

River to River Thru-Hike Trip Report

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Greetings everyone!

After cancelling a summer 2020 North-bound Appalachian Trail thru-hike attempt due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was left with two things: a bunch of new, expensive hiking gear and an intense desire to get out in the woods for a few days and do something challenging. These factors actualized into a river to



river thru-hike over my thanksgiving break, starting on Friday Nov. 20. As a forestry student at SIU and an avid trail/ultrarunner and backpacker, the Shawnee was my stomping ground. I'd covered most of the R2R already at one point or another, whether it be running Cedar Lake, Giant City SP, or Godwin wilderness, or overnight trips to Garden of the Gods, Lusk Creek Wilderness, and Millstone lake. I've even taken field trips for Tree ID class to Fern Clyffe, Crab Orchard, and other points of interest around the Shawnee. Walking through all my favorite local gems at once was the logical next step.

Day 1

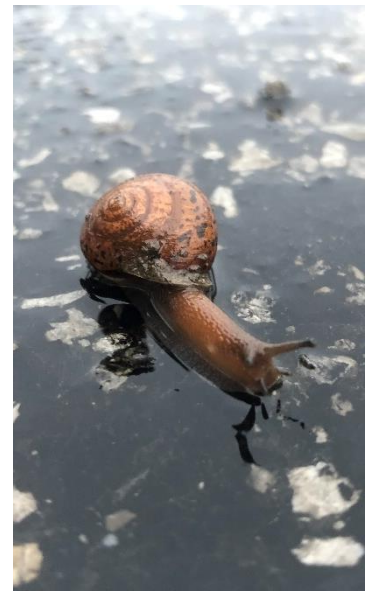
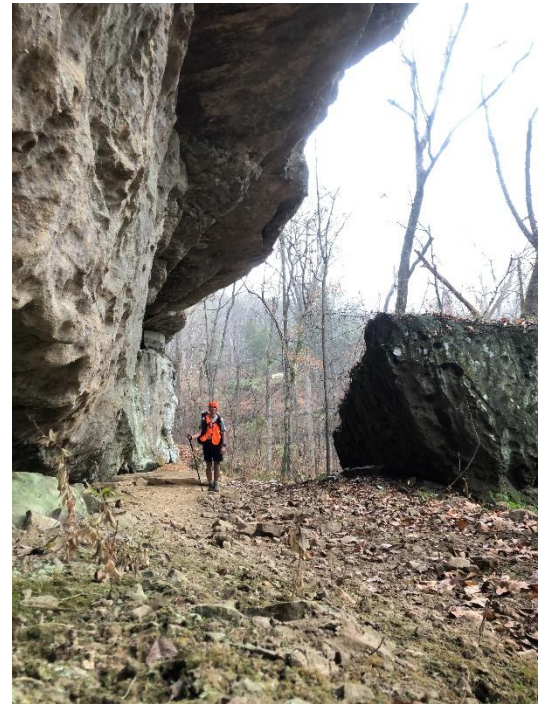
My friends helped me drop a car at Grandtower the day before, and then my parents picked me up from school on Friday after a zoom Spanish class and drove me to the Ohio river at Elizabethtown. After donning an orange vest and saying my goodbyes, I was off! Start time: 1:49 PM on Friday, Nov. 20.

First observation of the night: wow, there were a lot of hunters. I was increasingly glad to be wearing a ridiculous amount of blaze orange – vest, backpack panel, gloves, and hat despite the temperature nearing 70 degrees. Sadly, I lost my lucky Sierra Club hat (Make America GREEN Again) on this first day – must've fallen off the back of my pack. As the night came, the gunshots disappeared and I was much more comfortable hiking through the woods in the dark, albeit the occasional trail of blood and pile of deer innards diminished my usual carefree feeling of being alone in nature. Some neat abandoned houses near high knob became much spookier in the dark. I ended up walking till about 9 PM, making my camp at buzzard point. I explored the rock features with my headlamp before calling it a night.



Day 2

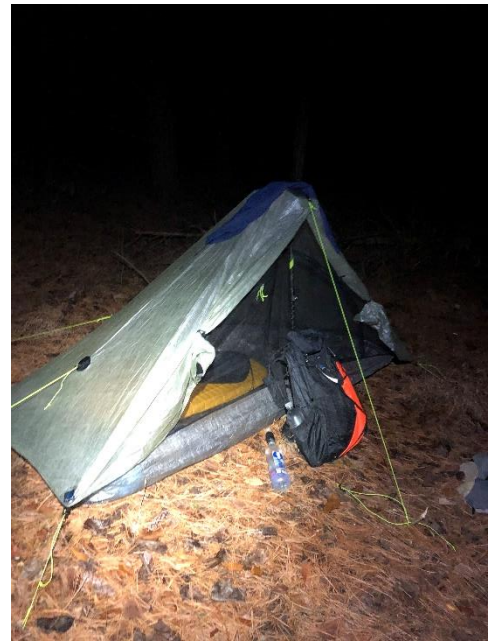
Woke up to a pretty warm morning around 5 AM, taking down camp and hiking by 6. I enjoyed my cold instant coffee in my all-purpose peanut butter jar inside of Garden of the Gods, admiring the mystery created by foggy overlooks. After the road walk past Herod, I started encountering hunters. Strange little tent cities filled the forest roads, littered with empty beer cans and half-full bottles of hard liquor. All positive encounters with the hunters I spoke with – the ones in the tree stands as I hiked by seemed slightly upset at my disturbance of any possible deer in the area. My body felt great all day, though rain began around 8AM and continued on and off. Wet feet started to hurt in the early afternoon, and I began worrying about foot submersion diseases. Managed to reach the patch of wilderness just before Eddyville before dark, though as I dropped my pack to set up camp a couple hunters began setting up a tree stand nearby. I decided to not stick around for something to be killed, so I went a little farther and found a new campsite near the road. As I type this and resist the urge to itch the poison ivy on my hand, I remember seeing all the little brown twigs with deer-hoof shaped buds surrounding my camp site, so this night is likely the culprit. Had my dinner of cold soaked beans and a weird vegan candy bar that I did not enjoy as much. In my tent by 7pm due to rain and cold setting in.



Day 3

Wow it was cold! Woke up to misty, blowing rain. Began hiking by 5:50 AM to start some road miles in Eddyville – pretty unpleasant morning, especially having to put my feet in wet socks and shoes to begin. Kept moving to stay warm, smiling all the way ☺ Passed some really neat spots near gum springs and max creek – on a warmer day I would've for sure been swimming! I'll be back...

Notably fewer hunter sightings today, being the last day of deer season (I was getting excited to take off the orange vest). Ended up changing into my sandals for a road walk to dry out my socks and shoes a little – with dirty socks hanging from my chest I started to feel like real hiker trash walking along the highway. Another lost item today – left my bag of tent stakes at my site – made me feel like a dumb litterbug (who no longer has tent stakes). I found a really nice camp site for tonight in the pine forest just past Dutchman lake. I set up my tent with 9 twigs I whittled and a fork salvaged from a creek. Cold bean mush still tasted great!



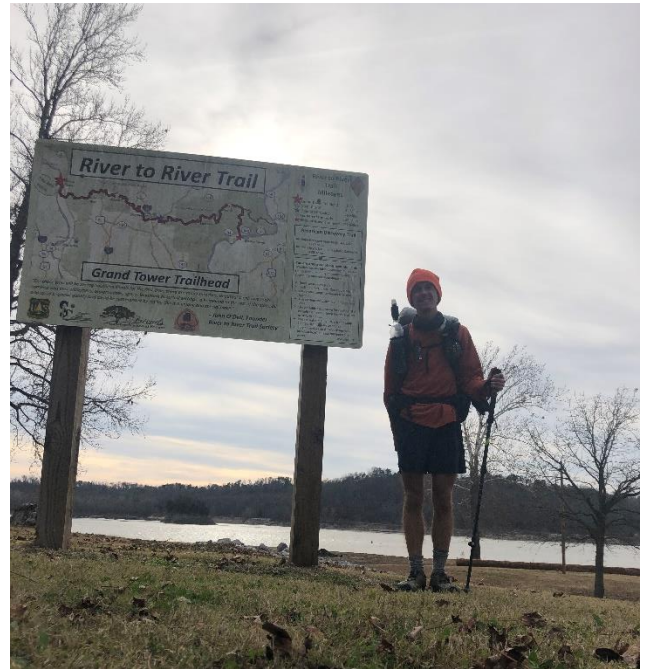
Day 4

Extra early today – hiking by 5AM. I cruised some early road miles while sipping cold instant coffee – barely made it to Fern Clyffe for a bathroom trip. My wet gear froze as I walked in the morning – crazy cold! Thin fleece gloves were definitely not enough. Fern Clyffe was beautiful as usual – the trail passed through some parts that I hadn't seen before. Overall, very road heavy day, however the road section to Panther's Den had some incredible views. As it warmed up, my feet dried and legs felt amazing. The original plan was to camp somewhere near Giant City, but I checked the map and thought there was a patch of woods in Makanda so I kept walking. Turned out to be a road walk and not woods, so I opted to try and reach Cedar lake and camp at the spot between the lakes (one of my favorite campsites). The road walk in Makanda made me very nervous at night – lots of big dogs and traffic. I underestimated how far the campsite was from Lirley trailhead too, and I didn't arrive in camp until after 9PM. My legs felt nice and dead as I sat on the ground admiring the stars above the lake, eating my cold-soaked beans. Twigs worked well as tent stakes again for a second night. Slept hard.



Day 5

NO CONDENSATION THIS MORNING, WOO WOO!
Hiking by 5AM for some chill miles through Cedar lake. Ironically, here was my only wrong turn, and I run the Cedar Lake trails probably once a week – I missed the turn off for R2R from Cedar Lake trail in the dark and had to double back a ways. Enjoyed my cold instant coffee on the Alto Pass road section. A couple big stray dogs in Alto Pass made me anxious, but I didn't have any issues. Beautiful views from the road climbing up to bald knob, but the wind was very chilly. I started to feel some pain in my left achilles here, which was a little worrisome, but it stayed pretty mild for the remainder. Godwin wilderness was a lot more pleasant now in late November than it was when I explored it in September. I took a break at Hutchins creek for my last water fill-up, then pushed up to inspiration point. The main spot at Inspiration point had always been busy when I went, so this was my first time out there – incredible! Wind whipping and sun shining while looking out over the swamp to Missouri is a memory I won't forget! I cruised the last road section, which offered plenty of time to reflect on the past few days. Rolled into Devil's Backbone at 1:37 PM, just under 96 hours, and dipped my hand in the Mississippi – what a hike!



Overall Thoughts and Lessons Learned

My first thru-hike attempt was in 2017 when I was 16 years old – my friend and I tried to hike the Ozark Trail in Missouri in June. We bailed after 60 miles due to insane quantities of ticks (150+ each) and an overgrown, impossible-to-follow trail. My pack weighed a ton and I slept terribly in a hammock. I learned a lot then, but I learned even more this trip.

For one, I learned to not lose my stuff. It's littering and it's totally avoidable. Take the time to double check things are properly attached and nothing is left behind at camp/break spots!

I learned that road sections are best walked during the day (at least for me). I have a somewhat irrational fear of large dogs and I was so anxious walking near houses during the night.

I learned that, when given the choice between granola bars and cold instant oatmeal, I will always choose granola bars. I'm glad I brought the extra food. Nothing is less appealing on a frigid morning than a jar full of cold, beige, unsalted mush.

I planned for this trip to be 6 nights long with 7 days of hiking. I finished after 4 nights and 5 days of hiking, but under 96 hours. My biggest revelation was that I just really love hiking. Any time I had that I could have been sitting in camp, I would much rather be strolling through the woods. I even love night hiking – there's a whole new world out there with totally different feelings that can only be accessed with a headlamp. Pre-dawn morning hikes, when the woods are silent and still, are incredible.

I understand not everyone likes to hike the way I do. To respond to criticism of my love for long days and big miles: I don't feel a need to justify how I like to hike. Hike your own hike 😊😊

Gear Notes

I was very happy with all my gear. Z-packs arc blast 55L pack felt amazing on long days. Z-packs plexamid 1-person tent pitched easy and stayed dry in the rain. I was stoveless, and my all-purpose peanut butter jar was perfect for instant coffee and cold-soaked dinners. Hiked in ancient, falling apart Altra Lone-Peak RSM trail runners with nearly 1,500 miles on them (shoes that got me through the 2019 Bandera 100k Ultramarathon). Brought xero shoes z-trail sandals for a couple road sections and camp shoes. Hiked with one cheap amazon trekking pole. Everything else was standard stuff. Base weight was around 12lbs, and I'd estimate full food/water pack to be about 35lbs at the beginning.

Mileage Breakdown and GPS tracks

Started at 1:49 PM on Friday, Nov. 20 and finished at 1:37 PM on Tuesday, Nov. 24., totaling 95 hours and 48 minutes.

Day 1: E-town to Buzzard Point (20 miles)

<https://www.strava.com/activities/4386927889>

Day 2: Buzzard point to near Eddyville (32.5 miles)

<https://www.strava.com/activities/4386929559>

Day 3: Eddyville to Dutchman lake (34.2 miles)

<https://www.strava.com/activities/4386931206>

Day 4: Dutchman Lake to Cedar Lake (45.6 miles)

<https://www.strava.com/activities/4386933452>

Day 5: Cedar lake to Grand tower (26.4 miles)

<https://www.strava.com/activities/4386934392>

Total Tracked: 158.7 miles (some off trail)