

Lake Ontario North

Yours to Explore!

The north shore of Lake Ontario is home to a wide diversity of species – including people. This is Canada's most urban region, but it is also an interesting place to explore and see nature. Natural habitats in the region range from the country's largest urban park in the Rouge Valley on Toronto's eastern edge and the forests and kettle lakes of the Oak Ridges Moraine to tallgrass prairies and oak savannas in places like Toronto's High Park and the Rice Lake plains.

In the heart of Canada's biggest city, steep ravines and wide river valleys are home to everything from colourful songbirds to coyotes, foxes and deer. And nature is coming back strongly in the city – often with the help of groups committed to restoring watersheds like the Don and the Humber or to preserving those that have remained largely natural, like the Rouge.

Outside of our urban boundaries, green jewels are scattered across the densely developed landscape. Well to the east of Toronto is Presqu'île Provincial Park, a great spot to see both songbirds and waterbirds. This 10-kilometre long peninsula pointing south into Lake Ontario attracts a fascinating array of species, thanks to its combination of shoreline, marshes and sheltered bays.

A smaller jewel is Peter's Woods near Peterborough. This nature reserve is best known for its beautiful old-growth Great Lakes forest of sugar maple, beech and white pine. This is an excellent example of the forests that once stretched all around the Great Lakes – a taste of what southern Ontario once felt like.

The proximity of these and other natural areas to large urban centres makes them ideal destinations for day trips but also, too often, leaves them threatened by development. The Oak Ridges Moraine is a prime example of an unique and important natural area that has been steadily eroded by the pressure to build more roads and housing.

Fortunately, there is also a growing awareness of the critical need to conserve areas like the Moraine – areas that filter our water, provide shelter for wild species and give us a chance to get away from urban stresses.

One of the greatest examples of visionary thinking about the need for natural areas within and around urban areas is the Rouge Park. Nature lovers led a long fight to preserve the last largely intact river valley in the Toronto region and finally succeeded with the designation of a large park in the early 1990s. Today, valley walkers can brush past southern species like sassafras and black walnut or rest on a cool northern slope under the shade of an eastern hemlock knowing that they can come back in one year or five and experience the same peaceful places.

In recent years, there has been a lot of focus on the Lake Ontario waterfront itself and a good deal of work throughout the region on “greening” waterfronts that had been turned over to industrial docks and warehouses. One of the most exciting initiatives is the development of the Waterfront Trail tracing the shoreline of Lake Ontario. Already, large sections of this ambitious project have been completed, allowing walkers, riders, rollerbladers and strollers to explore the water’s edge for many kilometers.

The focus on restoring the Lake Ontario waterfront has also led to recognition of the interconnections between natural areas, such as between river valleys and lakeshores. If we don’t protect areas upstream, the thinking goes, then all our good works downstream will be in vain. It’s a great lesson to keep in mind as you visit the green jewels of this region.