



Rediscover

Terra Cotta

Story by Andrew Hind
Photos by Ted Brown

Terra Cotta Conservation Area has always been a wilderness oasis.

Its 485 acres of varied wilderness terrain offer the best that nature has to offer, offering solace and tranquility just miles from the major urban centres of the Greater Toronto Area.

But Terra Cotta has undergone significant changes in recent years, the result of a change of focus.

The conservation area was previously used as a recreational facility with campsites, parking lots and a large swimming pool. While enjoyable for thousands of visitors, such a use didn't truly fit the Credit Valley Conservation's mandate for the protection and preservation of nature.

"We've undergone a marketing change which has transformed Terra Cotta into a centre for environmental learning," explains Bill Lidster, senior superintendent of conservation with Credit Valley Conservation. "We also wanted to restore the property to its natural state as an example of the Niagara Escarpment."

In the interest of returning the land to nature, the campsites have been replanted, the parking lots re-vegetated and the swimming pool removed and replaced by an award-winning wetland, used as a learning tool, illustrating to visitors the importance of wetlands.

"Work at Terra Cotta started three years ago and included a wide range of alterations, including upgrades to the education building, now known as the Watershed Learning Centre, improvements to other facilities, such as the Visitor Welcome Centre,

and work on the trails," Lidster explains. "The grand opening for these changes was last spring."

Lidster is particularly excited about the Watershed Learning Centre. After all, it's in this newly-renovated building that Terra Cotta's new mandate for educating people about the environment goes

from becoming merely a goal on paper to a concrete reality. Its here, for example, that educational programs (known as "Landscapes for Learning programs") will be hosted every other weekend throughout the summer, and occasionally throughout the remainder of the year, touching on diverse and important environmental subjects. These range from guided nature hikes, wildlife drawing classes, presentations by accomplished authors and hands-on workshops.

One of the most well-received events at Terra Cotta has been the Haunted Forest, a Halloween event for all ages started two years ago. Last year, more than 1,000 people attended, so Lidster assures Haunted Forest will return again this fall.

The new Visitors Welcome Centre, located just north of the main parking lot, was formerly just a concession building. Renovations have expanded the building's role. It now features modern, fully-winterized washrooms, a lounge/visitor centre with an atmospheric fireplace, and a gift shop selling snacks and a variety of merchandise, from maple syrup to puzzles to books. In the winter, cross-country skis and snowshoes are available for rent. In addition, this space is rented for after-hour meetings of up to 20 people.

"We were a self-service facility until three years ago, but now I have someone on site at the Visitors Welcome Centre at all times to greet guests. It makes a big difference towards making the property more hospitable," explains Lidster.

The walking trails are the true heart of the conservation area. Whether you are a spirited hiker



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