

## **WALKING, THE ACTIVITY OF A LIFETIME**

People walk and hike for a multitude of reasons. For some, it is a low-cost heart-healthy recreational activity. For others it is a social occasion, a chance to meet people with similar interests.

But all walkers and hikers are drawn to the infinite variety and beauty of the land and to that release of tension such an experience induces. Walking and hiking can be an antidote to so much of what plagues us in our modern urban life-style.

John Muir, the founder of the Sierra Club, and in a real sense the father of parks in North America, said it best:

"Walking yields a greater closeness to the earth, an independence. The solid thud of boots on the path means freedom to stop and admire a flower, to move at one's own speed, to rejoice in crossing a stream on risky stepping-stones, to explore off the trail, to get a close-up of dew jewelling the grass."

There is more to walking and hiking than just exercising or looking at a view. We gain appreciation for nature's values: simplicity, silence and solitude. We learn that we must depend on ourselves more than upon external aids. We learn that by "roughing" it we can better appreciate what we have. In the end, we learn more about ourselves.

## **BENEFITS OF WALKING**

Any birdwatcher, stargazer or snowshoe enthusiast knows the inherent pleasures of walking. But walking is more than an enjoyable mode of transportation. It can also improve your fitness, health and mental well-being.

Walking refreshes the mind, reduces fatigue and increases energy. More than half the body's muscles are designed for walking; it is a natural movement that is virtually injury-free. Walking provides an enjoyable time for sharing and socializing with friends or family. Regular, brisk walking can reduce elevated blood fats or blood pressure and improve digestion and elimination.

## **WALKING RELIEVES STRESS AND TENSION**

Regular walking increases the number of calories you expend and helps you feel good about your body. When combined with healthy eating, walking will help you maintain a healthy weight and a positive body image. Brisk walking is an aerobic activity. It increases the body's demand for oxygen and trains your heart, lungs and muscles to work more efficiently.

## **WHERE TO WALK**

Begin close to home. Many urban centres are developing footpaths linking parklands and other pockets of green. Then look for conservation areas or provincial parks a little farther afield. Most will have a series of trails arranged in loops, thereby leading you back to your car without having to retrace your steps.

As you become interested in going further, find out about trail clubs in your immediate area. These are volunteer groups who build and manage hiking trails. Each offers a series of organized walks and hikes as well as newsletters and social activities. (We usually talk of "walks" as lasting for up to a few hours; "hikes" are longer, up to a full day; "backpacking" is hiking while carrying your camping equipment. But any definition is fine.)

Finally you can head to the most distant corners of the land where Parks Canada has established national parks to preserve our most striking areas of natural beauty. In Banff National Park, for example, there are enough footpaths to last one a lifetime!

## **EQUIPMENT**

One of the joys of walking or hiking is that these activities do not require a lot of money. If you are just beginning, do not spend your hard-earned cash until you decide that you wish to continue. However, if you decide to purchase hiking gear, remember that costly items can be a good investment. Quality gear will work well, prove durable, and be a pleasure to use. A cheaper item will often fail under stress.

The key is always to look after your feet. For easy trails, a good pair of walking shoes will suffice. In more remote areas on strenuous trails, a pair of hiking boots is needed. A good outdoor equipment store can show you the wide range of styles (and prices). Find a knowledgeable sales person to discover what best suits your plans and pocketbook.

On a full day hike you will want a lightweight day-pack with padded straps. In hot weather a belt pack or fanny pack can be more comfortable because it allows your back to breathe and also avoids the problem of a stiff neck and sore shoulders. A couple could get all their necessary gear into one day-pack and one fanny pack.

Each item of equipment that you carry in your pack should be as light and as small as possible. When hiking or backpacking, "pleasure is inversely proportional to the weight carried". In other words, less weight will mean more fun. Carry a small first aid kit in a plastic pouch; essentials are moleskin or molefoam for padding blisters as soon as you feel a hot spot on your foot, a small pair of scissors, and an elastic bandage for sprains or sore joints. From May to August, use insect repellent - probably the most reliable is that with a high concentration of DEET. Pack a small flashlight with long-life batteries: it is so light

that you will forget it is there until you need it. A Swiss Army knife is the most versatile tool you can carry. Spare boot laces have many uses, including repairing a broken pack. A good whistle will help get attention in an emergency.

In hot weather, you will need a lot of water. Wide-mouthed screw-top litre-sized plastic bottles are ideal: if you freeze them the night before you hike (leaving room at the top for expansion) and carry them wrapped in a towel or sock (to absorb condensation) you can have cold water on the hottest day.

Rain gear should always be carried, no matter what the weather forecast. It only pours when you forget your rain suit! Under a strong sun, a wide-brimmed hat is better than a cap because it protects your neck and ears. A sunscreen is especially useful to help avoid sunburn or possible sunstroke. In cold weather a hat and gloves are essential.

Store your hiking gear in your pack - that way you will not forget it when you go hiking. And use your ingenuity - adapt everyday items for hiking and increase your fun on the trail.

What to include in your daypack: rainsuit, or waterproof and windproof shell; sweater (in case of temperature drops); a change of socks (always take care of your feet); hat (for sun protection or warmth) and gloves; water bottle (one to two litres per person); lunch and some high energy snacks; compass and whistle; insect repellent; sunscreen; first aid kit with moleskin and a small pair of scissors; map and guidebook; small flashlight; Swiss Army knife; spare boot laces; sunglasses.

## **HOW TO FOLLOW A TRAIL**

In most provincial parks and conservation areas, maps are available or are posted at the beginning of a trail. Each intersection will be signed. It is simply a question of knowing the name of the trail and your destination.

Hiking trails managed by trail clubs are usually "blazed". Although individual variations do exist, the usual symbol is a white rectangle, 15 cm high and 5 cm wide, painted on trees or fence posts beside the trail. Usually as you hike the trail, the blazes face you, and if the path ahead is not obvious, another blaze is visible from the first.

A double blaze (one above the other) indicates a turn. The upper blaze is offset in the new direction of travel, then look for the next single blaze to either the left or the right.

If by chance you lose the footpath, simply return the way you came to find the previous blaze or sign. From here you should be able to relocate the trail and your route.