

## The Ice Age Trail

My partner and I began this trail by walking rather haphazardly through the Dane County portions. We got serious however, when our friends, Kate and Fiona wanted to do the whole of the trail. This meant that we could have two cars on the trek which would make walking sections in one direction possible, without all the hassle of biking back to our beginning spot each time. We still did some of this, but not much. The four of us began at the Western terminus-four women, ages 58, 65, 70 and 77. We finished 5 years later.

So, thoughts on the trip. I have never been a person to take challenges like this. Sure, I walk, but underneath it all, I held a belief that I just might not be able to make it, physically. A big learning for me was that if I keep myself focused on the near ground with my head down, I would eventually make the long haul. It's the intimidation of the steep uphill and distant goals that make me question. This has been for me, a significant life lesson.

On several parts of the trail we encountered the horrible joy of hard times. For example, we walked several days in pretty much constant rain. After a few such days of this walking I found myself almost dancing along the drier spots unperturbed by my questionable sense of balance. Another of these rainy days we stopped under some trees for a break. Raindrops were coming down fat and splashy. I noticed small common puff ball mushrooms on the forest floor. Each mushroom exhaled a puff of spores when a rain drop struck it. And, there were those times of falling deeply in the mud. One such day, walking beside a big logging truck parked in the woods, I fell through a piece of ice a full leg down in cold water. I had to use my hands to hoist myself out.

And one day, there were ticks. I mean a lot of ticks.

And we ate many lunches with mosquito nets over our heads. (Sage advice, do not spit with a net over your head).

And one day, on a hot day, we noted that the trail sign ahead was underwater. We chose to "walk around" this problem adding five miles to the hike.

I began to love and learn about the plants and rocks on the trail. Of course, who doesn't love a hillside full of trillium, or mayapples, trout lilies, Jacks in the pulpit, ginger. On a larger scale I was awed to find myself in a cathedral of eastern hemlock trees. (These trees are getting more rare as our state warms and they cling to cool spaces). On one hike I became disgusted when seeing a golden colored rock close to the Dells of the Eau Claire. I assumed it was painted. Instead, I found that growing on the rock was "gold dust lichen". That turned it gorgeous for me.

It's almost embarrassing to admit how much I came to love club mosses. Indeed. These tiny treelike forms show themselves most in the late fall and early spring when there isn't much else around. They have descriptive names - fan clubmoss, prickly tree, interrupted, flat-branched tree, and Hedwig's (?) fringe leaf moss. I learned that their Paleolithic ancestors grew to enormous heights and when they died became the coal that we have in our country.

There we <sup>see</sup> kettle lakes along the trail, far too numerous to name or mention. There are springs bubbling up from way way deep. The sheer number of erratics was so overwhelming that we christened ourselves "the Erratics".

The kindness of the people along the way was heartening. We were given water and offered a seat under the trees and had our pictures taken and were given advice on which parts of the trail truly were and weren't problematic. At one point a trail angel had re-routed us so that we could walk the trail without spending all our time in ankle deep water/mud.

I love that the trail goes through small towns. We visited the Rutabaga Festival, a cranberry bog, witnessed a maple syrup operation and had many many coffees in local shops. We witnessed one of the most talented bartenders mixing drinks and twirling bottles at a pub/superclub. We ate at Mexican Restaurants (no self respecting small town goes without one) and rested at benches and on swinging bridges. We saw amazing creativity and artwork. Who would have expected that? A display of chainsaw art that consisted of maybe 10 poles decorated up and down with old chain saws. We saw cow skulls indicating the Bermuda Triangle. We saw a lot. And we stayed in motels and airbnbs of all stripes. Each with its own character.

The trail allowed me to enjoy being outside when many of my friends were hunkered down with Covid. Instead, I had to keep going. And, I take for granted feeling deeply relaxed walking in the woods. It's a physical response for me now. I can't do without it.

Thanks to all of you, especially the legion of volunteers, who work so tirelessly to make this experience available to the public!

Liz Lusk