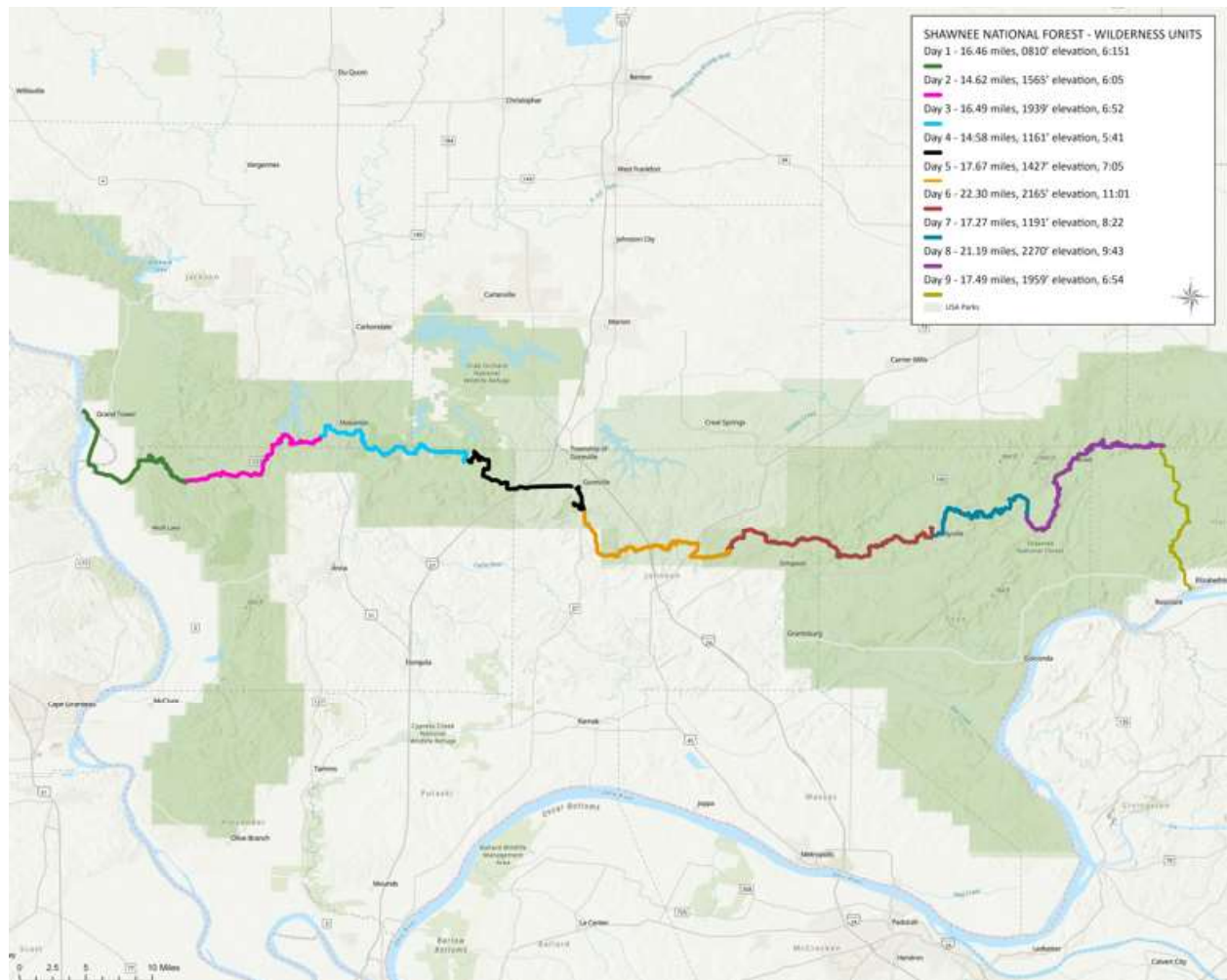


River to River Through Hike April 21st - 29th 2024



I had planned to retire as early in life as possible for many years. I have been blessed with a great job that paid very well, but I didn't want money to be a trap. I have always wanted to explore and adventure while I still had my health and spirit. My favorite quote from John Muir is *"I am losing precious days. I am degenerating into a machine for making money. I am learning nothing in this trivial world of men. I must break away and get out into the mountains to learn the news"*

Long story short, I retired April 5th, 2024 and the plan was to watch the Solar Eclipse on April the 8th at my farm, and then hit a trail on April 9th. Life

intervened and I was thrilled to attend my Son's wedding on April the 20th, so after the wedding I had my wife drive me to the trail on April the 21st.

I had looked at the Sheltowee Trace in Kentucky along with the River to River trail in Southern Illinois. I'm in Henderson County KY, so the River to River is not that far and it's half the distance of the Sheltowee. I had completed some other hikes, but nothing as ambitious as the River to River. My previous longest was the Knobstone Trail (46 miles) and the Adventure Hiking Trail (25 miles), both in Indiana. I have had some IT Band issues with my right knee, so I thought the River to River would be a great one to start with and see how I held up.

I started physical therapy for my IT Band and a training routine 3 weeks prior to the hike. I really wanted to be successful and complete the entire trail. I would wear a 20 lb vest and hiked often in Audubon State Park which had some nice trails and hills. On longer days I'd hike 10 miles or so, and 4-5 on shorter days. I really felt like I was ready, but with my knee issue, it would start hurting only after 10+ miles, mainly while going downhill, so it was really hard to be confident.

In preparation, I reviewed the Trail Guide from the River to River website, downloaded the maps from Avenza (which I'll talk about later), and I started to plan a rough itinerary. I chose to start at Grand Tower and hike to the east ending in Elizabethtown. Several reasons for a west to east hike for me; most hikers seemed to hike east to west and I wanted to intersect as many hikers as I could, I had an impression the areas around Garden of the Gods was spectacular and I wanted to save that for last, and I live in Kentucky so every step was a step closer to home. My plan was to try and stop in as many small towns and parks and eat, rest and charge my electronics along the trail. This worked out great, at least for me. I also decided to mail two resupply boxes to myself on the trail at Goreville Post Office and Shotgun Eddys.

After the wedding on the 20th, I drove to Elizabethtown with my wife following me. I had called the Hardin County Sheriff's Office and they allowed through hikers to leave a vehicle in their lot. You can go into the office, fill out some paperwork and you're good to go. After dropping my car off, my wife drove me to Grand Tower and dropped me off. There was no turning back. Here is a brief summary of my hike.

Day 1

After starting in Grand Tower, I had pictures taken at the River to River sign, said goodbye to my wife and was off. I always saw people putting their feet in both rivers and I thought it would be near the sign, but I walked a mile or so to the boat ramp, then went down and took the obligatory wet foot picture. After leaving Grand Tower, there is around 11 miles of flat road walking. I was glad I was starting here because I was excited and even road walking was fun. The first entry into the Shawnee National Forest was Inspiration Point which has a great overlook. If you leave the trail and hike about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile, you have an amazing view. After leaving Inspiration point the Godwin Trailhead was just down the road, and I felt like I was on the "real" trail. I camped the first night at Hutchins Creek; there are nice camp spots along the trail on the east side. I got lucky and ran into two section hikers almost at Hutchins Creek and we agreed to camp together. Both of these ladies were military retirees, and we had a nice afternoon of fun conversations and supper at camp. These would be the only hikers I would camp with on the trail, and I'll admit, camping and sharing stories with other like minded people is very nice.

Summary: 16.46 miles, 0810' elevation, 6:15 time hiked



The Mighty Mississippi



Grand Tower Trailhead



Inspiration Point



Hutchins Creek

Day 2

I am an early starter, and I wanted to get out of camp before I had to face either hikers in camp and was asked the question “so just how bad did I snore last night”? 6 miles later I was in Alto Pass and had a great BBQ sandwich at Duty’s Country Store. This is a great stop for a meal and to pick up supplies. They really have everything and it’s a neat small town shop that I miss in larger towns. There is a pavilion in the town park where you can charge too. Repacked my backpack and hiked to Cedar Lake which had a neat rock spillway where I took a nap. Hiked on and camped at Clay Lick Creek. It’s a shallow creek with rock shoals you can easily walk over. Met a group of 4 ladies riding horses and wished them well. After sunset, there were very big fish who had to lay flat and splash and fight over the very shallow shoals. It reminded me of seeing salmon jump, fight and swim upstream in Alaska. I could lay in the tent and literally count the fish as I’d hear them splashing and fighting to get upstream. Great second day!

Summary: 14.62 miles, 1565’ elevation, 6:05 time hiked





Day 3

Haven't seen a person on the trail since the end of day 1. Went through Makanda where I had planned to eat breakfast, but the Makanda Country Store opened at 9:00 am and was there at 8:00 so I pushed on to Giant City State Park (where I pigged out at the Lodge). I was disappointed that I arrived in Makanda early, it looked like a cool hippie town with some nice shops, stores and things to walk around and see, but when I wake up, I can't sit at camp and relax, I have to get moving. I wonder if that's a good or bad thing but I'm content with accepting it as the way I'm made. After Giant City State Park. I passed Antioch Cemetery and then upsides down truck then saw the remains of the SIU lodge where the fireplace still stands. Made camp in the Panthers Den Wilderness area which is very beautiful. Great Day!

Summary : 16.49 miles, 1939' elevation, 6:52 time hiked





Day 4

Started in the middle of Panthers Den Wilderness and ended at Ferne Clyffe State Park. About 54 miles were completed of the 157 or around 38%. It was a really cool birthday. I woke up this morning and there was a turkey gobbling and making a semicircle around me in my tent gobbling and wishing me a happy birthday. Went through some beautiful areas. Met another hiker who is 71 and had a great conversation with him. Carmen Williams I'm wishing you the best and successful finish. Decided to not push it too hard today, had a nice meal at a Mexican restaurant in Goreville, went to the laundromat to wash some clothes and then went to the local state park to charge all my devices and relax and even took a shower. We take simple things for granted, like good meals, warm water and bathrooms. Great way to turn 57!

Summary: 14:58 miles, 1161' elevation, 5:41 time hiked





Day 5 - 17.67 miles, 1427' elevation, 7:05

Very long day, started at 5:00 am in Ferne Clifye State Park and ended at Max Creek. Many points of interest and I hit the halfway point!!! Passed Dutchman Lake, crossed I24, walked my first Rail Trail, the Tunnel Hill State Trail (pretty cool I have a touring bike and will be back), crossed 45 and hit the midway point, then pushed on and camped at Max Creek. Max Creek has a nice picnic table and makes camp very comfortable.

Summary: 17.67 miles, 1427' elevation, 7:05 time hiked





Day 6

Long day. Rain was scheduled to start at 5:00 am so I broke camp and was underway before it started. That means hiking in the dark, with a headlamp. Took the wrong trail and added a few overall miles. Typical stuff in the woods! Started at Max Creek, ended at Eddyville, big mileage day. I think I'm around 104 miles of 157 or 66% done. Many sites! Tin Whistle Horse Tunnel, Hippy Bus, Milestone Lake, Ruby Falls, Petticoat Junction. Big thank you to Hays Canyon Campground for taking care of me. Finished with a burger at Shotgun Eddys! Great (long) day!!
Summary: 22.30 miles, 2165' elevation, 11:01 time hiked

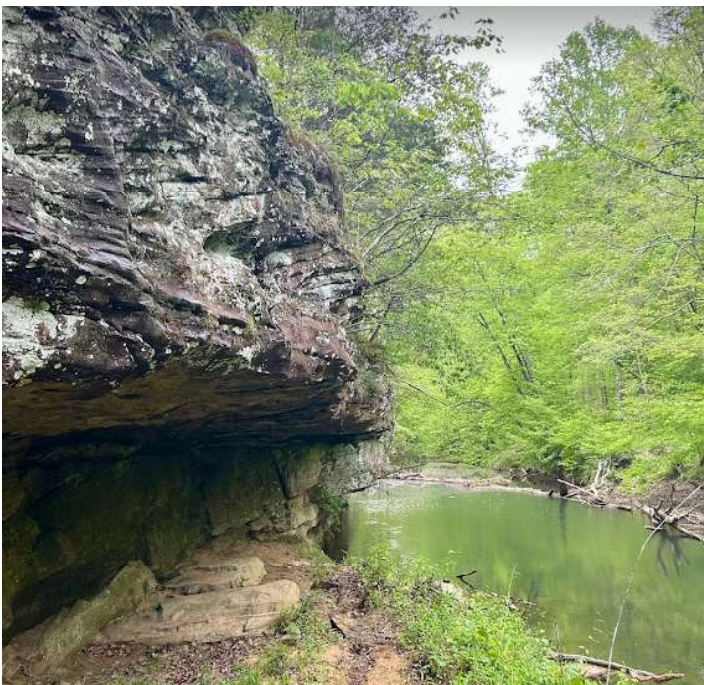




Day 7 - 17.27 miles, 1191' elevation, 8:22

Time kinda changes on a longer through hike. I started at Shotgun Eddys this morning at 6:30 am and had a wonderful breakfast, but that seems like a week ago for some reason. I ended the day just passed Concord Cemetery, I think about 119 miles completed, 38 to go. Many neat sights today; Lusk Wilderness and Creek, Owl Bluff, and old stone wall from a homestead long ago, and plenty of pretty country and flowers. Tomorrow I will get into the Garden of the Gods, I hope, so looking forward to that. Night.

17.27 miles, 1191' elevation, 8:22 time hiked



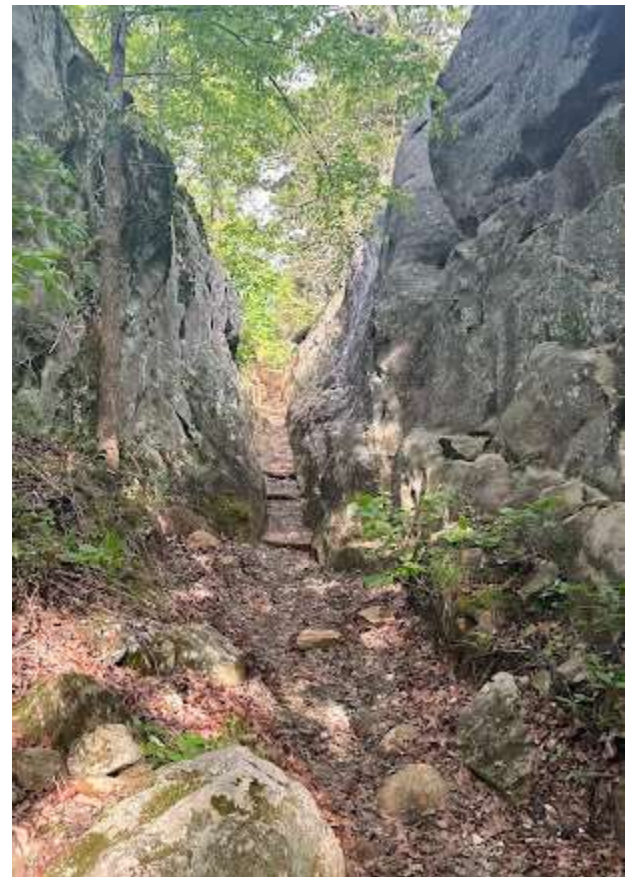


Day 8 - 21.19 miles, 2270' elevation, 9:43

Really feeling the miles and days, several blisters and lost a toenail, good thing I have 10! Started near Concord Cemetery and ended at High Knob Campground. Saw a lot of wildlife today; turkeys were gobbling at dawn and then I had 3 tom's cross the trail by me later, saw a young bobcat which was cool, and the normal deers, squirrels and rabbits. Past many neat sites including No Horse Gap, One Horse Gap, Rocky Top Overlook, GOG Wilderness Overlook, Garden of the Gods, Buzzards Point and many other unnamed rock formations. I think about 22 total miles and should finish tomorrow.

Special thanks to two groups. Herod Spring Baptist Church is very kind to hikers with a fridge full of supplies and electricity. They even welcomed me in for a potluck (I declined due to my smell and nasty shoes) but still very kind. Also High Knob Campground is a wonderful place with a sweet lady running it. She has a kind heart and looks out for hikers.

Summary: 21.19 miles, 2270' elevation, 9:43 time hiked





Day 9 - 17.49 miles, 1959' elevation, 6:54

I've finished other trails, but now consider myself a through hiker! Started at High Knob Campground and ended at Elizabethtown. Knew rain was coming so I started very early. I'll be honest this was my least favorite section; ATV mud holes, the trail cutting cross country and not following contour lines, just not as nice as western sections, but I'm not complaining. Very humbling experience, so thankful, so grateful, so happy to finish. Sites along this section I saw; the old homestead chimney, Tecumseh Lake, the Iron Furnace, Elizabethtown and the Ohio River. Walked to the sign, took some selfies then walked down to the river and dipped a toe in, to end my hike. And I swear, as I was walking up to the sign again from the Ohio River, a bald eagle flew right over the little pavilion that sits on the water, pretty amazing. Walked back to the Sheriff's Office, got my car, and set out for home (and a milkshake!).

Summary: 17.49 miles, 1959' elevation, 6:54 time hiked





Lessons Learned:

- I normally use All Trails, but I found the Avenza maps much more accurate. I wasn't familiar with Avenza previously, but grew to really appreciate the app and tools. Several times multiple trails would merge and a quick glance at the geocoded Avenza maps would confirm (or deny) I was on the right path.
- I had allowed 12 days and really tried to "go slow", but as the days passed, I had trouble not pushing my pace. I finally decided that if my body would let me, I'd range ahead. I guess that just shows it's true, hike your own hike and trust your instincts.
- I really enjoyed stopping in the towns, talking to the locals, learning some history and eating some great meals. For me, this was really cool.
- To complete a hike like this was something I had dreamed of for decades and it's given me the confidence to try another. I'm thinking of the Tahoe Rim Trail in July or August.
- Be kind, be grateful and enjoy the good and the bad.

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