

Today I completed the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. 1200 miles, 16.5 months, approximately 450 hours of hiking, 100 hours of biking for my self-shuttling, 88 audio books, countless hours of crime podcasts, thousands of miles driving to and from the trailheads. Countless post-hike Subway sandwiches and white chip macadamia nut cookies (there are subways everywhere). Hikes that were breathtakingly beautiful, and others that were long and underwhelming. Perfect sunny and 70 degree weather and snowy, -15 degree weather. Dry trails and calf deep mud trails. Spring flowers, summer heat, fall colors, and snowy winters. Sunrises. So many spectacular sunrises. River crossings and road segments. Bugs and ticks and then the complete silence that winter provides. Deer, skunks, bear, raccoons, porcupines, birds, fox, coyote, ducks, geese, chipmunks, squirrels, and turkeys to name a few of the animals I saw. I have learned turkeys are aggressive and unpleasant. I've learned hiking alone is peaceful and calming and restorative. It allowed me to take the stress of the day or the week and come back as a better person.

I've always believed in loving where you live. In 2019 I hiked in every Wisconsin state park, that led me to ask what's next. After various hikes I committed to the IAT, hoping to finish in 2 years. The IAT exposed me to all parts of Wisconsin, to so many dirt roads and small towns, and to the idea of a continuous trail as opposed to the loop hiking trails that are typical in state parks.

Thank you to all who supported me on this journey and for all of the amazing volunteers who work to make the IAT a life-changing opportunity for so many people.

Jennifer Bowling