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Rails to Trails of Central PA Inc.

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## **HIKE YOUR WAY THROUGH 2022: 5 SIMPLE STEPS TO ENJOY A WALK IN THE WOODS & KEEP IT SAFE DURING THE PANDEMIC**

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As we move into 2022 amidst another surge in COVID infections nationwide, our resilience continues to be tested. This last couple of years have been stressful. The global COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on physical and mental health, social relationships and more.

As the worldwide pandemic continues, many folks are discovering or re-discovering the gift of exploring on public land. With proper social distancing, and masking, spending time exploring the outdoors on public land – hiking - can be a safe way to connect with loved ones and the natural world.

Whether you are a beginner hiker, or getting back out there for the first time in a while, this guide will give you some simple steps to enjoy hiking safely during the pandemic and at any time.

### **HIKING IS FOR EVERY BODY**

Hiking - the act of walking for a generally unspecified amount of time, usually on unpaved trails on public lands - can be for almost everybody.

In fact, accessible trails and adaptable programs in many communities and tools will assist you in your goal of enjoying public lands and spaces through hiking, even if walking is not possible or poses a challenge for you or a loved one. The important thing is to plan ahead, be safe, and stay within your comfort zone.

You don't need to live near a park or public forest to hike. "Urban hiking," which is the act of walking through a city, just for the sake of walking through a city, is also an option!

### **GETTING STARTED IS EASIER THAN YOU THINK**

Never considered yourself a hiker but ready to give it a try? Maybe you haven't been in the woods in decades but want to get back out there, or you are more hesitant to get outside without a group of experienced friends? This guide serves as a reminder that hitting the trails can be easy with just a little bit of planning.

Hiking these days can also certainly be serious business - with long distance hiking, thru hiking and speed hiking all regularly in the outdoor recreation news.

Most of us are still just out for a fun afternoon walk or weekend wander, loving the chance to disconnect, get some exercise, reconnect with the natural world, and just take a closer look at the real world with our family.

### **STEP 1: PICK YOUR PLACE**

Finding the right place for your first hike is the first step. Ask around in your local online community about great places for beginning hikers to explore; check out our [Purple Lizard Adventure Blog](#), or contact your local outdoor shop or outfitter for some suggestions. You may find that state or local park websites are a good place to find useful information (State Parks often have accessible trails perfect for beginners). As you look for your hiking location, it is a good idea to choose a place with several options, so if you get to your destination and it seems too busy, you can head on down the road to the next trailhead until you find one without a crowd. Finding a trail without lots of other people is not only a good idea in a pandemic, but makes for much more pleasant hiking in general. Your Purple Lizard Map will always be a great help - it's basically Plan B in your back pocket. Make sure you know what the latest closure and opening info is for the area you plan to hike - some parks will have limited services and there is a chance important options like public restrooms are closed. Our COVID resource page has helpful links to keep you in the know about the forests we map.

### **STEP 2: DECIDE WHETHER TO HIKE WITH OTHERS OR ALONE**

When you are just getting started, it's always best to go with a buddy. Of course, in today's situation around the globe, it may be best to limit your hiking partner to housemates and immediate family members. If you do choose to go out with a non-household group as a way to reconnect, there are some things you can do to keep safe.

**Don't Forget to Mask Up and Keep Your Distance.** Even if you go it alone and hike in a place where you don't expect to see others, it you may want to have your mask with you in case you find yourself in close proximity to others.

The CDC still recommends limiting your group size and keeping a 6-foot minimum distance from each other and wearing masks. While this may feel strange at first, it is actually a very common practice for experienced hikers to hike some distance apart from each other. By hiking apart, each hiker can absorb the sights and sounds of the natural world around them and take in the views while still feeling safe and secure.

Whether you are alone or with someone else, be sure to start with short hikes to known areas within your fitness level and where you can easily get help if you need it. Remember, walking in the woods is more challenging than walking on flat surfaces, and mileage is not a measure of difficulty. Some short hikes go straight up the side of a mountain, so study your map and choose wisely.

### STEP 3: GIVE YOURSELF PLENTY OF TIME AND NOTIFY YOUR FRONT COUNTRY BUDDY

**Take your time!** Don't hike on a tight schedule. Part of the beauty of being out in the woods is creating some spaciousness in your life. Be sure to leave yourself a few hours cushion so you can stop and smell the roses during your hike, rest as needed, and enjoy the experience.

**Let someone know where you are:** Every outdoor enthusiast needs a 'front country buddy' - a reliable and trusted friend who doesn't go out on adventures with you, but will notice if you don't come home in time - and will call the proper authorities if needed. Always tell your front country buddy when you're leaving, where you're going, and when you're expected to return home.

### STEP 4: GEARING UP - KEEP IT SIMPLE

**Clothing and Footwear:** Serious long distance thru-hikers these days are shattering speed records every year; and tons of fancy, high-tech, ultra-light hiking and backpacking gear is available to keep these folks breaking records. With all of this kind of media attention, one would think that everyone is a hardcore thru-hiker with hundreds of dollars in high tech gear.

But don't be fooled by all the gear hype, while there are lots of great technical advantages to hiking clothing these days, you don't have to go out and spend hundreds of dollars on your beginning hiking wardrobe. You already have everything you need.

Keep it simple and follow these general guidelines to start. In winter, wear layers and carry a small pack so you can remove some clothing when overheating, but continue to stay warm by adding layers during breaks. Shorts and a t-shirt will work fine for some hikes in summer, but long pants and long sleeves are even better at protecting you from the sun, insects, and thorny plants.

You will definitely want a pair of comfortable shoes with good traction. Street shoes in winter or flip-flops in summer may be fine for a walk in the park but out on the trail it's better to have more protection for your toes and a sturdy sole with some tread for stability for walking on loose surfaces.

### STEP 5: BRING A MAP AND SOME ESSENTIAL SAFETY GEAR

Grab a backpack that is comfortable - nothing fancy is needed - an old schoolbag will work just fine to start. Even for relatively short hikes, the safe way to hike is to bring along some basic supplies. Fill it with **a bottle or two of water** (staying hydrated is very important), **some snacks, a flashlight, and any first-aid gear that you may need** (think prescription meds, band-aids for blisters and an epi-pen if you have a serious allergy to bees).

Most importantly, **bring a map** of your local area and know how to use it!

**Hikers use real maps for a reason.** Remember, your cell phone is usually not the best and certainly not the only tool to rely on when it comes to hiking. Cell phones don't work everywhere, and even cell-phone map apps that don't rely on data won't help you if your phone is lost, wet, or dead.

What kind of map do you need? Many state parks provide paper maps, and paper maps work fine on sunny days (be aware they will quickly disintegrate in the rain), guidebooks work great as long as they're not out-of-date (note: trails tend to change every few years and guidebooks are often out of date).

Accurate, waterproof maps are, hands down, your best resource. That's where we come into the equation. Although no map is perfect and the natural world is constantly changing, Purple Lizard Maps are updated frequently, and they are completely waterproof, so you can use them to get out of the woods quickly when that unexpected summer rainstorm starts to dump on you. Don't forget, no matter where you hike or with whom, pull out your map to verify your location frequently - especially at all trail intersections.

### REMEMBER: KEEP IT FUN!

One of the best things about getting outside is slowing down and appreciating where you are, and having some fun! Taking your journey into the world of hiking step by step and enjoying yourself is always the best way to go.

*You Might Also Enjoy These Lizard Blogs*

[How to read a Lizard Map](#)

[Anatomy of a Daypack](#)

[Winter Hiking with Kids, Tips and Tricks](#)

[Chasing Lizards: How to Plan a Spontaneous Family Outing](#)

### ENJOY RAILS TO TRAILS, EVEN IN THE SNOW:

*By Bob Richers*

The winter of 2020-2021 has ample snowfall for the outdoor enthusiasts. Some would say it was unusual but to us older folks it was more like the winters of our youth. The snowfalls so far this year thru early January have been followed up with heavy rain creating slush or ice.



Many years back my wife Sue and I purchased cross country skis and headed to local rail trails to enjoy the beauty of the fresh snow-covered environment. When using cross country skis, level trails make for a great outing.

Some of my favorite winter trails are the Lower Trail, Ghost Town Trail, Bells Gap Trail, and the Spring Creek Canyon. Unfortunately, when a set of ski tracks are established on a trail, human nature, which causes the walkers to follow the path of least resistance, damages the ski tracks and with an overnight freeze, makes for a treacherous outing.

For that reason we avoid the more popular sections of the Lower Trail for cross country skiing. Last winter, when dropping off books at the Flowing Spring Little Library I noticed that someone had used a snow blower to clear the left side of the trail for the length of the fence and that the right-side closest to the fence had a perfect set of ski tracks. Needless to say we returned with our skis.



When the snow gets deeper than 6 inches, skiing can get cumbersome. Last year we discovered, when snow shoeing in 10 inches of snow in Prince Gallitzin State Park, a groomed cross country ski trail. As it turns out the park grooms a 7 mile stretch of the Plessinger trail, starting near the main marina out to the far edge peninsula on the Troxell Trail. The grooming equipment is pulled behind a snow mobile which compacts the snow and leaves behind a perfect pair of ski tracks.

It has been 4 years since we added snowshoes to our winter equipment. Some years we hardly get to use them. Last year the snow depth on the mountains totaled over 18 inches. The shoe performed well in the deeper snow and make climbing up and down hills a breeze. Following marked trails in any of the state parks is now possible. Other areas to visit are the bike trails above the Horseshoe Curve and the Tubb Run Trails on State Game lands 108, at gate 27. It is located 1.5 miles beyond the power lines on the Juniata Gap to Dysart road. The parking areas on the game lands and above the Horseshoe Curve usually do not get plowed, so a bigger ATV or pickup truck with a higher wheelbase may be needed to safely pull off the road for parking.

The modern snowshoes are not like your grandad's shoes. They are shorter and lighter. The foot clips are adjustable, and the bottom has an ice clip to keep solid footing when encountering ice. The shoe itself is high strength aluminum tubing with sturdy composite webbing. The 2 poles are easily adjusted which helps keep your arms at a comfortable height, depending on snow depth and the compaction rate. The shoes come in 3 or more weight classifications and if you are on the border of 2 classifications go with the higher limit. Enjoy!

## TREE OF THE MONTH: DAWN REDWOOD

By Dave Despot

Dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) is a hardy, fast growing species with a pyramidal growth habit supported by a single straight trunk. Trees of this species can grow up to 100 feet tall with a 25 foot spread. Dawn redwood trees are typically found in parks, on golf courses, and along streets or boulevards where there is adequate space. Best growth occurs in full sun with adequate moisture.



Leaves are needle-like, deciduous, approximately 1/2 inch long by 1/16 inch wide, opposite in arrangement and dark green on top with a lighter green underside. The leaves (needles) are borne on slender "twigs". Both the needles and "twigs" are shed for the winter, in the same manner that trees with compound leaves shed their leaflets and rachis.

I use quotation marks around the word twigs because true twigs would not be shed for the winter, but would form the base for next year's growth. Tiny buds are paired at the base of the "twigs".

Flowers bloom in the spring, but are small and inconspicuous. Male flowers are borne in stalks, while female flowers are borne alone. Cones are round to oval in shape, about 3/4 of an inch in diameter, mature the first year, and contain small winged seeds. The bark is reddish brown darkening to gray with age, developing shallow fissures with exfoliating strips. The species that you are most likely to confuse dawn redwood with is baldcypress (*Taxodium distichum*). They are easy to tell apart if take a look at the buds. Baldcypress has alternate buds, while dawn redwood has buds that are opposite in arrangement.

The back story associated with dawn redwood is that it is considered a living fossil. Fossil records from the northern United States indicate that trees of this species were alive at the time when dinosaurs roamed the earth. The species was thought to be extinct. In 1941, dawn redwood trees were discovered growing



wild in a rural area of China. It is amazing to think that trees of this species have been growing and reproducing for 50 million years. In 1944 an expedition from Arnold Arboretum visited China and collected seeds which were shared with botanical gardens around the world. It is unlikely that you will find any dawn redwood trees growing along the Lower Trail as it does not seem to have established a wild population in this area.

## SUPPORTING RAILS TO TRAILS IS AS EASY AS; SHOPPING AMAZON.COM.

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You can use this quick link <http://smile.amazon.com/ch/25-1605920> to access Amazon Smiles using RTTCPA as donor recipient.

**Next Newsletter: Election results and Spring Gathering/Raffle information.**

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## CALENDAR OF EVENTS

### MONTHLY BOARD MEETINGS

February 8<sup>th</sup>  
March 8<sup>th</sup>  
June 5<sup>th</sup>

Monthly Board Meeting, 7 PM  
Monthly Board Meeting, 7 PM  
Spring Gathering/Raffle Drawing, more details in the next newsletter

Depending on weather and the Covid-19 numbers. board meetings may be held via zoom and not at the Grannas Station

### KEEP YOUR ADDRESS CURRENT

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**Remember, if your mailing address is Highlighted, your membership is about to expire. Please renew quickly and continue to support Rails-to-Trails. Thank You!**

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