

River to River Trail Journal May 3-10, 2021
By Jacinda Shields

Before my kids were born, I wanted to try backpacking. I was too intimidated so I never did. After my kids were out of the baby stage, my interest was rekindled. I started learning all I could about backpacking, reading about long trails and wanting to hike one. A trip planned for last summer fell through, like everyone else's plans in 2020, so this year I decided I'd hike a more manageable trail than, for example, the AT or PCT. A mom of three young kids just cannot go away for five months to hike a trail. I stumbled upon the River to River Trail in my internet browsing. Despite the fact that I was born and raised in Illinois, I'd never heard of it. I read everything I could, printed out the maps, made a hiking plan, arranged child care and set dates. My husband Matt would accompany me to be my "crew" and I decided it would be more of a "slackpacking thru-hike" than true backpacking. That worked out really well for my first thru-hiking experience.

We live five hours north of the Shawnee National Forest so we drove down the day before and stayed at a cozy Airbnb called Cedar Ridge Cabins near Golconda. It was raining and forecasted to rain much of the week of the hike. Of course I hoped it would clear up but I had my good rain gear. I'd decided to hike about 20 miles a day for the first seven days and hike about 15 miles the last day. I knew that was ambitious for me since my longest training hike was 14 miles, but again, with three kids to take care of, I couldn't train as hard as I should have. I wanted to do the whole trail and I didn't want to leave my kids for longer than a week, so 20 miles a day it had to be!



DAY 1 - Monday, May 3 - Elizabethtown, eastern terminus of the R2R Trail to Garden of the Gods - 20 miles

After taking pictures and touching the Ohio River, I started hiking the 157.1 miles toward the Mississippi around 7:20am. After walking through town and down a gravel lane flanked by cow pastures, I saw the Shawnee looming on the horizon as far as I could see in both directions. It was a gloomy day and the forest looked very imposing, like Mirkwood. Everything was wet and the trail was like a little creek as all the water ran down to lower ground. My main goal this day

and every day subsequent was to keep my feet dry as long as possible. I managed to for awhile, even crossing the first creek barefoot, but realized that was unwise and finally succumbed to the reality that I'd have wet feet no matter what I did because the trail was so wet. I made it to the road leading to Iron Furnace and Matt was waiting for me, which was a nice surprise. We took a short detour to the furnace, which was really impressive. I crossed a lot of creeks; only two were wide enough to get my feet wet. I saw two box turtles on the trail, tadpoles in puddles, frogs, toads and three deer. Beautiful birdsong was my nature soundtrack. Around High Knob the trail started getting really rough due to the horses on the trail. In many spots the trail was reduced to a slog through a wet, muddy trench, the mud sometimes sucking my shoes half off. Other times I'd sink up to my ankles in mud. By the time I reached High Knob Campground, I was tired and relieved to find a store that had one last Gatorade that I quickly nabbed and chugged, which gave me the energy to finish the last eight miles for the day. The trail continued to be difficult, much harder on my ankles than I'd expected, as the mud and rocks kept making them roll inward. I entered the Garden of the Gods Wilderness Area and enjoyed exploring the rock formations that seemed to be everywhere I looked. I finished up at the backpacker's campground and called Matt to come pick me up as we were staying at Pharaoh Campground up the hill and I didn't think I could take another step! I'd hiked 20 miles and it took me about 9 hours.



Iron Furnace and a fallen tulip tree blossom



The Garden of the Gods boasted some incredible rock formations

DAY 2 - Tuesday, May 4 - Garden of the Gods to Bethesda Church - 20.2 miles

Around 4am a big thunderstorm rolled through the area and I was worried about my tent leaking, which it did; also condensation from my breath and the humidity made the inside of my tent wet. I took a risk on this trip and brought a \$26 Walmart one person backpacking tent! I waterproofed it before the trip but it's definitely a get-what-you-pay-for tent. I do have to say, however, that if you are using it on a low-humidity, no-rain-forecast trip, it's actually a great tent! (I suppose most tents are great when you have perfect weather!). I had a blister on my foot from hiking in wet shoes but with moleskin it didn't hurt at all. I'd drained the blister and put Neosporin on it, and it was fine. It actually went away in a couple days. I hiked out of the Garden of the Gods into Herod and completely missed the turn and hiked a half mile up the road in the wrong direction! It did enable me to see the Building in the Bluff which is the ruins of a building and fireplace in the cliff face, and a huge copperhead snake resting nearby! There was a bit more road to walk on, then back into the forest. There was a deep creek crossing but fortunately there was a perfectly placed downed tree that acted as a bridge for me to carefully cross. It was very slippery because of the rain but I inched along and made it safely across. The trails were easier in this section and it helped that I wasn't carrying my sleep system as I'd left it with Matt for him to dry while I hiked. I carried all my gear as if I was backpacking by myself on Monday, but today without my sleeping bag, pad and tent, I dropped about 5-6 pounds from my pack which helped a lot! I crossed a lot of beautiful small, rocky creeks and even a couple of waterfalls. There were many more amazing rock formations scattered through the forest. I hiked about 8 and a half hours and finished at Bethesda Church where we were able to camp for the night after asking permission from some people who lived nearby. I felt

pretty discouraged that evening as I sat in camp because I was having a lot of pain. I'd expected it to hurt, but I wasn't sure if I could keep going up to 20 miles for six more days. This was definitely a low point, and I was disappointed in myself for feeling like I didn't want to keep going after only two days! Thankfully my wonderful husband gave me a lot of encouragement and I felt much better in the morning.



Fireplace in the Building in the Bluff and a lovely little stream



Fantastic view

DAY 3 - Wednesday, May 5 - Bethesda Church to Cedar Grove Road crossing - 19.5 miles

The morning dawned sunny and cold. I was thankful that there was only sunshine in the forecast! When I stood up, however, my inner ankles felt like someone was stabbing me with knives. I think it was worse than any pain I've ever had. I thought to myself, how am I going to walk 20 miles when I can barely shuffle around camp? Matt to the rescue again; he helped me walk around the driveway, leaning heavily on his arm, until my ankles loosened up a bit. Then he hiked down the trail about a mile or so with me and by the time he turned around to go back to the church to break camp, my ankles still hurt but the stabbing sensation was gone. Thank goodness for my trekking poles and ibuprofen! As I hiked on and entered the Lusk Creek Wilderness, the sunshine and the gorgeous woods rejuvenated me and filled me with joy. This section was my favorite so far. The trails weren't as wet and though the trail was harder to follow, it was incredibly beautiful. The Lusk Creek crossing (and others) had been giving me anxiety for months. I am scared of water and crossing creeks fairly terrified me. Matt said he'd hike in from the west and help me across, even if he was just standing on the far side for moral support. The R2R Trail Guide on the website had me even more scared about these creek crossings, though people I talked to said they usually aren't bad at all. I decided that instead of the crossing on the trail, I'd hike up to the Old Guest Farm crossing, hoping it would be shallower. I don't know what the actual trail crossing looked like, but I probably should have just stayed on the R2R because the Farm crossing was pretty fast and up over my knees. I made it across without slipping, but it was really deeper than I felt comfortable with. I didn't wait for Matt and met up with him farther on the trail. We had lunch across from Circle B Equestrian Campground and I decided to walk to Eddyville on the road as opposed to the trail to save my ankles a bit of turning in rocks and mud. Matt had gotten me some ankle braces and arch supports at Walmart to help with ankle pain. At the end of the day Matt picked me up on Cedar Grove Road where the trail crosses. We camped at Hayes Canyon Campground, which had showers! Hallelujah! I was even able to wash off my mud-covered shoes in the spigot at our site. The campground is mainly a horse campground and there were a lot of RVs set up with permanent structures built over and around them, like little vacation homes. I'd never seen anything like that before and it was fun to see various people's setups. I enjoyed seeing all the lovely horses. That morning I thought I wouldn't be able to hike at all, and I managed close to 20 miles again.



Muddy trails...and who says road walks are dull?

DAY 4 - Thursday, May 6 - Cedar Grove Road to Goddard Crossing - 17 miles

Today was a lovely section, though it was overcast and rainy most of the day. The rain gear went on and off several times throughout the day. I got to see some amazing things. I'd been under the impression that Illinois was flat and boring, but not so in Shawnee country! (I've recently begun to greatly appreciate the flat farmland and love walking country roads under a huge sky.). The area around Millstone Lake and Bay Creek was incredible. The lake was dammed by a gigantic levee that I walked across, and near the edge of the lake was basically a huge concrete hole in the lake that allowed water to go under the levee and through to the other side to the creek. This was something else I'd never seen before. There were some lovely cliffs in this area as well. I walked on towards Trigg Tower and took the parallel road again. I met Matt there for lunch. He had all our gear drying on the fence around the tower, which is the last remaining fire tower in the area. We climbed to the top and enjoyed the panoramic view of the forest. I hiked on after lunch and, although it was sunny, an afternoon thunderstorm was supposed to roll in, so Matt picked me up on Garfield Lane and for various reasons I inadvertently skipped about three and a half miles of trail. He dropped me at the parking lot just west of Max Creek and I continued on. I stopped at Goddard Crossing, which is the halfway point of the trail and we decided to stay at an Airbnb because of all the rain that day and more expected through the night. We found a Mexican restaurant, enjoyed the warm cabin and I was able to dry out my shoes completely for the first time since beginning the trail.



*Top: view of cliffs before crossing Millstone Lake dam
Bottom: feeling good on the trail and view from top of Trigg Tower*

DAY 5 - Friday, May 7 - Goddard Crossing to Panther Den Wilderness Trailhead - 28.5 miles

The sunshine poured down on me the whole day and the weather was absolutely perfect for hiking. I began at Goddard Crossing, hiked over two more dammed lakes-turned-creeks and on to a long road walk to Ferne Clyffe State Park. Before arriving at the park, I hiked through my favorite type of forest, pine forests. The trail was carpeted with a soft bed of dry pine needles and the wind whispered through the boughs above me. The sun shone through the trees, dappling the forest floor with its light. The fresh scent of damp pine forest is something I wish I could bottle up and inhale whenever I want! Along the road I saw a huge owl sunning itself on a dead branch just off the road. I only saw it when I was just feet from it. My presence didn't disturb it a bit, but I moved to the other side of the road and gave it a wide berth just in case. He had to have been about 18" tall. When I made it to Ferne Clyffe, I was blown away by the beauty of the area. This was my other favorite section of the trail. The park was gorgeous with beautifully maintained trails. They were actually dry, which was a gift, as I'd been trudging down wet trails for days. If I got to hike a part of the trail again, this would surely be the part I'd choose. The natural arch was awesome and it was so cool to see it from the ground and then hike up over the arch. After Ferne Clyffe and past the beautiful Bork's Falls, another long road walk was ahead, but I felt so good and the weather was so great that I just kept going. I didn't mind any of the road walking on this trail except the really busy highways. Most of the road walking is along quiet stretches and I very much enjoyed it. I finally stopped as the trail left the road and led into Panther Den Wilderness. Matt picked me up and we camped at Ferne Clyffe park at the primitive campground.



A kite-swallowtail butterfly and an owl posed for me!



Picturesque solid rock creekbed



Natural arch at Ferne Clyffe and the lovely pine forest

DAY 6 - Saturday, May 8 - Panther Den Wilderness to Lirley Trailhead - 19.5 miles

The woods were so dark at times today that I thought a headlamp might be necessary! This section was probably the most dense so far. I really felt like I was deep in the woods. The trails were harder to follow because there were many spurs going all over the place around the big rock formations. I was thankful for the Avenza navigation app, otherwise finding my way would have been extremely difficult. I also felt like I was going to fall asleep walking after my long day yesterday. I forgot to stop at the Hidatsa Earth Lodge, so was disappointed I missed it. The trail got much easier as I entered Giant City State Park. I hiked through into Makanda and stopped at the Lirley Trailhead leading into the Cedar Lake section. Matt picked me up and drove me back to Giant City, where we got a cabin to stay in because of more forecasted rain. I was done camping in the rain in a leaky tent!

DAY 7 - Sunday, May 9 - Lirley Trailhead to Godwin West Trailhead - 18 miles

Started the day with some creek crossings and reached the natural dam/spillway at Cedar Lake. Before I got there I saw eight box turtles soaking up the rain on the trail. I almost stepped on one! The natural dam was a beautiful, unique place. The spillway was about half dry, half underwater, but not enough that I couldn't cross. It was extremely slippery so I was nervous I'd fall, but I didn't. I continued through Alto Pass, down a very long section of road. I saw another owl in a tree along the roadside. As I reached the ridge along Chestnut Street I could see the Bald Knob Cross at the top of the hill beyond the valley. The rain was starting again and mist was rising out of the forest, making it look forbidding indeed against the dark, stormy sky. Matt met me at the Godwin east trailhead. Hutchins Creek, which separates Bald Knob Wilderness from Clear Springs Wilderness, was another crossing that I was really worried about. Once I got there, I realized that even with a lot of recent rain, the creek was one of the easiest crossings of the whole trail! I'd been worried for nothing. The bottom and banks were gravel so I didn't have to worry about slipping on rocks and it was only ankle deep. It amazed me how different Bald Knob was from Clear Springs. I thought the trail would just fall off the hillside in Clear Springs, as it was just a narrow ledge along a steep hillside. The terrain and the flora differed significantly from one side of the creek to the other. Matt picked me up after I finished that section and we went to our Airbnb which was outside of Alto Pass. This place had a washing machine so even though I only had one day of hiking left, I was thrilled to do laundry and dress in clean clothes for the final leg! I was looking forward to my last day of hiking the next day, and especially excited that it was supposed to be sunny all day. Hiking in the rain didn't bother me but I was happy to finish the hike in the sun; it definitely raises the spirits.



The rock dam/spillway was slippery but lovely

DAY 8 - Monday, May 10 - Godwin West Trailhead to Grand Tower western terminus of the R2R Trail - 11 miles

Matt walked to Inspiration Point early this morning with me. I could have stayed up there for hours. The view was spectacular. We took lots of pictures and I hiked down the McCann Springs trail as he drove down and explored the area below the bluffs along the levee road. I tried to save some unfortunate snails from an untimely death on the gravel road as the sunlight threatened to bake them and found a dollar bill on the road as well! On the levee road that I'd walk until I reached Grand Tower, I was able to enjoy seeing hundreds of birds, mostly snowy egrets, in the surrounding swampy areas along the Big Muddy River. The sun was warm and the air was cool and I was completely at ease as I processed the last seven days of hiking. Finally the trail ended at a riverside campground in Grand Tower and I walked down the steps to the giant Mississippi River and touched the water, officially ending my River to River thru-hike. I felt proud of myself for doing the whole trail (except those accidentally missed 3 ½ miles on day 4), happy to be done, sad to be done, and ready to go home and see my kids.



The view from Inspiration Point was fabulous. The levee road walk was full of yellow wildflowers and birds, making for a beautiful walk.



Made it to the Mississippi!

Final thoughts:

I didn't technically backpack though I carried my pack the whole way (I just didn't have all my gear and food inside), but I was still able to walk from the Ohio River to the Mississippi River, and that was enough for me. I learned a lot about myself and about hiking during this trip. I am grateful we were able to stay inside to avoid some wet, wet camping, and though I feel like I didn't "tough it out" like I thought I would or should, I still felt a great sense of accomplishment. I walked/hiked/slogged/trudged/limped 154 miles in 8 days. I have an even greater admiration for people who thru-hike by themselves with all their gear and no partner to meet up with them throughout the day to boost morale, buy ankle braces and cook their food. I hope to do more of this, hopefully even a true backpacking trip. I just need a better tent! Hiking in early May was great because the weather was fairly warm and there were no bugs! The trail was semi-overgrown already in some places so hiking in the autumn I would assume the trail would be hard to follow at points. The downside was that the trail was so wet and muddy and it rained a lot. Sometimes the trail turned into a little river or even widened into a pond!

I truly enjoyed the River to River Trail and would highly recommend it to anyone.

Thank you to all who volunteer and work to maintain the River to River Trail. I was so happy to find a long trail close to home that I could walk in its entirety. The trail is a nice mix of forest and road (maybe too much road at times, but I didn't mind it), passing through some tiny towns and through a variety of terrain and environments. I'm glad I was able to explore the southern end of my home state and appreciate more of Illinois' natural beauty.