

Ice Age Trail Therapy

I am from Bloomer Wisconsin Chippewa county and have had a cabin in my family on Lower Long Lake there since the 1940's. In high school in the 70's there were some rudimentary sections of the IAT around which I hiked. This is now in the Chippewa Moraine segments. In some places there were no trails where there was supposed to be, one so bad I bushwhacked with a friend to Cornell. My mother picked me up on one section and was chastised to never do that again as I found 35 ticks in her car on the drive home. This was my introduction to the IAT now 50 years ago.

Fast forward to 2019 and my wife and I decided we would slowly start to section hike the entire trail, No hurry. We have lived in Wausau for years now, and have done all of Marathon County trails but decided to start west. We started at the beautiful St Croix terminus and proceeded camping through the Straight Lake segments, camping and occasionally hotels.

We planned on restarting in the spring. I was still working as a surgeon. Two very important events happened that spring 1. COVID-19 hit, and 2. I was diagnosed with a very aggressive type of prostate cancer.

I therefore retired April 1, 2020 and started to seriously segment hike from then on. I underwent robotic radical cancer surgery Juneteenth (6/19/2020) and started radiation therapy supplements in September. This combined with antiandrogen therapy left me with not much I could do. But by God, I could walk. Even if it was a few miles a day. I hit the trail when I could.

Initially my wife Carrie (and Jake and Bob Uecker our dogs) helped shuttle, hike, and would set up our camps, like Mondeaux Flowage(I never knew it was there). After a while I would bike ahead, and hike back to my car. I generally followed a west to east route. I camped up north mostly . Mostly hotels or friends farther south, thank you Mitchel and Tom Wood. I became hooked. Checking off the segments. Planning the routes. I would go for several days. Around Madison I got my youngest son to help and hike. It got very hot as I rounded Janesville and Whitwater in 2021. 95 degrees every day. Every day was an experience.

I have lived most of my life in Wisconsin, yet I did not really know the state. I learned as I went and every corner, town, view had something to teach me. And wildlife. I came upon two separate bears in Lincoln county, a family of mink in the Kettle Moraine, hundreds of turkeys, deer, birds, etc. My favorite may be the sighting of several rare karner blue butterfly alighting on lupines, or monarchs on milkweed in the prairies of the south. And who doesn't like indigo buntings and Baltimore orioles. I hiked in all four seasons but mostly in summer and fall, fall was my favorite time. Too many mosquitos, ticks, and mud in the spring. I ate some absolutely outstanding food, often at the local restaurants I found but it was just as likely it was peanuts and energy bars at Quick Trips.

I met some interesting people on the trail although I must say I had it to myself. I met a young woman from Chicago segment hiking on the weekends, and two thru hikers one whose trail name was Constatine (he has great videos), who is a professional hiker, and a man (in Iowa segment) set out to lose weight hiking in crocs as they were easier on his knees. Neither of these fellow hikers had seen or heard a sandhill crane before and I had to laugh at their descriptions.

I kept a journal and map. I joined the thousand miler facebook group (sadly signed off during my social media purge for the good of the country). What I learned about Wisconsin and glaciers from the trip would fill pages. I've driven by Portage, WI innumerable times going to college in Madison, but it never dawned on me it was a link between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers and how close they are, nor a canal had been dug between them in the early 1800s. Or the beauty of Gibraltar Rock. Or how the Ice Age Shaped this beautiful state.

I had one last road segment to do between Kewaunee and Algoma that I didn't do last year because I saw the salmon running in the rivers so I went fishing instead on the Kewaunee River. I went back and finished on a blustery December day, 12/15/2022. As I said I would bike ahead and then hike the road back to my car but when I got back to my bike in Algoma, it was gone, I could see the footprints of the thief and the tire tracks of my bike. So my final day was somber losing my wheels which had become a friend.

I titled this essay Ice Age Trail Therapy and I credit this hike, all the ups and downs, as getting me through one of the most trying times in my life. The hours and hours I spent alone hiking gave me

peace. Whatever comes next doesn't matter, I was at peace on the IAT. Anyone up for the AT or PCT now? Thru hike?

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