

My Ice Age Trail Journey

By Jenny Fuerstenau

A pre-journey background:

In 2019 I was neither a writer nor a hiker. I've always loved walking—in the woods, in my neighborhood, in far-away cities, in my job setting. I've been a nurse and a caregiver all of my adult life, including most recently for my mom, my father-in-law and a friend, all of them in my home, all on Hospice care, within a 9-month period from April 2018-January 2019. The summer of 2019 brought my first real hiking experience in the Porcupine Mountains in the UP of Michigan (or Wisconsin, depending on your outlook, ha-ha). My sister, Nancy, and I decided to tent camp and hike to reset and reconnect after the challenging year we had just experienced. We were total newbies and totally unprepared for that hiking experience, but we lived through it and learned a bunch.

Fast forward to March 2020:

I'm still not a writer but I'm liking the idea of becoming a hiker. Like so many others, Nancy and I needed an outlet for our pent-up energy and frustration during the Great Lockdown. Nancy lives near the part of the IAT that goes through Waukesha County and has walked the trails at Lapham Peak State Park several times. She wondered about those yellow blazes and investigated it. During a conversation about how much we enjoyed hiking the "Porkies" we became intrigued by this newly discovered Ice Age Trail. We researched it more together, joined some Facebook groups and finally decided, "Hey-how hard can this be? Let's do it!". So the planning began and the actual hiking began on May 20, 2020. We started with the Lapham Peak segment as it was slightly familiar to at least one of us. And the learning curve became evident immediately as we got lost on our first hike! Our most valuable lesson was learned that day—how to follow those lovely yellow blazes!

The Journey:

Over the next 2 years, 8 months, and 8 days we continued to learn and to grow. We overcame fears of fording (Prairie River) and heights (East bluff at Devil's Lake) and weathered not just storms of rain, wind and snow, but also the storms of life that sometimes interrupt or redirect your focus. Physical ailments experienced on the trail including Covid (twice), plantar fasciitis (Dells of the Eau Claire and Plover River) and hiking up that rock cliff at Devil's Lake with a stuck kidney stone taught me that I'm tougher than I thought, and that God is always with me.

Emotionally and physically challenging responsibilities at home also provided for lots of life-reflection opportunities out on the trail. In May of 2022 my mother-in-law, who lived with my husband and me, and also had Alzheimer's disease, had a stroke. Overnight my caring for her became my 24/7 opportunity to serve her through my 4th experience with Hospice care in our home. Thankfully, my husband and his siblings recognized my need for respite through hiking during that time. Those weeks spent on the trail that summer were some of my most reflective and appreciated, and increased my gratitude for this beautiful state we live in, for my sister (my rock), and my husband (my soulmate), and also my extended family and friends. Those weeks also drew me closer to the One who created all the beauty and who lovingly and mercifully sustains all of us in it—God. My mother-in-law passed away peacefully on August 30th, 2022

There were so many highlights from each of the segments and even some of the road walks that I could not possibly list even most of them here. But I can list some of my favorites and some that were most challenging. I like woods the best, and water in the woods makes it even better! Dells of the Eau Claire, West Bend, McKenzie Creek and Devil's Staircase are great examples of woods and water. Hilly areas are hard (Harrison Hills-where the hills have hills and Underdown-aka Overup) but cresting a climb usually rewards you with great views like at St. Croix Falls and Gibraltar Rock. Rock climbing can be challenging (Devil's Lake) and fun (Turtle Rock, Grandfather Falls). Some segments are downright difficult and not so enjoyable in the early spring with boot sucking mud and oodles of downed trees blocking the path as in Jerry Lake and Lake Eleven. Seeing different wildlife-deer, cranes, porcupines, eagles, beavers—and evidence of hidden wildlife—fresh wolf kill with wolf prints in the mud, bear scat and prints, freshly gnawed on trees—also make for great memories. Learning all the terms related to an ice age was an unexpected pleasure. Even the not-so-exciting flat, straight, hot, exhausting walk on Gandy Dancer helped to round out the whole experience.

The end of the Journey:

The last few months of this journey brought to light a new reflection for me: I CAN! I CAN do things I never thought I could do. I CAN ask for help. I CAN attain a level of gratitude I never thought possible. I CAN show love, and be loved, without limits. I CAN (sort of) write. I CAN enjoy not only this Journey on the IAT, but this journey called Life—even when the circumstances aren't particularly enjoyable.

Some post-Journey thoughts:

Now comes the best part—that best lesson learned—the Gratitude part. First and foremost, thank you, Jesus, my God, my Protector, my Savior! Without You none of this is possible. Next on the thanks list equally is my husband, who provided support in many ways and was my greatest cheerleader (I love you, Charlie!) and my hiking partner, my sister, Nancy, my rock, my sharer of triumph and defeat (and Fireball!), the Tweedle Dee to my Tweedle Dum—your presence with me every minute/every mile of this journey will be treasured and pondered in my heart forever (I love you, little sis!). To all the other hikers, chapter coordinators and volunteers we met along the way—thank you for your gifts of help, encouragement, time and talents in maintaining this beautiful trail. And lastly, thank you IATA for keeping vigil over this beautiful national treasure, the Ice Age Trail, and having the vision and mission-mindedness to preserve this treasure for future generations.

Jenny Fuerstenau (Tweedle Dum)

A Thousand Miler!

May 20, 2020--January 28, 2023