

## **Longest hiking trail in US seeks Vt. link “Extending the eastern terminus of the North Country Trail to connect with the Appalachian Trail connects two great national trail systems.**

Bruce Matthews, Michigan-based North Country Trail Association  
By WILSON RING THE ASSOCIATED PRESS June 25, 2012

**WEYBRIDGE** — A hiking trail to connect Vermont’s Long Trail and the Appalachian Trail to a 4,600-mile path to North Dakota could be coming to a farm field about midway between Lake Champlain and the spine of the Green Mountains.

The North Country Trail National Scenic Trail is being extended from its current eastern endpoint in Crown Point, N.Y. The route it would take through Vermont to connect with the Long Trail hasn’t been chosen, but it’s expected to be about a 40-mile path through the farm fields of Addison County and into the mountains and most likely make the connection in the farms fields of Weybridge. And it will make use of at least a portion of the 16-mile Trail Around Middlebury.

It could be years before the shield-shaped markers used by the North Country Trail start sprouting in the fields of Vermont’s agricultural heartland. Still, linking Crown Point to the Long Trail is one of the top priorities of the Michigan-based North Country Trail Association, the group responsible for the trail from the western shore of Lake Champlain to Lake Sakakawea in North Dakota.

“This 40-mile gap is a gap in the system. There’s no logical reason for it,” said Association Executive Director Bruce Matthews, who is working with the National Park Service, Vermont’s Green Mountain Club and others to build the new trail.

As planned, the new trail would head east from Middlebury and meet the Long Trail somewhere in the mountains to the east. From there, the North Country Trail and the Long Trail would run together about 25 miles south to Killington where the Appalachian Trail heads east to New Hampshire and Maine.

“Extending the eastern terminus of the North Country Trail to connect with the Appalachian Trail connects two great national trail systems,” Matthews said.

Despite being the longest hiking trail in the country, the North Country Trail isn’t as well-known as the Appalachian Trail or the Pacific Crest Trail.

The North Country Trail was one of 11 National Scenic Trails planned for decades and finally approved by Congress in 1980. When first conceived, the North Country Trail was meant to extend into Vermont where it would link up with the Appalachian Trail, the famous 2,000-mile hiking trail that runs from Georgia to Maine.

The North Country Trail is still a work in progress. On the map the trail is about 4,600 miles, but only about half of that is traditional hiking trail through rural areas. Much of it runs along roads. In many sections there aren’t camping areas where hikers can use a lean-to or easily pitch a tent.

Thousands have hiked the entire Appalachian Trial. Just 11 people have completed the North Country Trail.

“All the criticism that this trail gets really are some of its strengths. It doesn’t follow a particular geographic feature. It’s not associated with one state. It’s not associated with one ecosystem,” said Joan Young, 64, of Scottville, Mich., who completed the trail in 2010. “Its strongest feature is the diversity of the experiences.”

**Its paths meander through farmland, the hills of New York's Finger Lakes region and canal towpaths. Matthews said the North Country Trail is unlike many of the more traditional trails.**

**"With the North Country, it's more of an immersion in the people and how they have eked a living out of the hardships of the North Country than it is climbing from mountaintop to mountaintop," he said.**

**Young said she hiked it over many years in small pieces and long hikes. The road sections weren't her favorite parts.**

**"Trails are living things. Since I've hiked sections, there are huge portions that are completed off-road. It's happening, but it happens slowly," Young said.**

**The North Country Trail Association, which has a small staff, about 2,500 members and an \$800,000 budget, is constantly working to focus attention on the trail.**

**"In New England and the Appalachian region there's a hiking culture there, there's an expectation that people hike it and do know about it," Matthews said.**

**"The further into the Midwest you get, there's more of a love affair with the internal combustion engine."**

**In the mid-1970s when the North Country Trail was being planned, Vermont officials objected to it coming into the state over concerns additional hiker traffic could overwhelm the state's 273-mile Long Trail, which runs from Massachusetts to Canada. The Appalachian Trail and the Long Trail are one and the same from Massachusetts to Killington.**

**So the North Country Trail ended on the shore of Lake Champlain at the base of the bridge between Crown Point and West Addison.**

**The interest in linking the North Country Trail with the Appalachian Trail is part of a growing movement to connect America's longest hiking trails from sea to sea.**

**Back in Vermont, the Middlebury Area Land Trust is working with the National Park Service, the Green Mountain Club and other groups to get the rights of way to link Crown Point and the Long Trail. There was a public hearing on the issue last month.**

**The National Park Service is doing a feasibility study, which must be completed before the plan can be presented to Congress. Matthews said he was hopeful the Park Service approval can be finished by the middle of the summer.**

**He's met with representatives of Vermont's congressional delegation. The delegation knows people connected with the trail will be asking them to begin the process of getting Congress to approve the trail extension.**

**He doesn't know how long the process will take in Congress. It could be years.**

**Still, getting the North Country Trail to where it is now has taken more than 30 years. People involved in the trail will continue to move forward.**

**"It's one of those labors of love," Matthews said. "It's a simple foot path, yet it connects all the peoples of the north country and their combined experiences. You set foot on the trail in New York, you're connected with somebody in Minnesota."**