

Patrick's Philmont Adventure, June 2011

Departure Day: On Saturday June 18, 12 people woke up and met at the church at 5 AM. There were three adults- Mr. Viglietti and Mr. Koeplinger, as well as Colby Wallace. The other 9 were boy scouts- me (Patrick Nicodemus) the crew leader (basically the SPL); Tom Moyer, the Chaplains Aide; Matt Hepp, from Methacton, and the rest of them were from Troop 610 and the North Penn district: Dan Koeplinger, Matt Shaw, Robbie Roy, Jerri Knapp, Andrew "Laddie" Gladfelter, and Scott Landes. We were at Philadelphia International Airport by 6, met up, passed through security (don't forget to check your pocketknives in your luggage) and got on the plane, passing the time and playing 13 for several hours. We land in Denver, bus to the Colorado Springs and the Garden of the Gods State Park and hike through it, admiring the natural stone towers and practicing compass skills. We spend the night in a hotel (woo-hoo! Pool!) and they pack us in 4 to a room. We stay up till 10 watching Hancock (even though Inception was on another channel.) and pass out. Next morning we cruise a little farther south to the Arkansas River, which is flowing at its highest level in months- 5000 cubic feet per second (its' usual max flow rate is at 3600 cfs) so we rented rafts and flew down the river, looking on both sides for mountain sheep and goats, eagles and such. Lots of fun. We slept in a hotel that night, our last night in civilization. Here's where it starts to get intense.

Day 1: We get on a bus and drive to Philmont Scout Reservation in New Mexico. Philmont is the largest Boy Scouts High Adventure base. It has 34 staffed camps and 55 unstaffed trail camps spread out over 130,000 acres, and is one of the "Triple Crown" of high adventure bases in the United States. The others are the Minnesota Northern Tier Canoe Camp and the Florida Sea Base Sailing. We get our backpacks on and meet our Ranger, Greg Taylor. Greg's job is to teach us the basics of Philmont, like bear procedures and first aid and Leave No Trace. He will stay with us for 3 days and then leave. We are assigned a location in Tent City, a massive grid of tents (probably at least a thousand tents.) We leave our bags there and report to the mess hall for dinner. This place is massive too, it makes North Penn's cafeteria look small in comparison. We sit down with our food next to an old grand piano labeled with a sign. "SCOUTS ARE ALLOWED TO PLAY THE PIANO. HOWEVER, UNDER NO CIRCUMSTANCES IS "DON'T STOP BELIEVIN'" TO BE PLAYED." After dinner it is time for the opening campfire. Time to get pumped! Actors dressed as Lucien Maxwell, the 19th century millionaire who donated his land to the Boy Scouts, and Waite Phillips, another rich donator (he owned the Philips 66 petroleum company) and Kit Carson, wild west hero, appeared on the stage. Afterwards, we retreat to our tents for the night.

Day 2: Here it starts to get exciting. Today is our first day on the trail. We wake in tent city and head out for our last real food- breakfast in the mess hall. We get on a school bus which takes us on a 45 minute ride to the Ponil Turnaround (pronounced "Po-neel") along the only dirt interstate highway in America. Along the way our guide shouts helpful information. "Along your left and above us you can see the Tooth of Time landmark! The Tooth was formed by collision of tectonic plates 4.8 million years ago

TODAY! Happy Birthday, Tooth of Time!" They got less helpful as we went along. "Those are rocks! They were formed a long long time ago in different ways by nature! You can tell cause of the way they are! Ain't that neat?" "That's a buffalo! You can tell cause of the way it is! Ain't that neat?" "That's a tree! You can tell cause of the way it is! Ain't that neat?" We pass the Villa Philmonte (Spanish for "My house is bigger than yours") and admire its lawn- all the sewage pipes on the ranch drain here, it's the only green grass for miles. The bus stops, the doors open and we are kicked out at the Ponil Turnaround.

Training starts immediately. Our Ranger checks our skills with map and compass (although we honestly never needed a compass out there.) and makes sure we know how to do magnetic declination. We hike to Ponil, a Staff camp. The phrase Staff camp means that staff sleep there, so going to a staff camp means a taste of civilization- running water, a Trading Post (small shop), a post office (send Grandma a postcard!) and sometimes even a shower. At Ponil they had homebrewed root beer, delicious. We eat our first trail meal, a lunch with a packet of Gatorade mix, chicken in a tuna- sized can, and crackers to eat the chicken with. "Meat is a rarity out here," Ranger Greg says. "Eat up while you can." Even rarer are the unquestionable best item on the trail, the Stinger Waffle. Basically a thin, hard waffle soaked in honey.

After we hike to our camp for the night to set up camp and get our first lesson from Ranger Greg about bear bags. At night or when you leave camp without your bags, you have to put up a bear bag. Anything smellable is put in a burlap sack and hoisted up over a cable tied between two trees. "Bears can climb trees, and that's where they run up when they get scared" he reminds us. Collecting the smellables is harder than you think- bears can smell for miles. First of all you have food and drinks. Then you have any bottle that has ever had a sugary drink in it- you can't wash the smell out, it stains the plastic. You have all clothing that has had food spilled on it (it's extremely important to be a neat eater out there. If food falls on the ground, you pick it up and eat it. You have to put your personal first aid kit up, because the adhesives on the backs of bandaids are smellable. Toothpaste is smellable. Sunscreen, smellable. Duct tape, smellable. We are all experts on smellables at this point. For example, human blood is not a smellable. "Rule of thumb- when in doubt, put it up" Greg warns.

Once the bags and tents are up, it's time for dinner. Dinner is the only hot meal of the day-the other meals are candy bars and bags of trail mix and other packaged foods, but dinner contains an actual bag of mix that you cook in boiling water. Everyone gathers around to watch them cook. The cooks stir the pot. "Who wants Ranger Spice in their meal tonight?" Greg asks us. "Sure!" we reply. Greg picks up a pinch of dirt off the ground and throws it into the soup. "Stir that in!" he laughs. After dinner you cut down on cleaning by licking your bowl shiny clean before handing it in to be sanitized. After dinner the rest of our belongings go up with the bear bag in an "Oops" bag, for last minute before bed items.

We decide to hike back to Ponil (it's only 15 minutes, without packs). The staff puts on a show with singing and piano every night. Another crew passes by with a burro (that's Spanish for donkey) loaded up with gear. We recall the words of a wise old black man in the airport. "You're going to Philmont? Burros! Burros galore!" We pet it and feed it grass and send it on its way. Then, right through the middle of the camp wanders a doe and her children. It's a reminder that we really are in the wilderness now. They walk right past us. The sun is getting close to the mountains, and we decide to walk back. Out here, when the sun disappears at almost exactly 9:00 every day, it becomes cold

instantly- from 80 degrees to 40 degrees in minutes. It is day and then it is night, this is all there is to it. It is day and then it is not.

Once back at camp, I realized I had left my pocket bible at Ponil. The bible had over a hundred dollars tucked inside. Thankfully that was the last thing I forgot and SPOILER ALERT I got it back at the end of the trek. That night I realized I had another problem- my air mattress had a leak. There's always something that can go wrong in the backcountry, and whatever can go wrong will. Be Prepared.

Day 3: Second day on the trail! Yeah! Good morning! 5:30, the sun is coming up on the mountains, filtering through the pinyon pines to us here in the North Country. Here we are, out in the boondocks. Our destination today is along the river to Rich Cabins. It's a very long and strenuous hike, and it gets boring after a while. We take lots of breaks, but short ones. "There's a rule in the backcountry, the 5-20 rule" Greg says. "If you take a break, leave your packs on and don't stop for more than 5 minutes. More than that and your body thinks it's break time and lactic acid buildup begins in your muscles. If you stop for more than 5 minutes you have to take your packs off and take a full 20 minute break to let your body rest. Those are time expensive, so don't take too many of those."

Hiking with 30 pounds on your back looks tough, and it is. But if you buy a backpack that fits right, and you tighten the straps around your hips, the weight sits there, not your shoulders. So your upper body doesn't really get tired. You are just walking, so your heart doesn't really get tired unless you are going uphill. Then you start gasping a little bit, especially during the first few days because remember, Philadelphia is at about 600 ft. and we were at 9,000 feet. So, not much oxygen in the air. This only leaves your feet. If you are wearing tight, comfortable boots with ankle support you will be fine (Personally, I didn't get a single blister the entire trip) and you'll want some padding on the bottom for shock protection.

After several hours we ended up at Pueblano, a lumber camp where they practiced spar-topping, an old practice used to create a pulley system to haul logs out of an area. A man would climb a tree and lop off all the branches on his way up, then strap daggers to the inside of his feet and, using a belt to hold onto the tree, walk his way up the pole to attach a pulley. Dangerous job. After climbing the poles, (and singing "I'll Make a Man out of You" from Mulan), we hiked on to Rich Cabins, an old homestead founded by Austrian immigrants from the 1800s- a brother and two sisters. We milked a cow- a life changing experience. We saw their chickens and ate some fresh fruit. We filled up on water that was potable, but it was practically undrinkable because of all the chlorine added. We added Gatorade mix, but it just gave it a nasty, metallic twang.

Dinner was delicious: Macaroni and cheese. The biggest lie they tell you about Philmont is that they starve you, that you will be desperate for beef jerky or a hot meal. You will be stuffed to the brim, trust me on this! They give you more food than it is reasonable to eat. Your body argues about how much food it can process at a time, but you have to shove it down, because you are hiking like a boss. It's hard work.

Day 4: Greg the Ranger left this morning and we were on our own from that point on. We promised to send him a Philly cheese steak. Overnight, wrapped in ice or something? We haven't figured out how to do it yet. Today was a long hike. We just hiked and hiked. And hiked. We tanked up on water, because

there was no water on the mountain, or within a few miles of the base. Philmont was currently in the middle of a major drought, no rain for the past two months. At the entrance to each campsite a sign was posted: EXTREME fire danger EVERYWHERE! A campwide ban on fires was taking place, the only fire we had was our stoves. This also meant that rivers, springs and wells had dried up, and water was scarce. Also, you had to plan, because you had to purify water before drinking it, and that took a half hour. But that didn't mean skimping on drinking, just don't waste water. They tell you to drink a gallon every 4 hours, your pee should be clear. HYDRATE AGGRESSIVELY, Greg shouted at us.

Day 5: This is the day we planned to summit Mt. Baldy, at 12,500 ft. Our plan was to wake at 4:30 AM, hike hard and fast up the side of a ridge and take a break at the top. From there we had two options- to cross over the ridge and descend to the staff camp at Baldytown and do the day's activities, or- the ambitious approach- follow the ridge up to the top of Baldy with our backpacks on. From there we could hike to Ewell's Park to sleep and save our activities for tomorrow. This plan worked well until 500 feet under the base of the ridge, when unavoidable disaster struck- One of our crew members got altitude sickness. "I can't feel any of my arms" he mumbled. Numbness and tingling, dizziness and confusion- all present. We took him back down the path with some water, but finally decided we couldn't retreat all the way to the bottom, so we took all his gear into our own packs and pushed over the top and down to Baldytown and Ewell's park. We set up camp, but we arrived into camp late and missed the "program"- the activities at the camp, in this case learning about old blacksmithing and gold panning.

Ewell's Park was in the middle of a wide open field, which was a blessing and a curse- it was a beautiful view of the sunset in the mountains, but all the wind for miles was channeled into this plain and became cold and dusty at night (we had to wake up every hour, go outside and hammer the tent stakes back into the ground because they popped out). The field was plagued by mini-bears (chipmunks) oblivious little beasts who wanted to crawl into your pack and eat everything you owned and eat your face off. After we got tired of throwing rocks we set about building a catapult to launch them into the air. This camp was blessed with a Red Roof Inn, or outhouse. Each had two seats, either side by side (pilot/copilot) or front to back (pilot/ bombardier). Without one we were given a shovel and told to dig a cat-hole. Our ranger Greg instructed us on how to go about our business- the simple squat, the sit-on-a-log, the tree-hugger, and the extremely ambitious orangutan-hang. (I hope these are self explanatory.) That night, my tentmate was sick with diarrhea (affectionately termed the Hershey Squirts) and almost threw up. It was a long night.

Day 6: This time we were really ready for Baldy. We left our packs at camp (we were sleeping there again that night) and hiked up Baldy. It was steep, it was uphill. It was hard. We passed the ruins of a log cabin and reached a meadow about 800 more feet under the peak. The meadow had an incredible view, and all the wind under the mountain was pushed up and over at this one spot because there were no trees to stop it. We got here and just started laughing at the incredible power of the wind. We were so high, we could see the whole world. We ate lunch and continued up- the last slog was the hardest, straight up the rocks and gravel. The trees began to disappear (it's called Baldy because a hundred years ago it was strip-mined to the bone by gold hunters) and we fought our way up to the top. You knew you

were on top because the wind attacked you, seized you and buffeted you. There were already wind bunkers on top, constructed from piles of stones, and we crouched behind them.

On top we pulled out Greg's farewell gift to us- a poundcake with chocolate icing- and cut it. We held hands in a circle, and Tom said the formal beginning of the Philmont Grace before every meal: "Please remove all nonreligious headgear." Tom began and the others followed. "For food, for raiment. For Life, for opportunity. For friendship and fellowship, we thank thee O Lord. Amen." The pieces of cake were handed out and we began to eat. When you have worked hard and accomplished that much, any food is the most delicious thing in the world. Hunger is the best seasoning there is.

Back down the ridge to the fork- there was snow on top of the ridge. It was summer, there were cactuses, there had been no precipitation for months, even the greatest rivers in Philmont were running dry, and where were we? Building a snowman!! Its name is Charlie. It might still be there. Back down to Ewell's for a long and windy night. (I mean really windy. More midnight tent staking.)

Day 7: The halfway point of our adventure. Looking at the map gave you a sigh of relief because when you're on top of a mountain, it's all downhill from there. We hiked 3 miles to staff camp Head of Dean, where we did the Challenge Event- a series of team-building exercises that was unfortunately cut short. From there we entered Dean Canyon (canyons are awesome because they are fairly straight, totally level, and always downhill.) and hiked another 3 miles to Upper Dean Cow. We set up camp quickly and began construction of our Mini-bear Slayer Mark II, which took the form of a massive ballista (we had all the supplies we needed- deadwood for construction, rocks to stabilize it, and bungee cables to provide launching force) This was not quite Leave No Trace, but we scattered everything afterwards. Someone joked that it would be more effective against bears than against chipmunks, and at that moment a black bear with three cubs wandered past the campsite. Someone said Bear and we all just stared for a second, then the leader started flailing his arms and running toward it screaming. The entire campsite got the cue and followed. "Hey, you want some food?" I shouted. "We have some extra! Come on, take it! No one's gonna eat these Cajun Peanuts!" After they were gone we just looked at each other and laughed. "I've seen all I wanted to see. Can we go home now?" An hour later 6 deer wandered past in the opposite direction. They took no notice of us and came within fifteen feet. We walked between them and took photos while they grazed. It's weird how they ignore you- and it can be really weird when you're trying to use the bathroom and one comes up right next to you and starts grazing. The sun sets early in the canyons- bear bags up and time for bed.

Day 8: Long walk today but again- in the canyon, it's luxury. Smooth, steady hiking all the way to the staff camp at Dean Cow. 8 miles is not much when you're driven by thoughts of a warm shower. You would think the roads would be easier than the trails, but the roads are much steeper and you are walking under the baking sun- through the trees the path is less steeply graded and you have shade. At Dean Cow we set up camp and prepare for rock climbing. We put on helmets and climb to the route "Oxapus" (called that because there is a rock formation hidden in the wall that looks like a cross between a bull and a platypus.) Our belayer, "Tin Roof", demands a compliment on her name before she will belay us. It's a tough but fun climb. On top we get to rappel down the other side. We hike back to camp and set out to the only showers on our trek- armed with a bottle of Camp Suds (an uber-

distilled concentrate of soap, two drops for a load of laundry or to do the dishes, one bottle to clean a 747 inside and out) we fight fiercely over the washboard and watch the water turn black as it runs off our clothing.

Day 9: Today's hike is a tough one, with lots of breaks. We almost ran out of water before we reached the only full-flowing river in Philmont, the Cimarron River (which at this point was only about 6 feet across) and filled our bottles. We reached the underpass of a busy highway and found out that the legends were true- there was a pizza company that spray-painted its telephone number under the overpass, and they would deliver to the overpass. "Every year they put up their number" Greg told us, "and every year Philmont paints over it. If they catch you, you won't get your award at the end." We passed it by and ate lunch under a grove of trees. Hiking into Harlan (a staff camp) was a great experience- we saw a 40 foot tall dust devil form as we came in. We got our porch talk, and signed up for shotgun at 4:00, giving us time to set up camp (we are experts by now) and get down to the reloading center. This little warehouse is where they manufacture shotgun shells- they give us a used cartridge and we work the loading machines to insert a fresh primer, add gunpowder, add the wad, pour in shot, and crimp the edges shut. Then we take the shells we just made and take them down to the range to blast "clays," bright orange ceramics that are fired into the air. Then it's time for burro racing. We miss the main event but get there in time to see and pet the newest burro in the world- a burro born that morning, less than 20 hours old. Already walking around, acting burro-ey. It had the same birthday as me- June 28. Today is my birthday.

Day 10: Conservation day- all trekkers are required to do conservation work and help maintain the trails. We showed up at Deer Park and learned how to use a pick-mattock, a cutter-mattock, a sledgehammer, a spade and a McLeod hoe. Then we went out to begin forging a trail. They tell us of the conservation staff who maintain the trails- they carry almost a hundred pounds of equipment on their backs, including things like sledgehammers. We demolish roots and rocks to create a level trail for almost 3 hours. We finished about four hundred feet of trails. We hike along Ute (pronounced "yoot") Ridge to the Devil's Wash Basin (everything is fire-and-brimstone themed in the West: The Devil's Garden, Devil's Toothbrush, Hell's Backbone, Devil's Claw, etc.) and can see the commissary in the valley below us- it's easier to keep going when you know it's downhill the rest of the way. We pick up water and food at the commissary and learn a secret- if you ask a commissary for tortillas, they will give you a pack. They have massive stores of tortillas. ("What?" Scott says in outrage. "We could have had tortillas this entire time?") We hit the trail again, camp is another 3 miles away at Ute Springs (an isolated trail camp.) We have been hiking south for the past several days and now we are deep into the "South Country" and getting awfully close to the forest fire- what had been a plume before is now wide spread over our heads and condensing into rare drops of rain, just enough to speckle the trail and show evidence of bear tracks for about a quarter mile. A bear had been there just an hour before.

Day 11: The hike is a long one, but nothing we haven't seen before. Ridges and canyons, awesome views of Cathedral Rock and others, and an elaborate maze of short interconnecting trails in which every path seems to lead uphill. We finally figure out where we are and wait for the adults to catch up, but

they show up one short. "Where's Matt?" "I thought he was with you!" "We thought he was with you!" Sigh. We split up- one crew heads onward to camp and the others backtrack to find Matt. We reach Clark's Fork staff camp, make our packline and sit down- 15 minutes later Matt walks in, and now we're missing the other half of our crew. We enlist the help of the hardworking rangers, who drive off in a pickup truck to gather our search party. When all return, it's time for horseback riding. My horse, Willow, is small but quick and (thankfully) much, much smarter than the other horses. She breaks into a canter now and then, which is exciting. Afterward, we are given the opportunity to brand our personal effects (boots, hats, clothes, etc) with the Philmont brand, the "bar p crazy s". After dinner we have a campfire and hear them tell Western Lore, stories about the skinwalkers and old ranchers and gold panners, and sing songs until it gets dark. Banjos figure prominently. This was an awesome experience, especially with the mountain view in the background and the sun setting in the trees.

Day 12: Our last day on the trail. We wake at 4:30, break camp and hit the road, navigating and bickering furiously about which way to go. "Go! Hurry up!" "I don't know where we are, or where we're going." "I don't care! Just go!" We switchback up and around a mountain, cross through Schaefer's Pass (no altitude sickness here) and follow the ridge to the base of the Tooth of Time. Even from the bottom it's an imposing sight, as if God had gathered up a cluster of boulders in his hand and simply... dropped them on the ridge. It was a huge pile of boulders. On our way up we see a crew from Kansas coming down. We are stunned to see them, considering they were at Clark's Fork with us last night. "You guys must have left at, at least 4:00 AM!" "Nah, more like, what, 3:30?" "But that means you hiked 5 miles in pitch black night! And that's when the mountain lions and bears hunt! Why did you do that?" They look at each other and shrug. "Not really a big deal." We look at each other and shrug. Just mountain lions. No big deal. We put up a bear bag (can't leave your things on the ground unattended) and hike up the Tooth without packs. What an amazing sight. And look- Base camp. We are almost home. We hike down the switchbacks and into the desert at the base of the mountain. Here is a real desert in the traditional sense- nothing living higher than a foot tall. (no tumble weeds, sorry) And we are out of water. But we push on and before we know it the Sign appears in the distance. We All Made It.

We check in and get our tents here at base camp, where we had been 12 days before. We shower until we are out of soap, water or dirt. We catch a bus to the town of Cimarroncito (meaning little Cimarron), where we eat delicious homemade pizza and stop into a souvenir store that sells more than just souvenirs- she has knives, bowie knives, folding knives, butterfly knives, sheath knives, machetes, kukri knives (I don't know what those are either.), throwing knives, blowguns and lots of other cool things- kachina dolls, Baja sweaters, handmade Navajo crafts, fishing rods, and things you never heard of. I got myself a nice little 6-inch boot skinner. Not sure what I'll need it for, but it's very, very sharp. We get back, but there's no time to sleep- our bus leaves at 3:30 AM. My tent partner and I agree to sleep in shifts, but I can't wake him up when it's his turn. I head to the pavilion to let him sleep. Breakfast in the airport is a personal Domino's pizza with Coke. 4.5 hours later, we touch down in Philly and we take a last deep breath of the clean Denver air before they depressurize the cabin. The air floods in, filled with pollutants but more importantly filled with oxygen. At this lower oxygen I feel like a superhero. Our trip is over at last. We say goodbye and hit the road, to trade photos and talk later, when school starts. This is our story.