

River to River Trail
Section Hike
David Hilt
September 2023 – February 2024

Having retired at the end of 2022 gave me the opportunity to spend much of my time in the Shawnee National Forest and State Parks in Southern Illinois during 2023. One of my goals was to hike the River to River Trail and I planned to do it in the fall and winter months. I started on September 8, 2023, my 68th birthday. The hike was West to East and done in sections with friends. Since I live near the middle of the Shawnee National Forest, a section hike made sense and once I started the trail, it almost became an obsession to finish it. The River to River Trail bundle of maps that the River to River Trail Society provides through Avenza is an absolute necessity to complete the trip. The maps with active GPS showing where you are on the trail kept me from getting very far off the trail several times in the journey. I did record my tracks but unfortunately, I had to change phones during my journey and the recorded tracks did not transfer to my new phone so I don't know the total mileage I walked so I just have to assume it is at least the 157 miles the River to River Trail Society shows in the mileage link on their website. The River to River Trail Society has done a great job with the maps and maintenance of the trail. Most of my sections were selected to walk between 6 and 10 miles. Usually a morning hike. The other criteria was parking near the River to River Trail. Some locations are full parking lots, others have room for a couple of vehicles, and others were places with sufficient room on the side of the road.

Section one for me was from Grand Tower starting in Devil's Backbone Park to Godwin West trailhead. This section is on levee roads for most part and follows part of the Big Muddy River. While hiking south of Grand Tower, you actually cross into Missouri for a section where the Mississippi River has changed course. The old Mississippi riverbed is quite visible as you cross where it once flowed. By the time I reached the Pine Hills Road, I had seen enough of road and decided to take the route from McCann Springs to Inspiration Point and then back to Pine Hills Road. While the section does not have a lot of scenery until the end, I spotted 6 bald eagles that day, two were juveniles.

Section two was the Godwin trail from Pine Hills Road to Bald Knob Cross Rd. This section amazed me with the views from the ridges that are hiked and how deep the valleys are. Hutchins Creek was the only creek that I crossed on the entire trip with the amount of gravel in the creek. The biggest challenge was a hornet's nest about eye level in the creek bottom on the trail. Since this trip, I went back and hiked the section again and went north off the trail to Odie's Place and looked up the oral history of Odie and Florence Bridgeman describing how they lived.



Section three was the road section through Alto Pass to the point where the trail goes back into the woods off Water Works Road was next. This was a short section and in the early morning the sun came through the trees on the road in beautiful light rays.

Section four, the Cedar Lake section up to the Lirley trailhead, was the next section and Cedar Lake is beautiful. The rock outcropping between Cedar Lake and Little Cedar Lake had little water flowing and made it an easy crossing.

Section 5 was getting to Makanda from Lirley and is mostly road. We crossed Route 51 in chest high grass on roadside and found ourselves up to heads in it in the road ditch. From there the route is more interesting through forest getting into Makanda and we stopped on the road south of Makanda where the trail starts up the hill to Giant City.



Section 6 was the section through Giant City State Park to Antioch Cemetery and is very beautiful. Spectacular bluffs and boulders. Further east near Garden of the Gods, the trail guide notes a rock nicknamed “Leno Rock”. However, I believe the better rock for that moniker is in Giant City along the River to River Trail. The last section up to the road to Antioch Cemetery was a difficult hike. Many trees down and the old roadbed was extremely difficult walking.

Section 7 was from Antioch Cemetery to Rocky Comfort Road trail crossing. This is a short section and we completed that on a day where there were some other commitments. I hiked that section again after completing the River to River in the spring of 2024 when daffodils were blooming to look for old homesteads. I found three and four old wells, two of which had no covers. Also hiked to the Hidatsa Indian Earth Lodge. It has been standing since the late 1960’s, but without care, I wonder how long it will last. The fireplace and foundations for the old SIU lodge are also worth a stop. The fireplace took some serious effort to build given the size of the stones used at the base.



Section 8 was through Panther Den. This section is one of the most interesting sections in my opinion. Of course, Panther Den Village is incredible and spectacular in the fall with all the fall

colors. We explored all of that including the cave at the very back. Then the old, overturned truck must have a story to tell. It is just off what appears to be an old “road” where the road turned from following the creek to going up the hill over some large rock outcroppings. I had to wonder if the truck was just abandoned there or if there was more of a story. I wondered if it had jumped out of gear and rolled back down the hill only to end up rolled over where it lays. Mechanical brakes would have been hard to manage and the steering wheel is upside down and reaches the ground. Hopefully, if someone was in that truck they managed to jump out and were not pinned under the steering wheel. As we came out on Wayside Lane where we had parked we were in a downpour. This was the most challenging place to find parking as there are “NO PARKING” signs along much of Wayside Lane. We parked some distance down the lane off the road where there were no such signs.

Section 9 was from Wayside Lane to Bork Falls and is all on roads. Mount Hebron church and a large modern looking abandoned home are along the road as well as Songbird Land Cabin, a friend’s rental. The section ends at Bork Falls which is always spectacular, especially when frozen.



Section 10 was Ferne Clyffe State Park and is well known. The River to River Trail traverses the park in areas that most visitors do not see. Just off the trail is “alligator rock” with a spectacular view of the valley. Further to the east is a double natural arch. Of course, the large natural arch on the Happy Hollow Trail is right

on the River to River Trail. Along the trail here, I did experience my second hornet's nest which was easily avoided.

Section 11 from Ferne Clyffe to Dutchman Lake is also mostly road. Along this section is a historical marker commemorating a Revolutionary War event that took place in Illinois. Little did I know that General George Rogers Clark on directions from General George Washington marched through the area on his way to secure Kaskaskia from the British in 1778. He and his men had traveled down the Ohio and landed at Ft. Massac and then marched across land to Kaskaskia. As the trail reached the end of the Twinz Lane, the road becomes more obscure and is lined on both sides by Private Property signage. Once the trail enters the woods the trail becomes more secluded and then emerges on the dam at Dutchman Lake.

Section 12 crossed the Tunnel Hill Trail which I had biked many times. This section was full of diversity including pine forests, bluffs, lakes, and the abandoned corn picker that looked like it was picking a tree. There was one location where there were some trees that had two complete bands cut around the tree about a foot apart with a chainsaw and in some cases the bark between the bands removed. Presumably the Forest Service had done this for timber management and left them much as a beaver would to fall later. We hiked to Goddard Crossing, the

halfway point on the River to River Trail and then down to Taylor Ridge Road along US 45.



Section 13 was the Max Creek section starting down Taylor Ridge Road and ending at the Boot Ranch at the end of Garfield Lane. Max creek was low and easy to cross. I did not sense the “vortex” even though I lived through the 60’s and 70’s. We did come across another old well that was open. The old farm equipment at the Boot Ranch made good black and white images.

Section 14 was an evening hike trying to get a short hike in before dark. We hiked from the Boot Ranch to the parking lot at Gum Springs Road. We may have been able to make it to Trigg Tower Road Crossing before it was totally dark but decided not to push it. So instead, we took a side trip to Easter Basket Arch. There were equestrians out that evening and this was one location where I had to backtrack some. The River to River Trail turned from the equestrian trail and I had apparently missed a trail marker. Thankfully I was paying fairly close attention to the Avanza maps. Cedar Creek and the bluffs are worth exploring. That evening, there was no wind and the large pools in Cedar Creek made great reflection photos.

Section 15 took us from Gum Springs Road to Trigg Tower Road Crossing. As it turns out, it was wise that we did not try this later the first evening as it doubtful we would have made it before dark.

Section 16 took us from Trigg Tower Road Crossing to Cedar Grove Road Crossing, another great section with some slow going due to the rocky nature of the trail. The Tin Whistle under the railroad and Millstone Lake spillway are interesting as well as the bluffs along that section. Apparently, Millstone Lake overflowed following a large rain event and the flow over the spillway washed the soil from in between the stone

pillars leaving a very interesting look. The old hippie bus makes one wonder how they got the bus to where it is now.

Section 17 was longer from Cedar Grove Road through Eddyville to the New Home Road at Bear Branch. This took us past Crow Knob, a lookout point for the underground railroad and Petticoat Junction, a horse tie up where there are often women's undergarments high in the trees. The creek and bluffs in this section were really nice. At Eddyville, the sign said only 54 more miles to Elizabethtown. Beyond Eddyville, the trail follows some road then into the woods at Bear Branch cascade. We started up the hill only to discover we were on a different trail. Once again, the Avenza map told us we were off the trail and we had to backtrack.

Section 18 was long as well through the Lusk Creek Wilderness and crossing Lusk Creek. We started at the New Home Road parking lot and ended at Bethesda Church. Crossing the creeks were a challenge as beavers had built dams below the crossings and we needed to find another route. In one location I walked across the beaver dam. Owl bluff gives spectacular views.

Section 19 was road hiking on Bethesda Church Road and Raum Road including to Concord Cemetery and then skipping One Horse Gap (a long hike) starting where the trail comes out of the One Horse Gap section for a couple of miles to Herod on a quick late afternoon hike leaving the One Horse Gap section for the next weekend. I ultimately went back and hiked the latter road section again when I hiked to Garden of the Gods Backpackers Parking Lot (Section 21 below) so it was more contiguous. Two really nice old barns are along Raum Road that made great black and white photos. We visited the John Odell

monument in Herod and thanked him for determination and efforts to make his dream of a River to River trail a reality.

Section 20 was One Horse Gap hiking from Concord Cemetery to Raum Road just south of Herod. What a spectacular section with some of the most spectacular bluffs and canyons on the trail.

We found one horse gap and no horse gap. While hiking we came upon a camp of deer hunters with their prize hanging. It was still bow season and I always wore blaze orange or safety green when out hiking in the fall during hunting seasons. We did not hike during firearm season unless it was a road section.



Section 21 was from Raum Road where the trail comes out of One Horse Gap to Herod (2nd time) and from Herod to the Backpackers Parking Lot at Garden of the Gods. Another spectacular section that was highlighted by numerous icicles and frost flowers or ice flowers. We had a couple inches of rain previously and the temperatures dropped overnight to the single digits with highs expected in the 20's. Perfect conditions for frost flowers and there were more than I could photograph. Overlooks in this part of the state are breathtaking and with the clear skies in the winter they are even better.

Section 22 was planned to be short to allow for two longer hikes to finish the trail to Elizabethtown and was from the Backpackers Parking Lot to High Knob. We checked out Garden of the Gods Arch which many people pass by on the road and never even notice in the summer.

Passing by Buzzard's Point and Buzzard's Bottom we explored the crevices and caves.

Section 23 was from High Knob to Basset Road. Starting at High Knob there are two old homesteads still standing along the trail, a cemetery, and an old well. The trail had been restored to its original location after being temporarily rerouted due some logging and there were two crossings of Big Creek. With low water they were reasonable. There were numerous "switch backs" that crossed a four wheeler trail that cut through them. Each time I came across places where four wheelers had destroyed the trail, including previous section and the last section, it was frustrating and often difficult to walk since they like to root out mudholes. Hopefully the Forest Service can help solve these issues.

Section 24 was the last section into Elizabethtown and the trailhead on the Ohio River. Big Creek would need to be crossed again and both crossings were good.

There were three old homesteads I came across and two wells. One of the homesteads had the



overtaken car near one of them. I did some research, and it is a 1958 Pontiac Chieftan. It once was a beautiful automobile with a lot of horsepower. Again, where four wheelers had been on the trail, the trail was challenging. There was a sign for "Ralph Cemetery" but I could not locate any grave markers. At the end of the trail, I placed a bottle of water I had collected from the Mississippi River at Grand Tower just 5 months earlier and poured it in the Ohio River.

It was a great experience! I did not see any snakes during the fall and winter months and the insects were minimal. I since have been re-

hiking some of the sections to visit points of interest off the River to River trail.

Again, thank you to the River to River Trail Society for all of their work to keep the trail well marked, open, and accurately on the maps. Without this group, such a trail would not exist.

Thank you to each of my friends who hiked the trail with me. I will not name them here as they may not want their name shared. Finally, I want to thank my wife, Debra, who also helped by shuttling a vehicle when I hiked alone and her encouragement to complete the trail.