



THIRST:

THE HIKE THAT HUMBLLED ME

HOW I UNDERESTIMATED WATER ON A “SIMPLE” HIKE AT LAKE RED ROCK

STORY BY JERAMIE EGINOIRE, FIRE CAPTAIN/PARAMEDIC

I knew I had made a mistake when I started rationing water on a flat trail at Lake Red Rock—just 45 minutes from my house.

Lake Red Rock, Iowa’s largest lake, isn’t a place most people associate with risk. The trails are accessible. The terrain is manageable. It’s the kind of place you go expecting a straightforward day outdoors.

I expected challenges. I did not expect to run out of something as basic as water.

The goal was to hike around Lake Red Rock in two days with a stop to hammock camp along the way. This wasn’t

supposed to be hard. I had just come off a stretch of hill intervals with a rucksack on a treadmill and convinced myself I could simulate a long hike. I’d finished an Ironman. I’ve spent years in a profession that requires endurance, decision-making under stress, and pushing through discomfort. Hiking around Lake Red Rock felt like a manageable next step—a “baby step,” I told myself, into longer-distance hiking. The intended route would ultimately cover roughly 35 to 40 miles around portions of Lake Red Rock and the surrounding roads and trails.

At first, everything felt controlled. The trail was paved. The route was mapped—at least in theory. But as the miles

stretched on, the plan began to fray. The terrain wasn’t difficult, but the logistics were. Long stretches of road. Limited access. Fewer water options than I’d assumed.

Somewhere after crossing the mile-long bridge, the shift happened. My enthusiasm dropped. My pace slowed. My thoughts turned inward.

“This is stupid,” I remember thinking. “Why am I doing this?” That’s when I realized this wasn’t about endurance anymore. It was about a miscalculation I hadn’t seen coming.

At first, I treated the hike like a controlled effort—something I could manage with experience and willpower. The

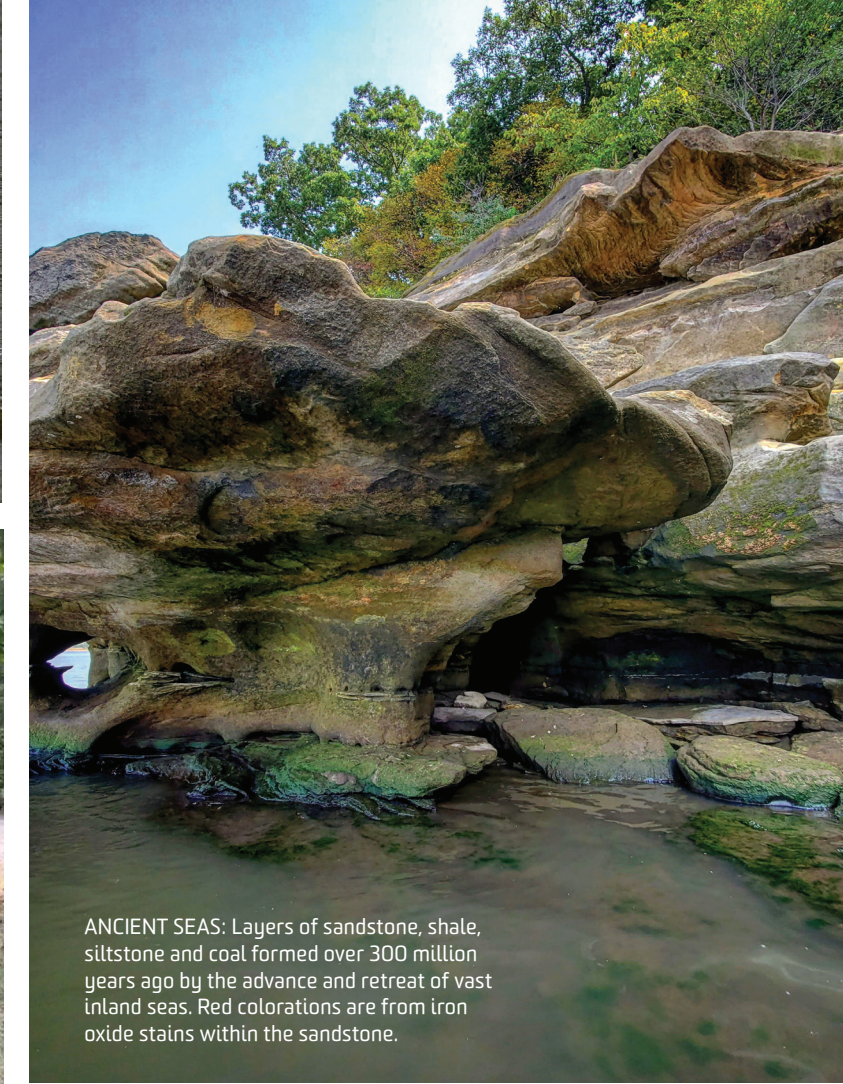
pace felt steady. The distance seemed reasonable. I had my route on GPS. I had time. I’d done harder things before.

But the variables I hadn’t respected started to stack quietly. The trail gave way to long stretches of road. The scenery opened up, but the shade disappeared—something that’s easy to underestimate on exposed stretches around Red Rock. What I assumed would be access points—water, facilities, easy reroutes—were either farther apart than expected or nonexistent. The plan I had built in my head didn’t match what was actually in front of me.

HIKER PHOTO BY JERAMIE EGINOIRE



MOON OVER WATER: A multi-day, 40-mile hike around much of Lake Red Rock didn't go as planned for the author—a fit, full-time Des Moines fire captain and paramedic. The culprit? Dehydration brought on by assumptions about available water along his route and lack of alternatives. By sharing his experiences, he hopes others will take heed of hard lessons.



ANCIENT SEAS: Layers of sandstone, shale, siltstone and coal formed over 300 million years ago by the advance and retreat of vast inland seas. Red colorations are from iron oxide stains within the sandstone.

And I kept moving anyway.

That's the part that's hardest to admit. I recognized early signs that things weren't lining up, but I treated them like inconveniences instead of warnings. I told myself I'd adjust later. I could push through this section and figure it out on the other side.

After crossing the mile-long bridge, something shifted. The excitement wore off, and the reality of the distance settled in. My shoulders ached under the not-the-best-choice-for-hiking pack. My feet started to feel each step instead of absorbing it. The miles stopped feeling like progress and started feeling like something to get through.

"It used to be fun," I remember thinking. "It's not fun right now."

I slowed down to conserve energy, but I hadn't planned well enough to conserve what mattered most. My water supply, which had seemed adequate at the start, was now something I was managing carefully—spacing out sips, doing the math in my head, trying to stretch it farther than it was meant to go.

That's when the mental side started to turn.

"My brain's getting a little combative with me," I remember thinking.

Part of me wanted to stop and reassess. Another part pushed back—reminding me how far I'd already gone,

how close I thought I was to the next checkpoint, how unnecessary it would be to slow down now. And I'm no quitter—right? I shifted into problem-solving mode, but the solutions were getting thinner.

The physical signs followed.

Dry mouth turned into persistent thirst. Fatigue turned into heaviness. My pace dropped again, not by choice this time, but because my body was starting to limit what it could do. I had trained for endurance. I had not prepared for this.

And by the time I fully understood the situation, I was already behind it.

Under the moon—which was not part of the plan—I finally arrived at my hammock camping spot in the primitive camping area of Hickory Ridge Wilderness Area. I had sparse amounts of water left, and in an effort to conserve it for the next day, I didn't use it to prepare my dinner. I climbed into my hammock and spent the night theorizing that dehydration and a lack of calories could be a bad recipe—and by the next morning, the problem was no longer theoretical.

I woke up knowing I was already behind. I had stretched my water farther than I should have the day before, assuming I'd find more along the way. Instead, I was starting the second day with less than I needed and more ground still to cover.

I adjusted what I could. Like dinner the night before, I

skipped breakfast that required water and ate what I had dry. I rationed what was left—small sips at each turn, trying to convince myself it would be enough to get me where I needed to go.

It wasn't.

For a while, I tried to manage it the same way I had managed everything else—mentally. Break the distance into smaller pieces. Focus on the next turn. Stay steady. Keep moving.

But this wasn't a mental block.

The first sign was subtle. A tightening in my calf that didn't release. Then another. Then the realization that it wasn't going away.

Not long after that, my body made the decision for me.

I stopped and threw up what little water and nutrition I had left. My right calf locked into a cramp that made it difficult to stand, let alone continue walking. Every attempt to push through it only made it worse.

I had trained for fatigue. I had trained for discomfort. This was different.

"There's a difference between mental blocks and physical blocks," I remember thinking.

And this was physical.

For the first time on the hike, finishing wasn't the

question anymore. The question was how to get out of the situation safely.

That shift is harder than it sounds.

It's one thing to push through something difficult. It's another to recognize when pushing further makes things worse. Every instinct I had built through prior training and experience told me to keep going—to finish what I started. But none of that mattered if my body couldn't cooperate.

I had miscalculated something basic, and now I was dealing with the consequences.

After grinding out one foot in front of the other for a couple more miles, I made the call.

There wasn't anything left to prove—only a decision to make. I found a way out, got a ride back to where I started, and ended the hike with seven miles still left unfinished.

Back at the trailhead, the disappointment came quickly.

I had set out to complete something and didn't finish it. That part was hard to ignore. I've spent years in environments where finishing—pushing through—was expected, where stopping early felt like failure.

But as the initial frustration wore off, something else settled in.

Clarity.

This wasn't a failure of endurance. It wasn't a lack of

LAKE AT DUSK AND PELICAN COURTESY IOWA TOURISM; HICKORY RIDGE PHOTO BY JERAMIE EGINOIRE ROCK SHORELINE BY MEGAN MCDOWELL

discipline or mental toughness. It was a failure to respect something basic. I assumed experience in one area made me prepared for anything that came my way—and that I was somehow above the needs of the human body.

I had vastly underestimated water.

Not the terrain. Not the distance. I had underestimated the one variable that doesn't negotiate. The one factor that doesn't care how mentally or physically "tough" you think you are, how strong you feel, or how far you've gone.

I knew better.

That's what makes mistakes like this different. They come from believing that experience in one area carries over cleanly into another. From thinking that because something looks simple, it is.

A flat trail in Iowa—just 45 minutes from my house—doesn't demand the same attention as a mountain pass. It doesn't feel like a place where things can go wrong quickly. But that's exactly why it's easy to overlook the details that matter most.

Water isn't optional. It isn't something you manage as you go. It's something you plan for—deliberately and

conservatively—because once you're behind on it, there's no catching up. Looking back, there were several simple things I could have done differently. I could have verified reliable water access points ahead of time instead of assuming they would be available along the route. I could have carried more water into camp, brought a lightweight water filter, or even cached water along portions of the trail before starting. Since then, I've added a LifeStraw water filter to my packing list for longer hikes, you know—since I was surrounded by water. None of those solutions are complicated—but they require respecting the conditions before you're already dealing with the consequences of them.

If there's one thing I'd pass along from that day, it's this: don't let familiarity replace preparation. Even in places we know well—especially in places we know well—it's the simplest variables that matter most.

I didn't finish the hike I set out to do.

But I left with something more useful than completion—a reminder I won't ignore the next time I step out onto a trail in Iowa. 🐻

Assumptions about water availability along his route led to discomfort when his water supplies ran low.

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And by the time I fully understood the situation, I was already behind it."

Things would get worse.

PHOTO LEFT, SUNSET AND BOATING PHOTOS COURTESY IOWA TOURISM. SELFIE, BRIDGE PHOTOS BY JERAMIE EGNOIRE. DAM AND BIKING PHOTOS COURTESY USACE



A complete trail around all of Lake Red Rock does not exist. Undeterred, the author created his own route, hiking using roads and other links to connect to existing trails.

He quickly learned its shortcomings. Stops believed to have drinking water didn't. As sun, heat and miles continued, dehydration began. A mental tug-of-war of "never quit" and "march through pain" versus the realities of thirst ensued. Fortunately, before his body quit, it gave big signals—severe cramps and vomiting. "There's a difference between mental blocks and physical blocks," he recalls. He stopped in time to share his experiences.

