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Taylor's through hike – Gilford hiker returns to AT after COVID kicked her off

By ADAM DRAPCHO, THE LACONIA DAILY SUN
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GILMANTON — Taylor Tognacci isn't a life-long hiker. In fact, it wasn't until she had graduated from college that she trod her first trail. Yet, five years later, she has accomplished a feat that most hikers only dream of – through-hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Tognacci grew up in Massachusetts, went to school for business management, then moved to the Lakes Region to help her mother run a store.

"I started hiking in 2016 when I moved here," she said. She started hiking almost by default, she said. "I moved here and didn't know anyone. I wanted to find something I could do on my own."



Her mother's shop, the Gilford Country Store, sold trail maps of the Belknap Mountains, so Tognacci decided to put one of them to work. Soon, she was hooked.

Within a couple of years, Tognacci had "red-lined" all of the Belknap trails – meaning she had hiked every one in the range. She also had started summiting each of the state's 48 peaks higher than 4,000 feet, a list she completed in October of 2019. Before she reached that goal, she had already set her sights on one of hiking's most arduous challenges.

How removed was Tognacci from the hiking world before she moved to New Hampshire? She only learned of the Appalachian Trail by accident, stumbling upon it on the Internet.

“I watched people’s videos on YouTube about their through hike,” Tognacci said. “I didn’t know what it was until 2018. I had no idea it existed.”

The trail, according to the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, is the longest continuous hiking trail in the world. It covers 2,193 miles and crosses 14 states on its way from Georgia to Maine. The conservancy says that, of the thousands of hikers who attempt it each year, 75% won’t make it to the end, at the summit of Mount Katahdin in Maine’s Baxter State Park.

Tognacci was part of that majority when she first took to the trail, though not by her own choosing. She first attempted the trail in 2020, starting on March 1. She made it 274 miles, to Hot Springs, North Carolina, when she got an email from the ATC requesting that all through-hikers suspend their hikes due to the global pandemic. An optimistic person, Tognacci took it as an opportunity in disguise, a chance to treat her 2020 attempt as a dress rehearsal of sorts, allowing her to retool her pack and return a year later.

“I was fine with it,” she said, though other hikers grumbled, or defied the request. “I knew that I would just try (the) next year. I saw it as a blessing, another year to train and get gear.

She did a couple of things differently in her second attempt. She packed warmer clothing, and she started a week earlier, on Feb. 22.

“I wanted to start a little earlier so that I could finish earlier,” Tognacci said. And she hit the trail with assuredness. “I was a lot more confident.”



Tognacci was packed for speed. She wore trail running shoes rather than heavy hiking boots, and kept her pack light – as light as 20 pounds. And she quickly made a name for herself.

Part of the AT culture is that each hiker becomes known by a trail name, and Tognacci had a penchant for wearing a shirt with the word “Nahamsha” on it – a mispronunciation of her new home state. It was as if the shirt was her nametag. “People called me ‘Nahamsha,’” Tognacci said.

Her distinct diet also helped define her trail identity.

“I ate lots of junk food,” she said. She cooked a warm meal at the end of every day, but started the day with Pop Tarts, and sustained herself throughout the day with Cheese-Its, candy bars, granola bars, Gushers and Diet Coke. She would sometimes find little bags of Gushers and diet soda, with her name on them, left by other hikers who heard of her appetites.

She found a trail friend, too. Cody, an Ohioan whose path she crossed on her fifth day, about 300 miles into the hike. They clicked almost immediately, and had the same aggressive pace, which made them ideal hiking partners. Tognacci and Cody ripped up the rest of the trail together, all the way to Katahdin, and will likely be friends for life, Tognacci said.

The Appalachian Trail Conservancy says most hikers who finish require between five and seven months to complete the trail. Tognacci finished on June 23, four months and one day after she set out from Georgia. She averaged 18 miles each day, including eight “zero days,” when she let her legs rest. It’s far from the record, but was fast enough to get her back to her home in Gilmanton in time for summer.

Along the way, she and Cody completed a couple of AT challenges. One was the “Four State Challenge,” completing a 45-mile stretch from Virginia to Pennsylvania in one day, passing through West Virginia and Maryland in between.

In Pennsylvania’s Pine Grove Furnace State Park, they tackled the “Half-Gallon Challenge,” eating a half gallon of ice cream in one sitting. It took her an hour and a half, eating a combination of Neopolitan and cookie dough. She wished she had picked plain vanilla.

Tognacci documented each day through a video diary posted to YouTube. Her Channel is Taylor the Nahamsha Hiker, and she said it feels “surreal” to be among those through hikers with videos on the internet, the likes of which inspired her just a few years ago.

Now that she’s home, she plans to spend the summer enjoying lake life and running her business. She took after her mother and has a gift shop in Meredith. She got engaged just before setting out in February, so there’s a wedding to plan. Come the fall, she expects she’ll get back on to some hiking trails, both locally and perhaps out in Ohio with Cody.

She said she feels a sense of accomplishment after her hike, and learned about herself in the process.

“I didn’t realize how far I could push myself,” Tognacci said. “I grew up being really shy and timid. That I could go out and have this big adventure without having any worries surprised me.”

