

Essay on Becoming a Thousand Miler

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On April 23, 2016 I completed the Chippewa 50k Ultramarathon and considered that a good start to doing the whole Ice Age Trail. Diane Harp, a good friend of mine had been picking away at it for a few years, so we talked about becoming 1000 milers. Another friend of ours, Barbara McKinley, a very goal oriented person thought it would be an accomplishment we could do together. As I was running the Ultramarathon they were hiking the first 13 miles from the Western Terminus. A few weeks later I went to St. Croix Falls to start hiking west to east. On May 30, 2016. I got through the first 29 miles and was committed. A group of four of my friends met me at the end of the Gandy Dancer trail to hike through to Indian Creek over the next four days. Sixty miles in six days, I thought I would get it done in a couple years at that rate, but life happens too.

In the eight years it took me to complete the trail, I had to work around rotator cuff surgery, a stress fracture in my foot, total hip replacement, severe tendonitis, and my hiking buddy's cancer treatments and illness leading to her diagnosis. Yes, life can get in the way.

I did about half of the trail with Barbara, 583 miles. Both of us had been running marathons so we put in some long hikes. One of them was 23 miles from Potowatomi State Park to our campground near Algoma. We averaged over 15 miles per day that trip. We hiked 65.8 miles in four days.

I also hiked with my dog, Guido, a Teddy Bear with 4 inch legs. On his first hike it was determined that he is not a good guide dog as his name reflects. He immediately followed the wrong trail and we had to start over. He hiked over 10 miles that day and was the first one to hit the tent that night. As he aged he rode in a backpack or on Connecting Routes I pushed him a jogging stroller. He accompanied me for 164 miles.

I skipped around a little to be able to join Diane Harp, a Thousand Miler and uber volunteer for the IAT. She and other volunteers inspire me to volunteer. I have used the help of many as shuttlers (see list above). I have done a couple trail building days and will be in contact with our chapter chair to get hooked up to shuttle.

I started hiking the Western Bifurcation alone and with Diane for a total of 15.3 miles. My hiking partner, Barbara, wanted to hike through Portage and take the ferry at Merrimac, so I chose to complete the Eastern Bifurcation. I will finish the Western Bifurcation sometime.

Barbara and I saved the last two hikes for Devils Lake so we would be close to home and hoped family and friends would join us. She wasn't able to finish due to cancer that ended her life in January of 2023. I kept hiking in her memory. I was sad not to be able to finish that last hike with Barbara, but family and friends were there.

I couldn't always have hiking partners. I enjoyed 200.3 miles of solo hikes. Shuttling myself with a bicycle or calling IAT volunteers and friends worked out.

I made up my own nickname. Since my name is Karen and my mom called me Kari I came up with Karrion as a play on the words, carrion and carry on. If you don't carry on you may become carrion.

Doing the Connecting Routes didn't appeal to me at first, but I soon realized that seeing different architecture across the state, odd landscaping projects for hikers' entertainment, and getting miles done was interesting and beneficial. A perfectly placed yellow bench, wine bottle tree, offending political signs, and best of all, a lemonade stand at the top of a long hill on an 85 degree day. I thought I was hallucinating!

During the COVID 19 epidemic, hiking was a great alternative to staying home, indoors. When Diane and I hiked the CR near Mirror Lake State Park we saw around 25 masks littering the side of the road. It kept our minds busy counting them.

I kept a journal that reports who I hiked with, distances, shuttlers, where we stayed, weather details, nature sightings, and other quirky experiences. I recommend keeping a journal as soon as you commit to becoming a Thousand-miler. It was fun going over it as I started gathering details for this essay.

Sometimes the logistics were difficult to work out with hiking partners, but they were flexible and generous about sharing the driving. Sometimes we got lost trying to find our starting point. My friend, John Hutchison, helped me finish the trail. He would even drop me off then meet me along the way to hike a little, then meet me at the finish. Good friend.

The prairie restoration is magnificent in many of the trail segments. You can't help but notice nature when hiking. We saw a mama bear and two cubs, I saw a whooping crane, lots of trumpeter swans, some snakes, turtles, frogs and toads, and much more. I use the apps, PlantNet and Merlin to identify new birds and plants.

If you are going to become a Thousand Miler you will have to put up with cold, heat, rain, wind, and whatever Wisconsin throws at you. The worst weather we had was the

five miles of CR going east of Mischicot with wind and sleet in our face and a fleet of dump trucks spraying slush on us. On another hike roads were flooded after a tornado went through the night before so we had to wade through a quarter mile puddle and I had to carry my son's dog who is not a swimmer.

The topography of the glacial terrain is endurable. Climbing to us is nothing compared to hiking in the Rockies, Himalayas or Alps where a fourteener is 14,000 feet. On the IAT its 1,400 feet. We joked about this with friends who hiked the Pacific Crest, Appalachian Trail, and the peaks in Colorado.

One of the things I tell people about completing the trail is how much I enjoyed getting to see places I would never have gone to and getting to experience the variety of towns in our state. Spending time with friends, meeting shuttlers, learning about geography, nature, and challenging myself are some of the things I appreciate about becoming a Thousand-Miler. Its not just about hiking in the woods.