

The Pacific Crest Trail's shadow hikers

By Caroline Benner, High Country News

Against the backdrop of a desert sunrise, two human silhouettes exchange double high-fives. By 8am, a bouncing crowd of a couple dozen has gathered around a group of wooden columns emblazoned with the crest of the Pacific Crest Trail – the monument that marks the start of the 2,650-mile path.

These are “through-hikers,” people who intend to hike from the fence on the California-Mexican border, all the way to Canada. They hug, take pictures and scrawl breathlessly in the logbook: “Wow!! Wow!! Wow!! Let’s do this!” “Dreams come true!” On this spring day, up to 50 would-be through-hikers set out, focused on the hike’s first leg, 42 miles to the town of Mount Laguna.

On the other side of the monument, just across the border, other hikers are assembling, unseen by the recreationists. Every day, up to 50 people wait until the Border Patrol agent’s truck peels away from the border fence. Once the truck is out of sight, they’ll slip through and begin their own journey north. These are border crossers, and they are focused on simply getting to a road, where a driver will take them deeper into the U.S. Some dash 1,200 feet to where Highway 94 swings close to the border. Some hug the Pacific Crest Trail, making occasional short forays across it; others quietly join the hoopla at the monument and try to blend in with the through-hikers. And some hike a route that echoes the trail’s first leg, heading toward a pick-up point near Mount Laguna.

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