

JUSTIN'S FOOTSTEPS: CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL

Third major thru-hike gives local the prestigious 'Triple Crown' title

Not much care
in the world
but the feeling of
FREEDOM
and feeling
ALIVE

Justin Smith

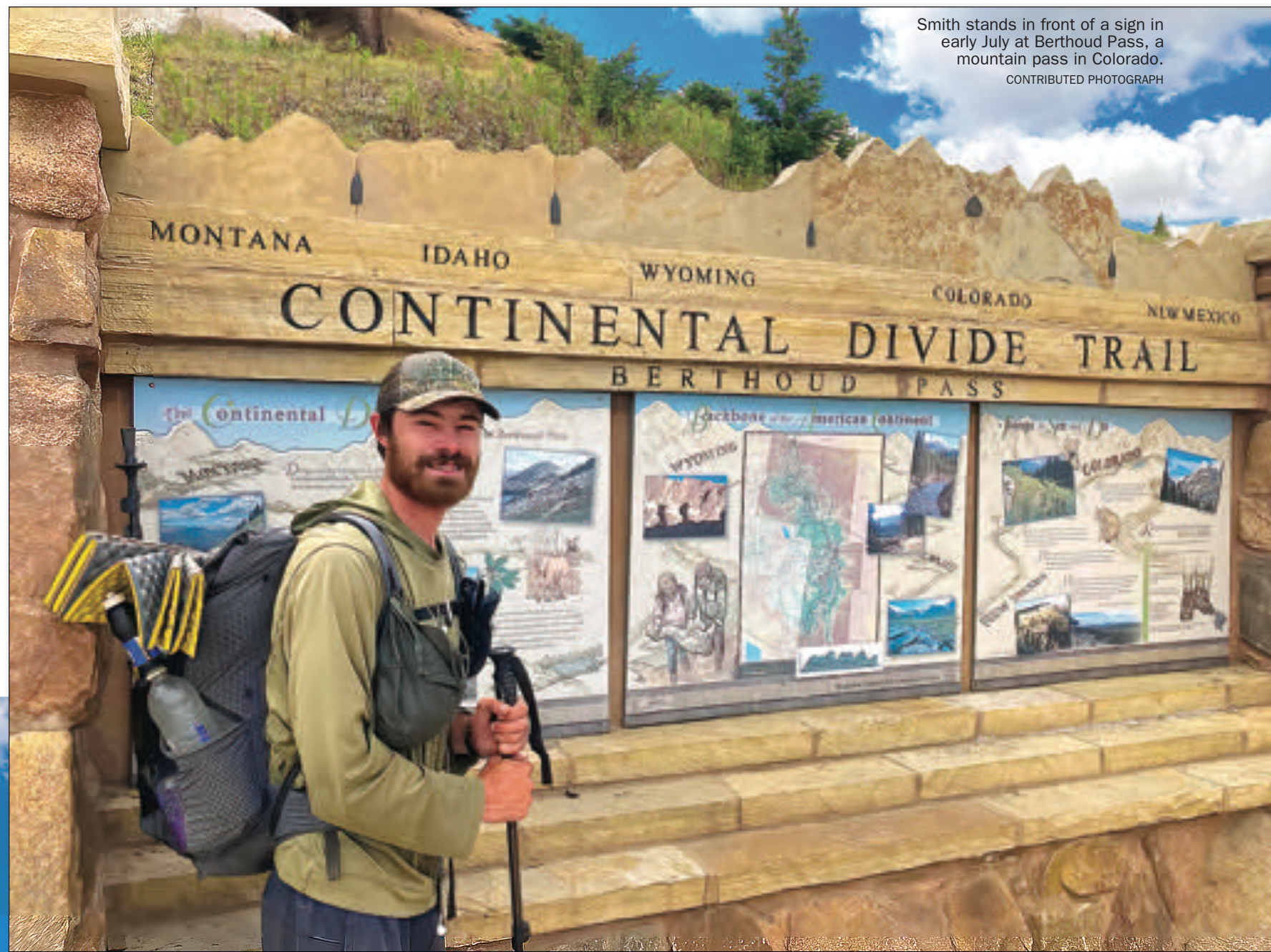
"I felt spoiled along this journey a lot, waking up and walking in the sunrises, walking in those sunsets, and of course getting roughed up by some storms," Smith posted on his Facebook page "Justin's Footsteps" on Sept. 6 after completing the hike.

BY EMILY KOESTER
SPECIAL TO THE LAKELAND TIMES

August 31, 2022 was a big day for Lake Tomahawk resident, Justin Smith. He may have been exhausted, emotionally and physically, but he was also elated, because after 16 weeks of thru-hiking the Continental Divide Trail, Smith completed his final of three National Scenic Trails to earn him the "Triple Crown" status.

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Smith stands in front of a sign in early July at Berthoud Pass, a mountain pass in Colorado.
CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPH



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Smith's CDT route

According to the National Park Service, the Continental Divide Trail (CDT) is 3,100 miles long and runs through states New Mexico, Idaho, Colorado and Wyoming. The CDT is the second longest National Scenic Trail, second only to the North Country Trail. Smith began in Mexico on May 11 and completed his 2022 journey in Canada 16 weeks later on Aug. 31.

In 2021, Smith completed the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), and in 2019, he began his thru-hike journey on the Appalachian Trail (AT). 2020, the pandemic year, Smith completed Wisconsin's Ice Age Trail. There are 11 National Scenic Trails in the United States, and in four years Smith has completed four of those trails.

According to Smith, the CDT is actually less than 3,000 miles because there are different routes to choose from, and the trail isn't totally complete yet. Regardless of the mileage, Smith went through four pairs of shoes, although he said he should have used a fifth pair.

"It was different from the other trails,

I was really a purist on the other trails where I wanted to stick to every foot of the trail," Smith said, admitting his mileage was closer to the 2,800 mark. "(This trail) there's different alternate routes and some of it is more beautiful. Cirque of the Towers in Wyoming there was a bit of a reroute and I'm glad I took that because that was one of the best parts of the trail."

There were also some fire closures which changed his route plans. Smith was hiking with a group of others when they had to take a road route because of a fire closure. Along the way, they met someone who offered them water, food and camping on his land. Through conversation, they learned this person and his family owned the private land the hikers were planning on trekking through and they were lucky enough to get permission to cut through the properties.

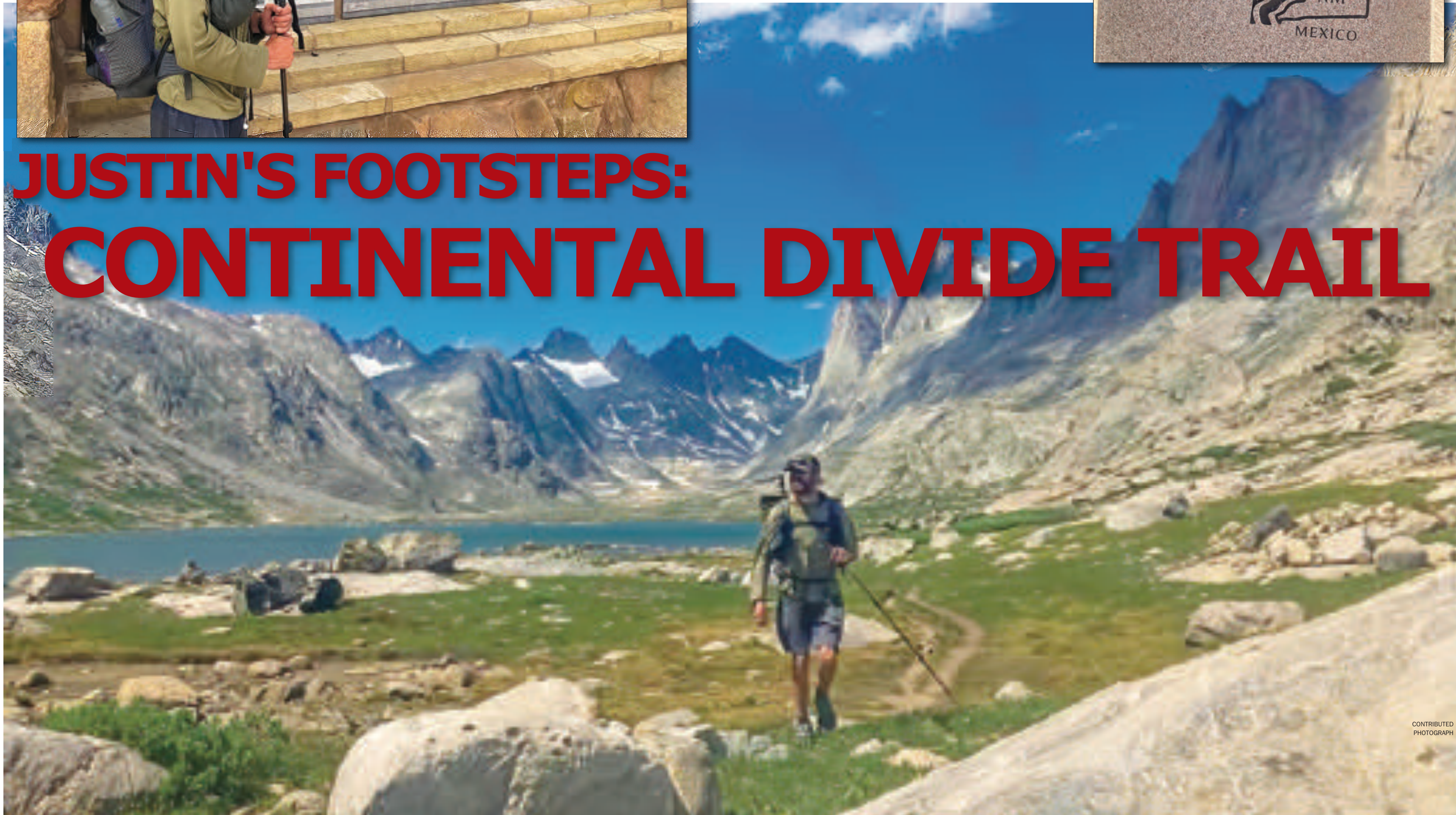
"It was one of the greatest road walks I ever did," Smith said. "He told us to stop in this neighborhood at his mom's, she'd have water for us. We stopped and she had fresh tortillas, bacon and eggs for us. It worked out really well. It was over 100 miles that we were able to do that way."

With the possibilities of fires and snow
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One of the signs along the trail shows the general route of the Continental Divide Trail.
CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPH



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closing some of the trails, Smith said he seemed a bit more relaxed on this hike rather than speeding through. He admitted to taking more Zero days (days of little or no hiking on the trail) than he had on any previous thru-hike, but also said he would get antsy when not moving along on the trail.

Most of his Zero days were at the beginning of his hike in New Mexico. Southern New Mexico was a lot of desert and water sources were scarce.

"There's no fresh water, so you're getting trail angels putting caches out, or mostly from cattle troughs, sometimes nasty looking water," Smith said. "You kinda have to get that water or 20-30 miles without water. Water sources were pretty nasty in the desert."

Once into northern New Mexico, the terrain changed to more woods through Colorado, where he also traversed more open ridges and peaks.

"I'm really lucky to have hiked all these trails and never have gotten injured or sick," Smith said.

Smith also said he got lost more on this hike than previous hikes.

"You'd have signs, then there wouldn't be one for miles and the trail would be gone," he said. "I was constantly looking at my map, especially in Colorado. It's more of a 'find your own route' trail."

'Into my own hike'

Similar to Smith's previous hikes, he went into it alone, but hiked portions with people he met along the way.

"I was going to go a little faster and then I heard a lot about fire closures ahead and people complaining about the snow in Colorado, they were getting there too early," he said. "So I settled down with a group, I stayed with them almost all of New Mexico, and then Colorado is when I decided to pick it up and take off. Get into my own hike."

Smith said besides the group he hiked most of New Mexico with, he also joined some familiar faces throughout the rest of the route,

including another man from Wisconsin who he had met while hiking the PCT last year.

Hikers and non-hikers he met throughout his journey were the most rewarding aspect of this particular thru-hike for Smith. He remembered the conversations he would have with older folks in diners or people who generously gave him a ride into town or back to the trail.

"People would have a conversation with us and congratulate us," Smith said of his time in Glacier National Park.

In his final Facebook post for this trip, Smith acknowledged those who helped him along the way.

"I am going to miss all the wonderful people along the way that gave me some great conversations and helped me along the way, giving me rides and snacks and stuff," he wrote. "For you to take your time to talk to me or appreciate what we are doing is a very great feeling and we are very

blessed to have beautiful caring people like that in our world."

Becoming a Triple Crowner

Completing the three major thru-hikes to earn the Triple Crown of Hiking became a goal of Smith's since he began the AT in 2019, and now that the goal has been met, Smith admits to feeling a bit lost.

"It's like, what do I do now?" he said. "It's been on my mind for so long, so it's kinda sad."

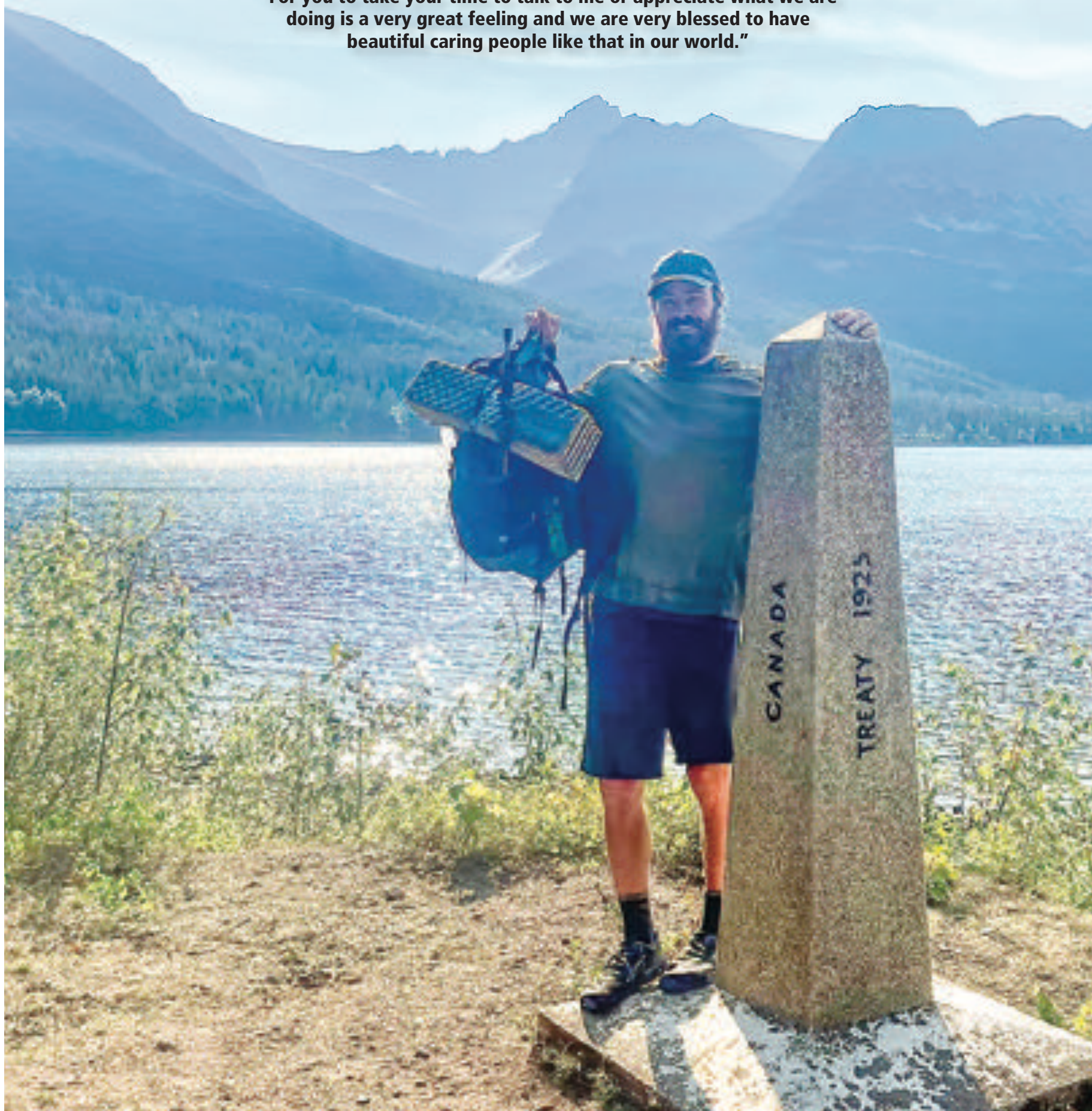
Having the opportunity to complete yet another thru-hike isn't something Smith takes for granted, admitting the long hikes have started taking a toll on him.

"I have the North Country Trail on my mind, but that's long and I want to do more stuff with my dog, he's getting old," Smith said. "I don't really want to leave him again, so I'm thinking maybe some trips to Michigan with him. Some little stuff."

He may be taking a break from the long thru-hikes, but Smith will continue to seek out new adventures. He plans on exploring Michigan more and possibly trying out bike-packing.

To follow Smith's hiking adventures, visit his Facebook page, "Justin's Footsteps."

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