

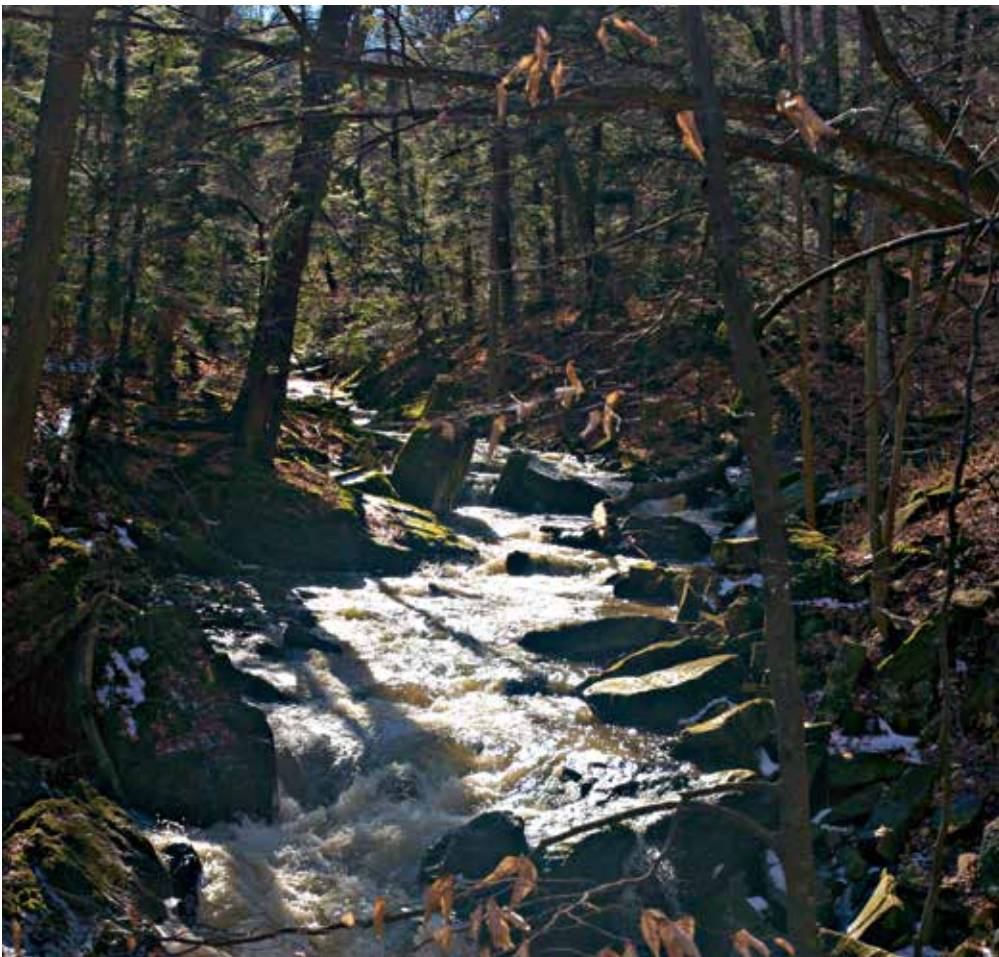
A person wearing a dark jacket and blue pants is seen from behind, walking up a wooden staircase in a forest. The ground is covered in brown leaves and some snow. The trees are bare, indicating late winter or early spring. The sky is blue with some light clouds.

A Late Winter Hike to Beamer Falls

Written & photographed by Chris Mills

THE FIRST HARBINGERS OF SPRING are usually underway by mid-March in Niagara Region's Niagara Escarpment. Not too cold, not too wet, maybe enough sunshine to break out the sunglasses. In spite of a very poor attempt by winter last year, ungraciously savaged by the notorious El Niño, my wife and I headed for Beamer Memorial Conservation Area on the edge of Grimsby to try our chances at a late winter hike. Instead of snow boots, we brought hiking boots at my wife's insistence. Clearly she was prescient.

This stairway descends from the viewing platform at Beamer Memorial Conservation Area to Forty Mile Creek.



▲ A rivulet from the Niagara Escarpment has created a wonderful cliff face of ice.

◀ Dolomite boulders that fell from the Escarpment rest at the edge of Forty Mile Creek.

Beamer Memorial Conservation Area has several notable benefits. It's not too terribly challenging when it comes to icy slopes and treacherous terrain, but it has its share of climbing and clambering so that you're not merely taking a walk in the park.

Here's the key, you'll find not just one cascading falls, but two seven-metre-high falls on this one creek. Both are visible from a car park on Ridge Road West. But at my wife's request we proposed to access them from the north through Grimsby.

The trail is the Beamers Falls Side Trail, part of the Bruce Trail, and is thus protected not just by the Niagara Peninsula



▲ View of the Lower Falls on Forty Mile Creek.

► Gibson House at the start of the trail is circa 1860 and has been designated of heritage significance by the Town of Grimsby.



► A closer view of the Lower Falls with its two kinds of cascades.

Conservation Authority who will smack you for walking on trilliums, but also by more than 100 private landowners who protect their property in order for the hiking public to use it.

It's called voluntary stewardship and it's a wonderful thing in Ontario, unless you park your car somewhere along the trail as I did once and found myself under the wrath of an elderly woman with a phone threatening to call the police unless I moved my butt. Hikers however are tolerated.

History

The area was settled back in the American Revolution days when Loyalists and Pennsylvania Dutch arrived to civilize it away from the local Iroquois. Very little data exists of how the original inhabitants felt about this, although 30-odd years later they would fight alongside the British to

keep the United States from taking over in 1812. The Town of Grimsby was incorporated in 1921, and to this day has retained its town status rather than become a city. Thus its charm is deliberately and shamelessly protected.

Before that, say 470 million years or so, it was under a lake that covered everything

in a basin that was centred in Michigan and fanned out across the entire Great Lakes region from there.

The sheer quantity of organic material and sea life in the form of fossilized bodies that died and sank to the bottom of the lake over millions of years became the limestone base upon



which layer upon layer of sandstone, dolomite and shale was built, all topped by impermeable Lockport Dolomite that caps the Niagara Escarpment in this area.

When the lake withdrew some 300 million years ago to form a large plain, a bowl was left behind. What makes this interesting is that

streams flowed over the rim and waves crashed against the base of this Escarpment. Erosion undermined the softer under-layers of rock, which caused great blocks of the overlying dolomite to break off and tumble into the bowl leaving the rocky face of the Escarpment that we see today.

Modified by the retreat



◀ The spring melt can fill the creek with dramatic volumes of water.

▶ Beamer Memorial Conservation Area and Forty Mile Creek are within Carolinian forest.

Niagara Parks chief gardener identified 909 different species of plants and ferns around Niagara Falls about 40 miles east. Over 300 species of birds have been identified including Turkey Vultures, Red-tailed hawks, Sparrow hawks, eagles, falcons and Ruffed Grouse.

Thus enthused for an invigorating commune with nature, we parked at the Coronation Park and Grimsby Lions Community Pool parking lot that's a couple hundred metres from the beginning of the trail up a quiet residential street at the end of which we found a historically-designated house, the 1860 Gibson House at 114 Gibson St., Grimsby.

If you follow the Bruce Trail markers reading "Iroquoia Section" (see Grimsby Map 5 in the Bruce Trail Guide) you'll find yourself on a trail above and beside the Forty Mile Creek cascading joyfully and noisily. It's about a 1 ¼ km hike to the falls.

Thanks to the spring melt, the lower falls is a daunting and cheering sight since it falls from a high distance. Well worth the effort to get there. The upper falls is about 100 metres past it, and according to reliable sources readily viewed from the parking lot off Ridge Road West. However the trail looked a bit dicey and the afternoon was getting late, so we turned around, but will make the effort another time to have a look at it, although it has a more leisurely drop in a staircase kind of cascade.

You can park atop the Niagara Escarpment in the Beamer Memorial Conservation Area parking

of ice ages, the most recent of which was about 13,000 years ago, fast-flowing rivers cut the chasm for Beamers Falls at one of the highest points in the peninsula just above Grimsby and opposite 200-metre-high Grimsby Mountain on the east side.

What geologists around the world understand is that this makes the Escarpment literally a geologist's paradise where millions of years of earth history unfold in visible layers you don't even need a rock hammer to see.

Forty Mile Creek is one of those rivers (so named evidently for the first forty families of Loyalists to cross the border to found Newcastle, later called Niagara-on-the-Lake. Or the distance from the U.S. border depending on whom you ask).

Botany

Equally unique about the side trail is that it's entirely located within the northernmost reaches of what's called Carolinian Forest. This is an old-growth

forest of Sugar Maples and Red Oaks, Hemlock and centuries-old White Cedar that produces such diversity in wildlife as the Tufted Titmouse, Louisiana Water Thrush and an abundance of White-tailed deer.

It's so diverse that it was designated in 1984 by the Carolinian Canada Coalition to be one of 38 critical natural areas in need of protection, not just for birders, hikers and nature purists, but also for natural and scientific interest. Much earlier, in 1894, the



lot off Ridge Road West and use the Grimsby Point Side Trail. A wood staircase built into the cliff allows hikers to descend to the creek, which cuts about half the hike. You could also approach from the car park around the corner on Ridge Road West whereby you barely need leave your car to see both cascades. Parking is limited to five cars.

Hawk Watch

Another point about the aforementioned Conservation Area parking lot is that this is where the hawk watchers gather in March. Those are exciting times.

Due to the rising currents that push over the Escarpment, tens of thousands

of hawks, eagles and falcons can be seen on their annual migration north in early spring. It's a natural funnel where raptor watchers flock, and during a typical Sunday you'll be hard pressed to find a place in the watchtower set in the middle of the meadow. Birders fill their books with not just sightings but volumes of sightings.

Bring running shoes to change into following the hike. They'll save your car's interior.

Chris Mills writes and photographs for a variety of publications in Ontario. His last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "A Country Manor for Everheart," Winter 2015-16.