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Heart of Turtle Island

by Peter Thoen

There are few really good photographers. I remember going to Black's Cameras some decades ago carrying some negatives of photos I'd taken at a wedding. I'd used my Instamatic and was sure that my shots were very nearly as good as those taken by the paid photographer. The man at Black's was nice about it but suggested that my photos lacked focus, detail and compositional merit. There may have been other shortcomings that I've chosen to forget but clearly behind an Instamatic was where I belonged. Photography with a capital P takes technical know-how, an eye for a picture, a sizeable chunk of capital investment and, not insignificantly, an abundance of time to sit and sort through hundreds, maybe thousands, of shots.

Mark Zelinski is one of those capital-P Photographers. Trained at Ontario College of Art and devoted to the profession for several decades now, Mark has taken his craft around the world. He will do wedding photography but his public face is that of a man who explores the world and captures the essence of people and places. He spoke to HNC as guest speaker on December 12 2016 and his topic was Heart of Turtle Island: The Great Escarpment.

Heart of Turtle Island, the book, is a photo celebration and study of the Niagara Escarpment that we know and love. We love it even though we somewhat parochially identify with the Escarpment only as the towering exposure of limestone ambling its scenic way from Queenston to Tobermory. We overlook its emergence near Rochester, New York and its continuance beyond Tobermory as Manitoulin Island. And we completely lose interest as it crosses the upper peninsula of Michigan, swings southward along the margin of Lake Michigan, forms the Door Peninsula in Wisconsin and finally disappears west of Chicago.

Mark's photo-celebration work takes us the length of Ontario's slice of the Escarpment, examining in half a dozen chapters crammed with superb photos the way the people, places and things have embraced, adapted to and sometimes spoiled its face.

Professionally fine photography soon exhausts the repertoire of superlatives so I will say at the outset that the Mark's images in



Author Peter Thoen.

his presentation and the book leave you breathless at times. It's about the skill of seeing and composing the shot; it's about knowing light and shadow, about when to be there and just as importantly when not to shoot; and it's undoubtedly about the work later on in the metaphorical darkroom.

Chapters One and Two look at landforms and the Bruce Trail respectively; the two are intertwined. Other than the inescapable drama of the falls at Niagara, you could hardly have the latter without the former. A dedicated few folks have hiked the Bruce Trail from end to end, but probably most of us (like me) have only dabbled with it. I've hiked, ambled and poked my way along a

stretch here and there, sometimes praising the forethought of the handful of local visionaries who got it started, other times discouraged by how trampled, eroded and abused it so often is.

Mark's eye leads us to many of the dramatic highlights that make the trail and its offshoots so popular: Balls, Felkers and Albion Falls – each with a thin, almost diaphanous, veil draping the cliff face. We see Crawford Lake in crystal clarity, Mount Nemo, Flowerpot Island, and the stomach-churning dolostone overhang at Skinner's Bluff. Some of the Escarpment's drama and scope can only be captured from the air, the way a Turkey Vulture sees it. Mark takes the reader skyward to peer down on Hamilton, Cabot Head and the ski hills of Kelso. It is all so marvelous.

Chapters Three and Four capture the Escarpment as people live and have lived on it; from the experiences and traditions of native people, to the settlement and exploitation of the past two-hundred years. There are slow-shutter-speed images of a traditional smoke dance taken to emphasis the frenzy of the dancers and then we see into the eyes and memories of elders at a New Credit First Nations' Pow Wow.

The twentieth century brought grape production and wine festivals to the Lake Ontario Plain while historical battles and battle re-enactments have taken their place in the modern history of the Escarpment. All of this is captured in the pages of the book.

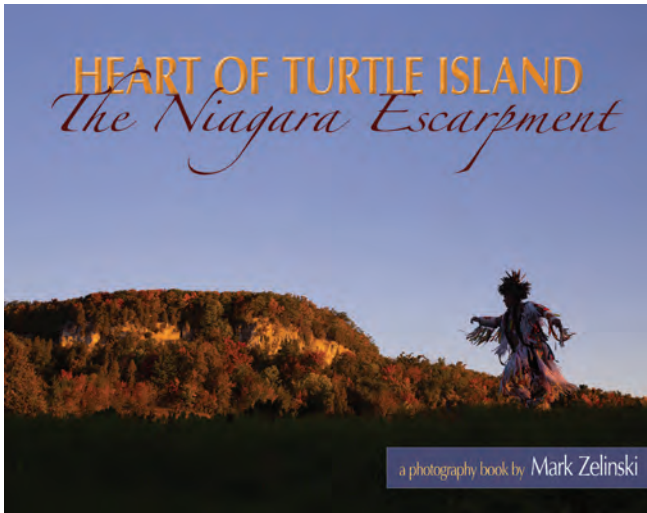
As naturalists we can find a special pleasure in the latter half of the book as Mark leads us first to the parks and conservation areas dotted along the Escarpment's length and then shows us some of the animals and plants.

The Niagara Parks Commission and Royal Botanical Gardens stand out as major attractions: Niagara Parks for its Parkway, and miles of manicured gardens and scenic drives as befits a world-class attraction. ('World class' is an often abused or misused adjective but not, I think, in the case of Niagara Falls.) Royal Botanical Gardens is featured as a sanctuary preserving lands that might otherwise have fallen to development around Hamilton's industrial heart. Along the journey from end to end are other notable public lands; Kerncliff Park, Lowville Park and Mount Nemo in Burlington, Hilton Falls, Glen Eden, Beaver Valley and Blue Mountain ski slopes, Lion's Head, Cabot Head and Bruce Peninsula National Park which stands as something of a counterpoint to the Niagara Parkway.

The Escarpment along its way holds many botanical treasures. The Niagara Gorge is known for remnant old-growth forest. Sassafras, Cucumber Magnolia and Pawpaw can be found along the Niagara Peninsula. It's fern country too with Hart's Tongue, Northern Holly and Walking Fern and the Bruce Peninsula is famous for



Mark Zelinski from www.markzelinski.com/books.html

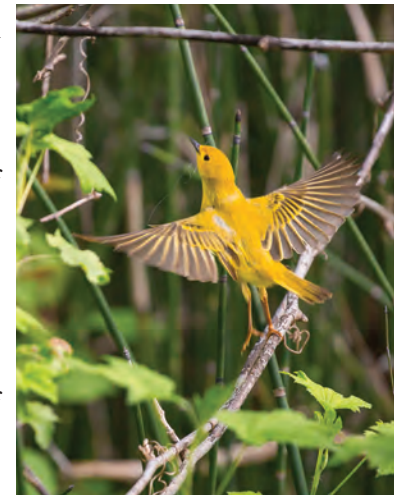


some rare and endangered orchid species as well as exuberant roadside shows of Yellow and Showy Lady Slippers. It would be tedious to list the fabulous shots of plants and animals. But you'll find some of the best shots ever of Cardinal Flower, Sassafras, White Trillium, Canada Anemone and a sundew (I forget which one) in these pages. Mammals and birds too: White-tailed Deer, Porcupine and Raccoon; Yellow Warbler, Lesser Yellowlegs and Sandhill Crane.

But back to the topic of the Photographer's Eye. It is easy to bandy around expressions like 'natural gem', 'stunning scenery' and 'masterpiece of living art' when it comes to describing places and features like the Niagara Escarpment. But while the Escarpment easily aligns with all of those characterizations,

there are nonetheless loads of rivals for our attention around us. On the other hand there are many (more?) crushingly dreary places. What comes to mind (and I'm not deliberately singling it out because they are legion) is Iowa's corn country. Take a look on Google Maps and you'll see what I mean. Even the Lindquist Wildlife Sanctuary near Gowrie, IA appears to be nothing more than a featureless cornfield. Really most of Iowa is, whether you like it or not, mostly one big cornfield. In an effort to be even handed about it, I can think too of Lubbock, Texas, where I spent an eternity one day. But returning to my point, this is where the Photographer's Eye comes in. A capital P Photographer (Mark Zelinski in this case) could, I'm sure, create a photo essay that would compel you to visit even the Lindquist Wildlife Sanctuary, making the metaphorical silk purse out of a sow's ear.

Just so that I'm not misunderstood by the foregoing mini-rant, I should close by noting that Mark's presentation and his book of the same name are, like those roadside orchids, exuberant, holding us captive to enjoy our own back yard as seen through his Photographer's Eyes. 🐦



Yellow Warbler from the book [Heart of Turtle Island: The Niagara Escarpment](#). A common species on Turtle Island - photo by Mark Zelinski.

