

## Thousand Miler Essay

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When I decided to start hiking the Ice Age Trail, I was in Yellowstone National Park on my honeymoon. It was August 2020. I had just planned and unplanned 4 different iterations of a wedding that fit into current COVID restrictions and my personal comfort level. I had just finished my Master's program. And the summer education program that I was coordinating had just wrapped up its final week. I realized, while adventuring through Yellowstone, that I needed a goal, a hobby, something to work towards. With my limited cell phone data, I ordered my IAT Guidebook and Thousand Miler Map while watching some bison cross the road before us.

Back in Madison, I made a list of reasons why I'm doing this:

- Be active and get outside more
- See more of Wisconsin
- Gain some confidence in myself
- Have a new hobby

It's fun to look back at this list – the Trail checked each of these boxes beyond what I had imagined when I somewhat naively scribbled these in a notebook.

**Be active and get outside more:** It's so easy to be okay with spending every weekend at home watching Netflix *especially* when the weather is less than ideal. Thanks to the Trail, I hiked 18 miles in a foot of snow including the challenging Mondeaux Esker segment, I walked in the pouring rain on the Firth Lake segment, and I've spent hours outside when the temperature was below zero. There is so much beauty and adventure to be had in the winter, the rain, and I suppose even the heat and humidity. I am also amazed at what my body can do. My longest hike was 27 miles in one day, which I did with a fellow hiker on a bit of a whim. We ended after sunset – an experience I won't soon forget. Finally, as someone who is extremely passionate about wildlife, I was grateful to get outside and see some really cool animals and signs of animals. I have seen 3 porcupines, 0 bears but 1 bear paw print, so many cool beaver dams (beavers are my new favorite animal), 40 swans hanging out on the Mackenzie Creek, and countless eagles - which just never get old to me.

**See more of Wisconsin:** I have always loved exploring local businesses – breweries, bars, unique stores, coffee shops. This part of the Trail did not disappoint. I loved exploring the local communities almost as much as I liked hiking on the Trail. What I didn't expect was how much I would love talking with local people – either sharing more information about the Trail or learning about the local community. One of my favorite experiences was talking with local

farmers while enjoying beer and pizza at Porkie's in Weyerhauser before going back to the Country Inn Motel. The owners of this motel are extremely supportive of the Trail and hikers. The magic of the Trail really does extend beyond the actual footpath.

**Gain some confidence in myself:** I am extremely grateful to the Trail for pushing my boundaries. It's easy to only hike where and when I'm comfortable. But the Trail pushed me beyond that. Looking back at my journal, I wrote that on my first few hikes on Brooklyn Wildlife, Indian Lake, and other hikes in the Madison-area, I was super nervous to be hiking alone. I even wrote that on the Brooklyn Wildlife segment I took along some bear spray for peace of mind. I know... it sounds outrageous, but anxiety makes you do some crazy things. For one of my final hikes, I snowshoed 30 miles alone in Polk County. I also camped by myself for the first time in September 2021. To start it was out of necessity and to save money. I was terrified. Since then, I've camped alone many times. Now, I love the time alone and being able to enjoy the quiet, the night sky, or a book and a fire before heading out in the morning to set out on a hike. The Trail challenged me *a lot*, but holy cow, I did it!

**Have a new hobby:** Finally, I've always sort of enjoyed hiking and being outside, but the Trail really pushed me beyond just being a somewhat passive hiker. I know more about shoes, gear, the National Trails System, hiker culture, and more than I ever knew existed. Hiking is now a huge part of my life (both personal and professional at this point). I admittedly will often throw myself into my career dropping anything for work. The Trail showed me how ridiculous that really is and what I can accomplish if I prioritize my life outside of work. It is very bittersweet to be done with the Trail. But, the Trail showed me that there is still so much adventure to be had. Up next, I hope to hike sections of the North Country Trail – including the Superior Hiking Trail, travel to every county in Wisconsin, and visit every Wisconsin State Park.

I can't finish this essay without mentioning the amazing community that supports this Trail. I have met so many inspiring hikers and dedicated volunteers. The Trail has a way of bringing together a lot of really great people who are all working towards a common goal. Thank you, thank you, thank you!!