

# **TOP TEN** **GUIDE** to the



# **NATIONAL TRAILS**

## **BILL BUCK**

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*For Gregory Briody,  
uncle and true friend  
(1950 – 2016)*

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# Introduction

This guide offers an easy way to discover the hidden gems of the National Trails System, a network of scenic and historic trails across America established by Congress in 1968. These routes immortalize our country's natural and historic treasures.

All 30 trails are featured here in this guide and each of these trails receives at least one mention, though some appear more than others. Well-known routes like the Appalachian appear multiple times but be on the lookout for lesser-known “star quality” routes as well, mentioned throughout the guide.

Here are **10 top 10 lists** intended to pique interest rather than provide detailed instruction. More details would require more pages and the goal here is to offer a brief introduction. Readers may follow up on items of interest with searches on the Internet or refer to the helpful links at the end of the guide, resources to assist in planning for great experiences on national trails.

The forthcoming **National Trails Guide** in its complete form will provide comprehensive information and guidance for all 30 of the national trails -- **sign up** at [www.nationaltrailsguide.com](http://www.nationaltrailsguide.com) and we will notify you when the full guidebook is available. For now, ***it's time to find your trail!***



*An authentic covered wagon on the Oregon Trail, near the last of its 2,000 miles.*

*“Westward I go free...  
I must walk toward Oregon,  
and not toward Europe...  
That is the way the nation is moving...”*

*—HENRY DAVID THOREAU*



# NATIONAL TRAILS SYSTEM MAP



*\*courtesy of the National Park Service*

*“Even after 42 years, the general public has little or no idea that the National Trails System exists and offers benefits that can enhance personal health, community economic opportunity, and educational transformation.” -NATIONAL TRAILS SYSTEM MOU*

## CHAPTER I

# Top 10 National Trail Sites with Outstand- ing Historic Experiences

### Criteria for Outstanding Historic Experiences:

- \*Each site should provide a powerful, immersive experience of history.
- \*Sites should have excellent facilities and signage.
- \*Should have long-established visitor center and/or interpretive sites.
- \*Should offer true insight into Native American history of an area.



*Following the route of the historic march, just east of Selma, Alabama.*

*The National Trails System is an essential way to immortalize our nation's defining moments—from the tragic to the transcendent, from the horrific to the hallowed. Many of these sites feature multiple national trails, an excuse to visit one locale and explore a few trails at once. Although all of the following places are among the best, it's impossible to limit the country's historic places to ten. Many sites had to be left out for the sake of brevity.*

*The following places are among the greatest historic sites on the national trails.*

**Presidio of San Francisco, California \*Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail** – Stories of the early inhabitants of San Francisco Bay and their modern-day descendants will be found here, including Spanish settlers and tribes of the area whose lifestyles were transformed by the Mission era. In 1776, the Anza expedition settled what would become San Francisco and today visitors can still experience natural areas here at the edge of the city. A restored Officers' Club and new museum provide views of the fort's original adobe walls. Archeological excavation is ongoing here with hands-on learning and cultural activities throughout the year.

**Fort Clatsop, Oregon \*Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail** – Fort Clatsop is the site of the winter encampment of Lewis and Clark and the Corps of Discovery at the mouth of the Columbia River. An excellent visitor center at Lewis and Clark National Historical Park immerses visitors in trails and activities close to Astoria, Oregon. A restored replica of the original fort occupies the same small patch of ground where the Corps of Discovery spent their long winter of 1805-06.

**Museum of the Cherokee Indian, North Carolina \*Trail of Tears National Historic Trail** – The Trail of Tears is an example of “America at its worst.” Misguided treatment of tribes like the Cherokee led to their forced removal and many deaths in the 1830s. Members of the Eastern Band of Cherokee evaded capture by hiding in the rugged mountains of Appalachia and today their descendants live here in the town of Cherokee. This museum tops the list for anyone wishing to learn about the history of the Cherokee and their contributions to American life.

**Campsite #1, Alabama \*Selma To Montgomery National Historic Trail** – The Selma to Montgomery Trail can be experienced in a day, making it unique within a system of mostly long-distance National Trails. The city of Selma is a good place to begin and the nearby Campsite #1, where Martin Luther King and hundreds of activists spent the night in 1965, offers particular insight into their journey. It is one of the best places in America to understand the meaning and struggles of the Civil Rights movement. A visitor center with nice parking and facilities provides a good place to walk part of the trail.

**Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, West Virginia \*2 National Trails** – One of the best “living history” towns in the United States, Harpers Ferry features attractions and accommodations for all types of visitors. Rafting and tubing on the Potomac River (at reasonable rates) is one way to begin discovering the rich history at this unique site, where two national trails intersect (Appalachian Trail and Potomac Heritage Trail). Harpers Ferry is located directly on the borderline of three states, a rarity.

**Colonial National Historical Park, Virginia \*2 National Trails** – The final days of the Revolutionary War remain on display here at this carefully preserved and well-interpreted National Park Service gem. Follow in the footsteps of General George Washington at the historic site of the British surrender and walk across battlefields today that look much as they did in 1789. The Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail extends to the shores of Yorktown.

**Jamestown Settlement, Virginia \*2 National Trails** – Just a short drive from Colonial National Historic Park (on the stately Colonial Parkway) is Jamestown Settlement. This pastoral site hides dark stories in its landscape: political disasters, suicidal scandals, and confirmed cannibalism occurred here in the early 1600s. This site is the beginning of the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail.

**El Rancho de las Golondrinas, New Mexico \*3 National Trails** – This carefully managed ranch is considered the “Southwest's Premier Living History Museum.” Just outside lovely Santa Fe, step into a different world and see through the eyes of the Spanish settlers of the 1500s. The Santa Fe Trail, Old Spanish Trail and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro historic corridors are all nearby.

**Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming \*2 National Trails** – It's a little known fact that the tragic flight of the Nez Perce tribe involved skirmishes with the U.S. military in newly created Yellowstone Park. Follow these men, women, children and elders of the tribe who trekked across great mountain passes and rushing rivers into Yellowstone, where signage and maps guide visitors today. The Continental Divide Trail is also inside the park.

**City of Natchez, Mississippi \*Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail** – Natchez is the historic starting point of the Natchez Trace route. The city just celebrated its 300-year anniversary and has more antebellum houses than anywhere in the South. Walk beneath huge shade trees and picnic on the edge of the Mississippi River; imagine the lifestyles of early American traders who began their long treks here in relative civilization before setting out onto the wild and treacherous Natchez Trace route.



## CHAPTER II

# Top 10 National Trail Sites with Outstand- ing Natural Assets

### Criteria for Outstanding Natural Assets:

- \*World-class, majestic sites enabling communion with truly wild places.
- \*All locations should preserve the original character of their region.
- \*Reasonable access should exist for visitors of varying abilities.
- \*Should have conservation lands buffering the national trail corridor.



*Sunset at Scotts Bluff National Monument, a famous landmark of the pioneers.*

*The purpose of the National Trails System is to provide recreational opportunities, of course — but it's also to celebrate and protect the country's unique natural landscapes. The following list is a distillation of the national trails which best provide stellar natural beauty while also preserving sites of great biological significance. It's no coincidence that these places are mostly within national parks though an attempt has been made throughout this guide to include a variety of classifications.*



**Hawaii Volcanoes National Park \*Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail** – This trail in Volcanoes National Park can literally take your breath away: the air can be noxious due to fresh lava billowing out of the earth! (In most wind conditions, it is safe for a limited time.) For the adventurous traveler, there's nowhere in America like this and it's a must-see on the Big Island.

**Glacier National Park, Montana \*2 National Trails** – The Continental Divide Trail and Pacific Northwest Trail intersect in this epic part of the American Rockies. A national park unlike anywhere in America, Glacier offers wildlife, craggy views and many other natural spectacles that are off the charts.

**Baxter State Park, Maine \*Appalachian National Scenic Trail** – A wonderland in the middle of Maine, this is the *end of the journey* for many Appalachian Trail hikers. It can be reached within a day's drive of Portland, Maine and other parts of New England. Moose (or moose droppings) can be seen along narrow winding sections of the Appalachian Trail as it passes through this lovely park.

**Upper Peninsula, Michigan \*North Country National Scenic Trail** – Expansive national forests cover this region of the North Country Trail as it meanders through the Great Lakes. Mackinaw Bridge is a gateway to Michigan's rarely visited Upper Peninsula (U.P.) where deep, dark forests and wildlife abound. Lovely lakeshore sections along the trail here at the edge of the Canadian border are a few hours from Detroit, Chicago or Madison.

**Olympic National Park, Washington \*Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail** – This terrain can feel like Alaska, though the Pacific Northwest Trail is just a short drive from Portland or Seattle. Olympic has some of the most dramatic mountains (and mountain weather) anywhere in the United States and both the Pacific Ocean and the coastline of Puget Sound are nearby.

**Everglades, Florida \*Florida National Scenic Trail** – The famous Everglades lap at the southern edges of the Florida Trail. Man-eating alligators, nasty bugs and swampland snakes are found here, among other unique qualities best experienced on foot (or in a slow-moving boat). Big Cypress National Preserve and other spots here on America's southeastern edges showcase wetlands and jungle habitats that feel a lot closer to the Amazon than to Miami.

**Grand Canyon National Monument, Arizona \*Arizona National Scenic Trail** – While the Arizona Trail does not pass into the depths of the Grand Canyon, it comes close. Explore this ancient, famous canyon of the Colorado River where the views alone justify a place on this Top 10 list. The park can be used as an embarkation point to walk a section of the Arizona Trail.

**Seward, Alaska \*Iditarod National Historic Trail** – Alaska's glaciers blanket the region and earn the Iditarod a unique spot on this list. Seward is a place that must be seen to be believed. It is grand and wild, with huge glaciers along the water's edge. It's a historic coastal town where those who arrived by ship disembarked and headed to Anchorage and points beyond for the great Iditarod route.

**Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming \*2 National Trails** – The Continental Divide National Scenic Trail and Nez Perce National Historic Trail cross each other here, west of the park, and both continue on into the core of Yellowstone. With its many natural wonders, Yellowstone National Park may be the best excuse to spend days exploring these two trails.

**Yosemite National Park, California \*Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail** – The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) meanders through Yosemite's High Country and combines with the John Muir Trail. This route through the higher elevations of a busy national park provides an excuse to avoid overcrowded Yosemite Valley. Head up to breathtaking Tuolumne Meadows instead, where the views are beyond belief.



*The Nez Perce National Historic Trail as it passes through Yellowstone National Park.*

## CHAPTER III

# Top 10 Beginnings of National Trails

*The point of a national trail is to guide visitors on a grand journey. There is a starting point and terminus for each trail. Some beginnings are humble and others are profound. Ideally, the “first steps” of a trail will feel special. The following spots are good places to begin your journey.*

**Natchez, Mississippi \*Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail** – Among the most charming historic towns in America, Natchez is the best place to begin a journey on the Natchez Trace Parkway. Located on the Mississippi River, Natchez has special architecture, landscaping and cultural activities that can be enjoyed in every season. The traditional direction of this trail has been south to north.

**Springer Mountain, Georgia \*Appalachian National Scenic Trail** – The legendary Appalachian Trail is primarily walked south to north due to the timing of the seasons. The forgiving climate of Georgia in the springtime compared to Maine’s can be a “life or death” decision for hikers and most opt for the less risky approach: they begin at Springer Mountain, within Amicalola Falls State Park.

**Glacier National Park, Montana \*Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail** – The Pacific Northwest Trail begins in the midst of Glacier’s rugged wonderland. This 1,200 mile trail huffs and puffs over craggy ups and downs through one of America’s most mountainous regions, before descending to the coast of Washington. A few miles away from this beginning is another trail’s end—the Continental Divide National Scenic Trail.

**Joseph, Oregon \*Nez Perce (Nee-Mee-Poo) National Historic Trail** – The story of the Nez Perce Trail begins in Joseph, a town named for beloved Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe. His tribe was forced from their sacred homeland here and ultimately onto a reservation. The region surrounding the small town of Joseph offers insight into why the chief and his people considered this land worth dying for.

**Volcanoes National Park, Hawaii \*Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail** – The start and end of a trail can be subjective but our nation’s one-of-a-kind active volcano at ocean’s edge makes a good case for where to begin. It’s the very southwestern edge of America — only the brave hike deep into Volcanoes National Park, where footsteps literally become inhibited by hot lava and toxic emissions.

**Jamestown, Virginia \*Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail** – This trail begins at the shoreline of historic Jamestown, established in the 1600s. It was here that Captain Smith stepped into a small boat with his crew and first began to explore the “New World” 400 years ago. The park does an excellent job interpreting the events of this ill-fated yet stubborn colony. Although this is a trail primarily experienced on the water, beginning at Jamestown is the best way to get oriented.

**Cherokee, North Carolina \*Trail of Tears National Historic Trail** – One of the most inhumane policies ever put into place by our government was the decision to round up peaceful tribes throughout the Southeast and force them from their ancestral homes. Many marched on foot, hundreds of miles through winter storms to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. The Eastern Band of Cherokees maintained a foothold on their traditional land, hiding out for years in the rugged Appalachian Mountains successfully avoiding capture. Today, their reservation is a starting point for the trail. It’s a special place that immortalizes the contributions this tribe has made to American culture.

**Mexico border \*Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail** – Every thru-hiker (anyone who “through-hikes” a long-distance trail from beginning to end) has to start somewhere. How about with armed guards in a dangerously hot desert along a wall at the Mexican border? In all seriousness, free shuttles are provided for hikers and many experience only jubilation here at the beginning of their 6-month adventure. The border town of Campo, California may not be the most scenic section of the PCT, but its often-photographed trailhead is instantly recognizable for thru-hikers, their families and friends.

*Congress amended the National Trails Systems Act in 1978 to create the category of national historic trails. It designated the Oregon, Mormon, Lewis & Clark, and Iditarod trails as the first national historic trails.*

**Mexico border \*Continental Divide Trail National Scenic Trail** – Similar to the Pacific Crest Trail, getting to this isolated beginning of the trail is inconvenient but necessary for thru-hikers planning to walk the entire route. Crossing through desert sections of New Mexico can be brutal but in the Spring, a well-timed start helps avoid the roughest weather up in the Rocky Mountains. This beginning is deceptively flat, a proving ground for what soon becomes months of jagged up-and-down hiking along the ridges of the Rockies. Free local shuttle services take hikers to this desert launch of the Continental Divide Trail.

**Selma, Alabama \*Selma To Montgomery National Historic Trail** – It would be difficult to imagine a more powerful beginning of any trail than this one, where Martin Luther King, Jr. led a group of civil rights activists across a bridge over a dark river through some of the bleakest days of the modern South.



*Heading west from Scotts Bluff National Monument near the Nebraska-Wyoming border.*



## CHAPTER IV

# Top 10 Drives On or Near a National Trail

*Not everyone chooses to hike a national trail; some prefer to drive. Priority in this list is given to high vantage points that offer big view payoffs—some of these roads provide days of jaw-dropping spectacle.*

**Hell's Backbone, Utah \*Old Spanish Trail** – Highway 12 shadows a portion of the Old Spanish Trail's territory, some of the most breathtaking canyon country in America. It would be impossible to find a modern road so close to this old trading route that provides endless views of Utah's color-studded canyons. The road offers insight into the beauty and unique recreational challenges inherent in this region.

**Rim Road, Arizona \*Arizona Trail** – This rugged road winds through national forest lands, paralleling the Arizona Trail as it ascends from hot, dry desert into the cool mountains. Like Hell's Backbone, it would be difficult to find a better road that illuminates this national trail route. An outdoor enthusiast could spend weeks on this plateau with camping, grand views, shady forests and plenty of historic sites.

**Natchez Trace Parkway (3 states) \*Natchez Trace** – A pleasant drive meandering through pastures, forests and ancient Indian mounds, this is one of the great roadways of America. The parkway was constructed during the Depression era by the WPA. It begins in the lovely city of Natchez, stretching 444 miles through the countryside to Nashville, Tennessee. Average speed limit is a relaxing 45 MPH. The Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail can also be walked in short sections throughout the route.

**Blue Ridge Parkway, Appalachian Mountains \*Appalachian Trail & Overmountain Victory Trail** – Driving along this mountainside parkway is like being able to experience the Appalachian Trail from the comfort of your vehicle — for hundreds of miles. Talk about *armchair travel*! The route intersects with the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, a section of which can be hiked to from the road.

**Highway 125, Vermont \*Appalachian Trail & North Country Trail** – Highway 125 is one of the many delightful two-lane roads that wind through New England's countryside. This one begins at Lake Champlain, near the North Country Trail's short beginning spur as it disappears into forest. The road heads east through the charming town of Middlebury and into Green Mountain National Forest, the domain of the Appalachian Trail. Head south on Highway 100 to shadow the route of the Appalachian.

**Going-to-the-Sun Road, Glacier National Park, Montana \*Pacific Northwest and Continental Divide Trails** – This road travels right into the heart of one of the most spectacular national parks in the world. Here are other-worldly mountain views that can seem endless (especially when driving slowly, as one must here). This is as close as possible to a "thru-hike" on either of these trails without having to leave the comfort of your vehicle, a rarity indeed.

**Highway 220, Wyoming \*California, Oregon & Mormon Trails** – A quiet two-lane road off the beaten path today but once humming with activity in the 1800s. This was an early “interstate highway” for pioneers traveling by wagon, horse and on foot. Stop in at the Mormon Handcart historic site to learn about the challenges faced on the trail, which closely follows the North Platte River. This route features spectacular monuments including Independence Rock and Devil’s Gap as well as South Pass nearby. The region sometimes feels like a land the modern world forgot.

**Highway 101, Olympic National Park, Washington \*Pacific Northwest Trail** – Follow this road west from Port Townsend to roughly parallel the Pacific Northwest Trail (PNT) as it makes its way west. Head south to visit breathtaking high country at Hurricane Ridge or go west to the beach, following the PNT as it becomes the one and only national trail to enter a coastal wilderness (near the village of La Push).

**Colonial Parkway, Virginia \*John Smith, Washington-Rochambeau & Star Spangled Banner Trails** – This scenic roadway connects three historic trails from Jamestown to Yorktown. Speed limits range from 35 to 45 MPH – that’s a good thing. Williamsburg is also a must-see. It would be easy to spend days exploring all of the historic sites in this area but, no matter what, take at least one leisurely drive on this Parkway!

**Highway 1, California \*Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail** – There’s no better coastal road in the entire National Trails System. The Anza expedition rode and walked along the soft sandy beaches of Santa Barbara and Ventura on their way to settle what would become the city of San Francisco. Here you can walk or ride a bike at these same places and experience the mountain views and salt-infused coastal sensations the historic Anza expedition did in the 1770s.

*“We simply need the wild country available  
to us, even if we never do more than drive to  
its edge...part of the geography of hope.”*

—WALLACE STEGNER

## CHAPTER V

# Top 10 College Towns with a National Trail

*This list focuses on small and medium-sized cities and towns defined by their universities. These institutions of learning, their students and faculty serve to enrich the regions in which they dwell both culturally and intellectually. They also improve the experiences of visitors to nearby national trails in tangible ways.*

**San Luis Obispo, California \*Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail** – California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) is a crown jewel of San Luis Obispo, a classic college town that features the historic Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa. Founded in 1772, this mission was utilized by the historic Anza Expedition, resting here on their voyage north to San Francisco. A walk along the shade-filled creek near the mission will activate the imagination. Restaurants and cultural activities await nearby.

**Missoula, Montana \*Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail** – Missoula College and the University of Montana are a looming presence in this great town. As it turns out, Lewis and Clark floated right through the area (on the appropriately named Clark Fork River) and spent a few days at a camp nearby while preparing to ascend the treacherous Lolo Trail. Missoula is a great place to spend a week and explore the region.

**Burlington, Vermont \*2 National Trails** – The University of Vermont and Champlain College have a big impact on charming Burlington. The Appalachian Trail is a short drive south, the North Country Trail is just across Lake Champlain, and Vermont's famed Long Trail also passes nearby. For any national trails enthusiast, this has to be one of New England's finest college towns to visit.

**Amherst, Massachusetts \*New England National Scenic Trail** – Also in New England, Amherst is known and celebrated for its excellence in higher learning. It happens to be close to the New England Trail, a short route which extends to the New Hampshire border north of Amherst.

**Bend, Oregon \*Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail** – This small city was named by early pioneers for the bend in the river and today three colleges reside here, supporting plenty of culture. The Pacific Crest Trail is a short drive west into the mountains — on the way, check out the classic western town Sisters.

**Tucson, Arizona \*2 National Trails** – The Anza Trail passes close to the campus of the University of Arizona and the Arizona Trail also passes nearby, east of the city. Visit Saguaro National Park to experience habitat similar to what the Anza party would have seen on their trek through this arid region. Also see the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, a wildlife and botanical garden showcase.

**Georgetown, Washington D.C. \*2 National Trails** – Historic Georgetown University is a destination unto itself but two natural attractions await the national trail visitor as well: the Potomac Heritage Trail, which traces the Potomac River by land, and the historic *C&O Canal*, a national park beloved by hikers and bikers alike. This route begins close to the campus and follows the river west for 180 miles.

**Madison, Wisconsin \*Ice Age National Scenic Trail** – For geological wanderers, the University of Wisconsin-Madison is a great jumping-off point to explore the Ice Age Trail. This route leads into Wisconsin's ancient glacial landscapes, with visual evidence of the ice age 2 million years ago. Catch this trail west of campus and visit Devil's Lake for a picnic and a walk along the water's edge.

**Boulder, Colorado \*Continental Divide National Scenic Trail** – The University of Colorado Boulder is a magnet for outdoor lovers from far and wide. The Continental Divide Trail lies to the west, nestled deep in the Rocky Mountains, far away in miles and elevation. But for anyone coming to the region, a stop in Boulder should be on the itinerary. Five more national trails are within a short day's trip so why not come see all the area has to offer and stay for a week? Boulder and nearby Denver would each be a smart home base.

**Austin, Texas \*El Camino Real de Los Tejas National Historic Trail** – The old Spanish trail has a few routes through Texas. San Antonio is the best place to experience the trail (see photo below) but Austin is also a must-see. The University of Texas is a great campus to visit on foot. Continuing south, follow the trail along Waller Creek to be transported into a quiet refuge within the Austin city limits.





## CHAPTER VI

# Top 10 Sites for Wildlife on a National Trail

*“The experience of wildness  
of a natural setting by trail users  
is essential for both national scenic  
and historic trails to be complete.”*  
-Gary Werner, Executive Director,  
Partnership for the National Trails

*National trails are becoming well-known for their unique ability to transport visitors to places of communion with nature for long stretches of time. Wildlife plays a key role in these places. The following sites offer unique chances to see the equivalent of “A-list” actors on the national trail stage. These places are among the best to experience unique American fauna.*

**Bison - Yellowstone \*Continental Divide National Scenic Trail** – Remnants of the once-great herds that roamed the West for centuries, bison can be seen in large numbers in beloved Yellowstone Park. The Continental Divide Trail heads right through the middle of the park, leading hikers into prime wildlife habitat where wolves and grizzlies also roam.

**Alligators - St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge \*Florida National Scenic Trail** – This is not a place for the squeamish. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service provides visitors with this local advisory: “On warm days in these wetlands you may see alligators basking in the sun, from 10 inches long to 10 feet long.” Enough said.

**Black Bears - Yosemite \*Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail** – Black bear habitat has existed here for a long, long time. Some bears have recently become a bit too accustomed to human food. The park has worked to address the situation, raising awareness about how best to manage trash in the park as well as preventing “car break-ins” by bears in search of goodies. Depending on the timing, hikers in this area will likely see a bear or two on the PCT.

**Orcas - Puget Sound \*Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail** – The waters of the Salish Sea, Puget Sound and the Washington coast include species that are unique among all of the national trails. Whidbey Island is a good starting point from which to see and learn about the wildlife in these waters. Embark from the island by boat for a chance to enjoy these wonders. To the west on the Pacific Coast is the only coastal wilderness in the entire National Trails System.

**Whales - Hawaii Coast \*Ala Kahakai National Historic Trail** – Whales live throughout the year in the Hawaiian Islands and, with the help of local experts, the

chances of seeing these giants (and other marine life) are very good. Along the trail, one good area for whale watching is Kawaihae, south of the Kohala Peninsula. Native Hawaiians traditionally followed this national trail route for cultural purposes.

**Wild Horses - Nevada \*Pony Express National Historic Trail** – It’s fitting that one can see horses today on a route known for its “ponies” that famously traversed it in the 1860s delivering mail. Bureau of Land Management lands in Nevada include numerous bands of horses that escaped throughout the centuries and today run mostly wild in managed preserves.

**Grizzly Bears - Alaska \*Iditarod National Historic Trail** – Grizzlies abound throughout Alaska and this historic route of the Iditarod dog sled race plunges into some prime bear habitat. Wolves, moose and bald eagles also share this terrain. Not a place to visit as a casual tourist.

**Sea Otter - Monterey Bay \*Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail** – The historic Anza Trail follows the coastline of Monterey Bay. Many days can be spent walking or biking along the beach paths here. A bonus is the opportunity to see Pier 39’s famous sea lions in San Francisco, just a few hours north, the end of the Anza Trail.

**Pronghorn - Montana \*Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail** – Along sections of this beautiful route through Montana’s wildlands, there’s a chance to see pronghorn, *Antilocapra americana* — “Antelope of America.” They are lithe animals and are extremely fast. If you happen to spot some, they will most likely be running, as they are wary of humans.

**Prairie Dogs - Wyoming \*Oregon National Historic Trail** – Prairie dogs are among the cutest and most entertaining creatures on the national trails. Just as they did along the Oregon Trail of the 1800s, their animated conversations continue today. “Prairie Town” villagers can be heard barking noisily at each other across their front yards among the open plains of Wyoming and other nearby states.

*“Without the native tribes,  
Lewis and Clark would have  
gotten lost or starved. Indians  
showed the white man the way.”*

—STEPHEN AMBROSE

## CHAPTER VII

# Top 10 National Trail Experiences on the Water

*Many of our waterways served as original highways for America, long before motorized travel existed. Today some of these historically important routes can be visited within the National Trails System. Designated water trails are a testament to our commitment to protect our precious waterways — for wildlife and recreation alike.*

**Chesapeake Bay, Maryland \*Star Spangled Banner Trail** – This 560-mile water trail links Maryland, Virginia and Washington D.C. It ends at Fort McHenry, site of a dramatic battle during the War of 1812. Spending time on the trail here can offer insight to Francis Scott Key’s perspective as he penned The Star Spangled Banner. He was then a prisoner aboard a British warship just offshore from the fort.

**James River, Virginia \*John Smith Trail** – Captain Smith conducted extensive exploration, charting hundreds of creeks and inlets throughout this area. He encountered many tribes and had misadventures of every kind along the way. Hop in a kayak and retrace his route. There are excellent resources available in this region for travel by watercraft and many areas are open to the public.

**Chesapeake Bay, Virginia \*Washington-Rochambeau Trail** – This trail is one of the least known of the national trails but that shouldn’t stop the intrepid adventurer from setting out on a kayak or ferry to enjoy the beauty of Chesapeake Bay in Virginia and Maryland’s Eastern Shore. Learn about the subtle strategies and battles of the Revolutionary War that were fought on or near the water.

**Astoria, Oregon \*Lewis & Clark Trail** – The best way to begin to understand the grueling and seemingly impossible achievements of the Corps of Discovery is to get in a boat. Rent a kayak or hire local outfitters to help you explore this rugged, lovely and sometimes miserable leg of their journey.

**Pacific Ocean, Hawaii (Big Island) \*Ala Kahakai Trail** – The historic pathways of native Hawaiians include this picturesque route along the shoreline of the Big Island. Cultural and natural treasures await. However currents, weather and geologic features can be very dangerous. Always consult a professional before exploring this area! Another option is to simply enjoy the trail’s wonders from its many beaches.

**Criteria for Water Trail Experiences:**

- \*Places should encourage communion with wild places by water
- \*Nearby outfitters that provide guided trips and/or safety training
- \*Sites should prioritize learning about our historic waterways
- \*Places with powerful, immersive experiences (no pun intended)

**Columbia River \*Oregon Trail** – The Oregon Trail was primarily traveled by land in the 1800s, but there were many river and creek crossings which everyone had to take along the way. As if that weren’t enough, some who elected to continue to Oregon City had to raft down the Columbia River (with their wagon and any remaining possessions). Retrace these adventurous miles today by water and gain a new respect for the survivors (and non-survivors) of the mighty Oregon Trail.

**Juniper Creek, Florida \*Florida Trail** – This waterway is a hidden gem along the diverse Florida Trail. It lies within the Ocala National Forest near Orlando (yet a world apart). Frolick in the pristine spring water of the public swimming area or quietly float away from the crowds on a rented canoe. This is one of the most serene, jungle-like places in the United States. Considering the importance of water to the character of Florida, it’s hard to imagine a more fitting place to experience the Florida Trail than this. (Of course, there’s always the beach.)

**Potomac River \*Multiple National Trails** – George Washington grew up on these shores and maintained farming operations along the Potomac River throughout his life. Three national trails share this river, including its namesake, the Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail. Find a way to get on the water or simply walk along its historic shores.

**Platte River, Nebraska \*Multiple National Trails** – This stretch of the Oregon Trail, California Trail, Mormon Trail and Pony Express route is part of America’s “original interstates” where pioneers wisely followed the course of the Platte River. Today, visitors can stop in at historic sites like Scotts Bluff in Nebraska and Fort Laramie in Wyoming to behold the beauty and utilitarian nature of the Platte.

**Puget Sound, Washington \*Pacific Northwest Trail** – Some of the best kayaking and canoeing in the world is to be found here in this island-bejeweled paradise near Seattle. The waters east of the Olympic Peninsula and south of the San Juan Islands are a “mandatory water section” of the Pacific Northwest Trail. Enjoy them by kayak, sailboat or simply a short ferry ride.

*\*Note: There are no guarantees when it comes to water-based adventures because there are many factors at play at any given time. This list narrows down many options to focus on sites that appeal to people of different skill levels. Remember that the highest priority is always caution.*





*The Oregon coast, where Lewis and Clark spent a long winter in 1805.*

*“The joy of life comes from our encounters  
with new experiences and hence, there is  
no greater joy than to have an endlessly  
changing horizon.”*

—JON KRAKAUER

## CHAPTER VIII

# Top 10 Shortest and Longest National Trails

*The National Trails System is broad and diverse — every corner of the United States is represented, with trails of all lengths (54 miles to 7,000 miles). Each American can find a trail to suit their preference, both in duration and conditions of the route: a drive, day hike or a multi-day “section hike” of a long-distance trail. Here are the official shortest and longest routes.*

**Selma to Montgomery Trail \*54 miles** – The historic march from Selma is the shortest of all the national trails. This route follows in the footsteps of hundreds of activists led by Martin Luther King, Jr. An auto tour can be completed in one day or a mostly roadside walk can be done in a few days. Stop at historic sites along the way to learn about the violent—though ultimately successful—struggle to pass the nation’s Voting Rights Act in 1965.

**Natchez Trace \*65 miles** – Motorized vehicles follow the beautiful 444-mile Natchez Trace Parkway. Four shorter scenic sections can be walked on foot. These scenic sections of the trail total 65 miles. Individually, most of these segments can be completed in a day or less. A patchwork of private property today along many historic sections of the Natchez discourages a thru-hike of the complete route.

**Ala Kahakai \*175 miles** – This trail hugs the coastline of Hawaii’s Big Island. Short sections of its 175 miles can be walked as day hikes, though private property and undeveloped trail segments prevent a continuous route by land. (It can be enjoyed by kayak or sailboat for longer stretches.)

**New England Trail \*220 miles** – This relatively new national trail (established in 2009) piggy-backs on three old regional footpaths through Connecticut and Massachusetts. The route can be completed within a few weeks.

**Star Spangled Banner Trail \*290 miles** – This is primarily a water trail through much of Chesapeake Bay. It begins at the Virginia shoreline and continues to the water’s edge at Baltimore, Maryland, site of the National Anthem’s origins.

**Continental Divide Trail \*3200 miles** – Among the most rugged and impressive of all the trails, the CDT runs from the border of Mexico to the Canadian border, traversing many of America’s iciest peaks along the way. Only brave and adventurous hikers attempt the entire route (and most do not complete its 3,200 miles). The CDT is the longest of the “Triple Crown” national scenic trails — the others are the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail.

**North Country Trail \*4200 miles** – Beginning at the Vermont/New York border, this route winds through many Northern states. Depending on timing, a thru-hiker could spend three full seasons following the North Country Trail (or longer). However, many sections are incomplete, which requires travel along roads or private property. On paper, this is the longest of the National Scenic Trails.

**Lewis & Clark Trail \*4400 miles** – This historic route follows in the footsteps (or 200-year old oar ripples) of the Lewis & Clark Expedition. Among the most thrilling of the national trails, this path can be followed by kayak, canoe or on foot through some of the most breathtaking terrain of the Rocky Mountains. Tracing the complete journey of the Corps of Discovery would take a year or more. But day hikes along many parts of this route will offer glimpses into a region that remains largely wild today.

**California Trail \*5665 miles** – The primary route of the Oregon and California Trails, as they initially converged, was 2,000 miles from the Missouri River, into the plains to the Rocky Mountains and beyond. After this popular early “interstate” trail diverged, alternate routes spread out north and south over the Sierra mountain range. Reasons for this divergence include gold prospectors and where they chose to stake their claims as well as differing ideas about the optimal routes over the mountains.

**Trail of Tears \*7329 miles** – The longest of the National Trails also has the most numerous braided routes along its length. The Cherokee and other tribes were infamously forced from their homelands throughout the Southeast and large groups followed these myriad routes. On rivers, roadways, fields and improvised trails, these routes finally converge in Oklahoma. Few today have followed these complete routes. Those who choose to must navigate rivers upstream as well as walk along busy roads and highways.



*Visit the newly restored Capitol Building in Washington, DC.*



*Mormon handcarts displayed alongside the Mormon Trail in Wyoming.*

## CHAPTER IX

# Top 10 Day Trips on National Trails

*Not everyone has the time, ability or desire to spend weeks or months on a trail. Luckily, day trips along each of our nation's best routes offer authentic glimpses into these trails and hence, the entire National Trails System. Just a few hours on the following carefully selected trails offer a quality experience.*



**Colonial National Historical Park, Virginia \*2 National Trails** – One of the best examples of a well-preserved Colonial-era town, the restriction of motorized vehicles enables walking on trails and old roads that transport visitors back to the 1700s. Williamsburg and Yorktown can be visited by car on the lovely Colonial Parkway. It's one of the best ways for history buffs to spend a day in all of America.

**Mt. Katahdin, Maine \*Appalachian Trail** – Baxter State Park and its new neighbor, Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument, offer a front-row seat to the grueling final miles of the Appalachian Trail. Ascending rugged boulder-strewn vertical sections on Mount Katahdin offers the adventurous hiker true challenges—or meander along a quiet stream on lovely forested paths near the mighty mountain.

**Tupelo, Mississippi \*Natchez Trace** – The Natchez Trace has numerous sections that stand out for day trips. The best is about halfway through the drive. Start with a visit to the charming hometown of Elvis Presley in Tupelo. Then walk an ancient forested section of the Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail along the Parkway.

**St. Joseph, Missouri \*Pony Express Trail** – The Pony Express Trail traverses miles of desolate countryside across the West. The beginning of this short-lived mail delivery service was in Saint Joseph which is very accessible today, with plenty of amenities. A Pony Express museum is nestled in the historic section of town.

**Washington, D.C. \*3 National Trails** – With three national trails here and two more within a day's drive, spending just one day here becomes a challenge. A week of activities awaits national trails enthusiasts with monuments, water trails, great walks and plenty of history. (**Sign up** to receive the National Trails Guide which will feature extensive information about visiting D.C.) For now, a good start is to drive the George Washington Parkway along the Potomac River and walk beneath the Washington Monument. (At night is especially memorable.)

#### Criteria for Day Trips:

- \*Each selection should provide a guaranteed powerful experience.
- \*Outstanding signage and thoughtful design of visitor experiences.
- \*Should offer an impression of the true character of national trail.
- \*Bonus points for a drive that remains at around 45 MPH.

**Harpers Ferry, West Virginia \*2 National Trails** – This is one of America's best preserved historic towns, with plenty to do. One day isn't enough but for those with limited time, you can easily walk both national trails that pass through town, the Appalachian Trail and the Potomac Heritage Trail. The epicurean visitor can also enjoy some good restaurants here and the history buff will have plenty to see and do.

**Santa Fe, New Mexico \*3 National Trails** – El Rancho de las Golondrinas provides one of the most effective ways for visitors to immerse themselves in the early Spanish way of life in the Southwest. Wagon rides, cultural events and quiet walks through this large working ranch are a good way to start.

**Fort Vancouver, Washington to Hood River, Oregon \*2 National Trails** – This region attracts visitors from across the globe to majestic waterfalls that flow into the Columbia River. A good place to begin is Fort Vancouver (northeast of Portland). Then head east by car for a few hours, with great views along the route. End at Hood River, near the intersection of the Pacific Crest Trail and Oregon Trail.

**Yosemite National Park, California \*Pacific Crest Trail** – Yosemite is a clear choice for national park lovers and includes a world-class section of the Pacific Crest Trail. Follow the PCT through Yosemite's High Country (where it combines with the John Muir Trail) or hike a section through Tuolumne Meadows and camp near the trail. There is good access and parking at Tioga Road nearby. One day may lead to more...

**Lolo Pass, Idaho to Missoula, Montana \*2 National Trails** – For the truly brave, embark on a journey up to the historic Lolo Pass, used for centuries by the Nez Perce tribe to access their bison hunting grounds. Lewis and Clark also followed this harrowing trail on both legs of their expedition. For the less adventurous, drive beautiful Highway 12 on a one-day road trip from Lolo, Montana to Kamiah, Idaho. There are many historic sites along the way with a high quality visitor center at the top of Lolo Pass—with national trails out the back door.

*“The West is one of the greatest stories  
of all time but no intelligent person  
can look at it without feeling  
a mix of both pride and shame.”*

—T.H. WATKINS, HISTORIAN

## CHAPTER X

# Top 10 Endings of National Trails

*All National Trails have a distinct end point, sometimes referred to as the terminus. This is formalized by an Act of Congress. Five historic trails and five scenic trails are featured here in this list, reflecting the duality of the National Trails System.*

### Criteria for Top 10 Endings:

- \*A feeling of closure at the end of the trail's journey.
- \*Visual confirmation of the end of the route with good signage.
- \*Indications of the end through numerous meaningful elements.

**Canadian border \*Continental Divide National Scenic Trail** – It would be hard to imagine a more rugged isolated area of mountainous terrain in the Lower 48. It's an ending that has been skipped by a few CDT thru-hikers over the years. The thickly forested area at the deserted Canada-Montana border includes a mandate for hikers who plan to continue on into the Great White North: proceed to Customs!

**Canadian border \*Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail** – Also at the Canadian border (but in Washington state) this famous site features a special wooden sculpture and sign. It's an isolated landmark in the forest that appears prominently in many photographs: exhausted yet elated hikers leaning against its weathered posts, with expressions ranging from grumpy to triumphant.

**Washington coast \*Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail** – This route features the only section of a national trail in an officially designated ocean wilderness area. It can be difficult to walk, with driftwood-strewn, rocky beaches, but the adventurous hiker will consider it worth the effort. Thru-hikers who complete a journey on the PNT are rewarded with a majestic walk along this final section of the trail, with small fishing towns, fog-filled inlets and quiet beaches.

**Utah southern border \*Arizona National Scenic Trail** – The Arizona Trail (commonly traveled south to north) reaches its end at the border of Utah. Though it's in a relatively non-descript area on BLM land, proximity to the Grand Canyon gives an extra edge to this particular endpoint. A celebratory trip to the bottom of the Grand Canyon may be in order for the successful thru-hiker!

**Baxter State Park, Maine \*Appalachian National Scenic Trail** – Among the most magnificent of sites in the National Trails System, this hidden treasure in the middle of the State of Maine offers a challenging end to months of travel for thru-hikers. Day hikers won't get off easily either!

**Boston, Massachusetts \*Washington-Rochambeau Revolutionary Route National Historic Trail** – Boston gets left out of most of the action in the National Trails System. Considering its place at ground zero of the Revolutionary War, one more reason to explore this historic city is this little known national trail. The city is a great place for history buffs. It's also one of America's walkable urban gems. Experience the Freedom Trail, a National Millennium Trail, which can be walked in two hours.

**Presidio of San Francisco, California \*Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail** – The crown jewel of the Anza Trail is its official ending in the Presidio of San Francisco. The final steps of the historic Anza expedition took place here at the site of a fort built by the Spanish and local tribes in 1776. The ruins can be seen today, in a visitor center which offers insight into a colossal collision of cultures.

**Astoria, Oregon \*Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail** – The Oregon coast is alternately foggy, rainy and windy – sometimes all three at once! Lewis and Clark National Historical Park is nestled along the lovely shoreline of northwest Oregon where the Corps of Discovery endured the winter of 1805-06. Today you can behold the same natural spring that provided their drinking water or stroll into newly restored Fort Clatsop for an unforgettable experience.

**Salt Lake City, Utah \*Mormon Pioneer National Historic Trail** – The final destination of Brigham Young and his followers was to be Salt Lake City, Utah. The city continues today as headquarters and spiritual base of the Mormons and the area is a must-see for anyone seeking to understand the migration of the Mormons in the 1840s.

**Fort McHenry, Maryland \*Star-Spangled Banner National Historic Trail** – Many Americans don't realize that our National Anthem was penned in 1814 by a prisoner off the shore of Baltimore, Maryland. Visit the historic fort that helped inspire a poem that would become an anthem. Learn about the specific events that led up to this fateful event. For the ultimate experience, travel by boat offshore and listen to a modern mix of the best recordings of the Star Spangled Banner.

Thanks for reading! A lot of lists were left out of this book as the goal was to keep it short and focused. Please stay tuned for many more detailed Top 10 lists to be featured in our upcoming **National Trails Guide** including:

*Top 10 Films About National Trails, Top 10 Books About National Trails, Top 10 National Recreation Trails, Top 10 National Trails Featuring Designated Wilderness Areas, Top 10 Train Excursions on the National Trails and more...*



*The Florida National Scenic Trail in Saint Marks National Wildlife Refuge.*

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# Resources

## *National Trails System*

The National Park Service administers National Scenic and Historic Trails with assistance from other agencies, volunteers and non-profit organizations. Other routes are administered by federal agencies, the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

## *National Trails - Individual contacts*

Agency administrators, superintendents and organizations are responsible for each National Trail — more than 70 throughout the country. Find out specifically how each trail is managed and administered by visiting these sites.

## *Partnership for the National Trails System*

The Partnership for the National Trails System provides a network through which federal agencies, nonprofit partners and individuals work together to maintain and strengthen the National Trail System.

## *American Trails*

Billed as the world's largest online resource for trails, American Trails offers a clearinghouse for news and information related to trails as well as workshops, a symposium, and events. National recreation trails are searchable in a large database on the American Trails site.

## *American Hiking Society*

The American Hiking Society provides extensive practical resources for those visiting national trails including guides and tutorials.

*BILL BUCK is an author, photographer and conservationist who traveled 20,000 miles across America visiting all 30 National Trails and all 50 states. This is his first book in the National Trails series.*



BILL BUCK  
Author - Top 10 Guide to the National Trails

Bill Buck walked two or more segments of all 30 National Scenic and Historic Trails over the course of five summers. This is his first in a series of books, *The National Trails*. His next guide will be a comprehensive look at the National Trails System to be published in 2018.

He has presented at universities and professional conferences and received awards from the National Park Service and the Environmental Protection Agency for his leadership efforts. Buck has been published by the New York Times Syndicate, magazines including Earth Island Journal and newspapers throughout California. He divides his time between Northern California and the Pacific Northwest.

*“This is a unique look at  
the National Trails System  
that’s never been done before...  
The book simplifies the process of  
discovering a huge network of trails.”*

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:  
[www.nationaltrailsguide.com](http://www.nationaltrailsguide.com)**