

## My Ice Age Trail Journey

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I am not quite sure what got me started on the Ice Age Trail. I had hoped to hike the Appalachian Trail when I was 18, and had planned my route, drop offs, resupply packages, etc., but then I got accepted as an exchange student and that adventure took precedence. Then on my return college and life took over. So I had always hoped to hike a long trail, but it hadn't happened yet.

Leap forward about 40 years, and I went to my friend Pio's Delta Beer Lab, where the charity of the month was the Ice Age Trail Alliance. Pio had completed the AT just before opening DBL, and I loved how his pack and boots hang in the lab. Because he pays his employees a living wage, all tips go to a charity. We went to support the lab and to find out more about the IATA. I had never heard of the IAT, despite having lived in WI for 30 years. Most of my hiking had always been done on the east coast, and while I was working as a teacher, I didn't have much extra time or energy to hike. I was middle aged, out of shape, had been retired for four years, and getting back into hiking intrigued me.

That night, I got a brief introduction to the IAT, and I guess that was all it took. It was January, so I didn't think that was hiking weather (little did I know what the following winter would look like), but I ordered the Guidebook, the Atlas, and the Databook, and I started reading and doing a little planning.

And then the pandemic hit. Everything changed. All of my physical activities (swimming, pickleball, exercise classes) were closed. I was spending long hours at home with my wife working from home, and I was going stir crazy. IAT to the rescue!

On May 22, 2020, I decided to start small, with a little loop (Springfield Hill) that was short and allowed me to not do an out and back or need a shuttle. After completing Springfield Hill, I thought I would just do the Highway 12 bit, to get that awfulness out of the way and not have to come back to it. And then I just kept walking. When I was halfway to Indian Lake, I called my wife and asked if she was willing to drive there and pick me up and shuttle me back to my car, because otherwise I needed to turn around, but I preferred to keep walking. That was the start of it all, and I was hooked. I remember signing the book at the Springfield Hill DCA, and I wrote that I would return to hike that again when I finished the whole trail.

Initially, I hiked the trails closest to me, and relied on family or friends for shuttles. But about three months in, as I got farther away, I realized this would not last long, so I decided to try bike shuttling. After one exhausting shuttle on my bike, I purchased an e-Bike to assist on the many hills I encountered on the roads around the trails. I also met a woman (Marianne Buth Modl) on the Thousand Miler Wannabes Facebook page, and we started hiking together occasionally.

Then, in early October, I tripped and fell on Monches and I was pretty sure immediately that my arm was broken. I got up, hiked the remaining mile out, called my wife to find out when urgent care closed, and ended up driving myself back to Madison to the ER, covered in mud from my fall. I was in a soft cast for two weeks, but it didn't keep me down. After only a week I was back out again, and I hiked the newly redone Slinger, Hartland, and some road sections. After the hard cast was put on, I started hiking some of the northern sections with Marianne. I also met Janine Onsager in my dog agility class (she asked how I broke my arm), and we became hiking buddies, hiking about 600 miles of the trail together.

Before doing this trail, I wouldn't have thought about hiking in all seasons. Fall is of course my favorite, but I also found I loved the calm and quiet of winter hiking, especially before we got a lot of snow, and December was my biggest month, with 136 miles. Most months I hiked between 80 and 100 miles, a little less in the hottest months. A couple of months, out of town family obligations have kept me from hiking as much, and each time I have missed it and loved getting back out on the trail when I returned to WI.

I started my journey with shorter hikes, squeezed into my daily life whenever I could. As I got farther from home, I needed to plan more in order to make it happen, and the hikes got longer. I found that ten miles is a good amount for me. Much longer than that, and my aging body begins to complain too much.

The hardest hikes I did were Wood Lake in about 8 inches of snow, Devil's Staircase (the big rocks on the western end were a challenge early in my IAT journey), Parrish Hills (the sandy soil and open logged areas), and Greenbush (it was one of the longer hikes I did early on, and I wasn't as ready and able to do that length yet, especially with how hummocky it was). I also found St. Croix Falls more challenging than I had expected. But the feeling of accomplishment after a challenging hike meant I never gave up, even when it was hard, and soon I found that none of them were as difficult anymore. I know a lot of people say Devil's Lake is hard, and it was kind of psyching me out, but the majority of it is paved, so when I finally took on the challenge, I didn't find it very challenging. I was grateful that I backed out of Parrish Hills in a foot and a half of snow with subzero temperatures, and I came back and did it in the spring. The coldest temperature I hiked in was -11 in February on the roads between Grandfather Falls and Underdown, which is what I opted to do that day instead of Parrish Hills.

Nearing the end held its own challenges. We had our last three hikes planned out to finish in August, but we cancelled one due to the heat. In early September, as I was driving north to complete the final 25 miles, I got a call that my mother was in the hospital, so I turned around and drove to Cleveland instead for a couple weeks. Janine and I re-planned that trip for later in September, but then she had to postpone to early October, so I used the time to work on the Western bifurcation instead. These are some of the lessons of hiking the trail: letting go of my goals, being flexible, setting new goals, and accepting change.

When I complete the Western bifurcation later this month, I will have hiked more than 100 miles of my second trip on the IAT. I have segments I want to re-hike because they have been rerouted (f. ex. Ringle), segments that I want to see in other seasons (some of the northern ones I did in winter), and segments that I will revisit simply because I loved them so much the first time (f. ex. Chippewa Moraine, Plover River). Will I complete the trail a second time? I am not sure. It is not an immediate goal that I will push to complete. And who knows which other trails my hiking will lead me to next. My more immediate goal is to volunteer with the IAT trail crews, to give back to this trail that got me hiking again and gave me such beauty and calm in a year filled with uncertainty and unpleasantness.