

# Freedom in Nature

Words & photos  
by Gloria Hildebrandt

**D**uring the COVID-19 pandemic, self isolation has not been an extreme hardship for me. It hasn't even been a huge change for me. I work from home, I usually take a daily walk around my own property, and in my spare time I like to garden or do chores related to my Managed Forest Plan. So other than food shopping, socializing with friends, and working on future stories for the magazine, I really don't get out much. I love being home.

This challenging time has caused me to increase my appreciation for this gift of land that I have been given by my deceased parents. I am fortunate to be able to walk freely outside, in nature, without the risk of

getting too close to people.

I have felt sympathy for others who have been confined in their homes and town-sized yards, with parks and trails closed. I can only imagine the stress they might have felt from these restrictions.

I read a line somewhere that has stuck with me ever since. I've changed it slightly to reflect how I'm currently thinking: Sometimes you look after your land, and sometimes your land looks after you.

Mercifully, I haven't had COVID-19, but I have of course occasionally come down with bad colds and the flu. After recovering, my energy has been low and I've felt weak. Still, I like to get outside. Sometimes I have only been able to walk to a bench by the pond before returning home. Each day, I have felt stronger and have been able to walk a bit further, until eventually I feel back to normal and can walk everywhere as before. When I'm weak, there is no way I can work in the forest. I can only let the forest restore me. When I can't look after it, it can look after me. The peace, the quiet, the scents, sounds and textures seem to be healing.

During the pandemic, with hospitals full, staff overworked and under equipped, and elective surgeries postponed, I have been conscious of the need to stay away from needing



▲ One of the new replacement bridges that were built last year. During the spring runoff, this bridge is needed to keep your feet dry.

medical care. This was a particularly bad time to break a limb, for example. I took care to walk where it's safe and tried to remember to take a supportive walking stick. Many of the trails through the property are rocky or can become so deep with mud that your booted foot gets stuck and it's difficult to pull out of it. I never want to break a leg out back but when hospitals are full it's particularly foolish to take risks. This was not a good time to need a rescue, for instance.

I'm not a fair-weather walker, either. I like to go out every day, no matter whether windy, wet or wild. As long as I'm properly dressed, I can enjoy all conditions. What I enjoy less, is having to deal with dogs' paws after a ramble, when sometimes they need a quick rinse in the bathtub.

## Managed Forest

I accept that there will be times when I can't do the hard work my Forest Plan requires. Sometimes I can't manage to keep the trails mowed, overhanging tree branches cut back from the trail, firewood

brought back to the house, branches piled into brush piles, invasive plants weeded out, bridges kept in perfect condition. When all is well, the weather is good, insects few and energy levels are high, good progress can be made.

Because I'm committed to being a good steward of my land, I want to do a good job of following my Managed Forest Plan, which was begun by my father. Because I'm still learning what to do and how best to do it, I searched online for a Facebook group to support forest owners. When I couldn't find one, I started one called Ontario Managed Forest Keepers. To my surprise and pleasure, more than 50 people have joined the group. It is open to anyone interested, and the posts are public. There is no such thing as a stupid question, and the group is intended for sharing tips and techniques. While not a very active group, some people have already indicated that they've learned something new from it. If you have any interest in forest management, I invite you to join us.



▲ A walk around the back. Thomas approaching Horse Chestnut trees in bloom.