

Introduction

It all started with the Twalkers (see Figure 1), a group of five who talked and walked locally to safely overcome the isolation so many were experiencing during the pandemic. We learned that all the “twalking” was quite therapeutic. But as the pandemic persisted, the same neighborhoods and parks grew tedious. Someone suggested we “*twalk*” toward a goal, and the seed was planted. We invested in the Ice Age Trail (IAT) Guidebooks, Atlas, large wall maps and a couple of trail t-shirts. On April 9, 2021, three of us embarked on the footpath of 1,200 miles.

Year One

We kicked off our journey with the Delafield Segment (see Figure 2). I had walked along the Bark River to Cushing Memorial Park and had biked the Lake Country Trail several times, but was unaware I had ever set foot on the IAT. Funny how those yellow blazes don’t register until the IAT gets put on your radar. Then those yellow blazes pop and you wonder how you ever missed them. We crushed the first segment and were feeling quite smug we had only 1,196.8 miles to go.

Hartland, our second segment, challenged us. It seemed to go on for eternity. When we reached Nixon Park, we gravitated toward the picnic tables. My legs ached and my feet were on fire. I did manage to get up and finish the segment with my group, but with just 10 miles under my belt, I was now filled with self-doubt as I began to comprehend the magnitude of what we had started.

Those first two hikes describe my relationship with the IAT. The trail would boost my confidence and give me that high-on-life feeling. Then the trail would humble me. And through it all, there was always the longing to return—maybe not immediately—but eventually.

One of several highlights was meeting thru-hiker Richard Larson “Skittles” on Scuppernong. Although our exchange was brief, he left quite an impression. We later learned from his online travel journals, with emphasis on the “s,” that the IAT was not his first rodeo, so to speak. He has hiked many national trails, including the Appalachian Trail. When we acknowledged how much more difficult a thru-hike would be, Skittles shrugged and said, “It’s just walking, right?” Humble guy!

Another highlight was sharing Lapham Peak with family members (see Figure 3). The grandkids enjoyed climbing the tower and spotting a fawn resting in the tall grass below. As with any hike, I learned a lot about my hiking partners. For example, I now know my then seven-year-old grandson is very goal driven because he kept asking, “How much further?” My oldest grandson, who was eight, is all about the journey—measuring little fir trees, admiring the wildflowers and enjoying the softness of mullein.

We completed our first Mammoth Challenge BIG time by hiking Devil’s Lake (see Figure 4). To date, it is hands down the most challenging segment, especially when you have a healthy fear of heights as I do. We also hiked Gibraltar Rock with my Naperville, IL, book group (see Figure 5). We read *Grandma Gatewood’s Walk* and celebrated per usual with food and wine—only this time we partook at the Wollersheim Winery. Patti, one of our shuttlers in October, wrote the story of our Mammoth 41 Challenge, which appeared in the Lodi Valley Chronicle on November 20, 2021 (see Figure 6).

By February, I had fallen out of step with my usual hiking group. Life has a way of doing that! I needed to hike the Verona Segment to get back in step. I went out of my comfort zone and for the first time responded to a hiking invitation that was posted on social media. Thank goodness I did. I connected with Snail and Slug (their unofficial trail names) from Jamesville, who introduced me to the glamping version of hiking. Delores (Snail) hikes and Mike (Slug) shuttles. Together they provide the most wonderful hiking experience. We continued hiking together for 170 more miles AND both Delores and Mike were at the eastern terminus when I finished, surprisingly less than two years later (see Figure 7).

To recap the first year, it took four months to surpass 100 miles. I hit this milestone on the Blackhawk Segment. By the end of December, we had clocked 200 miles on Monticello. In April, we reached 300

miles on the Milwaukee River Segment in Fon du Lac County. I was exactly where I wanted to be in my original four-year plan to complete the trail.

Year Two

It would be fair to say we had fallen in love with the IAT because it took us places where we might not otherwise venture. Wisconsin is a beautiful state, and the trail showcases that beauty. However, absorbing it does come with a price. For me, it was blisters (see Figure 8).

That's why one of my more defining moments during the second year was hiking with Barb on the connecting route between New Hope-Iola and Ringle. It was obvious with every step my Moleskin was not working. When I discovered Barb does a lot of mountain hiking, our conversation quickly shifted to footcare. I listened to the voice of experience...and no more blisters for me. Injinji toesocks for the win!

I was learning other survivor skills, too, such as becoming more competent with the online application FarOut. In August, I was the designated navigator, a new role for me, on the last seven miles of Point Beach. Since my hiking partners were fairly new to the IAT, the choice seemed obvious. As long as my phone was fully charged, I had FarOut as my guiding light. Yet, I still managed to miss a directional sign on the beach very close to where we had parked our car. I guess I was distracted by the good company. There was a large pile of rocks separating us from the parking lot. We decided to take the detour into Lake Michigan, getting splashed by chest-high waves. It was not a bad way to cool off on a very hot day. I suppose we could have retraced our steps, but that is so hard to do when your car is in sight and there is ice cream waiting just beyond that (see Figure 9). I did go back later and rectify my mistake.

Two other "key" incidents in the second year come to mind. I never understood why hikers always ask if you have your keys. It's such a silly question since you need your keys to lock your car. However, I changed my tune at the Leopold Nature Center just outside of Portage. I was 8.5 miles away from finishing the Eastern Bifurcation. My hiking partner Peggy and I planned to take our picture to commemorate the finish when we got back to the nature center. I was a bit short-sighted that day. I asked Peggy if I could hide my keys somewhere in her car to lighten my load before walking back to my car. Peggy didn't miss a beat; she was helpful as always and assisted me in finding a great hiding spot. It wasn't until I went to get Kleenex out of my car before taking our picture that I realized what we had done. Oops! Long story short, Peggy and I bonded and went on to hike at least 200 more miles together (see Figure 10).

The other key mishap occurred on a cold day in March. We were walking the connecting route between Skunk and Foster and New Hope-Iola. This time I had my key fob with me when I got back to the car, but it wasn't unlocking my doors. I pulled out the emergency key, but the door lock was frozen. Did the battery go dead in the fob? Wander Woman saved the day by warming the fob. It worked! There was just enough power, on the next try, to release the locks. I made it to Batteries Plus in Stevens Point before closing. Sure enough, I needed to replace the battery.

In contrast, we were boiling on the Kewaunee River Segment in July (see Figure 11). It felt like 102° since there was little shade. A good friend from Illinois joined me for eight miles. We used Polar Scarves for the first time and were not convinced they worked. A brief moment of removal proved the scarves do make a difference! The grueling heat overshadowed the thrill of finally seeing the grandfather clock, advertised as the world's largest. Hmmm...is it *really*?

As part of my second Mammoth Challenge, I hiked La Budde Creek with the Dawns, two of my former neighbors. This segment is near Qui Qui Oc Golf Course, where Dawn's late husband, who had passed away during the pandemic, had a memorial bench. We were energized by nature as we enjoyed forest bathing, followed by lunch at Ostoff Resort. Then we shared a special moment on Tom's bench (see Figure 12), remembering, missing and really just feeling so grateful Tom was part of our lives. To date, it is one of my most memorable and favorite hikes. I'm so glad we paused long enough in our busy lives to do this. The IAT has a way of slowing you down.

We finished the Mammoth Challenge by hiking from Kewaunee River to the eastern terminus in Potawatomi State Park, but not without some excitement. On the Forestville Segment, we saw two hikers with their dogs, who quickly shared they had seen a cougar at the last intersection. They seemed extremely motivated to get off the trail. We took their words seriously and got BIG (see Figure 13). We also decided to wait for the hiker in the distance behind us because there is strength in numbers! That's

when we met thru-hiker Punisher from California (see Figure 14). His goal is to finish all the national trails and was about to complete the IAT at the eastern terminus. Punisher walked with us past the feared intersection and convinced us the cougar was at least 30 miles away before he bid us farewell.

My youngest son and partner, and some of their friends, joined us on the Sturgeon Bay Segment. Who doesn't love a multi-generational picture with Monty (see Figure 15)? I know my knees for sure LOVED the extra support in the park that day (see Figure 16). Oh, to be young!

I closed out my second year on Harrison Hills and do believe I earned some bragging rights if I am so inclined ☺ We did three fords in one day. Two were very manageable, but one left us considering our options for a good half hour. In the end, we just went for it—boots and all (see Figure 17). Thank goodness for Smartwool! The frigid water was foot deep in some spots, which means we did not cross with dry socks. I also managed to high step through some very deep snow without squishing two unsuspecting salamanders (see Figure 18). AND I wore out my first pair of hiking boots (see Figure 19).

Here's the milestone rundown for my second trail year. In August, I surpassed 400 miles on Point Beach. I hit 500 miles on Grandfather Falls and went public, declaring myself a **tree hugger** with Woodsprite as my witness (see Figure 20). I crossed 600 miles on Deerfield and 700 miles on Harrison Hills. By year end, I was ahead of schedule, and enjoying the progress I could see on my colored-in map.

Year Three

When I first started the IAT, I doubt I knew what a trillium looked like—never mind some of the more uncommon plants. By the start of my third year, I had seen plants that resemble butter and eggs, ghosts, baby doll eyes, bishop caps, stars, bells and slippers. The first time someone showed me how to find Jack in the pulpit, which was early on in my IAT journey, I was hooked. Nature is fascinating...and there is so much to learn. I remember the first pothole I saw on Lapham Peak, a precursor to the magnificent potholes I would see along the St. Croix River. Or how about the trail marker trees? Who knew! Then there's the seemingly never-ending variety of mushrooms. You can't help but think about the underground networks and how everything, EVERYTHING is connected. You realize you are just a small part of this big, beautiful, magical sphere, and no matter how much time you spend in the natural world, there is always more to explore and learn. Year Three proved to be no exception.

I had finally made it to the Northwoods, which meant I had finally purchased bear spray. Although I saw plenty of bear evidence—paw prints, eaten signs, claw marks and even pictures other hikers had taken—I never did see a bear myself. However, I feel like I came close more than once. The prior winter when Delores and I hiked Summit Moraine, we thought for sure we heard a bear dumpster diving behind the warming house in the Jack Lake Ski Trails Area. We were snacking on the bench outside in the front (see Figure 21). It was obvious the outside of the warming house had been used as a bear nail file. What wasn't so obvious was the cause of the loud crash we had heard when we discovered there was no dumpster in the back. Did the noise come from the Porta Potti instead? Don't know. We gathered our stuff and hightailed it out of there! Late May, Delores and Billie heard a huffing and puffing sound that put them on high alert a few yards ahead of me on Wood Lake. Billie started singing (see Figure 22). It must have worked because we had no bear sightings that day either.

Then in August, I made a poor decision that put me in harms way. Barb, Peggy and I hiked New Wood with the intent to continue on and finish Camp 27 (see Figure 23). By the time we finished the first segment, my hip was bothering me and there was a very inviting, flat rock at the Camp 27 trailhead where I could rest (see Figure 24). I decided to wait there. Barb and Peggy hiked Camp 27 in less than an hour, but it was more like three to four hours before I saw Barb again. There is no direct route back and the roads are not well marked. I now know I chose the absolute worst place on the entire IAT to bail. As daylight was beginning to fade that day, I started walking. At a bend in the road, thankfully, I heard a horn. It was Barb, who was just short of contacting the sheriff to help find me. When I got in the car, Barb couldn't wait to show me pictures she had taken of two different bears only a half mile up the road (see Figures 25 and 26). I learned two valuable lessons: (1) Suck it up, Buttercup, and stay with the group; and (2) Never separate New Wood and Camp 27. Still no bear sightings for me. I hope it was worth the long drive for Barb. S-s-sorry!

When I did return to Camp 27 (see Figure 27), thanks to our shuttler Buzz, I saw a mink (see Figure 28). I also saw a porcupine on Jerry Lake (see Figure 29) and had the pleasure of hiking with IAT's very own

Grandma Gatewood. Have you met Barb L.? She is in her 80s and is on her third go-round of the IAT. Barb L. hikes in tennis shoes with no poles (see Figure 30) and car camps. The Grandma Gatewood I read about hiked the Appalachian Trail three times and was 76 when she finished. She hiked in Keds and slept outside. See the similarities? I doubt the real Grandma Gatewood knew how to capture wildlife on video, though. Barb L. does! She took great video of the porcupine climbing a tree.

Delores, my other hiking partner on Jerry Lake, found and photographed a fungus called Lion's Mane (see Figure 31). I had never seen this before, but have since learned it is very healthy to eat. Another first for me was seeing Bottle Gentian (see Figure 32) when we hiked Turtle Rock in August. This plant is so unique. I now have a new favorite plant next to the Yellow Lady's Slipper I had seen on Walla Hi (see Figure 33). Of course, I had never seen the ceremonial Turtle Rock before either (Figure 34). Well into my third year on the IAT, and I am still making new discoveries.

I am still meeting new hikers, too. There is a large group of hikers (800+) known as GOTC (Get Off the Couch). Here's a fun fact about my third year on the trail. I hiked with GOTC enough that my face showed up twice in the featured picture on the website (see Figures 35 and 36). Does that make me a GOTC poster gal? All joking aside, I wish I had tapped into this group sooner. What a great resource!

When I hiked Tuscobia with a group of GOTC-ers in late August, we received some true trail magic. We had found a great park complete with restrooms and a pavilion in Brill. Stevie, the business owner next door came over with her daughter to make sure we had everything we needed. She offered drinks and snacks. Turns out Stevie had hiked 500 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). She is all about women helping women on the trail. Naturally, we asked her daughter to take a picture of us (see Figure 37). Stevie is in the bright yellow shirt.

The miles got a little easier and I got a little faster. My Mammoth 43 turned into Mammoth 69. What took almost three months to complete as a newbie was now only taking a month...and I was hiking some of the tougher segments.

My milestone recap for the third year goes like this. I surpassed 800 miles on New Hope-Iola the end of May, and then took a two-month hiatus. Early September, I hit 900 miles on Hemlock Creek (see Figure 38), and we gave the troll a coin to ensure our trail safety (see Figure 39). It must have worked because by the end of November, I was carving my 1,000-mile marker in the snow for a photo op on Lake Eleven (see Figure 40). On December 28, 2023, I walked the Interstate State Park portion of the IAT with my husband and middle son (Figure 41). Together we reached the western terminus where Delores and Mike were waiting (see Figure 42). I officially become an IAT Thousand-Miler.



Figure 1: The Twalkers



Figure 2: Delafield



Figure 3: Lapham Peak with Family



Figure 4: Devil's Lake



Figure 5: Gibraltar Rock



Figure 6: Article



Figure 7: The Olvers



Figure 8: Blisters



Figure 9: Reward after Point Beach



Figure 10: Recovered Keys



Figure 11: Kewaunee



Figure 12: Tom's Bench with Dawns



Figure 13: Get BIG!!



Figure 14: Thru-Hiker Punisher



Figure 15: Photo w/Monty



Figure 16: Royal Treatment



Figure 17: Boots and All!



Figure 18: Surprise!



Figure 19: First Pair of Boots Retired



Figure 20: 500 Miles



Figure 21: Warming House



Figure 22: Singing Billie



Figure 23: New Wood



Figure 24: Keep Going!

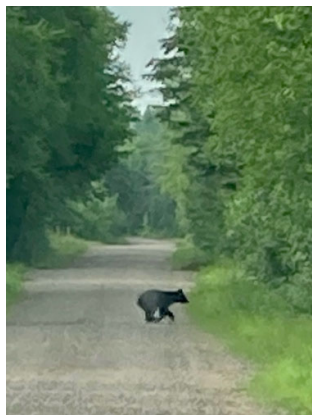


Figure 25: Bear #1

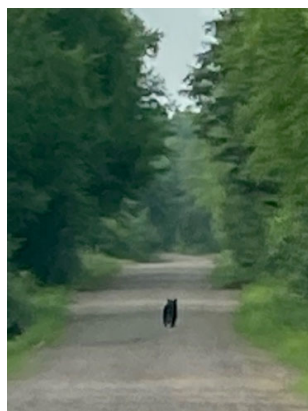


Figure 26: Bear #2



Figure 27: Back to Camp 27 thanks to Buzz!



Figure 28: A Mink, I Think



Figure 29: Porcupine



Figure 30: IAT's Gatewood



Figure 31: Lion's Mane



Figure 32: Bottle Gentian



Figure 33: Lady's Slipper



Figure 34: Turtle Rock



Figures 35-36: GOTC Poster Gals

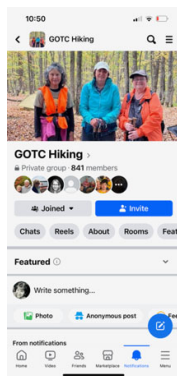


Figure 37: PCT Hiker Stevie



Figure 38: Hiking Poles Make 900 Marker



Figure 39: Safe Travels



Figure 40: Yee-haw!



Figure 40: Almost There!



Figure 41: Made It...with Help from Family and Friends