

Day Hiking 101

by Stephen S. Johnson



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If you're an outdoors person or homesteader, you might be interested in checking out my website: www.FourOaksCrafts.com.

I have how-to projects related to woodworking and the outdoors. At the end of this guide, I'll list some of my how-to articles that may be of interest to the outdoorsman or naturalist.



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Day Hiking 101

Overview

Feel that crisp breeze, the lively pulse of the forest and gaze out upon majestic, panoramic views. These are the rewards of hiking. Hiking builds us up and connects us with the outdoors. It brings people and families together to share unforgettable experiences. Walking down the leafy path, one must also ponder the Creator. What attention to detail and beauty. He created and He cares for the birds of the air and yet, He says we hold much more value.

Talk about low-cost entertainment. If you are relatively healthy, hiking is something most people can do and with little cash outlay. Parks and hiking trails are usually located a reasonable distance from most locales. The internet will help pinpoint a hiking trail near you.

Consider the health benefits. You become more fit with each step and just feel better. Hiking outdoors also affects your mental health and well being.

Hiking can be a great family activity. Just be mindful about how much your spouse or little ones can endure. Plan your hikes so everyone gets something they like out of the experience. Remember: your kids may care less about panoramic views or lovely waterfalls. They may just want to wade in the creek or catch grasshoppers. Your spouse may want to rest under a tree and pull out a good book. Each person has a different take or reaction to the outdoors. Exercise patience.

So, I hope you like this short guide to day hiking. It is both practical and informative. I'm still finding new places to explore. And I always feel better after a day of hiking.

Physically Fit

Before setting out on a hike, understand your physical limitations. Get a physical exam, especially if you have any known conditions. Your doctor can suggest how much effort you can expend. But everyone needs to build themselves up for hiking. I attempt to walk 3 to 4 times each week and usually for 2 to 3 miles for each session. This builds up the leg muscles and cardiovascular system. Also, remember to stretch and warm up before you hike.

Health Benefits

Hiking has many health benefits. It builds up your cardiovascular system and strengthens muscles. According to one of my iPhone apps, here is a breakdown on calories burned through hiking and walking:

- 730 calories/hour - hikes that involve climbing
- 610 calories/hour - cross country hikes
- 335 calories/hour - walking at a moderate pace 3.0 mph

Planning Your Hike

This is a really important step before you hit the trail. Here are some questions I ask myself before I set out:

- Who will hike with me? (Remember the buddy system)
- Who's going to know where I'm hiking? (incase you get stranded somewhere)
- What special precautions should I consider?
- What clothing to wear? (season of the year, what elevations, rain)
- Where can I get a current map? What about trail guides?
- What are my starting and stopping points?
- Is the trail easy, moderate or strenuous? (Match this question with your fitness level)
- How far can I go? (This is related to the ease or difficulty of the trail and your fitness level)
- Are there sources of water along the trail? (So either bring your filter or bring more water)
- What will I take with me?

Let me stress the importance of acquiring good maps and trail guides. You can find many maps via the internet, along with trail descriptions and guides. In the next section, I will tell you about my favorite trail guides. Trails are generally well marked (there are some exceptions), and it's difficult to get lost as long as you stay on them.

When you consider your hiking distance, think about your starting time. Will you start in the morning or afternoon? Will you hike in and back or be hiking a loop? Can you accurately judge distances off your maps or interpret them from the trail guide? Give yourself plenty of wiggle room on time. Though most well-defined trails can be hiked in the dark, I don't recommend it. And many parks officially close at sunset.

The average walking speed on flat ground is 3 miles per hour, but on strenuous trails it might be anywhere from 1 to 3. So carefully gauge your pace. Hike at a comfortable and even pace. Others in your hiking party may hike at a slower pace.

Trail Guides

I like the Falcon Guides. I have the *Hiking Georgia* book and *The Hiker's Guide to Georgia*. Falcon publishes trail guide books for other states. I found mine in the local bookstores, but they are also available through Amazon. Check out Falcon's website: www.falcon.com

Go to the Regional section in your bookstore and you will likely find guides for trails in your area or close to major cities.

What to Take

Obviously, with day hiking, you only need a minimal amount of supplies or gear. Consider the basics: food, water, clothing and protection from the elements. First, I will give you an overall list of essential things I carry, and then I will elaborate on some of them.

- Light or medium weight, comfortable hiking boots
- Appropriate clothing (consider seasons and elevation changes)
- Comfortable day pack that will fit snug to your torso
- Water bottles - usually 2- 16 oz. bottles. (your needs may vary)
- Water filter
- Healthy snacks.
- First Aide Kit
- Light rain gear or poncho
- Flashlight
- Toilet paper
- Waterproof matches or lighter (& fire starter)
- Emergency Blanket & whistle
- Cell Phone (assuming you have coverage)
- 550 Parachute cord
- Substantial bush knife (Morakniv makes great bush knives)
- Hiking stick or poles

Optional Things to Carry

- Books, binoculars, camera
- Bug spray, sunglasses, bear spray

You may wonder why I include items like matches, flashlight or emergency blanket. I always approach day hiking with the possibility that I may need to spend the night in the woods. Unless you're hiking in the backcountry or a very remote area, you shouldn't need to know a lot of complicated survival skills. But even in a popular public park, it's possible to sprang an ankle, or get off a main trail and get lost. That's why I stress packing for a potential overnight stay in the woods. With good pre-planning this shouldn't happen, but don't rule it out.

First Aid Kit

A small first aid kit is essential. Carry items like pain relievers, blister treatment, bandages, antiseptic, lip balm, tweezers, a roll of gauze. A small roll of duct tape may come in handy. And you may want to consider some materials for making a splint or a sling.

Hiking Boots

Get a comfortable pair of hiking boots or shoes. Your pack shouldn't be heavy like a backpack (30 or 40 lbs.) so you can get by with a light weight boot or shoe. Seriously consider waterproof boots. Wear some comfortable socks and spend a little money on good hiking socks. Merino wool socks are an excellent choice, and they are itch free. Cotton socks are not recommended. Also, don't forget to break those shoes in before you enter the woods.

Clothing

Clothing will depend on the time of year, but remember to dress in layers. If you get overheated, you can always take layers off and place in your pack. Make sure that first layer contains material that will wick moisture away. When it's cold, consider insulation layers and an outward layer which protects from rain, snow or wind. It's important to wear materials that dry quickly. Hypothermia is a real danger, so always dress appropriately.

Also think about what elevations you will hike. Temperatures and conditions can change greatly with changing elevations. You may also encounter changing wind speeds.

Water Filter

Do not drink water from streams without filtering, boiling or treating it. I like to carry a water filter or water filter straw just in case I get into a situation where I need more drinking water. This assumes I'm hiking near a water source which may not always be the case. For some, a filter may rank as optional, but I believe it's a good idea to take one. Take enough water bottles with you. Water is essential for staying hydrated.

Healthy Snacks

Hiking burns enormous calories. Take stuff that packs energy and is relatively lightweight. Food filled with water and sugar adds more weight. I like trail mix with chocolate, granola and nuts or maybe an energy bar or two. Don't forget protein—jerky is a great trail food.

Emergency Blanket

This, along with some other items, (matches, first aid kit, knife, etc.) is for worst case contingencies. An emergency blanket will help keep you warm for an unplanned overnight stay. With matches or a lighter you can build a small fire to keep warm.

Hiking stick or poles

Although this may not be absolutely necessary, I include it because it takes strain off your feet and knees and may protect you from falling. I love to make wooden hiking sticks, but if you're doing long hikes, the lighter-weight trekking poles are probably better. Hiking sticks or poles also make for a pretty nice spider web sweeper.

How to Hike

I mentioned before that you need to establish a comfortable pace. Take breaks, but don't overdo it with the breaks and lose momentum. Try to keep your pack cinched up and close to your torso, and don't tie heavy stuff to your pack that flops around. These are little things that can put a strain on your shoulders and back—and not to mention create snags.

Enjoy the scenery, but always know where your next step lands. Conserve energy by taking relatively small steps. What you want to do is keep your center of mass evenly distributed over your leading step and trailing step. As a general rule, if you can step on it, then step over it—again, expend the least amount of energy necessary.

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Use the hiking stick or trekking pole to ease the strain on your feet and knees. They are particularly helpful when hiking down steep inclines. Notice any pressure points in your boots which might create a blister. I like to take a small amount of Vaseline and apply to my feet, heels, toes—any points that might give rise to blisters. Make sure your boots are laced up comfortably—not too tight and not too loose.

Be patient with and considerate of those you hike with. Your children may want to occasionally stop and see what's under that big rock or maybe wade in the stream. Your spouse might want to walk at a different pace and snap pictures along the way.

When I'm outdoors, I love to indulge my curiosity. So try to learn something new—a new plant, tree, insect, or animal. I know some who like to pack identification guide books with them. If you have an iPhone, you probably have access to numerous apps that will help you identify most anything. Perhaps you're hiking an old Civil War battlefield. Take some time and read about the history of the area.

After the Hike

All of us recover differently after a full day of hiking. So get some rest, take some pain reliever, and apply ice or heat appropriately. Be patient—it may take some time to get into shape. The more you walk and hike the faster your body will recover from future hikes.

Don't forget to share your experiences and memories with others. I would love to hear about your favorite hiking spots.

Wrapping Things Up

I wish you well in all your outdoor pursuits. I hope this Day Hiking 101 Guide was helpful. If you're a do-it-yourself type person, please check out my website: www.FourOaksCrafts.com.

Here are few articles and tutorials that might be of interest to the outdoorsman:

[How to Make A Hiking Stick Paracord Wrap](#)

[The John Muir Hiking Stick Build](#)

[How to Make a Screech Owl Box](#)

[How to Make an Adirondack Chair](#)