

Thousand-Miler Essay

Andrew Nowak

While I've wanted to do a thru-hike of a trail for some time I never thought that my first would be the Ice Age Trail. I had already section hiked a third of it previously but finally decided to do it all in one go after I managed to pay off my student loans and felt like I could finally afford it. I chose to do this trail, because it's so close to where I live and I already had a good idea of what a large section of it was like. Even though I enjoy new sights, it was good to see areas that I had been through before. Most were about the same, some were considerably improved and it was interesting to see the changes that the seasonal weather brought.

One of the reasons I did this in the late summer/fall is that I wanted to be in the balance between bugs and freezing temps. I largely succeeded at this. My start along Lake Michigan had decent bugs, not the worst I've experienced, but it was up there. They largely petered off by the time I was swinging north from Janesville. The cold really set in around the Deerfield segment with my first morning below freezing. One thing I didn't care for was that as I got more into my rhythm and was able to shave off rarely used and unnecessary gear was about the time I had to start carrying more weight in insulation. A necessary burden that kept me warm and happy, but didn't feel great on my back. I found that fall is much quieter in general, but especially at night.

My ability to train ahead of time was hindered by work and how tired it left me at the end of the day. I did at least 3 miles of walking a day and tried to do more when I had the time and energy. This certainly helped but was not enough for suddenly doing 13 miles a day with no off days. This lack of buildup coupled with what felt like near constant slanted terrain all sloped in the same direction, ended up with me fracturing my right foot on day 3. I did 36 more miles on it after the break and was pulled for a week off when I limped into Mishicot. I was in tears from the pain at that point. After a week off, I spent 2 more weeks on trail, before being pulled again as a planned extraction to take care of things at home. At that point my foot had started to hurt again, but not nearly as badly as before. After returning to trail after that rest, it seemed to be doing much better. After that, it never directly bothered me but did twinge, seemingly at random, while resting for the rest of the trip. I suffered other, less significant injuries as well, but overcoming the fracture was one of the hardest things I have ever done.

Unlike many others I decided to do the entire trip in my hammock. This has been my primary sleep system for several years now. It involves an integrated bug net, top and under quilts for insulation, and a tarp with doors. This allowed me to setup anywhere with trees of the right size and allowed me to completely ignore wet, rocky, and slanted terrain. Overall, it worked exceedingly well. Ironically, I had the hardest time finding a good hang at established camp sites, where the trees tended to be removed in favor of RVs and ground-based setups. In more natural wooded areas, there was more often bountiful areas for me to set up.

I would not have been able to complete this hike by myself. I'm thankful for all the trail angels that helped me on my journey. My wife in particular. I don't imagine that many people would be lucky enough to have a spouse that would let them be gone for so long and not only that, but one that actively helped and supported them in their endeavor. While I found, researched, and purchased the food my wife counted the calories and assembled the meals in two-day increments and got me both the variety and the appropriate calories needed for each day. She also drove me long distances to and from home. There were other

angels that helped me immensely by offering me a place in their home, long rides out of their way, and food and drink. I am thankful for them all!

When hiking, that's your day. Hiking. Yeah, there's the details of breaking down camp and navigating and food and finding water. But all of it really comes down to is that you are traveling. Every day is different, immensely different, depending on terrain and distance and weather, but everything is the same as well. You need to stay dry if you can, keep warm, watch your step, stay on trail, and find/get to your camping spot. Sometimes some of these simple things can feel difficult, but mostly they are a comfort and give a drive apart from just walking from location A to location B. You get settled into it and there is comfort in the routine. You find that if you pay attention and take care of your body, you will make it through the day still feeling good. After a long day, once camp is set up, you feel good. Tired and accomplished. Sleep comes easily and you'll wake up ready to take on the next day. Some days were rough. Small injuries, sore muscles, long road miles, all day headwinds, and monstrous storms. Some days were just about perfect, with pleasant weather and scenic views all on off-road terrain.

If I were to thru-hike the IAT again, I would change directions. Partially for the novelty as you see new things and the trail seems different from the other way. I would train harder beforehand. I would not increase my average miles as much each week and do about 16-20 a day. 15 seemed too easy, but over 20 seemed to drag when I had to set up camp and cook. I would probably lean more on trail angels. and carry less food. There were so many places to resupply along the way I never had a pickup or resupply where I had completely run out of food. Even though it was some extra weight, it was good to have the knowledge that I could go longer without help if needed, but I would have rather not had to carry it. One thing I discovered is that if something bad is happening and you have no control over it, it is no help to be mad at the situation. There's no one to complain to and it's not going to change so it's best to accept it and keep going on your way.

My advice to those that try to thru hike this is, train ahead of time and train more that you may feel is necessary. Train in the shoes you plan to wear. Train in both pairs you get because one of them will fall apart. That many miles and it's going to happen. Accept help from trail angels and family if you can and feel comfortable doing so. While I didn't accept help from everyone who offered, I deeply appreciated the offers. I feel that If I had been more proactive in reaching out, I would have a had a far more comfortable trip.

Finishing felt very abrupt. Because of family being there I had not time to explore the views and the potholes at the end. I was whisked away to talk to people who seemed both proud and bewildered at what I had just accomplished. You go for days and days on end relying on your own skills and knowledge and all of a sudden it's just... off to home, I guess. It was jarring even with all the days I took off and the short jobs I took during my time off and I can only imagine how it must feel for others.

Looking towards the future there is still trail that I plant to complete. The Easter Bifurcation, any new sections since my finish, as well as sections closed due to hunting and logging. Maybe I'll see you out there!

You can find out more about my trip at www.facebook.com/AndrewsExpeditions. All of my trip photos will be posted there.