

MY IAT EXPERIENCE

Beth Hays

I began the IAT two weeks after I retired: July 2, 2020. I did not want to retire, but as a Children's Librarian, Covid changed my job radically. We had no live programming and I missed the people I served so much and could not see an end in sight. I felt it was the sign I'd been looking for and best for the community and future librarian who would step into my role.

My friend Becky Thompson had been hiking the IAT for a while and had recently shared her resources and experiences with me, so I'd been thinking about the trail a lot. My son had gotten me the guidebook for my recent birthday. I decided to try it out in my community and walked through Baraboo for my first hike. Following blazes was fun, so I ordered the Atlas and got going!

The rest of 2020, I went close to home, for short walks and often! I realized when I did the Devil's lake and Gibraltar Rock segments, which I already frequented as they are near where I live and spectacular, that I was hiking in places I'd never hiked and discovering things about geology, history and nature that I'd never experienced. I was in awe!

My goal became to hike the entire trail in segments, going at least once a month, to experience all seasons. I went when it fit in my life, so I usually went alone. I mostly shuttled myself with my bicycle which I also love to ride.

As distances to drive became longer, my goal was to walk farther than I drove or at least 10-15 miles per day. I started joining up with other walkers, asking trail angels for shuttles and my husband got more actively involved by going camping with me. We'd go to an area for three days, often figuring out ways for him to drop me off and me to walk back to the camper. It was fun!

In addition to loving to figure out where, how and when to hike, I developed such a love for the beauty of Wisconsin! Appreciation for the trail, and folks that cared for the maintenance of the trail and the support of fellow hikers was also amazing.

I enjoyed meeting new hiking friends, and hearing others stories. Mostly though, I loved my time with God in His world and experienced His protection. I have so many stories of getting lost, missing the meeting spot, encountering bears, falling hard and not getting hurt, and the tree along the the North Point Beach segment with my mother's name carved in it (Lavonne - unique name and when had I EVER seen a name carved on the pristine IAT trail)?! This tree "appeared" on a hike when my parents (in their late 80's) were shuttling me and I was seeing close-up the challenges aging and recent diagnoses were having on my mother.

I close with gratitude for such an amazing adventure! I want to note the very special final hike on the St. Croix Falls segment. My husband, children, their spouses and grandchildren came from TX, CO, MN and southern Wisconsin to hike with me. We had perfect weather and made a

huge celebration of it. Even got three surprise visitors (a stepson from CO and friends Becky & Bryan Thompson: also IAT hikers).

It was incredible! 💕

I'm so appreciative of the experience and adventure on the Ice Age Trail and encourage others to go for it!

As noted at the Interpretive Center at St. Croix Falls, my final hike's location:

"A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

HOW I HIKED THE TRAIL

I did 128 hiking outings total. I kept a journal recording the maps/miles covered, weather, shuttle and/or traveling companions and my feelings, stories on the trail.

Also who I met, animal encounters and "special" things that happened.

I began traveling close to home doing short hikes: Sauk, Dane, Columbia counties, but started to branch out when my husband accompanied me and went fishing. Locations like Mekan River, Whitewater, Bohn Lake, etc.

I also went with/near family in the Kettle Moraine/Rock County and Walworth County.

I also worked on the Eastern bifurcation my first autumn season.

My friend Becky's parents live in Spooner so I'd go northwest to Barron and Polk county with her, but we also worked on Janesville & Rock County around the same time.

I continued to work my way north and east to get to the areas within reasonable driving distance for day hikes (Waupaca, Washington counties, etc), with an occasional trip north...really varied!

I got in at least one hike every month closing gaps when I could.

By the second year, we started camping so I could go up north further like Taylor County and east to Manitowoc, Sheboygan, etc. I also decided to do the Western bifurcation through the winter as it is close to my home.

By 2022, I was completing Door and Kewaunee Counties and Chippewa, Menominee and zig zagging around: Lincoln and Langlade, etc.

By 2023 winter was tough as I only had a few segments left! I also traveled for 9 weeks, so when I got back I completed my last 30 miles: Alta Junction & Underdown, Kettlebowl and final: St Croix Falls.