

Local author uses baby steps to ease the uninitiated into great outdoors

If you're just getting started in hiking, camping or backpacking, would you take the advice of someone who spent all of last summer on his duff in front of a computer?



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Outdoor Trails

In this case, yes, by all means listen to Jason Stevenson.

The Lancaster resident has just published a primer on these pursuits: "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Backpacking and Hiking."

Published by Alpha Books and released April 6, the 344-page softcover guide sells for \$16.95 and is available from local bookstores or from Amazon.com.

The 31-year-old Stevenson knows his stuff. Having been an associate editor and in-the-field writer for both Backpacker and Outside magazines helps.

At Backpacker, he edited the skills and nature sections, writing about blisters, first-aid kits, bears, self-belays and the like. He's still a gear-tester for Backpacker.

But the main reason you should trust Stevenson is because he's made just about all the dumb, unwise and bull-headed mistakes you can make.

On his very first camping trip as a young tike of 5 with his family, he scalded himself with hot soup when one of those old collapsible cups, well, collapsed.

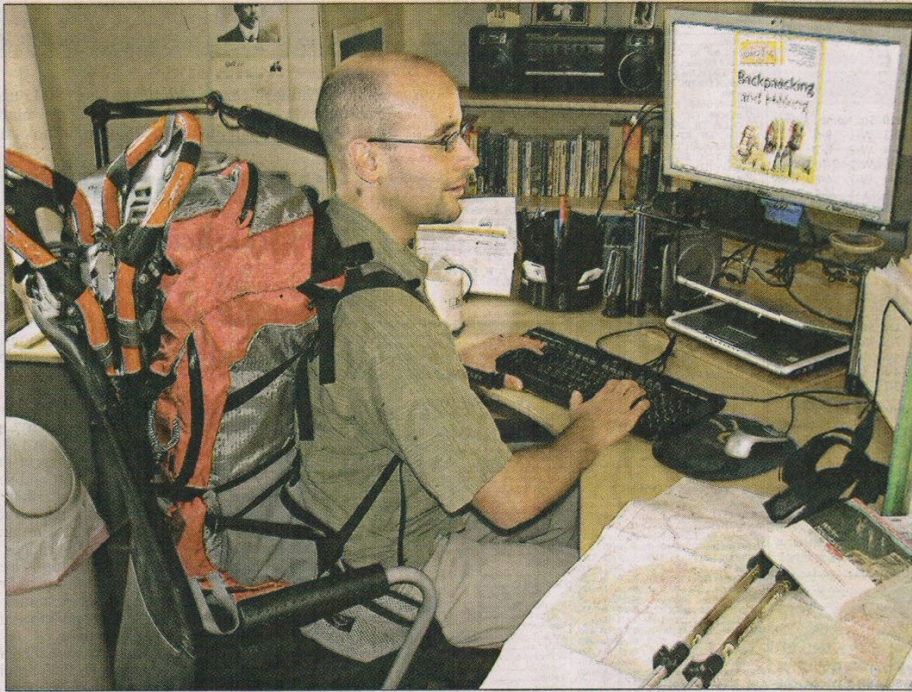
Then there were his various disasters with his wife, Jackie, currently doing her family practice residency at Lancaster General Hospital.

On the couple's honeymoon in New Mexico, they struck out to find a backcountry hot springs. The map was in a hefty guidebook that Stevenson thought was too heavy. The directions seemed straightforward enough, so he chucked it into the back seat.

The couple ended up veering down a game trail, and found themselves climbing hand-over-hand on tree roots jutting over a river gorge.

The lesson of the story is to take as many detailed maps as you can find for a backpacking trip. If the guidebooks are too heavy, copy the pages.

Before that disaster, only six months into their relation-



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Jason Stevenson, author of a new beginner's guide to backpacking and hiking, in his Lancaster rowhouse.

ship, Stevenson took Jackie on their first hike together. The first part of the trek along a brook in a wilderness area in New Hampshire went peachy.

Then on the way back, they decided to take a detour around a mountain so they could see new scenery. Stevenson didn't bother to check the mileage or that many stream fords were in the mix.

The couple was hiking with headlamps by the time they made it back to the car. They ended their march a mere half-hour before Stevenson's mom was to call state police to report a missing son.

"When we finally reached the car, we ended up actually kissing the tires," he recalls.

"My wife has been the guinea pig on many a misadventure. As I was writing the book, she kept reminding me of all the things I should mention."

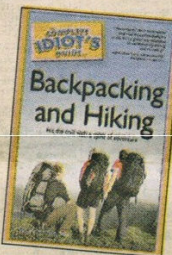
Like Stevenson, the former Jackie Rohrer is a native of Ohio. But with a name like Rohrer, it's not surprising that she has roots in Lancaster County.

AUTHOR ON TOUR

■ Jason Stevenson, local author of "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Backpacking and Hiking," will give two local how-to programs and book signings.

■ Saturday, May 15, at 11 a.m., Stevenson will be at Aaron's Books, 43 S. Broad St., Lititz. On Saturday, May 22, at 11 a.m., he will appear at the Lancaster Public Library. He will talk about "Five Lessons I Learned the Hard Way." Subjects include how to set up a tent in a windstorm, how to layer clothes, wilderness survival skills, compass and GPS, camping with kids and more.

■ More information on the book may be found at Stevenson's Web site at www.jasonstevenson.net.



The couple moved to Lancaster city in May 2008. They live with Nellie, a very energetic Australian cattle dog, in a 1890 rowhouse near Franklin & Marshall College.

Asked about the barriers that keep some from venturing into the woods with a pack, the Harvard graduate

suggests: "What they know is comfortable. There's comfort in thought and comfort in being. Going outdoor threatens both of those. You'll be outside your element, as well."

In the book, Stevenson also cites the fear of abandoning a familiar bed and going to the bathroom outdoors.

But, ultimately, he argues, "The tradeoffs are beneficial. You just get to breathe free and get to be away from your cell phone or computer or traffic noise."

"You have these magical moments when you're out there when you actually have to kind of pinch yourself and be like, wait a second, I'm pretty far away from my normal existence and why don't I come out here more often?"

One of the great things about hiking and backpacking, the former Boy Scout says, is that it's always there when you need it.

"There's certain points in your life where everything is aligned and you can take advantage of it quite a bit. And there's other moments in your life where there's a job or family and you have to scale back."

"But that doesn't mean you can't return to it," he says.

After the last year of near-solid writing from his third-floor office, Stevenson is looking forward to a new cycle of backpacking. He leaves any day now for a trip on the

West Rim Trail in Pine Creek Gorge.

Another impediment that keeps some people from taking the hiking or backpacking plunge is gear. Too daunting, too expensive, too bewildering.

"For beginning backpacking, you really don't need that much," says Stevenson. "A pair of walking shoes, some nylon or polyester clothing, fleece, a water bottle, a backpack, energy bars, and a map and compass, of course, and you can go out there."

"The only thing you really can't borrow is boots. But you can hike in tennis shoes."

Don't be afraid to "kick the tires" when shopping for gear, he says. Climb into tents and sleeping bags. Put heavy objects into packs to see if there any pressure points that could give you trouble.

Boots, incidentally, are perhaps the hardest gear to get right, Stevenson stresses. Some 80 percent of people have one foot a different size than the other. Try on many pairs to see which fits right.

Stevenson talks about the use of cell phones and GPS units in the book. Both can be safety tools. But beware using them as crutches. He preaches about the need to have good old-fashioned topo maps and compass. He still has his Boy Scout compass.

"All it takes is one dunking in the river or a couple dead batteries and you are digitally deficient and you have to resort to basics. And if you don't have them, or know how to use them, then you're not prepared," he says.

Near the end of our talk, during a conversation on the tendency to overpack for trips, Stevenson confides one of his real passions for backpacking: food.

"You can eat whatever you want because you burn so many calories getting to where you are that you can really splurge. That, I think, is one of the best things about being out in the woods."

"Sure, it might be a little uncomfortable, but what's better than cooking s'mores over a fire and eating gorp by the handful and cutting up strips of pepperoni and crackers and cheese?"

"That might be one of the main reasons I love to go backpacking."

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