

Hiking With Disabilities Workshop presented by Kenneth Knight



Kenneth Knight is legally blind. This has not stopped him from backpacking hundreds of miles of trail throughout the United States and abroad.

While being legally blind affects how he travels it does not prevent him from traveling. In this workshop he shares some of his thoughts on hiking with disabilities

Living with a disability affects how a person lives their life. While there is no doubt that a disability imposes certain limits on what individuals can do it need not prevent them from doing things they set out to do. While I cannot drive I can still travel. I can travel with others or, if I choose, alone. While I have to take my disability into consideration when I plan a trip and during the trip I try not to let it dominate my decision making. I try to remember that, although there are things I cannot experience as well as a person with normal sight, I can still experience them. I may, in fact, be able to find things to experience that a person with normal vision might overlook. There are differences in kind between a person with a disability and one without, but I think that most differences are more a matter of degree.

Before The Trip: Organization and planning are always important. Getting organized and prepared before you actually leave will take time, but in the long run this will make your trip run more smoothly. Develop lists of things you need to do at home and things you need to do at or near the trail. This will help you focus on what needs to be done. Keep in mind that some things may only be possible to do near the trail. For example, if you are flying you will have to purchase fuel after you land. That will require finding a store that sells the fuel you need. Creating and keeping lists from past trip, especially of the gear you use, will help you with future trips especially if you are attempting to lighten your backpack.

Route Planning: Try to plan your route ahead of time using whatever resources are available. For the Appalachian Trail, resources abound. The Data Book, maps, guide books, the ALDHA Thru-Hiker Companion are all very helpful. You may not stick with the route you plan, but having a good idea of what to expect will make your trip more enjoyable. I find the AT guides quite handy on and off the trail. They often help give you a detailed sense of what the trail will be like. I've hiked with and without the guide books. But I like to have them since they often provide the reader with a good sense of history and place. The Data Book and ALDHA

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Companion also provide useful information in a concise fashion about the towns near the trail. The latter is very useful when you are trying to figure out which towns you want to visit. If you are worried about weight just bring the pages you believe you will need. While the AT maps may be the least valuable I sometimes take them. Maps help provide information to place you along your route and that is never a bad thing. Learn how to read the map as best as you can. I'll never be as skilled a map reader as a person with normal vision, but I'm not bad.

Getting There and Back: Getting to and from the trail can be a challenge for anyone. It can be even more of one for a person with a disability. I am sure I spend more time and more money than someone with normal vision. For example, if I had normal vision and was planning a backpacking trip to the Grand Canyon I'd almost certainly fly to and from Phoenix, Arizona and rent a car to drive to and from the canyon. Instead I fly into Flagstaff, stay there overnight, take a shuttle to the Grand Canyon and essentially reverse the process when I depart. If I wanted to do a solo trip to Isle Royale my options are either an 18 hour bus ride, stay overnight in Houghton, then take the slowest ferry to Isle Royale (toss in a taxi ride to Copper Harbor to catch the Isle Royale Queen instead of the Ranger to shave off some ferry time) or fly into Houghton and again stay overnight there or in Copper Harbor. Obviously, I do not have the option of driving the 12 hours to Copper Harbor. Do your best to make your travel to and from the trail as painless as possible. If you need to get supplies in town you will almost certainly have to ask for help. Be polite, explain what you need. Most people will be helpful. If you are staying at a hotel ask the staff for help. They want to make your stay comfortable. Finally, make sure you give yourself some grace time to get to and, more importantly, back from the trail. You don't want to miss your flight. If that means giving yourself a couple of extra days spent in the airport town that's the way it will be. Maybe you will be able to leave on an earlier flight if you finish on time.

Who Do You Tell: It's always good to let people know you're going on a trip. Give them an itinerary, but remind them that things can, and often do, change. The itinerary is just your best guess. Like prophets it probably doesn't pay to be too specific. You don't need to tell people where you intend to be every day. Starting and ending dates, the start and ending locations, towns you plan to stop at and when, are enough. If you have family that is concerned about you (e.g., parents) try to call them when you do stop. They'll be much happier if you do. If you take a cell phone with you and call from the trail (remember to be courteous to other hikers and make the call out of their earshot) remind the people you are talking with that just because you don't call every day that doesn't mean something bad happened to you.

On The Trail: Now that you are on the trail a whole new host of issues arise. Remarkably the bulk of these issues are exactly the same ones hikers without disabilities face. They're just tougher to deal with if you have a disability. The primary categories are navigation on (and sometimes off) the trail, camp related issues, and keeping safe while enjoying your trip to the fullest possible degree.

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Navigation: All hikers have to worry to some degree about getting from point A to point B. For a disabled hiker this can be a tougher challenge. But the methods the hiker will use to get from point A to B are pretty much the same as anyone else's. The disabled hiker will probably just take longer to get to his or her destination. Here is a sampling of how I deal with some of these issues.

How do you stay on the trail?	Use your senses. Pay attention to what your eyes and feet are telling you. If the trail is well traveled, it will not only look markedly different from its surrounding but it will also feel different too.
How do you find side trails?	Knowing the lay of the land is important here. Having a good sense of where you are is key. If you know you are getting close to a side trail you want to follow slow down and start carefully looking for it. Look for side-trail blazes or signs if you know they are likely to be around. Remember that when you slow down it will take longer to get anywhere – don't get frustrated if it takes a while. Finally, keep in mind that just because a distance is written down does not mean it is entirely accurate. For example, the side trail to the Tagg Run Shelter in Pennsylvania is supposedly 0.2 miles long. I am convinced it is a good bit longer than that.
In camp, how do you find water, the privy?	It can actually be harder to find these things than you might first think. It's certainly easier to find water when you walk through a stream or pass a spring right on the trail. In a campsite you have to find a side trail and then find the water or privy. There may be many small trails at a campsite. Don't hesitate to ask. You won't have been the first person to ask for help. Sighted people ask too. If you are alone you may have to search a bit harder for the right path. Pay attention to where you are. If you are concerned about getting lost in the campground use your compass to help navigate. If you are worried about finding the privy at night do all you can to ensure you will not have to use the privy at night.
How do you cross roads?	Like everyone else: carefully. Chances are good the trail will not be directly across from you on the road. Just take your time and search for it. If it is far down the road the guidebook should say something. Look for blazes.
How do you cross streams?	Carefully. Take your time finding the route that you are most comfortable with. What someone else finds comfortable may not be good for you. Expect to get your feet wet. If you are going to cross many streams, river crossing shoes or something similar (e.g., Sealskinz socks) aren't a bad thing to carry.

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How do you cross a rock field?	Carefully. If you are like me you will be moving slowly. The trail should continue to travel in the same general direction. I find I use my monocular a lot as I look for blazes. If you are on a trail that uses cairns the going will be even tougher. Pay attention to where you are going and especially to where you have been. Be sure you know how to get back to a place you know.
What do you do if you get lost?	Don't panic. Like anyone else stay calm. Try to figure out where you are with the information you have. If you can't do that then do your best to return to a place you know you have been. Chances are most times you will just have taken a short detour from the trail. If you get lost in a campsite without your gear take your time and try to return again to a spot that looks familiar even if it is not the campsite. Keep an emergency whistle with you so you can call for help if you need it. Above all: don't panic.

Camp Chores: When you reach camp your day is not done. A disabled hiker still has to do all the things any non-disabled hiker does. Taking care of your camp chores efficiently though shouldn't be any more difficult once you develop a strategy. Keep in mind that it will probably take you longer to set up your shelter whether it is a tarp or a tent. I am sure that I set up my Tarp-tent slower than a sighted person does. It takes me longer to pick a spot, longer to get the poles inserted into the shelter, and certainly longer to get the stakes planted. A tarp, with many tie-out points, takes longer still. But I still often use a tarp. Take your time and set your site up right. It may also take you longer to find water. If your vision is poor or your hand-eye co-ordination is lacking hanging food from a tree will certainly take longer. If you are very concerned about this consider using a bear can (overkill on the AT). I can, given enough time, hang a decent bear bag. Learn how to do it right. If your campsite has a bear hanging apparatus, (e.g., bear poles or pulleys) use it. If you need help ask for it. Many people without disabilities have a tough time making good bear hangs too.

Do your best to keep your site organized. This is true whether you are staying in a shelter or inside your tarp or tent. Keep things in places you are comfortable with. I've spent plenty of time searching for stuff that was in plain sight because I ended up putting it somewhere I normally would not have. Devise a system and stick with it.

Since things will take you longer make sure you reach your campsite with enough daylight to spare. There is nothing wrong with being conservative. You shouldn't feel rushed. If you feel rushed chances are better you will forget to do something. It will probably also take you longer to break camp so take that into consideration when you are deciding when it is best to get up the next day. Again you do not want to rush since you could leave something behind.

Finally, treat anyplace you stop at like a campsite even if you are just stopping for a break to take your pack off to have a snack. Lay your stuff out in a way that makes it easy to find when you are set to leave. Have a system to remind yourself of everything you need to take with you when you leave. This is especially important if you have small items like a key chain with a knife on it. Over the years I have left my key chain with a knife, ID tag, whistle, and some other stuff on the trail and not realized it until I

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was miles away. I've been lucky and gotten it back each time. I am scrupulous about putting it back in my pocket as soon as I am done with it.

Keeping Safe While Having Fun:

Keeping safe is vital. The issues here are pretty much the same as they are for any hiker. Perhaps first and foremost hike with confidence in yourself. Pay attention to your body. Know your limits. If you are about to tackle a section of trail that you know is going to give you trouble take your time and don't rush. If you are traveling with others and need help, ask for it. If you are traveling alone and hit a portion of trail that worries you, consider waiting for someone to come along who can help you out. On a trail like the AT this is a viable option.



While a person without disabilities may tell you that you cannot possibly do a section, you probably want to take that statement with a small grain of salt. Don't dismiss it, but don't assume they know what they are talking about either. It is important to know yourself well enough to make a sound decision. There is nothing wrong with taking a more conservative course.

Learn how to best work with other people. If you are hiking with others it is important to help them understand that you can do what you are doing, but sometimes may need some extra time or assistance. This is a tough process. Most people will want to help you get through a tough spot. They feel good doing it. If, however, their help is not helpful to you you need to let them down gently. For example, it's of little value for someone to tell me when I cross a stream, "step on that rock.. .now that one... now that rock." I am probably not going to be able to tell which rocks they mean.

1. While you are hiking you need to find things to appreciate. I have a tougher time appreciating the wildlife around me since I generally don't see most of it. Hiking with others helps since once they point out something I have a decent chance of finding it with my monocular. I try to find my own ways to enjoy a hike even though I don't see everything a person with 20/20 vision would. I listen to the world around me and look for what I can see. I enjoy just being outside. When I see something I think is interesting I may decide to photograph it. Even a legally blind man can take some rather nice pictures. I try to remember what I experience so I can then write about it later on. There is no reason why I (or you) cannot keep a trail journal. In fact, I find that writing about how my trip is going can be invaluable as it helps me learn what has and has not worked. While a disabled hiker will not see the world the same way as a non-disabled hiker, he or she is still part of the world and will experience the world in some particular way. No two hikers will come away with identical experiences: remember that.

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Interacting With Others: I have touched on this some already. Hikers with disabilities have to interact with hikers who do not have disabilities. That imposes some extra strains on both parties, but they shouldn't be overwhelming. The disabled hiker needs to accept that non-disabled hikers are going to have preconceived notions of what he or she can and cannot do. The non-disabled hikers need to learn that the disabled hiker can do what he or she sets out to do. The disabled hiker is an adult too and should be treated as such. Learning to work with each other is important. The disabled hikers need to do their best to put the non-disabled hikers at ease, and the non-disabled hikers need to do their best not to make the disabled hiker feel self-conscious of their limitations.

As with any group there will be slower and faster hikers. This is true even if a group is composed entirely of non-disabled hikers. The fast people need to remember that just because someone is moving slowly does not mean they are not working hard. If the faster walker takes a break but starts again as soon as the slower walker catches up, the slower walker is probably going to feel compelled not to stop at all. After all, the slower walker doesn't want to slow the group down even more. Disabled hikers can feel this even more strongly.

Don't always ask how things are going. If things are not going well hopefully the person (disabled or not) will say something. If it is clear they are not going well and the person doesn't say anything that is a different matter, but there is no reason to always ask.

Don't always give help. It may not be wanted. It may, in fact, be detrimental. It is important for the disabled hiker to let the non-disabled hiker know when help is and is not needed. Put them at their ease. An example of help that is actually bad for all involved comes from my childhood. Although it is not hiking related it should get the point across. There is a game vision impaired children can play called beepball. It's rather like tee-ball for people with limited or no vision. The batter hits a beeping ball, the ball rolls into the baseball diamond, and depending on where it goes a sighted volunteer turns on a tone generator at either first or third base. If the batter runs past the turned on base before the fielder retrieves the beeping ball (players with limited vision or blindfolded) a run is scored. If the fielder gets the ball first the batter is out. I hit the ball one time and third base was switched on. I took off running as hard as I could so I could get my team another run. I ran past the base and began to slow to a stop. After all, I knew I had run past the base since it was obviously beeping behind me. The volunteer at that base had decided to help me stop by standing in the baseline just beyond the base to catch me. I was decelerating when I slammed into the volunteer. Very painful. The volunteer meant well, but this is clearly help that was not needed and was in fact dangerous.

A Sense of My World: The following trip journal excerpts are meant to give both disabled and non-disabled hikers a sense of my world. The goal is to show that a disabled hiker can have a richly enjoyable trip, and also a safe one, whether he or she hikes alone or is part of a group. You have already seen some of my photography.

Wind River Range, Wyoming: We were hiking for the experience not the views. Neither of us complained. The trail was all but obliterated but we still managed to follow it well enough. I had the easier time of it since I not only could follow what my feet said was right but I could track Peter's

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footprints and glance up and see his yellow jacketed, McHale backpack-encumbered body marching away from me. Great hiking.



Alaska: One of the best mountains off to the west of the trail was the Sleeping Lady. I believe the local name is Sisiska. If you look carefully you can see her profile with her head to the south and her legs to the north (her toes must be buried). I can sort of make out the profile but it is a challenge. I am no good at seeing stellar constellations and seeing a profile of a woman in the mountains of Alaska is not much different. The story is that the lady said farewell to her husband who went off to war. While she slept he died in battle. She'll only wake when peace comes to the entire world.



[afew days later] We flew over all three rivers that flow into one here at Talkeetna (the word "talkeetna" means where rivers meet - the rivers are the Talkeetna, Susitna, and Chulitna), forested wetlands that are probably a great moose habitat, the foothills of the mountains, and then the mountains themselves. As we rose we flew over massive glaciers that would reflect white and sometimes blue in the light. Deep ice can reflect blue as light is bounced around the crystals that act like prisms. However, in deep ice the light is not broken up into all the colors of the

rainbow. All but the blue light is absorbed and so we see a deep blue that signifies deep slow moving ice. We could also see crevasses in the glaciers some of which could be 500 or more

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feet deep. But the glaciers are not devoid of life. Below 2,500 feet there are trees and even above treeline grasses can cover glaciers. The plants grow on soil that has blown in and settled upon the ice. Life gains footholds in all sorts of climates even those that we would consider too harsh. The glaciers must be harsh. It can be cold, windy, brilliantly bright, and the ground you are on is moving. Depending on the glacier it might not be moving terribly quickly but there are glaciers that move easily 10 feet per day.

Michigan Mud Race: Leg 6 (AKA "This Sucks") meanders through narrow trails following blue ribbons for the next 5.1 miles. While the initial section of this leg has some decent-sized (for around here) climbs and descents, the leg is actually fairly level, gaining and losing about 500 feet in each direction over it's entire length. Sounds like an easy hike, right? A nice stroll through southeastern Michigan forests along narrow trail that have good footing. If that was all that this leg had to offer it would be easy, but it has much more in store for the hiker or runner. It has water. Water flowing in a river; flowing in a stream; creating standing swamps. Water that turns the ground it has saturated into soft, squishy, sucking muck that has a deep and powerful organic aroma. At times you might feel as though you are walking across a firm peat bog with each step bouncing back as you plant your feet. But most times you plant your foot and slowly start to sink. The muck oozes into your shoes and around your feet. An all-encompassing fairly warm embrace. Not really unpleasant, albeit dirty. Not bad until you have to pull your foot out. Then the suction takes hold. You strain, stretching your leg muscles to free the trapped foot. Grudgingly, the ooze relinquishes its grip and you pull your leg free with a sucking sound and you are ready to take another step.

After hiking over the bulk of the hilly portion on nice firm ground we dived into the bush and descended to a low area. We found ourselves at Honey Creek. This was the first of 4 crossings of Honey Creek. Honey Creek is not a warm flowing stream like the Portage River. It's a cold spring fed creek. Those first few steps weren't too bad, but then the runners found the pit where the water depth increased markedly. We'd warn them but it would do no good. You couldn't really avoid the pit if you wanted to go directly across. Cause for plenty of amusement for us as we watched them slosh across crying out at all the muck that was invading their formerly dry feet. We had to, in time, take the plunge too. Into the warm (I thought you said it was a cold spring-fed creek?) waters we went. The waters lapped at my knees and then at my shorts as I passed through the pit. The muck oozed around my bare feet. I was getting a free mud bath just like everyone else in our group. Things went well until you had to climb out. Off with the shoes and it's time to slosh through the mud again. Not too bad. Then the second crossing came. This one had a log you could cross if you were game. Andy was game. The others found their own paths. I found my path. I found perhaps the worst path of all. The mud was deep and the suction severe. Soon I was waist deep slowly creeping across the creek. Wishing I had tried Andy's route since the worst that could have happened was I'd fall off the log and get wet. I was getting wet and dirty as it was. The water and mud kept inching up and I kept inching forward. Step. Strain to pull the leg free, step, strain. It's just below my chest now. Step. Strain. Step. I'm at the bank. How to get out? It's hard to pull myself

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up and out, but I did it. I'm covered in black mud now. I'm definitely quite a sight. I've been dancing with the dirt. Much more so than anyone else.

The ground here is non-stop soft sucking muck. If you can pick your steps well it might not be so bad, but I found the poorer paths. I can't put my shoes back on because they'll get flooded with muck and I'm afraid I'll lose one or both to the staggering suction. My hiking pole sank in and then disassembled itself as I pulled it out. A victim of the suction. A runner found the trapped section and handed it back to me. Another runner cried that he'd lost a shoe in the stream (he managed to free it). Others slogged on by dealing with the ooze as best as they could. The rest of my group pulled ahead and called back now and then to see what was up. I slogged on through the ooze. Still barefoot now I was carrying my shoes in one hand, my disassembled hiking pole in the other, and I was keeping my pair of socks nestled underneath my shirt like some sort of mutant breast. On I went. Hard hard work. I got a helping hand from a runner who had found a fairly solid patch of ground. On I went. Then I thought I was done. I could put my shoes back on. I called out to the others, not too far ahead, to let them know that was what I was doing. On went the shoes and I moved out. Big Mistake. There was one last bit of major muck. It caught me, grabbed at my feet, I began to sink. I tried to free myself but the pressure was too great. I could free myself and lose my right shoe for sure and probably my left. I worked my left foot free, but the right was doomed. It wasn't going to move. So, I pulled and out popped my foot. I tossed Elwira my hiking stick parts and began to work on freeing my shoe. Andy, Elwira, John, and Mike waited, kibitzing a bit as they did, looking entirely too damn clean with relatively little black mud adorning their pants legs, arms, or hands. I worked the shoe free and waded across another crossing of Honey Creek. I was able to wash out the shoe and free it of most of the mud that had accumulated. Elwira had done the same for my hiking staff and it could now be used as it was meant to be used.