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Happy birthday to our national parks, part II

Steve Hill, Special to The Gazette
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The author visited the Emmons Creek Fishery Area, which hosts a section of the Ice Age Trail called the Emmons Creek Trail, along with a portion of the 7.7-mile-long Emmons Creek, a Class I trout stream. (Steve Hill photo)

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We've already wished happy birthday to our national pride and joy once in this space, but it's a year-long celebration, and this is National Park Week. That means free entrance to our national parks through Sunday, April 24, and that's worth another big shout-out to this critical part of our cultural and natural heritage.

There are four major national park units in Wisconsin, and as much as most Gazette readers would probably love to go see one of them this weekend, it's not always easy to do. Still, our nearest unit is far closer than many folks may be aware, and this week is as good as any to pay tribute with a short visit.

Emmons Creek Hatchery highlights little things

Many Wisconsinites may be aware of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore on Lake Superior, but three lesser-known National Park Service units are the North Country National Scenic Trail, the Saint Croix National Scenic Riverway, and the one that is closest to us in Portage County – the Ice Age National Scenic Trail.

Of course, the trails are only "units" in the sense that they form a relatively cohesive whole. Parts of the Ice Age Trail (IAT), for instance, are actually roadways between more traditional trails. The trail isn't yet complete, although it is 1,200 miles long from start to finish – a Wisconsin treat from end to end.

About 600 miles of blazed trail segments are joined by more than 500 miles of unmarked connecting routes. Both types can be found in eastern Portage County and contiguous counties.

I've written before about the Ice Age Trail Association and its local chapter's volunteer work in Hartman Creek State Park, as well as the trail portion I've walked in the Dells of the Eau Claire County Park and state natural area in Marathon County.

Recently, I visited a section of the trail and an associated loop just south of Hartmann Creek. The Emmons Creek Fishery Area hosts a section of the trail called the Emmons Creek Trail, along with a portion of the 7.7-mile-long Emmons Creek, a Class I trout stream.

The Emmons Creek Trail is 0.9 miles long between the parking area on Stratton Lake Road and the southern border of the fishery area. But there's also a 1.4-mile trail section that snakes off to the west and curves back east to rejoin the Emmons trail, making it a 2.3-mile loop back to the parking lot.

It's a fairly easy hike, with only a few slightly steep sections through the hilly terrain south of Emmons Creek.

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The hills make for very pleasant and tree-covered hiking, with ever-shifting views of the terrain through the trees.

I did both the loop, which has the very dreamy name of Faraway Valley Loop, and an extra 1.8-mile offshoot of the IAT for about a four-mile stroll in slightly less than two hours.

I spent a lot of time paying attention to little things – a black feather in the trail, a knotty outgrowth of a tree that appeared first to be a mushroom, and the various hues of rock, lichen and plant life under the crystal-clear water of Emmons Creek.

There were a couple of rock cairns on the early part of the trail, including one atop a boulder that had an expansive view of a valley opening to the north. Someone had added animal bones to the cairn, giving it an odd tombstone-like appearance instead of a trailside cairn's traditional landmark role.

Spring was still trying to pop up all along the trail, but it was a fine, mostly quiet trip I shared only with a squirrel and what appeared to be a startled pheasant, which are stocked at Mukwa Wildlife Area in the eastern portion of Waupaca County. There was also plenty of other bird life, and the trail was assuredly an excellent way to celebrate our parks' birthday.

Things to know if you go

The IAT section I visited is 28 miles from downtown Stevens Point, a 35-minute drive down Wisconsin Highway 54 from its Interstate 39 juncture. Stay on Highway 54 until reaching Portage County D and head south. Stay straight when you reach the stop sign; D turns to the west while Stratton Lake Road continues south.

After just over a mile, the road bends left and the parking lot is easily seen after the bend on the right. Signage clearly marks the lot.

There are no fees associated with hiking any section of the trail unless it passes through a park, like Hartman Creek, that charges for an overnight stay or other facility usage.

Hikers who take the Faraway Valley Loop to the west reach the juncture of the Emmons Creek need to be sure to continue straight when they hit the 1.4-mile mark, where there's a juncture with the IAT as it heads south toward Second Avenue. From this point, it's both 0.9 miles to Second Avenue and 0.9 miles back to the Stratton Lake parking lot, but turning right will mean an extra 1.8 miles round-trip, most of it through privately owned land.

There is hunting and fishing on both private and public land, so hikers will want to be aware of hunting seasons and when some trail sections are inaccessible. Hikers should also be aware of respecting private landowners' rights, as trail access can be revoked and the IAT relies heavily on the goodwill of landowners.

To the north of Stratton Lake Road, the IAT heads through the Emmons Creek Barrens and then Hartman Creek State Park, then ever northward until it passes Antigo and then moves toward its western terminus at Interstate Park on the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway.

Two useful sites are the park service page at www.nps.gov/iatr and the IATA page at www.iceagetrail.org.

Trout Unlimited meeting April 21

Although I'm not an angler myself, I have a great appreciation for the group Trout Unlimited, whose Frank Hornberg chapter meets at Sentry World's community room (behind P.J.'s restaurant) just as the Gazette's April 21 edition hits the streets.

The chapter will hear from the Department of Natural Resources' Tom Meronek, who will talk about upcoming trout habitat work, results from the latest trout stream surveys and the general health of fisheries in the area.

As the Ice Age Trail and Emmons Creek remind us, the relationship between state, federal and private individuals and organizations – like Trout Unlimited – is crucial to our ability to enjoy the outdoors.

Next week's column will pass on a few tidbits from Meronek, as well as more information on the April 30 induction ceremony for the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame, also at Sentry – but at the theater in its headquarters building.

The event begins with coffee at 9 a.m. and formal festivities kick off at 10 a.m. Lunch costs \$25 and the entire event is open to the public.

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