

Trip Report: How Bad Things Happen in the Woods  
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My first overnight hiking trip was pretty much a disaster I suppose, but I partly lucked out a lot on like weather and stuff, and overall lived through it anyway. It never rained, for instance. I learned a lot and did significantly better next time. :-)

A few years ago (five or six? I'm not sure) I got unexpectedly laid off from work, and just on a whim decided to walk to my parents' cabin. The most I'd ever done was like maybe a 12 mile dayhike. I grabbed a knapsack, put in some water, food, an 8x12' plastic tarp to roll up in if it rained, and a knife and pretty much took off at dark. I left at dark because it was about 40 degrees at night, and being this was either the last days of May or the first day or two of June that I did this, I was able to walk totally unbothered by mosquitoes or blackflies. A few hours into the walk, I stepped off the road in a swamp to let a car go by about 2am, and I stepped in a swamp mudhole and soaked my feet. This sucked, but my thinking was "ah, hell, I can deal. Wet feet ain't gonna kill me, are they? No reason to be such a priss about such a little thing, huh?"

They about did kill me, in the idiomatic sense. For one thing, I was wearing cotton socks. I had ALWAYS worn cotton socks all my life. These ones were even about brand new. I happen to remember they had only been worn once previously; they were still nice and fluffy and thick. I had some wicked blisters a dozen or so miles later. Because of this, and not being used to this kind of distance, I only got about 2/3 of the way there by about 9am, and so got off the road (Luce county road 500 just south of the bridge near where it crosses the Two Hearted river, and intersects the east end of Luce 414). It now being daytime and warmer, I simply slept on the ground and put my jacket over my head to keep the bugs off me. Toward late afternoon I woke up again and walked south down 500 intending on taking a right turn to the west on the road that goes in to the Little Two-Hearted Lakes. I had to keep my shoes on because of the gravel road, but my feet were in a serious world of hurt by now. I was hobbling.

I should also mention that it had been literally 10 years or so since I had been this way. Little two-track roads can change a lot in ten years. When I finally found the road that I thought was the one I wanted, I agonized heavily over whether or not it was the right one. Then when finally started down it, I had a sinking feeling it was not.

Nothing looked familiar at all. There were these plentiful, 3 foot deep, 50 foot long wide-as-the road waterholes that I did NOT at all remember in the road. (it had apparently changed a lot since I last knew it) This strangeness was compounded by the fact that it was dark now. My feet were getting worse, and the weather had warmed a bit, so the skeeters were out in good force tonight in this swampy area. Toward daylight, I was most of the way there, but stopped again for a nap, mostly for my feet again. I built a tiny fire for the purpose of making bug repellent smoke and napped within arm's reach of it. When I woke up again around noon, I was out of water except for a few swallows. (Now, I would either have a filter, or I also know of some places in the woods in the area where water runs out of the sides of the hills) I decided the shoes were tearing my feet up way too bad, and opted to go without them. The roads out there are mostly soft sand, possibly with grass in the middle. I did have open bleeding blisters, but it was still somewhat less painful than wearing the shoes and socks. The socks had somehow become rough, abrasive, and literally crunchy after they dried. Very odd.....

I stopped at an abandoned spring house to get some water within a few miles of the cabin in the early afternoon. I was dry. It was cold and good.

I rested for a day, ate, drank to sloshing with water, and then headed back. It was four days for the whole thing. I tried to wash out the socks, thinking the dirt had made them stiff or something, but couldn't really manage to improve them much.

I walked all the way back in one stretch, only wearing the shoes when the ground was mean enough to make it worth how the shoes and raspy socks were tearing away my hide. The only thing of note that was different on the way back was that the last night was very warm, and I walked for miles of the swamp section of the East Tower/Betsy River road in quite possibly the second worst infestation of mosquitoes I have seen. I got back to town thoroughly smeared black and red with dead bugs and blood. When I looked in a mirror at home, it almost looked like I'd made some half-assed effort to apply warpaint or something.

I had to throw those socks away. They started out brand new, and in four days I had ruined them. No matter how many times I washed them, or what soap I used, they remained stiff and hard when dried. That was the point in my life where I stopped buying cotton socks. For a while I only bought wool ones, but have since found that acrylic ones have pretty much the same benefits, and last a lot longer.

Well, pretty much for a lot of reasons, my first attempt was an all-round disaster. My feet were so painful for days... Skeeter bites don't usually bother me much, but from that experience, I first discovered that getting MASSIVELY bitten up by mosquitoes eventually makes the affected areas feel sorta like they've been sunburned for a couple days, though they don't itch past about ten minutes long. My arms and most of my neck and face had this burning feeling from that walk back through the swamp that last night. Since then, I now wear long-sleeved shirts year-round, and carry a headnet in the summer. I've since only gotten that "mosquito burn" effect around my wrists where they get at me between my shirt sleeves and gloves.

I guess I wasn't discouraged because I could readily see what some of the mistakes were that I had made, so I knew they were fixable. In some ways, I had enjoyed the trip, though possibly only out of a perverse sense of accomplishment for having survived :-). I haven't ever done anything since then that was QUITE so clueless, though I've come close. One long walk I took this winter was good competition for that rank, but every time, I learn something else.