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the timeless Ouachitas

WORDS & PHOTOS | SUSAN DRAGOO

I hear the wind approaching as it moves up the ridge. No other sound breaks the night's long silence, not even the rustle of a possum in the undergrowth. It is early autumn in a year of drought; perhaps the lack of water at this elevation keeps the critters away, which suits me fine. We took care to hang the bear bag high off the ground, regardless. Why tempt fate?

I drift off, awakening later to an unmistakable sound a few feet away. Zzip! Opens the tent. Zzip! Closes the tent. It is Mary, up and around in the darkness. Without looking at my watch I know it is morning, but I am in no hurry. My sleep was restless, as it often is the first night on the trail. I listen to the activity and stay warm in the cocoon of my sleeping bag. Soon I hear Deb getting up and decide I had better move. Day is breaking.

Mary already has water going in the Jet Boil. She cooks at the cold fire ring; the three of us gathered around it last night as if it crackled with flame. With the burn ban we could have no fire, but even the suggestion of it held some visceral attraction. By the light of our headlamps, we had perched on rocks, chatting after dinner, sipping a good Cabernet, making dessert of dark chocolate and homemade pumpkin bread. Now, pale sunlight filters through the green of oaks and pine, beginning to warm us. I eat a breakfast of oatmeal and tea and we begin to break camp.

Soon we are back on the trail. Eight more miles today to finish this segment. Back home in the flatlands, that distance would take about 30 minutes for a cyclist, less than 90 minutes for an average runner, two to three hours for a brisk walker. For us, it will take a good half-day with fully loaded packs, here on the rugged terrain of the Ouachita Trail.

We are hiking the trail a section at a time. Its 223-mile length is divided into 10 segments, each easily completed in a weekend. The "OT" begins at Talimena State Park, just outside Talihina, Oklahoma and stretches eastward into Arkansas through the Ouachita Mountains, the highest peaks between the Rockies and the Appalachians, topping out at 2,753 feet.

Unlike its big brother in the Appalachians, traffic on the OT is light. Begin a section alone and you may well complete it without seeing another hiker. I cling to this feeling of being "in the wild." The wildness is, of course, only relative, but it feeds a yearning in me. As a youth I explored the woods and ponds on the outskirts of my home town, defying frequent warnings of snakes and ticks. It was what I knew, and I made the most of it. My best friend and I would clamber over gates and squeeze between barbed wire, almost certainly trespassing although we thought nothing of it at the time. Cowpaths, oil roads, and an abandoned railway bed were our trails, when we weren't bushwhacking (not that we knew that word). Stumbling upon a pumpjack or the remains of some old building excited

our imaginations, and occasionally we found "treasures" in our explorations. Digging around in a pile of refuse near the railroad we retrieved vintage medicine bottles still in good condition; I have them to this day, displayed on my bookshelf, bearing witness to the truth of the adage, "One man's trash..." A creek trickling over the graduated layers of an abandoned rock quarry substituted for the waterfalls and lush, fern-filled streams I studied in my grandfather's National Geographic and on the cover of my favorite three-ring school binder.

Decades later, I have visited more beautiful places than I can recall, close to home and continents away. But rather than quelling the longing to be out in nature, time and experience seem to make it deeper, more

urgent. Am I more keenly aware of the gift of God's creation? Or of my own mortality? Assuredly, the pause it forces in a frenzied life cannot be discounted.

Whatever its origin, this calling to be outside won't leave me alone, and I am thankful that "my own backyard" provides an easy outlet. I can leave my home in the middle of Oklahoma early in the morning and be on the OT by mid-day. There, my mind is washed clean, attention only rarely drifting to anything beyond the journey. Intruding thoughts of responsibility are easily set aside in the sufficiency of the present. I am content to walk, talking with companions or hanging back to enjoy a solitary experience... watching the trail ahead for the next landmark, keeping an eye on the surface as

I pick my way over rocks and roots, digging in with my hiking poles as I climb a steep slope, or stopping at a vista to absorb the long view over the mountains. I notice the forest change from hardwoods to pines as I move from the north side of the ridge to the south. Ferns and wildflowers appear where there is moisture, and I watch for the coy Mayapple and delicate Dwarf Crested Iris in the spring of the year.

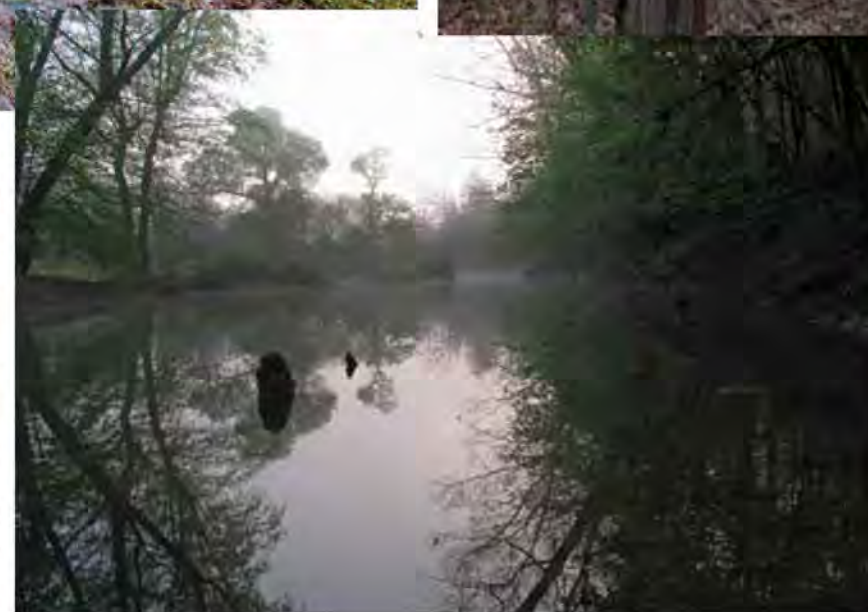
After miles of rocky trail, something as simple as a wide, level stretch with a soft covering of leaves or pine needles becomes a special treat for the feet, and a moss-covered path through a "wizard tree" grove seems magical. Then traversing the granite shards of a "rock glacier" is a welcome challenge.

Occasionally the trail reveals vestiges of white man's early occupation, in the crossing of an old road trace or sighting of an abandoned homestead. I see a lone chimney or the remnants of a stone wall and wonder, "Why here?" pondering what happened to the families who tried to scratch out a living in these rugged hills, now a land set aside for the pleasure of city folk who want to carry their stuff around on their backs for 20 or so miles and then go back to their leisure. Like me.

The sun is warm on the back of my neck as we ascend another switchback, leaning heavily on our hiking poles. A walking stick drops on my arm, and I hurry to brush him off. These insects may be harmless but I find them distinctly unpleasant.

Poison ivy lines the trail and will no doubt leave its itchy legacy. We are just at the cusp of hiking season, still a bit too early in the fall, so undergrowth and insects are part of the experience. Water is getting low and I am thankful we cached at Horsethief Springs. It is not far now, and I look forward to taking off my pack, knowing the rest is well earned.

Reaching the end of the trail is bittersweet. The satisfaction of completing another section is tempered by the knowledge that other obligations and adventures will delay my return. But while I am gone the Ouachitas will remain, the mountains unchanging in any span of time that I can perceive and the forest continually renewing itself in a timeless cycle. ✕





Getting There: the Ouachita Trail

BEST TIME TO GO: Late fall, winter and early spring are best for cooler temperatures, minimal undergrowth and insects, fall colors and spring wildflowers.

GETTING THERE: The western trailhead is at Talimena State Park near Talihina, Oklahoma, 142 miles southeast of Tulsa. The eastern terminus of the trail is near Little Rock, Arkansas. Multiple access points exist along the length of the trail.

GEAR TO BRING: I typically carry about 20 pounds (not including water) on a weekend backpack. I am always seeking ways to lighten my load and, to that end, use an Osprey Exos 48 pack, which weighs about two pounds. My tent is an MSR Hubba, a one-man three-season shelter weighing about three pounds. I use a ThermoRest NeoAir XLite sleeping pad; my choice of sleeping bag depends on the season. Be sure to pack a water filter – I use the lightweight and efficient Sawyer Squeeze System. High-top boots (broken in, of course) are strongly recommended on the Ouachita Trail, which is rugged and rocky – it would be very easy to twist an ankle or worse. Ditto for trekking poles – they have saved me from a bad fall more times than I count and they facilitate using your upper body strength to help with those tough, steep climbs. They can also give your knees a break on the downhills.

MAPS: Hiking Trails of the Ouachitas and Ozarks, ouachitamaps.com/OT

INFORMATION: The Ouachita Trail is primarily within the Ouachita National Forest and is administered by the US Forest Service. It traverses the Flatside Wilderness, the Upper Kiamichi Wilderness and several wildlife management areas. Camping is allowed anywhere along the trail, except near Queen Wilhelmina State Park and the last 30 miles on the eastern end. No permits are needed to hike or camp. Five campgrounds are located along the Ouachita Trail: Talimena State Park, Winding Stair, Queen Wilhelmina State Park, Big Brushy and Lake Sylvia. Shelters are located along the trail, with additional shelter construction underway and the ultimate goal of having a shelter every 10 miles.

Friends of the Ouachita Trail (FoOT) is a non-profit organization created by trail users to maintain the Ouachita National Recreation Trail as a healthy and enjoyable outdoor recreational asset. friendsot.org

BOOKS: Ouachita Trail Guide, Tim Ernst, timernst.com/Products/OT

PRE- & POST-HIKE FOOD & LODGING: Hootie Creek House Bed and Breakfast, 202 First Street, Talihina, Oklahoma, (918) 567-5388 hootiecreekhouse.com

Sun Country Inn, 1309 Hwy 71 North, Mena, Arkansas, (877) 394-7477 suncountryinn.com

Have a hearty pre-hike breakfast at Mena's historic Skyline Café, 618 Mena Street, Mena, Arkansas, (479) 394-5152



RENDEZVOUS RECIPE

- A handful of your closest friends
- Your favorite method of travel
- Long adventurous days
- Plenty of food and beverages
- A fire ring with a large supply of wood

Combine adventurous days with close friends and travel, mix well throughout the day. Sprinkle mixture around the campfire and add food and beverages. Apply wood to fire as needed.



Find out more about the Appalachian Rendezvous happening in North Carolina October 24-26, 2014 in the community events section on our forum, at...

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