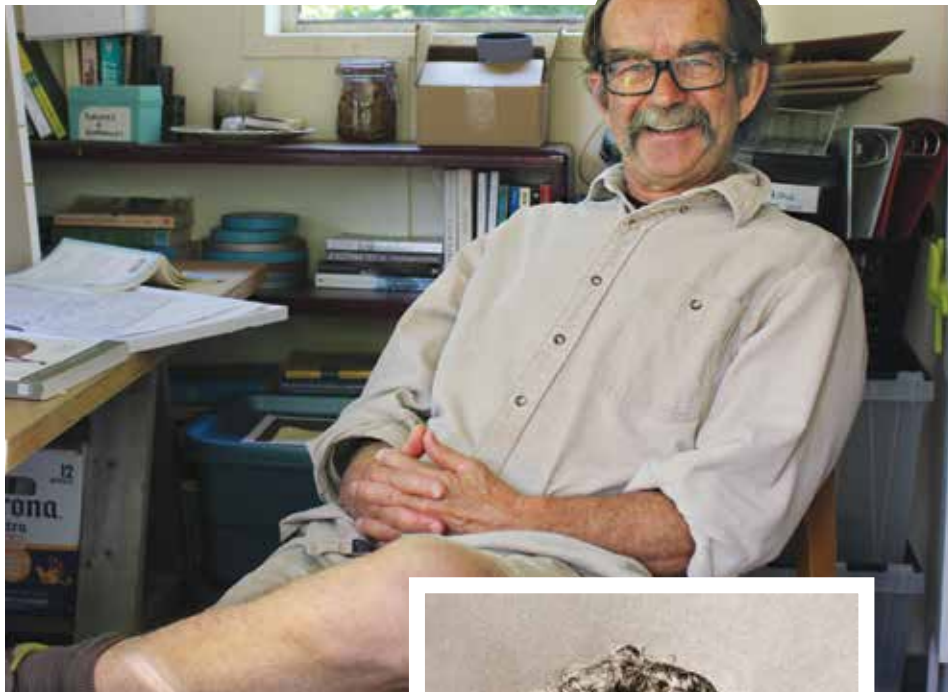


# Glorious Freedom: John Muir's Missing Months

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT BURCHER BY KEN HAIGH

Beaver Valley resident Robert Burcher is a professional photographer with a deep interest in history. He has written about Celtic explorers in the Great Lakes, Viking settlements in Newfoundland, and a possible connection between Louis Riel and a satchel found in the Meaford Museum. His latest quest is to re-trace the route of American environmentalist John Muir during his two-year sojourn in Canada.



▲ Robert Burcher of Beaver Valley.  
PHOTO BY KEN HAIGH.

**Ken Haigh [KH]:** In an otherwise well-documented life, the details about Muir's visit to Canada are rather sketchy. Why do you think that is?

**Robert Burcher [RB]:** I think the answer is fairly simple. Muir was a meticulous diarist throughout his life, but the mill he was working at in Trout Hollow, near Meaford, burned down in February 1866. I think all his notebooks must have been lost in the fire, and he never bothered to try and recreate them.

**KH:** He wasn't hiding the fact that he was a draft dodger during the Civil War?

**RB:** No, I don't think so. He was always very up front about his political convictions.

**KH:** What drew you to Muir's story?

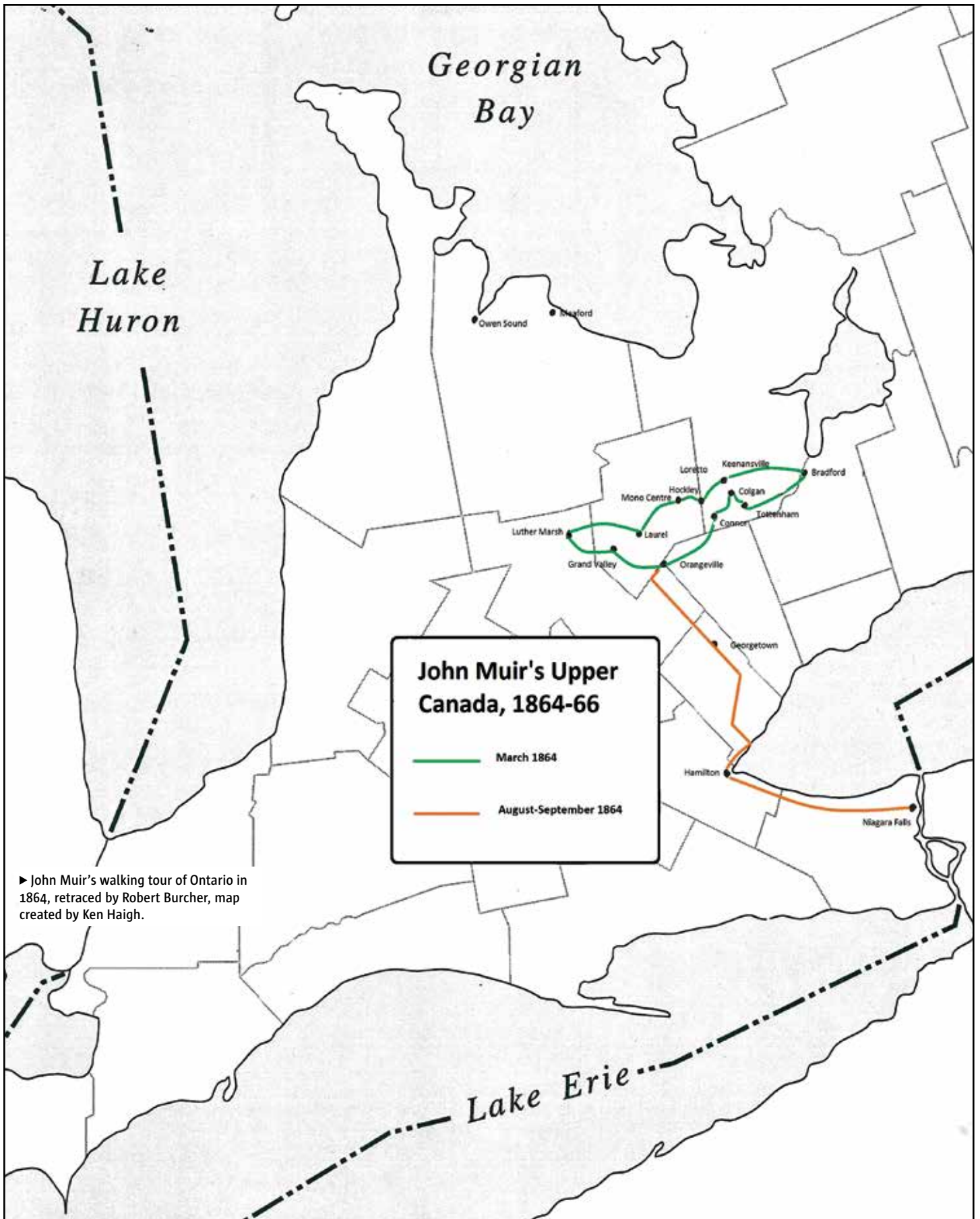
**RB:** When I was a teen my father gave me this book about two brothers hiking in the Sierra. I think he was trying to steer me toward the natural world and away from the suburban world of drugs and rock and roll. That book led me to books published by the Sierra Club [*which John Muir founded*] and eventually to Muir himself.

**KH:** Were you surprised when you moved to the Beaver Valley to discover a Muir connection?

**RB:** I was blown away. I thought, what's this guy doing up here? I eventually joined a group called the Canadian Friends of John Muir, *continued* ►



▲ John Muir by Carleton Watkins, circa 1895.  
University of the Pacific digital collections,  
courtesy Wikipedia.



**John Muir's Upper  
Canada, 1864-66**

— March 1864

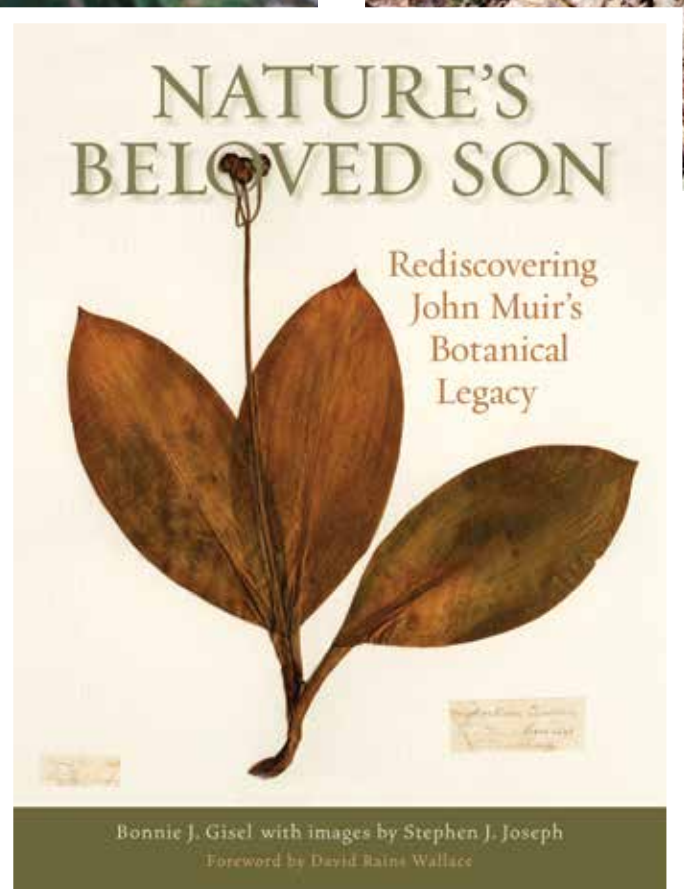
— August-September 1864

► John Muir's walking tour of Ontario in 1864, retraced by Robert Burcher, map created by Ken Haigh.



▲ Calypso orchid, "Fairy Slipper." By Jeremy Wade, courtesy Wikipedia

► From *Nature's Beloved Son* by Bonnie Gisel and Stephen J. Joseph. Used by permission of Heyday, [www.heydaybooks.com](http://www.heydaybooks.com).



and we did our best to tell the story of Muir's time in Canada, which was largely overlooked by his biographers. One of the principal questions was "How did Muir come to southern Ontario?" The standard answer was that he crossed into Canada at Sault Sainte Marie and walked around Georgian Bay. I find this unlikely. There were no roads or railroads to follow at that time, and it was late winter. Another possibility was that he took a boat, but one of our members, the marine historian Scott Cameron, searched all the passenger lists and found no record of Muir travelling by ship. In Muir's last letter

before he left home, he wrote "I take to the cars in two hours." I think he meant railway cars, which would suggest he took a train to Toronto, crossing the border at Windsor, and then headed north from Toronto to Bradford where we know he stayed with a family called the Campbells. This fits the timeline better.

**KH:** We know Muir arrived in Bradford in March 1864 and Meaford in September 1864. That leaves a gap of seven months. What was Muir doing during this time?

**RB:** Muir's hero was a botanist named Alexander von Humboldt, who travelled

extensively in the Amazon and Orinoco River basins, collecting plant specimens. Everywhere Muir went in southern Ontario, he carried a plant press on his back and collected specimens too. In fact, his nickname was "Botany." He shipped this collection to a friend in the

States, and, by some miracle, it has survived. Every specimen Muir collected had a label recording when and where it was found. It occurred to me that I could retrace his steps by following the labels and connecting the dots.



▲ Hart's Tongue Fern, 2012, identified by Bob Bowles. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

**KH:** How were you able to see these specimens?

**RB:** In 2008, a book called *Nature's Beloved Son* was published, which featured colour plates of selected specimens taken from the collection now held at the John Muir National Historic Site in Martinez, California. Looking at these illustrations gave me the idea of retracing Muir's route. I contacted the author, Bonnie Gisel, who put me in touch with the curators at the historic site. They sent me a complete list of the specimens held in their collection. I isolated the 236 specimens collected in Ontario and put them in

chronological order. Here's an example [he shows me the list]: "Honey Locust, Sept.5/64, dooryard in Hamilton." Not all the labels were as specific as this one, but I was able to follow his general route.

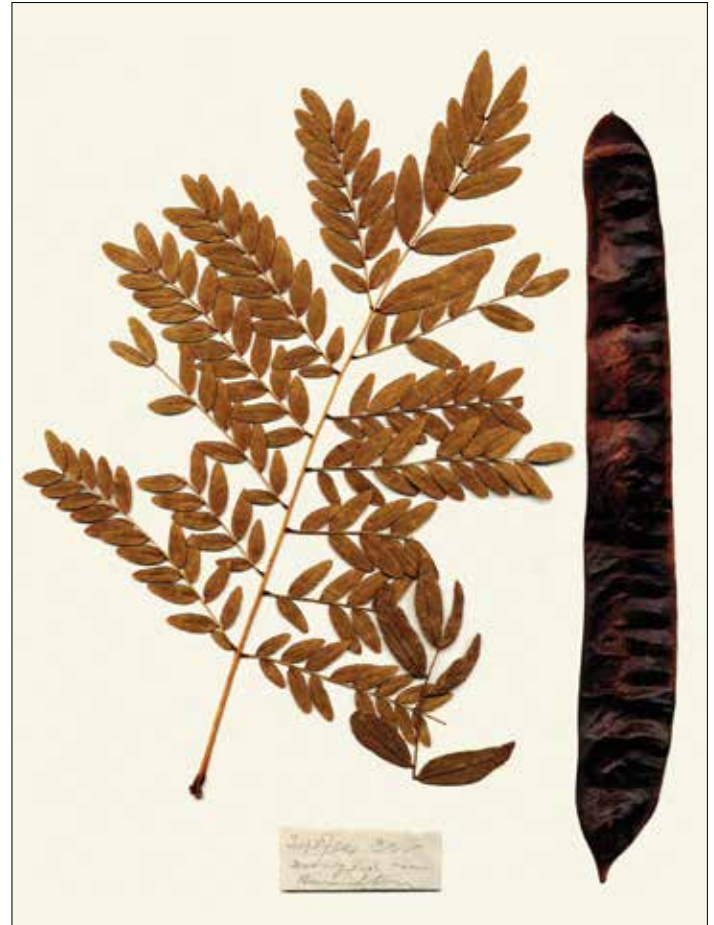
**KH:** Where did he go?

**RB:** He made two trips. The first was a loop through Simcoe and Dufferin Counties. It was on this trip, somewhere in the Holland Marsh that he discovered the Calypso Orchid, which he wrote about and which became his first published article. His second trip in August/September 1864, followed the route of Trafalgar Road

Three plates from Muir's specimens. Images from the book *Nature's Beloved Son* by Bonnie Gisel and Stephen J. Joseph. Used by permission of Heyday, [www.heydaybooks.com](http://www.heydaybooks.com).



▲ Leatherwood. The left label reads: "Leather wood, *Dirca palustris*, *Thymelaeaceae*." The right label reads: "Simcoe Co Canada Apr 20th 64."



▲ Honey Locust. Label reads: "Sept. 5/64 Canada. Dooryard near Hamilton."

down to Hamilton, where he had arranged to meet his brother Dan. They toured the Hamilton-Dundas area, and visited Niagara Falls, which was a huge tourist attraction even then. Then they headed north to Meaford, where Dan had found them work in a mill. Muir continued

to botanize in his free time, roaming the Escarpment as far as Owen Sound, where he collected a Hart's Tongue Fern.

**KH:** Muir was quite successful at the mill.

**RB:** He was a mechanical genius. The owners recognized this and put him in charge.

But there was the fire in 1866, and all of Muir's hard work literally went up in smoke. By then, the Civil War was over, and he decided to return to the United States.

**KH:** Was Muir's time in Canada important to him?

**RB:** I think his time in Canada

was very important. He was independent for the first time in his life. He wrote that he "travelled in glorious freedom." And it was here he developed many of the ideas about conservation that he would later put into practice with the Sierra Club.



▲ Wild Calla. The label at left reads: "Rhizome of *Calla palustris*, Araceae." The right label reads: "Devils half acre, 40 m NE from Hamilton Canada."

*John Muir (1838-1914) was a Scottish-American writer and environmentalist, an early advocate for the preservation of wild spaces, the founder of the Sierra Club, and is considered the father of the American National Parks System. His writings are still in print, and can be read online*

*at [http://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/](http://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/).*

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