THRU-HIKER SPOTLIGHTS: RAVEN - MOONDOG - MODEL

FOOTPRINT
Spring 2022 Volume 38 Issue 2

THRU-HIKING EDITION

Evolution of Hiking Gear

Women Set New Fastest Known Time Records

FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION
Building More Than Trails
Love it like you built it. Because you did.

In support of Florida’s vibrant outdoor community, since 2014 the co-op has been able to contribute over $85,000 to stewarding the Florida Trail and other natural spaces around the state.

Come by and see us at your local REI before heading out to enjoy the fresh air, or visit online at REI.com.
TRAIL TALK
Instantly recognized the picture on the back of our Winter Footprint as the Cathedral of Palms. If it wasn’t for the Apalachee’s recent well run Ididahike I would not have recognized it. This is what the hike is all about. Thank you Apalachee!
– Randy Madison, founder Ididahike

The volunteers are a big part of what makes the trail awesome! Thank you!!
– Tom Hammond

I hiked BC about 3 weeks ago. Trail was perfect! Blazes were bright & easy to follow! Thank you for what you do!
– Jacob F Voth VI

Thanks to all the volunteers who keep it blazing – Ron Dorzan 

Cover Image
Illustration by Claire Jarvis

Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), and a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida.

The Footprint Magazine welcomes your comments. The editors are committed to providing balanced and objective perspectives. Not all letters received may be published. Letters may be edited for clarity or length.

communications@floridatrail.org

Footprint Editor
Florida Trail Association
1022 NW 2nd St
Gainesville, FL 32601
OUR MAGAZINE

The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,500-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida’s own National Scenic Trail.

OUR GOAL

To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association efforts; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS

Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

MEMBERSHIP

As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The Footprint magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. To become a member, you can visit our website, mail in the form on the last page of this magazine, or call 352-378-8823.

ADVERTISING

Reach a highly targeted demographic of Florida outdoor enthusiasts by advertising with us or becoming a regular sponsor. Your advertising dollars directly support production and publication of this magazine and assist the Florida Trail Association in fulfilling its mission. Call 877-HIKE-FLA or email communications@floridatrail.org for more details.
Happy Spring, Everyone! First, a huge CONGRATULATIONS to the Apalachee Chapter on the success of this year’s IDIDAHIKE! The event raised over $11,000 and every hike was full.

We recently held the Annual Membership Meeting of the Florida Trail Association (FTA). During the meeting, volunteer awards were presented virtually. You can see a full list of the award recipients on page 18 of this issue. Thank you and congratulations to all our award winners.

During the Annual Meeting, the results of the election for the FTA Board of Directors were announced. This was the first election conducted under the provisions of the Association’s bylaws as amended in December 2021 and March 2022. All candidates were running for At-Large Director positions. Tom Daniel, Pam Hale, Rick Robbins, and Bill Turman were re-elected to the Board. Joshua Johnson and Sean Spence were elected to their first term.

The updated bylaws also changed the titles of board officers and the makeup of the Executive Committee of the Board. The positions of President and 1st Vice-President changed to Chair and Vice-Chair. The other Vice-President positions were eliminated. At the board meeting immediately following the Annual Meeting, officers of the board were nominated and voted on by the members of the board. Bill Turman was elected Chair. Alan Bradshaw, Pam Hale, and Darryl Updegrove were elected Vice-Chair, Treasurer, and Secretary, respectively. Leslie Wheeler was appointed Chair of the Chapter Council. Tom Daniel and James Catalano round out the Executive Committee with the respective appointments as chairs of the Trails Development and Planning Committee and the Advancement Committee. You can see the full committee structure and makeup on our website.

Unfortunately, due to personal and professional reasons Alan Bradshaw tendered his resignation from the board on May 9th. The board will now vote to fill Alan’s seat for the remainder of his term.

This issue is dedicated to thru-hiking the Florida National Scenic Trail (FT). We have seen a significant uptick in the number of thru-hikers in the past few years. This season had the largest number of thru-hikers in FTA history. I hope you enjoy the stories. I am glad to see the increased interest in thru-hiking the FT and the increase in our overall visitors.

Happy Trails,

Visit WarriorExpeditions.org for more information

Warrior Expeditions supports combat veterans transitioning from their military service by thru-hiking America’s National Scenic Trails.
Claire "Model" Jarvis grew up in Lakeland, Florida but spent their childhood blind to most of Florida’s beauty. They studied music in Chicago, dropped out, and eventually moved to Athens, Georgia where they developed a deep fascination and love for botany and ecology. Claire is currently “recreationally homeless” while focusing on hiking and exploring the woods, trying to learn all the plants, bugs, and birds. They enjoy digital illustration and cartooning; Claire created the artwork on this issue’s cover, inspired by their Florida Trail thru-hike in 2022.

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE WITH HIKING BEFORE YOUR FT THRU-HIKE?
As a young kid, I went on short summertime backpacking trips with my dad and big sisters in the southern Appalachians, then picked it back up on my own at age 20 with a catastrophically poorly planned excursion in the Scottish highlands. Since recovering from that disaster, I have slowly become less bad at packing and planning by making some 1-3 night solo trips around the eastern seaboard over the years. The Florida Trail was my first attempt at anything beyond that length.

YOUR WRITING ABOUT FLORIDA NATURE IS CAPTIVATING. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON HOW THRU-HIKING THE TRAIL HELPED YOU FEEL MORE CONNECTED TO THOSE ECOSYSTEMS?
Walking from Big Cypress to Pensacola Beach brought me through dozens and dozens of floral/faunal community types: limestone glades, cypress swamps, hyper-industrialized and polluted farm and ranch land, weedy roadsides, densely vegetated hammocks, pine savannas, scrub, estuarine marshes, suburban sprawl... Experiencing the transitions between these spaces step by step over the course of 1,108 miles allowed me to process and appreciate every tiny shift in landscape detail in such a delightful way. Moving northward, I smiled at many floral “firsts” that I noticed along the trail: first live oak (mile 22), longleaf pine (mile 260), eastern redcedar (mile 331), beech (mile 615), and countless other plant friends.

And, though hundreds of miles of road walking might not have been the most idyllic experience, it did poignantly illuminate the contrast between what these lands have been like for millennia (pristine and teeming with beautiful and diverse life forms) and the drastic impact human development has had on them in the last few hundred years. Thru-hiking it all bestowed on me an intimate appreciation for so many delicate minutiae of these spaces, as well as a newfound wonder (and mild horror) at what our species has done to Florida’s ecosystems - intentionally or not.

HOW WAS THE HIKING EXPERIENCE TRANSFORMATIVE FOR YOU?
As someone prone to anxiety, hiking helped me build confidence in my ability to operate under shifting circumstances (weather, closures, resupply and lodging options, etc.) and to trust my own judgment when things are difficult, or smelly, or painful, or boring. It also set a new baseline for comfort and misery, and imbued a new joy in sweet, simple things: running water, internet connection, hot food, time with loved ones, the kindness of strangers.

I THINK 2022 WAS THE BIGGEST GROUP OF THRU-HIKERS WE’VE EVER SEEN. CAN YOU SPEAK ABOUT THE TRAIL COMMUNITY?
What a fantastic group of hooligans! Generally, it seemed like most people I met had at least a couple thousand miles’ experience before they began the Florida Trail. The FT is definitely a niche and somewhat unconventional hike, so most people I met had a refreshing approach to hiking that wasn’t necessarily all about “bagging peaks” and
ogling mountain vistas; instead, many were more focused on the joy of hiking for hiking’s sake, finding connection within the hiking community, and discovering parts of a state that might be under-loved or under-appreciated. Hiking with a crew of super cool, super experienced hikers was a fantastic way to spend a first thru hike; there was so much experience to draw on from those around me, and so much fun, weird, friendly company.

WHAT WERE SOME OF YOUR FAVORITE SECTIONS? DID YOU SPEND MUCH TIME IN TOWNS OR DID YOU TRY TO KEEP IT MOVING?
The interplay of geology and flora was so much fun to walk through in the karst landscapes of the Suwannee and Aucilla rivers; and the spring-filled steephead ravines of the Nokuse Plantation and Eglin Air Force Base were otherworldly (and densely biodiverse!). I preferred to keep town visits to quick resupplies, and maybe a hot meal while I was around. Though I of course made sure to stay at the White Springs B&B, and took a zero to rest an injured ankle at Hillcrest Baptist!

WHAT CHALLENGES DID YOU FACE, PHYSICALLY/MENTALLY? HOW DID YOU OVERCOME THEM?
Tendonitis got me twice on trail: once in both ankles because of some cruddy insoles, and once in my ankle/shin from the foot-sucking muck and grit of beautiful Bradwell Bay. Both times I was able to work through it by slowing my pace and resting when the pain was at its worst. Also, I discovered that if you eat a handful of ibuprofen and then squirt Mio Energy concentrate directly into your mouth, you can overcome a lot of things.

I also dealt with a lot of boredom on trail, especially in road walk sections and agricultural areas. Left unchecked, this sometimes transformed into some anxiety and good old-fashioned existential dread. Through those times, though, I learned to focus less on the thought, “When will this end?” and more on the process of moving forward steadily, and finding small things to appreciate about my surroundings, without pausing to fret or obsess over miles or pacing. It was a thought exercise that, when I’m back to “normal life,” I think will prove incredibly useful in working through stress & anxiety.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR CONTINUING JOURNEY! WHERE ARE YOU HEADED NEXT?
This summer, I’m planning on hiking the Appalachian Trail southbound and, time and weather willing, I would love to continue southward onto the Benton MacKaye and Pinhoti trails. I was working a desk job prior to this hike, but after this year’s adventures I think I’d like to pursue fieldwork in ecology and/or conservation.

ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE?
I am amazed and my heart is warmed by the kindness and generosity of the trail angels and maintainers along this trail. So many people care for the hikers so deeply - people they’ve never met, out doing something that many would consider very silly, just because they want to. I connected with and was fed, housed, and cared for by the small, kind gestures of strangers so many times during my hike. And it has me so excited to pay it forward over the course of time by bestowing these happy acts on others.
Hiking the entire Florida Trail is an incredible achievement worthy of recognition. It represents not only athletic ability and proficiency navigating wild Florida, but also devotion and dedication to the journey. If you have completed the Florida Trail and your name is not on this list, please fill out the End to End Hiker Application on our website: [floridatrail.org/end-to-end-hikers](http://floridatrail.org/end-to-end-hikers)

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S – Section hiker
T – Thru-hiker
E – Hiked the Florida Trail as part of the 4,000-mile Eastern Continental Trail route
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Lolly Tharpe
Mountainside
Tallahassee, FL
T

Donna Stowe
Mosey
Melbourne, FL
T

Brian Darcey
T-Back
Tampa, FL
T,E

Douglas Meekins
Lumbar
Hatteras, NC
T,E

Grady Taute
Snap
Tierra Amarilla, NM
S

Allen Shoup
Tortoise
Palatka, FL
T,E

Ron Haskett
Winter Gardens, FL
T

Janette Davison
Land O Lakes, FL
S

Ian Brown
Orlando, FL
S

Ryan Carpenter
Seattle, WA
T,E

2009

Jodie Eller
Merritt Island, FL
T

Arthur Keene
Merritt Island, FL
T

Sue Turner
Hammock Hanger
Jacksonville, FL
S,E

Randy Anderson
Chuck Norris
Plant City, FL
T,E

David Curtis
Old Drum
Warrensburg, MO
T

Layyen Reguero
OB
Boca Raton, FL
T,E

2010

Joan Hobson
Igloo
Minneola, FL
S

Bill Bush
Bushwacker
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
T

Rachel Renne
Racheopod
Nocatee, FL
T

Gordon Crawford
Grandalfo
Whittier, CA
T,E

George Woodward
Billy Goat
Wellington, NV
S,E

Brad Henderson
Mary Esther, FL
T

Joel Kaiser
Wounded Knee
Port St Lucie, FL
T

Barbara Quinn
Nails
Lake Mary, FL
T

Paul Guyon
Palm City, FL
T

Christine Thuermer
Berlin, Germany
T

Frank Masters
Sunset
Sunset, SC
T,E

John-Michael Hernandez
HuffnPuff
San Francisco, CA
S

Edward Selby
Old Pack
Naples, FL
S

John Williamson
Nascar
Hernando, FL
T

2011

Dick Vogel
Hike On
Fort White, FL
T

Chris Binder
Ridgefield, CT
T

Ben Mayberry
Portland, OR
T

David Keegan
Speaker
Hilton, NY
T

Kevin Sparks
Sparky
Bloombfield, NM
T

Missy Little
Ridley
Magnolia, TX
T

Christopher Little
Panther
Magnolia, TX
T

Bill Bush
Bushwacker
Palm Beach Gardens, FL
T

Pete Hirst
Zipoff
Edgewater, FL
T

Amanda Hus
Jugglin June Cleaver
Tampa, FL
T

Tim Van Nest
Head N Out
Kent City, MI
T

Phil Clayberg
Max
Magnolia, DE
T

Clete Granade
Cope
Baxley, GA
T

Michael Kein
Bellear, FL
T

Caterina Lewis-Perry
Bellear, FL
T,E

Ed Talone
Silver Spring, MD
T

Peter Hoffman
Old Corpus
Corpus Christi, TX
S

George Meek
Arlington, VA
S

Larry Myers
St Cloud, FL
T,E

Rich Mayfield
Key West
Laguna Hills, CA
S

Bill Luttahe
Fireball
Gainesville, FL
T

Eric Bow
Czech Republic
Duluth, GA
T,E

Irene Hall
Alpenblick
Daytona Beach, FL
T,E

2012

Warren Renninger
Lakeland Nidhatak
Muncy Valley, PA
S

JoAnn Johnson
Foxfire
Fort White, FL
T,E

Sterling Coleman
Houston, TX
T

Jeff Reilly
Thirstyboots
Northfield, VT
T

Jim Beatty
Love It O Leave It
Portales, NM
T

Susan Hahn
Unbreakable
Rocklin, CA
T

John Hahn
No Trace
Rocklin, CA
T

Amanda Hus
Rainbow
Tampa, FL
T

Jack Toth
Captain Jack
Winter Springs, FL
T,E

Jon Phipps
Rodkneen DangerTrail
Oviedo, FL
T

Bill Bush
Bushwacker
Palm Bch Gardens, FL
T

Rachel Renne
Racheopod
Nocatee, FL
T

Leland Earls
Missoulia, MT
T

Mark Kuras
Winter Springs, FL
T

Jeremy Charlton
Bethesda, MD
S

Dexter Jones
Crow
Chattahoochee, FL
T

Jeff Parnkian
Stinger
Temecula, CA
T

Cam Honan
Swami
Australia
T

Cynthia Taylor-Miller
Mrs Gorp
Wallingford, VT
T,E

2013

Joey McMahon
Mornin Joe
Harpers Ferry, WV
S

Deanna Filkins
LaBelle, FL
S

Dave Divelbliss
Ocala, FL
T

Jim Eagleton
Rambler
Amber, PA
T,E

Kerry Smithwick
Scribbles
Saluda, NC
T

Mark Suits
Stumpkner
Spring Hill, FL
T,E

Yvonne Lynn Entingham
Princess Doah
Bellbrook, OH
T

Melton Cockrell
Grits
Quitman, GA
T

John Palmano
Johnny Thunder
Fort Lauderdale, FL
T,E

George Woodward
Billy Goat
Wellington, NV
T

Richard Efert
Five Gallon
New York, NY
T

Jimmie Hoffman
Catman
Fort Worth, TX
T

Emily Labit
Tampa, FL
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Mike Umbarger
Orlando, FL
S

Cody Umbarger
Orlando, FL
S

Zach Umbarger
Orlando, FL
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Charles Chandler
Madison, SD
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Caterina Lewis-Perry
Bellear, FL
T,E

Lynn Thompson
Boyon Beach, FL
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Mike Thompson
Boyon Beach, FL
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Joe Kinser
Tatu Joe
Huntington Beach, CA
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Marilyn Beckley
Ameoba
Syracuse, NY
T,E

Aimee Lamire
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Daytona Beach, FL
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2014

Joe Kim
Tatus Joe
Huntington Beach, CA
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David O'Neill
Ole
Bakersfield, CA
S

Debbie Crowder
Landcrusier
Stuart, FL
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Charles Davidson
Chase
Aston, VA
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Albert Scott
Ninja Tortoise
Eugene, OR
T,E

David Breinke
Problem Bear
Carmichael, CA
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Amanda Hus
Rainbow
Tampa, FL
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GIVE A COUPLE SENTENCES ABOUT YOURSELF: WHERE YOU’RE FROM, WHAT YOU "DO" ETC.

My name is David—trail name Moondog. Call me Moondog. I live around Lafayette, CO in my van and absolutely love everything Colorado. For hobbies I am a frequent backpacker, snowshoer, skateboarder, motorcyclist, kayaker and coffee connoisseur. In Colorado we have more hobbies than can fit into one lifetime.

WHAT GAVE YOU THE INSPIRATION TO THRU-SKATE THE FT?

About 3 years ago I read about a guy, Alex Fogt, who thru-skated the FT. He was the first.

At the time I didn’t know how to skateboard but I thought it was one of the coolest hikes I had ever heard about. Alex was definitely the inspiration and also a huge help when I reached out for advice. He’s a legend among legends.

WAS IT WORTH CARRYING THE EXTRA WEIGHT OF HAVING YOUR SKATEBOARD WITH YOU ON TRAIL?

I found my perspective on this question to go like this:

Am I carrying the skateboard for days on end while I am hiking? Not worth it. The second that board hits pavement: worth it.

If someone asks if it is worth bringing a board on the trail I think it comes down to how much you like skating. If you love to skate, it is absolutely worth the weight. If it’s not in your bones, in your soul, you’re probably not going to enjoy carrying this five pound rolling paperweight.

YOU’RE CURRENTLY SKATING ACROSS NEW MEXICO. WAS THIS INSPIRED BY YOUR FT HIKE OR HAVE YOU HAD A PLAN TO MAKE SKATING YOUR MODE OF TRANSPORTATION ALL ALONG?

During my FT thru-skate I learned of a guy, Justin Bright (@justindoeslife) who was doing a 1,100-mile skate through the state of Florida. We got introduced to each other and followed one another’s trips. Billy Goat Day was going on and I invited him out. The instant we met we hit it off. That night around a campfire...
we decided to skate a state together. Thus, the New Mexico trip was decided on. Neither of us can remember how we chose New Mexico but nearly a month later we were both standing at the Mexico/New Mexico border.

FAVORITE PART OF THE FT TO HIKE? TO SKATE?

The Suwannee River section was definitely my favorite. Such a beautiful area with smooth trails and so much history.

I have a really hard time picking a favorite spot to skate. The bike path into St. Marks was quite fun. For me the things that made the skating good wasn’t necessarily where I was at but the feeling I had. Was it smooth pavement, low traffic, good weather and some good music playing? Then it was a great skate no matter the section.

The hardest sections were the sections affected by Hurricane Michael. Some places were difficult to follow but mainly it’s because of the abuse the land has endured. You can tell that these areas used to be beautiful and then the hurricane, and side effects of that, destroyed the ecosystem. It’s hard to see.

IN THE LONG DISTANCE TRAIL WORLD SOME PEOPLE LOOK DOWN ON ROAD WALKS. DO THEY MAKE YOU MORE EXCITED? ARE YOU PLANNING OTHER HIKING TRAILS THAT HAVE OTHER ROAD WALK PORTIONS JUST SO YOU CAN SKATE THEM?

Even while hiking, I can appreciate a road walk. It’s the toll you pay to get to the next great part of the trail.

Coming off a trail and throwing my board down onto some good pavement is an incredible feeling that always boosts morale. The nice part of having the board with me is I’m either hiking or skating, two activities I love. I’m happy hiking or I’m happy skating.

I’ve thought of hiking the Mountain to Sea Trail in North Carolina. I may still do it but my New Mexico trip has kind of shown me that making my own trail with the board is the way to go. I can skate from town to town, hop on a trail and hike into a new town or just go where the wind blows me. The board allows me to go faster so in some ways I have more options on where to go. Plus, I have a great long distance skating partner in Justin now.

I may want to skate through another state soon, maybe Colorado, or even do a CDT thru-skate version.
when recognizing amazing thru-hiking feats it would be hard not to recognize what a very small and elite few have accomplished: a summer time thru-hike of the FT. It entails some of the hottest, most humid, swampiest, buggiest, and downright sweatiest long distance hiking imaginable. There’s no official or unofficial count on how many hikers have taken on this challenge (we can assume that it is not many) but we are so fortunate that thanks to social media, the world of trail journaling has become so accessible and enjoyable to the rest of us, from the comfort of air conditioning. From the FTA office this past summer, we ogled over the Wandering Raven’s wonderfully thorough and well photographed journey as she hiked SOBO from the Alabama border to Big Cypress. Not only was it fun to see her progress, but it was enjoyable to read and see her sheer joy with what was around her. There are very few people that would even attempt something like this but she did it with so much style and grace. To top it all off, this was her first time ever backpacking and she did it solo. Here is the Wandering Raven in her own words about her hike:

**DATES OF YOUR FT HIKE**

When recognizing amazing thru-hiking feats it would be hard not to recognize what a very small and elite few have accomplished: a summer time thru-hike of the FT. It entails some of the hottest, most humid, swampiest, buggiest, and downright sweatiest long distance hiking imaginable. There’s no official or unofficial count on how many hikers have taken on this challenge (we can assume that it is not many) but we are so fortunate that thanks to social media, the world of trail journaling has become so accessible and enjoyable to the rest of us, from the comfort of air conditioning. From the FTA office this past summer, we ogled over the Wandering Raven’s wonderfully thorough and well photographed journey as she hiked SOBO from the Alabama border to Big Cypress. Not only was it fun to see her progress, but it was enjoyable to read and see her sheer joy with what was around her. There are very few people that would even attempt something like this but she did it with so much style and grace. To top it all off, this was her first time ever backpacking and she did it solo. Here is the Wandering Raven in her own words about her hike:

**THRU-HIKER SPOTLIGHT**

Wandering Raven

by Jeff Glenn, North Trail Program Manager

Trail. I started at the Blackwater River section on the Alabama border. My goal was originally to section hike the trail after learning about it at an REI. I have played hard outside in Florida for several years and know how brutal our summers can be. When I got the opportunity to go for it, I wasn’t about to let that stand in my way. I decided to follow my dream, thru-hike and play outside for months.

On October 23rd, I completed my 1,100 mile thru-hike at Big Cypress. My dream was now complete and I felt incredibly accomplished but I wasn’t ready to say goodbye. During my hike, I was torn between the east and the west side of Orlando. I initially intended to go west but failed to plan where the junction was and missed my turn by 50 miles. I rarely planned my days. I wanted to experience everyday as spontaneously as possible. At a certain point I decided I needed to hike the entire trail, not just one corridor. I formed a plan, and with the help of trail angels giving me rides, I was able to head back north, starting at the Ocean to Lake Trail, then east of Lake Okeechobee, west of Orlando and then the last 47 miles to Fort Pickens.

**HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH THE BUGS, THE HEAT, THE HUMIDITY OF THE FLORIDA SUMMER?**

I experienced tick infested forests, daily thunderstorms, and the rain created perfect conditions for our lovely mosquitoes to thrive. Lighting struck terribly close and there were days the heat index was over 110 degrees. Not only were my feet wet most days, the humidity prevented me from ever fully drying out. The sun was my best friend and the only way I was able to dry my shoes, clothing and gear. Bug sprays offered very little relief and I was very grateful for my bug net that covered my head. It even kept hundreds of spiders off of my face. Allergy medicine and cortisone helped soothe hundreds of bites but not being able to prevent them was definitely my greatest challenge. Keeping my pants and shirt tucked in and treating everything with Permethrin kept the ticks off of me and I remained stress free with daily tick checks. I was filtering around 6 liters of water to drink, cook and clean. One of my favorite things about a lot of rain was having cold, tasty water to collect.
YOU NAVIGATED THE SUWANNEE RIVER SECTION AT NEAR RECORD FLOOD LEVELS. CAN YOU DESCRIBE SOME OF WHAT YOU DEALT WITH?

Flooding was not ideal and prevented me from hiking several miles along the trail of the Suwannee River. There were moments where I was chest high in water and had to turn back to find high ground. Seeing the water levels all the way up to the orange blazes, I knew it was over my head and I would be swimming if I moved forward. The only way I was able to navigate this section was with satellite maps. I found forest roads, bushwhacked dozens of extra miles and walked neighborhoods and through a lot of water. One day I hope to return to this section, so I can experience how it was intended to be hiked.

DESCRIBE SOME OF YOUR MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCES.

1,500 miles of extreme conditions and I truly loved every mile of this wild trail. One of my most memorable moments was waking up to the sound of alligators all around me at Three Lakes WMA. It sounded as if hundreds of giant cats were purring as the sun started to rise. Bradwell Bay’s swamp was waist high and cold! I remember wondering why no other hikers were there? It was the perfect hike on an excruciatingly hot day. The only time I saw people was when I would hike through towns. I never expected to love town as much as I did. It’s where I learned how passionate I am about sharing my adventure and explaining to locals that there is in fact a National Scenic Trail here in Florida. Their curiosity and appreciation for my enthusiasm inspired me to create my Facebook Page, The Wandering Raven. I began documenting every section and encouraging everyone to go outside and play. Our situations might not be ideal but it should never stop us from enjoying the moment. Nature has so many lessons for us. I’ve seen the strength of trees that were still standing when thousands of others were demolished by a hurricane and heard the persistence of the cicadas to never give me even a second of silence. The rain cleanses, the sun consistently rises and shines, and the stars give us a perfect ending to our exhausting yet spectacular day.

I no longer see this as just a trail. It is a guide that connects towns allowing us to meet complete strangers, opening our hearts to love, compassion, and nature. I am so thankful I trusted myself enough to venture off into the unknown and for the Florida Trail Association for their hard work and devotion to the great outdoors!
The Florida Trail Association’s annual awards serve as a way to recognize members, volunteers, partners, and supporters for their incredible contributions to the organization and the trail. Every year, we ask our partners, members and volunteers to nominate people in the community for their exceptional contributions. Please take part in helping us recognize those who have played a vital role in supporting and furthering the mission of the FTA.

THANK YOU!

PRESIDENT’S AWARDS
The following awards are selected and presented at the FTA President’s discretion
Cornelia Burge Volunteer Award
Susan Bennett Manns
Lifetime Achievement Award
Howard Pardue
Champion of the Florida Trail Award
Edwin McCook

MEMBERSHIP AWARDS
The following awards are selected by the Awards Committee from FTA member nominations
Activity Leader Award
Melissa Updegrove  Carmel Hind  Dennis Hardy
Melodie Hardy  Alan Collins

SPECIAL SERVICE AWARD
Richard Warren  Kay Ferrara  Debra Taylor
Susan Bennett Manns  Helen Wigersma  Christine Hale
Cheryl Gardner  Barbara Ross  James Fait
Bill Alexander  Amy Saperstein  Janet Miller
Mary Helen Miller  Jennifer Jones-Reynolds

John Weary Trail Worker Award
Ed Williamson  Rick Byrnes

CHAPTER TRAIL MAINTAINERS OF THE YEAR AWARD
Mike Tucker, Apalachee  Patrick Ellis, Happy Hoofers
Richard Warren, Big Cypress  Don Ravinski, Western Gate
Terry Heaps, Alligator Amblers  Jerry Rogers, Central Florida

PARTNERSHIP AWARDS
Friend of the Florida Trail
Loisa Kerwin
Pathfinder
Jessica Mills  Patrick Connolly

FLORIDA TRAIL PROGRAM AWARDS
Admin of the Year
Debra Taylor
Maintainer of the Year
Perry Koussiafes

25 YEAR MEMBERS
Leslee Heller  Walker Banning  Dee Dalrymple
Candis Harbison  Debbie Levi  Ben Ellis
Gerald Wald  Ann Rodgers  JoAnn Miller
Larry Warren  Bill Hofman  Michael Kelly
Debra Akin  Jean Williamson  Anna Dorsey
Hector Vargas  Kathy Besbekos  Dorothy Morrison
Robert Dodrill  Eve Barbour  S. Aaron Laden
Gary Sisco  Marsha Certain  Steve Meyers
Carmel Hind  Alan Collins  Jon Hillen
Robert Daniels  John Buchholz  Jeff Ernst
Mitch Almon  Alan Roddy  James Fait
Janie Hamilton  Greg Lane
Jean Powell  Don Lauher

50 YEAR MEMBERS
David Forman  Terrence Mahoney  George Stovall

THANK YOU!
On the weekend of February 25-27, the 13th IDIDAHIKE was hosted by the Apalachee Chapter of the Florida Trail Association. After being postponed for a year due to COVID-19 concerns, everyone was more than ready for the event. The event was staged in the Gateway Community of the Township of St. Marks, which is located on the Florida Trail. Consistent with their role as a Gateway Community, members of the Township welcomed us warmly and made several town facilities available to us at no cost.

The weather was a near perfect late winter weekend in North Florida. Days were warm and the humidity low. The nights were cool for camping and the bugs had not yet emerged in full force. The winter had been fairly dry so the trails were less muddy than usual.

Several unique and beautiful sections of the Florida Trail were chosen for hikes. These areas were in the Aucilla Wildlife Management Area and the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. In all, eleven hikes and two non-hiking activities were conducted that weekend. Hikes ranged in distance from 4 to 10 miles.

After the hike locations were established by the planning committee, a dedicated group of volunteers went to work to ensure that the trails were in the best possible shape. During the months of November and December 2021 volunteers logged a total of 192 hours of lopping, mowing and other routine maintenance.

In addition to FTA work parties, several other groups assisted in making improvements to our chosen trails. Travis Pollard of the Fish and Wildlife Services (FWS) led the Student Conservation Association Crew (SCA) to construct a beautiful new bridge in the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness. The SCA Crew also helped with maintenance on the Aucilla and St. Marks trails. Again, led by Travis, a new trail reroute through the Cathedral of Palms was completed by the St. Marks Trail Crew. The trails looked the best they have in many years.

In all, 201 people registered for the event. They hiked a total of 1,980 miles. To put this in perspective a Florida Trail thru-hike is 1,158 miles long. The total Florida Trail System is about 1,583 miles long. So we hiked more than either of these distances. Our namesake event, the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race is a mere 938 miles long, so our groups hiked more than twice that distance.

After the hikes on Saturday, participants converged on the City Park at St. Marks for an afternoon of snacks, silent auction and music provided by members of the Apalachee chapter. This was certainly a perfect way to end a hiking day.

In a short article it is impossible to give credit to all who helped make this event a tremendous success. Volunteers from many chapters contributed a total of 1,643 hours of time, which was divided between planning, preparation, hike leading and trail maintenance. Corporate sponsors contributed generous donations and the Township of St. Marks welcomed our presence. The personnel at the St. Mark’s Wildlife Refuge contributed in many ways.

Many things contributed to the success of the weekend. Perhaps the most important overall, was the spirit of the group. The Chairman of the event, Dawn Dunham Griffin worked tirelessly and continuously for all two years in the planning and execution. Everyone pitched in to support her efforts. There was rarely a time when there was a need to ask for a volunteer. Someone was always volunteering as soon as the need arose. How do we say thanks to everyone involved?
Hikers relax and enjoy the view of the Aucilla River rapids.

The team celebrates a highly successful event with a picnic at Edward Ball Wakulla Springs State Park, April 3, 2022.
Hikers on the boat crossing the St. Marks river on the way to Port Leon.
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Florida Trail Association
Building More Than Trails
For some, the Ocean To Lake Hiking Trail (OTLHT) is a chance to test gear and the durability of their feet before tackling a thru-hike on the Florida Trail. For others, it is a compact way to experience everything the Florida Trail has to offer. Slipping from farmlands to cypress domes, crossing wetlands and pine forests and sneaking undetected behind homes and beside interstates.

In a rare opportunity to hike a trail instead of just maintaining it, I set off in February with some friends and my husband to take on the OTLHT. For our group, the OTLHT offered the chance to recognize a goal met, an obstacle overcome, and a sense of accomplishment. As we set off from Lake Okeechobee, heading east as most do, it quickly became easy to forget that we were walking through the very populated Palm Beach County. We passed through public land after public land, climbed the observation tower, and crossed a road or two but still, we saw no one else and heard nothing but nature. Until suddenly, we were reminded just how close we were. One night of our hike, as we settled into our tents, the sky suddenly erupted in noise and color. After the initial shock, we realized the cacophony was coming from the Honda Classic Golf Tournament at the PGA Palm Beach Gardens. Laughing, we remembered that we were still very close to civilization and in the backyard of so many. I knew the trail hadn’t always been in place but other than that, I knew very little about its establishment. Upon returning, I was pleasantly surprised to hear that a history of the trail’s creation was going to be shared at the next Loxahatchee chapter meeting.

Today, the OTLHT spans 62 miles from Hobe Sound Beach to Lake Okeechobee. Typically hiked from west to east, this trail offers 8 campsites through Dupuis Wildlife and Environmental Area, J.W. Corbett WMA, Hungryland Slough, Loxahatchee Slough, Riverbend Park, and Jonathan Dickinson State Park. Water is abundant along the way, both on the trail and running alongside it. Hikers do not need any permits to hike this trail but reservations are required for some of the campsites.

Though the trail feels like a natural flow between lands with very few road walks, it was not always in place. Instead, it was the vision of the Loxahatchee Chapter that took ten years to complete. As the saying goes, “trails don’t build themselves” and this was no exception. What was exceptional though, was the collaboration that occurred between the land managers involved, the community, and the chapter.

Bea Rogers and Dean Drake were the original planners of the OTLHT, a vision that began in 1993. Throughout South Florida, trails were popping up but provided no connectivity to one another. Popular trails in Jonathan Dickinson State Park (JDSP) and Corbett WMA were being used but led nowhere.

When asked about how the trail got started, Roy Moore, chair of the Loxahatchee Chapter and long-time Florida Trail Member said, “In regards to Dean and the development of the trail, he had the love of the outdoors since childhood and that...
never left him. If I remember the story correctly, at one of the Big O hikes, Jeff Koons commented to Bea that what he wanted was a continuous trail from the Lake to the Ocean and that struck a chord that Dean and Bea carried forward. There were a number of trails, including JDSP, Corbett, Dupuis, and River Bend but there had not been a notion to connect them until that time. The major undeveloped section would be from the boundary of JD connecting to the River Bend Park and then through the LOX Slough, and a lot of Dean's and Bea's efforts were expended working on that connection as well as promoting the concept of a continuous trail linking the Ocean to the Lake.” With this goal in mind, off went Dean and Bea, flagging tape in hand, to see if it was possible to hike halfway across Florida.

Ocean to Lake Hiking Trail was Dean Drake’s dream with full dedication to its fruition. During putting the trail from concept to the ground there were many hurdles put forward by the public land managers. Dean Drake was the one who became a punching bag for all those who did not care if it did not happen. But it was Dean Drake who was resilient, persistent, and could take any comments, sometimes even personal, to bring it to reality. I was fortunate to work with Dean on the trail development and am glad it is there now for everyone to enjoy. - Bijaya Kattel, Former South Florida Water Management District staff member and long-time friend of the Florida Trail.

The meaning and or purpose of the memorial is twofold; first to honor Dean’s commitment to developing the trail and also to raise the level of appreciation for the trail from the general public. This memorial cements the idea that this trail was developed by and is maintained by volunteers, not by public entities. It reinforces the signs along the trail that indicate the trail is developed and maintained by the Loxahatchee Chapter of the FTA. - Roy Moore, Loxahatchee Chapter Chair

Over the next ten years, the Loxahatchee chapter would discover that blazing the trail was possible but challenging. Working methodically from east to west, they begin to tackle the obstacles one at a time. The trails already existed in JDSP and connecting those from the beach along the scenic Bridge Road seemed simple enough. However, “the first obstacle we encountered was how to get across Hobe Groves with friends on the OTHTL.

Regional Trail Manager Jenna Taylor with friends on the OTHTL.

Campsites Available on the OTLHT

- Loop 4 - Dupuis
- Powerline - Dupuis
- Little Gopher - Corbett
- Bowman Island - Corbett
- Soggy Socks - Palm Beach County *
- Lucky Hammock - Palm Beach County *
- Kitching Creek - Jonathan Dickinson State Park *
- Scrub Jay - Jonathan Dickinson State Park *

Hiker note: At the time of this article, the Everglades Youth Conservation Camp is not an option for camping. Stealth camping is not permitted in J.W. Corbett WMA.

Bea Rogers and Dean Drake scouting out the OTLHT.
Canal,” said Bea. After scouting for the safest place to cross, a location was selected and a rope for stability was installed. For years, this was how you got across until the crossing was improved with a mat for stability in 2012.

This was the beginning of a series of water crossing challenges. Cypress Creek would receive boardwalks, Hells Canal would get filled in and a little unnamed creek would become “BZ creek.” Simply put by Bea with a laugh, “It didn’t have a name, so they told me to name it and I did.”
PHOTOS

26 Rope for helping hikers cross Hobe Groves Canal.

26 Hikers crossing Hobe Groves.

27 A 2011 Cypress Creek boardwalk project.

27 A simultaneously installed “lady’s bridge” in 2011.

28 BZs Creek then.

28 BZs Creek now.
The west leg of C-18 canal lingered as a problem. In the beginning, hikers could only cross the canal by boat, provided by the county. “One day, Palm Beach County’s Department of Environmental Management (responsible for the Loxahatchee Slough and Riverbend Park) decided they needed a way to get equipment across that canal so they came to us and simply asked, ‘where would you like it to go?’ So we picked a location and the bridge you see today is the result,” said Bea.

After crossing all these water challenges, the group found themselves in J.W. Corbett. At the time, the trail was not very well maintained since the land’s primary function was hunting. So the group considered their options and a Student Conservation Association (SCA) crew was secured. SCA crews are used throughout the country to engage young people to make an impact on public lands. Traditionally, they recruit those interested in careers in conservation. The SCA crew assigned to J.W. Corbett spent five days clearing and building the trail to make the Corbett section what it is today.

Finally, all the pieces seemed to align, the final small connections were made and it was time to test it out. On January 23rd, 2004 a group of 10 hikers set out from Hobe Sound Beach towards Lake Okeechobee. It was a success and since then, hundreds hike the entire thing or sections of the trail today.

After Bea shared her oral history of the trail and its creation, I spoke to a former city commissioner who shared what it was like to watch the progress of the trail as an elected official who cared deeply about environmental issues. “It was very powerful to see these agencies working together. When it came time to prioritize money, everyone was on the same page,” he said. He shared how impactful a trail can be in driving funding for more than recreational usage. When people care deeply about an ecosystem and public lands, people show up and work together. The water flow in these lands was all deeply impacted.

Hikers cross by boat.

The C-18 bridge.
by development, farming etc., and slowly, they have been restoring the hydrology to its original flow and watching as wading birds and plants return to the area.

As we walked beneath the dappled light of the breathtaking trees that line Bridge Road as we finished our hike, our group was pretty silent. Some of it was that we were tired, sure, but mostly, we were all reflecting on the trail. We had all done trail work, so we could appreciate the value of the last six days. We knew and acknowledged the energy and perseverance it took to put a trail smack in the middle of one of the most densely populated areas in the state. As we walked onto that sand, we said a thank you to those who simply decided one day, “What I’d really like to do is hike to the ocean,” so the rest of us could say the same.

**NAME THAT TRAIL**

Though frequently simply referred to as “The Ocean To Lake Trail,” this name is actually incorrect. Prior to the completion of the OTLHT, Jonathan Dickinson State Park created a multi-use “Ocean to Lake” trail that remains in place today. Additionally, there is an Ocean To Lake Horse Trail that runs from J.W. Corbett to Jonathan Dickinson State Park which is blazed pink. Due to this, the official name of the 62-mile Florida Trail Association created and maintained trail is the Ocean To Lake Hiking Trail.

*The initial 10 hikers on Hobe Sound Beach at sunrise.*

*Finishing the trail at Lake Okeechobee!*

*Mowing new trail.*
One of my favorite things to do while I hike is to research the land’s namesake and history. Here is a quick snapshot of what the lands were used for before hikers made their way through it.

**INDIGENOUS PEOPLE**

These lands originally were originally inhabited by Indigenous People from the Tan-ion, Guacata, Calusa, Mayaimi, Jeaga, Taino and Seminole tribes. Originally, Lake Okeechobee was named Lake Mayaimi which translates to “big water.” In J.W. Corbett WMA, Big Mound City and Big Gopher are significant historical and archaeological sites showcasing mounds built by the Calusas and Seminoles. Dupuis WMA has evidence of a large circular ditch called the Whitebelt Circle. Though unclear the exact purpose, it is believed they served as a gathering space for massive ritual feasts. Additional Seminole archaeological sites have been discovered in Riverbend Park and Jonathan Dickinson State Park.

**DUPUIS WMA**

Archaeological sites here date early American Indians in the area as far back as 500 B.C. For many years, the lands were ranch lands for cattle, sheep, and goats. The area is named for John G. and Susan H. Dupuis who owned White Belt Ranch on the property in the 1940s before it was acquired by South Florida Water Management District in 1986.

**J.W. CORBETT**

Southern States Land and Timber Company logged slash pine and cypress here. They sold 52,000 acres to FWC in 1947. Now 60,330 acres, this wildlife management area was named for James Wiley Corbett who serves as a commissioner for the timber company. The Friends of Corbett group also says it is believed that an escaped slave or freed black community was once located on this property between the 1880s and 1920s though no evidence of the community has been found.

**JONATHAN DICKINSON**

This Florida State Park was named for a Quaker merchant who shipwrecked near this site in 1696. In 1942, this site was the location of Camp Murphey, a top-secret radar training school. The camp included over 1,000 buildings but none remain today. After two years, the camp was closed and in 1947 the land was transferred to the state which opened as a public state park in 1950.

**RIVERBEND PARK**

Visitors to this park can view chickees and a traditional Florida farmstead here. Tribal “middens,” trash deposits, have been found here. The Battle of Loxahatchee during the Second Seminole War also occurred near this community park.
What would you pack for a 1,500 mile walk? What do you need to travel through wild places while living out of a backpack, potentially for months at a time? Probably less than you think! Getting away with carrying less has always been a preoccupation of thru-hikers. Back in 1955 Grandma Gatewood famously packed little more than a duffel bag, plastic sheet, and blanket on her thru-hike of the Appalachian Trail. Luckily for today’s hikers, the intervening years have seen a revolution in lightweight hiking gear, even as the basic requirements have remained the same: shelter from the elements, an insulated sleep system, and a pack to carry it all in. The result has been a dramatic reduction in pack weights while maintaining comfort and efficiency.

At the same time, another technological innovation has become ubiquitous along the trail, just as it has everywhere else: the smartphone. These two developments—a shift towards extremely lightweight gear and widespread adoption of smartphones—have together fundamentally changed the long-distance backpacking experience.

Much of the evolution in gear has been driven by thru-hikers, the long-haulers of the hiking world. A thru-hike is a complete end-to-end trip along a trail system such as the Florida Trail or Appalachian Trail. These trips are often measured in months and hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. For the FT, this involves navigating some 1,500 miles of swamp, forest, and prairie between Fort Pickens and Big Cypress, essentially crossing the entire state of Florida. It makes sense that the longest, toughest backpacking trips benefit the most from lighter, more efficient equipment. Experienced backpackers start to consider the utility of every single ounce they carry. A few ounces might not seem like much, but when you consider the energy required to carry those ounces over thousands of miles, day after day, it quickly adds up. There is a gratifying feedback loop from packing less and using lighter equipment; every ounce saved translates to a bit of saved energy per mile, meaning that same mile can be covered more quickly and with less fatigue. Traveling at a faster pace means that one can comfortably cover more miles per day and spend less time between resupply locations. Fewer days between resupply allows one to carry less food and fuel, which means even greater weight savings, and thus the loop continues. Take this concept of lightweight packing to its extreme, and you have today’s super-ultralight backpackers, hikers with base weights—the weight of all equipment minus consumables such as food, water, and fuel—of as little as 5 pounds. To put this into context, the traditional measure of a light base weight has been anything under 20 pounds. Back in the days when the FT was first being blazed it was routine for backpackers to carry well over 50 pounds of gear.

The design of backpacks is probably the most visible sign of the transition towards...
Today’s thru-hiking philosophy relies on cutting down as much weight as possible, making smaller packs possible.

A large external frame bag was once the norm for backpackers.
External frame backpacks feature comfortable padded hip belts and shoulder straps designed for heavy loads.

A modern ultralight setup can pack a week’s worth of food and supplies in a slim, streamlined profile.

Lighter hiking gear. For decades the peak of hiking comfort and technology was an external frame backpack. With a padded hip-belt and thick shoulder straps, hikers could comfortably carry large, heavy loads. The classic “look” of a long-distance backpacker was one of a figure with a gigantic external frame rising behind their head, bed rolls and miscellaneous gear strapped to the outside, walking stick firmly in hand. Lighter packs with internal supports began to appear as early as the 1970s, but it’s only been in the last 20 years that ultralight internally-framed packs have become the standard choice of thru-hikers. These range from fairly traditional nylon bags with aluminum frames, to minimalist rucksacks crafted from exotic Dyneema fabrics with titanium or carbon fiber supports. As other gear has decreased in size and weight, the volume of a thru-hiker’s bag has also shrunk. These days a long distance backpacker’s bag, with its sleek silhouette and minimal footprint, doesn’t look all that much larger than a daypack.

Shelters are another category that has seen dramatic decreases in weight. Older tents were often the heaviest items in a pack. The earliest backcountry shelters used waxed canvas or oilcloth to keep out precipitation. These were supplanted by synthetics, but the structures were still fairly cumbersome, required many aluminum poles and guylines for support, and even relatively light options weighed as much as 5 or 6 pounds. The only way to achieve light weight was the use of bivy sacks, tiny tents barely larger than sleeping bags. These days, creative use of mesh fabrics and ultra-thin silicone-coated nylon has made roomy 2 pound tents possible. Hiking poles are usually used as supports, removing the need for traditional tent poles. Lightweight hammocks paired with tarps are also widely used, especially along forested routes like the FT. At the lightest extreme, simple poncho-tarps weighing just a few ounces provide the absolute minimal amount of shelter necessary to keep dry.

A sleep system is the last major component of a thru-hiker’s gear selection. This includes a sleeping bag and pad; the bag insulates the sleeper from the surrounding cool air, while the pad provides comfort and insulation from the ground. For decades the standard choice of sleeping pad was closed cell foam. While relatively light, these rolled pads can be bulky, uncomfortable, and hard to pack. Smaller, accordion-style pads are now more commonly used by backpackers, and inflatable pads have also become popular. A modern ultralight sleeping pad compresses down to less than the size of a water bottle, yet easily inflates to provide luxurious comfort and more effective insulation. And while the basic design of sleeping bags has stayed unchanged for decades, advances in high-loft insulation and thin synthetic fabrics...
Shelters have historically been the bulkiest and heaviest items to pack into the backcountry.

A modern thru-hiking tent is extremely lightweight and packable.
Bulky bedrolls were once the norm for long-distance backpackers.

Heavy leather boots were once required to stabilize the loads carried on external frame backpacks.

...has also made ultralight bags possible. Most recently there has been a trend towards using basic quilts instead of full sleeping bags, especially in warmer climates. By removing zippers and hoods, several additional ounces can be shed from a sleep system; an ultralight, 20 degree rated quilt weighs barely more than a pound.

In addition to the three big categories of pack, shelter, and sleeping gear, all of the other miscellaneous tools used by hikers have become lighter and smaller. Efficient titanium cooksets with integrated stoves, fuel canisters, and pots have replaced finicky gas burners and nesting pot sets. Rechargeable high-lumen LED headlamps have replaced incandescent lamps and disposable-battery powered flashlights. Synthetic fabrics and merino wool clothing wick away moisture and provide insulation while remaining light and breathable. Sturdy leather boots, once required for ankle support when carrying heavy loads, have now been replaced by flexible hiking shoes and trail runners. Ounce by ounce, all of these tools become slimmer, lighter, and more packable.

Of course, all of these advances do not come without some potential downsides. Ultralight gear is often significantly more...
expensive than traditional options. Durability can also be a concern; thinner materials can be more susceptible to abrasion, tearing, or exposure to UV light. The lifespan of an ultralight shelter or pack might only be a single thru-hike of 5 or 6 months. However, the biggest risk of ultralight gear adoption is not failing equipment, but rather gaps in the knowledge or experience of the user. Hikers using the lightest equipment have little margin for error when faced with severe weather, unplanned delays, or other misadventures. The trick is to avoid going “stupid light,” the point at which safety is compromised. As an example, trail runners can be perfectly comfortable during a summer hike in Florida, but would result in some miserably cold and wet feet when hiking across mountain passes during an early spring snowmelt in Colorado. An ultralight poncho-tarp may be appropriate for a desert hiking trip in New Mexico, but would be foolish for use during Florida’s cold spring thunderstorms. And it’s never a good idea to skip any of the essentials, items like a first aid kit or water purifier. Every piece of gear requires this type of evaluation, a consideration of the conditions to be faced coupled with an honest assessment of the hiker’s own abilities and comfort level.

Lightweight gear is only part of the story. The other revolutionary change we’ve seen with backpacking equipment has been the rise of digital technology. From early GPS units and digital cameras to today’s multifunctional smartphones, gadgets have become an inescapable part of many hikers’ experience. Now that we all carry them around constantly, it’s easy to forget how extraordinary of a tool a smartphone really is; this one lightweight pocket-computer can serve as a map, compass, emergency communicator, flashlight, camera, video recorder, field guide, media player, and, of course, a phone. For many hikers these are now the primary tool for navigation, especially on well-blazed long trails like the FT.

Of all the smartphone features, there is one app in particular that has completely changed the day-to-day experience of thru-hiking: FarOut, the mapping tool previously known as Guthook. FarOut is a combination guidebook, data table, and GPS-enabled map that pinpoints a user’s location along the trail. All of this data can be preloaded to a phone, so no cell service is required. With a quick glance at a screen, hikers can see the distance to all sorts of landmarks ahead and behind them: water sources, shelters, road crossings, scenic overlooks, campsites, and resupply points. These points of interest all have detailed descriptions, photos, and even crowd-sourced comments from other app users. While this data has always existed in data books for major trails (including the FT), the app puts all of it in relation to your current position on a map. All of the estimation and traditional map-based orienteering associated with long-distance hiking is no longer necessary, and travel along a trail becomes predictable and predetermined. It feels almost impossible to get lost, so long as you have a good GPS signal. In recent years it seems that
FarOut has become the single consensus tool relied upon by thru-hikers everywhere, and additional similar apps are starting to appear.

Just as the extremes of lightweight gear can become problematic, so too can a reliance on technology. Electronics can be fragile and are entirely dependent on batteries. Keeping them running has led to a new category of hiking gear, a whole collection of various battery packs, cables, solar chargers, and waterproof cases. Most importantly, a smartphone alone will never be a substitute for a hiker’s experience and good judgment. We’ve all heard the stories of drivers who, blindly trusting their car’s GPS system, have tried to drive over snowed-in mountain passes during winter, or guided their car straight into a lake. A similar dependence can take hold of hikers with their smartphones. While hiking trail maintainers do their best to share updates about trail routing and conditions, the reality on the ground can quickly change from what’s depicted on a map or guidebook. Wildfires, flooding, and storm damage can all strike literally overnight, forcing a hiker to improvise and adapt. What was an easy 5 mile section of trail can turn into a 20 mile detour, a route likely not described in any digital guidebook. And in some conditions GPS signals can be lost altogether, turning our fancy devices into paperweights.

Another less obvious risk stemming from our reliance on technology is its impact on the very experience of hiking. These days it’s not unusual to pass a hiker with earbuds in, oblivious to everything but the music or audio-book they’re listening to. Portable Bluetooth speakers drown out birdsong and the rustle of leaves in the breeze. Faces at an evening campsite or shelter are often illuminated not by campfires, but the glow of smartphone screens. It is entirely possible to wrap up a full day of hiking by catching a few episodes of your favorite television show while lying in the comfort of your tent. And thru-hiker resupply stops are not only about food and fuel, but also the search for a power outlet to charge up for the next leg of the journey. Being in the woods once meant being untethered from the rest of modern life, but now we are always connected.

Then again, “hike your own hike” has always been the motto of long-distance backpacking. Change is inevitable, and every generation of hikers will find their own way to appreciate the outdoors. While thru-hikers have led the charge in adopting ultralight equipment and smartphone guidebooks, these advances have benefitted everyone who uses outdoor gear. Backpacking has never been more accessible. Lightweight gear helps prevent injuries and fatigue, making the experience more enjoyable for everyone, whether you’re out for a day or a month. Tools like FarOut and other GPS-enabled maps and guidebooks have also made it easier for folks without orienteering or navigation skills to feel comfortable venturing out into the woods, making the experience safer and lowering the barrier to entry. If you’ve ever wanted to try an overnight backpacking trip, now is the time! The FTA’s Chapters, located all over the state, regularly host hiking events, both day hikes and multi-day backpacking trips. To locate a Chapter near you, visit the FTA website at: https://floridatrail.org/our-chapters/

Warm and dry conditions allow for the use of extremely light backpacking setups.

Heavy standalone cameras are a much rarer sight on the trail these days.
Relying on smartphones for navigation has become common practice for backpackers on the FT and beyond.

Backpacking used to be a much more disconnected activity before cell phones followed us into the woods.

Trail maintainers have also benefited from the adoption of lighter backpacking equipment.

Go retro without the weight! We re-created this ringer t-shirt as a throwback to this classic look. Grab yours at floridatrail.org/shop
There are many ways for you to enjoy a journey on the Florida Trail. You can be like some hikers and plan a day hike or perhaps plan a multiple day hike that goes through the entire trail. These are known as thru-hikers. Others, like myself many years ago, do not even realize they are on the Florida Trail until they come across a sign telling them, “this trail is maintained by volunteers”. Some hikers do research to figure out how to get the most out of their journey, while others spontaneously decide to go for a walk on a trail to get some exercise. You could be a hiker out there for the competitive sport or just to take a long unique journey by yourself. No matter what way you utilize the Florida Trail, it will definitely be an enjoyable day to be outdoors while getting some exercise.

Looking a bit deeper into some of the ways people enjoy journeys on the trail, there are basically two types of active hikers. One is to be a day hiker and the other is to be a thru-hiker. A day hiker is a person that is going solo or with a group, usually heading towards a destination. You will see via the link to the FTA website; www.floridatrail.org/day-hike that we have many “Grab & Go” hikes that are perfect for these sort of day hikes. For example, the Juniper Prairie Wilderness option is a wonderful day hike to Hidden Pond. Starting at Juniper Springs, it is approximately a five mile hike to get to Hidden Pond. After your morning hike, you can have lunch and relax with your feet in the pond or even take a swim before you and your group hike back. Now you are a day hiker! There are day hikers who, over the course of many months and years, finish the entire trail. This is also known as a section hiker.

The thru-hiker usually has different motivations. Their goal is to complete the entire trail in as much of a continuous journey as possible. Their motivation can be competitive for the Fastest Known Time (FKT) or may be a personal journey that only the closest of family and friends know about. Others have a mission to do something bigger than themselves and generate donations for a cause that is important to them. The FTA always appreciates the donations that this type of hiker provides to our trail organization.

Thru-hikers can be broken down into additional categories of self-supported, supported and unsupported. The self-supported hiker is able to take advantage of anything that comes along the trail, whether it be a cooler full of energy drinks left out by a “trail angel” or walking to a nearby town to eat a huge meal at a well-known pizza joint. As long as the opportunity is available for all the other hikers, it is all considered self-supported. Often, these hikers will coordinate sending themselves support packages to the local post office so that they may pick up fresh socks, food, and other special things that will make the miles go a little easier.

A supported hiker is someone who has taken advantage of something only meant for them. This type of hiker will coordinate sending themselves support packages to the local post office so that they may pick up fresh socks, food, and other special things that will make the miles go a little easier. A supported hiker is someone who has taken advantage of something only meant for them. This type of hiker could simply be a passenger in a car driven to town to be considered supported. However, most of the time this hiker has a team that is supporting them. I have seen supported hikers carry close to nothing on them and at practically each trailhead their team is there to support them with food, water, ice, a place to sit, a roller pad to loosen muscles and even massages. Additionally, at the end of the hiking day, these hikers are driven to a hotel and dropped off to rest and continue their journey the next day. The final group, unsupported hikers, appears to be an impossible task, as they can only hike the trek with what they take with them, excluding filling up water at natural sources. With the Florida Trail thru-hike being over 1,100 miles, this seems unattainable, for now. Perhaps someday, we will see an unsupported Florida Trail thru-hiker complete their journey after only eating pine bark, dandelions, ants, and green briar.

The hikers that take on the journey of a thru-hike on the Florida Trail and are motivated to get recognition from their peers can compete for the FKT. These fastest known times are recorded on www.fastestknowntime.com by a panel of peers. It is done on the honor system, and there is trust that no hiker is cheating. The hikers will announce their intentions and then keep track of their time and locations via different GPS devices. Many of these hikers will keep blogs chronicling their journey so that it offers more clout to their claim of a FKT. I have personally gotten to know a few of these hikers and feel that they are all very competitive, hard working and love the challenge of a task most others think is
impossible. We are still in the infancy with the sport of “competitive thru-hiking,” but the wonderful thing is that it is available to anyone that wants to try and move forward on the trail.

Beyond these traditional ways of being out on the trail, there are many unique ways that one may enjoy the beat of your own drummer. To mention a few are: fast-packers, ultra-hikers, slack-packers and mascot-hikers. Since a hiker has the freedom to enjoy the trail basically any way they want, some people want to be the first to do it in their own way. This can offer additional motivation during those difficult times when you are exhausted and may want to quit or it is hard to validate moving forward. This type of hiker can be a thru-hiker or just a day hiker. Fast-packers and ultra-hikers are very similar in the way that they both bring very light packs but the fast-packer is trying to physically run more than the ultra-hiker. Slack-packers are basically supported hikers in the way that they do not carry much weight on the trail and have supplies at the next trailhead readily furnished, whether it be by a team or a car they have parked that is full of supplies.

In my opinion, the most interesting type of hiker is the mascot-hiker. These amazing people take an interesting item with them on their journey. Occasionally, the item they bring becomes their new trail name. If you are not aware already, trail names are given to hikers out on the trail that a peer may give. It is a distinctive nickname that is usually based off of an occurrence that happens. For example, “Leaf Blower.” You may have guessed that this hiker carried a leaf blower on his thru hike. Originally, he had no other reason than to simply bring the item to his final destination. As it turned out, it became his motivation and he earned his trail name. The name “Cast Iron Skillet” was earned by another hiker, soon after, the item was dropped, due to how heavy it was, but the name stayed. Another hiker carried a WWE belt and was named “Champ.” This hiker wanted to take a picture of himself holding the belt with beautiful views in the background. Some items that hikers bring that you may not be as surprised about are harmonicas or guitars so that the hiker can enjoy making music after a long day’s hike.

Some mascot-hikers want to hike the trail with some additional items that can technically take them out of the hiking category. We have had thru-hikers claim the best thru-hike with a skateboard or roller skates. This can be a little easier to pull off than with a bicycle or horse because there is much of the Florida Trail that cannot be maneuvered by a bicyclist or equestrian. However, you could keep something such as a skateboard tied to the top of your backpack like thru-skater Moondog (@rooptown). He finds bringing this item can be really fun when hiking on the trail. As the hiker gets to a section of Rails to Trails that is paved, he then uses the skateboard or skates to achieve the miles at a different pace. Go the extra mile and turn your unique mascot way into a fundraiser for a specific cause like thru-skater Justin Bright (@justindoeslife) who has raised over $10,000 for Conservation Florida to preserve fragile ecosystems throughout the state.

Any way you look at it, there is no right or wrong way to enjoy a journey on the Florida Trail. One just has to get out there and keep moving forward. After we helped the Apalachee Chapter put on this year’s IDIADAKEDHIKE, we realized it was a great fundraising opportunity for our organization and a perfect way to encourage people to get out and enjoy the Florida Trail. This year, FTA will be working with RunBumTours.com to host the first supported 50K ultrahike on the Florida Trail. All proceeds from the event will go to the FTA. Come join us! For more information, check out: www.floridatrail.org/fta50k.
In 2020-2021, the long-distance hiking community experienced a huge spike in the phenomenon of endurance athletics. Left and right, hikers were achieving Fastest Known Time (FKT) records on popular routes like the John Muir Trail, as well as lesser known trails and unique routes. Women have taken it upon themselves to claim those records in higher numbers than ever. The team at Fastest Known Time reported that women set 903 FKTs in 2021. Just within the first quarter of 2022, women have achieved 127 FKTs. A movement is emerging for women to “claim space on the trails.” This is the motto and call-to-action of the Women Who FKT Project, a group of women based in the Pacific Northwest who strive to flip gendered statistics and encourage women to set a majority of FKTs on the boards in 2022.

As this style of hiking has gained in popularity, so too has the Florida Trail. While many women have tackled thru-hikes on the Florida Trail, with Solange Wiznia being the first female thru-hiker in 1994, no speed records had been recorded.

This year, two women set their sights on the charts, and with extraordinary ambition and effort, made their mark on the history of the Florida Trail by setting new speed records in the women’s category. While they share ambition and charisma, their hiking styles, approaches, and perspectives make for unique tales of perseverance, self-awareness, and the power of aligning our behavior with our values.

Shayna “Splash” Kott is a self-described “simple human,” but her record-setting hike suggests otherwise. She emphasizes the mental fortitude that propelled her through challenging moments during her FKT thru-hike of the Florida Trail, and offers a bold perspective that we can all learn from, regardless of our goals.

I first met Shayna in pre-pandemic 2020 while we were both thru-hiking the Florida Trail for the first time. I was hiking with a cluster of folks through Big Cypress Swamp and I happened to be the only woman amidst a group of men. A few hundred yards behind us, I caught a glimpse of a pink baseball cap meandering around the dwarf cypress trees. At that moment, I was stoked to see another woman on the trail. She introduced herself as Splash, and I peppered her with questions about her previous long-distance hikes since I was new to the thru-hiking scene and had primarily seen male representation in the hiking world.

I remember being impressed that Splash was rocking 30 mile days once we hit Ocala National Forest, so I wasn’t surprised when she an-
nounced her intentions to set a self-supported FKT in 2022. I caught up with Shayna via email in the springtime once her record was verified and officially posted on the boards.

Although Shayna grew up in Florida, she never imagined hiking the Florida Trail. “I thought you must be some kind of crazy to do an extended hike in Florida, but I kept hearing more about it and I knew if other people could do it, I could too.” After tackling the Appalachian Trail, Vermont’s Long Trail, and with a thru-hike of the Florida Trail already under her belt, the possibility of chasing the FKT tugged at Shayna constantly until she finally decided to go for it. Shayna opted for a self-supported thru-hike, meaning she could not accept help from individuals or services that wouldn’t be available to the public. She sent herself resupply packages and restocked at gas stations along the way.

I followed her journey on social media and kept tabs on her Garmin live tracking page. When she shared that she’d made it through Big Cypress National Preserve, starting at the Southern terminus at 3:46am and reaching I-75 by 7:24pm the same day, I was floored.

Shayna was candid about her struggles on social media, and I admired her authenticity. Spectators in the hiking scene often see photos of smiling faces at the trail termini, but rarely get a glimpse of the physical and mental strife underlying a bold FKT attempt. In real time, I watched those low moments evolve into wisdom borne from motivating herself a thousand times a day. More than a self pep-talk, she dubbed those moments pep-yells. “I worked myself up about certain sections, but at the end of the day, it was just me out there and I was the only one that was getting myself through. To illustrate, I was honestly downright scared to do Bradwell Bay alone, which turned out to be an unfounded fear and that day turned out to be one of my favorites.”

Through some pretty gorey blisters and muscular aches, Shayna adopted a practice of acute self-awareness and discipline that powered her through rough moments on the trail. “This experience showed me how we can be unstoppable and stronger than we believe. I was blown away by how quickly my body was willing to adapt to whatever I threw at it. Strangely enough, I experienced an odd disconnect of body and mind. It was like my body and my mind were two separate beings that were fighting for control, and when I pushed hard enough and my mind won, it was like something clicked. My body would now listen to whatever my mind told it to do as long as it had fuel for the fire.”

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When she reached the highest point on the Florida Trail (a whopping 272 feet, just 100 miles from the northern terminus) Shayna shared this sentiment: “Comfort slaves the unknown into just a dream.” I asked her to elaborate:

“I thought about how hiking follows the routine of moving to the next comfort: the next break spot, the next snack, water, camp for the night, the next town day, etc. And it got me thinking about people who may never fulfill their dream of a long distance hike, or any intimidating goal, because they aren’t willing to take the risk. I believe people can really set their dreams free by denying themselves certain comforts that they once thought were absolutely essential. There is a level of physical and mental performance that we will never know unless we stop dreaming and make it happen, and think a good place to start is making ourselves uncomfortable.

Amy Valentine Ansbaugh took an entirely different path to achieve the women’s supported Fastest Known Time on the Florida Trail, both in her athletic approach and her choice to utilize a support crew. She became an avid runner at the age of 40, and her feet carried her to the world of trail running during the Covid-19 pandemic. She began running ultramarathons and became interested in the world of endurance sports, as well as the sub-culture of runners and hikers that attempt speed records. At 48 years old, she set her sights on the women’s speed record that had not yet been established on the Florida Trail. “The motivation behind the FKT attempt was a culmination of many inner thoughts about how far I can take myself, how long my legs would last, and my competitive spirit.”

As a small business owner, Amy worked to ensure she’d have ample time to complete the trail. Running, rather than hiking, made sense on a limited time schedule. With the Florida Trail being her first long-distance route, Amy knew there’d be a significant learning curve. “Backpacking was out of the question,” she shared, a skill that takes years to develop, and setting up camp nightly would be a feat amidst high-mileage days. So Amy and her partner compromised by opting to use a recreational vehicle to support her journey. A 100k race on the Ocean to Lake trail served as a mock trial for the duo in June of 2021. “Dani crewed for me and earned her title of Crew Chief. That experience solidified our belief in our ability to tackle the whole trail.”

Before her trek began, Amy and her partner Dani put their heads together to determine the easiest way for Dani to meet Amy along the way while providing a comfortable place to rest each night. Since Amy knew that a healthy, nutritious diet would be key to her success, the ability to cook was a must-have. “Dani and I eat whole-food, plant-based, and due to some food allergies, regular hiking fare is not an option.” While driving the back roads of Georgia, Amy spotted a small school bus for sale on the side of the road. Converting the bus into a liveable space took several months and a lot of help from friends and family, namely Amy’s brother Chad. “He’s a pretty good wrench and worked his magic with our hand-drawn interior concepts, including fold-able bunk beds, allowing us to sleep more than just two people, and a portable toilet.” The outcome: a fully equipped mini-bus for Amy to achieve her dirtbag dreams.

Alongside her trail running regimen, Amy’s training also involved logging hours of trail maintenance on the Florida Trail and getting to know maintainers who are familiar with the woods. “During the months leading up to the start date, I spent time alternating between trail running and volunteering for work parties.” Amy noted, “work parties gave...
me the confidence to know that I can get through the Florida Trail.”

Despite being well-prepared to tackle the FKT, Amy experienced the same unexpected trail conditions as Shayna, and even had a run-in with Covid-19. When she and Dani began feeling sick, they tested positive for the virus and rested in the bus until they recovered. Amy shared that the couple had some tough conversations on how to manage being sick, and whether they should continue the journey. Although taking a break to recover from Covid was a setback, the rest allowed Amy’s tweaked leg muscle to heal.

Shin splints had developed after some hard miles along the Econfina tract. With less than 200 miles until she reached the north terminus, Amy had a harrowing experience: “Unexpected, chest high, choppy cold water near Rattlesnake Lake forced me to bushwhack through downed trees tangled with dense and thorny regrowth to find a way to circumvent the unmapped body of water without having to backtrack for miles. The temperature had dropped rapidly from storms that were rolling in from the west. Pure adrenaline from survivalist mode sent me hurdling fallen tree trunks and staying upright while racing to get my body temperature back up. I gave no thought to anything except getting to dry warmth. If ever there was a time that I thought I could die alone in the woods, this was it. The only thing that kept me going was knowing that I was so close.”

In a state of delirious bliss, Amy reached the finish line in 45 days and eight hours, just two days before Shayna. The two women met each other along the trail and Amy cheered Shayna through her last few miles. At the time of this article, Amy’s route is being verified by Fastest Known Time and is expected to be published once all the data is reviewed. As she reflected on her experience of achieving the supported FKT, Amy remarked on how her relationship with her partner grew, and how the love and support from friends and family contributed to her success. The couple is already scheming their next adventure together.

It is easy to applaud and celebrate these incredible women who hike mind-boggling miles at a fast pace, set extreme goals, and top the charts. Yet, what is more captivating is the way women in the outdoors community inspire others to simply get outside. When people see their identity reflected in the trail community, that supports a positive perception of who is a trail user. Representation in the outdoors matters. Through their record-setting FKT journeys, Shayna and Amy fostered skills and confidence to turn their ambitions into reality, while also showing the world what women are capable of.

Amy Valentine Ansbaugh is an avid runner who owns Atticus Printing in Oviedo alongside her partner, Dani. When she’s not in the shop or on the trail, she gardens and cooks almost every meal to remain energetic and injury-free. She is new to the Florida Trail Association, and aspires to be an avid volunteer. Amy holds the women’s supported Fastest Known Time on the Florida Trail (45 days and eight hours).

Amy’s partner Dani surprises her on the trail to offer some encouragement.
In 2012, Sean Gobin returned home from deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan as a Marine tank commander. As a means of raising money for disabled veterans, he convinced a fellow veteran to hike the 2,168-mile Appalachian Trail with him. Along the way, Sean realized that the experience was also helping him decompress from his service.

Historically, military units could spend months marching home from war. During this journey, they would process and come to terms with their wartime experiences, but in today’s age of modern transportation, military personnel can find themselves home within a few days of serving in a combat zone.

Since 2001, over 3 million veterans have returned home from war but many of them have never transitioned from their experiences. The Department of Veteran Affairs estimates that up to 20% of post 9/11 veterans suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Recognizing the therapeutic effects of long distance hiking, Sean founded Warrior Expeditions in hopes of helping other veterans “walk off the war.” The organization supports combat veterans transitioning from their military service by sponsoring their participation in a long distance outdoor expedition. This includes gear, equipment, supplies, and community support. Warrior Expeditions has since created the Warrior Hike, Warrior Bike and Warrior Paddle Programs to help veterans transition from their wartime experiences.

The program has facilitated veterans on thru-hikes of National Scenic Trails throughout the country. So far, the program has provided support for veterans hiking six of the eleven National Scenic Trails as well as two other long distance trails – the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, Continental Divide Trail, the Arizona Trail, Ice Age Trail, Florida Trail, as well as the Buckeye Trail and the Mountains to Sea Trail. Warrior Expeditions provides veterans with everything required to complete a long distance outdoor expedition at no cost to the veteran.

According to Warrior Expeditions the qualitative impacts of one of their expeditions are:

**Contemplation:** During their expedition, veterans have the opportunity to decompress from their military service and come to terms with their wartime experiences.

**Camaraderie:** Veterans experience their journey with the camaraderie of other veterans who understand the challenges of transitioning from military service to civilian life.

**Community:** Interaction with community supporters facilitates a veteran’s reintegration into society, restores their faith in humanity, and builds a network of life-long friendships and relationships.

The 2022 class of Warrior Hikes veterans represented the Army, Navy, and Air Force branches of the U.S. Military. In this article we hear from Dennis Gates aka “TURKish.”

I was born in Frankfurt Germany in 1976. My father was American and my mother was Turkish. This was where my trail name of TURKish originated. It was given to me when I thru-hiked the Appalachian trail in 2019 and has stuck with me ever since.

After bouncing around the world as an Army Brat, I decided to join the U.S. Air Force at the ripe old age of 17. I began my career as a Security Specialist guarding nuclear missile silos in North Dakota for my first few years. After that I was assigned to bases located in Turkey, Greece, Wyoming and then I was selected to be an Air Force Basic Military Training Instructor (MTI) at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. This was my favorite job while serving as I was given Joe, and I gave them back G.I. Joe a few months later. The lasting impact I had on the thousands of recruits is something of a legacy. I really appreciate being admired and remembered so many years later.

After my tour as an MTI, I returned to the operational Air Force as Security Forces and got stationed in Georgia, Germany, Arkansas, California, and Maryland. It was during my tenure as Security Forces...
that I was selected for multiple deployments to Iraq, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan. All in all, I was deployed to combat zones for roughly five and a half years of my career.

Living in the Washington D.C./Maryland/Virginia area gave me a lot of beautiful places to get back out into nature and hike and relax. I would visit national parks and state parks and hike for hours on end. I even went out for a few days to a week at times just to reset my mind and escape the daily onslaught of emails, phone calls and text messages. It was after just a few of these weekend getaways that I realized that hiking was extremely beneficial to my mental health and wellbeing. Not to mention the exercise I was getting trekking to remote locations that are not normally accessible by vehicle.

I made up my mind and did some research on gear, clothing, and what to expect if I were to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. I pulled the trigger and purchased my one-way train ticket to Georgia and started my hike. Since this article is not about the AT, I'll just say it was a life changing experience and I was hooked. I wanted more.

I moved to Florida right before the start of the pandemic in 2019. While self-isolating, spending countless hours online finding activities to do nearby, I found local Facebook hiking clubs and groups. I received some recommendations on day hikes ranging from Southern Florida to Central and Northern Florida. All were beautiful and completely different from the terrain I traversed on the AT.

Trying to find more trails to hike I wandered across the Warrior Expedition’s website. I read about all the trails the organization offered combat veterans to “hike off the war” and was interested in seeing if I would make the cut to be selected for their program. Warrior Expeditions not only offered hikes, but also paddle and bicycling expeditions for the veterans. So I filled out the application and waited patiently. January of 2021 I was selected as a Warrior Expedition hiker for the Florida Trail…but had to wait until 2022 to complete the thru-hike as the pandemic put a halt to just about the entire world until vaccines could be available for everyone.

January 10th of 2022, myself and two other veterans (one Army and one Navy) arrived in Naples to start the Florida Trail kick off and get our gear and any pertinent information needed for the trail. The Warrior Expedition staff and founder were there to walk us through all the equipment they supplied us for the expedition from Big Cypress to Fort Pickens. We trekked our way through the swamps along with Michelle, our Warrior Expeditions overwatch to make sure we did know what we were doing. The swamp was brutal and very wet…but it was supposedly the hardest portion of the trail. Three days later each of us slowly emerged out of the swamp near the I-75 rest stop and the Warrior Expeditions vans were there waiting for us. It felt so good to be on dry land again.

The Warrior Expeditions organization had preselected community support stops along the entire trail ranging about every 100 or so miles. One of the biggest supporters was the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Each of the VFWs and the individual supporters took us in like we were family. They picked us up from trail heads, drove us to town for resupplies and hotel stays, laundry and most of all…showers and real food.

After the first week, the three of us veterans separated due to different hiking abilities but we kept in touch via text messages. I never got to see Flash (Navy veteran) after Big Cypress but did run into Stew (Army veteran) every few days up until the second week on the trail. I was feeling bad, as we were no longer together as a group, but I was feeling better mentally already. There’s just something about being immersed in nature that resets my mind and washes away any mental fatigue that builds up after time; I am sure it was doing the same for both Stew and Flash.

I was very grateful to Warrior Expeditions for supporting me on the Florida Trail. In fact, if it was not for the logistics, community supporters, and the overwhelming support of the staff… I would have had a much different outcome on the trail. I made a few friends on the trail but stayed mainly to myself as I do not fare very well in large groups of people.

I was somewhere near Ocala one day when I received a message from the Warrior Expedition staff informing me that I was the last of the Florida Trail Warriors still on trail. I was sad to hear the others had to get off trail for their own reasons. Now I had to continue on and be the one in three that finished the
I didn't have any plans to stop, as I normally do my very best to finish what I started. This was a bit of a challenge now that I knew all eyes were on me. I thought to myself, “I thru-hiked the AT, I can finish this trail as well.”

There were plenty of obstacles that tried their best to get me off trail, both physical and mental. I had the wrong type of shoes to begin with and ended up with blisters so bad I could barely walk, but that was remedied by the Warrior Expeditions staff with new shoes that had wider toe boxes and new sets of shoes every 500 miles! For the most part, the weather was decent the entire hike… with the exception of the tornadoes while hiking the canals. Then there were forest fires that forced hikers to reroute miles away from the trail. Finally, some areas were flooded out causing more reroutes. I would rather do the extra miles and be safe than sorry. Unfortunately, these extra road miles were starting to hit mentally and physically.

I understood from the very beginning that there were going to be more road miles than the Appalachian Trail, but I did not think that I would be just a few inches or feet from the side of speeding cars, dump trucks, and semi-trailers in certain sections. There were several times I had to completely jump out of the way of vehicles that veered off road and came right at me. This was a bit unnerving and was stressful as I was trying to hike off the war and not get killed by a distracted driver on their cell phone. Then there was the impact, no pun intended, of hiking on pavement for extended periods which also took its toll on my feet and knees.

I was not complaining, as I knew what I was getting myself into when I wanted to thru-hike the Florida Trail. I knew it was not going to be a walk in the park. If it was, everyone would have done it by now. I knew I was going to “enjoy the suck” as we used to say in the military. Even though some situations might seem as if they are the end of the world…things would always get better in the end if I kept a good mental outlook for the future. This held true to my thru-hike on the Florida Trail.

I was in awe when I trekked through the Suwannee River, Little Big Econ, Eglin Air Force Base, and the Gulf Islands National Seashore sections of the trail. It was the most beautiful end to a very long journey that spanned from the swamps in Big Cypress to the white sandy beaches of Fort Pickens.

I finished the thru-hike totaling 47 days, with me taking two zero days where I didn’t want to move a single muscle in my body. Now that I look back, I should have taken a few more zeros and smelled the roses.

Lastly, I will remember all the hikers, Warrior Expeditions staff, community supporters, scenic views, the occasional trail magic, and generous trail angels that I met during my journey for the rest of my life. The Florida Trail is a very unique long trail that has changed me for the better. I am proud to say “I thru-hiked the whole Florida Trail.”

My mental health is better than it was when I began and dropping some unwanted Covid weight I gained over the past few years was an added bonus.

I don’t know where my next thru-hike will be, but I am thinking of completing the Camino de Santiago in the near future when travel to Europe is more accessible without all the restrictions that currently make traveling abroad difficult.
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Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at floridatrail.org. Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

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