

Colton Forster
Ice Age Thousand-Miler Recognition Essay
05/28/2024

Hello Ice Age Trail Alliance,

I am excited to be able to share a short essay about my experiences hiking the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. It all starts back in college my freshman year (2016) at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa where I met my love Maisey (we are now married). Within our first few months dating we went on a couple different trips out west to the mountains; where we fell in love with hiking. In 2017, we adopted a McNab shepherd herding dog named Shadow that was found stray in Houston, Texas by my Uncle. Fast forward to post-graduation (2019), we both found work in Madison, Wisconsin and subsequently moved there together.

After hiking Devils Lake we discovered the Ice Age National Scenic Trail, and were excited to check out more segments. After doing around 50 miles of trail just out of curiosity and wanderlust, Maisey started playing around with the idea of doing the entire thing (with Shadow too of course!). I wasn't as excited about doing the road segments at first, but agreed to do all of the "trail". Quickly after doing a few small road segments in between larger segments of trail; I started to find appreciation for the road segments as well. After that we were on a pretty serious mission of closing up gaps and knocking out big chunks.

The feelings throughout the trail were incredible. It took us nearly 4.5 years to complete (we both work as well so it took some time). Starting the trail at 22 years old, and finishing at 27; I went through a lot of different life experiences such as getting married, gaining a new brother, new friendships made, job promotions, as well as the loss of a close family member. Having days set aside in Maisey and I's lives to just be on the trail and get that chance to have a healthy outlet to process the highs and lows of life was amazingly therapeutic. We were able to share that experience as a family, bringing us closer together. I will always cherish that more than any other aspect of the Ice Age Trail; the connections that can be made and/or strengthened between you and yourself, others you encounter along the trail, as well as the community along the trail at large.

The trail itself is beautiful. The most gorgeous aspect of the trail has to be the seasons if you decide to segment hike it over a year. Wisconsin is known for its breathtaking fall foliage, and while I agree that it is arguably the most beautiful time to see the forests, every season has its wonders. Seeing a spring still flowing in the winter even in near zero temps (F), with the contrast of the associated flora greenery and the white snow surrounding it, or a summer morning when fog is rising off a lake deep in the woods and the sunlight just starts to pass through the mist, or the pastel colors of trees budding throughout the forest in the spring, or even a dead marsh that is mostly golden and brown blowing in the wind in the middle of winter, the beauty is just endless everywhere you look. Even along the roads in a mostly agricultural area, the beauty of the rustic looking barn perfectly situated in cow pasture full of green grass blowing in the wind is out of a dream. Even at night, seeing the galaxies and stars as well as getting the luck to see

the northern lights on our second to last night sleeping along the trail. It may not be the awe-inspiring views of mountainous areas, but seeing the cycle of nature throughout the seasons is just as marvelous to the spectator willing to take a closer look.

The communities along the trail were all friendly and supportive. We made an effort to stop into many of the local pubs, restaurants, as well as even a few motels. Several people told us recommendations, asked us questions, told us stories, and many more memories that Maisey, Shadow, and I will share forever. Wisconsin has many very peaceful small midwestern communities that are very welcoming and accommodating to trail hikers. The trail seems to be helping out the community as many hikers will spend money to see what the community has to offer as they are along their journey. It made for a unique experience where nature isn't the sole aspect of the trail, but a big part of the trail is getting to experience how Wisconsinites coexist with the nature around them (in a metropolitan setting, village, or rural countryside).

Overall my experience on the Ice Age National Scenic Trail was fantastic and I would recommend it to anyone who is willing to walk the 1,147.3 miles. Shadow doing the trail was very important to us, and we believe that is her big contribution to planet Earth. I want to thank all the volunteers and workers who have put in the effort to make this trail possible. We plan to someday now that we have completed the trail that we too will give back and help volunteer and keep this trail a world class hiking experience. Again, thank you so much IATA and the National Park Service with all the work that you do to make this trail an amazing experience to those interested in getting out and hiking some miles!

We are now planning on doing a traveling job for the next few years with our first stop in Virginia. We plan to hike some of the Appalachian NST and see what that's all about. After that we may someday return to Wisconsin as this is a fantastic state with wonderful people.

Thanks again IATA for such a great trail,

Colton Forster