



# Walking with Bateman

By Ned Morgan

“I want to talk about the caves we’re not going into,” says Robert Bateman, ruefully. We’re standing on the cedar-shaded top of Mount Nemo, a safe distance from the precipice but surrounded by deeply honeycombed Escarpment topography. Bateman continues: “So these are fissure caves...”

As the famed wildlife painter and conservationist gives a quick lesson on Nemo’s cliff ecosystem to a group of high school students plus adult hangers-on, his enthusiasm suggests he’d prefer all of us crawling through damp crevices for a closer look. But the Burlington high school that bears his name has forbidden its students – off school this morning for an educational hike led by Bateman – to climb into any caves. The legal implications of caving on a school day are even more slippery and jagged than the rock itself.

Mount Nemo is a resonant locale for Robert Bateman. He and his family lived just a few minutes’ drive from here, and he memorialized the view from his studio in his Canada Geese Over the Escarpment in 1985. And at Nemo fifty years ago this spring, Bateman began the now-legendary First Hike of the fledgling Bruce Trail, accompanied by his friend Ray Lowes and others.

In 1962, Bateman taught at Burlington’s Nelson High School and was unknown as a painter. Today, an Officer of the Order of Canada and one

of our most internationally famous and bestselling painters, he is leading the students and a film crew from a local television station on a short hike around Nemo, offering casual mini-lectures on forests, animals, the Escarpment, and conservation. It might be subject matter that the students have heard before, but when Bateman peppers it with comically tinged reminiscences and references to popular films and Xbox, his audience is rapt.

It is not a tough crowd, though – the students are from the Bateman Environmental Action Team (B.E.A.T.), a student-run organization at Bateman Secondary School that undertakes initiatives in school and in the community including green bin and recycling drives, planting vegetable gardens and trees, and enviro-awareness campaigns.

During the walk to the cliffs, Bateman tells the students about an early inspiration for his own awareness campaign:

the international Get to Know Your Wild Neighbors program. "I used to teach flower children, way back in ancient times, before you were born. They were big nature appreciators and did a lot of hiking on the Bruce Trail. I remember one time they came back from spending a weekend up on the Peninsula on the Bruce Trail and they said: 'You should've been with us, sir! We were camping under this beautiful big tree and when the sun came up the sun was shining through the branches and, oh, wow, it was...wow!' So I said: 'What kind of tree was it?' The flower child replied: 'Oh, man, don't snow me with names!'" Bateman calls this the "Oh, Wow!" school of nature appreciation – which is better than nothing, he adds. "But if they had been able to tell me it was, say, a white pine, then we could share the knowledge. And if we don't know the names of things, how are we going to protect biodiversity?"

As we walk, I talk to several of the Grade 11 students including two girls named Preet and Nupur. They strike me as far from your average suburban teenagers. They were brought up vegetarian and continue to be. Although they adhere to natural herbal medicine, they both plan to go to medical school. I ask them why the environment is a central theme in their lives. Nupur: "Once we get onto the topic we can really rant on about it. Our generation understands that it's up to us to make a difference... the previous generation is supposed to outlive us! That's because kids aren't getting out as much, aren't out in nature as much."

I express some doubt that the generation preceding could outlive them, but the girls insist it will be so – and don't seem too put out by this knowledge. They go on to point out the connection between their generation's sedentary lifestyle and the increase in diabetes and obesity. Preet: "Everyone knows about it, everyone's exposed to it because of the media. But too many people want to put it away and ignore it."

I ask them if they feel their fellow students – in particular, those who aren't involved in B.E.A.T. – understand the problems. Nupur: "We try to get the

word out to them but some of them don't believe it, they're oblivious to the facts. But we know lots of other people who are involved [in environmental initiatives] at other schools."

In the '80s when I was in high school, nothing like B.E.A.T. existed. So in spite of Preet and Nupur's predictions about their generation's shortened life spans, and after talking with other students and overhearing snippets of conversation, I'm heartened by the level of awareness and motivation (especially when I compare them with myself or my friends at that age).

After Bateman bemoans the ban on caving, he descends into a suitably shallow fissure with the students for a group photo. As they mug for the camera, he tells them to come back here on their own time and explore, hinting that there's a lot more nature to be seen here, especially for the more intrepid explorer. I know that his words are not lost on this crowd. •

