

A southbound adventure



By Christine “Dormouse” Martens

“John!” I screamed. “I can’t do it! I can’t ... I can’t move.”

I was shaking and tears were rolling down my cheeks. We were approaching Park’s Creek Pass, which at 6,100 feet above sea level was completely covered in snow. Glancing down from my feet into the valley I felt as though I would fall a thousand feet if I so much as breathed wrong. We weren’t even on the PCT yet.

It was July 6, 2014, and we had decided a few days before we started our southbound thru-hike that we would take a low elevation alternate route for the first 60 miles. Park Creek Pass was the highest point before we joined the PCT. We picked an alternate route after we heard how bad the conditions had been on the PCT for the first few southbounders of the season. The news had come back from the first group of hikers – led by **Ned Tibbits** of Mountain Education as a snow skills course – that one of the hikers had slipped in the snow and fallen several hundred feet. Trees broke his fall and several of his ribs.

I had already been nervous about the first part our hike. Until I heard about the person falling, my biggest fear had been getting

lost. **John “Dirt Stew” Haffner** and I had hiked the Appalachian Trail together four years earlier, and we realized that that experience did not prepare us for this. Nobody in his or her right mind goes for a hike in the high elevation portions of the Northern Cascades of Washington this early in the season – nobody except southbound PCT thru-hiker hopefuls.

They say you carry your fears with you, and we certainly did. We carried ice axes, crampons, an emergency beacon, a GPS, maps, a compass and extra batteries for the GPS. We wound up using all of it, apart from the beacon.

John looked back at me and yelled: “Just step in my steps.”

“Your steps are too far apart! I’m tiny compared to you!” I yelled back. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, pushed by my fear of heights. Every time I looked down, the whole world started to spin and my stomach jumped into my throat. Luckily, my husband has no fear of heights. He retraced his steps and came back to help me. Together we inched our way to the top of the pass. When we got there, I raised my ice axe in the air in triumph.



Left: Crossing a snowfield in the Glacier Peak Wilderness in mid-July 2014. Photo by John Haffner. Above: Dormouse and Dirt Stew exit Stevens Pass, Washington. Photo by Scott Button.

Once we joined the PCT, the next section through Glacier Peak Wilderness was far more challenging and beautiful than I could have possibly imagined. Good chunks, up to 30 miles at a time of the 100-plus-mile section, were above the snow line. The mountains were unforgiving. Crampons weighed down my feet. Each step on the steep snowy climbs was either like walking on sand or walking on ice. My energy quickly depleted.

I was glad that I was in shape to hike more than 20 miles a day before we started, but my huge hiker appetite hadn’t kicked in yet. With the calories we were burning, it should have. Every time I collapsed in the snow, exhausted, John would hand me a jar of Nutella. “Eat!” he’d say.

For every mountain we climbed we were rewarded with spectacular views spanning into the horizon of jagged mountains covered in snow.

We met our first other thru-hiker in Stehekin, and after following a pair of footprints we falsely assumed were pointing us in the right direction, we ran into a second thru-hiker. The four of us decided

to tackle the section together. We took turns kicking steps, and we hiked long days, hoping every day to make more progress than the day before. More than halfway through the section, we began rationing our food. The miles were going by too slowly, and it was hard to know how many more days the section would take. We vowed to burn Section K page 8 (from Halfmile’s maps) the moment we got to civilization, and when we got to the **Dinsmores** (trail angels at Stevens Pass), we did just that.

“We get about 20 or 30 southbounders each year, and only a handful make it,” **Andrea Dinsmore** said casually. I looked in the mirror at my sunburned face and the gashes on my body from bushwhacking through avalanche chutes in the snow, and I felt accomplished. I wondered if I would be one of them.

We parted ways with our newfound friends and exchanged information to keep in touch. We knew there wouldn’t be many more of us. Every southbounder ahead of us was on our radar. We knew each one by name. Although we met only seven southbounders on our whole journey, we knew of many more, both behind and in front



Far left: The author at Kearsarge Pass in the High Sierra, California. Photo by John Haffner.
Left: Signing the register at the Southern Terminus on Nov. 1, 2014. Photo by David Lippke.

of us. The times when we met another southbounder were times of pure excitement. Invariably we'd wind up talking about beginning in the snowy Shangri-La of Washington.

Once we hit Oregon, waves of northbounders passed us, some arrogant from having walked many times the distance we had, but most completely oblivious to our existence. Since John shaved at each town when we got a shower, he could easily have been mistaken for a day hiker or weekender. We preferred it that way. We counted 78 northbounders who passed us in one day.

To them, we were a rare sighting, but to us, they seemed like an endless parade. There is something funny about the moment when a northbounder and a southbounder cross paths. Together we have completed an entire thru-hike and yet we do not have a single shared experience of the trail. It makes for both helpful and frustrating conversations. I think hikers have selective memories, and a lot of the information we got from northbound hikers was false. I can only hope that the knowledge we imparted was slightly more reliable. When in Northern California the last stragglers finally pushed past us, we were happy to have the wilderness to ourselves again.

Northern California delighted us with a crescendo of mountains. As they got bigger, so did our appetites for the Sierra. We had left the mosquitoes behind in Washington and Oregon and were able to enjoy the scenery, especially the lakes and waterfalls. As we stopped in towns along the way, locals asked us if we were going to make it to Canada in time. We were constantly explaining that the trail can be done southbound as well, and that we were actually on schedule for our journey to Mexico. Locals were then quick to start talking about the hordes of thru-hikers who had come through earlier in the season and the effects they had on their community and the wilderness. I began to feel an increased awareness of our collective impact.

We also started learning about the ongoing drought and the effect the water shortage and wildfires were having on small towns along the PCT. Wildfires had chased us off the trail in parts of Oregon. We had struggled with long road walks where there was no water, and we even had to bypass a section where there was no alternative route around a fire. I started asking locals in each town where their water came from. I noticed empty lakes with cracked earth and glistening salt where water once stood. I was acutely aware of every liter of water we consumed and where it came from.

As we approached the Sierra, water slowly became abundant again. We climbed what felt like a staircase of mountains leading up to the High Sierra. At each peak, John would proclaim: "Now this is the highest I've ever been!"

Each day the scenery became more jaw-droppingly gorgeous. We felt a constant push to make miles as September progressed. Our goal was to make it out of the Sierra by Oct. 1. Other southbounders chose to push it to Oct. 15, but we thought that was risky. As we gained elevation it got cold, particularly at night. I was happy to have an extra down jacket as well as my 10-degree sleeping bag. We would camp at lower elevations when possible.

Although many thunderstorms chased us over the passes, we were overjoyed when we had the perfect day for a climb up Mount Whitney. There were hundreds of hikers climbing to the highest point in the continental United States, most of them wheezing and panting from the altitude. Leaving the PCT at just over 10,000 feet, we climbed to the summit at 14,494 feet.

We were low on food during this section. While we conversed with other hikers on the way up, several John Muir Trail hikers gave us their leftover food, since they would be finishing their hike at Mount Whitney. We were grateful for the extra fuel. Amongst the tourists at the top, I saw a marmot scurrying around eating crumbs that visitors had left behind. I smiled at it, recognizing one of my kind. In the end, we got through the High Sierra just before the first small snowstorm of the season.

By the time we were hiking in the desert, we were lean, mean, hiking machines and the prospect of 20- to 30-mile sections without water didn't intimidate us. With the water report in hand, we had our water consumption down to a science. The water report is a

crowdsourced online document we printed out in each town. Hikers who have recently been through a section update it. It was our bible.

Besides a lack of water, we didn't know what to expect from the desert in October since there had been little information online before we started our trip. I had assumed it would be outrageously hot during the day and freakishly cold at night. It was neither. There were hot spells, yes, but nothing like what northbounders experienced earlier. What hit me most about hiking through the desert was the solitude. We went weeks without encountering another hiker. We knew there were a few other southbounders in front of us, and although they were days or even weeks ahead of us, their footprints were perfectly preserved in the sand. From these footprints we could see where they had stopped for a break, where they had gotten water, and where they had gotten lost. It gave us a strange sense of camaraderie.

On our last night on the trail it rained. It was the first rain in weeks. The rain-packed sand was hard, and the footprints we had been following for hundreds of miles disappeared overnight. That made me realize that all those people had finished their hike. Mother Nature was reminding us that our journey was almost over, and soon the land would forget us as well.

But I will never forget the trail. I have been forever changed by my thru-hike. I realized that this journey had made me a better person. I could see the impact people were having on the land, and I felt responsible. I appreciate water more than ever. The kindness of strangers restored my faith in humanity.

At the southern terminus of the PCT, I pulled out the trail register. After reading the entries from the two or three friends who finished before us, I wrote: "Congratulations, Southbounders!" 🐦