

Renfrew County – A treasure trove of natural areas

By Ole Hendrickson

Abundant wildlife and highly diverse natural ecosystems occur throughout the Ottawa Valley. Rural roads provide access to beautiful rivers, lakes, forests and farmlands. The rolling terrain offers a new view over each hilltop. Back country explorers can travel freely through crown lands, which make up nearly half the surface area of Renfrew County.

Even larger towns and cities such as Arnprior, Pembroke, Petawawa and Renfrew include areas with special ecological features that are sought out by naturalists trying to add unusual wildlife species to their lists.

More than 80 areas within Renfrew County are specially designated as provincial parks (including waterway parks), conservation reserves, areas of natural and scientific importance, and provincially significant wetlands. The unique geological and biological features of these special natural areas in the Ottawa Valley make them well worth exploring.

Visiting these natural areas connects us with Canada's history. Generations of Algonquin peoples traveled up and down the Ottawa River for annual gatherings on Morrison Island near Pembroke. This is where the historic meeting between Algonquin chief Tessouat and Samuel de Champlain took place four hundred years ago. And since 1866, one year before confederation, Canada's Parliament has met on a bluff overlooking the river.

The Renfrew County portion of the Ottawa River is perhaps best known as a mecca for whitewater enthusiasts. But, it also links a series of protected areas: Driftwood Provincial Park in the northern-most tip of the county; Petawawa Terrace Provincial Park in the Town of Petawawa; and Westmeath and Ottawa River Provincial Parks in Whitewater Region.

The watersheds of the County's four largest Ottawa River tributaries – the Bonnechere, Madawaska, Muskrat, and Petawawa – all include headwater lakes in Algonquin Park with campsites and marked portage trails. But you don't have to drive all the way into Algonquin Park to find outstanding recreational opportunities. Within Renfrew County itself, adventurous paddlers can explore protected areas along the Barron, Bonnechere, Little Mississippi, Madawaska, Muskrat, Snake and York Rivers; and along Bissett, Black Donald, Constant, Deux Rivieres and Grants Creeks. These gems could be promoted for greater recreational use by County residents as well as visitors.

The Ottawa River Institute's Renfrew County Nature Notebook (www.naturenotebook.ca) makes it easy to find and enjoy these beautiful natural areas, whether in towns and cities, or in remote areas of crown land. The Nature Notebook pulls together information from a variety of sources. We provide links to resources that will help you identify species of plants and animals that you see during your travels. You can also view other people's photos and notes of their visits, and share your own observations

on the Renfrew County Nature Notebook Facebook page.

The Ottawa River Institute, in partnership with the Bonnechere River Watershed Project, and with funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation, has also developed and published the Bonnechere River Watershed Nature in Your Neighbourhood Guide, which is available on line at <http://www.ottawariverinstitute.ca/our-projects/nature-in-your-neighbourhood>. It describes one of the best-loved parts of the Ottawa Valley, central to the history of Algonquin people and European settlement, and highlights the work of local artists and photographers.

Building on work done by geologists, naturalists, and historians, the Guide encourages local residents and visitors to walk, paddle, or cycle through the exceptional scenery of the Bonnechere watershed. It features the numerous opportunities to paddle the Bonnechere itself, its tributaries, and major lakes such as Round Lake, Golden Lake, and Lake Clear.

Whether the Ottawa Valley is your home, or you are planning a visit, we encourage you to read the Nature in Your Neighbourhood Guide, on-line at <http://www.ottawariverinstitute.ca/our-projects/nature-in-your-neighbourhood>, and to browse the Renfrew County Nature Notebook at www.naturenotebook.ca.

If you have information about favourite natural areas in the County that you would like to share, please get in touch. Let us know how we can work together to better appreciate Renfrew County's natural wealth.