



Swayze Falls, in Short Hills Provincial Park, seen from the valley floor in spring. It is the tallest of more than a dozen waterfalls in the park.



SHORT HILLS PROVINCIAL PARK

Spectacular Year Round

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY ART WEAVER

When I first discovered Short Hills Provincial Park in the early 1990s, it immediately became my favourite year-round running/hiking location. Winter in the park is surreal and silent while summer is robust and full of texture. Fall is exciting with brilliant colours and the activity of migration, however, nothing beats spring. Spring in Short Hills celebrates life. The waterfalls are full and showing their power, spring flowers are erupting, trees are greening and the diversity of birds becomes apparent as they return for another year.



Short Hills was established as a provincial park in 1985 and is located southwest of St. Catharines near Fonthill. Currently 6.6 square km, it continues to grow through opportunistic acquisition. Sitting on the Niagara Escarpment, Short Hills is the headwaters for Twelve Mile Creek with numerous waterfalls, streams and rapids which have cut much of the park into valleys and ridges. It is strictly a nature reserve with multiple trails for hiking, running,

cross country skiing and designated trails for mountain biking and horseback riding. It has no facilities other than a basic toilet at each of the three parking lots located on Pelham Rd, Wiley Rd and Roland Rd.

Short Hills is considered Carolinian Forest. In addition to hills, valleys and streams, it boasts upland aquifers, swamps, open fields, mature forest, post-agricultural scrub, and lower seasonal wetlands. This variety has encouraged an enormous diversity of flora and fauna making it a paradise

for nature photographers and bird watchers. There are a few flat areas in the park showing signs of a past farming culture. One trail actually has an old abandoned set of harrowing discs.

Every time I enter the park, I discover something new. Some of the more exotic wildlife I've seen, include a Red Bellied Snake, Northern Flying Squirrel, Rufous-sided Towhee and Indigo Bunting. The variety of wild flowers and fungi is incredible, changing with the seasons and too numerous to list. I often feel

like I'm walking from one picture postcard into another.

The Roland Rd entrance has a wheelchair-accessible trail leading to Swayze Falls, the gem of the park. At 14m this waterfall is the tallest in the park and has an observation deck built on the south wall of the valley. It is a favourite destination in the spring for most hikers due to the spectacular volume of water as the surrounding forest comes to life. In the summer, it has a tendency to dry up but the deck is positioned over the ravine edge so that the view



▲ One winter, ice built up in the main channel of Swayze Falls, forcing water to flow to the side, where it froze into this beautiful, giant turquoise jewel of ice.

► The brilliant blue of the spectacular Indigo Bunting is eye catching.



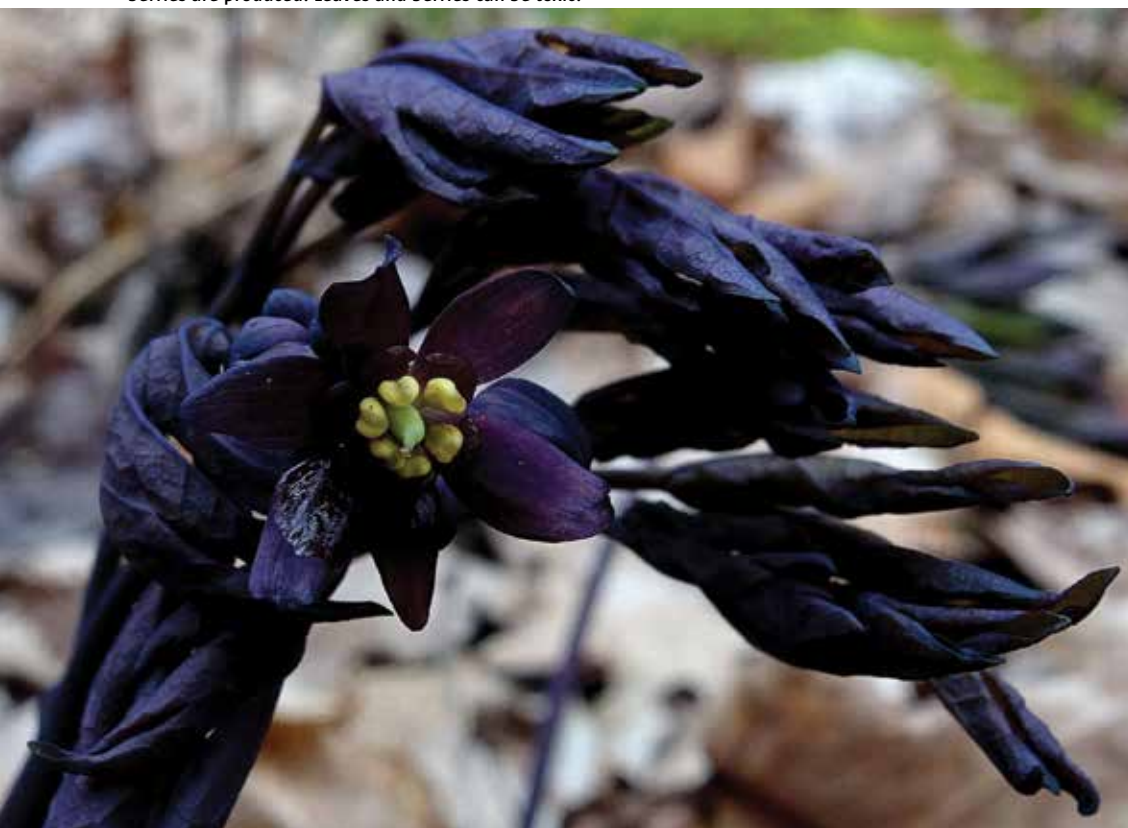
▲ Previously named the Rufous-sided Towhee, this colourful bird with a sharp chirping call is now known as the Eastern Towhee.





▲ Terrace Falls is spectacular all year but spring runoff is breathtaking. It is the widest waterfall in the park.

▼ Blue Cohosh comes up quite early in the spring. The flowers and early foliage are near black. The leaves turn green and clusters of large blue berries are produced. Leaves and berries can be toxic.



of the horseshoe-shaped gorge is still spectacular. One winter some freaky weather, heavy snow, heavy rain and a sudden deep freeze caused one section of the falls to fast freeze into a giant turquoise jewel. When the sun hit the ice, it glowed from within which was hypnotic.

Favourite Falls

One of my absolute favourite spots in Short Hills is Terrace Falls, a place my wife Kerry and I affectionately call “Stinky” Falls. It’s a beautiful waterfall with a straight edge and approximately five to six m high. The waterfall is surrounded by mature hardwood including Hemlock, making it postcard-perfect through all four seasons. This falls rarely dries up but in the spring with its incredible volume of water, you can hear it rumble long before you see



▲ This timid White-tailed Deer continued to peek around this Sugar Maple as long as we didn't move. Those eyes are hypnotic.

it. This waterfall is very accessible on the north side and it's easy to sit and lose yourself in the natural beauty. The Short Hills area has quite a bit of sulphur in the sub strait. At certain times of the year the sulphur makes its way to the surface. Those not familiar with this may look at their fellow hikers asking "What have you been eating?"

Visiting this park regularly, I have accumulated many stories about the wildlife. Late one spring I was in the middle of a long, early morning trail run with my friend Tony. We were on an upland trail which turned sharply to face a large open field sandwiched between two heavily wooded valleys. Suddenly a half dozen deer heads popped up above the thick grasses and wild flowers. We froze in our tracks, trying not to startle them further. The scene was breathtaking. They were all bucks as their antlers were showing. The staring contest continued as we inched our way along the trail hoping they would continue their meal. A couple more heads popped up. We kept inching forward, a couple more heads popped up and then they broke and started to run. White tails started to appear out of nowhere and numbers continued to grow. In a matter of seconds, the field became a firework display of white tails bobbing up and down and disappearing into the neighbouring valleys. And then it was over, the field was empty except for two totally stunned runners. We estimated nearly 50 deer. We felt bad about disturbing them yet really excited about the experience.



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Timid Coyote

Another warm spring day Kerry and I were out for a long hike, following one of the many tributaries. We stopped on the crest of a ridge perhaps 10m above the water to enjoy the view. We noticed movement almost directly below us. It was a coyote trying to cross to our side of the creek. It was balancing on a fallen tree trunk that was short of our bank. The last three m were only small branches and twigs. The coyote was shifting back and forth, pawing at the water, trying to decide how best not to get wet. We stood and watched, mesmerized and at the same time amused by its predicament. Finally, it made a desperate leap but its hind legs and tail hit the water. It scrambled up the bank and disappeared into the brush. We never saw it again but will never forget the experience.

Not only do the extensive trails in Short Hills touch on a variety of eco-systems, they offer connectivity to a variety of destinations outside of the park. Following the Bruce Trail west of the park leads to Rockway Conservation Area and a little further west is the Louth Conservation Area, both harbouring beautiful waterfalls. Heading east, the trails lead to the Reynoldsville ghost town, Morningstar Mill and Museum, DeCew House plus the Laura Secord, 12 Mile Creek and Steve Bauer trails. There is a lot to explore and only your hiking range limits the potential for adventure. **NEV**

Art Weaver's last feature for this magazine was "The Challenging Beauty of Niagara Glen" in Autumn 2019. His photography can be seen at his gallery site at trailape.ca.

► Likely a leucistic Eastern Gray Squirrel, this squirrel stood out as white when it was hopping through the woods in the fall.



▼ A Giant Swallowtail on blooming Teasel





▲ This Red-tailed Hawk sat posing for quite a while. It actually turned as if it was modelling.

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