

GRAND OPENING Veterans climb Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park.



TRAIL MIX

Mission Accomplished

Colorado-based nonprofit Veterans Expeditions is building community by taking vets into the outdoors

BY ALISON GWINN

They served their country. Now they're serving each other. That's the goal of the Salida-based nonprofit Veterans Expeditions, whose mission is to bring veterans together in the outdoors to remind them of one of the most positive aspects of military service: a sense of camaraderie while facing tough physical odds.

Co-founded in 2010 by Army veteran Nick Watson, Vet Ex prides itself on being run entirely by veterans, for veterans. "When I got out of the military, there weren't a lot of services for me," recalls Watson, who served as an Army ranger from 1991 to 1995 out of Fort Benning,

Georgia, followed by a 1995-98 stint in the Army Reserves. "But I was really into the outdoors, so I embarked on a career working for the National Park Service and also running wilderness therapy trips and mountain-guiding."

That experience, coupled with Watson's years in the military, taught him the psychological value of both team building and spending time outside, which in turn led him to create Vet Ex.

The organization kicked off its first official trip—a summit of Longs Peak—on September 11, 2010. "We had a woman nurse who had worked trauma triage in Vietnam, plus a great mix of younger guys—Marines, Army,

Navy and Air Force. We had age differences and disability differences," says Watson, now Vet Ex's executive director. "We didn't have much of a plan back then, but we'd been given a little money by the American Alpine Club. We would never have been able to get off the ground if they hadn't believed in us."

Since then, Vet Ex has expanded year by year, running more than 50 trips for more than 500 veterans so far in 2016, including white-water rafting, hiking, mountain biking, ice and rock climbing and mountaineering. "We're not afraid to tackle anything," Watson says. "Our trips cover everything under the

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Space all-weather blanket, \$16.95, at area REI stores, rei.com



Marmot PreCip waterproof shell mitt, \$45, at marmot.com



Leki Traveler Carbon nordic poles, \$199.95 per pair, at leki.com



Jetboil MiniMo cooking system, \$134.95, at jetboil.com



Nemo Cannon -40F down sleeping bag, \$1,049.95, at nemoequipment.com



sun, from a weekend hiking meet-up for beginners who have no outdoor experience to a full-on summit of Alaska's Mount Denali, the tallest mountain in North America."

The average trip is made up of 10 people, including leaders, and at least half of the trips take place in Colorado, attracting vets from across the country. "Colorado is the epicenter of the outdoors for the United States, so we can run trips right out our door in Salida, but we also do trips in the Northeast, in the Pacific Northwest—really all over the country," Watson says. "Our mandate is to get as many veterans out and active as possible, so all of our trips are open to anyone—every branch of the service, women, men, older vets, those who just got off active duty, people with physical disabilities, TBI or PTSD." (Vet Ex also does "Second Service" trips, in which veterans might, for example, work with the Bureau of Land Management to clear trails.)

For financial reasons, Vet Ex has yet to do any trips abroad, though in 2017 the organization is looking to do its first one—to Mexico. For the veterans who go on the trips, costs can range from zero (for meet-ups, day climbs, mountain-biking or hikes) to mid-level (\$20 or so to reserve a spot, say, on a Ouray ice-climbing trip) to more expensive (veterans have to pay their airfare to Denali, for example). Most equipment is provided by Vet Ex.

No one who lives in Colorado needs to be told about the head-clearing benefits of getting up into the mountains or out on a river, but Watson says the Vet Ex trips serve a larger purpose than that: "It's really all about building community. What happens on our trips is that folks are initially apprehensive—maybe

they don't really know whether they want to do a trip like this, or they're just tired of being around other veterans—but then they go out and really, really bond. There's a commonality among veterans right away—they give each other the benefit of the doubt—and whether they are hiking or tackling a really difficult objective, they really click."

Brad Noone, who served in the Army National Guard for eight years, including deployments in Afghanistan in 2006 and 2007, is a Vet Ex veteran. "We have a really tight-knit group of returners who have come out on multiple trips with Veterans Expeditions, but we also do them on our own," he says. "I have made a number of friends through the organization. Being veterans, we have learned to be independent—we don't need somebody holding our hands the whole time—but we also have the ability to build a team when we're outdoors."

For Watson and the other Vet Ex leaders, that kind of bonding is just what they want to see. "What we have done is build our own support network, so any veteran can ask any other veteran, 'Hey, I'm having trouble with the VA—have any suggestions?' or 'I need a good dentist—can anyone recommend one?'" Watson says. "Most veterans I know don't want to call a stranger at a help line, but when they are reaching out to someone they just went hiking with, that person is no longer a stranger." **DLM**



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A veteran-led Colorado nonprofit committed to enhancing the lives of U.S. veterans through outdoor experiences. **303.803.0068 / vetexpeditions.com**