

Trekking Poles

With a few caveats, the next generation of walking sticks can enhance the hiking experience.

By Seth Levy

GEAR HAS CHANGED A LOT since many of us started hiking. Perhaps one of the most obvious changes, other than the shift toward lightweight equipment, is the growing use of “trekking poles” among day hikers and long-distance hikers alike. Upon first glance, trekking poles resemble ski poles. However, trekking poles differ from ski poles in some important ways. Trekking pole handles are often textured, and the poles themselves are rigid and strong, unlike flexible ski poles. Often, their tips are hardened carbide steel, with the ability to “set” into rock and soil to provide traction, and, if improperly used, cause damage.

Hikers often ask how two trekking poles are better than one “regular” walking stick. The simplest answer to this question is that poles give symmetrical support that one stick cannot. Poles provide the following benefits more reliably, with less weight, than one “ordinary” hiking stick.

Protecting Knees: When walking downhill, poles allow the muscles of the upper body to “take over” some of the cushioning tasks often assumed by the quadriceps and smaller, discrete muscles that support the knee. This means that hikers using two trekking poles experience less knee pain—especially during descents, but also on level terrain.

Easing Ascents: Poles also allow the muscles of the upper body to “help

out” the legs during ascents. Walking up a steep hill, hikers with poles immediately notice that the ability to “push off” with poles gives them a distinct advantage. Poles can also correct posture during ascent, keeping your head elevated and your lungs fully expanded.

Increasing Stability:

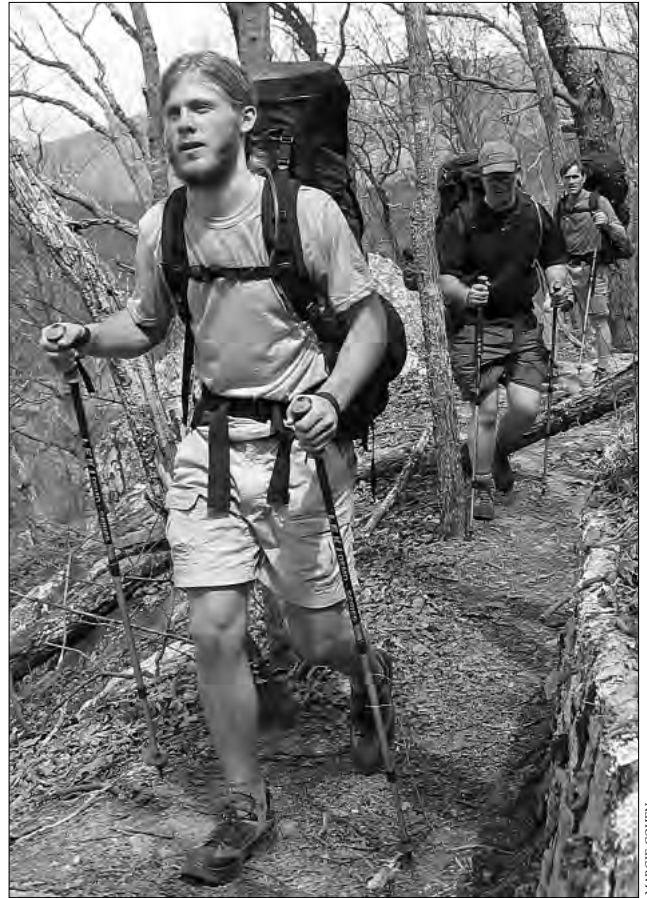
The occasional stumble is part of any hike. Poles provide two additional points of contact with the ground and hence enhance stability. Poles allow hikers to brace themselves on their poles to remain steady and upright, instead of falling after a stumble.

These benefits are of interest to all hikers, but are of particular interest to older hikers, among whom knee pain is a common complaint.

But, despite clear enhancements to safety and enjoyment, hiking poles have their drawbacks. Many of them have hardened steel tips, which can scar rocks, increase erosion, and contribute to trail widening. Hikers should weigh these possible impacts against the very real benefits that poles offer in deciding whether or not poles are the right choice for them.

If you do decide to use poles, keep these tips in mind to reduce your impact:

- ❖ Consider rubber tips, which cover the sharpest part of the steel point



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and prevent them from scarring rocks, while still maintaining decent traction.

- ❖ Place poles carefully. Avoid easily scarred rocks, fragile trailside vegetation, and other hikers.
- ❖ Place poles narrowly. Try to confine your pole tips to the established tread surface of the trail.
- ❖ Use baskets. Tip baskets limit the depth to which the pole tips can penetrate the soil, reducing impact and the potential for erosion.

Keeping these four simple tips in mind will enable hikers to take advantage of this new hiking tool while limiting negative impacts on the trail.

To learn more, participate in one of our trekking pole clinics (see page 19).

hiking and old pros looking for a new advantage will learn valuable tips through the clinics. The first 25 attendees will receive a free T-shirt.

Leki has designed commemorative poles for the clinics that feature American Hiking Society. With only 500 poles being produced, the poles are sure to become a collector's item. One pair of Leki poles will be given away in a drawing at the end of each clinic. American Hiking will auction the remaining commemorative poles on our web site and at events throughout the country.

New Staff at American Hiking

In March, American Hiking welcomed **Vanessa Vaughan** as marketing and outreach coordinator. She helps develop, organize, and coordinate American Hiking Society's marketing,

media, and outreach programs. Vanessa moved to the Washington, D.C., area from Tallahassee, Florida, where she worked with the Trust for Public Land (TPL), a non-profit land conservation organization, in the areas of public affairs, government affairs, and development.

Vanessa graduated from the University of Central Florida with a B.A. in journalism, an M.A. in liberal studies, and a graduate certificate in professional writing. She has hiked throughout Florida, where she has lived for most of her life. In addition to hiking, she enjoys other types of outdoor recreation, including biking and kayaking—and if the weather is not suitable for being outdoors, she enjoys indoor rock climb-



Vanessa Vaughan



Julia Braun

ing as well. Her commitment to environmental stewardship and love of the outdoors are evident in her work, and she will be an asset in presenting American Hiking to the public.

Julia Braun joined the staff in spring 2007 as an administrative assistant. She grew up in southern Maryland and is a recent graduate of St. Mary's College of Maryland, where she studied English. Growing up, she went on two cross-country camping trips with her family and grew to love bird watching and the outdoors through her father, a biologist and avid bird watcher.

Before joining American Hiking, Julia was a seasonal park ranger at Quiet Waters Park in Annapolis, where her love of the outdoors and conserva-

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When you do, you'll not only help preserve the places we hike, but will also receive the following benefits:

- *American Hiker*, our magazine featuring favorite hikes, public policy initiatives, local trail programs, and more;
- *Backpacker* magazine, the flagship periodical for hikers, backpackers, and outdoor enthusiasts of all types—a \$36 value;
- The opportunity to participate in members-only Volunteer Vacations—where you can give something back while performing trail restoration in some of the nation's most beautiful parks and wilderness areas;
- Members-only discounts on merchandise such as books, trail maps, and other gear; and
- The satisfaction of hiking on trails that you helped protect.

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