

A man in a green hoodie and blue jeans stands in a forest, looking towards a large, light-colored rock formation on the right. The forest is filled with bare trees, suggesting late autumn or winter. The ground is covered in fallen leaves and branches.

Bouldering Totally ROCKS

By Chris Mills ■ Photos by Dennis Barnes

THE GANG FROM THE ONTARIO ROCK CLIMBING ACCESS COALITION (OAC) descends the steel staircase that clings to the wall of ancient Escarpment rock in Niagara Glen.

As boulderers, they don't carry ropes, nor carabiners, nor hammers and studs to scar the rock walls or leave a trace of their passage.

Instead they carry climbing shoes with tough sticky rubber soles, climbing mats called crash pads to cushion a fall, a body trained by one of the many climbing gyms in Ontario, and a desire to test their mettle. ▶



Aaron Brouwers climbs a boulder in the Niagara Glen as two spotters stand near crash pads on the ground to cushion any falls. The specific route he's taking up the boulder is called Seppuku. It has a difficulty rating of V10 on a scale of from V0 to V16.



▲ Intense concentration shows on the face of Evgenii Kremlev as he works on the boulder problem called Real Kung Fu Massacre, rated V10.

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They turn left and follow the trail past climbing areas known as Bizzaro World and Old Country, then descend into Wonderland. If they go a little further west they can pick up the Riverwall to Romper Room or Land of Oz.

The challenging world of bouldering on the Niagara Escarpment finds its nexus here in Niagara Glen.

“Niagara Glen is often the first place they come when they come out of the climbing gyms,” says climbing researcher Garrett Hutson, PhD, associate professor in recreation and leisure studies at Brock University, and OAC portfolio manager. “It’s by far the biggest. The Niagara Glen is the premium bouldering area in Ontario, and all the more so because of its location within such a densely populated area as Niagara Falls, especially its proximity to the Greater Toronto Area.”

Boulder Problems

Bouldering differs from sport climbing. Instead of a cliff face, it’s often a piece of cliff that has broken from the rock face and rests on the ground. It’s unique in that many times very few crevices, cracks or hand ledges exist to grasp.

Harnesses, ropes, carabiners and fixed anchors to hammer into crevices are also banned outright within Niagara Glen. But therein lies the challenge.

“It’s unique in that in bouldering, the focus is on a few challenging, hard moves often close to the ground,” says Hutson. “That way it’s safer to try new and difficult moves without falling far, for instance, on a steep overhanging section of rock. Trying to solve and link a sequence of climbing moves is called a boulder problem.”

Municipalities, parks commissions, and property owners, either private or

government, don’t necessarily approve of anyone climbing their cliffs, often from a safety and litigious aspect.

Instead, the OAC has approached these property owners, like the Niagara Parks Commission (NPC), and negotiated access to climbing through responsible stewardship programs whereby they ensure climbers assume personal responsibility for themselves and for the rock faces.

Niagara Parks Stewardship coordinator Corey Burant agrees. “At one time we looked at banning climbing in the Glen because of the impact on the flora and fauna, and because we didn’t really understand it. I wasn’t around during the tense times, but now it’s very positive. They approached us and now we issue permits, help build trails, and there’s a display at the nature centre.”

And it’s made a difference.

Climbing access across Ontario along the Niagara Escarpment has leapt. In addition to bouldering at Halfway Log Dump on the Tobermory Peninsula, climbers have places like Kelso, Mt. Nemo, Rattlesnake Point, Metcalfe, and Devil’s Glen. (See OAC website for Area Access Status.)

Bouldering has seen exponential growth annually says Ontario Access Coalition co-chair Tony Berlier. Its membership runs more than 800 members since its inception in 2008 when about 50 members got together.

“The popularity of climbing has exploded in recent years mostly due to increased access to people in cities at indoor climbing gyms. This translates to more people wanting

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▲ Not much to hang on to. Umberto Pelloni's fingers grip a ledge on Zozobra route, rated V10.



Rocks take their toll. Injured hands can be the price paid for bouldering.



Not for men only. Kaska Kowalska defies gravity as she powers up BBB, a problem rated V8.

With beautifully manicured nails, Kacey Wilson climbs Bon Fire Rodeo, a V6 route.



Keith McKay has complicated hand holds to tackle Contact, rated V6.

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to get out in nature and experience climbing on real rock as well. Our membership ranges from three years old to over 70. The majority are 16 to 35. Climbing is one of the few activities that can be done at any age.”

The OAC’s goals are to foster those relationships with landowners and in fact to acquire climbing land themselves, as they’re working toward at Old Baldy in partnership with the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority near Kimberley southwest of Collingwood.

“When climbing, our goals are essentially to create a minimal impact on the environment,” says Hutson. “Between the park and the climbing communities,

we’ve agreed that there are just some boulders that should not be climbed on.”

Sensitive Plants

Working with the NPC’s botanist branch in 2010, they conducted a flora and fauna inventory by climbing the rocks, shooting specimens with digital cameras, then handing the information to the botanist below. Thus they established that certain crevices and boulder tops contain life that shouldn’t be disturbed.

“Ancient cedars and other sensitive species are a constant point of discussion in the Ontario climbing community,” says Hutson. “We’re in a constant state of discussing them and identifying them [for protection].”

▼ Easy for some: Kristine Hatfield does the easiest route possible, the V0-rated Warmup.



The guide to climbing in places like Niagara Glen involves the sacrosanct “Seven Rules of Leave No Trace” (leavenotrace.ca), as well as NPC’s 19 bouldering rules regarding permits, sanctioned activities, maps, fires, safety precautions and a permit for climbing.

“In the past, there wasn’t much of a plan in place to manage people, but the Niagara Parks Commission is now going to the climbing community and marking trails to ensure climbers find where they’re allowed to climb and to steer them away from areas they shouldn’t,” says Hutson. “One of their trail blazes is a triangle, symbolizing a mountaintop.”

To appreciate just how significant Niagara Glen is to the international

climbing community, you can see articles that have appeared in the U.S. climbing magazines like *Rock and Ice*, and *Climbing*, and the Canadian magazine *Gripped*.

“We have a great relationship with the NPC who’ve been really amazing,” says Hutson. “They’ve adopted us as stewards so that instead of restrictions, we have shown them how to do it sustainably.” **NEV**

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▲ Aaron Brouwers steps onto the Orient Express, a V8 route.

Dave Porter is close to the summit of V7-rated Riverwall.



Escarpment Bouldering

Rock climbing and bouldering opportunities abound on the Niagara Escarpment. These are just some of the exciting prospects gleaned from the Ontario Access Coalition website (niagaraaccesscoalition.com) and Escarpment Fund (escarpmentfund.ca).

Niagara Region

- Niagara Glen — Bouldering permitted with guidelines, like signed waiver and fee available either online or through the Nature Centre at the Glen or the Butterfly Conservatory. Bring photo ID.

Milton Area

- Fraggie Rock — climbing tolerated but don't touch those cedars and pay an entrance fee.
- Kelso — Open with Guidelines. Entrance fee.
- Mt. Nemo — Open with Guidelines. Top-rope ban and no slinging lines to trees, but you'll find traditional and sport climbing with more than 200 routes.
- Rattlesnake Point, Buffalo Crag and Bottle Glass Crag — Open with Guidelines, but this one has more than 235 routes and anywhere from beginner to experience climbing levels. Entrance fee. No slinging trees.

Beaver Valley

- Devil's Glen — Tolerated, but recommended that climbers park on Concession 10 and walk back to the trail that's marked with orange flagging.
- Metcalfe Rock — Open with a couple of commercial climbing operations on site to help out. No camping. Use the new parking lot.
- Old Baldy — Open with Guidelines. A 152-metre drop with lots of views. Permit required and experienced climbers only. Permit fees apply.
- The Swamp — Tolerated, which means climbing is not formally permitted, but informally accepted. Tread lightly.

Bruce Peninsula

- Cape Croker/Indian Ladder — Open with fee (private property).
- Halfway Log Dump — Open with Guidelines. Parking fee.
- Lion's Head — Tolerated as a non-conforming use of the park. Tread lightly. Don't annoy the cottagers.
- White Bluff — Tolerated. Highly sensitive area. Strive for minimum impact and low profile. Do NOT disturb cottagers.