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Crouch marks 50th year on the trails

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MOUNTAIN LIFE EDITOR

How is a local hiker celebrating his 50th year on the trails? By doing more hiking, of course.

In April, Ellijay's Travis Crouch completed the entire 289-mile Benton MacKaye Trail for the second time. Crouch, 64, also plans to venture out on at least one more long-distance hike later this year.

"It's my 50th year since doing my first long hike, so I just wanted to do something to celebrate that," he said. "It's been a life-long passion of mine. I'm thankful, at my age, to still be able to do it."

Two different hikes on the same trail

The BMT and the Appalachian Trail (AT) both share the same starting point — Springer Mountain, on the border of Gilmer and Fannin County.

The 2,100-mile AT continues on to Maine, while the BMT winds through north Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina, ending at Davenport Gap in the northeastern corner of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Crouch first covered the entire BMT in June 2007, not too long after its Tennessee section opened,

Gilmer hiker completed Benton MacKaye Trail for second time this year

making him one of the trail's first thru-hikers.

"The Georgia section was completed pretty early on, but the Tennessee section came along much later. In '07, it was brand new," he said. "A lot of the trail hadn't really been constructed yet. It was just kind of blazed and marked on trees. There was a lot of searching for the route on that hike."

The different seasons in which the two thru-hikes were taken made for contrasting sights and conditions, Crouch noted.

"The first time was in June, and there were baby animals everywhere. I saw 13 bears in 19 days and about eight of them were cubs. There were grouse, turkey and hawks everywhere," he added. "I didn't see as much wildlife this time around with it being in April. The weather was a lot different, that's for sure. It snowed this time. In Tennessee, it was about 3,500 feet up and full-on January conditions in April, which was a surprise."

The trail has been improved quite a bit over the years between the two thru-hikes, Crouch noted.

"From a hiker's perspective, they're doing a great job," Crouch said about improvement work done by the volunteer Benton MacKaye Trail Association. "In '07, there was still some of the trail walking along roads. There's still some of that, but a lot of it's been eliminated, which was a change."

Crouch said the BMT's mix of scenery, outstanding views, water walks and history are among the features that make it his favorite hiking trail in the southeastern U.S.

"Right here in Gilmer-Fannin County, you have Long Creek Falls and Fall Branch Falls, where they've rerouted the trail and made it better," he said. "The trail goes along the Cherokee Skyway, which is a 43-mile high altitude section of scenic road from Tellico Plains, Tenn., to Robbinsville, N.C. There's (places like) Bob Bald, Stratton Bald and Whigg Meadow that give you 30-40 mile views, which are pretty exceptional. In the Smokies, the trail goes along the shore of Lake Fontana for a good ways, which is very nice, pleasant hiking."

Being much less traveled than the AT, the BMT also provides another feature high on Crouch's list of desirable trail attributes — solitude.

"There's only two shelters the entire length of the BMT, and that's one of the things that appeals to me about it. They've been very intentional about not building more (shelters)," he said. "The AT has become more of a social gathering, but the BMT is still very wild and lightly traveled, relatively speaking,



Travis Crouch is pictured near Tennessee's Stratton Bald during his second thru-hike of the Benton MacKaye Trail earlier this year.

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which is more my style. The BMT today is more like the AT was in the '60s and '70s. I encountered four people hiking the trail (this time). When I did it in '07, I went 170 miles without seeing another soul."

Crouch said he covered about 16 miles a day on the April thru-hike.

"That's pretty high mileage for my age. A lot of people backpack for two or three days and they're sore and blistered and so forth. They never really get over the hump," he said. "On a longer hike, after a few days in, you get over that initial soreness and what-not. Your body adjusts. You get your trail legs and it becomes very pleasant."

'Never one to stay indoors'

Crouch said he's never been one to stay indoors, so hiking has provided a way for him to further enjoy the great outdoors. He often hikes shorter distances for fun and to keep in shape.

"I've always been outside and roaming around in the forest, so it was just a natural extension of that to do



Travis Crouch is pictured, left, at Whigg Meadow near the Cherokee Skyway on his first thru-hike of the Benton MacKaye Trail in 2007 and, right, atop Maine's Mount Katahdin in 2015 after completing his last section of the Appalachian Trail.



it a week at a time," he added. "I'd been camping for as long as I can remember. It wasn't really that big a stretch to start walking between camps carrying what I needed."

He was first inspired to start hiking as a boy growing up in Macon. A neighbor, Gene Espy, was the second person to ever thru-hike the entire Appalachian Trail. Espy's stories made the youngster want to follow suit.

"He's still alive, and a legend in the trail community," Crouch said. "I saw photographs from his hike, and even when I was 5 years old, I said 'I'm going to do that one day.'"

That day came in 1973, when Crouch and a buddy traveled north for their first outing on the AT.

"We used to get on the bus and get as close to the trail as we could, then we'd stick our thumbs out the rest of the way," he said. "We'd hitchhike to the trail, and when we got done, we'd hitchhike to where we could catch a bus back to Macon."

The first-time AT hikers covered about 70 miles to North Carolina's Pisgah National Forest, but that's all it took to light a fire Crouch has kindled ever since. In 2015, he completed the entire AT after hiking it in sections over six years.

"The first time, we were not that well prepared. It rained every day and we got blistered and all of that stuff. But we were both hooked," he said.

For several years, Crouch and wife, Shirley, owned and ran North Georgia Mountain Outfitters, a Gilmer County hiking supply store. When asked if he has any tips for aspiring trail hikers, Crouch said it helps to travel lightly and smartly.

"The big mistake people make is carrying way too much weight. On my first (thru) hike, I was carrying 40-plus pounds, and that's pretty miserable. Now, I never get over 22 pounds

and use a small pack that won't hold much," he said. "You've got to have shelter and a way to purify water, which in my case is a filter. You've got to have a good first-aid kit, as well as clothes and rain gear that are appropriate to the season. You need a reliable way to start a fire and you need your navigation."

Phone apps have be-

come popular navigation tools since Crouch went on his first BMT thru-hike, and they are plentiful nowadays. It's still wise to carry a compass and map or guidebook when hiking, Crouch noted.

"It used to be that, when hikers went in to town, they'd stock up on food and fuel. Now, it's food, fuel and power," he said. "I'm kind of old school. I've used (some of) the apps, and technology is great when it works. But a compass is always going to be there."

Crouch's 50th year of trail adventuring will include one more lengthy hike. He plans to tackle Vermont's 272-mile Long Trail this fall.

"It runs the length of Vermont north to south, from the Massachusetts border to the Canadian border. It's the (oldest) long-distance trail in the U.S.," he said.

AEMC NOMINATING COMMITTEE MEETS

The 2022 Nominating Committee met on June 28, 2022, and prepared a list of nominations for election of three directors at the Annual Meeting to be held on October 1, 2022.

Nominees for directors to be elected by a vote of the members at the Annual Meeting are James Bryan, representing Dist #1 (Dekalb County & Clayton County), and Mike...