

My journey began with random hikes on the Ice Age Trail, not realizing what it was, really. I've always loved taking my boys out to explore and see what we could see. I mentioned an IAT excursion I had to a friend of mine, and she told me about a friend of hers that had done the whole thing, and that she wrote a book about it! I immediately purchased "Thousand Miler" by Melanie Radzicki McManus. I was enthralled and inspired. I had to do it, but in sections.

When I began with the intention of hiking all of the Ice Age Trail, I was excited to jump right in, and in my mind, start big. I solo camped for the first time at Potawatomi State Park on Halloween weekend, 2021. I wasn't sure what to expect at the campground. Would there be strange things going on or people wandering around? It was quite the opposite, and except for a few other campers, I had the campground to myself. I got there Friday, set up camp and enjoyed the scenery. In the morning I hiked out and back from my site to Waterfront Mary's. Sunday morning, I hiked from my site to the Eastern terminus and back. I felt the trip was a success and had my first time under my belt.

Back then, I didn't have helpful resources like FarOut, the guidebook or atlas, so I searched online for information that I printed out and brought with me and did the best I could. As time went on, I was doing out and backs quite a bit, and the nice Fall weather turned cold. One of my longest hikes was on my 51st birthday; I hiked 10.71 miles on the Ahnapee trail, out and back. Pretty much every other weekend I was hiking out and backs in full on Wisconsin Winter weather; below freezing, wind and snowdrifts.

In February of 2022, I had a vacation get away planned to Key West with a group of friends. I was on the trail the day before I left, hiking Tisch Mills, and managed to hike 11 miles the day after I returned to get the road walk to East Twin River segment, talk about a climate change!

My strategy starting out was to travel westbound from the East, so I wouldn't have to pick a new place to hike from, and I would also be a little more familiar with the area. That went on until I attended my first Ice Age Trail Alliance Conference in Steven's Point. I signed up hoping to meet like minded people and learn more about the IAT. I got to listen to thru hiker and author Jennifer Pharr Davis speak about hiking the Appalachian Trail and Emily Ford talked about her experience hiking the IAT in the dead of Winter, finishing March of 2021. Their stories were incredibly motivating.

The entire event was amazing, and the appreciation for the volunteers by the Alliance was over the top. Thousand Milers shared displays of their maps and photos, telling the story of their journeys. I learned so much, like how there is a Facebook page dedicated to people who want to hike the entire trail, the Thousand Miler Wannabes page. I met Kris and Jared during their backpack shake-down and they said they post on that page when they'd be hiking, and anyone was welcome to join. After the conference, I hiked with another Wannabe that was at my table, and we got ten miles in doing the Emmons Creek and Waupaca River segments along with the road walk between. It was awesome!

I quickly joined the Facebook group and the first opportunity I had, I joined Kris, Jared, Priscilla and Laura for a hike, Friday, Aug. 12, 2022. We met at the Wood Lake segment, left our cars, and shuttled to a far-off spot, County E near Conservation Ave. We hiked 16 miles, knocking out Newwood, Camp 27 and Timberland Wilderness segments. Now THAT's how it's done! What I didn't know was how meeting these experienced hikers would change my life!

I saw a message that Laura posted about hiking in September, and it turned out that we were camping at the same campground! We hiked with Tiff Tiff and her awesome hiking buddy, Marshall. We got along well and hiked at about the same pace, and it was game on! This was the beginning of hiking many, miles, and a friendship.

On a long road walk in Langlade County with Laura in October 2022, we started chatting about trail names. The Energizer Bunny in Human Form explained how she got her name, and then started trying out names for me, settling on Ray of Sunshine. Although I wasn't a big fan of it at first, it has grown on me, so when signing the trail books from then on, that's what I penned.

In the following months the hiking trips were planned and executed at an amazing rate! Up before the sunrise, either driving to the location or already out hiking segments and road walks; sharing rooms at motels, camping and even car-camping. By September 17, 2022 I had 400 miles in. We worked around holidays, time with family and inclement weather to hike. On January 17, 2023 I was at 800 miles! On March 11, I reached 900. On May 21, I hit 1,000, and May 31, I reached 1,100!

Seeing as though Laura and I had hiked so much together, it seemed appropriate to hike our final segment together. Being the awesome communicator that Laura is, she put together an invite after we decided on the date. I had saved Table Bluff knowing it was to be her last hike for her THIRD journey!

The final day we didn't have to get up so early. We were meeting up at 9am with any friends, family and fellow hikers that wanted to join us. The segment was chosen because it's short, has a beautiful view and is close to the Crossroads Coffeehouse in Cross Plains. As people gathered in the parking lot it hit me that this was my final leg of a journey that had taken almost 22 months of my life. But it didn't take anything from me, it was what it gave to me that brought tears to my eyes. I'd met the best people, had the coolest experiences, persevered in all kinds of weather in all seasons, saw the most beautiful scenery, and gained such an appreciation for the beautiful state I live in. The worst, most difficult times made me a stronger person and as the miles grew, so did my confidence.

We got underway and Laura and I laughed at some of our wild adventures: hiking in the dark, in the rain, car camping, our high mileage days and creek crossings. We were toward the end of the pack after chatting with all the great people that hiked with us. We came down the hill back toward the parking lot and walked together under an arbor of arms holding trekking poles high.

Cheering and applause ensued, followed by Dixie cups of wine and a toast to two more "Thousand Miler Wanna Bes" no more! We took the celebration to the coffeehouse and enjoyed breakfast fare and comradery in the inviting atmosphere. After a while people started peeling off to finish up their weekend. I felt so full, my heart brimmed with the feeling of accomplishment, the support of people that really care and just general happiness and satisfaction.

I have so much gratitude for everyone that was able to share that day, anyone that took steps with me on the trail, the support of my family and friends, especially my hiking pal Laura. We helped each other achieve this amazing feat and became friends while doing it. My final mileage including both sides of the bifurcation: 1174.62

Many lessons that I've learned on this adventure I will be able to use the rest of my life:

Flexibility is key and preparation is crucial as it can make or break your hike.

There are hard days and there are easy-breezy days, and your mindset has a lot to do with what kind of day it will be.

Making a wrong turn isn't the worst thing and sometimes it can turn out to be the highlight.

Worry and fear get in the way of progress.

Good socks are super important!

Food is fuel, so preparing nutritious snacks can improve your experience, but do enjoy a cinnamon roll once in a while too!

Listen to your body and do yoga; it's about balance.

They may try, but mosquitoes will not actually carry you away.

Related: Winter hiking is pretty nice!

Get rid of anything no longer serving you; it's more than you need to carry. (Physically and mentally.)

Nature heals.

Affirmed: You can do anything you put your mind to.