

Discovering Rail Trails

In the spring of 2020, Mary & I tried walking on a piece of the TransCanada Trail (TCT) going northeast out of Uxbridge. Although we had earlier hiked the TCT to the south of Uxbridge, we'd ignored this piece because it looked boring – it was a rail trail. Because rail trails tend to be flatter, and straighter than many other (especially woodland) trails, I expected to enjoy them less. However, we have been walking on several of them for over a year now, and thoroughly enjoyed the hikes.

Since March 2020:

- TCT from Uxbridge to east of Hastings
- Victoria Rail Trail from Lindsay south to Bethany, and from Lindsay north to Kinmount
- At Kinmount the trail becomes the Haliburton Rail Trail, and we are continuing this walk to the northern terminus at Haliburton village
- Blackwater to Cannington – this trail joins the TCT at Blackwater; we walked it north to Cannington
- Soon, we'd like to try the Millennium Trail in Prince Edward County – crosses the Waterfront Trail south of Trenton and goes over to Picton

What makes these trails so attractive to us?

For Mary and me, a very attractive feature of the rail trails is that they are lengthy and linear walking opportunities. We've simply gone out to a starting point, walked for an hour or so, then returned to our vehicle at the starting place, for a walk of 8-9 km overall (or sometimes less). The next day we want to walk, we just go back to the turnaround point of the previous walk, and do another 8-9 kilometres. Because the rail trails are so long, we don't have to put in much time and effort deciding where to walk; we just go to the next section and start walking.

Solid trailbeds, usually built up in low-lying areas; well-drained. The surfaces on the beds are often smoother than some other trails – parts are asphalt or fine crushed stone, although some are looser stone that provides less firmness for walking

Little slope – designed for trains, slope had to be minimized. Rail trails often follow landscape that has typically less slope, such as stream valleys and marshes. Also in responding to the need to avoid significant slopes, rail trails often go around large hills rather than over or through them. A good example is some of the area between Peterborough and Hastings where planners appear to have used long sweeping curves to have the railbed go around the many large hills (drumlins left by the glaciers).

Interesting landscape features – As noted, these trails often follow stream valleys, or go through marshes, providing a myriad of opportunities to view the streams and wetlands. We stopped and watched turtles moving around in a marsh, passed over a remarkable 29-metre high trestle on the TCT (Dube's Trestle, between Omemee and Peterborough), watched boats go through locks, and walked along a path between homes and the lakeshore. Most of the time, these trails are away from the roads,

with reduced noise, almost no vehicle traffic, and offering different views of homes and farms than is typically seen from the road.

What to watch out for:

As a precaution, we make a point of staying off rail trails in areas where active hunting may be occurring.

These trails often have to be shared, sometimes with ATVs or snowmobiles. While almost all trails have other kinds of users - bicycles, horses, cross-country skiers, for example – rail trails can also be popular for these machines. Some walkers might not like the prospect of sharing space with them, but I really haven't experienced much downside to their presence myself. ATVs and snowmobiles are loud enough that I can hear them coming, and operators have almost invariably been very courteous.

Cycling opportunities, too:

We have enjoyed walking the rail trails. I am nonetheless somewhat envious when I consider the recreation opportunities they present for cyclists. Kilometre after kilometre of generally very good surfaces, no significant grades and even bike repair stations in some locations. The trails can support many long relaxing rides.