

Beating the Virginia Blues



Thru-hiking strategies to help you survive your next big project

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thru-hike

hiking the entire trail in 12 months or less

The Appalachian Trail (A.T.)

Longest hiking-only footpath in the world

Proposed in 1921; completed in 1937

Maintained by 31 trail clubs and partnerships

Length changes every year as trail conditions change

Marked with white blazes and AT symbol



14 states

Georgia

North Carolina

Tennessee

Virginia

West Virginia

Maryland

Pennsylvania

New Jersey

New York

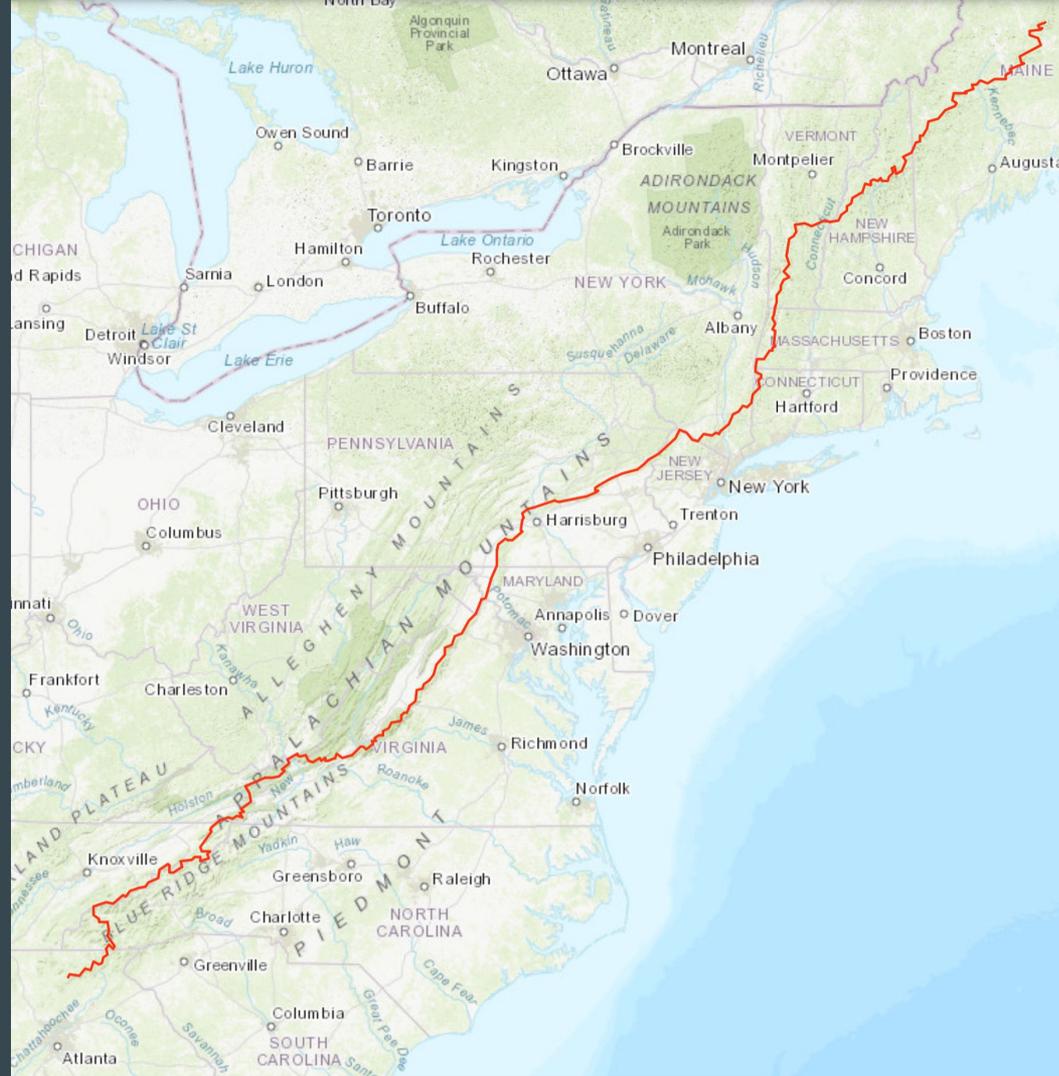
Connecticut

Massachusetts

Vermont

New Hampshire

Maine



Amenities

Periodic 3-wall shelters

Privies



Trail conditions vary

From picturesque or comparatively “easy”



Trail conditions vary

...to rocky, rooty, and hazardous



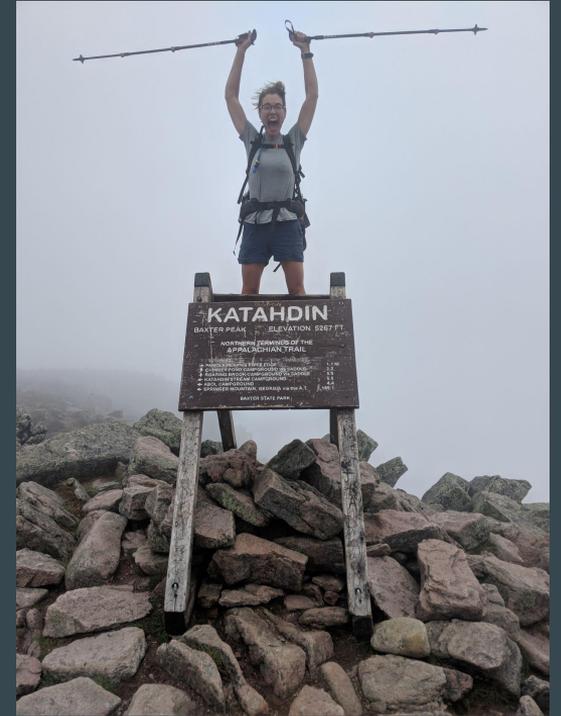
2190.8 miles

the official length of the Appalachian Trail in 2018 (3525.75 km)

5-7 months

average duration of an A.T. thru-hike, according to the [Appalachian Trail Conservancy](#)

14 March - 27 August 2018 (Northbound, 163 days)



The odds aren't in your favor

Northbound	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Springer Mountain, Ga. (est.)	2,100	2,250	2,500	2,700	3,377	3,839	3,862
Harpers Ferry, W.Va.	1,017	1,130	1,270	1,383	1,537	1,723	1,643
Completions Reported	549	589	690	677	685	715	728
Completion rate:	26%	26%	26%	25%	20%	19%	19%

Source: Appalachian Trail Conservancy, 2,000-Milers

<https://appalachiantrail.org/explore/hike-the-a-t/thru-hiking/2000-milers/>

Virginia

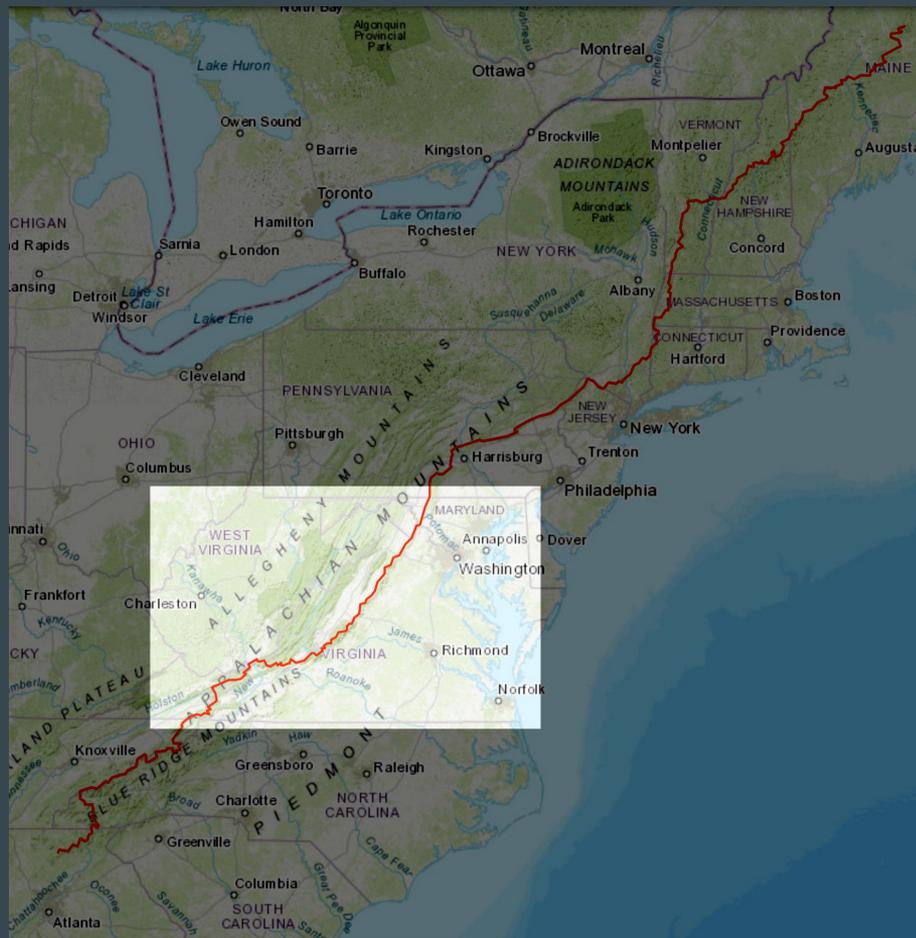
Has more miles on the A.T. than any other state ~ 550

Accounts for almost 25% of the entire trail length (second fourth of trail)

The longest state to complete

Includes some of the most iconic views on the entire trail

Known for the “Virginia Blues”



What are the Virginia Blues and what causes them?

Some people describe this as a form of depression.

Usually characterized by:

- Loss of love for the trail
- Low morale
- Lack of motivation to keep hiking

Not really “Virginia’s” fault so much as the “death of the honeymoon” ~Zach Davis, *Appalachian Trials*, p. 51

You might have the Virginia Blues if:

- you're no longer in love with or excited by your project.
- you don't feel like you're making meaningful progress on it.
- you feel overwhelmed by the amount of miles/work left to go.
- you're inventing other things to do instead of the project.
- the consequences of choices you made earlier have caught up with you in painful ways.
- you have lost perspective and forgotten why you ever thought this was a good idea in the first place.

Ultimately, it's a narrative problem

The story we tell ourselves about this project is no longer enthusiastic or positive.

Instead, we start telling ourselves the story that this is a miserable experience.

How do we cope with the Virginia Blues?

One strategy to rule them all: Expect & embrace the Virginia Blues

Hitting a wall, feeling overwhelmed, or losing motivation isn't a flaw in your project planning, estimating, or execution.

It's also not a personal character flaw.

It's a natural part of the project life cycle.

Accept that. And plan for it.

9 strategies with sass for getting through the Virginia Blues

1. Know when to seek help
2. Narrow your perspective
3. Take judicious zero days
4. Check your energy
5. Give yourself options
6. Write down what you do
7. Exercise the power of choice
8. Say hello to red efts
9. Find your fungi

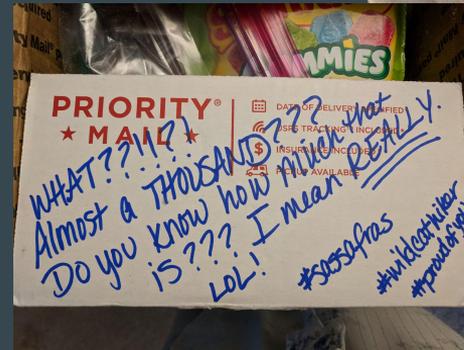
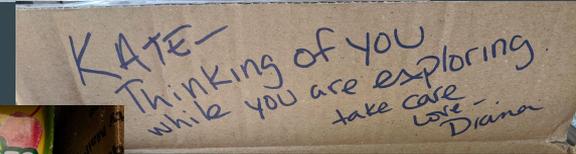
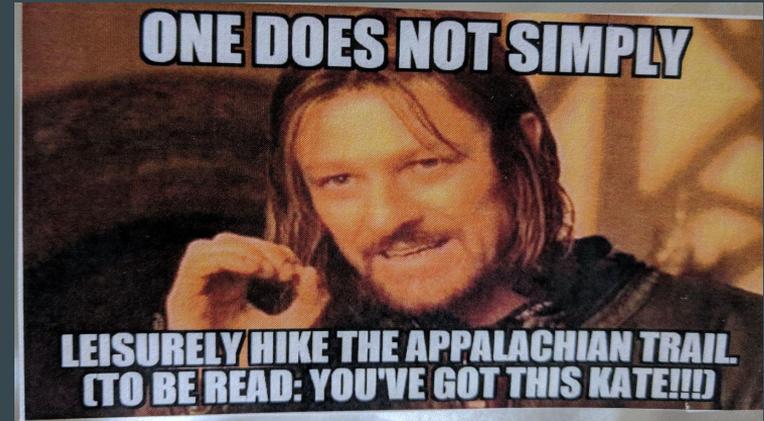
1: Know when to seek help

Know when to seek help

At various points, we all need different forms of help:

- **Encouragement:** You've got this.
- **Validation:** Your struggles or mindset make sense. It's okay that you're struggling.
- **Problem-solving:** Would this help with your struggle?
- **Celebration:** Look how far you've come!

Early on, identify at least 3 people you can go to for any of these forms of help, and then go to them!



2: Narrow your perspective

Narrow your perspective

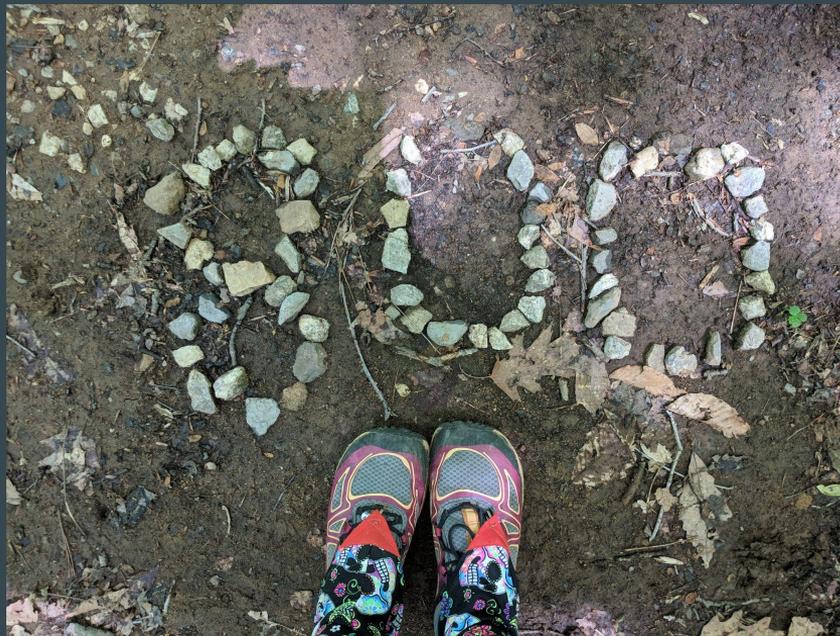
If you're feeling overwhelmed by how much work remains, forget the end goal for a while.

Create mini-goals.

Complete and **celebrate** those goals

Works well with techniques like:

- Sprints
- Pomodoro
- Move tasks to “Later”



3: Take judicious zero days

Take judicious zero days

zero day: a day where you don't hike any miles

Give yourself zero days on your project:

- Catch up on non-project work things (emails, meetings, etc.)
- Cross off some “productive procrastination” tasks to buoy your spirits
- Take an actual day off



4: Check your energy

Check your energy

Many choices revolve around your energy levels: breaks, food, water, camping spots, etc.

At the start of the day:

- Check in with yourself on how much energy and focus you have (rate 1-10)
- Choose tasks that work well with that energy
- Repeat throughout the day (like lunch)



5: Give yourself options

6: Write down what you do

Write down what you do

Many thru-hikers keep a daily journal, mileage log, or vlog.

At work, I've started creating a narrative during the work day when I'm in big projects, like this:

What went well this week? (optional)

- Mon: I finally had a totally meeting-free day and was able to get through a lot of PHP upgrade testing! I hadn't realized how much meetings had been derailing my testing efforts; for some reason having a whole day to do nothing but that was really helpful.

7: Exercise the power of choice

Exercise the power of choice

When you're thru-hiking, you decide every day to continue hiking.

This makes thru-hiking a deliberate and intentional act.

At the start of the day, say to yourself: "I am choosing to..."



8: Say hello to red efts

Say hello to red efts

Red efts most often appear on rainy, wet, miserable days.

Make changing tasks an explicit thing:

- Change a time tracker
- Add an item to a list
- Pause when you shift from sitting to standing
- Add three deep breaths to that change
- Say a motto or mantra



9: Find your fungi

Find your fungi, part 1: Zach Davis' lists

Hand-write a list in response to each prompt.

Take at least 10-15 minutes for each:

Why: I am [doing this project] because...

Benefits: When I successfully complete [this project], I will...

Consequences: If I give up on [this project], I will...

This should be a hotpen/freewrite—keep writing the whole time.

Reference these when you get the Virginia Blues.

Adapted from Zach Davis' *Appalachian Trials* Chapter 2. See Resources slide.

Find your fungi, part 2: Find your fungi

The story you're telling becomes negative because you're not finding joy.

What brought you joy in this project, role, job, company, life before you began this project?

Find ways to work those joyful elements back in.



**All endurance efforts are mental.
Change the story you tell yourself.
(And do it with sass.)**

Additional resources

Appalachian Trail Conservancy, [Thru-hiking FAQs](#)

Psychological struggles of thru-hiking: Zach Davis' [*Appalachian Trials: A Psychological and Emotional Guide to Successfully Thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail*](#)

Energy management, choice: Ari Weinzweig's [*A Lapsed Anarchist's Approach to Being a Better Leader*](#)

My thru-hike blog: <https://thetrek.co/author/kate-mueller/>

My lessons learned while thru-hiking and living with long Covid:
www.livewithsass.com

Thank you!

Connect with me on:
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