

## Not the AT, the CT is Different

Thanks to Bill Smith

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Hey everyone! I thru-hiked the Trail last year (July 3 to August 2, 2021) coming from the East Coast with zero experience hiking out West and at altitude, and I wanted to offer similar East Coast hikers a few tips that I wish I would have known. For context: I live in Pennsylvania at 700 feet above sea level, this was my first major thru-hike, and hiking the Trail was my very first time out West. Let’s just say: It was a rude (but amazing) awakening. I hope this is helpful to at least a few of you! The CT was one of the best experiences of my life, and you will soon know why!

1. Take the heat/sun seriously. I grew up in Florida and can say without doubt: The Colorado sun in July/August was the most intense dry heat I’ve experienced. Much of the Trail runs through high desert—a term that simply doesn’t exist out East—and the sun will bake you if you’re not prepared. Sometimes there isn’t shade for literally miles. I wore a sun hood, trail-running cap, sunglasses, and shorts, but I would probably add sun gloves and would even consider pants if I hiked the Trail again. Maybe even an umbrella. SPF lip balm is also a lifesaver out there. And hydration is critical—3L of capacity worked fine for me but might not be enough for later in August/September when water sources dry up.
2. Take the cold seriously. July nights in Pennsylvania are in the high 70s and humid—in other words, hot AF. And I never worry about hypothermia in the Pennsylvania summer, even if it rains. Not so on the CT. It dropped into the low 40s, and sometimes high 30s, every night on the Trail in July. And the wind at night sometimes made it feel even colder, particularly above 12,000 feet. The cold is just different in Colorado. I was comfortable with a 30-degree quilt, but I sleep hot, so prepare accordingly. Perhaps more important, prepare for really cold rain and hail. I was amazed at how quickly the temperature would plummet, sometimes into the 40s midday up high even after a baking-hot day, with cloud cover, rain, and hail. Without proper rain gear, hypothermia is 100% possible. A solid rain jacket is obviously a necessity (I can’t recommend the Lightheart Gear silpoly jacket enough)—but I also think rain pants/skirt and rain mitts are critical as well (some may disagree, but I was really, really glad I had them above treeline). I also recommend a fleece midlayer, since they breathe well, dry quickly, and work great when paired with a rain jacket (the Kuiu Peloton is insanely good)—a puffy, in contrast, soaks up moisture, making it a less-than-ideal active layer.
3. Take the altitude seriously. Before the CT, the highest I had ever been above sea level was 6,000 feet. And the term “treeline” was just a vague concept to me. The CT’s average is over 10,000 feet and it tops out close at 13,271, as I’m sure you know. Stated simply: That’s really, really high for we East Coast, flat-landers. Don’t underestimate it. I recommend looking ahead a few days on Guthook (FarOut now I guess?) or in the CT Databook to see how high you’ll be going in the coming days and for how many miles you’ll be at altitude/above treeline. (Treeline varies but is usually around 11,500 feet.) If it’s a new altitude that you haven’t experienced

before, try going really slowly and evaluating how your body is reacting to it every few steps. If anything feels off—crazy headaches, out-of-control breathing, abnormally fast heartbeat—go even slower and let your body adjust. And if it gets really bad, find a way to descend as quickly as possible. I had serious trouble with the altitude in Segment 7, right after Breckenridge, and it almost ruined my hike—I was simply moving too fast up the mountain, thinking I was acclimated when, later I learned, that I clearly wasn't. Anything above 12,000 feet was somewhat challenging for me. Eventually, I had no issues, but I learned a valuable lesson pretty early on: Go slow if you're new to high-altitude hiking. It's not a race.

4. Take the storms seriously. Finally, like the Colorado cold at night, the Colorado storms in the afternoons are just different. It rained hard, like clockwork, every afternoon for me on the Trail, often with serious lightning and hail. Sometimes, storms would come seemingly out of nowhere—and you can't "outrun" them. It wasn't too bad at lower elevations, but it was a serious challenge above treeline in 2021 (usually around 12,000 feet). It has been said a million times, but start hiking early and try to get down lower by noon. I got caught in a lightning storm at 12,600 feet in the San Juans, and let me just say: It was petrifying. The sky was blue lower, and we couldn't see the clouds until it was too late. Above treeline, there is simply nowhere to hide, sometimes for miles and miles, so plan ahead. Learn about how lightning works and how best to mitigate the risks. David Fanning shared an excellent article on this page that really helped me to understand the risks.

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Have a blast! And don't quit on the hardest day--you've got this!