

Opinion: 500 miles in one season

By Aaron Hussmann

In summer 2013, I walked a demanding 500 miles and I'm damn proud of it.

After working 60-80 hour weeks for nine months, living in a crowded city, and becoming one of the thousands of tired, nerve-shaken souls John Muir spoke about, I realized the famous naturalist was right when he said, "going to the mountains is going home."



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I packed my old Subaru full of my worldly possessions and headed home to South Lake Tahoe. Breathing in crisp mountain air and soaking in the stillness of the granite peaks surrounding me, I resolved to drag my city slicker feet over 500 miles of trail that summer.

Hiking 500 miles in one season isn't the most difficult task in the world, especially if you're a Pacific Crest Trail through-hiker. But it's also not the easiest thing to do. It can be difficult to stay motivated, to get out of bed, or out of your tent, and hike every day. Hiking 500 miles requires a steady balance of careful planning and wild spontaneity. The end result, however, is an overwhelming sense of pride and accomplishment, a rewarding connection (or re-connection) with

the natural world, and a new appreciation for a slower pace of life.

Here are five tips to plan for and stay motivated during a 500-mile season, but feel free to liberally apply these tips to any hiking adventure.

1. Invest in solid hiking boots and socks. I can honestly count my blisters on one hand after almost five years of dedicated Oboz use. Your feet are your most valuable, yet underrated, piece of gear on the trail, and your fancy, ultra-light thingamajig won't do any good unless your feet are comfortable, dry, and blister free. Seriously, try caring how many ounces your titanium spork weighs when your feet are covered in blisters. The winning combination in my blister-free history has always been an Oboz boot with Vermont Darn Tough socks.

2. Small hikes add up, so get outside every day. Researchers at the University of Michigan and Edge Hill University in the UK have found that weekly walks in nature significantly reduce stress and lower depression. These short walks also significantly add toward your 500-mile goal for the season.

3. Rediscover the familiar and explore the brand new. When embarking on your 500-mile ambitions, ease into the season by hiking familiar trails with a new eye for discovery. Consider buying a guidebook and map for hikes in your local area. For you Tahoans out there, I recommend this book, with over 500 miles of South Lake Tahoe trails (written by yours, truly). In the end, don't be afraid to wake up in the morning, unfold your map, close your eyes, and drop your finger on a new destination for the day.

4. Learn the local flora and fauna. John Muir taught his children the names of dozens of plants and animals on their Martinez ranch that served as a powerful lesson about respect, wonder, and inter-connectedness with nature. Pick up a guide

to the local plants, trees, flowers, and wildlife in your area and bring it with you on every hike. Each step down the trail becomes a learning experience or a re-acquaintance with a familiar friend. Plus, you get to look like a nature badass for knowing what all those different pine trees are.

5. Learn to love (and hate) hiking. You're likely reading this because you're already a fan of hiking. Yet, no matter how much you love hiking, at some point you might want to tell your hiking boots and trekking poles that, "just because I love you doesn't mean I have to like you right now." For me, being stuck in my tent for 30 hours of torrential downpour, having my "waterproof" rain fly soak through, and hiking through seven miles of trail-turned-river is one of these moments. But as my father always says, "the misery makes the memory," and my miserable hiking experiences are ones I will cherish for a lifetime.

In the end, whether you're hiking 500 miles or 50, when you connect the sole of your boots with the dirt on the trail, you're also connecting your own soul with the natural world surrounding you. With these five tips in mind, the only step left is to lace up your boots, grab your map, and hit the trail.

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