

Walk *the* Don

WILKET CREEK (Loop from Leslie and Lawrence Ave East)

This loop offers a series of contrasts. The walk begins in manicured gardens, meanders through an ever-changing and challenged valley, climbs the shore of an ancient lake and descends into the wider valley of the West Don River. It follows a small watercourse degraded through intense pressure from rapid urban development.



Public Transit: Getting there: From Eglinton subway station, take the 51, 54, or 54A bus to Leslie Street and Lawrence Avenue East. Enter the Toronto Botanical Garden via the southwest corner.

Getting home: Follow the road up to your left and catch buses heading for Eglinton station along Eglinton Avenue East (bus routes 34, 100, 305, or 354) or south on Leslie Street (bus routes 51, 54, or 54A).

*Public transit routes and schedules are subject to change. Please check with provider.
TTC Information: www.ttc.ca or 416-393-4636.



Parking: There is plenty of parking in the Toronto Botanical Garden parking lot accessed via the southwest corner of Lawrence Avenue East and Leslie Street.



Level of Difficulty/Accessibility: Much of the trail has a hard surface and is level. Exceptions are the steep, dirt trail climbing the escarpment at point 4. For stroller and wheelchair accessibility, avoid the steep climb by proceeding south along Wilket Creek and rejoin the trail at the comfort station at point 9.



Approximate Time: 1.5 to 2 hours.



Distance: 6.4 kilometres.



Caution: Be aware of cyclists and other trail users at all times. Use the trails at your own risk.



1 Visit the environmentally sustainable **Toronto Botanical Garden** for a brief glimpse into cultivated nature at its finest. Hopefully, the garden will whet your appetite for a return to one of Canada's best horticultural displays.

Take a look at the new parking lot. Prior to its reconstruction in 2011, rainfall flowed rapidly across the large asphalt surface and into the valley below causing flooding and damage. Now, rainwater passes slowly through the permeable surface, then through a series of drainage pipes and into the green swales where it provides water for the trees. The excess flows slowly toward the river below.

Stroll between the greenhouses and past the restaurant in the barn into a garden of the former estate of Rupert Edwards. Follow Evergreen Walkway to the shelter. Imagine the nine-hole golf course that Edwards once had here.

Down below is Wilket Creek. In the valley, enjoy rhododendrons, flowering trees and shrubs and extensive rockery.

2 Join the main trail and follow Wilket Creek, a tributary of the Don, which quietly enters **Edwards Gardens** from under the Lawrence Avenue culvert on your right. This scene is not always so peaceful. Several times in the past few years, flood waters have erased paved walkways, destroyed several bridges and caused massive devastation to the creek bed and adjacent vegetation. In fact, one storm in 2000 actually damaged the Lawrence Avenue culvert. One of Toronto's most beautiful and best-used parks is continually at the mercy of damaging flood waters that accumulate between Lawrence Avenue and York Mills Road, two kilometres to the north.

Alexander Milne first settled in this part of the valley in 1827. He built a three-storey mill on this spot, powered by an 18-foot overshot wheel. Large wheels need a steady supply of water to fill the buckets and the creek could not provide it. Within three years, Milne relocated the mill to the east end of his property on the East Don River at what is now Lawrence Avenue East and the Don Valley Parkway. From the 1820s until the 1950s, this area was known as Milne Creek. The name was changed (in error) to Wilket Creek circa 1965. Continue to follow the creek.

Today, the creek might appear as a narrow flow of clear water. However, after a heavy rainfall it becomes an angry, boiling torrent of muddy silt. Damage along this watercourse comes from uncontrolled stormwater runoff. Heavy rainfall drains unimpeded into the creek from large paved parking lots at Leslie Street and Lawrence Avenue and from the rapid flow on the downhill slopes of Banbury Park, site of the former IBM Golf and Country Club. In addition, storm sewers discharge an enormous volume of water from properties and roads into the ravine over a very short period. The greater intensity of recent storms, combined with the continuing loss of absorbent surfaces, will lead to further degradation in the years ahead unless methods of stormwater diversion are put in place.

3 **Wilket Creek Park**, with the Bata Trail running its entire length, is well known for its mature coniferous and deciduous forests.

Depending on soil moisture, light and orientation of the ravine slopes, mature stands of eastern hemlock, sugar maple and American beech thrive along the valley walls, as do several tall black cherry trees. Moist marshes and groundwater flowing towards the creek provide the dampness needed by the ferns, cattail marshes and wet scrub communities along the floodplain. This narrow, winding ravine is home to a number of wildflower plantings and natural regeneration projects over the past decade. Recently, however, foreign invasive species such as garlic mustard, Himalayan balsam, Japanese knotweed and dog-strangling vine have spread beyond control and threaten native species. European buckthorn and Norway maple also compete with native plants and change the mix of plant life throughout the ravine.

Several uncommon bird species visit here as a stop-over point during seasonal migrations. This valley is home to hundreds of over-wintering robins that appear as silent balls of fluff on branches of shrubs. Listen for the familiar tapping of the woodpeckers, the challenge of the red-winged blackbird and the delightful songs of sparrows, orioles and chickadees. rabbits, red fox, white-tailed deer, mink, muskrat and coyotes pass through the ravine or call it home. The fish population is limited to a few species of minnows and larger chub during breeding season; salmon and trout cannot make it upstream as they do on the East Don River.

4 Nature creates and nature reorganizes. This portion of Wilket Creek valley undergoes continual change. Notice the debris collected along the streambed, the heavy wire-filled gabion baskets of stone twisting into the creek from the force of water, and the paths and flat areas smothered with sand from high water levels. In several places, the large limestone boulders lining the bends of the creek are toppling inward as stormwater eats into the supporting gravel. Many of the larger, tilted trees near the water's edge started out at the top of the embankment. Heavy rain and seeping water undercut their footing.

Near the end of this stretch, you'll travel over a long steel structure, first a bridge spanning Wilket Creek, then an elevated walkway over the wetland. This was installed in late 2011 after the creek was widened and diverted to protect the steep cliffs from further collapse. This major remediation project should slow the damage, for even after minor storms, Wilket Creek becomes an angry, destructive flow of water.

5 Eventually the path meets an all-wooden bridge that leads towards the Tommy Thompson Trail as indicated on the sign. Turn right here, cross over it and proceed up the steep 24-metre climb ascending the shoreline of **Ancient Lake Iroquois**. When the last glaciers retreated from Toronto, between 13,000 and 14,000 years ago, deep layers of till, silt and clay were left behind. Water

levels rose significantly, creating Lake Iroquois. As glaciers retreated, land levels slowly rose, water eventually drained through the St. Lawrence River valley and the shoreline receded to its present location some 8,000 years ago.

The Lake Iroquois shoreline is an easily detected landscape feature. It is obvious on the Casa Loma hill, Yonge Street south of St. Clair, here in Sunnybrook Park and the Scarborough Bluffs.

6 Turn sharply left at the top, before the Sunnybrook Park signpost, to follow the path along the brow of the escarpment. Large sugar maple and eastern hemlock dominate the landscape. Enjoy great scenery here, especially when trees are without leaves. Keep following around to the right. Trilliums are abundant here in early spring.

7 The path eventually opens onto a large, groomed playing field, site of the first Provincial Plowing Match in 1913. Welcome to **Sunnybrook Park**, a recreation area that features a riding track and 17 sports fields. The parkland was a favourite campground for Boy Scouts and, during the World War II, was a transit camp for troops preparing to leave for Europe. You can be a sports spectator in the summer or a cross-country skier in the winter. Follow the horse track along the south side of the field toward the far end until you reach cement steps with an iron railing. These steps will take you down to the Toronto Field Naturalists' log cabin in the parking lot. This organization opened the first urban wilderness trail in

Canada here in 1930. To avoid the steps, continue along the horse trail and travel down the roadway past the riding stables.

8 You are now in the valley of the **West Don River**. The West Don River begins in Vaughan near Keele Street and Kirby Road. It flows from the Oak Ridges Moraine south by way of G. Ross Lord Park with its flood control dam at Finch Avenue. It then passes through Earl Bales Park and the Don Valley Golf Course south of Sheppard Avenue, Hoggs Hollow at Yonge Street, the Rosedale Golf Course, Glendon Forest behind York University and Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre to where you pick it up here.

9 Cross the road toward the river and follow the footpath left downstream to a wooden bridge. Cross it into **Serena Gundy Park**. This heavily wooded parkland hosts family picnics and outings most of the summer. The path up to the right leads to Rykert Crescent in Leaside. Stay left on the paved trail past the comfort station and left again to eventually cross the high steel suspension bridge to the parking lot. Proceed to the far end of the lot and turn right.

10 This next comfort station, open year round, marks the junction where Wilket Creek joins the West Don River. During heavy runoff, this whole area floods, leaving thick silt deposits on the lawns along both sides of the road.

South of here is Eglinton Avenue East, where the West Don River continues its journey augmented by various small tributaries that empty into it. Three kilometres downstream, just past where Taylor Massey Creek flows into the East Don River, the rivers merge as the Lower Don to flow as a single river through the Keating Channel into Lake Ontario.

Follow the signpost back up Wilket Creek trail to the start of the walk in Edwards Gardens. While you may occasionally hear the traffic on Leslie Street up the embankment on your right, enjoy the serenity of a wildlife-filled natural environment as you walk through the valley.

11 If you choose not to return to the start, here is an opportunity to leave the trail and connect with public transit at the intersection of Leslie Street and Eglinton Avenue East.

Trail Users' Guide

- Be advised that you are responsible for your own safety and wellbeing.
- Be aware of cyclists and other trail users at all times.
- Walk with others.
- Keep your children in sight at all times.
- Trails may involve stairs and slopes.
- Trails may not be lit or cleared of ice and snow.
- Stay on the trails or mown areas; do not leave them at any time.
- Cross roads only at intersections, lights or crosswalks.
- Keep your pet on a leash and clean-up after it.
- Do not pick, damage, or plant any vegetation.
- Beware of poison ivy: "Leaflets of three let it be."
- Respect and do not feed wildlife.
- Do not light fires.
- Leave nothing behind.
- Remember that washrooms operate seasonally.
- Avoid the trails during and after a storm; water levels can rise suddenly.
- Wear footwear for pavement, loose or broken surfaces and bare earth.
- Wear clothing to suit the weather and protect against insects.
- Carry drinking water.

Learn more about the Don River watershed at www.trca.ca



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WILKET CREEK WALK

