

The SST Wings Again!

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My friends joke that I always introduce myself as the President of the Standing Stone Trail (SST) Club as we come across hikers when running the local trails. However, it is not a way to brag, but a means of introducing people to the trail and to let them know that I can answer any questions. My first experience on the trail was in 2013 when I took my son section hiking on the northern half of the trail. That fall I attended a meeting and was Vice President before I knew it. Since then, I have met so many awesome volunteers who make the trail possible and these men and women taught me much more than just trail work. Their collective years on the trail have allowed me to learn more about local history, ecology of the forest, and our responsibility for stewardship.

Like most volunteer organizations, the SST Club faces the challenge of recruiting members to carry on its mission through the generations. So last year, I volunteered to be President and started to think about doing something to call attention to the trail. The trail is pretty well known within the hiking community, but given that I run trails, I thought it would be a great idea to establish a Fastest Known Time for the trail running community. Trail running is a niche sport that is sometimes seen as not really running by road runners and just stupid by many others. The idea is you carry as little as possible to run, hike, climb the trails, and with a good understanding of your limits, a person can travel very far. So, given my ability to trail run and wanting to promote the trail, it was natural that I decided to run the whole 84 miles of the SST.

The big run was scheduled for the Saturday of Memorial Day weekend and I had it all planned out. I would go southbound from the northern terminus in Rothrock State Forest where the trail meets the Mid State Trail. From there, I would stash ten kitty litter buckets with supplies along the way that include some water, food, and other essentials. Also, I would start in the evening so to do the northern section in the dark as I know it best and finish at the southern terminus at Cowans Gap State Park the following evening at about 24 hours later.

The day of the run, I was all ready to go and spent a good part of the day leading up to the start placing the buckets. At about 6 PM, things started off fine with an easy jog to Alan Seeger Natural Area, over Broad Mountain, through Greenwood Furnace State Park, and up Stone Mountain when night set in. Stone Mountain is aptly named as it is brutal at times with the terrain, even though the trail club has leveled a couple miles of rocks. However, I made it through there and past Rocky Ridge Natural Area and on to State Game Lands 112 where I remember running as startled coyotes yipped and barked at me. Soon I crossed Rt. 655 in the middle of the night and up Jacks Mountain. On top of the mountain, tiredness set in and my pace dropped to a slow trudge. As I made my way to the Thousand Steps, doubt became real and by the bottom, I knew that I did not want to continue for another 48 miles when a simple phone call home would have my wife pick me up in just 15 minutes. So, I quit and never looked back.

Each year I like to do a big adventure and for 2020, I decided to go West and run the Black Hills 100 in Sturgis, South Dakota. The mild winter allowed my training to progress without interruption and excitement was building when I bought my flight and booked all the travel in February. Of course, we all know what happens next as coronavirus becomes a thing and all events are cancelled. I kept up the running and even ran the SST from Allensville Road to Three Springs one day for 42 miles. Another "virtual" event was announced to run 57

miles on the Mid State Trail from RB Winter State Park to Little Pine State Park in May, which I did without much problem. My next thought was to visit my brother in Vermont to run some of the Long Trail as I kept seeing his beautiful pictures on social media, but the virus made it difficult to consider travelling. Then one day, my wife suggested that I give the SST another shot.

This was an exciting idea because I do love the trail, and with the experience of last year, it would totally be doable. Soon I was setting up an Excel spreadsheet and plotting out a new adventure. I figured what better day to do the run than the day of the Black Hills 100 was supposed to occur, June 26. Also considering last year, I still would do the northern section at night but wanted to end with it. That meant starting at Cowans Gap in the early morning and going northbound, which I thought would be easier given the climbs seem less intense on most of the mountains going north. Thinking back to the 57-mile run on the Mid State Trail a month earlier, I used two buckets spaced 20 miles apart and found it to be fine. So, this time around the plan was to use four buckets and space them out by decreasing distances. It would be 26 miles to the first, 20 miles to the second, 18 miles to the third, 13 miles to the fourth, and 7 miles to the finish. With a plan in place, I was all ready for my second attempt.

The evening of Friday, June 25, I placed my buckets and woke at 3:30 AM the following morning. My wife dropped me off at Cowans Gap and I was able to start just before 6 AM, which would allow me to finish about the same time the next morning. My running was cautious as I made my way up Cove Mountain and soon the run turned to a scramble over the rocks. Cove Mountain is also plagued by invasive plants like Mile-a-Minute, Japanese Stiltgrass, and Multiflora Rose which slowed me down too. Next, I came off the ridge, down past Vanderbilt's Folly, and out on Rt. 522. Then, I was back into the forest going near Monument Rock and towards Locke Valley Road as the day started to get hot. My original plan was to resupply water along the way from the various springs and streams and before coming to Meadow Gap, I found a great place to fill up so to make the next 6 miles of road running bearable.

After coming into Three Springs, I met my first bucket and took ten minutes to eat some real food and resupply my pack. The fruit cup was so good, and I grabbed a Slim Jim, chips, and a sandwich for the next section that goes to Mapleton. Coming off of Rt. 829, the trail follows the game lands road up the hill for two miles. It was a slow walk in the middle of the afternoon, but soon I was back into the forest going around Hooper's Gap and headed to Deeter Spring for more water. At the spring, I met three hikers who kindly let me step in before them to resupply. With a hello and goodbye, I was off and headed towards Butler's Knob. There I saw a juvenile black snake and wondered if I would have the chance to see a rattlesnake during my run. The trail took me past Silver Mine Knob, over the pipelines, and out Jacks Mountain before descending down Scrub Run and into Mapleton. Water was again an issue as I didn't realize how dry June has been, but I was fortunate to find enough at various spots that I only ran out as I came to my next drop spot at Bill Plummer's place.

Bill is one of the friendliest people and enjoys the outdoors in many of the same ways that I do. When I contacted Bill about leaving my bucket at his place versus along Oriskany Road, I knew he would say yes, and this was important because it is at about the midpoint and I had to prepare for night. I sat in my chair to change my socks, ate some food, and chatted with Bill as he drank an iced tea. I also pulled out my head lamp, refilled the water, and packed some energy shots in preparation for tiredness to later set in. Then I was off and soon climbing the Thousand Steps. I've done the steps dozens of times before but this time I had to remind myself to stay measured and not rush. After getting to the top, I made my way out the dinky grades and then to the top of Jacks Mountain as darkness surrounded me. The top of Jacks Mountain is covered by Hay Scented Ferns which encroach on the trail to the point of choking it out. Wading through the ferns slows you down given the hidden rocks underneath and at night, it is even more of a challenge. With going slower than I wanted, I noticed that again water would be an issue, and of course, there is no water on top of a

mountain. Even once I descend, there is only one spot at a culvert that might have water and after there, I wasn't sure about clean water until north of Rt. 655. Luckily the culvert was good enough and I had water to make it down to Rt. 655 and up into the state game lands.

My third bucket was located at the end of Frew Road before Rocky Ridge Natural Area which I arrived at just before 1 AM. I figured that I have 20 miles to go to finish, which should take 6 or 7 hours, and with another bucket at Greenwood Furnace, I was all set. I didn't delay in getting started, ran through Rocky Ridge Natural Area, and then started the long climb up Stone Mountain. As I was climbing, I could feel more of the warm wind and even a light mist. As I passed Allensville Road, I thought that the only real challenge left is to cross Stone Mountain. After that, it is just up and over Broad Mountain, which is much easier, and then a short run to Detweiler Run Natural Area where the trail ends. As I started, my pace was slow from being tired but also because the rocks were a little wet. Soon I was past the Hawk Watch platform and to Little Vista where the leveled rocks stop. Coming on to the unleveled rocks would be the hardest thing left to do especially as I had to make sure each step was safe while trying to find the orange blazes at night. Things were slow, but forward progress was being made.

Everything was going great and I intended to be at Greenwood Furnace at about 6 AM and finish around 8 AM. I knew that the rocks would be level again around Pole Trail and then near Turkey Tail before descending into Greenwood Furnace, which would allow me to speed up. Soon I saw three leveled rocks and was excited to know that I would get a respite from the unleveled rocks. As I passed them, it was about 4:15 AM and daylight would be coming in about an hour or so. Next, I climbed a large rock outcropping and noticed thunder all the sudden and it started to rain. Given that I was on top of an exposed spot, I climbed down a bit to wait out the rain. It began to pour, and lightening raced across the sky. I stood there with my head lamp on, staring into the rain, and thinking it should soon pass. Then fog began to roll in, which is the Achilles heel of a head lamp. At this point, I was stuck in the rain and could not see where to go. After waiting until about 5 AM, I thought my only option was to continue forward as I am familiar with the terrain and could find the blazes. So, after stumbling across a blaze and then another, I soon found the leveled rocks that lead to Pole Trail. After a short walk, I was out to Pole Trail, where I knew that I was safe. So then came the necessary self-assessment of can I finish without getting hurt or worst. After more than an hour of pouring rain, I was wet, cold, and shivering. Also, the next couple of miles were unleveled rocks and they were slippery, which meant very slow going. Once at Greenwood Furnace I could resupply, but with something like 14 miles to go to the finish, I had to wonder if it would even be fun anymore.

So, I called home and asked my wife what I should do. I said that I came 70 miles and know that I can finish another 14 and hung up. Soon I called back and asked her to come get me. It was a sound adventure, but Mother Nature intervened to bring my trip to a sound halt. It wasn't worth putting myself in danger of hypothermia or getting hurt from a slip. Plus, the SST wore me down the first time at about 35 miles and so I had 70 on her this time. Next time, I will finish, and the one thing that is for sure is I have much respect for the trail.