



The great idea of completing the R2R hike for me started several years ago while following Facebook pages like River to river trail hikers, Shawnee National Forest, Hiking with Shawn, and others. I've always been an outdoor type of person loving to camp, fish, hike and backpack short distances. Listening to others talk about their adventures gave me hope. I just didn't have the motivation until a friend suggested late last year to section hike the Appalachian Trail for a 3-4 week period. Sounded good to me so we started planning, gathering equipment, and trained hard all winter. Unfortunately, after 32 miles on the AT, my friend had medical concerns and we came home after just a few days. Since I was in great shape and my equipment was packed, I decided to plan the R2R immediately. One week later, I was down in Southern Illinois, my stomping grounds decades ago, starting the solo journey. Here's my story.



Due to weather, shuttles, prior commitments, and family engagements, I chose to interrupt the traditional start at Etown (or Grand Tower) and had my cousin drop me off Friday morning, May 14th, at GOG backpacking parking lot to start my R2R hike west. Night one camp was just past Benham Rd. West Crossing (about 16 miles). Night two was at Bowed Tree Crossing at Lusk Creek (about 11 miles). Night three was at Crow Knob Ecological Area (about 10.5 miles). I arrived on the fourth day at Millstone Lake (5 miles) for a pickup by cousin to carbo load my gut (and pack) and clean sweat and dirt from body, and sleep in a comfortable bed. On day and night five, I camped at GOG Pharoah campgrounds. Early on day six, I first met Bart Lane at the GOG backpacking lot where I parked my car this time. He shuttled me to Etown, and while doing so, we both told stories and got to know each other as much we could in the 45 minute drive. Night six ended about 1/2 mile west of the junction of the Etown R2R route and the Battery Rock R2R route (15.5 miles). Day seven, I arrived back at GOG car lot (6 mile hike) and ended at a hotel in Marion. Day eight started with a drop off of vehicle at Ferne Clyffe S.P. Maintenance Bldg. and a shuttle from Bart back to Millstone Lake. Due to a late start, I only made past Trigg Tower Rd (about 3.5 miles) for a good night sleep. Day and Night nine, I stopped past the Tunnel Hill Bike trail (about 15.5 miles). Day ten trail ended back at Ferne Clyffe (10 miles). Night ten was back at a Marion hotel. Day eleven was a drive back to Ferne Clyffe for a drop of vehicle and a cousin shuttle to Giant City Lodge. to start a east hike back to car. Night eleven made it past Bork Falls (17.5miles). Day twelve, made it back to Ferne Clyffe (10 miles or so) and motel slept in Marion again. Day and night thirteen and fourteen (due to severe weather forecasts), were spent relaxing at a friend's home. Day and night fifteen were at Devils backbone campground in Grand tower. Day sixteen, I met up with Bart Lane again for a shuttle back to Giant City Lodge. That night, I camped at the Cedar Lake spillway (12 miles). Night seventeen camp was at McCann Springs (15 miles). Day eighteen, completed the R2R at Grand Tower campground trailhead (10 miles). In total, I backpack camped nine nights and hiked thirteen days. I camped at two campgrounds, one night each. I stayed in three hotel rooms. I stayed at friends for two nights. I stayed at my cousins West Frankfort home one night. I hiked every trail and road 104% (the extra 6 miles or so doing fun side hikes off trail (or in some cases, missing trail markers and backtracking). The Avenza app with the R2R trail bundle never let me down. The trails were all marked well from my perspective. I just zoned out walking on some of those Jeep trails and missed trail 001 that crossed it. At the end, I even drove back and parked at McCann trailhead and walked up the road to Inspiration Point parking lot since I did the lookout trail the prior day and came down the backside to McCann. I was on a mission that last day and just didn't want it to end. I hiked my own hike and really enjoyed it.



What a journey I had! Some of the best trail segments I hiked were from Giant City Lodge heading east to the Panther Den east trailhead with Crab Orchard Wildlife Refuge in between the two. Another section was all of Bald Knob and Clear Springs Wilderness. Both were very remote and Clear Springs was hilly. Road walking was challenging at times when the temps were reaching the mid to high 80's. The section from 2 miles east of High Knob to GOG backpacking lot was the most polluted with garbage. This was a difficult 6 mile hike for me due to mud, hoof prints, and heat. (not complaining though except for the garbage).



I met many nice people on trail including solo thru hiker Anthony from REI and locals Carl and Chuck doing a west to east thru hike, Evan, a soon-to-be Marine Corps recruit thru-hiking, and American Discovery Trail hiker Shasta. I passed trails with a few other section and day hikers that were all very

friendly. In general though, it was very remote out there and some days would see no one except a wave from a car during a road walk. I had many vehicles stop and talk to me just curious (or dumbfounded as to why anyone would be walking down a road in the heat with 30 or more lbs of stuff attached to their back). Each one offered cold water (a beer one time) which I graciously accepted or in some cases, offered me a ride to a trailhead which I declined. High Knob Campground and Shotgun Eddies were a few places I refueled on the journey. Thanks. Also a shout out to Ferne Clyffe site employees and owner William at Devils Backbone campground in Grand Tower for all their kindness. One person I can't forget is Bart Lane who shuttled me around several times. He is a very likable guy who cares about Southern Illinois. Thanks Bart! My friends Mike and Mary Ellen were outstanding hosts to help me through the rainy/stormy days while at their home. Much appreciated. Second to last but not least is a big hug to my cousin Dave and Marsha. The excellent food, clean shower, soft bed, and great conversation were the best. Finally, and most loving, I thank my wife Judy and all my family for supporting and encouraging me on my journey. Happy trails everyone!