

A Wild Future Taking Shape

By Beth Gilhespy

If you walk in nature often enough, you begin to notice subtle changes. A meadow that remains open year after year because it is carefully managed. A wetland that feels just a little quieter, more settled, because it is no longer under threat. A stretch of forest where the future feels less uncertain. These are not dramatic transformations, but they are exactly what enduring conservation looks like.

Over the past two years, Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) has been building momentum toward a Wild Future. Quietly launched in 2024, the Wild Future campaign is a long-term effort to permanently protect thousands of acres of ecologically significant land along the Niagara Escarpment corridor, the Saugeen (Bruce) Peninsula, and Manitoulin Island. These are landscapes many readers of *Niagara Escarpment Views* know intimately. They are places discovered step by step, season by season, through hiking boots, canoe routes, binoculars, and curiosity.

What makes this moment different is scale — and urgency. The pressures on Escarpment landscapes are

accelerating. Development edges closer to sensitive wetlands. Regulatory protections are weakening. Fragmentation nibbles away at forest interiors. Resource extraction interests continue to scar the landscape. At the same time, opportunities to protect large, intact properties are becoming rarer. When they appear, they are often fleeting, demanding decisive action backed by strong stewardship and sound finances.

Remarkable Milestone

In 2024 and 2025, our vision of a Wild Future translated into tangible, lasting results. In December 2025 we reached a remarkable milestone: the total amount of land protected by the EBC since its visionary founding surpassed 25,000 acres. With the support of donors, foundations, and conservation partners, we completed the protection of the 600-acre Benallen wetland and forest complex near Owen Sound, a landscape of exceptional biodiversity and hydrological significance. We also secured shoreline, bluff, and interior forest refuges on Manitoulin Island, the Saugeen (Bruce) Peninsula, and along the Niagara Escarpment corridor. In

every case, conservation went far beyond simply “buying land.” It involved meaningful partnerships, careful stewardship planning, ecological monitoring, the engagement of dedicated volunteers, and the creation of financial reserves to ensure these places are cared for long after the moment of acquisition has passed. This work may be quiet, but it is what makes conservation — and a Wild Future — truly permanent.

Looking ahead, the Wild Future campaign remains ambitious. Our goal is to create a connected network of protected lands that supports biodiversity, climate resilience, and the quiet human experiences that make the Niagara Escarpment landscape such a powerful place to be. It is about ensuring future generations can still walk beneath ancient trees, follow cold streams to the edge of a cliff, or stand at a Lake Huron shoreline and feel deep time written into the rock.

We have already begun our Wild Future work for 2026. One delightful property has been preserved on Manitoulin Island near Misery Bay, and several more projects are underway. One forthcoming acquisition

will protect nearly 400 acres of woodland, meadow, and shoreline teeming with species at risk. Another is a sparkling waterfall near Owen Sound, beloved by the local community for generations, that will now be protected forever. And two landowners, one on the Saugeen (Bruce) Peninsula and another near Erin, have generously offered to donate their beautiful Escarpment lands, ensuring their care continues beyond their lifetimes.

\$5 Million Worth of Land

As these agreements are finalized, we will begin fundraising for acquisition costs and long-term stewardship. The total value of land expected to be preserved in 2026 under the Wild Future campaign approaches \$5 million. It’s an inspiring figure, and a reminder of the responsibility that comes with success. I am continually astounded and humbled by the commitment of donors who understand that investing in conservation is an investment in connected, sustainable landscapes where wildlife can thrive; in resilient natural systems that purify air, protect clean water, and help mitigate the impacts of climate change; and in the health and



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▲ Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy's 2024 and 2025 Wild Future Campaign nature preserves. IMAGE PROVIDED.

well-being of millions of people who seek connection, meaning, and renewal in nature.

For those of us who love the Niagara Escarpment, protecting natural spaces is both practical and deeply personal. Every conserved property represents a choice to value continuity over short-term gain, and care over consumption. Thanks to a growing community of supporters, that

choice is being made again and again.

A Wild Future does not arrive all at once. It is built patiently and deliberately, one wild acre at a time.

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