



POTOMAC APPALACHIAN TRAIL CLUB

HIKE LEADER HANDBOOK



Updated October 2025

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 day 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 liability insurance policy that covers hike leaders of official hikes. This insurance coverage applies only to official PATC hikes.

HIKER RESPONSIBILITIES

PATC's goal is to provide a safe and enjoyable outdoor experience for participants. The PATC brochure on Hiker Responsibilities answers many questions that may arise before and during a hike. The following are a few items that hike leaders are encouraged to mention to hikers when appropriate--especially when they know that a new hiker plans to participate.

1. **READ** the hike description to determine whether it is suitable for your physical condition.
2. **CONTACT** the hike leader in advance with questions, to explain any pertinent medical conditions, and to request permission before bringing a child or pet.
3. **BRING** a map, medications, rain gear, drinking water, sun and insect protection, and toilet paper. Consider bringing toilet paper and, especially on difficult or overnight hikes, emergency supplies such as a compass, first-aid kit, high-protein snacks, electrolytes, water purifier, waterproof matches, plastic bags, signaling device, and pocket knife.
4. **WEAR** clothing that does not retain moisture (i.e., not cotton), layers of clothing appropriate to the season, hiking boots or shoes, and inner and outer socks.
5. **REVIEW** the weather forecast before the hike. (<https://forecast.weather.gov/>)
6. **LEAVE NO TRACE** on the trail and at campsites. (More at www.LNT.org)
7. **WATCH** the video If You Get Lost. (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/visit/know-before-you-go/if-you-get-lost>)

HIKE LEADER CERTIFICATION

Becoming a hike leader for PATC is available to current PATC members who are experienced hikers and have taken the PATC Hike Leader Training. This training is offered periodically online and in person. Chapter or other PATC officials may provide individual training for those unable to attend one of these training sessions. The goal is to provide PATC standards for hike leaders that support safe and enjoyable hiking.

Attaining certification is a four-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 Training course online or in person.
4. Lead two hikes to include planning route, advertising hike, vetting hikers, leading the hike, and reporting on the hike--under the guidance and assessment of a certified hike leader.
5. Lead or co-lead one hike independent of a mentor.

HIKE LEADER INSURANCE

PATC hike leaders are covered by PATC'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 fall within the coverage of the insurance policy.

Liability insurance is designed to offer specific protection against third-party insurance claims, i.e., claims in which 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 sign to acknowledge the risks involved in their participation. By asking participants to sign one, PATC attempts to remove legal liability from the person responsible for the activity; i.e., the hike leader. 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 "Posting a Hike" section below. Post on the PATC Events Calendar and on Meetup, if appropriate.
2. Assess the capabilities of hikers that sign up, whenever possible, and be prepared to respond to questions from hikers regarding any aspect of the hike. For example, if you designate your hike as "Easy" in the hike description, expect extensive questions from novice hikers.
3. 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 in advance.
4. Establish the meeting time, hike start time, and meeting place. This will most likely be the trailhead. Hikers are welcome to meet elsewhere to arrange their own carpools to the trailhead, at their discretion.
5. Know the local weather forecast, and be prepared to modify the hike if necessary.
6. At the trailhead:
 - A. Circulate the Hike Sign-in Sheet and Liability Waiver. ([Hike Sign-in and Waiver](#))
 - B. Assess the material and physical readiness of each hiker. In a rare instance, it may be necessary to deny someone's participation, either in advance or at the trailhead. Do not allow that person to sign the waiver.
 - 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 provide alternative guidance.
 - E. Brief the hike. Describe the route and the trail (rocky, wet, exposed, etc.), the pace of the hike, any expected lunch or snack stop, any regrouping points, and any other information that would add to the safety and enjoyment of the hikers.
 - F. Inform hikers that the leader will stop at all trail intersections to make sure all hikers are accounted for.
 - G. Appoint a sweep and explain the sweep's function.
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. For example, a complex route with numerous turns, criss-crossing trails, 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. However, hike leaders can use their own first-aid training as appropriate. Call 911 if the condition of the hiker appears serious. Always know where the nearest hospital is.
 9. At the end of the hike, account for all hikers again. If anyone is missing, call the appropriate authority for the location of the hike for advice and/or assistance. In most cases, this entails calling an administrative number, not 911.
 10. At the end of the hike, inform non-members of the benefits of PATC membership.
 11. After the hike, submit a Hike Report Form at the "Volunteer Reporting" section of the PATC website.

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 or route, or cancel the hike, if the forecast warrants. Remember to consider water level in river crossings and possible snow or ice on north-facing slopes at higher elevations in winter.
4. Ensure that the length of the hike and the expected pace allow for completion in daylight.
5. 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.
6. Remind hikers in the hike description of what to bring, such as water, rain gear, personal medications, and possibly their own first aid kit.
7. Take the waiver sheet with you so that you have each hiker's name and emergency contact.
8. Consider providing a map, step-by-step directions, or other guidance to each hiker at the trailhead.
9. In your trailhead talk, give hikers a synopsis of the steps outlined in the video If You Get Lost. (<https://www.fs.usda.gov/visit/know-before-you-go/if-you-get-lost>)
10. Appoint a sweep for the hike and explain the sweep's function.
11. During the hike, remain aware of the condition of each hiker.
12. The hike officially begins and ends at the trailhead. Events before and after

are at the participants' discretion.

Above all, be aware of changes in circumstances and conditions, and be flexible!

POSTING A HIKE

PATC hikes should be posted on Meetup and the PATC Events Calendar. The posts should include the following information.

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** (note that 1,000 feet of climbing is 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, not including 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. The PATC Map # or letter and edition, and/or a link to an AllTrails or equivalent online map. State that PATC maps may be purchased from PATC's online store at www.patc.net/shop as well as from local outfitters.
 - B. If posting a photocopy online or handing it out at the trailhead, note that it is copied with permission of Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC), 118 Park St., Vienna, VA 22180.
5. **Meeting place** (typically the trailhead).
6. **Directions** to the meeting place and/or trailhead. Include GPS coordinates and address when possible.
7. **Time** to be at the trailhead.
8. **Carpool:** If people meet at a central location to carpool, they are responsible for coordinating carpools and meeting on time at the trailhead. Riders in a carpool should expect to reimburse the driver for the cost of gas.
9. **Fees for entrance.** Include a link when possible.
10. **Cancellation:** The latest you would cancel the hike and how you would inform hikers.
11. **Link for weather:** <https://forecast.weather.gov/>.
12. **Maximum number of hikers.**

13. **Signup instructions** if required in advance, and whether hikers can show up without signing up.
14. **Priority** for PATC members if applicable.
15. **Link** to PATC Membership: www.patc.net/membership

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 \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#)] Fording 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.

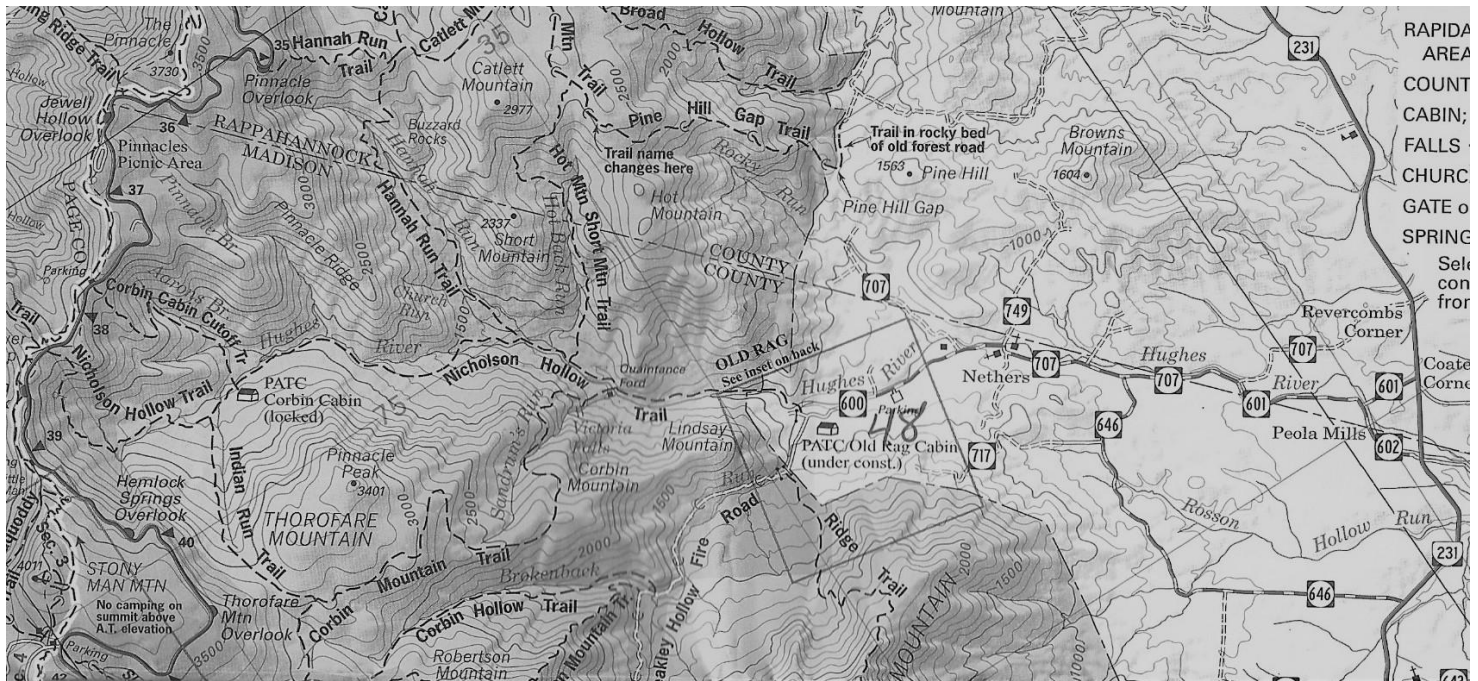
Meet at the trailhead off 2577 Nethers Road, Etlan, VA 22719 by 8:45am for a prompt 9:00am hike departure.

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 \(U.S. National Park Service\) \(nps.gov\)](#)

Weather information: check <https://forecast.weather.gov/>.



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/shop as well as from local outfitters.

HELP HIKERS REALIZE THEIR TRAIL IMPACT

1. *Encourage hikers to stay on the trail and not cut the switchback or corner, no matter how tempting. Once a path is established, it is hard to close. Cutting switchbacks:*
 - A. Increases the area of disturbed or trampled ground, degrades the environment, and allows for more invasive plants to get a foothold.
 - 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.
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. The puddle often expands into the wider trail, so people go around the wider puddle, trampling even more ground. 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. Widening the trail visually degrades the landscape.
3. *Encourage hikers to stay in the middle of the trail, even if there are 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 these as well, widening the trail even more.

- B. These wide, compacted areas increase runoff.
- C. Trail puddles form in flat areas with poor drainage, including these wider trail sections.
- 4. *Encourage hikers to go over features rather than around them.* Sometimes built features are not easy to walk over. However, walking around a feature rather than over it can degrade 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 a headache for trail maintainers to manage.
- 6. *Report blowdowns to trail maintainers.*
 - A. Trail 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 or backpack). A close-up of the log over the trail is less useful.
 - C. Damaged bridges, overgrown areas, and other trail problems can be reported in the same way.
 - D. If the person responsible for that trail is unknown, reports can be sent to PATC Headquarters to be forwarded to the appropriate party (HForrest@patc.net).

Encourage hikers interested in becoming trail maintainers to take one of the PATC trail maintenance workshops. Bad maintenance is often worse than no maintenance.

AFTER THE HIKE

After the hike, complete a Hike Report Form at the “Volunteer Reporting” section of the PATC website. Include a description of any incident, injury, or issue that occurred during the hike, especially any that could result in liability to the hike leader, PATC, or any participant.

1. Sign in at My Portal on www.patc.net
2. Click on the Volunteer Reporting link on left menu.
3. Click on Hike Report Form.
4. Fill in the requested information, attach a photo or scan of your Sign-in Sheet and Liability Waiver, then click submit.