

WHIP-POOR-WILL AND EVERYONE ELSE SEEKING JOY IN JULY ON THE RIVER-TO-RIVER TRAIL

BRIAN DENEAL

When hiking the River-to-River Trail there comes a powerful moment once the sounds of early morning Elizabethtown fade into the distance.

The sight of the trail marker on the light pole next to the *Hardin County Independent* is electrifying. That blue "i" on the white diamond tells the hiker the journey has just begun. It's exciting to pass the baseball diamond and see the cows grazing in the yellow morning light. Dew sparkles in the pasture.

Reaching the washout in the gravel road the experience begins to change. The dark woods loom ahead. Once in the gloom the trail morphs into old horse and wagon trails. The country is unfamiliar. Your ride to the trailhead is gone by now. The days of radio and television chatter are behind, replaced by birdsong and bullfrog bellows. There is a moment when excitement and adrenaline pass and the reality of the journey sinks in.

There are roughly 160 miles to the car parked at Devil's Backbone Park on the Mississippi River. Those miles pass through deep hollows, each with a creek at the bottom. Most of those creeks contain water. Some have just the right amount of water to refill a water bottle and just enough stepping stones to reach the other side without wetting the feet. Some creeks may be bone dry, denying the thirsty walker relief. Others may be too rain-swollen to pass without wading. A few of those creeks along the 8- to 12-day hike are prone to flash flooding. All it takes is one prolonged cloudburst and the trail may be impassible. If so, the hike may be through. A ride is only a phone call and a short walk away, if there is phone reception. A few years ago the Pope County Sheriff's Department embarked on the rescue of a hiking party stalled while waiting for waters to subside. This was late fall or winter and there was a diabetic in the party. An effort to cross the swollen waters to get help resulted in hypothermia in addition to the diabetic spell. The rescue party reached the crew and all were safe. The long-distance hiker is at nature's mercy and there may be no help available if needed. This is the realization that sinks in only a mile or two past Elizabethtown. There is no going back and going forward depends on persistence and a little bit of luck. Perhaps at this point it makes sense to sit and consult the trail guide.



Vicky DeNeal photo

The hike begins at Elizabethtown on the Ohio River. The floating E'Town River Restaurant is in the background.

I began my hike June 8, later than intended. The plan was to begin on a Monday a month prior and complete the walk in eight days. That may sound like a tall order, but I'd hiked it solo in May of 2007 and it took that long. That was only nine years ago and surely I was in as good physical shape.

Sunday morning, May 8, brought news that a former resident of private property surrounded by the Lusk Creek Wilderness Area had shot a police officer in Mahomet and had disappeared. The search for Dracy "Clint" Pendleton was underway. A former neighbor of Pendleton's kept me up to date on the situation until the news of the shooting began carrying datelines of "Pope County."

Monday morning former neighbors of Pendleton spotted him near his former residence miles into the roadless Lusk Creek Wilderness Area. At that point the fugitive be-

lieved he had killed the police officer and told neighbors the police would not take him alive.

Pope County Sheriff's Department, Illinois State Police, FBI and U.S. Marshals blockaded all the roads leading into the area where Pendleton was last spotted and the U.S. Forest Service issued a closure order for Lusk Creek Wilderness Area. That area would have been on day three of my hike.

I was stuck until the fugitive issue reached resolution. Officers spotted Pendleton in the early morning May 15 fleeing a cemetery near Sulphur Springs Missionary Baptist Church. According to the *News-Gazette* in Champaign, church deacon John Kunath on May 13 noted someone had broken into the church, had stolen food and had left bloody bandages in the trash can. Officers responded to the scene, but found no evidence Pendleton remained in the area. The following morning, Saturday, May 14, the deacon found a different door to the church had been kicked in. Having staged near the church and out of sight, officers spotted Pendleton near the church cemetery. Pendleton fled to an empty nearby home, exchanged shots with police, hit an FBI agent and then Pendleton died.

Illinois State Police have issued no information regarding the autopsy results. The question remains whether Pendleton died from officer fire or a self-inflicted gunshot wound. Pope County Coroner Mark Aly said July 20 he was leaving that piece of information for the Illinois State Police to release, but did say, "It is being investigated as an officer-related shooting."

The U.S. Forest Service kept the Lusk Creek Wilderness Area closed for most of the week for further investigation.



Brian DeNeal photo

This road leads from Elizabethtown, through pasture and into the hilly woods.

When Lusk Creek Wilderness Area reopened May 19 my plan was to begin the hike the following Monday, the final week of May. The weather forecast changed those plans. The week was to be marked by torrential rains and that

forecast proved accurate. Big Creek, Hart Creek, Lusk Creek and probably Hutchens Creek all would have been difficult, if not impossible, to traverse. The following week brought more thunderstorms.

By June 8 the forecast was dry, but hot. Temperatures in the mid 80s were in store. That was doable. On the first day hiking however, the forecast changed.



Brian DeNeal photo

Off trail at Whoopie Cat Lake.

After entering the woods the next landmarks are the twin lakes of Lake Tecumseh and Whoopie Cat Lake.

The Fourth Edition of the *River-to-River Trail Guide: Across Southern Illinois from Elizabethtown on the Ohio River to Grand Tower on the Mississippi River* is a remarkable achievement of River-to-River Trail founder John O'Dell. The magazine-sized publication includes maps that are large and easy to read. The size, however, makes it a difficult book to stuff into a pocket for easy access. I took the third edition of the book since it could fit into the pocket of my cargo pants. The trail was reconfigured in a few places in between editions and edition three had me wandering confused at these twin lakes.

The light was good that morning and I took a few photos. The water was blue with algae along the shore, but it provided a civilized respite after hiking through a lengthy expanse of woods. The trail paralleled the shore and then reentered the woods to the north until the trail quit. There was no trail to follow and there were no markers indicating I'd made a wrong turn.

Consulting the trail guide and compass it was obvious I'd taken the wrong direction. The map showed the trail passing between the two lakes so I backtracked. But there was no trail there either. This was the first evidence my trail guide was outdated.

There were two tents in the camping area. Outside one tent was a middle-aged woman with brown dreadlocked hair playing with a toddler in a baby chair. I backtracked again and was on pavement. A young man with a short, red

beard, red baseball cap and backpack was walking toward me. He also had a map in his hands.

It took us a while to exchange names, but there was no immediate need. We both knew we were thru-hiking the River-to-River Trail solo and both had reached a moment of doubt. My map showed the trail passing between lakes. His maps — that he had printed out on his computer and laminated — showed the trail passing over the north edge of Lake Tecumseh. We followed his undoubtedly more recent version and were at the boat launch near the camping area. Then we found our marker.

The woman with dreadlocks and toddler spotted us.

“Are you explore-or-atin?” she said.

I said we were and were walking on a trail that passed through the area. She turned her attention back to the baby.

There were two tents, but no vehicles parked nearby. Sometimes homeless people find refuge in these woods. I suspected she was one of these. Maybe of the Rainbow Family of Living Light, still camping since the annual October Shawnee Gathering. They come from all over the country to spend two weeks communing with nature. Some pilfer Dumpsters or go shoplifting and wind up communing in the area detention centers. Some visit carrying the baggage of arrest warrants, looking for a sanctuary. Most stay for a few days, burning vacation days and go back to their homes and jobs. Some stick around making do until another opportunity comes around. Of course, this woman and child could well have been locals enjoying a few days of relaxation while the vehicle was on a grocery run.

My new hiking partner and I climbed a hill and exchanged our basic information. His name was Michael Neilsson and he was a special education teacher in the Marion, Illinois, school district. His backpack was much larger than mine. His quart water bottle hung from a loop on his pack attached with a carabiner. His maps were laminated pages printed from a computer bound with a single metal ring.

We climbed our hill and he walked fast. I explained to him the reason I was wearing knee braces. On the first hike of the trail back in 2007 my knees were ready to give out by the morning of day two and the legs were ready to buckle, especially walking downhill. With a phone call, my parents brought me knee braces at Herod. On this hike the large, black, Spandex and metal braces were pre-emptive strikes against the same problem. With that small bit of advantage I thought the legs should keep performing until they became accustomed to the daily abuse.

Neilsson said he was familiar with such knee problems, having climbed the 14,000-plus foot Mount Harvard in Colorado. That feat had given him similar knee pain.

Neilsson said he had allowed himself 14 days to complete the River-to-River Trail and so had brought along 14 days worth of food, hence the large backpack stuffed to the gills. I said I was planning for eight days and my wife was meeting me halfway to restock.

Neilsson was carrying much more weight than I. At the

same time, he was striding up the hill. My breath became labored trying to keep up my end of the conversation. He mentioned that by Friday the temperature was supposed to be 95 degrees - real temperature, not heat index. I said I needed to take a short break, but told him to feel no obligation to wait for me. We said we would likely meet on down the trail and he disappeared out of sight as I tried to catch my breath. I've hiked in below-freezing temperatures. I've even camped without a sleeping bag at 9 degrees. Those conditions were uncomfortable, but never particularly dangerous. But 95 degrees was another beast and I began to worry.



Brian DeNeal photo

This is a meadow cleared for a power line in Hardin County. These types of clearings are prime tick habitat.

My night's destination was Buzzard's Roost, a sandstone bluff near Garden of the Gods. In order to reach it I would have to cross Big Creek, twice.

As the name indicates, Big Creek is fairly large. The creek passes through the Illinois Iron Furnace Historic Site, a landmark overseen by the U.S. Forest Service, where, incidentally, there is new and informative signage in place. The trail does not go through that site. It winds down through hollows and renders one's knees into a dull aching state. All-terrain vehicle enthusiasts have torn the trail into bowls of brown soup right where the River-to-River Trail markers tell you to walk. Frogs have made homes in the best of these bogs and their songs inform the forest of their presence, until the hiker approaches. When footsteps get close the bogs erupt with splashes of shy amphibians leaping to the murk of safety. ATV riders seem to prefer lunging into the muddiest muck and so the hiker usually needs only to step to the side to get around the bogs.

Neilsson showed me up. He was way ahead and I would likely be unable to catch up. His footsteps provided comfort and humiliation. At unmarked trail intersections I looked for his boot prints and they did not disappoint. Those prints outlined the mud bogs, forming a barrier between trail and

poison ivy.

I passed one trail intersection while following Neilsson's prints and the trail appeared to be growing faint. The map showed I was veering in the wrong direction. But Neilsson had gone this way, so he either knew something I didn't or was also lost. I looked for boot prints heading the opposite way and found them. He had backtracked and so did I.

The lost intersection was not far. The air was jungle humid. Then there came a sound that I can only describe as screaming monkeys. The raucous cries echoed through the hollow, a cacophony of shrieks, howls and yammering. The sound was incessant. Humanlike in tone, I thought the ATV or moonshining or marijuana cultivating crowd had snuck up behind trying to frighten hikers from honey holes.

The sounds were not human, but were familiar. The subconscious was murmuring to me this racket exists somewhere deep in the mental files. Owls. It was not yet dusk, but these were calls of immature owls asserting themselves to the world, or adult owls in some mating hootenanny. Or they were howler monkeys. I walked on.



Brian DeNeal photo

The trail crosses Big Creek at least twice, maybe three times. Prepare to wade.

Big Creek posed a problem since I'd forgotten to pack sandals. Any seasoned backpacker knows wet feet result in blisters which sometimes become crippling. The creek was too wide and deep for stepping stones. There was no choice but to cross barefoot. I removed the shoes and tossed them across to the opposite bank, shoestrings whistling helicopter fashion. I removed socks and tucked them under the sternum strap of my backpack. It was time to select a route.

One portion of the creek offered a smooth expanse of sandstone. Another offered small, jagged gravel. The best option was clear until my foot noted the smooth sandstone was covered in algae slick as ice. For a backpacker, the only thing worse than wet socks is a wet pack, which is much heavier than a dry one. The sharp stones bruised my heels,

but the distance was not far.

After my second crossing of Big Creek the sun was sinking low in the west. I'd refilled the water, saved shoes and socks from a dousing and was anxious that I'd be hiking to midnight to reach Buzzard's Roost.

It was clear the priority should be bedding down, not meeting some arbitrary destination in the dark that could lead to injury or debilitating soreness the next day. It was time to look for a camping spot, and then I found it. In this spot was a nylon hammock, a tent fit for three people and Michael Neilsson crouching over his hot Ramen noodle supper on a gravel bar in a picturesque creek.

"Nice camp!" I said.

We talked again about the heat. Neilsson had made camp early when he found this idyllic spot and set up his hammock for siesta during the swelter. That night he would be safe from bugs in the tent. Hammock. Tent. Siesta. Warm food. Pack filled with two weeks of supplies while keeping a breakneck pace up the steepest hills Hardin County had to offer. I'd be lying if I don't confess envy.



Brian DeNeal photo

The second crossing of Big Creek is a bit more daunting with a slick expanse of rock promising — but not delivering — a stable bridge to the opposite bank.

This is probably the time I should explain my preparation strategy. During my first thru-hike of the trail I had only 10 vacation days from work available and didn't know if I could complete the trail in that amount of time. To do it there was no room for creature comforts that would take up time and weight.

Brian Stark was a charter member of the American Discovery Trail Board of Directors. He was the first to cross the entire trail from Cape Henlopen State Park in Delaware to Point Reyes National Seashore in San Francisco. The River-to-River Trail is along that route and Stark — a trail runner — said it was among the most arduous sections of the national trail. Stark carried a fanny pack instead of a backpack.

He carried no tent and in the case of rain he had a tarp he would roll himself into as though he was the burrito meat and the tarp was the tortilla shell.

Using Stark's example, I'd never carried a tent thru-hiking the trail. Instead, I waited for relatively clear weather predictions, took a tarp and some twine to stretch it between trees. Knowing there are many convenient shelter bluffs along the trail in case of storms, I also kept an eye out for dark clouds and ear open for thunder. In the two times I've completed the trail I've been lucky. Never did I spend a night in the rain.

During my first hike — bound by a 10-day window — I was discouraged to be taking so much time boiling noodles on the wood-burning Sierra Zip Stove. The stove is a small bowl with a battery-powered fan that blows burning wood into red hot embers. Once the fire is going a pot of water boils in less than five minutes. That's pretty good time, but to use it the pack had to be undone, items rifled out of it, fire made, water boiled, food prepared, food eaten and pack reloaded. The lunch stop might take half an hour or more for a meal that might provide only 190 calories.

On the other hand, a bagel spread with peanut butter and some pre-cooked bacon could be removed from the pack, eaten and repacked in less than half the time. Plus there was no need to pack a stove, extra battery, pot, pot cleaning rag and extra cooking water.

My plan has always been to pack light as possible and to walk. When exhaustion set in, I'd stop to eat. Then walk and repeat until too tired to keep going. Then drop the pack, stretch out the tarp, wriggle into the sleeping bag and get up for breakfast of cold instant oatmeal and cold instant coffee.

Here is my checklist:

Food/Water

- Platypus bladder with sipping tube
 - Nalgene quart water bottle
 - 2 bottles of iodine tablets for water treatment
 - Bagels with peanut butter - one for lunch, one for supper
- each day
- Pre-cooked bacon
 - Granola bars
 - GORP - good ol' raisins and peanuts
 - Oatmeal - two instant packets for breakfast each morning
- Instant coffee

Tech

- Cell phone
- Go-Pro camera

Clothes

- 2 pair socks
- Pair of underwear
- T-shirt
- Zip-off pants/shorts

- Rain jacket
- Hat
- Handkerchief

Miscellaneous

- Toilet paper
- Cigarette lighters
- Bugler tobacco
- Compass
- River-to-River Trail Guide
- Tarp
- Paracord
- Fire stick
- Bowl
- Spoon
- Swiss Army Knife
- Headlamp
- AA batteries
- Tent spikes
- Blister bandages
- Water bottle carrier for pack hip belt
- Duct tape
- Notebook
- Pen
- Contact lens solution
- GPS system

Sleep

- Sleeping bag
- Foam pad

While I coveted Neilsson's hammock, tent, warm supper and trickling creek for ambience, my destination was Buzzard's Roost, which would place me right at the beginning of the Garden of Gods trail section the morning of Day 2 and I wanted to continue walking.

Neilsson asked me if the pouch strapped to my sternum strap contained a GPS. It didn't. Inside was my Go-Pro camera, a digital camcorder about the size of a box of matches and nearly weightless. He was familiar with such devices, having seen local daredevils use them during his time teaching in Thailand. With cameras attached to selfie sticks, they recorded themselves leaping from cliffs into the ocean. Thailand. Cliff jumping. Never mind, I had miles to go.

I left camp planning to hike until midnight if I had to in order to reach Buzzard's Roost. That would not happen and I blame the heat.

There was more than enough prepared food in the pack to keep me in calories all day every day until my resupply. The trouble was the heat and exertion destroyed any appetite I'd expected to have. Backpackers boast they have the best diet in the world. When you walk all day you can eat anything you want and as much of it as you want. Those calories all will be burned off in short order. However, the heat and body's moisture lost to sweat dehydrates a person in a hurry. There was no way to drink enough water to drive

away the cotton mouth that had plagued me since Elizabethtown. I was drinking water greedily, so much water there must have been no empty room available in the stomach to provoke hunger. Yet, the thirst was still never quenched.

When I forced myself to eat, the throat resisted swallowing. The calories had to be choked down. After resuming walking the waves of painful heartburn came on. Often I'd have to stop to let the heartburn subside, because all those calories were threatening to come back up and waste themselves on the trail. Loss of appetite, loss of calories, heartburn, nausea and endless series of hills culminated in frightening weakness. I told myself these issues would resolve themselves in a couple days. The body simply needed time to adjust to the new routine.

Camp Cadiz Road provided one of those comforting glimpses of civilization after miles of mud and darkness. Too much time walking on hard roads hurts the feet and leads to boredom, but in short distances provide a psychological boost. If there is serious trouble, houses are in view and the people who live there are undoubtedly friendly to the sight of grubby hikers on the road.

The trail appeared to use Camp Cadiz Road for less than a quarter of a mile before heading north to cross Karbers Ridge Road. Three people were taking advantage of the last remaining minutes of sunlight to assemble the structural support for a shed. The sound of their power tools had echoed fearsomely through the woods like a shrieking monster. Once I'd determined the source of the sound I was happy to see people outdoors doing normal summertime activities. But by that point the trail should have left the hard pavement. In the trees to my right — the north — the only signs visible read "No Trespassing." Soon there were sounds of vehicles on a roadway and it was clear I'd passed my intersection. By the time I'd reach the trail I'd have wasted half a mile.

A black dog with a red collar barked and charged me from a house on Karbers Ridge Road. It was a young dog and appeared more curious than aggressive. Dogs don't seem to like the sight or sound of hikers with a long stick in each hand approaching, especially on pavement. The sticks make a steady "tick, tick, tick" that dogs don't know how to interpret. This was my second run-in with alarmed dogs that day, the first being in an open field for hunting. Vegetation had been chest high on either side of the trail. When I'd started wondering how anyone could hunt turkey or quail in such overgrowth two dogs burst barking out of the brush ahead of me. They had let me pass but followed for a disconcerting distance as though ready to nip once my guard was down.

There was a steep hill ahead on Karbers Ridge Road. By this time it was too dark to be walking safely on blacktop. A truck turned into the driveway from whence the dog had

run and a woman shouted, "Shady, get off the road!" before driving home. Shady was glad to see the truck and to hear the woman's voice, but enjoyed following and barking at me even more. Soon the truck pulled up behind me and stopped. The woman asked me if I was OK and if I would like a ride. I declined, stating I'd lost the trail, but it was just up the road a ways and I'd be camping once off the road. She was concerned. "It's getting dark, you know," she said, but I said I would be OK and she drove back home.

Finding a place to camp would not be a problem, but it was a little nerve wracking knowing that in low light approaching vehicles would not be able to see me from a distance. When cars approached, I walked as far off the road and in the weeds as I could without falling down the embankment.

The trail left the roadway and used a forest gravel road back into the woods as its course. Shoulders along this road had been mowed and could have offered a spot to roll out the tarp, but the image of trucks joy riding in the middle of the night kept me walking.

After the trail passed a yellow Forest Service gate that blocked vehicular traffic I started looking for a campsite. Ahead on my right was a dark dog, crouched low and watching. It did not growl and did not bark. For the first time that day I was scared. "Hey, boy! That's a good boy!" It did not move as I approached. A flick of the cigarette lighter revealed it to be a low bush.

When a small creek crossed the road followed by a large hill I decided this was the spot. This was not quite a mile past Karbers Ridge Road. I didn't relish the idea of climbing the hill right after breakfast, but relished even less climbing it that night. On either side of the road were thickets of poison ivy. The tarp would have to be rolled on the green strip between the gravel road treads. There would be no soft bed that night. The phrase "Any port in a storm," kept going through my head.

I drank water and refilled the containers. I knew supper was in order, but even the thought of eating brought more heartburn. After a night of rest and cooling off surely the appetite would be raging by morning.

I rolled up a cigarette and then rolled up my pant leg. Usually the ticks will tickle as they settle on a good spot for sucking blood and can be picked off before they find it. Also, ticks generally aren't prevalent in the woods. They stick to clearings where they can depend on deer, coyotes, raccoons or possums passing through. The hiker crosses the clearing as quickly as possible and once back in the woods checks out the legs for the pests. But with pants, the ticks did not seem much of a concern so I'd left the bug spray at home. This decision was a mistake as the light of the headlamp revealed at least 20 ticks on my right shin and calf. Most were stuck while some were crawling. The crawling ones went first into the creek to be swept down-

AHEAD ON MY RIGHT WAS A DARK DOG, CROUCHED LOW AND WATCHING. IT DID NOT GROWL AND DID NOT BARK. FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT DAY I WAS SCARED. "HEY, BOY! THAT'S A GOOD BOY." IT DID NOT MOVE AS I APPROACHED.

stream and perhaps provide a meal to little fish. My left leg carried at least as many. Dog Ticks and Lone Star Ticks were in profusion and little ones the size of pepper grains had crawled through the weave of my socks to affix themselves to my ankles. It took at least 30 minutes of grooming to clear away all the parasites.

I called my wife and father to let them know I'd gotten through the first day without major difficulty. I asked Vicky to meet me at Garden of the Gods Pharaoh Picnic Area the next day with tick repellent. My GPS unit inexplicably indicated I'd walked 18.75 miles that first day. I'd figured it closer to 14.

Sleep came in short, shallow intervals that night. A rain jacket stuffed into a summer-weight sleeping bag stuff sack made for a meager pillow. A shallow foam camping pad did little for comfort on a gravel road. The campsite that had seemed so level to a headlamp's glow turned out to be on a hill, with me rolling to the left throughout the night. The sound of a motor convinced me an ATV operator had defied the gate and was roaring down the trail, not expecting someone to be lying in the middle of it. It was only a loud muffler on Karbers Ridge Road.

These problems would have been enough to keep sleep at bay, but were nothing compared to the ticks. Every minute of every hour I detected a new one creeping over me and had to grab it and flick it away into the brush. This act was futile as the same ones simply hitched back on board later.

The night before had been a short one. I'd stayed up late due to last minute preparations, slept poorly with nervous anticipation and gotten up well before the alarm went off. It was no big deal. A day of hiking would reset the sleep schedule. It didn't and dawn could not arrive soon enough.

The birds chirped early and the air was chilly. The rain jacket was a good call.

New ticks were stuck to the legs, arms, back, face and just about everywhere else. I made a mental note not to sleep in the middle of a road for the rest of the trip.



Brian DeNeal photo

This is one of several old cabins in the High Knob area.

The appetite that should have returned after a night of rest and cooling off had not, but I forced down two packages of cold instant oatmeal, a couple handfuls of GORP and a cup of cold coffee.

I was a few miles behind where I'd intended to be. While the day was supposed to begin entering the Garden of the Gods Wilderness Area, I hadn't even reached High Knob Campground. It remained a couple miles down the trail.

High Knob Campground is a good spot to refill water — ask permission if not a customer — and to buy a cold drink and sandwich. I was in no mood for either when I passed by.

The section of trail between Karbers Ridge Road and High Knob has always been a problem for hikers. Decades of heavy horse use has eroded the trails in many places. The heavy rains of May had left the soil still saturated. But I had never seen the damage so extreme. Some mud bogs lasted 20 yards while the trail was bordered by banks 5 feet high. Most of these spots had detour trails leading around the worst of the muck. Some of these detours had become mud bogs themselves. I later learned from an avid mule rider there had been a series of weekend mule riding events during the rainiest weekends in May involving as many as 300 mules walking the same trail.

Prior to reaching Karbers Ridge Road I could gauge the solidity of the bogs by watching for Neilsson's footprints. If those prints were deep it meant he had sunk to his ankles and I should avoid those footfalls. If his prints were shallow then it was probably a safe spot to step. But I had passed Neilsson so my footprints would serve as his guide. Many times those steps led me to sink beneath the tops of my trail shoes. The brown clay squished between shoes and socks. Each step squeezed moisture out of that trapped clay and in shorter order my shoes were filled with mud of gravel-like consistency. When this occurred I kept eyes open for downed trees to use as benches so I could remove the shoes and shake out the mud. This effort thwarted any hopes of retrieving the time lost the day before.

The odds of passing through Garden of the Gods, One Horse Gap and begin the next day at Lusk Creek Wilderness Area were looking poor, especially since I knew Vicky would be meeting me at Garden of the Gods. I welcomed the visit, but also wanted to make headway.

By the time the trailers and traffic of High Knob Campground came into view, small talk with horse riders was low on the agenda. Mud covered from knees down, it was my hope to fly through and disappear down the trail.

A team of riders passed me as I reached the far end of the campground and they wanted to make small talk, which I can understand. When horse riders meet backpackers the proper etiquette is for backpackers to leave the trail on the downhill slope and to speak to the horses. This practice tells the horses the backpacker is a person and not a threat. If all goes well the horse team passes safely. But this rarely works out the way we plan. Maybe horses just don't like me.

"Hiker up ahead!" the horse rider in front screams.

"Hello, how are you doing?" the hiker obliges.

"Beautiful day, isn't it?" is the typical response, even if in the middle of a thunderstorm.

"Yes, it is."

"These horses aren't used to seeing hikers out here," the rider says as the horse shies into the poison ivy.

"I can see that."

"Where've you come from?"

"Elizabethtown."

"That's a long way."

"Yes."

"Have a nice day."

"You too."

If no one is bucked off then the meeting is a positive one. The hiker then steps out of the poison ivy back to the trail and tries to dodge the piles of fresh horse manure, sometimes affectionately referred to as "trail apples."

This pattern repeats multiple times until out of horse country, which in southeastern Illinois does not occur until well after Lusk Creek Wilderness Area.

During one meeting with a horse team all horses appeared calm until one was passing near me. While all others had quietly walked past, this one horse grew wild and began to sprint. The woman on board did not have time to duck and got a face-full of leafy branch. "Ouch," I said, but the horse had carried her on down the trail. Her fellow riders would have to determine the nature of any injuries. There was no screaming, so both eyeballs must have remained intact.

A few times I had to remind myself the trip was for enjoyment. During breaks to catch my breath or to wait for the heartburn to subside I'd open my ears. The birds were singing. They were happy. The leaves around me were green. The trees were happy. At Big Creek there was clear water,

rocky outcroppings and trees reaching over the creek as though to shake hands. The experience wouldn't be all be orb-weaving spiderwebs in my face every five steps. It wasn't all mud and ticks and screaming thighs at each uphill climb. Shoulders wouldn't always be sore. I wouldn't always be so thirsty and exhausted. And there was a new disquieting sensation. There was a pinching sensation between my legs which every so often felt like a bottle of lemonade and salt was being sprayed on an open wound. Chafe. It was only a gentle reminder, nothing too serious.

"Stop and wait for enjoyment," I'd tell myself, and stare at a leaf. "Something will happen you will remember for the rest of your life."

Then I'd walk a few steps into the next spiderweb.



Brian DeNeal photo

This arch formation serves as a gateway into the more scenic portions of the River-to-River Trail.



Brian DeNeal photo

A few years ago this was a scenic overlook between High Knob and Buzzard's Roost. Trees have grown and obscured the view.

Traffic was so heavy at Garden of the Gods I had to wait for a motorcycle brigade to pass. It was Hog Rock weekend, three days of motorcycles converging on Hog Rock Campground at Lambtown near Cave-In-Rock. Up the hill to the picnic area I found Vicky and stepson David, along with our dogs Sasha, the little Husky-looking mutt, and Maggie the Golden Retriever.

I'd seen Vicky only the morning before, but it was still nice to have company. That company also provided a ham sandwich and a couple cold cans of Sprite. They brought a small bottle of insect repellent and a portable phone charger. I didn't know they made little boxes that hold a charge for a phone. The idea is to charge them at home and take them on your travels for a quick shot of juice when outlets are not available. I did not need it and didn't really want the extra few ounces of weight, but was willing to go along since it made my wife feel better.

I warned them a visitor could be sneaking up on us if he was in need of fresh water. Neilsson.

"This guy, he'll probably be up here any minute to grill up some filet mignon and sip Champagne, with an ice

bucket to keep it chilled," I said.

So far I'd kept ahead of Neilsson and couldn't believe he hadn't yet lapped me. Not that it was a race, but I honestly would have felt better if I'd seen him suffer at least a little bit. I couldn't tell he had even broken a sweat.

The dogs enjoyed jumping on the table, sitting under the table, barking at crows eating the neighboring party's leftover picnic chips, and I was beginning to think if the walking did not start soon, it would not resume. Vicky encouraged me to stop and to come back home. I wasn't ready.



Brian DeNeal photo

Bluffs line the trail in portions of the Garden of the Gods Wilderness Area.

The poor trail conditions continued all the way to Herod, though none nearly as nasty as the stretch between Karbers Ridge Road and High Knob. Since the hike, I've heard the U.S. Forest Service plans to reroute that section of trail.

The trail led to my old stomping grounds deep into the Garden of the Gods Wilderness, where we teenage boys would camp for a weekend.

Later, I'd go by myself to sit on rocks all night by a campfire. At one popular campsite the uninitiated could become convinced a UFO spaceship was spotlighting the camp. The camp is high and facing a steep road far into the horizon. On a clear night when a car drives over that hill the camper is struck with a faint burst of headlights. Those lights come so quick that seen from the corner of the eye the camper may think lightning from an approaching thunderstorm is to blame. But there is no thunder. And about the time he tends the fire there comes another flicker of light.

The trail was quickly leading to the mighty ridge that climbs to this campsite when there came a voice from behind me. It was Neilsson. He had finally caught up to me. His boots and pant legs were covered in mud. At least I knew he wasn't levitating. He was concerned about the

condition of the trail and I told him it was the worst I'd ever seen it. We talked about horse etiquette, something with which he was unfamiliar. He had sent a few horses scrambling since leaving camp. I was relieved he, too, had missed the trail that created the shortcut between Camp Cadiz Road and Karbers Ridge Road.

We chatted about music, about Makanda where we had mutual friends, about the upcoming trail sections and potential campsites, about ticks - he'd had total of two (of course) in his tent all night - and about the steep ridge coming up some have named Suicide Hill. In an ice storm a few years ago many trees that had provided shade on that ridge fell down. What remained was a barren dirt hillside where the sun beat down. Up this hillside we'd have to climb until it appeared we were at the top. At that point we'd have to climb some more and this process would repeat until the heart threatened to burst.

I told Neilsson we had approached the foot of the hill and we carried on conversation until I took a break. Again I encouraged Neilsson to continue, which he did, and was soon out of sight, leaving me panting and sweating at the side of the trail. I thought surely he would stop at one of those scenic vistas at the hilltop. I'd never asked what made him decide to hike the trail. But he wasn't up there. I never saw him again. I hadn't even asked for his phone number for a follow up call to see if he'd finished the trail.

On that scenic ridgetop campsite a log made a nice spot to drink water. Lunch would have been in order except for the filling effects of the sandwich a couple miles back. But something profound was sure to happen at this spot where I'd spent so many nights back when. Those nights taught the importance of stashing food where the raccoons wouldn't get into it in the middle of the night. One night coyotes howled so near I swear I could hear their claws skittering on the sandstone. They disappeared when the lightning flashed, thunder boomed and clouds burst to fill my tent with rainwater by the next morning. In the distance I'd swear I could see the hills of Kentucky, which, little did I know, contained my future wife.

But nothing spectacular revealed itself on this trip. The reminder it remained intact and relatively litter-free was enough so I packed up and moved on.

As I climbed down the ridge that painful pinch between the legs came again. When the inner thighs were slick with sweat the pain subsided. After a time of rest the pain returned. It was something else to get used to, like the shoulder pain and the spiderwebs across the eyeballs. But it was beginning to hurt.

There is not much to see between the vistas of Suicide Hill and Williams Hill Road. One small point of interest is a large, white escarpment of sandstone bluffs along the north side of the trail. The bluffs themselves are not high nor particularly remarkable, but the eons of erosion have created a trail bed of light, gray sand. Sand is not preferable as a trail base. The feet slip and the exertion is wasted. Also, the sand tends to flip into the top of the shoes to grind its way into to the socks. But there was no mud to slop through.



Brian DeNeal photo

This campsite in the Garden of the Gods Wilderness has been used by visitors for years. Some call the climb to it Suicide Hill.

Gape Hollow Road is misnamed. The road leads to Thacker's Gap, one time a name for Herod. Herod became the official name once a post office was established. The postmaster's surname was Herod. The hard road seems to continue for miles. After first touching feet and hiking poles to asphalt, there is that moment of relief after having climbed through mud and boulder-strewn creek beds. This paved section climbs past the point of novelty. Right at the moment one comes to believe the trail dips back into the woods, hopes are dashed, and it is another steep hill and curves. There is an old barn along the route and some cows and maybe deer grazing in the never-ending pasture. There may be a few joy-riders stirring up dust along the way.

Neilsson was long gone and the way my legs were howling it was obvious I'd not be passing up his campsite this night. The trail left the road into a well-used campsite on Hart Creek.

There was still light in the sky, but the woods were dark enough to require a lamp. At this site on Hart Creek there was a humidity haze that could be felt more than seen. Pushing my way through the overgrown trail I came to the clearing on the creek where there was a fire pit and logs arranged as benches.

Mosquitoes had not buzzed since I'd started the hike, but they were prolific at this campsite. I did not want to break camp, but, again, it was dark and a large hill loomed opposite the creek. I dropped the pack and began to un-stow it.

Normally on these death march hikes I don't consider a fire. If there is time to lounge by a fire then there is time to get another mile or two in. But those mosquitoes concerned me. Night one had brought a torturous plague of ticks. I didn't want night two interrupted by the whine and bite of mosquitoes, so I broke off a 1-inch chunk of my fire-starting stick and stacked twigs on it.

All the wood in this area was damp, either by soaking up

the humidity or through Hart Creek's flooding in May. The fire burned yellow and I added larger sticks and the result was a cloud of greasy smoke. I called Dad and Vicky while tending to the fire, but it was apparent the fire would not be burning without significant effort. That was OK. Survival did not depend on fire. The fire was only for the mosquito-detering smoke and it was smoking pretty well. Again, I did not eat. I couldn't, but drank significantly with a ready source of water nearby.

The woods rustled with wildlife. In the jungle atmosphere the imagination might conjure a jaguar in the may-apple and paw paw groves.

"Go on! Get out of here!" I said, and the rustling sound trailed up the hillside.

Shining the headlamp up the hill two yellow eyes of a raccoon reflected back.

"You can have this camp back tomorrow, but I'm using it tonight, so go on!" I said, in part just for the joy of raising my voice.

Unlike the first night of camping, this night I ensured the tarp was on level ground. Sleep had eluded me two nights in a row and if I was going to continue in good mental health it was vital I get at least a couple hours sleep. But first, I needed to check my upper inner thigh where the chafing was becoming increasingly irritating. By light of a headlamp I could already tell the situation was worse than I'd thought. It looked like a burn. White, raw tissue was ringed with inflamed redness, maybe three inches from front of thigh to back and half an inch wide. When I touched it, my finger wanted to stick to the wound. While not especially painful, the epidermis layer had rubbed significantly and fluid oozed to the surface. Gross, I know. I had to make a decision.

There was not a lot of money available to spend preparing for this hike, but I knew chafing was a possibility and high-performance, sweat-wicking underwear was a necessity. I bought the cheapest I could find at about \$17 for two pair. That's where I went wrong. Later, in the safety and electric light of home I examined them. There was a seam pressed tight to the inner thigh of my leg. This seam had been acting like a soft saw with each step for two days.

Why didn't it hurt more than it did? I'd endured chafing much more painful, but less damaging. I had never had chafing actually break through the skin before. I don't know the answer. The knee braces were tight around my thighs and shins. They had to be tight or else they tried to slip down my legs, defeating their purpose. It could be they were so tight they dulled sensations in the legs, meaning chafing could reach dangerous levels and ticks could party on the shins without me feeling either.

Chafing should not normally be a major concern. After bathing and restricted activity, the skin heals itself and all is back to normal. Left untreated, though, severe chafing invites bacterial and fungal infection requiring medical treatment. What I needed was a bath, some sterile gauze and needed to keep the area dry. The only bath available was a creek full of beaver activity — and, no doubt, beaver

bacteria. I had no gauze and if I did it would be impossible to keep it attached to the thigh while hiking in heat indices of over 100 degrees. Keeping the wound dry would mean sitting down at that campsite at Hart Creek for days.

The only option was to try to sleep and assess the situation in the morning. There was no way the chafing in the leg would heal by morning, but I chose optimism.

That night brought sleep, but not too soon. The lighting bugs twinkled and a whip-poor-will sang. A bullfrog bellowed. My head was comfortable on my makeshift pillow and there were only a few ticks crawling that night. Beavers splashed in the creek. They did not slap their tails on the water as they do when alarmed, but only swam through the placid pool. Coyotes howled in the next hollow over.

These were the sounds of my childhood, when windows were open on summer nights and only a bedside fan cooled the head. There is some sort of long-lost association there. The sounds and the heat lulled me into a euphoria. Some might call it experiencing a oneness with nature. Trail magic. Others might say the night sounds were stimulating certain parts of the brain and memory that have been dormant a few years. I felt peace lying on that ground. Sleep came and the morning brought a new vigor.

When I quit working for Harrisburg's *The Daily Register* newspaper in May of 2015, Vicky told me I should think about walking the River-to-River Trail. I agreed with her it was a pretty good idea. Whenever the newspapering experience became extraordinarily stressful I'd say things like, "This is too much. I wish I was out on that trail not having to think about this." She thought hiking the trail would provide me with a clean break between newspaper work and magazine publishing. When I returned I would be refreshed and ready to throw myself full into this magazine responsibility. She also thought the hike would be prime first-hand material for a *Springhouse* story.



Brian DeNeal photo

The white diamond with a blue "i" is a River-to-River Trail marker. This is along the trail between Herod and One Horse Gap.

But my first *Springhouse* issue had to be out first. There was no time to prepare, complete and write about a hike. Then, as they say, "Life got in the way" and winter did, too. By the time I was again talking about the hike, Vicky was concerned the heat would be too much to bear. As it turned out, she was right. "Why do you want to do this hike?" she asked.

I think I've sort of figured out the answer to that question. We all create routines that work. We arrange our lives in a way that makes sense to us. We survive, we provide and pretty much know what to expect from one day to the next. Even on vacations to Florida or wherever, we have an idea of what will happen, when we will return and the sorts of adventures we'll have during that time.

Hiking the River-to-River Trail creates the opportunity for unplanned experiences. Maybe joy is among those. A lot of the trail experience is less than joyful. There is a lot of hardship that many are unwilling to endure. At the same time — with patience and some determination — such a trek can scrape away the protective layers through which we filter our surroundings and our reactions to them. Immersion in nature can provide a way to experience life out of context. The call of a whip-poor-will can be as comforting as a soft pillow.



Brian DeNeal photo

This is a popular vista along the trail in the One Horse Gap Area.

I'd hiked about a mile toward One Horse Gap when I decided it was time to throw in the towel. That chafing wound not only was not going away, but was bound to get worse. I called Vicky and asked her to meet me at Concord Cemetery, the last landmark before crossing into Lusk Creek Wilderness Area.

The trail returned to mud and muck. The bluffs are always scenic, but didn't especially compel interest on the hottest day so far of the year.

I met a friendly couple on horseback. They were con-

cerned about me hiking alone on a such a brutally hot morning with afternoon only bound to get worse. I said my ride was meeting me shortly and not to be concerned.

The One Horse Gap section was only a couple miles and then began the long, slow climb up Benham Ridge. This portion had never seemed particularly arduous in the past, but I'd never noticed the lack of trees on some of the higher barrens before.

In the hollow the air was hot and humid, but not unreasonably so. On those barrens when the sun hits the body the brain flinches. There comes a primal need to sprint to the nearest shade. The body is telling the hiker, "We cannot endure this furnace."

I've experienced extreme heat exhaustion a few times, but not heat stroke, I don't think. During these times the brain tells the body it is time to sleep and I could do nothing else except sleep. It could be under the shade of a tree or in a bedroom with a fan, but there is no choice once the heat overtakes the body's ability to overcome it. Staying in the sun in those barrens between One Horse Gap and Benham Ridge had the same effect. It was too much to endure safely. Hiking from Concord Cemetery to Lusk Creek Wilderness would have required a death march through unshaded roadway. Lusk Creek would have provided relief, but then would require a similar grind before and after Edyville. I sympathized with Neilsson who was no doubt there or on his way.

I didn't make it to Concord Cemetery. I called Vicky and she picked me up on the road at the top of Benham Ridge. My hands were shaking, but I had plenty of water and felt pretty good.

The heat remained for most of June and there was no measurable rain all month. The corn leaves curled until they pointed to the sky. The grass died. The creeks probably dried up.

It was a good month to be anywhere but on the trail. The dry spell broke in July.

A sort of mild depression sets in soon after ending an extended hike. Maybe a "longing" is more accurate than "depression." I'll wander around the yard and house for a couple days, not knowing what to do with my time. On the trail there are few decisions to make. You walk, eat, drink, find new water, find a place to bed down, get up with the morning bird chorus and repeat. After ending the hike there is a desire to get back out on the trail, no matter how grueling the experience had been.

I sat in the garage and was in this sort of state, thinking I should be walking up a muddy hillside and then a sound perked my ears. "Whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will, whip-poor-will."

In my Junction home surrounded by fields I'd never before heard the call of a whip-poor-will. It didn't make sense. The call was faster and of a higher pitch than those of the birds in the more southern forests. Also, the call came in daylight, which is unheard of. I figured it out. A mockingbird had been yammering in the yard since May, usually at the top of an electric pole. For several days the bird had annoyed me and I repeatedly shouted for the mockingbird to give it a rest. Gradually, my ears tuned out its calls, as happens when one lives near a train station or airport. This day I paid close attention. The mockingbird had never made this call in my yard before. It seemed to be mocking me and my poor performance on the hike. Or maybe there was something else going on.

What if that bird that had so annoyed me in the yard secretly followed my path. Along its travels it could have picked up a new song to mimick. Maybe it was trying to soothe me. "If you are so glum, here's that song you like so much."

The bird sang only a few refrains of the whip-poor-will song that morning and has not performed it ever since. The mockingbird is less noisome now, though it's still around on the pole or wire, watching, waiting for the next adventure. Maybe in October.



Brian DeNeal photo

Bluffs tower over the trail in the One Horse Gap region.



The author is a member of the River-to-River Trail Society Board of Directors. As a member with the responsibility of marking the trail and relaying issues to the U.S. Forest Service, he realizes blame for losing the trail or other problems falls on him as much as anyone. Those who see a section of the trail lacking may contact him at (618) 499-2055 or send an e-mail to bmdeneal@gmail.com. All of us want to keep it viable.