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 **Thru-Hiking**

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ARTICLE

[View Citation](#)**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

THRU-HIKING/Enc Lupfer Gentian Pond Shelter, New Hampshire ON THE TRAIL, you hear about Ward Leonard long before you meet him. At the Gentian Pond the Yankee Buckeye told us, "Ward's jumped into shelters at one in the morning, shelters where he knew there were other thru-hikers, and yelled, 'You're not gonna make it! You don't have what it takes!'" The Yankee Buckeye shook his fist in the air, miming Ward's rage. "What's his trail name?" I asked. "He's a legend. He doesn't believe in them." This was on a gray evening in mid-July. That day we'd covered seventeen miles, mostly in rain—from Speck Pond in Maine, south through the Mahoosuc Notch (a narrow gorge of utility-shed-sized boulders, reputed to be the hardest mile on the Trail), then up and over three bare peaks and, finally, one marsh-covered bald. At some point in the late afternoon we'd walked out of Maine. Now, at dusk and in New Hampshire, my feet felt swollen and bruised. I stretched, then forced down two quarts of water. Kerry started the stove for dinner. The Yankee Buckeye sat with us before the shelter, looking at maps. He was a wiry man in his early sixties and had the crisp, neat appearance of an elf. He'd spent his past two summers on the Trail, he told us, hiking north in sections.

Clingmans Dome to the Shenandoahs, the Shenandoahs to Harpers Ferry. This was the last leg of his hike—"next stop, Katahdin," he said—so he began asking us detailed questions about the Trail ahead, noting our answers in the margins of his own copy of the Thru-Hiker's Handbook. What was the grocery like in Monson, Maine? (A general store, with little choice and high prices.) What exactly was the ferry service for thru-hikers crossing the Kennebec River? (A cheerful hippie with a canoe.) Was there any section where he might be able to do a thirty-mile day? (One, where the Trail skirts a series of lakes in central Maine.) The evening air was heavy and still. Kerry mixed tuna in with our noodles. The Yankee Buckeye stayed with us as we ate and resumed his stories about Leonard, oblivious to our growing impatience. Ward had hiked more miles on the Trail than anyone else, we learned. He'd once thru-hiked in sixty days and, in 1991, thru-hiked three times in one year. "And he covers his skin completely, even in the worst summer heat. Ski mask, rain gear, gloves. Doesn't want himself seen." The Missouri Review · 34 Kerry gave me a suspicious look, which I returned. Both of us firmly believed that a thru-hike required seriousness of purpose, a commitment to what the Handbook calls the "personal journey of exploration and discovery." These Ward Leonard stories were slightly offensive—tall tales, motivated by envy, the exaggerations of a blowhard attracted to the Trail for its gossip and chummy, frat-boy community. The Yankee Buckeye smiled, perhaps at our silence. He said reassuringly, "But he's way ahead of you guys. I saw him a month ago heading south." Our direction, too. The following morning I woke at sunrise and watched the Yankee Buckeye packing up. Like me, he used an internal frame backpack. He stuffed his sleeping bag into a nylon sack the size of a coffee can, fit it tightly into the pack's bottom compartment, then laid the pack out in the space where he had slept. He travelled light. He bagged his stove, jacket, and extra socks in separate Ziplocs and squeezed the air out of each. His Snickers bars and wool hat went into an outer pocket. He balanced his water bottles on opposite sides of the pack and arranged everything not immediately necessary for the next ten hours of walking deep in the main compartment. He fastened the outside straps of the pack, put it on, shrugged, and took it off again to move one of the water bottles closer to the center. When I woke again, his pack hung from one of the pegs...

THRU-HIKING / *Eric Lupfer*

Centian Pond Shelter, New Hampshire

ON THE TRAIL, you hear about Ward Leonard long before you meet him. At the Centian Pond the Yankee Buckeye told us, "Ward's jumped into shelters at one in the morning, shelters where he knew there were other thru-hikers, and yelled, 'You're not gonna make it! You don't have what it takes!'" The Yankee Buckeye shook his fist in the air, miming Ward's rage.

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