

Thousand-Miler Essay
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Before aspiring to become a Thousand Miler, I had long been a fan of the segment most local to me: the Chippewa Moraine segment and the many hiking loop trails accessible from the Ice Age Interpretive Center located there. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, my workload as a high school teacher skyrocketed as we temporarily transitioned to online learning. With few other recreational outlets, I found myself on weekend mornings walking the Circle Trail there, trying to find some respite from endless screens and indoor time.

When my district returned to in-person learning in the fall of 2020, I continued to use hiking as my stress relief. Work was a carnival of chaos, with students in and out of quarantine, sub shortages, and the need to duplicate all lessons for simultaneous in-person and online instruction. When the Mammoth Challenge that year rolled around, I was thankful for the excuse to get out and enjoy not only my local segments, but new trail communities as well (while engaging in socially-distanced recreation). My husband and I had such wonderful experiences hiking the Straight Lake and St. Croix Falls segments in beautiful fall weather that year. We hit the Straight Lake segment on a cool fall morning at peak autumn color. With the sun streaming through the yellow, falling leaves, it felt like walking through a dripping painting.

I was also blessed to have a coworker and friend named Pam who was working toward Thousand Miler status, and she began to invite me along on group hikes. She introduced me to a lot of the resources that would be helpful for my journey: Facebook groups for coordinating rides and shuttles, the Ice Age Trail Atlas, and the spreadsheet I downloaded to keep track of my miles.

As I became more comfortable with wayfinding and figuring out how to shuttle (and bike shuttle), my trips took me further and further from home. I hiked in all seasons and acquired hiking clothing and supplies that spanned the entire temperature range of Wisconsin weather: my coldest hike featured 11-degree temperatures with windchills below zero (the CR from New Hope-Iola to Hatley), and I recall some sweltering heat while walking a long, mostly treeless CR from Tisch Mills to East Twin River in early July that made me very thankful for my post-hike shower. These stretches were often made more comfortable by the company of fellow hikers who kept my spirits up.

While I am very grateful for the many friends I made through hiking the trail, my deepest gratitude is reserved for the solitude I found on my many solo miles. In addition to being a high school teacher, I also practice psychotherapy as a Licensed Professional Counselor, so my work days are long and require me to constantly and carefully attend to the needs of people in my care while setting aside my own. Especially during the pandemic years, I felt myself functioning as a surgical sponge, simultaneously salving and absorbing the wounds of those around me. Retreating into the woods allowed me to wring out a lot of that soaked up pain back out into the trees. I'd drive home after a hike with my body and mind feeling lighter.

It was fitting then, that my final hike of this journey was done solo on a bright spring day on the Sturgeon Bay segment. The weather was gorgeous and the wildlife abundant. When I reached the Eastern Terminus on that hillside, I felt that familiar lightness in body and spirit. The blooming spring ephemerals and bright sunshine signaled that this long, three-year winter was finally over.