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Trail Story

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This is not a success story. I would classify this as a learning tale.

I am a 58-year-old man who often erroneously sees himself as 28 in his mind's eye. I am a veteran of the Navy and the Army National Guard and find quitting difficult. I've also been taught to know my limitations.

I live in Central Illinois now, but spent my early childhood in Golconda and felt somewhat familiar with the area. I have read much about the River-to-River trail and had followed the adventures and advice of thru-hikers on the "River to River Trail Hikers Group" on Facebook. I thought I was aware of all the pros and cons of the trail.

I had some time off and after much preparation I decided to attempt a thru-hike of my own. My preparation also included studying weather and temperature averages for the area during the time frame of my intended hike.

The temperature averages for southern Illinois at the time that I planned my hike were highs in the mid to upper 70's during the day and mid 50's at night. From anyone's perspective the perfect temperatures for backpacking.

Even as early as a week before my trip the projected temperatures were in the range of the average for that time of year.

Well, I should have known that you really can't predict weather more than 48 hours in advance. I didn't go into this experience with those ideal forecasted temperatures. Instead, the temperatures were in the upper 80's with heat indexes in the low 90's. Not the ideal backpacking temps.

What was to be a nice, although strenuous, adventure in the Shawnee backcountry, became a continuous search for potential water sources that I could filter and treat. I had two bottles with me.

One I used to drink from. The other I used to both filter and treat water that I would replace once the first bottle was empty.

I was doubling up on both filtering and using water purification tablets. Being extra cautious. The tablets required at least 30 minutes to be effective. As I was moving between water sources on the trail. I was drinking 2/3rds of the drinkable water in the time it took for the water I was treating to be safe to drink. I was not having fun.

Other issues with the trail, I knew something about from Facebook, but didn't really understand to what degree the references meant, but would become evident from the time I first entered the forest.

I started my trek from the Elizabethtown trail head. Once you leave the town you hike up a gravel and dirt farm road for maybe 1/2 to 2/3rds of a mile before you enter the forest. Once you enter the forest the trail takes an immediate right. It's at that point that I got my first taste of how rough this trail is in sections.

I had read advice that the trail could be rough and was shared with horses. What I didn't read and would learn was that this multi-use trail was what appeared to be ATV and Jeep roads. (Something is actually illegal in the Shawnee National Forest). They, however, visually appear to be four-wheel ATV roads. Heavily rutted, muddy in spots, and often covered with large loose rocks. This is true on many of the steep inclines and declines of the many hills you'll be crossing. Your footing is a major concern. These rocks are loose and feel, depending on your step, that they could give way under you at any time. This will slow your rate of travel considerably in sections.

This is no joke. During the first legs of the journey, you will most likely be alone on the trail if you're soloing. I didn't see anyone else on the trail until I reached High Knob. Injuring yourself on this trail would be very bad. It would be a struggle to get yourself out and a challenge to be found. Be aware of the treacherous footing going in.

I read that the trail is poorly marked and found that to be understated. This is especially true of the portion leading out of Elizabethtown north. I saw perhaps four blazes in a roughly estimated (and I do mean roughly) 15-mile stretch. Minus a lot of twists and turns. There are many points in the trail where you can easily become disoriented and lost. Including your first water crossing. There are blazes leading you to the entry point. However, what appears to be the exit point leads you up an embankment and into undergrowth. It turns out the trail is about 10 yards to your left. There are no blazes directing you to an exit point.

If you read the Facebook River to River Hikers group you will read recommendations to get the Avenza App and download the River-to-River Trail Maps. This is very good advice. This may be the only way to accurately follow the trail.

I was aware that parts of the trail were overgrown and poorly maintained during warmer months of the year. I have to agree. There is a section that is set aside as an "Open Land Management Area" for Quail. This is an open un-forested area that stretches for a quarter of a mile or so. When you re-enter the forest, you walk through 10 to 15 yards of chest deep weeds. A good reason to treat your clothes and gear with Permethrin. I can't verify that it works, but that stretch of the trail should have been a hot zone for ticks and I made it through tickless.

Two other bits of advice that I think are worth mentioning. If you don't have a ride that's close if you should need to get off the trail, look up the number for "Bart Lane's Shawnee Guided Tours". He's a very nice, helpful, and knowledgeable gentleman who can get you off the trail to go home or just to get you to a legitimate camping area or lodge for a night if you need it. Also, bring cash! If you're from further north you've probably become accustomed to carrying little or no cash on you. I personally use my debit all the time. You will be astonished by how many "Cash Only" businesses there are in this part of Illinois. Including, "Bart Lane's Shawnee Guided Tours".

To reiterate the concerns with heat and water. If I knew then what I know now I would have pushed this trip out another few weeks. Get out of the window of potential temperature spikes. Most of the streams were at a trickle at best and many only had standing water in spots and were in the process of drying up. I would offer the same advice to anyone else attempting the River-to-River.

This trail isn't easy. Be prepared for that and have options before you start. It was the heat and concerns over water that cut my trip short.

My hat is off to all those who have finished this from end to end. 157 miles on this trail is a great achievement. I'm not giving up completing the trail. However, I may break this up in sections. It did show this 58-year-old that he wasn't actually 28 despite what his imagination was fooling himself into believing.