

Wilkes Dam/ Grand River Loop

(Brantford)

OVERVIEW

My intention was to explore a route in the Dundas Valley, but when I arrived, the place I'd selected was very busy. It was the annual Sulphur Springs trail race. Clearly I needed a new plan. I had heard rumours of some trails around Wilkes Dam in Brantford, so off I went. When I arrived at the dam, a giant trail map confirmed the rumours to be true. I quickly settled on an enticing, long loop that follows the river south through Waterworks Park, crosses over at Brant's Crossing, and then follows the river back upstream. What I got was 18k of awesome. This route has everything — beautiful forest and remnant tallgrass prairie, excellent birdwatching and some great people-watching too. It contrasts the buzz of urban hiking with the peace of rural solitude, and it features historical sites as well as natural wonders.

This loop is also a favourite among cyclists, so keep your eyes open for bicycles (and the occasional rogue scooter). But this hike has so much to offer that you'll want to keep your eyes open anyway. To quote my beta tester, this hike is "like your favourite movie where you don't want to miss a thing."



Insider Info

LENGTH

18 kilometres

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

Moderate



LENGTH OF TIME

4 to 6 hours

% ON ROAD 15%

HIGHLIGHTS

Birdwatching, Grand River, Wilkes Dam, Brant prairie, Brant's Crossing

PLACES TO EAT/DRINK

In Brantford: Blue Dog Coffee Roasters, The Golden Teapot (by reservation only), Healthy Rabbit (closed Sunday), Serenity Country Candles, The Bent King Boardgame Cafe, Warmington's Bistro (closed Saturday and Sunday)

ENTRANCE FEE n/a

TRAILHEAD

N43° 09.002' W80° 17.606'





"To think, to dream and to make sense of this world we live in. The path leads us to a richer canvas, a better design, a finer life."

ALEX STRACHAN



Directions

1. Park at Wilkes Dam in Brantford. There are a couple of parking spaces right at the dam, but there is also street parking on Dufferin Ave.
2. From the street, walk down toward the water to check out the impressive dam. Built in the 1850s by George Samuel Wilkes, it diverted water into a canal to power his mills downstream. Wilkes was the mayor of Brantford in 1853.
3. To the left of the dam lookout area, there are some stairs leading up to the trail. Go up the stairs and turn right, then make a quick left onto the dirt path running alongside the canal. This is part of the Grand Valley Tr., which is marked by white blazes.
4. When you come to the Y-intersection, turn right toward the paved path. Then turn left onto the paved path.
5. Shortly after turning, you'll see a wooden post with a white blaze directing you onto a grassy path that veers off to the right and down the hill into the forest. Follow it.
6. Stay to the left at the next intersection of trails. This section of forest along the banks of the river is a birdwatcher's paradise. Never on an Ontario hike have I seen such a quantity and diversity of birds. There were gangs of Baltimore orioles flaunting their orange-and-black colours. There were rose-breasted grosbeaks, cedar waxwings, goldfinches, cardinals, downy and hairy woodpeckers, ducks, geese and many more that I couldn't identify.
7. The trail here is bordered by stinging nettles. This upright herb with serrated leaves can be delicious and fortifying in soup and teas, but it's best known for its small hairs that cause an uncomfortable stinging sensation. So don't touch! As is often the case, there are patches of plantain serendipitously growing alongside the nettles. Conveniently, the plantain's broad leaves, which have deep parallel veins, have long been used as a remedy to alleviate the sting.



*Combine a hike with the wonderful
Saturday brunch at Serenity Country Candles.*





Wilkes Dam was built in the 1850s. Photo by Matt Carnwell

Stinging nettles are also the food of choice for red admiral butterfly caterpillars, so we should embrace these plants despite their antisocial nature.

8. The trail follows the river, and leads you through groves of elegant willow trees. Here, I scrambled to the river's edge to snap a photo of a passing canoe, only to realize that the canoeists were good friends of mine.
9. When you come to a Y-intersection, keep left, following the Grand Valley Tr.'s white blazes.
10. At the next intersection of trails, turn right to follow the path as it runs along the edge of the forest. The path curves left and goes up a small hill to rejoin the paved path.
11. Turn right onto the paved path. This is the SC Johnson Tr., which runs for 14k between Paris and Brantford.
12. The paved path leads to a small parking lot at Morrell St., where I met some residents of the Holmedale neighbourhood. They insisted that I visit Serenity Country Candles for its Saturday brunch. I was hungry, so I took a small detour for some delicious eggs Benedict before returning to the trail. I encourage you to take this detour too. To get there, walk through the parking lot and continue toward Grand River Ave. Turn right onto Grand River Ave. and walk approximately 600m, and then turn left onto Leonard St. The shop is on the corner of Holme St. and Leonard St. After refuelling, retrace your steps back to the trail.
13. Continuing from where the trail approached the parking lot (whether or not you took the detour), turn right before the parking lot to continue along the



- SC Johnson Tr. as it heads back toward the river. Here, the trail runs between the Grand River and the back of houses or businesses on Grand River Ave.
14. Eventually, you'll see the Colborne St. bridge arching over the river. Follow the trail as it leads down a hill and under the bridge.
 15. On the other side, the trail ascends a small hill and arrives at a pedestrian bridge crossing the river. This is Brant's Crossing. It was in this area that Joseph Thayendanegea Brant reputedly crossed, or forded, the Grand River as he led his people to their new home in 1784, after the Revolutionary War. This is how Brantford got its name.
 16. Turn right onto the pedestrian bridge and cross the river. You are no longer on the SC Johnson Tr.
 17. At the other side, turn right, where there are numerous signs detailing interesting historical details about this area. After reading the signs, keep straight to enter a tunnel under the road.
 18. The tunnel comes out into Lorne Park with its lovely gardens and trees. Continue through the park, along a paved path. You pass a spectacular willow tree.
 19. At Ballantyne Dr., turn right and walk along the wide curb, following a concrete wall.
 20. Continue to follow Ballantyne Dr. until you arrive at a dirt driveway and a sign for D'Aubigny Creek Park on the right. Turn right.
 21. Follow the driveway down a hill toward a parking lot and boat launch area.
 22. Just before the parking lot, turn left onto a trail leading to a bridge over D'Aubigny Creek.
 23. This path runs along the Grand River before reaching a collection of soccer fields. Follow the path around the end of the soccer fields and up a hill.
 24. At the top of the hill, you arrive at a parking lot with a fire station across the street. Turn right onto the gravel path at the top of the hill.
 25. When you reach a small stop sign, turn right to walk along the sidewalk. This is Oakhill Dr.
 26. Turn right onto Kerr-Shaver Terrace. The road will turn left twice. At the second left turn, you'll find a path running between the houses on the right. Turn right onto the path here.
 27. The path crosses over a small creek and arrives at the Oakhill Cemetery.
 28. Turn right to continue on the path as it runs between the cemetery and the river. Continue to follow the path beyond where the cemetery ends; it goes downhill through a young forest.





This pedestrian bridge offers some amazing views of the Grand River.

29. The path opens into a grassy meadow as it enters the Brant Conservation Area.
30. Continue straight across the driveway of the conservation area. The path soon leaves the park and continues through farm fields before arriving once again at the Grand River.
31. Cross the pedestrian bridge over the river, then turn right at the first trail intersection on the other side
32. This trail wanders through a pretty forest, bordered when I was there by mayapples, trilliums, skunk cabbage and small vernal pools.
33. In approximately 1.5k, you arrive at a private drive. Continue straight across this driveway.
34. When you reach the T-intersection, turn right onto SC Johnson Tr. This trail will eventually take you back to the trailhead.
35. The trail passes the Brantford Golf & Country Club and crosses a small road and passes through one of the last remnants of tallgrass prairie and oak savannah in the area; it has a unique ecosystem and distinctive assortment of plant species.
36. Off to the left, a side trail leads toward the Glenhyrst Art Gallery of Brant. This is worth a visit, and they serve refreshments in the Tea Room.
37. Beyond the gallery trail, the path crosses 2 more private drives and continues along the side of Lafayette Ave.
38. Turn right onto Dufferin Ave. and return to Wilkes Dam and your car.

