

Oak Ridges Moraine Trail a hidden gem in Headwaters region

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While the Bruce Trail remains Canada's most famous cross-country hiking trail, making its way through Caledon near Mono and Airport Road, the Oak Ridges Moraine Trail, starting at a west intersection off the Bruce, offers a spectacular alternative for outdoors enthusiasts to hike along the full extent of the Moraine.

Off-road wherever possible, with multiple side trail options, the Oak Ridges Trail Association (ORTA) covers 310 km of Southern Ontario.

ORTA, a volunteer-based organization, was started in 1991 by a group of individuals interested in highlighting the natural beauty of the Oak Ridges Moraine, in partnership with Metro Toronto, the Toronto Regional Conservation Authority, and Hike Ontario. Unlike the Bruce Trail, the Moraine Trail does not run across land bought specifically for the purpose, but instead runs along roadsides and across properties of land owners with whom ORTA has agreements.

It runs through Caledon to King City, Aurora, Whitchurch, Stoweville, and continues east along the Moraine, ending in Warkworth, intersecting the Ganaraska and the Great Trail.

According to ORTA, "The Oak Ridges Moraine is a ridge of land that runs parallel to and about 60 km north of Lake Ontario. It extends about 200 km from the Niagara Escarpment in the west to the Trent River in the east."

It continued, "One of the most significant features of the Moraine is the ground water which results from rainwater percolation into the generally porous soils of the Moraine. The Moraine forms the watershed divide between Lake Ontario and Lake Simcoe and is the headwaters to more than 30 rivers."

The Moraine was formed as a result of actions by massive sheets of ice that covered much of North America in the last million years. During advances and retreats of the glaciers, materials were scraped and deposited from the land creating a "new" landscape.

The Oak Ridges Moraine is one of these new landscapes. The varied geology of the Moraine has also contributed to the diversity of vegetation that can be found there. This includes 100 regionally rare, 5 provincially rare as well as a few endangered species.

ORTA, as a volunteer-run and membership-based organization, has two mandates. The first is to build and maintain the Trail, the second to provide education about the Moraine and the Trail itself.

"We lead organized hike four to five times a week, over 300 hikes a year. They are open to anyone, you don't have to be a member. But, if you are going to be a regular, we suggest you buy the \$40 membership, which is applicable to the whole family," says Association President Kevin Lowe. "All hike leaders are certified by Hike Ontario, and are trained in leading hikes of varying difficulty for different groups."

Groups vary in size (usually due to weather) from five to 35.

Information about the various hikes, including GPS listing, length, difficulty, number of hills, speed and Hike Ontario rating can be found on the website, www.oakridgestrail.org. Here, says Lowe, "people can look for the hike most applicable to them."

President Lowe and his group are very proud of their Association, all volunteer with the exception of one part-time employee who manages the office. ORTA boasts over 700 active members, and hikes take place in all weather, all year round. "Our hike leaders are very knowledgeable about the outdoors. We're totally funded by members and donations, so it's very much a grass-roots organization. Anyone is welcome to come."