

IOWA'S MODERN-DAY MAPMAKER

Meet an Iowa cartographer who's personally mapping all of Iowa's state parks one hiking trail at a time

Text by James Augustus Baggett



◀ Matt Scott of Ankeny hikes or bikes every route he puts on his maps.

▶ A sampling of the products he has created, including a trail map (printed on fabric and which doubles as a bandana) and a pocket notebook.

At the top of any hiker's must-have list has got to be a map. But not just any map, mind you. A good map, one designed specifically for hikers. Think mapmaking and you probably think of Google and the digital directions we now take for granted. But actual printed maps are not just relics from the past. Specialized printed maps are especially helpful to the hiker and can always be relied on, even without a cellular signal.

It's easy to forget that detailed maps can be painstakingly produced by just one person. From his home in

Ankeny, Matt Scott makes just such detailed maps of the hiking trails in Iowa state parks. Over the past seven years he's hiked—and mapped—more than 250 miles of hiking trails in at least a dozen state parks in Iowa. But not just any maps. His are printed on another hiker's necessity, bandanas. "I was frustrated by the lack of accurate maps for Iowa's hiking trail systems and decided to create my own," says the 56-year-old former illustrator and web developer. "I've been hiking the Sierra mountains, the Mark Twain National Forest, and the Boundary Waters for years and noted all the map resources

available for those areas. I thought Iowa needed some detailed maps for our parks, too."

Like trail-building, trail-mapping is both an art and a science. A science certainly, with its precise measurements, and an art in the beautifully rendered and printed bandanas. Scott launched Iowa Parklands in 2012 as an outlet for his interest in design, fitness, and his love of the out-of-doors. He creates his detailed maps by first hiking or mountain biking the longer trails with a GPS (global positioning system) in hand. He then downloads that data



into a computer and overlays that on top of a digital map. "At this point I have a complete map with all my references and I take that into an illustration application and trace all the elements by hand to create my maps," he says. "The creative aspect comes into play when I start to compose the maps. Assembling the maps on the computer is very satisfying when you see it come together. I also create a logo for each park that plays off the park's history or name."

Maps in trail guidebooks and from local and regional park authorities vary

in quality from excellent to abysmal. Unfortunately, many hiking trail maps poorly represent the trails, display them at an awkward scale, and for many reasons are not hiker-friendly. Scott knows that the more a map is oriented to the traveler afoot, the better it represents the trails and the more useful it is to the hiking enthusiast. And he should know—he's been exploring Iowa's backwoods since he was a child.

"I was born in Des Moines and moved to Ankeny when I was in third grade," says the Iowa State alumnus and father of two grown sons. "I grew up

exploring the wild places on the edges of a growing community. My friends and I played around the old coal mines south of town and built tree forts in the wooded areas along the railroad tracks and caught bugs in the grassy perimeter of farm fields."

Today Scott gets to all four corners of the state—often accompanied by his wife, Patty—by towing an 18-foot camper behind a 2005 Nissan pick-up truck. He brings along a used \$100 Schwinn mountain bike for mapping more extensive multi-use trails. So far, this mapmaker has field-checked



(hiked) and produced 12 detailed maps of Iowa's scenic gems, including Ledges State Park, Maquoketa Caves State Park, Backbone State Park, Lake Macbride State Park, and the Volga River State Recreation Area. Maps are free to download or purchase on bandanas at iowaparklands.com. He even offers a great-looking bandana of the entire state of Iowa featuring all of the state parks. "Which parks I map next is based on popularity and the size of the trail system," he explains.

Of course, he's encountered hazards along the way, including a 50-foot fall

from the Loess Hills equestrian trails in Waubonsie State Park. He's also made unexpected discoveries along the way. "The Mines of Spain State Preserve took my breath away," he says. "The Horseshoe Bluff Trail hike is not like anything I've seen in Iowa. Erosion and mining have created a geological feature that could best be described as Iowa's Grand Canyon." Still on his Iowa state parks bucket list are Stephens State Forest, Loess Hills State Forest, and Whiterock Conservancy.

"I'm able to utilize all my skills and abilities to create information and

products that people enjoy," he says of his new full-time venture. "I've hiked hundreds of miles in buggy, muddy, hot, and humid conditions to acquire the GPS data used to create the maps. It's physically difficult at times, but to say I've hiked every trail in Yellow River State Forest and have the GPS data to prove it is rewarding."

Matt Scott's website, iowaparklands.com, has free downloadable maps, information on Iowa parks, and a blog. You also can buy his bandana maps, stickers, and pocket notebooks.