



POTOMAC APPALACHIAN TRAIL CLUB

HIKE LEADER HANDBOOK



Updated July 2021

PATC HIKES PROGRAM

One of the stated purposes of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) is “to support and encourage the... proper recreational use of the Appalachian National Scenic Trail and other trails.....” which is done partly through the sponsorship of hikes. Hikes range from short close-in hikes to multi-day backpacking excursions and can be conducted for a variety of purposes.

An “official” PATC hike is one that is advertised by PATC. PATC has an umbrella insurance policy that covers hike leaders of official hikes for liability. This insurance coverage applies only to official PATC hikes.

HIKER RESPONSIBILITIES

PATC's goal is to provide a safe and enjoyable outdoor experience for all participants. This information answers many questions that may arise before and during a hike.

1. **READ** the hike description to determine whether it is suitable for your physical condition. The description normally includes distance, elevation change, hike rating, terrain, stream crossings, rock scrambles, viewpoints, and other special features.
2. **CONTACT** the hike leader in advance.
 - A. To ask questions regarding any aspect of the hike.
 - B. To explain pertinent medical conditions you have.
 - C. To request bringing a child.
 1. A parent or legal guardian must also attend the hike and is responsible for the child.
 2. The child, parent, and hike leader all agree that the physical demands of the hike will not exceed the child's ability.
 - D. To request bringing a dog.
 1. Hike leaders may or may not choose to allow a pet even if permitted in the park where the hike will take place. Dogs are not permitted on some trails and other trails may not be suitable for a dog.
 2. If a dog is allowed, it must be well-behaved, leashed, always kept under control, and licensed with a current rabies vaccination.
 3. If the dog becomes a problem on the hike, the hike leader may dismiss the hiker and dog from the hike.
3. **BRING**
 1. Your **first aid kit** and your medications.
 2. The **map** your hike leader may have posted.
 3. **Driving directions.**
 4. Personal items
 - a) **Clothing**
 - i. **Synthetic, silk, or wool are recommended.** Synthetic materials, wool, and silk do not absorb water, dry quickly, and provide warmth and padding even when wet.

- ii. **Avoid cotton.** In general – except possibly on hot, dry summer days – cotton shirts are not recommended because they retain moisture, do not dry quickly, and do not retain heat when wet. Cotton absorbs moisture (either from sweat or precipitation), keeps it close to the skin, and is slow to dry, all of which increases the risk of hypothermia, the chance for blisters, and discomfort.
- iii. **Dress in layers.** Adding and removing layers of clothing allows for appropriate adjustments as weather conditions and levels of exertion change.
- iv. **Permethrin.** Consider treating hiking clothes with an anti-tick solution such as permethrin or purchasing pre-treated clothes. See [Preventing Tick Bites on People | Lyme Disease | CDC](#)
- v. **Head protection.** Head gear should protect against sun, provide warmth and protection from the rain, and in the winter, it is essential for keeping warm.
- vi. **Rain jacket and pants.** In the mid-Atlantic region, the weather is never entirely predictable; rain is always possible. A rain jacket may also serve as a windbreaker. The best materials are waterproof and windproof yet “breathable,” allowing the transfer of moisture from the skin.
- vii. **Gloves.** In addition to providing warmth during the cold, gloves should keep hands dry during rain and snow. They are also useful if rock scrambling is planned.

b) Footwear

- a) **Hiking boots and shoes.** Good ankle support is highly recommended. Waterproofing of some sort is also recommended in the winter.
 - b) **Socks.** The logic of a two-sock system is that any friction (the primary cause of blisters) inside the boot occurs between the liner socks and the outer socks, rather than between the sock and the foot. However, some thick socks claim not to require liner socks. So, either thin, wicking liner socks worn next to the skin to wick moisture away or thicker synthetic or wool socks that provide padding and warmth are recommended.
 - c) **Gaiters** are available ankle-length to knee-length and worn over the boot/shoe. They protect invasion of small rocks, snow, rain, stream water during shallow crossings, and a multitude of other irritants and dangers as well as provide extra protection from critters when walking through high grassy areas.
 - d) **Trekking poles** add stability and transfer impact from legs to shoulders.
- c) **10 Essentials** (and more) is a guide – not a list – of absolutes. What is carried should be determined by specific hiking conditions and personal needs. All hikers should carry their own 10 Essentials Kit in case they get separated from the group. The original 10 Essentials List was developed by the Seattle Mountaineering Club (“The Mountaineers”) in the 1950s to deal with the specific conditions encountered in high-elevation mountains of the Northwest. PATC leaders adapted the original list to reflect their environment:
- 1) **Map and compass** (and know how to use them); GPS if one is available.
 - 2) **Water** (including purifier and/or purification tablets); electrolytes.
 - 3) **Emergency food** (high in protein)
 - 4) **Personal first aid kit**, personal medication, a first-aid book, toilet paper in plastic bags; trowel; SAM splint; Bevy sack or space blanket.

- 5) **Flashlight** and/or headlamp, including spare bulb and batteries.
- 6) **Extra clothing:**
 - a. Rain/wind/sun protection.
 - b. Extra socks in plastic bag.
 - c. Extra shoelaces.
 - d. Hat; gloves.
- 7) **Pocket knife** or multi-purpose tool; duct tape.
- 8) **Waterproof matches/lighter** in plastic bag (and fire starter).
- 9) **Plastic bags** (two 33-gallon, two small) or emergency blankets.
- 10) **Signaling device(s)** (whistle, mirror, flares, radio or telephone).
- 11) **Sunglasses** and sunscreen.
- 12) **Pencil and paper.**
- 13) **Insect repellent.**

4. REVIEW

A. Weather forecast <https://forecast.weather.gov/>

B. AT THE TRAILHEAD

1. Sign the PATC Hike Signup Sheet and Liability Waiver.
2. Introduce yourself.
3. Leader discusses the trails, pace, regrouping points, bailout points, and special instructions such as signs to be used, if any, to mark the trail. Ask questions if you are unsure.
4. Sweep (the last person in the group) may be assigned.

C. ON THE TRAIL

1. You may be required to stay behind the leader and ahead of the sweep.
2. If it becomes necessary to leave the trail, place your pack at the point you step off the trail as a notification to others.
3. If you lose contact with the group, STOP AND WAIT until the sweep or other hikers arrive.
4. If off the trail, backtrack to the last known trail position and wait.
5. NEVER take a "shortcut"—in the unlikely event of a disabling accident, no one will know where you are.
6. Never hike out of your comfort zone. If the pace, the terrain, physical state, etc. cause anxiety, seek advice and assistance from the leader, sweep, or another member of the group.

D. **LEAVE NO TRACE** © 1999 by the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics:
www.LNT.org

1. Plan ahead and prepare.
2. Travel and camp on durable surfaces.
3. Dispose of waste properly.
4. Leave what you find.
5. Minimize campfire impacts.
6. Respect wildlife.
7. Be considerate of other visitors.

E. **WATCH** What to Do if You Get Lost YouTube video
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq6fq-XdqUk>

HIKE LEADER CERTIFICATION

Training is required to lead PATC hikes. PATC hike leader training is open to experienced hikers in the Mid-Atlantic who are current PATC members. Hike Leader Education courses are offered periodically online and in person. Chapter or other PATC officials may provide individual training for those unable to attend a training session. The goal is to provide PATC standards for hike leaders to support safe hiking.

Attaining certification is a 4 step process:

1. Take American Red Cross Basic First Aid online or in person.
2. Read the PATC Hike Leader Manual.
3. Complete the Hike Leader Education course online or in person.
4. Lead 2 hikes to include planning route, advertising hike, vetting hikers, and leading the hike under the guidance and assessment of a certified hike leader.

HIKE LEADER INSURANCE

PATC hike leaders are covered by the club's liability insurance when leading official PATC hikes.

Liability insurance protects the purchaser (the "insured") from the risks of liabilities imposed by lawsuits and similar claims. It protects the insured in the event he or she is sued for claims that come within the coverage of the insurance policy.

Liability insurance is designed to offer specific protection against third party insurance claims, i.e., payment is not typically made to the insured, but rather to someone suffering loss who is not a party to the insurance contract. In general, damage caused intentionally as well as contractual liability are not covered under liability insurance policies. When a claim is made, the insurance carrier has the duty (and right) to defend the insured.

A liability waiver is a legal document that people who participate in an activity may sign to acknowledge the risks involved in their participation. By doing so, PATC attempts to remove legal liability from the person responsible for the activity. The enforceability of such a waiver depends on the law, a jury, and the language of the waiver.

HIKE LEADER RESPONSIBILITIES

1. Advertise the hike. See "Posted Hike Includes" section below. Post on Meet-up, if appropriate.
2. Know the route. Assess parking availability and restrictions, if any, at the trailhead. Also be aware of alternative routes back to the trailhead, if any. If trail access or parking requires a fee, know the amount required, how that fee can be paid, and let participants know about this requirement.
3. Be prepared to respond to questions from hikers regarding any aspect of the hike. If you designate your hike as "Easy," expect extensive questions from novice hikers.

4. Establish the meeting place. This will most likely be the trailhead though hikers may arrange their own carpools to the trailhead at their discretion. Set the start-time of the hike.
5. Know the weather forecast for the locality of the hike, and be prepared to modify the hike plan if the forecast so warrants.
6. At the trailhead:
 - A. Circulate the Hike Signup Sheet and Liability Waiver ([Hike Signup Sheet and Liability Waiver.pdf](#))
 - B. Assess the material and physical readiness of each hiker set to participate in the hike as each signs up. In a rare instance, it may be necessary to deny someone's participation in the hike; do not allow that person to sign up.
 - C. Introduce yourself and ask hikers to introduce themselves to the group.
 - D. Hikers should bring the map you posted; however, you may choose to bring extras or alternative guidance.
 - E. Brief the hike. Describe the route and the trail (rocky, wet, exposed, etc.), the pace of the hike, the expected lunch stop, any regrouping points, and any other information that would add to the safe enjoyment of the hike. Stop at all trail intersections to make sure all hikers are accounted for.
 - F. Appoint a sweep.
7. During the hike, be aware of the condition of each hiker. Keep the group together to the extent dictated by the characteristics of the route; a complex route consisting of numerous turns, crossing trails, perhaps a bushwhack, etc., would warrant tighter control than a simple out-and-back hike on a single trail.
8. Hikers are expected to bring their own first aid kit, including any medication and self-treat for minor injuries. Call 911 if the condition of the hiker appears serious. Know where the nearest hospital is.
9. At the end of the hike, account for all hikers. If anyone is missing, call the appropriate authority of the location of the hike for advice and/or assistance. (Call an administrative number, not 911.) Complete the PATC Incident Report form (https://www.patc.net/App_Themes/PublicView/docs/Forms/Incident%20Report%20Form.pdf) whenever an injury or incident occurs during a hike that could result in liability to the hike leader, PATC, or any participant.
10. Inform non-members of the benefits of Club membership.
11. Email the PATC Hike Signup Sheet and Liability Waiver and Incident Report form (if used) to Hikes@patc.net.

SAFETY

Although no activity in the outdoors is entirely risk-free, risk can be minimized by following a set of safety protocols designed to promote safe hiking.

1. Do not lead a hike beyond your experience or fitness level.
2. Scout the route in advance. Be aware of emergency exit options, availability of parking, jurisdiction of route, (i.e., town, county, National Park, etc.), and the cognizant authority.
3. Check the local weather forecast. Alter the destination, the route, or cancel the hike if the forecast warrants. Remember to consider water level in river crossings or north facing slopes and ice at higher elevations in winter.
4. Ensure that the length of the hike and the expected pace allow for completion in daylight.

5. Take the waiver sheet with you so that you have each hiker's name and emergency contact.
6. Consider providing a map, step-by-step directions, or other guidance to each hiker at the trailhead.
7. Choose a sweep for the hike.
8. The hike officially begins and ends at the trail head. Events before and after are at the participants' discretion.
9. Make sure the hike description is complete, accurate, and alerts participants to anything unusual such as the necessity to wade a stream, bushwhack, climb using hands, etc.
10. During the hike, remain aware of the physical condition of all hikers.
11. Remind hikers in your hike write up to bring their own first aid kit and any personal medications.
12. In your trailhead talk, give hikers a synopsis of the steps outlined in the **What to Do if You Get Lost** video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq6fq-XdqUk>.
13. Above all, be aware of existing circumstances and conditions that will change and be flexible!

POSTED HIKE INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING

1. **Description.**
 - A. What makes this hike worth the trip?
 - B. **Anything unusual** such as wading a stream, bushwhacking, climbing using hands, etc.
2. **Distance, elevation gain, difficulty** (400 feet of climbing equivalent to one mile of linear distance)
 - A. Difficult - more than 13 miles; challenging.
 - B. Moderately difficult - 10 to 13 miles; some difficult elevation gains.
 - C. Moderate - 5 to 10 miles; spread out elevation gains.
 - D. Easy - less than 5 miles; not much elevation.
3. **Pace** while hiking; does not include breaks.
 - A. Fast - more than 3.5 mph.
 - B. Moderately fast - 2.75-3.5 mph.
 - C. Moderate - 1.75 to 2.75 mph.
 - D. Easy - less than 1.75 mph.
4. **Map.**
 - A. Note PATC Map # or letter and edition.
 - B. Note photocopy made with permission of Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC), 118 Park St., Vienna, VA 22180. PATC maps may be purchased from PATC's online store at www.PATC.net/store as well as from local outfitters.
5. **Meeting place** (typically the trailhead).
6. **Directions** to trailhead (GPS and meeting place if different).
7. **Time** to be at trailhead.
8. **Carpool:** If people meet at a central location to carpool, they are responsible for coordinating carpools and meeting at the trailhead. Riders in a carpool should expect to reimburse the driver for the cost of gas.
9. **Fees for entrance:** Provide link.
10. **Cancellation:** The latest you will cancel and how you will inform hikers.
11. **Link for weather:** <https://forecast.weather.gov/>.
12. **Maximum # of hikers.**

13. **Let hikers know if they must sign up or can show up without signing up.**
14. Note if PATC members have first priority to join hike - if so, until when.
15. **Link** to PATC Membership: www.patc.net
16. [PATC-OnLineCalendarInstructions.doc](#)

SAMPLE POSTED HIKE

Nicholson Hollow Hike

www.patc.net

Gradually ascend Nicholson Hollow Trail following the Hughes River. This out-and back hike features a great lunch spot at Corbin Cabin originally built by George Corbin, a former resident, and maintained by PATC. [For details about the cabin, see [The Displaced - Shenandoah National Park \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#)] Forging the Hughes River and Brokenback Run may be difficult because of potentially slippery boulders. Wading through water may be a better option.

8-mile round trip, moderately strenuous, gradual **1,240' elevation gain** to Corbin Cabin and return.

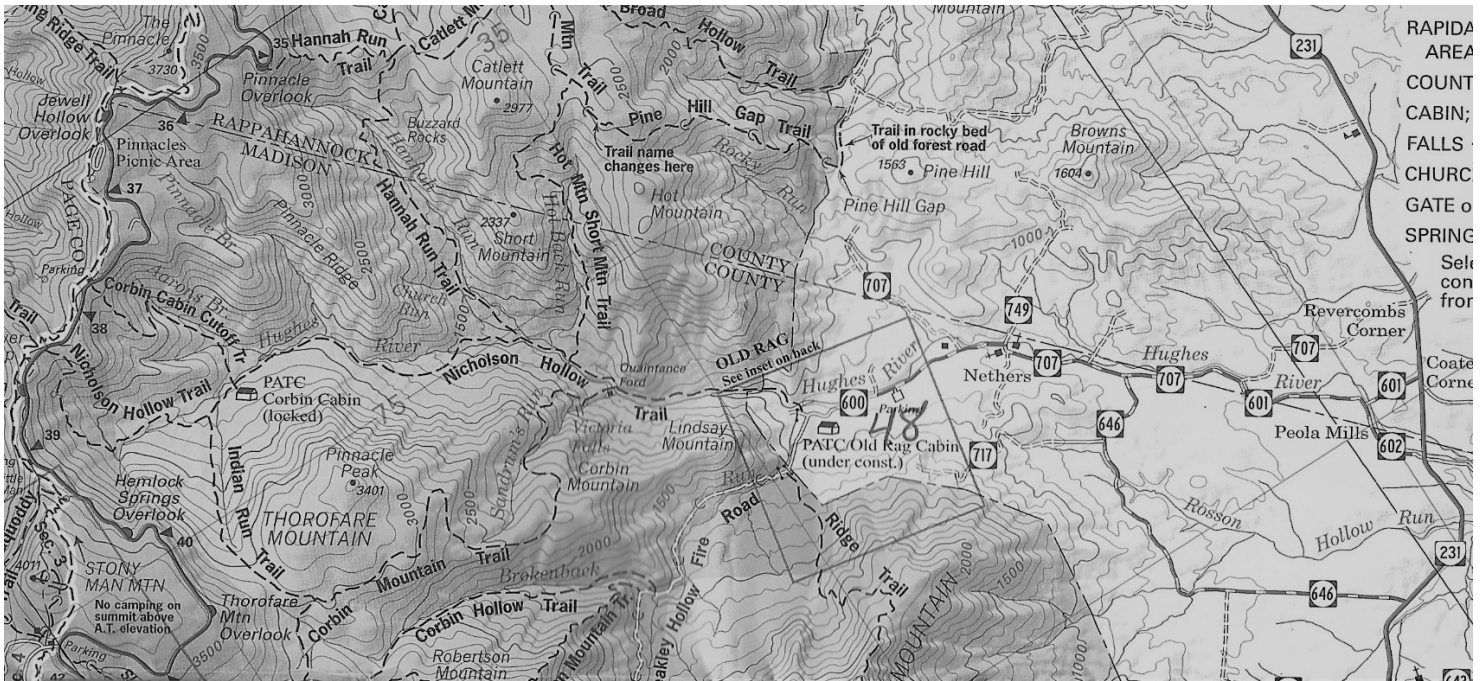
Meet at the trailhead off 2577 Nethers Road, Etlan, VA 22719 by 8:45am with a prompt 9:00am departure.

Expect a **pace of 2.0 to 2.5 mph** with a 30-minute lunch break. If everything runs smoothly, return to the trailhead expected before 2pm.

Carpooling: You are individually responsible for coordinating carpools and meeting at the trailhead. Riders in a carpool should expect to reimburse the driver for the cost of gas.

[Fees or Passes required - Shenandoah National Park \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#)

Check <https://forecast.weather.gov/> for updated weather information.



Map 10 Edition 22, 2013 photocopy made with permission of Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC). 118 Park St., Vienna, VA 22180. PATC maps may be purchased from PATC's online store at www.PATC.net/store as well as from local outfitters.

HELP HIKERS REALIZE THEIR TRAIL IMPACT

1. Cutting Switch backs: *Once a path is established, it is hard to close. Encourage hikers to stay on the trail and not cut the switch back or corner, no matter how tempting.*
 - A. Cutting switch backs increases the area of disturbed or trampled ground, degrades the environment, and allows for more invasive plants to get a toehold.
 - B. Promotes erosion by creating a straight-down-the-hill path for water, which then often dumps debris on the downhill section of the trail.
 - C. Degrades water quality downstream by increasing sediment load in the stream.
 - D. Visually degrades the landscape; it just looks bad.
2. *Encourage hikers to go through puddles rather than around puddles.*
 - A. Trail puddles usually form in flat areas with poor drainage.
 - B. Going around puddles rather than through them makes the trail wider. Usually the puddle then expands into the wider trail, so people go around the wider puddle, trampling more ground and the process is endless. There are sections of the AT that are 100 feet wide. Hikers with the correct footwear are more likely to go through the puddle; those in white sneakers or sandals/flip flops are more likely to go around and widen the trail.
 - C. Widening the trail harms the natural ecology and increases soil compaction and run-off.
 - D. Trail widening visually degrades the landscape.
3. *Encourage hikers to stay in the middle of the trail, even if there are many footing challenges*
 - A. Steep eroded sections of trail often have exposed roots and rocks which make footing less pleasant. Hikers tend to go around these spots, widening the trail. As the vegetative

cover is trampled down, the top soil and organic layer washes away, exposing more roots and rocks. So, hikers go around this, widening the trail even more.

- B. These wide, compacted areas increase run off.
- C. Trail puddles usually form in flat areas with poor drainage.
- 4. *Encourage hikers to go over features rather than around them.* Many built features are not very easy to walk over. While this is a failure of the trail maintainer/builder, walking around the feature rather than over it often degrades the effectiveness of the feature, by creating a path for water to bypass the feature.
- 5. *Encourage hikers to get in the habit of cleaning boots and other gear between hikes so they are not transporting invasive plant seeds to new locations. Remind them at the beginning and end of each hike.* Invasive plants are not only bad for the local ecology but are often a headache to manage for trail maintainers.
- 6. Report blowdowns
 - A. Maintainers need to know about trees down on the trail or other trail problems.
 - B. Exact location with GPS coordinates or trail mileage is helpful. Photos showing the entire tree, root ball to crown, are helpful, with something in the photos to show scale. (such as a person, backpack, or dog). A close-up of the log over the trail is less useful.
 - C. Damaged bridges, overgrown areas, other trail problems can be reported in the same way.
 - D. If the person responsible for that trail is unknown, reports can always be sent to PATC HQ to be forwarded to the appropriate party- patctrails@gmail.com.

If any are interested in becoming maintainers, encourage hikers to take one of the PATC trail maintainers workshops. Bad maintenance is often worse than no maintenance.

AFTER THE HIKE

Hike Leaders should submit a hike report on the PATC website.

- A. Sign in at patc.net.
- B. Click on the Hiking tab, then on Hike.
- C. Click on "For hike leaders only" in the center of the page.
- D. Click to go to the form in the "After every PATC hike" section.
- E. Fill in the requested information on the form, attach a photo of your sign-in sheet, then click submit.