

Mulmur resident hikes 900 kilometres of Bruce Trail from Caledon to Tobermory

By Constance Scrafield

'You are in a place that is just what it's been for thousands of years,' said Sharon Sommerville, Mulmur resident. 'You get to experience life as people have experienced it for thousands of years.'

Sommerville was talking about her 900-kilometre hike of the Bruce Trail from Caledon to Tobermory, an adventure she and her cousin shared over the span of three years.

It began one day when they were at Sommerville's home, where her cousin had come out for tea and asked about hiking the Bruce Trail.

'When do you want to start? Next week?'

They began in Caledon. From the Bruce Trail Hiking Club, they collected a three-ring binder with maps and trail descriptions. It is important to know what you are getting into. Use the maps as a main guide and now, there is an app, with a little blue dot and that is you.

Even in familiar places like Mono Cliffs, you have to be alert as to footfalls and other difficulties. Although the map is clear, you may still be looking at your feet and you can miss a blaze that shows you where to turn. The blazes on the trail are painted on trees - white for the Bruce. They indicate the direction the path is taking and are so important that, if you think you have gone a long way without seeing one, the advice is to go back to the last one to make sure you have not strayed.

Most people hike it independently or as small, frequently guided groups.

The Bruce Trail is organized into nine sections. Volunteer organizations look after the trails. In this area, the Dufferin Hi-Land Bruce Trail Club also organize hikes.

In parts of the hike from Warton to Tobermory, when they went with a group, the hike leaders were wonderful people. Your safety is primary, as says their motto: 'No one is left behind.'

We talked about the hike itself with its discoveries and moments. She told us that the Niagara Escarpment is verdant but all along, she mourned, 'You see the [encroachment] of people, of development.'

Parts of the trail run across private properties and she praised land owners' generosity in permitting hikers' passage through their fields and pathways.

'You get to places you can only get to by foot. The forests are cathedrals and there are lots of waterfalls,' Sommerville said. 'This is such a gift that we still have these wilderness areas in Ontario. There are people clearing away rubbish and fallen trees and invasive plant species. At home, we walk the dogs. Splitrock is a three-kilometre concentration of the trail.'

For any hiker, a well-thought-out lunch is needed. Sommerville's cousin's choices were nuts, dried fruit, certain energy bars, and date squares - all light and easy to carry, with a heavy-duty piece of plastic to put down on the grass while eating. An ample supply of water is a must. There are places to stop, although camping is basically not permitted.

At one stop down in the Niagara Peninsula, they saw a deep valley and falls with flat rocks.

There they paused for lunch, 'with this light coming through the trees and that was priceless.'

A place in Mulmur, a farmer's field and under the trees was a picnic bench, looking out over the hill. It could have been Ireland and Sommerville told the Citizen she paused to wonder if they got politicians there, whether it might change their policies. She said this is the way we used to live, with nature all around us.

You can get lost is a caveat. It is essential to be aware of where you are.

The cousins travelled south to north, as preference. They hiked three kilometres an hour; hiking is always based on where the parking is. In a day, their longest hikes were 17 to 19 kilometres. Sometimes for the parking, she and her cousin met independently to park at each end of the day's hike and drive back to the beginning. Sometimes, if there is only one vehicle, a hike back to the vehicle is doubled.

For difficulty, Caledon begins the hike with deep 'V' valleys, constantly ascending and descending, straight up and straight down. By the time you get to the Beaver Valley, you are in pretty good shape, they said. The pair did hike in that first winter. It was gorgeous but led to an ear, nose and throat infection for one of them.

It is important to have good boots, Sommerville said. In the Balls Falls Conservation Area, at the top of the Twenty Mile Valley Trail, stands a sign to warn this is for 'experienced hikers.' It is a two-kilometre hike, to the Waterfront Trail at Lake Ontario. Beautiful but hard work, Sommerville remarked.

'We just keep putting one foot in front of the other. I still look at my red hiking boots and think you're not done yet.'

Through it all, her husband was very supportive and encouraging. Any section over an hour's drive away and they would double their hike and stay overnight. Her husband was great about it all as what was 'to be expected.'

By the finish, they felt 'a great sense of we've actually done this and then, we're actually done.'

When asked about the toughest moment, Sommerville related the heart stopper for her: a couple of moments coming to a vertical rock face, looking for hand and foot holds, added to which, she has a fear of heights.

'Okay, not easy but you do it. My perception was, this is scary,' Sommerville said.

The whole experience gave her the pushback to save the Greenbelt. When once referred to as 'the tree lady', she recalled 'One day, we were on the trail and you couldn't see the trail for the fallen leaves. My foot got caught on a rock or a stump and I catapulted forward, and there was a tree exactly where it needed to be, and I wrapped my arms around it.

'That tree saved my life.'

Nicola Ross wrote the definitive Bruce Trail hiking book, '40 hikes in 40 Days.'

Philosophically, Sommerville observed that we get up every day and we are constantly at risk from other drivers. Yes, there are risks on the Bruce Trail, but you mitigate your actions and that's how you survive.

This, from the lady who rode her bike from Vancouver to Halifax on her own, in the summer of 1987, a great summer, warm and dry.

Remembering the moment fondly, Sharon Sommerville told the Citizen, 'Finally, when we got to the end of our 18 hikes, it worked beautifully.'

'It was October 18. They had a celebration. Family members came to meet us on that gorgeous fall day. You can see the cairn

(marking the beginning or the end of the trail) as you come over the step. As each hiker came around the corner, there was cake and sweet cider and someone blasts a little horn as each hiker steps to the end.?