Awenda Provincial Park: A Biological Oasis at Your Back Door!

By Tim Tully, Chief Park Naturalist

The Neighbourly Connection

Turtles can't read maps! Local wildlife moves freely in and out of the park to meet their habitat needs. In many ways, species' survival depends more on what is happening outside Awenda's borders than within it. The key to future conservation success is protecting core habitats throughout the Penetanguishene Peninsula and the natural corridors, like the woodlands around Farlain Lake that connect them which allow for physical species movement and maintain genetic diversity. Our local forests and wetlands are part of one Natural Heritage System.

The Farlain Lake watershed doesn't stop at the north end of the lake. It connects to Kettle's Lake, in Awenda and beyond, to Gignac Lake before flowing to Georgian Bay in the wide expanse of shoreline east of the park as far as southeast as Sawlog Bay. The bluffs around Farlain and Awenda provide areas of groundwater recharge and feed a pristine aquifer that we depend on for our safe drinking water.

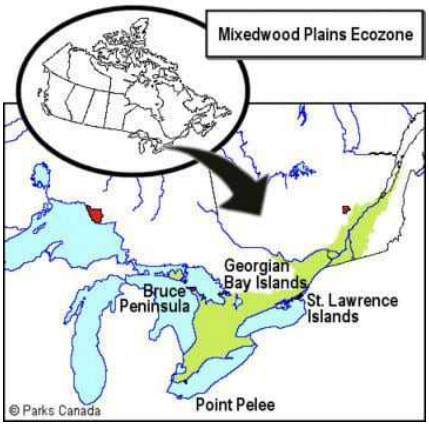
It is in our shared natural interest to conserve and protect native species and the ecosystem services provided by the entire peninsula. There is so much more to discover about this spectacular landscape and its wildlife. Together with community residents we can truly get to 'see' the big picture and better know the neighbourhood from the perspective of wildlife that clearly needs our mutual help.

An Introduction to Awenda

Awenda Provincial Park is a **Natural Environment** class park located in the municipality of Tiny, Simcoe County. The park was proposed in 1956, with land acquisition occurring between the years 1963-1976. It was regulated by its local name, Methodist Point Park Reserve in 1975. Awenda was opened for local camping in August of 1978 with an official anniversary on its grand opening date of July 4, 1979. Giant's Tomb Island was added to the park in 1985.

The park area boasts over 3000 ha of protected landscape, including over 90 percent of Giant's Tomb Island, making it one of the largest provincial parks in southern Ontario. It includes 5.5 km of Georgian Bay shoreline with exposed cobble beaches interspersed with sandy deposition beaches. Awenda is in the transition zone between the Boreal Region and Carolinian forest of southern Ontario which supports a rich biodiversity of species normally associated with areas north or south of the park.

Awenda is located within the Mixed-wood Plains Ecozone which covers about 8.5 million hectares or 9% of the provincial land area. The ecozone is defined by temperate broadleaf and mixed forests which typically surround the Great Lakes and border the St. Lawrence River.



Park Visitation and Facilities

The Mixed-wood Plains ecozone is home to 13.5 million people or 92% of the province's population. The region corresponds to environs of southern Ontario and as such Awenda is in a prime area which supports a burgeoning demand for nature-based recreation and tourism.

At the time of the management plan's completion in 1990, park visitation consisted of 55,461 annual visitors and 11,438 day-use visitors. Park visitation has increased steadily since the expansion of campsites from 200 to 333 sites with the opening of Wolf (1997) and Snake (1998) Campgrounds.

The recent two-year statistical average for the 2021 and 2022 calendar years is 172,649 campers and 44,298 day-use visitors. This represents a staggering 119% increase in visitors and a 387% increase in day-use visitation compared to 1990 visitation. The occupancy rate in July-August averaged 91% in 2023, one of the highest averages in Ontario Parks. Since the opening of the park in 1978 over 4.5 million visitors have discovered this 'hidden gem' of the Ontario Parks system.

The park's geography can be explored year-round with 29 km of marked trails and numerous ecologically compatible recreational opportunities to be enjoyed on foot, bike, cross-country skis or snowshoes. Park facilities include 333 campsites nestled within a mature forest environment.

The Discovery Department offers an impressive array of interpretive programs on the park's significant natural and cultural heritage including children's and evening programs, guided hikes and informal Ask the Naturalist style presentations throughout the peak summer period. Area residents are welcome to participate with a daily vehicle permit or season's pass. Visit www.awendapark.ca for the weekly July-

August program calendar and watch for updates of highlight programs in future "Ripples" issues so the Farlain Lake community can benefit from this year's Awenda-Farlain partnership.

The Department has the dual responsibility of organizing all resource management and coordinating park research. Various species monitoring activities including the ongoing Awenda Turtle Conservation Project offer volunteer opportunities to engage the community in the conservation of Awenda and the greater park ecosystem. Contact awendapp@gmail.com for additional information or to volunteer.

Nationally Significant Cultural History

Awenda embraces the story of the Wendat and Anishinaabe Nations. The park is the traditional homeland of the Bear Nation of the Wendat Confederacy. Evidence of their occupation accounts for 13 of 17 identified park archaeological sites (1480 AD – 1650 AD). The park is located on the treaty territory of The Three Fires Confederacy- Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomie; Treaty #5 was signed with the British in 1798.

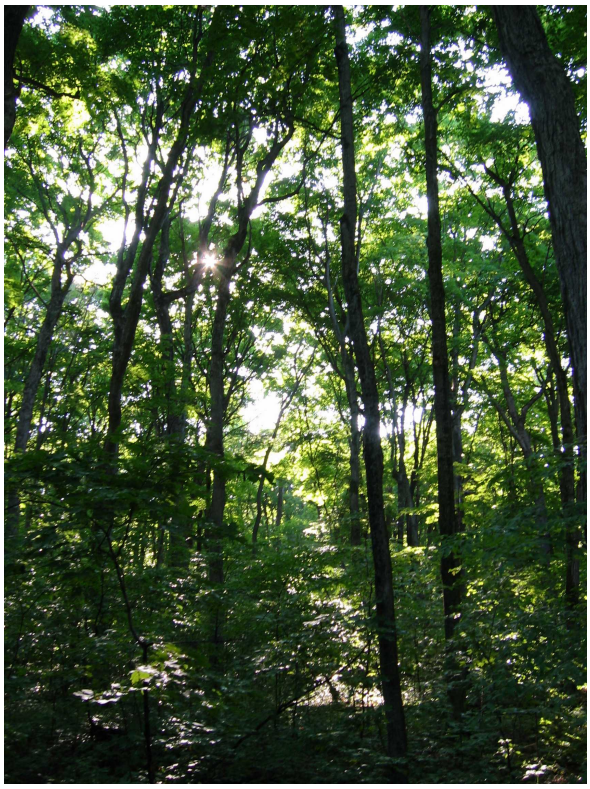
Early French explorers like Samuel de Champlain, the fur trader Etienne Brûlé and four of the eight North American martyred Saints were hosted by the Wendat Nation within villages currently located within park boundaries. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Métis settled and farmed throughout the northern peninsula. Three of the four known historic farms identified within the park are Métis in origin.

Provincially and Nationally Significant Life Science

The park boasts a remarkable diversity of species including 33 species of identified reptile and amphibian, 209 species of bird, 203 species of lichen, 220 species of fungi, 52 species of mammal and over 740 vascular plants. The park's biodiversity includes 46 Species at Risk highlighting the conservation importance of this wildlife oasis.

The park mainland is predominantly mature deciduous forest (70 to 120 years) with 285 hectares of old growth Sugar Maple (150- 290 years old) immediately north of Farlain Lake. It is estimated that less than .07 percent old growth forest remains in southern Ontario, which qualifies the Awenda tract as a 'provincially

significant woodland'. Younger stands of conifer plantation and successional poplar dot the park upland.



The park has an exceptional diversity of wetland communities including all four major types: swamps, fens, bogs and marshes. One site, the Coastal Meadow Marsh, is ranked G2 or 'globally imperilled' with only 5-10 sites known to exist in the world! Consider participating on a guided hike or children's dipnetting program to learn more about these critical habitats.

You can help!

We need to document and study area wildlife; it's paramount when we are trying to conserve and protect native species. You don't have to be an expert! Consider participating or supporting park research like the Awenda Turtle Conservation and Red-headed Woodpecker Projects, help with invasive species removal or volunteer for the annual area butterfly count or Little Brown Bat monitoring.

You can also email us anytime at awendapp@gmail.com with a wildlife photo, sighting or query and learn more about volunteer opportunities for you and your family.

Please join us for an FLCA exclusive event this year like the iNaturalist workshop in June to learn how simply taking a picture on your phone can make a conservation difference. For the wildflower enthusiast, the trillium show in Awenda is second to none and you can take a guided hike 'on the trillium trail' in May to experience Awenda's wildflower wonders. Stay tuned to future issues of "Ripples" for workshop and guided hike details.

In the meantime, consider becoming a member of the Friends of Awenda Park or support their education and research objectives with an online tax-free donation- www.awendapark.ca through Canada Helps. Send your membership inquiries to friendsofawenda@gmail.com.

At Awenda we're excited to work with the FLCA, an organization committed to conserving the beauty and wildlife of the Farlain Lake area. It's a shared conservation future so let's work together and make it a wonderful day in the park and the Farlain neighbourhood! It's a generational legacy that will last beyond a lifetime!