



## What to expect on your first group hike

*The following is from the GetHiking! Resource Page on the Great Outdoor Provision Co. website. Find more great tips for hikers just getting started [here](#), as well as tips on where to hike, [here](#).*

Maybe you've taken a short hike or two with a friend. Your friend isn't all that keen on going farther — but you are. Guided hikes are a great opportunity to meet other hikers and discover new trails. Our 42nd Birthday Hike on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail is just such an opportunity. A little guidance to get you through your first guided hike:

### What if I have a last-minute question, or can't find the trailhead?

A hike leader should be willing to share his/her cell number. If it's not posted on the event notice, request it.

### How will I find the trailhead if there's no street address?

Yes, it's surprising, but not many trailheads located out in the wild have street addresses. (Perhaps what is surprising is that many trailheads do; the land manager can request a street address for emergency medical response purposes.) Sometimes a hike leader will provide written directions, sometimes a Google Map, sometimes GPS coordinates. If you're at all uncertain about a trailhead's location, scout it in person beforehand. Remember, part of the reason you're hiking is to shed stress; that won't happen if you're darting about at the last minute trying to track down an elusive trailhead.

### When should I arrive?

Plan to arrive 10 minutes early. This gives you plenty of time to lace your boots, adjust your pack, get your bearings and ...

### How will I identify my group?

First, look around for a group of people clustered together. If there's more than one group, look for identifying features. If they're scantily clad, thin, and wearing running

shoes, that may not be your group. Look for people with day packs, wearing hiking boots and, perhaps most tellingly, leaning on trekking poles.

### **I don't know anyone; I think I'll just get back in the car and —**

Likely, some of the hikers will know one another and may appear cliquish. But there will be others like you. Seek out a fellow single, ask if this is the hiking group, develop your first hiking friend from there.

### **Which one is the hike leader?**

Ideally, the hike leader is the first to arrive and tries to greet each person as they arrive, especially the new faces. Unfortunately, this does not always happen. Ask who the hike leader is, seek her/him out, quickly introduce yourself as a beginner — “quickly,” because the hike leader has an entire flock to attend to pre-hike. That quick intro is important, though: it identifies you as a sheep who might need extra attention.

### **Who are all these people?**

Again, ideally, the hike leader will ask everyone to briefly identify themselves: name, where you're from, maybe a quick fact, like your last hike or your favorite hike. It's a good opportunity to identify yourself as a newcomer; hopefully, a veteran will make an effort to sidle up and make you feel welcome. And, you'll be able to identify the other first-timers who might be in need of a hiking companion.

### **I ... I don't think I can part with my smart phone.**

Nor should you — just make sure you switch to Airplane Mode. You'll want the phone's camera to record your adventure and, from a safety standpoint, you'll want your phone should an emergency arise.

### **Whoa! This trail isn't like my local greenway.**

No, it's not. First-time hikers are often surprised by the condition of most trails, especially a well-loved trail in a well-loved park in or near a metro area. Umstead State Park in Raleigh, for instance, sees about a million and a half visitors a year. The most popular trail is Company Mill, and the first mile of this trail, down to Crabtree Creek, is the most heavily traveled section of the trail. As a result, it has become eroded from a steady flow of hikers trampling the path: hiking Company Mill is a steeplechase, of sorts, as you're constantly hurdling exposed tree roots and rocks. Your desire is to take in the scenery, but there's a strong demand that you watch the trail. Be prepared.

### **Wait up! *Wait up!***

Now we arrive at the biggest fear for most hikers contemplating a group hike: *I'll be left behind, alone in the woods, relegated to picking berries and harvesting the early-*

*morning dew collected from oak leaves to survive.* Sadly, there's a bit of truth in this. For some, leading a hike is simply an opportunity to not hike alone; their focus is on "their" hike. I make it clear to our GetHiking! hike leaders that when they agree to lead a hike, it is no longer *their* hike: their responsibility is to make sure every hiker is safe and, to the extent possible, enjoying the hike. One of the key ways we follow this directive is by leading our hikes from the rear. At the beginning of each hike, we go over the route (if it involves multiple trails or a large number of confusing spots, we provide a map). Faster hikers can proceed at their own pace, the hike leader sticks with the back of the pack.

We share this to let you know that there are different approaches to leading a hike. If you're uncertain about your hike leader's approach, make sure you have a map of the trail, so that if you do get left behind — "dropped," in the vernacular — you won't have to rely on your berry-identifying skills to survive.

### **Wow! That went fast!**

You weren't sure you could hike four miles — now, at trail's end, you could hike four more. There's a lot at work here: the social element of hiking, the connection to nature (and disconnection from technology), the rare opportunity to free your mind. For most, hiking is an escape, but it's also a chance to push yourself and expand in different ways. Hiking's freeing nature frees us from the doubts we often have about our own capabilities. Three miles today, five miles next weekend. Before long, you might even be thinking the previously unthinkable: hiking the entire 1,175-mile Mountains-to-Sea Trail!