

A Fastpacking Education (Trail Runner Issue 52)

By Michael Valliant

Although I live in the East, my first experiences on the Appalachian Trail didn't come until recently, ridge running along Crawford Path in New Hampshire's White Mountains. Mount Washington loomed behind us, while lesser peaks formed green swells rolling away from us. Clouds were dangerously close, and fast, neighbors. Nearing treeline, I noted the rough beauty of the bent, wind-tortured trees. But the trek's aesthetic perks were riding shotgun to adrenaline and enthusiasm, as we raced and changed leads over rock piles on our way to Mizpah Spring Hut, which meant dinner and sleep.

I've been running for 20 years, with the last few focused on trail running. But, in 2007, my running partner and I upped the ante exponentially. It started with our first ultra—David Horton's Holiday Lake 50K++ in Virginia. Then came thoughts of the Gore-Tex Transalpine stage race in Europe, which violently shook the "go for a run" paradigm. The prospect of that multi-day race got us thinking about combining running trails and spending the night out.

My friend and training partner Mike Keene, 43, of Wittman, Maryland, is a White Mountains fanatic, and pointed out that the Appalachian Mountain Club runs a system of huts, where they feed you, provide shelter, a bunk and water.

"We won't have to carry a tent or a sleeping bag, just water, food, rain gear and a few clothes," the arm twisting began. "You'll love it. We'll go light and fast, push ourselves fastpacking in the mountains."

We mapped out a route that would take three days, looking for runnable sections of trail, the ability to stay at huts and the panoramic vistas for which the Whites are known. Our trek would start at Pinkham Notch, go up and over Mount Washington (6288 feet), the Northeast's highest peak, cruise along ridges and through wilderness areas and on and off the Appalachian Trail (AT). The goal was to cover ground and see things we couldn't on a one-day run.

WHO STARTED IT?

The term "fastpacking" was born during a trip by Jim Knight, 54, of Orem, Utah, and Bryce Thatcher, 45, of Rexburg, Idaho, who in 1988 made a south-to-north traverse of the Wind River Range in Wyoming, chewing up 100 miles, self-supported, in 38 hours.

"Jim [Knight] had this dream of linking the whole Wind River Range, but could never take seven days off work to do it so we decided to try it in a weekend," says Thatcher. "We did between 40 and 50 miles that first day, and by the end of the second I got a bit hypothermic, and wound up in the car with the heat on full blast for about three hours before I came around!"

An exploration had begun, both on the trail and in pack design and function. "Over time, we became more sophisticated," says Thatcher, "figuring out formulas for how much further you could go if you cut pack weight by, say, 10 pounds."

At the time of the Winds adventure, Thatcher was designing backpacks and created prototypes for the trip. He went on to found Ultimate Direction, a company specializing in hydration and fastpacking packs. After selling the company, he signed on to head-up product design and development for Nathan Sports, where his fast-and-light philosophy is reflected in Nathan's new packs.

His running excursions have continued, though now he focuses on treks that would take most people a few days and doing them within a single day. Thatcher still holds the record for fastest ascent-descent of the Grand Teton—3 hours 6 minutes for the 18-mile round trip that climbs and descends 7000 vertical feet.

The term fastpacking is a bit nebulous, but most people agree that it involves covering ground quickly on trails using lightweight gear and spending the night out, whether that be on the move, on the ground or in a hut.

“The point in fastpacking is to stay on the move as much as possible,” says Ryan Jordan, founder of the website and print magazine *Backpacking Light*. “It demands that you have a camp and an overnight component to your trip, but walking or running is your primary mode of action, unlike backpacking where more time is spent in camp. You may have two to four days and you say, ‘Let’s burn as much mileage as we can.’”

In Jordan’s case, a fastpacking trip might include covering 40 to 50 miles per day, with three days being his personal favorite trip duration.

Since Thatcher and Knight’s trip, the fastpacking concept has been refined and taken to wilder extremes. As a recent example, in 2004 Kevin Sawchuk, 41, of Alamo, California, set the speed record (which has since been broken) for California’s John Muir Trail (JMT), covering its 222.8 miles in 93 hours 5 minutes. Another is Sawchuk and Andrew Skurka’s six-day, six-night circumnavigation of Yellowstone National Park in 2006, covering 180 miles.

“To me fastpacking is being able to travel light in order to be able to cover a lot of miles, but also to be able to enjoy it,” says Sawchuk. “When I go fastpacking I go to a lot of places that I couldn’t if I was going slower. The emphasis is not so much on speed, but distance and what you are able to see and do. I feel so free when I am traveling light and moving fast.”

Skurka, 26, of Seekonk, Massachusetts, and Boulder, Colorado, might be as close to a national ambassador as the sport of fastpacking has. On November 3, 2007, he finished a 6,875-mile trek of the so-called GreatWesternLoop—which links together five existing long-distance trails, including the Pacific Crest, Pacific Northwest, Continental Divide, Grand Enchantment and Arizona trails, as well as a trail-less segment through the Sonoran and Mojave deserts. Skurka averaged 33 miles per day for 208 days, which is equivalent to 262 marathons or twice the distance from Boston to San Francisco. His effort and creativity landed him the distinction of *National Geographic Adventure* magazine’s 2007 Adventurer of the Year. During his trip, the base weight (without water or food) of Skurka’s pack was between six and seven pounds, only going above 10 pounds in the High Sierra section.

“On a fastpacking trip, you spend long days, with lightweight packs, doing a lot of miles,” says Skurka. “You aren’t just out there to explore nature. You are out there to explore your own limits.”

GETTING READY

I am a runner, accustomed to pushing from 20 to 30 miles with water bottles, a waist pack or hydration backpack. Until our White Mountains adventure, fastpacking was terra incognita, and I gleaned my gear list from books, such as Jordan’s *Lightweight Backpacking & Camping*, websites and friends’ advice.

My kit consisted of a 100-ounce hydration bladder, trail mix, Balance and Clif Bars, gels, rain gear, a water bottle, extra insulating layers and socks, a headlamp, a small knife and photocopied pages from the *White Mountain Guide*.

The Appalachian Mountain Club makes it easy for would-be fastpackers. Routes are well-marked, with accurate distances, degrees of difficulty and trail descriptions. I am thankful for the gear—shelter, sleeping bag, pad and stove—that the AMC huts allowed me to leave home. I guess you could call what we were doing “fastpacking lite,” since we really weren’t self sufficient or sleeping under the stars.

LOGGING MILES

The desire to explore nature and the self is a common thread between fastpacking, trail running and ultrarunning, an overlap in activities shared by Skurka, Sawchuk and another renowned fast-packer Brian Robinson.

“I like the saying, ‘Ultrarunners are fastpackers who don’t like to camp,’” says Robinson, 46, of Monterey, California. In both cases, you are moving into the night,

with fastpackers looking to recharge and continue the next day, while ultrarunners are pushing through the night to finish a course and stay ahead of cutoff times.

Robinson is well-qualified to make such an assessment. In 2001, he became the first person to achieve a calendar-year “Triple Crown”—fastpacking the Appalachian, Pacific Crest and Continental Divide trails during a single year. It took him only 10 months to cover the 7371 miles.

But put down the pack and sleeping bag, and he keeps going. If you check the 2007 results from two of the country’s most grueling trail ultramarathons, the Western States and Hardrock 100-milers, you’ll find Robinson’s name there as a finisher (29th out of 270 at Western and 31st out of 97 at Hardrock).

Sawchuk’s accomplishments also include trail running at all distances, but his true love is fastpacking. He started backpacking when he was five. It wasn’t until medical school in the Midwest, where he couldn’t find good backpacking or the time to enjoy it, that Sawchuk turned to running and ultrarunning to stay in shape. Ninety-eight ultramarathon finishes later—including nine sub-24hour finishes at Western States 100—he now balances the two disciplines. His fitness from ultrarunning allows him to cover more ground fastpacking.

“The JMT speed record was something I had wanted to do for a long time, but not the kind of trip I generally enjoy,” says Sawchuk. “That trip was all about mileage, about 55 miles per day, and elevation, about 12,000 feet per day, and I just pushed—there wasn’t any time to relax and enjoy the trip.”

In stark contrast to his JMT trip, Sawchuk pits his Yellowstone circumnavigation with Skurka. The two blazed 180 miles in six days.

“Traveling light and fast for a week let us see Yellowstone’s grand river canyons, swim in Yellowstone Lake and a hot swimming hole we ‘discovered,’” says Sawchuk. “We felt bison herds pounding away from us, heard the mating bugle of elk and saw eagles hunting from fire burned snags. We finished the trip with the feature everyone goes to Yellowstone to see—Old Faithful. However we had packed 180 miles to get there and found that was only a small wonder of the trip.”

NIP AND TUCK

On July 31, 2007, with our hydration bladders topped off, we began our odyssey. Our day’s agenda was to first summit Mount Washington via Tuckerman’s Ravine (known as “Tucks” to the short-of-breath), descend Crawford Path, grab lunch at Lakes of the Clouds hut, then continue along Crawford to our evening destination of Mizpah Spring Hut, for a total distance of 10.5 rocky miles.

Leaving Pinkham Notch, we ascended a winding, wooded tunnel, emerging into the sun to cross a footbridge and hear the roar of a nearby falls. We quickly distanced ourselves from a cluster of hikers carrying larger packs. The woods gave way to Hermit Lake Shelters, essentially a cabin with some supplies in a clearing. Past the shelters, the gradual grade shifted to the steep ravine headwall, which felt unrunable for my flatlander legs and 19-pound load (including water and food). Averaging 1000 feet of elevation gain per mile, Tucks redefined the term “incline” for me.

Bodies of weary but stoked hikers adorned various break-worthy stretches—rare, flat rocks and outcroppings, magnets for heavy packs—of Tucks’ higher parts. The White Mountain Guide lists the average hiking time for Pinkham to Mount Washington as 4 hours 15 minutes. Climbing up the final summit cone, we scrambled hand-over-head into a parking lot marking the summit in 3:08:55. If “summit” seems an odd term for a grueling climb ending in a parking lot, it is. If they added a Stuckey’s Restaurant, you’d have a rest-stop along I-95, complete with any souvenir you may want to take home. But more strange are the looks from the families exiting their cars for photo stops and gift-shop souvenirs.

THE CROSSOVER

Robinson and Sawchuk are known for their ultrarunning accomplishments, but trail running is also a big part of Skurka's training. In 2005, he ran his first marathon, the Lewis and Clark in Bozeman, Montana, signing up on Tuesday before the Saturday race. Just two months earlier he had finished a groundbreaking 800-mile hike, the first person to hike the Sea-to-Sea route, which connects the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific. The trek took him 11 months, and he had been running less than 30 miles per week since. He finished in 2:55. Running was not new territory—Skurka was a two-time all-state runner in Seekonk, Massachusetts, with a 4:21 PR for the mile and 9:31 for two miles.

"When I am planning for a long hike, I usually don't have time to train by hiking," says Skurka. "Running, specifically trail running, is a compressed workout—I go for a 90-minute trail run versus an eight-or nine-hour hike."

After finishing the Great Western Loop, Skurka is using 2008 as a year to plan his next long trek, as yet unannounced, for 2009.

For Robinson, upcoming challenges include a return trip to Tennessee for the Barkley Marathons 100-mile race. With 52,900 feet of climbing, it is arguably the most extreme ultra, requiring a combination of running, fastpacking and orienteering skills. Only six out of 600 entrants have completed the full course. In 2007, Robinson completed 80 miles at Barkley, the most for that year.

Sawchuk will attempt to ski the John Muir Trail unsupported this spring, before trying to notch his 10th sub-24 hour Western States finish. Later in the year, he plans to fastpack the Hardrock 100 course to prepare for next year's Hardrock 100 race, if he is lucky enough to get in through the lottery.

TREADING THE TREELINE

Each of the Appalachian Mountain Club's full-service huts are run by a "croo," as they term them selves, of young men and women, who handle cooking, dishes and hiking supplies up and trash down the mountain. Mizpah Hut's croo woke us with song, fed us breakfast and delivered the weather report. After breakfast was cleared, the dining hall's long benches and tables were ground zero for map and route discussion, gear loading and number exchanging to keep in touch with new friends.

The morning called for clear skies and 60s above tree line, with 80s in the valley—warm for the Whites. We prepared for the trip's longest day: nearly 14 miles of technical running and rock walking. We would spend the morning in the Dry River Wilderness Area, perhaps catching a swim in the falls of the same name, hook up with the Lakes of the Clouds hut again for lunch, then high-step over the rocks and ridges of the Gulfside Trail en route to Madison Spring Hut, where we would crash for the night.

Keene and I left Mizpah at 9 a.m.—much later than advised for the day we had planned—and started our descent into the green goodness of the Dry River Wilderness Area. Single track trails snaked through the woods, my favorite terrain. I barely felt my pack and parried trees full stride where the trails bent.

"Moose over there!" I joked, though we kept a watch.

"Must have missed that one, but I dodged two snakes back there." They were really there.

Our pace stayed quick until the nearby Dry River Falls deafened us. Whitewater roared down a 35-foot rock wall, filling up a clear pool. I wouldn't have flinched if Ricardo Montalban of Fantasy Island had walked out to greet us in his White suit. We ditched the packs for a series of quick dunks, imbibing the energy of the falls and the river. Swimming holes are not made any nicer, nor much colder, to a couple tidal boneheads from the Chesapeake Bay.

From there, we bushwhacked a lightly blazed trail. Despite, or because of, its untamed difficulty, the Dry River Trail was a treat to run. We pushed above treeline to about 4500 feet, which contrasted with the lush, green wilderness area. Having

covered 6.9 miles and spent more than an hour swimming, looking for lost glasses and route finding on the poorly marked trail, we arrived at Lakes of the Clouds hut in 4 hours 52 minutes. It was slightly comforting to learn that most people traversed the Dry River Trail as a two-day hike. We sat down to soup and brownies and were out the door at roughly 3 p.m., headed up Crawford Path toward Madison Springs Hut.

Despite the urgency of making it to the hut in time for dinner, my legs were slowing down. At the same time, Mike, a much stronger climber, was speeding up.

"You are the only way we are getting fed," I said.

"You sure? Are you OK?"

"I'll make it, but you had better make sure there's still food for me!"

Mike took off. The trail didn't miss a mountain or a tricky, rocky, descent, wrapping around Mount Jefferson, with climbs down rock faces just enough to keep me slow and watching my feet. At one point, I realized I hadn't eaten anything since the Lakes hut, three hours ago, so I sat down, wolfed some GORP, then got cranking again.

I finally spotted Madison Hut, an egg in a nest of trees behind Mount Adams and beneath Mount Madison. I hop-stepped down a winding trail, having the 6.8 miles in 3 hours 42 minutes (still short of the recommended hiking time of 4 hours 20 minutes).

Mike walked out of the hut. "Whoo! You made it! I saved you a spot."

Inside Madison, a full hut of 52 people sat at benches, slipping words between mouthfuls.

"Welcome to Madison. Soup?" said one of the crew.

"You bet."

"Sweet! Sal..."

"Please!"

Followed by some of the finest chicken casserole I've tasted.

SKILLS, SKILLS

According to Ryan Jordan, Kevin Sawchuk possesses the special combination of an ultrarunner's fitness and an experienced backpacker's woodsmanship. Many runners, myself included, lack such skills. I overcame my backcountry inexperience by using a hut-to-hut trek to take care of food and shelter, enabling me to pack light enough to run the flats and downhill.

"The more skills you develop, the less you need to carry," says Sawchuk.

Backcountry fastpacking skills include knowledge of first aid, the right gear, emergency fire building, blister prevention and map-and-compass use.

"Trail runners are used to having their course marked for them with flags or at least cleared trails," says Sawchuk. "That is not the case in the backcountry, where trails aren't always obvious and some of the most spectacular country is off trail. A good way to train is to take an orienteering course, then perhaps enter an orienteering race to advance those skills."

When transitioning to fastpacking trips, Sawchuk recommends initially planning treks that stick close to trailheads on fair-weather days, in case there is a need to bail out or change plans. And running fitness is essential.

THE DESCENT

Ultrarunner David Horton has run across the United States—2906 miles, with the third fastest time in history—won the first two Hardrock 100-mile races, holds the speed record for the 2650-mile Pacific Crest Trail, is a former holder of the 2175-mile Appalachian Trail speed record and is looking to better the 2959-mile Continental Divide Trail record this year. He has seen some rough country.

In Horton's book, *A Quest for Adventure*, he chronicles his then record-setting thru hike of the AT. He notes, "Perhaps the most difficult descent that I have encountered was the 3000-foot drop in two miles off Mount Madison to Pinkham

Notch. It is extremely dangerous and any slip would be disastrous.” Which is our agenda on our final day.

Finishing breakfast and loading our packs for the last time, we worked our way up Mount Madison via the Osgood Trail, a steep, rocky climb. From Madison’s 5366-foot summit cone, we marvelled at the spectacular view of Mount Adams, the Great Gulf Wilderness and a sea of peaks marching into the distance. Madison Gulf crosses the Mount Washington Auto Road and becomes Old Jackson Road—a rocky two-mile stretch of trail that Keene and I had run with just hand-held bottles upon our arrival in the Whites. Four hours after leaving Madison Hut, we crossed the road onto Jackson’s familiar terrain.

“Think we can do it in under half an hour?” Mike asked.

“I don’t know, man, we’ve got packs on this go-round.”

We trucked down Jackson, rocks flying underfoot, arriving at Pinkham Notch 25 minutes later, with nary a drop of water left between us. Total time on trail for the day was 4 hours 25 minutes, covering 7.8 miles.

Our three-day fastpacking odometer read 32 miles. We set no distance or speed records, but changed the face of our trail running. The Gulfside Trail challenged me in a way akin to Holiday Lake or the JFK 50-miler. In those ultras, I tested whether I could run 30 and 50 miles. In our White Mountains adventure, we covered ground to get to places most people couldn’t, given the same time frame. To borrow Sawchuk’s thought, we gave ourselves freedom.

Michael Valliant, 35, lives in Easton, on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. When not running trails or trying to keep up with two young daughters, he is the director of marketing and media relations for the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum in Saint Michaels.