

## Woods, water and wildness



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**By Nate Smelle**

I recently had the privilege of listening to a friend share with me her initial impression of North Hastings after visiting the area for the first time. Before making the trek north she told me how she couldn't wait to walk through woods, smell the wildflowers, watch the fireflies, and see the stars. Thinking about how excited she was to soak in these staples of summer in North Hastings; and how often these same marvels of nature go unnoticed by many of us who are immersed in this environment year-round, I asked myself what it is that draws cottagers and tourists to this area year after year.

Walking among the crowd of thousands gathered in downtown Bancroft on Friday for the opening night of the 6th annual Wheels, Water and Wings event, I struck up conversations with several people I crossed paths with while wandering around taking photos. What I learned from these random encounters was that nearly every person I spoke with, had come to town that evening from the cottage or campsite where they were staying. I also found out that more than half of this spontaneous focus group had traveled to North Hastings from the GTA. Furthermore, when I pried them regarding their reasons for coming to the area, every single one of them remarked on how beautiful and peaceful it is here, and how great it felt to remove themselves from the daily hustle of the city. Before heading home for the night, I decided to take a seat beside the York River to process my observations from these exchanges, and how they related to the question on my mind.

Having logged enough kilometres as a tourist, a journalist and a worker who has worn many hats to have driven to the moon and back within the coastlines of Turtle Island, I'm certainly no stranger to the road. Peering back on my own travels, I reflected on what it is that compels me to revisit a destination and explore it more carefully. I recalled art galleries and studios and quirky mom-and-pop stores full of trinkets and other treasurable creations ? many of which are now entombed in plastic containers, hidden away and forgotten in storage like the Ark of the Covenant.

Despite the joy these possessions give me from time to time, they are not in the forefront of my mind when I think of what it is that makes me want to return to certain places and pass through others. The actual material items themselves are not the origin of the smiles they periodically inspire over the long-term; what makes them precious are their ability to act as conduits to the sequence of memorable moments that led to their acquisition. Next, I thought of delicious meals, live music and other such cultural experiences worth remembering, and how when reminiscing on these moments with the loved ones I shared them with, our stories revolve mostly around the adventure leading to and from these fragments of the overall experience.

Stretching out in the sand to watch the night sky when I got home later that night, I laid there listening to the sound of a porcupine gnawing away on the stairs leading to the cabin where I was staying. Still contemplating my original question, I thought of my friend's close encounter of the first kind with North Hastings. Hearing the genuine enthusiasm and wonder in her voice as she described her deep appreciation of watching the fireflies dance below billions of stars, that are for the most part invisible in the city, I found the answer I had been searching for. What makes North Hastings a world-class destination for tourists is far greater than

anything we naked apes could ever manufacture. Our true value resides in the fact that when people come to visit our neck of the woods, they still have an opportunity ? an opportunity that is becoming rarer every day ? to connect with something sacred that paints a much bigger and more wondrous portrait of reality for us to enjoy...the natural world.