Hiking Near Portland Has Become a Headache. A Local Web Developer Has Created an App to Relieve the Pain.

TrailCheck is an app allowing users to crowdsource the information that matters to hikers most, from parking lot capacity to trail conditions.

By Cameron Vigliotta  Published June 6, 2019  Updated June 6, 2019

It used to be that if you wanted to escape the anxiety of life in Portland, all you had to do was drive an hour or two outside the city and hit the trail.

But in the past few years, Oregon’s hiking destinations have devolved into chaos.

Once-undisturbed paths in the Columbia River Gorge are now mobbed by tourists wielding selfie sticks, screaming babies and unleashed chihuahuas. Cramped trailhead parking lots have constricted the flow of traffic to some of the state’s most treasured landscapes.

In all that disorder, Arlo Leach saw an opportunity.

A Portland web developer and avid hiker, Leach first noticed the overcrowded trails when the U.S. Forest Service began requiring permits to climb Dog Mountain in 2018 due to congestion and accidents near the trailhead.

"I spent a lot of time being anxious about if I have a plan for where I want to go," Leach says, "and wanting to know if it’s going to be crowded before I get there."

So he did what most engineers do when presented with a problem: He built a machine to fix it.

In January, Leach launched TrailCheck, an app allowing users to crowdsource the information that matters to hikers most, from parking lot capacity to trail conditions.

The app has an unfussy design and is exceedingly easy to navigate. Once signed in, users can choose to contribute to the TrailCheck database with trail information of their own, or search the growing trail index to find the data they need before setting out for a hike. Users can add trails to the database as well.

To test the app, we spent one hot Saturday morning traveling to some of the most popular trails surrounding Portland—Multnomah Falls and Latourell Falls in the Gorge, and Lower Macleay Trail into Forest Park.

The parking lot at Multnomah Falls was a nightmare of muscle cars and SUVs. In response, I opened the TrailCheck app, located the Multnomah Falls Freeway Lot, and simply logged what I saw, rating the lot usage as "High."

Latourell Falls and Lower Macleay Trail were equally congested—on our visit to the Latourell Falls trailhead, a disgruntled Portland park ranger was recording cars without disabled permits parked in disabled spots. Again, I opened the app on my phone and submitted information, this time reporting back with parking lot conditions as well as information on the weather and trail conditions.

What I didn’t get was much help. In all three cases, I was the only user who had recorded information that day, even though it was a Saturday at three of the busiest hiking trails in the state.

Leach hopes that will change as the user base grows. To increase awareness, Leach hopes to partner with local organizations, including Trailkeepers of Oregon and Friends of the Columbia Gorge. The more exposure the app receives, the greater chance it has to benefit the community.

"I would love for this to be used by land management organizations that do trail maintenance," he says. He also envisions running statistics on the app as well, such as providing temperature changes from a mountain’s base to its summit.

For now, TrailCheck is up and running for summer hiking season and, even in its early state, could help relieve some of the headaches and anxiety associated with hitting the trail. But it’ll take a committed audience to ensure its success.

"I’d love to see it used," Leach says, "if only because I want to use it myself."

**GET IT:** TrailCheck is available for download from the Apple App and Google Play stores. For more information, see trailcheck.info