

## **THE COLORADO TRAIL ALPINE STYLE 468\* MILES, 19 DAYS, 0 BLISTERS**

Mile for mile, this trip was just as spectacular as the Long and John Muir Alpine Style thru-hikes the previous two months. Since there were many more miles, it was even more amazing overall, though it was not without its complications. Here's the good, the bad and the ugly.

### **BREATH TAKING TRAIL**

This trail runs through the magnificent Colorado Rockies from Denver to Durango. The variety of scenery is extraordinary in the summer, but even more so in September when the Aspen leaves have changed color and early snows lace the high peaks and passes. There's plenty of forest, alpine tundra and high desert and more amazing views than can be properly appreciated in one go. Unlike virtually all other CT thru-hikers, I chose to hike Northeast, from Durango to Denver. Going North is harder because you cover higher, more remote, drier segments with a heavier pack and because the signage and trail descriptions are generally geared for South-bounders. Despite the added hardship and inconvenience, I liked the psychology of hiking toward my home in Boulder, and I figured it was safer to go North since I would be lower in late September in case of early snow storms – I had no idea just how important this decision would be.

### **MIXED TERRAIN – AND LOTS OF IT**

Unlike the Long Trail, I never had to take a hand off of a trekking pole to make a move, let alone throw my poles ahead to scramble. This was straight hiking, though there were many rough patches. \*Also, the trail seems to be far longer than the 468 miles advertised. Many who have hiked most or all of the CT believe it to be over 500 miles, with 520 being a typical estimate. Interestingly, hikers who believe the CT is much longer than officially posted, do not tend to make the same statement about other trails they have thru-hiked. 520 miles seems about right to me given the number of instances where I could be absolutely sure that the mileage was well understated. As just one clear example, in segment 24, I hiked “4.1” miles of gentle down grade on an old jeep road, going just over 4 miles per hour (I know my pace well in such uncomplicated terrain) for 1 hour 37 minutes – do the math. I looked on the bright side enjoying the fact that there was even *more* gorgeous Colorado Trail to hike than I thought!

### **WEATHER**

As on the Long Trail, I got abused by Mother Nature, but only enough to make the trip exciting without ultimately posing any real danger to either my safety or successful completion. Most days started out crisp and cold and I awoke fully clothed in 2 layers of clothing from head to toe and generally stayed that way through a few hours hiking. Throughout the mid-mornings, I would shed all but shorts and wind shirt over a couple of breaks. By afternoon, it was hot and sunny and I applied sunscreen to my hands and legs on all but the last day. As soon as the sun went down, just after 7p, the temperature would plummet and I would dress back up and make camp. Nights usually got below freezing and I got into single digits 3 nights, generally at the highest passes I slept at. With all my clothing on and my hood drawn tight exposing only my nose, I was perfectly comfortable, though without any room to spare, those 3 nights. A few times, most notably in Segments 17 and 16, I got hammered by prolonged cold rain. This motivated me to move with peak efficiency and ironically I made some of my best distances on the harshest days. I later learned that this rain storm was an outlying arm of a tropical storm off the coast of Baja California, and that if I had been caught by it farther Southwest in the high San Juan mountains, I would have experienced a whole different degree

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of hurt. A surprisingly large and early snow storm struck shortly after I crossed US-50, marking the transition into the less remote northern half of the trail. The snow made for much slower going than expected the last week, though this was made up for with a far faster first week than I figured. Snow adds a stunning dimension of depth and beauty to the Colorado mountains, so I welcomed it as one more special feature of this September hike. I'm glad there wasn't more than there was though, and again, I'm grateful to have lucked out in choosing directions – the remote southern stretches would have been nerve racking while post-holing mile after mile. Unexpectedly, the “worst” weather of all came only 35 miles from the end where I was under 8,000 feet for the first time in almost 500 miles. A lightning and hail storm pinned me down in a forest for 3 hours. Nothing to do but crouch on a rock with my poncho on a long way from my poles and nibble the time away. Remembering my last night in Southern Vermont I told myself “it could be worse – on top of a lightening storm you could be swimming in a beaver pond with a pack on in pitch black :-~).”

### **WHERE IS EVERYBODY?!**

One of the biggest contrasts between the Colorado Trail and the previous two alpine-style thru hikes was the dearth of people on the trail. It was practically empty. In 19 days, I saw 1 other CT thru-hiker, 4 Continental Divide Trail thru-hikers (the two trails run together for 130 miles) and just a few handfuls of day hikers, trail runners, bikers, and motorcyclists. The volunteer crew of Smokejumpers I saw building bridges in segment 19 practically outnumbered the hikers I saw the whole month! I'm sure the CT is much more heavily used in summer, but clearly the remoteness of much of it and the ample supply of other great trails all over the Colorado Rockies are also key factors.

### **FOOD & WEIGHT LOSS**

The 100% raw food experiment that started on the JMT and Long Trail continued on the Colorado Trail (see my JMT write-up especially for details). It was a comedy of errors this time, though mercifully, several of the errors virtually cancelled each other out. First, I packed way too much food. I wanted to be very conservative given the remoteness of much of the trail and the possibility of major storms, so I planned on 21 days and 11lb, 14 oz of food per day – more food per day than I ate on the previous two trails. But shorter days meant fewer hours of hiking and this more than offset increased calorie burning due to cold. Now and then I wished I didn't have so much food to carry, and about 1/3 of the way in, as a near perfect illustration of the precept “be careful what you wish for” I lost almost 8 pounds of fruit due to molding taking my total fruit supply down from 31 pounds to just 23 for the whole trip. I may never know what caused the molding, but my best guess is that the freeze-thaw cycle most days impacted the fruit much more harshly than the California and Vermont temperature swings, which, while just as great, did not cross the freezing threshold. Since the fruit was my primary carbohydrate source, I immediately cut my hiking pace to burn an even higher percentage of my calories from fat, including body-fat. The high daily mileages I racked up the first week allowed me to do this without undo concern. I did start sleeping with my fruit though :-~). In case of a second major snow storm, I overcompensated, hoarding my calories until the final 2 days when I knew I would be below 10,000 feet and all but home-free. As liberally as I ate from there, I still came out with 4 pounds to spare – about enough for 3 nights survival in a snow cave. The good news is I could've handled 21 days; the bad news is I carried 4 pounds of extra food around 500 miles and it's just sitting in my kitchen still. Just as on the previous two trails, I lost over 1 ¼ pounds per day starting at 193 ½ pounds and ending up at 169. I went from size 40 to size 34 pants, which fortunately, I still own some of. Interestingly, while I put 17 pounds back on fast after the trip, my waist size hasn't changed – it seems that I rapidly regained lost muscle tissue far more than fat. I even lost a wrist size off my watch band after wearing the same Casio

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band on the same setting for about 15 years. Another interesting pattern to note is that the amount of weight I lost and kept off was 4-8 pounds for each of the 3 trails, so my body seems to have reacted in a healthy manner to each trip. While I never tired of my food on the previous 2 trips, I *did* on the CT toward the end. Most nights the last week I craved a huge pasta dinner and the first night home I had it, preceded by a burrito dinner and followed by an enchilada dinner! I don't think I was craving cooked food so much as I was craving a *lot* of food as my weight plummeted through the 170s. I have gorged on enormous pasta, nutritional yeast, olive oil and spice dinners countless times, both in the mountains and at home, and I probably just associate that meal subconsciously with mega calories quick.

### **FULL MOON NIGHT**

I purposely timed each of the 3 alpine-style thru hikes to end around full-moon nights so that I could take advantage of the extra light to make up lost miles, or just to enjoy some cool hiking in the magic of the night time. This worked out well on the CT. The last night I awoke at 12:22am due to some combination of the full moon beaming straight down on me and my general excitement to be near the end and home. Having arranged to be picked up at 3p only 25 miles away, there was no incentive to hike quickly, so I hiked with headlamp off for 5 hours at 1 mile per hour. Moving quietly at that meditative pace, I was not only rewarded by fascinating landscapes, but lots of wildlife as well including plenty of large animals. Dark as it was, it was often hard to tell just what type of animals I was seeing, but it was neat to know that the last few segments that seem so barren by day were actually teeming with animal life by night.

### **HEALTHY FEET**

I employed the same strategy and products to take care of my feet as in Vermont and California and the system worked almost as well. The shoes I wore for all but the last day on the CT were stiffer than what I wore on the JMT and LT. This offered good protection on the many long miles of tough rocky footing, but at the cost of mild bruising to my heels. This was trivial in the grand scheme of things and never threatened either the enjoyment or success of the journey. See my JMT write up to learn how to travel multiple long days without foot-deteriorization.

### **ALPINE STYLE THRU-HIKING MEANS UN-RESUPPLIED BUT NOT UNSUPPORTED**

When I came up with the phrase "alpine-style thru-hiking," I thought of it as un-resupplied and unsupported. I now think differently. While I took no water, food, gear, or anything else from anyone on these trips, I can not claim to have been "unsupported" on the Colorado Trail any more than the other two. My biggest supporter was my wife Kim. We talked twice or more via satellite phone each day and that phone was the last pound of gear I would part with such was the joy and reassurance that those conversations bestowed. We got to hike a few miles together one weekend too. For 2 ½ days at the start and another ½ later, Ron Rodd, a GoLite Intern, and I shared the journey, and later, Ryan Eshelman, a GoLite Customer Service Representative spent a morning with me. This company was most welcomed given how sparsely populated the trail was – one can only talk to oneself for so long before repeating oneself. In a larger sense, I could not have hiked the Colorado Trail alpine-style without the caring and support of my parents and all on the GoLite staff – if my family and company were not in good shape and behind my efforts, I could not even set foot on these trails. Finally, I would not have even *thought* to alpine style thru-hike what I now call "The Triple Gem" without first becoming infused with spirit and a sense of possibility by the inspirational example set for me, and for all of us, by so many outdoor adventurers I have had the privilege to learn from and the pleasure to call friend – a special thank you then to Ian Adamson, Sarah Ballantyne, Danelle Ballengee, Roger Bascomb, Robyn Benincasa, Russ Bevans, Buzz Burrell, Adam Chase, Angela Hawse,

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Laurent Osias “Maverick” Gaudreau, Ryan Jordan, Ted “Cave Dog” Kaiser, Mike Kloser, Billy Mattison, Monique Merrill, Robert Nagle, Aaron Prince, Gary Scott, R.J. Secor, Andy Skurka, Michael Tobin, Chris Townsend, Erik Weihenmayer, and Isaac Wilson.

### MILES EACH DAY

DATE	DAY	SLEPT AT	MILES**	Notes
Sep 10	1	Forest in middle of Segment 28	10	Started hiking at 11:33a
Sep 11	2	Ridge near Cape of Good Hope	19	
Sep 12	3	Near spring and Bolam Pass Road	24	Shockingly big mileage day this early
Sep 13	4	Just North of Molas Pass	20	
Sep 14	5	Near Pole Creek	24	
Sep 15	6	Brush 1 mile past Antenna Summit	20	
Sep 16	7	San Luis Pass	20	Huge airline route crossroads
Sep 17	8	Woods near FS-787.2D	25	
Sep 18	9	High ridge near minor unnamed summit	19	Late start, harsh weather, big uphill
Sep 19	10	Marshall Pass	29	Cold rain all day – hugely motivating
Sep 20	11	Near Four Mile Creek	25	
Sep 21	12	Near Middle Cottonwood Creek	24	
Sep 22	13	Near Clear Creek Road	26	
Sep 23	14	Near Highline Trail Crossing	25	Snow impedes progress next 5 days
Sep 24	15	Forest near Tennessee Pass	21	Got lost in Holy Cross Wilderness
Sep 25	16	Copper Mountain	24	
Sep 26	17	Near Middle Fork of Swan River	29	Some evening miles by moonlight
Sep 27	18	Near saddle south of Long Gulch	27	
Sep 28	19	Just north of FS-550	32	Easy terrain offset by 3 hour t-storm
Sep 29	20	Boulder, CO	25	Done at 3p

\*\*Per write up above, I am convinced that many mileages are understated by 10% or more.