

ISTHMUS

NEWS **OPINION** **FOOD & DRINK** **ARTS** **CALENDAR** **ABOUT** **STORE**
SUPPORT ISTHMUS

Getting away from it all

Dane County's remotest place sometimes gets a little crowded

BY **LIZ MERFELD** NOVEMBER 24, 2015 1:30 AM



If you could pick one place in Dane County to get away, off the grid, far from the hum of any highway or city glow,

where would you go? To the middle of some vast, forgotten field in Primrose or a nameless Mazomanie forest?

Turns out, you don't even have to fill up your gas tank to get to the remotest spot in the county. Florida-based conservation biologists Rebecca and Ryan Means would not be surprised. They are concerned, like many, that natural spaces are being gobbled up by roadways. "The U.S. road network fills the national landscape so fully that it is no longer possible to be more than 5 miles from a road within the vast majority of the conterminous 48 United States," [according to their website](#), Remote Footprints.

So the couple set out to find and travel to the wildest patch in each state to document the "ecological and physical conditions" in order "to increase nationwide awareness about the importance of preserving our remaining roadless wildlands — forever."

They call it Project Remote, and all across the country, folks like me are imitating their methods for defining and finding "remote" locales, curious about more close-to-home frontiers.

The project's quantitative definition of remoteness is the point that is the farthest straight-line distance from a road or town, which they calculate using Geographical Information Systems (GIS).

In September the scientists, with daughter Skyla in tow, visited Wisconsin's most outlying point — 17.2 miles from the nearest road, on the far northern tip of Outer Island, the northernmost and easternmost island of the Apostle Island Archipelago in Lake Superior.

U.S. Coast Guard Capt. Jeff Nourse, who runs Nourse Charters and has been navigating these waters for nearly

four decades, gave them a ride there. He wasn't all that surprised when they contacted him, given how secluded the area is.

"When the park was created," he says, of the lakeshore becoming a state-protected area in 1970, "it kept people from privatizing the island."

"I fired up the GPS and cruised the shoreline," Nourse says. After about 90 minutes, traveling between 25 and 29 mph, "the northeast wind kicked up, but we found the spot," a rock outcropping with white waves slapping and slipping over it.

"It's a wondrous place," Nourse says, home to bears, foxes, geese, sandhill cranes and mergansers, skirted by clear, cold water filled with lake trout and salmon. "The park kind of speaks for itself. It just happens to be my backyard and happens to have a lot of history."

It also happens to have cell phone reception, the Means were disappointed to note. "Why can you go to the remotest spot and get cell service when I can't even get it at my house?" Nourse quips. They stayed for about 45 minutes, taking photos and recording observations.

I began my journey to locate Dane County's remotest location by creating a free trial account on ArcGIS.com, which offers a suite of mapping apps I had no idea how to use. I wanted to replicate the Means' calculation by using the Euclidean Distance tool. But to do that, I learned, I would need access to ArcGIS Desktop and the Spatial Analyst Extension. And possibly a few university prerequisites.

To my great relief, when I reached out to the Wisconsin State Cartographers Office for support, program specialist Codie See viewed my query as an exciting opportunity to "engage some of our student lab in service learning."

In two days he shared **their analysis** of the single most remote square meter within Dane County. The result was this spot: 43°12'40.5"N 89°07'00.4"W (aka 89.116771 43.211244 decimal degrees). "Interesting and surprising, I think!" Codie wrote in an email.

I clicked on the coordinates. I could see East Towne Mall on my screen. The pin was dropped in a green shape on the map

labeled Deansville State Wildlife Area, a 14-mile jaunt from said shopping mall.

See pointed out that their analysis “uses roads and bike paths as a basis” for remoteness and that they removed “hydro” — otherwise my destination would have been the middle of Lake Mendota.

On a recent Saturday morning I drove there, my dog Marshall riding shotgun. The GPS routed us via I-94 to Highway N. I passed the Oaks Golf Course in Cottage Grove and followed County Highway TT until it turned into County Road TT. Rounding a corner at a dairy farm, the paved road abruptly becomes gravel.

Streams on either side of me, choked with duckweed, nearly reached up and touched my wheels. I felt like I was scouting locations for *The Walking Dead*. There was one truck ahead.

“Drive 1.5 miles,” Siri instructed, “then prepare to park and walk 350 feet.” I parked in a gravel lot used to access the wildlife area and I rolled down my car window.

“Pop-pop-pop!” I spied a speck of blaze orange moving toward my square meter. I looked at my outfit — blue jeans and black winter coat. I looked at my dog, the world’s most bang!-boom!-blast!-weary pup.

We sat and listened. A few cars whirred by. Another bullet cracked the air. I peered into the brush, gauging my mood. My tolerance for gunfire, which on a scale of 1-10 typically hovers around 0.5, was not at its peak.

A blue jay complained in the distance. Black-capped chickadees played musical chairs with tree branches, singing, *ti-ti-ti-fee-bee*. A helicopter thumped overhead.

Conflicted, I rolled up the window and pulled away, 350 feet shy of the most isolated speck of Dane County. On this day, Dane County's remote wilderness was just a little too crowded for me.

[NEWS](#) [OPINION](#) [FOOD & DRINK](#) [ARTS](#) [CALENDAR](#) [ABOUT](#) [STORE](#)

[SUPPORT ISTHMUS](#)

[FACEBOOK](#) [TWITTER](#) [YOUTUBE](#) [SOUNDCLOUD](#) [INSTAGRAM](#) [RSS](#)

Isthmus is © 2024 Isthmus Community Media, Inc. Madison, WI USA All rights reserved.

[ABOUT ISTHMUS](#) [PRIVACY POLICY](#)

BUILT WITH METRO PUBLISHER™