

# into the Wild

SOLO FASTPACKING THE TAHOE RIM TRAIL

STORY BY MEGHAN M. HICKS / PHOTOS BY RACHID DAHNOUN

**AT 6:10 A.M.** on Wednesday, July 3, I sidle up to the sign at the South Kingsbury Trailhead, 2,000 feet above the southeast side of California's Lake Tahoe. I'm about to set out on a solo fastpack of the 170-mile Tahoe Rim Trail (TRT), a meandering oval track around the big lake.

My mission is exquisitely simple: run the loop around the blue beast in less than six days. I stand here, thinking, *I'll run. I'll power hike. I might cry once or twice. But, hopefully, I'll be back at this spot on schedule.*

I've been qualifying everything about this trip with the word "hope." The word is my safety net against superstition, like touching wood or crossing my fingers. I've never traveled 170 miles in six days on foot before. I've never been alone for that long, either. I have, however, been a backpacker since 1997, and took my first fastpacking trip six years ago. I've gone 150 miles on foot in seven days five different times, and I have been alone in the wilds for three full days.

I could have chosen to do the trip with a friend, to do it in nine days or to hike all of it rather than running as much as I'm able. But I wanted a real challenge, not something that I would achieve with relative certainty, something that I would look at with anticipation, hopefulness, intimidation.

I've got the requisite skill set to do this, I feel certain. But anything can happen in a wilderness and, well, at some point it's going to get demanding. I've been reminding myself that my experience is my crutch.

**MY FIRST FEW MILES** will be along the TRT's newest singletrack, which was completed last year. The TRT was a vision of the Tahoe Rim Trail Association, a non-profit started in 1981 to plan, build and maintain the trail. The trail itself opened in 2001 but included a bit of paved road and some trail sections that still needed work. With the finishing of this new section, the TRT was officially complete and *all singletrack*. Beginning a new adventure on

The author takes in the wild of Big Meadow and the rest of the galaxy on the Tahoe Rim Trail's southeast side.



Hot water for cocoa warms a chilly night (above); gathering water from a small lake in the Desolation Wilderness (above right); on Dicks Pass just after sunrise, Day Five.

a fresh trail just feels right.

Because there's no one around, I say to the trailhead sign, "I hope to see you soon." I head up the access trail a half mile as peach-colored sunrise bathes the landscape, then make a right to begin my counterclockwise Lake Tahoe circumnavigation. My pack is as heavy as it's going to get, 24 pounds, which includes enough water to get me through the mostly dry terrain above the lake's east side. This load represents a bit more than 20 percent of my body weight and

panicking and darting across highways like this one.

I dip off the TRT a short distance to Spooner Lake for my first water refill. Knowing that humans frequent the lake, I carefully purify my water before returning to the trail. Poofy, cotton-candy clouds dot the sky, but today's forecast indicates that some of these may sprout into thunderstorms. I've got some above-treeline travel in the 10 or so miles between me and tonight's stopping point, the Marlette Peak Campground, so I add a

**THIS LOAD REPRESENTS A BIT MORE THAN 20 PERCENT OF MY BODY WEIGHT AND MAKES RUNNING A CHALLENGE. YOU COULD CALL MY MOVEMENT, AVERAGING ABOUT FOUR MILES PER HOUR, A "TROT."**

makes running a challenge. You could call my movement, averaging about four miles per hour, a "trot."

There are bumps and knolls, climbing and descending, but the trail is remarkably smooth and runnable. Tough terrain typically dictates rest breaks, but today I let the best views of Lake Tahoe decide where to stop and sit. Lake Tahoe is famous for its blue color, and throughout the day that hue shifts, mimicking the sky's slight color changes. During my breaks, I snack from baggies of nuts, dried fruit and one of my trail indulgences, corn nuts flavored like ranch dressing.

The TRT crosses Highway 50 at Spooner Summit, which is jam-packed with traffic moving fast, headed toward Fourth of July celebrations around the lake. My journey is just 18 miles old and already the pace of these cars feels frightening, chaotic. I eventually make my way across and back onto the trail, and now empathize with wildlife

little oomph to my stride and arrive before the skies unleash.

Evening at Marlette Peak Campground is filled with lightning, thunder and intermittent rain. I set up my tarp beneath a protective stand of trees, keeping my gear almost entirely dry. When the storms abate, I meander the mile up to nearby Marlette Peak just before sunset. The sky is still grouchy everywhere but overhead, and I watch a bolt of lightning hit a hill to the southeast through a grey curtain of rain. Minutes later, a thin, white pillar of smoke starts to rise from the lightning-strike site. I realize I've watched a forest fire's birth. Everything feels unsettled as I lie down to sleep.

**I WAKE**, feeling the sensation of close company. I flip on my flashlight and light up the green eyes and tawny form of a deer half inside my tarp. When I shout, the doe is unalarmed and slowly

saunters away, then returns. We repeat the process *all* night.

I give up on sleeping around 4:30 a.m. when the first hints of amber overtake the midnight-blue sky. The deer approaches multiple times as I pack up, and when I open my bear can to pull out food, the human-acclimated deer runs toward me, scrapes one of her front hooves on the ground, then darts closer until she is just steps away. I throw rocks in her direction, hurriedly lace up and hit the trail, unrested and unfed.

I climb a couple hundred feet and a mile or so up the trail to a viewpoint just north of Marlette Peak and overlooking Lake Tahoe from its east side. It's still pre-sunrise on Day Two. The eastern horizon is pale yellow and partially blocked by a veil of silver virga, leftovers from last evening's persistent thunderstorms. And the brand-new wildfire has already grown into a hefty column. The western view is breathtaking: the sky and lake in matching, morning aquamarine and containing all of the terrain over which I will travel in the next five days. Away from the pesky deer, I pull out my stove to make tea and oats, feeling sleepy and slightly overwhelmed.

It is a rough day, and running feels impossible. I am only able to hike 15 miles in 10 hours. I blame it on the nutty deer and a poor dinner the prior night.

**IT'S DAY THREE**, and I stand knee-deep in Watson Lake, a little blip of standing water above the north side of Lake Tahoe, soaking my sore feet. I've already power hiked and run around 27 miles today. But my destination, a hotel room in Tahoe City and a treat to myself

## My Gear List

### MY CLOTHING

- Plain, old ball cap
- Smith Pivlock V90 sunglasses
- The North Face wicking t-shirt
- Opedix CORE-Tec shorts
- Injinji Trail 2.0 Midweight Micro socks
- Salomon Speedcross 3 shoes
- Black Diamond Ultra Distance Z-Poles

### IN MY BACKPACK

- Osprey Talon 33 backpack
- Integral Designs Siltarp2 tarp
- Montbell U.L. Super Spiral Down Hugger #5 sleeping bag
- The North Face RDT rain jacket
- Mountain Hardwear ultralight down jacket
- Under Armour tights
- Spare pair of Injinji socks
- Buff
- Jetboil Flash stove and one fuel canister
- Light My Fire spork
- BearVault BV500 bear can
- Water bottles from a gas station
- Aquamira water-purification chemicals
- Ultralight headlamp
- Tom Harrison Lake Tahoe & Tahoe Rim Trail Recreation Map
- Roughly 15,000 calories of food
- Bag of toiletries and medical supplies

/ Fastpacking /





In Big Meadow at sunset, Hicks retraces her day's 34 miles worth of steps.

for making it halfway around the lake, is another half-marathon down the trail.

But I feel physically better today. To traverse the TRT in six days, I've got to average 28 miles per day, so I'm playing catch-up on yesterday's lost miles. As I soak, I envy the people lounging on the other side of lake. A mountain biker rolls up, interrupting the ugly thought spiral. He asks if I have means for purifying water as he's running low.

**IT'S A SUMMER FRIDAY NIGHT, AND TAHOE CITY IS ALIVE WITH WOMEN IN SUNDRESSES, EXPENSIVE CARS CRUISING THE STRIP. I, ON THE OTHER HAND, HAVE FILTHY LEGS, TREKKING POLES AND NO IDEA WHERE TO GO.**

As I fix him up with clean water, we idly chat. Mostly he wants to know why I'm still wearing my socks and shoes to soak my feet. I don't want to tell him my real answer—that I didn't think I could sniff back the foot-pain-based tears long enough to undress my feet—so I say that maybe my wet feet will soothe my toes a little longer down the trail. My logic isn't sound, but he doesn't seem to care. He just smiles and tells me about some rock formations down the trail.

This is a moment of symbiosis: my water-purification chemicals make his ride a little smoother and his positive attitude helps shift my own mood. I head on, stopping at a trail intersection to check the map. There I encounter two mountain bikers. I must look a little awful, because they insist on giving me a snack. This, the random generosity of people in the woods, restores my disposition even more.

With fortifications of spirit and

stomach, I run today's last half marathon hard. It takes me under three hours, which is a damn fine pace for traveling with a pack. I am elated when I pop out into a neighborhood at the edge of Tahoe City. This is the point in a trip, where, with friends, we'd whoop and high-five. But I simply jog toward the main drag.

It's a summer Friday night, and Tahoe City is alive with women in

sundresses, expensive cars cruising the strip and music emanating from restaurants' open patios. I, on the other hand, have filthy legs, trekking poles and no idea where to go. Then a police car stops in front of me.

"You've been in the backcountry," says the officer.

"What gave it away?" I respond, laughing, a little embarrassed.

"You look like you could use some help."

I tell him I'm looking for my hotel and a good restaurant. He points me in the right direction on both accounts, and then asks a couple of questions about my trip. Before he drives off he says, "You'll do it! You're halfway there!"

The rest of my night involves a hot shower, sushi and just one beer—I don't plan to screw up my recovery again—and eight hours of sleep in a soft bed. I study the trail map over dinner and scribble a note in the middle of it, in the blue waters of Lake Tahoe. "No one goes totally alone."

**IT'S A DIFFICULT BUT**

beautiful thing to be by yourself (or pretty close to it, as lessons from the first half of my trip have taught me) on an endeavor like this. It is, however, much less attractive that just about everyone I talk to is somehow shocked that I am solo.

"I'd never do that," says a woman who is, ironically, out for a solo day hike save for the company of her dog and the person on the other end of the cell phone she's using when we meet. Two other women day hiking together, when we stop for a chat, inquire, "A woman alone? Wow," and, "Aren't you afraid?" Perhaps the most amusing is the preteen boy who is on a backpacking trip with his family. He asks, "You couldn't find a friend to come with you?"

I have plenty of time to ponder the commentary. *Perhaps I appear incapable of such a thing? Friend-less, is that me?* And, finally, a more defensive, *what's wrong with being alone?*

It has taken me days, but I've finally developed the perfect retort. My first opportunity to use it is on a man a few miles south of Barker Pass, on the west side of Lake Tahoe, on Day Four. He's kind of a creeper anyway, the sort of guy that, as a woman alone in the wilds, you stare directly in the eyes, give an assertive hello and keep on truckin'. Creepers don't have distinguishing appearances per se, but something about them makes your be-careful instincts work double time.

I've just passed him, but I can see out of the corner of my eye that he's stepped to the side of the trail in the quintessential pause-and-chat position for trail users. I have no intention of hanging out, so I continue my mosey. He says, "Are you out here alone?" I don't stop moving but I turn my head in his direction and respond, "Are you out here alone?"

I must be 30 or 40 feet away now, far enough that my creeper alarm doesn't beep so loud, so I stop and turn back. The guy's first reaction is a giant smile. Then he transfers both of his hiking poles into one hand before leaning over and slapping the other hand to his thigh. A cascade of laughter follows. I notice, he's a bit old and has a little kyphosis, which makes his back curl away from his pack and gives him a vulnerable profile.

*He thinks I'm fantastic and I thought he was an ax murderer. Nice, Meghan,* I think.

“You have made my day,” he calls out. I give an awkward wave, and we head our own ways.

**TONIGHT**, my last night out, I want to camp at Big Meadow, the real meadow about a mile away from a trailhead of the same name. Someone told me that a night there will blow my mind.

It’s a helluva pull to get there, something like 34 miles on my fifth day of travel. Fortunately, Echo Chalet, a tiny store and café on the east end of Echo Lake that serves as a refueling point for lake recreaters and hikers, is perched on the TRT at today’s halfway point. At this point, I have tired legs and am constantly hungry, so the prospect of lunch at Echo Chalet motivates me.

I am also motivated by the fact that yesterday evening I crossed into the Desolation Wilderness, the land southwest of Lake Tahoe that protects dozens of high-altitude lakes, white granite mountains and a whole lot of desolation. I jog off into the pre-dawn dimness from my campsite at Middle Velma Lake wearing all my clothes.

From here, it’s four miles mostly uphill to Dicks Pass, and I don’t need to shed any layers, even though I run almost the entire climb. Ice clings to the edges of the creeks I hop over. Patches of snow hide under trees and my breath condenses into white poofs. But Dicks Pass, looking south into the wilderness and its layers upon layers of lakes and

**FAMISHED, I BUY TWO TURKEY SANDWICHES, TWO CANS OF COCA COLA AND TWO BEN & JERRY’S ICE-CREAM SANDWICHES. ON THE PORCH, I DOWN IT ALL WHILE A LITTLE GIRL WATCHES IN BEWILDERMENT.**

rock, makes up for whatever discomfort the cold creates.

It takes what feels like an eternity to get to Echo Chalet, thanks to a long, talus-slope descent strewn with loose, basketball-sized rocks. As much as I love the shoes I’m wearing on normal long trail runs, I should not have brought them on this trip. They have no rock plate and, after lugging myself and my pack more than three-quarters of the way around Lake Tahoe, my toes are on fire.

Finally, finally, I reach Echo Chalet. Famished, I buy two turkey sandwiches, two cans of Coca Cola and two Ben &



Managing a smile on the flank of Marlette Peak, on the east side of Lake Tahoe.

Jerry’s ice-cream sandwiches. On the porch, I down it all while a little girl watches in bewilderment.

I take to the trail, jet-powered by my caloric indulgence. Miraculously, my toes don’t hurt anymore. What happens next can only be described as an out-of-body experience. I run up a multi-mile climb, feeling neither the 140 previous miles in my legs nor the now 12-ish-pound pack on my back. I leap creeks. I spook hikers by coming up on them too fast. These few hours are like race-car driving, or sky diving or some other sport where you’re propelled by a force other than your own.

And then the magic is over, like, *instantly*. I bonk. It’s the last climb, the map tells me, before an easy, 1.5-mile drop into Big Meadow. I want to run it but can’t even really hike. My mind remains committed but my body is checking out.

Just then, a man in FiveFingers whisks up on his evening trail run. In a bonk haze I yell in surprise at his sudden approach. He feels bad, I think, so he passes then settles in front of me for a minute or two’s small talk. Our conversation is inconsequential, save for the fact that he distracts me up this small but overpowering climb. When he heads on, I can’t latch onto his pace but I do tap into his energy. On the fumes of his Vibram rubber, four hours and 17 miles after leaving Echo Chalet, I roll into Big Meadow.

Big Meadow is more than a half-mile



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Feb. 8	WA State Snowshoe Champs.	Cle Elum, WA
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Feb. 15	PA State Snowshoe Champs.	Drums, PA
Feb. 15	Fairbanks Snowshoe Classic	Fairbanks, AK
Feb. 15	Racing Gnome Snowshoe Race	Johnsville, CA
Feb. 16	Woodford Whiteout Snowshoe Race	Woodford, VT
Feb. 22	Bend 5k/10k Snowshoe Race	Bend, OR
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across, filled with knee-high, soft grass and encircled by conifers. The meadow is enormous but somehow still feels intimate, welcoming, although a pig sty would be welcoming at this point. I collapse into the grass next to a big rock on the edge of the meadow and yank off my shoes. I've arrived just in time for the evening show of alpenglow on the surrounding trees and mountains, which evolves like a symphony's movements over the next

of a stunner as last night. I march the last 24 miles up and over two, final mountain passes and across the shoulder of Freel Peak. The TRT passes mighty close to this peak but I'm strapped to the trail by exhaustion. The thought of extra mileage is too much.

There, I encounter another woman, Sara, my only meeting with another solo, female TRT thru-hiker. We chat for about 15 minutes. She's not carrying

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two hours. The interplay of light and environment waxes and wanes, beginning with a yellow light bathing everything and ending with a Halloween-y orange kissing the mountains' tip tops. I change into warm clothes, set up my tarp and sleeping bag and eat my rehydrated dinner.

The Earth spins some more on its axis and soon there's no sun, just black sky and stars. Lying on the soft grass in my sleeping bag, I poke my head out from my tarp to watch the sky. *It would be easy to feel very alone, but alone-ness is a myth, I decide. I get it now—who we are and what we accomplish are really just the sum totals of those we encounter along the way.* My mind is blown in Big Meadow.

**DAY 6.** I sleep in, until the sun rises above the trees and casts its light and heat on my tarp. I take my time with breakfast in Big Meadow, because morning is as much

a cell phone, so I lend her mine so that she can check in with her mother. She's amazed that I will have looped the lake in less than five-and-a-half days, and I am amazed that these 170 miles are her first-ever backpacking trip. She has many days to go on her journey, but she exudes a humble confidence that I think will see her trip through. I help her; she encourages me; we continue our respective journeys. We never go totally alone.

At Star Lake, located at 9,000 feet and surrounded by hemlocks, I muster the energy to strip down and swim. A few hours later, I arrive to the Kingsbury South Trailhead. I don't talk to the trailhead sign because, this time, people are reading it. Instead, I place my hand on its rough wood, bringing my journey to a literal full circle. It's anticlimactic yet somehow appropriate that no one I know is here to welcome me back. **TR**



The author setting up her lightweight fastpacking camp.

## TRAILHEAD Tahoe Rim Trail, California

### GETTING THERE

The nearest airport is the Reno-Tahoe International Airport. You can get to Truckee, within about 15 miles of the TRT, by Greyhound bus or Amtrak train.

### BACKGROUND BETA

The TRT crosses eight paved roads. Any of them makes a great starting/ending point. Study the Tahoe Rim Trail Association's website ([tahoerimtrail.org](http://tahoerimtrail.org)) as well as *The Tahoe Rim Trail: A Complete Guide for Hikers, Mountain Bikers, and Equestrians*, by Tim Hauserman, to plan a trip. On the trail, use the Tom Harrison Lake Tahoe & Tahoe Rim Trail Recreation Map.

### WATER

Water is plentiful on the west and south sides of the lake, and sparse on the east and north sides. Do your research and bring enough water-carrying capacity to get you through the dry stretches. Filter or purify all water.

### PERMIT

You'll need a permit from the Eldorado National Forest for travel through its Desolation Wilderness. There's a quota for entry, but TRT thru-hikers are not subject to it. The cost is \$5 per person for one night, and \$10 per person for two to 14 nights. You'll also need a California Campfire Permit from the Eldorado National Forest to use a camp stove. Campfires are never permitted

in the Desolation Wilderness, and they are banned on the rest of the TRT for much of the summer during high fire danger.

### RESTOCKING

While you can hypothetically hitch to a town from any road crossing, you'll pass convenient restocking opportunities. Tahoe City has restaurants, grocery stores and a post office. The Echo Chalet, located on the east end of Echo Lake, has a post office, a teensy grocery store and a café with sandwiches and ice cream. About a mile away from the South Kingsbury Trailhead is a convenience store and bar/grill called the Fox & Hound.

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