

The Cataraqui Trail comes alive in winter

By Christine Peets

While the Cataraqui Trail offers opportunities for activities all year, it really comes alive in the winter.

“People can really embrace winter and get out and enjoy themselves on the trail,” said Ross Sutherland, who chairs the Cataraqui Trail Management Board and serves on the Board of Directors for the Cataraqui Region Conservation Area (CRCA), the organization that oversees the trail’s development.

The 104 km trail stretches from Strathcona, (just east of Napanee), to Smiths Falls. The western end of the trail which also includes Newburgh, Yarker, and Camden East, is maintained by volunteers from the L & A Ridge Runners, a snowmobile group that has its headquarters in Yarker.

“There is a real synergy between the snowmobilers and other users,” Ross said. “The snowmobiles pack down the snow and groom the trail a bit for the cross-country skiers.”

Without the Ridge Runners, the western section of the trail likely wouldn’t exist, and they help to maintain it all year round, not just for snowmobiling in the winter, according to Graeme McDonald, vice-chair of the management board.

“They are spectacularly generous with their time and resources, and they are true members of our trail community,” he said.

There are other snowmobile clubs that help to groom and maintain the surfaces along the trail that travels through, or near, Sydenham, Harrowsmith, Perth Road Village, Forfar, Elgin, Portland, Lombardy, and other smaller communities before ending in Smiths Falls. Along the way there are restaurants where you can warm up with a snack or meal, and some communities also offer accommodations with B & Bs and the newly renovated Opinicon Lodge, which is at almost the half-way mark. There are also plenty of places where you will find a general store to pick up some food, beverages, or other items for your trail excursion. For a full list of where you can stop, check the website, www.cataraquitrail.ca From the site you can download maps, and get more information about the trail.

“We are progressing to the point where there are more places being developed along the way where people can stop for a while, or even stay overnight,” Ross said, “but it’s still great just to get out for the day.”

The trail is open to snowmobilers who hold a current Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs permit. Everyone using the trail is encouraged to purchase an annual membership, which costs \$25 for individuals and \$40 for families, although there is no requirement to do so.

Membership applications are on the website, and all donations are eligible for tax receipts, according to Graeme.

“Donations are very much appreciated and help us to raise the funds we need to match grants from the municipal, provincial, or federal governments,” he said. “We can’t maintain the trail as well without this help, and the help from the other snowmobile clubs.”

Snowmobilers may be the most frequent users of the trail in the winter. If the snow is not too deep, the trail can be used by horse-back riders, hikers, and Nordic Pole Walkers. Nordic Pole Walking was first developed in Finland by cross-country skiers looking for off-season training, but the poles can be used all-year round, and provide extra stability and balance on surfaces that can get slippery in the winter. Even with a bit of snow the trail could be packed down enough for Nordic Pole Walking. Some walkers switch to using snowshoes, which can also be used with poles. Another winter sport along the trail could be skijoring—skiers being pulled along by a dog, a horse or a snowmobile.

The CRCA works with trail users, snowmobile clubs, local municipalities, and other interested parties to make the “Cat Trail”, as it is known, part of a Regional Trail Network. This includes the Lake Ontario-St. Lawrence Waterfront Trail, and the K & P Trail, which provides links with the Trans Canada Trail. The Rideau Trail is also part of the network. Information about all of these trails is on the Cataraqui Trail website. Much of the work on the Cataraqui Trail is completed, and it’s hoped that the section bringing the trail into Napanee from Strathcona will be done in the next few years.

“The management board is extremely hopeful that there will be meaningful discussions in the near future with members of the municipal governments in Napanee, both at the town and county levels, so that we can make this happen,” Graeme said. “We know that it would greatly increase the trail use, and it will make it much easier for us to raise much-needed funds to further develop the trail if we have it originate in an urban centre, as well as finishing in one.”

Wherever you start or finish along the Cataraqui Trail, you are sure to enjoy the activities that help it come alive in the winter.