

Thousand Miler Essay by Rebecca “3 Hats” Nash

It all started when I was musing with my husband, Mike, that it would be nice if there was a significant trail I could hike near our home. He said, “What about the Ice Age Trail?” I had encountered this trail in our Wisconsin state parks, but even though I was a life-long Wisconsin resident, I did not know it was a “thing.” My husband checked out the binder of the atlas maps from our Baileys Harbor library and I was hooked. The Eastern Terminus was right in my backyard in Sturgeon Bay. I started there on December 2, 2017. My notes for the day say, “Inaugural hike on the Ice Age Trail; 58 years old; 45 degrees; Potawatomi State Park quiet and beautiful; encountered 2 walkers, 1 runner.” So, I thought maybe I would just do the trail hiking and skip the connecting routes. By the time I had about 250 miles in, however, I decided I was “all in” and started doing the connecting routes as an aspiring thousand miler.

I attended the annual conference near Baraboo in 2019 and really learned more about the trail, hiking, and support, as well as going on my first group hike. It took me 6 ½ years to complete the trail by segment hiking with my husband Mike as my support and gear (SAG) man through it all. He would drop me off at the trail head, check on me where possible, and sometimes would hike in to meet me at the end of the trail. At times, one of our two daughters would join me on the trail. I did not hike at all in 2020 due to the pandemic but was able to accelerate my hiking in 2022 when I retired. It wasn’t until 2023 that I acquired my trail name “3 Hats” when my daughter asked me just how many hats I was wearing during a brisk, rainy day when I had to take them off to get my neck band on. The name stuck and is fitting since I am always over-prepared when I go hiking.

The Ice Age Trail gave me an opportunity to see my home state on foot in a way I never expected. Not only did I learn the language of glaciers and experience it through the topography of the land, but I also could feel my endurance and courage expand especially after hiking the Northwoods. My favorite experiences were walking the tops of eskers, walking through old, hushed forests of hemlocks, and seeing the hummocky trail in the forest and on open prairies. I was especially taken with all the types of mushrooms and fungi that are abundant in the forest—so many shapes, sizes, and colors! I also had the pleasure of stepping up to a fawn playing dead, seeing a young, pitch-black bear in my path, hearing and seeing so many birds, observing a porcupine, and even having an elk sighting. Many, many times, I said thanks aloud on the trail for all the volunteers that marked and cleared the trails so I could get through as a solo hiker and not get lost! I didn’t plan it, but it seemed fitting that the last woods segment I hiked was the John Muir segment on the Eastern Bifurcation. What better place to end my journey but in the childhood home of this famous naturalist, glaciologist, and advocate for the preservation of wilderness in the United States.

People are amazed when I talk about the Ice Age Trail, the miles I have hiked, and the experiences I have had. Today, however, I see beyond the miles hiked. I see the Ice Age Trail Alliance as a way to sustain and preserve increasing amounts of our beautiful Wisconsin land for all to enjoy, and especially for the plants and animals that need this habitat to survive. In telling my story, I have become an evangelist for the trail, educating people who have never heard of this national treasure, right here in our own state, in hopes that they will become interested enough to support the trail too. I am grateful to all who continue to work toward this goal.