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Association of
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British Mountain
Guides

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Mountain Leaders

Mountain Training
Association

A group of mountaineers, including men and women of various ages, are gathered in a forest. They are wearing outdoor gear like jackets, hats, and backpacks. Some are looking at a map held by one of the women. The forest has many thin trees and some autumn-colored foliage.

FINNISH
Wilderness

GROUND
Anchors

FIT FOR
ADVENTURE

THE OUTDOORS
IS FOR **EVERY BODY**



ABOVE Plus size women on a hiking and navigation course organised by Steph Wetherell.

THE OUTDOORS IS FOR EVERY BODY

Engaging with the plus size community

Bodies, like mountains, come in a lot of different shapes and sizes, but plus size and larger bodied people face a multitude of barriers when getting outdoors. From not being able to get the clothing and kit we need to access these activities comfortably and safely, to being made to feel unwelcome in a lot of groups because of being 'slow', these barriers stop a lot of people from walking, climbing, cycling and more.

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY STEPH WETHERELL

Put aside any preconceptions and judgements that plus size people 'need' to lose weight, or indeed are even trying to lose weight – that's a different and deeply personal conversation, and not relevant when considering how to support someone to get outdoors and do a walk or activity right now. Within the plus size community, there's a vast range of different experience and fitness levels; demonstrating that you can't judge someone's ability on how they look.

As an enthusiastic long-distance hiker who wears size 20 clothing, I've faced many challenges myself. I didn't have a waterproof jacket that fitted me until last year – technical gear usually stops at a size 16 or 18 – instead, I had to make do with an ill-fitting oversized men's waterproof and roll up the sleeves. I've completed a two-week solo hiking and wild camping trip in Norway wearing supermarket leggings and sports tops because lightweight wicking clothing isn't made to fit bodies

like mine. Additionally, I am routinely treated like a beginner when I'm out in the hills or mountains with people judging my competency purely on the size of my body.

Within the Every Body Outdoors community, we regularly hear from people who've had terrible experiences on group walks or courses – from leaders leaving them behind to other group members making them feel unwelcome – and these experiences have had such a deeply negative impact on them that they're incredibly nervous to sign up for a similar experience again. Over the last few years, whilst running courses specifically for plus size people, it's amazing to see them find their confidence and realise all that they can do. When you remove the focus on speed and enable people to walk at their own pace and gain confidence in their abilities, we've seen participants go on to walk routes and achieve things way beyond what they thought was possible.



Steph Wetherell is an enthusiastic hiker with a passion for long distance paths. She is plus size, and a passionate campaigner working for plus size inclusivity in the outdoors, co-founding Every Body Outdoors last year. Over the last few years, Steph has co-run a series of Mountain Training Hill Skills courses specifically for plus size people, as well as working with a number of brands and retailers on increasing and improving their range of clothing.

As well as the plus size Mountain Training Hill Skills and Mountain Skills courses we're running at Every Body Outdoors (which have been supported by the Mountain Training Skills and Training Fund), we're also setting up a regional network of local groups where plus size people can gain confidence and get outdoors. However, we also need the existing network of outdoors leaders and professionals across the UK and Ireland to be more aware of the challenges facing those of us in larger bodies and encourage more inclusivity in the way you work.

What clothing and kit is available?

A key practical barrier for many is the lack of clothing and kit in larger sizes. From climbing harnesses to personal flotation devices to waterproof jackets to wetsuits, it's true across most outdoor activities. To help you direct people to what is available, here's some of the latest info!

For hiking clothing, there is very little technical gear available above a size 18. Alpkit are leading the way by working on bringing out their entire range in a size 20, and Mountain Equipment and Patagonia do a limited range in a size 20 too. The Outdoor Research plus size range includes Goretex jackets and trousers up to a size 30, but in the UK this is only available online from a few small independent retailers (Vampire Outdoors and Valley and Peak).

For more entry level items, Craghoppers have recently extended a limited range to a size 24 (feedback is that it fits small) and North Face also offer an extended size range up to a size 24, though both of these include more leisure wear. Mountain Warehouse and Regatta are great for beginners but the quality and fit are often lacking.

When talking about clothing with a plus size audience, I often advise people about alternative options – wicking sports tops from supermarkets or high street retailers are often more widely available and offer an accessible option for a base layer, and many people choose to walk in sports leggings due to the limited options in plus size outdoors trousers.

Practical advice for being more inclusive to plus size people

These things are just as relevant if you're organising a walk with a group of friends or a course as an outdoors' professional:



1 AND 2. Plus size women on a hiking and navigation course organised by Steph Wetherell.

1 Work out who you're trying to include

Not everything has to be inclusive of everyone, but be intentional in your decisions. When you're putting on an event and want to be inclusive to plus size people, try and find out from them what their current fitness levels, experience and pace are so you can plan accordingly. It may be different to what you assume it to be. Picking a 20-mile route with 1500 metres of ascent and claiming it's open and inclusive to everyone, may not be the best idea!

2 Give people the info they need to decide if it's for them

Be clear about the route in advance, accurately describing distance, elevation, terrain and pace. We have found that many plus size people walk at a good steady pace on gently rising terrain, but find their pace drops significantly on very steep sections (both ascents and descents). When planning routes, we account for this in how long a route is expected to take, as well as allowing for proper breaks during prolonged ascents so people can recover fully. Your idea of a 'slow pace' might not be the same as someone else's, so give people factual information (e.g. walking at a pace of approximately 3km/hr) so they can judge if it's within their ability or not.

3 Create the space for people to be comfortable and ask questions

If you want to make people feel

comfortable, give them a chance to share any concerns in a safe and confidential space. We invite people to contact us in advance to share any concerns or ask questions and gather the group together at the start of the walk to share expectations, anxieties and set ground rules for the day. For example, if you tell people that you're walking at a gentle pace and will be staying together as a group, it's much easier to call back someone who is charging ahead if you've already set this expectation.

4 Don't leave anyone behind

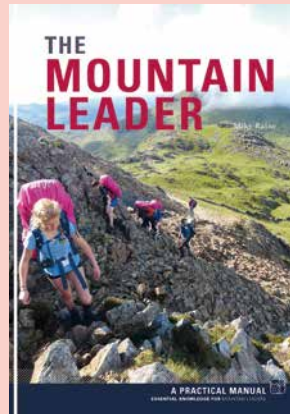
For a lot of plus size people, being at the back and the fear of being left behind is top of the anxiety list. Manage your pace carefully (especially on hills or uneven ground) – pause to look at geology, nature, etc., so nobody feels like they're slowing everyone down. And if you stop to wait for someone at the top of a steep section, make sure they've had a chance to recover fully before moving on. With walks I lead, I often aim to lead from the back where possible, allowing me to control the pace and keep a close eye on slower walkers.

5 Build confidence

Lack of confidence is a huge issue, and one of the biggest impacts you can have is helping to support people to grow in confidence. In my experience, this can sometimes be less about offering continuous verbal encouragement, but more about helping people



BOOK REVIEW



THE MOUNTAIN LEADER

by Mike Raine

Reviewed by Simon Patton

First things first, I must explain that I work for Mountain Training, in fact, I am the Executive Officer of Mountain Training Cymru. So, when I decided to review an independently authored book, focusing on our flagship qualification, I felt the weight of expectation sitting squarely on my shoulders. However, I'm happy (and feeling brave enough) to admit that this is an excellent book. There, I said it, phew...

Mike Raine has been a prolific and influential figure in the outdoors for many years. His first book, *Nature of Snowdonia*, is now in its second edition, having sold over 10,000 copies, and his workshops are busier than ever.

When Mike first mentioned that he was writing a book called *The Mountain Leader*, my immediate thought was how it would sit alongside our official textbook, *Hill Walking*, by Steve Long. Would it complement Steve's book, or compete with it? We'll come back to that question. For this review, I'll focus on Mike's book, as *Hill Walking*, first printed 20 years ago, and now on its third edition, is an acknowledged indispensable resource for Mountain Leader candidates, providers, and course directors.

I have always found Pesda Press publications to be excellent. I own several, and the quality of this one is as good as ever. The style of Mike's writing is very conversational and is, as a result, accessible and engaging. If you have been on one of Mike's workshops, you will almost hear him speaking the words to you as you read them. You'll be reminded of his sense of humour too!

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reflect and see what they've achieved or supporting them through aspects they might find challenging. We celebrate achievements, small and large – we may not always make it to the summit, but showing people they can ascend hills at their own pace can be a real confidence boost.

6 Diversify your feed

A really good way to change how you see different bodies in the outdoors is to be more intentional about what media you're consuming, and for many of us these days that means our social media feed. Find people who don't look like you, don't have bodies like yours and learn about our experiences in the outdoors. On our *@every_body_outdoors* page, we try to showcase the amazing things that plus size bodies can do, as well as delve into some of the challenges we face. In the US, *@unlikelyhikers* are an incredible outlet for underrepresented voices. Such inclusive viewing normalises our experience of being active. Seeing plus size people doing amazing things in the outdoors will not only change your view of plus size people it will inspire you to help more and more people get out and enjoy their time outdoors. ■



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