



PIECE BY PIECE

THE ICE AGE NATIONAL SCENIC TRAIL WILL TRACE WISCONSIN'S CONSERVATION LANDSCAPE—EVENTUALLY.

BY DAWN REISS

Hardly anyone outside the state realizes that there are more than 1,000 miles of glacial trail in Wisconsin. For more than 60 years, conservationists, landscape architects, and politicians have tried to get a trail built to highlight Wisconsin's stunning glacial features, and unless something changes drastically, it is still decades away from completion. Despite their best efforts and a spike in hiking during the pandemic, the Ice Age National Scenic Trail remains little known.

"I don't know why," says John Cannella, the National Trails System program manager for the National Park Service. "Once you get past the Triple Crown—the Appalachian Trail, the Continental Divide, and the Pacific Crest—I think there's less awareness of the National Trails System, that it is bigger than the Interstate Highway System."

The Ice Age National Scenic Trail is a patchwork of trails that follows a roller-coaster path through 30 counties from Interstate State Park on

the Saint Croix River in northwestern Wisconsin to Potawatomi State Park on Green Bay. Approximately 675 miles of completed trail are connected by road segments that can be thru-hiked as some "thousand milers" have done.

More than 88,000 miles of national trails crisscross the United States. Eleven, including the Ice Age Trail—as it is more commonly known—are National Scenic Trails because they traverse significant terrain that

ABOVE
In 2019, more than 2,000 Ice Age Trail Alliance volunteers contributed 82,880 hours of service on behalf of the Ice Age Trail.



LEFT

An observation tower offers a 360-degree view in the Lapham Peak Segment of the Ice Age Trail in the Kettle Moraine State Forest.

BELOW

A partially filled kettle along the Lapham Peak Segment of the Ice Age Trail.

highlights spectacular natural resources and stunning beauty.

Compared to the larger, more well-known trails, the Ice Age Trail is uniquely sublime, says Jonathan Bronk, ASLA, a landscape architect with the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Campus Planning and Landscape Architecture department. “It’s much more intimate,” Bronk says. “But I think people underestimate it.”

Unlike the flat land that characterizes much of the middle of the country, the ground in Wisconsin is jagged and rustic, with forested ravines and rolling hillsides more akin to the Great Smoky Mountains than the typical midwestern landscape. When glaciers abruptly halted their journey more than 10,000 years ago, a portion of Wisconsin was glaciated and part wasn’t.

The glaciers cut gorges (the Wisconsin Dells) and filled kettles, and sliced



ridges known as moraines (hence the Kettle Moraine region). The ice crafted snakelike eskers, earthen ridges, and the remnants of streams that flowed through ice-walled tunnels and left behind mounds of sand and gravel. Massive boulders, called erratics, now dot the land, coupled with kames, or dome-shaped hills.

Land untouched by the glaciers is the Driftless Area, where the ground is hard and filled with clay, a stark contrast to the fertile land raked over by glaciers.

The diverse landscape of Wisconsin, home to 11 federally recognized tribes, inspired environmentalists, ecologists, and naturalists including Gaylord Nelson, the Wisconsin senator who founded Earth Day and championed the National Trails System Act of 1968 that established the scenic trails system. The boyhood home of John Muir can be seen at John Muir Memorial County Park within a 1.7-mile loop segment of the Ice Age Trail in Montello. The beauty of the glacial land so impressed Muir, he said, “The beauty of its lilies and orchids is so pressed



LEFT

A hand-built stone staircase along the Devil's Lake Segment near Baraboo.

BOTTOM

Volunteers with the Ice Age Trail Alliance used this pulley to build the stone staircase in 2017.

into my mind I shall always enjoy looking back at them in imagination, even across seas and continents, and perhaps after I am dead," according to the 2014 *Ice Age Trail Guidebook*.

Aldo Leopold purchased an abandoned farm in the sandy soils of Sauk County, repaired land depleted by row crops and overgrazed by dairy cattle, and rebuilt a chicken coop, also known as "The Shack," as his weekend retreat. It is now a National Historic Landmark. The restoration experience formed Leopold's conservation ideology.

About 15 miles south of Leopold's Shack is Devil's Lake State Park in Baraboo, which includes a 10.9-mile Ice Age Trail segment with dramatically impressive views from 500-foot pink and purple quartzite bluffs overlooking a lake. Buddy Huffaker, the executive director of the Aldo Leopold Foundation, says the organization hopes to eventually do a connective path between the Ice Age Trail and the Aldo Leopold Legacy Center.

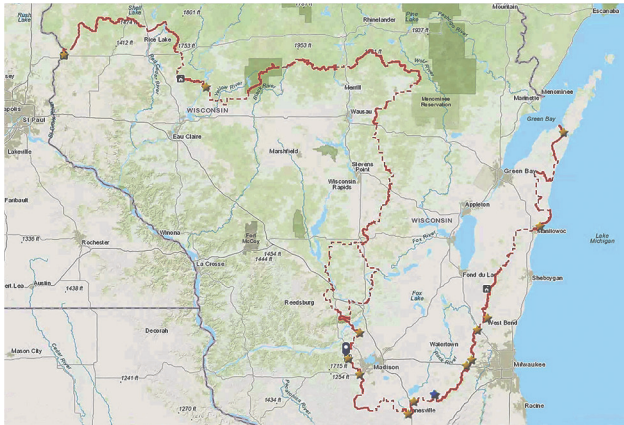
"What makes the Ice Age Trail unique is Wisconsin's unique conservation heritage," Huffaker says. "When you walk the Ice Age Trail you are treading on the same ground of conservation legends. It places you in that same landscape that inspired so many others to work hard to secure public lands and trails for all of us."

Pam Schuler is a landscape architect who served as the trail manager and landscape architect affiliated with the Ice Age Trail for the National Park Service, at the Ice Age Complex at Cross Plains. "Someday when this trail is complete, I believe [it] will be as big of a draw as the Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest," she says.

That's what Ray Zillmer, a Milwaukee lawyer turned conservationist, envisioned in the 1950s when he dreamed of creating a national park following the glacial landforms in Wisconsin.

He created the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation in 1958, now called the Ice Age Trail Alliance, and politicked





the Milwaukee congressman Henry Reuss, who convinced Congress—after Zillmer died of a heart attack—to recognize nine glacially significant geological sites as Ice Age National Scientific Reserve units in 1964. In 1980, Congress, led by Reuss, amended the National Trails System Act to establish the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. It began with 151 miles, according to Schuler.

The legislation included a caveat: No federal agency, including the National Park Service, could spend funds on land acquisition to help build the trail, says Tom Gilbert, who served as superintendent of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail and the North Country National Scenic Trail for more than 20 years.

“It was shocking,” Gilbert says. “Because the first thing you need for a trail is land.”

In the 1980s, there was a backlash against the federal government owning too much land. Many congresspeople and senators were nervous about the U.S. government invoking eminent domain to create federal land corridors across the country, which was the instrument used to create the Appalachian Trail but barred later trails, like the Ice Age Trail, from doing something similar, says Steve Elkinton, the author of *The National Trails System: A Grand Experiment* and a veteran of the park service.

The legislation had a loophole—it didn’t stipulate that federal funds couldn’t be spent on purchasing land. “So, you just had to get somebody else to do it [instead of a federal agency], like a state like Wisconsin,” Elkinton says.

As a work-around, the National Park Service, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (DNR), and the nonprofit Ice Age Trail Alliance—

which has local chapters that deploy crews of volunteers who repair and hand build new trails throughout the state—created a memorandum of understanding.

The National Park Service began allocating money from the Land and Water Conservation Fund to the state of Wisconsin, Schuler says. The state of Wisconsin then funds the DNR’s Knowles-Nelson Stewardship Program, which administers stewardship grants to help protect natural and wildlife habitats, including work on the Ice Age Trail.

“It’s a unique relationship,” Elkinton says. “The park service found itself administering this trail, which is really a Wisconsin idea.”

After decades of effort, 16 of the 30 counties with the Ice Age Trail now have a County Corridor Planning and Trailway Protection Strategy Plan in place, Schuler says.

TOP LEFT
The Ice Age Trail stretches more than 1,000 miles.

TOP RIGHT
Hikers along the Table Bluff Segment in Dane County, which includes native prairies and rock outcroppings with views of the Blue Mounds.

ICE AGE TRAIL ALLIANCE, TOP LEFT; CAMERON GILLIE, TOP RIGHT



LEFT
Volunteer chapters help with trail improvements, including making structural repairs, creating new segments, and rerouting trails.

BOTTOM
An Ice Age Trail Alliance volunteer uses a McLeod tool to work on a trail in the Ringle Segment in Marathon County.

Originally, the National Trails System Act wanted all the plans done by 1982, Schuler says, two years after the Ice Age Trail was authorized. Because of the “ebb and flow in governments,” with staffing, personnel, and land acquisition dollars, it’s made it difficult, says Schuler, who began working on the trail in 1985.

“We’d all love to see the trail done in 10 years,” Schuler says. “But given that we have 500 miles left to go, there’s still a long way to go.”

Part of the problem is not having a dedicated person at a government agency whose job is solely focused on purchasing land for the Ice Age Trail, says John Harrington, a professor who recently retired from the Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. “A handful of us have spent part of our time doing land acquisition,” Harrington says. “And

the Appalachian Trail had 35 people working full-time for about 20 years.” Funding cuts have also had an impact.

The Wisconsin DNR, with 275 miles of trail, is the largest landholder for the Ice Age Trail. During the past decade, Wisconsin’s state capital budget, which covers all lands that Wisconsin DNR manages, including the Ice Age Trail, shifted downward by “tens of millions” and had a “significant effect,” says Missy Vanlanduyt, the recreation partnerships section chief for the Wisconsin DNR.

For example, between 2011 and 2020, the DNR spent \$2.9 million on Ice Age Trail land acquisitions, according to its data. That’s less than a quarter of the \$12.7 million the DNR spent on Ice Age Trail acquisitions from 2001 until 2010.

Currently, about 2.3 miles of the Ice Age Trail are owned by the National

Park Service, says Eric Gabriel, the superintendent for the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. The other approximately 400 miles of the trail are owned by more than 30 entities, with 42 miles of trail going through Chequamegon–Nicolet National Forest, says Drew Hanson, a recreation liaison for Wisconsin DNR’s bureau of parks and recreation management. Included in those trail miles is the Ice Age Trail



CAMERON GILLIE



ABOVE
Hikers stand on the 500-foot Baraboo quartzite bluff overlooking Devil's Lake.

Alliance and its affiliated partners, which have 12.5 miles of protected trail and easements on another 15.5 miles of trail, according to Kevin Thusius, the director of land conservation for the Ice Age Trail Alliance.

At the current pace of land acquisitions, Thusius says, it will likely take more than 100 years to finish the Ice Age Trail. The reason: 10 properties are usually acquired per year, he says, for the Ice Age Trail. As parcels of land become smaller and more expensive to purchase, Thusius estimates another 1,200 to 1,500 land transactions will be needed to complete the trail.

In an attempt to fill the void, Thusius says the Ice Age Trail Alliance has amplified its land acquisition. For example, after years of negotiation, the Ice Age Trail Alliance convinced four landowners in Dane County—

known as the Swamplovers—to bequeath to the public a 433-acre property originally purchased as hunting and hiking grounds. In November, the property officially transitioned to the Ice Age Trail Alliance, making it the largest privately acquired property by the nonprofit for the Ice Age Trail Alliance, says Mike Wollmer, the executive director and CEO of the Ice Age Trail Alliance.

“This was just too precious a piece of property to keep to ourselves,” says Jerry Goth, one of the Swamplovers property owners. “We’re interested in getting young people interested in nature, so maybe they’ll be advocates.”

The explosion of hiking during the coronavirus pandemic may help that cause and create future conservationists. Pre-COVID users of the Ice Age Trail numbered 2.3 million a year, Wollmer says. With users over-

whelming every trailhead across the state, his best anecdotal estimates are at least a 50 percent increase, if not more, since the pandemic. Ice Age Trail Alliance membership grew 41 percent between March 2020 and 2021. If there’s a relationship, that would equate to almost an additional 943,000 new users of the trail, Wollmer says.

The Wisconsin DNR has also seen a significant increase in outdoor recreation use, sometimes as much as 60 percent on the weekends, since the pandemic.

“That’s really highlighted the Ice Age Trail,” Vanlanduyt says. “Because you don’t have to train for three months to hike it. Visitors to the state and residents are putting a much greater value on the Ice Age Trail and outdoor recreation. I think that’s going to continue to grow.” ●

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