Hiking Though A Canadian National Park That Protects Farmland

By Jennifer Bain
March 24, 2021



A sign along Harvest Trail in Rouge National Urban Park asks hikers to share the path with farm equipment. Jennifer Bain

The drive to the start of the Harvest Trail meanders down a rural road past market gardens selling brown eggs and honey, alongside fields waiting to be planted with wheat, soy and corn crops, and green pastures and barns and yellow warning signs ordering motorists to share the road with tractors.

Canada's national parks typically protect natural and cultural heritage, but Rouge National Urban Park is unique. It's the country's only national park and the first one that's of a protects agricultural heritage. This Class 1 farmland is "the rarest, richest and most fertile in the country," according to Parks Canada, and the park is still home to working farms.

Parking at the 1gth Avenue Day Use Area, I spot a sea of sidestickers to the north of the trailhead and head south, passing a sign that reminds me that I'm in a park that's part of the Toronto Zoo. I'm not, but I'm surrounded by wildlife. It is within a one-hour drive of 9 million people and the travel restrictions that forced people to embrace local green spaces, so numbers are going up. Apparently, so is the illegal dumping of household waste and construction materials.

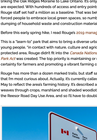
Before this early spring hike, I read Rouge's 2019 management plan, all 86 pages of it.

This is a "secret" park that aims to bring a diverse urban population, especially new Canadians and young people, to "connect with nature, culture and agriculture." Because it's a new category of protected area, Rouge didn't fit into the Canada National Parks Act and so the Rouge National Urban Park Act was created. The top priority is maintaining or restoring ecological integrity. Providing greater certainty for farmers and promoting a vibrant farming community are other priorities.

Rouge has more than a dozen marked trails but staff say Harvest Trail showcases the agricultural land that's the park's reason for being. It's a 6.5-kilometre loop that I'll do in a clockwise direction. I'll use the Map to reflect the area's farming history. It's described as an easy, family-friendly, linear trail that weaves through crops, marshland and shaded woodlot for 90 minutes to two hours. The trail ends at the Reesor Road Day Use Area, and so I'll have to double back to my car.

The Harvest Trail is wide and flat and meanders between fenced farm fields. Jennifer Bain

The park-in-progress spans the Greater Toronto Area from Uxbridge to Markham and Scarborough, linking the Oak Ridges Moraine to Lake Ontario. It's only 40 per cent complete and more land transfers are expected. With hundreds of access and entry points, it's also impossible to tally annual visitors, but Rouge staff said 2 million is a reasonable estimate. That was before COVID and the travel restrictions that forced people to embrace local green spaces, so numbers are going up. Apparently, so is the illegal dumping of household waste and construction materials.



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A sign warns visitors that illegal dumping is not welcome. Jennifer Bain

Before setting off on the 4.5-kilometre (2.7-mile) southbound trail, I read up on the Rouge Valley's history. Indigenous people lived in the area for thousands of years. The Seneca were forced out in the 1700s. Covid alert that says it's cleaned daily but that website is not updated. We still need to physically distance outside. A look at the trail map posted in the area and this area is a hotspot for ticks.

We love our warning signs in Canada.

A safety item for directions and I cheerfully say it's my first time here, too. It feels strange to talk to strangers again, but even my fussy "here and "to" and modeling and smiling as I pass people and their kids and pets calm for a stroll along with. But pointers and the provincial boundary on a warm afternoon.

"Stay on marked trails," a Rouge sign urges. "Access to agricultural lands is not permitted." The fields are fenced but nobody's out working and there aren't any crops to admire yet.



Fence sitters take very lightened down go on some of the park fences by farmland. Jennifer Bain

Parks Canada reminds us that Indigenous peoples used this area for thousands of years before settlers started farming in the Rouge Valley in 1794. Many early farmers were pacifist Pennsylvania Mennonites who arrived after the American Revolutionary War to get cheap land and military service exemptions.

Mennonite scouts sought black walnut trees that signalled fertile soils. One scout, Peter Reesor immortalized with Reesor Road, arrived in the late 1790s and built a log cabin just one of the first grist and saw mills on the Rouge River. Mennonite migration peaked between 1803 and 1807 as other groups from the United States (Germans, Quakers, Scots, English and Dutch settlers) arrived. This immigration waned after the War of 1812, but now "no settlers" arrived from England and Ireland in the 1820s and 1830s.

I groan at this news. I'm from Northern Ireland and I spent a big part of my childhood in England. I'm not a settler, I tell myself. I'm from the newly-pioneered town in big cities and I've used "dumb knob and seem" to clear the land for pasture to to grow oats, rye, buckwheat, potatoes, turnips and corn. When tree stumps left from clearing the land rotted enough to allow ploughing and harrowing, wheat could finally be planted.

Parks Canada says farmers eventually upgraded to brick and stone homes, adopted new fertilization techniques, grew new crops and bred new animals. There were apple orchards along with pears, plums, potatoes, hay, butter pork, wool, eggs and poultry. There were gendered roles, with man doing field, livestock and orchard work, and women caring for kitchen gardens, chickens and dairy cows, and selling extra produce at local markets.



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A sign says to share the road with tractors on a farm and barn loom in the background. Jennifer Bain

By the 1890s, the rural population started to drop as people left for urban areas. agriculture was mechanized and the soil was exhausted. By the mid-1900s, after the Great Depression and World War II, the Rouge Valley started becoming engulfed by suburbs.

Parks Canada says this shift was spurred by the opening of the Yonge Street subway in 1954, the advent of subdivisions in the 1970s and the creation of highways. That's why it became so important to protect the remaining farmland, which includes dwindling farmland, dairy farms, market gardens and organic grown corn, soy and wheat crops.

On an elevated part of the Harvest Trail, the skies are clear enough to see downtown Toronto's skyscrapers. I make photos at a scenic lookout, cross multiple short boardwalks over with a ponytail and rest in seating areas made from rocks and a split tree trunk.

The crows and hawks are out, and I stop to admire tree swallows boxes and three tin cans attached to hawthorn trees. Parks staff later gives they're homemade bird feeders. They also tell me that white plastic wraps around the base of young trees are guards to prevent rabbits and deer from eating precious bark.



Rosella is a hairy invasive, mostly ornamental plant. Jennifer Bain

There are occasional cattails and old corn cobs stripped of their juicy kernels lying on the ground, plus young white spruce likely planted during restoration projects. There are rosettes of furry leaves that will soon grow into unloved and invasive hairy mullein plants with clusters of small, yellow flowers.

The most exciting moment on this peaceful hike is when the wire fence suddenly ends in one small section with a warning sign that says "Farm crossing." Field to farm equipment? There's no machinery out today, though, and the trail doesn't pass by any of the old barns I spotted while driving.



A vintage abandoned car hidden in the bush by the trail. Jennifer Bain

The Rouge is proudly home to two main types of barns. Large, two-storey Central Ontario or bank barns have lower-level stables and upper levels for crop storage or work space. Smaller, one-storey English or three bay barn have distinct areas for a stable, storage and threshing floor.

When I cross Elgin Mills Road, I forget this is the end of the Harvest Trail and that the Reesor Road Day Use Area parking lot is just a short walk to the east. Instead, I keep heading south on a new 1.25-kilometre (0.7-mile) stretch called West Trail, past trees, old rustic fiber with wood chips and leaf debris that prevent erosion and sedimentation during construction around water bodies.



A hand-painted rock says \

It's on way way back north on West Trail that I spot an abandoned vintage car. Its windows long gone, its roof covered in dried grass, the remnant of a past farmer. I don't dare step off the trail for a closer look and I know that in a few short weeks the spring foliage will once again hide this relic. I do excitedly point it out to a couple walking by.

Two hours and 20 minutes after I begin this stroll, I'm back where I started near the parking lot. This time I notice a short stretch of trail that heads north to the closest subdivision. I follow it down a hill, through a small forest and to the end, where I spot one of those kindness rocks that kids paint with messages and leave for others to discover. Either it, created this one.

His message? "Protect the Earth."

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