

Backcountry

The Gear Closet »

New Year = New Boots

Time to replace your hiking boots? Check out some of these trail-tested models sure to give you happy feet and comfy miles

You put a few hundred more miles on your boots last year—over rough, rocky trails, through streams and mud, and probably a good helping of snow. The tread is gone, so you spent more time sliding down trails, while the water-repellency is shot, making every puddle feel like stepping into a river in stocking feet. The soles are cracked, and something has been gnawing on your laces, now hanging on by a thread or two. All these are signs that it might be time for a new pair of hiking boots.

Knowing that more than a few of you may finally be needing to retire your favorite hiking boots and start the new year with some new treads, we sent our intrepid gear team into the field with a variety of the latest hiking footwear—from trail runners and light hikers to heavy backpackers. The team hit the trails—from the lower rain forests, slick with moisture and wet vegetation, to the upper alpine regions, rife with loose jagged rock and even a little snow—and everywhere else in between—to determine their picks for quality footwear in preparation for hitting the trails again in 2012.

The testing criteria was simple. First and foremost, comfort. Would people want to hike in this product? Are the boots supportive in all the right places, without being restrictive? How heavy are they—like walking on clouds, or slogging with bricks on your feet? How's the tread and traction over all those soggy miles? And finally, are they

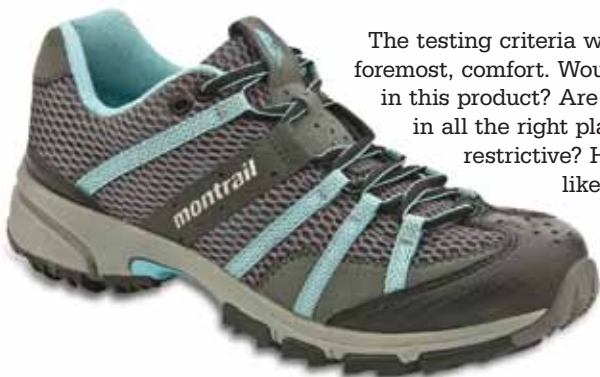
water-repellent enough to keep feet dry through the worst of rain and puddle jumping?

In the end, the team calculated their final scores on every pair tested, assigning each a 1–10 rating. Most scored fairly well, with a few close calls. A few they sent back to the planning boards. For this issue, we've selected the team's top choices for trail runners, light hikers, midweight hikers, and heavy backpackers.

Runners and Light Hikers

9.5 I honestly never knew that trail running could feel so good. The **Montrail Mountain Masochist** runners changed that world, and now I take a lot more runs in the city and out on the trail. The narrow heel cup and wide toe box make these some of the most well-fitted shoes I have ever worn. They literally hug your feet through the midfoot and have enough space in the toe box to let your foot effortlessly slide with the shoe. The Gryptonite blades on the outsole offer amazing traction, and the Trail Shield will keep your foot well protected from rocks as you saunter through wooded trails. The midsole is made of compression-molded EVA, which makes for a lightweight and super comfy ride both on the trail and hitting the pavement in town. The mesh upper provides ultra breathability, and you can opt to get this shoe with or without OutDry technology. Available in men's and women's sizes. \$95–\$115

— Cheri Higman





9.2

I like to push gear to its max and perhaps a little beyond. As a lightweight hiker, the **La Sportiva FC ECO 2.0 GTXs** withstood my beating—and I have to say I'm pretty thrilled with them. They took on Washington's wet autumn trails like a champ. The Vibram sole, combined with La Sportiva's Impact Brake System, prevented slipping and sliding on the wet, steep, muddy slopes of Mailbox, and the lugs are intense enough to take on Rampart Ridge with 18 inches of snow. Throw some gaiters on over these shoes, and you will find that the Gore-Tex bootie that lines the shoe creates an impenetrable force against the likes of our sloppy Northwest weather. Also, the uppers' mesh system is highly breathable, so even in hot months you will find your feet dry and comfortable. These shoes offer a very stable system, both laterally and torsionally. They give when you need them to give, so they offer a lot of comfort, but they are also firm enough to provide the support you need climbing across boulders. Plus, they're made with eco-friendly materials: the outsole is Vibram's Eco-Step compound, with nubuck uppers and recycled polyester insoles and laces. \$145

— Cheri Higman



8.0

Designed with the quickness of a running shoe and the support of a light hiker, **The North Face Havoc GTX XCR** will have you moving faster and going farther. On numerous day hikes in the Cascades, I was impressed with both its cushioning and protection. The one-piece hard plastic heel cup ("Cradle"), arch protection, and full-length plastic plate ("SnakePlate") gave me the torsional rigidity I was looking for on uneven terrain and really saved the soles of my feet from bruising and fatigue on

long sections of rocky trail. The construction employs a dual-density midsole to provide stellar cushioning, while the Vibram outsole kept me from slipping. Designed with a Gore-Tex bootie, these shoes are fully waterproof, yet remarkably breathable. The North Face made an excellent choice by designing the front half of the shoe with full-grain leather and a rubber toe rand, while the tongue and the back half of the shoe are made of a very durable and extremely breathable synthetic fabric. The Havocs look great, feel great, and perform great. And they're available in both low (as tested) and high versions, for those looking for added ankle support. Coming this spring in both men's and women's sizes. \$150

— Patrick Leahy

Midweight Hikers



9.2

As a mid-hiker, the **La Sportiva Delta GTX** will take you wherever you want to go and through just about any terrain you're willing to explore. The more steps you take, the more form-fitted this boot becomes, due to an innovative, foot-focused design called the Symbios System, which creates the perfect balance of fit, form and function. After fifteen hours of hiking and climbing in the Pasayten Wilderness—with a 40-pound pack on—my body and mind were exhausted, but my feet felt great! My feet stayed dry all day, and there wasn't even a hint of discomfort. The integrated, stretchy tongue hugs your foot like a sock, so there is no extra fabric and no folded gusset overlays to dig into the top of your foot, while the 3D Flex ankle area and ergonomically designed uppers move with you, not against you. The anti-shock EVA insole and "Agile" polyurethane midsole provide superior cushioning and support, while the Vibram outsole delivers exceptional traction and impact absorption. Deltas have everything you need and nothing you don't—all wrapped beautifully into one magnificent boot. Your feet will thank you! \$250

— Patrick Leahy

Ask the Gear Team

Q: Does packing a down sleeping bag in a compression sack damage the filling? I have been packing the bag in a sack about twice the size of the compression sack, but if compressing it more will not damage the filling, I would like the smaller size.

— Dennis Graver

A: Loft is what you want to preserve to make sure your sleeping bag remains performant, but packing your bag in the compression sack is what it's designed to do. If you crush and fluff your bag periodically you may actually find that it lofts better. But don't store it in the compression sack for long periods of time, use the loft bag that came with it.

— Matt Thyer

Got a question for our experts?

Send an email to gear@wta.org and ask.

If your question is selected for the next issue, you could win a piece of trail-tested hiking gear. This month, Dennis Graver has won a Therm-a-Rest RidgeRest SOLite sleeping pad.

Don't Forget Your Socks!

Of course, you still have to consider what goes between your feet and your footwear. This can be a crucial element of any hike—long or short. Wool socks offer warmth and odor-resistance, while synthetic socks are quick-drying and durable.

Again, our gear team took it to the trail. They sampled socks and sock liners of every weight, both wool and synthetic, from many of the leading manufacturers.

"For trail running, I go for Thorlo Experia crews. They hug your feet and provide extra support in the heel and toes."

— Cheri Higman

"I love hiking in Icebreaker Hike Mid Crews with a Bridgedale Coolmax liner"

— Patrick Leahy

"Thorlo Synthetic Trekkers and Icebreaker wool liners make the perfect long-distance combo."

— Eli Boschetto

Check out even more footwear reviews—plus the full sock field test!—at wta.org/hiking-info/gear.



9.6 The **Keen Targhee II** mid-hikers were consistently comfortable from the very first hike. From the steep gravel back roads near Cherry Falls to Snow Lake's frozen east grade, they provided 100 percent comfort and support. My feet were happy on both the upward slogs and the steep downhill—due in part to the compression-molded EVA midsoles and metatomical footbeds. Like most Keens, they provided ample room in the toe box—behind their patented rubber Toe Guards—while still holding my feet in place with their secure-fit lacing system. Plus, the carbon rubber soles are beefy enough to protect the feet from sharp rocks and provide a steady grip on wet surfaces. When the weather went south the waterproofed nubuck leather, in combination with the KEEN.DRY waterproof membrane, keeps the moisture out while the nylon mesh upper still allows breathability, ensuring dry feet and socks. All this makes the Targhee IIs ideal for year-round hiking, rain or shine. \$130

— Cherie Bevers

Backpackers



9.4 Every year, I cover hundreds of trail miles in several states, over every type of terrain, and I expect a lot out of my boots. Like a fine leather glove, the tried-and-true European-crafted **Lowa Renegade GTX Mid** continues to impress. The full-leather nubuck upper combined with Lowa's patented polyurethane Monowrap midsole offered ample support and durability in a surprisingly lightweight pair of boots. Mile after mile—from day hikes in the Columbia Gorge to thru-hikes in the Sierra Nevada—the

Renegades cradled my feet with a climate-control footbed, while allowing just the right amount of flexibility thanks to Cordura ankle bands and shock-absorbing full-length shanks—all supported by a Vibram Evo outsole with a heavy-duty tread that sticks to anything. And don't even think about getting any leakage in these things. The seamless Gore-Tex lining let me tromp straight through creeks and puddles—not to mention the rain—while the insides stayed dry and comfortable thanks to excellent breathability. This could be the perfect backpacking boot! \$210

— Eli Boschetto



9.6 Until now, my only experience with Salomon was their snowboarding boots, and a pair I have loved for the past few winter seasons. When I was offered the **Salomon Discovery GTX** backpacking boots I was eager to see if they would perform just as well. I was not disappointed. First off, for a backpacking-rated boot, these are ridiculously lightweight while packing some serious internal support utilizing Advanced Chassis technology. The suede-and-mesh upper allows for superior breathability, while the EVA midsole and OrthoLite sockliner cushion the feet over the rough stuff. The outsole is Salomon's Contagrip, providing maximum traction over the slickest surfaces—some of which I sampled in the soggy Olympics—and the heels and toes are protected by rubber caps. And talk about waterproof! With a waterproof upper and a Gore-Tex membrane liner, they kept my feet and socks dry and comfy through the wettest conditions. And for all of these features and trail comfort, you can't beat the price! Available in men's and women's sizes. \$140

— Eli Boschetto

Our advice: Try several pairs before you make your final decision on your new pair of hiking footwear. Walk them around the store, and try them out on a trail simulator if you can. Check the store's satisfaction and return policy—especially if ordering from online retailers. And be sure to properly break them in. Finally, get out and enjoy! ♦