

# The Long Trail, End-to-End in Thirteen Days

*Miserably wet feet, too little food, and no ride home at the  
end—a couple's most cherished adventure to date*

**Scott Livingston**



I GOT HOME FROM WORK A LITTLE AFTER 8 P.M., DROPPED MY backpack, loosened my tie, and started scrounging for some dinner in the fridge. My wife, Debbie, was teaching her late Monday night yoga class at the gym, so I fended for myself. It had been a long and hard day, and I was tired and hungry.

I closed my eyes and started smiling at another bad day I had just remembered.

Deb and I are trudging our way up the Long Trail to the ridge south of Spruce Peak, in Vermont. We are on our way to the Sterling Pond Shelter. The switchbacks out of Smugglers' Notch are brutal following the quad-pounding descent from Mt. Mansfield. Debbie and I both are starving, but she is having a particularly bad afternoon. We had bummed four granola bars off of a friendly day-hiker whom we met on the descent. He said that he was scouting some trails for a end-to-end hike later in the summer. It must have been obvious to him that we were close to a meltdown. We burned through those calories in minutes. As the climb begins to level out, I tell Deb that I am going to go ahead to the shelter, treat some water, and get it boiling for dinner. Every stream we had passed today was dry. She looks appreciative and assures me she will be fine, but we both are whimpering. I race ahead, emerge onto a ski trail, and can see that we are in for a spectacular sunset. I think that at this pace, I am going to have lots of time to come back with the camera and capture the mountains in all of their glory before the sun goes down.

I become confused trying to find the water. Deb has the map and guidebook in her pack. Obviously, the pond is there before me, but the spring that feeds it or some moving water would be better quality on this hazy summer afternoon. I re-enter the woods for the final section of trail before the Sterling Pond Shelter, and go faster. Soon I come into the clearing. The sight stops me cold. The shelter is gone. All that remains are four concrete-filled holes and a big pile of dirt. Whoa, Deb is going to be shattered, since we expect a night of cool rain, despite the nice sunset. In an effort to keep our packs as light as possible, we opted to carry a tarp rather than a tent and stay at as many shelters as possible. The next shelter is supposed to be more than three miles up the trail, and we had vowed that we would not rely on hiking with our headlamps again.

I drop my pack and rush off to where I think there is a spring feeding the pond. It is dry and I cannot get to the edge of the pond from here. It looks

*Another day on the trail, cooling off burning feet.* SCOTT LIVINGSTON

as if I am going to have to go all the way around the pond again. That is a fifteen-minute walk! No shelter. No water. Now, I am the one starting to crack. Then, I hear a voice through the woods and the crackling of a radio. I call out and get a reply back. A young woman comes out of the trees from another trail. She introduces herself as Schmidt, the Watson Camp caretaker. “Watson Camp?” She explains that the reason we saw no signs that this shelter was removed for renovations is that Watson lies only a few hundred feet off of the LT. They figured folks would find it. Under normal circumstances, this would not be a big deal, but for us, twelve days on the trail have made simple detours difficult. Schmidt confirms that getting to the water is going to require backtracking. Regardless, I’m ecstatic that we’ll be spending the night at Watson.

Suddenly, the vision of Deb struggling up the trail rushes into my head. I tell Schmidt that I am going to fetch Deb and that we would meet her at Watson after we get some food in us. I leave all my gear in the clearing (including the water bottles) and run back on the trail. It is a long time before I reach Deb. Her pace must have really fallen off. I find her standing still at the ski trail junction, obviously disoriented. When she sees me, she bursts into tears. The stress of another long day on the trail gushes out. She sobs that she didn’t know which way I had gone. As I try to calm her down, I have to tell her that Sterling Shelter doesn’t exist right now. But I assure her that we will be under a roof tonight. I explain where the water is, and then I chastise myself for not bringing the bottles back with me. I have passed the water access on the way to Deb. I take her pack, and we head up the trail toward nourishment and some rest.

Today was my day to play the support role, but two nights earlier, I was falling asleep on the side of the trail, refusing to go on. Now I try to get Deb settled and prepare dinner with the last of our water. After we eat, I return to the other side of the pond with the bottles and Miox water purifier—only, I forget my camera. Near the edge of the pond, I watch the most spectacular sunset that I have ever seen. The Green Mountains glow. I totally missed that photo, but the image of that sunset is burned into my memory forever.

### **A New Level of Suffering**

As I thought of this in my kitchen, my smile turned into a laugh.

I have been laughing spontaneously at Long Trail memories nearly every day since last July. I said, out loud, “What could be harder than the Long



*Deb tries to shade herself from the sun during a trailside snack.* SCOTT LIVINGSTON

Trail?” I launched into action to make dinner. I forgot the stress of the day.

I am not fond of the term “peakbagger,” but grudgingly, I admit it does describe a little of what Deb and I are about. Deb and I are a little extreme. Competitive by nature, we like the hard effort of long days on the trail. I am addicted to the rush that comes from pushing beyond my mental and physical limits. Cycling, trail running, kayaking, adventure racing, hiking—the method of torture varies, but each exertion strengthens my body and sharpens my mind. Suffering is one of the results of doing endurance sports, especially when you drive as hard as I do, and that is both good and bad. I like it that I am intense about life, but I also know that there is a downside—“tense” is part of the word “intense.” Isn’t it true, I tell myself, that in nature, tension is everywhere. It pushes, pulls, and ultimately balances life in harmony.

The Long Trail was not all harmony. When Deb and I first stepped onto the Pine Cobble Trail in Williamstown, Massachusetts, where the Long Trail starts, I had no idea how difficult an end-to-end hike of the Long Trail could be. We hike fast. The Long Trail succeeded in slowing us down, and I’m grateful for it because in addition to humbling me, that hike has now shaped me for the future. End-to-end hiking the LT has become so much a part of me that I rarely go a day without thinking about it.

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The genesis of our LT trip came during a drive home from the White Mountains in the late-summer of 2004. We spent most of our spare time in 2003 and 2004 hiking the forty-eight New Hampshire 4,000-footers. We were close to completing our quest and, characteristically, we were thinking ahead to the next one. Deb and I knew that we wanted to eventually hike all sixty-seven of the New England 4,000-footers, so that meant we would be hiking in Vermont and Maine when we were finished with New Hampshire. Maine is so far from where we live in Connecticut that we figured that we

would turn first to Vermont. I mentioned that all five of the Vermont peaks over 4,000 feet were on the Long Trail. Within a moment, we started planning the hike.

We finished our New Hampshire forty-eight on January 1, 2005, and shifted into LT preparation mode. June and July were already filling up with a business trip, a wedding in Canada, and a three-day adventure bike race for which I was training. I told Deb to go ahead and plan the trip—but that we had to hike the 272-plus miles in two weeks.

Several Excel spreadsheets later, we had a plan. It was aggressive—close to twenty miles a day, on average—but we figured that we could do it. We talked to a friend who went end-to-end in fourteen days with his father. We read guidebooks, and we did research on the Internet. A month before the trip, an important business meeting came up, leaving us only thirteen days to do the LT. We updated the spreadsheet, tacking a few miles onto most days.

Because Deb routinely runs trail ultra-marathons (often fifty miles or more) and I ride a mountain bike and run on trails, we thought that doing



*Deb wears a headlamp in Brandon Gap before the nighttime push up Mt. Horrid.*

SCOTT LIVINGSTON

the Long Trail in less than two weeks would be no problem. I even figured on extra time to explore and take pictures.

We were wrong. Completely wrong. Trail running has little to do with hiking with a full pack. I had visions of averaging three miles an hour. We ended up averaging two miles an hour, slogging from dawn to dark, and often hiking with our headlamps. Even wandering off-trail one-tenth of a mile became a mental blow; any time we were not headed north, I got mad. We talked about our feet for hours on end. They were in tough shape with all of the rain that we had. Imagine taking a ten-hour hike while in a bathtub. You get the picture? We learned that skin is darn tough, but not tough enough to withstand the combination of moisture and friction that we experienced.

### **Photographs—in the Mind**

And though I shot nearly 300 photographs, it was exhausting to apply the focus necessary for anything more than snapshots. I had no time to note the conditions, aperture, or film speed. We had to move! By the end of the trip, the camera spent most of the day in my pack, and I missed some great shots.

As we hiked, we had no idea how we would get home at the end. Our intended pick-up had fallen through, and we had started with no return plan.



*Deb works her way toward the top of Camel's Hump.* SCOTT LIVINGSTON

I had to get home for that business meeting. That was a stressor I would have preferred not to have, but we just had to deal with it. We crossed the Canadian border in North Troy, Vermont, on the afternoon of Saturday, July 9. The last day of the trip was the coldest and wettest. We left Hazen's Notch Camp at 3:15 A.M. and shivered our way over Jay Peak and the final miles to the northern terminus. For several days, we had been closing in on two other end-to-enders. We knew this from the trail register inscriptions and the news we got from southbound hikers. Figuring that this was our best chance for a ride, we pushed like heck to catch them.

Unfortunately, we came up short. We ended up hiking a couple extra miles on Journey's End Road toward town until we reached the first house. A kind neighbor allowed us to use their phone to call for a ride. He offered us each a soda, which we both accepted. It was my first soda in eleven years, but I did not care. Our ride took us to Newport, where we rented a motel room. Deb's mother, Barbara, saved the day. She picked us up and I drove the three of us home. Our four-hour motel stay was my briefest ever, but the hot shower was worth it.

Our shortest day was 18.9 miles and our longest was 26.4. We hiked eleven to fifteen hours every day and stayed at shelters every night. Carrying a tent would have meant extra weight. Deb's pack weighed 23 pounds empty and



*Ziploc bags come in handy. Deb crests Jays Peak on the cold, wet final day.* SCOTT LIVINGSTON

32 when loaded with food and water. Mine was 28 and 38. For the most part, we only brought what we needed and opted for lightweight gear wherever we could. We learned some lessons about gear on the trail. For example, cheap plastic bottles are lighter than Nalgene. We learned a few tricks “for the next time” from Appalachian Trail thru-hikers and LT end-to-enders. We learned how to make an ultra-light alcohol-fueled aluminum-can stove, which would have been even lighter than our Jetboil. Our choice in footwear had more in common with running shoes than boots, but next time, we would take flip-flops rather than our heavier Chaco sandals to wear in camp. There were no luxuries, but there were some items, like more socks and underwear, which we wish we had taken. I don’t regret carrying my manual rangefinder camera, one lens, and eight rolls of film. We sent food boxes ahead to the Inn at the Long Trail in Killington and the U.S. Post Office in Jonesville, but we wanted more food. We burned many more calories than our calculations predicted.

We are proud of our end-to-end accomplishment, and not because we had to do it so fast. For anyone contemplating an LT end-to-end hike, we suggest taking the recommended twenty to thirty days. We met fellow hikers who planned to be on the trail for that long, and they were equally enthused with what each day brought them. We also would advise that you pack a lot more food than we did. We had run completely out of food hours before each of our food pickups, and again at the end of the trail. We had to tightly ration food the whole time. We cut it close. Being short on food was part of the adventure, but in hindsight, it would have been nicer to be a little more comfortable. Before the hike, after reading about someone who hiked the LT “alpine style,” we toyed with the idea of going without food drops or re-supply, but we concluded that this was a hike and not a race. We race enough during the rest of the year.

The Green Mountain Club does a tremendous job with trail maintenance, and the people we met on the trail were great. Some were caretakers, some were end-to-enders, and others were just out for the day.

People we tell about our hike are surprised to learn that Deb and I hiked it as a duo, with no one else for company. They marvel at the thought of a husband and wife spending so much time together on the trail. To them, it seems so primal. They do not know that I prefer my adventures with Deb to any other type. Each of us has an inner fire that spurs the other. Hiking the LT in only thirteen days was the hardest physical thing that she and I have ever done. It was harder than the toughest multi-day race. Two weeks of constant suffering was over the top. Fortunately, we were together and able to help

## The Livingstons' 2005 Long Trail End-to-End Hike

Date	Destination	Starting/Ending Times	LT Miles	Total Miles
June 26	Southern Terminus	2:50 P.M./5:20 P.M.	0	4.3
June 26	Seth Warner Shelter	5:20 P.M./6:30 P.M.	2.8	2.8
June 27	Goddard Shelter	6:05 A.M./6:10 P.M.	21.6	22.2
June 28	Stratton Pond Shelter	7 A.M./5:15 P.M.	19.4	19.8
June 29	Peru Peak Shelter	5:30 A.M./5:45 P.M.	20.4	20.4
June 30	Minerva Hinchey Shelter	8:10 A.M./7:15 P.M.	19.6	19.6
July 1	Inn at the Long Trail	6:15 A.M./5:50 P.M.	20.1	20.1
July 2	Sucker Brook Shelter	8:15 A.M./11:15 P.M.	25.3	26.4
July 3	Battell Shelter	7:50 A.M./11:10 P.M.	23.6	23.7
July 4	Montclair Glen Lodge	6:15 A.M./7:45 P.M.	20.4	20.4
July 5	Buchanan Shelter	6:15 A.M./6:30 P.M.	18.6	18.9
July 6	Watson Camp	6 A.M./7:45 P.M.	19.9	20.3
July 7	Corliss Camp	6:15 A.M./7:20 P.M.	22.7	22.8
July 8	Hazen's Notch Camp	6:15 A.M./6:45 P.M.	21.1	21.2
July 9	Northern Terminus	3:15 A.M./2:45 P.M.	17.2	17.3
July 9	Journey's End Road	2:45 P.M./3:30 P.M.	0	2.8
<b>Totals</b>			<b>272.7</b>	<b>283</b>

each other when things were going badly. By the end of the second week, we were walking for hours without exchanging words, and it was in that silence that our bond grew stronger.

We recovered from the fatigue and sore muscles; the bruises, scratches, and rashes healed. Eventually the bottoms of our feet returned to normal. We stowed the gear, and the stench in our sleeping bags may or may not subside. Recently, we were hosting a party with some friends and family at our house. It was finally time to hang the Long Trail map and the end-to-end certificates we had framed. Nailing the certificates to the wall of our house triggered all kinds of LT memories. We recalled the scorching heat wave that kicked off the hike; "Hillbilly" and his warning about the Glastenbury Shelter privy; horrible thunderstorms; heavy rain that wrecked our feet; "Boom Boom" and his delicious granola; our friend Matt's showing up on the trail with dessert; the mess made by the menthol Gold Bond powder I salvaged from a hiker



*On the summit of Mt. Killington, a short detour off the LT.* SCOTT LIVINGSTON

box; and our lunch with the Jonesville postmaster.

It was truly a great adventure—and maybe not in spite of, but because of the heat, humidity, thunderstorms, mosquitoes, black flies, mud, and lack of food. These were low points, but also highlights, depending on your perspective. Thoughts of the LT pop into my head all of the time. Whether I am in our kitchen, at work, or back on a different trail, the vivid images of our two weeks together fill my thoughts. Any mud puddle triggers thoughts of the miserable condition that our feet were in for much of the time. But there were so many moments of joy that they diminish the moments of despair. I am certain that some of the details of our journey will fade with time but that the joy of hiking the Long Trail as a couple will remain with us forever. The weather, trail conditions, and other elements really tested us, but Deb and I both have a stronger marriage because we went through this together.

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SCOTT LIVINGSTON is president and CEO of Horst Engineering, a sixty-year-old East Hartford, Connecticut, manufacturer. When not battling the business cycle, he makes time to run, bike, kayak, hike, and, occasionally, write. He and his wife, Debbie, are members of the AMC Board of Advisors and live in Bolton, Connecticut.