

My Journey on the Ice Age National Scenic Trail

-Ellen Tobler, 5/30/23

I've been a big fan of walking, hiking and National Scenic Trails for quite some time and began to section-hike the Appalachian Trail in 2011. Being from Chicagoland, getting to the AT is time-consuming and expensive if you're not going to thru-hike it. On my 49th birthday, my husband and I took a trip to Shenandoah National Park, VA so that I could finish up the AT section that runs through the Park. I did complete that section and it left me wanting more, but I didn't have the funds to frequently visit the AT and with work, I didn't have the availability to thru-hike. So, I began to set my sites on the Ice Age Trail which is closer to home.

I had been to Devil's Lake to camp countless times and was familiar with the Ice Age Trail and had thought about hiking it in the past, but the CRs seemed daunting, and I just didn't know how I could do it without getting lost on the roads. When I got home from VA, I did some research and found the IATA website, the Thousand-Miler-Spreadsheet tracker, the Atlas and Guidebooks and the ThousandMilerWannaBes Facebook group. Well, when armed with additional knowledge, it didn't seem that confusing anymore, and I set my first official step upon the Trail (Whitewater Segment) two weeks later. After that day, I knew that I would complete the entire Trail someday.

That day was yesterday; I completed the Trail on the Kettlebowl Segment. It took me 2 years and 7 months and I estimate it cost me @ \$1 per mile (HA!) in gas and lodging. I was amazed when I realized that if I stretched out all the IAT miles I had hiked, I could have walked from my house west to Billings, MT or east to Bangor, ME! WOW! It took me 1,157.2 miles to finish the Trail

I've met so many great chapter volunteers and made a few new, close friends that I spend time with outside of the IAT. What a joy that is; it's not easy to make new friends at my age.

Things I discovered during my journey:

- I really like winter hiking, I had not done it before, and I don't particularly enjoy hiking in the summer.
- The sound of wind in the trees makes me think of my mother who passed away in 2018. I hiked 75% of the Trail by myself, but I was never alone.
- Fallen pine needles, decaying leaves and oncoming rain are three of the best smells on the planet.
- The kindness of strangers is heartwarming and keeps my faith in humanity.
- My state of mind has a lot to do with whether I have a good or bad day. Positivity and acceptance are key.

All that time, just walking, gave me countless moments of clarity, laughter, tears, creativity, boredom, wonder, restlessness, impatience, comradery, exhilaration, pain and enjoyment. Sounds like life to me.