



Come Hill or Highwalker

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By Barney Mann



While dropping off an early thru-hiker at the border on April 1st, I chanced upon an unusual sight. At home, I was not surprised to find the following on the newswire.

STILT WALKER ATTEMPTS 2,600-MILE HIKE

April 1, 2007, Campo, California: Sunrise brought the rhythmic clatter of wood striking hardpan soil as Luke "Highwalker" set off on stilts for a first-ever "stilts" thru-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Normally six feet tall, Highwalker stood closer to the ten-foot mark as he embarked, perched high on a pair of home-built, green and white striped stilts.

Campo is a sleepy berg in the sparse outer reaches of eastern San Diego County. Known, if at all, for its sprawling Border Patrol complex, train museum, and juvenile detention camp, Campo in spring has one more measure of distinction: an annual influx of Pacific Crest Trail thru-hikers.

Highwalker is one such intrepid soul, but a very different intrepid soul. He proposes to hike the entire length of the PCT on stilts. "I got the idea last fall," Highwalker says, "from another PCT hiker's Web journal. Sharon Allen joked about hiking the first 20-mile day on stilts. To me it wasn't a joke. I was hooked the moment I read it. 'I can do that,' I thought."

Many pre-trail problems had to be overcome. "I modified snowshoes with special fittings. I had custom crampons designed, too," says Highwalker. In June he expects to successfully negotiate the PCT's highest point, snowbound 13,200-foot Forester Pass, deep in California's Sierra Nevada. He says he



Luke "Highwalker" shows his stilt skills on the PCT's southernmost miles on April 1, 2007.

practiced back home on Mount Moosilauke in New Hampshire's White Mountains and is ready to take his game out West. "I've got it mastered," he explains, while flashing a hip covered in fading bruises.

As outlandish as it all sounds, long-distance stilt walking is not just the frenzied product of Highwalker's fertile mind. It has a legacy. In 1891, Sylvain Dornon stilt walked from Paris to Moscow via Vilno, Lithuania. It took 58 days and he averaged 31 miles a day. Closer to home, in 1917, F.E. Wilvert stilt walked from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, all the way cross-country to San Francisco's Pan-Pacific Exposition. In the 1930's, the era of flagpole sitting and marathon dance contests, "Hi-Jack" Redmond turned himself and his stilts into a roving billboard. Wearing signs proclaiming "Rib Steaks 20 Cents" and the like, Hi-Jack is reported to have covered over 40,000 miles. Finally, in 1958, Italy's Angelo Corsaro traversed hundreds of miles on stilts while on his way to the Vatican, where the Pope actually granted him an audience.

Highwalker has no expectations of audiences with the Pope, but he has generated some buzz in the hiking community. Robert "Go-Big" Francisco (a 2006 PCT "bipedal" thru-hiker) says "I wasn't sure it was for real when I first heard about Highwalker. I thought it a bit weird, but HYOH, 'hike your own hike.' More power to him."

Highwalker had worried that he might become a target for trail purists, and he had nightmares about someone making sawdust out of his stilts. But, so far, he's received encouragement and offers of "trail magic" assistance, instead.

As he left the PCT's southern terminus, Luke faced north and didn't look back. Then, as Luke's form faded in the distance, we heard a faint shout: "Canada here I come." God speed, pilgrim. ☪

