

## Choosing the Right Trail Shoe

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By Adam W. Chase

The selection process for buying trail-running shoes varies tremendously from person to person and is often haphazard. Finding the right "fit" is a key, but elusive, objective for both newcomers and trail-savvy runners; finding one that endures over the long haul is another.

However you acquired your current shoes, you may wish to apply a bit of thought and design when you go to pick your next pair of shoes for the trails. Those who have never purchased a pair of shoes for running on trails are likely to have more probing questions and, in either case, an informed trail-shoe shopping decision requires answering the following questions:

- On what types of terrain do you foresee using the shoes?
- How many miles do you want to get out of the shoes?
- How much can you afford to spend?
- What distance are you likely to run in the shoes?
- Are you a woman and, if so, do you prefer a "woman's" shoe?
- Do you need special support or stability built into your running shoes?
- Likewise, do you need additional cushioning?
- Do you have odd sized or shaped feet?
- Are you a particularly light and nimble runner who prefers more agile footwear?
- Do you need a shoe that breathes especially well or, conversely, do you favor a waterproof shoe?

Although not exhaustive, these questions will help to identify you as being a certain "type" of trail runner. Once you are able to categorize yourself, you will be a more informed and rational trail-shoe shopper. You will also be better able to find a replacement for your favorite shoe after the manufacturer discontinues making - or completely changes - the model after only a season.

Answering the first question above helps you determine what kind of outsole, or tread, you should have. If you are likely to be running primarily on paved surfaces with only a small percentage of trail running, then perhaps you needn't look at "trail" shoes at all, especially if you are particularly fond of the smoothness and lightweight qualities that are offered by a road shoe. Alternatively, many shoe manufacturers make hybrid shoes that are, for all intents and purposes, road shoes with a beefier outsole, toe bumper, and earthier colorways.

If, however, the majority of your runs are on single-track, sand, scree, ice, mud, gravel, rock, and other challenging off-road surfaces, you should look for a more aggressive tread pattern. The more gnarly the terrain, the more traction you will need. Keep in mind that softer outsole materials convert to better grip on rocky surfaces, but that those materials will wear more quickly than harder carbon rubber treads. Trail shoes will often have two or three "durometers" (or hardness) of outsole materials in different parts of the outsole to maximize traction and durability.

Another consideration is the number of miles you will be looking to get out of the trail shoes and the related concern of how much you can afford to spend. It is ironic, but is often the case that lower priced shoes have longer lives. This is common because the pricier shoes have relatively complex support systems and/or are constructed with cushy midsoles that break down or get compacted over time. The relative stiffness of the midsole is the most important consideration in selecting a shoe that will endure over the miles. The stiffer the midsole, the longer the shoe will retain its original cushioning. Those needing more cushioning not only have to pay more for each purchase, but they also have to make more frequent purchases.

A related concern in selecting the correct trail shoe is to anticipate the usual distance of the runs you are you likely to run. Cross-country runners will gravitate toward lighter shoes with very aggressive outsoles

and minimal support or cushioning. Trail ultramarathoners will want shoes that give plenty of support, breathe well, and have midsoles that remain consistent over different types of surfaces and in different weather. One thing ultrarunners might neglect in purchasing their shoes is the almost inevitable expansion of their feet after hours of running, especially at higher altitudes. Many experienced ultrarunners buy shoes that are at least a half-size larger than normal.

In the gender arena, many women are tired of purchasing shoes that were designed primarily for men, with "the other sex" a mere afterthought in selecting shoe colors. Several manufacturers have acknowledged this deficiency and are now catering to female trail runners with specially engineered shoes. Some women's trail shoes are even manufactured on a woman's "last" or foot shape.

Those who need special support or stability built into their shoes will have to be more selective when shopping for trail footwear. That also applies to runners in need of additional cushioning and those who have odd sized or shaped feet. Different manufacturers are known for accommodating certain types of feet and some companies offer trail shoes in a variety of widths. An alternative is to try socks of different thickness or amounts of padding built into them. Some sock manufacturers have incorporated new materials into the footbeds, and others use wool with knit-in padding. If you use orthotics, you will need to make sure that the shoes accommodate them.

Trail runners that are particularly light on their feet will want to avoid the tank-like trail shoes that many manufacturers have made with the thought that it is best to doze through trails rather than running with the trail. A few companies make more nimble, lightweight shoes for the trails and those shoes will appeal to lighter, more agile runners.

As a final consideration, if you have hot feet and need shoes that breathe well or that have more ventilation, you should look for shoes with lighter mesh uppers that have little or no leather or synthetic overlays. Conversely, if you are likely to be running in wet climates, through morning dew, or in mud, slush, puddles, or other wetness, you may favor waterproof shoes. Keep in mind, however, that a shoe with a waterproof barrier is likely to retain any moisture or condensation that builds up inside of it. An alternative that often prevents blisters is to wear a highly breathable mesh trail shoe with a pair of wool socks and to run through water crossings with an "easy in, easy out" philosophy. It certainly makes big puddles a lot of fun!

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