



The Appalachian Trail is the centerpiece of the “Wild East”

— its backbone and its heart. Its wildness is tangible and close. The Trail is the largest natural corridor that remains east of the Mississippi River, within a day’s drive from 55 percent of the U.S. population. Offering scenic and bucolic open space near many major population centers, the A.T. is surprisingly accessible to both thru-hikers and day hikers, to solo travelers and to families and groups. For the three million people who set foot on the Trail each year, it is a place for connection and community, yet a haven for solitude and silence, too. Guided by the Trail’s famous white blazes, A.T. hikers tend to discover something essential and profound — the exhilaration of freedom, an appreciation for beauty, and a sense of their own power.

BY KIM O’CONNELL

ILLUSTRATION BY TYLER NORDGREN

THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS were once a natural threshold between the Eastern Seaboard and the frontier wilderness that lay beyond, with its beckoning farmlands, forests, and endless possibilities. Yet visionary Benton MacKaye saw that the Appalachians provided those same qualities with scenery that rivaled the rugged landscapes of the Wild West. “Our job is to open up a realm,” he once said. “This realm is something more than a geographical location — it is an environment...not of road and hotel, but of trail and camp. It is human access to the sources of life.”

The Appalachian Trail can be experienced on two scales — one remarkably vast, the other exquisite and small. On the Trail, you are walking on the crest of an ancient mountain range, one that has stood for 480-million years. The path before you stretches nearly 2,200 miles in total and traverses 14 states.



A.T. – red spruce forest – Unaka Mountain, North Carolina / Tennessee. By Jeffrey Stoner

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Rather than making you feel insignificant, it feels right and good to be part of something much bigger than yourself, to bear witness to the epic forces of tectonics and gravity and erosion, as well as trailblazing and conservation, that have allowed you to be on this trail in the first place.

And yet, on the A.T., the scale shrinks, too. Your eyes focus. You notice small things, things that might escape your attention in everyday life. Bouquets of lavender-colored asters, pushing up between rocks. Bear scat, packed with berries. A green horned caterpillar resting on a leaf. The wind whistling

through stands of spruce and fir. The trickle of a stream or the mad rush of a waterfall. The constant, companionable rhythm of your breath and heart.

The lure of the wild has always drawn people outside, towards the mountains. But, in our rapidly developing world, wildness is disappearing. In the last decade, the United States has lost about 175,000 acres of tree cover to pavement each year. Worldwide, wildlife population sizes have dropped by an average of 60 percent in our own lifetimes. Children in urban areas are increasingly disconnected from places where they can roam and let their imaginations soar. With every passing year, conserving wild areas like the Appalachian Trail becomes more necessary for people and animals alike. Preserving the Trail and the open space that surrounds it maintains its recreational opportunities, provides economic benefits to local communities, ensures essential habitat for many species, and provides necessary resiliency against the effects of climate change.

The Appalachians have long been an important route for migratory birds, for example. Thousands of broad-winged hawks and other raptors depend on Appalachian mountain updrafts to make their way to and from their nesting grounds in South America each year. Other birds, such as the cerulean warbler, are ever more dependent on the Trail for habitat as their numbers dwindle throughout their historic range. Once found in abundance along the Eastern Seaboard, the cerulean warbler population has declined by more than 70 percent over the past 50 years. Yet they still fly — and find refuge — along the A.T.

If this is a trail about mountains, it's also about trees. Traversing one of the largest uninterrupted forest corridors on the East Coast, the A.T. lessens the effects of carbon dioxide emissions and climate change. Trees act as carbon sinks, capturing as much as 48 pounds of

A.T. night sky – Franconia Ridge – White Mountains, New Hampshire. By Erin Donovan



carbon dioxide per tree per year, according to some estimates, while sequestering carbon for the duration of the tree's lifespan. Trees also give the A.T. its “green tunnel” effect, beckoning us into the woods.

The Wild East of the Appalachian Trail also includes the wild sky. Because of artificial lighting, the Earth is becoming brighter at a rate of about two percent each year. Light pollution disrupts internal circadian rhythms and disturbs the normal activities of nocturnal wildlife. It also prevents our engagement with the sky our ancestors knew, one where the

glittering light from thousands of stars was enough to fill us with awe, make us feel safe, and quite literally guide us. Camping at one of the A.T.'s famous shelters (or in a tent) under an inky dome speckled with stars, or stopping at a mountain overlook after sunset, hikers can still find places to experience the wonder and thrill of true natural darkness.

In these wild and welcoming mountains and valleys, places, towns, people, and opportunities abound. There is one Trail, but there are many stories. The Appalachian Trail encompasses all of them. [▲](#)