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Introduction

I have backpacked for over 45 years starting in 1962 with a trip to the Philmont Boy Scout Ranch in New Mexico, but I had never hiked more than a hundred miles on a single trip until 2008. In July – August 2008, I through-hiked the 218-mile John Muir Trail (JMT) in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California using conventional backpacking equipment. Along the way, I ran into hikers who were using light-weight equipment. I had heard about this gear, but had more or less dismissed it as being impractical. However, seeing the equipment in action and visiting with hikers who were using it started to change my mind. I met Shoene and Alec at Reds Meadow Campground on JMT and saw their Henry Shires tarp tent. This was a single-wall, two-person tent with a floor and mosquito netting at both ends. My friends were very happy with their tent, especially since it weighed only 34 ounces. I was skeptical of single-wall tents due to potential for water condensation on the walls inside the tent; however, Shoene and Alec told me that condensation on the inside walls of their tent was minimal with the fully ventilated front and back ends of their tent. I ran into John twice along the JMT. He could lope like a coyote for long distances. His backpack must have weighed less than 20 pounds including food and water. I could hardly believe it. I started to think that it was possible, at least for some people, to hike with light-weight gear.

I finished the JMT with a very sore right foot diagnosed as plantar fasciitis by a podiatrist. This was in part the result of the punishing 6,000-foot descent from the summit of Mt. Whitney to Whitney Portal and partly from wearing heavy leather boots during the hike. I concluded that at least some of my foot problems stemmed from carrying too much weight, plus I was 61 years young and my body was susceptible to more wear and tear than it was when I was 31. When I returned home after the JMT hike, my foot problems persisted until Thanksgiving which prompted me to look more closely at light-weight hiking gear.

Once my sore right foot healed and the memory of my sore foot faded, I started thinking about hiking the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). By many accounts, this is the world's most glorious long distance hike on an established trail. I read many books and on-line accounts of the trip. *Beyond Backpacking: Ray Jardine's Guide to Lightweight Hiking* was perhaps the most intriguing with his "off the wall" ideas. Jardine's book convinced me that decreased pack weight would mean that I could hike in trail running shoes which had previously sounded to me like a crack-pot idea, especially since I have a weak right ankle. The hikers I met on the JMT who used light-weight gear appeared to span the spectrum of ages and abilities. My confidence grew that light-weight gear could work for me. I decided that I could reduce my pack weight without freezing in the dark or otherwise diminishing my enjoyment of hiking or without causing injuries. To the contrary, I concluded that reduced weight could make long-distance hiking a much more pleasant experience.

As I thought more about through-hiking the PCT, reality started to set in. Such a hike would require at about five months. Although I work for myself, I was not ready to tell my clients that I would be gone for that length of time, particularly in the summer which is my busy work season. I also realized that being gone for so long would place undue burdens on my

wife, Betsy, who would be responsible for chauffeuring our son, Riley, to his ice hockey practices (yes, even in the summer), paying the bills, keeping the house and yard in order, and so forth. Not to mention that I was unsure I wanted to be gone that long, either. As a fall-back, I had tentatively decided to hike a circuit around the Wind River Mountains in Wyoming, which is something I had long dreamed of doing, to test whether my right foot was capable of withstanding the rigors of a long hike. I saw a physical therapist several times but the exercises I practiced did not fix my right foot. Since that did not work, I visited another physical therapist who used a laser treatment and muscle manipulation that produced dramatic results. I started to believe that my foot could survive a long hike.

While I was dreaming of my Wyoming hike, Betsy, suggested that I hike the Colorado Trail (CT) instead because of the easier logistics of hiking closer to our home in Boulder. After initially rejecting her idea, I realized that it was a good suggestion, partly because the Wind River circuit hike would entail considerable rugged cross-country travel which is very different from trail hiking. Therefore, I read books and on-line accounts of the Colorado Trail, including *The Colorado Trail, Seventh Edition*, and the *Colorado Trail Databook, Third Edition* to get the flavor of the experience. I embraced the idea and decided to start my through hike on June 30, 2009, which would be immediately after returning from my wife's family reunion in Georgia. Hopefully, this start date would avoid steep snow banks on eastern slopes of Ten Mile Range near Breckenridge which I had learned could be dangerous. I planned to hike an average of 16 miles a day for 30 days over the 486 official miles of the trail. I am not sure exactly how I came up with 16 miles per day other than it seemed believable. The purpose of the trip planning was not to create a rigid schedule but to convince myself I could do the hike and to estimate the amount of food that I would mail to various post offices. Hiking 16 miles a day for 30 days with a relatively light pack seemed possible, if not necessarily a sure thing.

In the spring of 2009, I attended a presentation on the Colorado Trail at the REI store in Boulder. A gentleman named John who described himself as a (formerly overweight) Chief Executive Officer of a corporation in Denver through hiked the Colorado Trail in 2008. He started his hike with a mountain of stuff, not unlike many other hikers who employ traditional backpacking gear. Fortunately for him, he met veteran long-distance hiker Lint (his trail name) at the end of segment 1 at the South Platte River. Lint asked the John why he was carrying all that gear. Now, in John's eyes, Lint, who was probably somewhat scruffy looking, may not have the appearance of a person who knew what he is taking about. However, John listened to Lint and, by the time they reached Breckenridge, John had greatly reduced his pack weight. That presentation helped convince me that light-weight gear was the ticket to an enjoyable and memorable hike.

I considered potential ways to reduce my pack weight, starting with those that would have the greatest potential reduction in weight. They were the pack, tent (actually shelter), sleeping bag, sleeping pad, cooking, water purification, and clothing. I investigated various pack options on line and was not sure which way to go. I ended up buying a buying a Go-Lite Pinnacle pack weighing 2 pounds for \$50 at a Go-Light warehouse clearance sale in Boulder. I bought a Sublite-sil Tarp Tent weighing 20 ounces for \$200 from Henry Shires in

California. From what I could find on line, this was about the lightest, water-proof, and bug-proof shelter available.

I decided to keep my Marmot sleeping bag weighing 3.3 pounds based on my experience on the John Muir Trail of having cold nights where I kept warm and toasty inside my tent with long-johns, a long-sleeve shirt and a hat. I did not think I could stay warm at the high elevations of the Colorado Trail even fully clothed in a 1- or 2-pound sleeping bag. Several years ago, Betsy, Riley, and I backpacked in the Wind River Mountains, and I found I could not sleep comfortably on my foam pad. Riley graciously let me use his Thermarest pad, and I slept like a log. Based on that experience, I took my Thermarest pad on the hike even though it is heavier and bulkier than a foam pad.

I also began to explore options for cooking. After enjoying many interesting YouTube videos made by itinerant inventors, I made cat food and beer can alcohol stoves from designs I found on line. Many of my lunches during April 2009 were cooked on my front porch using the two alcohol stoves. To my astonishment and delight, both stoves worked very well. I gained more confidence that the light-weight approach to long-distance might really work for me.

I used water purification pills, as I have for several years after my water filter broke, but I also bought a 750-ml plastic bottle with a filter based on my friend Will's recommendation. It was light weight and simple to operate: just remove the filter element, fill the bottle with clear water, replace the filter, screw on the cap, point the opening into my mouth and squeeze.

I pared down my clothing to what I thought was the bare minimum given the terrain I would cover. Given potential rain and high elevations, I brought a rain parka and pants, pile jacket, zip-off long pants/shorts, long john bottoms and a top, long-sleeve shirt, short-sleeve shirt, stocking cap, wool gloves, two pairs of socks, and two bandanas.

I bought four days worth of food at the grocery store and loaded my new pack with the gear I would use on the CT. The pack weighed about 20 pounds including food and one liter of water. I figured that this was about the maximum weight I would have to carry on the trip. My training consisted of walking around Boulder in late evenings about every other day starting in April 2009. This was light duty, but my training was constrained by my work schedule. I found that hiking with the full pack was easy, but keep in mind that it was on concrete sidewalks. I continued my usual workouts at the gym lifting weights and doing 30-minute Fat-X routines. I also made two longer day hikes on Boulder Open Space lands of 8.5 and 17 miles. My right foot felt fine while hiking although I could tell that it was not quite the same as my healthy left foot. By June 1, I was pretty sure that I could complete the trip.

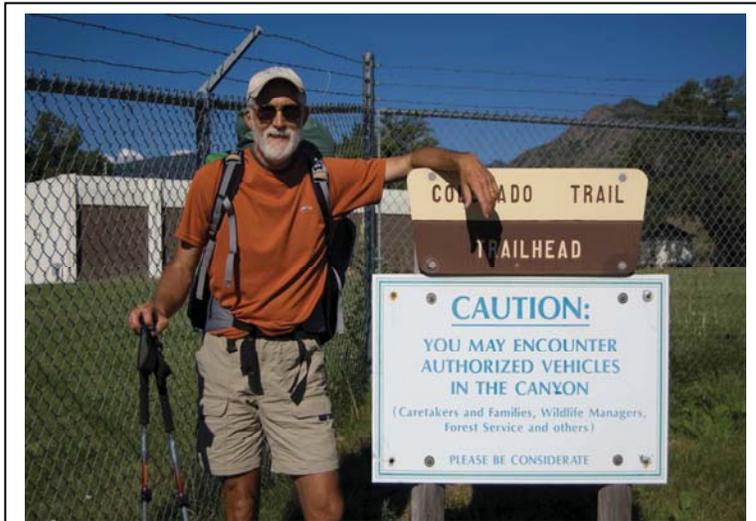
The following account is based on a journal which I kept faithfully during my hike. The numbers of the trail segments (1-28) mentioned in the text are the same as those in The Colorado Trail, Seventh Edition Revised. The numbers of the section maps (1-15) in the appendix do not correspond to the segment maps in The Colorado Trail, Seventh Edition Revised.

Colorado Trail Journal

Part 1 – Waterton Canyon to Breckenridge

Day 1 – Tuesday, June 30

I was up at 6:15 am, ate my usual oatmeal breakfast, and attended to last-minute packing and gear checking. I wrote an e-mail to one of my consulting clients telling him that I was not able to make the corrections to a conservation easement baseline report because I had forgotten to revise one of the figures. That was kind of a bummer! Finally, at 7:30 am, Betsy



Author at the start of the Colorado Trail at Waterton Canyon

and I headed out for Waterton Canyon, about an hour's drive south of Boulder. Riley and I had said good-bye last night because he did not want to wake up at this early hour. We arrived at the start of the Colorado Trail at 8:40 am after a brief stop in Golden for a cup of coffee and a scone.

Interestingly, as much as I enjoy drinking a cup of coffee each morning at home, I have not missed it on my previous hiking trips. Will this time be different? Betsy took my picture next to the Colorado

Trail sign as a large group of school-age kids started walking up the trail for a lesson in rocks and minerals. The chain-link fence was not an especially scenic beginning to the trail, but the morning was very cool and pleasant. The initial 6.4 miles of the Colorado Trail are actually a smooth gravel road that runs from the point where the South Platte River leaves the foothills at the trailhead to Strontia Springs Dam. The gravel road provides access for staff of Denver Water to maintain the dam and other water supply infrastructure. The trail/road follows the South Platte River, initially with a floodplain forest of plains cottonwood and box-elder trees that provided welcome shade. The hillsides were covered with Gambel oak and mountain mahogany



South Platte River in Waterton Canyon

shrubs. Spotted towhees and house wrens were singing along the road from the trees. Then the canyon narrowed and the wide floodplain disappeared along with the riparian forest.

There were quite a few bicyclers on the first six miles of the CT, along with a few anglers and no other hikers. In spite of being on a road, the hiking was enjoyable, the walking surface was smooth and almost flat, and the scenery was attractive. I wondered how much of my enjoyment of hiking on the road reflected the novelty of starting a 486-mile hike. Just upstream from a diversion dam, I thought I saw a rattlesnake out of the corner of my eye and jumped in the air. In fact, I did see a rattlesnake, albeit a dead one minus its head and rattle.

As I arrived at the Strontia Springs Dam, one of the cyclers pointed out a band of bighorn sheep feeding on the shrubby canyon slopes 200 feet away. This did not seem to be good bighorn sheep habitat, because it would have been easy for a coyote or mountain lion to sneak



Strontia Springs Dam on South Platte River



End of segment 1 at Gudy Gaskill Bridge on South Platte R.

up on the sheep and nab one of the lambs. At this point, the road veered away from the river and headed uphill, soon turning into a single-track trail. The trail was well graded and headed steadily upward for about a mile to a large wooden bench commemorating a Boy Scout named Lenny who died at an early age. The trail beyond Lenny's Rest went through a cool Douglas-fir forest with an understory of Oregon grape and elk sedge on north-facing slopes. Hiking was pretty easy on the excellent trail. At 8.8 miles, I stopped at Bear Creek for lunch and to soak my feet in the cool water. Wonderful! Here I discovered that I forgot most of my snacks for the first four days of the trip, but I did have a few Power Bars. Oh, well. Bear Creek was said to be the last reliable water until the South Platte River eight miles away so I filtered two liters of water. However, it turned out that West Bear Creek near mile 9.8 had plenty of water due to the very wet spring.