

We Are Those Guys: Four Decades on the Pacific Crest Trail

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A chance encounter with some older backpackers in 1981 inspired three friends to walk the entire 2,650-mile path from Mexico to Canada, one section at a time

This piece received a Bronze Award from the 2023 [National Mature Media Awards](#). In the summer of 1981, Rees Hughes and Howard Shapiro, along with mutual friend Jim Peacock, set out to hike the section of the Pacific Crest Trail that runs through Washington state. It was their first encounter with the 2,650-mile PCT, which stretches from Mexico to Canada. Before kids and without major career responsibilities, taking time for a long hike was easy, even if the actual hiking was harder than they'd expected.



Howard Shapiro (left) and Rees Hughes (right) have been hiking the Pacific Crest Trail together and separately for more than 40 years | Credit: Mountaineers Books

"We were just about finished with that hike — we'd been out for about a month — and we ran into these gentlemen who were ... probably in their mid to late sixties, maybe seventies," Shapiro says. The older men talked about how they tried to complete a section of the PCT each summer, which sounded pretty appealing to the younger hikers.

"As they walked away, we kind of all three looked at each other and said, 'We want to be those guys.'"

"They were going south, and we were going north," Shapiro says. "And as they walked away, we kind of all three looked at each other and said, 'We want to be those guys.'"

Four decades later, they are. In between raising families and building careers, the men continued hiking the PCT together and separately, along with other trails around the world. Hughes finished his last section of the PCT in 2016 — he jokes that he broke a speed record — while Shapiro hiked his last mile in 2019.

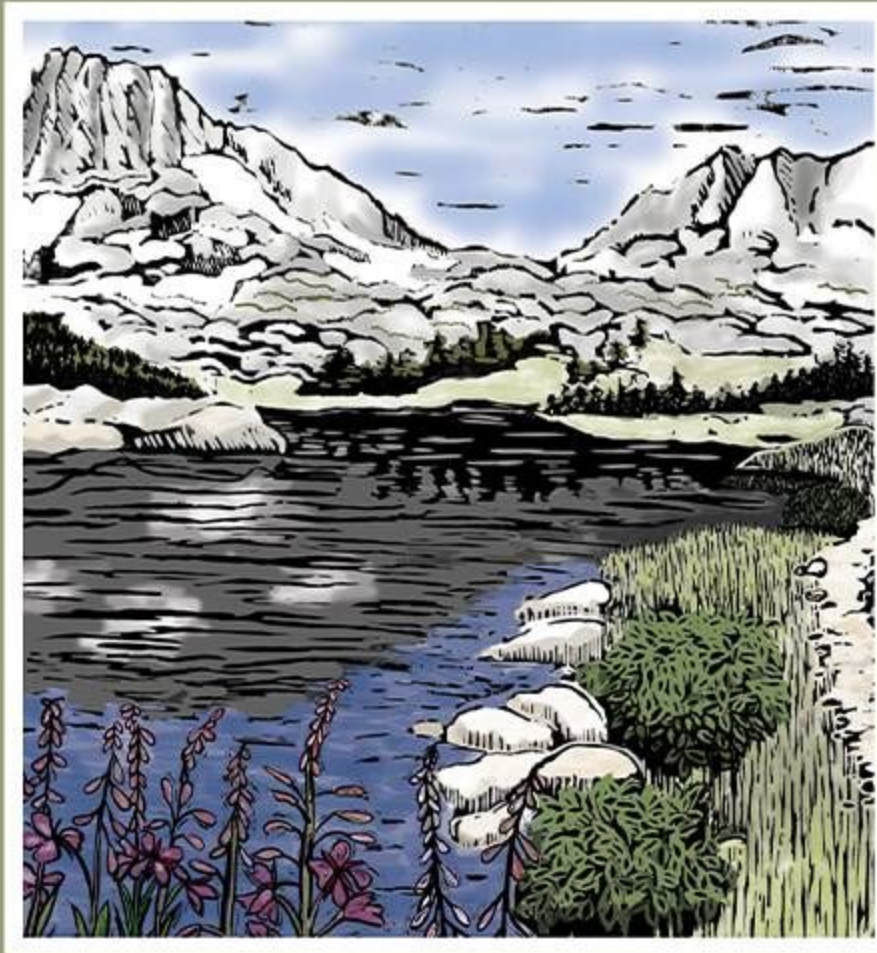
"I started with Rees and Jim, and I finished with Rees and Jim," Shapiro says. "They both accompanied me on my last bit, and that was pretty profound."

Hughes had a similar ending. "I finished it a few years earlier, and Howard accompanied me on the final stretch," he says. "And Jim had come with me earlier that same year to do one last section that I had to do down in the desert."

Recently, Hughes and Shapiro have been reflecting on their years on the PCT, not because they've hung up their hiking boots — far from it — but because they've been serving as coeditors of ["Crossing Paths: A Pacific Crest Trail Reader."](#)

Published in April by Mountaineers Books, the book tells the story of the PCT from the perspective of a diverse group of hiker-writers. Contributors include grizzled veterans like Hughes and Shapiro, but also newbies like [Crystal Gail](#), a Black woman who started the trail as a solo hiker in 2016.

Here are Hughes' and Shapiro's thoughts on hiking the PCT in your 60s and beyond.



CROSSING PATHS

A Pacific Crest
Trailside Reader

Edited by Rees Hughes and Howard Shapiro
Illustrations by Amy Uyeki

Credit: Mountaineers Books

Do older people commonly hike the PCT?

Hughes: There are older people than we are out on the trail. Now, not lots, but there are certainly ample numbers. It's sort of a bifurcated grouping: people before they have kids, who are young, early in their careers or unemployed, and people like us. It's people that are in the middle that struggle to find the time and the freedom to be able to get out on the trail.

How challenging is the PCT in general?

Hughes: The PCT in general is a well-made trail. Especially the newer sections have been built to some specifications where there are sometimes very frustratingly long contours. (These make climbs less steep.) But there are lots of places where there's dicey footing, there are river crossings, there's snow and ice that adds a coefficient of difficulty to the trail.

Shapiro: One of the biggest challenges is working around [fire](#). You're setting out with the idea that you're going to leave the (Mexican) border in March or April and you're going to get to Canada by late September or early October. But all that can be derailed by fire—and has been more and more over the last seven or eight years.

How challenging is it for older hikers?

Hughes: Physically, I don't think that's the issue for most of us. I think the issue is more between our ears, about what we convince ourselves that we can or can't do.

Shapiro: Everybody's older, you know? The chair is older, the cat is older, you're older, we're all older. But if we say we're *old*, that's [self-limiting](#). I don't think that hiking is a young person's game necessarily — doesn't have to be — but it's easy to limit yourself.

And what do older hikers bring to the experience?

Hughes: People who are older, I think, are more humbled in general by life, enough that we don't go into it with that sort of unrestrained overconfidence that I think we have sometimes seen on the trail.

"I don't think that hiking is a young person's game necessarily — doesn't have to be — but it's easy to limit yourself."

Much has changed on the PCT in 40-plus years. What stands out to you?

Shapiro: We've noticed the increase in numbers of people, and that's been mostly associated, or has a link to, Cheryl Strayed's book (the New York Times bestseller "[Wild](#)," which became a movie starring Reese Witherspoon). There are times when you meet up with a cluster of thru-hikers, so you really notice how many people are out there.

Hughes: For years and years, we never saw anybody but white guys on the trail, and I think one of the wonderful things about the slow evolution of who's out on the trail is that there are a lot more women and increasing numbers of people of color. I think that that is one of the things that is

really important: to make the wilderness a welcoming place for everybody. It's just not our place; it's [everybody's place](#).

Do you ever pine for the good old days?

Shapiro: I think we're just making good old days all the time, you know? When we go out together, it's very celebratory, in my view, and so we're sort of making good old days.

How can older adults get started with backpacking?

Hughes: I think you start with [walking](#) in general, and then I think you start with an overnight or a weekend backpacking trip in a place that's pretty benign. It's like so many things. You take the foundation and you build on it, and you learn every time.

Shapiro: I think fun has to be a key factor in it. If you can build it for some fun, then you're — without making a pun — a step ahead.

Editor's note:

“Crossing Paths” is a follow-up to two 2011 anthologies: [“The Pacific Crest Trailside Reader: California”](#) and [“The Pacific Crest Trailside Reader: Oregon and Washington”](#), which Hughes and Corey Lewis co-edited. It's a companion to [The Pacific Crest Trailside Reader](#) website, which Hughes and Shapiro also edit, along with Lewis and Amy Uyeki. The editors and contributors to “Crossing Paths” are all donating their royalties to the [Pacific Crest Trail Association](#), which has protected, maintained and advocated for the trail since 1977.