

Claire Kopetsky  
IAT Thru Hike Summary  
5/9/21-7/11/21

The Ice Age Trail is flatter, shorter, and full of more pavement than any other National Scenic Trail. But it has its own set of challenges. Ticks, flooded trails, unmowed grass. The isolation of not passing a single hiker for days or a gas station to restock food. Ticks. The confusion of the “no trespassing” sign and the chapter coordinator who emails you to tell you that the landowner says hikers can pass beyond the sign. Ticks. The long connecting road routes, which usually mean no shade or benches for a really, really long time. The limited camping options in some regions. And ticks.

This trail is also unique because of the community. The chapter coordinators have so much pride for the trail. There were many who told me to make sure to stop at a certain bench to enjoy the view; to make sure I didn't miss an erratic or a bed of rare wildflowers. I ran into 70 kids from the Lodi Saunters middle school program. Most of them have already section hiked a hundred miles of the trail! In Antigo, I met the parks director who excitedly shared that she just submitted paperwork for Antigo to become a designated IAT trail town. Outside a gas station in Lodi, I met a man whose family donated over 80 acres to the Ice Age Trail. These are encounters that I doubt would happen on the AT or PCT.

My favorite part of the Ice Age Trail is being able to share it with my dad. A year and a half ago (just before the pandemic started) I started exploring segments around Madison and bought myself a guidebook. My parents joined me for a few hikes and I shared with them what I knew about the trail and the alliance. My dad began to deepen his interest and go on his own hikes around Milwaukee or we would meet halfway and hike a segment. With his own guidebook, he followed my thru hike on the map and listened to my stories and challenges. My dad hopes to section hike the entire trail. It's so exciting to me that a father-daughter duo can share 1000 Miler Status together even though we got there by different paces and at different points in our lives.

As a woman, hiking alone added another dimension of fear. I went into the hike more afraid of people than animals, bugs, or the physical strains. Thankful, I had mostly all positive encounters with my fellow humans. My first trail magic experience was at Dylan's in Cornell where someone bought my lunch. The trail magic continued just outside Merrill where Ruby and Bruce Jaeks (chapter coordinators) picked me up on the coldest day of spring (33 degrees!) when it rained (or snowed or sleeted) all day. They invited me into their home and fed me steaming hot ham and corn chowder and ice cream drizzled in maple syrup. On the Lumbercamp segment, I met another woman thru hiking westbound. We shared stories and suggestions and she gave me some of her extra snacks. That Ziploc bag of snacks with a mini Snickers bar hidden inside, was the highlight of my entire week. In Antigo someone bought my lunch and the parks director

drove me around to run errands and restock my pack. A week later, temperatures were in the 90s and my days were full of many hot road walks between Ringle and Deerfield. A couple who lived right next to Hartman Creek State Park offered me their guest bedroom along with air conditioning, a washing machine, and more ice cream. On another road walk, a farm worker in the middle of nowhere came up to me with two cold bottles of water on a blazing hot, sunny day. Almost immediately after I reached the halfway point at Mekan River, I ran into the Lodi Saunters middle schoolers. They were excited to meet me and offered me cold water, a round of applause, and all of their extra snacks and candy. A semi truck driver handed me \$100 bill at a rest stop. John and Charlotte at Rendezvous Paddle let me camp in their backyard after I enjoyed a delicious dinner and beer at their restaurant. A local walker joined me for a mile and great conversation as I headed from Holy Hill to Pike Lake. A motorcyclist in West Bend pulled over and handed me a cold root beer and water bottle. The staff at Rumors Roadhouse BBQ in Elkhart Lake sent me on my way with a full pack of ice and a huge bag of watermelon.

All this magic along with the support of my friends and family and the beautiful Wisconsin landscape kept me going. During my first three weeks of hiking, I was hard on myself and doubted that I would finish. Every day got better and I learned to slow down, take more breaks, and savor those random Dollar General oases full of treats. And I quickly realized that a huge ice cream cone could turn even the worst days around.