

2 hikers enduring winter on the PCT

By Associated Press

RENO – After more than two months spent cold, wet, frostbit and blistered, Justin Lichter and Shawn Forry just wanted a few moments of comfort.

So, the first thing Lichter did before sitting down to talk about their attempt to become the first people to complete a wintertime through-hike of the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail from Canada to Mexico was throw some logs in the fireplace at his Truckee-area home. Then, he and Forry joked about a planned side trip to Reno where they could watch movies and find an all-you-can-eat sushi restaurant.

With more than 1,500 miles of mud, slush and ice behind them and the heart of the Sierra Nevada ahead, the two men were determined to make the most of a 48-hour break from the trail.

“This is definitely a stop that we have been dreaming about for a long time, even before the trip started,” said Lichter, 34.

Although they’re still facing what will likely be the riskiest and most challenging terrain of the trip, the miles behind them have been no picnic.

Not long after they started in late October, the weather took a dreary turn which meant weeks of hiking, setting up camp, eating, sleeping and waking in cold and wet conditions.

Forry’s first blog post from the trail focused largely on the blisters that developed from hundreds of miles of walking with damp feet.

“The feet have been kind of a constant theme,” Forry, 33,

said. "When you start in the wet and cold, it is a hard adjustment."

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In addition to contributing to blisters, week-after-week of wet, dreary weather was a challenge to the hikers' psyches, said Lichter, who has more than 35,000 miles of ultralight hiking on his outdoors résumé.

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Toss in some high winds, snowstorms and extreme cold they've experienced and it starts to make sense there's no record of anyone completing what Lichter and Forry are attempting.

Although both men are experienced adventurers with wilderness medical training and countless hours in the backcountry, the foreboding conditions already have resulted in some moments of doubt.

The greatest occurred not far from Bend, Ore., where they developed symptoms of frostbite on their feet. They'd been used to wet feet and cold mornings, but when they got to Oregon, the temperature dropped below freezing and it was too much for wet skin to endure.

"My journey into frostbite begins with jamming my feet into frozen boots in the morning," Forry wrote in a Nov. 19 blog post. "I've seen a fair amount of frost nip and frostbite during my tenure in the winters of Minnesota, so when I saw the hardened, blanched white skin, I knew I was in for a long recovery ahead."

At another point, the duo reached a rain-swollen Grider Creek in the Klamath National Forest only to find out the bridge they had been counting on to cross had been destroyed.

“We both ended up swimming across the creek at 7:30 in the morning and getting pretty wet in December,” Lichter said.

Given the difficulty of the journey, the obvious question for Lichter and Forry is, “Why?”

They say between the hardships, the trip has been punctuated with moments of ecstasy.

A big part of the enjoyment comes from knowing that even though thousands of people hike the Pacific Crest Trail in warmer months, very few get the chance to experience it during the winter when snowfall can make animal tracks easier to spot and lend a sense of quiet to the wilderness.

“There is just a real calm, surreal feeling in the wilderness,” Forry said. “You get a sense you are the only people out there, and in reality, we probably are.”

Lichter described waking up on Mt. Adams in Washington to a clear sky after weeks of storms and thick clouds and seeing Goat Rocks Wilderness and Mount Rainier in the distance.

“It was pretty much raining and snowing for over 40 days,” he said. “Then, you get a sunny day after that and, oh my God, I can see all these mountains. We just woke up to that.”

They’re even finding ways to power through the low moments by using them as reminders of why they decided to make the journey in the first place.

“You get frustrated, you get tired, that is part of the challenge,” Lichter said. “That is what makes the high parts even better.”

What’s next?

Lichter and Forry made it to Truckee late last week and even managed to get some miles in on Friday. They wanted to test the skis and boots they planned to use for the next part of the trip by traveling from Interstate 80 to a mountaintop at Sugar Bowl Resort, where Lichter works as a ski patroller.

Not only was it a chance to make sure the gear worked and fit comfortably, it allowed them to complete a difficult climb before resuming the trip. Getting to the top by their own power on Friday meant they could take the lift up the mountain Sunday morning to resume the journey from there.

At that point, they'll be embarking on the portion of the trip that could be the most critical to success.

They'll pass Lake Tahoe and experience the Sierra Nevada as it gets taller and more removed from towns and road access going south.

It's also the time of year when storm cycles can stack up and dump snow by the foot, making travel treacherous.

"The mountains get bigger, so do the avalanche paths," said Don Triplat, director of the Sierra Avalanche Center. "Right now, there are really good conditions that could change with the next storm."

That means Lichter and Forry will need to stay mentally sharp throughout the physically demanding trek. Snow conditions can vary from one aspect to the next and throughout the day.

"If you are on a trail in the summertime, you can put your head down and walk," Triplat said. "In the winter, you need to be evaluating constantly."

In order to account for tougher conditions, Lichter and Forry adjusted their estimated daily mileage in the Sierra Nevada to about 10 per day, down from 20 or more on other parts of the trip.

If they successfully navigate the Sierra Nevada, the two hikers will be left with some desert miles, then the San Bernardino, San Jacinto and Santa Rosa ranges in Southern California.

Whether they make it to Mexico successfully or not, each man said the experience of the journey is more important than finishing.

“You don’t want to get started in that rabbit hole of ‘I’m only doing this to finish,’” Forry said. “It is cliché, but the journey is the biggest part of the trip.”