

*WALKING GONE WILD will take women on a fact filled journey of becoming a walker and hiker as they age. Sprinkled with stories of real women the reader will discover a new model of aging with vitality, grace, and a deep connection to life.*

## **Walking Gone Wild**

By Dami Roelse

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# Walking Gone Wild



How to Lose Your Age on the Trail

# Dami Roelse



## What readers say

Over the course of my lifetime, my life has been altered and saved by a multitude of seemingly ‘small things.’ Your book is one of those things. It has been stated, “Never render insignificant the small things.” They matter.

Robin Hunter, Birmingham, Alabama

This book has become my walking/hiking go-to. It is filled with information, encouragement, and wisdom gleaned from many years on the trails. This book is filled with stories, pep talks and concrete facts about how women of all ages can discover themselves on the trail--be it a sidewalk from home to grocery store or backpacking in the wilderness. A must read for any woman who wants to join the legions of “wild women” walking.

Elaine Yates, Oregon

As a 64-year-old solo female hiker, I become very excited when I find a walking/hiking book written by another senior. This book didn’t disappoint, in fact, it’s become my favorite reference book. I’m now recommending this book to all my other senior friends that are trying to stay fit and have an active life. We now have a small group in my rural, Oklahoma area that are walking, hiking and kayaking. I’m not solo anymore.

Karen, Oklahoma

I loved this book. Practical information to get you prepared and encouragement to get off the couch and get on the trail. Read the book and join Dami's Facebook group, Walking Women 50 Plus, and you'll see she practices what she preaches.

Patti

I loved this book! As a new solo hiker in my late fifties this book inspired and educated me toward my dream of backpacking. Packed with insight, experience and encouragement, this book fills a unique niche.

Sandy

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# Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
Disclaimer	xv
Foreword to the Second Edition	xvii
Preface	xix
SECTION I: Walking	
What's a Woman to Do?	
1: From Exercise to Mindfulness Practice	3
2: Women by the Water	6
3: The Magic of 50	9
4: Why Walk?	17
5: Adopting a Walking Mind-Set	27
6: Walk! Your Life Depends on It	33
7: For the Love of Nature	35
8: Walking and Travel	40
9: Becoming an Active Walker	46
10: Training a 50-Plus Body	53
11: Walking Gear, Food, and Safety	58
SECTION II Hiking	
12: From Walking to Hiking	67
13: Planning Your Hike	71
14: Staying Safe on Your Hike	78
15: Where the Path Will Take YOU	95
SECTION III Backpacking	
16: Getting Ready for the Distance	100
17: From 5 to 50 Miles in 8 Weeks	104

18: A Woman at Her Own Speed	109
19: From 50 to 500 Miles in 3 Months	111
20: Gear for the Distance	122
21: Backpacking Gear Details	127
Food for the Trail	142
22: Food and Backpacking	143
23: Staying Safe for the Distance	151
SECTION IV Questions	
Frequently Asked Questions	165
SECTION V Zest	
24: Success and the Art of Living	173
25: Walking to Enhance Your Spirit	177
26: Walking Home to Myself	185
Congratulations!	187
More by the author	189
APPENDIX	191
Sources	199

## 1: From Exercise to Mindfulness Practice



*Walking brings health to mind and body.  
Walking allows for mindfulness.*

When I turned 65, I wanted to know, in depth, the place where I lived. No more running off to foreign places to find my happiness. I had traveled all over the world yet ignored the place I called home beyond what I saw from a car window and occasional forays on short camping and hiking trips. I decided to walk the length of Oregon.

I was relatively fit at the time, so I figured I could walk for three or four weeks carrying a backpack. I had been rowing competitively for six years; I was used to three- and four-day backpacking trips in the summer and could carry up to 35 pounds. I exercised an hour and a half each day, doing a mixture of aerobic training and strength training. I believed in working my body hard for periods of time. I had a sedentary job; I sat 10 hours a day behind a desk or in a classroom, four days a week. I figured that if I had a good, hard workout in the morning, I could rest on my laurels the rest of the day. I arrived at work with an endorphin high that lasted most of the day.

I'd become aware, though, of research that concludes that exercising one hour a day does not significantly improve health. Being active throughout the day—walking and carrying, hauling and digging, pounding and dancing—is more conducive to increased fitness and staying healthy.



On my trips in the Himalayas, I had met women and men of different ages walking long distances from village to village, often carrying large loads of goods to market—even sewing machines—to sell their wares and offer their skills. Young and old, they moved at a slow but steady pace. They helped each other balance their loads, held on their backs with a strap that wrapped around their foreheads.

In India I met women carrying stones and bags of sand on their heads, from the beach to a building site. They walked gracefully, holding their (strong) necks straight. From these travels, I gathered that walking with a load doesn't have to be torture if you balance the load on your body. I also saw that walking can be a community-building affair that brings people together. People talked, shared news, and shared their homes with travelers from other regions.

I was setting out on a journey to test these facts of health and community building, to experience how walking day in, day out with a load would change my body. I learned that, as with Asian villagers, walking the American wilderness brings people together as a community. Hikers stop and share information about the trail, the river crossings, the snowpack. They help each other stay safe and share their delight in the surrounding beauty. I learned that walking and carrying a balanced load with all my belongings gives a degree of freedom, autonomy, and confidence I had never experienced.

I also experienced the effect of walking on my mind. In the Himalayas, I had met locals with prayer wheels, walking and praying as a way to prepare for a good afterlife. Now I know that the rhythm of walking is conducive to meditation and brain health.

One study of a group of middle-aged adults had them take three 40-minute walks a week for a year. At the end of the period, MRI scans verified that the hippocampus in their brains—a part of the limbic system associated with memory, emotions, and motivation—

had grown on average by 2 percent. The hippocampus gets smaller when we hit our midfifties, which leads to an increase in memory loss.

Just as meditation increases the mind's ability to focus, walking focuses the brain. When I hiked at high altitude and in difficult terrain, this increased concentration became even clearer. In the thin air, all I could do was breathe and pay attention to moving my feet one step at a time. I suspect that the single-minded focus mustered by high-mountain climbers to reach their goal is a good part of what attracts them to climbing.

In the documentary film *Meru*, the interviewer asks climber Conrad Anker why he keeps going back to the mountains, having lost his best friend and climbing partner to them, and knowing he could lose his own life. Anker answers by citing the heightened focus of climbing, which creates a feeling of expansiveness and connectedness in the brain few pleasures can rival, a "mountain high."

I'm not suggesting that high-mountain climbing is the only way to experience this complex feeling. Sitting in meditation you can reach the same place. But why not get the double advantage of an expansive mind and a healthy body by taking up walking and hiking? As Sayadaw U. Silananda points out in his article "The Benefits of Walking Meditation," "Walking meditation can help us gain insight into the nature of things, and we should practice it as diligently as we practice sitting meditation or any other kind of meditation."

Health, community, confidence, and a sense of connection can be achieved by taking up walking. Let's see how, in more detail, in the chapters that follow.

## 9: Becoming an Active Walker

If you haven't been an active daily walker but want to become one, you're embarking on a change that will usher in a revolution, going against the grain of what you've been taught until now. Efficiency and ease drive our economy and drive our lives. Saving time is sacred. When you start walking, you give up ease and you give up time-saving efficiency. If you were raised on a diet of easy transportation, it will take a new mindset to incorporate walking into your life. Still, the long-term outcomes I've mentioned earlier in this book will be your gains: health, confidence, and a new outlook on living.

To begin walking sounds simple: put on your shoes and walk. It actually is that simple. The problems start when you don't know how far you can walk, when you can't find sidewalks or other safe places to walk, when you don't have shoes that are comfortable after a half mile of walking. The success of your newfound challenge depends on how much you walk, where you walk, and what you wear.

To get started, it's important to assess what your walking activity is at present. Get a tracking device you can wear on your wrist, or a pedometer, or use an app on your phone (newer phones have a built-in activity-tracking apps) that measures your steps as you go through your day. You may be surprised or shocked by the number you see at the end of a day. Are your numbers showing that you're leaning toward *sitting disease* or are they showing that you're on your way toward fitness and health?

If you're a sitter, make a list of tasks in your day you can do while standing or walking. Pick two of these sitting activities and walk while you do them. Let's say you sit to talk on the phone or to drink your morning cup of coffee or tea; instead of sitting, walk around while you do these things. Your body will thank you. Do you answer your mail on your computer while sitting? Set up your computing device so you can stand while using it and answer your mail while standing and moving. Do you sit to read the paper? Plug into news via radio and podcasts and walk while listening. I haven't figured out how to walk and knit, but I *have* seen Tibetans walk and spin their wool in the Himalayas, so I'm sure there's a way if I put my mind to it. I want to remind you: walking versus sitting is a mindset.

If the tracker surprises you, and you find yourself to be a “mover” during your day, you may be logging more miles than you know. If you add outside activities you can do while walking, such as getting groceries, doing errands, or visiting a friend, your daily miles will increase even more. If you use public transportation, walk to a bus stop farther away from your current point of departure or get off at a stop before your destination.

We often hear the recommendation of walking 10,000 steps a day, 4.6 miles to support your health. That number has been debunked since the first edition of this book. Research shows that 7500 brisk steps can be enough to be considered living an active life that supports your health. It depends on your age and on what other physical activities you engage in. The research on older women (median age 72) from Dr. I-Min Lee and others showed that increased steps correlated with decreased overall mortality, but at 7500 steps that correlation leveled off. Without taking a formal “walk,” I average two to three miles a day just doing what I need to do. Find out how much walking you're doing already!



*The long-term outcome of walking is health, confidence, and a new outlook on living.*

## **Fitting Walking into Your Life**

At this point even if you haven't added walking as a separate activity to your life, you've just changed how you go about your daily business. Yes, it may take more time to get the errands done if you do them while walking, but you'll gain much more than just getting the errand out of the way, including not having to look for parking. I use my bike if I don't have the time to walk to complete my errands. That way I'm still moving my body.

If you have a job or responsibilities that keep you occupied most of your day, finding time to walk can be an issue. Starting small in ways I have mentioned will help you develop a walking mindset. Once you integrate more walking into doing your errands or caring for a grandchild or an elder, it will be easier to take the next step and set a daily or weekly walking goal.

I learned of a woman who got into the habit of rising early to walk her dog before going to work. She liked the quiet of the early morning walk so much that she ended up walking two hours before getting ready for work, which included a 45-minute commute.

Her evening walk with the dog easily took up an hour as well. Her schedule looked like this: rise at 4:00 a.m., walk till 6:15 a.m., get to work by 8:00 a.m., return home at 6:00 p.m., walk the dog till 7:00 p.m., make dinner and eat, and get to bed by 9:00 p.m. When I heard about her walking habit, she had been doing it for 20 years.

By the way, she was happily married. You can see that there wasn't time for TV watching in her day. She had other priorities.

## Walking with Aches and Pains

Do aches and pains stop you from walking? Do they stop you from going shopping, going out to dinner or a movie, or going on vacation? Do the aches and pains stop you from living your life, from doing the things you want or need to do? Sadly, in our society walking doesn't "walk" into your life; you have to want to do it to make it happen.

Older people heal more slowly than younger ones. Do you let this stop you from getting active again after an injury? Or does the lack of desire to walk stop you? As an older friend once said to me, "Don't ask me if it hurts when I walk. It hurts all the time. It's no different when I walk, so I'll just keep walking." This woman walks because she wants to, pain or not.

You don't necessarily have to walk with pain after 50. With some care, you can let walking be your vehicle to feeling better. When my back acted up a few years ago every time I walked more than 45 minutes, I considered what to do. As soon as I stopped walking, the pain vanished.

It was tempting to avoid a longer walk. But I already was so committed to walking that I followed my heart and explored what caused the pain so I could get rid of it. I noticed that with a weight in my backpack the pain didn't occur. That told me it had something to do with my posture while I walked. It took a winter of visits to a doctor and physical therapist to find the cause. Eventually my osteopath ordered an MRI and found that I had a bulging disc in my mid-back. Stretches, exercise, and continued walking, especially the longer hikes with a backpack, have healed the injury over two summers.

I can now go for an ordinary two-hour walk without my back acting up. If I had stopped walking, I would not have found out what was going on and, risking other problems in the process, wouldn't have healed myself.



*Don't let your age determine your healing! Let your mindset determine what you can and cannot do.*

Young people assume they will heal quickly. Older people not so much. Don't let your age determine your healing! Let your mindset determine what you can and cannot do. I walk with a knee that doesn't have much cartilage left; I wore an elastic support and did exercises to strengthen the muscles all around the knee. I kept swelling down and hiked sometimes 18–20 miles a day without ill effect! My orthopedist said after diagnosing the problem, “Why do you need to hike 18 miles a day?” thus relegating me to a less active category. I responded, “Because I want to.” I don't hike 18–20 miles a day anymore, but I have strengthened my knee enough that I can hike without a compression sleeve and feel fine.

Another doctor told me, “Hike if you can control the pain. It will not create more rapid wear, and may slow it down. When your knee doesn't work anymore, get a new knee!” I liked the way my doctor's attitude aligned with mine. I walk with my crooked back, my worn knee, and my developing bunions. I care for these aberrations as much as possible by adding special exercises and foot treatments to slow down the process of my aging, twisting, shrinking body. At this point, taking anti-inflammatory meds now and then are my go-to assists to keep me walking.

On the long-distance trail I hear young people complain about body pains. Their feet hurt, they have stress fractures, their backs go out, their muscles are sore, you name it. Aches and pains happen at any age. How we react to them differs. The young ones quit only if they're forced to do so. Often they wait much too long before they go into rest and healing mode. The older ones become hesitant to continue their activity. Neither approach is helpful for the body's

healing. Listen to your body, stay active, encourage healing, and come back to walking as soon as possible without injuring yourself further. Walking will heal you. Your attitude will start the healing, or at least keep you living with zest.

## The Walking Route



*Start your walking life with walking around your home, your place of work, your neighborhood.*

As you become a walker, you plan where to go each day to fit in your four miles. Maybe you develop a regular route and are happy completing it; maybe you do your errands and get your walking in. At some point you may look for variety in terrain or variety in view. You can take a road not taken before and see where it leads you.

You can start your walking life with walking around your home. You can walk at your place of work, the gym, your neighborhood, a nearby park, the hills, the beach, the forest, and along highways and rivers. It doesn't matter where you walk as long as you feel safe and the terrain isn't too difficult for you. Start small and increase your distance as the weeks go by. Walk your dog, if you have one, to give yourself a reason to go out.

Consider where you take your walk. For a short walk it makes little sense to get into a car and drive to a walking destination, but if your neighborhood doesn't offer decent walking opportunities, take yourself to a better place by car if you must. If possible, choose nature over concrete for your walk: it's easier on your body, and it will enhance your mood. Choose walking paths and sidewalks over roadsides; you will relax more if you don't have to watch out for traffic.

If you're an urban walker, choose a less busy neighborhood or a city park. Traffic and noise stress our bodies. If traffic and noise are



unavoidable, plug into soothing music while still paying attention to your surroundings as you walk. Suburban walkers might want to find a park or waterway that breaks up the monotony of similar houses and streets. Country walkers often can't find sidewalks or walking paths and have to walk on narrow highways or roads. Make sure you face oncoming traffic when you walk on a highway, or pick unpaved roads, such as logging roads and wagon tracks where possible, so you can walk without having to jump away from passing cars. Many cities and small towns now have maps of walking trails and offer walking tours. Check online with your municipality for a map with ideas for walks.

## 15: Where the Path Will Take YOU



*Planning is dreaming. What better thing to do on a stormy winter night sitting by the fire than read about places to go?*

When you're ready for backpacking, follow the same pattern as for a day hike: nurture the idea, look at your destination options, choose one, and create a plan. For a multi-day trip, the planning becomes more complex and a vital part of your journey.

Planning a multi-day hike happens before you train, before you get your gear, before you're ready to leave home. Planning is dreaming. What better thing to do on a stormy winter night while sitting by a fire than read about places you want to visit? Start by collecting hiking magazines or hiking books, and scroll through hiking websites and social media to find scenic trails nearby a few months ahead of the day you want to start your trip.

To avoid pressure and to lower anxiety caused by the many details involved in a long trip, start your preparations several seasons in advance. The longer you've decided to stay on the trail, the farther ahead you must plan, prepare gear and food, and train your body. Once you've done a long trip, the outfitting phase will be shorter, but gathering food and training will take just as long as for your first long trip.

Divide your planning into several stages to make it a pleasure rather than a chore.

**1. Dreaming.** Let yourself fantasize, gather information, talk to people about hikes they have taken, look at pictures, browse through guidebooks, watch videos, or join a Facebook hiking group where you can hear about and see photos of places you've never dreamed of. Bookmark interesting hikes, and organize them into a file on your computer, or put sticky notes on pages if you have a printed guidebook. This is fun and helps you get into the spirit of walking and hiking.

**2. Narrowing your options.** Get real about your schedule, your finances, your other responsibilities, and whether you want to hike with friends or go alone, and pick a few trips that might be possibilities. Talk to others whom you might want as company on your trip. This will reveal how serious you are about taking the big hike. If you want to do this, you'll hear a voice inside you whisper, "GO!" I always ask myself, "Am I ready to go out alone if no one wants to join me?" And if I do the hike by myself, "What trip am I willing to do alone?" That way, I don't have to feel let down or desperate if no one comes out of the woodwork to hike with me.

Of the five people who show interest, usually only one will make the commitment and see it through. Remember you were the dreamer; the others have to come on board and give into the spirit of the trail.

**3. Getting down to the details.** Read guidebooks about the possible trips you have chosen. How far away do you have to drive to get to the trail? How accessible is the trail? How do you get to the trailhead? Is there a bus you can take to get there, or do you need to depend on others for a ride? For longer trips, this becomes a point of decision making, since you might not want to leave your car at one end of the trail, only to have to go back and get it weeks or months later.

Who can drop you off? Who will do so? What hiking support system will you use for food resupplies, drop-offs, and bailouts (this

applies to the longer hikes)? For multi-day hikes, you can usually leave your car at the trailhead, hike out and return the same way, or do a loop. If you have a hiking partner, you can opt to put a car at both ends of the trail you're going to hike, which takes care of your transportation to the trail and back. A third option is a shuttle service that will move your car from the trailhead to the end of the trail. If you're poised between doing a multi-day hike and a longer hike, don't fret about the decision, because a few multi-day training hikes are necessary anyway before tackling a longer trek, for training purposes. Ease of access and vicinity will be more important deciding points than beauty and locale in this case. If you can get both, lucky you.

**4. Narrow down the date(s).** These will depend on your availability, your hiking partner's, and the best time to hike the trail. Once you decide, you can begin the work of scheduling.

**5. Trip specifics.** Read guidebooks and blogs, and join a Facebook group connected to the hike of your choice to learn about its features—glories and quirks. Remember, you are most likely not the first to hike this trail, so learn from others' experiences. You will compile a list of needed gear, food, a water purification system, and footwear. You will check the gear you have and acquire what you need. If you give yourself enough planning time, you can look for sales and find discount gear items.

**6. Tying the knot.** You're now ready to commit. You arrange your transportation to the starting point of your hike; make your lodging arrangements near that starting point; get a firm commitment from your support person for pickup at the end, food drops, and emergency pickup; and pin down public transportation schedules to and from the trail. Don't let the lack of a support person stop you from going on a long hike. Plenty of people access on their own the trailheads of the Pacific Crest Trail, Appalachian Trail, and Continental Divide Trail, the three big long-distance hiking trails in North

America. They use public transportation, hitchhike, or avail themselves of local “trail angels.” Then again, if you have friends or family living near your trail starting point, it makes it easier to get on the trail.

**7. Organize, train, pack.** Here’s the last and final stage of preparation.

- Plan your training or continue with training you’ve started.
- Create a gear list and get the items you’ve decided you need for your chosen trip. Besides the gear list in the appendix, you can get gear lists online or in the back of guidebooks. You can look at gear lists on YouTube, where an avid hiker will lay it all out for you.
- Create a hiking schedule. For long trips you can plan your day-to-day itinerary, figuring out how many miles you will cover each day and where and when your food resupply stops will be. You can create a hiking schedule based on elevations, mileage, difficulty of terrain, and needed rest days, called zero days in trail vernacular to indicate zero miles hiked. This way you can figure out how much food you will need and how much food you must carry between resupply stops. Since these daily hiking plans may not work out, you can leave your daily schedule up to chance and let your body, mood, and the weather dictate how far you’ll hike. You can find food supplies along the way, or you can send yourself supplies a few stops ahead. In any case, a daily hiking plan will give you a good overview of what’s ahead, and once you know your hiking pace well, you’ll find that the schedule is a great organizer of your trail time.

## 16: Getting Ready for the Distance



*The best physical exercise to get in shape for hiking is walking. Walking is slow, methodical, repetitive, and low impact, and anyone can do it. It's also the main component of hiking.*

Already being a walker, I didn't just pack my bag and start hiking the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). Some people do. You can read the wry, funny, and not-so-funny stories of Bill Bryson walking the Appalachian Trail and Cheryl Strayed walking the PCT that illustrate what can happen if you load up your pack and start without training.

Recently I met some people on the first part of the PCT who were dressed in sweatshirts and long pants, each carrying a pack that looked like it weighed at least 40 pounds. They were standing by the side of the trail, catching their breath. They asked me if the trail would get steeper. I told them this incline was nothing compared with the Sierras. I encouraged them to think in terms of one mile at a time, reminding them they had already walked 20. I didn't think they would make it.

I met them again in a resupply town; they told me they had ditched a lot of their load and gone home to rethink what they were doing, and were building their training into their day on the trail, slowly increasing their daily mileage. If you're young, maybe you'll survive it, but if you're over 50, you invite injury and a divorce from Mother Nature.

It can start with a thought, a thought that excites you, lets you dream beyond the ordinary, inspires an emotional bounce, gives you hope for a better life. You feel yourself rise to a challenge. Instead of letting your age shrink you, you let your accumulated years be a force of expansion and turn you into a more alive person.

You don't have to take on the 2650-mile PCT challenge to find more vitality. You may take on a three-day backpack challenge and see what it's like. You may take on a 50-mile challenge and find out how it changes you. Life is change. It's up to you to guide the change in a positive or negative direction, to take whatever has come your way and let it push the edges of your status quo, loosen its constraints.

Who can say, "My life is perfect as it is"? Your life may be good, and maybe you're content, but that doesn't mean there isn't room to expand the positives now and in the future. Here's what it takes to do this by way of *backpacking*.

Chapter 10 described what it takes to walk or hike five miles. The following chapters outline training schedules for 5–50-mile backpacking trips and 50–500-mile long-distance hikes! Training charts are also available in the appendix.

To walk day after day, you must be strong and have a well-functioning body. As we age, our walking posture and our strength change, partially because of sarcopenia, loss of skeletal muscle and resulting loss of function. Inactive people can lose as much as 3 to 5 percent of their muscle mass per decade after age 30.

According to Mary Lowth, MD, "Age-related changes in the balance of older persons result in compensatory responses that meet routine needs but may be ineffective under demanding circumstances." The American College of Sports Medicine recommends that "able-bodied adults" do strength training two to three times a week for at least 20 to 30 minutes. For women (and men) over 50,

strength training is important to support balance, prevent falls, prevent or reduce osteoporosis, reduce back problems, and help maintain muscle mass.

Even though walking strengthens your body, specific strength training is important if you intend to carry a pack for any distance. Thus base strength is important to develop in the months leading up to a longer hiking adventure. Sufficient base strength to carry a pack over long distances is not something you can build in six weeks.

If you can't walk a mile without pain today, you may have to create a three-year plan for yourself to walk 500 miles carrying a pack. It's possible, but it won't happen quickly. If you exercise consistently and can hike five miles without negative side effects, you can train and be ready for a longer hike in six months. To find out where you are on the fitness scale, speak to the trainer in your gym if you have one, or do one or more of the standard available fitness tests available on the internet, such as a step test for aerobic fitness, a balance test, and a muscular strength test. You can find links to sample tests in the appendix.

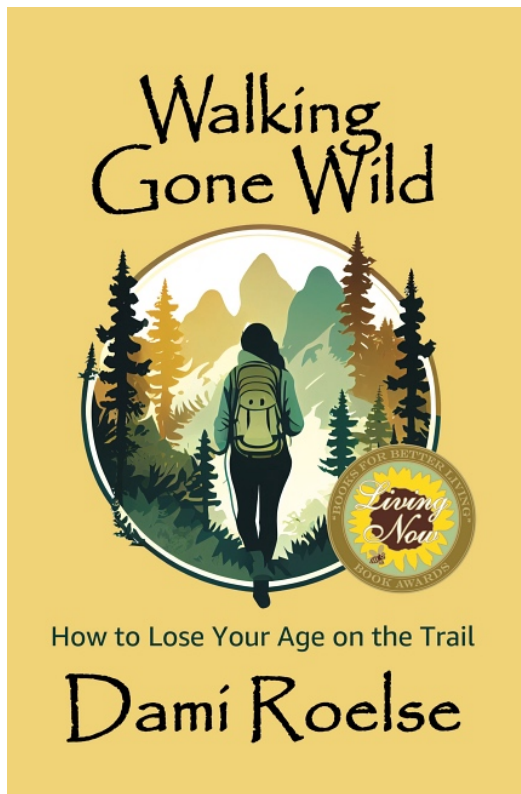
Knowing your fitness level helps you decide what training you need. To improve your strength, do strength-training exercises at least twice a week for 30 minutes. This doesn't mean heavy weight lifting in the gym. You can easily google a program online—check YouTube—that uses just your body weight and some barbells; you can do these programs at home.

Good body structure means you have a body that can walk without ill effect. It means that your legs, your back, and your hips are in working order and in decent alignment. If you have alignment problems, consult with a physical therapist (or someone who can rework connective tissue) and with a chiropractor to help correct your spinal alignment. Small alignment problems can become big problems once you're on the trail carrying a pack.



**A Warning!**

Before you embark on walking distances, make sure you speak with your physician and get the go-ahead to begin your training. If you have undetected health problems, you might find that the stress of training exacerbates them and sets you up for injury. You need your heart, lungs, and organs in working order to enjoy this ambitious aspect of the walking life.



*WALKING GONE WILD will take women on a fact filled journey of becoming a walker and hiker as they age. Sprinkled with stories of real women the reader will discover a new model of aging with vitality, grace, and a deep connection to life.*

## **Walking Gone Wild**

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