

HIKES ABO

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED

A Bald Eagle soars at eye level off the cliffs of Skinner's Bluff. Its white head and tail catch the sunlight as it glides along. Spread below is a carpet of colour: yellow, orange, red, purple, green, and brown treetops. The blues and greys of Georgian Bay sparkle. Griffith, Hay, and White Cloud Islands stand sentinel at the mouth of Colpoy's Bay. The Niagara Escarpment cliffs range to the north, mirroring the ramparts where we stand.

WE BIG BAY

BY SANDRA J. HOWE

Islands in Georgian Bay seen from the Niagara Escarpment on the Bruce Peninsula: White Cloud in the foreground, Hay behind, Griffith at the far right.



▲ A soaring Bald Eagle seen from above at Skinner's Bluff.

► Malcolm Bluff and Jones Bluff northwest on the Escarpment, seen from Skinner's Bluff. Jones Bluff, right, is in Neyaashiinigmiing, Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation also known as Cape Croker.

Located 30 km north of Owen Sound and 15 km east of Warton, Skinner's Bluff Nature Reserve is a 130-acre/53-hectare property owned by the Bruce Trail Conservancy. The main trail follows the cliffs which form the eastern and northern reserve boundaries. This reserve protects and provides for public access to spectacular views and fascinating ecology. It is a prime example of the Bruce Trail Conservancy's (BTC) Mission: "Preserving a ribbon of wilderness for everyone, forever."

The Chris Walker Side Trail completes a 2.5 km loop following the western and southern perimeter. Chris Walker was a dedicated volunteer who helped secure this property purchase, and design and build the trail. In 2007, this route was named to honour his 30 years of BTC service. Chris passed away later that year. Skinner's Bluff was one of Chris' favourite walks.

Skinner's Bluff

Escarpment rock outcroppings, moss-covered boulders, and shallow crevices are

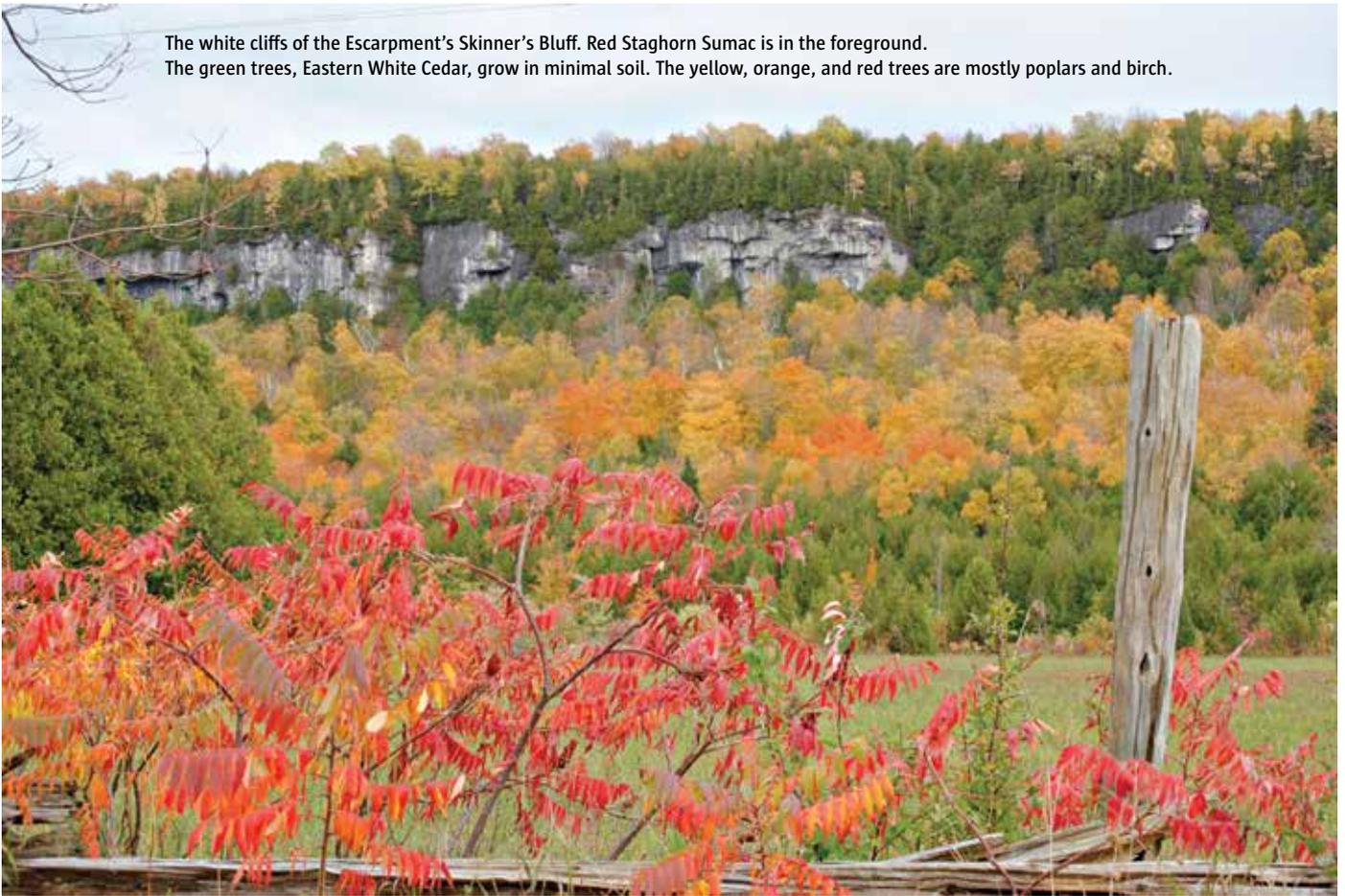
scattered throughout this area. Colourful Sugar Maples, slender white birch, and bonsai-like leatherwood shrubs line part of the trail. A zig-zag cedar rail fence marks the western boundary of the nature reserve. Ahead a line of ancient cedars highlights the Escarpment edge. Left of the trail junction there is a breath-taking lookout, a wonderful place to picnic, write, sketch, or just sit and absorb the beauty.

The vista has changed dramatically over millennia. The water level of Georgian Bay has at times been much

lower, making the islands just hills on the main land. During the last ice age, the whole area was covered by a thick sheet of ice. Post-glacial Lake Algonquin lapped near the base of these cliffs. Hay, White Cloud, and Griffith Islands were then completely submerged.

Returning to the trail, we continue along the main Bruce Trail near the cliff edge. Mighty Red Oaks tower above us. Polypody ferns hug the rock face. Bigleaf Aster carpet the forest floor among fallen leaves. There is a deep crevice to cross carefully to access

The white cliffs of the Escarpment's Skinner's Bluff. Red Staghorn Sumac is in the foreground. The green trees, Eastern White Cedar, grow in minimal soil. The yellow, orange, and red trees are mostly poplars and birch.





▲ The Slough of Despond is a remnant wetland of post-glacial Lake Algonquin. The ancient beach traps water in this area creating ideal wetland conditions. The open water area is decreasing in size as plants and sediments fill it.

Phil Howard of Owen Sound enjoying the view from Skinner's Bluff looking east to Big Bay and Georgian Bay beyond.





▲ Big Bay Sideroad descends the Escarpment going north to Big Bay.

an open dolostone precipice. Griffith Island on the left, the expanse of Georgian Bay, and in the foreground the curve of Big Bay, are spread below.

From this viewpoint, a short walk returns to the parking area. The Bruce Trail continues east on Colpoy's Range Road down the Escarpment. This road is not maintained for vehicular traffic, and is unsafe to drive. A second loop trail starts at this same parking location, exploring south through field and forest. It is a fascinating walk, and includes another beautiful BTC property, McNabb Nature Reserve. Dogs are not permitted on this trail.

McNabb Nature Reserve

McNabb Nature Reserve is a 105-acre/42-hectare property purchased by the BTC in 1984. It is hardwood forest with a right-of-way across neighbouring farms. It adjoins a vast tract of Grey Sauble Conservation lands which protect the Slough of Despond, an Area of Natural and Scientific

Interest. The rich diversity of flora, fauna, and geology make this 5.4-km loop hike worth the effort. Climb the stile to head south along the Slough of Despond Side Trail.

The trail crosses open fields passing hedgerows of old maples. Horses, cattle, and sometimes deer, stand watch in the pastures. A final stile leads into the McNabb property. The Slough side trail is on the left. Maple, beech, cherry, and ash are the main tree species here. Bracken fern have gone brown with early frosts. Dry leaves crackle underfoot. The wind whispers in the treetops. The McNabb Nature Reserve is a peaceful place of quiet beauty.

The trail winds through forest and skirts fields until it emerges atop Esther's Bluff, a cliff edge that faces southwest toward Kemble and Owen Sound. Far below spreads the Slough of Despond wetland complex. This was once a huge lagoon separated from post-glacial Lake Algonquin by a baymouth bar, an ancient beach ridge. This ridge is

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▲ Erosion and other geological processes cause the formation of crevices along the Escarpment. Stepping across these gives access to the east lookout at Skinner's Bluff. Note the Eastern White Cedar growing out of the crevice.



▲ Phil Howard and Ariel Barkley of Owen Sound look east from Esther's Bluff toward the Slough of Despond.



visible as a line of cedar trees at the north end of the wetland toward Big Bay. Over the centuries, sediments and organic matter have filled in the lagoon until only a small area of open water remains.

There are more dramatic views along the cliff edge. The President's Path side trail is on the right. Following snowmobile trails and field edges, the trail meanders back toward McNabb Nature Reserve. Only a BTC sign marks the transition from

Grey Sauble Conservation to BTC lands. Tall, straight young maples make the forest glow in yellow. Soon we are back at the stile emerging into open farmland. The blazed trail returns to the road.

To finish this tour of Big Bay hikes, some final views are in order. Drive on Colpoy's Range Road west, Centre Road south, Concession 24 east, and go north on Big Bay Sideroad. A stunning view of Big Bay, and the islands and cliffs beyond stretch out before the

Escarpment descends. In Big Bay, you can visit the beach and note the present-day beach ridge. Heading west on Grey Road 1 reveals Skinner's Bluff from below. Watch for Bald Eagles, Turkey Vultures and ravens soaring along these magnificent cliffs. **NEV**

Sandra J. Howe's last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was "Tag & Release: Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy's Annual Monarch Butterfly Festival" in Summer 2017.



▲ The view east along the cliff face at Skinner's Bluff. Hard dolostone caprock on the Escarpment resists weathering while softer layers below erode away, creating overhanging cliffs. Griffith Island in Georgian Bay is in the far distance.



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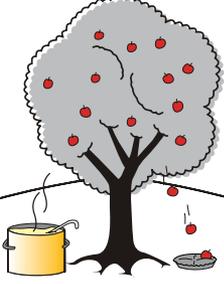



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