

JUSTIN'S FOOTSTEPS: PACIFIC CREST TRAIL

BY EMILY KOESTER | SPECIAL TO THE LAKELAND TIMES

Back at it again, Lake Tomahawk resident Justin Smith traversed more than 2,650 miles in 100 days, beginning the Pacific Crest Trail at the Mexican border on May 5 and completing the thru-hike at the Canadian border on Aug. 12. The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), one of 11 National Scenic Trails in the United States, stretches through California, Oregon and Washington state.

Thru-hiking — a non-stop backpacking trip on a long-distance trail — a National Scenic Trail isn't anything new to Smith, who last year hiked the Ice Age Trail through Wisconsin and the year before accomplished the Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine. The PCT is Smith's longest thru-hike yet and one he had planned on doing it last year but switched to the Ice Age Trail due to the pandemic.

As with past hikes, Smith went into the PCT hike alone, but ended up hiking sections with other thru-hikers. To start, Smith joined groups of older hikers along the way and "took it easy for a while" on the trail, going only 12-15 miles a day. With two National Scenic Trails already under his belt, he accomplished his hike at a quicker pace than he originally thought he would, even having back-to-back days of 30-40 miles a day.

"I was with some younger folks, my age, for a little over 100 miles and then I split off and I was seeing new people every day," he said. "I'd maybe hike with some people for a day and then be gone again."

He said at one point in northern California he met another thru-hiker going a similar pace and they hiked quite a few miles together into Oregon, then Smith didn't see him for a while until he saw him again in Washington.

Smith encountered only a few days of rain along his entire hike, and one day in California there were snow flurries. He and some other hikers also encountered a cougar in the desert one night, which luckily left them alone. Rattlesnakes and the small desert bird nightjars were also seen along the trail.

"(Nightjars) would sit on the trail and just hiss at you," Smith said. "It wouldn't move, it was like it was mad at us. We had to get our trekking poles and just move it and then they fly away."

Smith also said he met some "crazy desert people" along the first portion of his hike, who would tell him to "be careful of aliens and stuff in the sky."

"A lot of these people are and hour, two hours from a town," Smith said. "One place that was interesting was called Mike's Place, in the middle of the desert. You had to get water there. The guy had water tanks by his house ... there were a couple of places like that, where they would let people just come and hang out on their porch even if they weren't there. They had interesting lawn ornaments around, skulls, kinda give a creepy feeling. The vibe was really weird and there were a lot of people left, but I had a lot of older people who were there before tell me to stay there and experience it."

New challenges

After the last two thru-hikes, Smith said he felt well prepared for this hike in all aspects except the heat of the desert. One way to avoid the heat was to hike earlier and later in the day and to nap during the hottest part of the day.

"It was a big change coming from northern Wisconsin," he said. "That was my first time being further west than the Dakotas, so I had never really been in desert areas, but I loved all the cactus flowers and a lot of different birds and bugs."

One of the biggest challenges Smith faced in the desert was the lack of access to water sources. He said there would be 20-30 mile stretches of the trail without access to water, so when he did get to a water source, he would nap and drink as much as he possibly could before heading out on the hike again.

"I was worried about the heat, so I made sure I drank enough," he said. Smith faced another new challenge once he entered the forest areas: wild-fires.

"The fires were getting a little out of hand," he said.

Luckily for Smith, many of the fires started behind him in areas he had already hiked through. Some people had to be evacuated from areas he had hiked just days before. He said he saw firefighters working on the fires, but the trails were still open at that point, and to avoid having to hitch a ride around one section of the trail, Smith and some other hikers even hiked at night to get ahead of the fires.

"It was a really hard year to pull off a continuous footpath without getting in the car," Smith said. "A lot of the hikers I met and hiked with in southern California who were 200-300 miles behind me, they were getting caught in all that and had to do big hitches around them. A lot of hikers had to skip sections."

A closure in Oregon caused many thru-hikers to skip more than 90 miles of the trail, but Smith said to hitch such a large section of the trail would have bugged him — in his mind he wouldn't have completed the thru-hike then, so he did research on the roads in the area and ended up doing his own alternative route.

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CONTRIBUTED PHOTOGRAPH
With Mt. Adams in the background, Smith hikes a portion of the Pacific Crest Trail in Washington. This photo was taken about nine days before he completed his hike at the border with Canada.