

## An August Thruhike of the River to River Trail Mike Gunderloy

I wasn't sure whether I was going to write this one up, but in the end I decided that it would be good to have some reports available from hikers who did not have entirely Happy Fun Time on the trail. Don't get me wrong, I'm glad I hiked the R2R and I appreciate the people who put it together and keep it that way, but I definitely had some challenges along the way. I like to think I'm a reasonably experienced backpacker: I'd been doing 300 or so miles a year with some multi-day trips, but this one kicked my butt a bit. To be slightly fair to myself, I'm also 62 years old with some arthritis and post-cataract eyes, so if I can make it you probably can too. Anyhow...

If you're one of those people who tries to get in 10,000 steps every day, then one way to think of thruhiking the River to River trail is as a way to get in all your steps for entire month. Except of course that on the R2R, many of those steps are uphill. Or downhill. Or in my case, falling over downed trees and slipping on slimy rocks.

I took those 300,000 steps (more or less) from August 6 to 12, 2022. This was actually my second attempt at this hike. I got halfway through back in March, but pulled off the trail early when a heavy storm plus an equipment failure plus a sudden temperature drop left me borderline hypothermic. I hate leaving things unfinished, and when I got a week free in August I took a second shot at the trail. By stripping down to as little equipment as possible and planning not to cook, I was able to get my pack weight down to 32 pounds including food for a week, so I wouldn't have to worry about resupplies.

Saturday, August 6

I hit the trail about 7:30AM on a clear Saturday morning in Elizabethtown, dipped my toes in the Ohio River, and headed up to road. I'd hiked this portion earlier in the year, so I thought I knew where I was going. (Pro-tip: there's a little park just 15 minutes in that has the last toilet seat and paper you're going to see for a long while, so take advantage of it). Within the first half hour I made my first wrong turn. That's what comes of being complacent. The maps in the official Guide are excellent but that doesn't do much good if you're too cocky to look at them. Fortunately some nice people got me turned around quickly enough.

One of the themes of this week of hiking was "damp." There was rain the previous week, so lots of mud and puddles, and the weather was blazingly hot, with heat indexes pushing 100 for the first few days. Between the air and the water on the brush and my own sweat, I was somewhere between moderately damp and completely soaked all week. I knew this was coming, of course, which affected some of my gear choices. First, I didn't bother with water shoes. That turned out OK: even the worst of the stream crossings was less than knee-deep on me, and 30 minutes later I was as dry as I'd get all week. Second, I slathered my feet with Gurney Goo every morning to at least keep them from getting macerated. That worked too, though a couple of blisters were unavoidable.

I took my lunch break around 11AM, 10 miles in on the trail. I planned a simple menu with the same lunch every day: nut butter on whole wheat tortillas. I started by finishing off a jar of cookie butter (dangerously sweet but nicely calorie-loaded) and switched to peanut butter later in the week when that ran out.

Of course I chugged water all day every day. Fortunately with recent rains there was no lack of surface water in streams. My second stop each day was around 3PM to put some ramen in to cold soak ("cold" being a decided misnomer this week) as the core of my dinner. Most days I

only took two pack-off breaks; with 30 pounds or less on my back, I can hike as many hours as I care to at 2 to 2.5 miles per hour.

I had vaguely hoped to camp the first night at the Garden of the Gods campground, but it was full on a summer weekend night, I did take advantage of the pump at the campground to load up an extra liter of water to get through the coming dry stretch, so I headed on to the top of the bluffs carrying three liters. I managed water filtering all week with a Platypus Quickdraw system, which worked excellently: it's quick and easy to back-flush in the field. I camped at the second of the well-used sites along the cliffs. This meant setting up a bug bivy and air mattress for the night, and mixing some fake tuna into the ramen for protein. I ended up only eating about half of my dinner, This was a continuing problem all week: I simply didn't have much appetite. Some of that may have been incipient heat illness despite my best efforts, but in any case I forced down what I could and called it a night.

Sunday, August 7

I fell asleep, more or less, to people playing loud rock music down the trail somewhere until close to midnight. I woke at 3AM when those same people (I assume) came back up the trail driving ATVs and hooting and hollering. Some people are unclear on the meaning of "wilderness area." In my family we all them the Pig People. In any case, I'm crossing Garden of the Gods off my list of weekend destinations at this point. The trail character for a few miles was crappy, because the ATVs had torn the hell out of it, but after the last party spot it went back to being a reasonable track with knee-high poison ivy encroaching from all sides.

It was 72 degrees and 94% humidity already when I set out though (according to my Sensorpush wireless monitor, which I recommend to any data-oriented hiker) so I was sweating within 15 minutes, sun or no sun.

It took me about an hour for breakfast (granola and prunes), cleanup, and packing every morning, I didn't mind the early start, both because hiking in the dark let me avoid some of the heat this week and because I'm a morning person anyhow. I hit Herod at 6AM, and took a break at the little pavilion with fridge that the Herod Springs Baptist Church keeps stocked. I had some of their wonderful cold water and a snack, left them a donation, and trudged on down the gravel road.

The next hill climb after the road walk was the first place where the official trail pretty much just vanished. I've been up that hill on the switchbacks before, so I know they exist, and I even spotted some of the markers where they should be — but they've had so little traffic that they've vanished under brush and blowdowns. I ended up going straight up the fire line like everyone else, which doesn't improve the situation, but the only other choice was flat-out bushwhacking.

Sunday was as brutally hot as I expected, with the raw heat in the high 80s and the heat index close to 100. I mostly felt this on uphill sections, where I moved much slower than I would in the more sensible seasons. On the plus side, I'm sure it kept the trail traffic down: I didn't end up seeing a single other backpacker all week. Maybe the rest of them are smarter than me. I stopped for the night just past Big Lusk Creek. I'd vaguely planned to get all the way to the next trailhead, but I was knackered and decided that was a good place to camp. I could make up the miles later on. I napped for a few hours, had dinner, and went back to sleep.

Monday, August 8

Just as I was finishing up packing at 4AM, a little mouse came out of nowhere, ran across my pack, paused to look around, and then ran back into the leaf litter. I think we were both a bit

surprised. It was another hot and humid day, with distant thunder but no rain where I was walking, so by the time I finished the first long uphill from Bowed Tree crossing I was soaked through again.

I took an unintentional shortcut on the way to Eddyville by following the horse trail instead of the actual R2R, but then I got myself turned around and walked away from Eddyville for half a mile so I made up the mileage anyhow before I figured it out. I got into that town a bit after 6AM, which put me at 54 miles in on the official mileage, and sat down for a quick rest and to catch my breath. A couple of bikepackers went by while I was doing that, but they weren't following the same trail I was so I have no idea where they were going.

Today was the first (but not the last) of the equipment failure I had on my hike: one of the extra pads for my shoulder straps bailed out somewhere, and the zipper on my front pack started popping open. On top of that it was clear that I'd have to cut down my use of bug spray. My hiking clothes are all treated with permethrin, but I depend on DEET to keep the other creatures away, and I ended up rationing that (and getting somewhat chewed up) for the rest of the week.

Coming up on Petticoat Junction I started in on the ibuprofen. I knew I'd be doing that, and for the rest of the week I had at least 2 or 3 every day. I was also dumping electrolytes into my water on a regular basis (I always know I'm low on electrolytes when Fritos don't taste very salty). Petticoat Junction itself seems to be down to one pair of boxer shorts stuck on a low-hanging tree branch. If it wasn't for all the existing trail signs it'd be time to come up with a new name.

This would be a great trail for collecting horseshoes, by the way. By this time I'd passed half a dozen in the dirt since Saturday morning. Poor horses though.

Monday lunch was at almost 18 miles for the day — not bad for 11AM, if I do say so myself. I found a shady spot just before the Tin Whistle where a nice breeze was blowing up the valley and cooling things down. The trail in this area is pretty badly torn up by horses and ATVs, and the downhill sections in particular were ankle-breaker rocks and mud. I could feel some toenails starting to loosen, a chronic issue for me (I ended up losing three for sure, and might still have a fourth on the way out now that I'm done). I also had to pause not far before Bay Creek Lake because a guy on a bulldozer was out regrading the gravel road. We had a nice chat after he saw me and backed off. Fortunately the trail wasn't closed.

The afternoon was hot and humid, including half a mile off trail (and walking downhill, so I had to walk uphill to recover). The storm never did break, so I ended up completely done for the day by the time I got to the Cedar Creek horse tie-up and made my camp. I put up my tarp for the first time because the last weather forecast I got (via my InReach) showed a 40% chance of rain overnight, but it never did arrive. The evening was punctuated by distant thunder but the rain all missed me.

Tuesday, August 9

This was one of the worst days on any trail I'd had for a long time.

At 3AM I was a clammy mess: the temperature went down to 74 overnight but the humidity stayed at the "you're in a cloud" level. I gave up sleeping, had breakfast, and was on the trail an hour later. Literally on the trail: I was within my first ten steps when I tripped on a downhill stretch and went down hard. Nothing broken and no open wounds, but I took a lot of the impact on my left knee and hip, which are also where I've got the worst arthritis. This did nothing to make the rest of the hike more pleasant.

On the plus side, I hit the first road walk around 4:30 and last night's non-storm had blown the clouds out so I got to see rural stars for the first time on this hike. That's always nice. I also saw deer by the dozen, their eyes reflecting the glow of my headlamp. They apparently like sleeping in the fields. Probably everyone but me already knew this.

The long stretch down to Max Creek and back up is strenuous at the best of times, with its steep grades and washouts and rocks, and this was not the best of times: it's also thoroughly overgrown (which in southern Illinois means pushing through a mix of grass, poison ivy, blackberries and roses: not fun) and has a few big blowdowns. At least hiking it by headlamp made it easier to spot and clear some of the spider webs.

One thing I learned on this hike is that the shoulder on the east side of State Highway 45 is much wider than the one on the west side, where I hiked last time. It's still an unpleasant walk but at least it was a bit safer despite facing away from the traffic. Somewhere after that the trail followed a power-line right of way for a while. OK, that's safer than road-walking, but it hadn't been mowed this season, perhaps this year, so the weeds were hip-deep in places. Don't get me wrong: I appreciate everyone who maintains this trail, and I know it's a difficult and often-thankless job. But I think this is the first August trip report going out on the internet for this trail, and anyone else who attempts it should have some idea what they're up against. Be prepared to wade through weeds. And to shred your pants: I retired a pair of nylon hiking pants after this week. I can't imagine attempting it in shorts.

The trails around Dutchman Lake are severely overgrown and had some fresh blowdowns to make life even more fun. Some parts of that trail are hard to distinguish from bushwhacking, and I'd suggest just taking the road-walk alternate from Interest 24 down to the lake if you tackle this in the summer. Somewhat poor planning meant I needed to filter and pack some water from the lake - this time of year that meant pushing the algae mat aside to get at actual liquid, and it still tasted very green. But with an 8-mile dry stretch following the lake I took 3 liters along with me. I'm glad the trail guide had a warning about that.

I took a couple more bad falls navigating pine blowdowns after Dutchman Lake. The first left me scraped and annoyed. The second left me punctured by blackberries and holding a snapped carbon-fiber hiking pole. Better than a snapped leg, of course, but I definitely missed having two poles for the rest of the hike. Also, at some point in those falls, the zipper on my front pack failed and I didn't notice my camera falling out. I backtracked a bit but it was basically hopeless. If anyone can find it, there's an Olympus TG-6 somewhere between Dutchman Lake and Tall Tree Lake just waiting for its next owner.

I hate to use the word "lost" but I will admit that I was half a mile off trail and going in the wrong direction at one point. I finally made it to Ferne Clyffe State Park and sprang for a class A electric site, making me the only non-RV camper there. I took advantage of the electricity to recharge batteries and devices, left a few pounds of trash in the dumpster, and cleaned up a bit in the shower house. I dumped the last bit of nasty Dutchman Lake water and refilled with potable stuff. I also tried to splurge on a pizza, but GrubHub proved unable to cope with the state park as a delivery address, so it was ramen again.

And of course there were probably 50 people within half a mile, which is about 49 more than I want when I'm hiking. One of them set off their car alarm at midnight, which did not make me any happier to have company.

Wednesday, August 10

Things finally quieted down very late, and I “slept in” until 3:20AM. This was as far as I’d gotten on my first thruhike attempt, and it was the thought of failing again that got me out of bed and back on the trail. Sometimes cussedness is the only thing that keeps me going. As part of packing up I abandoned some of the food that I clearly wasn’t going to eat; no point in carrying extra pounds. That led to a bit of a wake-up scare. That raccoon wasn’t expecting me to open the dumpster before dawn and I wasn’t expecting him to come leaping out past my head, but we both recovered after a while.

I followed State Park trails back to the official R2R route. This included trying to figure out which of multiple alternatives was the “real” trail in several places, as well as five minutes of casting around to find a trail when it wasn’t actually where the park map said it was. On the flip side, whoever rated the Boy Scout Trail as “steep/difficult” wasn’t kidding. Half of my old Troop wouldn’t have made it to the top of that one. It reminds me of Agony Hill at our old Girl Scout camp, but five times as long.

I’m sure I missed some spectacular scenery at Ferne Clyffe and beyond by walking it before dawn, but by this point I was sick to my stomach, my feet hurt, and all I really wanted to do was put my head down and slog through miles at a sustainable pace. Oh, and dodge cars. There was a surprising amount of traffic on the rural roads outside of Goreville at 5AM. I was glad to have a bright headlamp and reflective pack & bright clothing to make me easily visible.

I got some cell service and checked the weather. Rain was still predicted any hour. It still didn’t show up. I kept walking. The section of Goreville Road up to I-57 is a nasty one: no shoulder to speak of, blind hills, blind curves, and people zipping by quickly. Be careful. Of course there wasn’t enough traffic to keep the little gas station at the Interstate exit in business, so no consolation treats were to be had.

Lots of road walking in this area, which at least makes for straightforward trail-finding but is hard on my arthritic knees. I also met a mangy-looking stray dog who did not want to back down. I thought I was going to have to spray him but eventually waving my remaining hiking pole and shouting convinced him to leave the road and let me by.

I finally got some rain (which turned out to be the only rain all week) for a couple of hours in the Panther Den Wilderness and Crab Orchard NWR. All my gear is in waterproof sacks or is waterproof itself, and I was already soaked to the hips from overgrown trails again, so I just hiked with a pole in one hand and a hiking umbrella in the other. It was still way too hot to put on a rain jacket (and indeed, I shouldn’t have bothered to carry one).

You know what’s worse than spider webs in the face? Wet spider webs in the face.

The rain picked up a bit and I took a slightly early lunch break in a nice dry rock shelter that was large enough to have a fire pit and seating. The storm was mostly past by the time I had eaten and filtered some more water. I also did a quick and dirty sewing job on the worst rips in my pants, since I remembered I had an emergency sewing kit along. Next time I’ll pack a needle threader too; my old eyes aren’t up to the job any more.

The trail through Crab Orchard was overgrown up to shoulder height on me, with plenty of roses across it. It’s still possible to follow because you can see the path where there’s packed dirt instead of forest duff, but that was the only way. If there were any trail markers I missed them, but the official GeoPDF agreed that I was right on the trail in this stretch.

I called it a night at the backpacking campsites at Giant City State Park, not too far off the R2R. Of course the registration kiosk is at the far end of the RV campground, which added another chunk of walking before I could settle down. This put me at 119 trail miles after 5 days,

not far short of the 25 miles a day that I'd tentatively planned on when I set out. Unfortunately a little more of my luck ran out: having walked all day in wet shoes and socks again, I finally had a blister on the ball of my right foot. I lanced it and dressed it, but it meant that every step from here to Grand Tower hurt a bit.

Thursday, August 11

I had a miserable night. My left knee and left hip were aching badly enough despite the ibuprofen to keep me awake, and the post-storm temperatures ran down into the high 60s, which was lower than I was really prepared for. I gave up on sleep just after 1AM and by 2:30 I was back on the trail and hiking to generate some body heat. Somewhat ironic that I started out night-hiking to avoid the heat, but it was an almost 40-degree swing in heat index from high to low the past few days.

I got a bit turned around in a twisty maze of mowed trails around some of the lakes on my way out of Giant City, but I eventually spotted the R2R trail marker high on a tree behind some overgrowth, so it turned out OK. The nice thing about starting stupid-early is that I was 10 miles down the trail and at the Lurly trailhead by 7AM, where I had some breakfast/snack/whatever before I started moving again. My next break was at the Cedar Lake spillway at 9AM, where I enjoyed the cool rocks, watched another heron take off, filtered some clear running water and reviewed the trail guide for the upcoming miles.

Past Cedar Lake there was a spot where I simply could not find the trail, despite having daylight at the maps and a GPS. After backtracking several times I finally laid in a route depending on terrain and relocated the R2R half a mile or so later. I'm sure there's a marker and an actual trail somewhere but this one just defeated me. A bit later that put me on the road into Alto Pass, which has more than its share of unrestrained dogs. I was glad to have dog spray and hiking pole to hand.

In Alto Pass itself I stopped at the Country Store and scored some Gatorade and a big bag of chips, which substantially improved my day. I also had a pleasant chat with a gal whose husband had done the trail a few years earlier. She offered me a cold drink but alas I'd already purchased one. Apparently she'd tried to flag me down on my way into town but I was so head-down at that point that I didn't even notice her. It turned out to be a long, long uphill walk from there to the Godwin East trailhead, with the sun beating down on me. I was glad I didn't hit that on the 100-degree days earlier in the week.

I hit Hutchins Creek about 2:30 in the afternoon, and packed up an extra liter of water. This spot gets recommended for camping, but darned if I can see why. At least in August it was buggy overgrown river bottom. I thought about making camp somewhere on the ridges past there, but that whole area is thick with poison ivy.

And then about 3:30 I gave up thought of stopping for the day when I came up to a log and two rattlesnake reared up behind it. I was no more than 5 feet away when they started rattling, but fortunately they were more interested in discouraging me than anything else. I backed way off and bushwhacked my way around, and then used the resulting burst of adrenalin to fuel me for a few more miles. I made good time to Godwin West in another hour and ended up stopping for the night at the McCann Springs trailhead. That put me over 30 miles for the day, but also left me without much hiking to do in the morning (and also meant I was down with actual wilderness trail miles).

McCann Springs probably isn't a legal place to camp, but there was no traffic to speak of so I just set up my bivy behind a tree and called it good. Despite the quiet I was too achy to really sleep, and when the suspension line that keeps the bug bivy off my face broke just before midnight I said the heck with it.

Friday, August 12

So, with 10 miles of levee walking to go, I hit the trail not long after midnight. I filtered the last of the water I had from Hutchins Creek which left me with a liter and a half: plenty for ten miles of not-too-hot night hiking. The moon was close to full, and I actually didn't need my headlamp for much of that walk.

Life wasn't quite done handing me surprises, though. I had to stop just before 2AM and get on the cell phone to Jackson County emergency dispatch when I came up on a working brush fire on the side of the levee. Fortunately it was no threat to walking by, and after dispatch and I agreed they knew the right location they said I could keep walking that they'd take care of it.

And so it was that at 3:45 on Friday morning I was at Devil's Backbone Park, dipping my toes in the Mississippi River. Officially that's 157 trail miles; with side trips and losing the trail and backtracking and so on I hiked closer to 170. Theoretically the park doesn't open till 8AM but nobody roused me, and I ate some of my spare food, napped and read in the picnic pavilion until my ride showed up a few hours later to take me back to the land of showers and comfortable chairs.

Many of the challenges of the River to River trail are typical of this area of the country: washed out sections, deep mud from horses, ankle-breaking rocks, hills and spider-webs. And of course you're nowhere more than a few miles from a cell signal, though in some areas those few miles could take a long time to navigate. At my age I hike with an InReach as cheap insurance against disaster.

On the good side:

- Beautiful views in many places (though you miss some of these if you go for night-hiking)
- Plenty of wildlife. I saw lots of deer, squirrels, turtles, frogs, snakes, a possum, a skunk and more (not to mention cows and horses in some of the more settled areas). And birds, including herons.
- If you're lucky a horse will go through a section not long before you and clear out the spider webs.
- The trail is marked and established

On the bad side:

- There are some pretty dull road-walking sections.
- Some of the wildlife is rattlesnakes, ticks, mosquitoes, and angry dogs.
- Recent horse traffic means dodging horse poop and increased mud.
- There are places the trail is not well-marked. Don't tackle it without the trail guide and the maps package.

All in all, I'm glad I grabbed the chance to hike the R2R when I did, even though the combination of weather and poor trail conditions made it more challenging than it would have been at some other times of the year. I doubt I'll do another summer thruhike of this trail, but I'm sure I'll set foot on parts of it again in the future.