

Steal This Trail

Welcome!

This is a book about exploring some amazing, near magical places. And yet they are only 90 minutes northwest of the **Greater Toronto Area**. **South Grey County** may be the best kept secret in **Ontario**. This neighbourhood is considered so special that its geological backbone – the **Niagara Escarpment** – has been designated by the **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization**, as a unique environment and named a world biosphere reserve.

The Niagara Escarpment is a 725 kilometre stretch of limestone running right through our neighbourhood and comprising cliff faces, dark caves and lofty lookouts. In the **Beaver Valley**, one limestone cliff on the Escarpment, known as **Old Baldy** or the **Kimberley Rock**, is a favourite panoramic lookout.

This is a region of secret, rushing waterfalls of rare and delicate orchids, of giant elms trees, of tiny 1,000-year-old cedars and of forest floors carpeted in spring with Trilliums, wild flowers and ferns.

These amazing adventures are all self-guided. They include public trails, provincial lands, conservation areas, county forests – and the granddaddy of all hiking trails, the **Bruce Trail**, the world's longest and oldest foot path. Each chapter provides you with driving directions or a GPS location, some flora and fauna facts, suggested high points – and the rest is up to you!

These adventures are designed for walkers/hikers and cyclists of all ages to enjoy without needing any special equipment or training. I've indicated the level of difficulty for each adventure and whether it is suitable for young children or for winter adventures, such as snowshoeing or skiing. For your pleasure and safety, most of the trail adventures in this book do not permit motorized vehicles, such as ATVs, dirt bikes and snowmobiles. And, as a bonus, all of these adventures free! (Or very low cost, for example the **Sulphur Spring Conservation Area** has a \$5 per car fee).

Many excellent food retailers, restaurants, bakeries, bistros and general stores dot this rural landscape and I refer you to theFlesherton.ca for specific details on seasonal events, eateries and accommodations.

If you enjoy this book, please be in touch to let us know; what you specifically liked and if you have any suggestions for future books or revisions to this one. The publisher's contact information is available at the end of this book.

Chapter 3. The Flesherton Hills

GPS Coordinates: Latitude: 44.26374 °North /Longitude -80.54554°West. Terrain: easy. Many water features; bikes okay; snowshoes and skis in winter but trails are not groomed in winter, so prepare to break trail on your skis.

One of two distinct hiking area right in the Village, the Flesherton Hills is a 100 acre tract of meadows, abandoned apple orchard, ponds, forest and trails behind **École Grey Highlands Secondary School (GHSS)** and **École Macphail Memorial Elementary School** and accessible to the public.

Use the entrance to the Hills at the west end of the parking lot at École Macphail Elementary (on Campbell Street, 2nd street south of the lights off Highway 10), if you'd like to take a look at the trail guide posted there (it's also on theFlesherton.ca). The guide will give you the basic "lay of

the land.” None of the trails are blazed but they are well-trod and you are often within sight of one or the other school, so it would be difficult to get lost; you can simply wander and explore. The area is used for outdoor studies and has an extensive network of trails. It is maintained by the **Environmental Studies Program (ESP)** at GHSS.

John Burton is the head of the ESP program, which in its 25 years has graduated almost 1000 students. Thousands more primary school kids from around the school district have enjoyed the day program delivered by these high school students, one that includes hiking in the forest, visiting frogs and tadpoles at the ponds and roasting hotdogs over an open fire. The GHSS ESP program is the only one of its kind in the **Bluewater District School Board** and is the model for a handful of other similar programs in the province.

The ESP students over the years have planted thousands of trees in the property. Burton recalls one **Earth Day** in the early nineties, when hundreds of trees were planted, including White Pine, White Spruce, some Red Pine and Tamarack. “They’re two storeys high now,” he says. And in 1994, through a grant from **Tree Plan Canada**, the ESP students purchased and planted 50,000 trees from the **Saugeen Valley Conservation Authority**. These included White Pine, White Spruce, Eastern White Cedar, Tamaracks some hardwoods, Dogwood and Poplar. Many of them were planted behind the ball diamond at the back of the GHSS as a buffer between the playing fields and the Flesherton Hills environment.

I like to make a loop – on foot or on my mountain bike – from Macphail school, through the apples, along the meadow and to the back of the site past the beaver pond. There, across a newly replaced bridge, is a short, but lovely forest loop through hardwood such as Maple, Beech, and Basswood that brings you back around to the bridge.

In the spring, White and Red Trilliums and Wild Leeks (Ramps) abound in the forest, the abandoned orchard Apples blossom and abundant wild flowers such as Trout Lilly and Violets bloom. There are some rare **Rock Elm** trees in the small gully just north of the picnic pavilion and in summer there are brambly Wild Roses, and pale blue Chicory and sprightly Daisies line the trails, along with the occasional garter snake or leopard frog!

In the fall, the colours are spectacular in the Flesherton Hills. Vivid orange, gold and red maple trees reflect in the still ponds. The fields are awash in colour also – as many varieties of Wild Asters bloom in alabaster white, mauve and darker purple.

Ponds abound around every turn in the trail – some all year around and some only in the spring. Cattail-edged ponds harbour a host of aquatic wildlife and are visited by Red-Winged Blackbirds, Canada Geese, Mallards, Mergansers and other ducks. The ponds at the rear of the property are home to some busy beavers and I have seen porcupine just off the trails during the day. (There are raccoons and skunks around, but they are mostly nocturnal).

Deer are plentiful at almost any time of the year. They especially like to travel in the stretch of forest alongside the east-west trail that takes one out of the Hills and toward the high school playing fields. One day in the fall, as I rode my mountain bike along that trail a deer leapt in front of me. I braked and we both momentarily held that “caught in the headlights” expression. Then before I could even utter a sound, the deer leapt back into the thick undergrowth. It disappeared as silently as it arrived – without snapping a twig or ruffling a leaf.

And, at the far entrance from the Macphail school there is a stone marker with a plaque in memory of playwright **Clarke Rogers** (1948-1996). Clarke, and his wife, artist **Rae Johnson**, moved to Flesherton in the early 1990s. Clarke, who was a theatre director and playwright (notably at **Theatre Passe Muraille** in **Toronto**), soon found local residents who shared his love for theatre. Workshops led to a production, **Aggie Macphail and the Fiddler’s Due** which was

performed several times in **Grey County**. *“We are liker to the earth than we would like to be, and we remember, we store in the soil of our being, the lives of our dead. We are more than the sum of ‘you in your small corner and me in mine,’ we are not candles, we are light.”* – Aggie Macphail and the Fiddler’s Due, written by Clarke Rogers.