

Dustin Brockway Thru-Hike Essay

The most unique and memorable experiences of my trek over the past two months include my interactions with people and other wild animals (hehe). When you are hiking solo for over two months, it affords you the pleasure of being able to laugh at your own jokes and the silly inner workings of your mind. There are many a rabbit hole the mind likes to go down and the monkeys of the mind rarely quiet down, for better or for worse. I am often entertained by the inner dialogues, thoughts, feelings, and dramas my mind stirs up, but when I was able to clear the mind by focusing on the present moment, the sights, sounds, and smells, it led me to a place of bliss in the beauty of Wisconsin's forests.

A few memorable encounters with wild animals included saying "hey bear" to a beautiful black bear in the Timberland Hills Ski Area, turning a corner and seeing an albino white deer standing beside a brown deer on trail during dusk on the Firth Lake segment, saying "hi" to a couple of porcupines in the Blue Hills, as well as a big white owl in that same segment. Much later in my trip, I stopped and saw a red fox grooming his/herself on the Woodland Dunes segment in Two Rivers. There is a feeling difficult to put into words that happens when I encounter wild animals such as these. It is a mixture of awe, giddiness, gratefulness, and love I feel when I have that connection both for the animal and for myself for having the opportunity to take this trip and, more importantly, for taking the opportunity. Even when I stumble upon the groups of brown deer, a common sight along the trail, I still get those feelings of love, respect, and contentment which I often struggle to find while living in "the real world," so to speak.

The majority of people I have met on trail and in towns helped lift my spirits, especially after long and tough road-walking sections which tended to put a damper on my trail experience. I have to thank a few people in particular who made a lasting impression on me with their kindness and generosity and helped me greatly in times of need. Vicki, the Chapter Leader from the Chippewa Chapter, who shuttled me to and from Brunet Island SP, provided me with a bundle of firewood for the night, and went out to dinner and breakfast with me. Thank you. Joe & Peg Jopek, Chapter Leaders from the Langlade Chapter, who shuttled me into Summit Lake to resupply and shared some of their personal stories with me along the ride. Thank you. Jackie & Kelly Lindow, from Wautoma near the Deerfield segment, for opening up their home and hiker cabin to me for two nights. I visited them two years ago during my failed thru-hike attempt in 2019 when I was in bad health which led me to call it quits on my first try. Grateful I made it back this time in much better health to enjoy more time together with two of the kindest, most loving people I have ever met. Thank you. I encountered lots more stories such as these from strangers, family, and friends who provided me with positive support one way or another. Thank you.

I could go on and on because this was a memorable and unique trip, a once in a lifetime experience. I needed to prove to myself I could do this and other difficult things, especially after my failed thru-hike attempt of 2019. Very happy I gave myself the freedom to try it again and succeed. It was great to hike all of the sections of trail during the Fall season and notice the changes in the environment right before my eyes. And it was a fitting end to the trip waking up to the first snowfall on my last day on the Ice Age Trail. A sideways freezing rain slapping me in the face as I got closer and closer to the end made it feel like the trail didn't want me to go, nor did I want to leave the trail, yet I knew it was time for me to finish and start a new chapter in life, onto the next adventure. Life sure is sweet.

Light N Love,

Dustin Brockway