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### Food on the Appalachian Trail

Hiking on the 2180 mile Appalachian Trail (A.T.) can be an incredibly long and exhausting (and rewarding) expedition. There are three types of hikers on the A.T: thru-hikers who hike the entire trail at once, section hikers, who hike the entire trail over several years, and flip-floppers, who thru hike the trail in sections that are discontinuous.<sup>i</sup> Regardless of which type of hiker you are, you will burn a lot of calories and lose quite a lot of weight while on the A.T. According to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, hikers burn 6,000 calories a day on average and lose 10-20 pounds after completing the entire trail.<sup>ii</sup> As a result, it is extremely important to replenish what is burned off on a daily basis. There are a variety of ways to accomplish this, both by packing appropriate food for the hike and by finding sources of food and water along the trail. Dried food is highly recommended for bringing along, and plants and water along the trail can be obtained with the necessary precautions and safety procedures.



Depiction of a thru-hiker before and after hiking the AT.<sup>ii</sup>

### Dried and Freeze-Dried Food

When travelling, it is important to keep the weight that you are carrying to a minimum. A balance should be reached between carrying food and waiting until resupply points along the trail to restock. Dry food is very light, contrary to food that contains a lot of water, which can weigh down a hiking backpack. Additionally, if you are hiking for a long period of time, it is best to

carry non-perishable food, and dry food satisfies this requirement. Food that spoils will not last long on a lengthy hiking trip and will therefore result in extra, unnecessary weight. Dry food that you can make yourself includes snack bags of trail mix containing a variety of healthy components (including peanuts, bananas, almonds, and cranberries), granola bars, and different types of seeds. Nuts especially contain a good amount of fat, protein, and vitamins that can help you regain what is burned off on the trail. Dried fruit and seeds are also good options because they are concentrated in nutrients.<sup>iii</sup>

Two options (or a combination of the two) can be taken with regards to bringing dry food on the A.T.: home-dried food can be packed or freeze-dried food can be purchased. The advantage of bringing home-dried food is that you can ensure its nutritional value, cater it to your taste preferences, and save on purchases of freeze-dried food. However, the downside is that it takes time to prepare, and mail drops need to be scheduled and planned so that the food can arrive at the appropriate location on the trail when you need it. On the other hand, while purchased freeze-dried food may be more expensive, it is quick and easy to prepare when it is needed. Purchasing such food from stores makes it easier on hikers and also helps the stores' business, since their main purpose is to cater to hikers on the A.T.<sup>iv</sup>

A popular option for purchasing dry food on long hiking trips is Mountain House. Mountain House is the number one brand of camping and backpacking food in North America due to its similarity to fresh, home-cooked food and its provision of a variety of options. Mountain House food is freeze-dried and therefore extremely sustainable (it can last for more than 12 years). The reason why the package is highly rated is due to the simple preparation required – a cup of hot water is added to a packet – and the similarity of the resulting food to home-cooked food. On the A.T., it is important to keep in mind that food should be filling and

prepared easily. These two conditions often mean that quality is less important. However, Mountain House satisfies the large quantity and nutritional requirements while also being delicious. If you are planning on purchasing Mountain House, you will need to also carry a stove and fuel. Although this increase the weight of your backpack by three to four pounds, building a fire to warm water can be very time-consuming on the trail, and doing so is prohibited in some campsites.<sup>v</sup>

On the A.T., it is a good strategy to eat periodically rather than just having three larger meals. Snacking at various points during the day can allow you to travel a longer distance in a given day, since it constantly refuels energy while walking on the trail. According to the *Blue Ridge Outdoors* guide, crackers and cheese help bring about the full feeling and therefore provide energy for hiking additional miles. Since cheese doesn't last as long as crackers, it is important to consume it before it spoils. The shelf life of cheese can be several weeks, but it rapidly accelerates once opened and must be eaten in a timely fashion. You can stock up your supply on this kind of snack food at the next store along the trail, although it may take a long time before you encounter the next store. Additional recommended snack items include energy bars, dried fruit, and nuts. Such snacks should be located in your pack so they are easily accessible; in this way, you will be able to eat while walking rather than having to stop and take off your pack to retrieve the food.<sup>vi</sup>

### Water

On the trail, it will be necessary to drink at least three liters of water a day, and it is better to drink periodically rather than only when you take a break and take off the backpack. As a result, plastic Powerade bottles and water bladders are a must in your packing list. Powerade bottles should be easily accessible so that you don't have to remove your pack to drink, and a

water bladder will allow you to keep sipping as you are walking. A water bladder is extremely useful to have, since it is guaranteed to be easily accessible and can therefore prolong the time you hike since you don't have to take breaks to drink water.

On a long hike, it will be necessary to find natural water sources, since there are few water faucets or pumps on the A.T., especially in the backcountry. Water taken from a natural water source should be clear, running water to minimize the amount of dirt and microorganisms. Even though water may appear clear and taste normal, it still must be filtered to completely eliminate these microorganisms. Failure to accomplish this will most likely result in watery diarrhea, vomiting, and intestinal discomfort. Techniques to purify water on the A.T. include boiling, using a portable water filter, applying drops or tablets of iodine or chlorine, or a combination of these methods. Boiling involves the use of a stove and fuel, and the time required for boiling depends on the altitude. Portable water filters approved by the National Safety Foundation should also exterminate most pathogens. Lastly, disinfectant drops or tablets make up another pathogen reduction method; however, the time and concentration of these drops or tablets depends on the manufacturer. In order to ensure that the water is completely safe, using a combination of the methods is the most viable strategy, since either of these methods may not exterminate all pathogens by themselves due to various factors. Additionally, it is important to evaluate costs when choosing the appropriate method and deciding what materials to purchase.<sup>vii</sup>

In addition to employing water purification techniques to ensure safety of drinking water obtained from relatively fresh water sources in the backcountry, it is equally important to maintain the freshness of these water sources. Often, in the backcountry, there are no restrooms, so hikers must go to the bathroom in the woods. In order to make sure the run off from human waste does not contaminate water sources, it is essential that hikers are at least 200 feet away

from the nearest water source when doing so. Only biodegradable toilet paper should be used, and a hole must be dug and covered up completely after you are finished. In addition to maintaining the safety and cleanliness of the water, this procedure helps maintain the trail itself and is a courtesy to other hikers.<sup>viii</sup>

### Gathering

Aside from food you may bring, mail, or buy on the A.T., you can also find food on the trail itself. However, it is important to remember that gathering on the trail should only be supplemental and cannot be relied upon for the tremendous amount of energy you will need to hike the A.T. The issue arises in that there is little to no food to pick beside the trail itself, so it may take some looking to find a suitable snack. Furthermore, long-distance (“thru”) hikes simply do not have the time or energy to acquire substantial amounts of food from the A.T., so they must utilize the aforementioned methods to plan their food effectively for the duration of their journey. The food found on the trail can however be utilized as snacks to nibble on for those who walk on shorter hikes or as extra snacks to utilize before the next food pick up stop. Seasons to best pick plants vary at different points along the trail, but the general rule is that the proper season extends from April to July, moving further along that range as one moves northward. The energy these natural snacks will give you will be significantly less than the planned energy snacks you should bring, but the most important thing to realize while gathering is that you should know what is edible and what is potentially harmful.

### Berries



***Huckleberries***<sup>ix</sup>

While there are not many fruits growing on the trail, berries are found quite abundantly. Huckleberries, blackberries, and mulberries are

among the fruits found on the trail, and it is important to remember how to identify them.

These berries are in season in the mid summer and early fall. Of the three, huckleberries provide the least nutritional value, for they contain no essential nutrients in high content. Though there are many different varieties, the huckleberries on the A.T. resemble blueberries but are slightly smaller. Mulberries and blackberries, on the other hand, contain essential nutrients which can greatly supplement your trailside diet. A major point of nutritional importance is that mulberries contain anthocyanins<sup>x</sup>, nutrients that can help fight infections. This is particularly useful on a hike, for hikers may be exposed to the elements constantly,

as weather can be extremely unpredictable. Furthermore, mulberries are unique in that they contain a substantial amount of iron. Because iron determines the oxygen carrying capacity of red blood cells, mulberries become



invaluable in replenishing the iron in the body and increasing the strength of the cardiovascular system, which is heavily taxed on a long walking journey.

*Mulberries*<sup>xi</sup>

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Blackberries, too, can provide vital nutrients that are of great use on the hike. They provide Vitamin C, which is known to help the body fend off infectious agents. Finally, although they contain few calories and cannot provide us with much energy on our hike, blackberries contain copious amounts of the beta complex vitamin group.<sup>xii</sup> This group aides the body in metabolizing carbohydrates, fat, and protein, meaning that eating blackberries will help you gain more energy from the food you consume overall.

### Other Plants

Ramps are a popular plant to consume on the trail. Similar to onions and garlic, these plants are also referred to



*Ramps*<sup>xiv</sup>

as wild leeks. Like Blackberries, they are a great source of Vitamin C and can aid the body's immune response. Furthermore, ramps provide large amounts of Vitamin A.<sup>xiii</sup> Best known for promoting good low-light vision, Vitamin A may seem trivial on a hike. However, especially for long hikes, Vitamin A deficiency can damage production of healthy bones, skin tissue, and retina pigmentation, and ramps are an excellent way to get more of this nutrient if it is not already planned in your hiking meals.

Though many foods found on the trail are not beneficial for providing very much energy, wild grapes are different in that regard. They contain a significant amount of carbohydrates and, while they cannot be used as a main energy source, they can definitely be used for supplemental energy. Grapes are also a good source of potassium<sup>xv</sup>, which is key in preventing muscle cramps and promoting strong bones. Because both your muscles and bones are going to be heavily taxed, it is important to maintain potassium levels to keep them at optimal performance.

### Fungi

Laetiporus is an edible mushroom that is also referred to as “Chicken of the Woods.” As the name suggests, it can be prepared as chicken can be and can add a new flavor and a great amount of protein to your meals. It is important to remember that, unlike the aforementioned along-the-trail foods, Laetiporus cannot be consumed raw. Doing so can cause unwanted adverse effects and could lead to an emergency while on the trail.



***Laetiporus***<sup>xvi</sup>



***Oyster Mushroom***<sup>xviii</sup>

Oyster mushrooms are another well-recognized variety, and, though they provide less protein than do Laetiporus, they contain a substantial amount of carbohydrates. Because the cell walls of mushrooms

make them extremely difficult to digest, oyster mushrooms should also be cooked before consumption. They are also an excellent source of copper<sup>xvii</sup>, which aids the body in maintaining the strength of the bones and various tissues. Additionally, copper helps incorporate iron into red blood cells and plays a key role in how the body accesses energy from carbohydrates.

Hiking the Appalachian Trail is an incredible experience, but it will be incredibly taxing on your body, no matter your fitness level. For this reason, it is vital that you plan your food efficiently and effectively and to know where to access resources when there is something you may have overlooked. For all three types of hikers – thru-hikers, section hikers, and flip-floppers – access to water, energy, and essential nutrients will be the driving factor for stamina, health, and overall enjoyment of the hike.

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<sup>i</sup> “Planning Food and Meals for a Thru-Hike.” *Appalachian Trail*. 2014. Web. 20 Oct 2014. Retrieved from <http://appalachiantrail.com/advice/planning-meals-for-a-thru-hike/>

<sup>ii</sup> Appalachian Trail Conservancy. “Food and Water.” *Appalachian Trail Conservancy*. 2014. Web. 20 Oct 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.appalachiantrail.org/hiking/hiking-basics/food-water>; Anderson, C. “US Marine Hikes 2000 Miles from Georgia to Maine, His Body Transformation Will Blow Your Mind.” *Guyism*. 15 Oct 2014. Web. 20 Oct 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.brobible.com/guyism/article/us-marine-hiking-the-appalachian-trail-body-transformation/>

<sup>iii</sup> McGroarty, K. “Best Food For The Appalachian Trail.” *Blue Ridge Outdoors*. 10 Oct 2013. Web. 20 Oct 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.blueridgeoutdoors.com/hiking/best-food-appalachian-trail/>

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Mountain House, Inc. “Mountain House is the #1 Brand of Camping and Backpacking Food in North America.” *Mountain House*. 2014. Web. 20 Oct 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.mountainhouse.com/M/ABUS.html>

<sup>vi</sup> McGroarty, K. *Blue Ridge Outdoors*.

<sup>vii</sup> *Appalachian Trail Conservancy*.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Neal, Brittany Lea. “20 Edible Plants and Fungi You’ll Find on the Appalachian Trail.” *Appalachian Trials*. Appalachian Trials Blog, 19 July 2014. Web. 20 Oct. 2014. Retrieved from <http://appalachiantrials.com/twenty-edible-plants-fungi-youll-find-appalachian-trail/>

<sup>x</sup> *Nutrition and You*. Umesh Rudrappa, n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.nutrition-and-you.com/index.html>

<sup>xi</sup> *In York the Exchange*. York Daily Record, 9 June 2011. Web. 20 Oct. 2014. Retrieved from <http://exchange.ydr.com/index.php?/topic/11505-mulberries-june-berries-huckleberries-fox-grapes/>.

<sup>xii</sup> *Nutrition and You*. Umesh Rudrappa.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiv</sup> Neal, Brittany Kea. *Appalachian Trails*.

<sup>xv</sup> *Nutrition and You*.

<sup>xvi</sup> “Chicken of the Woods.” *Northern Bushcraft*. Northern Bushcraft, n.d. Web. 20 Oct. 2014. Retrieved from <http://northernbushcraft.com/mushrooms/chickenOfTheWoods/notes.htm>.

<sup>xvii</sup> Neal, Brittany Kea. *Appalachian Trails*.

<sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.