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What Happened When I Went Hiking in a Dress

Are hiking dresses, skirts, and kilts more than a novelty? I freed my legs to find out.

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Carolyn Webber

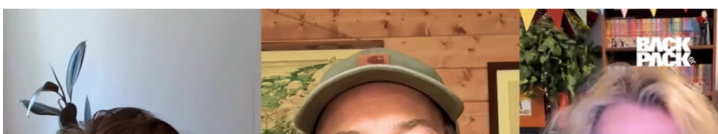
Published May 7, 2018 06:47PM



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I finished my thousand-mile hike on the [Pacific Crest Trail](#) in my underwear. From the start at Inyokern, California (PCT mile 702), I'd endured a gnarly 6-by-4-inch hip rash from my pants' waistband, plus the constant slipping and readjusting as my weight fluctuated, and the persistent cling of fabric to my sweaty legs. I reached my breaking point on the last day: I [cast my pants aside](#) and walked the final 15 miles without them. Sure, I got some weird looks, but for the first time in two months, I felt unburdened. My friend, who thru-hiked the whole PCT in a dress, just laughed—in that smug way that someone who walked double the distance with half the chafing is allowed to do.



Backpacker

In the Face of Terminal Cancer, Andy Lyon Hit the PCT



Yoga Journal

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“You need a hiking dress,” she said. “It’ll change your life.”

I’d seen the incredulous looks people had given her on the trail, and though having totally bare legs and seamless fabric under my hipbelt sounded refreshing, I had some reservations. What about bugs? Thorns? I’d seen ladies hiking in dresses (Heather Anderson set a PCT record in one in 2013, after all) and dudes in kilts, but they’d always seemed more quirky personal statement than apparel innovation. Still, after hiking all day in my undies, a dress didn’t sound so radical. I promised myself I’d try it the next chance I got.

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The opportunity came soon. I had a three-day, 30-mile backpacking trip with my boyfriend, Keeton, coming up at the end of the summer. We were headed to [Wyoming’s Wind River Range](#), where untamed vegetation and notoriously vicious mosquitoes would provide ideal testing conditions for my trial run. And if this dress thing worked, well, I’d have solved all my problems—hip chafing, awkward pee breaks, and overheating—all in one fell swoop.

I shopped around for something moisture-wicking, stretchy, and not too long (with boulderfields to scramble, range of motion was a must) and ended up with a dark gray, sleeveless, knee-length model.

I got out of the car feeling a little overdressed. As it turned out, the first obstacle in my test was one I wasn’t expecting: self-consciousness. Usually when I hike, I wear loose pants and button-up shirts, and I braid my hair back as tight as I can. I like to be seen as tough.

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Now, it seemed like every passerby paused to glance at my outfit, and plenty felt the need to comment. (Alternative hiking wear is common on the PCT. In Wyoming? Not so much.) And when we stopped, other hikers asked Keeton, with his tall frame and mountain man beard, about our itinerary, rather than addressing both of us. It stung a little—I was the mastermind of the trip, after all. I did my best to shrug it off.

Later that first afternoon, we climbed up to [Photographer's Point](#) and looked across the vast basin below us, where the Bridger-Teton National Forest stretched into the teeth of the peaks beyond. A breeze blew up from the valley, and the blissful feeling of the wind on my legs made me forget any misgivings.

Then came the moment I was looking forward to: It was time to pee in a dress—and not having to balance a squat with pants around my knees was everything I'd hoped for.

Except for one thing: That same wind that was brushing pleasantly against my shins a minute ago? Well, now it was blowing fabric straight into the stream. Used to peeing while wearing pants, I'd held up the front of the dress but forgot there was material in the back as well. There was a learning curve to this thing.

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We continued on to our first camp, answering questions about my apparel from what seemed like every passing hiker. It was a good conversation starter, but I was tired of being a spectacle.

By late afternoon, the mosquitoes had come out. I only suffered a few bites before tugging on a thick pair of baselayer bottoms under my dress. Easy.

The following day brought the next challenge: [bushwhacking](#). I knew there would be tradeoffs to bare legs, and this was one of them: The flowy fabric caught on twigs, and low branches scratched my legs. I was starting to get jealous of Keeton's easy, yelp-free stride—for bushwhacking, pants were definitely the better choice.

Just then, we arrived at the crystal waters of Seneca Lake. It took me two seconds to throw off my clothes and dive in. I was doing backstrokes while Keeton was still struggling out of his second pant leg.

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For the rest of the hike, I climbed on rocks, stomped through creeks, and hopped over



logs with ease. But on day three, the inner-thigh chafing started. The affected area was small—nothing like my PCT hip rash—but big enough to dash my dreams for a chafe-free hike.

On our last day I was in the zone, pounding up a hill, when I passed a woman and got yet another double take. I braced myself for a snarky comment, but this time, all I got was a smile.

“I admire you for doing this in a dress,” she said. *Girl*, I thought, thinking of all the triumphs and trials. *You don’t know the half of it.*

The Verdict: Pass

It wasn’t perfect—the bushwhacking was clearly a mistake—but overall I was glad to ditch my pants. I only botched peeing my first time, and overall I was more comfortable than I’d been on the PCT.

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Key Skills: Hiking in a Dress or Skirt

Keep legs dry. Skin-on-skin friction (especially in hot, sweaty conditions) can cause chafing. Dedicated to the bare-legged lifestyle but prone to hot spots? Use anti-chafing balm or powder, and bring diaper rash cream for overnight treatment, just in case. (Good news: Inner-thigh chafing often improves over the course of a thru-hike).

Choose the right model. Any synthetic skirt or kilt will do, but moisture-wicking, stretchy fabrics add comfort. On a dress, look for sleeves or thick shoulder straps, and built-in support if you need it. Longer hemlines can make it difficult to step over rocks and logs, but shorter ones expose more skin.

Bring PJs. As with shorts, bare skin means dirty legs, and dirt can compromise sleeping bag insulation. Clean up or pull on baselayer bottoms before getting into your bag.

Layer up. Expecting poison ivy, snow, bugs, extended bushwhacks, or frigid nights? Bring lightweight pants, gaiters, or baselayers to slip on under your skirt or kilt.

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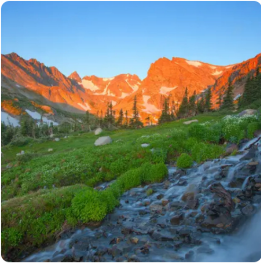
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Backpacker meets up with Colorado's Summit County Search and Rescue Group to check out a new technology that is making a big difference in the field



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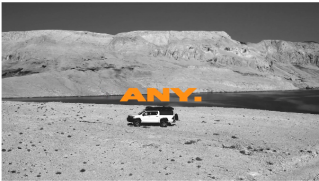
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As technology evolves, search and rescue teams are embracing new tools that allow them to work more effectively. Teams like [Summit County Rescue Group](#) (SCRG) in Frisco, Colorado, are experimenting with specialized drones equipped with speakers, spotlights, and advanced search identification software. Others, like [Seattle Mountain Rescue](#) (SMR) in Washington, are integrating e-bikes, hiking exoskeletons, and e-assist rescue litters into their operations.

These new technologies aren't just making it easier to save lost, injured, or stranded outdoor users—they're making rescuers safer too. Drones allow them to scan an area for hazards before entering. And electronic bikes, litters, and exoskeletons help them conserve energy on the approach and extraction.

We're entering an era of "search and robo-rescue"—and that's good news for everyone who likes to get outside.

To learn a little bit about this brave new technological frontier, I met with Nick Potochnick, a rescue drone operator for SCRG. He gave me a rundown on the organization's drone operations and some of the new technologies making it easier and safer for them to get to people who need help in the backcountry.

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Potochnick explained that if a mission coordinator decides to use drones, rescuers can enter coordinates directly into the drone controller, fly it to a victim's location, and get a view of them.

"If it's at nighttime, we can put the spotlight on them," Potochnick said. "We have the speaker capacity on it that we can speak to them and tell them to give us a thumbs up or something like that, and see what's going on. It kind of outfits our field teams so we can bring the right gear with us. It also gives some comfort to the patients who we're rescuing as well. The drone is overhead of them. They know that we know where they're at, and that way you can tell them we're sending a team in."

Using the rescue drones, SCRG can scan an area using "hypersensitivity mode" or using the camera's thermal, or regular vision. It can catch and flag motion or anomalous colors to help rescuers find their patients.

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"You can zoom in on any of that stuff, and we can see what's going on," Potochnick said. "Then if we see something like that first color that we just looked at, see the rescue



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Why Drones Are the Future of Outdoor Search and Rescue



group van, we can actually zoom in on that. And so you can see we can zoom in pretty close to things. And then we can also go to thermal [vision] if we want.”

SCRG’s drones also work in tandem with [CalTopo](#) maps. The maps show where the drone has already flown. It also allows rescuers to mark where anomalies have been spotted, and attach photos to dropped pins.

“So this is a training that we did, and we flew like a grid there,” Potochnick says, indicating a patch of colored lines highlighted on the map. “You can see that’s from our station down there, and we were just doing a lot of training [flights]. So it’ll show up on the map. I’ll take a photo of this, and that’s what the teams can see with the coordinates in the photo.”



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Summit County Rescue Group also uses Starlink and specialized medical side-by-sides for wilderness extraction, and other vehicles designed specifically for wilderness medicine. These tools and equipment help keep rescuers safe and are all funded purely through donations and government grants. Other search and rescue organizations across the country are likewise exploring technologies like these. In Washington, SMR has its own program dedicated just to using emerging technologies. They’re experimenting with exoskeletons, e-bikes, post-mission analysis using AI, and other technologies that are just starting to become available today. Get a firsthand look in this video.



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Will Brendza

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Will Brendza is a writer, journalist, and editor from the Rocky Mountains. He grew up reading books like *Hatchet* and trying to recreate scenes from ‘Survivorman.’ Today, he’s an obsessive skier, mountain biker, and hiker with a passion for the outdoors and a mission to protect them.

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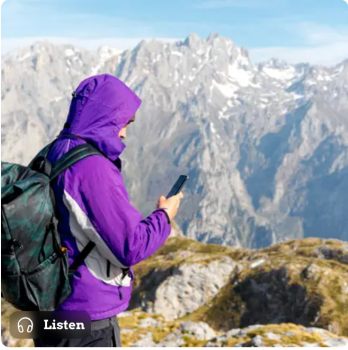
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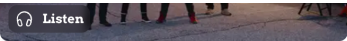
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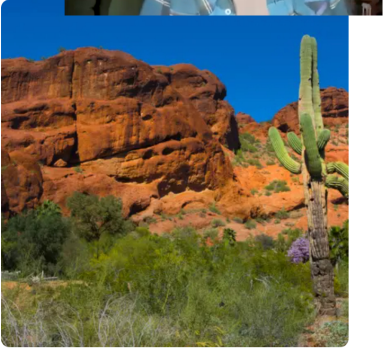
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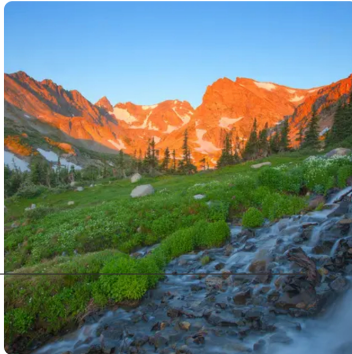
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