

LEVELED Book • X

Hiking the Appalachian Trail

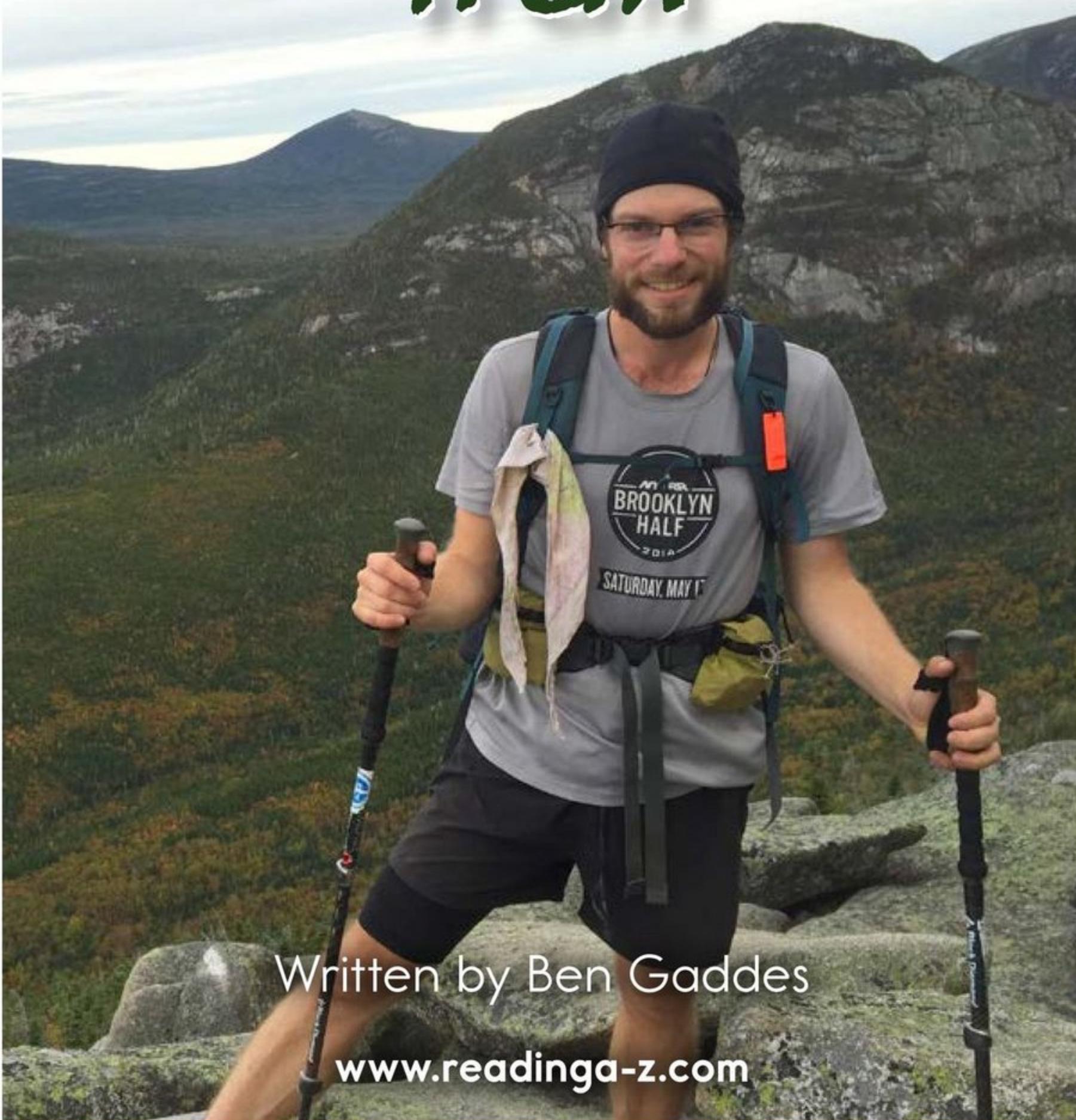


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Written by Ben Gaddes

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Focus Question

What are the challenges and rewards
of hiking the Appalachian Trail?

Words to Know

acclimate

solitude

footpath

subsist

hygiene

summitted

hypothermia

terrain

insurmountable

thru-hiking

lean-to

traversed

Front cover: Beautiful clouds rolled in at the end of a long day in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Back cover: I came across this quiet beach along the trail in Maine.

Page 3: These spiderwebs caught my eye just after sunrise in New Hampshire.

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I encountered many different types of landscapes on my hike, from steep mountains to the rolling fields of Pennsylvania pictured here.

Introduction

My name is Ben, and I work as a psychotherapist in western Massachusetts, providing healing to people who suffer emotional distress. I love my job, but sometimes I need a break. When that happens, I go for a walk in the forest to help me regroup. In 2015, I became so overwhelmed by my work that I needed an especially long break. I decided it was time to fulfill a childhood dream and hike the entire length of the Appalachian Trail.

The Appalachian Trail, or “A.T.” is nearly one hundred years old. In 1921, while standing on a mountaintop in Vermont, conservationist Benton MacKaye conceived of a grand trail that would connect the Appalachian Mountains of the eastern United States along their highest ridgelines. Once it was completed in 1937, the A.T. became, and remains, the world’s longest hiking-only **footpath**.

The Appalachian Trail



You must take a canoe to cross the Kennebec River, an official part of the trail in Maine.

October 1, 2016
Mount Katahdin ↑

Mahoosuc Notch in southern Maine, with its jumbled and slippery boulders, was the most difficult mile on the trail.



My sneakers wore out (right) just before I crossed into New Jersey, so I changed to a new pair (left).



It was painful to hike this rocky section of the trail in Pennsylvania.



I didn't forget to brush my teeth—even on the go!

↑ April 4, 2016
Springer Mountain
Georgia



The A.T. begins on Springer Mountain in Georgia and travels over 2,000 miles (3,000 km) north. It runs through fourteen U.S. states, ending on Mount Katahdin in Maine. Many people refer to the A.T. as the “Green Tunnel” because it passes through a lot of dense green forest. The trail also goes through farmland, alongside rivers, and even through backyards.

Hiking an entire long-distance trail in one year is called **thru-hiking**. Most thru-hikers begin in spring and hike north, as I did, because it’s already warm down south. Thousands of people try to complete an A.T. thru-hike each year, but only a few hundred succeed. I am writing as one of the lucky few who have completed this grueling and demanding endeavor.

Fun Facts about the Appalachian Trail

- ▲ **Length:** 2,190 miles (3,524 km)
- ▲ **Steps on an A.T. thru-hike:** Approximately five million
- ▲ **Highest point:** Clingman’s Dome, North Carolina–Tennessee border, 6,643 feet (2,025 m) above sea level
- ▲ **Elevation gain and loss:** Equivalent to hiking Mount Everest from sea level and back—sixteen times!
- ▲ **First and oldest thru-hiker:** Earl V. Shaffer, first in 1948 at thirty years old and again in 1998 at eighty years old
- ▲ **Record for fastest A.T. thru-hike:** 45 days, 22 hours, 38 minutes

Preparation Is Key

I spent several months intensively preparing for my thru-hike. I walked wherever I could with my full backpack on. I did many practice hikes in poor weather. To learn about what supplies I would need, I got a job at an outdoor store. I tried to save as much money as I could.



After months of preparation, I was ready to start hiking. I rode the train from New York City to Atlanta, Georgia, and got a ride to the trailhead. I took my first step on April 4, 2016. My thru-hike had begun! The next few days

I did a practice hike across the Brooklyn Bridge wearing my backpack full of supplies.



I practiced setting up my tent inside my apartment.

were some of the hardest. My body and mind had to **acclimate** to the daily challenges of hiking.

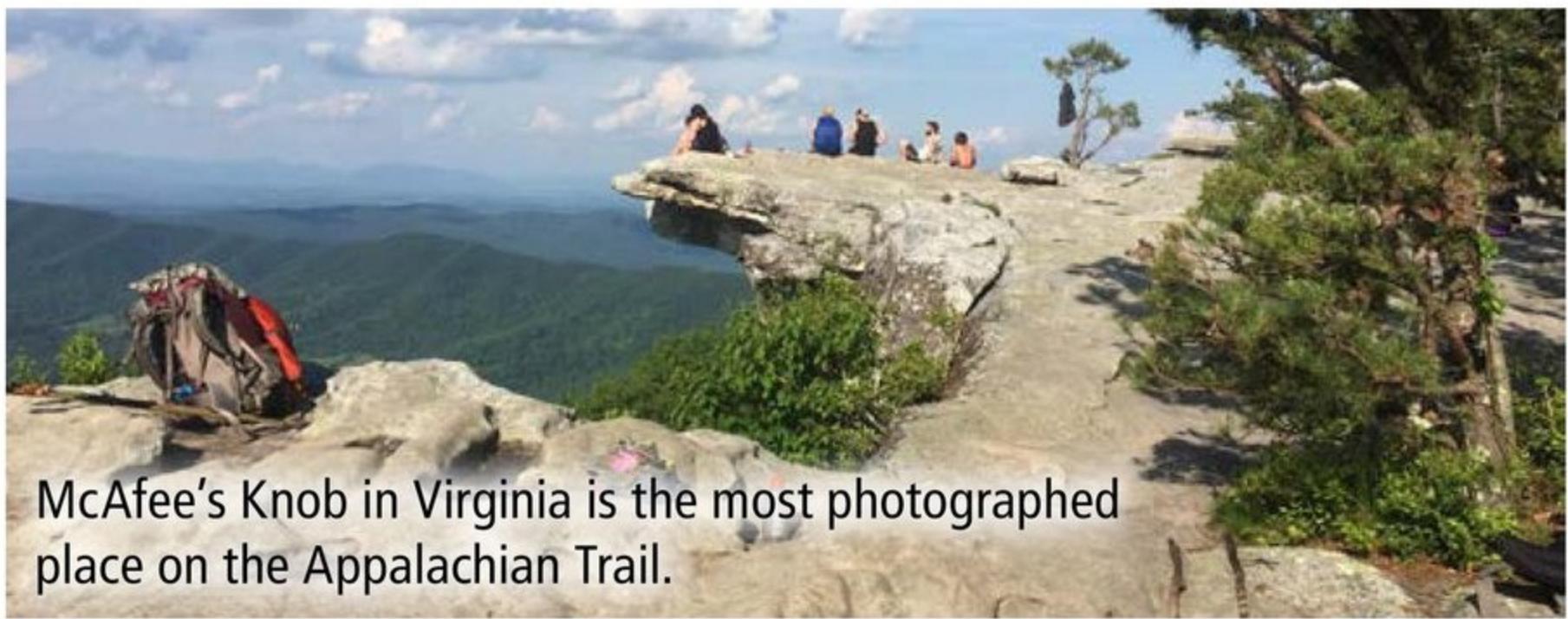
Thru-Hiking Gear

- ▲ Backpack, tent, trekking poles
- ▲ Sleeping bag, sleeping pad, sitting pad
- ▲ Down jacket, rain jacket, poncho, rain skirt, pack cover
- ▲ Waterproof bags, food/bear bag, rope
- ▲ Camping stove, fuel, lighter
- ▲ Water bottles, water filter, purification tablets
- ▲ First aid kit, repair kit, mini-pocketknife
- ▲ Earplugs
- ▲ Sanitary kit, toothbrush/toothpaste, towel
- ▲ Hat, gloves, bandanna, underwear, long underwear, T-shirt, shorts, pants, long-sleeved shirt, balaclava
- ▲ Hiking sneakers, camp shoes, camp socks, sock liners, wool socks, gaiters
- ▲ Headlamp, smartphone, headphones, GPS tracker, backup batteries

Total Average Pack Weight = 21 pounds (9.5 kg) with a day's food, some stove fuel, and a liter of water

Total Gear Cost = nearly \$2,500





McAfee's Knob in Virginia is the most photographed place on the Appalachian Trail.

The Trail Community

Ever since I had heard about the A.T. as a kid, the notion of its trail community intrigued me. Just imagine an entire community, constantly moving at different speeds, sprawled across 2,190 miles (3,524 km) of continuous trail measuring only a few feet wide.

Interesting people of all ages, cultural backgrounds, and abilities choose to hike the A.T. each year. I met many veterans who had recently returned from overseas. Many people were hiking to recover from trauma and tragedies. Everyone I met was on the A.T. for a reason, and everyone had a story to tell.

Whereas some thru-hikers hiked with a group, I chose to hike alone most of the time because I enjoyed meeting new people and keeping my own schedule. Whenever I felt lonely, I could find friends in fellow hikers. The A.T. was a special place where I could strike the perfect balance between **solitude** and good company.

Daily Challenges

One of the most difficult aspects of hiking every single day was just that—hiking every single day! Most thru-hikers **subsist** on inexpensive foods that are lightweight, are easy to prepare, and won't spoil. On a typical day on the trail, I woke up with the Sun, hiked until I reached my daily goal, and got to camp just before sunset.



Shelters were generally small, such as this one in Pennsylvania (top), and also crowded, such as this one in the Smoky Mountains (bottom).

The distance I hiked each day varied depending on the weather and **terrain** as well as my personal goals and level of exhaustion. I typically tried to stay at campsites that had a **lean-to** shelter, a water source, and an outhouse. Otherwise, I set up my small tent.



If I was unable to find a space in a shelter, I set up my tent, as I did in this forest in Vermont.

On rainy days, I planned my whole day around arriving at a shelter in time to get a spot, as shelters can fill up quickly in bad weather. Sometimes it rained nonstop for several days in a row, and I couldn't fully dry out until I reached a town.

Every few days I went into a nearby town to replenish my food, take a shower, and do my laundry. I learned that properly resting and resupplying were just as important as hiking.

The most important concern while hiking is safety. On my thru-hike, I encountered black bears, venomous snakes, and disease-carrying ticks. Knowing what to do when faced with unsavory critters is critical to staying safe in the woods: remain calm, act respectfully, and keep a safe distance.



Hikers store anything with a food odor on "bear poles" to avoid attracting bears to their campground.

Math Minute

My thru-hike took 181 days. How far on average did I hike each day?

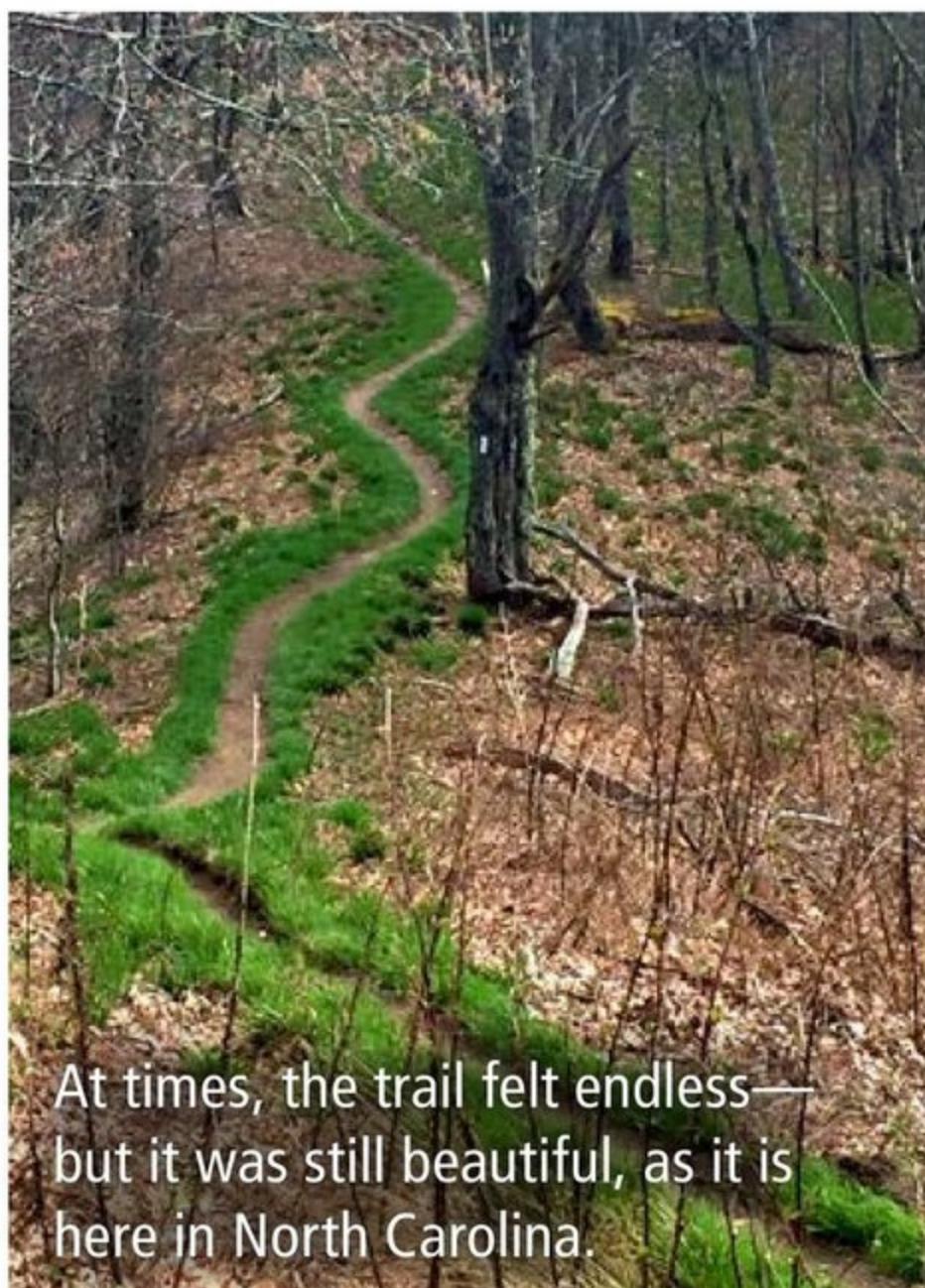
Answer: 12.1 miles (19.5 km)

I filtered all my water and was cautious about hygiene to avoid getting sick. To prevent **hypothermia**, I stayed dry and warm. Having the right shoes and making sure I rested when I felt it was necessary helped me avoid injuries. Keeping my gear well organized allowed me to be prepared in case of an emergency. Staying in touch with loved ones was important both for safety and for addressing the homesickness that came with spending months alone in the woods.



Intense heat caused most water sources to dry up in New York, so I filtered puddle water.

Although I felt very happy most of the time, one of the biggest challenges I faced was that



At times, the trail felt endless—but it was still beautiful, as it is here in North Carolina.

hiking was not always fun. In fact, I was often very hungry, exhausted, and sore. Sometimes I even got bored. I learned that the best way to overcome these challenges was to lean on the people around me—the trail community—for support.

Like the beginning of my hike, the end was difficult. With the fall season in full swing, it had started getting cold at night, and I was hungrier than I had ever felt. The mountains of northern New England were undoubtedly the hardest to climb. My pace was cut in half as I **traversed** the steep White Mountains in New Hampshire and the rocky ranges of southern Maine. After nearly six months of hiking, I did it—I **summitted** Mount Katahdin on October 1, 2016!

However difficult they were, these last days on the trail were also unlike my first. I felt as though I was a different person than when I had started hiking. I never felt so strong, confident, and accomplished. As a child, I rarely played sports, but after thru-hiking, I could call myself an athlete for the first time.



After hiking more than 2,000 miles (3,000 km), I am noticeably skinnier and dirtier than when I began.



After the most challenging night of my adventure, I enjoyed beautiful views of the Roan Highlands in Tennessee.

Reflections

Since I finished my hike, many people have asked me about my favorite memories. My fondest memories were those times when a challenge that seemed **insurmountable** turned into something beautiful.

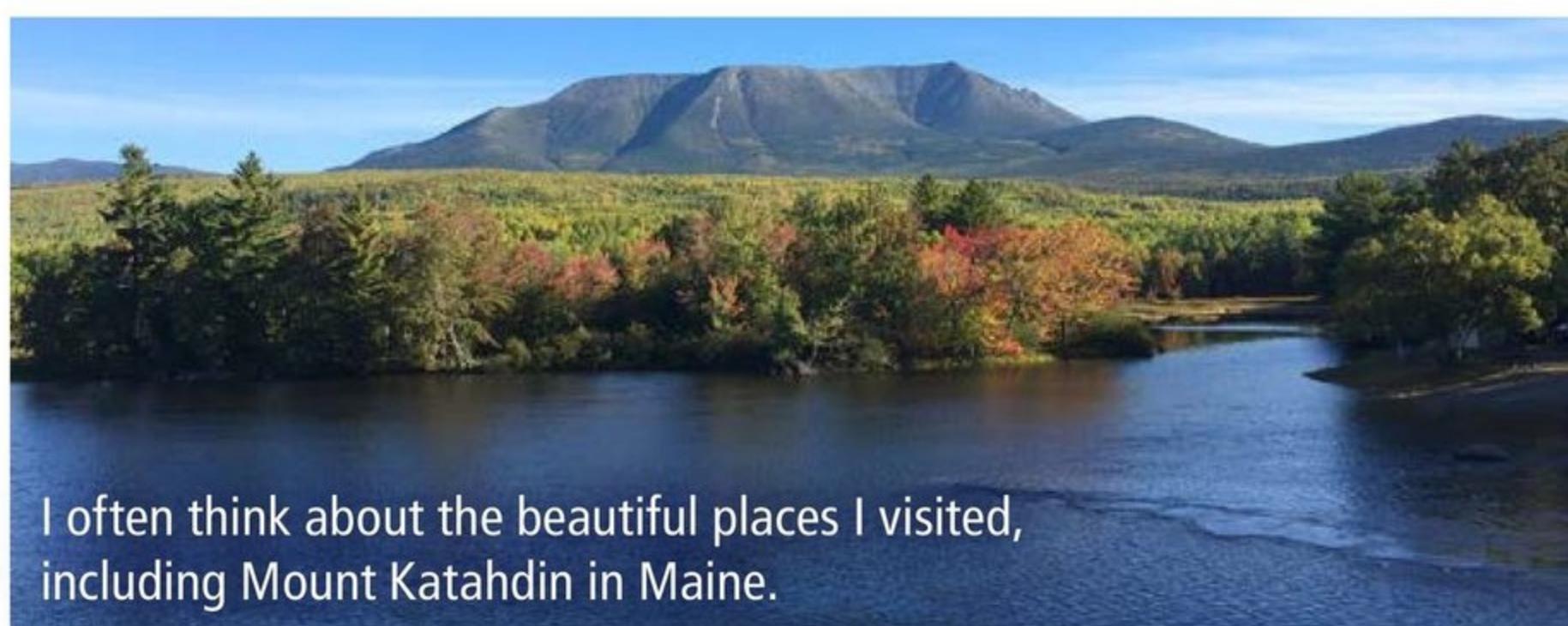
One night when I was camping alone on a treeless mountaintop, strong winds and heavy rain caused my tent to collapse. I became frustrated and afraid. At 3:00 a.m., I gave up trying to sleep and decided to pack my belongings, eat breakfast, and start hiking. What followed was the most amazing sunrise I had ever seen, all alone on a mountaintop. I had faced a challenge that at first seemed impossible but over time became something incredible.

Many people have asked me, “How did you do it?” I tell them that I hiked the entire Appalachian Trail the same way you do anything else: one step at a time. People have also asked me, “Why did you do it?”

Looking back, the reasons I kept going were different from my reasons when I began. I felt so surrounded by love and support from those around me and at home that I never really wanted to stop.

I'm writing this book several months after finishing my thru-hike. My knees still hurt from those five million steps, and I'm not sure how long the pain will continue. I was away from people I love for six months. So you might be wondering, was it worth it?

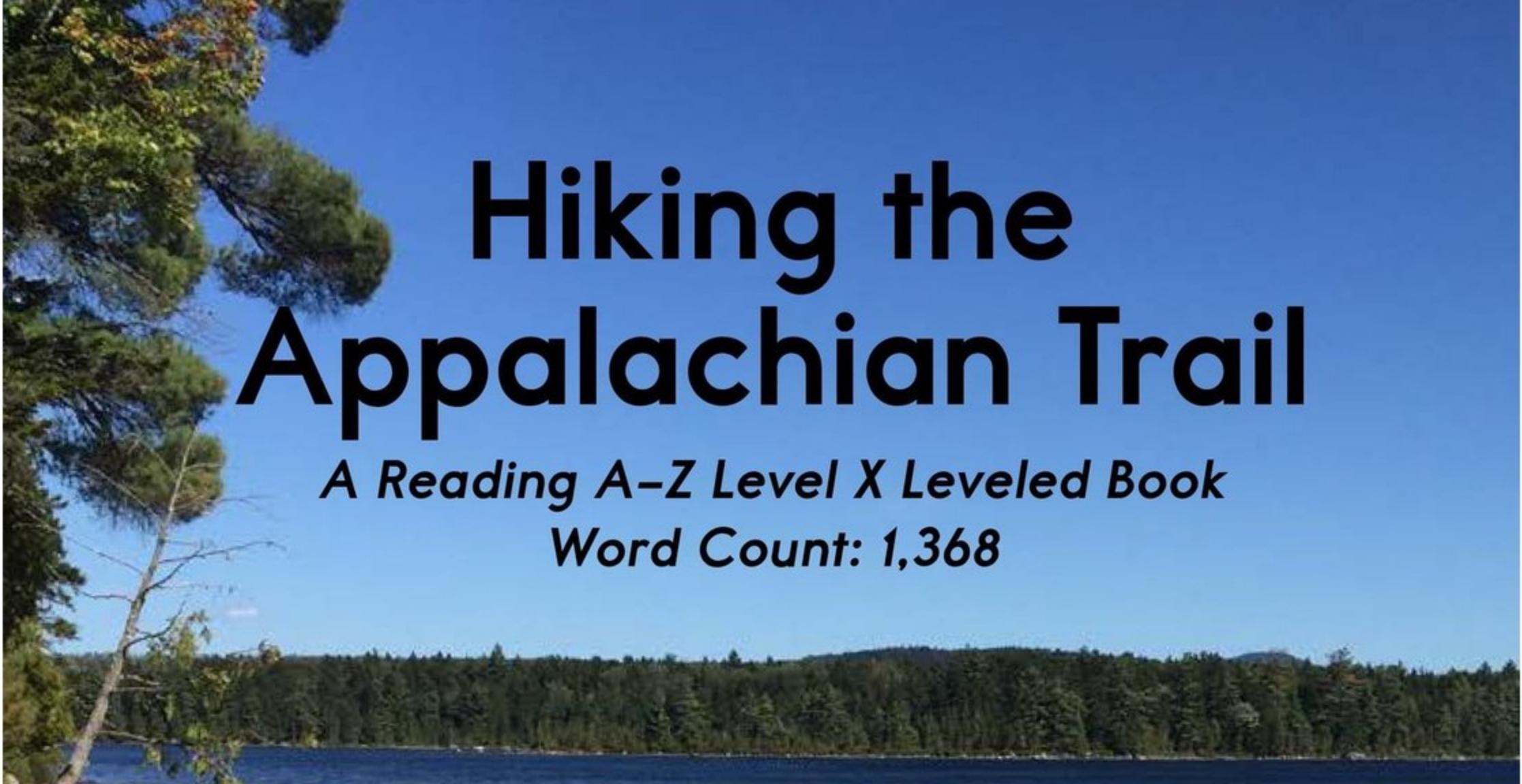
I followed a dream, one step after another, for five million steps. No one can ever take that accomplishment away from me. I left my comfort zone and healed the heaviness in my heart. I planned and saved money and learned to live on a tight budget. I also learned to value every item I carried because my life depended on it. Despite all the challenges, in the end, not only was thru-hiking worth it, it was an invaluable experience.



I often think about the beautiful places I visited, including Mount Katahdin in Maine.

Glossary

acclimate (<i>v.</i>)	to get used to a new climate or situation (p. 7)
footpath (<i>n.</i>)	a narrow trail or path made for people to walk along (p. 4)
hygiene (<i>n.</i>)	cleanliness for the purpose of staying healthy (p. 12)
hypothermia (<i>n.</i>)	a dangerously low body temperature (p. 12)
insurmountable (<i>adj.</i>)	impossible to overcome or achieve (p. 14)
lean-to (<i>n.</i>)	a small shelter with a sloping roof that is held up by rocks, posts, or trees (p. 10)
solitude (<i>n.</i>)	the experience of being alone (p. 9)
subsist (<i>v.</i>)	to exist or continue to exist; to maintain life (p. 10)
summitted (<i>v.</i>)	reached the highest point of a mountain (p. 13)
terrain (<i>n.</i>)	the natural features of a piece of land; ground (p. 10)
thru-hiking (<i>n.</i>)	hiking a long-distance trail from beginning to end within a single hiking season (p. 6)
traversed (<i>v.</i>)	moved through or across an area (p. 13)



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A Reading A-Z Level X Leveled Book

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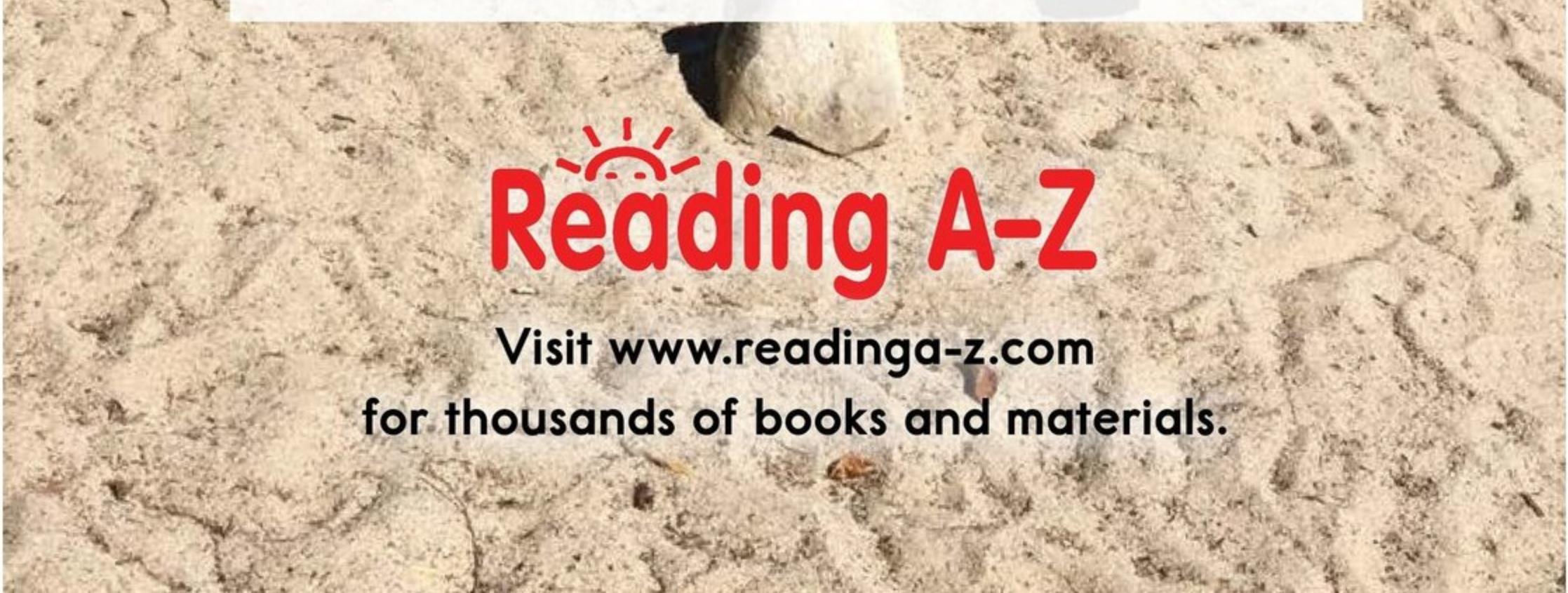
Connections

Writing

Ben achieved his dream of hiking the Appalachian Trail. Write a paper about a dream you have achieved or would like to achieve.

Social Studies

Create a brochure for the Appalachian Trail. Include a map that shows the fourteen U.S. states it goes through, and at least five interesting landmarks on the trail.



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