

A History of Byng Island Conservation Area



Since its birth in 1960, Byng Island Conservation Area has grown into one of the busiest of the GRCA's network of 11 parks. It records more than 250,000 visits a year from people who come for the access to the Grand River and Lake Erie, the huge swimming pool, the Carolinian forest and many other features. Byng Island is especially popular for seasonal campers who keep coming back year after year.



Beautiful Byng Island sunset

Opening Ceremonies - July 28, 1960



Garfield Disher, the chair of the Grand Valley Conservation Authority, at the opening ceremonies for Byng Island. Disher and others were participating in a beard growing contest and wearing old-fashioned clothes because it was also the 100th anniversary of the founding of Dunnville.

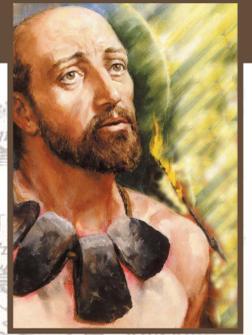
Premier Leslie M. Frost (right) and Garfield Disher (left) cut the ribbon at the opening ceremony. At this event, Frost called upon people to look at the beautiful island and the unspoiled beauties that were once part of the 'highways' and communications of the beginning of Canada 300 years before.



In the early years, Byng Island Conservation Area visitors could picnic, fish and hike at the park. In 1961 they could also camp next to the Grand River. From the time it was first constructed in 1966, the two-acre "swimming lake" at Byng Island has brought increasing crowds on hot summer days. It is still among the largest outdoor swimming pools in Ontario.

A timeline...

Aboriginal people lived in this region long before the first contact with Europeans in the early 1600s. Many artifacts have been found in this area and some have been carbon-dated back more than 2,000 years. One of the first known tribes in the area were the Attiwandarons, later named the 'Neutrals' by the French since this group supported neither the Hurons to the north, nor the Iroquois to the south.



Jean de Brébeuf (1626-1649), a French Jesuit in the Huron Country, serving in Huronia, and one of the first recorded Europeans who paddled down the Grand River past Byng Island to Lake Erie.

- 1626** --- Two French priests, Father Jean de Brébeuf and Father D'Aillon provided the first record of Europeans paddling down the Grand River to Lake Erie, although many historians believe the first European to pass through this area on the Grand River was French explorer Etienne Brûlé.
- 1669** ---  The French explorer Robert de LaSalle, and priests René de Bréhan de Galinée and François Dollier de Casson, were part of an expeditionary mission that was to follow the northern shore of Lake Erie. In September, likely near present-day Hamilton, LaSalle became ill and left the party to travel back to Montreal. But Galinée, Casson and their party made the trek to the Grand River. They travelled eight days by canoe down the river to its mouth at what is now Port Maitland, then headed west and spent the winter near Long Point.
- 1812** --- During the War of 1812, some British ships, having lost a battle at Put-in-Bay at the west end of Lake Erie, eluded the Americans and crossed the lake to Port Maitland where they were sunk at the mouth of the Grand River.
- 1829** --- The weirs connecting Byng Island and other islands were constructed. These joined the islands with each other as part of the first Dunnville Dam. This was devised as part of the feeder canal project to bring water from the Grand River to the Welland Canal. This project included a dam across Byng Island to Sulphur Creek. A swing bridge and wooden lock opened the canal traffic to the upper Grand River, and steamers from Buffalo moved past this island up to Brantford.
- 1850** --- The population of Dunnville was only 1,100 but it was a very busy port.
- 1910-20** --- The swing bridge was replaced by a double roadway iron bridge. It was brought to Dunnville up the feeder canal by boat.
- 1960** --- Official opening of Byng Island Conservation Area and the 100th anniversary of the founding of Dunnville.

Natural Heritage of the Southern Grand River

This is where the Grand River and everything that comes downstream joins Lake Erie. In fact, the river has lake-like conditions when it gets to Byng Island and for several kilometres up the Grand River.

Carolinian forest

Byng Island lies within the Carolinian forest zone. It is biologically very diverse and holds one-third of Canada's rare and endangered species of plants and animals. Some uncommon tree species that can be found at Byng Island include American chestnut, bur oak, shellbark hickory and pin oak.

Southern flying squirrel

This seldom seen small mammal does not actually fly, but has a membrane of skin extending from wrist to ankle which allows it to glide through the air. It has large, luminous black eyes useful for night feeding. The squirrels live in mature oak, hickory, maple and beech forests. Their dens are in trees with a large cavity found near water.



Bur oak (*Quercus macrocarpa*) ► Bur oak gets its name from the burr-like bristles on the cup of the acorn. Its bark is light gray and fissured. It commonly lives to be 200 to 300 years old!

Bur oak drawing: USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown, 1913



Photo by Joe MacDonald

Dunnville Marsh

The Dunnville Marsh lies along the Grand River downstream of this park. These coastal wetlands were once much larger. The GRCA owns a little over one-quarter of the Dunnville Marsh, which totals 16 square kilometres. A coalition of organizations purchased much of this land in 1992. Wetlands farther back from the shore have been restored and work is always underway. Countless biological processes take place in wetlands thanks to diverse inhabitants that make up the complex ecosystem and help to restore water quality. For example, cattails absorb pesticides and toxic metals such as mercury and lead.

Walleye (*Sander vitreus*)

► The name "walleye" comes from the fact that their eyes, like those of cats, reflect light. This "eyeshine" is the result of a light-gathering layer in the eyes called the tapetum lucidum which allows the fish to see well in low-light conditions. The fish's eyes also allow them to see well in turbid waters (rough, breaking waters) which gives them an advantage over their prey.



Walleye image: NYSDEC

Many fish species

There is a lot of interaction between Lake Erie and the Grand River. Depending on winds and weather, cool lake water can come up the river and rejuvenate the fish habitat, bringing an interesting variety of fish along with it. Byng Island is very popular for sport fishing. The fish include walleye, rainbow trout, bass, Chinook salmon and longnose gar.



► **Dunnville Dam**
The first Dunnville Dam was built in 1829 as part of the Welland Feeder Canal project. Although no longer required for that purpose, the dam retains its historic and recreational value. However, it also blocks the path of some fish that need to migrate upstream; volunteers help the fish by moving them up above the dam by hand or through a fishway constructed in 1994.



Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)
Bald eagles are known to breed in this area. They are most commonly seen within four km of bays, rivers and lakes. Illegal shooting, habitat destruction and pesticide use are the main threats to this amazing raptor.