

Much like the Ice Age Trail winds through the state, the experience of hiking the trail has been a continuous thread through my time in Wisconsin. I started the trail essentially as soon as I moved to Madison in January 2023. Hiking with my partner Katie then became the thing we did on the weekends, our obsession for the next two years. Planning our hikes by staring at FarOut at night, learning about the ColdCaches that we'd hit along the way, visiting the Interpretive Centers, volunteering to write blogs for the Ice Age Trail Alliance, following the progress of thru-hikers on Facebook, updating our hiking Instagram account (@iceage_manny), and of course driving/hiking the trail.

It's been a way to appreciate Wisconsin, once viewed in my mind as a "flyover state." The relatively recent geological history is fascinating, the nature is stunning, and we've had the pleasure to visit really nice cities/towns/trail communities throughout Wisconsin. Of note, I'll remember camping in April 2023 at Devil's Lake with Katie and two friends, walking Fern Glen while discussing what career path to take (public educator or engineer or PhD, I ended up choosing being a middle school teacher in Madison). Our Fourth of July weekend in 2023 in Chequamegon National Forest, slipping in the mud and hopping to avoid the snakes. Meeting a nice couple who were part of the Waushara County Chapter, who shuttled us for two days and even picked us up unexpectedly. Our backpacking trip in St. Croix Falls, meeting an old friend who now lives in Minneapolis after walking 55 miles and swatting endless mosquitoes. Our week up north where we hiked 130 miles in 8 days and got to revisit one of our favorite trail communities in Cornell. The beautiful fall colors in the eastern section of Parnell segment.

About half way through our almost two year journey, we texted Katie's family that we had just done another 20 mile day of hiking. Katie's sister messaged back in the group chat "Why?" The answer is...I'm not quite sure why. I, at least, can't answer it simply.

Maybe it's because those countless 20-mile hiking days were difficult and painful at times, and doing things that are difficult means that I can look back and say "Hey, I can do difficult things." And I could look to the future and say "I can do those difficult things in my life too."

Maybe it was because when we hiked, ideas would seem to sort themselves out and my busy mind would clear. I would just focus on what's important. No emails, no grocery list, no chores to do. Just walking (and eating food and drinking water and talking).

Maybe it's just to be outside, be in nature, breathe in air, move my body. Or spending time with Katie, the one person that'd want to have on the crazy adventures we'd go thorough on the trail together.

Whatever the ultimate reason, I know I'm proud of what we've accomplished. I'm happier and healthier because of the Ice Age Trail. I'm grateful for all the volunteers who help make this trail great, to the people we've met and briefly chatted with on the trail, and grateful for the natural beauty of this state.