

The Search for Solitude: Lonely and Long in 2020

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In 2017, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy recorded 1,173 people as finishing the Appalachian Trail, and 1,013 of them were thru-hikers. On the Pacific Crest Trail, it's just as crowded. The Pacific Crest Trail Association recorded 1,169 people as finishing this trail in 2018. Backpackers who seek solitude avoid the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails, yet lesser-known long trails can't offer solitude anymore either. About 300 people finish hiking the Tahoe Rim Trail each year, while about 400 finish the Colorado Trail. Solitude on the John Muir Trail, Long Trail, Wonderland Trail, or Arizona Trail? No.

Do not despair, ye solitude-seekers. Many long trails still see a fraction of the above use. They're in the East, they're in the West. They're in the mountains, they're in the flats. They're in the deserts, they're in the Northern Forest. Finding a long trail that offers solitude is not difficult, and the inventory of long trails is increasing. Below are ten lonely paths, ranging from 164 to 4,600 miles, that see fewer than fifty completers each year. This is where to go for solitude in 2020 and beyond.

1. Ozark Highlands Trail

Distance: 164 miles

Location: Arkansas

Thru-hiking season: Year-round

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than fifty

More: ozarkhighlandstrail.com

Construction of the Ozark Highlands Trail was begun by the U.S. Forest Service in 1977, the Ozark Highlands Trail Association was founded in 1981, and this trail was first thru-hiked in 1984 by Tim Ernst. A self-described "genuine trail nut," he had previously hiked the entire trail's forthcoming route in 1975, bushwhacking much of the way. In 2005, I included the Ozark Highlands Trail in my *Thru Hiker's Guide to America*. It was then 164 miles long, and some people, including Ernst, still regard this as its full length. However, many backpackers are

reaching the eastern terminus at Woolum ford and continuing on the 43-mile Buffalo River Trail. This 207-mile route will one day be part of the much longer Ozark Trail, which will stretch to St. Louis. Thru-hiker statistics are difficult to pinpoint. Ernst, author of *Ozark Highlands Trail Guide*, admitted, "I doubt there are any records kept about thru-hikes in Arkansas, so anything would just be a wild ass guess." When the Ozark Highlands Trail Association was asked if crowding was an issue, they boasted, "Not at all! You will seldom see other hikers along the trail at any time of the year."

2. Cohos Trail

Distance: 165 miles

Location: New Hampshire

Thru-hiking season: May to October

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than fifty

More: cohostrail.org

Compared to the Appalachian and Pacific Crest trails, it's a short trail. But it's a fine one. Pronounced "COE-ahs," the Cohos Trail traverses northernmost New Hampshire from the Canadian border to the southern tip of the Presidential Range. During its course, it visits forty summits, enters three river watersheds, and reaches a handful of lakes and waterfalls. Its founder, Kim Robert Nilsen, dubbed it "a no-nonsense wilderness route," a fitting description. Today the Cohos Trail Association encourages hikers to "get out there and have a great time with the moose." A modest amount of hikers have done so. During 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018, there was an average of twenty recorded thru-hikers. As Nilsen wrote, "If ending up in nowhere land on the border of another country is your idea of a wild time, then the Cohos Trail is your pathway to heaven." This Northern Forest trail climbs 30,000 vertical feet, and Susan Kenn was first to thru-hike it back in 2000.

3. *Ouachita Trail*

Distance: 223 miles

Location: Arkansas, Oklahoma

Thru-hiking season: Year-round

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than twenty

More: friendsoftheouachita.org

Pronounced "Wah-SHE-tuh," the Ouachita Trail was conceived in 1971, completed in 1981, and first thru-hiked, by Jim Rawlins, in 1983. It spans the Ouachita Mountains, and 192 of its 223 miles are within 1.8-million-acre Ouachita National Forest. Nearly 180 miles are in Arkansas, while the rest are in Oklahoma. Elevations range from 270 feet at Pinnacle Mountain State Park to 2,610 feet on Rich Mountain, a peak that more than fifty planes have crashed into. Two wilderness areas are traversed. Tim Ernst, author of *Ouachita Trail Guide*, wrote that "only a handful" of thru-hikers tackle this trail each year. Terrain is exceedingly rocky, summers exceedingly hot. As Rawlins wrote in Ernst's guidebook, "Unlike the Ozark Highlands Trail, which goes up and down all day long, the Ouachita Trail will climb to a hogback ridge and stay there for hours. So knowing where the water is... and when the springs and creeks are dry, can make a hike one to remember, or one you would like to forget!"

4. *Trans Adirondack Route*

Distance: 238 miles

Location: New York

Thru-hiking season: May to October

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than ten

More: transadk.com

As the East's newest and wildest pathway, the Trans Adirondack Route was developed in 2010 by your humble writer and opened in 2013. This petite route quickly earned a nickname, "The Triple Crown Crusher," due to it defeating three Triple Crown hikers. Overall, thru-hiker success rate is 56 percent. Consisting of 188 miles of hiking trails, 39 miles of road walking, and 11 miles of off-trail travel, it's those 11 miles that hikers find most challenging. If you're looking for real

wilderness, though, the work is worth it. As the only two-time thru-hiker, during both of my thru-hikes I saw no other hikers on the northernmost forty miles and southernmost forty miles. Primarily a lowland path, the Trans Adirondack Route reaches three summits and is content for the rest of the time to visit lakes and rivers. Climbing is 25,000 vertical feet end-to-end. Highlights of this route include the fifth highest peak in New York, the largest wilderness area in the Northeast, and the longest river entirely within New York.

5. Palmetto Trail

Distance: 500 miles

Location: South Carolina

Thru-hiking season: Year-round

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than twenty

More: palmettoconservation.org

Established in 1994, the Palmetto Trail stretches from the Blue Ridge Mountains to the Intracoastal Waterway, taking in all of South Carolina and offering an impressive amount of diversity. Approximately 400 marked miles are in place. These 400 miles are broken into 29 sections, the longest being the 47-mile Swamp Fox Passage. About 350 miles are dedicated to foot travel. The remaining 150 run on greenways, sidewalks, bikeways, and dirt and paved roads that connect local, state, county, and federal lands. As the Palmetto Conservation Foundation put it, long-distance adventurers will experience "Revolutionary War battlefields, Native American paths, urban to rural, swamps to mountains, maritime to sandhills to piedmont, and much more."

6. Hayduke Trail

Distance: 812 miles

Location: Arizona, Utah

Thru-hiking season: March to May, September to November

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than forty

More: hayduketrail.org

Named for Ed Abbey's *The Monkeywrench Gang* character George Washington Hayduke III, the Hayduke Trail links six national parks – Arches, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef, Bryce Canyon, Grand Canyon, and Zion – and is the toughest hike within this article. Conceived by Mike Coronella and Joe Mitchell in 1998, these founders offered a no-nonsense description of their route. It is "not intended to be the most direct way through the region, nor is it always the easiest or even the most logical route...." They summed this route with two words: "extremely challenging." Waterless sections surpass thirty miles, the route follows no official trails, and resupply points are sparse. This route was first thru-hiked, by Brian Frankle, in 2005. In a 2019 *The Trek* article, Megan Mondor enticed hikers, describing the Hayduke Trail as being "Where canyons and wind-worn slickrock serve as a playground, amid a backdrop of innumerable towering natural arches and spires, and a rim to rim traverse of the Grand Canyon is the icing on the cake."

7. Mountains to Sea Trail

Distance: 1,175 miles

Location: North Carolina

Thru-hiking season: Year-round

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than ten

More: mountainstoseatrail.org

The Mountains to Sea Trail is one of a handful of long trails that traverse all of a given geopolitical region. It stretches from the Tennessee border to the Outer Banks – all of the Tarheel State. Approximately 700 miles are open, and leaders and members of Friends of the Mountains to Sea Trail are doing their best to take the remaining 475 miles into the backcountry. The trail was first thru-hiked in 1997, when Allen DeHart and Alan Householder backpacked it. DeHart went on to found Friends of the Mountains to Sea Trail. Householder served as this organization's treasurer and projects director. Use remains sparse. Recorded trail completers in 2015: 13. In 2016: 14. In 2017: 14. In 2018: 11. In 2019: 8. About 65 percent were thru-hikers. During end-to-end hikes, backpackers will climb eight peaks taller than 6,000 feet, including the highest peak in North Carolina (6,684-foot Mount Mitchell) and the highest peak in Tennessee (6,643-foot Clingmans Dome). They'll also cross three national forests, three national parks, and six state parks.

8. Ice Age Trail

Distance: 1,200 miles

Location: Wisconsin

Thru-hiking season: May to October

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than ten

More: iceagetrail.org

Much like the Buckeye Trail of similar length, about half of the Ice Age Trail's 1,200 miles are dedicated hiking trails. The other 600 follow canal towpaths, dirt and paved roads, sidewalks, and bike trails. The Ice Age Trail Alliance finds this combination appealing. "Most of the blazed Ice Age Trail segments fit hikers' ideas of a traditional, off-road hiking experience. Some segments, however, lead hikers right down the main streets of Wisconsin communities. This is by design – the Ice Age Trail is meant to connect people and communities." Following the terminal moraine of the last Ice Age, this trail traverses 31 of Wisconsin's 72 counties and visits local, state, and federal lands, the biggest and most popular being 1.5-million-acre Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest. During their thru-hikes, backpackers can take a ten-mile-long side trail to the highest point in Wisconsin, 1,952-foot Timms Hill. The first person to traverse the Ice Age Trail was James Staudacher, who backpacked it in 1979 when he was a 20-year-old student at Marquette University.

9. Buckeye Trail

Distance: 1,444 miles

Location: Ohio

Thru-hiking season: April to November

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than ten

More: buckeyetrail.org

The Buckeye Trail is, by far, the longest of three long-distance loop trails in the United States, the others being the 165-mile Tahoe Rim Trail and 95-mile Wonderland Trail. Crossing nearly half of Ohio's 88 counties, this trail traverses a mix of private, local, state, and federal land ranging from cornfields to National Park Service units. A 500-mile section serves as part of the North

Country Trail discussed below. The Buckeye Trail is the least-wild pathway shared within this article. Approximately 500 miles are set off-road. Surfaces include hiking trails, canal towpaths, rail trails, bike paths, and dirt and paved roads. The Buckeye Trail was conceived in 1958, the Buckeye Trail Association was formed the following year, and the trail was deemed "complete" in 1980, though improvements are still taking place. Highlights include the Hocking Hills of the Allegheny Plateau, Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Lake Erie, the Miami and Erie Canal, the Wabash and Erie Canal, and the Ohio and Erie Canal.

10. North Country Trail

Distance: 4,600 miles

Location: New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota

Thru-hiking season: April to October

Average annual thru-hikers: Fewer than ten

More: northcountrytrail.org

The North Country Trail Association let prospective thru-hikers know of the stout test they'll face. "With a length of 4,600 miles and lots of connecting road walks, pulling off a thru-hike of the NCT is a big challenge." If a thru-hiker averages 22 miles a day, that's still a seven-month trip. More than 3,000 miles of trail, which reach nearly 200 pieces of public land, are in place. The best sections center on two national wildlife refuges, four National Park Service units, ten national forests, and nearly fifty state forests. The first section hiker was Peter Wolfe, who completed the trail in 1980. The first thru-hiker was Ed Talone, who tackled this massive path in 1994. As of 2014, there were thirteen recorded end-to-enders, which includes thru-hikers and section hikers. Overall, there have been fewer than twenty end-to-enders. No one was recorded as completing the trail in 2019, and it's predicted that in 2020 one or two hikers will finish this trail, the longest of the country's eleven national scenic trails.