

Memories to Last a Lifetime – My Through-Hike of Pennsylvania’s Mid State Trail

by Dan Styer
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What do I remember about hiking the Mid State Trail from Maryland to New York?

I remember standing at a rocky view point in clear air, with a solid cloud bank in the sky above and a solid cloud bank in the valleys below. Only the summits and ridge lines of nearby mountains were visible, hanging between two bands of white.

I remember a rushy, songfull stream full of rocks and pools and waterfalls, decorated with ferns and wildflowers and mosses. After a (soapless) splash bath I sat quietly on a rock to dry, and two deer walked by calmly.

I remember pulling on my long pants for protection while walking through *yet another* trail section overgrown with briars.

I remember falling asleep in a ferny forest full of flashing fireflies, while a whip-poor-will and a barred owl called alternately.

I remember finding purple-stemmed cliffbreak and blunt-lobed woodsia, two unusual ferns that I had sought for decades.

I remember a black-throated blue warbler approaching and examining me out of curiosity while I rested.

I remember a carpet of pink wild basil, and covering it another quivering carpet of white butterflies.

I remember surprisingly few mosquitoes, but surprisingly numerous black flies and surprisingly voracious deer flies.

I remember pulling blowdowns out of the section of trail, south of Everett, that I oversee.

I remember walking through a virgin forest of white pine and hemlock, hushed but for bird and stream song.

I remember meeting a cluster of five Amish boys, followed two hundred yards later by a cluster of seven Amish girls.

I remember a group of four youth from inner-city Harrisburg, and their leader who was trying to teach them both that there was a life outside of the inner-city, and that places of beauty existed not only in remote Yosemite and Grand Canyon, but also in central Pennsylvania. We sat around the campfire talking about hiking, physics, and life.



Dan Styer, Mid State Trail through-hiker (left), and Dan from Harrisburg at Libby Run.

I remember a father and son team that set out to dayhike the entire Mid State Trail in sections when the son was 12 years old. Health issues interrupted their plans, but they were resuming now, with the son 27 years old.

I remember industrial fracking in Tiadaghton State Forest: coils of wire scattered through the forest; narrow woods roads converted into 50-yard-wide passages; a gas-company ATV parked astride the MST; a noisy, glaring derrick set a few yards from the trail. The contrast between the natural and the industrial would have befit the movie *Avatar* – at the second fork of Ramsey Run, a forest of silvery-gray tree trunks ran from silvery-gray rocks to a silvery-green canopy, and all of this was enveloped in noise from the highway below, from excavation on all sides, and from helicopters above. I do not know what has been gained through fracking, but what has been lost is beyond valuation.

I remember starting on the Mason-Dixon line at Pennsylvania Route 326 on 18 June 2011, and finishing on the New York/Pennsylvania border at Heffner Hollow Road on 12 July. I don't think I made the first through-hike of the MST: My analysis of trail registers suggests that Bill Shaffer of Groton, Connecticut accomplished this in October

2008, that Douglas Ryan of Altoona, Pennsylvania did it in September 2009, and that Joe Fennelly (along with his beagle Ms. Jenny) of Cheshire, Connecticut, did it in May 2010. In addition, I suspect that Tom Thwaites had hiked every centimeter of the MST the instant it was completed in June 2008.

Equipment notes: (1) The Mid State Trail is rocky. I was glad that I carried a hammock, and I often slept suspended above rocks or brush that would have prevented any other form of camping. (2) The Mid State Trail is rocky. To save weight on my feet, I wore running shoes. Bad idea. Wear hiking shoes or hiking boots.

In about the year 750, the poet Li Bai wrote “We sit together, the mountain and I, until only the mountain remains.” Perhaps Li Bai was able to pull this off, but I have never been able to immerse myself in a mountain simply by sitting. But by treading the mountain’s rocks, maintaining its trails, observing its wildlife, drinking of its waters, eating its blueberries, contributing blood to its insects, and sleeping suspended between its trees, I was able to feel myself seep into the mountain until I became a part of it. This doesn’t happen immediately. For the first week I constantly said “I stink. I’m dirty. I can’t bear the tacky touch of my own body.” But then I grew used to it. I didn’t mind my odor, or my tackiness. It was part of me. I was part of the mountain. And this is what I remember most: The experience of sleeping every night at a different place, but knowing that I was every night at home on the mountain.

I thank my wife Linda for driving me to the start of my hike and picking me up from the end, and for her constant love and concern. Everett regional trail manager Deb Dunkle invited me into her kitchen to discuss trail maintenance priorities, and gave me a tall glass of iced orange juice. David at the Everett Foodliner gave me a loaf of rye bread, and a clerk at the Avis Home Town Market gave me a discount on two bottles of cold spring water.

I thank the visionaries who had the audacity to dream up the Mid State Trail and then the guts to put it on the ground.

I thank the volunteers who haul rock, clip brush, blaze, locate, and map the trail, who contact landowners, fill out paperwork, and who in general do whatever needs to be done to build the trail and keep it open.

I thank, especially, the private landowners who allow the trail across their property.

I thank the people of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania who have, through their Game Commission and Bureau of Forestry and Bureau of State Parks, assembled a magnificent legacy of public lands. These serve not just the occasional hiker who wants to walk the span of the entire state, but the Amish, the inner-city youth, the family teams; the hunters and the anglers; the birders, the wildlife stalkers, and the landscape photographers; the loggers, the mill hands, the carpenters, the cabinetmakers, and those who love wood products; those who drink rainwater that fell on the State Forests and those whose land is not flooded because the rainwater fell on State Forests.

Pennsylvanians, I salute you! May you never be held thrall to those who would despoil your magnificent public lands legacy.

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