

# HEALTH

with you in mind

## A backpacker's checklist for trekking trails

By Patricia M. Albrecht

The Dover Public Library is normally closed on Sundays, but on June 13, area residents received a special treat when author Jason Stevenson visited from Lancaster, Pa. He brought backpacking and hiking gear and informing the audience about things novice backpackers should know before trekking trails.

Stevenson, who started in journalism as an intern and assistant editor for Outside magazine, and recently was associate editor at Backpack magazine, has been a freelance writer for those magazines as well as Wired, Men's Health, Men's Journal, Women's Health, Runner's World, Best Life, Spirit, Boston, Seed, Delicious Living, and World War II.

In April, he published his first book, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Backpacking and Hiking*, written for the amateur backpacker and filled with practical tips and information for those who want to start with small day hikes and eventually work up to weekend and longer adventures.

Stevenson grew up in Hudson, went to Harvard, where he received his B.A. in Social Studies in 2000, and went on to get his M.Sc. by research at the University of Edinburgh, in Scotland.

"My book," said Stevenson, "has no Everest accounts in it. It's more of an outdoor book for the rest of us who go camping with the grandkids, would like to do a 10-mile hike, or a small adventure. The information comes from my own misadventures."

Five lessons were presented by Stevenson. Lessons, he said, he learned the hard



Dover Public Library welcomed guest author Jason Stevenson, wife Jackie Rohrer, and Neille, their Australian Cattle/Jack Russell dog, to speak June 13.

way. Losing the trail, being unprepared for bad weather, forgetting to break in new gear, taking a cross-country shortcut, and starting too late in the day.

"My first lesson was learned while I was in Santa Fe, N.M.," said Stevenson. "I decided to leave my trail book with the map and trail instructions in the car. As we hiked, I realized the trail got narrower and narrower but just thought it was a rugged trail. When my wife was near a cliff, I realized we were definitely off the trail."

"So, it's important to always bring the map. Everyone in the group should have one, in case you get separated or someone loses it. As soon as you notice something different, be sure to speak up. Another mistake we made was to keep going. There is nothing wrong with turning around if you notice something amiss."

"Logs on the ground in an 'X' formation signals the universal trail sign to not go there. These are often placed by previous hikers who know that there is some sort of danger up ahead. Also, keep your eyes on blazes or marks on the trees. If they disappear, you are headed the wrong way," he said.

The second lesson was obvious when Stevenson and his wife, Jackie, were near Mount Rainier in Washington and he couldn't fit two sleeping pads in his pack, so decided to just bring one for his wife.

It began raining and then turned to snow, and they found themselves trudging through four to five inches.

"It was October," said Stevenson, "so I wasn't expecting snow. I gave my wife the sleeping pad, and ended up very cold that night. As you hike up in elevation, the weather naturally drops. You may think you only need a sleeping bag, but a sleeping pad prevents the cold ground from stealing heat away from your sleeping bag. I had a 30-year-old sleeping bag that I thought would still be fine, but they actually lose their insulation after a while."

It is also wise, added Stevenson, to check out the weather in the area you plan on hiking on <http://www.noaa.gov>, instead of a basic weather site to give a more accurate information.

Forgetting to break in new gear, Stevenson told the audience, can be a painful lesson. The night before he left for the West Highland Way in Scotland, he threw his boots into his pack. He hadn't worn them in over a year.

The next day, he had to throw them out and buy new ones. He recommends trail shoes now, instead of boots. Trail shoes, like Merrells, breathe and are lightweight.

"Break in your shoes before you wear them," said Stevenson, "to prevent blisters. If you feel a hot spot, duct tape can be used to create a barrier between your skin and shoe. I wrap duct tape around my water bottle, so it's readily accessible."

The next lesson was learned in the Continental Divide by Montana and Idaho,

where Stevenson decided to go around the mountain on the way back. He entered a burn area, and the fire had destroyed the trail. They had veered off course, were in a remote area where no one would be coming along to help, and their water source was gone. They finally got to the trail and water, but learned another valuable lesson about not taking a cross-country shortcut.

"Always bring your common sense when hiking," said Stevenson. "There is a certain disease called Summit Fever. It's not an actual disease, but it's named that because people can become so consumed with reaching a goal, that they make dumb decisions. It's always better to take the known route."

The last lesson, starting too late in the day, occurred in 2003, while hiking in New Hampshire in the White Mountain National Forest. Stevenson and his wife got a late start, added another trail they thought was only two miles, that ended up actually eight miles with streams.

"We had to go slow," said Stevenson. "I had told my mom we would check in about 7. We finally got back at 10, just before she was about to send someone out looking for us."

Most people, Stevenson added, overestimate the miles they can hike.

Stevenson answered questions from the audience and did a clothing and gear demonstration.

"Five extra pieces of gear you might consider," said Stevenson, "are headlamps, trekking poles, footprints for your tent (plastic sheeting under your tent), rain pants, and camp shoes. Camp shoes or water shoes are good for the end of the day at camp or crossing a stream. Your feet need a rest at the end of the day, and if you cross a stream, you don't want to be in wet shoes all day. I also bring a hat, even on summer hikes, to use at night sleeping."

"Layering is the key for clothing. Your base layer should be polyester that is lightweight and keeps moisture away from your skin. Your second layer is your insulating layer like fleece, and your outer layer is your armored shield that should be waterproof but breathable."

Stevenson always brings his cell phone on hikes in the event he encounters a problem or may come across someone who is injured, keeping it off unless needed in order to conserve battery power.

A book signing and refreshment time followed the program, and Stevenson continued to answer backpacking and hiking questions from the crowd.

Everyone walked away from the Dover Public Library on June 13 with many trail-tested techniques for a safe and enjoyable hiking experience.

Find out more about Jason Stevenson by visiting <http://www.jasonstevenson.net>.