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The Chebucto Peninsula: A Significant Conservation Area

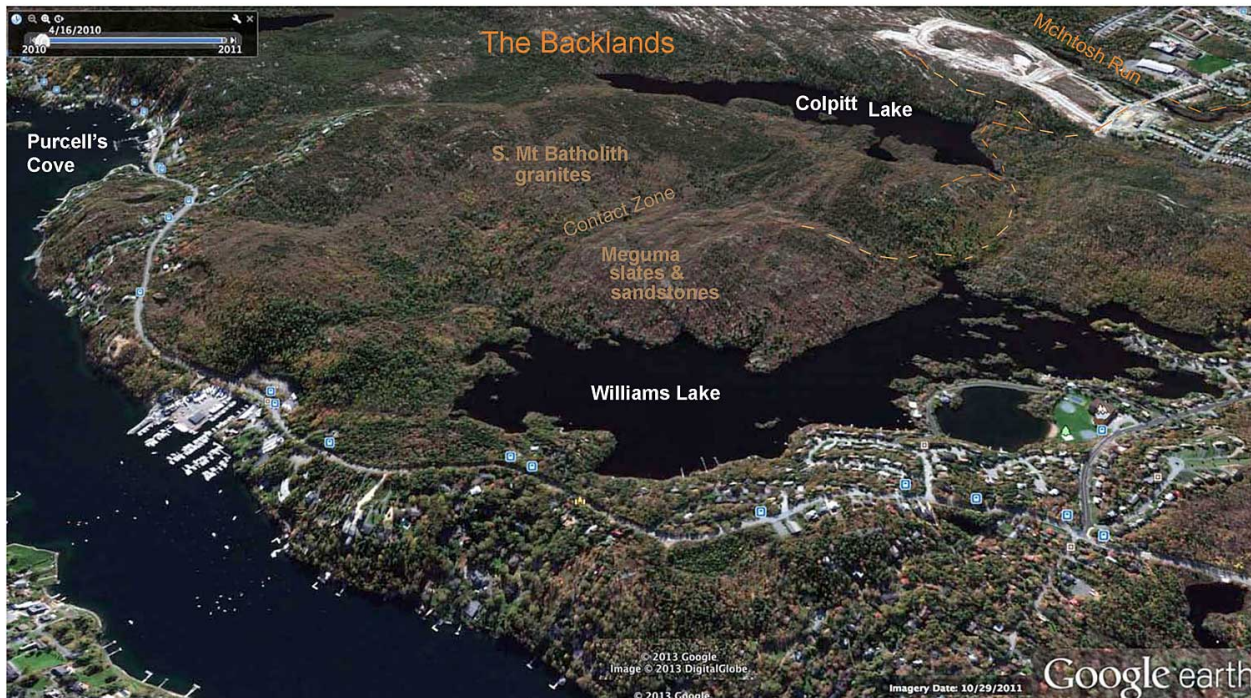


posted by **DAVID PATRIQUIN** | 5sc
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Five of the seven final events in Hike the Greenbelt take place on the Chebucto Peninsula. The area has enormous significance ecologically and recreationally to the whole region.

Living on peninsular Halifax, (a subpeninsula of the Chebucto Peninsula), I regard this lovely piece of rock as [my bioregion](#). Most of the bedrock is South Mountain Batholith, that hard granitic stuff that covers a lot of western Nova Scotia; in the area of Halifax it gives way to the black slates and siltstones of the “Meguma Supergroup”.

In the Backlands where we will hike on Aug 16, a sharp transition occurs along a “contact zone” where the granite meets the Meguma rocks. About 370 million years ago, the Meguma was heated and pushed upwards by molten granite in series of folds which peak today in a ridge overlooking [Williams Lake](#). It is a dramatic, Thomsonsque landscape with Jack Pines. Granites to the Southeast were quarried in the 1800s and moved via Nova Scotia’s first railway down to Purcell’s Cove. The Backlands are full of history, recent and ancient.



Entering the Backlands via Google Earth. The broken lines show the approximate route of the hike on Aug. 16.

Click on the image above and others for larger versions.

On the more recent side, the Chebucto Peninsula was shaped by glaciations, the last finally retreating only 11000 years ago. Shallow lakes were scraped out of the hard bedrock and teardrop shaped drumlins formed where till was deposited as the glaciers retreated. The more exposed surfaces remain largely bare of soil and forests today. We call them “barrens”, but they support assemblages of acid-loving shrubs that treat us to feasts of berries in the summer and turn fire-engine red in the fall.

Arctic-like bogs develop in depressions. Acadian hardwood and mixed forests occupy hilltops and slopes and red maple and northern black spruce swamps the lower lying lands. It is a mosaic landscape strewn with large lichen-covered boulders dropped by the glaciers. These “erratics” are in full display on the barrens in the Peggy’s Cove area where they are so aptly emulated by the Swiss Air monument. Atlantic Coastal Boreal Forest forms a fringe on most of the 200+ km of coastline. On the more sheltered [Troop Island](#) in St. Margaret’s Bay, there is a rare tract of old growth mixed Acadian forest. (The island was recently protected under the Nova Scotia Nature Trust.)

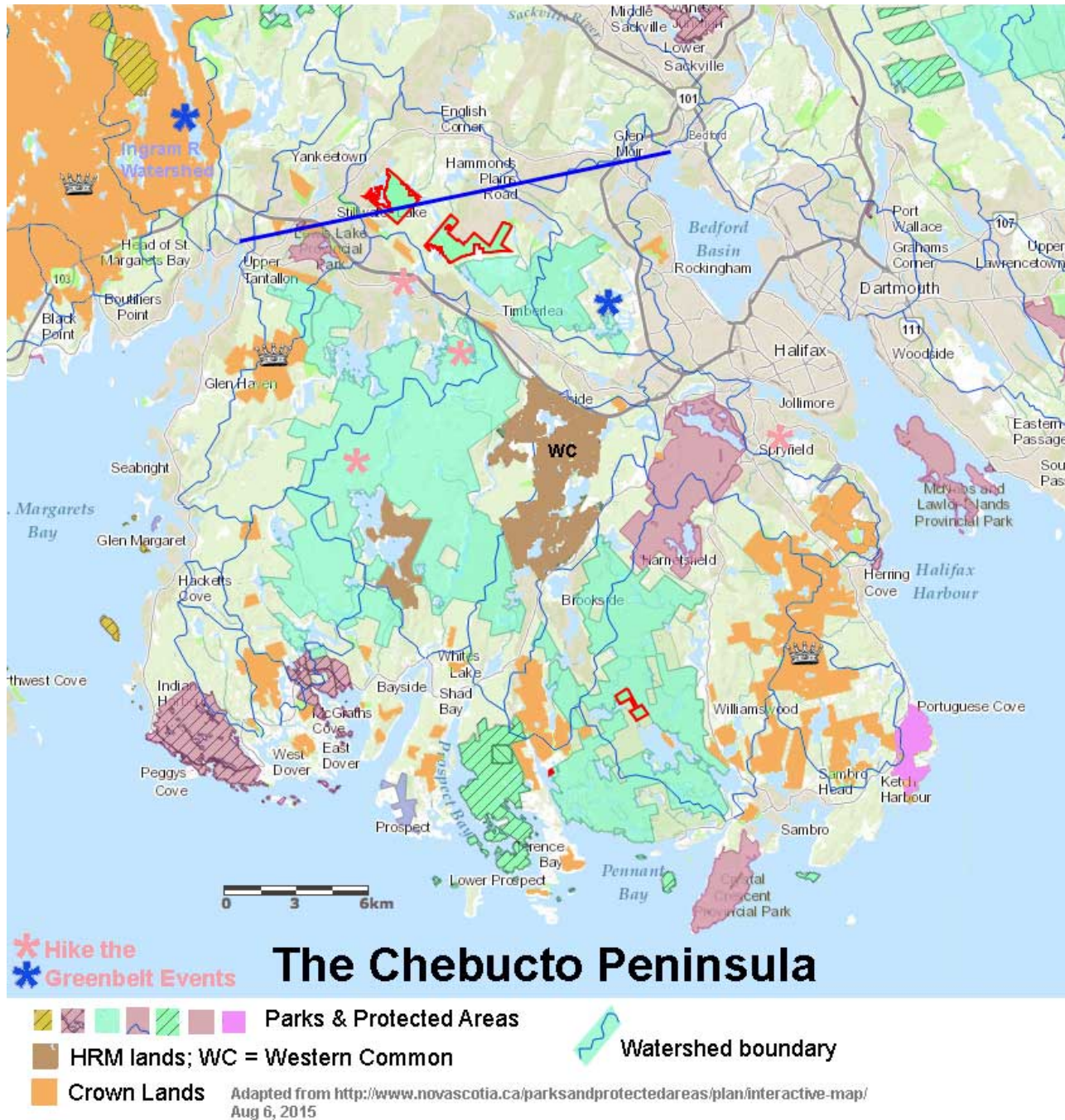


Erratics on coastal barrens

Swiss Air Memorial



The geology and landscapes of the Chebucto Peninsula are not conducive to farming, or mining (except for some quarried granite), and even not much to forestry. Vegetation on the shallow soils is very prone to fires sparked naturally or by humans. Until today's mega rock-crushing machines arrived on the scene, this landscape was not even conducive to settlement. In part because of the lack of economic pressure on these lands and because of their inherent natural values and the high value placed on them for wilderness recreation, large portions of the Chebucto Peninsula have been designated as Parks and Protected Areas (PPA) or are protected by Nova Scotia Nature Trust and the Nature Conservancy of Canada.



Among the at-risk species that these lands protect are a group of Mainland Moose, Canada warbler, Common Nighthawk, Olive-sided Flycatcher, Harlequin Duck, Roseate Tern (on the islands), Boreal Felt Lichen. Some of the best stands of the [globally rare Jack Pine/Broom Crowberry barrens](#) occur on the Chebucto Peninsula, notably in the Purcell's Cove Backlands. But what's more common more often entertains visitors: bald eagles and ospreys above; sweeps of migratory birds on the coast; the magical vegetation of coastal trails with its special hues, textures and fragrance; the golden seaweed floating on the surface by rocky shores and kelp beds below; blooms of pink orchids in bogs, the call of loons on wilderness lakes... and much much more.



Olive-sided
Flycatcher on
snag by the
lower Woodens
River

For Haligonians, the wilderness areas of the Chebucto Peninsula are readily accessed by foot trails, rails to trails, designated ATV routes, and paddling. Thousands belong to Meetup groups and clubs that explore them regularly and thousands more do so informally as individuals, families and with friends.

So there is lots we should celebrate about the Chebucto Peninsula. It's a very significant conservation area. By my estimate, 29% of the land is now in Parks and Protected Areas (versus 12-13% for the province as a whole, 15% for HRM as a whole) and an additional 12% is Crown and HRM land that remains undeveloped.



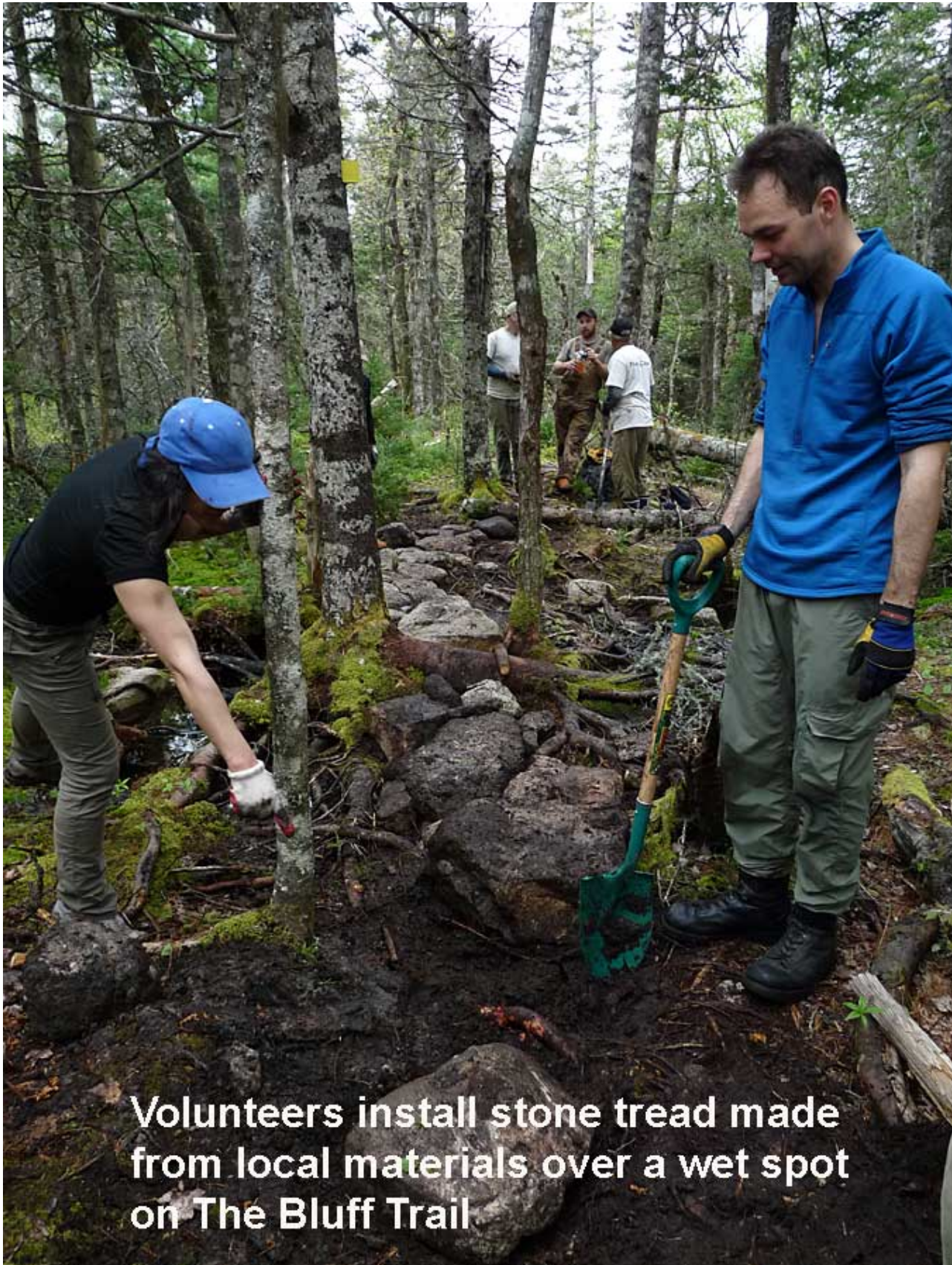
Moasic landscape by Upper Five Bridge Lake in the Five Bridge Lakes Wilderness Area

There are at least two things we need to do to ensure that future generations continue to celebrate and for wildlife to thrive on the Chebucto Peninsula, and indeed in all of HRM and of Nova Scotia:

1. **Manage more land for Biodiversity Conservation.** Conservation science tells us that to avoid large species losses, we need to manage 50-60% of the landscape for biodiversity conservation with natural corridors connecting high quality habitats across roads and through larger patches of highly altered landscapes. So we should protect as much as we can of the publicly owned lands not currently in Parks and Protected Areas and work with private land owners to encourage biodiversity conservation and enhancement of ecological services.

It is critically important that natural corridors are established between the larger protected areas on the Chebucto Peninsula and across highway 103 and into the Mersey Lands. [View example](#). We are hopeful that the [Green Network Plan](#) now being developed will provide the detailed maps and identify options that will allow us to achieve these ends for the Chebucto Peninsula and [all of HRM](#).

2. **Leave-No-Trace.** The proximity and accessibility of wilderness to Haligonians is a priceless asset, but it also puts added pressure on the wilderness areas. We should stay as much as possible on the official access routes because they are designed to minimize impacts. Most of these routes are maintained by volunteer organizations and more are planned, e.g., for the [Blue Mt - Birch Cove Lakes Wilderness Area](#). Please take out a membership (numbers count) in at least one of our [trail](#) or [paddling](#) groups or the [Safety-Minded ATV Association](#) and offer help as you can, e.g., to monitor the state of trails, participating in trail builds.



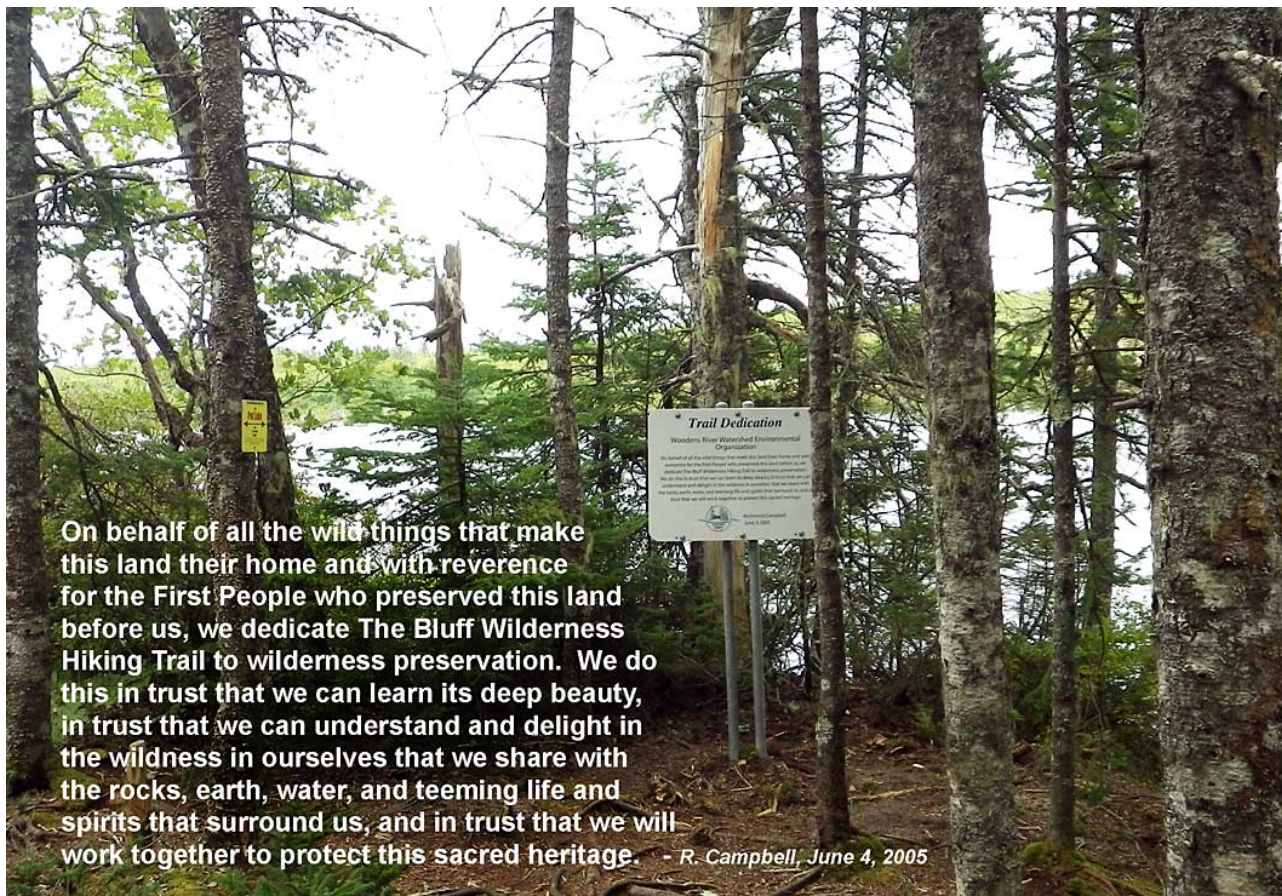
Volunteers install stone tread made from local materials over a wet spot on The Bluff Trail

The principles and practices of [Leave-No-Trace](#) hiking and camping must become second nature to all who

visit our wild lands. As individuals and in community groups we can set examples by taking garbage bags on our treks and picking up refuse. We will do just that on the hike into the Backlands on August 16th. Hope to see you there.

- *David Patriquin* (Biology Prof, retired)

With acknowledgments to [WRWEO/The Bluff Trail](#), [Halifax Field Naturalists](#), [NS Wild Flora Society](#), [Backlands Coalition](#), [Five Bridges Trust](#), [YNC](#) & [Halifax Adventure Seekers](#) who have introduced me to many of these areas or shared and enlightened my ventures into them.



Words at the dedication of The Bluff Trail
say it all...

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