

Miles From Nowhere

First, we both would love to comment of the amazing staff and volunteers who keep the trails so well maintained and blazes marked. We were surprised at how clean the hiking community is as we very rarely saw any garbage along the trails. It seems hikers are very respectful of the beauty and nature around us. We are also so grateful to the residents who so graciously allow us to hike through their properties.

Two years and 5 months ago Mark and I retired together. A few months prior to that, I started thinking about attempting to hike the IAT. Together we had done some random sections here and there and I knew we both enjoyed hiking. My thought was that this would keep us moving, having a goal which tends to “make it happen” and enjoy something together during our retirement. We had heard Emily Ford interviewed on some YouTube videos. We also saw her speak at an event in Madison and loved hearing about her adventure. I knew we would need to section hike as my camping days were well behind me and I prefer beds and showers to tents and sleeping bags. We often mentioned her as we talked while hiking wondering what she thought when she came to this area or wondering how she could handle the extreme winter conditions.

Initially when we decided to take on this challenge, we hadn't realized the learning curve we were about to embark on. We learned quickly about having supplies with us for any possible scenario. We also learned (the hard way) to scale down our expectations of ourselves and break down the longer segments. We had to remind ourselves that this is meant to be fun so if we push ourselves too hard that tends to take some fun out of it (along with blisters, very sore legs and cranky attitudes). We also learned that “mud season” is real and really slows down your hike. We had some very pleasant winter hikes but had to have a “plan B” when snow was way too deep but that was where connection routes came in handy. There was always a connecting route we could do until trail was easier. We would proceed to walk (sometimes with crampons) until some of the snow would melt or trail was packed down better.

The beginning half of the entire IAT quest was easier to achieve as we could hike most segments from the bifurcation and south of without needing a hotel. We could do pick days around our normal life schedule and watch the weather.

I initially was not looking forward to connecting routes but was pleasantly surprised that I enjoyed them because it gave my feet a break from the hiking boots, I enjoyed the horses and cows watch us walk by, old barns and roosters crowing.

We never listened to any music or anything for the first 1-1/2 years. One day while on a very long connecting route we needed something to perk our mood so I played “Miles from Nowhere” by Cat Stevens on my phone. From that moment on, it became our theme song whenever we felt a bit mundane during our hike or we needed something to help us get through a particularly long stretch.

We both ran for exercise in our past with an occasional 5K or fun run. I never did get that “runners high” you hear of. From this experience though I will honestly say I get a “hikers high” and miss being on the IAT when we have long stretches in life where we were unable to hike.

Our adult children have supported us and seem proud we have achieved our goal. We were blessed along the way to be accompanied on some of the hikes by our close friends Joan & Al, and brother & sister-in-law, Bil & Marlene. For our final stretch, our son, Kevin, daughter-in-law, Teagen, and grandson, Brooks accompanied us. We were so grateful for their support and company! Most of our grandchildren have also experienced some bits and pieces of the IAT and we hope that perhaps we have planted a seed and they will forever have a love and respect for the IAT like we do.

Happy Trails!

Laura and Mark Wahlen

Word to describe the IAT: Impressed

Impressed by how well kept and clean the trail was.

Impressed with the work of the volunteers with blazes and amazing boardwalks built.

Impressed with through-hikers who tackle this all at once.

Impressed with beavers and the incredible beaver dams we saw along the trail.

Impressed with the beauty of the state and so many parts I've never seen though I've lived here all my life.

Impressed that I would want to hike outdoors in very cold weather, wearing a bug net and bandaged toes.

Things I had not expected but I have noticed and loved

The fantastic war memorials in many of the small town and trail communities

The blazed trail throughout many communities making it easy to follow the route

The many friendly and kind people throughout our experience both on the trails and in the communities

The fact that we could hike among and visibly see the erratics from the Ice Age

The small towns I never knew existed

The vast beauty of every trail. I loved when the trail would take us through tall grasses and especially when we were surrounded by and could smell the pines (especially loved this in winter)

The fact that I used to want to stay in the house in the winter and did not like the cold. Now I love being out there hiking.

I've learned to bundle up in layers, plan to slowly remove layers as my body warmed up.

I've learned to bring another pair of hiking shoe/boot option along. The fact that I could hike with less fear after seeing large wolf and other animal footprints in the snow as well as couple piles of bear poo.

Crazy Fun Memories

Meeting randomly Theresa Jansen – "Snail on the Trail" was fun. I had seen her posts on Facebook but we were never hiking in the same area. She found us as she happened to drive by while we were on a connecting route.

Nicolet Forest area and some coon dogs befriended us and hiked quite a few miles with us. We didn't want them to hang with us at first then realized they may be a blessing if there are bear nearby!

Hwy 33 near Baraboo - walking CR along Hwy 33 & a Semi passed us so fast & created wind that blew Mark's winter cap right off his head.

Two Rivers/Mishicot: connecting route between these two communities when about a dozen septic trucks passed us (one about every 4-5 minutes) while walking this connecting route. The smell was unbearable - we had to hold our breath each time one went by us but the smell lingered for a bit after. We ended up covering our noses & mouths with our shirts, and just when the air smelled good again. along came the next truck.