

A man with a beard and glasses, wearing a light blue long-sleeved shirt, khaki pants, and a tan hat, is climbing a wooden ladder in a forest. He is holding a long wooden pole. The ladder is leaning against a large rock. In the background, another person is visible on a higher part of the ladder. The forest is lush with green trees and foliage. A large tree trunk is in the foreground on the left.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL

Completing
the Bruce Trail
During COVID

BY SUE HORNER



◀ Doug Sloan climbs down a ladder from a rock face on what he calls his “champagne” hike in 2015, when he finished his 50th end-to-end. Photo permission of Doug Sloan.

The Bruce Trail is Canada’s oldest and longest marked footpath, stretching 900 km along the Niagara Escarpment, from Queenston Heights to Tobermory. The Escarpment itself continues through Manitoulin Island. From the trail’s creation, the idea of hiking its entire length, known as an “end-to-end,” has caught the imagination of hikers.



▲ Robyn Phillips, far right, and her golfing buddies Diane Ruygrok and Jen Van Tiggelen tackle the last hike of the Niagara section in their first end-to-end. PHOTO COURTESY OF JEN VAN TIGGELEN.



For Robyn Phillips, golf was a lifeline during the pandemic restrictions of 2020. As she finished a round in September with the regular partners in her bubble, Diane Ruygrok and Jen Van Tiggelen, they looked to the looming winter with dismay. What would they do without golf, travel and dinners out? Phillips had always loved

hiking, and when she heard about someone who had walked the entire Bruce Trail, the idea struck a chord. None of the three had done extensive hiking, but all were active, fit and adventurous. Tackling the trail section by section seemed doable spread over two years.

When golf season ended, the three invested in good

hiking boots and headed for the southern terminus at Queenston Heights. Between November 3 and December 3 last fall, they logged 83 km over weekly hikes to complete the Niagara section. Their end-to-end was underway.

A Hare-Brained Scheme?

Phillips and her friends are among many who flocked to

the Bruce Trail in 2020. “More than ever, people have been seeking a connection to the natural world, to find solace and rejuvenation,” said Bruce Trail Conservancy (BTC) CEO Michael McDonald in *Bruce Trail Magazine*.

Finding solace in nature is one thing. But the trail is often physically demanding and weather can make it



▲ Cin Johnston loves all the moss and greenery of the crevices found along the Bruce Trail, here in the Sydenham section. PHOTO BY CALVIN SNOW.



▲ Diane Ruygrok and Robyn Phillips take a breath before a steep set of stairs near Ball's Falls Conservation Area. PHOTO BY JEN VAN TIGGELEN.

treacherous. You might encounter bugs, poison ivy, rattlesnakes and other hazards. And who starts a journey that takes several weeks to several years?

Walter Soroka was the first, and he didn't waste any time; he set off right after the ribbon-cutting ceremony that officially opened the trail on June 10, 1967. At the time,

the trail covered 643 km, and the journey took him 14 days. When he finished, his comment says much about the experience: "I would like to make a public apology to my wife, Laurie, for charging off on a hare-brained scheme in the first place," he told *Bruce Trail Magazine*. Hare-brained or not, many have followed Soroka's footsteps.

In 2019, BTC gave a record 218 official numbers to members who completed an end-to-end, more than in any of previous 10 years. In total, BTC has recognized 3,885 end-to-ends over its 51 years of operation. They did not issue any numbers this year for those who began during the lockdown, since the trail was closed for part

of the year. No doubt, many more people have completed the trail without fanfare.

BTC doesn't track speed for safety reasons, and "completing the entire 900-km Bruce Trail in a single trip is a major endeavour requiring significant physical, mental and logistic preparation," warns the BTC website. Still, there's always someone

who is all about speed.

Self-described “veteran endurance athlete” John Harrison Pockler had no races in 2020 due to COVID-19 and was looking for a challenge and a way to keep training. Pockler broke the record for the fastest end-to-end, finishing his in September 2020 in nine days, 17 hours, two minutes and 25 seconds. The venture involved two and half months of planning, a base crew of six support people, and an RV.

More typically, hikers will take about two years. That’s the plan for runner Cin Johnston, whose first end-to-end is part of her bucket list.

Once Cin retired in 2017, she decided to hike the entire trail, sparked by taking part in a 30K “Survival Run” through parts of the Iroquoia section. Cin and her husband had become good friends with Calvin Snow and his wife through a running club in Milton. Calvin, too, had recently retired and wanted another adventure. With both spouses still working, he and Cin joined forces that fall and started in Niagara. After a delay due to knee surgery, Calvin still has the Bruce Peninsula to cover. The plan is to finish in spring 2021, with their spouses joining in for the final leg.

Once is Not Enough

As for the most end-to-ends, the record is 50 times, set by Doug Sloan, a lifetime member since about 1995. He started hiking seriously in 1990 and was smitten, completing his first end-to-end three years later at age 52.

“Hiking has a quality akin to meditation, among other things,” Sloan explains. “You can devote one part of your mind to the actual hiking whilst pondering the

COVID-19 CAUSES CHANGE

The pandemic forced serious changes to BTC’s hiking program in the early months of 2020 and beyond, including support for end-to-ends.

In March and April, CEO Michael McDonald urged people to stay home, stay safe and stay away from the Bruce Trail. BTC cancelled organized hikes and in-person events in March, as well as the Trail Angels transportation program that supported end-to-ends. Many partner organizations such as conservation areas closed or limited access to parking and trails.

By mid-May, BTC coordinated trail re-openings with its partners, urging hikers to keep two metres away from others, move aside to allow others to pass and stick to local areas. Most of the Bruce Trail was open by early September, and BTC updated guidelines in November to limit group hikes to 10, suggest masks and advise checking for closures. At this writing, organized hikes through local clubs remained suspended.



▲ This stone cairn marks the southern end of the Bruce Trail in Queenston Heights. A matching one marks the northern end in Tobermory. PHOTO BY SUE HORNER.



▲ Jen Van Tiggelen's Golden Retriever, Gracie, recovers after the first 20-km hike of their end-to-end in November 2020.
PHOTO BY JEN VAN TIGGELEN.



► Calvin Snow enjoys a wintry moment on the Bruce Trail in Beaver Valley. He left home on a clear day, but was prepared for changing conditions.
PHOTO BY CIN JOHNSTON.

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◀ Webster's Falls are among many beautiful waterfalls in the Iroquoia section. In the early 1800s, Joseph Webster built the Ashbourne Flour Mill just above the falls that now bear his family's name. PHOTO BY SUE HORNER.

▶ Water tumbles along 30 Mile Creek near the 73.2 km mark of the trail in the Niagara section. PHOTO BY JEN VAN TIGGELEN.

▼ A white blaze clearly marks the main paths along the Bruce Trail. This one is near where hikers first enter the forest after touching the Southern Cairn to start the end-to-end journey. PHOTO BY SUE HORNER.



great and small questions of life. Or have lively conversations. It's also a great community of hikers."

Over the years, he's mixed up how he tackled the challenge, doing the trail in 12 Saturday hikes in 2004 and a "double-double" (four end-to-ends) in 2005. That meant hiking out and back to his car every day to finish two end-to-ends in 31 days. At the end of this first double, he took eight days off and did it again, this time in 29 days.

Sloan finished his 50th end-to-end on July 18, 2015, which he figures brings his total to the equivalent of

walking around the world. He's still doing regular 16 km- to 28 km-hikes, although stopped doing official end-to-ends. "Had to give all those friends of mine trying to catch up something to shoot for, you know!"

As for Robyn Phillips and her friends, their eyes are firmly set on finishing one end-to-end.

To Make It Official:

- 1) You must be a member of the Bruce Trail Conservancy.
- 2) Log when and where you start and end each day; a separate page for each of the nine club sections helps.

- 3) Submit the log for each club as you go to get a badge then, or request all badges at the end. Submit your trail log to BTC with the date you completed your end-to-end, with \$15 plus shipping to cover your badge, certificate and processing. If you want all badges at once, the cost is \$75 plus shipping. **NEV**

Sue Horner wrote "Risky Roads: Road ecology measures step in when animal instincts and urban sprawl collide," for Niagara Escarpment Views, Winter 2016-2017. She has hiked about 10 km of the Bruce Trail.



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