

# Carolinian East

## Yours to Explore!

Did you know you live in Carolinian Canada? The most southerly of the broad bands of forest that cross Ontario runs from Toronto to Lake Huron. This area is called Carolinian Canada because plant and animal species common to the Carolinas and the Mississippi basin are also at home here thanks to a warm climate, rich soils and a long growing season. This is a region where you can find magnificent tulip trees growing alongside sugar maples and opossums sharing their foraging grounds with raccoons. It's a fascinating mixture of north and south – everything from tallgrass prairies and oak savannas to hardwood forests and pine groves.

The eastern part of the Carolinian region wraps around the southwestern tip of Lake Ontario and follows the Lake Erie shoreline over to Long Point. It is an area known for fruit orchards and vineyards. The same conditions that make the region attractive for these delicate crops are also responsible for its fascinating natural diversity. Just one example: the Carolinian region has more native tree species than the rainforests of British Columbia!

This region also includes one of the true natural wonders of the world – Niagara Falls. And there's a lot more to see than just wax museums when you visit the famous Falls. The nature trails of Niagara Glen, for example, will take you back through millions of years of geological history and past southern tree species such as blue beech and sassafras. It's also just beyond the Falls that the Niagara Escarpment begins and with it, the world-renowned Bruce Trail. The Niagara River is also world-renowned for its congregations of gulls and waterfowl – often numbering into the hundreds of thousands during the fall and early winter.

Another birding hotspot is Long Point, a thin finger of shifting sands, extending into the shallow waters of Lake Erie. The Point, along with forests further inland, makes an ideal rest and recovering point for migrating songbirds. In the spring, the area is often buzzing with bird watchers looking for hooded warblers, Louisiana waterthrush or perhaps the very rare (and endangered) prothonotary warbler. In the fall, the Point is a great place to observe the annual migration of monarch butterflies – the sight of trees leafed with butterflies is truly amazing.

Closer to the major urban centres of the Golden Horseshoe, natural areas become more scattered and generally smaller. But the Royal Botanical Gardens near Hamilton offer an excellent chance to explore a relatively large natural area close to the city. Cootes Paradise in particular has trails through hickory, maple and oak hardwood forests and across boardwalks in the marshy “paradise” itself. Cootes is also an interesting example of what communities can achieve by working together to restore natural areas.

On the edge of Toronto in Mississauga is Ratray Marsh, the last remaining shoreline marsh along Lake Ontario between Burlington and Toronto. This is a great place to see migrating songbirds, look for Carolinian plant species or to see swans, ducks and other waterbirds enjoying the sheltered marsh setting.

The Carolinian East region packs a lot of nature into a very small and busy land area. And that makes it all the more important that we protect – and expand – the natural areas that remain in this region.