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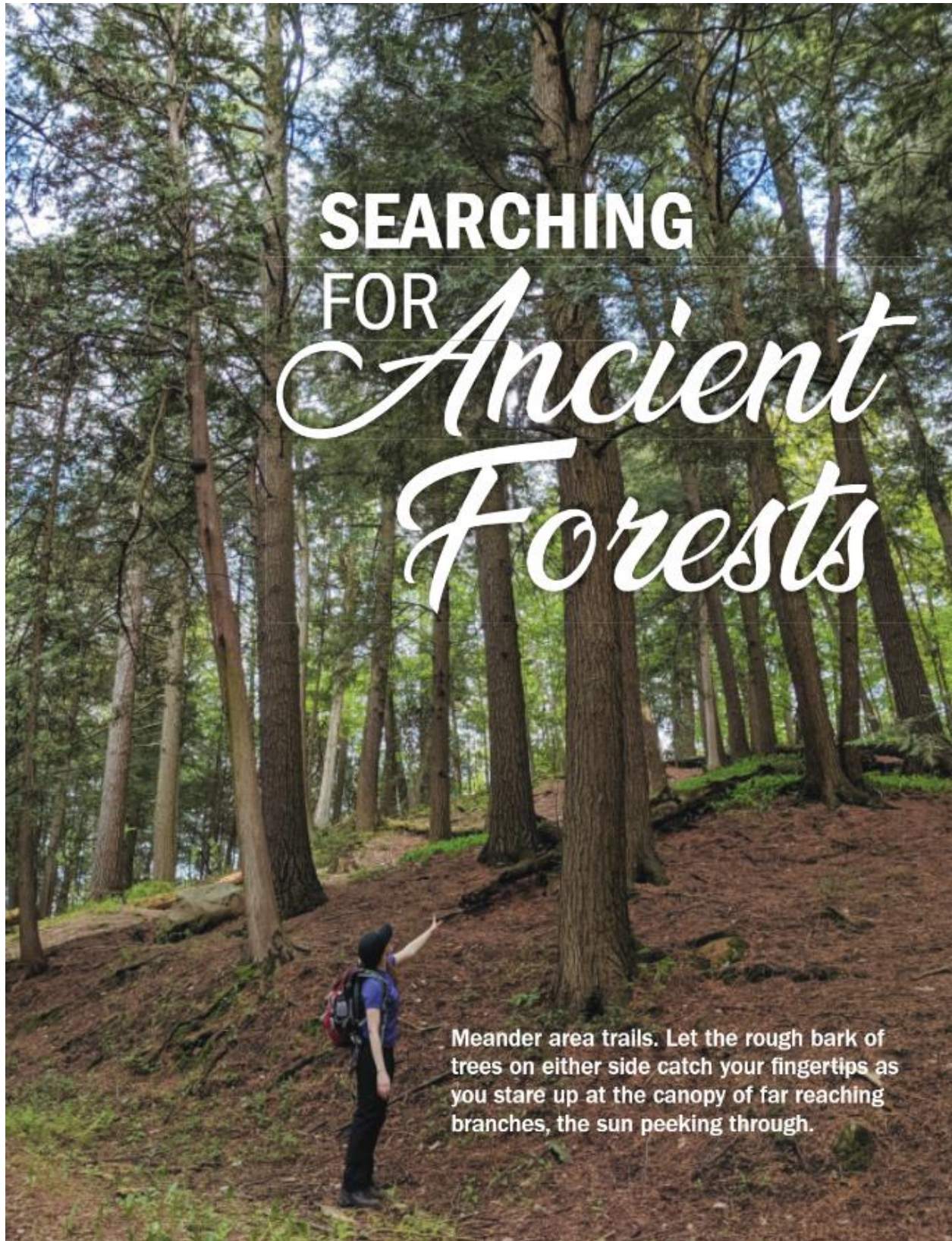
Ancient Forests

Discover the beauty of nature's secret

\$5.95



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**SEARCHING
FOR**
*Ancient
Forests*

Meander area trails. Let the rough bark of trees on either side catch your fingertips as you stare up at the canopy of far reaching branches, the sun peeking through.

BY SARAH SOBANSKI
PHOTOS BY ANCIENT FOREST EXPLORATION AND RESEARCH

There is something innate when exploring nature that speaks to the human experience. Most forests were here long before you, and they'll be here long after you — barring deforestation.

One area research group is working to protect and learn from our local forests. Carling Dewar leads guided walks through local parks and preserves as a forest ecologist and public outreach coordinator for Ancient Forest Exploration and Research (AFER). She's a University of Toronto masters of environmental science graduate with a specialization in conservation biology.

"The forest is really relaxing and therapeutic," Dewar says. "Just to get out there and feel the wind on your face, hear the birds singing... It's usually so much cooler and there's so much life around... It's an experience I hope everyone gets to experience once in their lifetime... There's definitely something there."

Dewar's group is educating locals to identify old-growth trees and encouraging them to help discover ancient forests in the surrounding area as part of a citizen science project in co-ordination with Kawartha Land Trust. The Peterborough Old-Growth Forest Project is sponsored by a \$75,000 Ontario Trillium Foundation Seed Grant that runs until February 2020.

"The project is a search effort for remnant old-growth forests in Peterborough County. Once we do find the forests, we'll document them because we suspect that there are lots out there that are undocumented," Dewar explains.

A 2016 AFER report already shows Peterborough's Jackson Park has trees up to 250 years old. A tree that started growing in the mid-1500s was also identified in Peterborough's Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park. Dewar says it's "amazing" to still be able to find trees so old. She explains



when settlers arrived to the area "almost every forest was clear cut or logged to some extent."

Dewar says there is a lot of ground to cover in the search for ancient forests. A map on the project's website shows Jackson Park and Mark S. Burnham Provincial Park as the only identified old-growth sites across Peterborough County and the Kawarthas as well. It's all uncharted territory.

Not much is known about old-growth forests, but communities in environment and science believe them to be important, Dewar suggests. She says the forests are complex, they often sequester carbon better than young forests and have richer ecosystems for living things, such as birds

who can make their homes in the cavities of wide old-growth tree trunks.

Following the success of the project, Ancient Forest Exploration and Research will be eligible for the foundation's Grow Grant. That would mean an additional \$50-\$250,000 per year over a maximum of three years for the project. Dewar says by identifying old-growth forests her group can study them, develop best practices for reforestation projects in the future and work towards protecting them.

"Ultimately we want to help protect them, whether it's through petitions or policies, educating the public and making them aware that there's these incredible forests out there."



You can identify old-growth trees by keeping your eye out for a number of characteristics:

- Look for a tree that's leaning, or has an interesting shape. Ordinary trees aren't exactly great for lumber, they may have been left behind by loggers.
- Look for a tree that resembles a column. If a tree tapers at the top it is probably younger, where older trees won't have sprouting branches but thick arms at the top that may have been growing for hundreds of years in their own right.
- Like you might lose your hair as you age, so might a tree lose its bark. Old-growth trees may be missing bark in places, revealing a bare trunk underneath. Dewar notes this doesn't mean they're in bad health, just that they've lived experiencing rough weather conditions and other forest events.

There's also an app that can help you identify trees in your area. iNaturalist allows you to snap photos of your discoveries in the forest and makes suggestions on what they might be, from critters to trees.

The only way to truly age a tree is to drill its core. By removing a circle of wood around the diameter of a pencil you can count the rings of a tree, which signify years, without harming it.

"It's a learning process no matter how many times you've gone out into the forest," Dewar says noting she's often stumped on her expeditions. She encourages beginner naturalists to get out in their local forests and start discovering them.

If you think you may have found an old-growth forest in your area you can reach out to Dewar at 705-312-2337, email info@ancient-forest.org or find out more online at www.ancientforest.org/peterborough-old-growth-forest-project/. AFER is also looking for volunteers for the project. ☺