



I recently just finished my first thru-hike, the River To River (R2R) Trail in southern Illinois. The R2R is a 157-mile network of hiking trails, equestrian trails, and road walks. The trail stretches from the tiny hamlet of Elizabethtown on the Ohio River--to the town of Grand Tower on the Mississippi River. This trail took nine days for me to complete, and it gave me a taste of what thru-hiking will be like!

COVID Life Update

Like many other people, COVID-19 threw a wrench in my thru-hiking plans this year. April 3rd was my start date for the Appalachian Trail, but I decided to postpone it. So instead of being hot and sweaty hiking the AT, I was being hot and sweaty weed-eating for the cemeteries in my hometown. I cannot complain about the cemetery job though. I was able to create a greater cushion of money working 40 hours a week while living rent-free with the parents. October 16th was my last day at the cemetery, and October 18th was my first day on the R2R.

Logistics

The River to River Trail runs east to west, or vice versa. I live about an hour away from the western terminus, so I decided to start in the east and head west back home. So on October 18th,

my parents graciously drove me two hours to Elizabethtown. Nine days later, my Mom was able to pick me up at Grand Tower. For navigation, I used the Avenza App, which worked out well and saved me a few times from being lost. This app can be used offline, which helped a lot whenever there was no service.



Food/Cost of Trip

For food, I packed what I thought would be enough for six or seven days, but it ended up being too much. I had food left over, as I took advantage of two restaurants-- Shotgun Eddy's in Eddyville and Acee's in Goreville. I also stopped at the Dollar General in Goreville to pick up a small, \$6.24 snack grab. Altogether, I spent a staggering \$45.42 on this nine-day hike. I was lucky enough to get a full meal from horseback riders one day. Another day two middle-aged guys bought me stuff at the convenient store in Alto Pass. Trail Magic for the win!



Hiking

I do not have much to base this hike off of considering it was my first thru-hike, but I would say there are parts of this trail where it was hard to follow. As a member of the River to River facebook group, I saw many posts of people saying hiking it in the summer is very difficult considering how overgrown the trails are. This makes sense, as I hiked in late October and there were times where I felt like I was bushwhacking. As far as elevation, there is not much of it on the R2R. I think this, with the combination of many miles of road-walking, led to me doing more miles than I plan on the AT. There were a few days I hiked more than 20 miles, and I don't know if I was ready for that. My right heel was pretty sore at the end of the hike.





Mental Aspect

This hike was only nine days, so I was unable to mimic the full AT grind, but I think I was able to get a taste. For example, it rained on me almost all of Day 2 and a lot of Day 3. The trail conditions were so wet and muddy, my shoes suffered. I spent a lot of the time on trail trying to figure out how to dry out my gear. This will be an ongoing struggle most of the AT. I was actually grateful for the rain to give me a taste of what is to come. There were a few instances where I caught myself muttering to myself things like "This trail sucks, I just want to be done..." or "Where the bleep are the trail markers?" A few other thoughts came to my head but my Grandma reads these so I won't share those. Overall, I believe it was a good introduction to the thru-hiker grind-set.



Favorites

There were many moments where I thought to myself how happy I was and how free I felt. Walking through the many pine groves on this trail. Hiking through beautiful fall foliage. Bathing myself in the creeks and lakes I walked up on. Cowboy camping underneath the stars at Millstone Lake. Sleeping under Natural Arch in Ferne Clyffe State Park. The rock formations at Panther Den. Enjoying the view on Inspiration Point. Spending my last night on trail under a tin roof on a cot, sleeping like a King. There were so many happy moments that I know are unique to thru-hiking/adventuring. These moments have made me very excited for the ones I will experience on the AT.











The People

I met so many nice people on this trail. Barefoot Carolyn and Lana from Bra Hollow, the two spunky older horse-riders I met on the banks of Cedar Creek. They put off such a fun, happy vibe and were very hospitable. They gave me quite a bit of their food before we parted ways, which I was very grateful for.



Mike and Shawn I met outside of Alto Pass. I hiked with them for a few miles, and they bought me some goodies at the convenient store. Brothers Marty and Jeff who were hiking with their two sons I stumbled upon on my last day. We camped together at Odie's Place. It was great having a fire and company on my last night on trail. Also all the people who followed along with my posts on the R2R Facebook page. They were so supportive and happy to hear from me. A few times on trail, strangers saw me and said "Caleb? I'm following you on the R2R page! You are doing great! Do you need anything?" I'm not even joking this happened four times on this hike. I tell ya, they love me over here in southern Illinois, I felt like a celebrity! It was so fun and definitely inflated my ego. All of these people that I met through the R2R, thank you so much for enhancing my hike!

Takeaways

Pack Less Food than I think I Need

- I filled my 12 liter food bag up about as full as I could and I had food leftover. Considering that the AT passes through more towns than the R2R, I don't think I will need to pack as much food. Also considering all the hiker boxes and trail magic in the beginning, I will definitely keep that in mind this spring.

New Tent for the AT.

-I have the Nemo Hornet 2p right now, and for how cheap I got it, it's a good tent. However, it was too small for me on the R2R. At 6'1, I slept diagonal most nights and still managed to get wet with condensation almost every night bumping my head or feet into the side of tent. I bought the Zpacks Duplex when I got home. I know this is a very lightweight, roomy trekking pole tent. I'm very excited to try it out!



Pace Myself Better

-I think I started off well, when I was walking in the rain. Whenever the rain let up, I started pushing big miles. It felt fine until my heel started hurting the last two days. On the AT, I know the miles will come harder because of elevation. Also, the AT is 2,193 miles compared to 157. Pacing will be essential, especially in the beginning, to stay healthy and uninjured.

Attitude is Everything

-On rainy, crappy days, or hot, humid days, it will be essential for me to keep a good attitude. I was proud of myself for having a good attitude on the R2R. I hope that will translate to the AT. The AT is so much longer, so I know there will be days on it where I don't want to be there. That

is fine, I need to embrace those feelings and not push them aside. The full thru-hiking experience involves crappy days. That's what makes it so great when you finish. The bad days on a thru-hike can be some of the most valuable days on trail! At least that's what I'm going with to trick my mind. BOOM. Reverse psychology.



Looking Ahead

This thru-hike has given me a small hint of what's to come next year. After the R2R, I am reassured that I am prepared for the Appalachian Trail. The R2R has given me confidence. That being said, I know I will be tested on the AT in ways that I wasn't tested on this nine day hike. I am beyond excited for next spring!