

The Secret World of Dodging Deer Ticks a Trail Running Ramble

by Stride Longley

In light of the fortuitous change in weather that kicks off any good summer campaign, I've recently begun to take advantage of the numerous trails Massachusetts has to offer. Granted, there are a pitiful number of trails within Boston city limits, but a quick 20-minute bike ride in nearly any direction but east puts one well within woodland territory.

I personally welcome the opportunity to stomp around in the forest like a child, grinning from ear to ear, whilst simultaneously employing my adult reasoning and waning agility to dodge deer ticks and shining patches of poison ivy. The puddles in March and April made my trips less than frequent, but with the weather poised to stay, dare I say "consistently nice," you can rest assured I'll be rediscovering what it means to be lost in the woods in no time.

All this trail running does beg a few questions, though, about the real benefits, and some of the dangers, of running off the beaten path.

The first matter at hand with any new sporting endeavor is acquiring the proper equipment for the job. Trail running, despite being spiritual kin to road running, bears enough differences to warrant at the very least a second pair of shoes.

Despite what you may think, trail running shoes (you know, the grey and brown ones that look like they can handle rock strewn terrain without the merest sign of flinching) are not so unlike the shoes you train in on a day to day basis. Tear apart a road shoe and a trail shoe, and you'll find they break down into the same constituent components: an upper with a few strategically placed overlays, a cushioning midsole, and an outsole typically made of some hard carbon rubber. The difference is in how effective a given shoe type will be for the terrain underneath it.

More often than not, a typical road shoe will be suitable for short trail runs on well maintained, clear trails and national park paths, at least for short runs. In some cases, the softer terrain mandates a slightly more supportive shoe type, so it may make sense to get a road shoe of a more substantial midsole material for your trail running. Also, given the greater number of good road shoes compared to their trail versions, there is a much wider spectrum of support and cushioning available to the user. In many cases, a brand will take a couple of their most popular shoes and make trail versions of them, leaving those trail runners with trickier biomechanics fewer options than with road shoes.

However, for the less "accommodating" trails, and for those of you who exclusively run on trails or through muddy, nasty weather beaten passages, true trail running shoes can make a world of difference. The midsole rubber compounds are typically of a slightly denser makeup than their road counterparts, and offer the practical benefits of a more stable platform (for loose, softer terrain), with enough resiliency to deal with a careless step on a pointy rock.

Furthermore, they will often be built with a more dramatic outsole lug pattern, giving the shoes significantly better grip in demanding situations. To add to the already impressive list of features, most trail running shoes are either coated with a water resistant material called DWR, or lined with GoreTex for true waterproof properties. Because many running shoe companies market their trail shoes as "all-weather" alternatives, the water-resistance factor is

becoming more and more common.

As for the good, the bad, and the ugly of trail running, the benefits typically outweigh the dangers. Obviously, the first thing anyone thinks of when it comes to trail running is that it's easier on the knees. And that's true: the softer terrain helps to absorb a significant amount more shock than the hard tarmac you're used to, and as such puts a significant amount less stress on the cartilage in your knees. The additional benefits are a little less obvious.

Trail running, by putting the foot on a less predictable surface than pavement, enables the small stabilizer muscles in the lower extremity to become stronger, by virtue of the additional effort required to stay balanced. Not only does this instability help to build better leg strength, it can also help to build speed, and even increase core strength (that first hard trail run of the season will always leave your abs in tatters).

The downsides are few, but worth noting. Obviously trail running poses some risks, as the natural instability of running on unpredictable surfaces can lend itself to sprained ankles, and Achilles Tendonitis is a very common complaint as calf muscles tend to tighten with softer surfaces. Beyond that, getting lost is a real, if rare, point of concern, so make sure you're running with a buddy or on well marked paths if you're not familiar with an area. Woodland flora and fauna are less of an issue, but avoiding winged buzzing things with stingers, growling furry things, and plants with shining leaves-of-three is advised.

If you do a little research, get the right equipment, and stay clear of the dangers, trail running can be a great alternative to road running, and indeed can help improve your form, fitness, and be quite a lot of fun. Just be sure to steer clear any flailing-armed, rash-covered, bewildered runners; they're probably me, I'm probably lost, and chances are good there's poison ivy and a hive of particularly agitated winged things nearby.