

On The Ice Age Trail

A Hiker's Essay, by Brock Jansen

The good titles have been taken. 'A Walk in the Woods' is the first thing that comes to mind as a title for this essay. Bill Bryson got that one. 'A Year in the Wilderness'? That would be Amy and Dave Freeman. 'Wild', maybe, but no – Cheryl Strayed used that one. 'The Old Man in the Woods'? Nope. Gale Swihart. 'The Thousand Mile Summer'. 'The Man Who Walked Through Time'. 'Walking Man'. Nope, nope, nope. All taken.

So I am left with 'On the Ice Age Trail', which coincidentally is the name of my blog, <https://ontheiceagetrail.blogspot.com/>. There, you can find a day-by-day retelling of all my adventures on the Ice Age Trail with my wife Theresa, who grew first to infamy as "The woman who hates hiking" and later to fame as "The Snail on the Trail". The blog was written partially as a way for me to relive and reflect, partially as a way to give other hikers information about each segment, and partially because I like writing. I like to pretend that some humor can be found in reading those long blog posts, but I have yet to hear from anyone who would prove that theory to be correct.

I am submitting this essay in conjunction with my application for official Thousand Miler status. I hereby avow and attest that I have walked every inch of this trail from the glittering waters of the Saint Croix River to the new terminus overlooking Green Bay. In between those two points, I have placed one foot in front of the other over two and a half million times, over hills and valleys, through boot-sucking bogs and fens, on scorched hilltops and flooded wetlands, atop drumlins, eskers, kames and moraines. I have been hailed on, rained on, blasted by subzero wind chills, baked by 100+ degree temperatures, feasted on by flies, mosquitoes, and ticks, and risked all manner of pestilence. I have traversed beaver dams, rickety bridges, log walks, ice-covered hills, washouts, shallow rivers and mile upon mile of terrain featuring roots, water, mud and rocks. All of this in pursuit of... what?

First, I don't know who might read this, and I suppose it doesn't matter. In all likelihood you may have heard of us already. I am the lesser-known half of the Snails on the Trail, or perhaps just 'Mr. Snail'. We were the people who went out and designed our own patches to wear and to give away as we met other hikers on the trail. Even today, two weeks after completing the trail on the brand new White Cedar Segment in Marathon County, we found ourselves at Dells of the Eau Claire Park and ran across a hiker. We gave her a patch because it makes everyone smile.

So if you know us you know that my wife and I were not thru hikers, but rather were/are Section hikers. For eight years we were opportunistic, going where and when we had an extra day or a weekend to spend wherever we happened to be that also had part of the trail nearby. We started our hiking in 2013, on a miserably hot day in July. It took us an entire day of walking to even find the Western Terminus. The next day we started at Mile Zero and hiked our way out of Interstate Park and through town, only getting lost twice along the way. Thankfully, our skills improved as we went.

For the next eight years, we hiked a little here and a little there, twice taking gaps of more than 500 days, covering over 333 miles of trail and connecting route. Our goal was to cover the trail from end to

end under our own power. For *our* mission, *our* adventure, it didn't matter to us if we were on foot or on bicycle. We weren't trying to get official 'Status'. We were just doing things our way. That equated to 170.9 miles of hiking and 162.3 miles of biking. Mostly the biking was on connecting routes, but it also included a large portion of the Gandy Dancer Segment and bits and parts of other 'segments' where the trail portion went along the road.

Then in March of 2021 we decided that if we were going to *finish* this trail within our joked-about ten-year timeline, we had better get a move on. We proceeded to spend another 166 days over the next 16 months not only completing the rest of the trail, but also circling back and hiking all the miles we had previously done on bicycle. That was not only the 162 miles of trail and connecting route that we did prior to March of 2021, but also another 116 miles that became necessary because we didn't STOP using bicycles until October 2021. In total, 278 miles of mostly road hiking. This was the origin of the random road hiking thoughts, because when you walk almost 300 miles of roadway in just a couple of months with little to no trail to break it up, your mind starts to wander a bit.

The irony? All of those road miles were the ones closest to home, because it was those miles we biked first. That meant that by the time we were nearing the end we could slip out after work and get a few miles of hiking in, because everything we had left was within easy reach. I'm not sure anyone else has ever done it that way.

As I reflect back on my experience, I like to complain loudly about all the difficulties – the weather, the hills, etc. – but all that is to be taken with a grain of salt. After all – I kept going. So there had to be something besides misery involved. And there was. The truth is I have a little of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau in me. My inner transcendentalist cries out to be taken into the wilderness and be left there to steep in the scent and aura of nature; to taste its sweet and bitter moods, hear the cries and whispers of the untamed, and see with my own two eyes the unrivaled beauty of a hemlock grove beside a swift flowing creek. Unlike those two visionaries, though, I chose to do so not alone, but with my closest friend, who has been my spouse of these last three decades and more. We are getting older, we two, and if we are to experience the grandeur of nature here in Wisconsin, what better way than to take the well-marked and maintained Ice Age Trail, which could lead us safely into and through the remote parts of the state?

The Ice Age Trail is many things to many people. For some, it is an epic challenge, taking physical limits of strength and endurance. For some it is a journey of discovery. For some, it's an adventure. Some go there to forget, others to remember. Some feel the greatest sense of achievement by reaching personal distance bests of 15, or 20, or 30, or even 50 miles in a single day. Others get their reward from identifying and photographing two new species of spring wildflowers as they walk out and back on a trail they have covered 100 times. For some people it's a dog run. For some people it's a way to get to their favorite fishing spot. For some it's just a vague notion or idea; something they aspire to and might like to do – someday.

I have asked myself over and over again – What does the Ice Age Trail mean to me? What did I get out of it? What do I owe in return? What have I learned? What have I lost? And perhaps the single hardest question put to anyone who completes the trail, alone or in groups, in pieces or all at once – why? These questions do not have easy answers. Or maybe the truthful answers are just hard to articulate.

I characterize myself as being a capable hiker. I cannot go out and hike thirty miles a day for days on end, but neither am I overly daunted by a fifteen or twenty mile hike, so long as I'm not toting a bunch of gear on my back. I might be more athletic than many people my age, but at the same time I have gained a new appreciation for my physical limits. I guess that's one thing the Ice Age Trail has taught me. I'm not as indefatigable as I was fifty years ago.

For me, completing the IAT wasn't really something I would call 'adventure'. I think for there to be real adventure there must be some doubt as to the final outcome. I never had any doubts that I would be physically capable of completing the trail, or any of its requisite parts. I've been very fortunate in that way. I also had no fears that the trail would be too difficult to follow, or that I would get lost, or that I would be attacked and eaten by bears. If anything I felt like the biggest hurdle I faced was financial, and the biggest threat came from unleashed dogs and unhinged people. I have been attacked by both on the trail.

No – for me, the Ice Age Trail was literally just a walk in the woods, and that was all I needed it to be. The woods hold for me a deep sense of belonging. The trees live out their entire lives – hundreds of years – staying in one spot and contributing to the world, giving as much as they take. Their boughs stretch out to shelter an entire world within and beneath, and the rest of us are beholden to their benevolence. I long to be with them. Birds and beasts, lichens and mushrooms, spiders and insects, even the fish could not survive as they are without the trees. And neither could we.

I think what the Ice Age Trail represented to me more than anything else was 'opportunity'. It was my opportunity to go out and explore Wisconsin at the pace of a pedestrian, if not an actual snail. It was my chance to see firsthand what has become of my homeland; to take the blinders off and slow down enough to really see Wisconsin for what it is. In some cases it is breathtakingly beautiful. In other cases is an unsightly, blunted shadow of what it once was, which is just terribly, terribly sad.

The IAT was an opportunity for me to learn. By being outside hiking day after day, weekend after weekend throughout all weather and in all seasons, I was able to watch the world bloom into life in spring, watch it shelter and nourish and mature during the summer, ripen and age in the fall, and recede into complete bitter cold dormancy in winter, only to have the cycle start again this spring with all the same delicate wildflowers once again breaking free from the ground.

How strange that the word 'delicate' is applied to a flower, when it can survive the harshest of winters, the most driving rains, ferocious winds and baking heat, and still go on about its business, quietly providing food for the insects and growing seeds for the next generation. A human forced to endure conditions like that would surely not do as well.

I learned about plants and flowers from my 'PlantNet' App. I learned about birds from my 'Merlin' App. I spent time studying the many insects along the trail, though I must admit beetles are my particular favorites.

And I got the opportunity to go places and see things I could not have otherwise seen if not for the courageous and selfless efforts of thousands of volunteers. I was given the chance to not just see beaver dams and lodges up close, but also walk across a few and catch an occasional glimpse of the industrious

critters, too. And for the first time in my life I was able to sit on a bench and watch nesting swans out on a small lake. I was given the privilege of walking across private lands to see amazing rock formations, watch mergansers in kettle ponds, see salamanders and frogs and lizards and toads and turtles and snakes, all while knowing exactly how to get there, and how to get back.

And I had the opportunity to spend a year with my wife, doing something we had never done before and will certainly never do again. We walked 1000 miles together, often hand-in-hand, and as we talked to fill the hours, we learned things about each other that even thirty-three years of marriage hadn't revealed. I learned to rely on her, and she on me. That is a treasured gift I received from the Trail.

The Ice Age Trail made me feel happy. It made me feel young. It made me feel old. I felt at times both daunted and victorious. But beyond the feelings of annoyance, awe, loneliness, comradery, angst, peace, reverence, fatigue and exhilaration, I experienced a sense of inspiration. The Ice Age Trail, when it was not reminding me of every decision I ever made in life that brought me to my current state of decrepitude, enabled an inner freedom that encouraged my mind to soar in unexpected ways.

Typically, this took the form of words, and I spent time writing lyrics to original songs, as well as rewriting new lyrics to well-known classics. If you catch me on a good day, I might be able to recall a few verses of 'A Lovely Day in Parrish', or 'On the Ice Age Trail'. I also wrote an interesting version of "I've Been Everywhere", but I won't bore you with those here. I've got it all in my Blog, and if you really care you can see it there.

I also lost things on the trail. I lost my sense of invulnerability. Fifteen hours of road hiking now leaves me with crippling blisters. Eight or ten hours of walking will cause me knee pain and hip pain, and if not treated will also cause middle-of-the-night leg cramps. True, I lost a few pounds, but sadly, I also lost the ability to glance at the fields and forests from a distance at 70 miles per hour and pretend that everything is just fine. It's not.

Winter cold grips the landscape. A dry and powdery blanket of white covers the trees and their branches. The silence is physical thing; a barrier to be penetrated. On a normal day, this wonderland would be a playground for the chickadees and juncos. Cardinals and blue jays would leave red and blue streaks across the sky. Nuthatches, sparrows, siskins, finches, grosbeaks and redpolls should be busily flitting about, eking out their improbable living in this harsh and foreboding landscape. Today, there is only the silence.

There is not enough life in the woods.

A lone fox track wanders ahead of us down the trail, occasionally darting left and right into the thickets, only to fall back to the trail and continue on. There are no rabbit tracks. There are no squirrel tracks. There are no deer tracks. Twelve hours after the snowfall and six hours after daylight, there is evidence only of the passage of a cold and hungry predator.

There is not enough life in the woods.

The skies are a brilliant blue, and no breath of wind diminishes the golden sunlight that streams through the bare branches, just breaking buds during the first long days of spring. In

the distance is the sound of a creek, still trickling past ice that clings to the rocks along the edge. A crow voices its displeasure at my passing, and far off I hear the hammering of a downy woodpecker. I hear the mating call of a handful of familiar species of birds. But there should be more. Where once the woods were teeming with birdsong in the springtime, there are fewer birds and fewer different voices in the trees.

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The trees are leafing out, but something is not right. Some are late, and some do not revive with the spring. Whole hillsides defy the coming warm weather, showing only naked, dead branches. Where once was a richly diverse mixed hardwood forest, not one living ash tree can be found. Blue and green spruce trees create brown patches against what was once an evergreen tableau, even where water is abundant. They are dying from the heat, with only a tiny fraction of the newest needles still clinging. Elm trees stand, shorn of bark and foliage, next to the fields they once shaded. Nature herself seems to be suffering from an autoimmune disorder, drowning some areas, parching others. Storms are becoming more and more severe, laying waste to whole regions. And because we don't allow any of it to burn, what remains is just laying out the script for some future inferno.

There is not enough life in the woods.

So yes – the IAT has been an opportunity for me to see Wisconsin as it is now, in all its glory and its frailty. Those who follow will all see their own version of Wisconsin, and there will always be good things and bad things. For some, adventure is always just over the next hill, or across the stream, or dancing just out of sight on the horizon. For me, the real adventure has been one of discovery. Only by learning can one begin to understand, and hope to contribute.

What I owe to the Ice Age Trail is to leave it better than I found it. In small ways I have done this with every mile I walked. I am a trail sweeper. I pick up small sticks and fling them to the side. I move branches that have fallen across the trail. I have worn out three hand saw blades cutting whole trees out of the way, and moved logs that were bigger than I should have attempted, all in an attempt to assist with trail maintenance as I go. It is my way of thanking the people who gave so much to create the trails I was walking on, and helping those who continue to dedicate their time to the hiking community.

And I have skills I can bring to the trail. I have participated in trail-building events. I can grub, haul dirt, swing a McCulloch, move rocks, build bridges, and in general put some sweat equity back into the trail. But my real passion is the benches. There are a great many places on the trail where a bench would be useful, not because of some vista or trickling brook, but because it's been too far since the last one. Hikers need places to rest. If I have a fantasy for my contribution to the trail long-term, it is to work with chapters to find sections that need benches and find contributors who can help finance, build and transport them.

I know it wouldn't have been possible for me to hike the IAT if my wife wasn't all-in on the project. It involved hard work, planning, an enormous amount of money and a willingness to abandon all other obligations and commitments. We hiked on perfect spring days. We hiked Gibraltar Rock at sunset in January, descending the ice-covered rocks in the dark while wearing headlamps. We walked with

umbrellas in ninety degree heat along dangerously busy highways, and both of us hiked at times battling pain and fatigue.

My biggest lament with the trail is that I didn't take enough time to enjoy it. There were many places I would have lingered for hours or days. There were many places too beautiful for words, but we were driven by the need to go as fast as we could, or as far as we could, because to do the whole undertaking – to hike the entire trail – takes so long, and takes so much money that we couldn't afford to 'waste' the day not hiking. When we do go back to different sections, and I'm sure we will go back, I intend to take things a lot easier. The real joy to be found out there is not in getting from Point A to Point B, but in getting from Point A to Point Nowhere, and then staying there a while.

The last question that remains unanswered is 'Why'. Robert Frost wrote a poem first published back in 1923, called *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*. It describes the allure and calling of the woods.

In Frost's poem he is drawn to the woods, if only for a moment, as he passes by in a horse-drawn carriage. Without describing why, his last stanza conveys to the reader that he holds a deep affection and longing for the woods, which sadly must wait for another day to be fulfilled.

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.*

I have been that man. I have driven by mountaintops, passed by rivers and waterfalls, stood at the edge of the forest with a beautiful and inviting path laid out in front of me. But for all the longing, I had my obligations, my work, my commitments - my own 'miles to go before I sleep'. But like Old Rivers I had an inner drive. I always told myself, *"One of these days I'm gonna climb that mountain."*

I can think of many reasons why I hiked the IAT, but none of them seems all-encompassing enough, save one. It is the same reason Grandma Gatewood gave to one of the many reporters who hounded her on her three complete journeys along the Appalachian Trail. It is a simple response that held a meaning as deep as a glacial lake. Four words that expressed all the inner longing and satisfaction she felt by doing what she did.

"Because I wanted to."

And now I have.