

# The Land Between and the Carden Alvar

A brief history of the geomorphology, effects of early peoples, birds and ecological importance

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The Carden Alvar is part of *The Land Between*. Soon we will be hearing more about this ecologically diverse area as it gains recognition. *The Land Between* is an irregular area 20 - 40 km wide stretching 240 km on both sides of the southern edge of the Canadian Shield from Georgian Bay to the Frontenac Axis (Arch) about 40 km north of Kingston. It is the contact zone where Paleozoic sedimentary limestone alvars meet Precambrian granite barrens. The hilly granite barrens are the hardrock counterpart of alvars. Granite is an igneous rock, but when used in a general sense includes other rock types such as metamorphic gneiss. This article about *The Land Between* concentrates on the Carden Alvar and adjacent granite barrens of Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands Provincial Park.

Vernon Le Crow of Norland coined the name *The Land Between* in 1967 for the title of his Centennial project book on the history of the Townships of Laxton, Digby and Longford (Le Crow 1967) in northern Victoria County, now part of the City of Kawartha Lakes. Vernon Le Crow (pers. comm.) recently signed a release giving permission to use his book's name to promote the "conservation and appreciation" of this distinctive zone.

Most of *The Land Between* was heavily forested before settlement. The first European to visit the Carden Alvar was Samuel de Champlain in September 1615. He portaged with a party of Huron warriors from Lake Simcoe to Balsam Lake to attack the Iroquois in New York State. The Hurons told Champlain that they had recently occupied the Kawartha Lakes region. Champlain saw regenerating areas where the Hurons once lived.

I was surprised to learn that four Huron villages are known from the former Carden Township (Kirkconnell 1967). These Huron villages date from the 1500s. The Hurons abandoned their villages east of Lake Simcoe by about 1590, presumably because of increasing warfare with the Iroquois Confederacy.

The Hurons used stone axes and fire to clear land for villages and farms. They also used fire to open large areas for blueberries, strawberries, raspberries and wild foods. Their activities increased the size and enhanced alvar habitats for scrubland and probably some grassland birds.

After the Hurons departed, some areas of Carden regenerated to white pine. A probable example is along Kawartha Road 35 about 1 to 2 km north of McNamee Road, where old pine stumps dot the fields. There was a Huron village on the hill just west of the road and second house north of McNamee Road. When Carden was "lumbered off" after the late 1800s, the area was frequently burned by early settlers and later became ranchland for cattle. Fires removed the duff layer. This combined with some tilling exposed the shallow soils to water

and wind erosion. Many of the alvar areas that we treasure today resulted from past and present human activities.

Modern fire protection has eliminated the positive effects of lightning-caused fires, which are important in setting back plant succession and renewing alvar habitats. The last big fire in Carden was in the late 1940s. Cattle grazing and periodic removal of woody vegetation have replaced the role of fire in setting back succession, but fire whether natural or prescribed is still needed.

Until recently *The Land Between* was a forgotten land squeezed between the popular Kawartha Lakes and cottage country of Muskoka and Haliburton Highlands. Being so close to the Greater Toronto Area, developments such as a casino, quarries, golf courses and severances for cottages and homes are accelerating. Fortunately, two large areas, an alvar and granite barrens, are protected in the Carden area. They are (1) the Cameron and Windmill Ranches recently acquired by the Nature Conservancy, which will become Carden Alvar Provincial Park, and (2) Queen Elizabeth II Wildlands Provincial Park, protecting 33,505 hectares of granite barrens, extensive mixed forests, wetlands and many deep Canadian Shield lakes.

Next time you visit the Carden Alvar, treat yourself to birding the nearby granite barrens. There is an excellent birding road into Queen Elizabeth Park. From Carden take Kawartha Road 6 to Sebright at the junction of Kawartha Road 45. Continue north past Sadowa to the Black River Road. Turn left (west) on Road 6 to Riley Lake to see granite barrens or turn right (east) to Ragged Rapids and Victoria Falls. See breeding birds in varied habitats typical of the southern edge of the Canadian Shield. Enjoy both sides of *The Land Between*.

**Note:** The former Carden Township was named to honour an English captain in the Peninsular War of 1808 to 1814, presumably at the suggestion of Sir John Colborne, Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada from 1830 to 1836 (Kirkconnell 1967). Later Carden Township and surrounding areas became known as the Carden Plain, before the importance of alvars was described in the scientific literature. Recently the name Carden Alvar has supplanted "plain" as the preferred name. The Ontario Field Ornithologists promotes the name Carden Alvar.

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#### References

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The Land Between - An Overlooked Ecotone in Southern Ontario. Online at [www.couchconservancy.ca/thelandbetween.htm](http://www.couchconservancy.ca/thelandbetween.htm)