TRAIL TIME

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"Trail Time" is Green Trails Ontario's flagship knowledge-sharing program, directly advancing the organization's mission to share valuable information, experiences, and resources. Through personal stories, observations, and insights gained on the trails, "Trail Time" authors highlight the inherent connection between people and the natural world. These narratives raise critical awareness about how nature shapes our quality of life, while reinforcing the link between human action, climate change, and environmental sustainability. Ultimately, these insights inspire us to champion sustainable decisions, make healthier choices, improve our mental and physical well-being, and, above all, enjoy life.

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A Tale of Turtle Trails

Mike Bender

I grew up in a house with pond just outside the front door and about thirty meters away from a kettle Lake. This pond has been a habitat for many species of flora and fauna. Among all of them, the turtles were the most interesting to me. I used to watch them on a sunny log by the pond. There were both painted turtles and snapping turtles who got along well in their quiet watery home. Their dry nests were by the edge of the gravel driveway where they laid eggs during late May, June, and early July.

September used to be an extremely exciting time when I watched the newly hatched baby snapping turtles struggle through the grass to reach the pond. The baby painted turtles would over-winter in their nest and hatch in the following spring. The next fascinating time was when I could find the baby turtles by the edge of the pond trying to hide in the taller grasses and at the bottom of the shallow edge waters. They always found their trail to the pond.

Painted turtles lay 4 to 15 clutches of pliable eggs, while snapping turtles lay 20 to 80 leather-like eggs. Watching these two types of turtles over my childhood years, I learned that painted turtles dig shallow holes in sandy, sunny soil close to water while snapping turtles travel much farther inland, often digging nests in gravelly roadsides or gardens. Much later during my grown-up years, I learned that both species use the sun's heat as an incubator, warmer conditions produces females, and cooler conditions produces males.

Painted turtles are the most widespread native turtles in North America. They are small to medium reptiles and may live over forty years. The adults typically grow between 10 to 25 centimetres in length and weigh up to one kilogram. I learned to recognize them by their bright, colorful markings. They have a dark smooth top shell with bright yellow, orange, or red stripes on their neck, legs, and tail. Their bright red-orange belly shell is always a great sight to experience. Snapping turtles may live over one hundred years, weigh up to thirteen kg with a dark rough shell reaching thirty-eight cm long, have a long dinosaur-like tail, and a tiny belly shell that leaves its legs exposed.



Snapping Turtle



Painted Turtle

For their habitat, turtles choose slow-moving freshwaters like ponds, marshes, creeks, and lakes with soft, muddy bottoms. Painted turtles feed on aquatic plants, algae, insects, crustaceans, and small fish, which makes them omnivores. Snapping turtles are also omnivores that wait patiently to catch fish, frogs, and plants, acting as a quiet cleaner of the deep water. Snapping turtles spend most of their time in the muddy pond bottom and it relies on a sharp, hooked beak and a quick snap to warn away trouble.

Like all other creatures, turtles use some survival techniques. As hatchlings, they also face heavy predation from raccoons, skunks, foxes, birds, bullfrogs, and mature snapping turtles. Fewer than 1 in 10 hatchlings survive their first year, though snapping turtle survivors quickly outgrow most these threats. As a protection method, they leave the nest immediately after hatching and look for the brightest open horizon, which reflects light off the water surface. They crawl downhill away from dark, towering silhouettes like trees and bushes. In the winter, they instinctively dive into the pond bottom and bury themselves. When I skated on the frozen pond, I smiled when I thought about the turtles hibernating in the mud under the water and ice below me. The ice cap on the water prevented the turtles from coming up to the surface for air. In such state, they absorb oxygen directly from the water through specialized, blood-vessel-rich skin linings in their tails. Their heart rate slows to just a few beats per minute, allowing them to survive for months without eating. Painted turtles have special proteins in their blood that allow up to half of their body water to freeze solid without damaging their organs. When spring warms the water, the turtles wake up to bask immediately in the sun to purge lactic acid from their muscles and kickstart their digestion.

Extensive urbanization and removal of natural areas have ecologically degraded and reduced turtles' habitats. Snapping turtles and most painted turtles as species of Special Concern in many parts in Canada and both species are Special Concern in Ontario. This status indicates that necessary actions need to be implemented now to help avoid these turtles becoming threatened or endangered. The main threats to both species include road mortality, habitat loss of wetlands, the length of time to reach breeding age, and that very few numbers of babies survive their first year.

Turtles fascinate children and influence human cultures. To many First Nations, particularly the Anishinnaabe and Haudenosaunee, turtles hold deep spiritual significance as a symbol of creation, time, and the Earth itself. The Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) consider the rugged, ancient shell of the snapping turtle as the physical representation of this foundational crust of the Earth. Their creation story tells that the Sky Woman falls from the sky and lands safely on the back of a giant turtle. Animals place mud onto the turtle's shell, which grows to become their land.

The Iroquois Traditional First Nations map their lunar calendars directly onto the turtle's shell. The thirteen large central scales (scutes) of a turtle's carapace represent the thirteen full moons of the year. The twenty-eight smaller scales surrounding the edge of the shell perfectly mirror the twenty-eight days between each moon cycle. The Turtle Clan is one of the foundational clans in many First Nations communities, carrying roles related to environmental stewardship, mediation, and wisdom. The bright, colorful painted turtle represents beauty, adaptability, and the vibrant life found within the natural world. The snapping turtle symbolizes patience, strength, and perseverance, teaching lessons about standing one's ground and surviving through harsh conditions. Same understanding from other cultures reflects in the old saying, "Slow and steady wins the race."

When I was thinking of a story about my trail experiences, I was standing beside the same pond with emerging yellow water lilies and a great blue heron where I watched turtles during my childhood. Earlier, I was holding a baby painted turtle in my hand that I found walking along the pond edge. I began to think about the grass path that the turtles use for traveling between the lake and the pond. A similarity between the importance of the green trails to people and this thirty-meter-long path to these turtles came to my mind. I like to think of it as the turtles' trail.

Hopefully one day soon you get an opportunity to see and watch a turtle in their natural habitat.



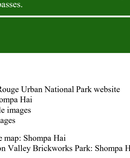
Fighting Phragmites

Richard Scott

My wife Renée and I live near Jackson Park in Peterborough. The park follows a steep valley along the creek that gives the park its name. The Trans-Canada Trail forms the spine of the park—a rail trail that parallels and periodically crosses the creek. For several years Renée, a nature enthusiast, had noted the presence of two small stands of Phragmites—one larger clump along the creek that floods every spring and another small clump with scattered specimens along the trail itself not far away. She was eager to tackle it as we knew it was extremely invasive but, unlike other invasive species that had invaded the park—European Buckthorn, garlic mustard, dog strangling vine, the list goes on—Phragmites was limited to just these two areas. She felt we could make a difference.

Finally, in the spring of 2023, she said, "it's now or never—let's get at it!" And so we did. That first spring we tackled the tall shoots of the previous year's growth (some up to 10 ft tall) and the early shoots then emerging. We ended up going in about six times throughout that first year spending one-to-two hours each time. We went in again in 2024. We noticed the increased presence of native species whose growth had been suppressed by Phragmites such as red-osier dogwood, speckled alder, Joe-Pye weed. We went in about four times, which encouraged us that we were making headway. The following season (2025) we tackled the two areas again, but this time it only required two sessions. Natural vegetation now almost completely dominated both areas with only a few isolated examples remaining. We even saw frogs. We did notice that because Phragmites grow from rhizomes, new plants tended to sprout adjacent to areas where we had removed plants.

This year we once more tackled the two sites. Again, there were some small areas where Phragmites had now invaded, but this year we feel this single visit (in late July) will suffice. The area of largest concentration we found in 2023 was almost completely Phragmites-free with only a few specimens.
We attended a webinar on Phragmites in the Great Lakes held jointly by Environment Canada and the US Geological Society. It revealed major headway in the use of biocides in controlling growth in Long Point National Wildlife Area. Although such control was beyond our scope, we did learn that cutting stems beneath the water can drown the plant.



Phragmites



Cattail

Although Phragmites is an enormous problem, by tackling areas strategically one can, with persistence, make a significant difference. We have not eliminated the problem but feel that it can be managed if tackled early. And every year, the management effort required is substantially reduced. Every year we remove stalks in July, before the seed heads emerge. We leave the cut stems next to the trail where they decompose relatively quickly. It is a joy to see native plants dominating where once were impenetrable thickets of Phragmites.

Another benefit of the work is being next to the Trans-Canada Trail. Passersby often stop to enquire about what we are doing. Most people recognize Phragmites but are unaware of its name and the fact it is horribly invasive. They generally walk away supportive of our work and, we hope, more aware. Unfortunately, we neglected to take "before" photos of the Phragmites, but the area of natural vegetation that four years ago would have been unrecognizable because of the presence of Phragmites. We're aware that Phragmites is but one of many invasive species in Jackson Park. We are, nevertheless, gratified that just two people can make a difference to improve the environment through which this nationally significant trail passes.



Benefits of Trails

Tom Friesen

I had the great good fortune to grow up in a small town in a house that backed up to the base of the Niagara Escarpment. Trails let up the hill to an abandoned orchard with a pond that developers did not exploit for housing until I was an adult. I have had great fun teasing some of my Bruce Trail friends that as a child, I pioneered their trails in the area of the Devil's Punchbowl before the establishment of this great organization.

This start gave me the identity as a trail user and seeker of green spaces. Now living in London, I appreciate the Thames Valley Trail and its connectivity to trails along the river to the south (Elgin) and north (Lyon). London as a glaciated area contains some great green spaces where the glaciation prevented rampant development and gives us nine wonderful Environmentally Significant Areas. These pockets of nature have given us hours of pleasure as we engage in "Forest Bathing" **(shinrin-yoku).**

During my teaching career, I felt truly fortunate to take students out for hikes or trail rides on bicycles on forest paths. I am also pleased by the love that my children and now my grandchildren show for nature experiences. When I retired and my children had grown up, I rejoined the local trail association and soon became a hike leader and hike leader trainer. It was really satisfying to lead hikes for friends and even more rewarding to train other experienced hikers to become hike leaders. The gift of confidence and skill application that hike leaders acquire is all part of the gratification you receive when you develop hike leaders or take people out for a hike on trails. My favourite hikes are Spring Wildflower Walks and History or "Ghost Walks". A program that I have been a part of since 2012 is the Mood Walk project that Hike Ontario collaborated with the Canadian Mental Health Association (Ontario). We trained hundreds of Mood Walks volunteers, staff and clients as Hike Leaders so that people with mental health challenges could benefit from walking safely in Nature. I have also used trails to have stellar experiences in other countries in the world. It is my feeling that by exploring a place on foot, you are able to encounter others in their own environment and become a traveller and not a tourist.

We are fortunate to have so many trails managed by volunteers, municipalities, conservation authorities, provincial and federal parks which allow us to enjoy the wonderful Natural Resources that we have in Canada.



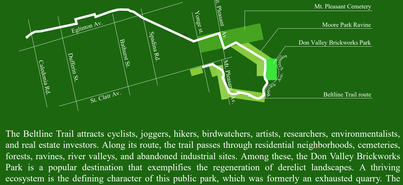
Creating Memories on Beltline Trail

Shompa Hai

A quiet walk or a bike ride along a shaded trail can feel like pure magic on a hot summer day. Life thrives in these green corridors, offering endless ways to enjoy their beauty. You might spot a mother bird flying back and forth, her beak full of treats for the hungry chicks in her nest. You might pause to watch a woodpecker drum on a decaying tree or appreciate the unusual shapes of fungi sprouting from the bark of fallen logs. These small wonders are the threads of life that sustain the trail's vibrant ecosystem.

Along the trail, you might see bees and butterflies moving from flower to flower. A chipmunk or hare might dash across your way before vanishing behind a rock or under the shrubs, and a mother squirrel teaches her young the tricks of climbing. These lessons are vital for the next generation as they prepare to care for themselves and future families. Beyond the chirping of birds, the trails capture the sound of wind passing through the leaves, the dance of light and shadow on the ground, and a burst of color from wildflowers. A birds' flight, the vivid colors of the plants, and the earthy smell of rain-soaked soil are only a fraction of the intangible natural wealth that makes each trail visit special and unforgettable. Trails offer a cool escape from the summer heat, a playground for children to explore nature, an outdoor gym, and a year-round classroom for students and photographers.

Trails are often connected to urban service structures, including stormwater pipes, culverts, gabion baskets, and retaining walls. These functional features act as silent storytellers of the city's landscape, highlighting the differences between the ecosystems of urban green trails and natural paths. In Toronto, several trails are celebrated for their unique shapes and forms, deep-rooted connections to local communities, and their capacity to attract people. These trails inspire visitors to explore Toronto's dramatic landforms, which serve as the lungs of the city and a habitat for diverse wildlife. As products of urbanization, these paths often contain buried historical and natural features that reflect regional ecosystems and cultural heritage. The Beltline is one such trail that loops through mid-Toronto, once marking the city's northern edge and its first suburb. After a brief period of service as a commuter rail connecting downtown's Union Station with new suburban neighborhoods, the corridor was reimagined through an extensive evaluation of alternative uses, followed by a pivotal land swap between the city and the Canadian National Railway. This negotiation transformed the former railbed into a nine-kilometer trail corridor and a designated city parkland. Toronto's ravines may be an inconvenience to development, but they present incredible opportunities for conservation and green trails.



The Beltline Trail attracts cyclists, joggers, hikers, birdwatchers, artists, researchers, environmentalists, and real estate investors. Along its route, the trail passes through residential neighborhoods, cemeteries, forests, ravines, river valleys, and abandoned industrial sites. Among these, the Don Valley Brickworks Park is a popular destination that exemplifies the regeneration of derelict landscapes. A thriving ecosystem is the defining character of this public park, which was formerly an exhausted quarry. The park's visionary design improves the Don River's water quality and nurtures wildlife habitats. It also preserves ancient geological features and industrial relics from the past century that now coexist with dynamic modern community activities.



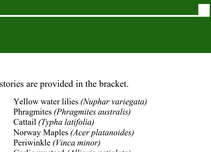
Don Valley Brickworks Park adjacent to Toronto's Beltline Trail.

Although this park is connected to public transit services, the most appealing access is through the shaded trails under tall trees. The ravine's thick, leafy canopies create an instantly recognizable, pleasant microclimate. Here, only observant eyes may spot the exposed soil beneath the stands of Norway maples. This non-native species thrives in southern Ontario's clay-rich soil and suppresses native groundcovers. Consequently, the ravine slopes are left with bare soil that is easily washed away. The exposed foundations of houses at the top of the ridge and the uncovered roots of large old trees highlight the safety issues caused by this ongoing erosion. Invasive plants like periwinkle, garlic mustard, and dog-strangling vine quickly encroach where native groundcovers are struggling to survive.

Furthermore, the ponds on either side of the trail testify that the old rail bed cut through the creek, disregarding its natural flow and layout. Relegating the remnants of the buried Mud Creek to stormwater outlets causes flash floods that continue to carve away pond edges, erode the trail, destroy vegetation, and release unpleasant odors. These are common environmental challenges associated with urban green trails.

The contrasts between the ravines and the urban systems are undeniable, and the Beltline trail invites you to experience them. Despite the challenges, the trail's lively energy makes you forget any discomfort and invites you to be fully absorbed by nature. Its cool, fresh air fills your lungs under the canopy of tall trees rising from the ravine's depths, each reaching for its share of light. Before European colonization, thick Southern Ontario forests covered these lands. As plant communities changed, so did the climate, wildlife, and ecosystems.





The stormwater drainage pipes carry water of buried Mud Creek and release into the ponds of Don Valley Brickworks Park. These pipes run across the Beltline Trail and along the slopes of the ravine above the quarry of the Brickworks.

Exploring the Beltline Trail between Moore Avenue and the Bayview extension might reward you with the charms of urban ecology: flashes of yellow from American goldfinches, the calls of red-winged blackbirds, or glimpses of cardinals, robins, swallows, warblers, or terns. There are many more wonders of the hundreds of species nesting or feeding in the woodlands of the Brickworks Park, the ravine, and the cemeteries. You might see a muskrat gliding across one pond, a visiting cormorant from Leslie Street Spit swimming in the open water of a deeper pond, water lilies blooming in another, and a fish caught in a heron's beak. Sometimes, you might see curious children discussing their findings from dip-netting. With some luck, you might even watch a heron's flight or a family of white-tailed deer quietly crossing the trail to drink from the ponds in the quarry bottom.

Your camera may fill with pictures of these moments, and you might come home with burdock fruits stuck to your clothes. Reflecting on your recent observations on the Beltline Trail, you may find yourself wondering about the secrets of life's strength in these green corridors — eager to come back and be part of the story again.

Photo Credits:

Snapping Turtle: Rouge Urban National Park website
Painted Turtle: Shompa Hai
Phragmites: Google images
Cattail: Google images

Beltline Trail route map: Shompa Hai
Photographs of Don Valley Brickworks Park: Shompa Hai.

Pictures used in the collage: Google images

Species status: The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC) website:
https://cosewic.ca/index.php/en/
Ontario's Endangered Species Act and Canada's federal Species at Risk Act
Indigenous Climate Hub website:
https://indigenousclimatehub.ca/2025/01/the-sacred-turtle-teachings-on-our-shared-responsibility-to-mother-earth/

Scientific Name:

Scientific Name of Species mentioned in the trail stories are provided in the bracket.

Painted turtles *(Chrysemys picta)*
Snapping turtles *(Chelydra serpentina)*
Great blue heron *(Ardea Herodias)*
American goldfinches *(Spinus tristis)*
Red-winged blackbirds *(Agelaius phoeniceus)*
Cardinal *(Cardinalis cardinalis)*
Robins *(Turdus migratorius)*
Swallows *(Tachycineta bicolor)*
Warblers *(Cardellina canadensis)*
Terns *(Sterna hirundo)*
Muskrat *(Ondatra zibethicus)*
Cormorant *(Phalacrocoracidae)*
White-tailed deer *(Odocoileus virginianus)*
Yellow water lilies *(Nuphar variegata)*
Phragmites *(Phragmites australis)*
Cattail *(Typha latifolia)*
Norway Maples *(Acer platanoides)*
Periwinkle *(Vinca minor)*
Garlic mustard *(Alliaria petiolata)*
Dog strangling vine *(Vincetoxicum rossicum)*
European Buckthorn *(Rhamnus cathartica)*
Red osier dogwood *(Cornus sericea)*
Speckled alder *(Alnus incana)*
Joe pye weed *(Eutrochium maculatum)*
Water lilies *(Nymphaea odorata)*
Burdock *(Arctium minus)*

