

Thousand Miler Essay  
July 31, 2023  
by Karen Stephany

I began hiking the Ice Age Trail on April 6, 2021. I was just looking to get out of the house post-Covid, and I wanted to hike more, maybe travel a bit. Living near Madison I knew I had a lot of trail relatively close to me, and decided to hike the segments closest to home. I never intended to hike the entire trail, but once I started experiencing the joy and accomplishment of finishing each segment, it led me further and further away from home.

In 2021 I hiked 206 miles, and hiked mostly alone and with my dog Scout. I did most of the segments out and back, which was okay initially, but the further I drove the more I realized that I'd have to find another way to do this. My first year I hiked most of the segments from Gibraltar Rock through Hartland. I had not yet started any Connecting Routes. My husband Dan and oldest son Owen joined me on several hikes in Lodi, Janesville, and the southern Kettles. I did my last hike of 2021 on November 1<sup>st</sup>, then waited all winter for spring to come back around.

In 2022 I began doing overnight trips since I was driving further and had decided to actually try to do the entire trail. I filled in connecting routes near home that I had skipped the year earlier, and started doing 2-3 day trips to areas further from home – Door County, Manitowoc, and Waupaca areas. I started using my bike to shuttle, which I was not very good at, but it did save me some time. My husband started shuttling me to areas within 90 minutes of home, we'd take 2 cars, and he'd drop me off. The first time he dropped me off 14 miles from my car was terrifying. I had always been within about 5 miles of my car – my car was my safe zone when I was out there alone. I hiked through spring and summer racking up some good miles and did more miles by July than I had done the previous whole year. My husband and I did a 2-day anniversary hike in early August – Plover River through Ringle, one of my favorite trips and the furthest north I had hiked. However, I was beginning to grow tired of hiking alone so much and joined some Facebook hiking groups, looking for people I could meet up with or group hikes to join.

I had nearly 2 months off from hiking in August and Sept of 2022 due to a vacation, then catching Covid. My first attempt at hiking after Covid failed spectacularly – a 2-day trip to Rib Lake. I could not even do half of the miles I usually did, and was completely winded and exhausted. I could hardly pedal the bike and had no chance on those hilly roads. I came home disappointed and wondering if it was time to wrap this up. I was at 480 miles and figured I could do 20 miles of connecting route close to home, hit the 500 mile mark and be proud of that accomplishment. It would be enough.

But everything changed when I responded to a Facebook post from someone looking to hike some segments in October for the Mammoth Challenge. She had a pretty aggressive 2-day hike planned – Highland Lake, Summit Moraine, and Lumbercamp – about 19 miles each day. I had some serious doubts if I could do those miles, given how I struggled on my last trip in Rib Lake two weeks earlier, but I decided to go for it and that is how I met Nicole, my first hiking partner! October was an incredible month, and Nicole and I met two more times that month to hike Mondeaux and Kettlebowl. I arranged solo hikes on the days before or after hiking with her to get in a few more miles on those trips up north. On Kettlebowl we met a group of hikers by chance and I got to chatting with a lady named LuAnn. She was looking for a shuttle the next day and Dan was coming up to hike Parish with me. We exchanged

numbers and met up the next day. Little did I know that I had now met the 2 ladies who I'd cover over 475 miles of trail with.

As fall pushed on into winter, I continued to hike connecting routes with Nicole and LuAnn, sometimes all 3 of us. I was nervous about hiking in winter, and purchased some winter clothing to make it more tolerable. I was pushed way outside of my comfort zone out there in winter, but knew that it was better to hike these CRs with someone in winter, versus hiking them in summer alone. I finished all the CR on the eastern bifurcation, all the CR up the middle of the state, the long Cornell CR, the CR by Blue Hills, and the CR in Door County. In March I started thinking about the Western bifurcation, even though I had already done the east, and Nicole agreed to join me! We covered it in 4 days in April. As much as I had not wanted to hike in the colder winter months, we completed almost 300 miles from November to April, and it was definitely worth it.

Spring rolled around and I anxiously waited for the snow to melt up north. LuAnn arranged an early May multi-day trip with several other ladies and we tackled Bear Lake through Straight River. Then another trip up for the Blue Hills area. Then another trip for Newwood to Timberland Wilderness and Wood Lake. Nearly every week there was a trip up somewhere – LuAnn was on her final push to get done and I was chasing close behind her.

I filled in a few CR's by Manitowoc that I needed, and planned out my last 3 trips. LuAnn had just finished and Nicole had already done a few of the segments that I still needed to do. I had been hoping to save St. Croix for my final hike, but a Facebook post popped up from a lady looking to hike St. Croix and Gandy Dancer, I jumped on it and met up with her to do those. Dan took the next Friday off work and we hiked Jerry Lake and then Lake Eleven the next day. Then there was one trip left – 4 Segments and a little CR in between. I decided Chippewa Moraine would be my last segment, and Nicole could hike it with me. I arranged a shuttle for the day before to do Firth Lake, the CR, and Chippewa River.

I finished the trail on July 30, 2023. Nicole and I met and hiked Harwood Lakes, and LuAnn met us at the Chippewa Moraine trailhead with ice cold water and snacks! We hiked to the Obey center where we took a long break under a tree and chatted and reminisced for nearly an hour. Then it was time to finish the final 2 miles. It was perfect weather and a beautiful trail, with my 2 dear friends and hiking partners. It was a perfect ending to this long, incredible journey.