

R2R 2018-2019

Written by Joe McCamish

Photos by Danielle Hartline

Trail Magic, a Resupply, and Lessons Learned on the River to River Trail



We were born and raised here in southern Illinois; She from Cobden and myself a Cartervillian. We both grew up exploring the Shawnee Hills and had visited most of the common places. We became sweethearts several years ago after meeting at Crazy Joe's Fish House in Ava where I was playing banjo and singing with a band. We were both wild, free and divorced. After some very turbulent times we knew something had to change. Ready to start down this path together, we gave ourselves the gift of sobriety and started to look for a better way. Hiking became one of our means of healing. We were literally hiking down the path to a better life.

Eventually, our day hikes started getting longer and we were night hiking back to the trailhead under a super moon when we realized we wanted to start staying the night so we wouldn't have to leave everyday. She was new to backpacking, but had an old external frame pack purchased at a yard sale with hopes of going someday. I had accumulated some gear and used it once on a failed attempt of the Red Cedar Trail at Giant City State Park (which we have since completed successfully, I might add)! So, after her thoughtful and encouraging parents gave us a backpacking tent for Christmas, we were ready for our first night out. We decided to spend two nights at Panther Den, the smallest of the wilderness areas here, and found it to be the perfect training ground for backpacking.

We started the R2R, unwittingly, sometime in February 2018 by hiking the section from Garden of the Gods through Lusk Creek Wilderness. We had no intention of section hiking the whole trail, really. We just wanted to be out there. It was slow

and painful. The 25 miles took us almost three days and two nights. We had donated our old packs and bought new decent packs from REI, but had a lot to learn. Stopping at each water crossing to take off boots, our overloaded packs, no trekking poles, but it was amazing. Especially the views along the ridge at One Horse Gap, and I would consider this 25 miles to be the most spectacular stretch. If you could only hike part of the R2R, this is it.



The very next week we decided to hike the same section in reverse-from Lusk Creek trailhead to the backpacker's parking lot at Garden of the Gods. It was this trip when things got serious. There were thunderstorms off and on throughout the three days and we became soaked. Our boots, pants, and packs were so heavy and we experienced blisters and chafing. It was very difficult, but the hardships became lessons learned and it was then that we decided to regroup, refine our gear and begin our section hike of the River to River trail starting at Elizabeth Town.

In the meantime, I began to study what the experts were doing. I discovered Andrew Skurka, named National Geographic's Adventurer of the year for his long hikes, including the 7,778 mile Sea to Sea Route and the 6,875 mile Great Western Loop . There are many others, but Skurka's blog is reliable and the techniques he uses are tried and true if not original.

We also began to take a look at our gear. We wanted to carry as little as possible, but avoid what Skurka calls "**stupid light**" as in not bringing enough essentials like food or a compass just to save weight. We wanted to stop "**packing our fears**," which are easy gear to identify because they never get used. They just take up space and add weight to your pack, but you want to bring them just in case, like a Bowie knife or five pairs of waterproof sox.

These we left behind. We also bought a luggage scale and a kitchen scale. These two items get used as much as any of our gear. For maximum comfort while backpacking, thus increasing the quality of the experience, we weighed every item we carry and either discarded it or looked for a lighter replacement.

The two biggest additions that improved our comfort on trail were trekking poles and trail runner shoes.

The poles give you four points of contact, which gives advantages similar to having four wheel drive in a vehicle. These more than proved their value on some of the long stretches of abused and neglected trail that more resemble an off-road mud buggy track than a hiking/equestrian trail. We chose cork handles and carbon fiber poles for comfort and light weight. Trail runner shoes are light weight and quick to dry, which is nice, since we no longer stop to take them off at creek crossings. In fact, we gave up any notion of trying to keep our feet dry while backpacking. Since we were going to get wet no matter what we did, we looked for ways to minimize its negative affects and focus on the positive ones. Soon we were looking forward to the cool creek water on our sore feet and rain in the forecast meant plenty of water to drink.

Another important change was from a canister stove to an alcohol stove. These we made out of cat food cans with a hole punch for paper. They weigh one-tenth of an ounce and burn denatured alcohol. We use the yellow bottle of HEAT from the automotive section for fuel.



For our food we followed a simple formula, again laid out by Mr. Skurka. This system

breaks everything down by weight and calories, not just recipes. It is as simple as choosing **foods, mostly nonperishable, that have at least 110 calories per ounce.** So if you pack a hearty meal for dinner, like say beans and rice with cheese and corn chips and an instant breakfast like cereal and protein powder, plus eleven ounces of snacks for in between, then you have enough for one day. The idea is to not stop for lunch, which can slow you down and might put you in a food coma, but only take breaks when needed and snack as you hike, eating two to four ounces of high calorie foods every couple of hours. Another way is to bring one and a half to two pounds of foods that have at least 110 calories per ounce, per day. This helps keep our pack weight to a minimum, ensures enough calories to keep warm and moving, and simplifies meal planning. We prepare multiple meals at a time so they are ready when we are.



Next came planning logistics for each section. Since hiking 25 miles in three days was working for us, we started to look for trailheads that were about that far apart so we could drop my truck at one and drive her jeep to the other and then hike back to my truck. This is the method we chose for almost the entire trail, and it kind of became a running joke. It seemed a little crazy to park a perfectly good truck 25 miles away just to turn around and walk back to it. We did this from E-Town to the backpacker's parking lot at Garden of the Gods. We parked at the Hardin County Sheriff's Office in E-town, which was allowed, out of the way a little up the hill from the office. Don't forget to buy some ice cream along this section from Jo Jo at High Knob Campground.

Now spring had turned to summer and the Shawnee Forest filled itself with the usual flesh-eating insects, poison ivy, and the oppressive southern Illinois humidity that

clings to you like a wool sweater. This, combined with the fact that herds of horses and ATV's had churned the R2R into large expanses of slick mud flats, strung about here and there with ponds and lakes surrounded by the hooked thorns of multiflora rose and thick tangled Japanese honeysuckle, turned our attention elsewhere for the season. It is worth mention here that, despite the horse manure milkshake filled "ponds and lakes" in the middle of the trail, most clean water sources in the forest become scarce or stagnant during summer.



Also, April started my second season leading guided canoe tours on the lower Cache River and my attention was focused on that ecological wonder for the next six months. We learned to enjoy the lakes and streams here during the summer and go to the forest the rest of the year. The beaches of Rend, Carlyle, and Kentucky Lakes can be as enjoyable and pleasant as any coastal beach, in the summer time. But we didn't stop backpacking for the summer, we just went elsewhere. We spent some nights in the Clifty Wilderness and Red River Gorge in Kentucky and completed the difficult and beautiful Eagle Rock Loop in the Ouachita Mountains-the longest loop trail in the state of Arkansas through some of the oldest mountains in the country.

When the leaves began to fall in 2018 we returned to the R2R. We skipped the section from Garden of the God's to Lusk Creek trailhead since we had already hiked it twice. We instead hiked from last said location to Trigg Tower, camping below Crow Knob, atop of which we enjoyed a beautiful sunset. Trigg tower is only a short hike from the trail and, as we discovered, a hot spot for some late night underage drinking. Here is where we

started implementing sleeping in the jeep at the trailhead on the R2R in order to get an earlier start. Sometimes we were hiking before sunup. From Trigg tower we hiked to the trailhead off Rebman Road at Ferne Clyffe State Park. This took us three days and two nights.



This next section of trail became more challenging to plan because of the long road walk between Fern Clyffe and Panther Den and the fact that camping is only allowed at the campgrounds in the State Park, which was so near our starting point. We would have to make 17 miles the first day or else sleep somewhere on the side of the road. I think seven or eight miles of this is open road, which makes for fast hiking. We accepted the challenge and succeeded, camping at sundown about a mile from Wayside Lane inside Panther Den wilderness and hiked to my truck at Giant City State Park campground the next day.

Road walks aren't everybody's favorite part of hiking, but on this one something magical happened. Somewhere along Mt. Hebron Road, a kindly gentleman stopped his truck and asked if we were doing O.K. and said, "I don't know if you guys are tough or just crazy" after informing us of the forecast low of 25* F that night. We assured him that we were ready and well equipped and parted ways. Somewhere toward the end Wayside Lane we again encountered this fine fellow at his barn, happily watching his cattle munch their fodder he had recently provided. After a short chat he provided us with some fodder of our own in the form of two bananas "so you won't get leg cramps" and this was our first ever Trail Magic!

Our next and final section of the R2R began at Giant City State Park campground. We used the Red Cedar trail for a short distance to where the R2R joins it. I think it's important to note that we informed the park staff of our plans ahead of time and left a written account of it

on the dash of the Jeep. That night we camped up the hill west of the Cedar Lake spillway to avoid condensation issues on the walls of our tent.



The next morning dawned and we were soon in Alto Pass. We stopped at Duty's Country Store for our only resupply on the entire trail. I had already calculated the amount of ounces of high energy foods we needed to finish the trail and we had lunch there, too. They have a fine deli and we watched "The Price is Right" on the TV by the tables in back. Restrooms are down the hill in the park.

From here to the Bald Knob wilderness it is back road walking again with fine views of the Bald Knob Cross and surrounding countryside. It was cool and misty that day and we made good time back to the forest. We crossed Hutchin's Creek and hiked to within a mile or so of La Rue Pine Hills Road before making camp. That night we could see the cross shining bright in the distance. A beautiful sight of one of southern Illinois' most sacred and historic landmarks.



The next morning we began our last day on our section hike. It is all road from the Pine Hills to Devil's Backbone Park, mostly one lane gravel along the Big Muddy River levy then along the Mississippi River levy across Grand Tower Island, which is part of the state of Missouri! From all the accounts I've heard this is the least liked stretch. It is exposed and can be hot and dusty in summer. Gravel can hurt tender feet. There's nothing "to see". However, in February, we found it not only beautiful, but the weather of late winter is perfect for hiking. To our left our attention was fixed on the river backwaters, filled with hundreds of ducks and other waterfowl, while to the right the fields of the bread basket of the nation slept silently, awaiting spring. From the East, the giant that is Inspiration Point keeps watch of the nations largest and magnificent river valley.

This is the River to River Trail, after all.

My sweetheart's mother was scheduled to pick us up at Devils Backbone Park. We did this instead of parking there because it is private property and we had heard from others that we might be towed. I got no answer by the campground phone number. This seemed the safest way. There is no parking at the end of the River to River Trail that I know of.

We section hiked this trail beginning in March 2018 and finished in February 2019. We chose to section hike because, since our time here on earth is limited, we know its probably not possible for us to adventure and hike all the places we want to. For example, if we were going to take two weeks off work and away from our pets then we were going to visit somewhere far away. Here at home we could leave to sleep in the Jeep at the

trailhead after work on Saturday and be back home Wednesday after completing each section- the same amount of time it would take just to drive to Grand Canyon and back. During this twelve months we also spent ten days in the Florida Everglades canoeing the mangroves with dolphins and alligators. We drove west and climbed our first high mountain, Telescope Peak at Death Valley, hiked in Grand Canyon, and sat beneath the Giant Sequoias. This, plus countless miles of road tripping and day hikes. Time is precious and it is experiences like these and our section hike of the R2R that mark the hours of our lives down in the book of life in a meaningful way.

