



Hike, Write, Repeat

STORY BY ANN GIBSON // AUGUST 9, 2018

Staring down a belligerent groundhog on the trail, plunging into waist-deep water to circumvent a beaver dam, and taking lunch breaks on rugged mountain peaks are all in a day's work for writer [Melanie Radzicki McManus](#).

The Wisconsin-based journalist and author has always loved hiking, but it was on Spain's Camino de Santiago Trail almost a decade ago that she developed a passion for long-distance trekking—so much so that she returned to the Camino to hike another 620 miles and complete a hiking guide.

In the decade since, she has hiked thousands more miles on America's [National Scenic Trails](#).



Age Trail. Photo by Gary Knowles.

Ice

This year happens to be the 50th anniversary of the National Trails Act and hikers are discovering these trails in record numbers. From the legendary Appalachian Trail and Pacific Crest Trail to the under-the-radar Potomac Heritage Trail, the 11 National Scenic Trails share these common characteristics:

They're each over 100 miles long

They're each maintained in large part by volunteers

They're each reserved for non-motorized recreation only

Though the popularity of these trails is growing, they still offer plenty of solitude, wildlife viewing, and opportunities to connect with nature.

When McManus discovered one of the National Scenic Trails—the 1,100-mile Ice Age Trail—was in her own state, she was floored.

“I’d been writing about travel in Wisconsin for years and never heard of it,” she says. After hiking the entire trail in 36 days (a female speed record for the Ice Age Trail), she wrote dozens of articles, published [*Thousand-Miler: Adventures Hiking the Ice Age Trail*](#), then hiked it again, this time in just 34 days. That’s when she set her sights on hiking all of America’s long-distance trails.



Loblolly pine forest. Florida National Scenic Trail. Photo by Melanie Radzicki McManus.jpeg

To date, McManus has added three more trails to her portfolio: the 1,300-mile Florida Trail, 400 miles by bike on the Natchez Trace Parkway, and the 215-mile New England Trail. She still covers many miles in a day, but isn't always in it for the speed anymore.

Currently, she's section-hiking the 4,600-mile North Country Trail—stretching from eastern New York to central North Dakota. She's breaking the distance into shorter day and weekend treks, and is eyeing another 800 miles on the Arizona Trail next.

McManus' trail adventures are fueled by both her travel writing career and love for the outdoors.

“The minute I start hiking, my stress level goes way down. I'm a typical woman, mom, and wife, always worried about somebody or something. But all those demands melt away,” she says. “I love the day-after-day on the trail for a week or two or three.”



Ice Age Trail. Photo by Michele Walker.

Just how does one hike up to 25 miles a day with time to spare for documenting the journey along the way? It doesn't hurt that McManus is a lifelong runner, sending her laptop and gear ahead so she can alternate hiking with trail running. She's used a combination of shuttles and hotels to fit her work in, but is easing her way into [camping](#) and [RVing](#) as ways to cut costs and spend more time outdoors.

According to McManus, the flexibility of RV living is ideal for hiking as little or as much of the National Scenic Trails as you like.

"It's so easy to move around in an RV that you can have just about any type of experience you want on these 11 trails," she says. "You can even park your RV, backpack for two or three days, and come back to it."

Asked what her favorite trails are, McManus recommends the pristine swamps and beaches of the Florida Trail in winter, the Ice Age Trail's world-class glacial remains in summer, and the peaks and ridgelines of the New England Trail in fall foliage season.

The Florida and Ice Age Trails are both only two-thirds finished, but local volunteer groups have websites, maps, and social media to help you connect the completed segments. There are similar resources for all 11 trails, and McManus is adamant about contacting them.



Melanie backpacking across water. North Country National Scenic Trail. Photo by Ed McManus.

“People involved with these trails are super passionate,” she says. “These trail angels are eager to help you with shuttles, water, camping, anything you need. They want to showcase their trail and help you hike it.”

She recommends being prepared for anything, like running into overgrown stretches of trail.

“You never know what you’re going to find,” she says. “There are highs and lows every day. But no matter how frustrated you get because something goes wrong, in the end it’s always good.”

“The more you handle situations on your own, the more you see what you can do and the greater sense of accomplishment you’ll have when you’re done.”