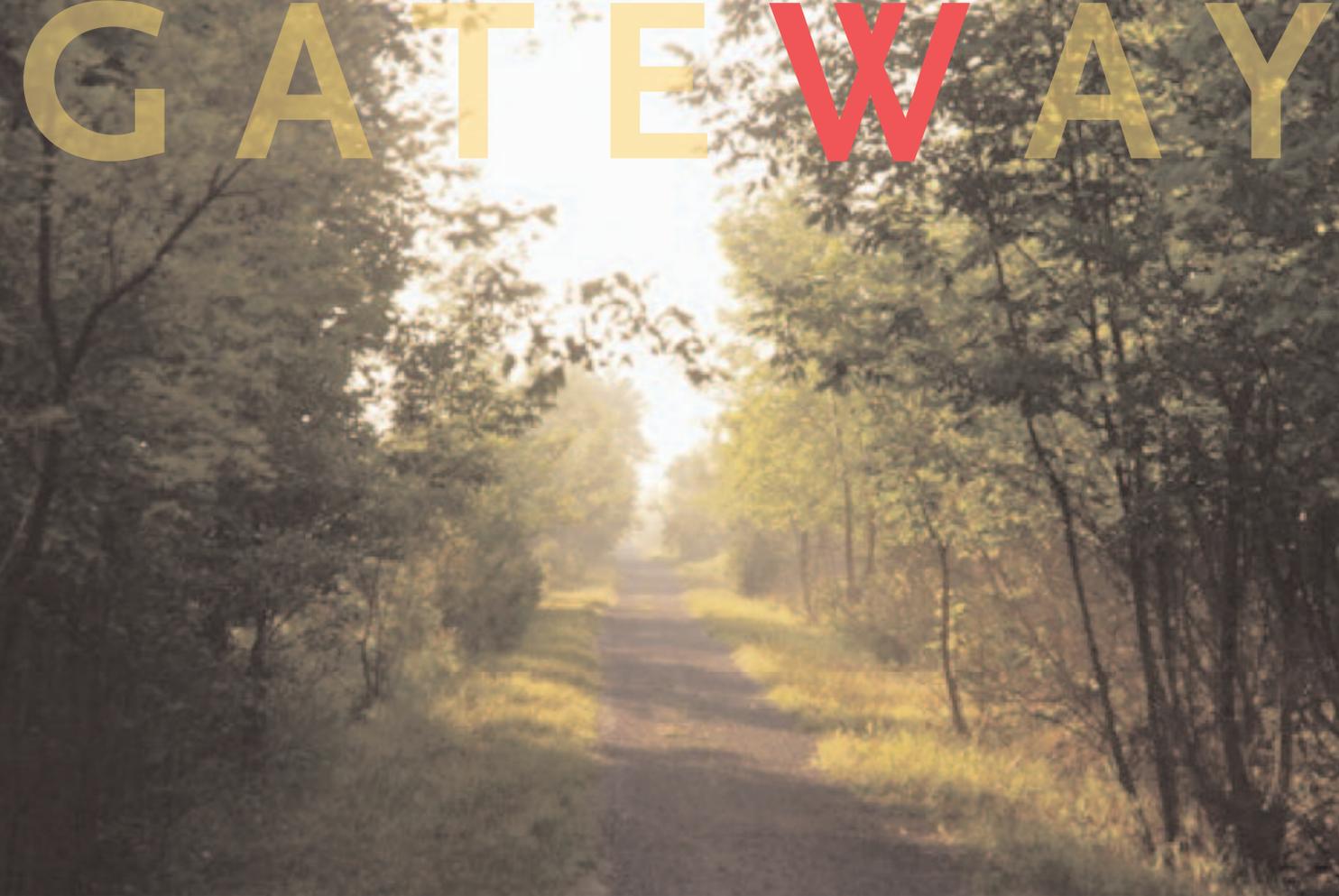


GATEWAY



Connecting the dots

BY ERIC RUMBLE

Al MacPherson (BELOW) led the push to build a new stretch of Trans Canada Trail (ABOVE) east of Omeme, Ont.



TRAILS SWEEP YOUR GAZE over the wetlands and pastures about 90 minutes northeast of Toronto and it's easy to overlook what makes the landscape so remarkable. Sure, there are the blue veins and placid bodies of water that give the municipality of Kawartha Lakes its name and draw weekend cottagers in droves. There are the verdant pockets of spruce, maple, dogwood and sumac, often speckled with shocks of colour by bluebirds, cardinals and orioles. But walking through the area on a wide, packed gravel pathway, you might not recognize the terrain's bulbous ripples as part of one of Canada's two largest stashes of drumlin formations.

Hailing from the most recent ice-age glacial period — the Wisconsin Glaciation, which ended about 13,000 years ago — the Peterborough drumlin field features some 3,000 of these oblong hills, formed by rock and sediment under massive ice lobes on the move. The field stretches about 140 kilometres east of Lake Simcoe between the Algonquin uplands and Niagara Escarpment. In the Kawarthas, clusters of drumlins bookend the town of Omeme, averaging 45 metres tall and about half a kilometre long.

Drumlins are an apt metaphor for the

44-kilometre stretch of Trans Canada Trail (TCT) that cuts through here. Tracing an old rail line, the trail is mostly flat, without any of the spectacularly rugged eye candy you'd find on, say, the Sea-to-Sky route between Squamish and Whistler, B.C. But due to the gradual, patient force of highly engaged locals, the Kawartha TCT has carved out a place of distinction in the national landscape. Like the drumlins, it's a display of progress that isn't obvious.

Unlike the drumlins, however, the Kawartha TCT was built from scratch with amazing speed and efficiency. A mere five years passed between the meeting that established a trail-building mandate and the penultimate section being linked from Lindsay's Memorial Park to Peterborough's Sir Sandford Fleming College last spring. (The final kilometre of trail will go through Lindsay.) During that span, more than \$875,000 was raised and 200-plus volunteers donated their ideas, skills and sweat equity, turning an unkempt rail bed into the municipality's binding thread.

"It's not just about building a trail — it's about connecting a community," says Al MacPherson, an ecology professor and veteran trail organizer who won the TCT's

2009 Volunteer of the Year award for spearheading the Kawartha Lakes effort.

All told, the Trans Canada Trail will fuse 22,000 kilometres and more than 400 recreational corridors, touching every ocean, province and territory to create the longest trail network on the planet. The volunteer-driven effort launched in 1992 with a completion goal of 2017, in time for Canada's 150th birthday. As of last spring, 73.4 percent of the trail was done and another 83 projects across the country are slated to finish by March 2011. "The actual construction of trail is the easy part," explains Tim Hoskin, the TCT's national director of trails. "Securing land permissions and fundraising for the building of it are really the toughest components."

Hoskin cites sparsely populated areas, such as a mostly incomplete section northwest of Thunder Bay, as particularly difficult because there aren't enough people to create momentum. Although Kawartha Lakes isn't exactly sparse, the range of contributions by its rural-minded residents sets an example that TCT staff now trumpet as a how-to model.

Tirelessly guided by MacPherson, the Kawartha TCT has excelled at stimulating a broad, piecemeal ownership. Eleven managing partners have been enlisted to maintain and monitor sections of trail. A handful of local handymen have supervised construction crews, handled repairs and installed finishing touches such as signage and ATV-impeding gates. Unsolicited, the local lilac committee donated a garden. Sir Sandford Fleming

students have helped with the environmental assessment and mapping process, and their campus hosts a donor's wall.

Moreover, contributions from a half-dozen secondary and elementary schools along the trail are likely to make the communal sense of ownership last. Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Secondary School overhauled its wood shop curriculum last year to teach handcraft carpentry techniques. Rather than rickety souvenirs, a small group of students built a full-size sun shelter for one trailhead. "When our kids go out on the trail now for a nature study," adds Jack Callaghan Public School principal Kathy Spaeth, "they're looking at the trees they've planted."

The Kawartha TCT has even invigorated a vanishing dot on the map. The hamlet of Reaboro once had a train station, sawmill, cheese factory, schoolhouse and church but is now just a sleepy knot of old houses with a post office. "The trail is wonderful for meeting neighbours and people from far away," says managing partner Marnie Callaghan. "Before this, Reaboro seemed to be losing its purpose and focus. Now people actually know we're here."

IF YOU GO

- Visit www.kawarthatranscanadatrail.ca for more info about the Kawartha TCT, including maps and a podcast that outlines features of the landscape, such as a 127-year-old trestle bridge.
- If exploring on foot doesn't cut it, the trail also accommodates cyclists, horse-back riders, cross-country skiers and snowmobilers.
- To get involved with trail building or maintenance efforts, to track the TCT's progress or to locate the section nearest you, check out www.tctrail.ca.

