Cootes Paradise Sanctuary

Established in 1927 for its significance as a migratory bird stopover, it’s RBG’s largest and most diverse sanctuary at over 600 hectares. The area features a 320-hectare river-mouth marsh, glacial plateaus, 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, access to six kilometres of nature trails, and connects to 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 outdoor education centre and the Bruce Trail Conservancy’s main office in historical Razzberry 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 the finest views in the region.

- **Vegetation and Microclimate**
  - By 1850, Cootes Paradise flowed around the north end of the Heights but railway construction centered the outflow. During the construction, post-glacial bones of mammoth, giant sloth and beaver were uncovered.

- **What’s in a Name?**
  - The site is named after Captain Thomas Coote, a British naval officer who enjoyed the abundant waterfowl while on leave from his army duties in the 1780s. The community at the west end of the marsh was also named Cootes Paradise until the 1840s, at which time the name was changed to Dundas.

- **Early Residents**
  - People have been drawn to Cootes Paradise for centuries. From AD 500 to 1000 this area was occupied by the Princess Point people, named after archaeological discoveries which indicated they were the first to bring agriculture to the region. Europeans arrived in the 1700s, with the first houses built on the north shore plateau. One of these sites, Razzberry House, remains today.

- **Vegetation and Microclimate**
  - Nestled between the Niagara Escarpment and Lake Ontario, the area’s flora is characteristic of the more southern deciduous forest region. Carolinian trees such as sassafras, oak, and hickory dominate the uplands, while northern species like hemlock, sugar maple, and white cedar are found in the many spring-fed shady ravines.

- **Habitat Restoration**
  - At the inception of Project Paradise in the 1990s, nearly the entire marsh ecosystem had been lost, leaving it a shallow muddy lake. With the exclusion of destructive carp at the Fishway, waterfowl and white cedar are found in the many spring-fed shady ravines.

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- **Trail Destinations**
  - **1. Burial Grounds**
    - Located on Burlington Heights along York Blvd., the area provides the best views in the region. 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 the cholera epidemic in the 1860s.

  - **2. Westdale Ravine**
    - Located on the south shore of Cootes Paradise, this deeply incised sand-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**
    - Below the Lilac Dell and looking out towards Hickory Island, this is one of the few locations where white pines dominate, evoking images of the forests that once covered the 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 most isolated point in the sanctuaries, the boardwalk provides an up-close look at one of the largest creek deltas on Lake Ontario. This area is favoured by migratory waterfowl and is home to our baid eagles. Rat Island is directly across the creek to the south of the platform.

- **Cootes Paradise Flowers**
  - **Round lobed hepatica** *(Anemone 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)*
    - This woodland flower blooms spring through mid-summer. It is sometimes called cranebill, in reference to the long beak in the centre of the flower and the shape of the seedpod.

  - **Pale-leaved sunflower** *(Helianthus strumusus)*
    - 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 Conditions**
  - The 27 kilometres of trails include packed earth, crushed stone, asphalt and boardwalks; some sections are steep and hilly. Ice build-up on hills during winter can make trails slippery. During spring thaws and after rains earthen trails become muddy.

- **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 Royal Botanical Gardens Auxiliary office at 905-577-7771.

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

- **Learn More**
  - Guided educational outings are offered year-round. Seasonal programs include everything from spring wildflower walks to stories of the Escarpment. For information call 905-527-1158, ext. 270. External groups charging for independently guided tours must register with the Gardens.
Though the property spans more than 900 hectares, urban encroachment has left few true sanctuaries for sensitive species. To ensure that all species have an opportunity to thrive, 20 per cent of the property is set aside as Special Protection Areas (SPA) 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.