

Running shoes for trails

It used to be that a trail shoe was a running shoe with mud on it. Those days are history, but shoe companies are still wrestling with exactly what a good trail-running shoe is. Does the ideal trail shoe provide the support of a hiking boot or the lightness of a running shoe? Everything shoe companies do is an attempt to balance the dual nature of running on a surface that's challenging enough for most people to walk on. The following shoes have all made their compromises; the trick is to pick a set of compromises that works for you. Marketing departments around the globe await your purchasing decisions.

Reebok Alterra \$80

Tread, where the shoe meets the world, is an often neglected component of trail shoes, but the Alterra has very aggressive, diamond-shaped lugs for full-on traction in the dirt. The upper is reinforced with synthetic leather and a substantial toe cap for protection, while the Hexalite cushioning in the midsole has enough Hexalite to soften jarring downhill runs. Despite all the protection and padding, the shoe is still light enough to run on the road with, a real plus for mixed pavement/dirt outings.

Saucony Fastpack \$95

The Fastpack is built and overbuilt to last. It has more midsole protection than most other trail shoes, lots of leather and enough side-foot protection to repel anything short of a land mine. The low-profile midsole keeps your foot close to the ground, but the sole is still stiffer than most because of the beefy sole construction. The Fastpack isn't light, but it should last like the Energizer Bunny (who's lasted way too long, come to think of it).

Nike Air Rover \$90

Hidden under the Air Rover's staid exterior is the usual plush Nike air bag, a water-repellent nylon layer (nice for snowpatches and muddy conditions), a full synthetic leather bumper area, and an arch/shank rock guard. The Rover isn't flash, and the colors belong in a mausoleum, but its performance is superior. It really does protect your foot from rocks and other pointy stuff, but it's still light, unlike some of the tanks passed off as trail-running shoes.

Avia Bulo \$70

What do you get when you cross a climbing shoe and a running shoe? A Bulo. The Bulo has the monster black rand, nylon upper and lace eyelets typical of a climbing shoe, but performance trail-running features such as aggressive tread and good foot protection. The heel adjustment system holds your heel firmly in place, solving a problem often found on some other trail shoes. The shoe is heavier than ideal, but offers excellent support.

Asics Gel Moro \$70

The Gel Moro has a functional lacing system reinforced with plastic ribs for additional support, an aggressive sole (more tread on the rear of the sole would be better), and ASICS's gel cushioning system. Although the shoe is designed to perform in "extreme conditions," it's pretty basic and uncluttered.

Adidas Adventure Claw \$84.95

The tread on the Adventure Claw is, surprise, modeled after the foot-and-claw combination of a big animal. A tight-fitting "Mono-Tongue" keeps your foot largely in place, but a Velcro strap system really locks the shoe to your foot. The bulbous amounts of foam under your heel give the Claw a soft feel, and the colors are definitely cool. While the sole of this shoe is from a clawed animal, its soul is still a running shoe—runners can still respect it.

One Sport Trail Runner \$85

While most shoe companies come at the trail-running game from the pavement side of running, One Sport is a hiking boot company making running shoes. Their first trail shoe, aptly named the Trail Runner, has a Lycra/COOLMAX boot and One Sport's TerraFlex footbed. The sole is aggressive and made from Goodyear rubber (yeah, like the tire) for excellent traction. The shoe won't win any awards for lightness, but it's an excellent foray into the trail-shoe market. These shoes are generally available at specialty mountain shops.

Brooks Vanguard vs2 \$95

The Vanguard is a clean, lean shoe that offers good support and plenty of cushioning, thanks to the HydroFlow system under the heel. The E20 outsole has deep grooves that theoretically allow the whole sole to move and flex with your foot in a more natural pattern. The E20 seems to work to some degree, but the sole needs a much more aggressive tread patch on the rear for steep trail running.

