

Delores Olver

Essay

Thousand Miler Application

Trail completed on June 11, 2023

Traveling, teaching, and learning have always been passions of mine. In 2019 I was invited to join a group of young teachers on a trip to South Africa to assist orphaned children and their community. Recently retired from teaching kindergarten, I wondered how I would ever be able to keep up with the group. That's when I set the goal to hike at least one trail in each of Wisconsin's state parks. During one such hike I spotted a kiosk with a flier announcing the first IAT Mammoth Challenge. Challenge accepted! After completing the required forty miles, I returned to hiking the rest of the state parks. In June of 2021 I accomplished my state park goal and my trip to South Africa was postponed due to the COVID pandemic. Now what was I going to do? Hike the Ice Age Trail of course! My intent was to hike only segments but then I discovered two FaceBook groups; Thousand Miler Wannabes and Ice Age Trail. The photos and commentaries posted by Yolanda deLoach convinced me that the connecting routes (CRs) could also be challenging and an opportunity to get a glimpse of Wisconsin culture.

And so my journey began...

I hiked 1133.0 miles to complete the trail which included the Eastern Bifurcation and some miles of the western side. Thirty seven percent of my hikes were solo. Most of my first hikes were solo or with close friends. It wasn't long before I started to meet up with hiking groups and like-minded individuals. I met and visited with many segment and thru hikers on the trail and exchanged stories with them.

Snail on the Trail was the trail name given to me not only because I averaged only a mile an hour on rugged segments but I also stopped to photograph the flora, fauna, and terrain I encountered during my saunters. My favorite photos of the flora on the trail included ghost pipes, pink and yellow lady slippers, wild ginger, American cancer root, Dutchman's breeches, and Indian paint brush. Prior to hiking the trail, I had never seen nor heard of these plants. I also became intrigued with snapping pictures of mushrooms. Photographing fauna on the trail was a bit more challenging. My subjects did not want to remain still. However, I did manage to get photos of a bear, a painted turtle, slugs, deer, trumpeter swans, snakes, and salamanders. A favorite find was a group of porcupine quills embedded in a downed tree trunk.

The challenges of crossing beaver dams, fording rivers and streams, maneuvering through mud and around fallen trees never got old. I loved it! The four miles on the west side of Mondeaux Esker Segment took me seven hours to hike due to conditions resulting from the winter ice and snow storms. That was a workout! The most challenging hike for me was the quarter mile up Balanced Rock on the Devil's Lake Segment. It took me two tries to complete that section of the segment as I have a fear of heights when I don't have a handrail or guardrail to hold on to. My

first try was solo and my successful climb was with hiking buddies encouraging me along the way.

The Ice Age Trail community is phenomenal. Hikers truly want others to enjoy the beauty of the trail. They are willing to help in so many ways such as shuttling, setting up group hikes, sharing an alternative connecting route, volunteering to build boardwalks or improve the trail, or simply giving updates on trail conditions. I never expected to make connections and new friendships with so many people when I started my journey. An added bonus to hiking the trail was having my husband shuttle. Together we were able to explore northern and eastern Wisconsin.

As I wrap up this essay on my IAT journey I turn my head and get a glimpse of my packed suitcase by the door. Tomorrow morning I will be heading to South Africa with the young teachers to volunteer and explore. Did my Ice Age Trail adventure prepare me for what is to come in the next couple of weeks? I think so...

John Muir said, "In every walk in nature one receives far more than he seeks." What a perfect way to describe my transformation and growth on the Ice Age Trail.