

GRIMSBY BENCH: Not All the Best of Niagara is Wine

Written and photographed by Ashley Brown



◀ Raccoon tracks in Grimsby Bench.



▲ Wind-blown snag just off the trail in Grimsby Bench.

In Niagara Region, we call the area atop the escarpment The Bench, and it's easy to see why; looking out from the Escarpment is all the Golden Horseshoe laid before you, with the bright blue of Lake Ontario beckoning you to take a seat and ponder the view. Acquired in early March, Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy's (EBC's) new property is the first the Conservancy secured in Niagara Region, and a jewel in EBC's 225 (and counting) conservation areas.

As with so many of Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy's nature preserves, we are truly indebted to the Firestone family for their incredibly generous help making this sanctuary possible and permanent.

Situated at the edge of the Carolinian ecozone, Grimsby Bench is unique for EBC. Visitors will find

species Shagbark Hickory, Sycamore and Honey Locust amongst Eastern White Pine and maples. You might hear a Carolina Wren or Red-Bellied Woodpecker along with the familiar birdsongs heard at Heaven's Gate near Manitoulin Island or Cup and Saucer, on the Island. The property is nestled between farm fields and the southwest edge of Grimsby Bench prime edge habitat preferred by birds of prey. Hawks and Turkey Vulture are often seen circling overhead.

The 43.5 acres of conservation land is open to the public, thanks to the Firestone family who donated the parcel to EBC. It can be accessed by traversing the Bruce Trail from Park Side Road where you'll find yourself on the Escarpment at the top of the property. Looking down from the bench, you see stream tributaries flowing towards

the lake, winding around a line of old Black Oak that once marked out a homestead. Much of the property is moist mature forest, perfect habitat for native flora and fauna.

Lush Niagara Nature

Even in early spring, life is abundant in Niagara Region, evidenced by scores of singing birds, groups of Chorus Frogs, tracks, early blooming ferns and Hepatica. As the forest awakes from winter, EBC will keep a close eye for Species At Risk (SAR) that might call Grimsby Bench home, particularly those only found in this corner of southern Ontario; species like American Chestnut, Jefferson Salamander or Gray Rat snake are contenders for the area. Alongside SAR unique to Grimsby Bench for EBC, bird monitoring in this migratory corridor is also an important facet of stewarding

our new Niagara jewel. Joining incredible EBC properties like Trout Hollow, Grimsby Bench is also steeped in history. Before European settlers, Grimsby Bench was settled approximately 13,000 years ago by Indigenous peoples drawn to the fertile land that now produces some of the best wines in Canada. Stewards of the land included; the Neutral Nation, Iroquois, Mississaugas of the Credit, and Seneca peoples. United Empire Loyalists fled to the region during the American Revolution and homesteaded throughout Niagara Region. The rich history of Niagara Region can be felt acutely as you walk the section of Bruce Trail protected on the property, imagining the route American and British troops took during the War of 1812, seeing the same incredible views they may have seen. Whether it's the history of the region, the legacy of the Bruce Trail, the phenomenal birdwatching or simply an appreciation for lush Niagara nature, Grimsby Bench offers visitors a unique experience within the EBC umbrella. People have marvelled at the view from The Bench for thousands of years; though that view has changed over time, it remains, and will always be a spectacular place to stop and ponder.

Ashley Brown's last article for this magazine was "Trout Hollow Nature Reserve," in Winter 2021-22.