


# Sharing Indigenous Knowledge

WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT | PHOTOGRAPHED BY MIKE DAVIS & GLORIA HILDEBRANDT





Christopher Akiwenzie, standing in the centre to the right of the small tree, leads a group of people on a "Walk and Talk" on a Kolapore Wilderness Trail in the Escarpment area of Grey County, between Collingwood and Markdale. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS

**W**hen is a walk in the Escarpment woods much more than just a pleasant stroll? When it's part of a program to help Indigenous people connect to the land again and protect it by sharing knowledge widely with others.

Last September, people were invited to share in a “Walk and Talk” by Aki Guardians, who are part of Bagida’waad Alliance. Aki Guardians are Indigenous youth leaders who help protect land through education and stewardship. Bagida’waad Alliance is an environmental group led by Anishnaabe people from Saugeen Ojibway Nation on the Bruce/Saugeen Peninsula. The alliance was begun to bring attention to the disappearance of Whitefish, an important, popular food source, which has been declining in Georgian Bay due to climate change.

“In the Anishinaabemowin language, also known as Ojibwe, Bagida’waad means ‘they set a net,’” explains Natasha Akiwenzie, manager of Bagida’waad Alliance. This organization has broadened its focus to support the transfer of knowledge and skills, including Native languages. “Youth are asked what they want to learn,” Natasha adds. “They said seed collecting, birding, basket weaving and butterfly and dragonfly identification. We practise gentle catching only to identify them.”

### Connect People to the Land

The September hike began at 495436 Grey Road 2, on one of the Kolapore Wilderness Trails, a 50-km challenging trail system in the Niagara Escarpment south of Georgian Bay. Beaver Valley Destination Stewardship organized the event. While Christopher Akiwenzie, Natasha’s son, leads the large group of people into the forest on a trail, Natasha returns to the parking lot with someone who has a mobility challenge. Even in this unlikely location, Natasha has plenty of nature knowledge to share. She explains how the walks in the woods help people connect to the land again.



▲ In the woods of the Kolapore Wilderness, Chris shows a map and shares his knowledge. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS

“We’re seeing different habitats and which animals and birds prefer them,” she says. “Newts are starting to migrate and hibernate. Chipmunks and squirrels are preparing for winter, gathering nuts and seeds.” Natasha doesn’t seem disappointed by missing today’s forest walk. She seems to have the attitude that nature can be everywhere if you look closely. Along the perimeter of the gravel parking lot, she finds a surprising number of plants and animals to point out in the scrubby, wild growth just beyond.

The beautiful blue colour of Chicory plants in bloom prompts her to explain “Chicory is a coffee substitute. It grows in disturbed areas.” Later, it’s easy to find information that the root of flowering Chicory plants

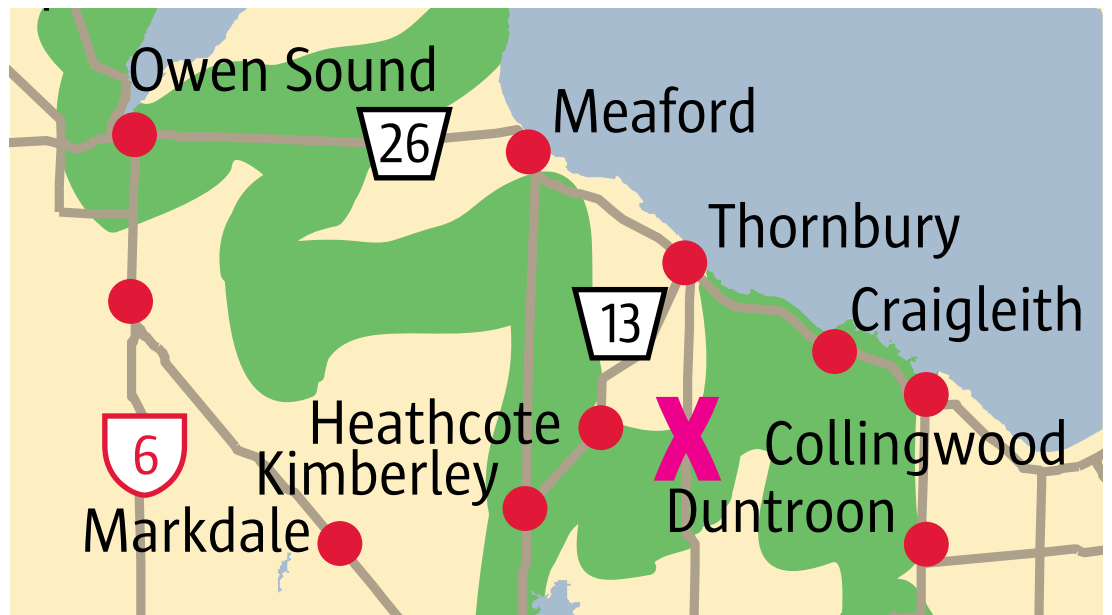
can be roasted, ground and then brewed like coffee.

Natasha mentions that branches from the Leatherwood shrub are used for making bows, and that Black Ash can be used for making baskets and snowshoes. Pointing to the beautiful flowers of the Purple Knapweed plant, she adds that it’s invasive. She indicates Common Milkweed, saying that Swamp Milkweed is preferred by the Monarch Butterfly. Dark purple New England Asters are a favourite for many people, but the equally common Goldenrods are hard to identify, she admits.

### Learning About Insects

Insects are plentiful among the dense “weedy” growth around the parking lot. Natasha explains that the Conehead





▲ X marks the rough location of Kolapore Wilderness Trails.



▲ In the parking lot at the start of the walk, people gather in a circle around Chris to hear plans for the afternoon. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS



▲ Natasha Akiwenzie, manager of Bagida'waad Alliance, pointing out Common Milkweed and proving that nature is almost everywhere. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT

From the bagidawaad.ca website, the description of the organization:

**“The Bagida’waad Alliance is a grassroots organization that includes a majority of members of the Saugeen Ojibway Nation, whose traditional territory’s shoreline is over 800 km. Saukiing Anishinaabekiiing extends from near Thornbury on Georgian Bay around the Saugeen (Bruce) Peninsula and down Lake Huron past Goderich.”**

Grasshopper is green, large, with red “lips.” Swiftly yet carefully, she captures a Large Marsh Grasshopper, gently holding it by its legs to allow for a photograph. She also knows caterpillars, noticing one on a Goldenrod leaf, and identifying it as a Brown-hooded Owllet Moth. Even the galls on plant stems, those hard round growths that swell inside the stalks after insects have laid eggs or fed on the plants, are of interest. “We’re learning which insects like

which plants,” she says.

Natasha moves to an area where grasses are tall in the shade of large trees. “We’re looking for signs that animals have been here,” she explains, and soon she points to some flattened grass that might be a trail or a resting place. Looking up into the trees, she explains that Trembling Aspens have leaves that catch sunlight on both sides, which is why they “tremble,” exposing both sides to the light. Looking at



▲ Chris shows the Sensitive Fern, which is an indicator of wetlands.

PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS



◀ Natasha’s eagle eye spotted this Brown-hooded Owllet Moth caterpillar on a Goldenrod leaf.

PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT



► Chris points to Basswood leaves, saying they’re a good substitute for toilet paper, and giving the tree’s descriptive rhyming nickname.

PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS




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Sandhill Cranes, taken by Rob Wray



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▲ At the end of the Walk & Talk, Kate Russell, left, gives some closing remarks while Natasha looks on. Kate is treasurer for Bagida'waad Alliance. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS

other trees, she makes the unusual statement "Elms are corky under the bark," and adds that grabbing the tree helps to identify it in winter.

There is still more to see, identify and learn about even in this unimpressive patch of scrubland, but Christopher and the large group is returning. The time with Natasha in the parking lot is finishing long before she shares all her knowledge even of this place.

### Hunger for Native Knowledge

People seem to have a hunger for Indigenous knowledge of the natural world. After a few hours exploring the forest, the Walk & Talk group moves to Osprey Museum, by then hungry for

the buffet meal of good food.

For more information about Bagida'waad Alliance and Aki Guardians, see the website [bagidawaad.ca](http://bagidawaad.ca). **NEV**



▲ Natasha carefully holds a Large Marsh Grasshopper. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT

Also from [bagidawaad.ca](http://bagidawaad.ca), observations of climate change:

**The Bagida'waad Alliance has been running a program called New Journey to Save Fish: Oshki Maadaadiziwin Jaa Bimaaji'ut Gigooyike. At least for the last ten years, the commercial fishers have noticed changes in the weather patterns on Lake Huron and Georgian Bay: in particular, increasing winds and increased severity of storms. These changes have had negative effects on the number of safe days for being on the water. Each day when we decide whether to fish or not, one of the critical issues is how windy it is. We either decide it is worth the risk, or stay on shore. When one family, the Akiwenzies, started fishing fifteen years ago, we used to have two windy days a week with five calm days to fish. Today it is about five windy days a week, with one or two days of calm days. We have been collecting the stories of the changes in the environment through hiring youth to interview community members, produced a mini-documentary, and are working on a book of stories. We are also running a Film School for Anishinaabe youth in our region to gather stories about the perspectives of stewardship and caretaking.**

## ■ READERS & VIEWERS

continued from p 8.



Read your wonderful Summer 2025 magazine and just had to send this picture of a flag in Orangeville. Hope you enjoy.

David Kirk



Norman Wingrove



Kay Hedley



▲ Chris indicates Hart's Tongue, a very rare fern, growing close to tree roots along the trail. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS

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