

Land Stewardship

Conserving The Land We Love

With 50 years behind us, now is the perfect time to reflect on the reasons why the Bruce Trail has been essential to the protection of the Niagara Escarpment. From its beginnings as a mere gleam in the eyes of our founders, to the status of the Bruce Trail as Canada's longest footpath and the BTC as one of the largest land trusts in Ontario, we have forged a well-marked path of preservation and conservation that is internationally recognizable. The backbone of this effort is the securement of land along the Niagara Escarpment. Since the BTC began protecting land in 1974 we've been responsible for the protection of almost 10,000 acres of Escarpment land, 8,500 acres of which is still directly under our care. And although every acre protected is a cause for celebration, our responsibility as a conservation organization does not simply stop once land has been acquired and protected. This is where the Land Stewardship program enters the picture.

As the BTC's roster of preserved properties grew to over 60 by the mid 1990s, it became increasingly apparent that the organization needed a dedicated program to ensure that they were managed in a way that promoted the ecological

Almost 200 Volunteers give their time and talent to care for more than 8,600 acres of Niagara Escarpment Land, making the BTC's Land Stewardship Program the largest and most comprehensive program we know of in Ontario. *Our Volunteers are the life force of the program!*

integrity of the Niagara Escarpment. Led by dedicated BTC volunteer Jim McDonald, the Land Stewardship program sought to define what it meant to 'manage' a property in a way that was consistent with the vision of the BTC. At present just shy of 200 volunteers work with the Land Stewardship program, contributing countless hours to the protection of properties that are under the care of the BTC.

Preservation is the act of making land or some other ecosystem legally unavailable to development or exploitation by builders and other individuals.

At the BTC, Preservation of the Niagara Escarpment is carried out under our Land Securement Program.

Conservation is an active involvement in sustaining, maintaining and improving an ecosystem.

At the BTC, Conservation of the Niagara Escarpment is carried out under our Land Stewardship Program.

The base upon which the program rests is the Land Steward: a volunteer that is assigned to care for a specific BTC managed property. Technically this care boils down to two formal visits a year; however this is often just the starting



BTC staff ecologists preparing a detailed Ecological Inventory

point for many who spend a great deal of time monitoring and initiating projects on their assigned properties. Land Stewards are the 'soldiers' on the ground, so to speak. They are often referred to as the 'eyes and ears' of the BTC, ensuring that every property is safe from a host of problems that could jeopardize



Photo: Brian Popeliter

Tree planting at Humber Heights



Photo: Cary Hall

ardize the ecological integrity of their property, and they work on projects geared towards the ecological betterment of the property.

If we take a step back from our Land Stewards, we're met with our Land Stewardship Directors. These BTC volunteers oversee and coordinate all Land Stewardship efforts within each of the 9 Bruce Trail sections. Land Stewardship Directors are the glue that keeps the Land Stewardship program running, helping with the coordination of projects, ensuring that every property is properly cared for and liaising with the BTC head office to come up with strategies for the proper care of all BTC managed properties. If the Land Stewards could be seen as soldiers, Land Stewardship Directors would fit the ranks of a General. With the bigger pic-

ture in their view, they provide any needed support to Land Stewards and work strategically to respond to any immediate concerns or devise and implement projects that would work towards the environmental protection of BTC managed land.

Helping with these decisions are two dedicated Land Stewardship staff and the Land Stewardship Committee Chair, who heads a Committee made up of all Land Stewardship Directors, Land Stewardship staff, a representative of the BTC Environment Committee and a representative of the Ontario Heritage Trust.

With properties ranging from Niagara to Tobermory the challenges associated with managing this significant amount of land are constantly changing and evolving. Issues that may affect a property in the Niagara section may have very

little impact on those in the Peninsula section. A example of this would the prevalence of invasive species. As one can imagine, the densely populated southern portions of the Trail see an abundance of species that are considered invasive. An invasive species is classified as a non-native species whose introduction or spread negatively impacts biodiversity, the economy and/or society, including human health. In the southern sections of the Bruce Trail some of the main offenders are Common Buckthorn, Garlic Mustard and Dog-strangling Vine. As we move farther up the Trail however, the frequency of these species decreases, much to the relief of conscientious hikers and concerned ecologists alike. The BTC has been working to catalogue and control invasive species on our properties since 2009. With all

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BTC managed properties in the lower three Club sections (Niagara, Iroquoia and Toronto) now completely surveyed, control efforts are being strategized and implemented in an effort to keep the most pervasive of invasives at bay.

Along with addressing the ongoing threat of invasive species the Land Stewardship program has a host of other projects on the go. Of prime importance is the creation of habitat to benefit the various species that exist on BTC protected land. Land Stewards have been

instrumental in installing a number of bird boxes to provide a nesting location for species that include the Eastern Bluebird, Screech Owl, Tufted Titmouse, Wood Duck and the endangered Prothonotary Warbler. The BTC is also working with farmers that use agricultural portions of our land to ensure that all requirements are met to ensure that grass nesting birds, particularly Species at Risk such as the Bobolink and Eastern Meadowlark, have safe habitat in which to breed in the spring.

To date 873 occurrences of 62 different rare species have been documented on land stewarded by the BTC, including Jefferson Salamander, Round-Leaved Ragwort, Eastern Massasauga Rattlesnake, and Butternut Trees, to name a few.



Bluebird boxes at Smokey Hollow – Iroquoia

Our staff ecologists are also thick in the mix, constantly working on ways to make sure that all environmental concerns on BTC properties are addressed. With the core of their duties related to the writing of management plans for each property, they still find plenty of time to work on other important Land Stewardship initiatives. These include long-term monitoring projects such as breeding bird surveys and locating rare species that exist on BTC managed land. To date 873 occurrences of 62 different rare species have been documented; a number that will continue to grow as more land is protected along the unique Bruce Trail Conservation Corridor. Other initiatives include forest management efforts on the coniferous plantations on BTC land in an effort to restore the indigenous tree canopy. This is an important part of ensuring biodiversity along the Escarpment, as are various other ecological restoration projects, such as tree plantings and native meadow restoration.

With the whole Land Stewardship machine happily whirring away it's hard to imagine the time when the program was in its infancy. Like the Bruce Trail itself, the Land Stewardship program began as a vision and blossomed into something that is a critical element in the protection of the Niagara Escarpment. And although the day when the entire Bruce Trail corridor is secure seems far on the horizon, it remains inevitable. When that happens the BTC's Land Stewardship program will be there to ensure it is in the best possible hands. •

Horizon Utilities Volunteer tree planting
at Smokey Hollow property

