

Following the Art Loeb
Chris Hunnicutt
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The Pisgah National Forest map arrived a few days before the trip and I kissed it, knowing if it had come late, there would be no trip. I scanned the map and found what I was looking for – the Art Loeb trail, yellow with black dashes – 30.1 miles, from Brevard to the Daniel Boone Boy Scout camp. We could either park at one end and make a loop, only doing a portion of the Art Loeb, or leave a car at both ends and hike the whole thing. We decided to do the whole thing.

I planned to take four days, sticking to the Art Loeb, except for a possible side excursion to the top of Cold Mountain on the last day if we had time. I wanted to join the ranks of literary pilgrims who climbed the mountain for which Charles Frazier named his moving novel, but I doubted my fellow hikers would like the idea of climbing yet another mountain after four long days.

Jay and I left Charlotte early Sunday morning and met Travis, Preston, Mike, and Bryan in Asheville, then drove to the Boy Scout camp and dropped off my car. It was an hour drive to Brevard up and down a thin curving mountain road.

“This is how far we’re hiking?” Bryan said, staring at the endless array of tree covered mountains.

The trail began on level ground following a river. It inclined suddenly, zigzagging straight up High Knob. My muscles quickly began to ache and sweat collected on my forehead. Bryan stopped to catch his breath. He apologized and insisted that we didn’t stop for him, but we did anyway.

We passed a couple with a dog. It ran ahead as we clambered up a hill, barking at us excitedly until we reached the top and then scampering off back to its owners. We camped just before dark, between Cedar Rock Mountain and a steep hill. Long smooth rock faces ended a few yards from where we put the tents. A fire pit was already in place. We unloaded our packs and Bryan said, “I’ll pay each of you \$100 if we turn around and go back tomorrow morning.”

By the time we stopped, almost all my water was gone. I had to borrow Bryan’s to cook my noodles. Everyone else had canned soup. Mike started a fire and Travis propped a rock onto the burning logs and set the cans on top to heat up. The logs crumbled into ashes and the rock fell, spilling the soup, sizzling, in the embers.

It began to rain softly. Jay and I discovered we were the only two who brought ponchos. Mike and Preston had waterproof jackets, but Travis and Bryan had nothing to keep themselves dry. We gave each other worried glances when snowflakes started to fall, but they didn’t last long.

After eating we hurried out of the rain and into our tents, and soon after the rain stopped. Then the wind began, roaring further down the

mountain. We heard it changing directions. The leaves would begin to rustle outside our tent, and the branches above us would sway and creak. A sudden gust hit the tent wall. It snapped back, pressing against my body and hitting my face which poked out of the sleeping bag. The wind felt like it was trying to roll the tent over. Then it would stop as soon as it began and then start again far away.

It was only 8:00, and it was hard to sleep. We chatted and joked, yelling at each other from tent to tent. The sleep finally came, but only in dream- filled, hour- long spurts.

In the morning we were slow to rise and left the campsite at 10:00. We made it a point to stay together, often having to stop and wait for Bryan to catch up. He lagged behind, slowing us down. We tried to keep him near the front because when he was at the tail of the group he walked the slowest. As soon as he stepped to the front, he walked as fast as the rest of us and stopped complaining. From then on we put him in the lead as often as possible.

I knew our biggest challenge of the day would be Pilot Mountain. The topographical lines were tightly packed, indicating a steep hike, but I didn't intend on one mile taking hours to complete. I looked up and saw only the ground in front of me, sloping upward into a gray mass of leafless trees that blocked my view, preventing me from knowing how far I was from the top. I was glad that we made this trip before spring, because I could see vistas of the surrounding mountains through the empty tree branches. In other parts of the year I would see nothing but foliage.

We struggled to the top of a rise, and we stopped and I swore as I realized we had not reached the top of Pilot Mountain. I could see the real peak another half mile away. We ate lunch and the wind picked up, chilling our sweat soaked bodies.

At the top we had our first unobstructed view of the surrounding mountains. They were brown and grey with patches of evergreens. In the distance the peaks became bluer and bluer, fading into the bright cloudless sky.

"This is so worth it," Bryan said. "I take it all back."

We didn't pause for long because the wind picked up and we had to keep walking to keep warm. My left knee began to hurt. It ached not when I put my weight on it but when I lifted it. I had to fight to keep my balance. We reached the bottom of the mountain and found the Deep Gap shelter. It had a pointed roof and three walls. I studied the map and we were almost halfway through the trail, but not as far as I had hoped.

That night the sky remained clear. We built a big fire and stayed up later, telling jokes. When I climbed into the shelter to sleep, I noticed Bryan's sleeping bag. It was just a summer bag and the zipper was broken, allowing cold air to seep in. I slept well in my thick down bag, except when I woke up in the night with pain shooting through my leg. We woke up earlier and hit the trail at 8:00. I knew our first few hours

would be the hardest, until we reached the top of Silverface Bald. From then on we would walk the tops of various ridges. Halfway up we crossed the Blue Ridge Parkway. There were no cars in sight, only the gathering clouds above us. Long icicles hung from the rocks.

Travis and Preston were in the lead. The only times our group broke the rule of sticking together was when we were almost up a mountain. To some it was easier to stop to catch their breath while others preferred to reach the top in one go. Travis and Preston disappeared from sight, and when the rest of us reached the top of the bald, which was not a bald at all, we found that they had not stopped to wait for us.

“You know Travis,” Bryan said.

There was a fork in the trail. We hoped Travis and Preston had picked the right way, but with every step it was more discomfoting that they had not waited, which they had always done before. Clouds rolled over and it began to snow.

“Hey Travis! Preston!” Mike yelled.

Thinking perhaps they had taken the wrong fork, Jay and I hurried in its direction, but soon Mike called us back. When we returned it was snowing harder, and there was already a half inch on the ground. Bryan, wearing socks as gloves, said he found a road. A family camping alongside it said they had seen Travis and Preston wait at the road for ten minutes and then continue on.

We loaded up and followed the trail, but we found another fork. A sign with an arrow pointed right, but according to the map the arrow pointed to a different trail. We looked for footprints, but the fresh snow had covered them up.

The falling snow strengthened. All we could see was white. We stopped again to think about what to do. We knew if we could not find Travis and Preston, we could ask the family we had passed to drive to a phone and call for help. We split up into two directions, agreeing to turn around in thirty minutes if we didn't find them. Jay and I hurried down the trail the arrow pointed to. We hoped that they did eventually stop for us to catch up. We called their names, but the falling snow muted our shouts.

I heard something in the distance.

“Whose voice is that?” I yelled.

“Travis!” it replied.

Seconds later he and Preston came tromping up the path. Travis looked angry. We told him we had stopped to look for him.

“What were you doing?” he said. “We were in front. You don't backtrack for us. We backtrack for you.”

“You're on the wrong trail,” I said.

Although it was still snowing, walking along the ridgeline was easy going. We reached the top of Tennent Mountain and cursed the clouds blocking our view. This peak was a true bald, devoid of any trees that would have obscured our sight.

After losing and finding Travis and Preston, we made excellent time. According to the map, if we kept the same pace we might finish the entire trail that day. The snow died down to a trickle of meandering flakes. Sections of the trail were covered in solid ice, often hidden under snow. We slipped and fell several times, lucky that we didn't injure ourselves.

We passed a sign announcing the entrance to the Shining Rock Wilderness area and the trail blazes disappeared. Jay and I used the map and a compass to keep up us on the right trail and every time we chose a path Bryan would say, "I have a bad feeling about this."

We passed a group of hikers led by a wilderness trekking guide. We told him our plan to finish that day, in the dark if necessary, and he laughed and whistled and he wished us good luck and warned us to be careful at the Narrows.

When we reached them, the clouds around the trail prevented us from seeing how far we would have fallen if we stepped off the trail. We climbed up and down one steep slippery rock after another and the pain in my knee slowed me down.

Surrounded by white, it was hard to tell when it would turn dark. We descended from the Narrows and reached Deep Gap at the base of Cold Mountain. We never glimpsed the mountain because of the clouds. It was our last chance to stop and camp or continue on as long as necessary to reach my car. It was a unanimous decision. The idea of climbing Cold Mountain had disappeared from my mind.

I moved to the back of the line, falling behind because of my knee. The trail turned sharply away from the ridges we had followed and traversed the side of the mountain below the Narrows. Bryan stayed back with me as the others walked ahead and stopped every twenty minutes for us to catch up, thinking we were tired and needed a break, but it was only my knee that was slowing me down. I had enough energy to continue. It quickly turned dark and we had to walk by flashlight. We found forks that weren't on the map, and the diverging trails went in nearly the same direction, making my compass useless. We always took the one that went more downhill and Bryan continued to announce his doubts.

Finally we rounded a bend and saw dim streetlights in the distance. The trail descended the mountain parallel to the road. Anxious, we watched them slowly get closer over the next half hour. We found the road and my car parked alongside it. All the joints in my legs ached as I climbed in. I gave one last look at the mountain, shrouded in darkness, and wished I had had a better last glimpse. Then I pulled out, just wanting to get home.