

Marta Weldon

Gratitude, inspiration, perseverance, and awe.

Hiking the Ice Age Trail changed my life. What started as a way to cope with work and other stress during the pandemic became a joyful challenge. In August 2022, my husband, Michael Weldon, got the idea from somewhere to explore the Trail in Potawatomi State Park. It was an easy drive from our home in Appleton.

The hike was difficult for us. Potawatomi State Park was beautiful, but we'd underestimated how far it was to the end of the Sturgeon Bay Segment where we'd left our car. We were clearly out of shape without proper footwear and enough to drink.

The next weekend we were on the Trail again, determined to keep going. Mike found various Ice Age Trail Facebook groups with advice, encouragement, and a new community of people to connect with.

After a few weekends, Mike suggested we only take one car and hike towards each other. I was not happy about this: a single woman hiking alone, not being able to share the adventure together, and what would happen if one of us got into trouble? However, taking two cars meant being alone driving to and from the Trail anyway, not to mention the cost of gas and miles on our vehicles. There were no Trail Angels at that time to help shuttle us. Walking towards one another, averaging three-to-five-mile sections each time became our method of hiking. We completed about 75% of the entire IAT doing this – Mike hiking east to west and me enjoying the Trail west to east! Meeting about halfway each time, we'd share what we'd experienced with delight and cautionary tales. I gained a sixth sense about when I should be meeting Mike along the way and sure enough, I'd hear him singing at the top of his lungs coming towards me. This was his favorite bear repellent. I never felt unsafe and often enjoyed the solitude. Riding home together and sharing our favorite moments each week became an important ritual in our lives.

Once we reached the Western portion of the Trail we started hiking with other people. The snow, lack of cell service, wolves, bears, and getting hurt while hiking were always on my mind.

In February 2021, we naively set out to hike the Holy Hill Segment in bitterly cold weather. We were dressed well and thought we were prepared. Mike is diabetic and without knowing it got dehydrated and lacked enough food for strenuously slogging through deep snow across open fields in the wind. He managed to call me and 911 before blacking out. I was hiking towards him from the Kettle-Moraine State Forest Pike Lake Unit parking lot. I must thank the Washington County Sheriff's Office, Hartford Dispatch 911, and the fire, ambulance, and snow teams. The staff at Aurora Medical Center Hartford Emergency Room were wonderful. Gratefully, Mike suffered no damage, and many lessons were learned! Our entire family was suddenly invested in our journey. Our adult children got us GPS service to use "at all times!"

My favorite time of day to hike was always in the late afternoon. I loved the glowing red-orange sun, long shadows on the Trail and CRs, and the significance of another hike ending. One November day, Dory Witzeling and I were walking on Schepp Rd./CTH U south from Levee Rd. that runs along the Wisconsin River. The road winds through farmland ringed with soaring granite bluffs. Gazing west in the setting sun we saw hundreds of Sandhill Cranes circling the fields and settling into the black earth. At that moment my respect for Wisconsin's natural beauty soared!

Many wonderful and sorrowful events happened during our journey. For two years hiking the Ice Age Trail offered solace, peace, and good company, no matter what was happening in our lives. We truly celebrated as we ended at Interstate Park surrounded by friends and family and the spectacular beauty of Dalles of the St. Croix River. I'm ever grateful to have experienced the Ice Age Trail.