

## ICE AGE TRAIL THRU-HIKE (August 3 to September 26, 2023)

David 'Lightningbolt' Brock

- Home: North Carolina since 1981. Born/raised in Alabama
- Age during hike: 67
- Type of hike: A classic 'unsupported' thru-hike.
- 1,145 miles, west to east hike.
- 23.85 miles per day overall average.
- No 'zero' days as I hiked every single day.
- Beginning body weight: 162 lbs. Ending body weight: 157 lbs.

One of the most often asked questions during my thru-hike was, "Why did you choose to hike the Ice Age Trail? First and foremost I am a lifelong long-distance hiker and needed a new trail so hiking along the glacial line of the last ice age from 12,000 years ago really appealed to me and I felt that seeing and experiencing such powerful geologic history up close and personal would be a great catalyst for better understanding my place in the world. I would also reach the 10,000 miles of hiking on America's greatest trails during this hike, and couldn't imagine a better trail for the fruition of this endeavor! It was a good choice!

But what really sealed the deal was following Emily Ford's winter thru-hike of the IAT a bit over two years ago. Her journey across a frozen landscape with her dog "Diggins" was very inspiring and something that I knew I wanted to do, but during warmer months! LOL. Emily's thru-hike was a success as she became the first female (and second person) to ever complete a rigorous winter thru-hike of the trail.

As I had slotted 2023 for the thru-hike I now had to decide in which direction that I would hike, from the eastern terminus at Lake Michigan or from the western terminus on the St. Croix river on the Minnesota border. Actually that was a very easy choice for me because from just a quick glance at the map I immediately knew that I wanted to conclude my hike by reaching the beautiful beaches of Lake Michigan and Sturgeon Bay, that it just sounded like something right out of an Ernest Hemingway novel! In my mind, THIS would be an epic way to finish my hike!

Also, I immediately knew that I wanted to hike through the western and northwoods section first because that's where most of the IAT has been completed, so less road connectors AND because I spent over two years living in the Alaskan bush so I felt a strong urge to make a connection right off the bat with this 'wilder' section of the trail. I was prepared in every way to take on this section first!

Next, I had to decide when to hike the trail. I consider myself a classical 'unassisted' thru-hiker and the northwoods section would definitely be the greatest challenge of this trail. During research I had heard a lot about the horrors of the mosquitoes and ticks on this trail, especially during the spring. I thus decided to do a late summer/early fall hike in hopes of a lesser assault from the insects and the heat, so I began hiking on August 3. After finishing, I still believe this was a good start time, but like all things, it was still a compromise between the bugs and the heat for the best outcome possible.

## WESTERN/NORTHWOODS SECTION

After deciding to hike from the western terminus to the eastern terminus I secured a flight into Minneapolis International Airport where I then caught an Uber to the trailhead on the St. Croix River at Interstate State Park. At the airport I took the city bus transit for \$2 all the way to St. Paul to do some last minute shopping and to get as close to my destination at the western terminus for a much lower Uber fare.

When people ask me what the toughest part of the hike was, I always have to answer, "The mosquitoes and the heat, especially during August in the northwoods." The mosquitoes were the worst that I have ever experienced during a long-distance hike and the worst overall since I paddled my kayak across the Alaskan tundra in 1984.

Fortunately I took the insect and heat thing seriously during my planning, so I was prepared with lightweight convertible pants, an OR 'Echo' long-sleeve hoodie shirt, and a mosquito headnet, and a 1oz. bottle of deet spray. In less than a week I dumped the deet and decided to just use my clothing as a defense which worked out great for me. I just hated putting anything on my skin that was almost always impossible to wash off at the end of the day on the kind of unsupported hike that I was doing. Surprisingly, I never saw a single tick during my hike so that must be a springtime nuisance.

So yeah, I had to wear long pants, two shirts, and my headnet most of the time until I got to Antigo where the mosquitoes began to disappear in the central section, as other hikers told me would happen. I was very happy with my clothing choices which were very lightweight yet had great ventilation. It was a compromise between protection from insects and staying as cool as possible. The Trade River was my first encounter with mosquitoes and they didn't retreat until I had reached the woods near Antigo.

At the western terminus a couple out for a day hike took several pictures of me as I was preparing to hike and as I relished the last moments at mile zero. Of course all kinds of thoughts and emotions are racing through my head, but I knew that I've done this kind of a thru-hike before on other long trails so that realization kept everything in good balance.

Also, before departing the terminus I found a bluejay bird feather that I picked up and would pack all the way to the eastern terminus at Sturgeon Bay. I'm sentimental like that and it is my own way of making a small personal and symbolic ceremony at each terminus, a beginning and an ending upon completion.

The northwoods section also had some of the longest stretches of trail with no re-supply points near the trail, with Rib Lake to Summit Lake being the longest at 108 miles, so I knew that I'd have to pack more food but I was there in less than 5 days hiking, so not too bad for this old man!

Haugen was the first place on the trail that actually felt like a trail town, with the café for breakfast and then the old country store for re-supply. It was also where I had my first gear scare when I was several blocks out of town and realized that I didn't have my trekking poles! I returned to the café and they said that I had them when I left, so I returned to the little country grocery store where the lady proprietor helped me re-trace all of my steps while there, then suddenly I was so embarrassed when I found the poles attached to my backpack, and right where I had placed them a couple hours earlier before coming in the store. We both had a good laugh then I was on my way once again!

Cornell was another good stop, but a short one giving me just enough time to re-supply my food at the local grocer and to charge my phone at the post office while waiting for them to open, then retrieving my bounce box for other needed supplies. On all of my long-distance hikes I mail a 'bounce' box about 200 miles ahead of myself so that every couple of weeks I can retrieve things like vitamins, various clothing items, etc.

On the trail near Lorain I ran into a bear hunter who was running his dogs in the woods from the direction I'd just hiked. He was waiting on his last dog named 'Clincher' to return and asked if I'd seen him. I hadn't but we spent the next 15 minutes sharing all of our bear stories with each other until Clincher finally showed up. Needless to say, bears were now on my mind in a very strong way and I was seeing a lot of tracks and scat along the trail. The blackberries were heavy in this area so I made sure that I was making plenty of noise as I hiked to announce my presence.

Within just an hour of leaving the bear hunter I turned a corner on the ski slopes that shared tread with the IAT and there was a bear eating away at the blackberries! It wasn't long before he also saw me as I began yelping some noise and shaking my trekking poles above my head. The bear turns to give me an intense stare of inspection, then suddenly turns around and splits off in the opposite direction from me. Yeah, gotta stay aware as I hike in these woods filled to the brim with bears!

Besides the summer heat and onslaught of mosquitoes, I loved hiking through the wild section of the trail, where a dirt trail was the norm and paved connectors were the exception. I saw that one bear but evidence of their presence was thick and heavy. For the most part there weren't a lot of springs or streams for water and I had to get most of my water from beaver

ponds and lakes, so had to be very careful to not get sloppy with the filtering. This section also had the most abundance of blackberries so it was nice being able to supplement my diet with some fresh berries most every day!

I walked into town at Summit Lake which had a good gas station with lots of hot food, sandwiches, and subs, etc. then I hung out at the small post office charging my phone while waiting for it to open. The postmaster was very nice and immediately knew that I was the owner of the package that I'd sent here from Cornell a couple of weeks ago, my bounce box. I showed her my ID but she just gave me a big smile and said, "Oh, I knew it was you." She then shared a couple of tales from over the years of other hikers sending their packages here, so I left Summit Lake with a warm heart, a full stomach, and a good enough re-supply to get me to Antigo.

## II. CENTRAL SECTION

Arriving at the beginning of the central section of the trail was my first big goal and achievement and I was more than looking forward to some mosquitoes relief which everyone told me would happen here, and it did! From Summit Lake to Antigo was like a gradual lifting of the mosquito nightmare, then after Antigo it became only the occasional lone blood sucker! THAT alone was worth celebration!

This section had a lot of paved highway walking but having thru-hiked the Florida Trail last year, I was prepared with experience. For the most part the road connectors took me through very pleasant farmland in America's Dairyland, the corn, the soybeans, the alfalfa, the milking cows, and apple trees. I especially liked the apple trees gone wild along the route which gave me a steady way to supplement my diet since the wealth of blackberries from the western section had run their course. Actually, the abundance of wild apple trees would continue on all the way to the eastern terminus.

Other highlights from the central section included my arrival in Cross Plains and a visit to the main headquarters of the Ice Age Trail Alliance. I received an incredible gracious welcome and enjoyed breakfast with Melissa, the public relations director of the Alliance who I enjoyed breakfast with while being interviewed. They also watched my gear while I re-supplied in town and after charging my phone I was on my way again.

Just an hour out of Cross Plains I caught a ride into Madison where I needed to replace my trekking poles, both of which had blown their carbide tips and the R.E.I. store in Madison couldn't have been at a more perfect location for that purpose. After purchasing my new poles I was sitting out front of the store shuffling gear when a young lady asked if I was a thru-hiker and if I needed a ride anywhere, so after a quick stop at the grocery store she took me all the

way back to the trail. We enjoyed good conversation but the funniest part was her just glancing at me outside the R.E.I. store and saying, "Who else but a thru-hiker would be sitting outside of an R.E.I. store"? Gruffy, well-seasoned and dark tanned skin, long unkempt hair, and a small ultralight backpack. Yeah, we are always VERY distinguishable from the normal hiker population for sure! LOL

Same day that I left Madison it was sort of neat arriving in Verona at dusk on a Friday night and spending some time watching the soccer games. Personally, I am a baseball and football fan the most, but just mingling among the people and watching the kids kick their ball for a while was still very refreshing and enjoyable thing. Later that evening I retired in an official Dispersed Camping Area right in town! How cool is that?!?

The best highlight of the central section was by chance arriving at the Devils Lake area on Labor Day. I had just spent the previous 3 days hiking on mostly pavement in 100 F degree weather, so having a good meal in the restaurant there was a huge morale booster! I then spent the late morning going for a nice refreshing swim on the sandy beach in full clothing along with hundreds of other people enjoying the holiday, so that also counted for a laundry wash! LOL

I then hiked a couple of miles on the continuing IAT along the high cliffs of the lake to the south beach where I spent more glorious time on the beach, talking with people, and eating ice cream. This was a Labor Day that I will long remember!

In a nutshell, the central section had some challenging road walks but that only made the special completed trail sections along the way seem like even greater golden nuggets to anticipate and to enjoy so much more!

### III. Eastern Section

As I began to arc around the most southern parts of the trail and now moving north again toward the beaches of Lake Michigan and the eastern terminus, I was now more excited than ever! At this point I realized that I just might make it all the way! This was the point of achievement where I realized that things were coming 'full-circle' and I was now hiking with an extra umphhhh in my stride! Overcoming all of the mosquitoes, the great heat, the long road walks, and dutifully hiking every morning from dawn to dusk were now paying off. I was now Walking on Sunshine!

It was nice finding lots of dirt trail sections to hike again and most of the road sections took me through very pleasant farmland where the harvest season had begun. Turbines were busy cutting the corn and huge trucks were hauling it away to make silage for the cattle. It was also here that I saw the first distinct and brilliant fall color in the trees which was already attesting to the approaching winter.

I could now taste the finish line in a way that took over my body that pain could no longer conquer my drive! A whole different mentality engulfed my brain on this eastern section and the beaches of Lake Michigan at Manitowoc, Two Rivers, Kewaunee, Algoma, Sturgeon Bay, and finally the Eastern Terminus were now guiding my every step like a nuclear powered laser beam! My mission was more defined than at any other point during the hike.

North of Janesville I walked through a lot of finished trail sections and talked with many small game hunters as this seemed to be very popular hunting grounds, so I knew that it was wise to be careful and to make myself know, especially during dusk and dawn when I would keep my headlamp on and make enough noise to let anyone know that I was there. Even during all of my encounters these hunters knew their game and I never feared an accidental ID, but I remained cautious just the same.

I also enjoyed walking on a lot of rail-to-trail sections on the eastern trail which shared tread with the IAT and the hiking was most pleasant, level, and open.

When I first saw the magnificence of Lake Michigan at Manitowoc it was pure euphoria and I knew that I had made the right decision to hike the Ice Age Trail, from west to east. As I bent over to touch the water then looked up to gaze upon an infinite expanse of beautiful blue water it felt like something akin to coming home! I just wanted to keep hiking like a machine and was certainly doing some big mile days.

Finally, the last day of hiking was on hand even though I wasn't sure waking up that morning on the outskirts of Algoma that I could get there this day, but deep down I knew that I'd probably do whatever it took for that last 24 miles! Friends kept telling me to slow down and enjoy the hike but I told them that it's hard to miss anything walking at just 2-1/2 mph. LOL I couldn't possibly miss anything at this turtle's pace as long-distance hiking not so much of a quest for speed as it is most of all simply an engagement with endurance.

After a greeting in Sturgeon Bay from the famous "Woolly" the mammoth I anxiously left town knowing that THIS was the day! I can't even begin to describe the excitement as I reflected back upon the last six weeks and six days of keeping my eye on the prize, and now it was almost here!

At the same time I had a clashing of emotions because the idea of NOT waking up in my tent again also left a flat and empty feeling inside of me. But I also knew that this is why I like being what I call, a 'classical' unsupported thru-hiker because THIS is what it means to be alive. For me, this intense clashing of emotion during a huge physical/mental achievement is the pure definition of what it means to be alive. It was a tired but good feeling!

As I hiked I also reflected upon what it took to get here, not only the happy moments, but all of the obstacles that I had to somehow find the strength to overcome. The constant neverending hordes of mosquito's that engulfed my every movement in the northwoods, then the great 100 F degree temperatures that I kept pushing myself forward in on some of the pavement walks in

the central section. The heat and the mosquitoes were probably the toughest part of hiking this trail but I was prepared for both, mentally and physically. Anticipation and planning for those obstacles is always the sure step to defeating them. I never let them get the best of me and just kept my mind focused on the full-circle of the whole hike and it ended up paying dividends beyond all expectations this last day! It was a GREAT day to be alive!

As I followed the trail along the edge of Sturgeon Bay during those last few miles this flood of thoughts and emotion pushed me forward and I felt no pain. Arriving at the Eastern Terminus I paused for a moment to look out over the wide open space, and then proceeded to approach the end point, then touched it with my hand. I was the only person there and had the whole terminus to myself for about 15 minutes where I took several pictures and just reflected upon what it took to get here.

A local couple then arrived and learned that I didn't have anyone there for my arrival so they agreed to be my cheering committee, then gave me a ride a couple of miles back to the state park where I camped one last night. They really made my day!

Next morning I walked a final 2.5 miles to the nearby regional airport and leased a car that I drove to Green Bay to catch a plane back home where I could once again cut the grass, watch the news, and all of the other rote routines of life off the trail, but just long enough where I could research and plan to get back on the trail, in the woods, and feeling completely alive once again!