

Ice Age Trail Thousand Miler Essay – A look back at our journey

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My wife Sharon and I decided to start hiking the Ice Age Trail with the goal of completing the entire trail before the 2023 Atlas is released. In just under two years, we reached our goal by hiking a total of 95 days to complete the 1,111 mile journey.

It is hard to believe that some of our big hiking days were just under 30 miles in a day. In the beginning we did not hike as many miles, but as time passed, we kept increasing our mileage and changing our strategies. We started out doing short out and back hikes and quickly determined that takes too much time hiking the same segment twice. So, we started taking two cars or bikes. We left bikes or a car on one end of the trail and drove back to start our hike on the other end of trail which allowed us to hike the trail once and bike or drive back to our car. As some of the trail segments took several hours to drive to, we spent many weekends camping near the trail to spend more time hiking and less time driving. As the weather became colder, the number of campers in the campgrounds dwindled and once we were the only campers in the entire Interstate State Park campground.

Hiking through different weather conditions was always interesting and rewarding. We hiked in cold, heat, humidity, wind, rain and snow. Sometimes it is hard to step out the door, however whenever the conditions are the worst you will always be grateful that you put one foot in front of the other to start the hike. Some of the most memorable hikes are the ones in the worst conditions and you will always be glad that you stepped outside after you finished. One of our last hiking segments was 13.4 miles and it rained for 13.3 miles in cold temperatures. The other .1 we were still being hit by water being knocked off the trees from the wind. A hike that will always be remembered. Winter hiking is something we really did not do until we started this goal of completing the Ice Age Trail. It was incredible to be out early in the morning to discover we were not the first ones on the trail. When you are the first steps on the trail after a snow fall it is pretty special.

It is hard to pick what my favorite segments of the trail would be. There are so many to choose from that would fall into the favorite category. The diversity of the trail segments is incredible. The one area that always pops into my head that I want to go back to is the Straight Lake segment area. The water there just is impressive to hike past. I also enjoyed seeing all of the prairies. Came across a IAT crew burning prairies and that was impressive. There are segments that we want to revisit when the prairies are in full bloom like in the Cross Plains/Madison area.

I was always curious as to how some of the trail sections are maintained. On a hike we heard this loud noise of machinery. Came around a corner and came face to face to a land owner and their Bobcat with the most intense mower deck that was just eating the trail. We stopped, talked and thanked them for clearing the trail. Hiking in the tall grass during Tick season is not always the most fun.

It is amazing how many different places and communities we experienced because the Ice Age trail took us there. Dylan's Dairy Restaurant is a special place that we visited a few times in Cornell, WI while camping at Brunet Island State Park. The Chef/Owner and Waitress there were just amazing and the history makes it even more special. We will certainly be visiting again. The Mondeaux Dam Lodge was discovered on a long hiking day when I was running low on water and stumbled across this gem of a place. Great place to grab something to drink and eat.

Popping in at the various Ice Age Interpretive Centers was always fun. The view at the DAVID R. OBEY ICE AGE INTERPRETIVE CENTER is something that I will never forget. We watched the short video at the INTERSTATE PARK ICE AGE INTERPRETIVE CENTER that was informative to me. I am not a techie when it comes to the landscape in technical terms. I am out there just appreciating the beauty of the trail. Having a little tutorial was most welcome to understand the different types of terrain we hiked on.

We drive to a cabin on the Mississippi River regularly during the summer and our route takes us past the IAT Headquarter Building in Cross Plains. Since starting the IAT, we were excited to pass the building and made sure to point out the headquarters building as we passed it on each drive. This turned into a standing joke with our kids and other family members. Every time we pass by, we take a picture of the building and send saying, "check out this cool building."

The finish at the Eastern terminus will always be special. Our good friends setup a surprise finish line for us with IAT banner with homemade yellow blazes with soccer horn blowing as we approached. It was awesome to enjoy the finish with friends and fellow hikers of the IAT.

The completion of Ice Age Trail with my wife in just under two years is an accomplishment that we will always be proud of. It certainly opens the door to the future what's next question (Superior Trail). Now that our goal is completed, we will certainly be revisiting sections of the IAT trail on a regular basis to explore in different seasons. Each hike on the trail will always be different!

I have to give a big thanks to all of the people that support and maintain this incredible trail.