

"Taylor" Made Hike on the Ice Age Trail in Taylor County

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Never have I been without running water, civilization, or a car full of supplies. Instead of a modest two-mile hike, I'd be hiking 14 miles. Instead of sleeping in a cozy bed, I'd be carrying it on my back! As an intern for the Alliance's Outreach and Education Program, I would be joining the Frederic School District's Summer Saunters Backpacking trip led by teacher Carrie Peterson.

Before I left, I stopped in at the Alliance office to pick up some gear and finish packing. Luckily, my fellow coworker Luke was in the office. He took one look at my bag and told me I was packing it all wrong. (Mind you, Luke has hiked the entire Ice Age Trail which is over 1,000 miles long). As Luke helped me rearrange my pack, putting heavier things on the bottom and lighter things on top, he noticed items he thought were unnecessary. He took out my deodorant (as he put it, "Who are you trying to impress? The trees?"), he took out my extra clothes (because "this isn't a fashion show"). I must admit, Luke packed my bag very nicely, diminishing its weight. He told me I would thank him later; by his rule of thumb, "Ounces lead to pounds, and pounds lead to pain."

After a four-hour drive, I met up with Buzz Meyer, the High Point Chapter Coordinator, who kindly shuttled me to the start of my hike where I would eventually meet up with the Saunters students. "We're here!" Buzz said, as he pulled over on the side of the road. I turned to where he gestured and saw a yellow blaze on a tree, my sign I was on the Ice Age Trail. I watched as Buzz drove off, his car making a tornado of dust in the gravel. As the dust settled, all I could see was dirt road and an entry to an endless amount of tall, green, leafy trees.

"Well," I thought, "this is kinda scary!" It was just me and my backpack heading into the woods. "I couldn't back out now." There'd been so many turns and twists on the ride out, I knew I wouldn't be able to get back to town if I wanted to...let alone on foot. Adding to my nervousness, my phone was out of service range. I took a long, deep breath and took in the soothing forest smells. Luckily, I had my Mammoth Tracks app. It's designed to help hikers find their location on the Trail even when there isn't any service. I instantly felt better. On top of that, I remembered the yellow blazes were there to make sure I was going the right way. I was going to be just fine.

There were no distractions...no phones ringing, no cars honking, or people yelling. All I heard was the birds chipping and sweet sound of light rain hitting the tops of leaves. Peering through the tall trees, I could see the sun starting to set. I was alone...in pure bliss.

My silent hike slowly transitioned into children's voices. I made it to the campsite and right away was greeted by a group of students ranging from 7th grade to high school, along with two teachers. They all looked exhausted. It was their second day of hiking and they had just hiked 10 miles. I arrived just as they were setting up their tents. Carrie Peterson,

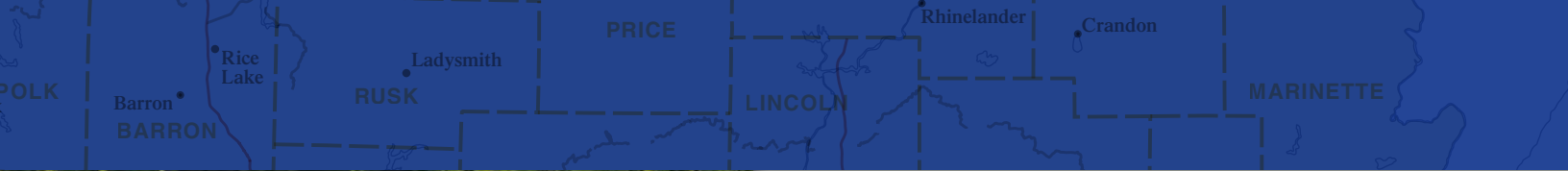


Taylor fords a stream, wincing from the cold water and the unreliable footing. Photo by Kim Gould.

an art teacher and current hike leader, found a clear and safe area, away from any bushes and low hanging trees, where everyone could cook dinner. She also cleared the area of any dry leaves and twigs. We wouldn't want to start a fire in the middle of the forest! I borrowed a beer can stove to cook my first backpacking meal, noodles. Sure, some of the noodles weren't fully cooked, but man did a warm meal taste great!

After dinner I helped start the fire. It was a challenge because it had rained all day and the wood was wet. First, we made a border of rocks in the shape of a circle. After gathering up twigs, and with a little help from some lint placed in the center, the fire sparked! We then took the bigger, damp logs and laid them around the edge of fire to dry them. Finally, we placed them in a teepee formation; the fire was a success.

Another group of students, under the guidance of Ms. Peterson, filtered water from a stream with a gravity filter. It was a team effort. Someone had to be in the water scooping it up while others filtered the water bag or filled up the bottles. The filtered water had a yellow tint to it from the minerals in the water. Although, I was hesitant at first, it was safe to drink and tasted great. Food also needed to be put in a safe place. Ms. Peterson filled a bear bag with the students' food. They tied the bag up in a tree some distance from the campsite so the bears wouldn't get it or be attracted to our campsite. Yes, I said bears!



After stories around the fire, we were off to bed. I thought it might be hard to fall asleep. My pillow was not an actual pillow, but was a pillow case filled with my clothes. I slept just fine. I woke up to the birds chipping. It's the most blissful wakeup call I could ask for.

The next morning, we packed up and headed off for what would be a 13-mile day complete with long hours, many bug bites, and a few blisters and tears. While walking alongside Ms. Peterson, I asked her about her decision to take the students backpacking. "When we first decided to go on a backpacking trip, it was because the older Saunters were looking for the "next level" of Sauntering," she replied. "Exposing them to a completely different section of the trail and carrying everything they needed on their backs seemed like a natural step in a more extreme direction. We went again this year because the students demanded it! Each of the participants helped raise funds in some way, they were so excited about going backpacking!"

I get it. Before this experience I had only car camped. This trip took it to another level for me, too. Packing light was a new challenge, especially since my motto has been, "You never know if you will need it, so bring it just in case." This definitely does not work when you are carrying it all on your back. After the trip I felt so refreshed and reconnected with nature. I am excited to use what I learned on this trip for future backpacking trips! Bring it on!

(Left) Taylor (standing) with her water filtration team and their water bags filled with tannin-rich water. Photo by Kim Gould.

(Below) Taylor (far right) with her team of fire-starters, all enjoying the warmth of a crackling fire as a cool evening settles in. Photo by Kim Gould.

