

Starfail, Pro-tip, Buckeye, Catnap, Smiley, Jethro, Gilgamesh, Giggles...what is the story behind all these “trail names”. Where do they come from? Why do they exist?

This week we, the Subaru/Leave No Trace Traveling Trainers East Central Team, accepted a challenge to hike one of the toughest trails east of the continental divide: Devil’s Path in the Catskills. Testing our endurance, the grueling hike led us over five peaks that reached above 3,500 feet, through boulder fields, and up rock faces. As we marched forward, ready to defeat the army of obstacles on Devil’s Path, we soon realized that our demeanor was everything but militant. Rather, we were clumsy and giggly; like a puppy chasing its first ball: tripping over invisible lines, running into objects that seemed to step directly into our path; and then, as if we hadn’t *just* slipped through a mud puddle, we would jump back to our feet in boastful laughter: “Katelyn, I can see why they called you, Giggles on the Appalachian Trail.” Blake said.

In 2013, I thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, and this, my friends, was the first time I learned of *trail names*. Trail names are appointed to individual hikers for several reasons: A) It is easier to remember the name, Catnap than it is to remember, Trevor, not to mention the fact that there might be multiple, Trevors on the trail and only *one* Catnap. B) It allows hikers to embrace their wild side and become part of the hiking community that they love so much, and trail names just happen to be key phonic in the hiker lingo. C) Trail names, generally, give a glimpse of information about the hiker: Catnap was known for getting up early in the morning, hiking a few miles, and then cuddling up behind a boulder or in some pine-straw for a quick, midmorning nap. It is this third reason that is my favorite; the revealing of how one earned his/her trail name.

As Blake proclaimed his understanding of my trail name, Giggles, a short anecdote fast-forwarded into my thoughts, and I proceeded to tell him the tale of, Dirty Rice. A tale that reminds us to plan ahead and prepare and to respect wildlife. A tale that will never let you forget how important it is to... well you will find out soon enough.

Dirty Rice—then answering to his birthed, muggle, name, for which I to this day do not know—set out, head strong to hike the entire 2,200 miles-ish of the Appalachian Trail. His posture began to wilt, like a parabolic graph showing the number of hikers who start the Appalachian Trail but don’t quite make it to the finish line, as the weight of his crammed Deuter Pack rose and sank with each step ascending from Amicalola Falls to Springer

Mountain, Georgia: the approach trail. From dawn till dusk he lugged his pack to the top, all the while planning to eat the biggest Ramon and beef jerky dinner imaginable.

He arrives, anxious to set camp before all the lurking critters pounce. It takes a few attempts to straighten the ground tarp and guy out the rainfly, but now, as he cools his decadent feast, he admires his castle.

As his eyes become weary and the wild hooting, howling, and stick breaking creeps closer, Dirty Rice sees other hikers rigging their bear bags high in the surrounding tree branches, reminding him to safely store his rations for the next five days.

He grabs a piece of string, a Sea To Summit sack, and does his best to secure the food in a strong, sergeant-like tree. To assure he can quickly retrieve his breakfast come morning, he stands below the hanging sack, reaches up, and grazes the sack with his fingertips and thinks: "Perfect. With a few hops in the morning, I can have that bag down in no time."

Morning came. Fast. With a full bladder, an empty stomach, and the hope that he was not too sore for the hop needed to retrieve the stash...turns out he wasn't. In fact, no hop necessary: and it wasn't because he grew a few inches in the night.

As he approached, he noticed a bright orange Reses wrapper. A jerky stick. A spoon? No, not a spoon... *HIS* spoon! The tree soldier guarding his loot now looked like a sapling. A twig! And the only evidence that his bear hang was once there, was the pathetic, limp string that now tickled the top of his lowered head.

It was gone.

All of it.

Well, almost all of it. Hidden in the paw prints beneath the dangling string was nothing but (I'm sure you have guessed it by now)...dirty rice. For the next 2 days, his menu consisted of dirty rice and dirty rice only.

Though this comedy makes for a good trail name story; it is extremely important to learn from Dirty Rice's mistakes. Be sure to practice proper food storage skills, because "A fed bear is a dead bear". This sounds extremely harsh, but in many cases it is true. According to Colorado Parks

and Wildlife, from 2009 to 2013 state wildlife officials euthanized 529 bears (2015). That is three times the amount of bears killed in the previous five-year span. Check out this interview to find more about why.

Remember, bear hangs should include all smellables (food, drinks, lotions, toothpaste, etc.) and be at least 12 feet high and 6 feet from any branch or tree trunk. Scout your backyard or a local park and practice your skills before hitting the trail...or you could be the next, Dirty Rice.