

# Trail drawing upsurge of hikers seeking a “Wild” adventure

By Greg Stiles  
Mail Tribune

MEDFORD (AP) — Build a trail from Mexico to Canada, and a trickle of hardy souls will see if they can cover it, pushing through parched desert, driving rain and sky-high fields of snow.

Let Hollywood glamorize the trail a half-century later and the masses will arrive, prepared or not.

In its nearly 50 years of spanning the Sierras and Cascades border to border, the Pacific Crest Trail has seen nothing matching the onslaught of hikers measuring themselves against the 2,650-mile route this year. For the first time, the U.S. Forest Service has restricted, to 50 per day, the number of “thru-hikers” embarking from the trail’s southernmost point in Campo, Calif.

Thousands of newbies have jumped on the trail, inspired by Cheryl Strayed’s 2012 tome “Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail,” which Hollywood subsequently revisited in 2014 with a movie starring Reese Witherspoon.

A record number of hikers are now picking their way through California, with some of the faster trekkers already passing through Southern Oregon. In coming weeks, the main body of thru-hikers will enter Oregon, crossing the border not far from the headwaters of the Little Applegate River on the Siskiyou Crest.

Even though a few thousand people hope to go border-to-border this year — compared to a few hundred most years — far more day-hikers, weekend hikers and short-haul hikers will pursue the mountainous route, says the Pacific Crest Trail Association, an organization that works with the Forest Service to manage the trail.

“It would be safe to say there is lot of new interest, but at the kickoff this year, there were a lot of old-timers who have done the trail and are going to do it again,” said

Mark Larabee, a spokesman for PCTA. “We say that hundreds of thousands of people use the trail every year, and thru-hiking makes up a small minority of that.”

The terrain and weather regulate much of the early movement.

“I haven’t observed big masses of people, but by the time people get up here, they are pretty well spread out,” said Justin Kooyman, the PCTA regional representative in the Upper Sierra Region, which ranges from the northern boundary of Yosemite National Park through Lassen National Forest. “We’re not seeing a large-group effect they might see down south. What I’m hearing is a lot of hikers seem to be skipping at least part of the Sierras. It’s not uncommon for hikers to skip the Sierra Nevada outright or come back later on in the season. Even though we had a pretty weak winter, there is still a lot of snow in the high country.”

Hiking the trail in bits and pieces — or returning in subsequent years to cover parts that must be skipped for various reasons — seems to be a common theme among PCT hikers. A long-time thru-hiker from Washington, who goes by the trail name “Yurt Man,” covered 1,400 miles of the trail in 2010, and he was in Southern Oregon this week covering parts of the trail he missed previously. He says he encountered some less-than-prepared hikers earlier this month.

“I saw some unbelievable sad cases of people, and I hope they are going to be OK,” he said while taking a break near Mount Ashland. “I met three guys this morning who didn’t even know how to put their backpacks on, and they were ready to go.”

Lenka Jensen, who hiked the trail in 2014, is revisiting parts of the trail this year, journeying from the Siskiyou Summit to Crater Lake this week. The Czech-born backpacker, who now lives in Los Angeles, will next cover

about 60 miles in the Seiad Valley along the Klamath River and a stretch near Hat Creek that she missed due to the Happy Camp Complex fire that closed the trail for several weeks.

“Even though I grew up in the mountains in the Czech Republic, I had never had a backpack on my back, never had set up a tent before, and everything went just fine,” said Jensen, who struck out April 1, 2014. “I had a wonderful six months. I was excited the last mile. I fell twice. I tripped over a couple branches and did a face plant.”

Embarking on a journey such as a thru-hike of the PCT will change a person, Jensen said.

“No matter for what reason you come here, or how prepared or unprepared you are, after the first 700 really brutal miles in the desert, the trail teaches you and changes you in profound ways, and it’s beautiful. I’d like to see more people get on the trail and just do it ... especially us older ones. We need it,” she said.

Hiking hundreds upon hundreds of miles was less of a challenge, she said, than leaving the trail behind.

“When I went back to civilization, I realized how crazy we are in the civilized world. When I got back, I thought I had it all figured out, but the hike became almost like a surreal dream. The last two weeks on the trail helped me to really realize what I want out of life. The trail teaches you that.”

Sam and Nicole Lee of Portland, who launched an attempt to hike the entire trail April 1, have had to alter their plans. They covered the first 702 miles, just over a quarter of the way from Mexico to Canada, when some major snow storms just after

Mother’s Day forced them to rethink their plans.

“We started early to avoid the big herd that takes off toward the end of April,” said Nicole Lee, interviewed this week as the couple passed through Southern Oregon.

“We started a little too early and got caught in a couple of snowstorms north of the Mojave Desert. Once we got to Kennedy Meadows, another couple of snowstorms hit, so we ended up having to change our plans a little bit.”

They hitched a ride north, touched home base, and resumed their hike in May, heading south from Bridge of the Gods in the Columbia River Gorge. The PCTA says fewer than 5 percent of hikers journey southbound.

“Instead of messing around, we ate some chow and started back,” said Sam Lee, who has lost 28 pounds on the trail. “The most noticeable difference about Oregon is a lot more in the trees, a lot less exposure. We really enjoyed that aspect of the California desert, being able to see out in the terrain for quite a distance.”

They estimate 60 people hit the trail about the same time they did, but they don’t expect “the herd” to stampede across the Siskiyou until early July.

The Lees had no second thoughts about leaving behind their jobs in floor covering and a chiropractic office for a summer on the trail. All their earthly goods are stowed away in a trailer on her parents’ property in Vancouver, Wash. Last Christmas, they bought \$1,000 worth of dehydrated meals and stuck them under the Christmas tree. The food, and other supplies, were carefully shipped to post offices along the route.

“There is so much more than sitting at a desk,” she

said. “There’s no hustle and bustle out here, no appointments or having to be here for this appointment or that job.”

Much of their trail talk centers on the next adventure, a long canoe trip, or perhaps Nicole running across the United States while Sam pilots a support vehicle. Soon their private conversations will be intermingled with greetings from hundreds of northbound hikers.

“Since we’ve already hiked Oregon,” Sam said, “I’m excited to get back to California. I’m sure we’ll see a lot of people any day now.”

There are relatively few supply outposts along the trail. One of them is Seiad Valley Store on Highway 96 along the Klamath River in Siskiyou County, Calif., where owner Rick Jones has developed a long-term relationship with hikers. More than 400 hikers signed his registry last year, and he estimates another 50 to 75 skipped past because of fires in the region.

Hikers such as the Lees ship packages to places along the trail, such as Callahan’s Lodge, Seiad Valley Store and small post offices. Packages come as early as mid-April, and last year Jones handled more than 100 packages sent ahead by hikers.

“They ship new shoes and boots, personal items, and sometimes goodies from home,” Jones said. “Over the years, I’ve developed a pretty good resupply selection. Between May and October, 25 percent of my business is hikers.”

During that time he’s learned what long-distance hikers will be looking for when they emerge from the mountains, so he stocks an assortment of things like blister packs and remedies for sore muscles.

“I stock a lot of pain meds and bandages,” he said.



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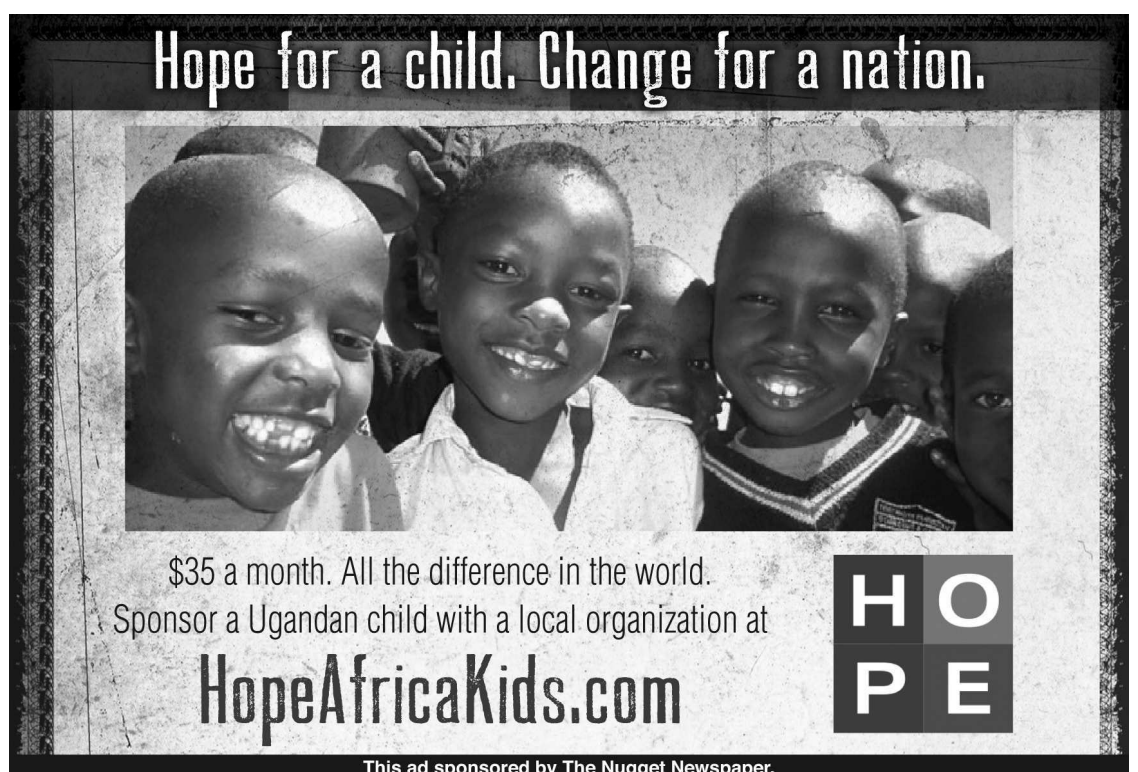
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