

Thank you Here is my story. The grammar is more than likely awful but it's in my words and that's what matters:

My first trip to Shawnee was only in March 2021. I took three more trips down there and hiked/backpacked some of the river to river trail. On one of those trips, I mentioned to my friends I should do the whole thing solo. Of course they were very encouraging.

Originally I was supposed to go slackpack the AT with a friend of mine but due to a family illness, I had to cancel that and chose something closer to home.

I planned and watched every video out there about the trail. I dove into the Facebook page for hikers and got as much information as I could. I then read the guide book from start to finish (well minus the horse camping and battery rock section). That guide is amazing by the way and chocked full of information.

So after all the research, I started on March 16. Me and my backpack, who I officially named Big Blue Bertha, headed out on trail. Boy oh boy was she heavy. I was doubting my ability to carry that weight for 160 miles.

Day 1 was good. I pushed a little too far and basically plopped down in the first space I saw that would fit my tent. Little did I know that cows would keep me up all night long. Yikes! This was at the intersection of the trail and Battery Rock.

Day 2 started off amazing. A bobcat was within 10 yards of me as I sat finishing my coffee. It took a second and stared at me while I sat perfectly still staring back at it. I told a friend of mine that the bobcat was just telling me I was going to be ok and that i was now a part of the forest. Weird yes but it's how I felt about that encounter.

This day was also very hot and the climbs from Battery Rock intersection to GoG was hard I cried and wanted to be off trail. It was only day two. Ha!

I camped at GoG just a little past the overlook. This is a great campsite and I had stayed there before on another hike.

Day 3 started very early as it was supposed to storm that day. So I started my hike to Herod to get to shelter if needed. That little shelter is just perfect. Electricity to charge a phone, snacks and cold water. It was great.

The weather had changed so I continued my hike to make it to Bethesda church. That New Hope Hill is a calf killer. Ouch! Stayed in the yard at Bethesda and the storms never came. I looked at the radar and I was seriously in the middle of storms all around me. The Universe had my back!!

As I headed into day four I knew I had Lusk Creek to deal with. I had been worried about this creek crossing since starting my planning. I got that done and let out a yell when finished. That was when I knew I faced my fears and conquered them!

This day was a great day. A stranger from the Facebook group met me at the end of the trail and walked in to Eddyville with me. He brought me a snickers and a Gatorade. Now don't freak out. Him and I had chatted and I felt comfortable giving him my location. We had dinner at Shotgun Eddy's and stayed at Hayes Canyon campground. My first shower in four days! It was magical. The stranger, who I now consider a friend, started off day five with me as well. He was the first human interaction in two days. I'm sure I talked his ear off. Poor guy. Lol.

Day five was probably my favorite day on trail. Hayes Creek Canyon is spectacular. Easy hike for the most part. Ended that day just a little east of Trigg Tower in the most perfect pine forest. It was so quiet.

My day six started with a sunrise at Trigg Tower. Worth the climb up but it does add a mile to an already long day. I finished my day at Dutchman Lake and stayed at a friend's cabin. This is where I had my resupply. I got to shower and wash my clothes. I almost felt human again.

I ended up taking a zero on Day 7 as the weather was high winds and pouring rain. I napped most of the day and honestly glad I got to take that day off. I knew though that I would have to push really hard the next four days to finish on the date I originally set. There was a reason for this date.

I got up super early on day eight and trekked all the way to Interstate 57. It was the longest miles on trail yet. Borks Falls was flowing great from all the rain. It was beautiful. What was not so beautiful was my soaked shoes and socks. Wet feet and hiking aren't a great combo.

I ended up staying at Hilltop Campground that night in hopes to get my shoes dried out. The use of a hand dryer in the bathroom did wonders for my socks. Hiker trash at it's finest. They still weren't dry.

Day 9 started with a 4 mile road walk to Panther Den Wilderness. I had finally had a great night's sleep and was ready for this day. Welllllll, let's just say once I hit the wilderness my mood drastically changed. It starts with a descent into a creek bed of mud and water. Wet shoes again! It never ended. I got lost several times at the bottom of Panthers Den. It isn't well marked and there are about 5 creeks back to back. I tried to take my shoes off where I could but it was so much work taking on and off the pack that I just gave up trying. My shoes were soaked at this point anyway. I did enjoy the rock formations this day but can honestly say I hated this day so very much and highly doubt I would ever explore this area again.

Coming out of Panthers Den and up into Giant City area wasn't much better. Mud filled trails. I was exhausted and hungry. I got lost again on those grass paths (no signs) and just stood at one point and questioned even finishing.

I made it to the Giant City Lodge after 7 that day. Missed the dinner but they were so accommodating and gave me a to go order. They have no idea what that meant. I cranked up the heat in the room and sat with a blow dryer for 45 minutes drying my shoes and socks. I honestly can say I wanted to quit this day. I called my sister telling her I would make a decision the next morning. A friend reached out and told me I couldn't quit on a bad day. I'm not a quitter but the mental game of this trail is real.

I got some much needed rest. My shoes and socks dried and I woke up on day nine with a renewed sense of purpose and took off for the day. But first I had an amazing breakfast at the Lodge.

Today was an easy day. Hiked up to Cedar Lake and crossed the spillway. Here I was worried about creeks. Ha! That crossing was the scariest thing I did on the whole trail. Rocks covered in algae makes for a slippery situation. But I made it. Shaking and overwhelmed. And the most beautiful camp spot I stayed at. It was an easy 12 mile day and I stopped early because I knew the next day was going to be a big one.

The final day. My tenth day on trail. I was up at 330 am and had my coffee and breakfast. Got all my things packed up and ready to go and was on trail before 5 am.

This day I walked almost 27 miles. I crossed Hutchins Creek. I made it to Inspiration point and sobbed like no tomorrow. I was almost done.

I then started the descent down to the levee road. I knew I had nothing but rock road ahead of me. My son texted me to ask what road I was on and much to my surprise he showed up, honking his horn, playing "it's your birthday", and bringing me a whole large pepperoni pizza. Nothing like walking down the road eating a slice. And yes, it was my birthday!

That walk was a doozie. Wind in my face the whole time and every step felt like ten but only counted for negative twenty. Ha. I would think I had went a mile to only realize I had went .3 miles. I slowed down considerably as my body was just exhausted. My son motivated me with music, laughter and encouragement. So I kept on pushing.

The last mile I think I was yelling, growling and doing anything I could to just take one more step. It was the longest mile ever. But when you round that corner and see the sign, you know you have made it. It still brings tears to know I did this. No one else did it for me. I walked 160 miles across every hill, creek and mud pit in southern Illinois.

I slapped that sign and yelled "I did it". Then I took my pack off and proceeded to go touch the Mississippi River with my feet.

This journey was epic in every way. It was hard. It was rewarding. It was powerful. It was magical. It was so many more things. I know I can do anything now and will push on to do even greater things.