

How to Do It »

Love Hiking More

Six conditioning tips, and one secret, to get you into the best shape possible

In *Survival of The Fittest*, Dr. Mike Stroud, medical advisor to the United Kingdom's Ministry of Defence, makes a compelling argument that walking is the primary activity that we as humans are designed to do.

I could not agree more. I personally enjoy hiking and backpacking as a way to experience the beauty of the outdoors, and as a fitness coach, I recommend that everyone go hiking. It is a perfect way to build a solid foundation for fitness and health. I can't think of a single activity that provides more fitness enjoyment and benefits than hiking.

I also know that sometimes we experience fatigue or pain which might detract from our enjoyment. Back pain and knee pain are very common. But is the hiking to blame? Not according to the physical therapist who once told me, "If people hiked regularly, I'd be out of business." It's my observation that the hours we spend sitting in an automobile or at our desks cannot help our posture and overall balance. In coaching, I try to address this imbalance in simple and effective ways that will always increase body awareness and efficiency.

Here are six exercise tips that can help us all enjoy hiking more:

Think About Your Posture

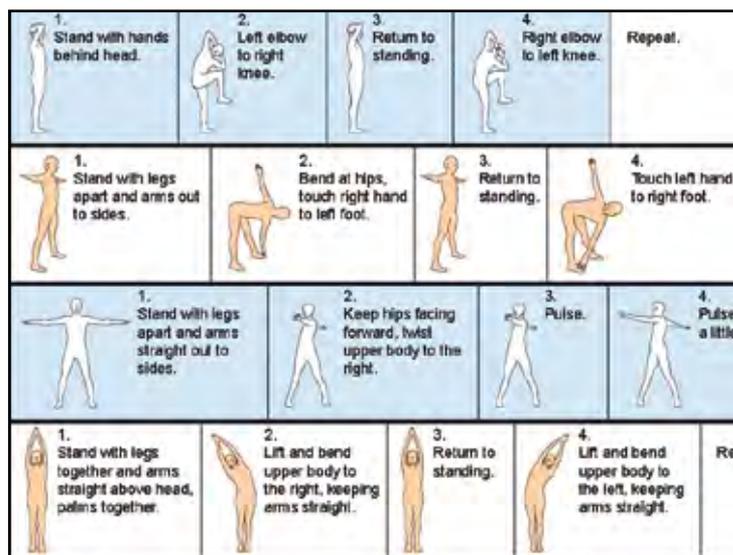
As you walk, imagine yourself as a dancer—tall and elegant. This awareness can help align, or unkink your body in a way that you are now recruiting more of your muscles, especially in the middle of your trunk.

Use the Most Powerful Muscles

As you walk, focus on stepping off from your heels; this small action can increase the use of strong gluteus muscles as well as hamstrings. You can also reduce the strain on your quadriceps muscles, knees and calves and ankles while greatly increasing your efficiency.

Maintain a neutral spine

It's important to create equal tension in a way that neither strains our back or our core abdominal muscles. One way to do this is to imagine you had to carry a friend on your shoulders. You'd bend the knees slightly and quickly engage your core trunk muscles to protect your lower back and gain balance.



To download a step-by-step graphic featuring all of the exercises in "The Daily Dozen," visit www.wta.org/how-to, or John's website www.fitbynature.us.

John Colver

An avid hiker, athletic coach and Rainier guide with over 80 summits, John's book, *Fit By Nature* is available from The Mountaineers Books.

Build Strength Naturally

As an outdoor athlete, I would rather not spend my time in a gym, and yet I want to have the necessary strength to be able to comfortably carry a pack, quickly put up a tent or to easily use a snow shovel or mountain axe. One of my favorite routines is the "daily dozen." It takes only twelve minutes, and it will exercise all of your muscle groups, develop great movement skills and increase strength and flexibility, all by using only your own body weight. You can go through the routine twice for a longer session. (You can download a step-by-step graphic featuring all of the exercises in "The Daily Dozen" at www.wta.org/how-to.)

Work on Speed

Struggling to keep up can be a drag. Hiking alone will improve your overall fitness, and practicing some strength exercises like the daily dozen will build strength, but there are some tricks to improving your speed.

One thing you can do is to practice "interval training." Here's an example of how to add some quick segments to your hikes or training walks. Pick a large tree or rock a few hundred yards away, then simply pick up the pace and see how quickly you can reach your target. Alternatively, you can use your watch to measure a minute of faster-paced hiking. Doing even three to four faster intervals during a hike will make a big difference. It works because you are stimulating your neuromuscular system to be able to move more quickly. With intervals, the key is to focus not on going "hard" but on being fast and nimble. Try intervals two to three times each week, and you'll see an improvement in your speed in a matter of weeks.

Practice Your Balance

Everyone can improve balance. And it's a myth that we lose it as we age. What really happens is that we practice less. One simple and fun way to see improvements in balance and stability is to see how long you can stand on one leg—fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, a minute or more. For an extra challenge, try standing on one leg with your eyes closed. Do it for fun each day after your daily dozen.

And finally, I'd like to share an experience. This approach has been one of the best things I've ever found to improve my hiking, but I didn't learn it in a book or from a coach. I learned this secret by walking behind my Nepalese friend, Lakpa Rita Sherpa. He walks with a grace and softness that is almost impossible not to mimic. When I'm on trail and want an energy boost, I walk like he does. I become completely aware of every footfall landing so softly as to try to leave no footprint. I find myself walking taller. I breathe more deeply. I explore my connection to nature.

And this awareness reminds me that I'm doing the very best exercise possible. I am surrounded by beauty, getting fit and improving my health with every single step I take.♦

For a list of conditioning hikes recommended by WTA members, visit www.wta.org/conditioninghikes.

Backcountry Bookshelf »

Mariposa Road Trip

Robert Michael Pyle takes readers along as he pursues a 500-butterfly year



If you haven't read Robert Pyle's *Sky Time in Gray's River*, you're obviously not on my Christmas list. Pyle earned a Ph.D. in ecology, and his books are full of informed, yet vivid descriptions of the land and its occupants. His book *Wintergreen* won the John Burroughs award for natural history writing.

Sky Time and *Wintergreen* are about his corner of southwestern Washington. In these books he intimately captures in words what so attracts me as a photographer to this area—the dreamy play of light and the fluid effects of the changing of the seasons on the land and its inhabitants. The appeal to those of us who dwell in cities is irresistible. We would love to be on a first-name basis with neighbors and local wildlife. So I wondered if his new book with its much-expanded scope of his personal radar would be too ambitious. Would *Mariposa Road*, a travelogue of his trips across the 50 states, measure up? I need not have worried. Opening this book is like sitting down with an old friend who is a great yarn spinner and very much in tune with the natural world. You want to hang out with this guy.

Mariposa Road details Pyle's challenge to log observations of 500 butterflies in one year. The book begins in January 2008 when, not surprisingly, Pyle often gets skunked by bad weather on his West Coast expeditions.

The man knows his bugs, specifically butterflies, and has written several other books on them, including *Chasing Monarchs*, published in 2001. If you've ever tried to identify a butterfly using Internet tools such as butterfliesandmoths.org, you'll gain an enormous amount of respect for Pyle, the breadth of his knowledge and his passion for this quest. Pyle is also keenly observant of the natural surroundings that constitute the butterflies' habitat.

Butterflies have a hold on Pyle, as they did on Vladimir Nabokov, who was intensely interested in butterflies. (Nabokov's theory on their evolution was recently vindicated.) Be careful. The butterflies' names and Pyle's illustrative descriptions of them are contagious. You might be drawn in forever, too. I now want to drive to Texas, simply to see the elusive red satyr. And yet, as good as Pyle's descriptions are, I still wanted to have a butterfly handbook nearby to see these wonders for myself. There are no photos within the book.

With most of the journeys undertaken in Pyle's 1982 Honda Civic named *Powdermilk*, *Mariposa Road* is strong on travel narrative, too. It's as fun to read about places you too have visited as it is to get ideas for places to visit on your own future road trips. Pyle encounters Texas state troopers and other unexpected problems, including a "dumpster dive" to retrieve a lost specimen. He meets friends and enjoys their company, food and the local brews as he adds to his butterfly count. Along the way, the "by-catch," Pyle's term for that which ends up in your net without direct intent (meaning anything other than butterflies), turns out to be some of the most entertaining parts of the book. And there are poignant moments when he describes habitat destruction or his wife's ongoing battle with cancer.

This is not your usual dry diatribe on butterfly species, nor is it an uneducated travelogue of banal sightseeing. I would follow this guy anywhere. I could write more about *Mariposa Road*, but I'm planning my own road trip to Texas to see that elusive red satyr.

—Cindy Clark

Photo: Lorquin's Admiral (*Limenitis lorquini*) by Kate McPeck.