

# Sterling Heights teen earns all 137 Scout badges

Francis X. Donnelly, The Detroit News Published 11:52 p.m. ET Feb. 12, 2017 | Updated 12:59 p.m. ET Feb. 13, 2017



(Photo: Max Ortiz / The Detroit News)

*Sterling Heights* — Many Boy Scouts struggle just to earn a few merit badges. Eagle Scouts flaunt 21.

Eagle Scout Ian McKinnon of Sterling Heights passed 21 a long, long time ago.

McKinnon, 16, recently received his 137th merit badge. That's every one the Scouts offer. Actually it's more than they offer. One of his badges, computers, was discontinued in 2014.

So how does he feel after such a Herculean feat?

Relieved.

"It was a lot of hard work," he said. "Just having a break from that is nice."

He is one of just eight Scouts in Michigan (332 nationally) who have earned every merit badge in the 106-year history of the Scouts.

They range from useful (first aid) to strenuous (personal fitness) to expensive (scuba diving, \$350 for lesson alone) to obscure (nuclear science) to inspiring (citizenship in the community).

They took him from Haliburton, Ontario, to Islamorada, Florida. He drove a motorboat, sailed a boat, built a robot from Legos and constructed a model house from balsa wood and papier-mâché.

"It's a fantastic accomplishment," said Ed van Amstel, one of his former Scoutmasters at Troop 156. "It takes a special, unique individual with a committed drive."

Some badges were quick: sculpture took two hours. Others were not so quick: bugling took repeated lessons over several months.

The vexatious bugling badge, created in 1911, is the bugbear of many a Scout. It didn't help that the only musical instrument Ian ever played was the harmonica when he was younger.

On the other hand, dog care was a lot of fun, he said. It allowed him to work with his two dachshunds, Dakota and Tinker Bell.

As he talked about the dogs, they interrupted to bark something, perhaps about how much they like his bugle playing.

"I enjoyed working with my dogs," he said.

Ian, the youngest and only boy among five children, is a junior at the Utica Academy of International Studies in Sterling Heights.

He has a 4.13 GPA and wants to go to college to pursue a career in scientific research, maybe in genetics or marine biology.

He began reading at 3 and was perusing books by 5, said his dad, Richard. When his kindergarten teacher took out a reader with three-word sentences, Ian just scoffed.

"Since he was a little kid, he's been like this," said Richard. "He's won award after award after award."

The overachiever excels even while relaxing. At school, he plays in the table tennis and ultimate Frisbee clubs, allowing he's pretty good at both sports.



Ian Mckinnon, 16, of Sterling Heights, shows (from left) the god and church medal, eagle scout medal, and the Chief Pontiac trial medal. (Photo: Max Ortiz)

His drive came early. As a Cub Scout, he received every pin and belt loop that was available.

Attending a ceremony where a family friend received his Eagle Scout medal, Ian was struck by all the merit badges on the friend's sash. Ian decided that, when he joined the Boy Scouts, he would earn as many badges as possible.

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He asked his dad whether it might be possible to get them all. His dad didn't have a doubt.

"Many people laughed, but we knew he would do it," said Richard.

To receive a merit badge, a Scout has to learn enough about a subject to answer questions about it and perform tasks in it. The work must be overseen by an expert in that field.

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For the mining in society badge, it took “forever” to find an expert in Michigan, said Richard. When they did, the expert told them Ian was the first Boy Scout who ever contacted him.

To do that 137 times requires one to, as the Scout Oath says, stay physically strong, mentally awake and morally straight.

For six years, Ian chipped away at it, stealing away a few hours a week, more during the summertime. His parents helped out with the expenses and by ferrying him wherever he needed to go.

“I got a lot of support from my parents, especially my dad, who would take me all over the place,” he said.

Ian paid some of his expenses by raising money through troop projects, selling fertilizer and bird seed during the summer and road salt in the winter.

Only 6 percent of Scouts become Eagle Scouts, which require 21 specific merit badges. Ian, who joined the Boy Scouts when he was 10, received the 21 badges, among dozens of others, in two years.

Ever with the quick start, he doubted he could accomplish his goal of earning every merit badge. There were just so many.

Then, when he reached high school, he became interested in other things, including girls, he said.

Despite it all, he persevered and gradually received all 136 badges plus one.

“It feels good to say I got all of them,” he said.

One of his merit badges has already been useful.

He was skiing with the troop last month when he fell and twisted his knee. Thanks to his first aid badge, he knew what to do, elevating his leg and applying ice to his knee.

He especially loved the merit badges that put him on the water, like water skiing, small-boat sailing and whitewater rafting.

“I’ve never done those before. It allowed me to experience something brand new,” he said.



Ian Mckinnon gives thanks to Troop 156 for the 137 badges. (Photo: Max Ortiz)

Not so enjoyable was the American labor merit badge, which forced him to sit through a dry, six-hour workshop and lecture by the UAW.

All the badges wouldn't fit on a regular Scout sash so his aunt added material to it. The round patches are four across, instead of the normal three, and fill the front and back of the sash.

But Ian doesn't like to wear it.

His dad has to push him to bring the sash to meetings and get-togethers, and then Ian will "forgetfully" leave it in the car, said Richard.

Ian doesn't like to show up the other Scouts, who are proudly wearing their five or 10 merit badges.

The other Scouts look upon Ian as a hero.

"The troop is proud of him. Everyone is proud of him," said Richard.

Sometime this year the Boy Scouts will offer a new merit badge for exploring.

Will Ian go for it? Do Boy Scouts camp in the woods?

"I'm always open to a new experience, a new way to challenge myself," he said. "One or two more shouldn't be that big of a deal."

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