

Trail runners



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

One of the things I have paid attention too lately is thru hiking and the strong people who take part in this outdoor activity. My wife of many years says she wishes I would pay attention to the some of the domestic issues around the house. I tried to explain to her that those issues don't particularly interest me, thereby explaining my lack of attention. She went off on one of her tangents, and in the interest of marital bliss, I went back to reading about thru hikers.

Thru hikers are folks who hike a long-distance trail from one end to the other in a single continuous journey. They complete the hike in a single hiking season, and they carry all their own gear, often camping along the way. The focus of these people is to complete the entire trail.

The trails these people chose are not your typical weekend hiking trails; they are the real deal. AN example would be the Appalachian Trail (AT) which

starts at Springer Mountain, Georgia and terminates at Mount Katahdin, Maine. The trail extends approximately 2200 miles and passes through 14 states. Be sure to tell the spouse you won't be home for supper if you embark on this journey.

What really grabs my limited attention span is the type of footwear these people use. Pictures all show these people wearing athletic looking footwear. I had halfway expected them all to be wearing at least mid-length lace up hiking boots.

Admittedly, I was in my teens before I owned my first real hiking/hunting boots. They were a pair of Herman Survivor Boots. If I recall correctly, we ordered them from an ad in the back of a Field & Stream magazine, for an amount of money equal to the net proceeds of two months of my paper route.

Prior to that, my outdoor footwear consisted of a pair of PF Flyers tennis shoes. My grandmother bought me a pair every spring, one. full size too big (you'll grow into them). These ugly canvas shoes were the ultimate outdoor shoe, and just about every kid I knew had a pair. We wore them until they rotted off our feet, which was usually around the time winter hit.

Modern thru hiker footwear has shifted away from the traditional, heavy leather boots toward trail running shoes, which is a

specialized type of athletic shoe. As of 2024, roughly 86% of the thru hikers on the Appalachian Trail chose trail runners over hiking boots.

The reasons vary, but one is the reduction of weight. Trail runners are significantly lighter, reducing leg fatigue, especially when hiking 20 plus miles a day. A good pair of boots weigh in just north of three pounds a pair, while trail shoes may go just over a pound a pair. Weight is not your friend in any outdoor activity, so any reduction you can make could only serve to improve the outcome. There is an old saying that "a pound of weight on your feet is equal to five pounds on your back."

A study conducted by the U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine found that even tiny increases in the weight of footwear could add up to significantly higher energy expenditures in people when walking or running. The consensus of the studies concluded that carrying an



I spent 10 days hunting along the Parana river in Argentina, and the trail runners were far superior to leather boots in the slop. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

amount of weight on the feet required between 4.7 and 6.4 times as much energy as carrying that same weight on one's back.

According to that science, swapping out the three pound hiking boots for a one-pound pair of trail shoes would be the equivalent of losing from four, and up to a dozen pounds of weight from your pack. Furthermore, those lace up heavy hiking boots will tire your legs quicker and make your feet clumsier as they tire, leading to a fall or risk of ankle injury.

Another reason to consider trail runners is that they are faster drying and breath better than the old leather boots. Unlike waterproof boots that can stay wet for days once soaked, trail runners are designed to drain and dry quickly.

Don't worry about skimpy soles either. The modern trail runners have very traction minded outsoles, with deep lugs for grip in mud, rock, and loose dirt. Many use Vibram Megagrip soles. They also have harden plates in the midsole to protect feet from sharp rocks. While these shoes may appear skimpy because of their lightweight, don't be fooled. They are very tough and durable. They use reinforced mesh uppers and protective toe caps that are far more durable than standard

running shoes.

One argument I threw out there was the protection to my shins from thorns, lamb's tongue, and various blood-letting vegetation that inhabits the country I hike in. The answer to that is a pair of lightweight gaiters. Not only will gaiters keep the biting vegetation off your shins, but they will also keep your feet dry by repelling the rain and dew from the brush as you walk through it.

One thing the trail shoes will not do is keep your feet warm. For the late season or winter type outings, you are still going to need those insulated lace-up hiking boots. I have boots with varying amounts of insulation depending on the activity and how cold it will be outside.

Boots take a long time to properly break-in. Until they are just right for your feet, boots can be a blister nightmare. Most trail shoes do not require the extensive break-in compared to boots. Overall, the lighter shoe will be kinder to your feet as far as blisters go.

The main drawback of using trail runners is durability. Thru hikers often go through 4 pairs of shoes over a 2,000 plus mile hike, as the lightweight material wear out faster than heavy leather boots, so there is a tradeoff. I have several pairs of Danner boots

that are a decade old.

Salomon makes several trail runners, like the Aero Blaze and the XA Pro. My personal favorite is the Hoka Speedgoat series. I have three pair of these, and they stand up to abuse very well. One pair has over 700 miles on it, been on safari in Africa for 15 days, and is still going strong.

For me, the tradeoff is worth it. Lighter, great cushioning, and long-term comfort. I have made the switch to trail runners, with the exception being cold weather. Perhaps science will come up with a lightweight insulated pair of trail runners, instead of fooling around collecting rocks on Mars. While they are at it, let's get science to figure out how to control the weather.

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These are my new hunting/hiking/backpacking shoes for everything except snow. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)