

COLUMBIA MISSOURIAN

Columbia hiker prepares to conquer the Appalachian Trail

By [Chelsea Bengier](#)

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Caleb McMurry takes a break while walking along the Shooting Star Trail portion of the Gans Creek Wild Area Trail System at Rock Bridge State Park. McMurry, 23, is training for a 5-month hike this coming spring along the Appalachian trail, which stretches from Georgia to Maine.

| [Sarah Bricker](#)



Packets of dried rice and pinto beans fill Caleb McMurry's backpack during a training hike at Rock Bridge State Park. The packages of rice along with other hiking essentials put the pack at about 40 pounds, a good weight to train for his upcoming 5-month hike along the Appalachian Trail.

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Caleb McMurry is preparing for a 5-month, 2,180-mile hike along the Appalachian Trail. | [Sarah Bricker](#)

COLUMBIA — Caleb McMurry never had a party when he graduated from Webster University in the spring of 2011.

Instead, he celebrated with a 3-week, 185-mile hike through the Arkansas Ozark Mountains.

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Next April, Columbia resident Caleb McMurry will embark on a hike that will take him more than 2,000 miles over the course of five months. The

But making one big trek wasn't quite enough for McMurry. Almost as soon as he returned, he began to plan a more extreme adventure.

"By the end of those three weeks, I really felt like I had just begun," McMurry said. "My body was finally adjusted to the stress of the pack. My muscles were finally in shape, and my mind wanted more."

In April, McMurry, 23, will pack up and embark on a 5-month hike along the [Appalachian Trail](#).

The entire distance is an estimated 2,180 miles from the southern terminus at Springer Mountain in Georgia to the northern

over the course of five months. The Appalachian Trail stretches from Maine to Georgia and incorporates various types of terrain, from flatlands to steep cliffs in the Great Smoky Mountains. Hikers' success rate in completing the entire trail is typically 10 percent to 15 percent.

terminus at Mount Katahdin in Maine.

McMurry hopes to complete the journey with a good friend, Robert Corcoran, a Columbia native who lives in Salt Lake City.

"We're pretty similar in the fact that we like our quiet, peaceful time with nature," Corcoran said. "He's just a fun guy, and I really enjoyed my couple hikes that I've done with him in the past."

Picking a route and finishing it

McMurry started toying with the idea of another hike when he was waiting to hear about admission to graduate schools. He is between undergraduate and graduate years, and this seemed like the opportune time to check a dream off his list.

"I started thinking I really wanted to go on a longer hike, and here I am at a time in my life where I could do it," he said.

McMurry hopes to be a "thru-hiker" — a hiker or backpacker who completes an entire trail in one uninterrupted journey.

These adventurers decided upon three U.S. trails to choose from: the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail in California and the Continental Divide Trail in the Rocky Mountains, each more than 2,000 miles long.

The two western trails are remote and have far more dangerous summits. The limited number of towns along the way also pose a serious problem for restocking provisions.

For long-distance hiking, the Appalachian Trail is the most forgiving in terms of food and supplies, McMurry said.

Although it may be the easiest of the three, it shouldn't be underestimated. The total elevation from start to finish is equivalent to climbing Mt. Everest 16 times, and only one in four hikers complete the journey, according to the [trail website](#).

In the last 90 years, only 13,205 hikers have covered the distance as thru-hikers. They are known as the "[2,000 Milers](#)."

The trail began as a break for city dwellers

The idea of a "super trail" took hold in October 1921 after Benton MacKaye published "[An Appalachian Trail: A Project in Regional Planning](#)."

MacKaye, who had been a forester and government planner, proposed a series of wilderness camps

in the Appalachian Mountains as getaways for urban workers.

By 1925, efforts were under way to build the trail when public attention turned to hiking. The last section was completed in 1937.

The [National Trails System Act of 1968](#) designated the Pacific Crest Trail and Appalachian Trail as the first national scenic trails.

The Appalachian Trail meanders through 15 states and is naturally divided into distinct physical regions along the East Coast.

The most difficult section at the southern end of the trail is from Georgia to Virginia. The land levels out through the plains of Pennsylvania and Maryland before hitting the challenging New England stretch from New Hampshire to Maine.

Each year, nearly 2,000 people attempt to hike the trail. In 2000, Columbia native Rick Wise was one of them.

Although he stayed pretty close to the trail, he said he liked the accessibility to trains so he could visit big cities, especially in New England.

"It's indescribable, like fulfilling a lifelong dream," Wise said. "It was a different experience than I had expected in terms of a social atmosphere, and it was a great way to see some of the states that I hadn't visited before."

Preparation involves extensive training

Preparing for the journey is a physical, mental and financial task. To train, McMurry hikes twice a week at Three Creeks Conservation Area, Rock Bridge State Park and Pine Ridge Recreation Area.

He plans to buckle down two months before he leaves, hiking three-to-five days a week with a 40-pound pack. His goal is to walk 10 to 15 miles each time and build from there.

A month before the Appalachian Trail venture, he hopes to hike the Ouachita National Recreation Trail from Oklahoma into Arkansas, a 223-mile trek spanning two to three weeks.

"Ideally, the best way is to just set aside two to three weeks to hike every day with a pack as far as you can go without hurting yourself," he said.

Most of the expenses center on food

Hiking the Appalachian Trail costs between \$3,000 and \$5,000, McMurry said. Most of the money is dedicated to food, which costs \$1.50 to \$2.50 per mile, he said.

"You're burning, like 5,000 calories a day," he said.

The options for food on the trail are essentially two: mail drops and trail towns.

Although trail-town grocery stores provide an easy stock-up, the downside is not knowing what kind of food is available, McMurry said. In some places, there may only be a convenience store.

Many hikers ship food to themselves ahead of time. Common trail munchies include light food that won't go bad, such as peanut butter, granola bars, soup mixes and prepackaged meals, McMurry said.

"Backpackers' eating is never gourmet," he said with a laugh.

Sometimes, hikers also must pay to stay in campsites or hostels. A hut system along the trail offers more than 250 shelters, each with three walls and one open side that provide basic protection from the elements.

"It might not be that expensive for a lot of people who are well-established in their careers, but I just graduated, and I have student loans to pay," he said. "It's a lot for me."

The ultimate challenge may be mental

To hike the Appalachian Trail takes determination and courage, but, most of all, it demands dedication.

"The biggest challenge will be staying committed to it," McMurry said. "Just getting up every day and knowing where I have to be and where I have to go and having that drive to do it will probably be the biggest thing."

He is developing a daily strategy, so he won't become overwhelmed. He plans to hike 15 miles a day, which adds up to roughly five months of walking. Ten miles a day would take about seven months, he said.

"It'll be nice to give one another moral strength because that's a long trail, and I'm sure there will be days where one of us will want to quit or go home," Corcoran said.

They also have to finish before Oct. 15, when the park in Maine closes because of freezing temperatures and other poor weather conditions.

In the end, it's a spiritual journey

In order to fully appreciate nature, McMurry said he is leaving his iPod and possibly even his cell phone at home.

Every hiker has a different motivation for making the trip. For McMurry, it is a chance to meditate and enjoy the beauty around him.

"On a really personal level, it's a time to think and a time to reflect," he said. "It's always a spiritual thing in the sense of being surrounded by something I can see God's creation in."

The two items that will remain in his pack are a journal and a camera.

McMurry said writers Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau inspired him, as did John Muir, a 19th-century American naturalist and author.

"A lot of those ideas about Transcendentalism are really dated, but they still hold a lot of truth," McMurry said. "I think if you want to get something out of nature on a personal or spiritual level, it's still very much possible and relevant."

Taking his camera follows a longtime interest. McMurry graduated from Webster University in St. Louis with a degree in art with an emphasis in photography.

"One of my motivations to do it was because I wanted to shoot photos," he said. "I have always sort of had themes revolving around nature."

If he finishes the adventure, he said he believes the journey will make him see the world in a more positive light.

"Based on the experience of three weeks hiking, I'd say it will probably bring me back stronger in character, more considerate of others and more considerate about the planet."