



Explorers' Haven

The Sydenham
Section of the
Bruce Trail

By Ned Morgan

The Sydenham Club occupies a primary place in BTC history. It was one of the first to incorporate, in 1962 – its allotted section completed by volunteers in under a year. It was the Cub that gave forward momentum to the fledgling effort to establish the Trail from Niagara to Tobermory in the early 1960s. --->

A Trail founder and recent recipient of the Order of Canada, Dr. Philip Gosling was then working as a realtor and appraiser. When an Atkinson Foundation grant paid expenses for Gosling to take a year off and become the first Trail Director in 1962, he travelled up and down the length of the Escarpment, surveying the route, finding volunteers to run the Clubs, securing landowner permission, building trail, and sending reports back to the Bruce Trail Committee. "I was able to pick people who would take this thing and run with it," said Gosling when I interviewed him in 2012. "I told them, 'We're just asking you to build one mile at a time, from A to B.' And in less than a year, the 60 miles assigned to the Sydenham section was completed."

Clearly, this is a reflection of the drive and dedication of the volunteers Gosling mustered in the Owen Sound region – among them the renowned forester and conservationist Malcolm "Mac" Kirk and his wife Joan, then living in a red brick house on 2nd Avenue West with their three children. The Kirks were an ardent Bruce Trail family. As active members in the Club's early days, Joan Kirk remembers, "we had a section from Blantyre over to Walters Falls. Every spring and fall Mac would get all of us, including the three kids, cleaning up." Mac was then Resources Manager for the North Grey & Sauble Valley Conservation Authority. "We knew Phil Gosling very well," says Joan. "He used to come to our house all the time and I kept him going with food."

Mac Kirk was in the midst of his legendary land conservation spree that saw the permanent protection of Spirit Rock, Bruce's Caves, Inglis Falls, and other areas. Kirk immediately recognized the value of partnering with the Trail and for the next several decades he continued to amass land, much to the delight of con-

servationists and nature lovers, and to the chagrin of real estate developers.

The city of Owen Sound is particularly blessed with public land and the Bruce Trail weaves through these spaces in and around the city allowing easy access to Niagara Escarpment riches including the pre-glacial Sydenham River gorge and the dramatic talus slopes of The Palisades.

"In Owen Sound, we're fortunate to have the Trail on so much public land all around the city," says Sydenham Club President Bob Knapp. "It means the Trail doesn't get stuck on roads." I sat down with Knapp in June and talked about recent land acquisitions – including the 200-acre Silent Valley Nature Reserve – and his abiding interest in the old-growth trees that dot the trail. The Sydenham section has suffered extensive and even destructive logging over the last 150-odd years, but protected areas such as The Glen and Silent Valley now serve as examples of forest, wetland and habitat reclamation.

In 1970 Bob Knapp and his wife Marie moved to Owen Sound and have been involved in the Sydenham Club ever since. Another ardent Bruce Trail family like the Kirks, in 1982 the Knapps hiked End to End with their eight-year-old son. In recent years, Bob Knapp has taken to identifying and measuring old trees along the Sydenham section, including sugar maples, basswood, beech, butternut, and eastern white cedar. "I keep finding old cedar trees," he says, showing me a photo of one with woodpecker damage. "This pileated woodpecker has gone right into the middle because that's where the insects are. And the reason you can find so many big cedar trees is that loggers knew they would be hollow and didn't cut them."

With infectious enthusiasm Bob and Marie hunt down these rare giants along Sydenham's 168-km stretch and sometimes in "secret" spots a short walk off-trail.

In 2007 the Club added 69 kilometres of trail known as the Bayview Extension, which takes hikers deep into the Bayview Escarpment Nature Reserve, a mini-wilderness of ancient-cedar-topped Escarpment cliffs and maple forests paved with wildflowers and ferns. "This was the biggest extension in the history of the Trail," says Bob Knapp,



Joan Kirk in front of an Eastern White Cedar, Marshall Woods 1966

Photo: Mac Kirk

"and Trail Director Ron Savage was instrumental in building it."

Along with a superabundance of old-growth trees and rare ferns, the Sydenham Club section also boasts a surplus of walkable crevices where hikers can view Escarpment features up close. "Ron has put the trail through a lot of crevices, which is quite unique," says Bob. "You can walk through and get a good look at all the fossils." You can find one of these fossil-lined crevices on the Frank Holley Side Trail, with plenty of eye-level views of honeycomb, syringospora, halysite and horn corals, as well as specimens of ancient marine animals.

There is much to explore along the Sydenham Section, and the book *Looping Through Sydenham* serves as an excellent guide.

In a recent club newsletter, Ron Savage described an exploration that is not in the book. "With the use of the ladder and rope we descended into this huge gap in the Escarpment," he writes. "The crevice descended on three different paths ending in three unique caves... The north crevice led under a huge wedged shaped boulder and continued down to a cave which continued on for several meters before starting back up and ending at a jumble of fallen rocks. The one to the east continued to drop downwards seemingly ending at a sudden drop. By carefully balancing ourselves along that ledge we continued another 10 meters farther into the cave. Still balancing on the ledge we rounded a bend in the cave and found a way to further continue our descent. At last we were on the floor of the cave..." The club would not recommend this sort of exploration, but it nevertheless encapsulates the youthful spirit of discovery that should serve as inspiration to all. •



Hiking in Sydenham

Photo: Ethan Meleg