



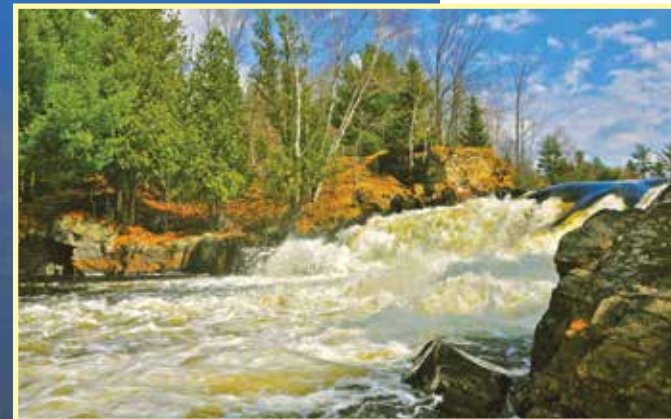
MINDING THE Oxtongue

by Mark McLean

The Lower Oxtongue River is recognized by the District of Muskoka as a “Muskoka Heritage Area.” This area of approximately 425 acres includes the entire floodplain of the river valley below Marsh’s Falls as well as some of the surrounding forest land. The Official Plan of the Township of Lake of Bays states that the heritage values will be protected and that development will be directed to land outside the boundary of this heritage area. While the intent of the Official Plan is to protect this area, the granting of variances or a failure to enforce the rules could still put those heritage values at risk. We must be vigilant to ensure the long-term protection of this area.

A boat trip up the Lower Oxtongue River from the lake is a favourite pastime for tourists, cottagers, and residents of the lake. I try to go at least once every year. Last summer it was not until a sunny Saturday afternoon in early September. Navigating the channel through the large fan-shaped delta that extends into the lake from the mouth of the river is tricky. Ignoring the off-station buoys, I find the passage that leads through the delta.

I enter the river and stop to clear the weeds from my propeller. The water is black, trees loom on either side, and there is an enveloping silence that is quite distinct from the lake.



inset, above: Water gushes over Marsh’s Falls—a popular destination for picnics and swimming.
opposite and this page: Brian Tapley’s aerial view of the mouth of the river shows the accumulation of sandy sediment.

We have a responsibility to be mindful of our impact on this fragile environment and we should do everything we can to ensure its protection.

The Oxtongue River actually begins in Algonquin Park about 35km north-east of Lake of Bays. The river drops 100m before it meets the sandy floodplain below Marsh’s Falls and becomes the Lower Oxtongue. From here it slows and widens. The river’s winding course extends 4km over a distance of only 2km to the lake.

On my way upstream I see a great blue heron intently fishing in one of the river’s many meanders. The bird resents my scrutiny and flies off squawking as it goes. These meanders are the result of the changing course of the river over time. The ones I can see from the river provide habitat for species that prefer quieter water. There are also meanders within the floodplain that have been completely abandoned by the river. These begin as lakes of still water that gradually become covered in floating plants such as the water lily and pondweed. Then aquatic plants like pickerel weed and bur-reed move in from the edges. Eventually these plants fill the meander creating deep organic soil, which provides opportunity for terrestrial plants to grow.

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photos by Mark McLean (left), Paul Dillenberger (above)

The drag-trails of the beavers can be seen all along the banks and it is not long before one swims by and eyeballs me before diving out of sight. Beavers are critical agents of change in this landscape and play a crucial role in creating new habitat.

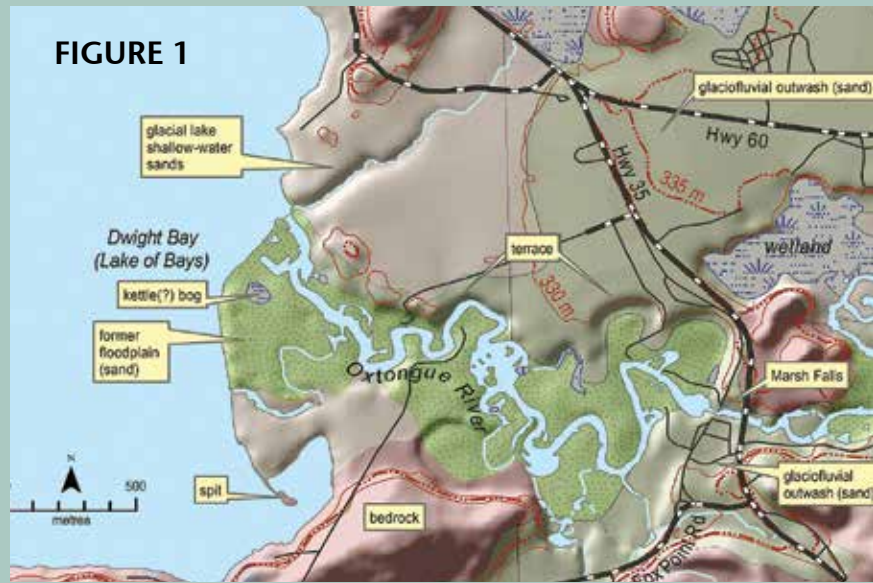
I now come to the edge of the property purchased by the Lake of Bays Heritage Foundation in 2008. To the north and west is a mature red pine and white pine forest growing above the 10m bank of the river. This pine forest survived the fire that cleared most of the river valley in the early 1900s. This is indicated by the presence of burnt stumps and mature and dying white birch.

At this point the river turns south and enters a long stretch flanked by wide bays with islands and several meander channels. I know that a short distance to the east is an isolated meander scar in the bush. At the upper end it supports a fen of leather-leaf and sphagnum moss and small tamarack trees and alder shrubs are scattered about the surface. Following it back to the river, broad-leaf cattail and wild calla grow where the water is less stagnant. As the meander drains back to the river it changes to a swamp with a thicket of speckled alder. Another example of abandoned river bed lies on the other side of the river where, hidden in the forest of the floodplain, there is a very large oxbow. It describes a semi-circle that is 4-5m deep and a kilometre in length (it can be seen as a shadow line in figure 1,

next page). There are many different stages of succession that occur in these meander scars and each one supports particular species of flora and fauna that are adapted to that specific environment. This diversity of habitat is one of the factors that make the Lower Oxtongue River such an important natural site.

The setting sun reminds me that I have a long return trip and, reluctantly, I turn back. The eastern shores are glowing with light and cardinal flowers appear as bright splashes of red on the bank. Near the river mouth a family of Canada Geese congregate by the shore. Back on the lake I begin the journey home. Each year these trips on the river inform and renew my interest in the Lower Oxtongue.

The Lower Oxtongue River is the most significant natural heritage site in the Township of Lake of Bays. The accessibility of this site to the lake makes this area an asset for tourism, but also represents the greatest threat to its preservation. The primary concern is boat wakes that can disturb habitat and cause harmful erosion. We have a responsibility to be mindful of our impact on this fragile environment and we should do everything we can to ensure its protection. When you visit, be informed, slow down, and take in what is around you. ^{1, 9, 10}



A Brief History Lesson

by Dr. Andrew Stewart

At the end of the last Ice Age, remnants of the glacier melting in the Algonquin Highlands released a torrent of water, which flowed to present-day Muskoka, carving a channel that was to become the Oxtongue River. The lowest part of the Oxtongue River, shown above, hints at a variety of events that shaped this land over the past twelve thousand years.

Between about 11,500 and 10,400 years ago, Glacial Lake Algonquin filled today's Lake Huron and Georgian Bay, as well as the lowlands surrounding them, including Muskoka. Lake of Bays was once a mere inlet of this vast water body. The shoreline of this ancient vanished lake is in many places elusive, but geologists estimate that it roughly follows the 335m contour in the Huntsville area, which is shown as a dashed red line above. This is based, in part, on the fact that sands settling out of the shallow waters of Lake Algonquin occur below this elevation—mostly below 330m. The earliest aboriginal people in Ontario (who archaeologists call Palaeo-Indians) entered a sparsely-forested, sub-arctic tundra-like environment and hunted caribou and other animals along the shores of Lake Algonquin. They sometimes left behind traces of their hunting equipment in the form of distinctive stone spearheads and other tools.

Meltwater and sediment flowing from the Algonquin Highlands into Lake Algonquin at Dwight Bay left a train of sand along this "outwash" route. This meltwater channel became the valley for the Oxtongue River. Over many years the river channel, particularly below Marsh's Falls, has meandered extensively. Sand entrained in the channel upstream has gradually accumulated below the falls, forming a delta with a spit curling off its south end in Dwight Bay. Sands and mud have been accumulating in a wide floodplain for a long time. This is the kind of setting where archaeological sites typically get buried by this sediment and preserved.

Parts of the main channel have become cut off as it meanders across its floodplain—visible as oxbow ponds. South of the river mouth, a round wetland may be a kettle—a remnant of the Ice Age as a mass of ice was buried by sediment before melting. The floodplain is bounded by scarps or steep bluffs of sand carved, perhaps, by meltwater outwash or during an early stage in the evolution of the river. Geologists have identified terraces at the top of some of these scarps that appear to be remnants of the late Ice Age. Aboriginal people, as long ago as the Palaeo-Indians, likely walked these ancient landforms establishing camps and lookouts from which they could monitor the movements of game in the floodplain below. ^{1, 9, 10}

opposite page: Grasses and water vegetation camouflage the sandy entrance to the river.
opposite page, inset: Kayakers enjoy the unexpected twists and turns of the river.