



Hiking the

Unfinished Trail

By Elizabeth "Snorkel" Thomas

Hike 3,100 miles from Canada to Mexico along the grizzly-bear infested Continental Divide Trail? No way. The few hikers I met who had walked the Divide called it a “trail in flux.” Sections are built or changed so frequently that most USGS maps don’t bother labeling it. This is why CDT guidebooks warn would-be hikers they should expect to be lost four hours a day—everyday. Even the Forest Service calls the trail “incomplete.” I, like most hikers, wasn’t even sure what an “incomplete trail” meant, but it terrified me more than bears.

Between my end-to-end hikes of the Appalachian Trail (AT) and Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), I have walked the distance from Los Angeles to Washington D.C. and back. But I still thought wandering along the towering backbone of the United States called the Continental Divide would be a formidable endeavor. Unsurprisingly, only 100 or so hikers—only 18 of them women—have hiked the Appalachian, Pacific Crest, and Continental Divide Trails, called the Triple Crown of Hiking. Within the trail community, I always elevated Triple Crowners to demigod status. When I learned the CDT isn’t finished, I thought only a minor deity could navigate a trail that doesn’t even exist.

Although I am a skilled route-finder, I had reason to fear becoming lost. While trekking the finished and well-marked PCT, I lost the trail under the Sierra snow for a quarter-mile on my way to Mather Pass, only to emerge four hours later, gripping my ice axe desperately, at an unnamed and probably unexplored saddle. If losing the trail on the PCT for a short distance could lead to such a scary adventure, hiking a route where hundreds of miles hadn’t been built sounded like a date with the rescue helicopter.

Wanderlust, an inescapable calling, persuaded me to thru-hike again and I decided to walk the CDT. I was ready to feel my mind and body join to become focused and energized on succeeding at my hike. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls this mental state “flow.” On the AT, within weeks, I could move over rocky terrain without my brain telling my feet, “Watch your step!” My body moved where I wanted it to go without direction from my conscious mind. I became insect-like and I had never felt more alive. I wanted to feel “flow” again.

Last May, I wrote “Women Going the Distance” for American Hiker to spread what I learned from walking the AT and PCT to other hikers. This summer, as I trekked the CDT and recorded my progress on AHS’s Facebook page, I realized that many hikers weren’t sure what an “unfinished trail” is. Of eleven congressionally designated National Scenic Trails, all but the AT and PCT are still unfinished. If other hikers and I want to explore all the National Scenic Trail System has to offer, we must acquaint ourselves with the challenges of walking incomplete routes. I embarked on the CDT to solve a mystery for all of us: what is it like to hike an unfinished trail?

I started the CDT in June at the Canadian border cruising downhill on a well-marked footpath in Glacier National Park. “If this is what the CDT is like,” I proclaimed to my hiking partner, Brian Doble,

“then it is going to be easier than the AT and PCT!” Yet I knew that unlike the AT and PCT, there was no “one trail” that would lead me to Mexico. Days earlier, before even taking my first step, I selected one of two northern starting points. On the AT and PCT, I never had to make routing decisions—the trails are like bumpers in a bowling alley which safely guide the ball from one end to the other. For the first time on a thru-hike, I had to “choose my own adventure” and it terrified me.

An unfinished trail, the CDT connects footpaths, paved and unpaved

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Opposite page: Liz Thomas (Trailname: Snorkel) hikes cross country from cairn to cairn in San Juan National Forest, CO. Above: Liz Thomas carrying her Jim Wolf guidebook near Homer Young’s Peak, Deerhead National Forest, MT. *Brian Doble.*

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roads, jeep trails, and highways to create continuous routes within the Continental Divide corridor. Landslides, floods, persistent vegetation, and private property render some routes unusable. For safety, hikers choose to take alternate paths to avoid these obstructions or to travel below tree line during lightning storms or when snow levels are high. In the desert, I opted for routes that travelled by cattle troughs; sharing water with a cow beat the alternative of going without. I think most CDT thru-hikers would say for now, the term Continental Divide Trail is a misnomer. On the unfinished CDT, everyone chooses their own course by connecting hundreds of trails and roads. It is the difficulty in linking these routes on the ground that gets hikers lost.

No matter how experienced, every CDT thru-hiker gets lost. The first time I became lost was in Northern Montana. Brian and I were coasting on a well-maintained trail which suddenly faded into a knee-deep swamp. Certain our route

continued on the other side of the water, I slogged onwards until I could not move. We backtracked, hoping to find where we were supposed to turn, but neither of us had seen marked trails for miles. Finally, I spotted unsigned tracks across a meadow. Apparently, we missed that “turn.” I was livid. “This would never be acceptable on the AT or PCT,” I told Brian. “Where are the signs? Where is the—trail?”

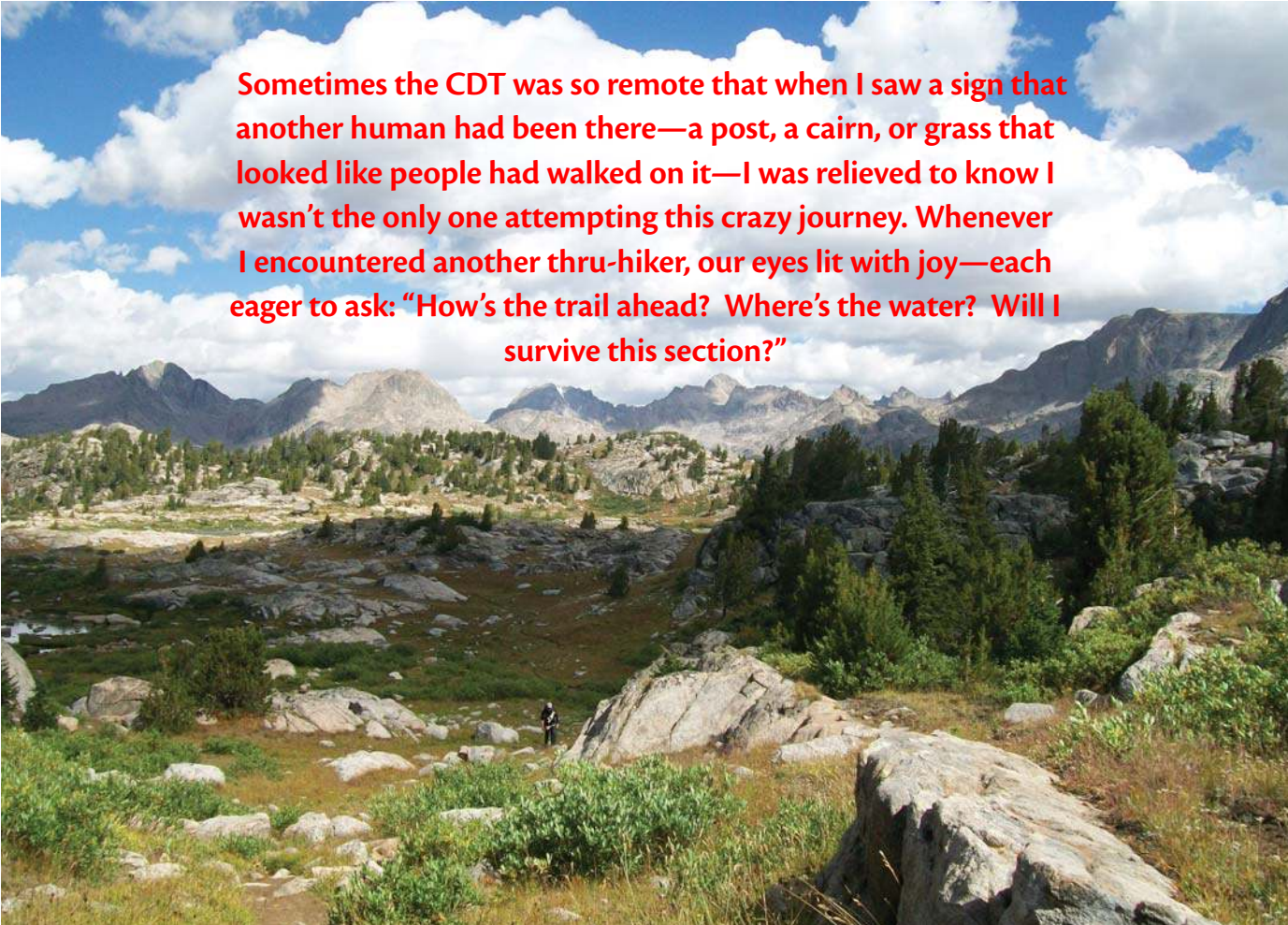
I learned to stop expecting signs or a trail. In Montana, the route sometimes followed overgrown logging roads which insidiously camouflaged their meanderings into surrounding forests. Frequently, the route wound through a maze of Forest Service roads—most which met at unnamed and unmarked intersections. If I was lucky, I’d find a rock cairn placed by another hiker to signal forks in the road. Although I was headed southbound, the correct path often was not headed south. By the time I walked to Idaho, I accepted that being lost was another part of the day. It didn’t mean I was

going to die or starve. It was just something I needed to fix.

Sometimes the CDT was so remote that when I saw a sign that another human had been there—a post, a cairn, or grass that looked like people had walked on it—I was relieved to know I wasn’t the only one attempting this crazy journey. Most years, only 30 people attempt to walk the entire Divide, and day hikers or weekend warriors are rare. On the AT and PCT, I was confident I would find other hikers nearby. On the CDT, whenever I encountered another thru-hiker, our eyes lit with joy—each eager to ask: “How’s the trail ahead? Where’s the water? Will I survive this section?”

In southern Wyoming, I discovered that seeing people on the trail can be dangerous, too. Months of sharing my mixed-use trail with ATVs, dirt bikes, and jeeps, taught me to quickly get out of a vehicle’s way. But I wasn’t prepared for what hunting season would mean for my trek. On September 1st, I heard a gun blast less than one hundred yards in front

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Brian Doble (Trailname: Frogs) near Jean Lakes, Bridger Wilderness, the Wind River Range, WY. *Liz Thomas.*

CONQUERING THE TRIPLE CROWN

Starts and Finishes



The Appalachian Trail

Left: Liz Thomas finishes the Appalachian Trail on Mt. Katahdin in Maine's Baxter State Park on July 18th, 2008 (left); Months earlier, on April 9th, 2008, she began the AT at Amicalola Falls State Park in Georgia (right).

The Pacific Crest Trail

Liz Thomas in front of the PCT's Southern terminus monument at Campo, California with (non-hiker) friend, Jenna Hilbert when she began the trail on May 2nd, 2009 (left); She finished the PCT on September 6, 2009, at the northern terminus monument in Manning Park, British Columbia (right).



The Continental Divide Trail

Liz Thomas begins the CDT at the Canadian border monument at Chief Mountain, Glacier National Park, on June 26th, 2010 (left); Liz Thomas and Brian Doble finished the CDT at the Mexican border at Palomas, Mexico. November 20th, 2010.



Liz Thomas (Snorkel) hikes at 13,000 feet in Gunnison National Forest near the San Juan Wilderness, CO. Brian Doble.

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of me. Two men, now holding still squirming grouse, were parked on our trail brandishing smoking rifles. Now, when people ask me how I grapple with the fear of bears and snakes while hiking, I tell them that on a mixed-use trail, I am more worried a hunter on an ATV will mistake me for an elk. While I am grateful to several hunters who shared their food and water with me as I hiked the CDT, I know that on unfinished hiking trails, some conflict with other outdoor users is inevitable.

In several areas, like the Wind River Range in Wyoming or most of Colorado, my route was on well-marked footpath. I saw hikers frequently. These sections reminded me of the AT and PCT. But now I realized that when I hiked the AT and PCT, I took well-marked and well-maintained trails for granted. On the CDT, I learned my lesson. Even as I was hit by a blizzard at 13,000 feet in Colorado's San Juan Wilderness, my numb toes and exhaustion were slightly alleviated with the relief of knowing underneath the waist-deep snow was a well-marked footpath.

When I reached Pie Town, New Mexico, I was so emaciated that I consumed 10,000 calories a day whenever I resupplied in towns. I was delighted to find a trail-town whose economy rests on dessert. As I finally left the bakery to continue my desert journey, the sun was already low in the sky. The "trail" out of Pie Town is a public sandy road bordered by private ranches. Frequent signs warn hikers they will be prosecuted or shot if they dare trespass. What a sharp contrast this was to the AT and PCT, where locals leave out water and food for hikers. Trapped for 20 miles on a narrow path between barbed wire fences, I was fearful I could not walk to a legal campsite on National Forest land before dark. That night, as I frantically searched by headlamp for a patch of public land, "unfinished trail" took on a new meaning to me. Unfinished is beyond unmarked. Unfinished trails lack corridors of

public land where hikers can camp. Along most of the PCT or AT, terrain was my only obstacle to finding a campsite. But on the CDT, I constantly had to check maps and postings to make sure I wasn't camping illegally. Fortunately, outside of Pie Town, I stumbled upon a patch of federal land checkered between ranches. Other hikers have not been so lucky. Every year, ranchers call the cops on hikers who unknowingly trespass. After travelling the CDT, I believe working with willing landowners to identify safe hiking and camping places is a priority to completing long distance trails.

Before this summer, I expected navigation would be the biggest obstacle to hiking an unfinished trail. Yet I found orienting on the CDT, although often frustrating, rewarded me in a way 5,000 miles on well-established trails had not. On the CDT, I experienced "flow" not only from walking, but from following my compass. As hiking the AT freed me from doubt that I could walk across the country, hiking the CDT gave me confidence to navigate a route. Now I plan to trek on unfinished trails and routes that I had never before considered walkable.

The obstacles I endured on the CDT convinced me why trail organizations like AHS dedicate themselves to protecting, preserving, and finishing trails. The CDT needs work to become a finished trail, but I was so delighted by it that I didn't want to reach the end. After four months of hiking, Brian and I touched the Mexican border feeling grateful for the adventures of the CDT—from lupine-covered grassy ridges to tarantulas crawling by our lunch spot. Hike 3,100 miles over the tallest mountains in the lower 48 states? Way.



Elizabeth Thomas is a Doris Duke Conservation Fellow and recent graduate of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies. Her journals from the CDT can be read at the AHS Facebook page and at <http://www.trailjournals.com/snorkel>.