

# A Walk in the Woods, The Long Trail Up

## Orinda man completes the Appalachian Trail

By Chris Lavin



After almost dying on his first attempt in 2014, Richard Birss of Orinda completed hiking the Appalachian Trail this summer. Photo Chris Lavin

A certain ethos exists among the people who torture themselves by hiking long, excruciating distances. "Oh, he's done the whole PCT (Pacific Crest Trail)," is something that might be said while burgers are being flipped among backpacking friends. Yet the Appalachian Trail remains among the big mammas, one of the triumvirate. If you do them along with the Continental Divide Trail, well, people get your burgers for you.

Now an Orindan has successfully traversed the trail, and he's 67 years old.

"There were times when I questioned my motivation," said Richard Birss modestly, sitting at a table loaded with instant bags of food that can cook quick, near a couch full of backpacking equipment. He just got back in July, but that's not quite enough for one summer. He's leaving now for Mammoth in order to hike to Yosemite. He's been hiking for 50 years.

Now that he is retired from his job as a probation officer for Contra Costa County, Birss can continue to check off the long list of trails he has wanted to conquer. His first attempt on the A.T. began in March 2014. It didn't turn out well. About 400 miles in, he suffered horrific indigestion. He couldn't even stand. He lay down in the middle of the trail. Fortunately a "kid" from one of the established lean-to shelters where he had stayed the night before came along, and asked if he should call 911. Birss said yes immediately.

It took search and rescue crews three hours to get there. They hung an IV bag from a tree branch strapped to an ATV, tied him on, and began the long road back to civilization, where Birss would find that a hole in his intestine was leaking water (and other stuff) into his abdomen. He went in for emergency surgery the next morning. "The doctors said I could die if I didn't get surgery right away."

That little episode ended that trip. He decided to try again this summer.

The Appalachian Trail started to get put down and marked in the 1920s, when engineers and then-environmentalists and more than 30 organizations worked together to build a trail from Georgia all the way up

through Maine. It traverses 2,000 miles and goes through 14 states. (That is not a typo.) Birss went through four pairs of shoes. And his return comes at an important moment in A.T. history: Robert Redford's movie, "A Walk in The Woods," based on Bill Bryson's book by the same name about his own trip on the trail, debuts on Labor Day weekend. Birss is worried that the movie is going to be so popular that the A.T. will become severely overcrowded with hikers.

"There just isn't the infrastructure to support that kind of traffic," he said. Yet one of the reasons the A.T. is so popular is that resources are relatively easy to find. The trail goes through, or near, a lot of towns where hikers can resupply, or rest up under a real roof. Many hitch into a town, then back. But the going is hard.

Something that people who have lived and hiked only in California do not realize is that hiking on the East Coast is different. Most of the trails are not trails. They are not nature paths. You cannot skip. There is no skipping. At times you must turn sideways to wedge your way through boulders. One must remove one's pack at such times, drag it through the slot, then haul it back on and climb through mud another 500 feet in elevation within the span of a football field. Birss' pack was 35 pounds, most of the time, thanks to regular resupply stops. A hiker often loses sight of the white spray-painted splashes on trees that mark the trail. Panic may sometimes ensue.

Therefore much of it is not fun. "It's really, really hard," Birss said. "People don't realize that there are huge boulders to get over. There's not a real trail. You have to hold onto trees sometimes to pull yourself up." You reach a place in the trail where the next step is a piece of granite three or four feet in the air, with no steps. Some days he would hike 14 hours and traverse a mere 10 miles.

On the other hand there were his favorite, the moose, which he loved to watch. The occasional bear. The porcupines at night drove him nuts as they chewed the wood on the shelters to get at the salt left by sweaty hikers resting their heads on the timber. Some nights he had to shoo them

away from dusk till dawn. Apparently his experience has not scarred him too much. After all, his couch and dining room table were already filled up with camping gear. He's off to Mammoth.



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