

Beating Bald Eagle Mountain

Story & Photos by David Kagan

Hours into the 2007 endurance hike, my knees buckled on the downhills. The blister on my right sole burned with each step. My calves, quads, and hamstrings all threatened to cramp up. And I asked myself, "Why are you doing this again?"

Yes, why would anyone willingly attempt to traverse 24.9 miles on foot, over mountainous terrain with a 5000-foot elevation gain, and shell out \$50 to do it? Well, I'm really not sure, but I hope to have done it four years in a row once the sun sets on October 4, 2008.

"It" is the Bald Eagle Mountain Megatransect wilderness hike/run, at Lock Haven in Clinton County, Pennsylvania, now in its sixth year. And I and the 599 other participants registered for the 7:00 a.m. start on Saturday, October 4, will, with the sun barely risen and to the sound of the starting horn, stride once again "into the valley of Death" (apologies to Alfred Lord Tennyson).

Besides the daunting enough challenge of just covering almost twenty-five miles on foot in one day, the Megatransect features special obstacles that have made the course one of the most popular in the eastern United States. Entrants in the 2007 running of the event came from nineteen states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico.

After the start on September 29, 2007, at the Castanea Township fire hall picnic grounds by Piper Airport, I jogged slowly on a paved road along Bald Eagle Creek. I then crossed the bridge into Castanea, passed through that small community, and headed east along Youngdale Road.

The so-called "Jump Up" was my first real challenge, a very steep forest path (actually an old logging slide from the 1800s) up Bald Eagle Mountain. After that initial test of my quads, I loped on a temporary, mile-long "reprieve" along the side of the mountain about three-quarters of the way up.

This was followed by the second major challenge, the roughly quarter-mile-long scramble up the "Bald Spot," a white-stone boulder field with rocks up to the size of cars, easily seen from Route 220 below. I teetered precariously on some stones, avoided falling into crevices, and kept a watchful eye out for rattlesnakes.

The third challenge was the so-called "Goat Path" at about mile eleven, a tiring climb sideways up the mountain. "Just keep going," my mind hammered. "No use bleatin' about it."

At about mile fourteen was "Fleming Way," named af-



Above: Negotiating the "Bald Spot" boulder field along the north face of Bald Eagle Mountain. Right: The early morning mass start of the Megatransect.

ter one of the course planners, Craig Fleming. This steep climb, out of a gorge, tested my quads yet again.

The next seven miles would have been quite pleasant, mainly along dirt and some grass-covered trails and along Kammerdiner Stream, but by then my body had worn down greatly, fatigue was setting in, blisters were forming, and muscles cramping.

At about mile twenty-one "Castanea Chilkoote" loomed before me, a now hobbling fifty-nine year old, feeling more like ninety-nine. Chilkoote is the name of the three-fourths-mile-long, forty-five-degree ascent back over Bald Eagle Mountain, beginning with a rope-assisted, seventy-five-foot-long, insanely vertical climb. This was followed by the brutal descent on rubble stones along the "Back Side" power-line cut, which brought on the torturing pains of my jammed knees and toes (with my inevitable damaged toenails, which would color out in their ebony and violet glory a couple days later).

Now just an average, happy-if-I-finish participant, down off my pedestal dream of breaking the seven-hour



mark, I returned to Castanea off Chilkoote at about 3 p.m., eight hours since the 7 a.m. start. In another seemingly interminable fifty minutes, I crawled the final two miles to the finish line. After the adrenaline high from the applause and the placement of a finisher's medal over my head, I looked to my wife for consolation in my utter exhaustion and pain (which she offered, even though she thought I was crazy for participating once again). I drank plenty of water and stretched a bit, fearing to sit down lest I go into a full-body cramp. Finally, I ate some of the food that all the wonderful volunteers had so mercifully prepared.

On the way home, I swore again never to return. But

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Tired but jubilant participants cross the finish line after a long day.

country during my school years. Tennis, bicycling, mountain hiking, jogging, and a lot of walking have kept me reasonably fit all my adult life. And, yes, I did run seven marathons (twenty-six-mile races) between 1978-80, and some 5K and 10K races even as late as five years ago. And I've never smoked.

Mentally, I've always been a real competitor. I hate to be bettered by anyone at anything, or not be able to overcome any challenge. If my body collapsed short of the Megatransect finish line, my mind would part ways with it and continue on.

As of September 12 of this year, I have bicycled over 2200 miles (mostly on the Pine Creek Rail Trail, which I live along in Torbert Village). And I am planning to get some jogging in during the last three weeks before the event (I'll start tomorrow, promise!).

Maybe even some runs up the big Furnace Run hill near my home. So, I'll be ready—to break the seven-hour barrier. Well, at least to finish again, I hope, at age sixty this year.

What do other participants have to say about the Megatransect? Karen Ramm, a Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania, teacher, said, "It's a personal challenge—no matter how far you go, finish or not, you're here, and there are thousands of other people who could be here, but aren't."

Another, who shall go unnamed, confided in me, "I'm here because my wife wanted to do this, and I have to come along to follow her up the mountain."

Who has been the oldest competitor? In all five of the

past Megatransects, it's been Nelson James, from Northumberland, Pennsylvania. Completing all of them, he finished the 2007 event in eleven hours, seventeen minutes, at age seventy-eight! He is entered to run once again this year.

The youngest? In 2007 seven-year-old Chase McCauley from Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, completed the course in ten hours and thirty-five minutes. And Spencer Stocum, the second youngest at nine, from Antes Fort, Pennsylvania, raced home in an astounding seven hours and thirty-six minutes, bettering his previous year's time by forty minutes.

The Bald Eagle Mountain Megatransect is a truly phenomenal, "just for the fit and/or insane" event, which was started in 2003 by Lock Haven's Jeff Stover, who also came up with the original design, with strong support from the Lock Haven City Council, still the main sponsor. Since then, with a lot of help from Craig Fleming, David Hunter, and David Demko, who "took the course by the horns" according to Stover, it has grown each year, with 127 finishers the first year, 232 the second, 320 the third, 417 the fourth and 448 last year.

A resident of the Pine Creek Valley, writer David Kagan is an occasional contributor to Mountain Home magazine.

WHAT: Bald Eagle Mountain Megatransect
WHEN: Saturday, October 4, 7 a.m.
WHERE: Castanea Twp. fire hall picnic grounds, Lock Haven, PA
INFORMATION: 570-893-1868
www.ultrahike.com

I really am such a liar.

Now, for the fourth consecutive year, I wonder whether my "training" will be enough for me to finish. In 2005 I finished 204 out of 320, in a time of eight hours, forty-two minutes; in 2006, 336 out of 417, in 9:45; and in 2007, 253 out of 448, in 8:52.

How did I prepare each year physically and mentally for this extreme challenge to body and mind? Did I have a rigorous regimen of daily exercise for months leading up to it? Nope.

I'd say that my best preparation has been leading a very healthy and physically active life since the days in the 1950s when I played wiffle ball all summer long in the large backyard outside my house in Middletown, Pennsylvania. I played baseball and ran track and cross-

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