

Appalachian Trail: Bill Bryson's 1996 versus 2026

The Trail itself is **38.7 miles longer** than it was when Bryson attempted it: ATC's records give the 1996 distance as 2,159.2 miles, compared with 2,197.9 miles in 2026. This doesn't mean somebody simply added 39 miles at the end; the route changes as sections are relocated and measured more accurately.

Probably the greatest change: the smartphone

This would completely change some episodes in *A Walk in the Woods*. Bryson and Katz could be surprisingly uncertain about where they were, how far away the next town was, what the weather was doing or what facilities they would find.

A present-day hiker can consult digital maps showing shelters and access points, register a journey through ATCamp and receive urgent Trail alerts by phone or email. The ATC nevertheless specifically warns hikers **not to depend entirely on apps and phones** and still recommends proper maps and navigation skills.

That means one of the great sources of humour in Bryson's book—two relatively inexperienced middle-aged men disappearing into the forest without quite knowing what awaits them—would be harder to reproduce today.

Bryson and Katz's enormous packs

This is another area where the book would be different.

Bryson and Katz begin spectacularly badly equipped, carrying too much and gradually abandoning unnecessary items and food. Their struggle with their packs is an important part of the comedy. Contemporary long-distance hiking has been greatly influenced by lighter equipment and the "ultralight" approach.

Interestingly, hikers haven't eliminated heavy packs altogether. Of **1,422 prospective thru-hikers whose packs were weighed at the Georgia starting point in 2026, the average was still 30.5 lb—about 13.8 kg.**

Bryson might therefore still find plenty to complain about.

There are a lot more systems around the modern hiker

In Bryson's book, setting off feels rather informal: buy the equipment, get yourself to Georgia and start walking.

Today the Appalachian Trail Conservancy actively tries to manage the flow of hikers. ATCamp allows people to register starting dates so that they can see which days are becoming crowded. The registration system began in 2015, long after Bryson's hike. In spring 2026, more than **2,000 prospective northbound hikers registered in person at the Georgia Basecamp.**

It isn't bureaucracy everywhere, though. ATCamp registration remains voluntary, and most shelters are still first-come, first-served.

The shelters would look surprisingly familiar to Bryson

This is one of the things that has changed less.

There are still **more than 250 backcountry shelters** along the Trail. Most are simple places for hikers to sleep rather than comfortable hostels.

So the classic Appalachian Trail scene from Bryson's book—walking all day, arriving tired and dirty at a wooden shelter, cooking a basic meal and talking to strangers—**still exists.**

The difference is that the person sitting next to you is now quite likely to be checking the next day's weather, water supply and mileage on a phone.

It is also considerably more popular

This is difficult to measure precisely because there are hundreds of entrances to the Trail and historically there was no comprehensive visitor-counting system. But the first comprehensive official estimate put **2025 use at 16.9 million recreational visits** along the Trail.

Bryson himself helped make the Appalachian Trail famous outside the American hiking community. *A Walk in the Woods* became one of the best-known books ever written about it and is widely credited with introducing enormous numbers of non-hikers to the idea of walking the AT.

There is therefore a nice irony: **one reason Bryson would encounter a busier Appalachian Trail today is Bill Bryson.**

Nature has provided a much less amusing change

A 2026 version of the book would also have to deal with the aftermath of **Hurricane Helene**, which devastated parts of the southern Appalachians in September 2024. There are still detours and damaged areas in 2026; in the worst affected places around 90% of the trees were knocked down. Hikers are being warned about unstable ground, fallen trees, increased sun exposure, water problems and damaged campsites.

That would give a modern *A Walk in the Woods* a rather more serious conservation element.

Flooding is changing the physical Trail. In northern New England, crossings that historically could usually be forded have increasingly become difficult or dangerous after heavy rain. After a hiker died at a Vermont river crossing in 2023 and there were several near misses, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy created a task force to reconsider when bridges, reroutes or other solutions should replace traditional fords. This is quite a fundamental change in philosophy. In Bryson's day, a difficult stream crossing was largely regarded as part of being in the wilderness. Managers increasingly have to ask whether a crossing that was reasonable 30 years ago is **still reasonable under today's rainfall patterns.**

Drought has become a bigger problem as well as flooding. This sounds contradictory, but different parts of the 2,000-mile Trail can experience very different conditions. ATC warns that springs and other water sources can now go dry during droughts and in late summer and autumn. New overnight sites are supposed to be located near water sources with a dependable history of continuing to flow during drought.

For a long-distance hiker this matters enormously. A spring that guidebooks once treated as reliable can no longer necessarily be assumed to contain water.

Wildfire management is becoming more important. The eastern United States isn't normally associated with the enormous fires seen in California, but the southern Appalachian Trail has experienced significant drought and fire. In 2023, three wildfires temporarily closed parts of the Trail; one Virginia fire burned more than 11,000 acres. ATC says hotter, drier and windier conditions are likely to mean longer periods of serious fire danger.

Managers are therefore doing more **prescribed burning**, removing hazardous trees and planning for restoration after fires. This is a significant change from the traditional image of Trail maintenance simply involving volunteers cutting back vegetation and repainting white blazes.

Spring is genuinely arriving earlier. A study covering observations from 2004–2023 found changes in the flowering times of plants along the Appalachian Trail, with spring arriving earlier, especially in parts of the north. Managers are concerned because plants, pollinating insects and migrating birds do not necessarily change their timing at exactly the same rate.

So climate change is not merely changing what temperature a hiker experiences. It is gradually changing **what the forest itself looks like and when things happen within it.**

Ticks are a more prominent concern. Warmer winters allow more ticks to survive and can extend their active season, increasing exposure to Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses. The National Park Service regards this as one consequence of a warming eastern forest.

Bryson worried memorably about bears. A modern AT hiker probably needs to think at least as seriously about **ticks.**

More Management

Camping is becoming more controlled. In numerous heavily used sections—including Maryland, New Jersey, Connecticut and Massachusetts—camping is restricted to designated shelters and campsites. The purpose is deliberately to concentrate damage in manageable locations instead of allowing thousands of hikers to trample a much larger area.

That means today's hiker sometimes has less freedom simply to walk until tired and pitch a tent wherever seems suitable.

Some beautiful locations have effectively been rescued from visitors. Max Patch in North Carolina is a striking example. Its popularity exploded, particularly after photographs circulated online. In 2020, more than a hundred tents could be present at once, accompanied by rubbish, human waste, erosion and damaged vegetation. In 2021 managers made it a day-use area, stopping overnight camping while vegetation recovered. Fences, designated paths and volunteer Trail Ambassadors have subsequently been used to control how people use the area.

This is probably one of the clearest examples of how the Trail has changed since Bryson: **a place once managed mainly as wilderness is now sometimes actively managed almost like a popular National Trust site in Britain. But there is an interesting paradox. Much of that extra management is being introduced precisely so that the Trail can continue to look and feel wild.**

But the most important things haven't changed

This is what I think is particularly interesting if you have read the book.

Bryson would recognise the Trail immediately.

You still walk for hours through trees. You still climb what seems like an unnecessary number of mountains. You still get wet. Your feet still hurt. You still sleep in basic shelters or tents. You still become obsessed with food. And 2,197.9 miles is still an extraordinarily long way to walk.

Technology can tell you that the next shelter is 7.3 miles away.

It can't walk the 7.3 miles for you.

And that is why I think *A Walk in the Woods* still works so well nearly 30 years later: **the practical details of Appalachian Trail hiking have changed enormously, but Bryson's central experience—exhaustion, boredom, friendship, beautiful scenery and the absurd scale of the undertaking—hasn't.**