

## Making Connections on Trail Marked by White Lines:



Hiking the Ice Age Trail from December 2015 to July 2021

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Anyone who hikes the Ice Age Trail talks enthusiastically about the fauna, flora, and geological features of Wisconsin. Each hike offers lessons on a myriad of topics such as beavers, butterflies, derechos, erratics, fossils, flowers, and ticks. However, in addition to traversing nature, the Ice Age Trail is routed through cities and towns and along rural roads. The designers of the Ice Age Trail intentionally placed the trail near urban areas, hoping that providing close and easy access would increase use of the trail. My epiphany while hiking was that the proximity of the trail to people, either townspeople or rural residents along the connectors, enhances the chances that people from distant parts of the state might also find connections. I owe this realization to a chance meeting on the Marquette County Connector one summer day when I paused to talk to a man working in his farm yard carving a totem pole. Our conversation

meandered, much like a trail in the woods, through many topics. When I was about to leave, soft spoken Marcus Frank said, “I was surprised you stopped to talk to me.”

“I’m glad I did,” I said. “It was great to meet you and learn about the totem pole, the trees, the farm, and the area.”

**“When you talk to people” he said, “you find that most people are friendly.”**

That simple, frank, statement became my steady companion on every subsequent hike. I don’t make it my mission to talk at length to every person, but I am friendly and aware, looking for signs that someone might want to talk to a hiker wearing a reflective vest passing a house or farm. Over and over, a simple wave or hello to a person raking leaves, sitting on a porch, or even passing in a car led to a fascinating, informative, or heartwarming conversation. “Connector” is the perfect name for the routes that make it possible to connect to the people who live in Wisconsin today, as you walk in the footsteps of those who lived here ten thousand years ago.



Marcus Frank, Marquette County, August 18, 2017

As a result of my positive experiences hiking connectors, I learned to approach road miles with enthusiasm and optimism. Knowing that many 1000 miler wannabees merely tolerate road miles and other hikers eschew them completely, I am devoting this essay to the joy of hiking connectors, hoping to inspire an appreciation for the miles marked not by yellow blazes, but by white stripes.

I stopped at the Fern Avenue farmyard on that summer day because I was surprised to see a totem pole being carved in the middle of Wisconsin. There I met 88 year old Marcus Frank, who had seen a tree on this farm grow from a sapling he planted with his father to the giant pine he was carving. As we talked I learned that his woodworking passion included making an exquisite barn quilt just the year before. The conversation turned to other topics and Marcus Frank described deer conservation in the county and taught me about sandpoint wells, which are common in areas of fast draining sandy soil left behind by glaciers. As I walked that day, I realized that my moments with Marcus had enhanced my entire hike, and I decided to create a mindset or framework to shape future connector hikes. I settled upon four questions to consider before the start of any connector and to guide me on the journey:

1. Who will I meet?
2. What will surprise me?
3. What will I learn?
4. How are the lives of the people here affected by the terrain the glaciers bequeathed them?

Framing each hike with these questions has made every connector hike an adventure. Rarely have I finished a hike without answers. In addition, over time, I

developed hiking strategies and activities that added fun to road miles. The top ten are briefly listed below. I have also created an expanded version with adventures and photos from connectors corresponding to each of the ten tips.

### Ten Tips for Hiking Connectors on the Ice Age Trail

1. **Be comfortable.** Check the elevation change, the wind direction and speed, and the direction of the connector. Is it mostly north/south or east/west? I prefer maximizing the amount of trail hiked downhill with the wind and sun at my back. Carry a small pack of emergency supplies. Day hikers, especially on roads, are known to be least prepared for emergencies.
2. **Plan a length of hike that leaves time to take a break** when the unexpected happens and you need to pause to meet an amazing local resident or pursue an adventure. Connectors are populated by creative and wise people who are eager to share knowledge about both the nature and history of the part of the trail they call home.
3. **Be an ambassador for the Ice Age Trail.** Smile and wave at people in their yards and say, "I'm hiking the Ice Age Trail past your house/farm/business; your road/farm/land/dog is beautiful." Don't be surprised if this leads to a conversation. Be interested in people and what they are doing and you will discover you can connect through shared interests in ancestry, farming, art, books, geology, architecture, boating, birding, pets, kids, and even weather.

4. **Learn what you can about living in the area by observing with your five senses.** The glaciers affected the land in various ways leaving diverse beauty, but also diverse resources that influence the ways of life for the people who live there.
5. **Keep an eye open for animals.** If you keep track you may discover you will see more animals as you hike connectors than on the trail, and I don't mean just dogs.
6. **Carry a bag and pick up cans.** It's a nice way to say thank you to the people in the area, but I guarantee this practice will lead to other discoveries and conversations.
7. **Look for glacial features.** Large formations such as moraines, eskers, and kames are easier to appreciate at a distance. Marvel at the gift of water from the Ice Age as you cross many bridges and pass countless lakes. Think of Wisconsin's rich logging industry and the many logs floated on these rivers. You may want to stop and kayak.
8. **Consider what's in a name.** Find the humor and history in the names of towns and streets, rivers and lakes, and even on tombstones in cemeteries you pass. Also enjoy the whimsical and humorous signs local residents post in yards, on trees, and next to mailboxes.
9. **Carry a book you have finished** in your backpack so you can take-from and add-to the many Little Free Libraries you will encounter along the way. The first Little Free Library was created by Todd Bol in Hudson, Wisconsin. There are now more than 100,000 Little Free Libraries world wide.

**10. Create your own fun with your hiking buddies.** Write limericks, haikus, or songs about the trail, do a ROYGBIV rainbow hunt of colors on the connector, carry a stuffed mammoth or other creature to pose in fun photos, and simply enjoy that you can often walk side by side and talk on a lightly traveled connecting route.

As you hike connectors expect the unexpected. Be open to the possibilities. If there is an opportunity for a conversation or adventure, take it. You might think you should keep hiking and come back another day, but remind yourself, you might never pass this way again. Pause to savor every inch of your 1200 miles. Remember, “Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished” (Lao Tzu). Milk becomes butter, wooly caterpillars morph into moths, bees create honey, sap becomes syrup, cans are recycled, alpaca fur is woven into warm blankets, librarians transform children into readers, past meets present...and it happens, all in good time, and good times, on the Ice Age Trail.



Sandpoint Well, Frank Farm, Marquette County