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## Mother and son take a hike

By Michele St. Martin



Hiking through Minnesota's countryside brought Gwen Ruff and her son Ben Woit closer together. Photo by Countrymann Press.

If you picture the kind of person who would write a book about hiking, what's likely to come to mind is someone who's athletic, maybe downright jock-ish.

Gwen Ruff and [Ben Woit](#), authors of *50 Hikes in Minnesota* (The Countryman Press, 2005) may be the exception that proves the rule. The mother-and-son writing team from Edina deny that they're at all athletic. "We're not backpackers or anything like that," said the 48-year-old Ruff. "Anyone in reasonably good shape can manage these hikes; you don't have to be super athletic. These are short hikes and day hikes."

What they are is passionate about places and their history. Mother and son developed their love of hiking on family trips that began when Ben and his younger siblings were small.

"Up until this year, when I took a new job, we've gone on a joint vacation every summer with my sister and her family," Ruff said. Ruff's sister, Pam Krzmarzick, is a history buff—she's curator of the Brown County museum.

Nature and the environment are both lifelong interests for Ruff, who grew up surrounded by the rich natural beauty of the Long Prairie/Osakis area of west central Minnesota. She also shares her sister's interest in history.

"When I hike, I like to think about the total experience of nature and humans or nonhumans: how humans moved here, the occupations that the land forced them into," Ruff explained. "After I look at the plants, the grasses, I think about why the people lived where they did—who was attracted there, and why they're not there anymore. Where did those people go, what did they do?"

"I want to know where the name of the place came from and the geological history, as well as what attracted people there. The total experience of a place."

The love of place is evident as you read the book, which reels the reader in like a gripping novel with its first sentence: "Banning State Park is named for a town that doesn't exist anymore."

Mother and son share a way of thinking about the environment they hike.

"We've always loved nature and the outdoors," Woit said. "We've never been a real active, athletic family—it's the scenery, the history, the natural aspects that we like. As a family, we've always talked about the history of a place. Even places we've gone 10 times like Fort Snelling and Fort Ridgely—we can walk around the grounds and imagine what it was like before."

## Writing the book

Woit has worked part-time for the past three years as an assistant to a local literary agent. It was the agent who suggested that he and his mom write 50 Hikes in Minnesota, one of a series of 50 Hikes books published by The Countryman Press. He was just 16 when they began work on the book.

The book is divided into sections by geology: coniferous forests, deciduous forests, prairie grasslands, Mississippi River banks and bluffs. Along with the basics, the book features maps, pictures and historical information. A handy at-a-glance chart at the front of the book lists geological and historical features, types of lodging, whether the hike is kid-friendly and other onsite activities.

Mother and son hiked all 50 of the routes during the summers of 2003 and 2004 in order to meet their publication deadline. They researched routes and asked friends for suggestions before selecting the hikes to include in the 240-page paperback.

It was natural for Ruff, an experienced editor and writer, to take the lead. Both Ruff and Woit had input into the selection of hikes. Ruff did much of the research and decided who would write what. She also edited Woit's work.

"He's a good writer," she said. "I edited him mainly for consistency."

Being on the same wavelength about hiking made it easier to work together, Ruff said. "He likes the same things I do: the historical aspects of things. And he's intellectual, and pretty verbal for a teenage boy.

"In some ways, writing is really easy," said Ruff. "Doing all these hikes, concentrated in a short time, was more of a challenge."

"We really piled on the hikes," Woit agreed. "There are lots of trails I want to go back to."

It is possible to miss a few things if you're hiking for the purpose of writing. "We took notes as we hiked," Ruff explained. "I almost fell off a cliff at Vermillion Gorge."

Despite the timetable, working with his mother was a pretty good experience, Woit said. "At times it was, well, not challenging per se, but ... but she was kind of the taskmaster, delegating things to me." He was quick to add, "She's not that way as a mom."

As they hiked and wrote, Ruff felt the two of them getting closer, though she was aware at the same time that soon he would need to pull away. Part of the time they were writing the book, Woit was trying to decide about colleges ([he is now a first-year student at Macalester](#)), and the future became as much a topic of discussion as the past.

"A lot of times we'd end up having really philosophical or political discussions," said Ruff. "If you like the outdoors and like ideas, while you're hiking you can walk through spectacularly beautiful places while talking to somebody important to you about important ideas."

She cherishes one memory in particular. "We were at Frontenac, Ben was trying to think about what to do about college. It was overcast, and then the sun came through the clouds, and there was spectacular, golden light everywhere.

"And everything was clear."

**Here are a few of the authors' best-loved hikes:**

•**Buffalo River State Park.** 14 miles east of Moorhead, this park offers a 3.3-mile trail. The park and adjoining Bluestem Prairie Scientific and Natural Area contains one of Minnesota's largest unspoiled prairie areas.

•**Tettegouche State Park.** This North Shore hike is one of the longer and more challenging ones in the book—it takes about six and a quarter hours to hike the 11.6 mile trail, which has many steep points. The scenery is spectacular, including half a dozen small lakes, and Minnesota's highest waterfall.

•**Split Rock River, Superior Hiking Trail.** One of the state's most popular areas. The trail combines the best of the North Shore's scenic features in one loop. This 5-mile hike takes about three and a half hours.