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A Conversation with Jonah McDonald

Author of *Hiking Atlanta's Hidden Forests: Intown and Out*

You hiked the entire Appalachian Trail in 2002. How did you become an urban hiker?

After completing the AT, I knew I wanted to continue to make hiking a major part of my life. But living in Atlanta, my only model for hiking was driving hours out of town to get back to the Appalachians. At the same time, I started leading outdoor education programs, hikes, and camping trips for school groups. Some of these schools didn't have the time or money to send their students to the mountains, so I had to find forests in the city. I discovered so many amazing greenspaces hidden around Atlanta that I no longer yearned for the mountains. Now I hike beautiful trails in urban forests several times a week without having to spend more than a few minutes en route.

You list over 150 "sentinel" and "champion" trees in your new book. What exactly are these trees, and why are they important?

Atlanta is a city of trees, but very few of us stop to truly admire the beauty of the arboreal giants standing around us. The nonprofit organization Trees Atlanta recognizes trees that are the largest of their species within the perimeter and calls them champions. I came up with the term sentinel tree to recognize other particularly large, ancient, or otherwise remarkable trees – some of Atlanta's trees are over 200 years old. By listing sentinel and champion trees on each hike, I hope to encourage my fellow hikers to take special notice of the trees that make up the backbone of our city's ecosystem and provide a living link to the past. Including these trees in the guidebook also adds a treasure hunt component to each hike: Can you find each sentinel or champion tree along the trail?

The Atlanta Audubon Society contributed lists of birds often seen in some of the greenspaces your book explores. Are you a birder yourself?

Though I love hearing bird calls as I walk through an urban forest, I am decidedly bad at identifying birds by sight or sound. That's why I asked the Atlanta Audubon Society to help me include birds in this guidebook. Hikers can find birds in Atlanta's forests year-round, and we are a major stop on many species' migration routes. My love for this city grows every time I encounter a bird that shares my environment, be it a majestic red-shouldered hawk, an elusive screech owl, or just an unidentifiable "little brown bird." Thanks to the Atlanta Audubon Society, our birds have advocates for healthy habitat. I hope people who use my guidebook will join in his advocacy for birds, trees, and trails.

Yours isn't the only guidebook with "hike" and "Atlanta" in the title. How is it different from the others?

Not only is *Hiking Atlanta's Hidden Forests* the first guidebook dedicated entirely to hikes in intown and close-in neighborhoods, nearly half of its 60 hikes appear in no other guidebook. That means this book gets the word out about intown greenspaces that, until now, have been explored only by in-the-know neighbors and hiking enthusiasts. I'm proud that 20 of the 60 routes are inside the perimeter and many more are just outside the I-285 loop. Other guidebooks include only urban sidewalk routes within I-285, while this one focuses on trails in the forest. Also, with this book in hand, you can experience full days of hiking without spending half a day in the car.

When researching a hiking guidebook, how does an author decide which trails to include? What were your criteria?

From the beginning I knew I wanted to focus on hikes close to downtown Atlanta, so I drew a 30-mile radius from the Capitol dome and began highlighting greenspaces that might provide a good hiking experience. The second criterion was equally important: "Do these forest trails help you forget you are in a city?" I try not to use the term "urban hiking" to describe this book. The phrase may apply in the literal sense, but it brings to mind crowds of people, skyscrapers, and asphalt. Though some trails in this book draw thousands of hikers (the Stone Mountain Walk-Up Trail, for example), skyscrapers are visible from some (such as Piedmont Park), and some trails are even paved (like McDaniel Farm), every hike route is within a forest or other natural area, and most of them allow hikers to totally immerse themselves in the natural world and forget they are in one of the largest cities in the United States.

As you were doing your research, did you run into any surprises?

I had no idea how underutilized most of our city's greenspaces are. Though you will pass hundreds of hikers at Cochran Shoals and Sweetwater Creek (and thousands more on Kennesaw Mountain's Summit Trail and Stone Mountain's Walk-Up Trail), it's unusual to see more than one or two hikers at Cascade Springs Nature Preserve, the largest greenspace in the City of Atlanta. Even within the popular Stone Mountain Park, very few people hike the Cherokee Trail and almost no one visits the Songbird Trails. Most Atlantans know the most famous hiking venues in town, but few explore the dozens of other greenspaces that hold equal beauty. My hope is that *Hiking Atlanta's Hidden Forests* will change this.

What hike would you recommend for someone just starting out hiking in Atlanta, and why?

My wife laughed at me a lot while I was working on this book because every time I returned home from scouting a hike, I would say, "That is definitely my favorite hike in Atlanta!" So it's like asking me to choose my favorite kind of ice cream—if you push me to recommend just one, I think I can settle on three.

First is the **East Palisades** unit of the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area—it's just inside the perimeter, but feels like the Appalachian Mountains. You'll walk along the riverbank, visit two overlooks, meander through a laurel-filled hollow, and pass through an amazing bamboo grove.

Second is the **Morningside Nature Preserve**, one of the largest nature preserves in the City of Atlanta. This hike leads through the lowlands of the South Fork of Peachtree Creek and rolling piedmont hills covered with wildflowers. Despite its proximity to bustling Atlanta streets, the trails feel miles away.

Third would be Davidson-Arabia Nature Preserve's **Mountaintop Trail**. Similar to the famous Stone Mountain Walk-Up Trail, Mountaintop Trail provides an incredibly scenic and much more secluded hike. From the top of Arabia Mountain, you can barely tell you're in the city.