

# Bring on That Lake FX!

Powder Riding in Southwestern Ontario

by Craig Nicholson



Excellent field staking makes trails easy to follow.

Who said there's no snow in Southern Ontario? Its southwest region won the snow sweepstakes for Ontario last winter, hands down. Starting in early February, lake effect snow pounded continuously off Lake Huron and Georgian Bay. Copious amounts of the white stuff blanketed a giant area, stretching from the cities of London and Kitchener north to Owen Sound, and northeast to Midland, Barrie and Orillia, taking in all or parts of OFSC Districts 4, 5, 8 & 9.

And the snow just kept coming! After we launched our tour from Midland on February 12th, we rode several mornings in fresh powder up to two feet deep! It reminded me of riding in the bottomless fluff of a Rocky Mountain meadow, and if it wasn't for the excellent field staking done by local snowmobile clubs, we couldn't have stayed on the trails.

Our group rode 2,239 kilometres over nine consecutive days without repeating many routes. The premier area was undoubtedly the Grey-Bruce, located in the northwest corner, north of the town of Mount Forest. Here, lake effect snow piled deeper than I'd seen anywhere else in Ontario in recent years. We also found the Grey-Bruce to be the most tourism friendly part of the larger region, although even here some gas stations surprised us by taking a weekday off — and they also tend to close early, often by 6 PM. So even though we

rode the most fuel efficient sleds available today, we made a habit of gassing up more frequently than usual... just in case!

## Good variety and no water

Great riding occurred everywhere except when we scratched along the bare pavements of Paisley and Wasaga Beach, which definitely need to relocate the trail off of their town roads. (Note: With the completion of a new bridge outside of Wasaga Beach, apparently that main trail has been re-routed for 2008.) Generally, the farmland is relatively flat in the south near Listowel and Palmerston, although there are plenty of woodlots and small valleys to keep riding interesting. Moving north through Hanover and Walkerton, the fields assume a more rolling profile that provides a sweeping ride over hill and dale, with some exciting woop-dee-doo thrown in for good measure.

Many of these fields are separated by stands of bush. The trails traversing them reminded me of crossing the portages between lakes in other parts of Ontario — although these southwestern passages were generally better groomed. Speaking of lakes, if you have an ice phobia, it is worth mentioning that every trail we rode on this tour was land-based, with all water crossings bridged. With no reliance on ice crossings and with the ground surface on so many fields being comparatively smooth under the snow, much of the southwest doesn't need a lot of snow to make and

keep trails rideable. Not that lack of snow was any concern on this trip!

On the Bruce Peninsula north of Owen Sound, the terrain turned increasingly rugged with Niagara Escarpment rock and forest. Various spectacular views along the eastern shore of the Peninsula and from TOP Trail B along Nottawasaga Bay, grabbed our eyes. (Note: Try the Colpoy's Bay and Purple Valley trails near Wiarton.) Along with ascending and descending the Escarpment various times between Owen Sound and Wasaga, we had enough variety on this tour to satisfy even the most avid snowmobiler. The hilly aspects of many trails just north of Barrie also surprised me.

Mid-tour, we spent two days riding to Tobermory and back. I'd recommend this journey for a couples' tour or a casual overnight ride, not for riders who want to rack up serious miles. The last third of the way into Tobermory is on forest trails that are tighter and narrower than any others we rode this tour, with an average speed of under 35 kilometres per hour. We spent almost six hours riding the 170 kilometres from Wiarton, including a stop for lunch at Lion's Head, so making a return trip on the same day would have been quite a challenge. In fact, we met two snowmobilers booting it south at mid-afternoon, trying to do just that. I think by then they were resigned to arriving back in Wiarton long after dark and bone tired!





*Ascending the Escarpment between Owen Sound and Wasaga*

### Timeouts

Although six riders participated in this tour, circumstance dictated that we rode no day with our full complement. Dennis Burns was delayed in Thunder Bay and didn't arrive until Day Seven. Jean Leroux was present for the duration, but spent two different days in the repair shop, one to replace a bearing and the other, his track. And that wasn't the only dealer visit!

On day two, we pulled into the Shenstone Motel, Warton, to fuel up shortly past 5 PM. My wife, Marsha, commented that this town smelled peculiarly gassy. Actually, a line had popped off her sled's fuel filter and was spewing gas everywhere when it was running.

We couldn't get at the disconnected location, but thanks to a couple of generous snowmobilers, with a truck and empty trailer, we were able to transport it

to Colborne Ski-Doo Sales & Service in Shallow Lake. The nice folks there went out of their way to fix the problem while we waited.

However, as luck would have it, Marsha reinjured a bum knee on Day Six and spent the last two days driving Dennis' truck from destination to destination — I could get used to having a chauffeured support vehicle! Undeterred by these various happenstances, Don Webb, Jim Reavelle, and I, stalwarts all, rode everyday and here's what we experienced...

### Blowing and drifting

There was plenty of snow everywhere, although we heard reports that the lake effect had skipped over some shorelines of Lake Huron, leaving them scratchy at best. So we stayed inland where we found trails to be decently and consistently groomed, especially from Wednesday to Sunday. As

is often the case, Monday was our most brutal day for rough ones.

The primary challenge across the region was blowing snow, however. Even after a recent grooming, it can pile up in king-size drifts across the smooth trail, especially on unprotected north-south corridors and across the many open fields. Fresh drifts are usually soft and easily bashed through, unless they're so deep you get stuck. But day-old drifts can be rock hard after a night of compacting and freezing, and about as comfortable to cross as driving over concrete speed bumps. Of course, the trick is to know which ones are which...driving full tilt into one not as soft as expected can really rattle your bones!

Blowing snow can also cause serious whiteouts — hence, the fantastic field staking. Local clubs spend hours ensuring that tens of thousands of mostly bright orange stakes are double-spaced frequently and regularly enough so that when visibility diminishes, riders can stay on the trail. After riding through two major snow-blows, I can attest that it's a job very well done.

### Great trails with no crowds

The quality of our ride was equal to or better than anything else in Ontario. We discovered more than enough straightaways and wide open field trails to satisfy even the most ardent among us. Plus there are so many trail options that our choice of loops seemed almost endless. With good planning, you may never have to ride the same trail twice. So I kept wondering to myself why anyone would trailer many hours to the far north from residences along the 401 corridor, when such superb riding can be had much closer to home?

Best of all, the trails were never anywhere near crowded — a surprise considering that with poor snow elsewhere, everyone and their uncle was heading to this area to ride. What little traffic we passed, even on the weekend, didn't add up to more than a couple of dozen sleds per day...at most. We saw more deer than sleds, especially near Warton and Sauble Beach. And wild turkeys seemed to be very prevalent, too. What's more, unlike many remote regions of the province, help is usually only as far away in Southwestern Ontario as the next concession road or any of the farms that dot the horizon.

### Navigation challenges

Overall, being familiar with the general layout of the area, we found our way around okay. Most intersections were well signed, many with map boards and most with destination signs with town names (Note: Be sure to circle each sign post completely, because the sign you want may only be on one side of it.)

District 8 has trail numbers on their map that correspond with those on the ground. District 9 relies on a system of intersection numbers, which show up on their map, but are missing on the ground about 25% of the time. Furthermore, although District 9 TOP Trails are well numbered, their club trails have no numbers at all, so we often had to find the next numbered corner or fall back on their destination signs for guidance.

Unfortunately, these are not consistent either. One intersection would display the name of a town we wanted to go to, but the signpost at the next intersection would not. Or an intersection would display destination signs for towns that actually couldn't be reached directly from that trail; at least not without making several other turns on several other trails to get there.

Our familiarity with the area didn't include much sense of distance and neither district maps or trail signs helped. There were no distance charts on the maps. Few destination signs included any distance numbers — although most displayed those ubiquitous "KM", preceded by a blank space — and neither did the maps. With no sense of map scale or accuracy, we were left to guess how far apart places were.

From a touring snowmobiler perspective, this is both annoying and unnecessary, to say nothing of making route planning more difficult. Fortunately, both district maps included road names and concessions numbers, so we often used these to confirm our actual whereabouts. (Note: By the way, kudos to District 9 for using a virtually indestructible paper for their map: after nine days of folding and refolding, it was still in one piece.)

### Road running

If keeping your carbides and studs in pristine condition is your priority,



*Blowing snow can pile up in king size drifts across the smooth trail.*

you may cringe at Southwestern Ontario riding, which has more than its share of road running. The trails here primarily cross private land and exist with each owner's permission. If that permission is denied or revoked — often thanks to ignorant snowmobilers straying off trail or to trespassing ATVs — then the clubs are too often forced to re-route onto public roadways to make the connection to the next available land trail.

When snow is plentiful, as on our tour, this isn't such a concern, but otherwise roadsides can be rough going, because most municipalities don't leave any snow on the shoulders to run on. From a tourism perspective, the whole trail system could be significantly improved if the shoulders had a little snow.

When a trail meets a road, 90% of the time there's either a sign or arrow showing you which way to go, and most often the trail continuation — sometimes several clicks away — is well marked, too. However, we ran into a few instances where we missed the next entry point due to mammoth snow banks or missing signs so my advice is to go slow on the roads and have everyone keep a watchful eye for the next trail turn off. And by the way, keep an eye out for Mennonites travelling the roads by horse drawn buggies or sleds!

### Unbeatable quality

No snowmobiling destination is perfect and I've tried to present a balanced report of what you can expect from

riding in Southwestern Ontario. Despite the navigation challenges, the ultimate measure for outstanding snowmobiling is quantity of snow and quality of grooming — and this region gets full marks for both. When the snow comes, they frequently get oodles of it that nobody else has, often so much that the groomers have trouble getting through...but, somehow, they do! However, this is Southern Ontario after all, so their snow can also disappear almost as fast as it came. So when they have it get there fast and enjoy their incomparable riding.

Nothing else matters when your skis are cutting through fresh powder, billows of snow are whisking over your hood, huge flakes are fluttering through the crisp air, and a smooth trail is zipping under your track. Yes, we found a good old-fashioned winter in Southwestern Ontario — and no one can beat that!

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*Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling — Your Ultimate Ride Guide". His syndicated column "The Intrepid Snowmobiler" appears in newspapers throughout North America. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears regularly on Snowmobiler Television. For more info, click [www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com](http://www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com)*



photo by Chris Hughes

*It often takes groomers running in tandem to handle the lake effect snow!*

## ***WHO TO CONTACT***

### **For maps and info**

Snowmobile Paradise Ontario: [www.ontariotravel.net/goride/](http://www.ontariotravel.net/goride/); 1-800-ONTARIO (668-2746)

Ride The Bruce: [www.ridegreybruce.com](http://www.ridegreybruce.com): 1-800-268-3838

### **For Info on Permits and Trail Conditions**

Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs [www.ofsc.on.ca](http://www.ofsc.on.ca)

## ***MAPS NEEDED***

**OFSC TOP Trail Guide, OFSC District 4, 5, 8 & 9 maps**

**Ontario Road Map**

## ***OUR TOUR ITINERARY***

**DAY ONE:** Trailer to Midland

**Where We Stayed:** Best Western Highland Inn & Conference Centre, 1-800-461-4265 or (705) 526-9307; [www.bestwesternmidland.com](http://www.bestwesternmidland.com) . Large, full service hotel with on site restaurant, bar, pool, sauna and hot tub. Ample parking. Located across Highway 12 from TOP Trail C, so best access is to cross at the traffic lights.

**DAY TWO (8 hrs.):** Ride 248 km from Midland to Wiarton via TOP Cs, Club Trails 301/601, then TOP Bw to TOP B107n.

**Where We Stayed:** Waterview Resort, 877-534-0921 or (519) 534-0921; [www.waterview.ca](http://www.waterview.ca) . Your hosts, Evan and David, offer a charming inn with lodgings for every price range and home cooked meals for groups too! Fuel up at Shenstone Motel (Shell sign), then follow B107 (rail line) northbound through Wiarton to Intersection 44 (watch for signs for Waterview Resort and Wiarton Kepple Airport) and turn right. Follow trail across the next road to "T" intersection with the airport on your right. Take the left fork and when the trail ends at a road, proceed left about 100 yards to Waterview.

**DAY THREE (6.5 hrs.):** Ride 170 km from Wiarton to Tobermory via B107n and B108n.

**Where We Stayed:** Adventure Inn The Bruce, 866-312-7362 or 519-596-2273; [www.adventurethebruceinn.com](http://www.adventurethebruceinn.com) . Your hosts, Bud & Ellen, offer a new motel with outdoor hot tub and winter restaurant on site. No phones in rooms. Fuel nearby, but irregular hours. Follow B108 to end of trail at road, then follow road to 1<sup>st</sup> left, then next right to Highway 6. Turn left and ride about 1,000 yards through gas station to motel. Alternate gas: turn west on first groomed trail south of Cameron Lake Road and ride west to Highway 6.

**DAY FOUR (8.25 hrs.):** Ride 229 km from Tobermory to Owen Sound via B108s to TOP Be to TOP B110n.

**Where We Stayed:** Days Inn, 877-775-2614 or (519) 376-1551. Full service hotel with on site restaurant, bar, pool and hot tub. Ample parking. Located west of TOP B110 (rail line); watch for Days Inn sign and take local trail to end, then follow the road a short way to hotel. Fuel up at Rockford: turn west off of B108s the next road south of where TOP B turns west off the railway line.

**DAY FIVE (9 hrs.):** Ride 300 km from Owen Sound to

Pike Lake. We rode a loop through Chesley, Wingham, Brussels and Palmerston, so pick your own route.

**Where We Stayed:** Pike Lake Golf & Country Club Resort, 800-265-2551 or (519) 338-3010; [www.pikelake.com](http://www.pikelake.com) . Motel unit located across the road from the restaurant/bar. Ample parking. Located between Harriston and Mount Forest. Direct trail access: turn east off TOP B111 at Intersection 410.

**DAY SIX (8.25 hrs.):** Ride 220 km from Pike Lake to Walters Falls. We rode another loop via Mount Forest, Arthur, Grand Valley, Shelburne, Dundalk and Markdale.

**Where We Stayed:** The Falls Inn, 866-204-0814 or 519-794-4388; [www.thefallsinn.com](http://www.thefallsinn.com) . Your hosts, Meg and Dwayne, offer an exceptionally classy inn with on site restaurant, bar, hot tub and massage too! Fuel nearby at general store. Located in Walter's Falls, just west of Intersection 170 and about 30 clicks east of Chatsworth.

**DAY SEVEN (7hrs.):** Ride 220 km from Walter's Falls to Orillia via TOP B111e, Club Trails 606/506, TOP B109e, Club Trails 502/411, TOP B103n, Club Trails 414/421/206.

**Where We Stayed:** Best Western Mariposa Inn & Conference Centre, 800-461-0283 or (705) 325-9511; [www.bwmariposainn.com](http://www.bwmariposainn.com) . Full service hotel with on site restaurant (closed Sundays & Mondays), bar, pool and hot tub. Ample parking. Other restaurants and fuel nearby. Direct trail access from Club Trail 206 (rail line); watch for Mariposa Inn sign and turn west into hotel.

**DAY EIGHT (9hrs.):** Ride 280 km from Orillia to Varney via TOP Bw to B109s to Club Trail to Shelburne, then Club Trail (rail line) north past Dundalk to Intersection 384, to TOP B102n to Intersection 4023 and Club Trail west to Varney.

**Where We Stayed:** Varney Inn Motel, (519) 369-9982; [www.varneyinn.com](http://www.varneyinn.com) . Roadside motel (Highway 6, south of Varney) with on site restaurant and ample parking. Fuel nearby in Durham. Trail access by turning south at Intersection 246 to Wilder lake Road, then west to Highway 6.

**DAY NINE (9hrs.):** Ride 300 km from Varney to Sauble Beach via loop through Ayton, Mildmay, and Paisley to TOP B108n.

**Where We Stayed:** Sauble River Marina & Lodge Resort, (519)422-1762; [www.ddontario.com/saublerivermarina/](http://www.ddontario.com/saublerivermarina/). Your hosts, Ken & Charlene, offer motel suites with multiple bedrooms and kitchen facilities. No phones in rooms. Restaurant in town, not nearby. Fuel on TOP B108 coming through Sauble Beach. Access to motel by groomed local trail west off TOP B108 just south of Sauble Falls Road (just south of bridge over Sauble River). Follow trail to London Road and take it two blocks, then left on Marina Ave 100 yards.

**DAY TEN (7.75hrs.):** Ride 280 km from Sauble beach to Midland via Tara, Chatsworth, Walter's Falls, and then TOP Be to TOP Cn.

**Where We Stayed:** Best Western Highland Inn & Conference Centre (same as Day One).