

The Making of a Thousand-Miler

BRIAN BEDNAREK

Do your kids ask to go hiking? Fortunately, mine do. I'm a middle school teacher, outdoor enthusiast, and member of the mowing crew of the Waukesha/Milwaukee Chapter of the Ice Age Trail Alliance. For the past five years, I've been leading hikes on the Ice Age National Scenic Trail for my summer school students from the Montessori School of Waukesha. Based on the records I keep of each day's hikes, my students have covered 2,367 total Trail miles over the last five years.

It's a privilege to spend unplugged, outdoor time with these kids, a generation growing up with smartphones, Instagram and Snapchat accounts. We take time to geocache, find Cold Caches, explore historical sites, and investigate whatever is of interest to the students in that moment: a toad, an erratic, or a snake. And then

there is the climbing. Many students are fearless climbers of rocks, trees, and whatever else seems inviting.

Along the way, we also talk about glacial features, ecosystems, plants and animals, invasive species, first aid, handling emergencies, and navigation, just to name a few topics. Our class has also adopted a portion of the Scuppernong Segment and takes time to spruce up the trail as we pass through. In other times of the year, my students and I work on invasive species removal.

Last summer, one of my personal favorite moments was when two of my students went off trail to re-hide a geocache, only to walk within a few feet of a turkey vulture concealed in the brush. The screams from the two boys as the bird thunderously flew into the air left those of us

who stayed on the trail in hysterics.

Another was when, in the course of a few minutes, we encountered several deer and then a flock of turkeys. Shortly afterwards, still with our hearts pumping from trying to follow the birds over a hill, we stopped under a stand of trees. We stayed there for a few minutes just listening to the wind move the leaves above us. It may very well have been the first time these kids had ever stopped still in the forest just to listen. The looks of amazement on their faces seemed to confirm that.

For two weeks, in each of the last five summers, my students and I hiked the 46-plus miles of the Ice Age Trail in Waukesha County. In the first week, we start at the Washington/Waukesha County line and head south, eventually ending up just beyond the beautiful prairie at Lapham

Caught up in the moment, the kids watch in fascination as a frog swims in the waters of the Nemahbin Spring, Lapham Peak State Park. Photo by Brian Bednarek.





Peak State Park. In the second week, we continue southward until finishing at the Waukesha/Jefferson County line.

The Milwaukee/Waukesha chapter offers the 'Walk the Wauk' hiker recognition program for those covering all miles in its territory. To date, I've hiked with 14 students who participated in and completed the program, and had 17 other students finish half or more. Many of my students have hiked the entire county more than once. Over two weeks, we cover about 50 miles in total with side explorations. One of my students this year said she "thought the Eagle Segment was the longest and the most beautiful."

Since 2014, I have also offered a one-week advanced class outside of our county. Twice now, we have hiked from our county line to Milton, covering Walworth, Jefferson, and about a third of Rock County. So far, ten students have covered that territory earning the 'Kettle Trekker' patch. This year, we braved hot and threatening weather, and even had to ford through a portion of the Storrs Lake Segment. One of my students later commented, "My favorite thing...was when we went through a flooded trail for about five minutes...it was really fun, but the trail smelled really bad." He wasn't wrong.

In 2015, four students earned 'Meander the Mid-Moraine' patches in Washington and Ozaukee Counties. In 2016, six students earned 'Hall of Kamer' status in the Lakeshore Chapter. One student said he liked how the Ice Age Trail interacted with nature, and he "liked all the different animals you could see out on the trail." Some students become so tuned in they can spot a tiny toad, slug, or other creature well off the trail.

Besides the feeling of accomplishment my students feel, it is just amazing to watch how each child's experience is unique. No two students have exactly the same hike, but each comes away being richer for the experience. Several of my repeat hikers marvel at how the trail changes from year to year. They also have an increased sense of confidence and fitness level, with one remarking how he now needs to take fewer breaks on the trail than in the past.

Thanks to a supportive school administration, and the Ice Age Trail Alliance Saunters Program, the past five years of hiking with my students has been incredible. Also, thank you to those in the Alliance who create, support, and protect the Ice Age Trail, as well as the agencies and individuals who support the Saunters program. Without your support, so many of my students wouldn't have already set the goal of becoming Thousand-Milers one day.



Taking silly photos at this erratic in the Pinewoods Campground in the Scuppernong Segment is an annual tradition. Photo by Brian Bednarek.

An adventurous spirit crawls into a tight space at Brady's Rocks in the Eagle Segment "to see what it like" in there. Photo by Brian Bednarek.



In search of a bird's-eye view, just after successfully finding a geocache, a fearless group of kids scale a massive pine tree at the Pinewoods Campground in the Scuppernong Segment. Photo by Brian Bednarek.



A teaching moment happens naturally as curious students stop to count the growth rings of a tree felled along the Hartland Segment. Photo by Brian Bednarek.