

INTERVIEWER: As a child, Stephanie Pearson grew up like a lot of Northern Minnesota kids do. She hiked the Superior Hiking Trail from her home in Duluth and spent summers canoeing in the Boundary Waters. Those adventures kickstarted her career in outdoor writing. Her job has taken her all over the country and has given her the chance to explore national parks and remote trails through wilderness beauty.

Now she's back in Duluth and has just published a book with National Geographic about her time on the trail. It's called *100 Hikes of a Lifetime USA*, and she's here with us now to talk about her favorite hikes and how she put this behemoth of a book together. Stephanie, welcome back to the show. It's good to have you.

STEPHANIE Oh thanks, Kelly. It's fun to be here.

PEARSON:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So those who hike and maybe even those who've just done a couple of hikes in their life know that there are more reasons to hike than just seeing a cool view or maybe accomplishing a really difficult challenge to your body. They're educational, historical, or even spiritual aspects that people get out of hitting the trail. So when you were putting this list together of 100 hikes that people have to do, I'm wondering what criteria made a trail remarkable to you.

STEPHANIE That is a great question because there are a lot of trails in the US. But I-- from my background at *Outside*
PEARSON: magazine, oftentimes it was hard trails through hikes or fourteeners or somebody-- Mount Everest or whatever. But I really wanted to include in this book a wide array of hikes, and so my first criteria was to include one in each state. But then I wanted to look beyond just beauty.

There's one really cool trail that's only a half mile long, and it's an interpretive trail about a shipwreck that took place off the coast of Georgia many, many years ago. And it was a ship of enslaved people. And this trail tells the interpretive story of that shipwreck.

INTERVIEWER: So give me a sense of what kind of hikes are on the list. Are they small day hikes, very accessible, long? Am I going to have to take time off of work like a sabbatical to go on these hikes?

STEPHANIE Yes, some of them you will.

PEARSON:

INTERVIEWER: OK.

STEPHANIE The longest one is the American Discovery Trail, which is 6,800 miles, and I think the shortest one was the one I
PEARSON: just mentioned, which is about a half mile. So there's a huge, huge array. Some are wilderness. Some are you can walk out-- outside, DC, or a city. One Rings actually, the Bay Area. So there's a lot of really wide variety of hikes.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. So I'm assuming that people who have all kinds of experience could pick this up and find something for them.

STEPHANIE Yeah, it's super aspirational and the photos are gorgeous.

PEARSON:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, I bet. That might be even part of the appeal just to look at all the hikes that you could do and dream. So this is Minnesota. We have to ask how much of Minnesota is on this list.

STEPHANIE PEARSON: Well, there are two trails that are in Minnesota proper, but then there's also the North Country Trail that goes through Minnesota. So I, of course, had to choose the Superior Hiking Trail because it's literally in my backyard and I grew up before it existed as a trail. But I hiked a lot of the social trails that eventually became the Superior Hiking Trail, so that's one of my all time favorites.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a favorite stretch of that trail? It's so long it's hard to say the trail is my favorite even though people who have hiked it or are in the midst of hiking through would say that. Is there a stretch that you're like you know what, if you can pick it up here and get out here, this will give you a feel for it?

STEPHANIE PEARSON: I find the section through Duluth to be very fascinating because you go from deep woods where you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere to city streets. But I also love the section around Lutsen because of the relief around that section. But I've hiked a lot. Around Aberg mountain is beautiful, and then, of course, everybody loves the Bean and Bear section, which is maybe perhaps one of the more populated, which is near Silver Bay. So I would just recommend people do a little research and try to do as much of it as possible in whatever section they can bite off.

INTERVIEWER: I remember years ago learning about the Superior Hiking Trail and seeing people keep referencing Section 13. And I thought how am I going to find this. But there are so many resources online and I'm sure in your book as well to make these things accessible. You really can find your way in and out, and it's gorgeous, gorgeous scenery.

STEPHANIE PEARSON: Yeah. And a lot of these trails have friends associations or like the Superior Hiking Trail Association, they have all the resources that you would ever need. So there's a lot available out there.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. I'm curious, just in the grand scheme of things, if you have any big takeaways, when you were reflecting on a lifetime so far of hiking. What's changing? What are you noticing?

STEPHANIE PEARSON: Oh, there's a lot that's changing. When I started writing this book, it was a watershed period really in the US. For one, the Appalachian Trail, Hurricane Helena just destroyed a good portion of the Appalachian Trail. So parts of that were not up and running by the time I finished writing this book, and that's a work in progress. But also the first hike in this book goes to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, and that just experienced a major fire.

So there's all the climate issues, but also there's decreasing funding for public lands. And so one of the most poignant things that happened when I was researching this book, I was talking to a ranger in a national park, and he got fired before he could finish answering my questions. But he was so dedicated to this park and this trail that he answered my questions and made sure that I got the answers that I needed through his superior, who hadn't been yet laid off.

So there's a lot of changes, and there are a lot of attacks on public lands right now in a lot of different directions. And so it's a pretty fluid situation out there. So I guess that brings me to the recommendation that you might want to check and do some research on the trail before you set out on it.

INTERVIEWER: That's the hard thing about books these days. Everything changes so fast.

STEPHANIE Yes.

PEARSON:

INTERVIEWER: So there's 100 hikes. How many of these trails have you been able to hike yourself?

STEPHANIE That's a good question. The answer is that I haven't hiked all of them. I had a little over a year to write the book, and the longest trail is 6,000 miles. But I've hiked probably 60% to 70%-- the Appalachian Trail, I did a section of it, and I used to live in the Southwest for many years. So I have hiked many trails in the Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, Arizona area. I've hiked a lot in the Midwest, and I did do a big road trip for this book as well and hiked them-- a number of trails, so I'd say about 60%

INTERVIEWER: That's pretty impressive still, Stephanie. You're like not all of them, but 60% to 70% of 100 trails, I think that's something that you could put in notch on your belt maybe. Do you have-- you can notch how many belts or how many trails you've walked.

So here we've got about a minute or so left. I would love to know how you have learned to get the most out of the hikes that you do. So for those of us who are thinking about spring and summer, and we're like, yes, I'm going to hit some of the trails. How should we think about it? How should we approach it to really make it valuable?

STEPHANIE Well, I think first of all, make a plan but don't make it too rigid. Maybe set a goal to get out-- set some time aside to do a hike that you really want to do. But then maybe not make it as goal oriented.

I think our culture is very much we have to summit fourteeners. We have to do through hikes. We have to do the long thing. And it's really just about getting outside and breathing the fresh air and maybe seeing some wildlife, and I'm really a proponent of doing where you are. And that's one of the reasons I wanted to include hikes everywhere. They may not be a bucket list hike, but they are a hike that is approachable and doable.

And so there's a lot of hikes, for example, in the Midwest that I didn't really know about before I did this book, and I-- those-- some of those are-- I don't really have a bucket list, but some of those are hikes that I would love to do because they're fascinating places.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That's fantastic. I really appreciate you both sharing your wisdom, Stephanie, and also writing this book for those of us who maybe feel a little intimidated and don't know where to start. So thanks for joining us today.

STEPHANIE Oh, thank you so much for having me. It was really fun to talk about trails.

PEARSON:

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. That was outdoors writer Stephanie Pearson. Her new book, *100 Hikes of a Lifetime USA*, is out now.

[MUSIC PLAYING]