

Sore Feet. Happy Camper.

Brian Jackson, CPA, Hikes the Colorado Trail

BY NATALIE ROONEY



Even for Colorado’s outdoor enthusiasts, the phrase, “I’m going for a hike,” probably means, at most, a several hour trip out and back in a single day. When **Brian Jackson, CPA**, goes out for a hike, he’ll see you in two months.

A former CFO of CoBank and now a private investor in Denver, Jackson set out in July 2010 to hike the famed Colorado Trail, which runs from Durango to Denver, covers just short of 500 miles, and includes 90,000 vertical feet of climbing. Clearly, it’s not your run-of-the-mill day trip.

Starting Small, Planning Big

Jackson didn’t just wake up one Saturday morning and decide to hike the Colorado Trail. Rather, the journey was the culmination of a lifetime of outdoor activities including hiking and backpacking while growing up in Arizona. Although work and family life pushed hiking aside for many years, Jackson knew he’d eventually pick it up again.

In recent years, as he prepared to step away from his position with CoBank, Jackson began hatching a plan to hike the entire Colorado Trail with a friend, Steve Staley, a former work colleague and chair of the Colorado Trail Foundation, the nonprofit organization that maintains the trail.

Jackson did extensive research to prepare. The Colorado Trail is divided into 28 segments which range in length from 10 to 30 miles. While it’s a continuous trail, each segment starts and ends with a trailhead. A guidebook produced by the Colorado Trail Foundation provides a page of data for each segment including things like landmarks for where to find water, whether the water is seasonal, elevation gain and loss, camping areas, etc.

Jackson and Staley nailed down the logistics for the trip over the course of several months prior to their departure, overlaying the guidebook and maps. Planning each night’s camping around water availability was imperative.

“You can carry six or seven days of food with you at a time,” Jackson says. Daily ac-

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cess to water is key. Once he combined his calculations about how much he could carry and the trail specifics, “it became pretty clear where we needed to stop each day.” Resupply efforts came in mountain towns such as Silverton, Breckenridge, and Lake City. Boxes of supplies can be sent ahead to await your arrival, says Jackson. “When you get to the top of a pass, you find a ride into town and keep your fingers crossed there’s a box there with your name on it.” When it wasn’t possible to send supplies in advance, Jackson’s wife, Nancy, and others met the pair at prearranged trailhead locations that crossed county roads. Knowing that spotty cellular service would prevent reliable communication, they made arrangements in advance. “We said, ‘At 2 o’clock we’ll meet Nancy at Hwy 119’ and she would be there,” Jackson says.

That spotty cell phone coverage is part of the trail’s allure, Jackson says. “You unplug from the real world — or maybe it’s the unreal world — and your whole perspective changes. Your main concerns are very basic: food, water, shelter, and how your body is holding up.”

No Rest for the Weary

Other than a two-week break for family obligations, Jackson hiked non-stop. Pit stops in town meant it was time to dump trash (pack it in, pack it out), hit the laundromat, shower, resupply, and head back out on the trail. “We never took a rest day,” Jackson says. To add a bit of complexity to the journey, Jackson and his hiking buddies decided to hike the trail in reverse. While the majority of people start in Denver and end in Durango because it provides a more gradual ascent, Jackson chose to start in Durango and end in Denver. That meant that during the first two days of the trip, the hikers faced more than 6,000 feet of climbing. “There wasn’t much time to acclimate,” Jackson laughs. “Your fitness level improves very quickly.”

Day-to-Day on the Trail

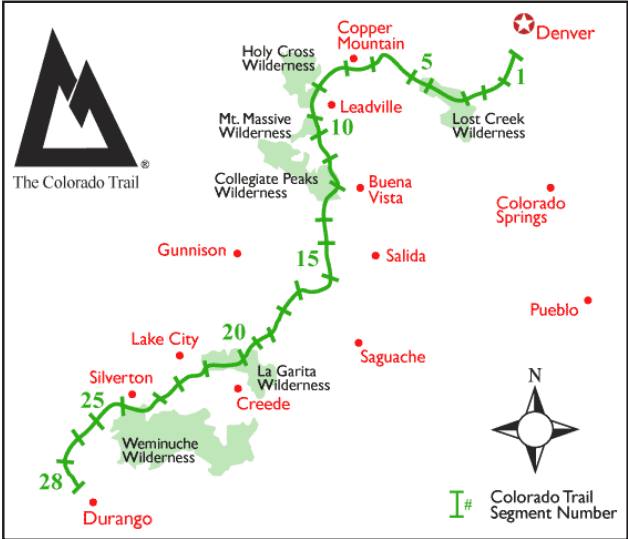
Wake up. Eat breakfast. Break down camp. Get on and experience the trail. Eat lunch. Set up camp. Eat dinner. Sleep. Do it again the next day. “You get into a rhythm,” Jackson says. With an average altitude of 10,500 feet, and several segments over 12,000 feet, your level of fitness is very important, says Jackson. He

“You and only you are responsible for getting yourself over a pass, up the hill, down the hill, and into the next camp.”

With some technical segments along the route, focus is important. “Your whole level of attention for the day changes,” Jackson says, citing a day when they crossed four passes. “You don’t want to be distracted carrying a fifty pound backpack.” Conditions weren’t always ideal. Early in the trip, the hikers endured several days of constant rain. They hiked in muddy, slippery conditions up difficult sections of the trail while gaining significant altitude. “It was cold and wet, and the trail was very hard,” Jackson recalls. “When you’re hiking in the rain, putting up your tent in the rain, and sitting in the rain, it can be mentally challenging,” he says. “We always knew we’d hit days like that at some point. You just tell yourself it’s going to be a hard day and tomorrow will be better. There’s no upside to sitting and worrying about it.”

Drama Free Zone

While there thankfully were no emergencies, accidents, or significant injuries during the trip — other than blisters and a strained Achilles tendon — there were small bursts of excitement. One night a black bear wandered into camp. “It was more exciting for us than the bear,” Jackson laughs. “He was bored and looking for a quick snack. We blew our bear whistle. He didn’t even flinch.” The bear sat down, hung around for awhile, and then ambled away. Four days into the hike, the sole of Jackson’s boot delaminated from the upper. A little duct tape held for four days, and when the hikers reached the trailhead where his friend’s Jeep was parked, the group drove back to Durango to buy him new boots. “Incidentally, the Colorado Trail is not the time to break in a new pair of boots,” Jackson advises. “Make sure you carry moleskin.” While several friends joined Jackson during different points in the trip, Staley was the only other person to make the entire journey. “I was blessed to have a friend who knew what he was doing and had the desire to go on a big adventure,” says Jackson. Staley had hiked the trail from Denver to Durango before.



ciers. With plans to hike the Grand Canyon this spring, there will be more adventures to come. Jackson has been changing his pace with work to ensure his schedule remains flexible for his trips. He remains active with many of his charitable efforts, including serving as national chair for Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and on the board of trustees of the Mile High United Way. Nancy remains “supportive and tolerant” of his wanderings. Jackson says she likes to hike but isn’t interested in living outdoors for 40+ days. Since completing the Colorado Trail, Jackson has had a few revelations. “I realized I used to be like everybody else,” he says. “If I was outside and it started to rain, I’d run for an umbrella. Yet, the human body is waterproof. And when you live outdoors for that long, your senses become much more acute. You watch your body evolve.” Jackson says people wonder, if you’re hiking the Rocky Mountains, isn’t it all the same? He asserts that hiking out to the jaw-dropping scenery is the best way to see Colorado. “We took our time on the trail because we wanted to have the opportunity to stop and really take in our state. Some of the real wonders of nature aren’t next to a highway, near an airport, or accessible by car. You can only see them on foot.”

Hike the Trail Yourself

Visit www.coloradotrail.org, the website of the Colorado Trail Foundation, the nonprofit organization whose volunteers maintain the Colorado Trail, for resources that can help you plan your trip. The organization also publishes a guidebook that covers the 28 sections of the Colorado Trail for those who want to hike the trail in segments.▲

