

Jeff Around Town – October 7th, 2025

Jeff: This is Jeff Around Town and I have a confession to make. Actually, I have two confessions. First, I need to tell you that I love going for walks and even more so I adore hiking.

In these parts I prefer Hitchcock Nature Center just north of Crescent, Iowa. I especially love the undulating hills and how you can gaze upon fields but also immerse yourself in deep forests. Sometimes if the light is hitting just right, I might squint and imagine I'm back living in the Alps of Austria. And granted, I had to squint pretty hard but when you're living in the Midwest and missing the Alps, well, you do what you can.

Here's confession number one. When I walk or hike, I always wear earbuds. Always. Like always, always. Sometimes I listen to music but more often than not I'm listening to something French related, you know, to improve my French. It might be a French learning app or a French learning podcast. Being out in nature, especially when I'm not around anyone, allows me to also practice speaking my French out loud to no one in particular. Well, except for maybe the wildlife.

I can't help but imagine a Gary Larson Farside cartoon. You know, a couple of deer hiding behind some trees making snarky comments about the French snob wandering through their beloved forest. But I digress.

Recently on one of those glorious summer-like autumn afternoons I made my way to Hitchcock. And this time, however, I told myself I wasn't going to plug in. I was going to do what maybe most humans prefer to do when spending time in nature. You know, to actually spend time in nature. Not just visually but to hear the birds chirping, the wind in the trees, the gravel crunching beneath my hiking shoes and trekking poles. I started out on Badger Trail, my favorite for all the scenic views, and then made my way toward a newly developed area at the Nature Center.

I'd been hiking for a few hours and my water was running out so I turned back to head to the lodge. I'd told myself that I'd make a stop at the top of a hill on Badger Trail where there's a bench. If you've been to Hitchcock and know that trail, then you know the spot. It sits on a lovely overlook. Maybe the best view at the center. Except as I began to climb the hill toward the bench, I could hear two loud voices. I continued climbing and as the voices grew louder I realized I was hearing someone talking on their phone and their phone was on speaker.

Here comes confession number two. I was annoyed. More than annoyed. Here I was in nature wanting to fully embrace the sights and sounds of a glorious place on a glorious day and now I was being subjected to a stranger's conversation with another stranger.

As I reached the top of the hill I could see an older gentleman sitting on the bench and talking on his mobile device. I mean I guess I could have sat next to him but awkward. So of course I kept going. As I hiked past, we exchanged nods and I forced a smile and continued on my way toward the lodge.

It had not been my attention to eavesdrop but when the only sound one hears is a very loud conversation there's not much you can do about it. He was telling the other person how stunning the view was. On that we could agree. Just before I was out of earshot that's when I

heard the man on the bench tell the other person that yes his son lives in town but they don't speak very much. It broke my heart.

I don't know this person. I don't know their story but it was a good kick in the pants for me. A reminder that you never know what someone else is going through. What they're dealing with. You know that impatient person in the checkout line of the grocery store or maybe your favorite barista just isn't as chipper as they usually are.

Back on the trail I immediately regretted my private annoyance toward the stranger on the bench. I immediately regretted not giving him a wider smile.

By the way, Hitchcock, if you haven't been, is lovely and they even have an ADA compliant boardwalk.

If you're going through something right now dealing with some problem just know that there are those who do care and if I should ever run into you, I'll do my best to give you a warm smile. This is Jeff Around Town.