

THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL A FEW OF ITS MANY FACES

Resident, Glenn Oster hiked the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine in sections. Early on his southernmost trail hiking he made a number of observations that tell of his experience. He relates these observations in the following article.

Every person who hikes the Appalachian Trail for a mile or a thousand miles sees it in a different way – a different face. In my limited exposures to the trail, I always see something that registers, be it weather, walking surface, ascents, descents, fellow hikers, wildlife, vegetation - you get the drift.

This year I took two bites out of the Appalachian Trail apple (hikers refer to it as the " A T "), the first for three weeks in June, and the second for two weeks in September. These bites took me from the start of the trail at Springer Mountain, Georgia to Hot Springs, North Carolina. However, I'm a bit of a wimp, and my distance hiked was a modest 270 miles. Sure, I encountered hikers, super nice people, whose goals were five to eight miles a day - and the latter when "all systems were go", and I did average more miles than that . But many of you who read this can cover much more ground than I; so I make no pretense at being macho. If I were to have had any such illusions, a pin would have been stuck in my bubble by two people who shared one of my campsites a day's climb south of the Nantahala River. They were averaging sixteen miles per day - the man was age 64, his grandson companion, age 14, - and they were both energetic and enthusiastic upon their arrival at the campsite just before dusk. What a humbling realization. Why did they have to push so hard ? They were driven - would have felt unfulfilled to have done less. As the old saw goes, each of us marches to a different drummer.

As if the grandfather and grandson hadn't humbled me enough, I came across a scout troop of 15 or 20 boys struggling up the south slope of (would you believe) Blood Mountain. The map profile shows the Blood Mountain climb as a succession of ups and downs totaling 2200 feet of elevation gain (about five times as high as Mount Washington in Pittsburgh is above the Monongahela River); however, for reasons that I'll discuss later, the climb had to be much greater than 2200 feet. Well, these scouts looked to me like more than their anchors were dragging, and when I eventually came upon the scout leader I learned why. The scouts were all small, ranging in age from 9 to 12, clipping off fourteen miles a day for the last five days. Seems the assistant scout leader is a macho man with a sadistic bent who believes this will make men out of them. The scout leader was not sure that he himself was going to survive it, and he was concerned that the little guys would remember this backpacking experience with horror rather than to generate a great sense of pride in their manly accomplishment. Guess I'll never know how that played out. At any rate, they were covering much more of the trail each day than I.

Discussing motivation further, I'm hiking the AT in "fits and starts", sort of pecking away at it. I've never had an overwhelming desire to do the entire 2143 miles, but I surely get a kick out of doing it in sections and have covered something in excess of 800 miles. Looks like I've come to the

point of deciding that I will complete all of the AT - if I live long enough (the first person to finish the trail at age 96). However, let's get down to a couple of other examples of true motivation.

One such is Eugene Tailor, an attorney from Dalton, Georgia, who shared my stay at ColdSpring Shelter. Gene was age 64, had only recently recovered from a stroke and has had by-pass heart surgery within the past two years. He was determined to hike from Springer Mountain to Harpers Ferry, West Virginia (about half the trail's length) . It's simply something he had to do, and his family was beside themselves trying to talk him out of this madness. Saw him later at Fontana Dam, and he was doing great. Surely admired his spunk and determination and hope that he completed his trek as planned.

The second example is Bob Gallimore from Salinas, California. He volunteered the information that he had weighed 300 pounds prior to this hike, was age 53, smoked heavily, had been married and divorced four times, was a self-styled escape artist, i.e., fled from anything in life that was difficult. He had generally been considered to be the blacksheep of the family and hadn't seen his parents in some fifteen years. As it turns out , Bob's folks live near where the AT crosses through Harpers Ferry, and he reasoned that if he hiked the nearly 1000 miles to Harpers Ferry, he would have at least one major accomplishment in his life and would feel more self assured as he showed up for a surprise visit with his mom and pop. To add to the stage setting, Bob's method of selecting backpacking gear for this odyssey was to tell a clerk in an Army/Navy surplus store in Georgia to pick out whatever he thought Bob would need while Bob was nearby getting a much needed cup of coffee. More to that point, when I met him at Neel's Gap, - he was wearing sneakers! To us equipment intense backpackers, his was surely a blueprint for failure. As luck would have it, I had the pleasure of meeting Bob on two more occasions, the first at Bly Gap, at the Georgia, North Carolina border, where we stood in a torrential rainstorm and talked for half an hour. We met again at Rainbow Valley Campground, farther north. He was relaxing for the day, and I, coincidentally, stopped with my mini-van to retrieve gear and excess food that I left there when I did that section of the trail. We became good friends, and I felt less skeptical that he could make it. ---- and make it he did! He wrote to me several times, had a great reunion with his parents and has a new lease on life. How's that as an example of motivation He hasn't yet told me how much weight he lost

During my first week of hiking, I enjoyed the company of two Pittsburgh Council AYHers, Helen Coyne and Kirk' Slater. They were more than just company to me; they provided a measure of security. To elucidate, I had had a serious bicycle accident two months earlier and was laid up for six weeks, unable to do anything physical. But as soon as I could, I got busy and got in shape, or so I thought. Turned out that once on the trail, I really had to grunt and groan to make each day's schedule. Having Helen and Kirk along to bail me out if I got in trouble was a real plus. I didn't actually have to be bailed out, but they represented reassurance, a real plus. I toughened up somewhat during that first week, after which Helen and Kirk drove back to Pittsburgh and I was on my own throughout the following four weeks, admittedly not the wisest course of action, but if you want to do something badly enough you'll rationalize it - somehow. I reasoned that you're likely to see other hikers on the trail almost every day, and they constitute messengers for your evacuation in event of a mishap.

As matters unfolded, there were occasional sections where I would not see another hiker for a day or two. However, with few exceptions I spent the nights in Adirondack type shelters, and in

most of them I had company. In addition to the hikers I mentioned earlier, several sheltermates stick in my memory. I enjoyed a group of five men, ranging in age from 25 to 50, all sons or nephews of the 50 year old. They teased and kidded each other incessantly. And, incidentally, they made great campfires. They take a "family "backpack trip each summer and have grown much closer for the experience. Had the pleasure of sharing shelters with them on two successive nights.

Continuing on the subject of sheltermates, I couldn't help being impressed by a young woman from Detroit, named Theresa. She was on her first backpack trip and had joined her friend, Scott, for a week in the Smokies. The weather that evening was cold and rainy, the shelter was dismal and the area in front very muddy. Moreover, her feet were a mass of blisters and she had an assortment of aches, pains and sore muscles. When I offered sympathy and asked if she would ever want to backpack again, her response was, " How could I think of not doing this again; it's so wonderful." Then, at another shelter there were two men by the names of Tom and Keith who joined me. They were good buddies who each drive a UPS route out of Fort Lauderdale, Florida. They take backpacking vacations each summer and had lots of good UPS stories to tell - super guys. Without question, the other hikers play a major role in my enjoyment of the trail.

My favorite sheltermates were Missy Vogel and Dave Burgess. They had been classmates at Georgia Tech and had just graduated the previous weekend. I was well settled in at Roaring Fork Shelter late one afternoon when they arrived in heavy rain. They had only intended to wait for a let up in the downpour, but we quickly became friends, and they decided to remain with me. This was great; they encouraged me to tell them stories of backpacking, bicycling and bear encounters -- and that doesn't require much encouragement. Next morning, Missy gave me a big bag of gorp, and nothing would do but that she take a picture of me and a self- timed picture of the three of us. She promised to send me copies, and surely enough they were in my mailbox along with a nice note from her and Dave not long after my return from the hike.

And while I'm on the subject of people, I couldn't get over the frequency of groups on the trail numbering 15 to 30 hikers each, several of which, as you probably guessed, were scout troops. There was one group of young men, obviously not scouts, who, were polite to me but lethargic and unenthusiastic. I noticed that they were overseen by two tough looking older men; they had to have been from a juvenile correctional center. In Georgia, the authorities see difficult hikes on the AT as character building - giving young people something for which to be proud of themselves. This was one example, although it seemed to be falling short of the mark. There were three other examples - all from Georgia - but I'll only touch on two of them here. In the first example, as I approached the shelter at Fontana Dam (called the Fontana Hilton - what a nice place) I encountered boys coming from every direction - possibly 20 or more in the group - and all between ages 9 and 11. My chances of getting sleeping bag space in the shelter looked slim at best, and even if I got a spot, would I want it. Was I surprised! The group's leaders insisted that I select my sleeping area first. Then, following a meeting they had outside until dark, they entered the shelter walking softly and whispering; they didn't make a sound all night. I learned that they were all from broken families or were taken from parents who were not stable enough to raise their children. The boys had been on the trail for three weeks, mostly sleeping in tents, and this was their last night. Their purpose on this trip was to learn personal responsibility. No way for me to evaluate their new grasp of responsibility, but they surely knew how to conduct themselves as young gentlemen.

In the second example, farther south on the trail, I was able to hear one group of disadvantaged young people about a quarter mile before reaching them. The group consisted of about 30 teenagers, of both sexes and multiple races, overseen by several adults. The reason why I could hear them was that they posted a very loud voiced 16 year old girl at the head of the column who's duty it was to call out every large and small obstacle on the trail, roots, rocks, major stepdowns, snails - you name it. I thought of discussing the matter of noise pollution with the leaders, but I came to realize that this was a technique to help those young people feel more secure. None of them had ever been away from home before, let alone in the wilderness. Most were frightened. I never brought up the issue of noise on the trail - didn't have the heart. Let's hope that they achieved their self confidence goals.

In contrast, at one campsite there were about 20 hikers in their late teens. You only had to look at their clothes and listen to them talk for a few minutes to know that they came from wealthier families, impressively polite, considerate young people. Seems they were part of a commercially run summer camp, who's name I have forgotten. I asked one of the counselors what the cost was per person for the summer camp; her only response was - enormous.

And I came upon a group of young men in an Outward Bound Program. They had been out for 20 days and were nearing the end of their program. Apparently, this had been a difficult group to work with, and I sensed that the leader was going to be very glad to see its completion. She told me that each group selects its own leader from among the participants, and the one this group chose turned out to be a very negative person, bent on frustrating the system. She didn't explain why they didn't change leaders, but it was obvious to me that she had had enough.

I could fuss ad nauseam about the church sponsored groups that I met on the trail, usually in large numbers. Unfortunately, most church group leaders fell short in preparing their hikers as to what you do out of doors. Whether they were too Victorian to discuss the matter of bodily waste or what I don't know, but there was fresh feces and toilet tissue strewn widely in back of their camping areas, and no one else could have been responsible. Apparently, no one told them to bury (let alone burn) toilet 'tissue, when they urinated as well as when they had a b.m. To their credit, though, they left no trash at the campsites or on the trail. Nevertheless, it was clear that some of them got little guidance from their leaders. As one example, I was tenting about 100 yards from a large encampment of late teens from a church in Florida. They had taken over the shelter and made clever room extensions with sheet plastic. The camping area's water source was a stream that flows about 20 feet from the shelter. I was at the stream getting water for dinner when a boy in his late teens called to me, "Are you going to drink that water?" "Yes, why do you ask?" "I'm just starting to wash my hair. " It goes without saying that I was appalled and should have handled the situation in a friendlier and more controlled manner except that I was so shocked. "Young man, you don't wash yourself in the stream; you don't wash your cooking pots or clothing in the stream; you don't wash anything in the stream even with biodegradable soap. Take water in a pan and do these things well away from your water source. You wouldn't want anyone fouling **your** water supply." The leader and most of the others had been looking on as I walked by the shelter to access the stream, and they witnessed my calling the boy to task. I went to the leader and told him that he was going to have to talk with his people. He hadn't taken the time to prepare them in advance of the trip, and it didn't look like he was planning to do so. He could see that the hair washing incident was going to take place and wasn't taking any measures

to stop and educate the boy about how he should have been going about it. The leader visited me later that evening and said that he would hold a question and answer session. Hope the campers thought to ask the right questions.

Getting away from the people aspects of the hike, which were most enjoyable notwithstanding the matter just related, the trail itself is interesting and challenging. Before embarking on an AT hike, you can buy maps and trail guides from the Appalachian Trail Conference at Harpers Ferry, W.VA. They are a great help in planning each day's hike and camping location. They also help by providing a profile of the trail that shows the elevations of the peaks and gaps and everything in between. You take into consideration the climbs and descents when you are planning your daily hiking distance and campsites. In effect, you allocate your energy output. Paul Petzold, the father of American rock climbing and backpacking technique, writes that the energy output of a 1000 foot climb is the equivalent of walking a mile on the level. I'm ready to debate the accuracy of that principle. For a smaller guy, such as I, who can't discipline himself to carry a light pack, I'm much less tired when I walk a mile on the level than when I climb 1000 feet with a forty - some pound backpack. Be that as it may, when allocating energy output based on the profiles shown on those maps, you can significantly underestimate the required exertion. Most of the mountains had ups and downs that just don't show in the profiles. In fairness to the mapmakers, to keep the map size manageable the maps must be drawn to a scale that can't show roller coaster climbs and dips of less than 100 feet. For that matter, I don't think they worry much about elevation changes of a good deal more than 100 feet. The same casual approach to "minor" elevation variations applies to sections, rare though they be, on mountain ridges shown on the map profiles as flat. Don't you believe it. Those "flat" sections can wear you to a nub.

Lest I beat on the mapmakers too hard, I must say that the basic maps are excellent. Only the mountain profiles gave me any trouble. And, except as I'll note a little later, the trail's walking surface was unbelievably good considering the rugged terrain. The blazes (white 6 x 2 inch paintings on trees to define the trail) were mostly all fresh and close enough so that you should have no problem in following the trail. Nonetheless, unexplainable things can happen to good hikers, e.g., I was at a loss to understand how my new friends, Missy and Dave, managed to get off on a side trail, lost for a full day. Must have been caused by some major (ain't love grand) distraction. They can't explain it.

Over the years, I have read that the large amount of foot traffic with lug type boot soles (for example, Vibram) has worn the trail excessively, and in Great Smoky Mountain National Park (I'll call it " The Park") there are high balds where the AT is supposedly rutted four feet deep. Happily, I found that to be quite an exaggeration. In the balds and meadows where this effect could be measured readily, the treadway was a good eight inches deep, but not four feet. And there was indeed the undesirable evidence of hikers walking parallel to these trenches, creating unsightly duplicate trails, but nothing as severe as I'd been lead to believe.

Where I did see serious footpath problems were in areas of water erosion where trail maintenance efforts with water bars just couldn't measure up to the forces of rainstorm runoff. The proof was there, though, that trail maintainers had tried. Where trail crews tended to totally drop the ball was at swags of narrow ridges. Hikers might encounter 150 feet of wall to wall

muck which deep enough ditches could have drained; the drains that were in place were often too shallow. Now, when it comes to tearing up the trail, Vibram soles take a distant back seat to horseshoes, especially in wet weather (Was there any other kind of weather in June and September this year?). Horses not only make deep hoof print gouges,, that are difficult to walk over, but they also break down the outer edges of shelves that trail builders laboriously carved out of the mountainsides with backbreaking pulaskis.

There probably are many responsible horseback riders, but there surely are many who aren't. For example,as I was crossing Max Patch Mountain, south of Hot Springs, N.C., there were a number of signs that no one could miss saying that the area, not just the trail, was off limits to horseback riding and to pack stock. I came within 100 feet of ten people on horseback there. Horses are permitted on certain sections of the AT and on other trails in The Park, and their riders must use the shelters, the same as thru hikers (you are required to obtain permits in advance and may not camp overnight anywhere other than in your approved shelter). Regulations require that horses be tethered well away from the shelters and are not permitted within 100 feet of water sources. Sounds reasonable. However, there exists in society a malaise characterized by certain types of people who hold that anything they want to do is okay as long as they aren't detected. Pretty safe considering The Park's limited resources for policing such activities. I was at one shelter where the front was a quagmire of the prohibited hoofprints full of rainwater - a most unpleasant circumstance. And other hikers complained to me of pom de la rue directly in front of the shelter and in the water source. That was not an especially nice ambience in which to prepare and eat meals, to say nothing about the fragrance all night long while you slept. Considering that you are not permitted to tent and must sleep in your reserved shelter, you're a prisoner of the stench. Further to this point,(Where did you get the idea that this is one of my hot buttons ?) on a backpack trip a few years ago in the Pecos Wilderness in New Mexico, I hiked about thirty minutes behind a group on horseback for about ten miles and found at least one fresh beer can each mile. Admittedly, equestrians should have a right to enjoy what we hikers do, but they must earn that right by following the rules and not damaging the trails. If they can't do so, they should forfeit that right and be required to stick to dirt roads thru the woodlands.

On a more pleasant note, the subject of shelters, their quality ranged from Birch Springs Shelter in The Park (locally known as "the dungeon") to the Fontana Hilton. Most shelters are three sided "lean to" structures with a wooden floor and roof. Some have dirt floors and inside fireplaces. Many of the shelters have two levels of sleeping accommodations and have space for twelve hikers. With only the front open, the shelters tend to be dark inside, but they surely are convenient when you want to cook a meal and it's pouring outside. In The Park, the shelters have chainlink fences across the opening to keep the bears out. Talk about service! One really nice shelter was just completed in 1991, Deep Gap Shelter in Georgia, constructed throughout by notched timbers and wooden pegs. This is a real showplace, even has a skylight and a table inside - sinful luxury. Even better in some respects, is the Fontana Dam Shelter to which I've referred a couple times. It's open at both ends rather than being the typical lean to. It's large, double decked holding twenty hikers, varnished, immaculate and has a picnic area with about seven smooth concrete picnic tables. On top of all that, 100 yards away are heated rest rooms with hot and cold water and flush toilets. **And**, you can get a free hot shower at the visitors center by the dam. After being on the trail for several weeks, you know you've died and gone to heaven when you reach Fontana Dam Shelter.

And all the shelters, except the Fontana Hilton, have cords hanging from the ceiling and running through the tops of tin cans, the idea being to attach your backpack to the bottom of the cord; then, when mice come down the cord intent on investigating your backpack, they encounter the tin cans which are too wobbly for them to cling to in trying to descend the cord. Don't know if they work, but I never saw a suspended pack invaded by one of those hungry little creatures. On the other hand, in Low Gap Shelter, Patrick, one of my sheltermates, did not suspend his backpack one night, and next day as he prepared to leave, he found a nest in one of his pack pockets where a momma mouse took up residence and gave birth to a number of little ones. She seemed rather indignant when he evicted her and her brood before returning to the trail.

Now brace yourselves for my lament about the weather. Ten minutes after we got on the trail on our first day of hiking we were drowned in a downpour that from time to time teased as if it were over with, but it returned with renewed vitality again and again for the remainder of the day. (The shelter was really a luxury that evening.) That day's rain just set the stage for things to come. We had rain off and on for most of that week. The weather for the next two weeks was a bit better, but nothing to get excited about, mostly very cool. When I returned for the next two weeks on the trail, I was "treated" to even more of the wet stuff. During the first eleven days, I had one clear/beautiful day, one day on which it didn't rain but was yucky (in the clouds, dense fog and wet everywhere) and on all the other days it rained for hours at a time. Hikers coming the opposite direction complimented me on the good looking fins and gills I was growing. But hooray, the finale was glorious - three clear, warm days - days on which it was simply great to be alive. As you have already surmised, except for the few clear days, all those awe inspiring high mountain vistas were, instead, expansive views of the insides of clouds. Happily, the eighth day of the eleven that I mentioned above was superb and couldn't have come at a better time. That was my day to cross Clingman's Dome at an elevation of 6,642 feet, the highest point on the entire AT. I climbed the lookout tower and could see distant towns as well as the endless series of peaks that I had already climbed, looking north, and many of those yet to be mastered, looking south. What a treat, clear and warm but not hot. I opted for a week of weather like that, but to no avail, the next day was the first of several more days of precip. At times, water coursed down the trail creating the impression of hiking up a fast moving stream. Then, in the low spots, you could find yourself with extensive wall to wall muck to plow through. Almost every other trail I hiked in this year also gave me a soggy greeting; so I can't pick on the AT exclusively -- it's just that I was on it for a longer period of time and got tired of explaining why my fingers resembled prunes.

More than compensating for the bad weather, there were some truly rewarding pleasures on this trip, especially the flora. In various areas, mountain laurel was in bloom. In other areas, rhododendron was blooming the wild, whitish blossoms that we see in Pennsylvania, whereas, in others, the rhodies had large, lavender flowers much like domestic varieties. In certain sections the rhododendrons were so thick and tall that the trail was simply hacked through them and became a tunnel, sometimes as long as 200 yards, albeit dark but really a nice change of scenery.

To me, the most impressive jewel in this floral crown was the flame azalea, miles and miles of breathtakingly beautiful blossoms in shades of orange, salmon and yellow in full bloom. In my years of woodland hiking, I had seen only two flame azalea bushes, one at Bear Run Nature

Reserve near Ohiopyle, Pennsylvania and the other near The Homestead Resort in Hot Springs, Virginia. I had been so appreciative of seeing them; little did I know that one day I'd see miles and miles of them. As if that weren't enough, the more familiar (to Pennsylvanians) wild pink azaleas were in bloom in a few other places. And there were wild flowers of too many varieties to name (largely because I don't know their names), not profuse as they are when we are hiking the mountain ranges out west, but enjoyable nonetheless. As a sampling, we saw lots of cardinal flower, evening primrose, yellow and orange hawkweed, columbine, various types of dayflower and on and on.

Did I see any wildlife? That's the most frequently asked question about my being on the trail. Well, yes. But some of the fauna I could have done without. (not sure that they are considered fauna, but they definitely weren't flora.). I was uncertain whether that fauna, in the form of flying critters that were giving me living fits at times, were large gnats or small black flies, but I surely knew they were around. They'd get into my hair (not a tough job when you only have fourteen hairs remaining), in my ears, in my nostrils and where not. Fortunately, they weren't a problem everywhere. Some campsites had no insect problems at all, and in general I was rarely bothered by mosquitos. Yet, I did lose out in an engagement with a nest of hornets. There I was with my little orange trowel in hand, digging a cathole for my morning fertilization of the forest, when an angry hornet landed on my right hand and used his stinger to great advantage - his advantage. That demoniac winged thing was getting even; it became readily apparent, when hordes of them emerged, that I had unwittingly dug into their ground nest. You have to wonder what the mathematical probabilities of that's happening would be. Certainly the hornet won that encounter. I had trouble making a fist for four or five days, let alone holding a pen to write trail notes. Can't remember whether I lost interest in my mission that morning or found a less dangerous spot to fertilize.

Addressing the more commonly thought of forms of fauna, I saw a box turtle, a few garter snakes, a timber rattlesnake, a golden eagle, hawks, crows, ravens, turkey vultures, a flying squirrel, an abundance of birds that I couldn't identify and a good sized black bear(looked at me but did its best to ignore me as it lumbered away slowly). The wildlife encounter that I really treasure took place atop Max Patch Mountain (no, I'm not bashing the horseback riders again - same place, though). I was crossing over this bald, that is, a large meadow where the trail blazes are on six inch diameter posts about forty inches high. I noticed on one of these posts a large grey squirrel. When it saw me, it climbed down on the opposite side of the post and hid from me. Then, as I came nearer, he'd move around the post, always keeping to the opposite side. Pretty clever. But, how was I able to track him on the opposite side of the post? X Ray vision? Nope. He forgot that his long, bushy tail remained on top of the post the whole time. You don't have to be too swift when - -

Unexpectedly, the sighting that was new and different for me was a pack of wild hogs. At a rare moment when the sun was shining through the trees, I heard a downed tree branch break, and I looked to see the sun shining on an animal. I watched silently and came to realize that it had a pig shaped head, perhaps a little sharper, and curved tusks - a wild boar. I watched without moving and then realized that there was more action. In all, I counted eight boars and numerous sows in the pack, most about forty feet away from me and slightly downhill. They were rooting under the dry leaves on the ground foraging for food and gradually moving in my direction until one got within fifteen feet of me. He spotted me, let out a loud squeal and all of them bounded

down the mountainside out of sight - lucky for me. I had always understood them to be rather belligerent rascals.

Much as I enjoyed the flowers and wildlife, there were additional people incidents that I'll remember. As I was climbing south out of Stecoah Gap, I came upon several dayhikers from Knoxville, Tennessee. One woman noticed my AYH (an outdoors group to which I belonged) tee shirt and asked about my home; her eyes lit up when I said, " Pittsburgh". Her next question was just two words, " Baker Trail?" It then developed that she is Ruth Zimmerman, one of the great Pittsburgh AYHers from yesteryear who built the 142 mile Baker Trail in Western Pennsylvania. Never can tell who - - -.

Another pleasant memory of people on the trail was a ridgerunner named Morgan Briggs. His job is to walk the AT in The Park, check to see that hikers have their shelter permits, help them change permits if their hiking plan changes (by contacting Headquarters by radio), provide information to hikers and horseback riders, administer first aid, report serious tree blowdowns and so much more. He's also a safety factor. To exemplify, at Silers Bald Shelter, he and the family of five men that I mentioned earlier were spending the night, and the five men knew that I planned to sleep there, too. They had hiked a good deal faster than I and became alarmed that I hadn't arrived. When Morgan settled in, they mentioned their concern. Without even donning raingear (was raining, of course), he took off in my direction and met me about a mile and a half from the shelter; we walked back together. He knows how easily one can be injured by slips on wet rocks and mud and was more comfortable coming to meet me than waiting at the shelter. I really appreciated that, and after concluding my hike, I made a point of filing a formal report with the Park Superintendent's Office commending his initiative and concern.. As a postscript to this, I received a Christmas card from Morgan saying that my report had been circulated at Headquarters and would be helpful in selling continuation of the ridgerunner program in this climate of tight operating budgets.

I could go on and on (looks like I already have) with stories of people and experiences on the trail, but this will give you the sense of the different faces that I see of the AT. Without doubt, the great people and enjoyable experiences far outweighed the seemingly endless rain that I slogged through. I'm anxious to get back on the trail.