



Pathfinder

It's a simple thing, really: a well-trod path through a place otherwise untouched, a scraggly aisle cut through a sun-dappled canopy. It's rudimentary and practical. It's a way through. But as the eight routes featured in these pages prove, an Arkansas biking trail can be far, far more than just a means to an end

Edited by Wyndham Wyeth

I'VE ALWAYS BEEN OF THE MIND THAT those who talk down about Arkansas have never actually set foot in the state. Surely, those folks have never been fortunate enough to see the unyielding natural beauty that abounds in this neck of the woods we call home.

When it comes to the great outdoors, the variety found in The Natural State is inexhaustible. From the Buffalo, the country's first national river, to our state's highest peak on Mount Magazine, and all manner of flora and fauna in between, the call of the Arkansas wild is difficult to resist.

But if you want to discuss Arkansas and its eminence in all things outside, you'd be remiss if you failed to address the hiking trails, those hand-cut paths through terrain both savage and tamed that represent Arkansas in its purest form. With well over 1,400 (and growing) miles of trails through the state, these paths lead us on journeys, taking us far from the din of our metropolitan hubs and the settled lands where we live our daily lives.

But why is it that we tend to return to the same trails over and over again when there are so many new adventures on the road less traveled? This was a question we asked ourselves early in the planning stages of this feature. And as these stories came together, common threads began to emerge.

The idea of rewards kept appearing, whether in the form of the "winding stairs" along the Little Missouri River on the Eagle Rock Loop Trail (page 76) or the 95-foot waterfall for which the Cedar Falls Trail (page 78) gets its name. So did places where, as one writer put it while describing the Ozark Highlands Trail (page 66), "man confronted wilderness head-on, and sometimes lost," which seems to suggest that walking a trail brings us closer to our collective roots, shrinking the gap between our forebears and ourselves.

But ultimately, it was the concept of the personal connection we make with trails that won out as the most recurring through-line. These relationships are steeped in individualized history, some of them stretching back decades, and some of them—like the family taking their newborn on her first backpacking trip along the Ouachita Trail (page 64)—are still in their infancy (pun intended!). For myself, it was a specific memory and a photograph that connected me to Pinnacle Mountain's West Summit Trail (page 80).

The eight trails featured in the following pages represent only a fraction of what Arkansas has to offer. But we hope the unique stories these particular routes inspired will embolden you to explore new paths that might have otherwise escaped your experience. —ww

For a special Google map marking the locations of all the hiking trails in this feature, visit our website at arkansaslife.com.

Photo on previous page by Sara Reeves

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Ouachita National Recreational Trail



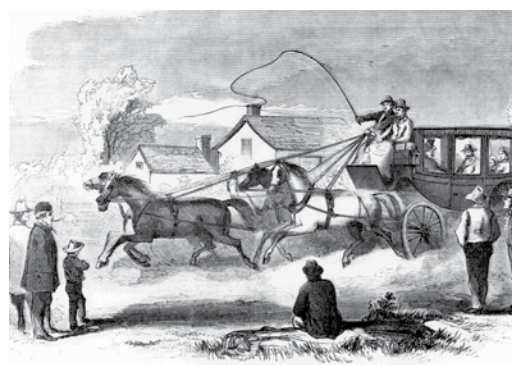
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Ozark Highlands Trail

"It's called the OHT, for short, and it's one of Arkansas's best kept secrets. There's only one problem: It's broken."

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Butterfield Hiking Trail



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R. Kenny Vernon Nature Trail

"Stand absolutely still and study the ground. Look for the clusters of acorns the blackjack oak has tossed aside; the horn of plenty may live nearby."

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Mount Nebo Bench Trail



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Arkansas' Special-est Spots (according to Tim Ernst)

"It's not just for rock climbers anymore—this is one of the very best sunsets in all of Arkansas."

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Eagle Rock Loop Trail



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Cedar Falls Trail

"It's not hard for the little guys. It's not hard for us old farts. It's plenty fun enough for the people in the prime of their life."

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Pinnacle Mountain's West Summit Trail



Ouachita National Recreation Trail

For young families, connecting with a trail is oftentimes just a matter of taking the first few steps—even if they're taken at a crawl

By Ragan Sutterfield



Trail Stats

Ouachita National Recreation Trail

LOCATION

Western terminus: Talimena State Park near Talihina, Oklahoma; eastern terminus: Pinnacle Mountain State Park

DIFFICULTY

Strenuous

LENGTH

223 miles

DURATION

Approximately 2–3 weeks

PRO TIP

Like another lengthy Arkansas trail, the OHT (page 66), this trail can be hiked in sections or all at once. The segment from the Highway 7 trailhead to the Flatside Pinnacle Spur is one of the most popular because of its proximity to Little Rock. Featuring fantastic Flatside Wilderness scenery, the 20-mile section is easily accessible and offers trail shelters, as well as plenty of campsites and streams.



MAURICE, HIS SUMMER shave growing shaggy, led the way—nose down then up, gathering the olfactory scene of the forest floor. His saddle pack wobbled against his sides, and occasionally he'd turn his head, black ears flopping as he looked to judge our approval of his direction and distance. I had the backpack, an old Lafuma internal frame I'd bought as a Campmor closeout before a college trip to Europe. It was heavy—a full tent, a camp stove, all the food, the sleeping bags, the rope and lights, and photocopied pages of the Flatside Wilderness section of Tim Ernst's guide to the Ouachita Trail. I was carrying enough gear for two, but we weren't going far, only three miles at most into the woods.

My wife Emily was behind me, a hand-me-down baby pack from REI extending from her back with a sleeping pad strapped on and as much gear as would fit in its small zippered pouch. Our daughter Lily's legs dangled down from the sides, and her head peered out of the top, the curious blue of her eyes watching the bouncing brown-green vista.

This hike was both an embrace and a rebellion. I'd met Emily three years before at a time when she was backpacking the

Ozark Highlands Trail, section by section, over a series of weekends. Our friendship was built on trails, and our love cultivated in campsites. We'd first held hands and kissed under the bright lights of the Milky Way, camping at Lake Sylvia. Then came marriage, then a swelling belly and the first-term nausea that kept us from the spring hikes we'd planned. Nevertheless, as we readied baby beds and onesies, we also sought out baby-carrying backpacks and read books like *Babes in the Woods*, an outdoors guide for new parents. We promised each other we wouldn't be one of those couples who sacrifice the adventure of the trail because of a baby. We would keep hiking and bring our daughter along, raising her in the knowledge of bear bags, tent set-up and a one-match fire. Those were the plans hatched in the comfort of a living room; plans that seemed to crack with the cries that began to break the woodland quiet.

THERE IS SOMETHING ANIMAL about a baby crying. It hits at the recesses of our history, deep in the beginnings of our consciousness as a species. It sparks chemical cascades across

the brain; it demands a response. It was a half hour down the trail when Lily started wailing. She cried, she squirmed and struggled against the barriers of the pack. She wanted out.

We tried pacis and other appeasements, but no luck. Her will and determination were greater than ours. We stopped by a creek, Maurice lapping up the clear water that spilled over mossy stones. I dropped my pack and helped Emily with hers, lowering Lily down. Emily sat on a stone and nursed the baby as we watched crawfish hardly larger than a quarter scurry among the rocks.

We weren't covering the dozen miles we would have traveled without an infant, but we were here in the woods, sitting by a clear creek, listening to the birds—the clicks of tanagers and the slurs of vireos. We'd go slower, but we'd still savor the goodness of that going.

We followed the trail along the slopes, around a ridgeline, and into a section wrecked by storms. Large oaks, cross cut by the Forest Service, lined the trail like walls. Lily traveled in the pack, and then in our arms when that would no longer work. *How had our ancestors done this? How had the natives of this place lived as semi-nomads*

with children? The questions came as my biceps burned and cramped, my arms crooked around the little girl who leaned in close.

We set up camp that evening along a creek, a grass-bent clearing that had seemingly proven a good stop for previous hikers. It was early, but this was an out-and-back, a beginning to our backpacking with a child, and so we didn't want to try our luck.

Lily loved the tent, crawling circles on its floor, pressing her face against the mesh of the mosquito screen. She wasn't walking just yet, so we kept a close watch as she traversed a surface more treacherous than the rugs and laminate of our home. Though she did cry from time to time, as babies do, she seemed enraptured by the wideness, the never-ending ceiling of the sky, the noisy music of frogs and birds and whirring insects.

Sleep didn't come easily—it never does for me on the first night camping—but somewhere amid the noise of the college kids that set up camp across the creek and the whimpers of Maurice, whose ears were buzzing with the rustling of the night, we fell asleep. In the morning, Lily stirred at the tree-splintered light. I put on my boots, gathered her up, and slipped out of the tent

to let Emily stay nestled in her sleeping bag a little while longer.

I carried Lily back along the trail, showing her what I knew, questioning with her what I didn't know, and wondering with her at it all. A beetle, green with iridescence, walked among a flower's petals; turkey tail mushrooms formed Escher stairs across the bark of felled trees; a broad-winged hawk let out a whistle before taking to a thermal, rising on its heat above the earth. We marveled at the strange variety of a world beyond us and yet near us.

I realized that in backpacking with Lily, my daughter still new to the mystery of the world, I had entered the wilderness not to show her, but to *join* her. My openness had been blurred by deadlines and pixels, data and urgent trivia. Coming here with her, I was able to bend down and see the ever-shifting beauty, the deepening mystery of it all, through the borrowed vision of her newness. I had come, as the poet Wendell Berry has written, into "the wilderness of Creation where we must go to be reborn." I was alive again to the freshness of the world, still a child in a place defined by millennia. I was put in my place, like an infant returned to the safety of a parent's arms, and I was glad to have returned.

Ozark Highlands Trail

In the heart of the Lower Buffalo Wilderness, a dispute between two outdoor organizations over a fractured trail has been brewing for decades. Is now finally the time to make a mend?

By Paul Chisholm

THERE'S A LINE ACROSS NORTHWEST ARKANSAS.

It runs from Fort Smith to the shores of Norfolk Lake, and if you follow it, it'll guide you through 253 miles of the most covertly scenic country the nation has to offer. Along the way, you'll cross open Ozark ridgetops and secluded mountain hollows. You'll pass towering arches, moss-covered bluffs, and eerie stone ruins—remnants of a bygone era when man confronted wilderness head-on, and sometimes lost. You'll see rocky-bottomed streams, dozens of trickling waterfalls, and, if you're lucky, a bull elk crashing through the underbrush on his way to a mate.

It's called the Ozark Highlands Trail—the OHT, for short—and it's one of Arkansas's best kept secrets.

There's only one problem—it's broken.

You see, there's been a bit of a disagreement between those who are building the trail—the Ozark Highlands Trail Association—and those whose property the trail must cross. It's a matter that's been simmering for decades, a conflict that ultimately centers on how best to preserve the environment—and the philosophy that entails. Specifically, how that applies to a 15-mile stretch of pristine wilderness maintained by the National Park Service along the banks of the Buffalo River.

Back in 1987, volunteers with the OHTA completed the first 165 miles of trail, from Lake Fort Smith to the Buffalo River. From there, the trail was supposed to extend east through NPS property along the river, but more than a decade of bureaucratic delays prevented construction. In 2003, tired of waiting for the NPS to act, the OHTA skipped over those lands that fall within the territory of the Buffalo National River and built a discontinuous 31-mile stretch of trail, the Sylamore Section, in the Ozark National Forest near Norfolk.

A year later, the NPS announced a plan to extend the trail and unite the two unconnected sections of OHT. But this plan came with a surprising twist: Although 43 miles of trail were authorized to pass through the developed portions of the park, there would *still* be no trail through 15 miles of the Lower Buffalo Wilderness. None. Nada. *Zip*. A giant black hole smack-dab in the middle of the OHT, sandwiched between 208 miles of completed trail on one side and 31 on the other.

The reason? Follow the Buffalo River upstream and you'll run into

the Ponca Wilderness, also managed by the NPS. The area has dozens of miles of trail and is a hot spot for hiking and horseback riding—the loud, outspoken life of the party compared to its shy, taciturn counterpart, the Lower Buffalo Wilderness.

“The opportunity for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation is greater in the Lower Buffalo Wilderness than it is in the Ponca Wilderness,” explains Chuck Bitting, an NPS veteran and current Natural Resources Program Manager at Buffalo National River. “I personally don't like running into a bunch of people when I'm in the wilderness, hiking or camping. I never get that feeling anymore when I'm in the Ponca Wilderness ... but I do get it in the Lower Buffalo Wilderness.”

Sure, the NPS happily allows hikers attempting to complete the trail end-to-end to bushwhack through the area on their way to the next stretch of trail. They simply don't want a new footpath cut through that tract of land.

By keeping trails out of the Lower Buffalo, NPS planners hope to retain the isolated quality that has been lost in places like the Ponca Wilderness. But human values aren't the only thing at stake here. The Lower Buffalo also serves as home to several endangered species, including two species of mussel, the American eel, and four species of bat. OHT hikers who explore the local caves could potentially spread white-nose fungus, a highly contagious disease that has decimated bat populations across the U.S. (though Bitting concedes that locating the trail strategically would minimize the risk).

Regardless, some community members view the Park Service's rejection of the OHT in the Lower Buffalo as a broken pledge.

“Back in the '70s, [the Park Service] had committed to allowing the trail corridor through the area,” says John Pennington, president of the OHTA, “but in 2004 they changed their mind.”

“The promise hasn't been kept,” agrees Duane Woltjen, an OHTA member who has been advocating for the trail for nearly three decades.

For trail proponents, extension through the Lower Buffalo would make the OHT a more attractive proposition for potential hikers. As the trail has lengthened, the OHTA has received an increasing number of inquiries for information about the trail from members of the public. And the prospect of connecting the OHT with Missouri's



Trent Sugg/Capture Arkansas

Trail Stats

Ozark Highlands Trail

LOCATION

Western terminus: Lake Fort Smith State Park near Mountainburg; eastern terminus: Highway 65 bridge near Tyler Bend Recreation Area on the Buffalo National River near St. Joe / Sylamore Section western terminus: Spring Creek Trailhead near Big Flat; Sylamore Section eastern terminus: Matney Trailhead near Norfolk

DIFFICULTY

Strenuous

LENGTH

Approximately 237 miles

DURATION

Approximately 2–3 weeks

PRO TIP

This trail can be hiked in sections or all at once, making it great for day hikes, weekend jaunts or backpacking. Several National Forest Recreation Areas provide access to the trail (and parking!), but the one at White Rock Mountain near Winslow is a particular favorite, particularly for lovers of a good sunset.

Ozark Trail—a 500-mile route that is 80 percent finished—could bring the trail national acclaim on par with well-known treks like the Pacific Crest and Appalachian Trails.

Northern Arkansas could benefit economically, too. “If there is a willingness of the park to allow recreational opportunities, you could almost have a recreation-based economy,” Pennington says. “[Hikers] will want a shower, they'll want a beer and a hamburger,” adds Woltjen.

And while they want to avoid overuse, OHT supporters assert that bringing more people into contact with nature via the trail would only do positive things for conservation.

“The reason we need to share [this area] is because people cannot really be protective of a place that they haven't seen or experienced,” says Woltjen. “We need constituents who want to conserve the beauty and bounty of the Ozarks. They can't do that unless they come here and experience it. You can read about it, or look at it on your iPhone. But being here and living it and doing it, that's the thing.”

“I don't want to see a bunch of clubhouses all over the place. I want to see it pristine—not overrun, but not underrun. It takes a balance.”

Balance. Ultimately, the motivations of the two opposing factions are remarkably similar—both want to see the Buffalo retained in its natural state. Both want to preserve the scenic beauty and wilderness qualities of the Ozark high country. And both want to ensure that visitors to the Lower Buffalo Wilderness find what they're looking for.

Striking that balance is what the NPS will try to accomplish as it moves forward with its next round of planning. Today, nearly 41 of the 43 authorized miles of Buffalo River OHT have been constructed, and the rest are tentatively slated to be finished by the spring of 2018. What's more, the NPS intends to produce a new trails-management plan for the Buffalo National River beginning in 2017, and extension of the OHT through the Lower Buffalo will receive consideration, according to Bitting.

“As time wears on, sometimes we have to go back and reconsider decisions that were made and see if it's time to make a different decision,” he says.

The path to resolution currently remains unclear, but one thing's for certain: With a place as cherished as the Buffalo River, disagreements over how to manage it are sure to run hot.

Butterfield Hiking Trail

Nowadays when we hit the trail, it's typically to get away from it all. Years ago, however, when the nation was divided—and on the verge of dividing further—trails often served a different purpose

By Jordan P. Hickey

Trail Stats

Butterfield Hiking Trail

LOCATION

Begins at Devil's Den State Park and loops back to start

DIFFICULTY

Strenuous

LENGTH

13 miles

DURATION

12 hours, more or less

PRO TIP

Even though the trail starts at Devil's Den State Park, the majority of it weaves through the Ozark National Forest, where trail markers are easy to miss. Hikers complain from loose rock throughout the rough terrain, so good shoes are important. And if you're planning on bringing your pup along for the hike, make sure its paws are protected.

R. Kenny Vernon Nature Trail

A poem

By Scotty Lewis

Trail Stats

R. Kenny Vernon Nature Trail

LOCATION

Starts at the Bell Slough Wildlife Management Area parking lot on Grassy Lake Road in Mayflower

DIFFICULTY

Easy

LENGTH

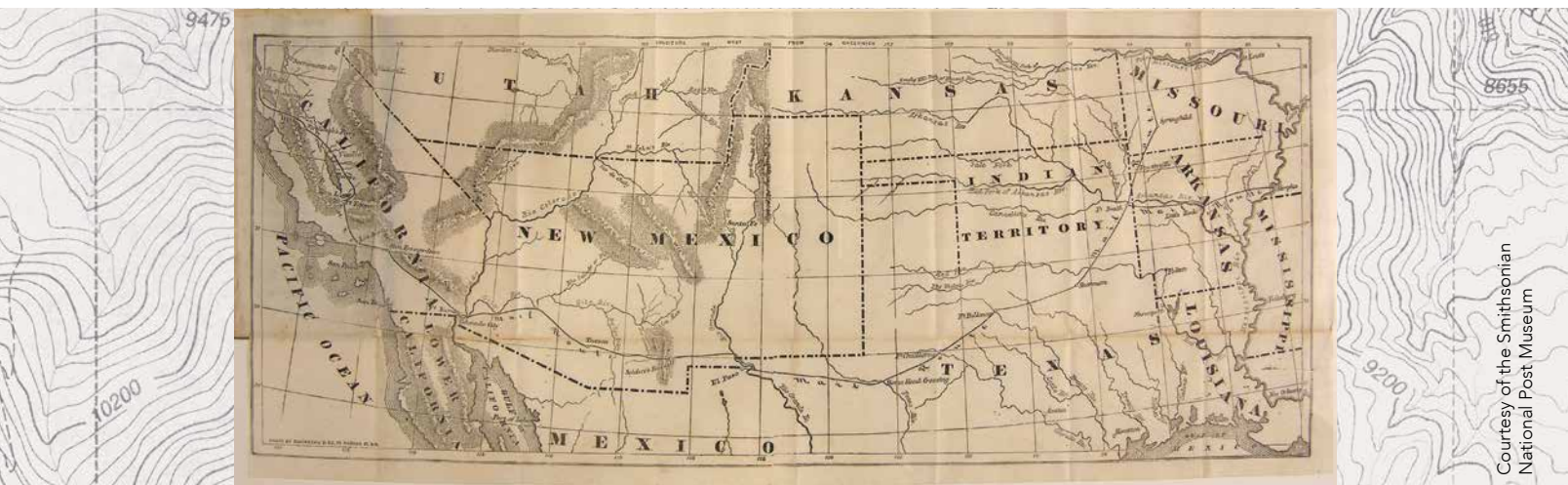
2.3 miles

DURATION

About an hour, depending on how often you stop to admire the wildlife

PRO TIP

You'll need your camera for this one (your phone will do just fine), as hiking the trail is a great way to spot interesting birds—indigo buntings, warblers, northern waterthrush and, like, 100-some different species—during certain months of the year.



IT'S NOT THE ROAD LESS traveled, though it's not the most popular, either. There are places where the trail is faint, passing under brush and fallen limbs, and goes fuzzy along the edges. But even on its bad days, the Butterfield Hiking Trail is still a trail. Fifteen miles strung through Ozark hills and valleys, representing a guiding element in what would otherwise be a rather intimidating place. Because, y'know, it's the wilderness. And even though there are no paved paths and it's hardly a place suited for strollers and requires some forethought and preparation, it is charted territory and it is known.

But let's say it wasn't.

Let's say you were going in without the assurance of what you might find there. Let's say the road less traveled was, like, really less traveled. Let's say you'd forked over some \$200 for passage in a stagecoach

from St. Louis to San Francisco, packed sardinelike with as many as eight other passengers (and possibly, at times, another six on the roof). In all likelihood it would have been an experience not unlike that of one Hiram S. Rumfield, who wrote the following in a letter to his wife in 1860, detailing his trek through the Boston Mountains:

No one who has never passed over this road can form any idea of its bold and rugged aspect. It winds along the mountain sides over a surface covered with masses of broken rock, and frequently runs in fearful proximity to precipitous ravines of unknown depth ... when [the horses] are driven at their topmost speed, which is generally the case, the stage reels from side to side like a storm-tossed bark, and the din of the heavily ironed wheels in constant contact with the flinty rocks is truly appalling.

All of which is to say: Let's imagine

you were taking that *other* Butterfield Trail (which runs 2 miles distant from the modern day iteration), the Butterfield Overland Stage, which for a period of two and a half years linked the country from coast to coast, at a time when the function of trails was concerned more with necessity than recreation.

On March 3, 1857, the last day before adjourning for the session, the U.S. Congress authorized the Postmaster General to subsidize a stagecoach line that'd reach west from the banks of the Mississippi all the way out to California. Largely a response to an April 1856 petition made by 75,000 Californians who wanted better ties to the east in the form of an overland mail system, the act stipulated that the contractors chosen would need to be capable of crossing the country, from the Mississippi to San Francisco, in under 25 (Continued on page 99)

Rumors of this place will plead with you to save your time, to hoard your minutes like pennies in a rinsed-out pickle jar.

It is only a loosened clove hitch, crushed gray stone tying wetlands to the aspiration of a ridgeline. At best, a jogging path for those who never run.

Slow your pace, then, to know these acres gradually as a body you will come to love. Circle them a thousand times

until your senses are a finger tracing every crease. Know the cypress gutted by lightning where the great crested flycatcher wiggles in to decorate its nest.

Know the rash of pumpkin colored warts pushing up through slick mud are chanterelles. Know that you will contend with the deer flies, the gnats and the questing ticks to pick them.

Know that the possums and maggots may cheat you of your meal. Know that everything in Bell Slough is hungrier than you.

But come here anyway with purpose. To find each thing in its season. When the frog can see its frosted song, it chooses silence.

The resurrection ivy's green outlasts the naked hardwoods, and the forest floor is a yellow-red confetti. The bloated, hairy snowflake bursting from the fallen sycamore

is bear's head tooth. And the white lips pouting from the dead stand oak are oysters. And when there is only the smell of mushrooms rising where rain gullies into the hillside,

stand absolutely still and study the ground. Look for the clusters of acorns the blackjack oak has tossed aside; the horn of plenty may live nearby.

Fluted to the shape of orange flowers on the creeper vines, they hide in molted grays and browns, black trumpets pushing up like goosebumps with the first breaths of winter.

Pick every one. Taste what hides in this unencroachable tract of wild. Believe the unwashed fragrance of these labors is all you ever really are.

Mount Nebo Bench Trail

This is what happens when you send a first-time backpacker into the wilds of Arkansas with little more than a tent, some beef jerky and a pat on the back—oh, and absolutely zero technology

By Heather Steadham

August 10, 2016, 10:53 a.m.

I am going on a hike in the heat of Arkansas summer and camping somewhere, alone, overnight. I, the former pageant queen, the lover of donuts and air conditioning, am going to hike some unknown number of miles into the Ouachita National Forest, using not a trace of technology (only a map and a compass), sleep in a tent, and hike back out.

I don't even know what to pack. But I'm quite certain that whatever it is, I don't have it.

August 12, 2016, 10:56 a.m.

My mom texts me a picture of hiking boots, saying "I know they'll fit you."

My mom often sends me pictures of clothing she's thinking about buying me, and when I don't like things, I try to be diplomatic and say something like, "For you?" This time I reply, "I don't like hiking boots but you are so sweet to think of me." Ten or more minutes go by and I have an epiphany. I text back, "OH WAIT! For my upcoming camping trip?"

"Yes," she replies.

I am so obviously going to rock this trek.

August 16, 2016, 10:00 a.m.

I meet with my editors and Arshia, the photographer I learn will be accompanying me and capturing the glory of the weekend on Polaroid (in keeping with the low-tech nature of this experiment).

Both editors are outdoorsy types, and they tell Arshia and me that they can

loan us backpacks, a tent, sleeping bags, sleeping pads, tarps, ponchos ... the list is exhaustive. And dumb! Who needs sleeping pads and tarps? *Whatever*. And then they tell us we'll need food and probably a camp stove. Camp stove?

"What's wrong with jerky?" I ask. "I can see it now: 24 hours of jerky."

"You could do jerky," they reply, but their faces seem to reflect the thought that I am crazy.

Whatever, whatever, whatever.

August 19, 2016, 5:17 p.m.

Arshia comes to my house for a dry run on the tent assembly. We are going to camp out tomorrow, just four days after picking our destination, which we agree simply gives us less time to be nervous.

I'm pretty comfortable with the little springy rods that hold up tents today, but I don't want to take the time to stake the tent in my front yard, so I just run the rods through the sheaths and don't put the tent up completely. It lies on the ground like a deflated balloon.

The Hindenburg stares up at us sadly from the ground. But I'm absolutely positive that when the time comes (tomorrow!), I'll be totally successful making a beautiful home of that tent.

"I just don't think you know what you're getting yourself into," my husband tells me.

Have I mentioned *whatever*?

August 20, 2016, 4:16 p.m.

Arshia arrives to whisk me away. We go to Target for last minute supplies—you know, jerky. Applewood-smoked bacon jerky. And

hand sanitizer. And \$4 pillows that we can throw away if they get too icky.

We program the address into Arshia's phone, and we're off. We both know it's supposed to be a techless trip, but we're not actually hiking yet, right? RIGHT?

6:00 p.m.

We are lost. Not *lost* lost. We're in the park. Somewhere. Driving around. And the stupid maps function on Arshia's phone isn't helping because there's no exact address for "entry onto the bench trail where you can park your car and hike to your campsite, where everyone thinks you're going to die." We see a pavilion crafted from natural rock hung with chandeliers that look like they were made from old barrels, and as we walk up to the map on a display stand, we realize there is a wedding going on. And there are tuxedoed Corgis. I want to be respectful of their special day—they are taking pictures behind the pavilion with the incredible backdrop of the sun just beginning to set around the peaks of Mount Nebo—but there is a bathhouse just to the left of where the happy couple is being photographed. A BATHHOUSE. This may be my last opportunity for a civilized potty for the next 18 hours, so I stride past the bride and groom shamelessly, my Mom's hiking boots thunking on the pavement.

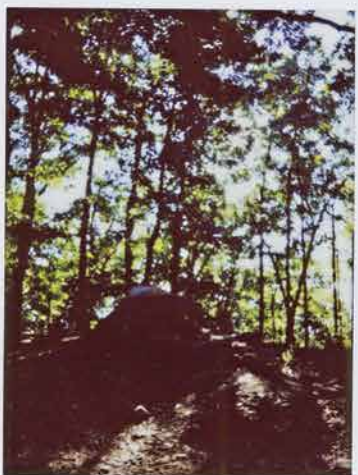
6:40 p.m.

We go back the way we came, and lo and behold! There's the entrance to the bench trail, right along the road we drove up on our way to the summit. Whatever. What matters is we are here, and we are parked, and—so far—the rain has held off.

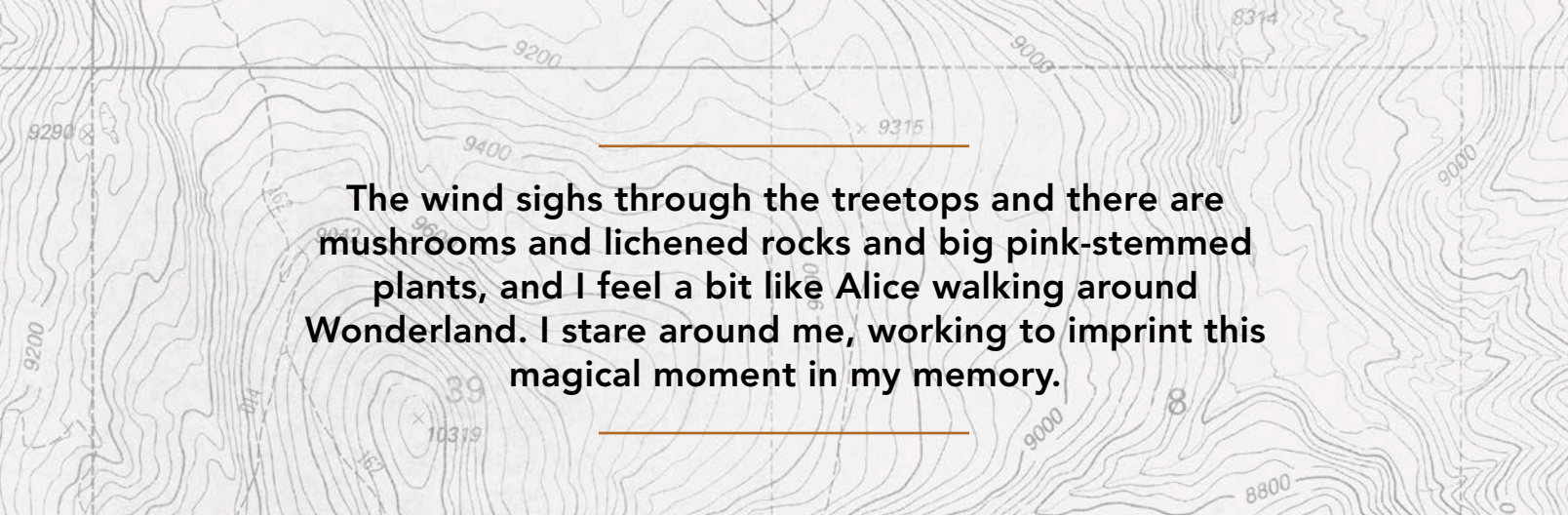
Thirsty-time p.m.

It's raining. We were dry until we got to the campsite, me hiking along the trail, wearing some kind of travel backpack (it's not mine) and carrying a sleeping bag (it's not mine) in one hand, the tent (it's not mine) in the other, and a pillow (I just bought it so it's totally mine) under my arm. I even stopped at an area called Varnell Springs, a project of the Civilian Conservation Corps to provide water to downtown Dardanelle, to pontificate on the value of said CCC to post-Depression America, especially in Arkansas (where had it not been for the progressive program, my grandfather would never have met my grandmother, and the all-important me would never have been born).

But once we arrive at the very first campsite (why walk further than



Photography by Arshia Khan



The wind sighs through the treetops and there are mushrooms and lichened rocks and big pink-stemmed plants, and I feel a bit like Alice walking around Wonderland. I stare around me, working to imprint this magical moment in my memory.

necessary?), and I start unloading and eyeing the actually really nice tent pad (is that what they're called? The little cleared area, bounded by wood and raked evenly for nice tent placement?), the heavens open and shower us. I needed water anyway.

I have no way to tell what time it is. I did think to go through my watches, knowing that for years I've only used my phone to tell the time and that I wouldn't have that convenience on this trip, but all of the batteries in my watches were dead. I was going to ask my husband to borrow one of his ... but I forgot.

I set up the tent without incident. Unless you call cursing loudly and emphatically as the tent stakes repeatedly claw their way out of the soft, wet ground "incident." The front little porchy thing (an extended flap for entertaining purposes? Heck, I don't know) is lopsided. Whatever. It's up, isn't it?

Getting darkish p.m.

The sun's about to set for good, so if I'm going to see anything I'd better get on it. I make sure my pen and notebook are in the easy-to-access outside pocket of my backpack, and I put on my headlamp flashlight (a leftover from the days I dreamed of going on *The Amazing Race*). I look at my water bottle, and it's big. Heavy. We're just going on a little traipse, so I'm sure I'll be okay without it. I leave it behind.

Current dirt level: Mild. I've got some mud making its way up my mom's boots, a couple of smudges on my calves, a dot here and there on my forearms.

Current humidity level: Soup. The paper I'm writing on is more akin to freshly-used paper towels than the sharp crispness of my usual notebook.

I find a bug in my hairline. It's not a tick. It's not a tick. It's *not* a tick. I hear an unrecognizable chattering in the woods. I

see deer tracks. Do deer chatter? Do ticks? I wish I could Google it or text my husband (a middle school teacher I affectionately call Mr. Science) and ask him. But my iPhone sits securely in Arshia's car, as promised.

There are blue diamond-shaped signs affixed to trees along the trail, and I wonder what they mean. The wind sighs through the treetops, and there are mushrooms and lichened rocks and big pink-stemmed plants (something else I'd like to Google), and I feel a bit like Alice walking around Wonderland. I'd love to take a selfie, here in the woods at dusk. But I can't. So I stare around me, actively working to imprint this magical moment in my memory.

Quite darkish p.m.

The chirping of cicadas is one of my very favorite things about living in the South, and my little insect friends don't let me down, even here on the mountain. We were trying to walk to the "seasonal waterfall" (about a six-inch hike along the bench trail on the map I printed from my computer at home), but it's getting darker and darker and it must be 8:30 at night and I haven't had dinner and I'm hungry.

And thirsty, now that I think about it. Some water would be nice. But you need water bottles for water. WHATEVER.

We head back toward the campsite, and my headlamp isn't as bright as I would like it to be and I walk into a spiderweb and a bug flies up my nose and I REALLY WISH I HAD SOME WATER, but there are lightning bugs amongst the trees, and they look somewhat like fairy lights tempting me to follow them.

But unless they have an indoor potty and air conditioning, they can forget it.

Late, late dinnertime p.m.

We sit at our picnic table, and the generic

drinking water is refreshing and the applewood-smoked bacon jerky is delicious. I don't know if it's because I'm tired and it's late or if that jerky really is little bits of manna from piggly angels.

Arshia and I hear music wafting in from somewhere, but it's too quiet—too elusive—to tell what kind of music it is or where it's coming from. We hear musical female laughter, too. Have our fairy lights manifested into humanoid form? Will we be visited by wee folk tonight? It is so dark now that a whole tribe of ancient Celts could come upon us and we wouldn't see them until they were sitting on our heads.

I pull out surprise marshmallows and Arshia pulls out the camp stove. I have zero idea what I'm doing here. Instructions on the canister are:

1. *Before use always inspect canister for damage.* (What would that look like, exactly?)
2. *Keep away from all sources of ignition.* (Then how the heck am I gonna light it?)
3. *Close the appliance control valve.* (WTF is the "appliance control valve"?)
4. *Screw down hand-tight only.* (Screw what down how?)
5. *Avoid cross-threading ...*

There are more instructions but they are far beyond my comprehension. I pop the black plastic top off, aiming away from my face so I don't die.

I don't.

I screw this weird metal claw thing on to the top, set the whole contraption down on the picnic table, and light a match.

Nothing.

I turn this little crank on the side until I hear a gush of air, then light another match. WHOOSH! Do I still have eyebrows? I don't know. I don't have a mirror to look in.

But I have marshmallows. Seared black on the outside, with a perfect smoky taste, gooey on the inside. Arshia doesn't

normally like marshmallows, but she likes mine. I. Am. A. Goddess.

A goddess who needs to ... evacuate her bladder.

We have to put the food out of reach of bears, right? And they can smell through a tent, right? The car is clearly the only safe place to store our consumables. And since we're going to the car anyway, we might as well take one last trip to the bathhouse, right?

Riiiiiiight.

Unbelievably dark p.m.

Arshia and I arrive back at the campsite. We IMMEDIATELY hear a growl. I look at her and she says, "Yeah. That just happened." We throw off our shoes and dive into our tent, zipping up that surely bear-proof flap as quick as we can. I realize I have done no research on what kind of predators live in these parts. Bears? Wolves? And I have no idea what to do if you encounter one—play dead? Scream at it? Hit it on the nose like you would a shark?

Instead, Arshia and I bed down quietly. We kill ant after ant after ant. Liberate a few grasshoppers from their tently prison. I pass her *The Alchemist*, a book I know she loves, a fable about how when you are on the path to your destiny, the universe conspires to help you achieve it.

I hope our destiny is not to be eaten by a bear.

Morning time a.m.

I awaken to yet another full bladder. While I usually wake up to an alarm and go to the bathroom first thing because that's what you do, then eat breakfast because that's what you do, I am much freer out here on the trail. And, I decide, I will give in to that freedom. For the first time in more than half a day in the "wilderness," I pee in the woods. Just like that bear last night does daily.

I'm not hungry yet, and I have no schedule to adhere to, so I simply don't eat. Instead, Arshia and I walk in the direction of the waterfall and see a side path marked with green diamonds. *No thanks*, I think, figuring that those signs mean the offshoot is more difficult than the trail we're on. We come across Fern Lake, a little inlet coated in what looks to me like green sludge. I remember my husband telling me that algae is actually a sign of a healthy ecosystem, but it looks too much like the Nickelodeon slime from my childhood to me. Arshia asks how long until we hit the waterfall, and when I pull out the map I realize we have

somehow passed it.

"Maybe we were supposed to go up that path marked 'treacherous,'" I say.

"Um, I think it said '*strenuous*,'" she replies, and I don't care one bit for her sassy tone of voice.

We turn around and head back to the *strenuous* path (she was right, whatever), and my eyes follow the trail up a long, steep climb. But I promised myself we'd see that waterfall today, and by golly, I'm going to do it.

The way up is beautiful. The gorges are filled with colossal rocks and the view into the valley is stunning. I mentally begin singing "Going On a Bear Hunt," but after our close encounter last night, I figure I better keep that tune to myself.

Many times I stop on the *strenuous* route up, thinking I hear the trickling of water. Many times I am wrong. The map does say "seasonal" waterfall, but there's been so much rain lately, how could it not be flowing?

We've been hiking for about 10 years up this path, and when I look up at the sky, I see the moon is still out.

We hike another 10 years or so and then I stop suddenly. I make Arshia stop. And there it is.

The sound of a trickle.

We turn the corner and instead of a rushing, gushing deluge, we are treated to a trickle.

The path doesn't go all the way up to the waterfall itself, but I am hot and have not walked all this way for nothing. I scale the rocks, stand right in the middle of the trickle, and survey this mountain that I have climbed. The fact that it does not actually belong to me is, in itself, one big whatever. At this moment, I own it.

Still really early morning, I'm guessing a.m.

We return to camp. Arshia leaves to take a load to the car while I disassemble the tent. "Can you do that by yourself?" she asks me. "I think so," I tell her. "Most of it, anyway."

I strike the tent. Fold it up and roll it up and even make it fit in its tiny little travel bag. I roll up the sleeping bag Arshia couldn't figure out how to pack, and I successfully put it in its bag, too. I pull out the stakes, fold up the tarp and saddle up with all the bits of our camp that remain.

Arshia is not back yet. I hope she didn't get eaten by a bear.

I head toward the trailhead. As I walk, I realize that I packed up camp, by myself. I

didn't get eaten by a bear in the night and I didn't fall off the cliff up to the waterfall, and I am walking out of these woods just the slightest bit dirtier than normal—but leaps and bounds more confident about my ability to rely on myself. To survive when people think I can't and to actually enjoy myself even when I don't have any "entertainment" to occupy my time.

I encounter Arshia. She is not bear-eaten. "How about McDonald's?" I ask.

Trail Stats

Mount Nebo Bench Trail

LOCATION

Starts at the bench overlook on Highway 155 in Mount Nebo State Park, near Dardanelle

DIFFICULTY

Easy

LENGTH

Close to 4 miles

DURATION

Approximately 3-4 hours, depending on pace

PRO TIP

Though the trail itself is an easy hike—it's a peaceful walk along what used to be a road in the early 1900s, surrounded by wildlife and tall trees—there are several steep trails that shoot off of it, if you're up for a challenge.



Tim Ernst's Favorite Special Scenic Spots

Special-est, scenic-est ... spottiest, if you will

"Arkansas is blessed with thousands of 'special scenic spots,' or SSSs, along our many hiking trails and roadways," writes wilderness-photographer-slash-writer Tim Ernst. "I've noted many of them in my guidebooks over the years." But while any number of glittering vistas or flowing waterfalls has captured his attention, there's just one thing that ties them all together, says Tim: "The BEST special scenic spots are those places where the mood strikes you. Here's a list—in no particular order—of some of my favorites."

You can find detailed directions and maps for all of these areas and hundreds more in Tim's guidebooks, available at book and outdoor stores, park visitor centers or online direct from Tim at TimErnst.com.

CHAMPION TREE TRAIL

*White River National Wildlife Refuge
near Ethel*

"An easy mile hike through bottomland hardwood forests will take you to the base of the largest living thing in Arkansas—and the largest tree. It is an enormous bald cypress tree, 45 feet in circumference (and still growing) with 'knees' that are taller than you are. This giant really puts the world into perspective to me—I'm very tiny, yet connected to everything."

SAM'S THRONE

Ozark National Forest near Lurton

"It's not just for rock climbers anymore—this is one of the very best sunsets in all of Arkansas. It's a short hike from the parking lot to the top of the great sandstone bluff where you can just sit and admire the view. There is also a trail that drops down and follows below the bluff for close-up views of this spectacular rock layer—many spots to stop and study all the shapes, textures and colors—but be sure to make time to get back on top for the sunset!"

TALIMENA SCENIC DRIVE

Ouachita National Forest near Mena

"Well known for its amazing fall colors, you can find amazing scenery on this National Scenic Byway all year long. In fact, I believe there are more scenic vistas along this route per mile than any other drive I know of in Arkansas. It's especially beautiful at dawn and at sunset, when the colors of the sky melt with the landscape, both reaching far to the horizon. Bear, deer and wild turkey frequent the route, too, so drive slow and enjoy the ride."

MARINONI SCENIC AREA

Ozark Highlands Trail near Cass

"We first discovered this magical area in 1982 while laying out the route for the Ozark Highlands Trail, which passes right through the middle of it. The trail follows Briar Branch past sandstone bluffs, waterfalls and towering trees. In the spring, there are wild azaleas and blooming umbrella magnolias—the sweetness will blow you away!"

COSSATOT FALLS

*Cossatot River State Park-Natural Area
near Umpire*

"It's not really a waterfall, but rather a quarter-mile long series of cascades that roar and splash through many boulders that have been polished smooth by the powerful action of the Cossatot River (the name means 'skull crusher,' and it lives up to that name quite well). This area is terrific to visit even when the water is low—the sculptured rocks are really something to see, plus there is a great swimming hole or two downstream."

MIRROR LAKE FALLS

*Blanchard Springs Recreation Area
near Fifty-Six*

"Most folks come to visit the beautiful springs or tour the amazing caverns. But I love to spend time on this little loop trail that follows Mill Creek from the springs downstream alongside turquoise-colored Mirror Lake. Follow the trail below the dam to a multitiered waterfall that is formed by two spillways that were built on top of each other. The falls flow all year, and the spray they produce can really cool ya off on a hot summer day!"

Eagle Rock Loop Trail

If a tree falls in the forest ... who picks it up off the trail?

By Paul McDonnold



ARRIVING AT THE ALBERT Pike Recreation Area, one of the first things I notice is the abandoned campground along Arkansas Highway 369. Geysers of green—plant life in its dizzying array of forms—well up from the ground to jostle for sunlight. Head-high weeds obscure benches, picnic tables and boarded-up restroom facilities. Since a tragic flash flood in 2010 that took the lives of 20 campers, the Forest Service has closed the campground to overnight use. The site's present state shows what happens when something, even a "natural" area, is not regularly maintained.

The adjacent day-use area and its hiking trails are open, but the same sort of wildness now taking over the campground must be kept at bay. After all, people come to hike, not hack, through the Ouachita National Forest. Thanks to volunteers like Mark Davis, who lives in nearby Mount Ida, hikers can do so.

In the parking area, Mark exits his white four-wheel-drive pickup to greet me. A fit-looking 56-year-old with short hair and a

heavily salted goatee, he looks the part of a hiker as he puts his arms through the straps of an Osprey backpack, cinching it against his Columbia Sportswear T-shirt.

For a day hike, he recommends the Little Missouri Trail, named for the river it parallels, as one of the most popular and scenic. It is one of several hiking circuits that form the Eagle Rock Loop in the southern Ouachita range, some 50 miles west of Hot Springs. We make our way to the trailhead and start down it.

"This needs to go," he says, retrieving a piece of litter someone left behind. "My wife and I maintain this trail from the trailhead down to the winding stairs."

That makes for about 3.5 miles of trail. In addition to litter removal, the work involves clearing forest undergrowth from the trail—"keeping a little corridor here through the brush and briars," Mark explains. "We usually maintain late in the winter. And then we will come back after the first frost and brush everything again."

Self-employed, Mark works part time in construction, taking on small remodeling

jobs. A longtime avid hiker, he first got involved in trail work a decade ago on the Buffalo River Trail with Wilderness Volunteers, a nonprofit group that organizes "adventure service trips" on public lands.

Mark was initially motivated by curiosity about the trail-building process and the chance to meet others with a love of the outdoors. He subsequently worked projects with other groups, such as the Ozark Society and Friends of the Ouachita Trail, while building a circle of friends (including his future wife, Donita) through the BackpackingArkansas.com forum.

"We just kind of started organizing trail maintenance on the Eagle Rock Loop and Caney Creek Wilderness trails," Mark says. "And we used the forum as our vehicle to get volunteers." When prior volunteer leader Tom Trigg moved to the Delta region, Mark took over for him.

"Usually, after a day of trail work, you're pretty well worn out," Mark says. "You might only cover a couple of miles in a day, but the amount of energy it takes is way more than just hiking or backpacking. It's always

a nice feeling to know you left a section of trail better than you found it and that your work is going to make for a better hiking experience for others. A lot of people stop and converse with you as you're working, and most let you know how much they appreciate your efforts, so that adds to the satisfaction."

He tells me the Little Missouri Trail we are on was built in the 1980s by the U.S. Forest Service and the Youth Conservation Corps. The Forest Service classifies the path as a "more difficult" trail: unsurfaced, with elevation changes and water crossings. It doesn't take Mark and me long to get our feet wet fording a narrow, rushing creek. Soon we're in deep woods. I ask him if the bulk of maintenance work on these trails is done by volunteers.

He nods. "The Forest Service, they've lost so much funding, they really don't have the resources to maintain, really, any of the trails ... over the whole state."

"I probably spend close to a month, throughout the year, doing trail maintenance," he adds.

Regular volunteering has given Mark a sense of stewardship of the trail that mere recreation-seekers might not experience. When we encounter a fallen tree blocking our way, Mark stops to survey the scene. Tree removal is beyond his maintenance duties. The Forest Service has chainsaw gangs, but unsure when one might be sent, Mark ponders a re-routing of the trail. He points out a potential path around the obstruction as a future project. For the time being, we get low to the ground and pass under the tree.

With it being late summer, it's not peak hiking season, though we do encounter a few other small groups. The forest is steamy and buggy, and I can tell I'm slowing Mark down as the trail ascends. But soon, we are rewarded with beautiful views of the Little Missouri below us, the water shallow and clear. The pebble-strewn riverbed shows through like a tile floor.

As we continue hiking, the trail descends to river level and curves around to the "winding stairs," a spot famous for the large rock formations standing along the

Trail Stats

Eagle Rock Loop

LOCATION

Southwestern corner of the Ouachita National Forest

DIFFICULTY

Strenuous

LENGTH

Close to 27 miles

DURATION

2-3 days' travel one way

PRO TIP

Study the weather before you plan this trip, as heavy rains cause flooding at the many water crossings, which will put a damper on things. (You can call the ranger station at 870.356.4186 to check conditions before your trip.) For a day hike, we recommend the Little Missouri Trail section our writer visited for this feature, which starts at the Albert Pike Recreation Area. If you press on to mile 6.3, you'll be rewarded with the Little Missouri Falls and their namesake picnic area.

riverbank. It's a popular place for relaxing and swimming—a reward for the hiker to reach it.

With public funds short, the relatively easy access to such isolated places that trails provide depends on a partnership between Mother Nature, professionals of the Forest Service and, critically, volunteers like Mark. On the hike back, shortly before we reach the parking area, he spots a large piece of tarp jammed onto a tree branch. He frees it and carries it with us the rest of the way, stuffing it into one of the trash receptacles at the trailhead. As we part ways, he removes his pack and drives off. For Mark, today was just a quick, easy jaunt to show a reporter around. Before long, however, he'll be back to do some real work.

Cedar Falls Trail

For families, connecting with a trail can be a decades-long journey—the path stretching back a lifetime

By Wyndham Wyeth

WHAT IS IT THAT MOTIVATES

us to go out into the woods and follow the route laid out before us, weaving through trees and tall grass, scrambling over boulders. What is the goal? For some, it's a matter of serenity, a desire to lose oneself in nature, marveling at the organic makeup of the Earth we inhabit but often take for granted. For others, it's a means to exercise outside the static, fluorescent-lit walls of a gym. For even more, it's both.

But what happens when a particular trail becomes a part of your personal history?

Gene and Tyra Reid have been visiting Petit Jean Mountain every year with the same group of friends for almost 40 years, and in that time, the tradition hasn't changed much. "Everybody gets up there on a Friday night," Gene says. "We sit around, we potluck, we'll eat some chili and have a few beers and a few shots of whiskey, and we'll tell jokes and see how hard we can make each other laugh. The next day, we have a little breakfast down at the lodge, and we hike down to the falls."

And they've continued to do so year after year, even when other parts of their lives were undergoing drastic changes. Through marriage, the birth of their two children, their own separation and divorce, the Cedar Falls Trail has remained a constant in their lives.

That connection to the trail has been passed down to their children as well—particularly to their daughter, Alisyn. Here, Gene, Tyra and Alisyn chat with associate editor (and longtime friend) Wyndham Wyeth on how their relationship to this path through the woods has progressed over the years—and on what the trail means to them now.



Courtesy of the Reid Family

Is Cedar Falls the main trail you hike when you're up there?

Alisyn Reid: That's the most-hiked trail we usually do. I mean, we've done the Seven Hollows, and we've done the Bear Cave, but Cedar Falls is the one.

Tyra Reid: If you're just going to do one, that's it.

And I know y'all have been going there for ...

TR: Many long times.

Almost every year, if I'm not mistaken?

Gene Reid: Mm-hmm, since 1978.

TR: Yeah, close to 38 years. Is that what that is? Yeah.

GR: I went up there the first time in 1980. The group we go with started going up there in '78. So yeah, that's what, 38 years? Whoo! So, I've been going up there 36 years.

The first time you went up there, I imagine you didn't know you'd be going back for so long?

TR: We thought we'd all be dead by now.

GR: Right! We were young. ... And it's nice to go back and see how you changed as the years go by. Look at different things, different landmarks and stuff, and you realize, *Well, at this point, this is where my son fell in the water when he was 7. We had to put coats around him and carry him back cause he hit his head. But now he's grown and out of college. So it's a way of kind of measuring your life in terms of events that have happened there.*

When was the first time you took Alisyn out there?

TR: She was born in February, and for the life of me, I'm having trouble remembering if we took her up that year or not.

And the trip usually coincides with Alisyn's birthday? You usually celebrate it up there?

TR: Right. I know for sure she was there the next year. I can't remember if we took her up there as a newborn or not.

GR: Carried her in one of those kiddie backpacks. We carried her down there ... and out.

TR: We kind of passed her around. Everybody took a turn. But for sure, by the time she was a year old, she was there.

Alisyn, do you have a first memory of being on that trail or being up there at Petit Jean?

AR: Since it was every year, they all kind of run together. It was me and my younger

brother, Adam, and then our friend Joseph. The three of us used to race each other down the trail to get to the falls. We'd just sort of take off running. The trail itself, I think, is like half a mile to get down. It's not super long, so it was sustainable. So we'd race each other down, and then we'd hop around on rocks. Eventually, we got brave and climbed behind the waterfall every year. So, yeah, I have a lot of memories of us being little bitty kids together, sort of having the ability to take off on our own because they knew where we were going. We just got to wander through the woods by ourselves as young kids, and we liked that.

Gene and Tyra, I'm wondering how your relationship has changed with the trail as you've both grown—when you were married, then separated—and now with two children as well.

GR: Well, I guess one of the biggest things is that we don't share the same cabin anymore. But we still go up there, and we still potluck together, and we still play music together, and the kids still hang out with the same people as always. But we each have our own space, so there's that. But we've always managed to remain friends, and that's been one of the ways—one of the vehicles—by which we managed to remain friends ... and it just lent an element of stability to our lives, in general.

TR: With regard to my personal relationship with the trail, that is very much wrapped up in the fact that I'm 35 years older since the first time I went down there with this group. I always now have to factor in, *How's my knee doing? Can I do this this year or not? Well, if I go slow and I take a stick, I think I can still do it.* But it's always a surprise to me how easy it is. I mean, it's almost like muscle memory a little bit. I know what's coming next, and I can pace myself because I know what's coming next, and I know it's gonna be worth it.

What about you, Alisyn?

AR: When I was young, it was a place that I could go hang out with my brother and my friend Joseph, and whoever else brought their kids. I could hang out with them with—I don't wanna say *no* supervision because we were supervised, but we felt like we were by ourselves.

TR: Your leash was long.

AR: Yes! We had a long leash.

GR: It was more of a '50s atmosphere in terms of the kids being out: *Be in by dark.* It had more of that kind of a feel to it because it felt safe.

AR: Then when I was a teenager, it was

a way to see my parents cut loose for a weekend, which was hilarious to me. Then when I was, I think, 22 or 23, I rented a cabin—I wanted to do something where I was by myself for the weekend—and I went up there by myself because that was like home to me. That year, it had been raining a lot, and the trail was kind of flooded. So nobody else was on the trail except me. It was, y'know, *crazy*, I guess. I had to climb up over rocks to get around the flooded part of the trail to make it to the falls, and it was just *shooting* out of the rocks. And I was the only one in there, and I'm like sitting here by myself in this cavern that is echoing.

GR: *Ohmmmmmmmm.*

AR: That was pretty much what I wanted out of the weekend. And I've spent a lot of birthdays up there. Now, whenever my birthday is coming up, I associate it with being up there and doing that. Now it's a family reunion for me, too. I'm one of you.

TR: I think the second and third generation of this group—I would not be at all surprised that they continue to do that particular activity in that particular space because it's so perfect for what you're trying to get from being outdoors with your friends. It allows for every age group to do pretty much the same thing up there. It's not hard for the little guys. It's not hard for us old farts. It's plenty fun enough for the people in the prime of their life.

What do you think, Alisyn? Is that something you'd be interested in?

AR: I would. I've always wanted to.

Trail Stats

Cedar Falls Trail

LOCATION

Starts around Mather Lodge at Petit Jean State Park and backtracks to starting point

DIFFICULTY

Moderate to strenuous

LENGTH

About 2 miles

DURATION

About 2 hours, depending on skill

PRO TIP

The trail starts off steep, so make sure to wear shoes with a firm grip to reduce your chance of sliding during the descent. It will all be worth it, especially when you get to the scenic 95-foot waterfall—so get your camera ready!

Pinnacle Mountain's West Summit Trail

Conquering a mountain is one thing, conquering technology is another

By Wyndham Wyeth

I STARED DOWN AT THE SMALL RECTANGULAR screen with confusion and mounting frustration. Using the arrow keys, I scrolled to the last number dialed and tried again.

Still nothing. I tried a third time. And a fourth time. But ultimately, each attempt ended with the same result.

“Why isn't it *working*?” I asked my mother, my voice undoubtedly pitching with the distinctive whine of a 9-year-old not getting his way.

“I guess there just isn't a strong enough signal up here,” she replied. Terms like “signal” and “bars,” “sim card” and “ringtone” were still very new to me at that time, as they were to most people in 1997.

“But get a load of that view!” she said, gesturing with a sweeping arm motion to the expansive vista before us, obviously trying to change the subject. “Hey, let's take a picture.”

But I was unmoved by the panorama of hills and trees, the mighty Arkansas River flowing by. In that moment, I had only one thing on my mind.

“You said we would be able to call Dad from the top,” I protested, still looking down at the little blue Nokia.

We'd talked about it the whole way up the mountain's West Summit Trail. It was my first time climbing Pinnacle, and I was thrilled by the idea of summiting the peak with the other boys from my Cub Scout pack. I'd never climbed a mountain before, never even considered it as a possibility. *Would I even be able to do it?* Mountains were craggy, snow-capped things I'd really only experienced through my science textbooks or *Encyclopedia Britannica*, maybe Sylvester Stallone's *Cliffhanger*—and I remembered what happened to Sly's climber friend in the opening of *that* movie. My entire relationship with Pinnacle Mountain before that day was limited to seeing it off in the distance from the Interstate-430 bridge whenever my family went into “town” from our home in Maumelle. Honestly, I always thought it might be a volcano, with its profile of perfectly sloping sides and flat peak.

So when my mom suggested we try using her new cellphone to

call my dad from the top, my mind started racing. Although we'd had our usual Saturday breakfast of fried eggs, bacon and toast just that morning, I still couldn't wait to hear Dad's voice coming to me from the comfort of his blue Sears armchair in the living room of our house. I'd fill him in on all the dramatic details of our ascent as I took in the vista, having conquered the mass of rock beneath my feet. On top of that, I was already rehearsing how I was going to regale my school chums, not only with my chronicle of our adventure, but with my account of the mountaintop phone call as well.

The idea of making a call from anywhere that didn't require the tether of a phone line was still a very new concept in 1997, and an exciting one. Sure, my family had had a cordless phone for years by that point, but the range on it only went so far, the bottom of the driveway, maybe. And my grandparents had a car phone in a bag in their Toyota minivan, but it was only for emergencies, and I'm not even sure I ever saw it get used.

In fact, my mom's new cellphone was the first one I had ever seen in real life, the first one I had gotten to use myself. I didn't even know of anyone else who had one yet. Of course, our family only had the one, and it was used sparingly to conserve our monthly allotted minutes. However, Mom still let my siblings and I each take a turn on it—getting to know the menus, listening to midi versions of the “William Tell Overture” and Mozart's “Symphony No. 40 in G Minor”—but mostly we just played “Snake.”

But in that particular moment up on the mountain, with nothing but dead air at the end of the line, I experienced my first (but certainly not last) irritation with a piece of cellular technology. I was so annoyed, I wanted to chuck the thing off the top of the mountain, an act that would've surely resulted with me being grounded until my 87th birthday. (Though, in retrospect, I feel fairly certain that little blue brick would've survived the fall with barely a scratch.)

Unbeknownst to me, as I continued to fiddle with the phone, my mom handed off her camera to another parent. In a simultaneous motion, she pulled the Nokia out of my hands and threw one arm around my shoulders, pulling me in tight.

Trail Stats

West Summit at Pinnacle Mountain

LOCATION

Trail starts at the recreation area of Pinnacle Mountain State Park

DIFFICULTY

Short, but becomes strenuous about halfway up

LENGTH

About 1.3 miles round trip

DURATION

1.5 hours

PRO TIP

During warm, sunny days, the West Summit sees a lot of traffic, so much so that parking overflows to the field across the street. If you aren't terribly keen on dealing with the crowds, the base trail is a great way to get exercise—and some peace and quiet.

“Say cheese!” she said with the sugary tone she lovingly used to annoy us kids when we were pouting.

Rebellious and insubordinate, I promptly crossed my arms in front of my navy Cub Scout uniform and put on the most sullen frown I could muster.

Click.

ALMOST 20 YEARS LATER, I FIND MYSELF IN the same spot—on top of Pinnacle Mountain, posing for a photo with my mom. Honestly, it's probably a little too hot to be out on the trail today, but luckily, the route is mostly shaded by trees, and the splendor of the near-cloudless, brilliant blue sky almost makes the heat worth it, if you ask me. (Though if you ask my mom, she might not agree.)

We do our best to look presentable for the camera, wiping the sweat from our brows and fixing our hair. Striving for authenticity, I've brought along a navy-blue button-up as a stand in for the Cub Scout uniform shirt I wore on the original hike, having grown out of it years ago. In place of the North Little Rock School District T-Shirt she wore that day in '97—now a relic left over from her 30 years as a teacher—my mom has opted for a University of Central Arkansas T-shirt, a garment-based update representing her current position as director of Tutoring Services.

A lot has certainly changed in the 20 years that have passed. The list is practically endless, but a few highlights for me: I graduated from college, moved to Atlanta and back, moved to Tulsa and back, got married, bought a house, landed a dream job.

However, I lost something over the course of that 20 years as well. In 2012, my father died after a year-long battle with Non-Hodgkins lymphoma. I think about him every day, and I particularly wish he was around to see me now. But I know he'd be proud of the man I've become, even in the four short years since his death. I say as much to my mom during one of our rest breaks on the West Summit Trail this second time around, and she wholeheartedly agrees.

I always keep reminders of him with me, though, and I even bring a couple to Pinnacle with us. The Case Stockman pocket knife he always carried in the right-hand pocket of his jeans throughout the 23 years we shared on this Earth rests securely in the same side pocket of my shorts. Even the wedding ring my wife slipped onto my finger this past June originally belonged to my father. *Vickie to Wallace* is still inscribed inside the band.

Looking off in the distance from the mountaintop, I can see a dozen spires of various heights sprouting up from a hillside, and I assume a good number of those are likely cellphone towers. I would wager quite a bit that every single person on the mountain today owns some sort of cellphone, and most of those people probably brought them along on their trek as well. I watch as several hikers take selfies to capture their accomplishments and presumably upload the photos to social media immediately. I look down at my iPhone 6 to check my reception—four out of five bars.

Unfortunately, despite the advances in cellular technology, I'm not able to call my dad from the mountaintop on this trip, either. But I can still call someone who loves me just as much as he did and whom he cared about very much as well. I take a moment to soak in the view that I was too preoccupied to enjoy that initial go-round—the rocks, the river, the setting sun. The scenery playing out before my eyes combined with the comforting weight of my father's knife in my pocket almost overwhelms me, to say the least.

When I look back down at the phone in my hand, I find my wife's name at the top of my favorites list and tap it.

Ring ring. **AL**



Courtesy of the Wyeth family



Photo by Arshia Khan