

Cedarburg's own 'Night Owl' conquers the Appalachian Trail

By Cori Kaminsky
Special to the News Graphic

CEDARBURG — When most of us think about a nice hike through nature, we head to Lion's Den Park or up to Riveredge Nature Center for a relaxing afternoon. But Liz Pfeifer, founder of Trail Dog & Company, took the idea of a hike to the extremes this year — hiking the entire Appalachian Trail from Georgia to Maine.

She started her adventure on Feb. 28 at Springer Mountain, Ga., and just under six months, 14 states and 2,198 miles later, she stood at the summit of Mt. Katahdin in Maine.

"It took me 150 days," Pfeifer said. "I had to take three weeks off to nurse a sprained ankle, less than 100 miles from the end of the trail, if you can believe it. Other than that, I had only 11 'zero days,' where I didn't hike at all. Honestly ... even at my lowest points — and there were a few — I found it easier to just keep moving."

Over the course of the six months, Pfeifer logged as few as 7 miles in a day, and as many as 26.6 miles one day in Pennsylvania.

"By that point I was a well-oiled machine," Pfeifer laughed. "I was with my 'tramily' — that's trail speak for trail family — and the weather was perfect."

Trail culture comes with its own quirks and traditions, including trail names. Trail names are often adopted during long-distance hikes as a tradition to create a unique, memorable identity separate from their daily lives, often given by other hikers.

"Most hikers go to bed early and wake up before sunrise. I'm not typical. I'd sometimes stay up until 10 p.m.," she said. "So they gave me the name Night Owl. I still haven't met another Night



Photo courtesy of Liz Pfeifer

Liz Pfeifer celebrates completing the Appalachian Trail on Mt. Katahdin in Maine.

Owl, because most hikers are snoring by 8 p.m."

When she reached the summit of Mt. Katahdin, Night Owl joined the 25% of hikers who actually finish the trail each year — a small percentage compared to the 3,000 to 4,000 who start.

"Fewer hikers attempted it this year," she said, "because many people were hesitant to hit the trail after the devastation from Hurricane Helene to North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee. It was also a very rainy spring and summer. I was the 386th hiker to finish this year."

For Pfeifer, the Appalachian Trail

wasn't a whim.

"I first stepped foot on the trail in 2020 and immediately felt a draw," she said. "It felt magical. It represented Americana. I became obsessed."

A women's backpacking trip along a portion of the trail in Virginia sealed the deal.

"At the end of five days everyone else was excited to go home, and I thought, 'oh no, it's over?' I didn't want to leave. From there, I just kept thinking, what if I didn't have to stop? What if I just kept going?"

See **TRAIL**, PAGE 6A

Trail

From Page 1A

That “just keep going” attitude became her driving force.

“My goal was simple: hike as long as I was having fun. Every time I crossed into another state, I’d evaluate my situation, and each time I thought, ‘Well ... I might as well keep going.’”

Friends, family and even strangers back home provided that much needed support and encouragement.

“My husband Adam was so amazing — he kept things running at home and cheered me on. My parents, my friends — everyone was so supportive. After a while, people in Cedarburg, then Ozaukee County, and then beyond started following my updates. When I sprained my ankle so close to the end, I knew I had to go back and finish, not just for me, but for them. It became their summit too.”

But the hike didn’t come without its challenges. Pfeifer battled norovirus in Virginia, rain-soaked days in Vermont, rattlesnakes in Pennsylvania, voracious mosquitos and that frightening ankle sprain in Maine.

“I’ll admit, there were days when I wasn’t having fun anymore. There were days when I was miserable. I called those ‘dig deep days.’ That’s when trail friends made all the difference. They’d encourage me, empathize with me and keep me going.”

It helped to plan out the



Photo courtesy of Liz Pfeifer

Liz Pfeifer, center, is pictured with her friends “Tuck,” right, and “Flyer” at the halfway point of the Appalachian Trail.

next day each night before bed — studying inclines, mileage and water sources gave her a sense of control. She had two nights with close calls with bears outside her tent. One scampered away when she yelled out, but another was much more curious and spent some time sniffing around her tent. It finally ran when she poked it with her

trekking pole.

“But even worse than the bears and snakes were the bugs,” she said. “Some nights I’d want to hang out with fellow hikers by a campfire, but the mosquitoes were so bad they’d drive us all into our tents early.”

High points included crossing into North Carolina just one week after start-

ing her hike; reaching the halfway point in Pine Grove Furnace, Pa, and celebrating by watching her trail mates Flyer and Tuck polish off a half gallon of ice cream each (a tradition she didn’t take part in because of the norovirus); and weathering a 65 mph windstorm on a mountain in Tennessee on her first night camping alone.

“I realized if I could survive that, I could survive anything,” she said.

Virginia became her favorite state.

“Most hikers hate Virginia because it’s the longest state. But for me, it’s where I grew the most, learned to be independent and even enjoyed solo tenting,” Pfeifer said. “Fourteen nights alone taught me a lot about myself.”

Life on the trail meant simplifying everything. Pfeifer’s tradition became hiking three or four days before heading into a town to restock food and other supplies. She relied on tools like hiker hostels, the “Far Out” app (which pairs hikers up with “trail angels,” volunteers who help hikers along the way) and “hiker boxes,” frequently found at the hostels.

“You’d be amazed at how much support there is out there for hikers,” Pfeifer said. “Hiker hostels provide affordable places to sleep, shower and do laundry, and a place to gather and share stories. They would provide ‘hiker boxes,’ where hikers could take or leave supplies

— Ziploc bags, extra granola bars, personal items. I was amazed when I found tent stakes at one stop — those were on my shopping list!”

Among her favorite fellow thru hikers were the 6-Pack Family that came upon her shortly after her fall and ankle sprain. They helped her hobble to the nearest logging road by carrying her gear, encouraging and reassuring her and before they left, they tucked an inspirational note into her bag.

“I read it in my bunk late that night, sobbing,” she admitted. “They somehow said exactly what I needed to hear at that moment.”

Meals were fun at first, but pretty quickly lost their allure.

“I ate ramen every night from Virginia to New Hampshire. Sometimes I’d fancy it up with beef jerky to make ‘trail pho,’” she said. “But one day I woke up and thought, ‘I can’t do this anymore.’ Same thing with peanut butter and Clif Bars. I loved them ... until I didn’t.”

It wasn’t until the halfway point that finishing actually started to feel like a realistic goal, she said.

But when I finally crossed into Maine, that’s when it hit me. I was going to finish.”

And finish she did.

“I cried the entire last mile to Katahdin. Well, I’d cry, ... then I’d laugh ... then I’d cry again. I was finishing those last 100 miles after being off the trail for three weeks and I cherished every single moment of that last week.”

She laughed when she shared her summit photos.

“Of course it stormed that last day. Everyone else has sunny, blue-sky photos that look like postcards, and I have a backdrop of gray nothingness,” Pfeifer said. “But honestly? For all the wet and miserable hiking I did, that was the perfect ending for me.”

Now back in Cedarburg, Pfeifer is pouring her passion into Trail Dog & Company, her local business that leads guided hikes, team building treks and adventure travel. From Nov. 1 to Nov. 6 she is hosting a women’s hiking retreat on part of the Appalachian Trail, but this time with vacation rentals and restaurant dinners.

“We day hike and stay at a nicely appointed vacation rental, no camping required,” Pfeifer said with a laugh. “And I still have room for four more!”

In 2026 she’s guiding a co-ed hiking excursion through the front and back country of Yellowstone, as well as a woman’s retreat along the Superior Hiking Trail.

“I’ll never forget this journey,” she said. “But the best part is bringing what I learned back home, and helping others discover the magic of the open trail.”

Trail Dog & Company offers local hikes, regional trips and custom adventures. Learn more at traildogandcompany.com; on Facebook at Trail Dog and Company; and on Instagram at [@traildogandcompany](https://www.instagram.com/traildogandcompany).