-hiking is 95% mental. Some say 99%. Some say 99.99%. Same thing. The important takeaway here is that thru-hiking is pretty much ALL mental. It's not for the weak of mind and you need to start training your hiker brain now. Forget the gear. Forget the miles. Forget how many pairs of shoes you'll tear through or how many privies you'll piss in. This month is about preparing mentally for the rigors of long-distance hiking.

You can't mentally prepare for a thru-hike in one month, but you can start developing the lines that will benefit you over the next year. Set the foundation and build upon it as you progress along this journey. I offer the following bits of advice to chew over as we prepare your mind for the ups and downs of a 2,200-mile hike.

THE MAP

About that map. You know which map I'm talking about. That tall, handsome overview of the east with more states than you can name. The map with the angry red snake squiggling 2,200 miles from Georgia to Maine.

It taunts your tiny legs and laughs at your little feet. It humiliates your confidence and stutters your plans. Looking at this map of the entire Appalachian Trail is overwhelming, so don't. Stop looking for it, stop looking at it, and stop contemplating the distance.

If you do have this map, or stumble across it any time over the next six months, focus only on that tiny little dot at the bottom labeled "Springer Mountain." This is

the only part you pay any mind to. This little dot is your goal, nothing above it.

Your first objective is Springer Mountain.

If you already own one of these maps, fold it so only the southernmost square is visible. Or better yet, burn everything but the bottom 5%. Practice building a fire with the rest. The top 95% is an unnecessary distraction.

If you don't have one of those annoyingly large maps but still want some sort of visual, use the map I've included here (see next page). Tear it out and place it somewhere you'll see it every day. Bathroom mirror. Ceiling above your bed. Inside the fridge. Next to the television. Under the toilet seat. Somewhere you'll see it every day and think, *Oh, hey, look! There's Springer Mountain! That's where I'm going!*

Use this as your motivation and reminder. Set other motivators about your life that you'll see often. Change your laptop background to a picture of the plaque at Springer Mountain. Snap a picture of the pretty map on the next page and set that as your phone background. Set your phone's lock screen to a picture of a tent in the woods or a white-blazed tree. These will help reinforce your goal and remind you to take the actions required to reach it.

SAY IT

Before telling anyone else about your decision to hike, tell yourself. Tell yourself again. And again. Don't just think it, say it out loud. Louder! Tell yourself, "I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!" at least once a day. More than once if you can stand to hear yourself talk that much.



Every time you go to the bathroom, look in the mirror and say it. Every time you put your shoes on, say it. Every time you step outside, say it. Keep repeating this line until you believe it. Until you can't help but brighten at the incantation. Until the giddiness bubbles to a point where you can't say the line without cracking a smile.

“I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!”

Then say it again.

“I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!”

SHARE IT

Before this six-month countdown, it's likely you shared the idea with a friend. That's fine. It's encouraged. This is one way to gauge your interest in the thing. Sharing an idea makes it real, and it's a good way to get feedback. If you had these conversations, I'm guessing they went something like this:

You: “I think I want to hike the Appalachian Trail next year.”

Your friend: “Really? That's cool. But, what about your career? What about your friends? What about bears?”

What about X? Fill in the X. There's always an X.

Your friend notices the uncertainty and timidity. By using “I think” and “I want,” you open yourself for questioning. You aren't sure, and your friend in the above scenario recognizes this. Nobody is going to believe you if you don't even believe you. Prior to this month, wish, and want, and hope as much as your heart desires, but once November begins, either commit to the

bit or burn the book. From here on out, no more iffy proclamations from a half-committed mind.

Say it with confidence.

“I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!”

Say it with absolute certainty.

“I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!”

Say it to that concerned friend who is worried about your 401k or love life or social status or whatever.

“I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!”

Telling others makes it real. It holds you accountable. They will tell you you’re crazy, stupid, or unstable. Get used to it. That’s their opinion. Keep telling your friends. Remind them. Tell them until they’re sick of hearing it.

Then, tell your family.

I know what a cheesy, dishonest, disgusting, blown-out corporate holiday Thanksgiving is, but I digress. There is a time in November when you will likely be surrounded by family members near and far. Tell them. You don’t have to make an announcement to the whole dinner table, just inform your favorites, and word will get around. The news will travel faster than a warm boat of homemade gravy.

If that scene is too unbearable for you, fine. Just tell your parents or siblings or children. For some, this will be tricky enough. Speak with confidence and talk in absolutes. Say it proudly and say it definitively.

Remember, this hike is for you. This is not for your parents or your best friend or your partner or the cousin you only see once a year. Address their concerns and do

your best to comfort them, but keep moving forward. One step at a time.

Just don't tell your coworkers. Not yet. Keep work life separate from hike life, for now. You still have a job to do and money to make. It's not time to slack off in that department or start staring out the window. If your only friends are coworkers, then it's probably a good thing for you to get outside and meet some new people.

SHORT-TERM

The goal of this guide is to get you to the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail: Springer Mountain. Where it all begins for many hopefuls.

Do you understand why we've set the southern terminus as your goal? Or why this companion is broken down into months with achievable milestones? Why the chapters are short, and there's barely any information about the actual activity known as thru-hiking?

Because we are training your mind to think short-term.

Thinking long-term is overwhelming. It's playful at best and fear-inducing at worst. There's no point thinking about the last 2,000 miles when your next water source is in 2 miles. You should not be pondering town stops in New Hampshire when you still haven't crossed the border into North Carolina.

A thru-hike is merely a combination of shorter section hikes. You fill your bag with two, three, or four days of food, walk trail to the next town, and repeat. There is no reason to think more than one resupply ahead.

It's how I write my books, by thinking and acting short-term. Sure, there may be an outline or notes to follow, but each day I write a page. Within a few weeks, it starts

resembling a book and less a random collection of paragraphs.

The Appalachian Trail has an outline. It's that absurdly large map with the skinny red line tracking fourteen states. This is big picture. This is long-term. If you solely depend on this map to hike, you will get lost. Progress is not recognizable on such a massive scale. Progress is made day by day. Mile by mile. Step by step. Within a few weeks, your time living out of a backpack will resemble more of a thru-hike and less a collection of half-remembered campsites.

Think short-term because it is all you can influence. Only concern yourself with what you can control.

EXPECTATION

Expectation is the root of disappointment. Once you tag expectations to yourself or an event, you undermine reality. Everything we experience is set against the filter of our expectations.

Over the next year, you will encounter an endless stream of people who are amazed by your daring. Just telling someone you're *going to hike* the Appalachian Trail is enough to send them into a cadence of compliments and applause. You haven't even stepped foot on trail or hiked a single mile, yet they bow to your glory. This impressed bunch will counter your statement of intent with something along the lines of, "It's going to change your life." You will be called an inspiration. Brave. Courageous. People will light you up with the wonder in their eyes.

Don't let their words or reactions go to your head. Those who have experience thru-hiking will offer better advice than most (hence this guidebook), but even their

suggestions should be taken with a grain of salt and an appropriate amount of skepticism (including this guidebook).

Thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail *can be* a life-changing experience. For some, one weekend on trail is life-changing, so imagine what six months of this will induce. But it's not like your life changes the moment you step foot on the white-blazed path of liberation. It may take days, weeks, months, or years to realize the change catalyzed by this extended walk.

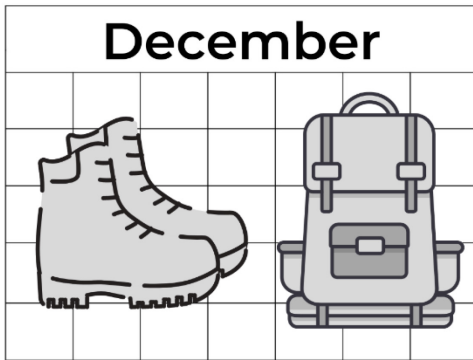
But nothing is going to happen while you're admiring the portrait of your life. Don't stand there waiting for the colors to change and the shapes to shift into something spectacular. Put the painting away. Don't stare at an impression when the real thing is right in front of you. It's best to enter this adventure without expectation. It may change your life, it may not, but it's not going to happen because you will it. Or because some wide-eyed stranger says so.

THIS IS ONLY THE BEGINNING

As a reminder, the Mental topic is not limited to the confines of November. It's not even limited to the confines of this guide, as you will continue to be challenged every day leading up to, and throughout, your hike. But I don't want to get too far ahead and spoil the fun. That's for you to discover and overcome.

NOVEMBER CHECKLIST

- ❑ Place the Georgia map somewhere you'll see it every day
- ❑ Tell yourself, "I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!"
- ❑ Tell one friend, "I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!"
- ❑ Tell one family member, "I am hiking the Appalachian Trail next year!"
- ❑ Think Short-Term and avoid setting Expectations



GEAR

This is a big one. Arguably, the biggest one. Get used to talking about it, looking at it, using it, and loving it. Pretty soon, it's all you're going to have. Without gear, you're just another homeless tramp shelter hopping north, bumming off the better prepared, and sniffing out the next spot of trail magic. Gear gives us trail cred, makes backpacking easier, and separates us from the dumpster-diving degenerates living on the outskirts of town.

I'm actually surprised Gear was able to wait until the second chapter. I only managed to put it off until now because you are just that important. Okay, maybe not *that* important, but you are more important than gear. You can buy gear, you can't buy mental rigidity. Gear is replaceable, you are not. Gear has a price, most of you don't.

Let me be frank with you, I hate gear talk. By the end of your thru-hike, if not this chapter, you may be sick of

gear talk too. I go backpacking to get away from the ingrained consumerism of America, and gear talk is merely the hiker's way to indulge this pastime.

It's like going to happy hour with your coworkers, and all they do is bemoan the boss, complain about clients, and discuss standard operating procedure. There are better things to talk about. But no matter how many times you change the subject, it always circles back to gear.

Alas, it's one thing all hikers have in common. You need gear to thru-hike, and we shall discuss it at length.

32 ITEMS, MORE OR LESS

In a couple of pages, there is a Pack List. There are 32 spots on this Pack List. I made it a nice even number for you. While hiking, these 32 items should be on your person at all times. Most are individual items, save for the sub-categories listed under Toiletries. For example, First-Aid Kit occupies one spot on the list, but there are multiple items that make up your First-Aid Kit.

Can you carry more than what's on this Pack List? Sure. You can carry as much as your shoulders desire. But remember, you have to carry it. Every mile of every day. Don't say, "Oh, it weighs nothing!" Wrong. Everything weighs something, and it all adds up.

Following the Pack List, there are 4 additional items listed as Optional. These are common carries on trail but aren't necessary in my book. If you do carry more than the original 32, at least stay within the extended list of 36.

Can you carry less? I don't recommend this approach for all hikers, but yes. I will make note of items to remove

and modifications to make if you want to drop weight. The Ultralight (UL) fad gets carried away at times, but their philosophy is well grounded. “Only carry what you need” is interpreted differently by each hiker.

My advice? Less is more. Carry as little as possible without sacrificing too much comfort. You’re living out of a backpack, so it’s normal to experience some discomfort. What we’re aiming for is acceptable discomfort. I pack by the rule, “If you don’t use it every day, you don’t need it!” This is difficult to judge since you aren’t hiking yet, but keep it in mind. Ask yourself, *Will I use this every day?* Adjust on trail as necessary.

GEAR OF TODAY

Luckily, for us spoiled hikers of the 21st century, we don’t have to strain our bodies with an 80-pound ruck. External frame backpacks, 10-pound sleeping bags, oversized foam mattress rolls, and cotton garments are fashions of the past. Thanks to technology and science, gear is lighter and more packable than ever!

I’m a tactile shopper and, when purchasing gear, you should be too. Don’t just buy everything online and hope it fits. Visit stores to try on clothes and backpacks. Lay down on a sleeping pad in the middle of REI. Kip up in a display tent. Put the shoes on and walk around for a while. Get your hands on these things. Find out what works, what doesn’t, and narrow down your options.

Buy quality gear and treat it with care. Be nice to it. I know you may be tempted to slam down your pack at the end of a long day and give it a swift kick in the back, but try to resist. This stuff has to last all summer. Gear can make or break a thru-hike. If you cut corners on gear, it’s likely to fall apart too soon or cause

unacceptable discomfort. Then you're spending time and money to replace it mid-hike. We want to avoid this.

PRICING

How much is all this gear going to cost you? I wish I could provide a solid number, but it depends on what you buy and where you buy it. If you're starting with nothing, then you're going to spend around \$1,500-\$3,000. For everything. As a thru-hiker, gear purchases are easy to justify because these items will be used every day for six months. You get your money's worth.

The Big Four category is where the bulk of your gear money will be invested. Outside of this, there are a bunch of smaller items that add up quickly. Another reason to start buying gear now. Accumulate over the next four months rather than dropping a couple grand all at once. And if you keep your pack list short, the less there is to buy. The less you buy, the less you have to carry.

ASK FOR HELP

Ask outdoorsy acquaintances if they have gear they don't want or aren't using anymore. They may be keen to thin out their supply or have backup items that don't get much attention anymore. Take what's available and use it till it falls apart.

Do you have friends or family who want to help you prepare but aren't sure how? Draft a Thru-Hiker Wish List and share it with them. Include links, pictures, sizes, and color preferences. They can help you gather the less expensive (under \$50) items on the Pack List. This is a fun way to "bring" someone along on your hike. If a friend buys you a headlamp, you'll think of

them every time you use that headlamp. Thru-Hiker Wish List items are marked with an asterisk(*).

You may notice the dashed line down the side of the Pack List page. Start a Gear Box and tape the Pack List to the outside. If you are against ripping pages out of books, copy the Pack List by hand. If you're reading the electronic version of this guidebook, then definitely copy it by hand. Track your gear gathering progress and check off items as they fill the Gear Box.

BIG FOUR (4)

Put in orders for your Big Four items this month. You're not the only person starting a thru-hike next year and the major gear companies develop waitlists around the holidays.

1. **Backpack:** 50- to 60-liter range. Depends on your size as a human. Smaller people have smaller clothes, bigger people have bigger clothes. Please, absolutely nothing over 65 liters. The more space you have, the more you fill it with stuff.
2. **Tent:** One hiker = One-person tent. If you're over 6'5", consider getting a two-person tent. If you're a couple, get a two-person tent. If you're solo, just get a one-person tent. When sleeping in shelters, use your tent as a groundsheet. Place it under your sleeping pad to avoid punctures.
3. **Sleeping bag or quilt:** 30 to 40 °F range. Summer temperatures in Appalachia are mild. Down fill is lighter and more packable. Synthetic is less susceptible to moisture.
4. **Sleeping pad:** Get an inflatable pad. Foam pads are glorified yoga mats. You might doze off

during savasana, but you're going to want some comfort in the backcountry. And no hammocks. You're not a bat, sleep on the ground.

CLOTHING (12)

One outfit to hike in and one outfit to wear at camp with some hybrid items. Your camp outfit also serves as your town outfit. No cotton! Wrap yourself in polyester, nylon, or wool.

5. **Hiking shirt***: Long sleeve or short. Lightweight and breathable.
6. **Hiking shorts***: The shorter the better.
7. **Undergarments***: Whatever supports your sack or braces your bosom. Pack a couple of pairs. These are going to get stinky.
 - a. UL Mod #1: Don't carry underwear. Get a pair of running shorts that come with a liner. Underwear/shorts combo!
8. **Hiking socks***: You'll go through multiple pairs during your hike. Stock up now.
9. **Hiking shoes**: Light and comfortable. The heavier your feet are, the quicker you tire. Think about how many times a day you'll be picking up your feet. Most people will be fine in trail runners or running shoes. Wear boots only if you need the ankle support. When you get to camp, remove the soles. This will give your swollen feet a little more wiggle room.

PACK LIST

- Backpack
- Tent
- Sleeping bag or quilt
- Sleeping pad
- Hiking shirt*
- Hiking shorts*
- Undergarments*
- Hiking socks*
- Hiking shoes
- Camp shirt*
- Camp pants
- Camp long johns
- Camp socks*
- Insulated jacket
- Rain jacket
- Buff(s)*
- Pot*
- Spoon*
- Stove* & Fuel
- Water filter*
- Water bottles* (2)
- Small knife*
- First-Aid Kit*
- Dental/Facial
- Poo-Bag (Trowel*, TP, used TP bag)
- Headlamp*
- Trail Guide*
- Phone
- Wallet*
- Bear rope*
- Pack cover*
- Bags*

OPTIONAL

- External battery
- Hat*
- Trekking pole(s)
- Journal* & Pen

NOTES

10. **Camp shirt***: Long sleeve or short. When you get to camp, change into your camp clothes.
11. **Camp pants**: Convertible zip-off pants offer some flexibility. They're also crazy stylish.
12. **Camp long johns**: For those chilly evenings at camp when no one has the energy to build a fire.
 - a. UL Mod #2: Pack either long johns or pants, not both. If you get cold, tuck into your sleeping bag.
13. **Camp socks***: Your "clean" pair of socks.
14. **Insulated jacket**: Puffy or synthetic. For the cooler nights at camp and brisk mountain mornings. Again, down fill is lighter and more packable, while synthetic is less susceptible to moisture.
15. **Rain jacket**: More useful as an insulation layer. When it rains, it is ridiculously humid. If you wear a rain jacket while hiking, you'll sweat on the inside and end up soaked anyway. Leave it in your bag and enjoy the free shower. Save the rain jacket for camp and town.
16. **Buff(s)***: You can wear a buff twenty different ways before Wednesday. They're versatile and offer many uses. Makes for a good sweat-catcher during the day and a sleeping mask at night. Heck, pack two if you want! They're light and small enough. I like to wear one around my neck and one around my head.

KITCHEN (6)

17. **Pot***: No, not that kind of pot. When I write a prep guide for the Pacific Crest Trail, maybe that

- pot will make the List, but not on the east, Bob. This pot is for hot meals on trail. A 24- to 32-fluid ounce cooking pot with handle and lid.
18. **Spoon***: Long handle and strong shaft. Seriously, you don't wanna be the dummy eating dinner with a stick because your plastic spork snapped in half. I've been there. It's not as fun as it sounds.
 19. **Stove* and Fuel**: Three-prong foldable stoves are more popular out west, but you'll see them on the Appalachian Trail. These use fuel canisters which are bulky and can be difficult to find in some areas. Here on the east, because it's so wet, we're allowed to use alcohol stoves, which are lighter and cheaper. They just don't have an on/off switch. You can find alcohol stoves made out of aluminum beer bottles online. Or make one yourself out of a tuna can. These stoves burn denatured alcohol. Outfitters and general stores along the AT sell denatured alcohol by the ounce. Carry a small bottle (6-8oz) and refill as needed.
 - a. UL Mod #3: Go stoveless. Drop the stove, fuel, and pot. I recall many evenings on the AT eating a hot dinner while still sweating. Consider cold-soaking. All you need is a plastic jar with a lid and a spoon.
 20. **Water filter***: Get the squeeze filter that threads on most water bottles. Small, light, and efficient enough.
 21. **Water bottles* (2)**: Two, one-liter bottles for a total capacity of two liters. The tall 1L plastic bottles fit in side pockets well. Replace as needed.

22. **Small knife***: Think more MacGuyver, less Crocodile Dundee. We're not hunting rabbits, just opening pesky plastic packages and slicing apples. Don't get carried away, Rambo.
- a. UL Mod #4: Drop the knife. For opening packages use nail clippers. Instead of slicing apples with a knife, use your teeth. If you really need to use a knife, ask a fellow hiker.

TOILETRIES (3)

23. **First-Aid Kit***: Band-aids, nail clippers, lighter, strong tape (Leukotape, SuperSkin, or duct tape), hand sanitizer, alcohol wipes, small tube of neosporin, lip balm, needle, floss, Vitamin I (Ibuprofen).
24. **Dental/Facial**: Toothbrush, toothpaste, glasses (if you're blind). I don't recommend wearing contacts on trail. Your hands are filthy most of the time and you don't need to stick dirty fingers in your eyes.
25. **Poo-Bag**: Trowel*, TP, used TP bag. Privies are located at most shelters. If Nature calls between these locations, you need to dig a hole (at least 6" deep) and pack out your TP. Toss when you reach the next trash receptacle or privy.

GADGETS/ETC (7)

26. **Headlamp***: Get one that has a red light. It's useful at night when staying in or around the shelters. Don't forget the batteries!
27. **Trail Guide (AWOL)***: This is the paper guide I used on my 2014 thru-hike, and it's updated

every year. AWOL's guide is detailed, accurate, and lists everything you need to know about upcoming trail and towns. In recent years, many people have turned to the Guthook app, which is an electronic trail guide and mighty useful if you get lost. However, the Appalachian Trail is extremely well marked, and you shouldn't get lost as long as you pay attention to what you're doing and aren't distracted by a bright, shiny screen. Use the paper guide and leave the phone in your pack.

- a. **UL Mod #5:** Don't carry the entire trail guide at once. Divide it up and have someone send you sections as needed. Burn the pages when you're done with that stretch of trail.
28. **Phone:** For emergencies and checking in with loved ones. Take pictures while you're out there, but not too many. No matter how good the camera is, it will never be as good as your eyes.
29. **Wallet*:** A small zippered bag or change purse that will fit your cards and cash.
30. **Bear Rope*:** For hanging your food at night. Some shelters have bear boxes or bear poles, but not all. Carry at least 30-feet of paracord with a small carabiner on one end. And know how to use it!
31. **Pack cover*:** Keep your gear dry. Backpacks are not waterproof, and some gear isn't useful when it's wet.
32. **Bags*:** As a hiker, I've developed an obsession with bags. They're light and keep your stuff organized. You'll need one for toiletries, one for

the Poo-Bag, one for electronics, a larger bag for food, and maybe a couple more.

OPTIONAL

33. **External battery:** I refuse to put this on the main Pack List, but I'll include it here. Since the arrival of 4G and GPS-aided electronic trail guides, external batteries have made their stake on nearly every Pack List from here to Snoqualmie Pass. To argue against carrying one, batteries in phones nowadays are larger than ever and will last between town stops, as long as you aren't using the thing constantly. Turn it off or leave it in airplane mode. Take a break from the device. Look around! Your followers will survive without daily trail updates, and you will too. However, if you are using electronic maps, then it's a good idea to have the extra juice.
34. **Hat*:** You'll be in the green tunnel most days. This means you'll be hiking in the shade and won't need the sun protection a cap provides. But it can cover up that dirty mop of yours and add flare to your outfit.
35. **Trekking pole(s):** I don't care for them. I like to have my hands free. It's just walking. You've been strutting around on two legs for how many years and now you need poles to keep you upright? If you trip, better to have your hands available to catch yourself or slow the fall. My preference aside, some tents use one or two trekking poles instead of tent poles. This would be a good reason to carry however many are required for setup. If you are on trail and start

developing a hobble or want something to do with your hands, find a sturdy stick.

36. **Journal* & Pen:** When I hike, I maintain a daily journal. It helps me keep track of days, mileage, expenses, events, interactions, and people. A lot happens during a thru-hike, and there's no way your tiny brain will remember all of it. Record what happens each day so you have something to look back on in five years. You'd be surprised at what you don't recall. And who knows, you might want to write a book about your hike. This will help jog your memory if and when that time comes.

BUY USED

Some items on the Pack List are okay to purchase used: tent, sleeping bag, clothing, pot, stove, headlamp, small knife, trekking poles. Make transactions in person when possible. If purchasing used gear online, buy from a reputable website and request lots of pictures before finalizing any deal. Check out Reddit ULgeartrade, Geartrade, MEC Gear Swap, eBay, Craigslist, and Facebook Marketplace.

Be cognizant of how much you're spending on gear. Of course, you should buy quality, but there's only so much quality you can buy. Don't be tempted by the \$80 PataGucci button-down claiming no-sweat, no-stink, no-stain, no-rain technology. Browse thrift stores for a hiking shirt, shorts, camp shirt, and pants. Your hiking shirt will be a shredded scrap of garbage after three months, so buy the \$5 polyester sport-tee from Goodwill. Save money where you can.

I know we all want to look good, but you're going to be living out of a backpack and not showering for days (weeks?) at a time. It's okay if your outfits don't match perfectly.

ONE PIECE AT A TIME

Start researching. Browse websites and online catalogs. Read reviews. Be alert for holiday sales. Bookmark pages. Draft a Wish List and make a spreadsheet of Items To Buy. Purchase one piece of gear at a time. By the end of this month, you need at least ten items in your Gear Box.

If you have a list of prospective items and want more experienced eyes on it, send me an email and I'll let you know if you're on the right track. I make an exception for gear talk over email.

DECEMBER CHECKLIST

- Start a Gear Box and tape a copy of the Pack List to the outside.
- Browse the internet for gear and make a list of Items To Buy
- Make a Wish List and share it with anyone who wants to help
- Visit a store, put your hands on the gear, and test out some items
- Purchase at least ten (10) items and place them in your Gear Box



FINANCIALS

Disclaimer: Financials is a tricky topic. We all have different jobs, incomes, expenses, lifestyles, bills, belongings, habits, and hobbies. There are various approaches to thru-hiking and no two hikes are the same. Most of the information below has been generalized to address the average. There are a lot of If's in the following section. Take what pertains to you, leave what doesn't.

Happy New Year! This is it. This is the year. Your year. This year you are hiking the Appalachian Trail! Get loud. Get proud. This. Is. It! But before you slip on your sneakers and spend a summer in the woods, there's something you need. Actually, it's one thing, but you need a decent amount of it.

Yup. Money. The terrible beast that keeps us chained to the desk. The disease holding humanity in its shackles with the sweet commercialized promise of tomorrow. The word that makes children cheer and bosses boast. You want to spend your days smelling daisies and

walking trail but Big Daddy Capitalism holds up a ring-covered hand in earnest. Nothing is free. Not even beloved Nature.

NEW YEAR, YOU THRU

I set this topic for January, not because it's unimportant, but because the prior two subjects are more pressing. We think about money constantly, so you probably recognize the situation you're soon to be in. Regardless, let's consult the calendar and make sure we're on the same page.

It's January. You're leaving your job and starting your hike sometime in April. Counting January, this gives you three whole months of employment with a steady income (unless you're reading ahead or have sources of passive income, in which case do your own math). The more money in your account, the less you have to worry about a financial clock while on trail. The more money in your account, the more you'll have available for gear, transportation, food, drinks, and two-star motels.

If you've already been saving for many months, if not years, then you're probably fine at this point. There are numerous nuggets of wisdom in the following pages, but if you don't want a Business minor lecturing you on financials and budgets, feel free to scan the rest of this chapter at your leisure.

If you haven't been saving up and are only thinking of money now, three months before departure, don't worry. That's what this manual is for! Read on to see how you can stretch your paychecks and make every dollar count. You only have so many paydays remaining until you're unemployed, but there's still time to climb into the green.

SIMPLIFY & PRIORITIZE

The good news is society is expensive. Even with minor adjustments, you'll be able to set aside a decent chunk of coin over the next three months. All you have to do is make sacrifices. So, how do you stash away enough money for a thru-hike in three months? Easy. Do less and prioritize your spending.

Stop going out. Bars, restaurants, clubs, cafes, happy hours, arcades. Just stop going out. Food is overpriced at restaurants. Alcohol is overpriced at bars. Service is overpriced everywhere. It's how they make money. By taking yours.

You know what's a better deal than happy hour? The grocery store. And it's not an hourly special. Speaking of food, eat two meals a day instead of three. This cuts your food costs by a third! Have a late breakfast, skip lunch, and eat dinner as you normally would. Unless you're walking ten to twenty miles a day, you don't need three full meals.

Stop buying cases of wine and bottles of beer. If you're spending money on liquid vices, eliminate this cost from your budget. You'll have plenty of time to drink alcohol on trail. A six-pack of Yuengling tastes much better after a ten-mile walk. A bag of wine pairs nicely with a campfire. Whiskey pulls smoother in the woods.

THINK ABOUT YOUR GEAR

(Look at that. Already back on the topic of gear!)

Consider your expenses against the cost of gear. A \$50 bar tab is unnecessary and the buzz only lasts one night (and maybe a morning). With that \$50, buy a water

filter. A \$4 coffee every morning is a headlamp one week. A pair of socks the next.

Speaking of, how is your gear accumulation coming along? Have you purchased these items yet? Gather at least five more pieces of gear this month and add them to your Gear Box.

THINK ABOUT YOUR HIKE

While preparing for my 2018 thru-hike of the Continental Divide Trail, I was struggling to save money. Rent is expensive in a ski town. Going out to eat or drink, if not both, is a daily temptation. For weeks, I seriously considered getting a third job. Thankfully, this was a passing thought.

Instead, I changed my habits. Rather than going out five times a week, I chose one. Whenever I was invited to happy hour, I thought of my upcoming hike and went home. Over the next three months, my savings increased substantially and my worries subsided. I wouldn't be strapped for time or money on my hike.

I'm not saying you can't order takeout or drink at your favorite bar ever again, but limit these occasions. Select one weekly outing, not four. I encourage you to spend time with friends before you leave, but don't get mimosas every Sunday, margaritas every Monday, tacos every Tuesday, and wine every Wednesday. I love alliteration too, but don't let it weaken your wallet. You have a larger goal this year. Focus on your objective.

Change your habits. Continue your mental preparation. If you can't say "No" to your friends now, you're going to have a hard time leaving them come April. The sacrifices you make in the present will pay triple in the

future. It'll all be worth it once you get to Springer Mountain and start walking north.

ASSETS

Walking away from normal life is liberating, as long as you have your home affairs in order. Anything that is a mess when you leave will be more of a mess when you return. Avoid this and take steps to ensure your summer is stress-free. Each person is in a different situation, so again, I offer general tips and ideas. Take what you need, leave what you don't, and improvise where I'm ignorant.

If you have a vehicle, find somewhere to store it for six months. A storage unit, a long-term RV/vehicle parking lot, a friend's driveway, your parent's backyard. Somewhere safe and cheap. Preferably free.

If you have a boat, I don't know. I've never had a boat. What do you do with a boat for six months? Take it to the middle of a lake, shoot a hole in the bottom, and let it sink? You're on your own there.

If you have a house, you probably know how to take care of it better than I do. The closest thing to a house I've ever owned is a converted camper van. Most months, my house is a \$500 tent. If I *did* have a house, I would consider the following options.

Rent it over the summer on a monthly or six-month lease. Or (location dependent) as a vacation rental. This provides monthly income to help offset hiking costs. Or sell the house. That'll give you plenty of spending money for your thru-hike and less to worry about while on trail. If you rather leave the house unoccupied and have it for when you return, hire a caretaker or give the job to a trustworthy friend.

If you're on a lease, ideally it ends sometime in April. If not, talk to your landlord and see if they're open to early termination. They may have someone on their waitlist chomping at the bit. If the lease runs through the summer, sublet the remaining months. If this isn't allowed, then you're paying for an expensive and livable storage unit. Let it run and calculate the monthly payments into your budget.

If you're renting a place and moving out in April, you need a place to store your belongings. If you don't have much, pack your car. Or find a friend with a garage that can store your luggage and bins. If you need more space than this, contact a storage unit company and reserve some square footage for the summer. If you are packing your life away in boxes, you will be putting your hands on every item you own. Take this opportunity to declutter.

Backpacking is the Art of Doing Without. All you have are the 30-some items on your back. Continue your mental preparation by removing things from your life before stepping on trail. Go through your belongings and get rid of what you don't need or don't use anymore. Make a pile of items To Sell and post them on Facebook Marketplace or Craigslist. Put this money toward your hike.

BILLS

Are you paying student loans? What a silly question. Of course you're paying student loans! Defer your payments for six months. As long as you've been paying on time, this shouldn't be a problem. There is also a grace period following graduation that you can play around with if you're in this position.

Cancel your car insurance before you leave or have it set to expire in April. Cancel any other bills you can. If you have a permanent home, contact the utility companies and share your situation. Ask if they will shut off your services but keep the accounts open. Set-up auto pay for the bills you must keep or pay these ahead of time.

If you have any monthly subscriptions, cancel them before you depart. It's a waste to continue paying for these services while you're on trail. Are you getting monthly boxes of random junk delivered to your door? Netflix, Prime, Hulu Plus, Disney+, ESPN+, Plus+, Starz, Showtime, HBO? Cancel these subscriptions and anything else that is plundering digits directly from your bank account every four weeks.

HOW MUCH?

All right, enough words. How much money do you actually need for a thru-hike? Not counting gear costs (which we talked about already) or travel, how much should you set aside for your entire hike?

Once you're on trail and hiking, the general rule of thumb is \$1,000 per month. You can spend less, you can spend more, but this is a nice round number, so let's walk with it. Times this by six months and you get \$6,000. This includes lodging, food, resupplies, gear replacement, and other possible unforeseen expenses.

Remember, this is just an average. Part of the fun of thru-hiking is there are no rules. There's no right or wrong way to do this. Actually, I take that back. Some wrong ways come to mind, but there certainly isn't a right way.

ON-TRAIL SPENDING SPECTRUM

During my 2014 Appalachian Trail thru-hike, I met a guy who carried a five-gallon bucket as his supplementary food bag. You might meet him too. When his primary food bag ran out, he refilled it from the five-gallon bucket. He didn't hike more than ten miles a day and didn't go into town as often because he had no desire to. He probably didn't spend more than \$2,000 throughout his hike.

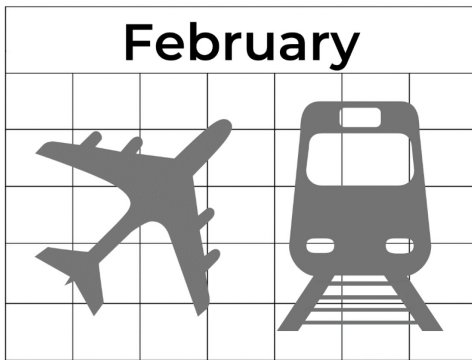
I also met a guy who was receiving full paychecks from the military. Amounts for someone they expected to be living a normal life in an expensive city. He spent lots of time in town, ate at restaurants every opportunity, and indulged in luxury whenever possible. He probably spent at least \$12,000 between Springer Mountain and Katahdin.

For some of you, this may be your one and only chance to hike a long trail. Enjoy the adventure and make it last. Stay in town whenever possible. Take days off and rest your body. Overnight at the local Bed and Breakfast. Eat a real meal every other day. Buy the lightest gear and pack out the finest whiskey. No need to live cheap if you don't have to!

If you're on a tighter budget, you need a different mindset. Use nights in town as a reward. Only stay in town every two weeks or every two hundred miles. Why pay for a roof and bed when you can walk down a trail and sleep for free? Shelters don't cost a thing, cowboy. Enjoy the grime that comes with living outside. When you do spend a night in town, you'll appreciate it more.

JANUARY CHECKLIST

- ❑ Calculate your income over the next few months and subtract gear costs
- ❑ Think about what kind of hiker you might be and set a budget
- ❑ Tend to assets and find storage solutions, as needed
- ❑ Cancel subscriptions, take care of bills, and prepare payments, as needed
- ❑ Purchase at least five (5) more items and place them in your Gear Box



TRAVEL

Finalizing travel to Springer Mountain is your next task. Automobile, plane, train, hitchhiking, walking. Each is an effective mode of transportation with their own pros and cons. This month, figure out how you're getting to Springer Mountain and establish a start date.

You are starting your hike sometime in April. Earlier in the month if you think you'll be slower. Mid-month if you think your pace will be average. Later in the month if you're already in decent shape and plan on maintaining a fair clip. You know you better than anybody else, so make this decision for yourself. If in doubt, choose an earlier date. It's easier to slow down than it is to speed up.

AUTOMOBILE

The easiest way to get to the southern terminus is to have someone drive you there. This is easier the closer you are to Georgia, but never underestimate the sell of a road trip. Suggest it to some choice friends and see what

they say. Doesn't hurt to ask. Maybe you're in Oregon and have a friend moving to Atlanta in April. Catch a ride with them.

Near or far, help pay for fuel, offer to drive, and be a quality copilot along the way. You can't put a price on companionship, and it's always nice to have someone see you off at the start of something big. If driving to Georgia isn't an option for you, then your best bet is to take a plane or train to Atlanta. From there, book a shuttle to Springer Mountain (more on this later).

PLANE

Planes are the quickest, but some items on the Pack List may not, or absolutely cannot, fly. As a hiker, you have to think about these things. (Just like that, we're talking about gear again!) A small knife is fine in checked luggage, but forbidden in a carry-on. Tent stakes and tent poles have been known to raise suspicion. I've never had a problem but others have not been as fortunate. Wrap your tent poles and stakes in clothing and make sure they're inside your backpack.

Trekking poles are hit or miss as well. The possible weapons here are the tiny metal tips. Yeah, I know, real threatening. If you must carry them on, pack the poles in a cylindrical tube and tape it shut. External batteries contain lithium and are only allowed in carry-on luggage. Fuel canisters cannot fly at all, so make arrangements to purchase one upon your arrival in Georgia.

Plan for these circumstances and be prepared to check your backpack. Just make sure the straps aren't dangling all over the place.

Don't like flying? Me neither. Airports are stressful. Everyone is trying to get where they're going as quickly as possible. They're like the interstate of air travel with terminals instead of exits.

TRAIN

After walking, my preferred way to travel is by train. You get way more leg space, you usually have an empty seat beside you, it's easier to walk around and stretch the legs, there are more than two toilets, and you can even reserve a whole cabin for yourself (if that's in your budget).

Amtrak is also less strict with regard to luggage. If that above paragraph about what you can/cannot/maybe fly with stresses you out, consider this grounded alternative. Some stations have security guards that will look through your bags, but some don't. Usually, they won't investigate luggage unless they see reason to.

Whether you prefer train or plane, book a one-way to Atlanta. Nothing says "committed" like a non-refundable ticket. Make your purchase in February and mark the date in your calendar. The countdown begins!

SHUTTLE TO SPRINGER MOUNTAIN

Once in Atlanta, you need a ride to Springer Mountain. Have any friends or family in the area? Forgotten friends? Friends of friends? Yes? Bribe them with gas money. Ask politely, of course. No? Don't worry. There are plenty of trail angels (people who willingly aid hikers), shuttle services, and hostels in the area that coordinate shuttles from ATL to Springer.

Search the Web and browse the message boards. Make a few phone calls and finalize arrangements. The earlier

you do this, the better. April is a busy month for them, so reserve your spot and make whatever deposit necessary, if necessary.

HITCHHIKING

I'm not suggesting anyone hitchhike to Springer Mountain, but it is an option. And quite an undertaking if you do pursue this route. While we're on the topic, let me expand on hitchhiking for a couple of paragraphs.

Hitchhiking is a crucial part of thru-hiking any long trail. The Appalachian Trail goes right through some towns, but others are a ways down the road and require a bit of thumb waving to get there. It's one of my favorite things about going to town. You never know who you're going to meet!

The Appalachian Trail is old and, therefore, well known to those living along its corridor. Citizens of nearby towns are alert during thru-hiking season and will give hikers a ride without hesitation. You may encounter a few friendly folks who have never heard of the trail. Take this as an opportunity to educate them. Use the buddy system and no hitching in the dark (or just before sunset).

WALKING

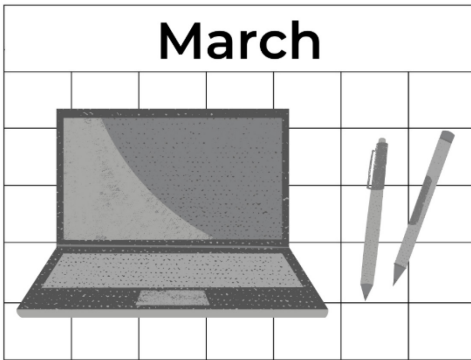
You could walk to Springer Mountain. Not recommending it by any means, but you could. You *are* about to walk from Georgia to Maine. It seems ridiculous now, but continue your mental preparation in this sense. Your expectations of what is possible are soon to be blown into proportion.

The real reason I bring up walking is because you need to start doing it. Every day. Take thirty minutes each

day and go for a walk. Around the block. On a trail. On a treadmill. Up and down the staircase or through the hallways of your apartment building. Get your legs used to the exercise. Don't load up your backpack and ruck around town just yet, no added weight is required at this time. Thirty minutes every day this month. Your body will thank you come summer.

FEBRUARY CHECKLIST

- Establish a Start Date
- Purchase a ticket (if traveling via plane or train)
- Finalize a ride to Springer Mountain (via shuttle or friend)
- Walk for thirty (30) minutes every day
- Purchase at least five (5) more items and place them in your Gear Box



WORK

Letter of Resignation — ✕ ×

To Cc Bcc

Letter of Resignation

Dear *[insert superior's name]*,

This summer, beginning in April, I am hiking the Appalachian Trail. My last day of work will be *[insert date]*.

I am grateful for the education and experiences this position has offered over the past *[insert length of time]*. Thank you for the opportunity to grow under your employment. I hope I can count on your reference in the future.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss this further, please let me know.

Best regards,

[insert name]

Send ⋮ 🗑

This month, inform your superiors, peers, and inferiors of your intentions. Start with the head honcho. Fill out the form Letter of Resignation provided above, and send it to your boss. Short and to the point. If the style doesn't fit your groove then modify as you see fit. You can meet with them in person, but keep it brief: "Hey Boss, I'm hiking the Appalachian Trail this summer. My

last day working here will be *[insert date]*.” Either way, they’ll probably want a hard copy on file, so have a Letter of Resignation printed out or ready to send.

Most employees aren’t required to give more than two weeks’ notice, but consider your position in the company. It might be courteous to provide a little more heads-up. It could take some time to hire a replacement, and they may want you to help train that replacement.

Your last day of employment is up to you. I recommend a two-week buffer between your last day of work and your date of departure for Springer Mountain. This gives you plenty of time to set your affairs in order, tidy up around the home, finalize your Pack List, and enjoy the company of familiar faces.

SPREAD THE WORD

Now, inform your coworkers. Tell them at the water cooler, in the break room, or via email. They may think you stupid, silly, or spectacular, but who cares what they think? Most likely, they’ll be jealous. Jealous of your six-month sabbatical. Jealous of your summer of unemployment. Some may view it as an extended vacation, but don’t entertain this opinion. This is no vacation.

Oh, you’ll work. Trust me. When you’re climbing switchback after switchback, with sweat streaming down your forehead and no end in sight, facing false summits and mountain tops with no views, you won’t be thinking, *Ahhh, what a lovely vacation!* It’s work, and anyone who disagrees is a narrow-minded fool. Thru-hiking is work, it’s just not a traditional type of work.

Whatever their reaction, use it as fuel. If anyone doubts your ability or sense, prove them wrong. If they're jealous or admit they'll be living vicariously through you, indulge them. By handing in your two weeks' notice and informing your colleagues, you create another layer of accountability for yourself. There's no turning back.

PREPARE FOR UNEMPLOYMENT

During your final weeks as an employed citizen of society, take steps that will make your post-hike transition period less stressful. Update your resume. Request a Letter of Recommendation from your current boss. Compile a list of references. Save job applications that you can fill out when the time comes.

If you have any concerns about returning to the workforce post-hike, put them away for now. You'll have plenty of time to ponder the next move during your six-month walk. For future brain food, think about how you can use this break to further your career or adjust its course. I'm not promising you'll figure anything out, but you will have plenty of time to think, play out future lines, and ponder the possibilities. Contemplate a new career. Brainstorm business ideas. Come up with ways to improve your work-life balance.

The shape of our economy is constantly changing. In ten years, the workforce will evolve beyond our recognition. Whatever your job is now, it's likely to differ, or even disappear, within the next decade. Better to escape now and begin a readaptation period than wait until they lay you off unexpectedly.

The Next Technological Revolution is well under way. Get ahead of the wave and determine how your skill set

can be of benefit to you as we fall deeper into the New Age of Automation. But, hey, what do I know? I'm just a Business minor, remember?

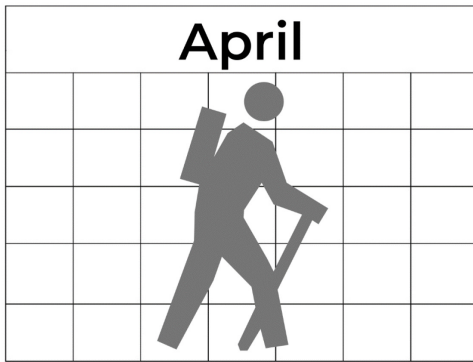
REGISTER YOUR HIKE

The following isn't strictly work-related, but it is if you take company time to do it! And, why not? What are they going to do, fire you?

Before the month closes, visit ATC.ORG and register your thru-hike. The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC) attempts to limit how many hikers start each day, but they really just want to know how many thru-hikers are on the Appalachian Trail. This allows them to keep a tally of trail use and popularity. Permits may be required one day, but not yet! If and when that happens, I will update this guidebook with the necessary information.

MARCH CHECKLIST

- Turn in Letter of Resignation
- Tell one coworker, "I am hiking the Appalachian Trail this summer!"
- Update your Resume
- Register your Thru-Hike with the ATC
- Purchase at least five (5) more items and place them in your Gear Box



START

You made it! Finally! You thought the month would never come, but it is here! You've done the prep and taken the metaphorical steps, now it's time to roll your ball to Springer Mountain. Let the games begin!

TEST YOUR GEAR

Be familiar with the items on your Pack List. Make sure everything works as it should. If you don't know how to use something, learn. Figure it out now, in the comfort of your home before taking it on trail. Some gear may not function the way you thought it would. It's possible you left a crucial piece in the packaging. If anything needs to be replaced, fixed, or adjusted, do it before you leave.

Set up your tent. Take it down. Set it up again. Pack your backpack. Unpack your backpack. Repack your backpack. Put the backpack on. Take the backpack off. Find a tree and practice throwing your bear rope. Flip through the Trail Guide. Look at the first section from

Springer Mountain to Neel Gap. Get familiar with the symbols. Make sure you can read it properly and understand how to use it.

One evening, either in the backyard or the living room, set up everything as if you have just arrived at camp. Cook dinner in your new pot, using your new stove. Spend the night in your new tent, on your new sleeping pad. In the morning, pack up, saddle up, and go for a 30-minute walk around the block.

February was your month to walk every day. I didn't ask you to keep this up until now, but if you are still walking every day, stop. Allow your body to rest and recover before its demanding journey.

Establish what you are taking and what you are leaving behind. Purchase a resupply and fill your food bag. Make sure everything you're taking fits in your backpack.

ON FOOD

One topic I chose not to address in this manual is food. I reasoned food is an on-trail topic and has no place in a prep-style handbook. That, and it would take another 40 pages to say all there is to say on food. I feel bad for omitting this topic, so I'll touch on it briefly.

After a few weeks, you will be hungry all the time. You'll eat anything and everything and you'll still be hungry. You burn so many calories each day while thru-hiking that it almost doesn't matter what you eat, so long as you eat a lot of it. But just because you can eat everything doesn't mean you should.

Thru-hiker is synonymous with endurance athlete. You may have no experience being an endurance athlete, so I'll share my bread. Mind what you put in your body.

What you eat is your fuel. If you fuel yourself with candy bars and sweets, your engine will gunk up fast. If you consume whole foods, quality fats, and plenty of proteins, your body's engine will run much smoother.

I'm no dietitian and will not recommend a one-size-fits-all six-month meal plan for hikers. Everyone has their preferences, and all of our bodies are different. Try a variety of foods along the way and find out what works best for you. If this topic interests you, please do your own research.

BACK-UP GEAR BOX

Do you recall the Gear Box mentioned in December's Gear section? Well, now it becomes your Back-Up Gear Box. Whatever gear you aren't packing can remain behind in this box. The Back-Up Gear Box may contain items you need, but don't need quite yet. There may be items you don't want now, but may later. In this box, I suggest having a few pairs of socks, a spare pair of shoes, and another set of hiking clothes.

Recruit a willing friend or family member, and bequeath the Back-Up Gear Box to them. This person will be your Box Buddy. Someone you trust who also gets stuff done. Someone who doesn't easily forget or dilly-dally in the face of tasks. Someone who doesn't mind running errands for you. Someone who wants to help.

Put all your extra, spare, back-up, and miscellaneous gear items in the Back-Up Gear Box, and entrust it to your Box Buddy. If you need something out of the box, your buddy can send it General Delivery, via the postal service, to the next town. If you have an item in your backpack you aren't using every day but don't want to

throw away, send it to your buddy and have them hold it in your box.

Depending on your housing and vehicle situation, this person may also be the one who collects your mail, drives your car around the block, or mows your lawn. You will enjoy your thru-hike a lot more if you have someone on the outside helping with the little things. The less you have to mind, the better. You have enough to worry about on trail.

THAT'S IT!

Relax and enjoy your final days in society. Spend quality time with your favorite people. Do the things you think you'll miss when you're away hiking. It may not be the same scene when you return, so savor it while you can. You've done all the work to prepare (as long as you've followed this guide!), and the hard part is behind you.

Now, the easy part: Walking!

APRIL CHECKLIST

- Make final Gear purchases
- Finalize your Pack List and make sure it all fits in your backpack
- Spend a night in your tent
- Purchase a food resupply
- Organize your Back-Up Gear Box and entrust it to your Box Buddy

CONCLUSION

We all dream. We float off during the day and get lost in wild fantasy. It's a way to escape the moment and pass the time. A distraction from your normally scheduled programming. It's motivation, and it can yet be reality.

Some only dream and leave it at that, never taking action on their desires. Many put their dreams so far in the future they hardly seem attainable. Retirement is a classic example. When faced with forty years of work, an alternative life or a distant goal provides present purpose. This job may suck now, but at least there's an end, even if it's not within sight.

You have decided to pursue a dream and for this I applaud you. No matter what happens after Springer Mountain, you have done a difficult thing in getting to this point.

Cherish your time on trail and appreciate all you can with eager eyes. Remember, one day at a time. Don't look beyond what is in front of you. If you're too busy

staring at the horizon, you're going to kick the roots and rocks right in front of you.

Be open to new experiences. Embrace the uncomfortable. Get your shoes dirty and break a sweat. Travel light and just go for a walk. A nice long walk.

Happy Trails!