

## TRAIL-RUNNING GUIDE

Rocks, streams, logs, mud. The path less traveled gives you a chance to get closer to nature, and perhaps yourself. Here's everything you need to get inspired for a great off-road adventure

# Into the W I L D

Photographs by  
Jason Gould

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# Where the Sidewalk Ends

A city runner heads to the woods in search of a new route to happiness

By Josh Dean

**I**f you were going to take up trail running, there are many places where such a thing would be easy. Boulder, Burlington, Boise—pretty much anyplace, in fact, other than Brooklyn, which is where I live. But I had a moment this summer when road running was wearing on me. I felt myself tiring of concrete and cab fumes, of bobbing and weaving around strollers and bicycles, of jogging in place at lights.

When I'm training regularly, the fear of failure motivates me out the door. This past summer I found myself not only with no race goal, but with a newborn (my first). So it was becoming easy for me to find excuses not to lace up my shoes, to strap on my iPod, to map out a route that was just different enough to not feel tedious. And that's why I decided to give up pavement for a month. This would be a concerted effort to go off-road full-time, with the hope that the new terrain might shake me out of a running rut.

But sometimes you have to take what you can get. My first trail run was only barely that, around the outside of Fort Greene Park, a six-square-block oasis conveniently located at the end of my street. Just inside the edge of the park's boundary, set off from the street by a wall about as high as a sixth-grader, is a thin path of dirt. You have to run it twice just to make a mile, but already it seemed rejuvenating. Whether or not I was actually feeling a difference in my legs, I was feeling a difference in my mind, and for whatever

reason, I felt a little better at the end. I also felt ready to find an actual trail. Because I'm pretty sure part of the appeal of true trail running is that you shouldn't feel like you're running laps.

**I REALIZE THIS SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN** difficult. For most people, finding a good trail is as simple as unfolding a map. But I felt clueless, and had no idea, really, even where to begin. I wanted to make some friends who'd help me find my way. So I e-mailed some clubs, and via a recommendation from a guy in Albany, New York, I found myself heading to meet a stranger one morning at the entrance to Prospect Park, Brooklyn's crown jewel. Geoff Decker is not hard to find. He's 6'6" with the lithe, gaunt build of a runner. Like me, he gets bored running on pavement, and so he began to kick around the park, linking together trails into a single run that more or less equals four miles.

Decker led me around a wall and into some pine trees, where we were hidden



## CHANGE OF SCENERY

The author traded the roads of his native Brooklyn for the rocky trails of New Paltz, New York.

from the road and on a trail that cut along the park's edge before dropping down into a small valley that had been made into a mountain-bike park, complete with berms and jumps. Decker said he's seen drug dealers hanging out here, or at least what he thinks were drug dealers, having watched *The Wire*.

A few days later, I returned to Prospect Park to do a run on my own, figuring I'd sample a few more of the trails. The good thing about a park in a borough of 2.5 million is that there are lots of trails—just about any patch of woods is full of trails or trail-ish things. Some lead to actual destinations—ponds, a waterfall, some overlooks; others go nowhere. I had to leap logs, run up a mountain-bike ramp, and watch that I didn't step into horse crap. I found hills and dales and sometimes ran out of trail only to duck into some trees and find a piece of fence that had been pried aside by ne'er-do-wells. At one point I found myself forgetting I was in a city park, my mind lost in the chirp of birds that were not pigeons—and then the woods gave way to a plain of softball fields filled with players.

I hesitated, unsure where to go, when there was a rustle, and out of the woods came two guys, only sort of dressed like they were out for an intentional run, followed a few yards later by a woman definitely dressed for running. I fell in behind them and they led me on an all-turf run up over a hill. I couldn't tell if they were together or if we were just an impromptu parade, but the runners in front looked back, at which point the woman did the same and then they all did double-takes. I realized then that I looked like a stalker and broke off into a new path.

It was time to ditch civilization.

## MY TRAIL-RUNNING ADVENTURE BEGAN

to resemble a game of telephone. Decker contacted Justin Harris, an old buddy who ran cross-country with him at Marist College. Harris was now living in New Paltz, a quaint hippie town about an hour



### ENVIRONMENTAL ED

A group of local runners (including Kai the Lab) introduce Dean to the trails of Shawangunk Mountains.

north of New York City. He offered to show me around some actual woods that did not lead to softball fields. At the same time, Josh Merlis, grand poobah of the Albany Running Exchange, recommended I contact Jay Friedman, part owner of the Shawangunk Running Company in New Paltz, which happened to be Harris's employer. Harris and Friedman offered to take me out into the trail-rich Shawangunk Mountains, just outside town.

I suppose a less naïve person would assume that a man who owns a running shop would be an awesome runner, and that a guy who works in the shop would also be something of an enthusiast. But I didn't think much about whom I'd be meeting and arrived to learn this: Friedman is a 2:40 marathoner who dabbles in ultras; Harris is a professional triathlete.

These are intimidating facts to learn, and if I were to set out on a road run with a 2:40 marathoner and a pro triathlete, the experience would no doubt be both painful and humiliating. And then they'd leave me in the dust. But that's not how trail runners operate. When guys like Friedman and Harris head into the woods, it's not to set personal records; it's much more about losing themselves in the run, and that makes for a much more laid-back form of running that's compatible even with a newbie like me.

Most serious road runners I know are concerned with pace and mileage and are wired up to GPS systems and heart-rate



monitors. It's all about efficiency and performance, clock-watching, and PR-beating. It's just not my world.

Friedman laughed when I told him I was nervous. "Most trail runners are ultra guys," he said. "They run slowly because they have to run so far. And I don't go trail running to set records."

Why do you do it?  
"You'll see."

We piled into a car with the store's other owner, Jan Cyr, and headed up the ridge into the Gunks, a wall of cliffs that looms over New Paltz, forming a spectacular backdrop. It's one of the best trail-running destinations in the East, home to nearly 100 miles of carriage roads, as well as countless additional miles of medium to difficult singletrack. This is the land of trail runners, ultrarunners, and triathletes. These people eat granola for breakfast and mileage for lunch. For dinner, they eat whatever they want.

We set out single file on a rocky single-track with the triathlete at the lead. His pace was quick but not overly so, because he's nice and because singletrack is a natural leveler. Two or three times, the

path turned into a bumpy scramble that offered no choice but to walk. For the first time, I was walking on a run and not feeling guilty about it. Once the trail leveled off, the woods fell away to reveal 300-foot cliffs and vistas that stretched to the Hudson River and beyond.

Trail running is undeniably scenic, but one funny thing is that you sometimes aren't directly taking it in, because your main focus is often down. There's trail running as most know it, the rail-to-trail variety, easier on eyes and knees than pavement but mostly just rural road running. And there's trail running on single-track hiking trails, which requires constant attention. Look up too long to take in the view and you'll turn an ankle—or worse, take a header.

This constant focus occupies the mind, and it makes for a kind of mental rock-and-root Tetris, where you're always looking three or four moves ahead: *Right foot goes to the left of fallen log, left foot takes slightly longer stride over the wobbly rock.* With no two strides being alike, it engages your whole body and mind. It's totally different from road running, in which (for me,

## (Say What?) TRAIL-RUNNING LINGO, DEMYSTIFIED

**FIRE ROAD or DOUBLE-TRACK** Trails big enough for four-wheelers. Fire roads are like regular roads, except they're packed dirt rather than asphalt. This means your legs don't get as beat up and you can run longer (and eat more).

**SINGLETRACK** Narrow paths—winding through woods, up mountains, around lakes—that take you places that cause your heart to sing and spirit to soar. They can require a certain amount of mental energy, which makes

you forget about being tired or hungry or cold or wet.

**RUNNABLE** Sections of trails that are too steep or technical to gallop through are deemed unrunnable. You're a wimp if you walk up a runnable hill.

LOCATION: COURTESY MOHONK PRESERVE



at least) the whole point is to zone out so as to forget about the pain and the monotony. On the trail, there is the potential for pain, sure, but there's never monotony. I found myself especially focused in the rocky sections, determined to carefully pick my footing so as to not twist one of my bad ankles.

I was so tied up in my footwork that I didn't miss my iPod, a distraction so critical to my road running that leaving it behind would be like biking without a front tire. But freed of the dull hum of the city's HVAC units, and the more shrill interruptions of horns and sirens, a playlist was less necessary. It was unnecessary. In their place, another sound track: nature—birds chirping, leaves rustling, animals making animal noises. At one point I heard a barking sound and actually thought, *Is that a coyote?*

Near the end, I was tired, and it was a different kind of tired. There was leg soreness, sure, but this was total-body exhaustion. I asked how far we'd run. It felt far, though I knew it wasn't. Friedman said that he always overestimates the distance

on trail runs because it's a harder workout. "We probably did six or seven, but I call it eight because that's how it feels."

"There was some walking," I noted. He smiled. "That's part of trail running."

**IT WAS PRETTY OBVIOUS THAT IF I WAS** going to get in a few nice trail runs in a row, I'd have to do it out of town. And since we were due for a little break anyway, in June I packed up the family and rented a house outside the town of Roxbury, in New York's Catskill Mountains.

There, I ran parts of the 19-mile Catskill Scenic Trail, which runs on top of an old rail bed between the Hudson River and parts north. It's a flat trail, with some slow curves, but the surface wasn't as smooth and well tended as the typical rail-trail. Even these small tastes of trail running were changing the way I looked at the woods. One morning, I went to Mine Kill Falls. It looked like something you'd find in Hawaii, a powerful gush of water surrounded by lush green forest, but I caught myself instead looking at the

**SPLASH ZONE**

Experienced trail runners like Mike Halstead can leap from rock to creek banks. Others just step in the drink.

trail and other paths slicing off into the woods and wondering if I could piece together a run here.

The next day in town, I found a sign for a nature trail pointing straight uphill and hopped up some stone steps, over the abandoned railway and onto more stones, which led to more stones—and up it went. It had just rained, and the stones were slick. I was forced to walk, which made me feel a little like a failure until I remembered the wise words of the triathlete: "That's part of trail running." Once things leveled out, I zigged and zagged, going from nature path, to ATV path, to old carriage roads to finally, but not obviously, the golf-cart path that led to a nine-hole course. I ran along the fairway until a ball bounced 30 yards to my right, followed by some guys in a cart. I said howdy and cut into the woods, making my way back to the road.

I realized at the end that the hunt for paths was so erratic, and interesting in and of itself, that I had no concept of time. Fifteen minutes passed in an instant, and by the time I found my way back to the parking lot, I'd been out for 45 minutes that felt like 20. For an obsessive clock-watcher, this was a revelation.

**A WEEK AFTER I'D RETURNED HOME** and was making do with the parks of Brooklyn, Friedman invited me back up

**(Say What?) TRAIL-RUNNING LINGO, DEMYSTIFIED**

**SWITCHBACKS** Z-trails that make going up crazy steep inclines easier, if longer. Switchbacks cut across hills in runnable grades. You might cover twice as much distance, but it will be four times easier. With less risk of humiliation.

**EXPOSURE** Risk of danger not from the weather, but because the trail is narrow and may drop off hundreds of feet. Exposure ahead means there's a cliff, ledge, or wooden bridge where you could get hurt if you take a wrong step. This

warning encourages one to stop the trash talk until the trail gets easy again.

**CHUB RUB** When the inner thighs chafe, causing redness and pain. You don't need to be chubby for this to happen.



### ROUTE WITH A VIEW

Dean, Jay Friedman, and Jimmy Buff (from left) ascend to a visual reward for their efforts.

found something even more once he wandered off-road. “I played in the woods a lot as a boy, and the feeling of joy and freedom I had then is rekindled by running trails,” he said. “The ever-changing terrain makes long runs forever interesting; truly, I am never bored.”

We tackled a singletrack known as the Undivided Lot Trail, which starts down the hill from the famous Mohonk Mountain House hotel, and immediately begins to climb—slowly, then steeply, with some scrambles. As hard as it was, the views were again epic: this time looking west, toward the heart of the Catskills.

Buff ran at the back and sometimes dropped off, but when I stopped to catch my breath, he’d come jogging along at a pace I could appreciate. Halstead was a trail-running ninja who rarely broke stride, including on downhill stretches covered in rocks the size of basketballs that required me to pick my steps carefully. Both men said this was among their favorite trails, in part because of its difficulty. “You have to watch every step; that makes the time fly by,” Halstead said.

It also ends with a nice surprise: an idyllic swimming hole known as Split Rock, where a waterfall feeds a clear pool between two boulders. Halstead cannonballed in and Kai followed, panting happily as he paddled in circles. I wandered in tentatively, but the cold water felt great—it was a salve and a reward. Road runs don’t have this kind of payoff; the best I can expect is a cold shower. I caught myself thinking, *Man, I should move to New Paltz.* (continued on page 112)

to New Paltz to try another trail with a new set of friends whose résumés were just as intimidating as the first guys’. One was Mike Halstead, a local veterinarian who moonlights as an Ironman triathlete and who won the insanely difficult Escarpment Trail Run, held in the Catskills, in 1999. The other was Jimmy Buff, program director of Radio Woodstock, and a passionate ultra-trail-runner who covers 50 miles or more at a clip. Halstead brought along his yellow Lab, Kai, also a seasoned trail runner. I asked Halstead later why a competitive triathlete like himself would seek out trails, which are clearly slower. “I run roads only when I have to, due to snow or time constraints,” he said. “I enjoy the trails so much more.

The roads, for me, just have a lot of unappealing aspects, like redneck Nascar-style drivers, the pounding of my joints. And I can run with Kai off-leash.”

Buff said he first headed into the woods because he was “bored running roads.” He

## (Say What?) TRAIL-RUNNING LINGO, DEMYSTIFIED

**“BIKE BACK!”** One of many exclamations trail runners shout out to warn others of possible dangers, like “Dog up!” (when a rabid—or merely unruly—off-leash dog is headed for the group) or “Stump!,” “Root!,” “Hole!”

**GETTING CHICKED** Being outrun by a woman. This can happen only to men. It’s best when it happens to macho men. It’s even better when the woman is wearing a skirt. Tough trail women wear skirts. And look hot. And beat men.

**HANDHELDS** Water bottles with straps. You can carry fluids in packs on your back or on your fanny, but holding bottles for miles can give you big guns. That’s why trail runners have such gorgeous upper bodies.



## RECOVERY BATH

Dean and Jay Friedman (yellow shirt), cool off at Split Rock swimming hole, which is fed by a waterfall.

spectable for a man of 37. (To put that in perspective, Harris ran 51 minutes, and finished third. Whoa.)

**YOU KNOW AN EXPERIENCE HAS** changed you when it causes you to reassess. A month of trail running wasn't going to cause me to uproot to New Paltz, but it did get me thinking about the kind of life I might like to lead someday.

Not long after the race, I was upstate yet again, this time weekendening with friends, and one morning a few of us headed to a trail. We were all city people, none of whom run together, but there in the woods we just naturally fell into a pace that fit us, and the surroundings. I wasn't sure if we ran three miles or five, and I didn't care. Never had I left so readily for a run, nor ended one so happily.

Back home I returned to the roads, and I found it harder than ever to motivate myself to keep pounding the pavement. I started to mix in the path in my park with some cross-country runs of my own design that involved crossing the grassy patches where soccer games break out. At least once a week I pedaled over to Prospect Park, locked up my bike, and lost myself in the woods as best I could.

Obviously, this was nothing like New Paltz, but exposure to that world gave me a way to look at running differently. I was more aware of everything going on around me, and less in need of things that automate the process—routines, routes, iPods. It's easy for anyone who runs to start to forget that part of the point is to escape stresses and responsibilities. There is a freedom in the movement, and in the unpredictability of what you find out there, no matter how predictable it sometimes seems. Sure, it would be nice to have 100 miles of dirt trails starting from my front door. But at least the result of shaking up my surroundings was that I was appreciating the whole experience a tiny bit more. Sometimes you have to travel a little farther to realize that what you have close by isn't so bad after all. [▶](#)

**A WEEK LATER, I WAS BACK. THIS TIME** to take an even bolder leap, at least in my mind; Friedman had talked me into entering a race—a 14-K that, using trail math, would surely feel longer than 8.5 miles. The Summer Solstice Run is an annual event in New Paltz, held as close as possible to the actual solstice, at Minnewaska State Park. A 14-K on trails seemed like a lot to bite off, especially considering that the first half was supposedly uphill. "It's nothing worse than what you've done so far," Friedman assured me, and so I agreed.

The race began near Lake Minnewaska, and for four miles, the trail wound up, up, up. With thick, humid air and temperatures near 90, I felt as if I was running with weights in my pockets. Not helping matters was the fact that I'd started my day on a barstool in Manhattan, cheering on Team USA's stirring victory over Algeria at the World Cup, then hopped in a car and sat in traffic for two hours, only to arrive as the pack was receiving final in-

structions from the race organizer. I had barely ducked into the swarm before it took off up the hill.

Friedman, Harris, and Halstead were ahead at the front, while I hung in the midpack. The trail climbed for what seemed forever. As we neared the top, the trail presented one ridiculous vista after another—ho, hum, another spectacular viewpoint—and the Hudson Valley shimmered in the haze. Finally, about four miles from the start, I reached what appeared to be the summit, home to the first of two water stations.

"Is it all downhill?" I asked the waterhander-outers. "Mostly," a woman answered, then giggled. "But nothing's ever all downhill up here."

From there it *was* down, mostly, with more cliff ledges, then some woods and some meadows and finally—one last uphill. A cluster of people urged me along in the final corner, and I crossed the line in 1:20, not terrible but only barely re-

## (Say What?) TRAIL-RUNNING LINGO, DEMYSTIFIED

**TECHNICAL** a.k.a. **GNARLY** Rocks, roots, steep drops, burly climbs—trails where you have to pay attention or risk falling. Sometimes you fall anyway. This allows you to acquire some sexy scars. Yes, trail runners find scars sexy.

**TRAILHEAD** Announced by a happy brown sign. This is where you start. Once you are addicted to trails, you will perk up like a dog smelling steak every time you drive past a sign indicating a trailhead. Or a national forest. Or a state

forest. Or any place that might have trails.

**WALKIE-TALKIES** When a runner punctuates each step with a fart. Worth commenting on if it's particularly good—like six in a row. —RACHEL TOOR