





Atop Spirit Rock

BY SANDRA J. HOWE

THE INDIAN PRINCESS STOOD HIGH ON THE CLIFF EDGE overlooking beautiful Colpoy's Bay. Shunned by her own people for loving an enemy chief, she waited for nightfall and leapt to her death on the rocks far below. It is said that when the light is just right you see the profile of her face in the Escarpment edge. So goes the legend of Spirit Rock.

Spirit Rock Conservation Area is a fascinating 87-hectare property just north of Wiarton on the Bruce Peninsula. Noteworthy for its historic ruins, spectacular views, spiral staircase, and trail network, it is a wonderful place for people of all ages to explore. ►

▲ (Above) Ruined remains of The Corran mansion of MP Alexander McNeill are open for imaginative exploration.

◀ (Left) The spiral staircase is an impressive structure that gives easy access to the shore and the top of Spirit Rock.



▲ Above the parking area on Bayview St., Spirit Rock rises above you. From here, an Indian princess is said to have jumped to her death. In the rocks of the Escarpment cliff, her profile is said to be sometimes seen.

If you are fit and game for a little hiking, here is an adventure for you. From Hwy 6 heading north in Warton, turn right on William St. at the stoplight and immediately left onto Bayview St. Niagara Escarpment cliffs tower above you on the left and Colpoy's Bay is close on your right. Watch for the white trail blazes. You are now driving on The Bruce Trail, Canada's oldest and longest footpath. Park at the boat ramp and picnic area on the right just before Warton's Water Filtration Plant.

Directly above you is Spirit Rock. The crystal clear waters of Colpoy's Bay sparkle beside you. The water looks inviting

for a swim but is chilly even in summer: more likely it will be a quick, refreshing dip. Common mergansers, a lovely diving duck, are often visible on the water here. It is also a popular fishing and boating spot. Signs at the cliff base tell the Spirit Rock legend in detail and explains Niagara Escarpment geology.

This 6-km round-trip hike takes you along the rocky shoreline to the clifftops and ruins through several different ecosystems. Follow The Bruce Trail's white blazes north along the shore.

A wide array of wildflowers grows along the road and shore. The white cedars along the cliff edge are among

Canada's oldest trees. Stunted by the harsh conditions, they grow slowly and were left unharvested by generations of loggers who cleared much of southern Canada's wilderness.

The trail is rugged with talus rock which has tumbled from the Escarpment face over the ages. Several massive boulders lying at the water's edge provide great scrambling opportunities. Feel free to climb but be careful. The views of Colpoy's Bay with cliffs rising on both sides are truly awesome. Enjoy the fresh air and the breeze that moves along the bay. Soon you will see the double white blaze indicating a left turn to the cliff base and climb to the top.

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Crystal clear waters of Colpoy's Bay remain chilly even in summer.







▲ “Leaves of three, let them be,” is the saying to help avoid poison ivy, shown here.

◀ Huge boulders, long ago fallen from the Escarpment edge, provide challenging climbs.

Spiral Staircase

The rocks approaching the spiral staircase are often slippery with moisture. An abundance of ferns and mosses covers this area. Herb Robert and wild columbine grow on the cliff face. Insects and even frogs partake of the water which seeps from among the rocks. Climb this historic stairway to enjoy beautiful vistas of the bay and shoreline far below.

You have entered a new kind of forest: birch, maple, beech, and other hardwoods live atop the Escarpment. The forest is more open and drier. Follow the blue blazes straight away from the spiral staircase to reach The Corran ruins. The Bruce Trail turns right here continuing on to the village of Colpoy's Bay and north to Tobermory; it is a long and spectacular walk!

Poison ivy is common atop the Escarpment especially north from Warton. Closed shoes, long pants and walking in the centre of the trail all help protect you.

The Corran

This approach to The Corran is especially lovely. As you step out of the forest into the meadow the ruins tower above you. The scent of roses is often strong in the air. This was the grand home of Alexander and Hester McNeill.

Begun in 1881 the 17-room mansion was built of stone quarried on site. It featured a conservatory, luxurious furnishings, a magnificent spiral stairway, and the largest private library north of Toronto. The McNeills entertained lavishly with great garden parties.

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The beautiful,
turquoise waters are
clear below you.
Turkey vultures soar
at eye level from this
high vantage point.

Atop Spirit Rock

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▲ The Corran mansion in well-maintained times.



▲ These remains show where The Corran stables once stood.

◀ From Spirit Rock Lookout, the clear, beautiful water of Colpoy's Bay looking across to the village of Oxenden.



▲ The noteworthy glacial pothole along Spirit Rock Sidetrail.

Alexander was an avid gardener and grew 500 species of roses including a black rose. It was the tradition to give each party guest a cut rose as they departed. Roses still bloom around the ruins.

In 1906 Hester died young before the mansion was fully completed. Alexander lived on to age 90. He served as federal Member of Parliament for North Bruce from 1881 to 1901. He was loyal to Great Britain and opposed Sir John A. MacDonald on several issues.

When Alexander died in 1932, The Corran passed to son Malcolm. Under Malcolm, the property and family fortune deteriorated. The housekeeper was willed the estate after Malcolm's death, and in 1960 she sold it to a Toronto resident. Without a full-time occupant, the mansion fell

prey to vandals. In 1976, Grey Sauble Conservation Authority acquired the property. A fire claimed the mansion soon after, and now only the ruins and the stories remain.

The Corran retains a feeling of its former grandeur. Remnants of the roses, gardens, orchards and stables stand as reminders of this significant bit of Canadian history. It is easy to imagine yourself as a guest at a luscious garden feast in this tranquil setting. Today it makes a wonderful stroll or picnic site. There are parking, picnic tables and toilets available, as well as an abundance of wild raspberries and currants for nibbling.

Lookout

To continue your hike to Spirit Rock Lookout, follow the blue blazes across the parking area

into the fern-strewn forest. The trail meanders among the trees, rocks and crevices to the Escarpment edge above your original car park. The beautiful, turquoise waters are clear below you. Turkey vultures soar at eye level from this high vantage point. Across Colpooy's Bay is the village of Oxenden, and Caframo's towers.

At the lookout, the Wiarton Sidetrail branches to the right and leads you out to Hwy 6, downhill into Wiarton and back along Bayview St. to your car. Better is the Spirit Rock Sidetrail to the left following the Escarpment edge back to the spiral staircase and along the shore once more.

Wildflowers and birdlife are plentiful in this section. There is also a prominent glacial pothole beside the trail. Again, be careful of the poison ivy.



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After a good walk, Wiarion has lots of great treats to revive you, at many fine eateries.

For a less rigorous exploration of The Corran, drive north of Wiarion on Hwy 6 to Spirit Rock Conservation Area. You can park within sight of the ruins and walk the

grounds. Access to the spiral staircase descending the Escarpment is to the right of the ruins. Spend minutes or hours as you wish. **NEV**

Sandra J. Howe's last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Skiing the Kolapore Wilderness Trails," Winter 2014-15.