A Mammoth Walk Along Door County's Ice Age Trail Segment

By Jennifer Bain
January 2, 2023

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Green Bay sculptor Carl Vanderheyden's \

Woolly stands resolutely in a tiny waterfront park near a pizzeria and historic steel bridge in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, posing for endless photos and subtly trying to encourage people to hike the Ice Age National Scenic Trail a few miles in one direction to the eastern terminus or almost 1,200 miles in the other direction to the western terminus on the Minnesota border.

"Still roaming in Wisconsin," reads a plaque from Green Bay sculptor Carl Vanderheyden who created the steel and concrete woolly mammoth in 2017. Woolly lived at Edgewood Orchard Galleries in Fish Creek for four years until Sturgeon Bay was named an official Ice Age Trail Community and local resident Chris Kellems got it in her head that Woolly would be the perfect trail ambassador.

Twenty-six thousand dollars in community donations later, Woolly was given a permanent home in Bayview Park along an urban segment of the Ice Age Trail in August 2021. He's about 8-feet tall and 10-feet long — longer if you measure from tusks to tail — and is an impressive representation of the extinct mammal that roamed North America during the Ice Age.

I make a quick pilgrimage to Woolly after hiking the first — or last, depending on how you look at it — three miles of the Ice Age trail on a December weekend in Wisconsin. I quietly apologize to him for not having time for the trail's full 13.7-mile Sturgeon Bay segment this time around.

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Near the eastern terminus of Ice Age National Scenic Trail in Potawatomi State Park is this trailhead sign/Jennifer Bain

There are just 11 National Scenic Trails in America and Ice Age is entirely in Wisconsin, where glaciers carved a path through rocky terrain, prairies and forests and then retreated leaving unique landscape features like kames, lakes, drumlins, ice-walled-lake plains, outwash plains, eskers and tunnel channels. "Although many of these features are outstanding by themselves, seen as a whole they form a glacial landscape of remarkable beauty," the National Park Service says.

Congress designated Ice Age a National Scenic Trail on Oct. 3, 1980, but the idea dates back to the 1950s when Milwaukee attorney/conservationist Ray Zillmer dreamed of a long, linear park winding through the state along the glacier's terminal moraine (edge).

The trail now travels through 30 counties over private land, city parks, state parks, county forests and national forest. It's managed by a partnership of the NPS, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Ice Age Trail Alliance.

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Ice Age National Scenic Trail winds through Wisconsin cities like Sturgeon Bay, shown here from the Door County Maritime Museum's rooftop observation deck/Jennifer Bain

Built and largely maintained by volunteers, the trail isn't complete. More than 600 miles are yellow-blazed segments, while more than 500 miles of unmarked connecting routes link the blazed segments. The western terminus is in Interstate State Park in St. Croix Falls, Polk County overlooking the St. Croix River and Minnesota. The eastern terminus is in Potawatomi State Park in Sturgeon Bay, Door County.

Most blazed segments offer traditional hikes. Some segments are down urban main streets in a deliberate bid to connect hikers and communities. As a trail community, Sturgeon Bay pledges to promote the trail and in return the alliance promises to promote Sturgeon Bay. But the initiative is still new and there is much work to be done to spread the word.

The Ice Age trail isn't on my radar during my three-night visit, until someone mentions seeing a woolly mammoth sculpture behind the parking lot at Sonny's Italian Kitchen & Pizzeria after we have lunch there. Then I connect the dots. Poring over the *Official Door County Destination Guide*, I realize it calls the trail "the crown jewel of Wisconsin hiking" and enthuses about how it shows off the state's geography, wilderness and "quintessential small-town" communities.

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The eastern terminus of the Ice Age National Scenic Trail is marked by this rock and plaque in Potawatomi State Park/Jennifer Bain

The alliance, on its website, describes the trail as "a place for mental and physical rejuvenation," and I decide that even though I just have two free hours to spare, a quick hike is better than nothing.

The Ice Age trail is only daunting until you realize it's conveniently broken into manageable segments. The 13.7-mile Sturgeon Bay Segment starts in Maplewood with a rail-trail hike, transitions into an urban hike through Sturgeon Bay, and then finishes with a forested trek through Potawatomi State Park to the eastern terminus.

I can only tackle one of these and opt for the forest. Working my way backwards, I catch a ride to the state park and get dropped off at the official eastern terminus marker affixed to a large rock. "Commemorating the Wisconsin Glaciation, which ended about 10,000 years ago, this 1,200-mile trail highlights the landscape formed by the forces that shaped much of North America," the plaque reads.

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The iconic observation tower in Potawatomi State Park has been deemed unsafe and closed/Jennifer Bain

The trailhead is nearby and marked by a painted wood sign that shows the outline of the state with a white area (the glacier) over green (the wilderness) with a yellow line between the two (the former glacier's edge/modern-day trail).

I set off into the woods on an admittedly gray day with just a dusting of snow, and soon come to the park's iconic 75-foot observation tower. Built in 1931 but closed to the public because significant wood decay has made it unsafe, this was the first purpose-built recreational tower in a Wisconsin state park and it boasts an easy-to-climb switchback staircase and wide viewing platforms. Many people apparently hope this historic structure can be restored.

Things really seem to get started here by the vault toilets and the sign announcing this is the Sturgeon Bay Segment of the Ice Age Trail. A bright orange bulletin warns that I've arrived during hunting and trapping season, but it's a relief to learn neither of those things can happen within 100 yards of the trail.

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Ice Age National Scenic Trail is marked by yellow blazes/Jennifer Bain

"Ice Age National Scenic Trail," a yellow marker nailed to a tree proclaims as I start walking.

"Follow the yellow blazes."

From here, a steady stream of yellow blazes painted on trees and posts keep me on course. Occasionally, there are trail maps and even Ice Age National Scenic Trail crests showing a woolly mammoth.

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Volunteers added these rock steps to the Ice Age National Scenic Trail in Potawatomi State Park/Jennifer Bain

Without a guide or interpretive signs, though, I'll admit that I don't always know what I'm looking at.

There are bedrock outcrops of the Niagara Escarpment (which aren't a glacial feature) and scenic spots to view the Sturgeon Bay arm of Lake Michigan. The trail overlaps with the park's Hemlock and Tower trails, but there's almost nobody out today. Then again, the dusting of snow has made the trail slippery.

I do stop briefly to marvel at a set of impressive rock steps in Niagara dolomite that I read about in the *Ice Age Trail Guidebook* and that were constructed by alliance volunteers. After hiking by an accessible fishing pier and catching sight of downtown Sturgeon Bay, I exit the park on to North Duluth Avenue. It has been a brisk 80-minute hike and since I'm on the run to the airport and can't spare 40 more minutes to walk through city streets to Woolly, I call for a ride and get driven to the statue and then a few blocks away to the Cardy Paleo-Indian Camp archaeological site.

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The Cardy Paleo-Indian Camp archaeological site is on a residential lot in Sturgeon Bay/Jennifer Bain

The site, marked by a kiosk and plaque and promoted by the alliance as a worthy detour, is considered one of Wisconsin's most important archeological finds. It preserves the remains of a campsite used by Native Americans at the end of the Ice Age. A 2003 dig unearthed spear points, tools, a fire pit and other artifacts. Archeologists believe that Native Americans lived here 11,000 years ago near the shore of what was then the glacial Lake Algonquin and near the receding continental ice sheet, hunting mammoths, mastodons and other large mammals that are now extinct.

The unsung site is on a residential lot on West Spruce Street in a small city that's dominated by shipyards, dry docks, that steel bridge and a ship canal, but quietly boasts an impressive art scene. Before that final whirlwind hike, I tour Third Avenue PlayWorks with artistic director Jacob Janssen as they prepare for *A Christmas Carol: A Live Radio Play*, and I watch a glass-blowing demonstration at Popelka Trenchard Glass Fine Art Gallery & Studio. At the Door County Maritime Museum, I learn how the Sturgeon Bay Ship Canal opened in 1881 to save ships time sailing between Green Bay and Lake Michigan and help them avoid the dangerous Death's Door passage at the tip of the Door Peninsula.

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Most of the Door County Maritime Museum is in a new lighthouse tower/Jennifer Bain

Most of the museum is in a new lighthouse tower, where I climb to the rooftop observation deck and work my way down exploring some of the 10 exhibit floors since a few aren't open yet. On the floor devoted to tourism, I learn how Door County has long attracted visitors escaping the summer heat of Midwest cities like Chicago and Milwaukee. Cherry tourism was once the biggest draw. Now more than two million annual visitors come, mainly in the summer, for the shoreline, shipwrecks, lighthouses, state parks, outdoor recreation and pristine wilderness.

There's no mention (yet?) of the Ice Age trail. But Sam Perlman, the museum's deputy director and development manager, later assures me that floor nine — "Our Rocky Peninsula" — is dedicated to the county's geologic origins. When it opens next spring, the floor will detail how the peninsula has been defined by water, ice and wind.

"We do have a great view of the mammoth sculpture from the top of the Jim Kress Maritime Lighthouse Tower," Perlman adds, sharing a photo taken in the one direction I neglected to look when I was there and fixated on the bridge and ships. It's Woolly alright — arriving at his forever home last summer and preparing for his new role as ambassador of a national scenic trail that patiently awaits a higher profile.

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