

A Lion's Roar

Written and photographed by Bruce Mackenzie

Lion's Head is an amazingly beautiful feature of the Niagara Escarpment on the east shore of the Bruce Peninsula on the west coast of Georgian Bay. The Escarpment dips its toe into the Bay here. The awesome scene is clearly visible from the community of Lion's Head but to fully involve yourself in the sheer dynamics of the shoreline you need to paddle along the wild untamed shores of the talus slope.

The waters run deep, clear, green and cold at Lion's Head. As abruptly as the land rises from the water's surface, the rock bottom of Georgian Bay goes down. The deepest part of the Bay is just north of here at around 200 metres a short distance from shore.

Some summers ago my wife Laurie and I had been kayaking along the shore of Lion's Head when we got caught in a dangerous thunder and lightning storm.

We were never far from shore but the black clouds of that storm blew over the Bruce from Lake Huron to the lee shores of Georgian Bay in what seemed like a panic, catching us off guard. The torrential rain was warm and we still remember the huge raindrops bouncing off the green waters like millions of emeralds as we paddled in desperation for safety at the Town's beach and our vehicle. In that fantasy of beauty was the reality of thunder and lightning strikes along the Escarpment along the shore beside us.

Echoes of Thunder

The echoes of thunder off the Escarpment face still live with us.

More recently, Laurie suggested we explore Lion's Head again in calmer waters. Our goal was to paddle the same route of a few years ago but this time get to the end of



▲ The Bruce Trail runs through the wilderness along the top of the Niagara Escarpment at Lion's Head. In this photograph, the jutting "face of the lion" is clearly visible at the top of the cliff. The huge tree-covered rock beneath it fell off the Escarpment an unknown time ago. The lion now guards it.

the cliff formation and around the point towards MacKay's Harbour, about an eight-km round trip. The skies were clear and waters inviting.

We did not go far when we came across a small fishing boat close to shore, with occupants looking up at the cliffs and rock climbers. We had thought it was dangerous to be here in a lightning storm. Watching these climbers changed my perspective. Our ancestors had a natural fear of heights and that is one of the reasons why our bloodlines exist today.

On we went along the shore below the cliff, enjoying all the fascinations that nature has left for us to explore. We stopped right under the Lion's Head precipice and Laurie noticed another climber. This one was not taking the easy route. He was right at the bottom of the huge overhang, the Lion's throat. We did not want to watch. We wanted to



▲ Laurie Mackenzie on the shore with the Bruce Trail behind her. The Escarpment is evident on the horizon to the south.

paddle away fast but morbid fear for the man made us look. He made it out to the sunny vertical cliff face to the right of him, where he tried to go from climbing almost upside down to go straight up again.

Heart-Stopping Cry

I turned away for a moment, then we heard a sound I never wanted to hear, surely the sound that a man makes in his last seconds.

At the terrified cry of the man we turned to see him swinging like a pendulum about 15 m below from where he ascended to. It took a while for the twisting and swinging of the man, like a pendulum, to stop. He had been attached to a safety rope. When the climber stopped moving, an unseen partner started to lower him to the ground through the trees. We never saw the partner and once the man was lowered below tree tops we did not see or hear anything more.

This was an example of blind trust in a piton hammered into limestone and a harness that consisted simply of a safety belt attached to a loop around the top of each leg, with nothing around the chest or shoulders. Just what were the forces on his lower trunk and hips when he came to that incredibly sudden stop?

Even though our hearts stopped a moment, the scenery stayed alive, the waters flowed and we kept along our way. The weather stayed fine and a km or so later we were safely



▲ A place of beauty: looking out from inside a cavern on the shore at Lion's Head.

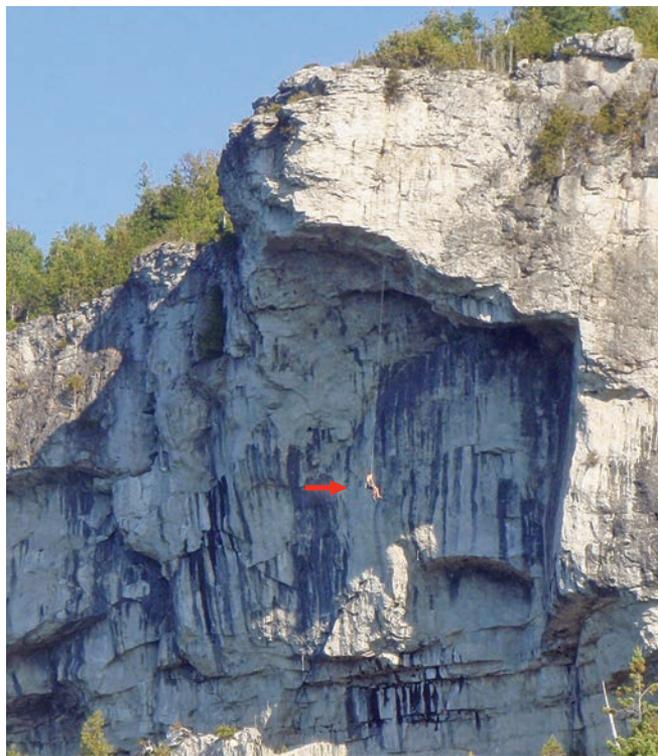
back to our beach. It might be a while before we kayak Lion's Head again. We have heard the Lion roar twice now.

Bruce Mackenzie, retired director of customer service of the Hamilton Conservation Authority, is active in various

naturalist organizations in the Hamilton area and is deeply involved with the Save the Wood Lot project in Grimsby.



◀ A rock climber (see arrow) defying gravity under the "chin of the lion."



After the fall: the climber hanging below the "chin" after suddenly dropping 15 m. ▶