Cootes Paradise Sanctuary

Established in 1927 for its significance as a migratory bird stopover, Cootes Paradise is RBG’s largest and most diverse sanctuary at over 600 hectares. The area features a 320-hectare river-mouth marsh, 16 creeks and 25 kilometres of shoreline.

MAJOR ACCESS POINTS

Princess Point

Princess Point is a natural gathering place and trail hub. It includes a canoe launch to the marsh and access for ice skating, as well as connections to six kilometres of nature trails and Hamilton’s Waterfront Trail. Princess Point is undergoing restoration to return it to its pre-European roots as an oak savannah.

Arboretum

The Arboretum is a hub leading to more than 10 kilometres of RBG trails, as well as many horticultural collections including lilacs, magnolias, flowering dogwoods and the Avenue of Trees. It is also home to RBG’s Nature Interpretive Centre and the Bruce Trail Conservancy’s main office in historical Raspberry House.

Burlington Heights

At the eastern edge of Cootes Paradise overlooking the water, this 30-metre-high ribbon of land is actually the beach of glacial Lake Iroquois formed 13,000 years ago. The area provides some of the finest views in the region. Until the 1850s, Cootes Paradise flowed around the north end of the Heights but railway construction required the cutting of a new outlet and the Desgaries ship canal was created. During construction the bones of mammoth and elk were found.

What’s in a Name?

The site is named after Captain Thomas Cootes, a British army officer who enjoyed hunting the abundant waterfowl while on duty. The site is named after Captain Thomas Cootes, a British army officer who enjoyed hunting the abundant waterfowl while on duty.

Royal Botanical Gardens

Mission

Royal Botanical Gardens’ mission is to promote the public’s understanding of the relationship between the plant world, society and the environment.

Canada’s Biodiversity Hot Spot

Royal Botanical Garden’s 1,100 hectares is dominated by nature sanctuaries enveloping the western end of Lake Ontario. These form a Nodal Park within the Niagara Escarpment World Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO) and the heart of the Cootes Escarpment Ecopark System. With more than 750 native plant species, 277 types of migratory birds, 37 mammal species, 14 reptile species, 9 amphibian species and 68 species of Lake Ontario fish, the area is an important contributor to ecosystems that span international borders.

Trail Conditions

The 27 kilometres of trail includes packed earth, crushed stone and boardwalks; some sections are steep and hilly. Trails are not plowed or sandy during the winter. During spring thaws and after rains earthen trails become muddy. Please take appropriate caution.

LIABILITY

Royal Botanical Gardens assumes no responsibility for any damage to property, personal injury or mishap. All activities are at the risk of the participant. Our parking lots are not monitored. Do not leave any valuables in your car.

Volunteer

TrailWatchers Join our volunteer trail monitors and help us inform fellow visitors about our trail code, work on trail projects and learn more about the local environment. For more information pick up a TrailWatcher brochure or call RBG’s Auxiliary office at 905-577-7771.

PlantWatch Join a national volunteer effort to help monitor our changing climate. The PlantWatch program enables citizen scientists to get involved by recording flowering times and reporting these dates to researchers. Visit www.plantwatch.ca.

Learn More

Guided educational outings are offered year-round and include everything from wildflower walks to birdwatching and photography workshops. External groups charging for independently guided tours must register with RBG and are subject to our self-guided admission rate. For information call 905-527-1158, ext. 270.

Cootes Paradise Flowers

Round-lobed Hepatica

(Acerone americana)

This spring ephemeral is one of the first flowers to bloom. This small forest species can be found throughout the property and is one of two hepatica species present within the sanctuaries.

Wild Geranium

(Geranium maculatum)

Blooming from spring to mid-summer, this flower is sometimes called Cranes-bill because of a long column that protrudes from the flower — a part of the plant’s explosive seed capsule.

Pale-leaved Sunflower

(Helianthus strumosus)

This mid-summer, brightly-coloured sunflower prefers dry sandy soils on sunny open slopes. It is one of three species of native sunflower found on the property.

Turtlehead

(Chelone glabra)

Look for this plant in wet areas along Captain Cootes Trail in the late summer. The upper segment of the flower curves over the lower segment making it look like the head of a turtle.

Trail Destinations (See map)

1 Burial Grounds

Located on Burlington Heights along York Blvd., the area provides the best views of Cootes Paradise. A memorial marks this site’s historic connections — the War of 1812, immigrants who died arriving by ship in the 1840s and those who died in a cholera epidemic in 1854.

2 Westdale Ravine

Located on the south shore of Cootes Paradise, this deeply incised semi-plain ravine features a spring-fed creek, exposed glacial beach rocks and some of the tallest trees on the property. It is a forest-birding hotspot.

3 Native Trees Walk

Starting at the Nature Centre, these trails travel through a labeled native tree collection — a perfect way to learn how to identify the trees of the Carolinian forest region.

4 Pine Point Lookout

Located at the entrance of Cootes Paradise Marsh, this seasonally operated structure blocks the entrance of more than 10,000 non-native carp annually, while ensuring the spring migration of native Lake Ontario fish to and from this critical spawning area.

5 The Fishway

Located at the outlet of Cootes Paradise Marsh, this seasonally operated structure blocks the entrance of more than 10,000 non-native carp annually, while ensuring the spring migration of native Lake Ontario fish to and from this critical spawning area.

6 Marsh Boardwalk/Spencer Creek Delta

The boardwalk provides an up-close look at one of the largest creek deltas on Lake Ontario. This area is favored by migratory waterfowl and is the best place to view our Bald Eagles. Rat Island is directly across the creek to the south of the platform.

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Cootes Paradise Trails
18 km of trail, 10 lookouts
5 boardwalks, 12 creek crossings

MAP KEY
- RBG Properties
- Roads
- Rail Lines
- Wide, Open Trails
- Narrow, Dirt Trails
- Lookout
- Canoe Launch
- Boardwalks
- Waterfront Trail
- Wheelchair Access
- Trail Heads
- Parking
- Pay and Display Parking (free for RBG members displaying valid pass)
- See reverse for trail destination highlights

Trail Code
These lands are part of Canada’s biodiversity hot spot, open to passive recreation — leave only footprints, take only pictures.
Garbage receptacles located at trailheads.
Restrictions (per RBG’s bylaws):
- Pets must remain leashed at all times
- Running/jogging and cycling are not permitted
- Motorized vehicles are not permitted
- Feeding the wildlife is not permitted
- Smoking is not permitted

Special Protection Areas
Though the property spans more than 1,100 hectares, urban encroachment has left few true sanctuaries for sensitive species. To ensure that all species have an opportunity to thrive, 20% of the property is set aside as Special Protection Areas (SPAs) closed to the public. There are observation points and interpretive signage adjacent to the SPAs to help visitors understand the significance of these unique spaces.