

My Ice Age Trail Journey

Matthew Mitschke & Bob

Part One

April 23 2015 - May 28 2022

Part Two

September 16 2022 - May 13 2023

Part One

In May of 2012, my pup Bob was diagnosed with canine intestinal lymphangiectasia, a fairly rare disorder that is fairly debilitating with a low success rate of recovery. I will not go into the details of the condition here, but it caused extreme weight loss, chronic lethargy, and constant trips to the vet to get fluids and nutrients pumped into him. My once healthy 70 pound baby boy lost weight until he was down under 50 pounds, and no longer had the energy to make it much more than around the block. I vowed that if he recovered we would go on some adventures together and make some memories while there was still time.

After nearly three years of treatment, extreme dietary management, and lots of rebuilding his strength, we were ready for some “real” walks again. I started looking for hiking trails in the area, and stumbled upon a link for the Monches section of the Ice Age Trail, probably on Google Maps. As far as I can remember now, I had never heard of the IAT at the time, but since I had grown up near there decided that would be our first trip. That day was April 23, 2015, and we hiked from County Line Rd to where the trail first meets the Oconomowoc River and back, about 2.5 miles round trip.

Bob LOVED it, every second of it. I realized I was out of shape. But I got home and did some more research, and the next day we did a little bit of Scuppernong. Pike Lake the day after that, and then a bit of Holy Hill. I realized that this trail is what we were going to do together, not fully understanding what 1,000 miles was going to entail, but it didn't matter. This was going to be our grand adventure. I sold my full sized truck that week and got a more fuel efficient Subaru as I knew we were going to be putting on a lot of road miles.

On May 19, 2015 my mom was in town visiting from Arizona. I asked her if she'd be willing to drive me “for a hike”. (We were about fifty miles in at this point, and all of our hikes had been out-and-backs, so in actuality we had hiked a bit over a hundred miles.) She agreed, and we met at the Blue Spring eastern end lot, and she drove us to Duffin Road. This was also going to be our first 10 mile day, and anyone that's shuttled a hiker knows that the drive always seems like you're going a really long way. I could tell she was getting nervous, asking about wild animals, crazy people in the woods, and other unlikely disasters, and made me promise to call her immediately when I was done. When I got back I saw she had made a post on her

Facebook page telling the world that I was hiking 1,000 miles that year with my dog. We were really committed now, no turning back.

I realized that summer that Bob was not a “nice weather” hiker. Any day when the temperature was above 70° was too hot for him, so we slowed way down, only to pick back up in fall. When I look back at all of our hikes we spent the vast majority of our time on the trail in late fall, winter, and the mud season. It made things difficult as the drives grew longer, and the days grew shorter. Still, we passed 500 miles together in spring of 2016. We wouldn't be able to complete the trail in a year, but I thought we'd certainly finish in two.

Hiking the trail had also uncovered a love of photography for me. People were really impressed (or at least interested) in some of the photos I'd been taking along the way with my phone, and I stepped it up a notch and got myself a camera for Christmas that year. This also took up more of my time, and I took long road trips with Bob across the country to photograph out west, and up and down the lakefront on weekends. We were still doing fun things together, so that was great, but it also started to cut into my hiking time.

Life got busy. In 2017 we only hiked two days. In 2018 and 2019 we didn't hike at all. Work was busy, sections were now really far, I got married, and I never felt like I could go far from home. I was discouraged as I watched some of my human hiking partners finish, and felt that I probably wasn't going to get it done. Bob was getting a little older, and I told myself I was worried that something could happen in the northwoods, but in reality it was just an excuse I think. He of course didn't care about the goal, but I'll always be sad knowing that we could have had a few more memories if I didn't stop hiking during that time.

Well, next came 2020. What better way to “social distance” than to be on a hiking trail? In April, as things were hitting hard, we headed up to Turtle Rock and did the full section, and looped back to the car. Almost 10 miles of fairly difficult terrain, and Bob was a champ. I was reinspired to start again, and we picked things up when we could get away. However, Father Time was taking his toll now for real, and although Bob still loved our trips I could tell we weren't going to finish together.

In May of 2022 we took our last mini road trip, with stops in the Keweenaw peninsula, Porcupine Mountains, and finally the Obey Center in the Chippewa Moraine. On the 28th, we hiked our last new section together, less than a mile, and I had to carry Bob partly up the last hill. When we finished we sat out on the lawn overlooking the prairie, with a nice cool breeze blowing, and he just looked out over the landscape and looked so at peace and content. We spent the summer trying to heal him, but his legs kept giving out and getting worse. In August he could no longer walk, and it was time to say goodbye to the greatest hiking partner and best friend I could have ever wished for.

Part Two

After saying goodbye to Bob, I knew I had to finish the trail. I waited until I had his ashes back so I could carry him along with me, and in September went and hiked the remainder of Sturgeon Bay. It was hard, I'm glad no one was on the trails those days as I cried a lot, but I was carrying my boy along with me and keeping him close to my heart. I was motivated, had less than 200 miles left, and planned to finish in time to be a "Thousand Miler" before the spring conference.

My final hike was going to be finishing Chippewa Moraine, where I had left off with Bob on his last hike. I had planned it perfectly, a three day trip in mid-December, and had to do Southern Blue Hills, the CR, and Chippewa. This time it wasn't Father Time, but Mother Nature who was going to have her say. A major snow and ice storm had made the Blue Hills impassable, with thigh deep snow and trees broken and bent, blocking the trail. I headed home, a bit disheartened, and decided I was going to wait until the trilliums were reemerging so I could finish in better weather.

I planned my trip, booked a nice little cabin AirBnB for May 11-13, and it turned out to be perfect. I hiked solo on Thursday, finishing up the CR between Potato Creek SNA and Weyerhaeuser. Friday a friend joined me to hike the Blue Hills, and Saturday I again hiked solo for my final section. It was a bit surreal after so much time, I found myself walking slower than I ever had, but it was the perfect few days to finish. As I got closer to the end, I realized I didn't want to be done, I wanted to stay in this beautiful piece of our world for longer, so I added a few more miles before finally returning to my vehicle. I left some of Bob's ashes near the bridge at North Shattuck Lake, as I know he'd love to swim there, and more on the lawn at the Obey Center where he rested after his last hike.

It's difficult to talk about this experience with non-hikers. For me the trail was an escape, at the beginning from Bob's illness, and later on from his absence. I occasionally hiked with others, and have met some incredible individuals that way (honestly, I think most hikers understand the reasons for the journey in a way others simply cannot, and there is no judgment, only support). However, most of my trip was just myself and Bob. We saw so much of the state that no one else will ever see (I am very partial to backroads, and never taking the same way twice if I can avoid it) We had some easy days, some difficult days, but every single one of them was good.

As someone commented on one of my completion posts, I'm now a member of the "what the heck do I do now" club.

I have some ideas.

Favorite Moments of Bob's Journey

- Wading and drinking out of every stream we crossed
- Swimming in remote kettle lakes and beaver ponds

- Watching the cows at every farm we passed on the drive, and coming face to face with a few of them on connecting routes (sometimes we had to stop for twenty minutes just so he could sit and watch them)
- Snow days, oh how he loved them
- Hiking through Lake Michigan at Point Beach (the water was so high when we did it, it was the only option)
- His encounters with the snapping turtle on Stoney Ridge, and the porcupine on Sand Creek (neither led to any harm to either party)
- Listening to the frogs, or other sounds at night when we camped. He had a little muffled bark back at them every time, which sounded like he was trying to be polite to anyone else sleeping at the campground
- Just the trail in general, he led every step of the way, never missing a turn
- Laying his head in my lap on the long drives home, after snacks of course

Favorite Moments of Matt's Journey

- ^ All of the above list, this hike was for Bob as much as it was for me, and him being able to do this trail brought me all of the fulfillment I need
- The drives, the small towns, the beauty of the WI rural landscape
- Hiking with the few great friends I made along the way
- Taking pictures, although carrying a camera can be a pain I also have those visuals to remember forever
- The stillness and quiet when you get far enough away from the road that you can really just immerse yourself in the nature around you
- The planning, the mapping, and the feeling of accomplishment after a long successful day
- Hiking on top of eskers - so cool that the trail runs over these features
- Favorite sections - St Croix Falls, Trade River, Hemlock Creek, S. Blue Hills, Mondeaux Esker, Plover River, Hartman Creek, Mecan River, Sauk Point, Lodi Marsh, Arbor Ridge, Parnell, Point Beach
- The generosity of the volunteers and really everyone associated with the trail that helped with maintenance, offering rides, assistance, and encouragement