

A Guide to Rock Climbs at Bon Echo

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"The best climber is the one having
the most fun." . . . Alex Lowe

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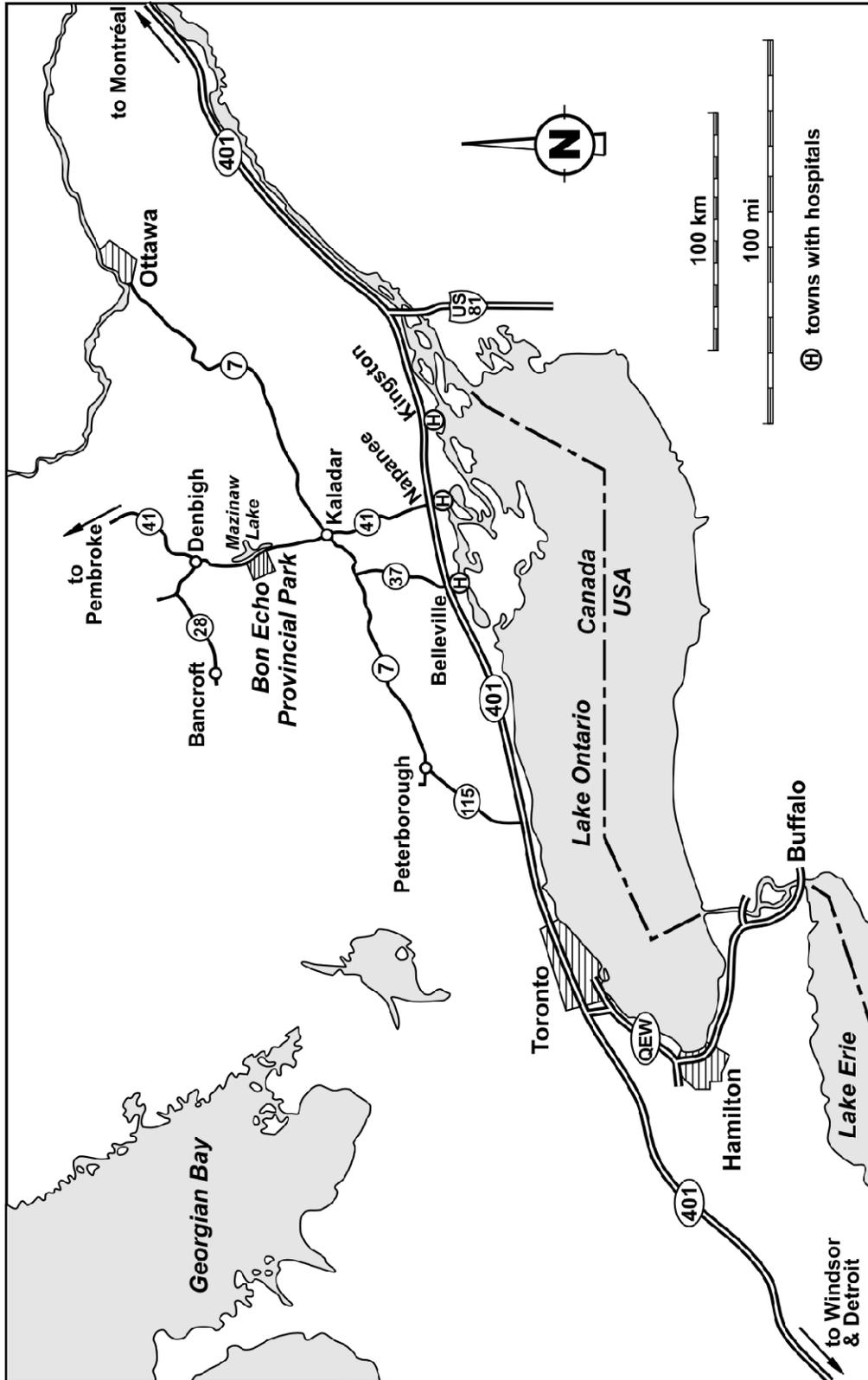
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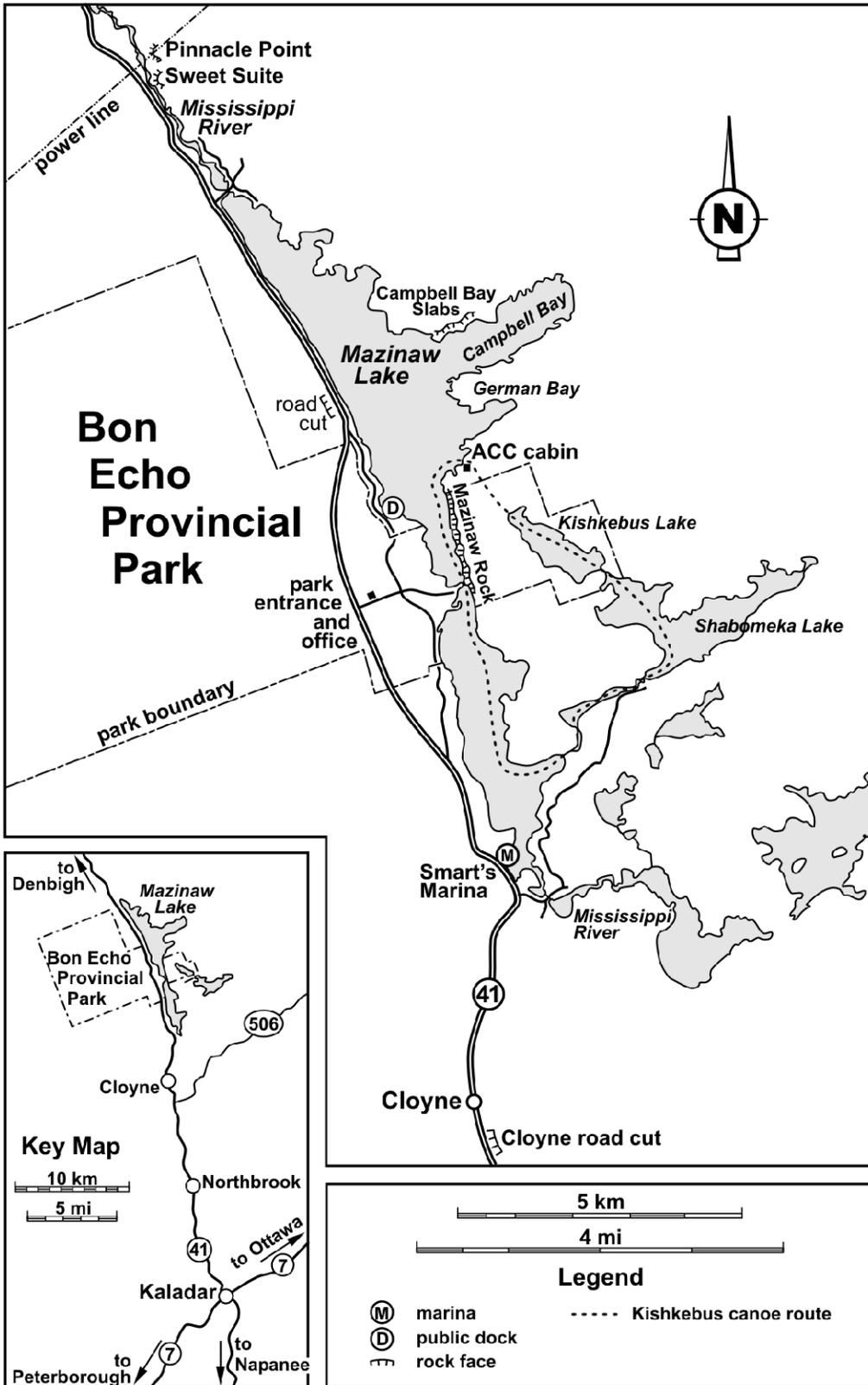
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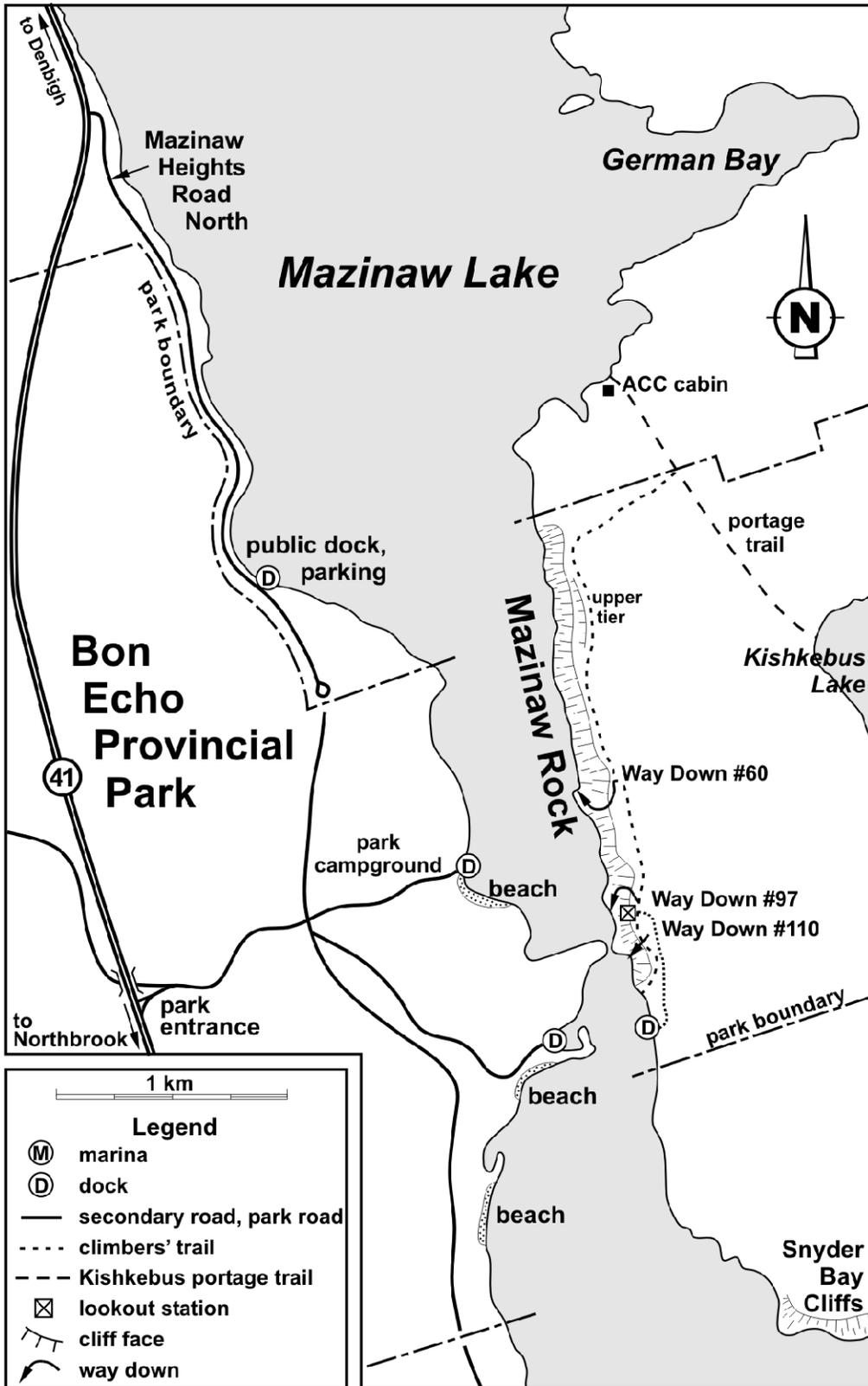
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Introduction

Bon Echo Provincial Park is located between Toronto and Ottawa on Highway 41, 30 km north of Highway 7. See map, page iv. The focal point of the park is Mazinaw Rock, a 2 km long granite cliff almost 90 metres high at its highest point. It is the largest cliff in southern Ontario, and the cliff drops straight into Mazinaw Lake. The lake is about 13 km long, up to 2 km wide and 120 m deep. It is divided into two halves by a spit of land (“the narrows”), adjacent to the provincial park campground.

Highway 41 and the park campground are on the west side of the lake, while the cliff is on the east side. Access to the cliff is not straightforward. The tour boat operated by the Park stops at a dock south of the cliff, at the start of a park trail to a lookout at the top of Knob Hill. The climbs from this point north to route 97 can be reached from the talus slope at the water’s edge. Climbs further north are accessible only by boat. Canoes or small outboards can be rented at several of the marinas on the lake.

The Provincial Park is popular, and is often full on summer weekends. Campsites can be reserved by phoning the Park (613-336-2228). On sunny summer weekends the lake is crowded with boaters (canoes, kayaks, power boats and jet skis).

Climbers staying in a local motel can use a public dock with a small parking lot, located north of the Park (see map on page vi), convenient for canoeing across to the cliff. Public telephones are located in the Park and at all the marinas along the lake.

The rock is metamorphosed granite, intruded by many black dykes. The dykes trend diagonally up and left, and give rise to planes of weakness producing slabs, ramps and cracks. Many routes follow these lines, upwards and leftwards. The quality of the rock varies from good on the more popular routes to incredibly bad on some of the less frequented routes. A safe Bon Echo climber tests **every** hold before using it.

The rock climbing season runs from early May to late October. Ice climbing is best attempted in February, when the lake is well frozen.

Mosquitoes are never a major problem on the cliff itself. Blackflies are annoying on some routes for a short period around the end of May – primarily routes near vegetation, and especially those near the narrows. Poison ivy is common at the narrows and does grow elsewhere, but is avoidable when recognized. Climb past the occasional wasp nests with care. Blueberries are incredibly abundant at the top of the cliff and reach their peak in late July and early August.

Mazinaw is an Algonkian name meaning “painted rock”. Scattered along the rock at lake level are scores of Indian paintings – the largest visible collection in Ontario. They were done in red ochre pigments and represent men, animals and creatures which cannot be identified. Selwyn Dewdney discusses them in his “Indian Paintings of the Great Lakes” but comes to no firm conclusions about their origins, purpose or meaning. Treat these paintings with respect – do not touch them and especially do not climb over them. Please obey climb closures intended to protect these paintings.

General History

The following text is based on a Bon Echo Provincial Park pamphlet.

Until the turn of the century, Bon Echo’s story was much like that of other parts of the Canadian Shield. The Indians came thousands of years ago to hunt and fish. The French explored

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the area and the English began to settle it in the 19th century. Then the lumbermen came, followed by farmers to keep them provisioned. Towards the end of the century, the lumbermen moved elsewhere, the farms failed and the population decreased.

In 1889, Dr Weston A. Price and his wife, captivated by the beauty of Mazinaw Rock, bought it and the adjacent lands, and constructed a handsome hotel. They called it “Bon Echo” because of the acoustical properties of the giant rock towering over Mazinaw Lake. The brochures Price had printed make it plain that his establishment catered to the prosperous and the highminded: rates were steep, but healthful walks, wholesome food, and inspiring views of “the Canadian Gibraltar” could be enjoyed at Bon Echo far from the foul air of urban smokestacks and the evils of demon rum.



Bon Echo Inn, about 1920

from a "Friends of Bone Eco Park" postcard

After some successful years at the resort, a personal tragedy forced Dr. Price to sell. He found an enthusiastic buyer in Flora McDonald Denison. Mrs. Denison was no ordinary person. She operated a successful business in Toronto; she wrote on women and labour for the newspapers and was a vocal advocate of women’s rights. Together with other feminists, she established the Canadian Suffrage Association, and campaigned until her death for justice for women. Her devotion to feminism extended to having the insignia of the movement included in the design of the hotel china.

Not content with running her business and furthering feminism, Mrs. Denison determined to transform the Bon Echo resort into a cultural centre. She founded the Walt Whitman Society in

honour of the American poet. Devotees of his work, including Whitman's literary executor, Horace Traubel, who died at Bon Echo in 1919, frequently came and lectured; lines from one of Whitman's works were incised in letters a foot high on the cliff face opposite the hotel; and a periodical, "The Sunset of Bon Echo" was launched. Its aims seem to have been the praise of Walt Whitman and the encouragement of business at the resort; Mrs. Denison was not only an idealist but a practical woman as well and her magazine reflects both aspects of her personality.

After her death in 1921, her son, Merrill Denison, took over the hotel. Denison was a successful writer whose work is well known to many Canadians; the hotel, unfortunately, did not prosper in the ensuing years. The depression limited the number of people who could afford Bon Echo holidays and the inn closed in 1929. Late in 1936, it was destroyed by fire. In 1959, after long negotiations, he turned over land on both sides of the Narrows to the Province and Bon Echo Provincial Park was born.

Climbing History

The history of climbing at Bon Echo is closely intertwined with the history of the Toronto Section of the Alpine Club of Canada. The Toronto Section was re-established in 1957 (after operating from 1910 to 1935, it mysteriously disappeared), with Dr. Alan Bruce-Robertson as chair.

Some time earlier, Kathleen McCormick (later Kay Bruce-Robertson) had been told about Mazinaw Rock by Col. A. C. Malloch of McGill University. Her suggestion to three friends that the rock might be climbable led to the first route at Bon Echo being established on Saturday, September 1st, 1956, by herself, with David Fisher, Marnie Gilmour (later Marnie Fisher) and Alan Bruce-Robertson. Since Marnie's birthday was the next day, it was named Birthday Ridge. On Sunday, the foursome climbed Front of the Pinnacle. After descending Birthday Ridge (and before swimming back to recover their canoe) they were picked up by a boat sent by Merrill Denison, and treated to dinner at his cabin. An article in *The Tweed News*, believed written by Denison, recorded the event. The four returned the next year with a group of their friends, and climbed One Pine.

Over the next few years, most of the major easy lines were climbed. Then came the harder stuff. Two early highlights were John Turner's excellent pair of routes – Sweet Dreams and The Joke. The Joke was so named because Turner's friends "jokingly" suggested he try climbing it. Turner was resident in Montreal at the time, having emigrated from Britain. He climbed many hard routes in Quebec, the Adirondacks, New Hampshire and in the Rockies before returning to Britain. Quoting from Chris Jones' "Climbing in North America":

Turner was also first to put in high standard routes at Bon Echo, a 300-foot crag rising out of Ontario's Lake Mazinaw. Although most of his routes were completed at the first attempt, he took four tries to climb the unrelenting line of the Joke (5.9). On the first attempt, he took a huge fall and ended up suspended 100 feet above the lake with a broken leg. The second attempt was frustrated when the only available boat sank; on the third he got past the crux but was so drained by the effort that he rappelled off; on the fourth all went well. On the last two attempts he placed a single knife blade piton to protect the crux. It popped out when second Strachan pulled on it. Not only did Turner put up rock climbs as demanding as any in the country, but he did them with minimal protection, and he did them single handedly. He

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did not operate in the competitive atmosphere of a Tahquitz or an Eldorado Canyon, where several good climbers advanced the standards together. He operated out of the mainstream and received almost no recognition beyond his immediate circle.

We've recently discovered that the final pitch of The Joke, as climbed by Turner, is 5.10 or harder, making his 1961 ascent even more noteworthy.

Climbing activity increased dramatically after the Toronto Section purchased some land and built a cabin just north of the cliff.

Helmut Microys started his prolific collection of new routes at Bon Echo in 1964, in company with Michael Rosenberger. Helmut climbed actively at Bon Echo until he moved to Calgary in 1995, and still visits occasionally.

In the late '60s and early '70s, Eric Marshall accomplished some very difficult free climbs, including free ascents of Great Leap Forward and L'Idiotie (both 5.10), as well as some desperate aid climbs – Spiderman being the most impressive.

A new generation of climbers arrived in the late 70s, led by George Manson. This group included Tom Gibson (George's cousin), Dave Lanman, Rob Rohn and Chris Rogers. They established the first 5.11 routes on the cliff.

Activity in the late 1980's slowed down. Dave Lanman freed some of the old aid lines, Compulsion at 5.10 and Spiderman at 5.12. Spiderman is the only "12" on the cliff and unfortunately now closed to protect pictographs.

The Chapel Hut, a tool shed, was built by Roger Parsons in 1971 (Why is it called the "Chapel Hut"? Because it was built by a Parson.). A sauna on the lake shore was built by Rob Large and Jamie Moffat in 1982. Later, Chris Rogers used the decking from an old dock to construct a boardwalk from the sauna to the dock. In 2007, the sauna and boardwalk were rebuilt by Larry Forsyth (with a little help from his friends).

Boats have come and gone – the Section is always saving for the next boat or motor. The current boat has a motor with an electric starter, a clear sign that today's climbers are not as tough as their predecessors, even if they can climb as well.

In the 1990s, new route activity gave way to environmental concerns. A peregrine falcon nesting program resulted in the closure of some routes at the north end of the cliff for several years, and this continues year to year during the nesting season when the falcons return. Biologists dated some of the cedars growing on the cliff and found them to be as much as 900 years old. The native pictographs along the base of the cliff are slowly succumbing to the elements, and it is very important that human activity does not accelerate their demise.

John Wylie and Dave Myles worked to develop a Memorandum of Understanding with the Provincial Park, first signed in 1995, "designed to safeguard the cliff resources while permitting climbing to continue".

Bon Echo continues to be one of the most beautiful climbers' cliffs in all of North America.

Alpine Club of Canada Contact Information

All members of the Alpine Club of Canada are welcome to stay at the Toronto Section cabin, located north of the cliff on the east side of the lake (see map, page vi). Call the custodian the week before if you plan to stay at the cabin.

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The Toronto Section has a web site at <http://www.climbers.org/> . There you can find a list of weekend custodians for the Section cabin.

The cabin has propane lights and stoves, a motorboat, a sauna and good company. Volunteer custodians look after the cabin and drive the boat each weekend, spring, summer and fall. ACC climbers are ferried to the cabin from the public dock on Mazinaw Heights Road North, and then to and from the climbs. This greatly simplifies the logistics of climbing. The cabin has no facilities for sleeping – you must camp in one of the campsites in the woods around the cabin.

The national club can be reached at: The Alpine Club of Canada, PO Box 8040, Canmore, AB, T1W 2T8

phone: 403-678-3200

email: info@AlpineClubofCanada.ca

web site: <http://www.alpineclubofcanada.ca/>

The national club office can provide current information on the Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal sections.

Restrictions

Our MoU with Bon Echo Provincial Park prohibits new route development and the installation of bolts, except those placed (or replaced) by the Toronto Section after consultation with the Park.

Slings must not be put on trees – where an anchor is needed and there is no convenient crack, a bolt has been placed to make slinging a tree unnecessary.

Rappelling is permitted only in emergencies or at the established rap stations on Thunder Crack (#11), The Slab (#23), Formication (#62) and Saucer Lucy (#73). Only the Saucer Lucy station is at the top of the cliff, and for this you need two ropes. The others are at the top of one pitch climbs.

The rap stations at the top of The Joke and Spiderman are for Toronto Caving Group training. These require very long ropes – the Spiderman drop is 80 m.

Closed means closed. Don't even think of climbing it. Occasional route closures will be posted in the Park and at the ACC cabin.

Protection

Climbers now rarely carry piton hammers at Bon Echo. Pitons were usually left in-situ, either on the first ascent, or on an early repeat. Treat “found” pitons with extreme suspicion – there is a large collection of rusty pins on display in the ACC cabin, all removed from the rock by fingers. Bolts have been placed near trees, to make slinging trees unnecessary, and near former piton placements, usually where other protection is impractical. Climbers should not depend on finding a bolt whenever wanted; Bon Echo routes are not sport climbs.

Cams should be used with caution in placements in black friable rock. Accidents have resulted from Friends pulling out of such placements. This cliff is a good place to follow the old British advice: “The leader must not fall.”

Accidents and Rescues

If the injured climber is stranded on the cliff, other climbers must be brought in to assist. A

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stretcher is kept at the ACC cabin (north of the cliff – see map on page vi).

Somebody must to the Park gatehouse to call for an ambulance and to notify the authorities. All accidents resulting in injury must be reported to the Park. The ambulance has to come a long way (Northbrook, at least), so it is best that it starts as soon as possible.

Rely on other park visitors as little as possible. However, it may be useful to request the use one of their boats to get to the park campground and/or the cabin. The injured climber should be evacuated via the park campground. The nearest hospital is in Napanee, but people are often taken to Belleville (a long way in either case).

Notes on the Route Descriptions

The editors of this guidebook have not climbed all of the routes and cannot guarantee the accuracy of the route descriptions. Each edition of this book contains corrections and revisions based on input from other climbers – if you find an error please tell us about it.

Some routes are either unrepeated (tagged !!) or have seen very few ascents (!). Descriptions and grades for these routes are much less trustworthy than those for established routes. A few minor variations are not indicated on the photos. Some routes are not shown in the photos because we don't know exactly where they go.

Many modern guides indicate how well protected a route is. This one does not. Routes which are undeniably dangerous are described as such (e.g. The Joke, Shrimps).

Routes 47 to 59 are accessible from the bottom of route 60 (one of several named “easy way down”). Note that the adjective “easy” is relative to your climbing ability - non-climbers or beginners should be roped and belayed from above. Routes 97 to 119 start from the talus field above the narrows, with route 97 recommended for descent. Several climbs in the Birthday Ridge area can be climbed using the Saucer Lucy rap station. A boat is required to get to the starts of all other climbs.

An indistinct trail along the top of the cliff is used to hike from the tops of climbs to the various descent routes.

Bon Echo rock is covered with lichen of various colours – all of this is slippery when dry and treacherously so when wet. An obvious comment is that if you're trying to climb on rock covered with large flaky lichen (the stuff you can rub off), you're probably off route

Abbreviations & Symbols

FA	First ascent
FF	First free ascent
FRA	First recorded ascent (when it was obvious somebody else had climbed the route before)
FWA	First winter ascent
Quality	* really good
	** even better
	*** fantastic!
Notes	! very few ascents to date
	!! possibly unrepeated