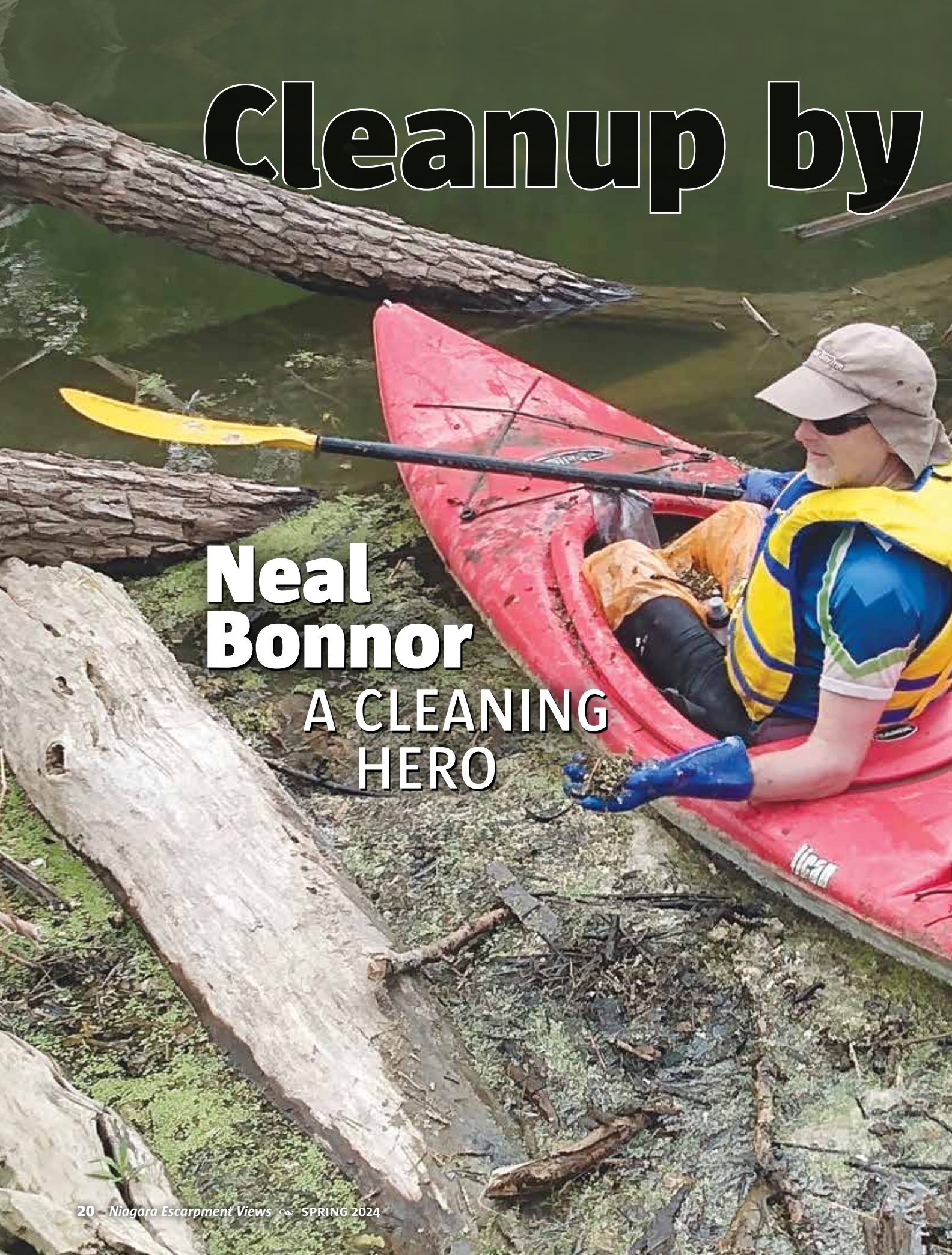


Cleanup by

A person wearing a tan cap, sunglasses, a blue shirt, and a yellow life vest is sitting in a red kayak on a river. They are holding a yellow paddle and a blue glove filled with debris. The riverbank is covered in large logs and fallen branches, indicating a cleanup effort.

Neal Bonnor A CLEANING HERO

Kayak

WRITTEN BY TERRI SHEWFELT

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEAL BONNOR AND TERRI SHEWFELT



When Dundas resident Neal Bonnor was given a kayak on his 50th birthday, little did he realize that it would become an integral part in a life mission to clean up litter in his local waterways.

◀ Neal Bonnor in Spencer Creek, Hamilton, trying to clean up the Styrofoam bits. He calls his efforts “kayakcleaning,” a combination of “kayak” and “cleaning.”

Neal, an environmentalist who has volunteered with Friends of Rosebough Creek, Stewards of Cootes Watershed, and Hamilton 350, has dedicated more than 400 hours in the past decade removing litter from the creeks and waterways in Dundas, Hamilton and beyond. Over the years he has been out on the water from as early as January 2 to as late as December 30, even sometimes when the waters are partially frozen, but always mindful of safety first.

The garbage that Neal has found includes “legacy trash:” old tires, metal cans and glass bottles that have accumulated over the years, as well as new trash items such as plastic bottles, Styrofoam shells, tennis balls. He has levered tires out of the creek bed muck, wrenched traffic cones from the creek bank sand, scooped fishing bobs floating amongst treefall, and plucked plastic bags hanging from overhead branches.

To date he has collected over 16 tires, sometimes three at a time, and more than 270 bags of trash. Some more interesting finds have been a message in a bottle, although it could not be deciphered, a car seat, a wooden Indonesian puppet head, a leather jacket, a sleeping mattress, hiking boots, and a rocking horse. Then there was the face-mask phase during COVID, the Styrofoam deluge during a local construction project, and now he is finding more vaping products.

His strangest experience was floating over a bike pathway beside Cootes Paradise marsh in 2019, thanks to unusually high water levels of Lake Ontario. He has had many wonderful wildlife encounters, including with Bald Eagles, American White Pelicans, Coho Salmon,



American Minks, and North American Beavers, with their landscape of gnawed trees.

Disgusting

On the downside, Neal said his experience “kayakcleaning” Chedoke Creek in Hamilton could be disgusting.

“The number of wet wipes coating the creek bed was astounding,” he says. “Condoms, tampon applicators, blobs of sewage, anything

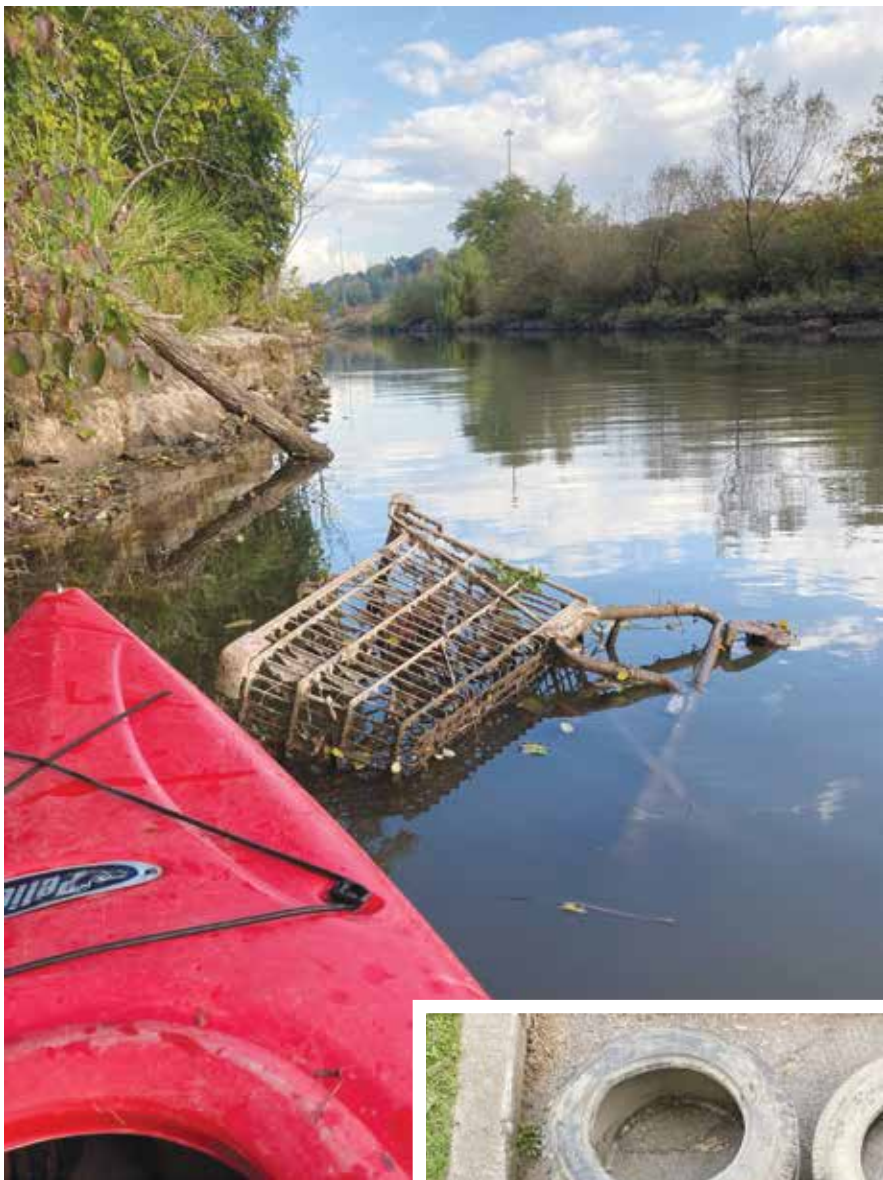
flushable ended up here.”

His last of 17 clean-ups of Chedoke Creek was in October 2020, soon after it was revealed that 24 billion litres of sanitary sewage had discharged from a local overflow tank over a four-year period. Add in the numerous legacy-combined sewers built upstream, which are cross-connections of sewage and stormwater sewers, and the result was “basically an

open sewage channel.”

The City of Hamilton was fined, the overflow tank was repaired, and sources of sewage continue to be remediated. The City also paid for hydraulic dredging of the creek bed, to remove all those wet wipes.

Neal’s “kayakcleaning” adventures have extended to St. Catharines, Mississauga, Etobicoke, and the Toronto Islands. He finds that while



◀ Neal has seen several shopping carts embedded in the bottom of Hamilton's Chedoke Creek. They can't be removed by kayak.

Neal's haul from Spencer Creek on a sunny warm Sunday in May 2021, was 15 items including two car tires, 31 plastic bags, 16 wrappers, bottles, cans, a pair of briefs, a boot and a wallet.

◀ Neal getting ready to "kayakclean" Spencer Creek.



municipalities are generally good about cleaning up their manicured parklands, they tend to neglect their hard-to-reach and out-of-sight properties, which typically include the banks and bottoms of waterways.

Documentation

Neal found it disheartening that more litter continued to leak into the same creek that he had swept clean



▲ Minks, kingfishers, herring, hawks and herons kept Neal company during a two-2-hour kayakcleanup of Spencer Creek late in August 2021. Along with two bags of smaller Styrofoam, plastic and metal litter pieces, Bonnor collected a mangled plastic kiddie pool.



the week before. So, he upped his game. After each “kayakcleaning” event, he began reporting his garbage retrieval stats complete with “collection” photos to the Ministry of the Environment and the local city and conservation groups. He also began documenting his kayaking adventures on a blog, cleaningbykayak.wordpress.com.

Then, over an eight-month period in 2021, Neal documented every item that he removed from a beautiful creek that tumbles over the Niagara Escarpment at Webster Falls into a

spectacular gorge and winds its way through downtown Dundas: Spencer Creek. Working a 1.3 km stretch where the creek discharges into the Cootes Paradise Marsh, Neal counted 10,787 items during 29 outings, ranging from tiny Styrofoam beads to massive truck tires. He found that most of the items were made of plastic.

Neal shared his findings with governments and universities, and continues his analysis of the data, looking for trends in weather, water flow, human activity, and



◀ Snow did not stop Bonnor from spending three hours kayakcleaning Spencer Creek in December 2022. This beautiful portion of the creek meanders into Cootes Paradise Marsh in Hamilton, where water levels are the same as Lake Ontario.

▼ Looks can deceive. The storm sewer discharge channel from adjoining Sydenham Creek has served as a convenient launch point for Neal's Spencer Creek litter study.



storm sewer configuration to determine the likeliest sources of litter. These include items tossed from cars, dropped by walkers or fishers, blown in from blue boxes and overflowing dumpsters, and migrated from construction sites. Neal hopes that the study will inform governments on the need to stop litter from entering local waterways, particularly as those plastics decompose to form microplastics that enter our food and drinking water sources.

"I am really concerned about the damage microplastics may be inflicting

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▲ Recent rains causing high creek levels seemed to flush extra litter into Spencer Creek in early October 2021. Several tree deadfalls conveniently captured such floatables as these plastic bottles, sandals, cups and Styrofoam bits. Neal collected 754 litter items during this kayakcleanup event, many of them tiny Styrofoam beads.

on our ecosystem,” Neal says. “Scientists say that microplastics are now embedded in every food chain, and that microplastics attract toxins, and that these toxins bio-accumulate. So, nature has cooked up a new toxic soup from our negligent plastic product stewardship. This soup-du-jour is our every meal.”

Suggestions

Neal has the following suggestions for stewarding our plastic waste: intercept stormwater to capture floatables prior to discharge to a waterway; use enclosed lid-snapping containers for municipal and commercial recyclables and garbage collection, regularly enforce commercial and multi-residential waste management practice standards to reduce off-site migration of litter, conduct weekly litter

removal sweeps of local parks, roadways and waterways, and remove all garbage bins from parks because animals tend to drag food containers to the verges.

Other suggestions include educating the public on the dangers of littering resulting in micro- and nano-plastics in food and drinking sources, eliminating the use of all non-compostable fast-food containers and utensils, placing booms at the mouths of waterways to catch floatables, and dredging local waterways to remove legacy litter such as tires, shopping carts and embedded plastics.

Neal’s efforts have gained him some well-deserved recognition: in January 2023 he and his kayak were front-page news in *The Hamilton Spectator*; a week later the local TV station CHCH interviewed him creekside, despite sub-zero temperatures!

Then, in October 2023 he was awarded a Hamilton Environmentalist of the Year Merit Award for his “kayakcleaning” activities.

Neal is grateful for support received from the Royal Botanical Gardens, the Hamilton Conservation Authority, and the City of Hamilton “Clean and Green” crew.

“It’s great to be appreciated and recognized for something that you enjoy doing,” he said during his acceptance speech. “Fresh air, exercise, communing with nature—what’s not to love?! Oh yes, the never-ending litter!”

His parting words were “Together, let’s develop new waste management policies to minimize litter in our



environment and reduce the impact that microplastics are increasingly having on the health and welfare of the global ecosystem.”

That’s my husband: a diehard environmentalist and a kayaker! **NEV**



▲ A warm sunny mid-September day in 2021 was a perfect opportunity for Neal to complete a two-hour kayak cleanup of Spencer Creek as part of his litter study. Styrofoam seemed to be the star of the show this time, including 355 tiny bits, 70 small pieces, and one large board, among other litter.

◀ Neal was awarded a Hamilton Environmentalist of the Year Merit Award on October 27, 2023, for his kayakcleaning efforts. Presenting the award was City Councillor Craig Cassar, right.

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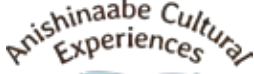


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