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# TRAIL TIPS

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## Helpful Hints for Hiking

### Maps or Apps?

Happy New Year! I hope everyone had a happy and joyful holiday season. I certainly did.

Let's kick off the 2018 hiking season with an article on finding our way out of the woods (or desert, as the case may be). I have participated in many a discussion on the subject of navigating in the wilderness back country. Some folks like good old fashioned paper maps, some like various GPS systems, and a few use both. The sextant and breadcrumb crowd are in the definite minority.

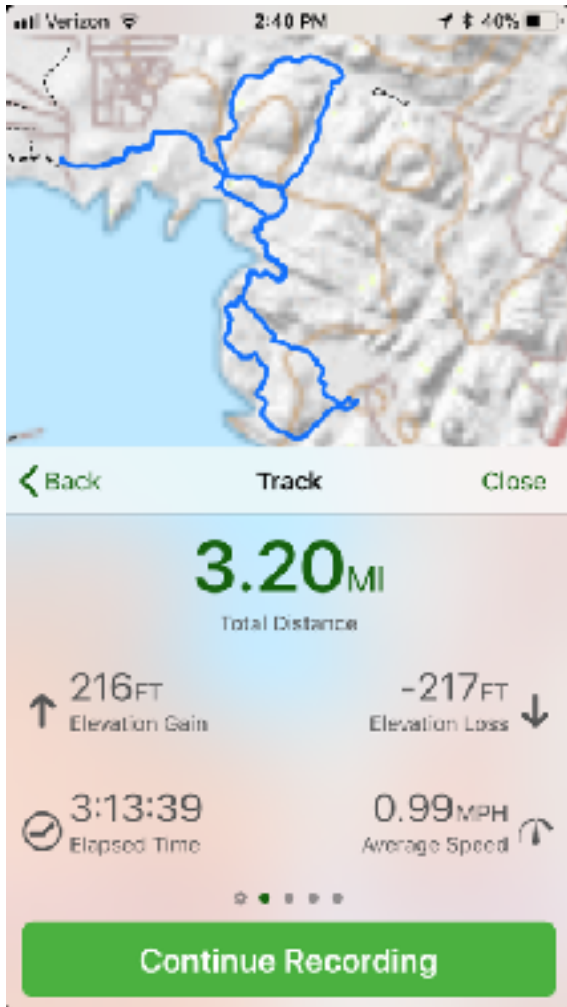


Now, now, I hear the sextant folks grumbling in the background. To be sure, knowing how to identify Polaris, aka the North Star, can be helpful if all else fails. Yes, moss does tend to grow on the north side of objects. The sun usually rises in the east and sets in the west. If you find yourself having to fumble your way back to the parking lot using the aforementioned methods, you have my sincere sympathy, and I hope you make it out alive.

My plan is to never have to rely on moss or lichen to point my way back to civilization. I generally use both maps and GPS Apps to guide me through the wilderness. Twenty years ago I grudgingly allowed myself to be dragged into the 21st century, kicking and screaming that my trusty Rand McNally Atlas was still the most reliable navigational tool available. And to a certain extent, it still is. A paper map never runs out of battery power, never has to reboot, and one can't forget to turn the durned thing on back at the trailhead.

However, a paper map can't tell you WHERE on the map you really happen to have your boots planted. A map doesn't know where you parked the car, how far you've hiked out into the desert, or the route you actually took to get from said car to the spot you're

currently occupying, scratching your head wondering if you should go right or left at this trail junction.



The image you see to the left is an actual screen shot of a hike I was on with the club. As you can see from the blue line, we walked a few extra credit paces. The signage on this trail system was terrible, and even though the Leader had scouted it, it was very confusing. Thanks to our GPS systems, we made it out OK and lived to tell the tale.

Alright, perhaps a little dramatic, but there are documented cases every single year of hikers who went out for a short little two or three mile hike, and became hopelessly lost. Many times a hiker becomes disoriented after stepping off the trail to answer the call of nature, and can't find their way back to the trail. Or simply continued straight when they should have made a turn, and continue on until it gets too late in the day to find their way back to the trailhead. I have misplaced myself once or twice for a period of time, and it DOES induce a panicky feeling and loose bowels.

So, to avoid having to bring a change of underwear with me on every hike, I have adopted the following practices:

1 - ALWAYS have a paper map with me, or with the group. One allowance I make with this rule is if a paper map is not readily available, I will have downloaded a map from the park's website, or take a photo of the trail system at the trailhead. It IS a risk I take if my phone battery dies, or I drop said phone on a rock or off a cliff. I generally always make sure that my phone is fully charged before starting a hike, and I do carry a battery backup with cord for my phone in my backpack. Yes, I am a geek. :c)

2 - I try to always download maps of the area into the GPS App I am using. That way, even if I don't have a cellular signal, I can still navigate offline. This also saves using data on my cell phone. I'm cheap, er, frugal!

3 - I make a point of looking back at the way I came periodically, to check landmarks and terrain features. The scenery always looks very different when you go back the way you came in, and I am reassured when I can recognize some of the more prominent landmarks as I wearily slog my way back from whence I came. This wards off LBS (Loose Bowel Syndrome).

4 - I never venture far off trail! This is not so important in the desert as it is when hiking in dense forest. If the call of nature does take me further off of the path than I'm comfortable with, I make sure I look back and memorize landmarks. Yeah, that tree with the broken branch on the left. That outcropping with the creepy moss hanging down at the bottom.

Now, what Apps do I use? I have tried several, and so far Topo Maps+ is a very good app for the price - free. I could upgrade to their premium if I wanted more features, like better resolution and more tracking data, but the free version works very well indeed. Your mileage may vary. There are oodles and oodles of GPS apps out there, so find one that you like and trust.

AllTrails is another great app, one I use to locate trails to hike that are near to wherever I happen to find myself. This is another free app, and it also has a tracking function. I don't use this feature, because I like the Topo Maps+ app better. It tracks my distance hiked, elevation gain and loss, current elevation, and the route I followed. It also saves my hikes into an archive I can go back into later and review. And it seems to glitch out a lot less than other apps I have tried.

I like to track how much elevation I've hauled my weary legs up and down. I like knowing how many miles I covered in my dusty boots. It's motivating to me. Shortly after retiring, I was comfortable with elevation gains of 500 feet or so. Now I'm good climbing up and down 1500 feet on the rocky trails. My stamina has increased from tackling five mile hikes to taking on 10 mile hikes without wincing. Much...

One can also purchase a stand alone GPS tracker. Did I mention I'm frugal? My phone works quite well with no additional hardware needed. But I do have a Garmin 400t handheld GPS unit that I have used hiking and Geocaching. It works very well, but is large and heavy (it's almost ten years old, and my, the times they are a changing!). There are some very nice handheld units available that won't break your budget and are very compact and light. And they've gotten very user friendly.

So there you have it. That's what I have in my arsenal of goodies to find my way out of the beautiful but sometimes intimidating environment we call Nature. I have never been truly "lost." Momentarily misplaced, maybe, but not well and truly lost.

Do you really need to run out to REI and purchase a GPS unit? No, not at all. Should you pop into the App Store or the Marketplace and get a hiking app quick like a bunny, or risk being lost in the desert forever? Nope, not saying that either. I just wanted to share with you what resources are available to keep you on the right path back to your car...

...and keep you from having to have that change of undies in your backpack.

Be **SAFE** out there, and I'll see you on the Trail!

Burt