



# Pathfinder

Blazing a New Wilderness Trail  
in Modern America

RON STRICKLAND

founder of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail

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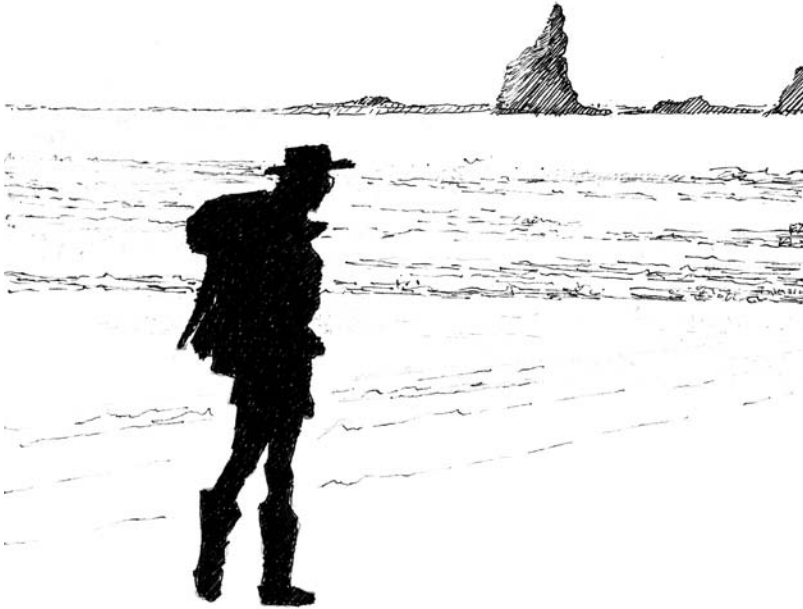


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BLAZING A NEW WILDERNESS TRAIL IN MODERN AMERICA

*Ron Strickland*

*Illustrations by Elise Zoller*



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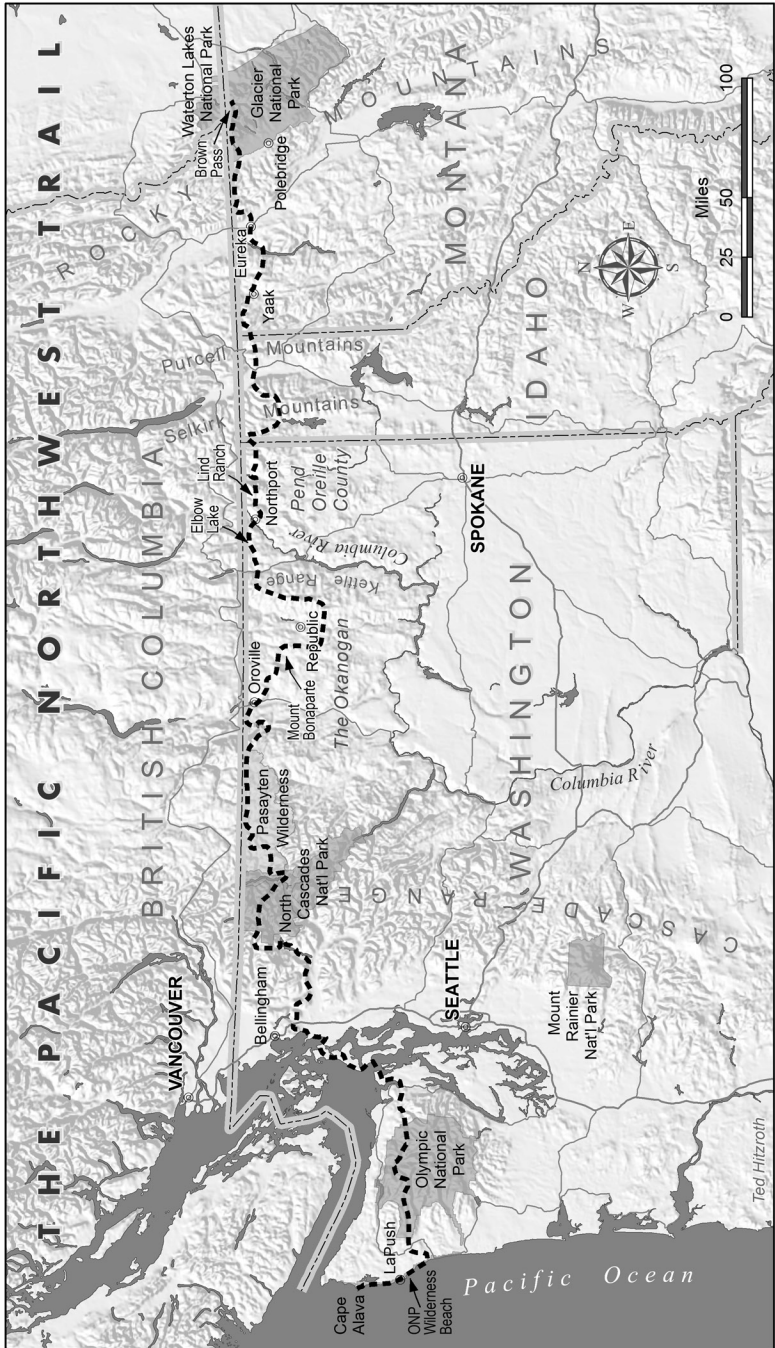
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	Introduction
5	I Became a Hiker Because
17	The Bad Boys of Backpacking
25	Along the PNT: The North Cascades
31	Bucking the Brush
37	Ralph Thayer's Broadaxe
51	Murder Mystery at the Old Mine
57	Along the PNT: The Okanogan
63	Trail Magic
69	Along the PNT: Roll On, Columbia, Roll On
75	Off the Trail: Longing for Roots
83	Solo
87	Off the Trail: The Backpacker Parent
99	Along the PNT: The Selkirk Mountains
105	Women on the Trail
113	Pass It On
125	Along the PNT: The Purcell Mountains
131	"A Labor of Truly Obsessive Love"

143	“Willful and Eccentric”
155	Ten Essentials
169	“Very Romantic”
177	Off the Trail: Walden Pond
181	“For I Believed in Traveling Light”
195	The Path Ahead
201	Along the PNT: Shared Vision
205	Books from My Backpack
217	Hiking’s Enduring Appeal
223	Glossary
225	Notes
232	Bibliography
243	Index

## I Became a Hiker Because ...

*It's not the walking I go for; it's what I find when I go. Each and every day is fascinating. I never know what's around the next corner. Once I came out from behind a rocky bluff to see a magnificent stag barely ten meters away. I was close enough to hear him breathe out in surprise. That was several years ago, and the memory is as fresh as yesterday.*

Judy Armstrong, 2007

(after her 4,000-mile circuit of the French Southern Alps)

I NEVER SET OUT to become a professional trail developer. As a teenager, all I ever wanted to do was fly fighter jets. When I enrolled at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service in 1961, I'd already spent several years as a Civil Air Patrol cadet, so it seemed perfectly natural to join ROTC with the goal of flying F-104s.

I'd begun life as a chubby boy with short parents. To overcome fate, I had used peanut butter as my secret weapon to grow tall. It must have worked because in seventh grade, fueled by Skippy, I sprouted almost overnight from five feet three inches to six feet three inches. Yet I still weighed only 145 pounds. It was as if Nature had extruded me through a fun house mirror. I doubt if our officers had ever met a more ungainly recruit. Major O'Malley certainly had a hard time finding me a flight suit at Andrews Air Force Base. My ill-fitting helmet crimped my forehead painfully as I awaited our orientation flight in a Shooting Star trainer.

Nevertheless, after years of devouring Battle of Britain memoirs, I could barely hide my excitement as I slid into the rear seat next to the ejector handle. *Dogfights, here I come*, I imagined. Major O'Malley, as if he could read my thoughts, ordered me not to touch my joystick.

As we took off, I felt as if I were strapped to a deafening blowtorch. There was nothing subtle about the T-33. As the major



throttled us faster and faster down the runway, I was unable to focus on either the instruments or the fast-blurring ground. Commercial jetliners were still such a novelty that I'd never been up in a jet of any kind. But I did know enough to worry that, despite our rapid acceleration, we still hadn't risen much at all. I realized that we were accelerating in level flight toward something large and menacing at the end of the 3½-mile runway.

Major O'Malley pulled back suddenly on the stick to send the T-33 straight up into the sky like a Roman candle. Pinned against my seat, I gaped at the topsy-turvy Maryland countryside while my senses reeled and my lunch rose.

The major, a veteran of many Cold War flights above the Arctic Circle, appeared oblivious to my distress. I knew him as a terminally boring, time-serving teacher in our "military science" classes. But up here, free at last, he yawed, rolled, and dove for the sheer joy of flying. Like a puppy chasing a stick, he gamboled across the sky. Though I only saw the back of his helmet, every stomach-churning movement told me that he was as much in his element as I was out of mine. I was so startled when we burned through the atmosphere *upside down* that I scarcely breathed. As I hung from my harness, the horizon disappeared like a drink down a drunk.

Finally O'Malley remembered me and, now all business, he righted the plane, leveled off, and told me to take the controls. This was to be my moment of glory. I tried to reorient my spinning senses in order to "Fly straight toward that cloud."

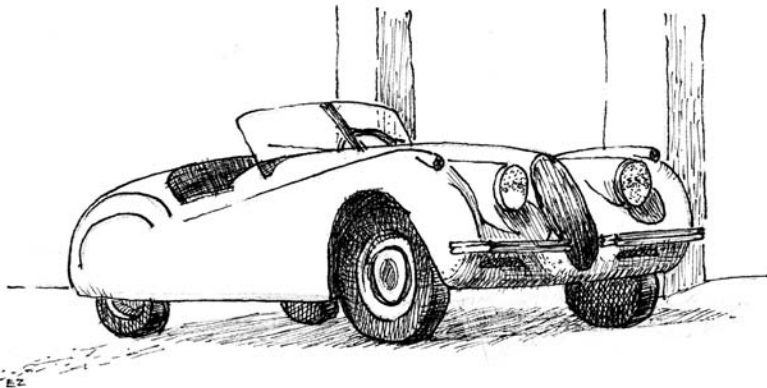
"Yes, sir, I see it," I mumbled, spotting the crenellated, fluffy mass. *Nothing to it*, I thought, swallowing hard and grasping the joystick with a death grip. None of my literary aces had explained that a pilot must be like the skilled dancer who coaxes movement from his partner with a gentle hand on her back. Instead my coarse grip repeatedly sent us rocketing off course. I overcorrected like a man with bees in his flight suit. The very real joys of flight were right beneath my nose but not in my hands and brain.

Reluctantly O'Malley turned back toward Andrews. He was as eager to stay up there doing what he did best as I was anxious for

my ears to stop hurting from the descent. Then to make matters worse, after our wheels touched down and I loosened my mask, I got a snootful of acrid fumes. It was all I could do to ease my wobbly legs off the wing onto the tarmac. Nauseous from the foul cockpit air and undone by the plane's aerobatics, I upchucked as soon as my boots touched ground. Major O'Malley stepped deftly aside, and gave me a disgusted look.

Later, when I flunked the red-green color-perception test, the remains of my pilot fantasy imploded. In retrospect, I realize that I was so absentminded and ill-coordinated that I should never have attempted to become a fighter pilot. But as an eighteen-year-old freshman, I knew little about my own untested character. And what I thought I knew I later learned was incorrect. It was only through dumb luck that I lived long enough to become a hiker.

AFTER MY FLYING CAREER nosedived, I lurched toward President John F. Kennedy's call to patriotic service. *Diplomatic Corps, here I come!* Imagining my future life at embassy parties, I soon affected an ascot, wore a beret, and bought a series of superannuated sports cars. Perhaps the most ridiculous part was that I didn't even know how to shift the ferocious manual transmission on my 1952 cherry red Jaguar XK-120. That exotic beast required (1) careful double clutching, (2) its own full-time



mechanic, and (3) ears of iron (to withstand the roar from its glasspack-enhanced muffler). Wherever I went the shrieking of my gears advertised my ignorance. But what did I care? I was young, and that Jag was so beautiful that some of its luster rubbed off on me as the perfect complement to my new ambassadorial persona.

Choosing a rewarding path in life is often one of the most difficult things that a person can do. My initial, stumbling efforts got me nowhere—certainly not to the State Department—even though the answer was under my feet all along.

Both flying and the Foreign Service had wanderlust in common. Perhaps I had itchy feet because I'd grown up in a New England backwater so old-fashioned that it had scarcely emerged from the nineteenth century. My mother, Winifred Gibson Strickland (1916–), and my father, Edwin Theodore “Ted” Strickland (1915–2001), were both second-generation offspring of English immigrant parents who worked in the textile mills in Rhode Island. We lived very much off the beaten path in a Cape Cod-style house where my father maintained a large vegetable garden and raised Rhode Island Red chickens. Perhaps because of lingering habits of wartime austerity, but probably because of New England frugality, Mom bottled large quantities of strawberry, grape, and raspberry jam. She put up all kinds of vegetables in Mason jars and cooked plain, unseasoned English-style meals. Each summer I tagged after her to pick high-bush blueberries on overgrown pastureland. I was little help and my four-years-younger sister, Susan, even less. But pails full at last, we were sure to feast on a juicy pie that night.

My best friend, Barton St. Armand, and I haunted a millpond trail, complete with its own little universe of bullfrogs and a rock-embedded maple known by us as the Meteor Tree. We hightailed it there every noon when the whistle blew at the textile mill. What we didn't know then was that our path would surely have led us to factory jobs if chance, ambition, and macroeconomics had not intervened.

I think Mom recognized from the beginning that education could be my ticket to a better life. At age six, I enrolled at the same

Nasonville grammar school that she'd attended in the 1920s. Kids at that bare-bones structure still used the same outdoor latrines that Mom had known. So she, to improve my prospects, transferred me to nearby Harrisville's basement-restrooms-equipped eight-room school. Our modernity was relative, though. At Harrisville Grammar School, we made our own ink from powder, kept it in desktop inkwells, and wrote with steel-nib pens that were not much of an advance from the colonial period's bird quills.

In 1955, my father moved us south to Wilmington, Delaware, to follow the dying textile industry. It was a sad uprooting for him but a lucky break for me. I became a scholarship student at Tower Hill Country Day School and embarked on a lifetime of learning.

I BECAME A HIKER because at the impressionable age of twenty I happened to read a newspaper article about a Newark, Delaware, antiques dealer who had just hiked Washington's 450-mile Cascade Crest Trail. At that point I had done little overnight hiking myself, but I was so curious that I phoned the mysterious Paris Walters (1905–1999) to request a meeting.

At the time I had never even been west of Indiana. The Sixties' political and cultural stew had begun to heat up, but I still gave the impression of having only recently fallen off the turnip truck. Ralph Waldo Emerson could have been speaking of me when he wrote:

*Because I was content with these poor fields,  
Low open meads, slender and sluggish streams,  
And found a home in haunts which others scorned*

"Ronald, come right in," purred the handsome man at the door of his antiques shop. "You are as welcome as the flowers in May." And, thus began the series of visits that continued for decades.

That first afternoon, Paris regaled me with the story of his life. I sat among his "American primitive" hutches, chests, and decoys to hear about the time he ran away from military school to join a tent show. "I played slide piano from one hick town to the next,"

he beamed. In a showroom redolent of linseed oil, Paris's mellow baritone evoked the jazz bands of the Roaring Twenties. He told me about his stint as a Hollywood talent scout and about his present gig selling antiques to rich collectors. Finally I found the nerve to ask about hiking.

It turned out that Paris was new to the sport himself. Less than a decade earlier, he'd been intrigued by an article about Vermont's Long Trail (LT). Completely unprepared, he'd walked half its 270-mile length until he and his nephew encountered a midnight deluge near Sherburne Pass. "As novices we didn't have wit enough to find a shelter and build a fire to dry out our sleeping bags," he said. "My nephew, who had been studying Wagnerian opera in Germany, was concerned about the condition of his vocal cords. I was wet and cold and confused. So we hopped on a bus and headed home to Delaware."

Despite that setback, Paris was so hooked on hiking that he later completed not only the Long Trail but also the Appalachian Trail and the Oregon and Washington parts of the Pacific Crest Trail. He said that his passion for the sport grew out of childhood experiences with his maternal grandfather:

*He helped open my eyes to the world of Nature: the weather, the land, and the need for food and water and shelter. He was a bark contractor for our local tannery and would often take me on his trips into the forest to buy chestnut oak bark used for tanning hides. He would plunk me up in front of the saddle and we would take off on his horse, sometimes for a week. We slept on the ground using blankets for bedrolls. Grandad always carried a frying pan, salt, lard, and a rifle for game. We more or less lived off the land: stuff like fried squirrels and morels.*

During my next DC-based six years, I visited Paris whenever I returned to Delaware. He always urged me to go west to hike, but I needed a major catastrophe to make me do it. On April 4,

1968, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., set off days of pandemonium as two hundred fires burned simultaneously. Things were so bad that it took 13,600 federal troops three days to reclaim the city from thousands of rioters. Thirteen people died; over a thousand were injured. I was eager to escape the mayhem.

Even if there hadn't been a racial insurrection, any DC summer, before the advent of air conditioning, was enough to make my spirits sink. Also my twenty-two-year-old girlfriend was way too eager to follow her recently married friends to the altar. I wanted none of that, especially when what I considered to be "the real America" beckoned from out beyond the Beltway.

1968 was a watershed year for America and, I hoped, for me. However, I was unsure what to do until Paris Walters offered me advice that appealed to my deepest instincts. "Ronald," he drawled, "why don't you take the summer off to hike the Cascade Crest Trail like I did? You're young. There's nothing holding you back."

In 1968, the North Cascades Mountains offered some of the grandest roadless hiking in the Lower Forty-Eight. When I got off the bus one chilly day at Snoqualmie Pass, I mentally thanked Paris Walters for the 250 miles of wilderness that awaited me on my walk north to Canada.

Following sketchy maps, I immediately felt like an ant among the U-shaped valleys and jagged peaks. The Cascade Crest had a raw, unfinished quality; work crews were still blasting new sections of the trail from solid rock. Steaming piles of bear scat hinted at hidden danger. But there was music in the creeks and snow on the summits. I didn't care that I sometimes went comically astray. It was enough to have escaped DC's heat, humidity, pollution, and political chaos. I may have been a greenhorn, but I began to feel with each new mile that at last I was getting somewhere.

I climbed slowly past Snow Lake, a deep bowl ringed by 100-foot old-growth Douglas firs (whose tiny cones seemed altogether too small for such magnificent trees). Literally awash in new sensations, I soaked in a sun-splashed, fern-bedecked hot spring

that emerged from an old mine shaft. The otherworldly sounds of varied thrushes lent a fairytale quality to the astonishing forest and its magical mine.

That enchanted feeling guided my steps all the way north to the international frontier. The first half of the hike required many thousands of feet of elevation gain and loss as the trail wound over passes, through glacier-carved valleys, and along ridges. The second half, wilder still, challenged and amazed me with rugged mountains, a dormant volcano, and permanent snowfields. Most days there was water in the sky, water underfoot, and drizzle down my neck. Even when rain was not actually falling, thick mists kept the brush (and me) soaked. As a result, I only had glimpses of the long panoramas that Paris had promised. Except for those brief sun breaks, I had to content myself with the unexpected charm of mushrooms, flowers, toads, and mosses. Then, whenever I became too contemplative, a grouse was always sure to pop my reverie by bursting noisily from its hiding place.

DURING THE FIRST couple of days I thought more about pain than the landscape's grandeur. I'd bussed in directly from sea level at Seattle to Snoqualmie Pass to hike at elevations of as much as 7,000 feet. The combination of that altitude plus a 65-pound pack meant that I was chronically out of breath. Skinny as I was at sixfeet three inches and 150 pounds, my load weighed almost half as much as I did. It contributed to the merciless bastinado that I suffered from rocks, roots, and my tight, inflexible boots.

In 1968, I was too green to realize that Paris's hiking methods hadn't evolved much from the era of the fur trappers. So, imitating him, I hauled along a rubber poncho that produced so much sweat that I needn't have bothered trying to stay dry. My 5-pound sleeping bag kept me warm at night but was outrageously heavy. The tube tent that Paris had recommended was an 8-foot-long, open-ended, plastic pillowcase that ripped easily and condensed readily. If I'd been even a little bit wiser, I would have substituted a lightweight tarp and a ground cloth.

Paris's worst recommendation stemmed from the fact that he was so fastidious and dandified that he never liked to go unshaven. He weighed me down with a 2-pound can of whisker foam. When I awoke after my first day of hiking, every part of my tall, skinny body protested against my dangerously heavy load. I hurt from my toes to my shoulders. Even the gray matter between my ears would have throbbed if there'd been more of it.

After disconsolately spreading minty goo on my face and taking a few swipes with the razor, I abandoned the whole shitteree right there next to a boulder where the next fool could find it. From that moment on, I wore the resulting scraggly beard with misplaced pride. In photographs taken during the next thirteen years my face resembles the hide of a mangy coyote.

I also had Paris Walters to thank for my gaseous menus. "Cooking in the woods is easy," he advised. "Just boil water, add split pea soup mix, and thicken it with cornmeal and bits of compressed bacon." Paris actually bragged that his yellow-green, primordial slop would make anyone "fart like a bull." No wonder that my bowels often competed for sympathy with my aching feet, legs, lungs, and back.

Clothes were another sore point. "Gay Paree," as he often called himself, invariably sported stylish summer duds. Following his fashion dictates, I was usually so chilled from rain, hail, and snow that I had to move fast just to keep warm. Thanks to him, I was always on the verge of hypothermia.

Yet young as I was, I never cared that my gear failed repeatedly. Each morning I hoisted my pack with new confidence. Every day my strength grew. A week out, and I strode along like I knew what I was doing. Backpacking all day, every day, I felt stronger by the hour. Finally one giddy evening, hiking by the moon, my T-shirt steamed in an otherworldly light. Pure animal exuberance surged through my veins. I had never felt so free and so alive to the moment.

Throughout that trip my predominant feeling was joy. That was especially true during the final forty miles. Periodically relieved



from the oppression of squalls and sleet, I gaped as views piled atop views. Glaciers, lakes, and peaks kept coming and coming and coming. And if that weren't enough, I often stumbled upon wildlife that literally stopped me in my tracks. I remember crossing an alpine pass where black bears, mountain goats, birds, and rodents (pikas, conies, and marmots) hinted at the ecological richness of pre-Columbian America.

That North Cascades summer unlocked something in me that had been struggling to get out. I became a hiker because in navigating the wilderness I discovered a new direction for my life. I loved trails because they were the most exciting things I'd ever experienced. Opportunity appeared out of the fog, and I found my path.

My mother always blamed Paris Walters for my "failure" to follow her advice to become a Fortune 500 CEO or a Wall Street heavyweight. "If it hadn't been for that bum," she used to say, "you could have amounted to something." But I became a hiker because the North Cascades made me happy.

Paris used to delight in telling about how he met the first woman to thru-hike the Appalachian Trail. He said:

*In May 1963, I was walking along the trail in Shenandoah National Park when I glanced ahead and saw an old woman headed my way. She was wearing a hat, tennis shoes, and a homemade plastic raincoat. A bundle was tied around her waist. Oh, she was so wild looking that I knew without being told that she was the Queen of the Appalachian Trail, Grandma Gatewood. I had heard so much about this woman, what she wore and how she traveled, that I almost felt that I knew her. She walked the entire trail twice and was known and welcomed from one end to the other. She was asked into more homes for the night than George Washington ever was. When I met her, Grandma was walking several hundred miles from Pennsylvania to*

*Roan Mountain, North Carolina, to see the rhododendrons in bloom. Knowing of her experience through all sections of the Trail, I asked her which part she liked best. "Going downhill, Sonny," she replied.*

Grandma Gatewood had it right. There was nothing complicated about hiking. And its simplicity and deep immersion in Nature were just what I needed.

"This book couldn't come at a better time. As Ron Strickland shows, a life lived outdoors is an immensely rich experience—and an antidote to the travails of recession, politics, and the daily grind. Witty and evocative, *Pathfinder* is a conversation that our society desperately needs. Read it—and go hiking."

JONATHAN DORN, Editor-in-Chief, *Backpacker*

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In the early 1970s, Ron Strickland—a young, novice hiker with an audacious idea—launched a campaign to link Glacier National Park's alpine meadows and the Pacific Ocean via a new, 1,200-mile footpath across three national parks and seven national forests. He—along with countless other volunteers—lobbied landowners, raised money, and dug dirt until, in 2009, Congress added the Pacific Northwest Trail to the National Trails System.

In *Pathfinder*, Strickland describes the process of untangling brush and bureaucracy to establish one of the world's most beautiful trails. He intersperses colorful portraits of memorable trail characters, insider's tips about favorite hikes, and news about the coming renaissance of hiking. "The adventure," he says, "is just beginning."

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RON STRICKLAND is the founder and past executive director of the Pacific Northwest Trail Association. He is the author of seven oral histories and guidebooks, including *The Pacific Northwest Trail Guide*, *River Pigs and Cayuses: Oral Histories from the Pacific Northwest*, and *Whistlepunks and Geoducks: Oral Histories from the Pacific Northwest*. He is the recipient of numerous conservation honors, including the L.L. Bean Outdoor Heroes Award.  
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