



Saving Nottawasaga LIGHTHOUSE

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY SANDRA J. HOWE

Nottawasaga Lighthouse protected ships from dangerous shoals at Collingwood harbour, since 1858. The lighthouse is wrapped in protective plastic tarp, awaiting restoration. The island is off limits without special permission.



From the top of the Niagara Escarpment on the Blue Mountains near Collingwood, the view over Nottawasaga Bay is spectacular. Turquoise waters sparkle in the sunlight. A series of islands is visible along the coast. The largest is Nottawasaga Island, and its lighthouse still rises proudly at the northern tip. The tower gleams white but is in serious trouble. Without the help of the Nottawasaga Lighthouse Preservation Society, this beautiful historic structure will be lost forever.

In the mid-1800s, marine traffic was thriving on Georgian Bay and the Great Lakes. European settlement was forcing First Nations peoples further north. Rail lines were connecting communities across what is now southern Ontario. Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries were developing. Economies were booming, and goods and services were in high demand. Most people and goods still travelled by water, and shipwrecks were an increasing issue with loss of life and merchandise. The need for navigational aids became very clear. It was time to build lighthouses.

Nottawasaga Lighthouse was one of the first lighthouses built on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. Called Imperial Towers, they were built between 1855 and 1859 by John Brown, a wealthy stonemason and quarry operator from Thorold in the Niagara Region. Limestone cut from the Niagara Escarpment was shipped to each site in huge blocks, shaped by hand, and lifted into place for the massive stone towers and accompanying homes. The work proved more difficult than expected with shipwrecks, construction delays, and costs far over budget. Of the 11 towers planned, only six were completed: Point Clark, Chantry Island, Cove Island, Griffith Island, Nottawasaga Island, and Christian Island. Most later lighthouses were built of wood, a more manageable material.

Collingwood's Guardian

Nottawasaga Lighthouse was first lit in 1858 to mark the dangerous shoals leading into Collingwood harbour. Collingwood, first known as Hen and Chickens for the shape of its local islands, was



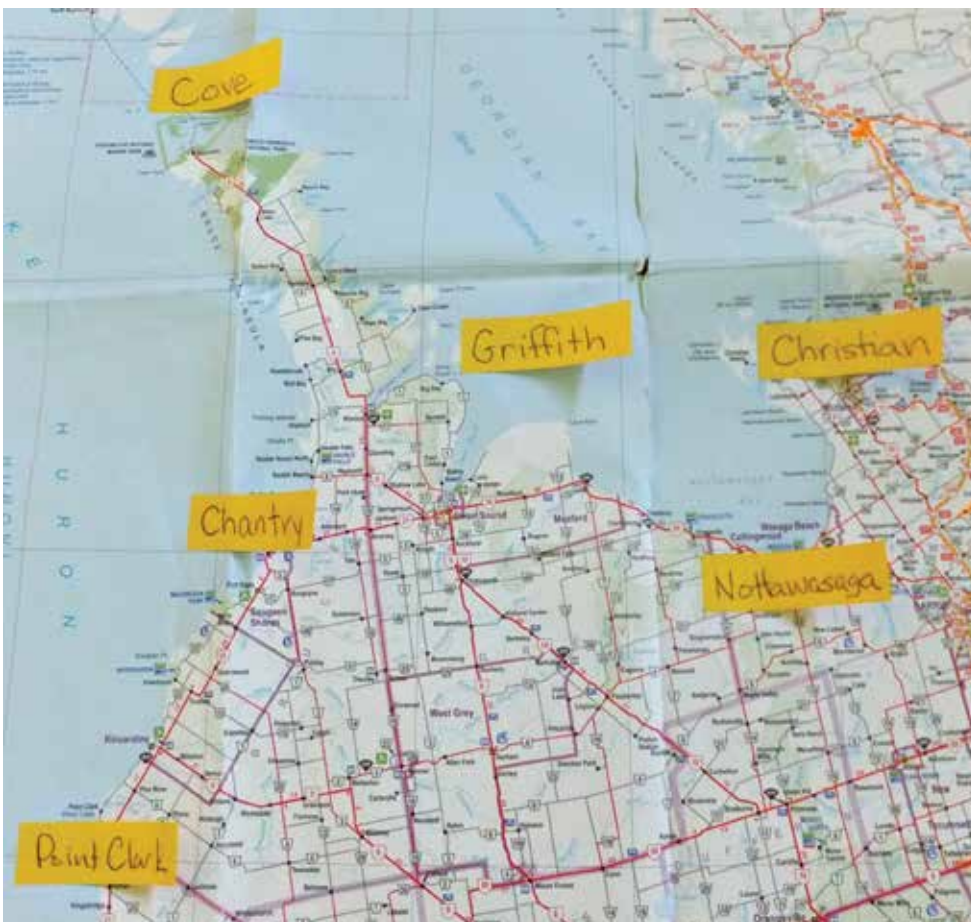
▲ The view across Nottawasaga Bay from the summit of Blue Mountain Ski Resort on the Niagara Escarpment near Collingwood. Nottawasaga Island and Lighthouse are visible at the centre of the photo.



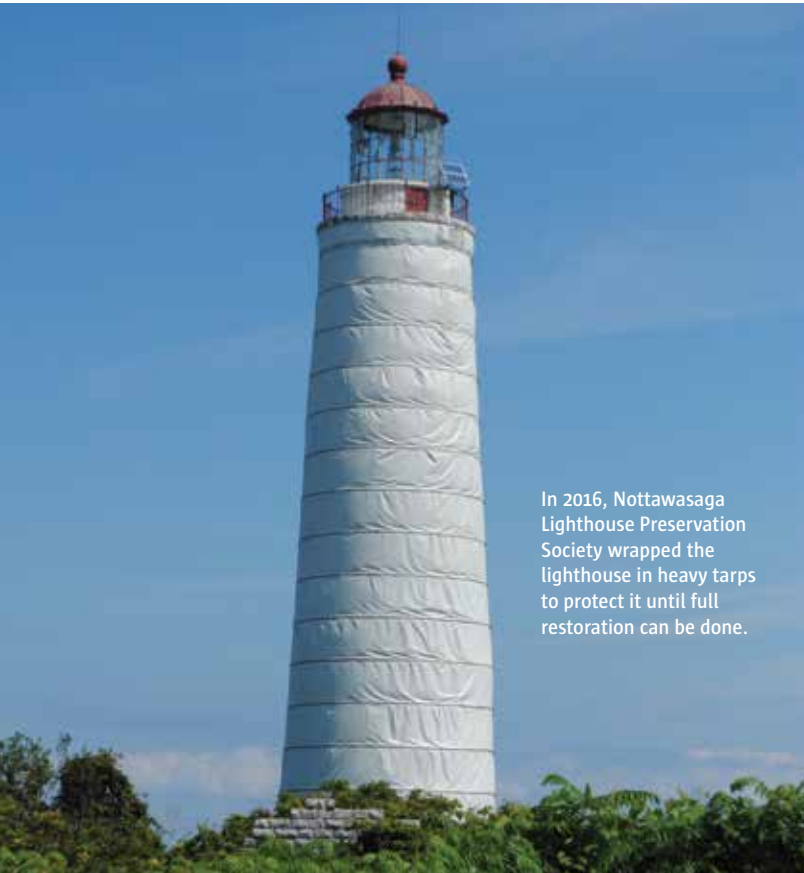
► Nottawasaga Lighthouse Preservation Society members in the lighthouse lantern room atop the tower, from left, Robert Square, Stephen Emo, Andrew Karsgaard.



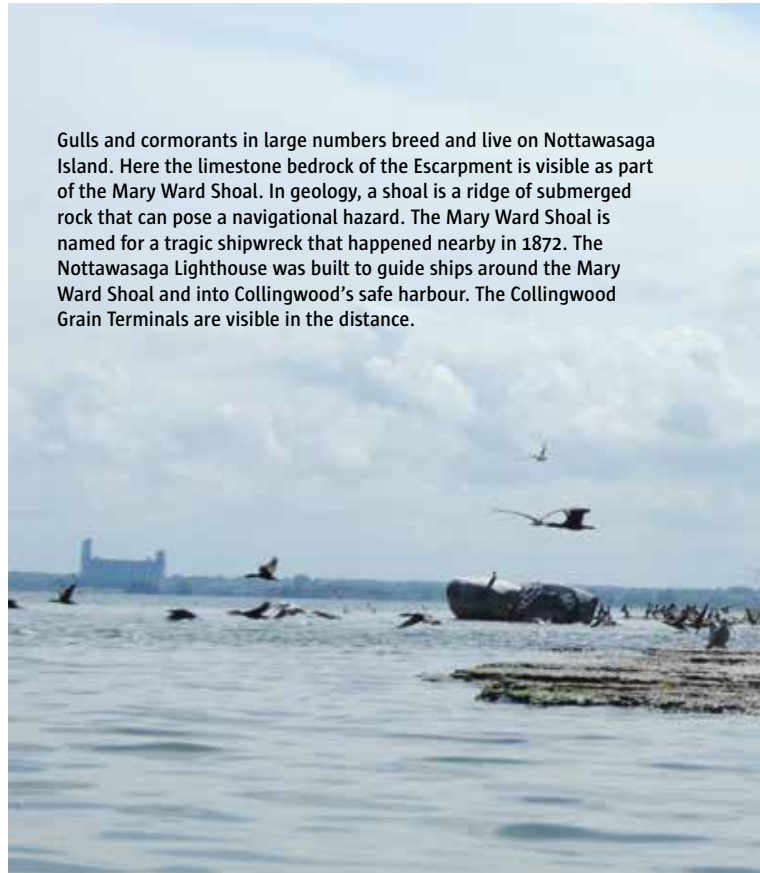
▲ Dennis Stier of Southampton kayaks near Nottawasaga Island. To the west the Escarpment rises inland from Craileith in the Town of Blue Mountains.



◀ Road map showing locations of the six Imperial Tower Lighthouses built on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay between 1855 and 1859. All are still standing, and Point Clark and Chantry Island are fully restored and open to the public.



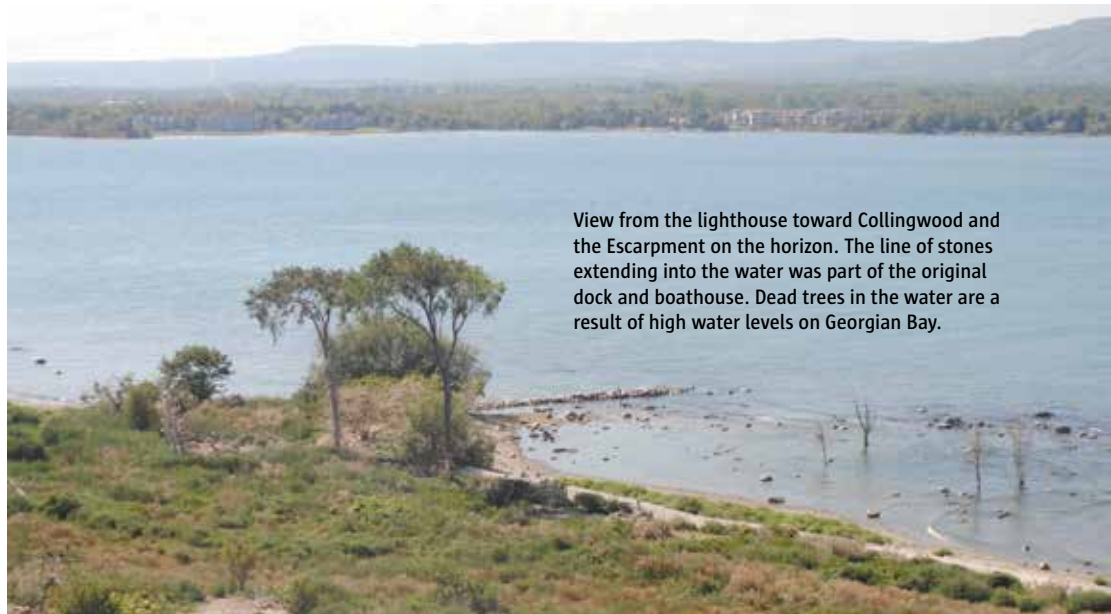
In 2016, Nottawasaga Lighthouse Preservation Society wrapped the lighthouse in heavy tarps to protect it until full restoration can be done.



Gulls and cormorants in large numbers breed and live on Nottawasaga Island. Here the limestone bedrock of the Escarpment is visible as part of the Mary Ward Shoal. In geology, a shoal is a ridge of submerged rock that can pose a navigational hazard. The Mary Ward Shoal is named for a tragic shipwreck that happened nearby in 1872. The Nottawasaga Lighthouse was built to guide ships around the Mary Ward Shoal and into Collingwood's safe harbour. The Collingwood Grain Terminals are visible in the distance.

incorporated in the same year. It was fast becoming a major shipping port and railroad terminus. With the arrival of a railroad in 1855, people and products could travel quickly between Toronto on Lake Ontario and Collingwood with all points beyond. This was a great boon to development around the Great Lakes and western Canada.

Guarding the waters, Nottawasaga Lighthouse served faithfully for almost 150 years. Her resident lightkeepers were famous for their daring rescues. Captain George Collins, lightkeeper from 1860 to 1890, and his son and assistant, Charles, are credited with saving 52 lives during their careers. Several other lightkeepers also won medals and honours for their selfless service. Three women are listed as lightkeepers who took over duties when their husbands died or were absent. The life of a lightkeeper was difficult, isolated, but had its rewards. In 1959, the light was automated and a fire damaged the keeper's cottage.



View from the lighthouse toward Collingwood and the Escarpment on the horizon. The line of stones extending into the water was part of the original dock and boathouse. Dead trees in the water are a result of high water levels on Georgian Bay.

Without resident lightkeepers, vandals destroyed the cottage and it was eventually demolished. The Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) continued to operate the lighthouse as a solar-powered navigational beacon.

Lightning Struck

By 2003, DFO had decided to quit servicing Nottawasaga

Lighthouse. The tower structure was deemed unsafe for work crews. Lightning struck the tower in 2004 causing a large section of the limestone exterior wall to collapse. Fortunately, Imperial Towers have thick, double walls and the lighthouse remains structurally sound but badly damaged. Community outcry prompted DFO and

the Canadian Coast Guard to install metal bands around the tower in 2006. This has helped prevent further collapse but is only a temporary solution. Community members in Collingwood and surrounding areas began coming together in 2013 to explore ways of saving their beloved lighthouse. The Nottawasaga Lighthouse



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▲ This is the kind of light that was previously used in the Nottawasaga Island Lighthouse. An original Second-Order Fresnel Lens, this one is on display at Bruce County Museum and Cultural Centre in Southampton. All Ontario lighthouses now have solar-powered, electric light beacons.

Preservation Society (NLPS) was incorporated in 2015.

“The Nottawasaga Lighthouse is an iconic structure of Collingwood,” says NLPS chair Stephen Emo. “It is part of our heritage and should be preserved.”

In 2016, NLPS wrapped the whole lighthouse in heavy tarping to further protect it until full restoration can be undertaken. That cannot happen until DFO hands over ownership of Nottawasaga Lighthouse and Island to the community. NLPS connects almost weekly with DFO to move this transfer forward but bureaucracy moves slowly. There is significant environmental contamination on the site which must be addressed before transfer.

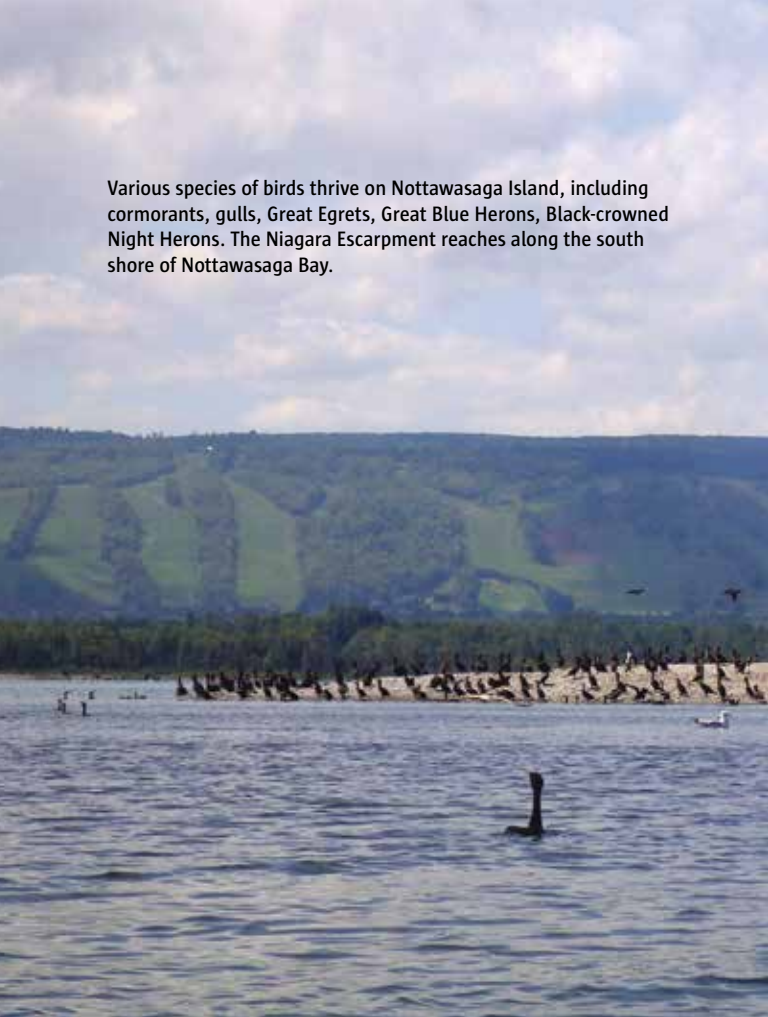
Stephen says, “NLPS could move this cleanup forward in the most efficient and cost-effective way,” but so far

DFO has not agreed. And so the lighthouse stands, precariously, in limbo.

Protecting the Lighthouse

The 2020 and 2021 seasons have been challenging for NLPS’s public awareness and fundraising efforts. With in-person gatherings limited or cancelled, usual events like the annual BBQ and regular displays at farmers’ markets and other venues have not occurred. One huge win for 2021 was signing an agreement to work together with the Saugeen Ojibway Nation (SON) to protect the ecology of Nottawasaga Island and surrounding waters.

These lands and waters are part of traditional territory of the SON. The name “Nottawasaga” comes from an Algonquin phrase meaning “the Iroquois are at the mouth of the river” because Iroquois



Various species of birds thrive on Nottawasaga Island, including cormorants, gulls, Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons. The Niagara Escarpment reaches along the south shore of Nottawasaga Bay.

raiding parties came down the Nottawasaga River to attack indigenous communities along southern Georgian Bay. Nottawasaga Island is part of the Mary Ward Shoal, an important spawning ground for Lake Whitefish which is a major ecological, cultural, and commercial resource for the SON. Nottawasaga Island is also home to a vast array of bird species: Great Egrets, Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons, cormorants, and various gull species. Any lighthouse work must protect the ecological heritage of the island and waters.

Today, the Nottawasaga Lighthouse is in need of help to continue standing proud. Robert Square, vice-chair of NLPS and a long-time lighthouse advocate, says, “Within 10 years, I hope to see the lighthouse and keeper’s cottage fully rebuilt. Visitors

would arrive in controlled numbers for guided tours. The lighthouse, birds, fish, and environment would be well protected. You can help now by joining NLPS, liking us on social media, donating and volunteering, talking to MPs, MPPs, and government officials, and advocating for this important part of our history.”

For more information, see nlps.info. **NEV**

For another feature about this island, see Albert Bedward’s “Staying Alive: Safe Winter Kayaking from Collingwood to Nottawasaga Island,” in Winter 2020-21.

Sandra J. Howe’s last feature for Niagara Escarpment Views was “Winter Journey Through Time at Kemble,” in Winter 2021-22.

Both these features are available at NEViews.ca.



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