

OPINION | ARKANSAS SPORTSMAN: Rawlins blazed trails for hikers

(<https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2022/jun/05/rawlins-blazed-trails-for-hikers/>)

by [Bryan Hendricks](#) | June 5, 2022 at 2:28 a.m.

Jim Rawlins, 94, one of Arkansas's most influential naturalists, died May 22 in Primm Springs, Tenn.

Rawlins was not known in the hunting and fishing circles, but he was a giant in the hiking community. He wrote and published "A Hiker's Guide to The Ouachita National Recreation Trail," the first comprehensive guide to one of our state's most treasured resources.

I met Rawlins in the spring of 1987 at the Schlotzky's sandwich shop on John F. Kennedy Boulevard in North Little Rock. I wrote an article about him for the North Little Rock Times. His calm, rugged demeanor and his chiseled physique gave him a statuesque bearing, but what impressed me most about him was his serenity and his confidence. He was highly accomplished personally and professionally, but his passion was advocating for the conservation of our vanishing wild places. Hiking was his conduit for advocacy. None of it was abstract to him. He'd walked, slept and broken bread in all of the places that mattered to him.

That brief conversation inspired me to put on a backpack in October 1987 and spend the next year backpacking from Arkansas to Maine.

My contacts with Rawlins were rare and brief in later years, but Steve Heye, outings chair for the Ozark Society, had much to say about him in a recent email.

"A better friend to hiking could not be found," Heye wrote. "Jim came to Arkansas in the early sixties as a youth counselor for the Methodist Church. One of the tools Jim used in his job of counseling troubled youth was taking the kids on backpacking and hiking trips. Several times after I got to know him, a person

would come up and thank Jim for turning their life around through his hikes."

In 1980-81, Rawlins participated in HikaNation, a journey that 37 backpackers took from the West Coast to the East Coast to advocate for more hiking trails.

"During the late seventies, Jim, along with a few others, helped establish the Ouachita Trail," Heye wrote. "Taking several established segments, he helped to piece together what has become one of the areas great assets."

That's when he wrote the Ouachita Trail guide.

"Tim Ernst even credits Jim's book as being the foundation for [his own] trail book," Heye wrote. "If the Ouachita Trail had a daddy, it would be Jim."

After retiring from being a counselor in the late 1980s, Rawlins started an outfitting service that led weekend trips to some of Arkansas' backwoods gems.

"But what he became known for was his ten-day trips to the hiking hotspots of the West," Heye wrote. "Big Bend, Pecos Wilderness, Grand Tetons, Maroon Bells, Zion and Grand Canyon were some of the places Jim would take his paying clients for some backcountry adventure.

"Five people would pile into his van on Thursday night or Friday morning and would drive straight through to the trailhead," Heye wrote. "Once there, it was five or six days of hiking in the best areas the country had to offer. I took several trips with Jim. Each one was a memory I shall not forget, nor I suspect, the hundreds that also joined him on these trips. Through Jim, I was able to check off many of the hikes on my bucket list and visit some that were not on it.

Rawlins's last guided hike was to Alaska's Denali National Park in 1987. Back and knees problems ended his endurance hiking, so Rawlins and his wife Ruth spent the next 25 years exploring in a recreational vehicle.

"I am indebted to Jim for nearly everything I've done in the past 40 years as far as hiking," Heye said. "He got me to join the Sierra Club, where I became their local outings chair. Through the hikes Jim had led locally, I had a large list of places to lead Sierra Club trips in the 80s and 90s. I've taken this treasure trove over to the Ozark Society and used it since 2000. People thank me for leading hikes into the Arkansas wilderness, but I tell them that everywhere we go is thanks to Jim

Rawlins, who brought me there first."

Rawlins never sought the spotlight. His accomplishments were born of love for his adopted state. He was a native Georgian, but Arkansas was his home. Remember him next time you visit a designated wilderness area. He was one of many that worked hard to have them set aside for the rest of us.