

# A Focused Eye

Story by Christine Ellsworth, pictures and captions by Peter Zelinka

Remember when you first got your driver's license? Suddenly, the whole world opened up for you under those wheels. And that's exactly what happened for Peter Zelinka when he got his driver's license. The road he was on, however, took him to the North Country Trail.

Perhaps that's a bit ironic, that this particular rite of passage allowing him to travel on wheels brought him to hiking off-road. He'd spent time hiking before that, of course. But once he got the license, he heard about a national trails event at Beaver Creek State Park, and decided to check it out. There, he says, he met everybody and has been going back ever since.

That was more than 5 years ago, and he joined the Great Trail - Sandy Beaver Canal Chapter of the North Country Trail Association in 2010. Since 2008, he's logged about 80 volunteer hours of trail work in 10 to fifteen days each year. That amounts to about 250 hours, plenty of experience for the 23-year-old member already, but he imagines the hours one of the other members has at 90 years of age!

Asked about his most memorable trail project, he recalls when the chapter was building a new section of

trail over a hillside covered in poison ivy. *"The rest of that summer,"* he says with a wince, *"my legs were covered in poison ivy welts!"*

Now, as he's become more familiar with the trail, he's even begun leading hikes. The first one was earlier this spring. The chapter had just finished a new section of trail, and Peter gave a background speech on the work and led 30 people on a section of trail.

Peter doesn't just work on the trail, though: he uses it. He's done the Allegheny 100 Hiking Challenge many times. He says he usually does 25 miles on the hike, but in 2013 did 50 just to see if he could. The interesting thing is that Peter has done the past three Allegheny 100s in his bare feet.

*"Hiking barefoot is my preference,"* Peter says. *"There are some real benefits, believe it or not. I usually wear boots when I'm doing trail work; I'm rather clumsy swinging those dangerous tools around! But I sometimes do trail work barefoot, too. Unless it gets really cold—then I'll throw on some wool socks."*

Barefoot hiking has been gaining a great deal of traction around the country. Those who do say the experience is incredible, once your feet get toughened up a bit.



The intense stare of a magnificent bald eagle. Eagles have been a very symbolic part of the North Country Trail for me. I saw my first one while I was doing trail work in Beaver Creek State Park; it flew right down the river while we were watching. Also, as I completed my 50 mile trek on the Allegheny 100, I saw a bald eagle soaring down the Tionesta Creek.

Then, the connection to the earth is immediate—and the entire hiking experience greatly enhanced.

The 25-mile hike this year was, as Peter called it, *"insanely muddy. When we were all coming in on the bus, we saw a wall of black clouds. We got signed in at the registration table, they gave a quick speech about the hike, and the lightning began. For the first hour or two, it was pouring down rain."* It didn't deter most of the 70 participants.

*"It was a good time,"* Peter insists. *"We saw a black bear run right in front of us, and saw a tree fall, too."*

When Peter started hiking on the North Country Trail in high school, he had a point and shoot camera. He took photos on every hike and found a real affinity for the terrain. About a year ago, he decided to invest in a better camera *"to get higher quality photos,"* he says. *"I've set out to learn as much as I can the last year, reading stuff online, reading books, and just shooting a lot. I get these photo shoots in my head, and get out and try to replicate what I've envisioned."*

He posts many photos to Instagram, Flickr, and on the Great Trail-Sandy Beaver's Facebook page. Among others, the Milky Way shots belie his relative newness to the art of photography. *"I wanted to be able to capture the light from those distant*

## Earthing

Hiking barefoot isn't a new notion, but one that is surely gaining traction in the media. Called "earthing," the practice involves walking on trails without shoes.

You'll need to start slow to desensitize those tootsies. Try walking around your back yard for starters. Always put your feet straight down, no lateral or side movement to avoid slips and cuts.

And of course, you'll need a good dose of common sense when building experience on the trail: avoid overly stony or raw trails at first, and keep a sharp lookout for any impediments ahead.

Proprioception, sometimes called one of our missing senses (of the 5 we focus on), is a scientific argument for walking barefoot. Scientists say that when we walk barefoot, we're stimulating previously ignored sense receptors in our feet that provide important information to the brain. This information helps us understand where we are, and helps us to walk more effectively and more fully engaged.

Earthers also say they walk this way to reduce the human impact on our trails.

You'll find a wide array of information on the internet, and even organizations devoted to the growing practice. Here's a couple to get you started:

[www.barefooters.org](http://www.barefooters.org)

[www.unshod.org](http://www.unshod.org)



The Milky Way shines bright over the Allegheny Reservoir. Never before have I seen the Milky Way glowing so brightly! The North Country Trail can provide stunning night views, just one more reason to do an overnight trip.

*stars,” he says. “That takes anywhere from 10 to 30 seconds with the lens open.”* It takes that, of course, but also innate talent and a reverence for nature to produce such incredible photographs.

Have a look at Peter Zelinka’s work; I predict this young man—currently a software specialist for the local newspaper—will soon find a home in the field of professional photography. We’ll just hope he keeps a focused eye on the North Country Trail to give back to us the beauty he finds there. ✧

To view some of Peter’s best work, you can visit his photography website at [www.peterzelinka.com](http://www.peterzelinka.com).



Backpacking in Glacier National Park, Montana. I spent two weeks backpacking in Glacier and had a truly amazing experience, from white water rafting on crystal clear rivers, to climbing mountains, to camping in some of the best locations in America. Get out there!