



SoBo 2

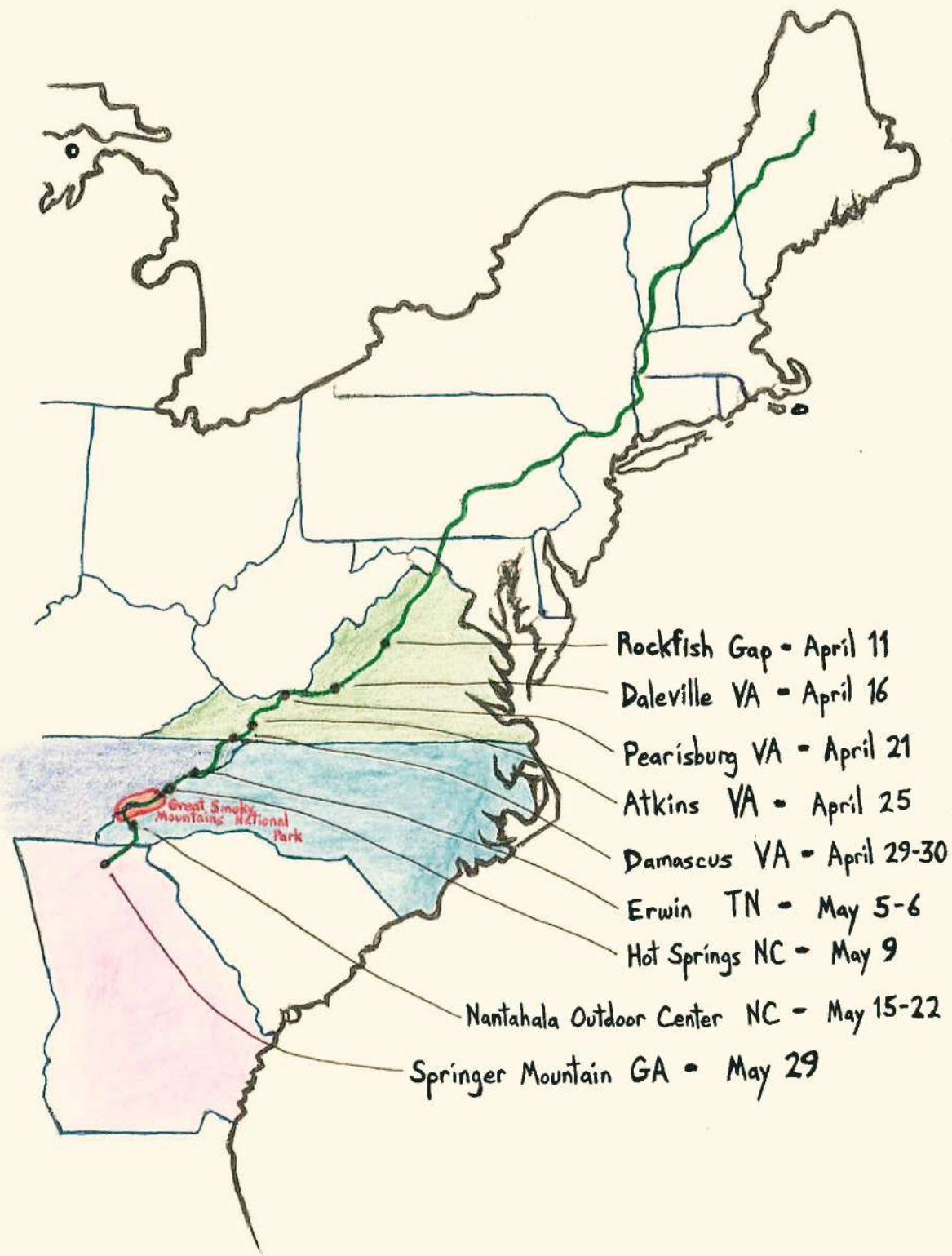
Rockfish Gap VA to Amicalola Falls GA ~ April 11 to May 29, 2015



Part 2 ~ the southern 868 miles

On November 12, 2014, after about 1333 miles from Katahdin in Maine, I paused my southbound hike at Rockfish Gap VA — conveniently near where my sister lives. After a 5-month winter break, I started off again on April 11, 2015. With a recovered and well-rested body — plus a light pack, a fast plan, and eight food boxes mailed down the trail — I was excited to finish the trail more as I meant to hike the whole thing.

AT



My winter stopping point at Rockfish Gap VA is on the south side of Shenandoah National Park. Heading south, I've still got almost 400 miles of trail in Virginia before reaching the well-known and beloved trail town of Damascus VA. The trail will pass right through three other Virginia towns on the way to Damascus — Daleville, Pearisburg, and Atkins. I plan to spend a cheap motel night in each of these towns.

Just south of Damascus, the trail crosses into the eastern corner of Tennessee. This stretch of trail has long been sponsored by the Eastman company where Dad worked.

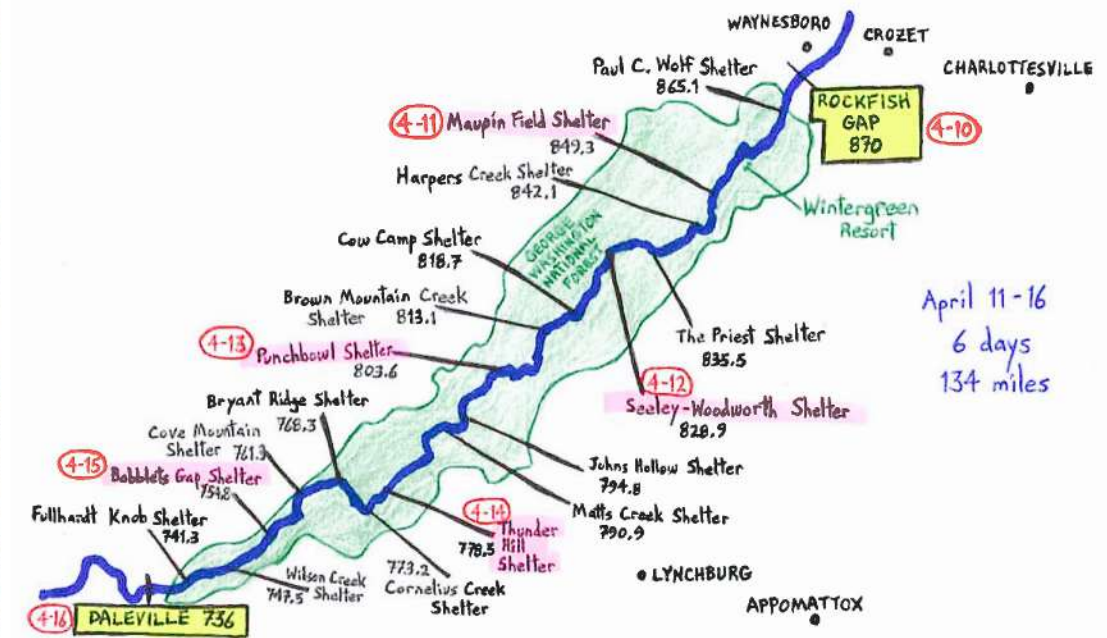
Kingsport TN is only about 30 miles from the trail. It's a nice 125-mile stretch of Tennessee trail from Damascus to Erwin TN. Then the trail cruises along near the TN-NC border for about 160 miles, first passing through Hot Springs NC (another famous trail town), then running the length of Great Smoky Mountains National Park and passing by Clingmans Dome, the highest point on the AT at about 6644'. After leaving the park, it's about 85 NC miles to the Georgia border, then 90 miles to trail's end.



early April prep in Harrisonburg VA

I had 10 days near Rockfish to watch Shakespeare in Staunton and send boxes down the trail. The boxes mostly contained food, plus reading material and map pages. Picking these up at places right along the trail, I planned to avoid any car rides for resupply.





ROCKFISH GAP VA TO DALEVILLE VA

April 11 to April 16

Paul C. Wolf Shelter, 4.8 miles down the trail from Rockfish Gap. Back on the trail at about 7:20 in the morning on April 11. Joy accompanies me for the first 4.8 miles. I look at the logbook in the shelter and leaf back through five months of entries. Only a couple of northbound AT hikers have already made it this far north so early in the season. Some visitors have written in the book since last November, but I quickly get back to a few trail names that I know: Murrum and Giggles. I never met Giggles, but I saw her name in many logbooks in the final month of my autumn hike. I briefly met Murrum in Pennsylvania — flew by him on the trail as his shoes disintegrated. I never expected him to make it this far south. According to the logbook, his hike ended here and he headed back to Rockfish Gap about a week after I got there...

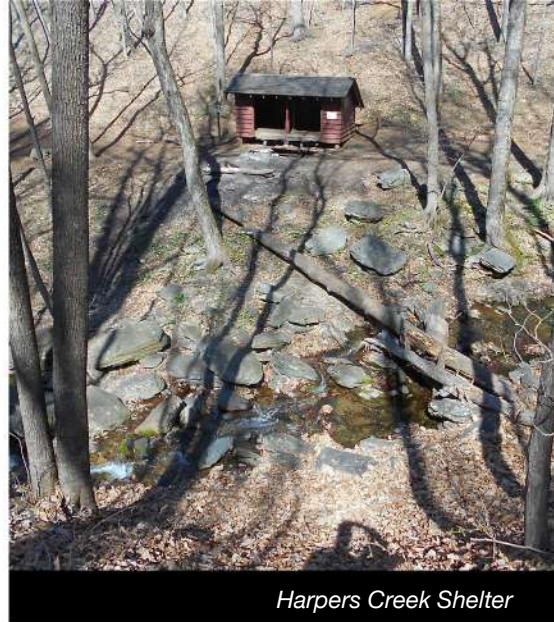
This is the first section of my spring hike — and one of the longest sections between towns and resupply boxes. The plan is to hike the 134 miles to Daleville in six days. So I'm carrying enough food for that many days. Not much extra, not even that much per day, all of it lightweight and dehydrated. I've got an ultralight stove and a fuel canister. I'm traveling light. If necessary, there are other road crossings where I could get off the trail and get to town.



April 11 ~ Rockfish to Maupin Field Shelter

For many miles, the trail will be passing through George Washington National Forest and Jefferson National Forest. After walking through the fallen leaves of autumn last year, it's nice to start off in the early spring with the snow gone, the same brown leaves uncovered on the ground, and the new green leaves just starting to come out.

I cover 21 miles to the Maupin Field Shelter in decent time. I stop here for the night, even though there are several more hours before sunset. There's only one guy here when I arrive, but by dark there are eight of us. It's so nice out, most of us stay in tents. I feel good... but not perfect: sore feet and tired muscles.



Harpers Creek Shelter



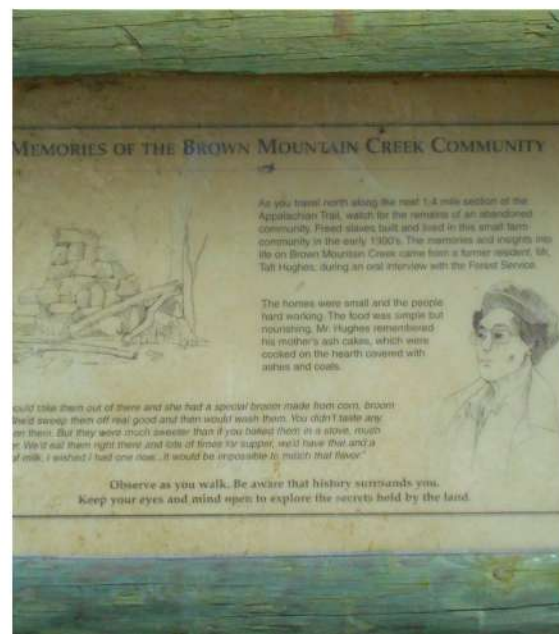
April 12 → Seeley-Woodworth

Another good tough day. Sunny and warm, and a significant climb to get up The Priest in mid-afternoon. I met Nacho Libre — apparently the first NoBo to start off this year. He started on January 1, but he was a bit clueless when he started, and he hasn't gone fast. In the Priest logbook, I see Cornbread's confession from November. Seeley-Woodworth is full of hikers when I get to the shelter, so I tent it again.





sunrise April 13 ~ 25 miles to Punchbowl Shelter today





A badly functioning headlamp offering to the gods



April 13 ~ to Punch Bowl Shelter

Wake up just before 6:00. Start moving at 6:15. Start hiking an hour later. Clear blue sky. Clouds descend stunningly at 9:30, and it gets overcast, windy, chilly.

A nice big black snake at Brown Mountain Creek Shelter. I take a nice afternoon break there.

Make it to Punchbowl Shelter at 19:15.

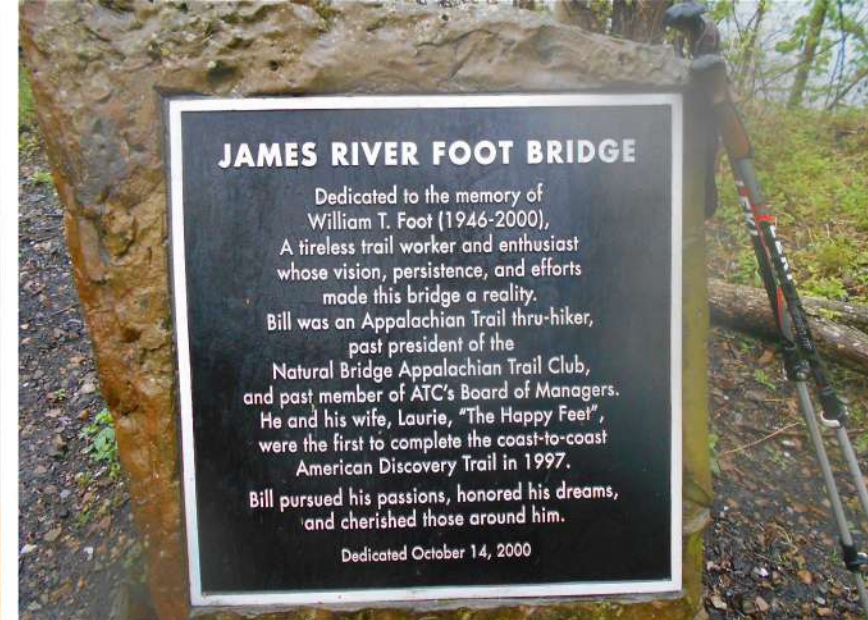
There are four hikers at the shelter: Bird, Pop Pop, Pack Mule, and Bear Bag.

Bird arrives late. He's a NoBo — still among the first I've seen, the front of the northbound pack — and he carries no stove. No hot water, no cooked food.

I'm intrigued. I used to do that all the time, but I've grown very fond of hot drinks and reconstituted foods.



Wet morning at Punchbowl Shelter



Johns Hollow Shelter



April 14 ~ to Thunder Hill Shelter... in the rain

Wet all day long. Starts raining around midnight. I get out of my tent and on the trail during a lull at 7:00. Misty tolerable for a while, but coming down hard by the time I reach Johns Hollow Shelter. Pouring down as I cross the James River footbridge and scurry to the Matts Creek Shelter. Another guy from Punchbowl has called it quits for the day. A good choice. But I've got a schedule, so I change into new dry clothes and continue onward. My "raingear" isn't up to the task, so I'm quickly soaked again. At the top of a knob I stop for a drink — I'm chilled so quickly that I move on. When I reach the Thunder Hill Shelter, it's packed with seven NoBos and their wet gear hanging everywhere. They nicely squeeze me in, but no room to hang stuff.



Matts Creek Shelter



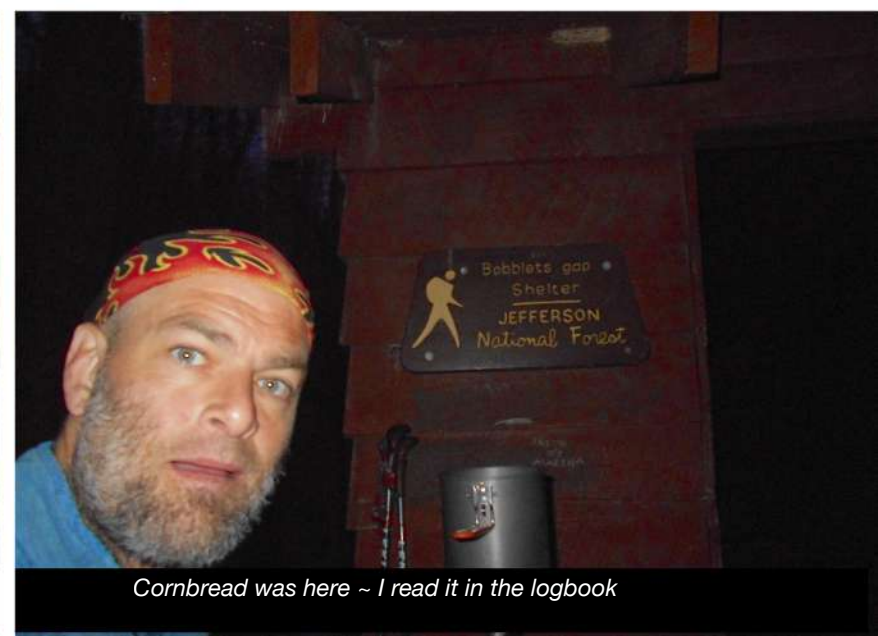
Thunder Hill morning ~ poor guy in background



Bryant Ridge Shelter ~ big and awesome



Bobbet's Gap Shelter ~ all by my lonesome, April 15



Cornbread was here ~ I read it in the logbook

April 16 ~ into Daleville

After all the rain... nice weather and a solo night at Bobblets Gap Shelter were quite welcome.

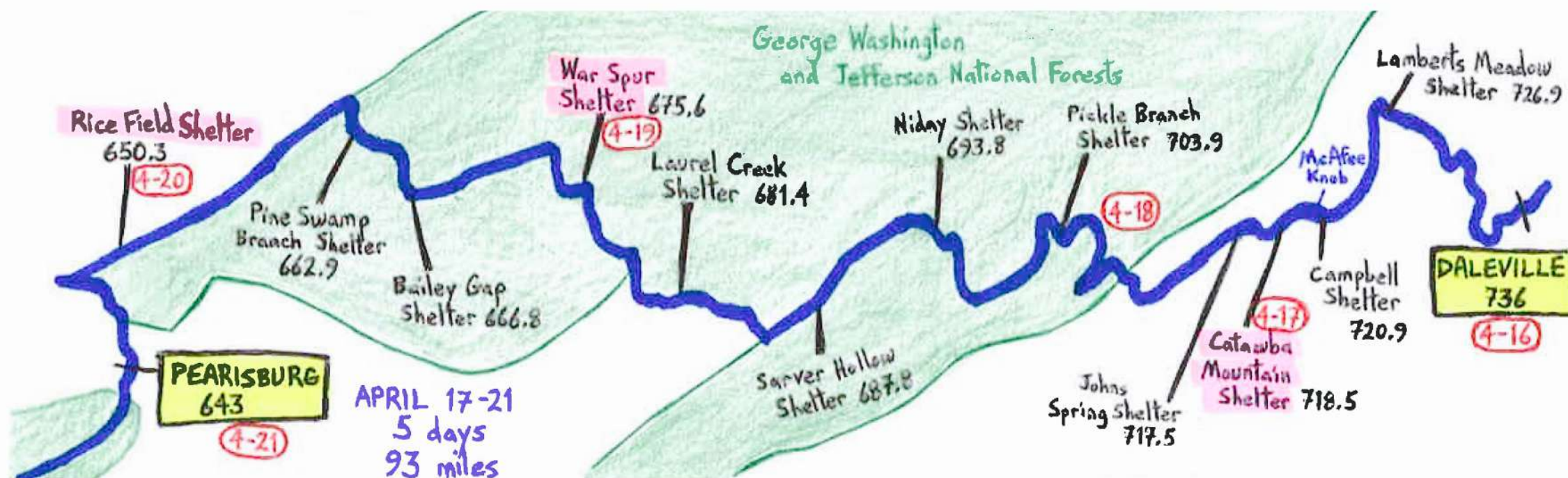
The walk into Daleville made for a long pleasant day.

I was down to just some crumbs in my foodbag. The Howard Johnson motel is right by the trail. So is the Pizza Hut. The cute girl at the HoJo (Sydney) somehow couldn't find my maildrop package. Luckily, the next worker found it for me.



Fullhardt Knob Shelter





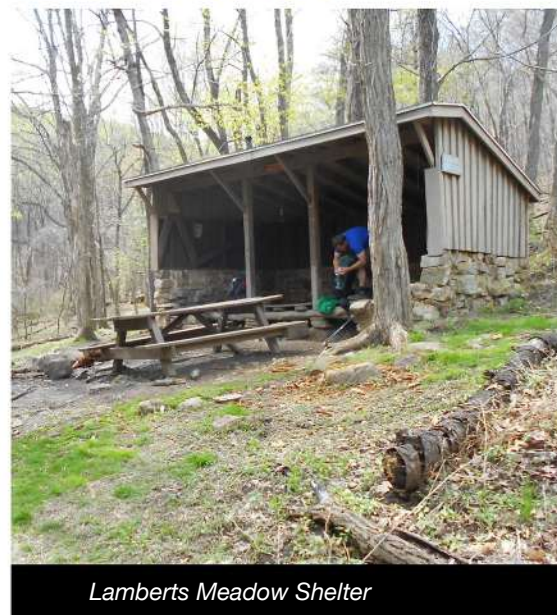
The view once I got up onto the long ridge south of Daleville

Daleville VA to Pearisburg VA

April 17 to April 21

Even with some heat and then some torrential rain, I managed to get to Daleville in six days right according to plan. I was in for heat and hills and another very rainy bit on the 93-mile section to Pearisburg.

On the first day I soak up the comfort of the motel room for as long as possible, and so I don't get back on the trail until almost noon. Hot and uphill and sweaty. A fair number of NoBos passing going the other way now. The trail running along some nice big ridges with great views. A bit of cloud cover in the later hours. Then it gets really buggy as I approach the Campbell Shelter which is right before McAfee Knob. The shelter is crowded. The weather is nice, it's Friday night, and McAfee Knob is one of the most popular spots on the AT. Many sources allege that it's the most photographed spot on the trail, with a fantastic rock overhang jutting out above the forested lowlands below. Appropriately, I didn't get a picture there. But it wasn't really intentional. It was getting dark, and there were some guys camped out right on the trail at the top — blatant signs about not camping up there, but who's patrolling the place? Probably nobody. I cruise down off the Knob to the Catawba Shelter. Amazingly, there is nobody there. I have a great relaxing evening and drift off to sleep.



Lamberts Meadow Shelter



Catawba Shelter



Campbell Shelter





April 18 ~ Fresh Ground's Leap Frog Cafe

A loud bunch of yahoos show up near the Catawba Shelter at midnight, but amazingly they stay at the nearby campsite, so all I get is their noise. I sleep well and trudge onward in the morning. Mid-day I walk a short distance on a crossroad to get to Catawba Grocery for pizza and pop. Then another long hot walk along a rocky ridgeline. I surprise myself by taking a bad fall off the trail. On a thin bit of ridgeline, I'm caught not paying attention, and when I lose my balance, there's nowhere to put my feet. I'm amused as I roll downhill until I crash against a tree, bruising or busting my ribs. I'll be feeling that for a long way down the trail.

I hurry to keep up my daily pace, but toward the end of the day I cross a road where trail angel FRESH GROUND has set up a food tent for hikers...



War Spur Shelter



April 19 ~ in the rain to War Spur Shelter

Fresh Ground is a funny guy. He's been following the bubble of NoBos as they go north. He sets up his tent someplace where the trail crosses the road, and he cooks up all kinds of food for hikers as they pass. After about a week in one place, he moves further north. Many hikers are on a pace to pass him every new place he sets up. The night that I camp near his "café", there's a hiker there named Neon Mountain. He did the PCT last year, and he travels light.

I take off and have a nice walk for awhile, but it eventually starts to rain pretty hard. I kinda want to make up lost time from yesterday, but the rain persuades me to stop early at the War Spur Shelter. Once again, it's crowded, but there's just enough room for one more.



Pine Swamp Branch Shelter



Baileys Gap Shelter



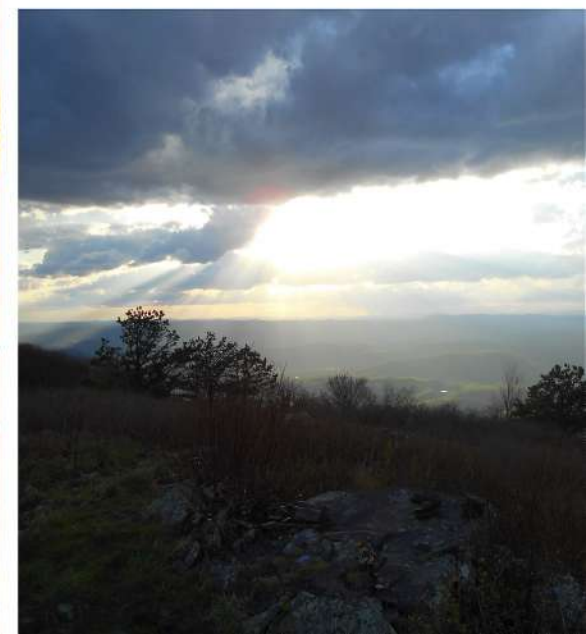
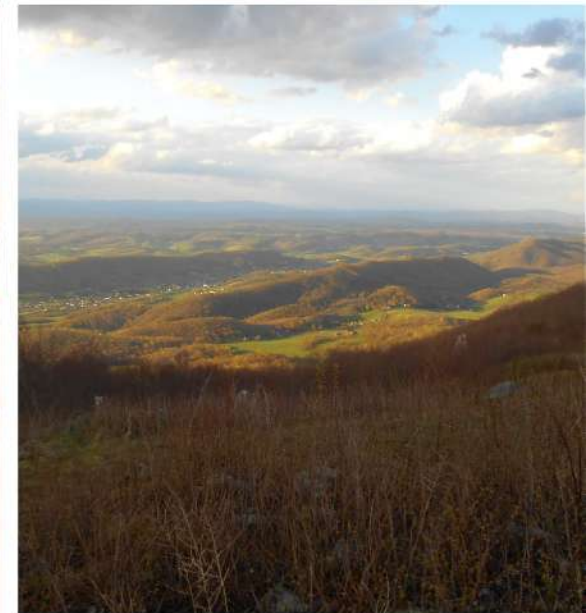
War Spur Morning

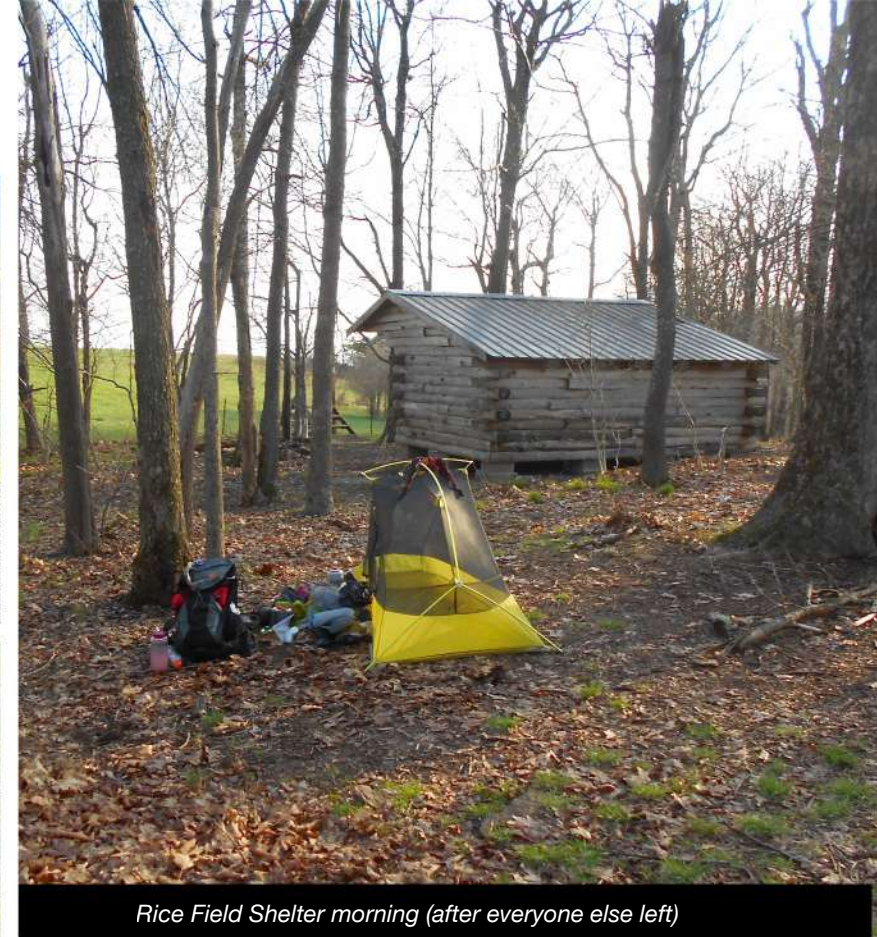
April 20 ~ Rice Field Shelter

The rain is gone in the morning.

It's a great hiking day.

I pass many hikers and a few other shelters. All day I want to push 32 miles to keep my PLAN for getting to Pearisburg. But when I get to the Rice Field Shelter — 7 miles from town — I make a lazy cupcake choice: Get to town tomorrow and lose a day from my schedule. If I pay for a motel room there, I wanna get a fair number of relaxing hours in it.





Rice Field Shelter morning (after everyone else left)



Where the old Pearisburg Hostel burned down

April 21 ~ into Pearisburg

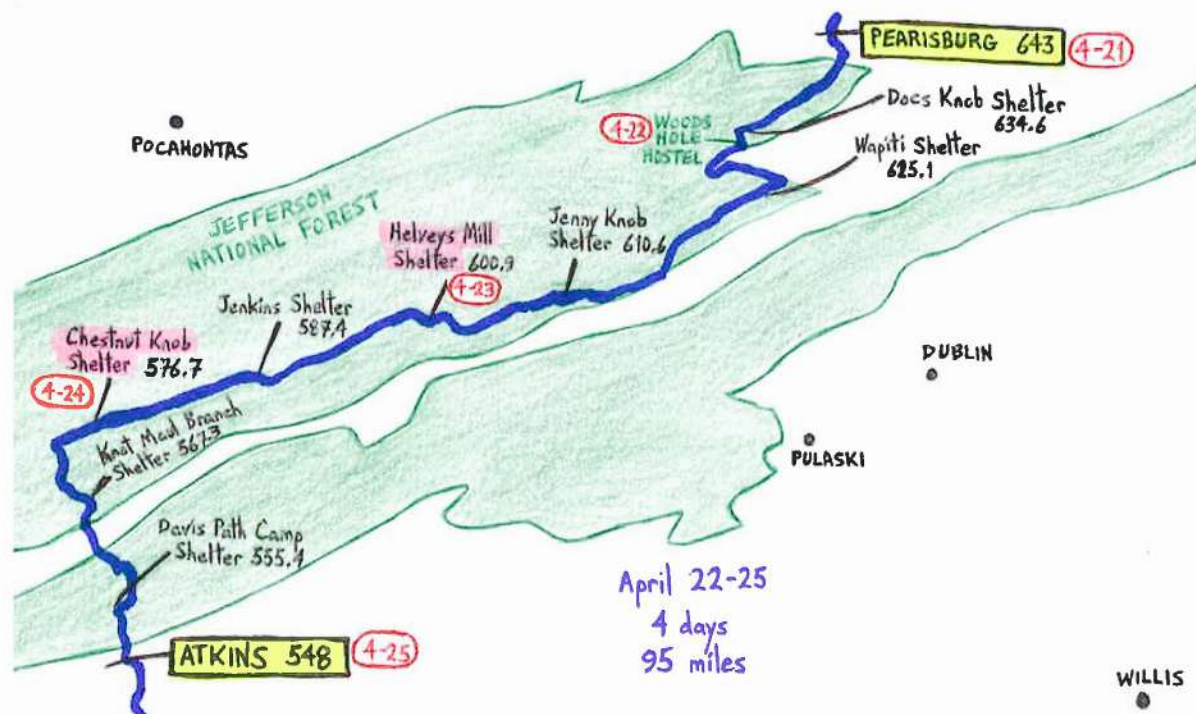
Since I didn't come to town last night, it's an easy morning walk. I arrive around noon and get some pizza for lunch. Check in at the Plaza Hotel — there aren't many guests right now. I find out there's a cheaper motel where most of the hikers stay.

The internet doesn't work very well at the Plaza — half of the reason I like to get motel rooms.

But there's sports on the tv. I get to watch Neymar, then LeBron, then James Harden.

And I pick up my second mail drop package.





Pearisburg VA to Atkins VA

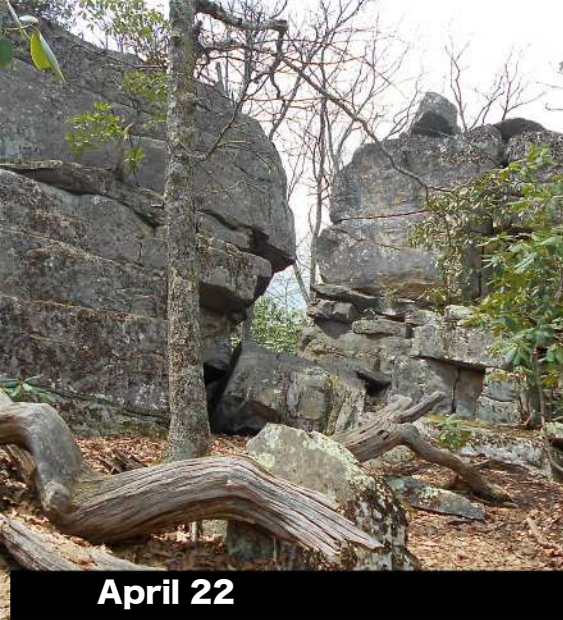
April 22 to April 25

So I took an extra day to get from Daleville to Pearisburg. Now I hope to take four days to go a similar distance from Pearisburg to Atkins.

When I set out from Pearisburg, it's a similar story: I check out of the motel room as late as possible. So I don't get out of town until noon. A nice climb up to Angels Rest. I want to make up for the lost morning, but after only 10 miles I decide to visit the Woods Hole Hostel. Some folks have recommended it. Some other folks have said that it will be nearly empty. But they didn't count on drive-in daytrippers and slack-packers. So it's crowded. But nice. I get to sleep early and get up early.

The next day is one of my favorites. I get up early and take off before sunrise. After six hours I hit VA 606 and walk to Trent's Grocery. Then I walk for seven more hours to get to Helveys Mill Shelter. All day I'm focusing on keeping a good fast pace. It makes for a tiring and satisfying 34-mile day. Shelter all to myself.

I got lost on the way back to the AT the next morning but eventually made 26 miles to Chestnut Knob Shelter — a cool enclosed stone structure on a windy knob. And on the fourth day I rolled the remaining 25 miles to Atkins.



April 22





April 23 ~ Helveys Mill Shelter

Helveys Mill Shelter was great partly because I had it to myself. It featured one of the great zero-privacy privies right on the trail to the shelter. And the water was a good little hike down a steep slope.

I was also very pleased with myself for making the distance to the shelter.

And the weather was great for the twelve hours that I spent there.



Wapiti Shelter ~ about 500 miles to go



Helveys Mill Shelter



April 24





Chestnut Knob Shelter ~ 4410'



That's 3/4 way for you SoBos...



The covered bridge in Atkins



Atkins VA to Damascus VA

April 26 to April 29

Five miles before I got to Atkins, I leaned over weirdly and popped a rib in my back. Hurts to cough, hurts to sneeze, hurts to blow my nose. Obstacles!

It's a short 70 miles from Atkins to Damascus. But rather than push it in three days, I'll take four. Gives me a nice late start out of town (again) and a nice early arrival at the other end.

Twelve miles out of Atkins is the Partnership Shelter, a really nice two-story thing with a shower. Kept really nice because it's right next to the Mt. Rogers Visitor Center. There's a phone at the visitor center, and you can call out for delivery, though there's a \$50 minimum at Pizza Hut. I consider it. When I arrive at Partnership, there's a crowd there. They leave, but they leave a mess. It ends up being a fairly quiet evening. I stay upstairs in the loft. It's fairly cold.

On the second night I sleep in a tent at the Old Orchard Shelter with a swarm of NoBos who show up after I get there. They quickly take all the best tent spots. Luckily there are lots of places for tents. And on the third night I pass by the crowded Lost Mountain Shelter and pitch a tent by the river a mile further on.





April 26 ~ Partnership Shelter

It stays gloomy but doesn't rain on the hike up here. Everything feels pretty good except my back — I wonder how long this thing will last.

After the loud crew leaves the shelter, there's just one guy left downstairs: STONEY, who's zeroing here. A couple upstairs hikes back up the trail to pitch a tent: They have no sleeping bags, and a tent is warmer than an open shelter. If it's chilly tonight, I may wrap up in my tent fly upstairs. Now there are only four of us in the upstairs loft... And the other 3 kids are sacked out at 6pm, an hour before dark. I sit here eating and writing, and then a chatty guy named WALLY shows up. He really likes the social aspect of the AT. He tries out the shower.

Cocoa, jerky, candy bar, sunflower seeds

I'll turn in at dark. Maybe listen to Mulvey. Maybe read some Hamlet and/or Rum Doodle.

20:00 the sky has cleared, mostly

Could tomorrow be beautiful?

Do I dare to eat a peach?



Partnership Shelter





April 27 ~ Old Orchard Shelter

A nice hike today. When I arrived at the Old Orchard Shelter, two people had occupied the whole thing with their stuff spread out everywhere. Pretty lame, but with such great weather, I'm happy to tent it outside. While I rest and make dinner, loads of NoBos hike in, swapping tales of where they got lost in the Grayson Highlands.

After the newcomers set up their tents, I go find a spot. I'm happy that it seems like I'll be warm tonight. My "broken ribs" are killing me.





April 28



Wise Shelter



Grayson Highlands and ponies



April 29 ~ on into Damascus

Yesterday I took the side trail up Mt. Rogers.

Great morning today —

I wake up in a tent by a river and it looks like great weather. Thirteen miles to Damascus and it's warm and easy. Since I have plenty of time, I take the side trail to the Saunders Shelter for a break. I also need water, and this is the only place to get it. On the way into town, I bite down on my last root beer barrel and chip a bit out of an upper left rear molar.

At 13:20 I waltz into Damascus and its streets and stores. After a big double bacon cheeseburger at *IN THE COUNTRY*— first restaurant for SoBos — then I get free LEKI pole ends at *SUNDOG*.
Let the good times roll.



Saunders Shelter



Damascus VA

April 29 and 30



I'm slightly disappointed with this trail town. It's what I expected, minus two things: cheap motel rooms and bars with sports on tv. There are plenty of hostels and B&Bs for hikers — THE PLACE is a nice cheap \$7 hostel run by a church. After walking around town, I get a bunk there. Then I check out the coffee shop. But no sports bar. I have a long night on the wooden bunk platform — it creaks every time I move, and very few positions feel okay with my back/ribs. I end up sticking around for a second night, but I get a pricey room at the Old Mill. I think it's the first day of the summer season for this place. Sports on tv, cozy bed, and the bar is open tonight. NBA playoffs are going on. A good day to zero as it rained all day. I plan to do 50 miles in the next 2 days to get to BOB PEOPLES and his Kincora Hostel.



Damascus VA to Erwin TN May 1 - May 5

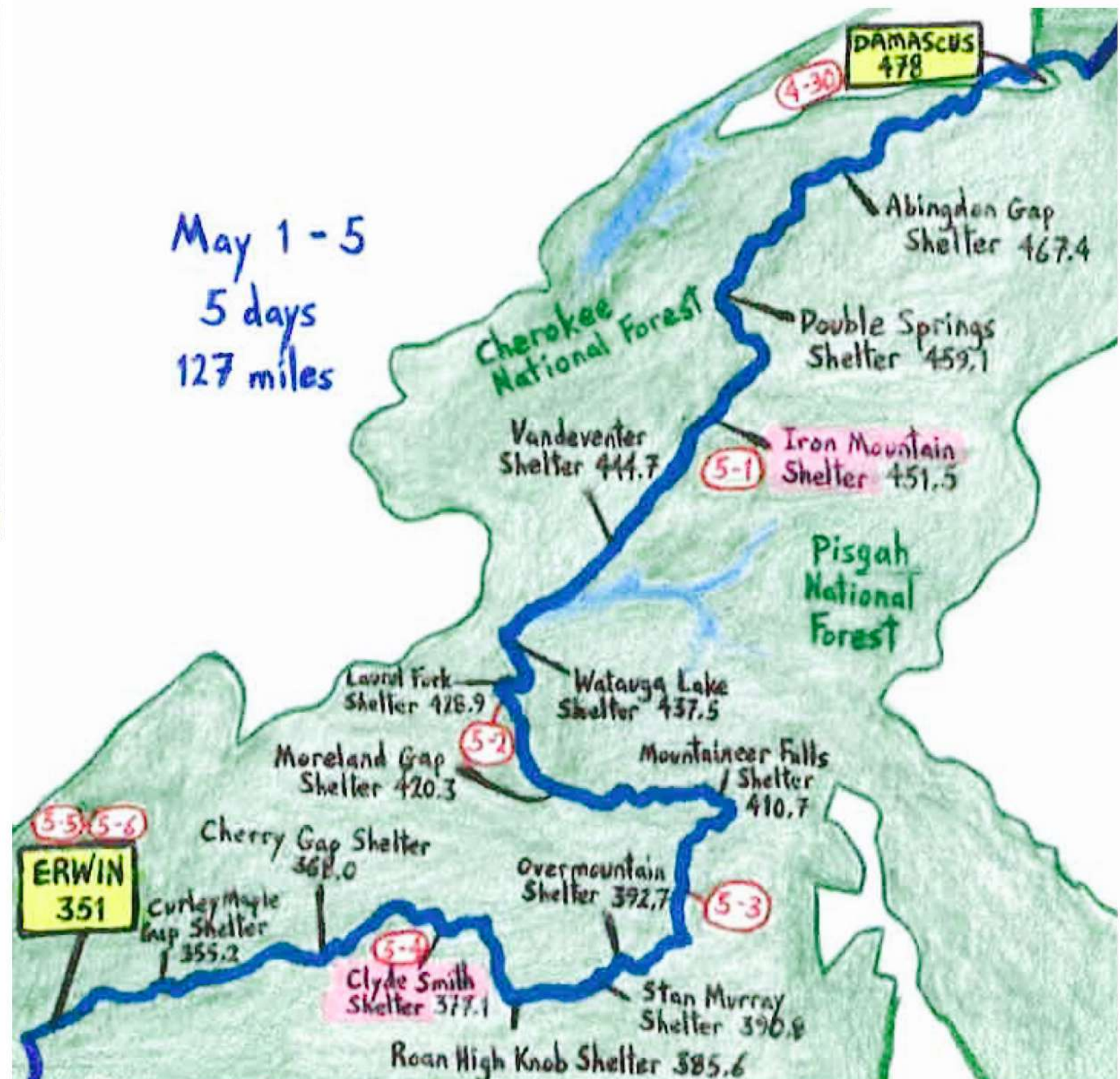
So after taking a zero day in Damascus, I'm now two days behind my original schedule. That schedule has me doing the next 127 miles in 5 days, about 25 miles every day. There are a couple hostels around mile 50 and 75. I'm aiming for those. Into Tennessee.

First day of May and the hike out of Damascus is uphill and gloomy. I put in 10 good hours to get to the Iron Mountain Shelter. I have a new sleeping pad to replace the leaking Big Agnes. There are several guys in tents here, and Captain K in the shelter. Cold night.

Second day I hike to Bob Peoples' Kincora Hostel.

Third day I hike to the Mountain Harbour hostel.

Then into the 6000' mountains, past Roan High Knob Shelter, and into Erwin TN on the fifth day.







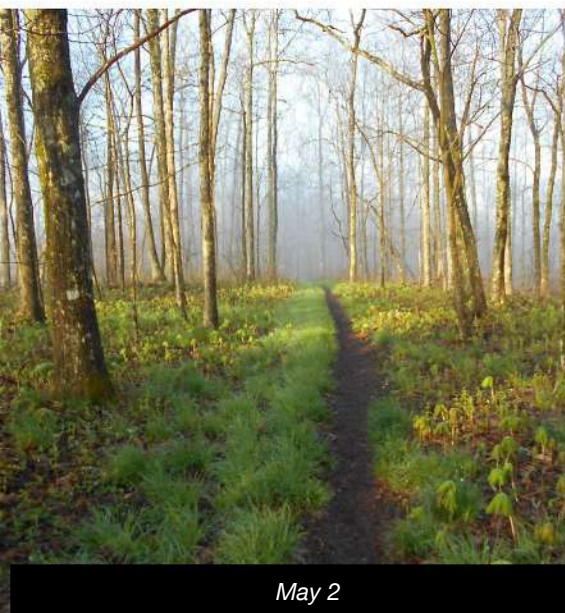
Iron



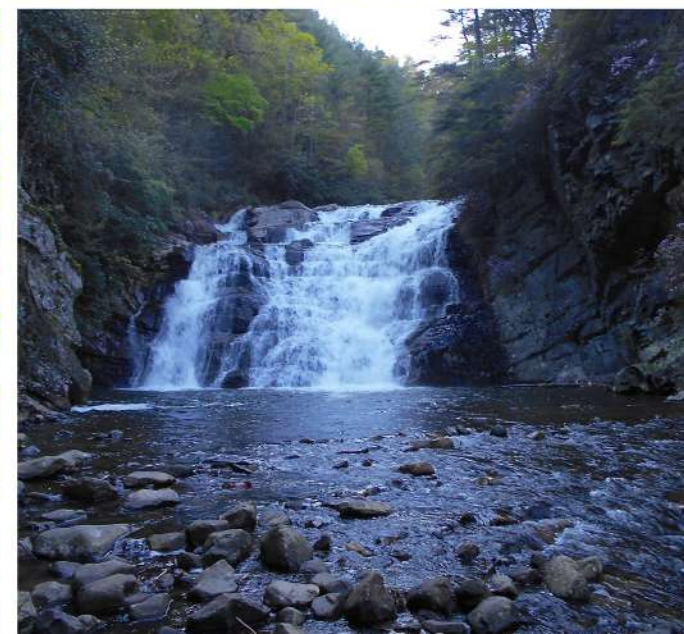
Mountain



Shelter

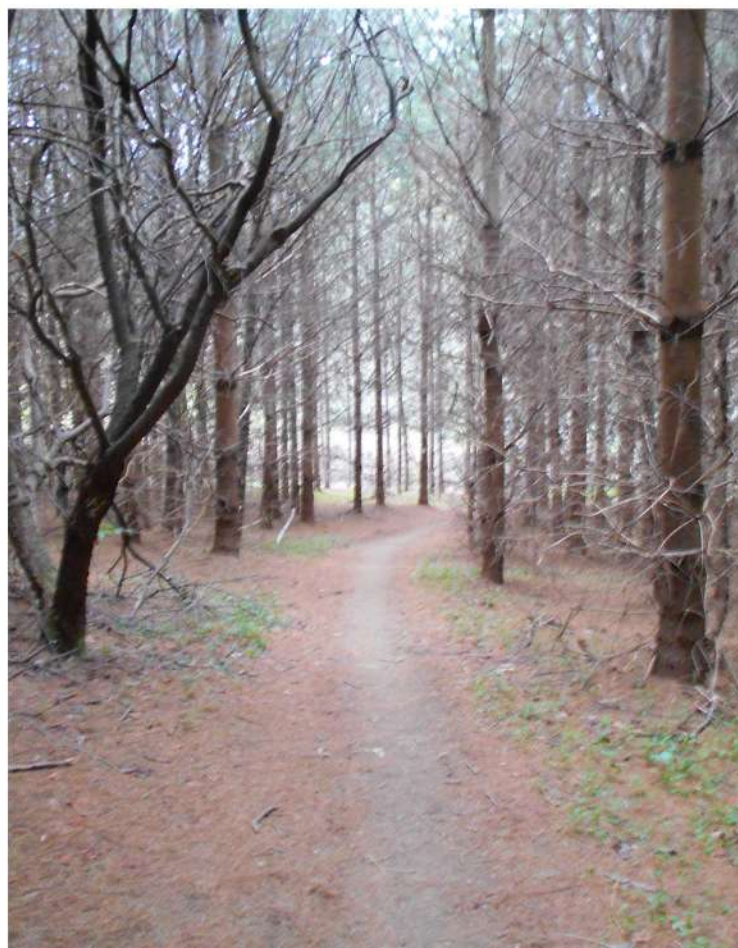


May 2





Mountaineer Falls Shelter



May 3 ~ Mountain Harbour Hostel

From hostel to hostel today ~ about 25 miles.

Get going at 7:30. Cove Mountain Shelter at 10:00.

Scotty hostel for pizza at 13:00. Into Mountain Harbour by 19:15. Hot in the AM, Clouding over PM.

The bunkroom is full here. I could've slept on the bunkroom couch, but tenting is cheaper. Lotsa tents here, too.

Up into the 6000' mountains tomorrow.



Overmountain Shelter



May 4



Roan High Knob Shelter





Cherry Gap Shelter



Curley Maple Gap Shelter

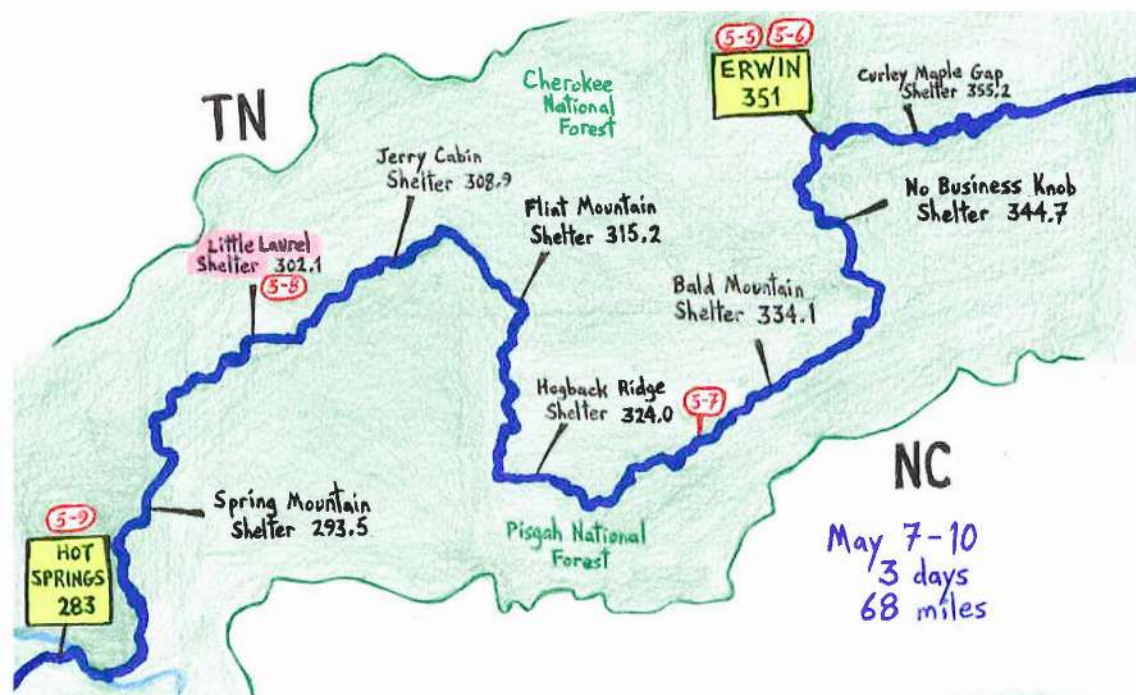


May 5 ~ into Erwin TN

I passed by the Roan High Knob shelter yesterday afternoon and continued to the Clyde Smith Shelter. Arrived at 20:00. Full shelter. Many tents. I slowly made soup, got settled, and pitched my tent without the fly — clear night. I had to put the fly on at 3AM for more warmth.

I wake up before 7:00 and get hiking by 7:47. Kinda monotonous day. Camera not working in the morning. Hot and parched over Unaka Mountain. Dragged into Curley Maple Gap. Then an easy 5 miles to the Nolichucky River.

I visit Uncle Johnny's hostel which is the hiker place and it's right where the trail goes through town. But I opt to walk a mile down the road to a motel. NBA on tv.



MAY 5 - 6 DAY OFF IN ERWIN

Living the good life.

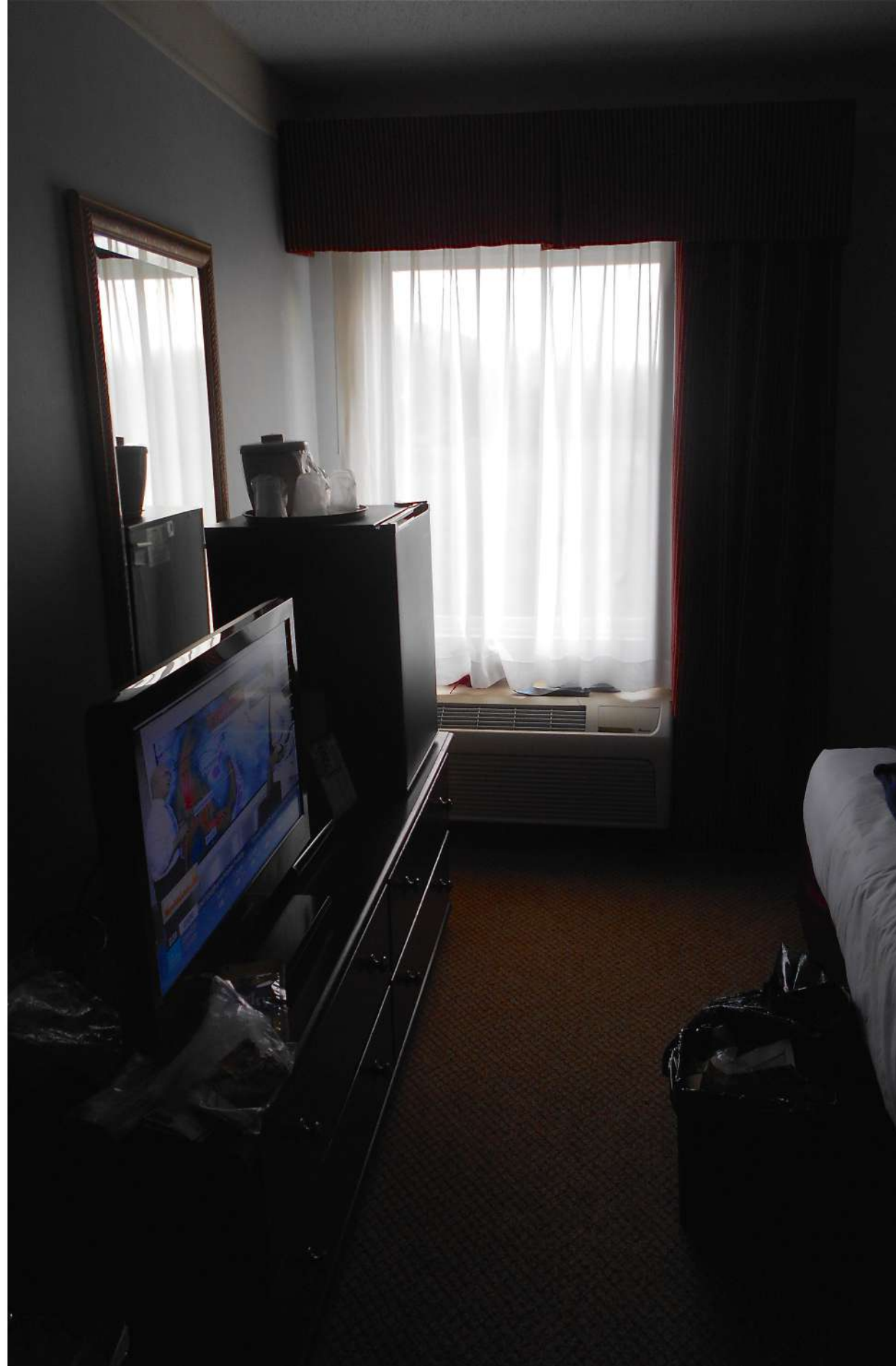
I take another zero day. This isn't a habit that I want to get used to... now I'm three days behind the original plan. I've already changed endgame plans accordingly — I'll have to take a break from the trail to fly up to New York for a week. Getting off the trail and to the Atlanta airport and then back from the airport to the trail adds some logistics... but it'll all work out. Even if I tried to speed up and finish the whole trail before flying to NYC, I couldn't count on succeeding. The new plan is a bit more flexible.

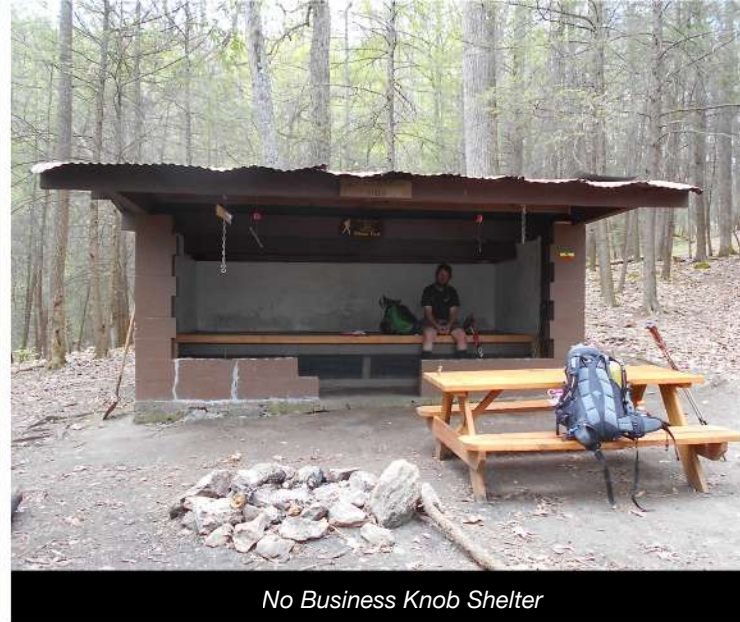
The next section will be three days at a slightly easier pace than Damascus — Erwin.

I manage to see another FC Barcelona game on the television.

The next section will be full of rain but full of springtime. Flowers, birds, and bugs.

On May 7 I hike through wetness all afternoon and into the evening. It's crowded at the Bald Mountain Shelter and it's still light out, so I go a few more miles to the Low Gap campsite. There are two guys there in tents, and I set my tent up, too.





No Business Knob Shelter



May 7



Bald Mountain Shelter





Low Gap campsite



yoga hippies at Jerry Cabin



May 8 ~ Little Laurel Shelter

I leave Low Gap at about 8:00. About an hour later, a guy coming the other way yells at me. Instantly, I know it's Lochness. He's been trying to catch me since Waynesboro, following my logbook entries and asking passing NoBos. Since he thought he was close, he got a ride 40 miles south from Erwin and is slackpacking back there, hoping to pass me. It worked. Although he was lucky — If I hadn't taken a zero in Erwin and/or if I hadn't stopped short in Low Gap, he would've missed me. We talk for a while, then continue on our ways. Now that I know he's behind me, I can text him and write messages to him in logbooks. Late in the afternoon, I go over the exposed ridge in a thunderstorm. I run down the hill to get to the Little Laurel Shelter where 2 other guys are already sacked out.



Little Laurel Shelter



May 9 ~ into Hot Springs NC

The rain fell hard last night, but it mostly held off till I was situated in the shelter.

There were mice. I had my food up in a bearbag (out in the rain), but I swatted a mouse that was climbing around on another guy's pack. It fell to the ground stunned. I could've jumped up and stomped it, but I didn't.

Both of the other guys are up and gone by 7:30. It's downhill all the way to MOM'S, which has been mentioned in logbooks. Chili dog, pizza pocket, coffee, little chocolate donuts, pepsi. One nice thing about going against the flow — there's a lot of information about what's coming up on the trail.

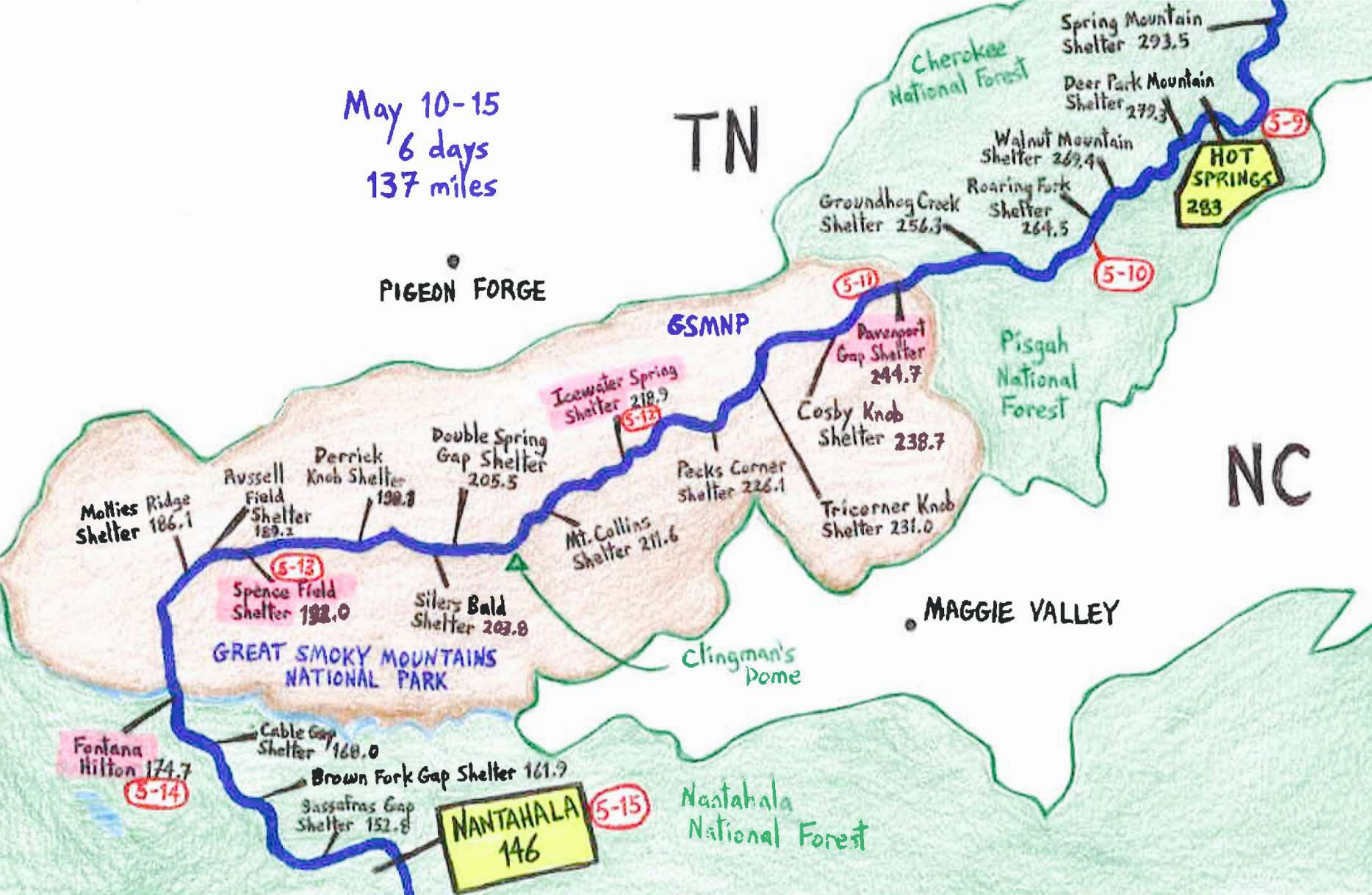
Some of the privies in this section of the trail are terrible: falling apart and full to overflowing. Hogback Ridge gets the prize for the worst.

The heat gets to me on the way into Hot Springs. Before crossing the French Broad River and arriving in town, the trail follows the river allowing great camping spots right near town. I stop in a crowded bar for a Gose and Chili Cheese Fries. Barcelona on the tv. It's so hot that I can barely eat my food — I'm soaked in sweat. I get a room at the Laughing Heart Hostel.



Spring Mountain Shelter





Hot Springs NC to Nantahala Outdoor Center NC ~~ Great Smoky Mountains NP

An exciting six-day section passing through the most visited National Park in the US. And that includes the highest point on the AT — Clingmans Dome. And that means even more hikers on the trail and more restrictions on camping. I decide to go light on food, assuming I can pick up some stuff at the Standing Bear Hostel before the park and the Fontana Visitor Center after it.



Walnut Mountain Shelter



May 10 ~ Max Patch

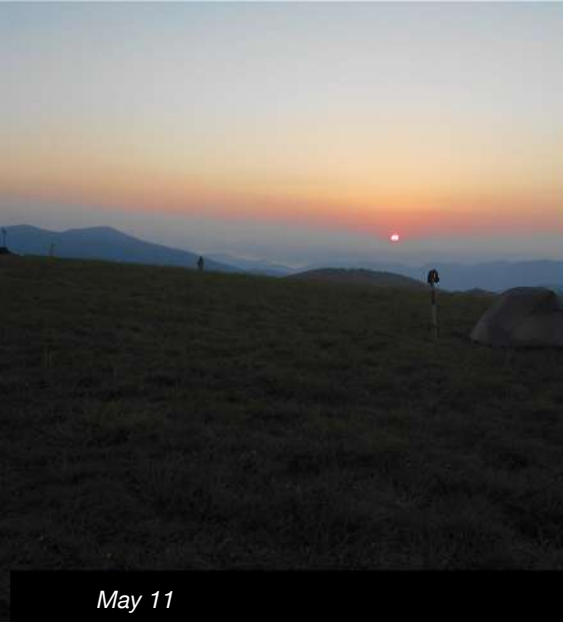
I sewed up the hole in my shoe while I was in Hot Springs. And I got a good long sleep, which helped me recover from yesterday's exhaustion.

It's hot today, but a pleasant hike all the way to the Roaring Fork Shelter. I arrive there at 20:15... and it's full of loud goofballs. One guy tells me that it's not far to the top of Max Patch, and that I'd probably prefer to spend the night up there. He's right. It ends up being one of my favorite nights on the trail — great weather, starry sky, lovely sunrise, and nice views.

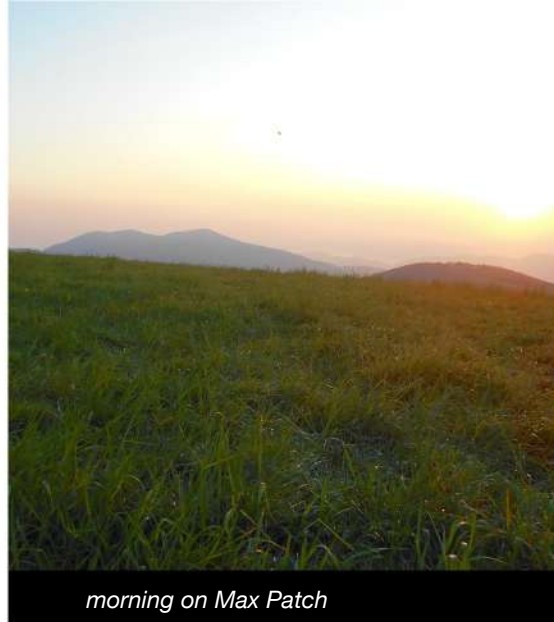
When I get to the summit, there are quite a few tents. And somebody is flying a kite with the last gasps of daylight.



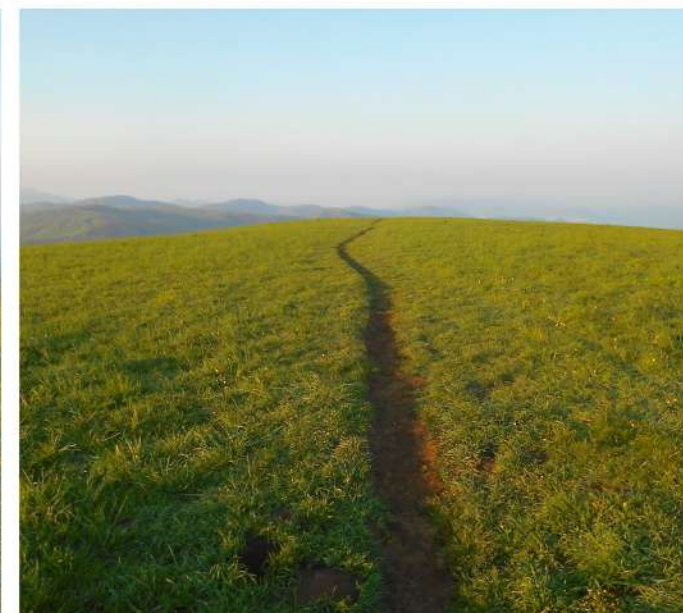
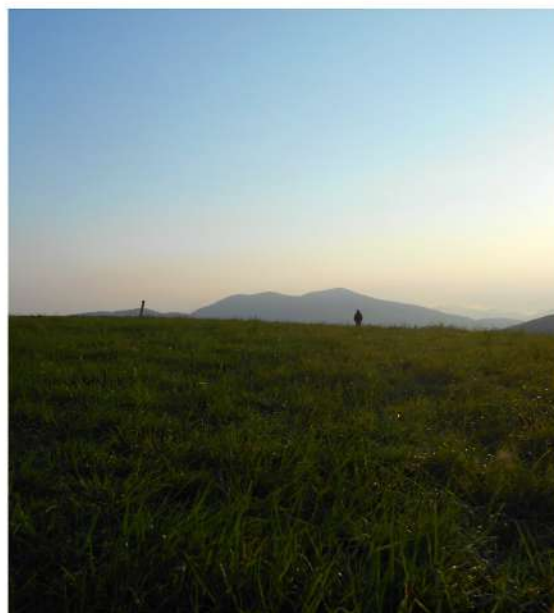
Roaring Fork Shelter



May 11



morning on Max Patch



Groundhog Creek Shelter

Great Smoky Mountains NP

The most visited national park in the country. But most of the visitors don't get far from the road.

There are about 70 miles of the AT running through the GSMNP, and I hope to get through the park in 3 days.

Clingmans Dome is the highest point on the AT and you can drive to it and there's a big funky observation tower. It's like the Mt. Washington of the southern AT, except there's no great snack bar here in the Smokies.

I haven't passed through a big regulated national park since Shenandoah, and I passed through there late in the fall season when there wasn't much traffic.

After hiking all day from Max Patch, I get to the Standing Bear hostel in the mid-afternoon. I eat some food and wait out some rain. I don't really want to enter the national park yet, but I don't want to stay at the hostel, either. So I hike up into the park and spend the night in the crowded Davenport Gap Shelter — the only shelter that still has a big bear fence across the front of it...



May 12 ~ GSMNP Day 1

So I start the day at the ugly Davenport Gap Shelter, just inside the park. I head up into the highlands today, and since we're not supposed to camp in the park, I plan to make it to a shelter. It turns into a nice day — soupy fog early, so no visibility when I get to the first tower, but it clears up once I'm on the ridge.

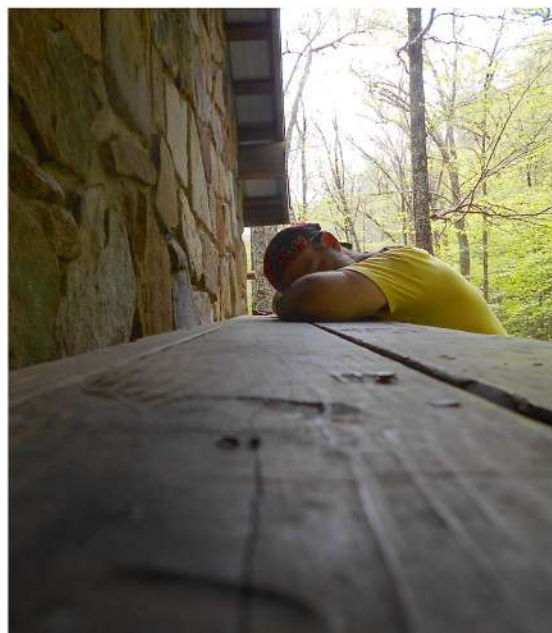
Super nice day and evening, so I do 27.4 miles to the Icewater Springs Shelter at almost 6000'.

There are lots of people here when I show up at 20:15. They've got a fire going in the fireplace. These mountain shelters get cold, so the fireplaces are nice.

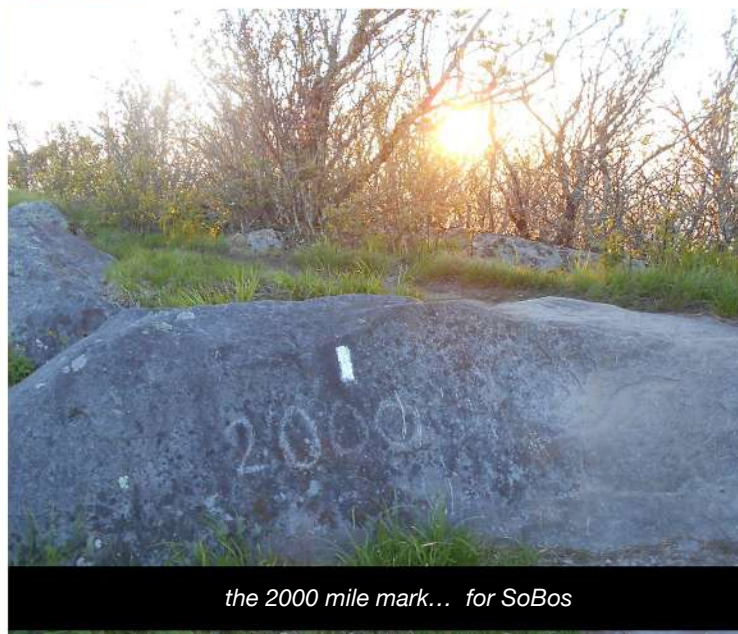
I make dinner, then set up my stuff in a space up on the platform. I read and write a little bit by headlamp, and then get to sleep. It's only 10pm, but everyone is sacked out for the night.



Cosby Knob Shelter



Icewater Springs Shelter



May 13 ~ GSMNP Day 2 ~ Clingmans Dome

I push hard again today. Get to Clingmans Dome just after noon. Climb up the observation tower and observe. You can drive up here, so there's lots of people. I go to the gift shop and buy what little "food" is available: some super-expensive chocolate bars.

Sunny blue sky all day.

I race dusk to get to the Spence Field Shelter. Not long before I get there, I pass a 2000 on a rock. There are six peeps in the shelter and a few in tents (against the rules, but who's checking?)

I look forward to getting out of the GSMNP tomorrow.

the 2000 mile mark... for SoBos

May 14 ~ to Fontana Dam

A hot weather day getting out of the GSMNP and to the Fontana Dam.

Got in pretty early ~ 14:00.
But it was hot and I was drained, even though I had a major descent for the last 8 miles - - - I was actually running for a good bit of it. Passed three slow guys and really rocked it for a while.
Visitor Center — shower! YAY!
no gift shop! BOO!

I walked 2+ miles into town for pizza, drinks, food... Woulda loved to stay for LeBron game 6 vs. Chicago. But back to the Fontana Hilton, now full of boisterous 160-milers. Back at about 7pm.

Lazy waiting around.
As its name implies, this is a really nice shelter with running water, bathrooms, and showers nearby.

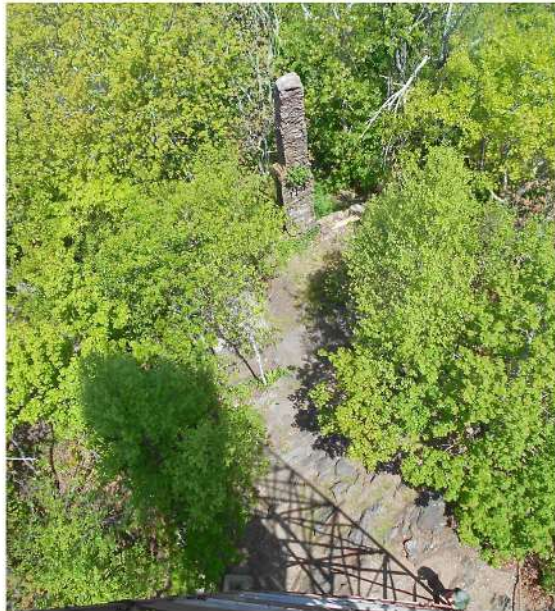
Maybe sleep early. Some possible allergy symptoms coming... itchy eyes and congestion.

Met "The Dude" coming north... he said the way to NOC is rough.

Met "Bad Dinner" at the Hilton... he said not so much.



Spence Field Shelter





May 15 ~ to Nantahala Outdoor Center

The Dude was wrong. It's pretty easy to get from Fontana to NOC in a day. 28.5 miles of up and down, but nothing too bad. The worst parts — "Jacob's Ladder" and "The Jump-Up" — are downhill for southbounders. There are probably a lot more named things at the southern end of the trail, where there are more hikers going more slowly and naming every bump in the trail.



Cable Gap Shelter

I had a pleasant hike to Nantahala, and I worked hard to get in by 8:00 pm, assuming that things would surely still be open. But I was wrong. It's not a great place to arrive late at night... the bars were all closed up — I got there just minutes too late. There are nice bathroom and shower facilities which are open all night. And there are many roofs for shelter. But the hostel rooms are all booked and there's no camping allowed. Once it's dark, it's easy enough to sneak off and find a place to sleep, but there's probably an old watchman wandering around hassling you if you're too obvious about it.

I was annoyed, so I walked back along the railroad tracks to where I'd seen a campfire. I climbed up a steep slope and found a guy who had set up there for the night. There was another decent tent space, so I pitched my tent there and had a nice evening.





May 16-17 ~ Nantahala

The NOC is a pretty cool place, though. Lochness was a bit more than a day behind me, and my parents were planning to pick me up here on the 17th. So I had some time to kill. I picked up my penultimate maildrop and got a room in a nearby town on the 16th. I spent a relaxing Saturday at the NOC watching kayakers in the river and tourists in the bar — and a few hikers passing through. I was texting Lochness, advising him about the trail to NOC and where to stay and what to expect. I planned to return Sunday morning, meet him when he hiked in off the trail, and then meet my parents when they arrived to pick me up. It all worked out well. When my parents showed up, we all had lunch. Then I headed to NYC and Lochness headed for Springer.



Lochness

Fireball



MAY 23 ~ BACK ON THE TRAIL, BARELY

After a week in NYC, Cornbread picks me up at the Atlanta airport and drives me back to Nantahala. I get back to the trail late on May 23. Take off toward the first shelter, not far from the NOC, but it's very crowded. I push on and look for a tent site. There are some good ones, but they're already taken. Soon I'm hiking by headlamp. I decide to camp at a wide spot in the trail, just inches from the footpath. I hope to get up and going before anybody comes by.

146 miles to go. Lochness finished two days ago.

I'm going ultralight for this last stretch. My folks took some of my stuff back home with them: no stove, no sleeping bag, no puffy parka, light running shoes...



trailside camp



May 24





May 25 ~ to Bly Gap and the Georgia Border

*A nicer tentsite on May 24. Right by US64 to Franklin.
Loads of hikers — Memorial Day Weekend.*

Lochness left a few great messages for me in logbooks. I didn't go to the Siler Bald Shelter, but I did go up to Siler Bald summit. Sunny clear sky. Views all around. I stopped well before dark, so was in bed by dark. I've been a bit colder without my sleeping bag at night. Just all my clothes and a thin sheet.

On May 25 I easily hiked 31 miles to the GA border. Great weather. Managed to get my tent up before the rain really came down. It rained all night...



Deep Gap Shelter



May 26 ~ to Tray Mtn. in the rain

Rain all day.

It tapers to almost nothing by late afternoon, then explodes into a thunderstorm downpour about an hour before I get to the Tray Mountain Shelter. I arrive soaked at about 18:30, and of course the shelter is full of barely-hiking daytrippers. They've been in the shelter all day. There's one other AT hiker in a wet tent. I consider going on, thinking the rain might stop, but then I pitch my tent in the rain. If it rains all night, puddles may get me. I'm down to my last dry clothes. If I end up totally cold and wet, I might want to head for a hostel tomorrow.

Rain all night.



The rains let up by morning.



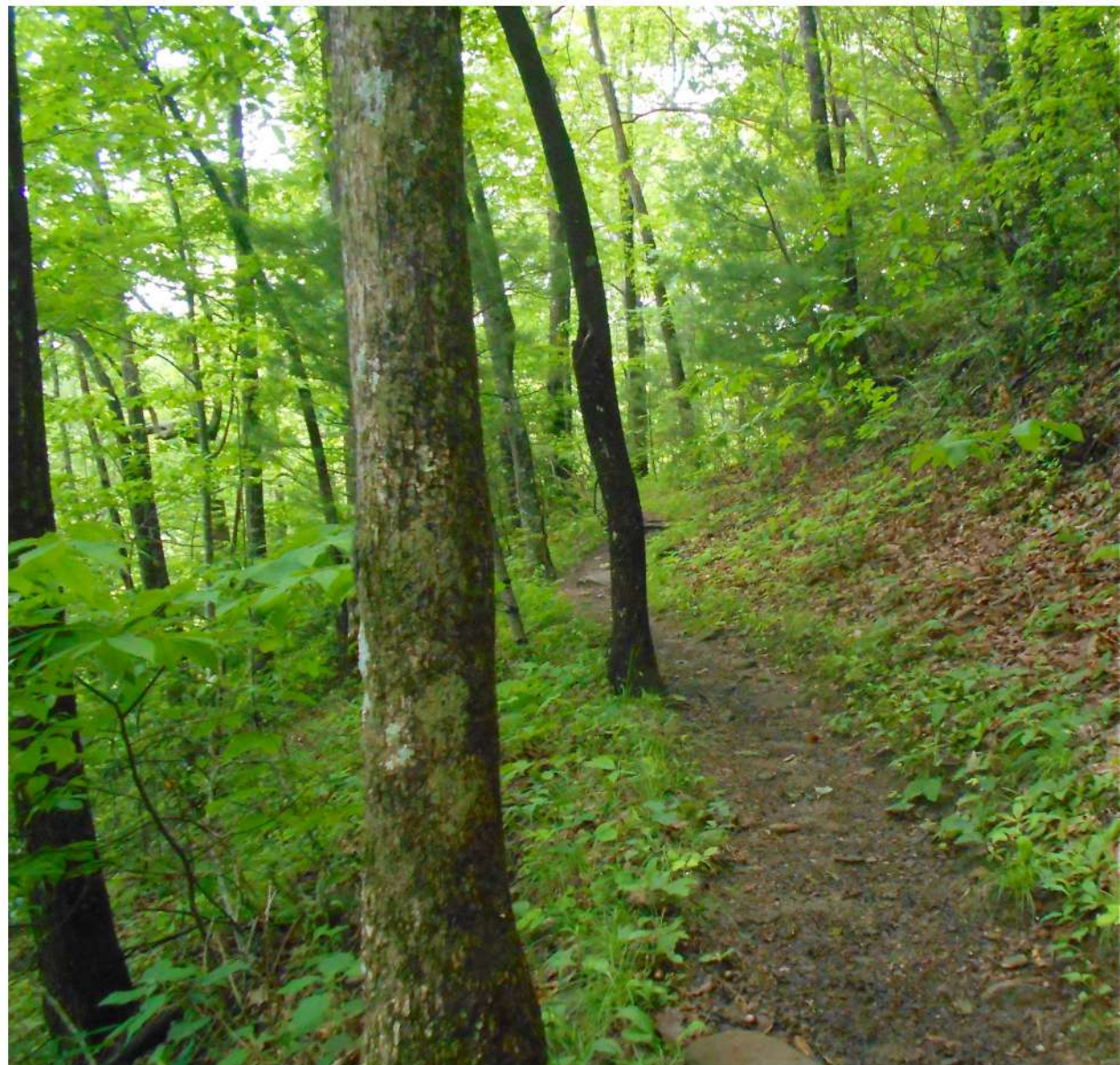
The clouds dissipate.



May 27



Blue Mountain Shelter



Late in the day I passed Scott Jurek on the trail. His first day heading north.



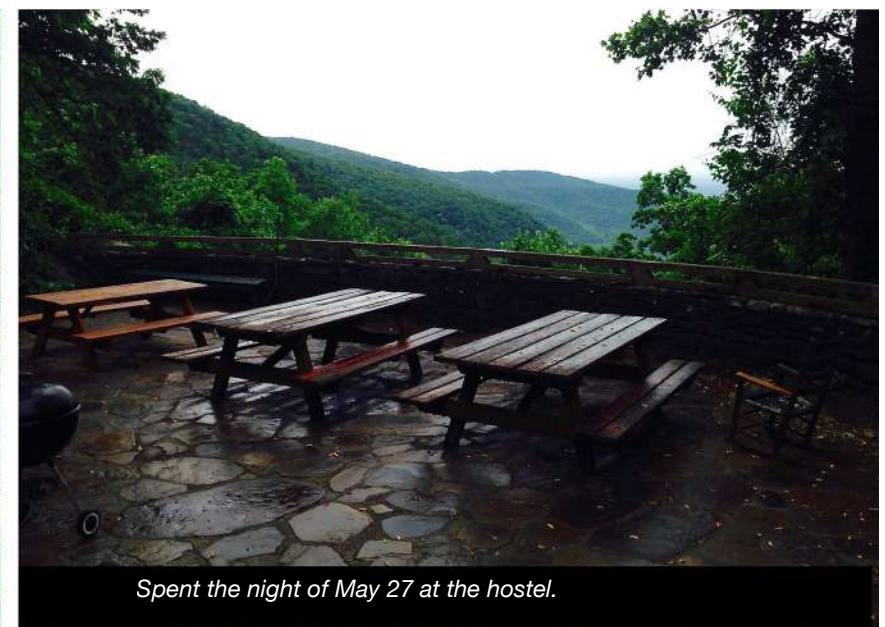
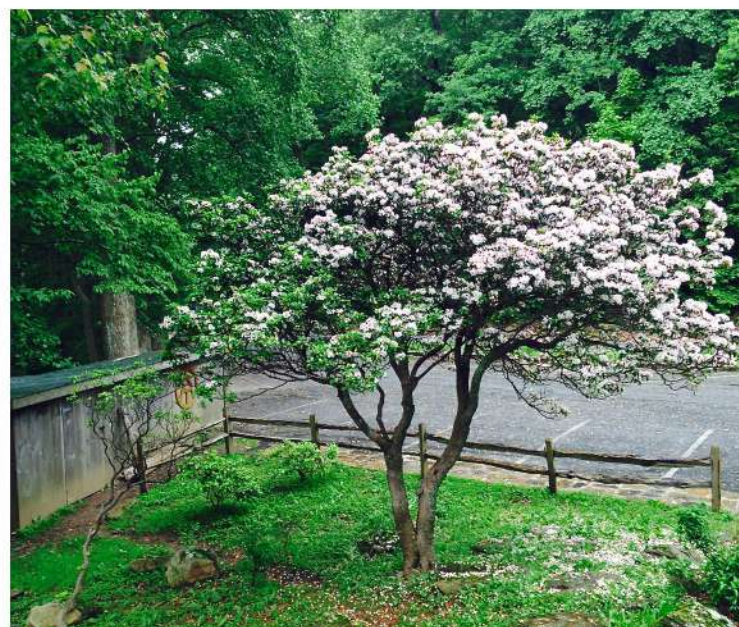
I arrived at Neels Gap just before 6pm on May 27.



31 miles to Springer, 40 miles to Amicalola



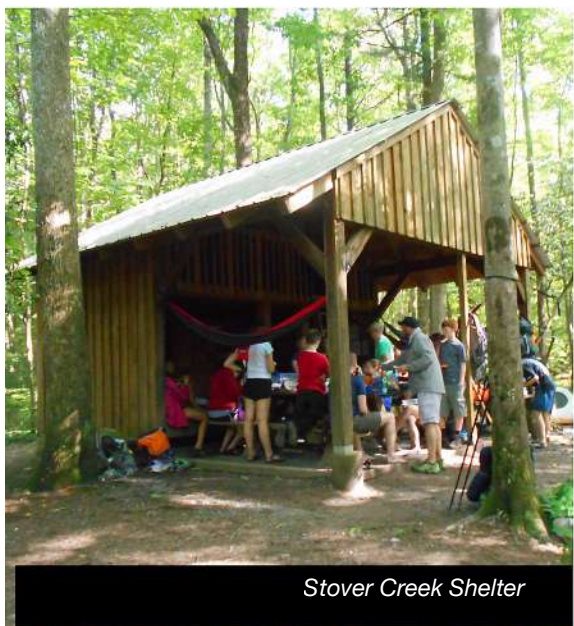
Spent the night of May 28 at Blood Mountain Cabins



Spent the night of May 27 at the hostel.



Blood Mountain Shelter



Stover Creek Shelter



May 29 ~ Springer Mountain GA

sunset

May 29

Katahdin to Springer ~ 2188 miles

I left Neels Gap at about 7:00 on May 29.

It was foggy in the morning, as I climbed up to the Blood Mountain Shelter.

I hiked all morning, and the weather cleared up.

The conditions were near ideal as I passed by Gooch Mountain Shelter at about 13:00.

I took a quick break at the Hawk Mountain Shelter at 15:45, telling the incredulous NoBo there that I was doing the last 40 miles in a one-day push.

I thought back to Maine and the NoBos I'd met and the logbooks I'd read —

Folks doing 30-mile days through the 100-mile wilderness.

"Thirty always hurts" — **SHIVERS**

I stopped and ate a banana at the crowded Stover Creek Shelter around 17:40.

Then a quick stop for my last shelter logbook entry at the Springer Shelter.

I reached the Springer Summit at 19:00. There were a few guys there, heading north.

I had to put on my headlamp at the very end,

reaching the Amicalola Falls Lodge at 21:45.





in the bubble in the mountain in the cloud

There's always the quandary about whether to spend precious adventure time on the document. I scribbled daily notes and took some photos, but that's no substitute for fresh memories. I put this book together ten months later, in early April 2016, down in the easy chair in Koliganek AK. Ten long months. I relished making the maps and picking the pics, reliving what I could. But some of those memories are gone for good.



On Springer Mountain

My Neymar shirt, my fireball bandanna, my shades, my browned skin, my scraggly beard, and my enthusiasm to have finally reached the southern terminus of the Appalachian Trail... some 6 months later than I'd originally planned.