

Gathering

of the tribe

'Attitude of gratitude' prevails at Kick Off



It's like a big family reunion that welcomes new cousins into the fold each year. ADZPCTKO—the unpronounceable acronym for Annual Day Zero Pacific Crest Trail Kick Off—is all about connecting, reconnecting and, most of all, bonding around a common denominator: The Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail.

Held the last weekend of April at Lake Morena County Park, an hour west of San Diego and about 21 miles north of the PCT's southern terminus at the Mexico border, ADZPCTKO ("Kick Off" for short) began 1998 with a handful of Trail veterans providing logistical support for hikers starting the long journey north. The idea of an annual gathering centered on the premise of hikers helping hikers gathered steam on the PCT-L, the lively Internet forum for the PCT community. The first organized gathering, still small and highly informal, was held at Lake Morena the next year.



Since then, with no commercialization or advertising outside tight-knit hiker circles, Kick Off has morphed into the largest hiker gathering west of the Mississippi. The Thursday-Sunday event draws a full house of 650 campers who transform the usually sleepy park into a village of sorts, with every imaginable make and model of

Above: The class of 2010. Right, top: ADZPCTKO volunteers take time off from their chores to pose for a group shot. Right, bottom: What Kick Off is all about: Hikers setting off on their journey. Left: ADZPCTKO attendees are welcomed at the entrance to Lake Morena County Park. Photos by Janet Fullwood.



720	Burritos
700	Bagels
100	Pounds of ham
100	Pounds of tomatoes
40	Pounds of onions
40	Pounds of cucumbers
80	Pounds of cabbage
1,050	Eggs
25	Pounds of tofu

799	Sirloin burgers
200	Veggie burgers
200	Hot dogs
20	Gallons of potato salad
50	Pounds of cereal
45	Pounds of cream cheese
7	Gallons of yogurt
80	Pounds of fresh strawberries
220	Pounds of other fresh fruit



Kick Off by the numbers

Feeding 650 campers for three days is no easy feat. Neither is preparing a shopping list to accommodate the 3,200 meals served at this year's event. "Volunteers make it happen," says meal coordinator **Monty Tam**, who is also proud to report "zero wait time" for campers working their way down the serving lines.

At Kick Off 2010, approximately 140 volunteers stepped up to slice, dice, chop, shred, scramble, grill and serve:

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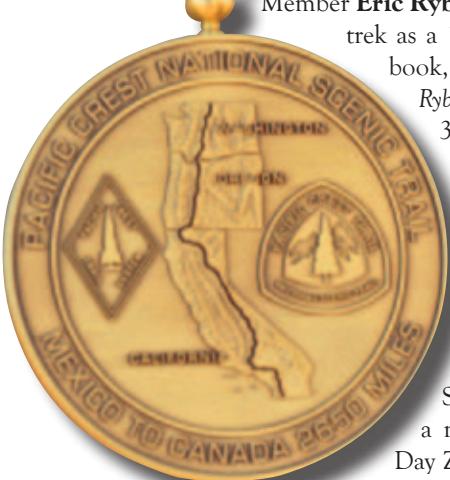
Since the Pacific Crest Trail Association unveiled its Trail-completion medal program this spring, more than 100 of the 9-ounce, solid brass medallions have been engraved and presented to hikers who have completed the Trail.

The program is funded by PCTA Board Member **Eric Ryback**, whose ambitious PCT trek as a 17-year-old in 1970 led to a book, *The High Adventures of Eric Ryback*, that sold more than 300,000 copies to become an outdoor classic that continues to inspire PCT hikers today.

The first medals—including Ryback's—were presented at the PCTA's open house in March. Scores of hikers lined up a month later at the Annual Day Zero PCT Kick Off event to claim their personalized mementos.

Some were contemporaries of Ryback who hiked the trail in the 1970s; others still had "Class of 2009" dust in their boots. Many converged on Ryback with dog-eared copies of *High Adventures*, asking for an autograph.

Ryback founded the program to recognize the monumental, life-changing achievement realized by all those who complete the PCT, whether in a single season or over many years. The 3-inch diameter,



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backpacking tent and gear on display. Another 400 to 600 attendees show up for daytime programs that include educational seminars, social events, volunteer projects, storytelling, slide and video shows, a gear contest and a vendor fair.

Want to examine the latest in ultralight gear or compare the merits of one type of bear canister over another? Get the latest on Trail conditions, water reports, fire closures and detours? Learn what to do if you encounter a mountain lion? Meet the faces behind the names on the PCT-L? Complete the paperwork for a PCT thru-permit? Kick Off is the place for all that and more. If you're an aspiring thru-hiker, it's also the place to bone up on strategies and skills that will help calm the butterflies and fears that inevitably rise up in the face of a major life experience.

"If you aspire to hike the trail, the guys you want to talk to are the ones who hiked last year and the year before," explains **Greg "Strider" Hummel**, a 1977 thru-hiker and Kick Off co-founder who leads the organizing team.

Many who come to Kick Off are veterans who gather to bask in Trail camaraderie and share their expertise with the current year's crop of aspiring thru-hikers. Others are "trail angels" who support those in the midst of their life-changing journeys.

"We figured each year's hikers would want to come back," says Hummel of the early years of Kick Off. "But what we never expected was the huge upswing of volunteerism. Hikers, locals, people from throughout the PCT community have joined in to make the operation extremely easy in many ways. The participants do the lion's share of the work. We have a huge number of people who volunteer to

help with the food and silent auction, set everything up and sweep the campground when we're done on Sunday. It's pretty amazing."

Among those who have responded year after year to the call to give back to the hiking community is **"Warner Springs Monty,"** a.k.a. **Monty Tam**, a well-known Southern California trail angel who has logged about 10,000 miles on the PCT. The Trail "is my life and my passion," says Tam, who puts his 41 years of experience in the food and beverage industry to use by serving as meal coordinator for Kick Off weekend.

The first time he showed up at Kick Off, Tam was on the other side of the food-service line. "The year 2000 was my first thru-hike," he says of his involvement. "I came to Kick Off and the organizers said 'we don't want your help; this is for you.'"

But Tam insisted, and kept coming back and giving back. In recent years, he says, "We have been focusing more and more on getting the thru-hikers to volunteer. It's absolutely amazing the amount of bonding that is done now. They are the Kick Off. They come back, they help. The thru-hikers have become the center of the event."

If networking and mutual support are what Kick Off is all about, it's the positive energy generated by like-minded souls that gives the event its joyful ambience. "The attitude of gratitude extends all the way through Kick Off. It's the PCT family, people helping people, the way you wish the whole world was," Tam says.

Kick Off ends each year with a great wave of hikers – "the herd" – setting off from Lake Morena on journeys sure to be filled with adventure, joy and hardship. Next year, many of those hikers will be back to mentor the next crop of PCT newbies.

For more information on Kick Off, go to www.siechert.org/adz/ • Registration for the 2011 event will open in February.



Extreme!

National Geographic film is a hit with PCT community

The newest documentary in National Geographic's "America's Wild Spaces" television series was creating a buzz heard all up and down the Pacific Crest Trail long before it was scheduled to debut July 4 on the National Geographic Channel.

About 125 PCTA staff members, board members, agency partners, major donors, volunteers and other guests attended the premiere of the long-awaited PCT documentary and gave it a standing ovation at PCTA headquarters in March. The next month, about 400 Trail enthusiasts watched it on an outdoor screen during the Annual Day Zero PCT Kick Off event at Lake Morena County Park in San Diego County, Calif. Several hundred more people have viewed the production at showings for students, nonprofits and other groups.

Cleary and crew ascend Forester Pass to get some extreme footage.

The 50-minute film highlights the PCT's geographical extremes, touches on several scientific topics and introduces the diverse community of hikers and equestrians who journey along the Trail. Aerial footage adds dramatic perspective to locations in California, Washington and Oregon.

Field producer **Katie Cleary** and crew spent about two months filming along the PCT last summer. A DVD of the production will be available for purchase later this year. The "America's Wild Spaces" series also has featured the Appalachian Trail and Death Valley.

For schedule information, go to <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/channel> and click the NATGEOTV tab.