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LIVING

A river scarred

"On and on for hours, the same interminable forest stretched to the right and left, before and behind us..."
Susanna Moodie, Roughing It in the Bush

The doomed woodlot north of Trent University on the Otonabee River's west bank constitutes no less than an integral part of our local heritage

OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

The Otonabee River between Trent University and Lakefield is one of the most scenic and easily accessible areas to observe and enjoy nature in the Peterborough area. The stands of white cedars, deciduous woodland, gently flowing waters, limestone cliffs, cattail marshes and old fields form a landscape so typical of much of the southern Kawarthas. A unique feature, too, is that County Road 32, or River Road, as it is known locally, hugs the shoreline along much of the river, thereby affording excellent views of the water and the many bird species to be seen. In addition, picnic areas around the locks make great places to have a meal or simply to relax and enjoy the scenery.

Other than the four locks north of Trent and the university campus itself, the relative lack of development along the river only adds to its charm. Because most of the landscape has not really changed in decades, a drive or bicycle ride along the Otonabee provides a real feeling of connection with both our cultural and natural heritage. In this age of urban sprawl, there are very few places left anymore where one feels such a strong link with the past.

The opportunities to observe birds and even mammals also add interest. Ospreys hunt over the river from April through October and nest on the tower beside Trent's athletic building. Bald eagles are routinely seen in winter, often in the vicinity of Sawer Creek and Lock 25, where they often find fish that have washed up on shore. The river almost always has an interesting selection of diving ducks to observe as well. During migration, you can usually find buffleheads, hooded mergansers, common goldeneyes and common mergansers. Ringnecks, scaup, wood ducks and green-winged teal often show up as well. If you have never seen a pied-billed grebe, the large bay just north of Lock 23 is a good place to find this little-known species.

Small numbers of common mergansers and goldeneye are usually present on the river all winter. The amusing late-winter courtship rituals of the goldeneyes are something every nature enthusiast should see.

In the spring, large flocks of swallows use the Otonabee as a migration corridor, their flight fuelled by tiny midges emerging from the water. Some species stay to nest along the river, with cliff swallows setting up home under the footbridge at Trent, and rough-winged swallows nesting in the limestone cliffs just below the dam at Lock 22.

For Jerry Ball, one of Peterborough's most active and experienced birders, the River Road always offers up something new and exciting. "I just never know what I'll see," he says. Just last week, Ball watched as otters hauled a large carp up onto the ice, only to be forced to surrender it to a bald eagle who happened to be flying by. Over the years, he has seen a host of unexpected species including Barrrow's goldeneye, red-breasted merganser, white-winged scoter, and horned grebe.

Interesting songbirds, too, are easily found along River Road. Cedar waxwings and eastern kingbirds sally out from dead branches to catch flying insects, common yellowthroats and red-winged blackbirds sing from roadside marshes, and song sparrows nest in the grassy ditches.

A particularly productive area for birds can be found along the west bank of the river, extending from the Trent campus to north of Lock 22. Here, we find the River Road's only mature deciduous woodlot and a magnet for migrants. Composed mostly of mature maples, beeches and black cherries, impressive numbers of warblers, vireos, rose-breasted grosbeaks, and even scarlet tanagers can be found here during spring migration. What is more, the woodlot is almost entirely within city limits and easily accessible to the public.

Drew Monkman, special to The Examiner

The woodlot at Lock 22, as seen from River Road.

However, the woodlot is doomed if the proposed Trent Rapids power development goes ahead. The plan is to construct a 1,200-metre canal from above the dam at Lock 23 to below the dam at Lock 22 in order to produce hydroelectricity. To get a sense of how long this is, imagine a canal stretching from the intersection of Parkhill Road and George Street all the way to Hunter Street. It will involve clearing eight hectares or more of vegetation and excavating massive mounds of excess rock, shale and overburden. To get a sense of scale, this is an area equivalent to 12 soccer fields in size. About 2.5 hectares of wetland and old field habitat will also be destroyed in the process. When the woodlot goes, so will much of the aesthetic appeal of driving or cycling along River Road.

The canal will have chain-link fencing on its east and west sides. This will cut off access to the river for mammals such as the many deer in the area and make the west bank far less suitable as a wildlife corridor. The only way wildlife will be able to move north-south will be along the very steep bank that will run down to the west side of the canal.

This woodlot has long been a favourite field trip destination of the Peterborough Field Naturalists, in particular for the Sunday morning bird walks. I also take the Edmison Heights Public School birding club there regularly and have done woodland habitat investigations with my classes on several occasions. Some of the activities of the annual Trent Summer Sports Camp also take place here. Many Trent students and members of the public walk or jog the trail along the water's edge, as well.

The woodlot has long been a teaching site for a forest management course at Trent University. Professor Dennis McGee, a professional forester, considers this particular woodlot to be "the best example of a late succession tolerant hardwood stand on campus, even though it is only a forest fragment." He estimates that the large sugar maples are in the range of 120 to 150 years old and that some of the beech and black cherries are of similar age. It is therefore relatively similar to the forests that Susanna Moodie describes in Roughing It in the Bush and constitutes no less than an integral part of our local heritage.

By proceeding with the hydro-electric project, a huge swath of water, stone, and concrete will run through the heart of the woodland. The remaining edge fragments along both sides of the canal will be much more open and will soon fall prey to European buckthorn. This is an aggressive, non-native shrub which easily out-competes native vegetation and, in turn, reduces biodiversity.

Loss of natural habitat such as southern Ontario's rapidly disappearing woodlots does not occur in one fell swoop, but happens more insidiously through thousands of smaller-scale projects like this one. Every project in isolation seems somewhat defensible, especially one like this where green power will be produced. The accumulative effect on the natural environment, however, is staggering. And it's happening everywhere in the world.

This project in particular presents a moral dilemma. It's hard to be against green power, and the idea of small-scale hydro projects is definitely part of a vision for a sustainable future. However, given the impact on the Otonabee River's natural and aesthetic values as a National Historic Waterway, the tremendous damage to be wreaked on the 1.2 kilometres of fairly undisturbed riverbank forest, and the relatively small amount of electricity to be generated, one has to wonder if it is worth it. Many people would like to see alternative solutions such as refurbishing or replacing the existing dams at Locks 22 and 23 and installing a power house at each. This option fits with the stated urgent need by Parks Canada to protect the ecological integrity of the waterway and its many species at risk as expressed in Trent-Severn Waterway Wildlife Action for Habitat Health (www.waterwaywildlife. com).

A loop trail across the two dams could connect the west side of the river with the existing Rotary Greenway Trail and provide an idyllic stretch of forest-lined, riverbank walking. Instead, we are now looking at the possibility of creating a 1.2-kilometre-long scar on the landscape — a hardened shoreline with chainlink fences lining a canal with berms rising five metres or more. The eyesore will be especially visible in the fall and winter when the leaves drop.

Founding Trent University President Tom Symons and the first board of governors saw the Otonabee River "as part of the character of the university" and the campus and riverbank land as one of the components of "...a continuation of the beautiful river parklands of the city, available for the pleasure of the citizens of the community, as much as for the members of the university." We need to keep faith with this vision.

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