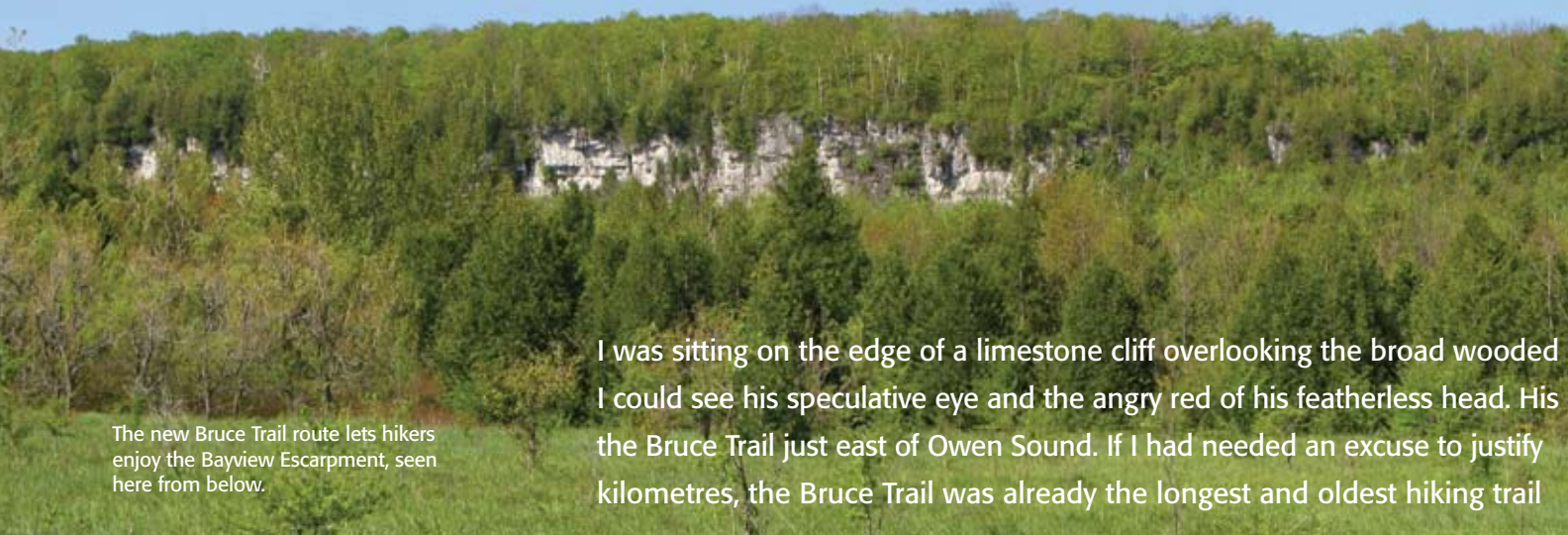


# Trekking the Optimum Route: Hiking the Bruce Trail's



The new Bruce Trail route lets hikers enjoy the Bayview Escarpment, seen here from below.

I was sitting on the edge of a limestone cliff overlooking the broad wooded valley. I could see his speculative eye and the angry red of his featherless head. His head was on the Bruce Trail just east of Owen Sound. If I had needed an excuse to justify the kilometres, the Bruce Trail was already the longest and oldest hiking trail

In 1960, four men sat around a kitchen table looking at a map of Ontario. They called themselves the Bruce Trail Committee, and they were there because one of the men, Ray Lowes, a metallurgist at Stelco, had a dream, a long-distance

hiking path from Queenston to Tobermory along the Niagara Escarpment. Seven years later, with the help of hundreds of volunteers divided into nine local clubs, the dream had become a reality, and the Bruce Trail was born.

But, as Beth Kümmling, executive director of the Bruce Trail Conservancy, explains, "When the Trail was first laid out in the late 1960s, there was urgency to get the trail on the ground in time for the 1967 official opening of the Bruce Trail." The

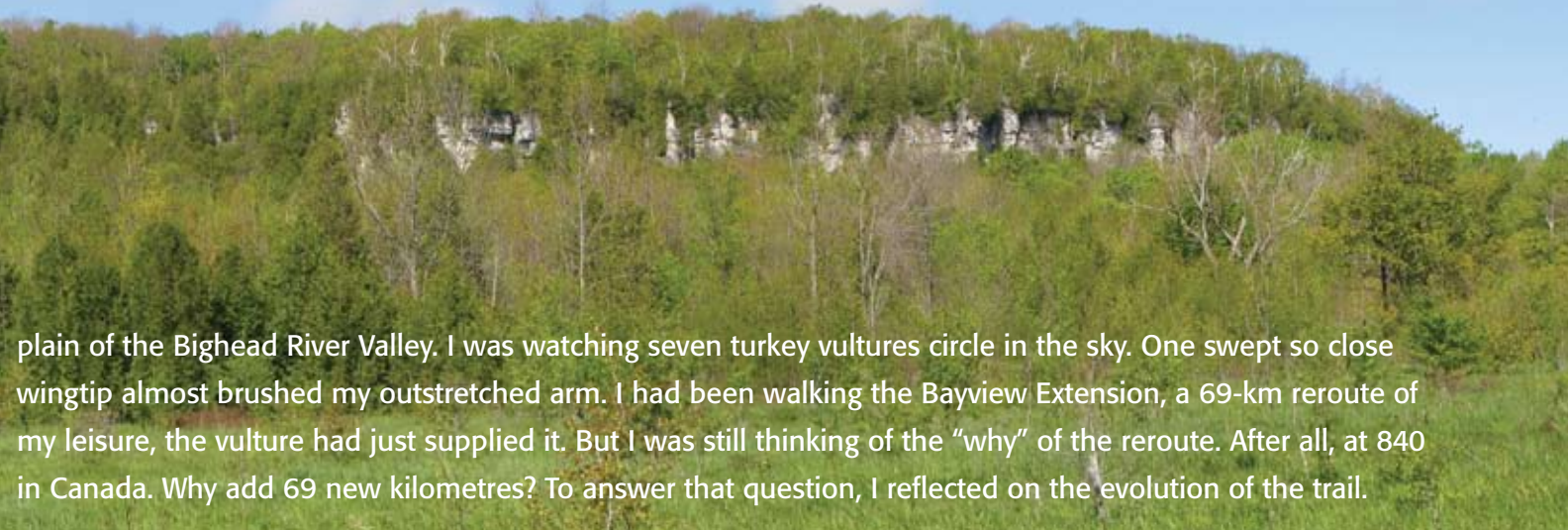
Turkey vultures soar over Bighead River Valley





# Bayview Escarpment Reroute

Text & photographs  
by Ken Haigh



plain of the Bighead River Valley. I was watching seven turkey vultures circle in the sky. One swept so close wingtip almost brushed my outstretched arm. I had been walking the Bayview Extension, a 69-km reroute of my leisure, the vulture had just supplied it. But I was still thinking of the “why” of the reroute. After all, at 840 in Canada. Why add 69 new kilometres? To answer that question, I reflected on the evolution of the trail.



optimum route would have been to follow the Niagara Escarpment as closely as possible. But, because of the deadline and the fact that much of this public trail had to pass over private land, the best route was not always available at the time.

In 2002, four other visionaries sat around a different table and looked at a different series of maps. They were looking at the peninsula that jutted into Georgian Bay between Owen Sound and Meaford. The Escarpment

looped up into this peninsula as far as the Bayview Escarpment Provincial Nature Reserve, but the Bruce Trail cut straight across the bottom of this loop. If they could reroute the trail up into the peninsula, they could add 69 kilometres

A boardwalk reaches into Bognor Marsh.



Map courtesy of Bruce Trail Conservancy



## Trekking the Optimum Route: Hiking the Bruce Trail's Bayview Escarpment Reroute


to the trail and put the trail onto the optimum route (OR). It would be the biggest reroute in the Bruce Trail's 40-year history. But would it be possible?

Ron Savage, trail director for the Sydenham Bruce Trail Club, says "Back five years ago, Chris Walker, Ross McLean, Cliff Keeling and I decided that we would make another attempt at moving the trail onto the OR through the Bayview Nature Reserve. It had been tried sometime in the past, but failed due to lack of landowner support. This time it meant we would have to contact dozens of landowners for permission to use their land and to get approvals from provincial, county, municipal and conservation authorities for their lands. This time we were successful and with the help of hundreds of volunteers we opened the trail last fall."

I had heard good things of the new trail and resolved to check it out for myself. I decided to hike from the top of the loop at the Bayview Escarpment Provincial Nature Reserve to the Bognor Marsh Management Area, a distance of 21.3 km.

I couldn't have picked a better day. New growth was just beginning to show in the canopy of the hardwood forest. The forest floor was carpeted with wild flowers. There were masses of trilliums, both red and white, also yellow trout lilies, delicate Carolina spring beauties, patches of Dutchman's breeches, Canada bloodroot, jack-in-the-pulpit, and clusters of violets in shades of purple, white, blue and yellow. To my surprise, the forest was also full of butterflies, Mourning Cloaks awakening from their winter dormancy. Ferns were

It can be a tight squeeze through the crevice near Woodford.



View east over the Meaford Land Forces Training Centre for tanks and artillery





everywhere on the exposed limestone. There are 20 different varieties of fern in the nature reserve, including the rare Hart's Tongue fern. The trail bumps up and down over broken cobbles of dolostone along a fence marked with No Trespassing signs in both official languages, for the nature reserve borders the Meaford Land Forces Training Centre to the north and east. I soon approached the Escarpment edge and had a magnificent view to the northeast.



In 1942, the Canadian government appropriated 17,000 acres of land to create a training facility for tanks and artillery. More than 100 families were forced to relocate. A whole community was lost. From the lookout today, you see only forest where once you saw farms, schools, mills, and churches.

From the lookout the trail turns south, wandering at times along an old cart track and at times along the perilous cliff edge. The trail even-

tually leaves the forest and, following an old fence line, emerges at the St. Vincent/Sydenham Town Line. A short walk along a quiet road brought me to another forest where the trail passes the ruins of a pioneer homestead. I flushed a ruffed grouse from a dogwood thicket that had once been the foundations of an old barn. At one point, I had to scramble through an ice-filled crevice so narrow that I had to remove my pack and carry it in front of me, sideways.

I stopped for a drink of water at the quiet hamlet of Woodford and chatted with the woman who is restoring the old coaching inn by the side of Highway 26. She pointed out the amenities: "Separate men's and women's parlours on the ground floor, kitchens out back, and a dance hall on the third floor. In the days when the stage coach to Owen Sound ran past here, it would have been a pretty lively place."

The two km of road walking south of Woodford were the most tedious, but the trail soon plunges down an unopened road allowance between tumbledown split-rail fences, until it reaches a peat-brown brook. A bridge across the brook leads to a cart track and once more to the top of the Escarpment. For the next hour the trail never strays very far from the cedar-fringed lip of the Escarpment. Finally, the trail descends to the valley floor and circles the Bognor Marsh. The quiet solitariness of the uplands was replaced by the harsh cries of marsh birds and the croaking of bullfrogs. I followed the boardwalks around the central portion of the marsh and climbed a viewing platform with a splendid view of the setting sun. I was sorry to see the day come to an end. But I knew I would return. ■

*Ken Haigh has lived in Bhutan, China, and the Canadian Arctic, but now calls the Beaver Valley his home. His memoir of life in Bhutan as a volunteer teacher, Under the Holy Lake, was published by The University of Alberta Press in 2008.*