



Don Huntley—photo

# Hiking Backwards

Don Huntley

*You can only go halfway into the darkest forest;  
then you are coming out the other side.*

— Chinese Proverb

**I**t's Saturday morning, the sky is blue, the temperature moderate, and the threatening weather is still 2 cloudless days away—perfect weather for a hike on the Appalachian Trail. As I pass the North Georgia town of Dillard, a lampshade bounds off a furniture-laden pickup and then under my car. Fearing the rest of the lamp or, perhaps, something larger, I floor it and once again see a clear road ahead and the Carolina mountains beyond. I'm headed to Deep Gap, which is situated on a mountain ridge overlooking a valley and source of the Nantahala. My planned 2-day, 26-mile hike will follow this ridge that, according the topographical map, will be a moderately difficult within its 4200 to 5200-foot range.

After a year of watching dust settle on my untouched REI gear, I decided that now is the time: no more waiting for the

right season, the fit body, or for agreeable friends; I would do this alone and suffer the pains of a body stressed to its limit. Having backpacked only once in the last 15 years, I have every right to be apprehensive; but oddly enough, I'm not. I feel energized and positive that all will go well. Besides, why worry? Surely the hoards of Summer hikers will be there to keep me company, and should—God forbid—something happen to me, such as being attacked by a black bear, a wild boar, or snake, they will be there—no sweat.

In recent years, my attention to detail has gradually given way to seat-of-the-pants intuition. The gratifying “one glance at the map tells me what I need to know” is either seated in a sense of self-assurance gained with years of experience, or it's just plain laziness. Either way, it doesn't serve well when trying to discern subtleties in maps and written directions. So, some 2 hours after my anticipated arrival at the trail, I'm still driving up and down a one-lane mountain road (steep drop on one side) and searching for the elusive trail. Finally, I give up and pull onto a grassy area that seems to match my trail guide's description of the AT parking area. Not described in the book, however, are the two men with their small camper, two trucks, a couple of cheap lawn chairs, and a 50-gallon fire barrel that

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now occupy this area.

Definitely, these are local boys. “Hey,” I say. “How you doing? Do you mind if I park here? I think this is parking for the Appalachian Trail.” “Nawp, tit’s not,” says the older one. “Trail’s up the road,” pointing his hand in a direction I’d already been. Explaining that I’d been that way, I scratch my head in defeat. I remove my hat and ask, “Do you mind showing me on my map?” They grunt their approval; and so, I pull out the topographical map and lay it on the old man’s truck. As we gather around the truck’s hood, they ask if I’m familiar with such places as Pickens Nose Gap or Big Butt Mountain. I say (as if this isn’t blatantly obvious by this point), “I’ve never been here before.” We continue to ponder the gaps, ridges, and small roads that snake their way through the contour lines of the map. With growing confusion, I try to sort out this jumbled and convoluted map; and then, as though a veil is lifted, I understand. My God, I’m on the opposite end of the trail! This is where I meant to camp!

I feel somewhat embarrassed with my incompetence (I mean, jeez, the wrong end of the frick’n trail!); but in general, I’m relieved to find the trail is near and so I silently chart my new course. Folding the map, I offer my thanks and head back to my car. Before I can get in to drive away, the older one offers this parting warning: “You better watch out for them guys bear huntin’.” And while I can’t quite make out what he says next, I get the jest of it: something about dogs running bears through the woods. Oh, great, this is all I need: some frantic bear barreling down the trail towards me with a pack of dogs not far behind. As if this weren’t enough, he adds that someone killed a large rattlesnake up on the trail this morning.

With my unblemished and crisply new pack mounted securely on my back, I eagerly set out on the first leg of my journey up Albert Mountain. My neophyte eagerness, however, quickly gives way to, “oh, my God, what have I gotten myself into?” As if to rub it in, ahead I see two spry and attractive day-hikers strolling down the mountain. I slow my labored breathing down in a futile attempt to hide how ill prepared I am for this journey. When they stop to ask where I’m headed, I give up this pretense, inhale deeply, and say with pride, “I’m hiking to Deep Gap and back again.” With my change in plans, this was no longer true, but it was the only name my oxygen starved brain could summon. “All in one day?” they ask. Oh, what flattery; 25 miles in a single day, and it’s already noon! “No,” I say. “I’ll camp before I return.” Goodbyes are exchanged and I continue on, considering how nice it will be to see others on the trail.

At Albert’s peak, I climb a fire tower. This opens to a spectacular view: from the hazy blue and distant mountains of the southern skies, to the green rolling hills of my westward destination. Before I head on, I reach back for the larger of my two water bottles; it’s gone! Chagrined at my bad fortune, I consider and quickly drop the idea of heading back down this accursed mountain looking for it. No problem, one small bottle will do.

I slip and slide down the damp, boulder strewn west side of the mountain, hanging onto branches and small trees as I descend. I gain momentum and speed with my rising confidence, and just when I think I’ve got this licked, a damp moss-covered boulder proves too much: I slip, and careen to the left while hanging onto a worthless branch, finally landing on my



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butt and pack. A quick inventory reveals that except for a few scratches, nothing is hurt; and so, I resume my decent with my newly christened, earth-stained pack.

With Mt. Albert behind me, the trail levels out, allowing for a more leisurely stride. To my right and through the trees, I see the road, and a bit further, I see a small parking area, allowing easy access to the trail from the road. Still feeling the pains from Albert, I regretfully wonder, *Why didn’t I start here?* Close by is a parked truck, but no one in sight. Empty dog cages sit ominously on the truck’s bed. This is not a good sign. I think back when, a few years ago, a poor girl left her tent on the Appalachian Trail in Georgia for the morning’s first pee. Not more than 100 yards from her tent and the trail, she was shot by some idiot who thought she was a deer. As I consider this girl’s fate (she survived), I round a corner of the trail and see two dogs. While I’m no expert on hunting dogs, these are definitely hunting dogs. *Oh, my God!* The dogs freeze, and glare at me. One slouches slightly as if to jump. Do they consider me game? I quickly scan the nearby trees, checking for a treed bear. If only I had known it was hunting season, I would have worn orange. I’m really worried now, and I call out “Hello!” wondering if the hunters are nearby. “Hello,” again, but still no answer. I imagine a loud *blam!* aimed at me as the hunter recklessly rushes to make the kill before his quarry

escapes. Though I have an urge to run, reason prevails and I hurriedly walk away, hoping that these perplexed dogs will not follow.

The next few miles are uneventful, and are, in good measure, focused on my back. Efforts to adjust the pack make little difference. Occasional breaks help, but with my late start, they are short and limited to quick snacks and sips from my remaining water bottle. As I pass small, muddy springs, I consider using my water filter, but with the earlier loss of the wide-mouth water bottle, and my inexperience using the filter, I trudge on.

In time dreariness sets in. Even though I am hiking during the height of the afternoon, when one would expect an abundance of sun, there's a cool darkness to the trail. My assumption of a trail filled with Summer hikers has proved false; I haven't seen a soul since my encounter on Albert Mountain. It is eerily quiet, and I'm totally alone. I'm reminded of Stephen King's novel, *The Stand*, in which a rampant virus kills most life, including the birds. For the hikers in the story, the birdless landscape was a symbol of the desolation. Has something happened here? Where are the birds? Instead, I only hear my footsteps, and during the ascents, my pounding heart. At times my heartbeats are so loud that I mistake them for footsteps behind and turn, half expecting to see someone. *Thump, thump, thump!* Three beats per second, 180 per minute; is this too high?

After almost 5 hours on the trail, I finally encounter some hikers: first a couple with a large brown Lab—this dog nearly as big as my dog, Raz; then two couples struggling up a hill with two black Labs—“Is the shelter far?” they hopefully ask; then finally a couple with a very small dog. In amazement, I exclaim, “Gee, that's a small dog!” They explain, “We brought him to chase the bears away.” I'm heartened



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by these encounters, and feel lightened by this last touch of humor. The final approach to my destination at Beach Gap will certainly go quicker.

Beach Gap is perfect: a wide expanse of flat, rockless ground with multiple fire rings and a small spring nearby. I'm so relieved to be here that I don't bother taking my pack off. I just walk around in an exhausted stupor, trying to decide where to pitch my tent. A person nearby is setting up his tent; when I say “Hi,” he nearly jumps out of his shoes. I offer my apologies, and spend another few minutes shuffling around until I find the “perfect” spot. This is so much nicer than Mooney Gap, where I had initially planned to camp. This has worked out quite well.

Creeping shadows grow darker and spread with the approach of evening, gradually giving way to the shadowless time before dark. As I put the finishing touches on my camp, a cool fog floats down through the canopy of the enormous trees that surround and shelter Beach Gap. Exhausted and famished, I settle on a large fallen log to feast on my freeze-dried meal of chicken, tuna and noodles, washed down with instant tea, and capped off with a bar of semi-sweet chocolate. In ordinary times, it would hardly have been a meal of note, but at this moment, it's a feast from Heaven ■