

# IRISH LOOP POST

Vol 4 # 10

The Community Newspaper of the Goulds, the Southern Shore & St. Mary's Bay

Sept. 1, 2011

## Staying on top of it

### Maintenance workers on the East Coast Trail overcome challenging weather

Damage inflicted by Hurricane Igor last fall coupled with a summer that saw a record number of rainy days posed challenges for the people who maintain the 260 km long East Coast Trail, but they managed to get through it all just fine, says spokesperson Judith Whittick.

“At the beginning of the year we made a decision to clear all the blow downs from Pouch Cove right to Cappahayden,” said Whittick, who oversees ECTA's trail maintenance program. “Last fall we had 7,000 blow downs, which we cleared before Christmas, but with the continuous wet weather over the fall and into the winter months, we had another 1,400 blow-downs. So to make sure the path was open for tourists and hikers we had the crew working for almost a month clearing those 1,400 blow downs.”

ECTA depends on government funding for the money to employ maintenance workers. The number of workers employed depends on the actual project. The normal complement is three to six people. Their work is bolstered by volunteers who turn up many weekends to clear alders and other brush.

“It's a very demanding work environment,” Whittick said. “And it is a challenge because there is a lot of driving, it is a linear path.”

The abnormally wet weather this past summer added to the challenge.

“When you have a crew of six or eight people working together in one site it can cause a mud bath,” said Whittick. “So that was one of the challenges – to keep moving them around so that we didn't chew up the trail too much and were able to do what we needed to do. So it has been challenging in terms of the weather this year, but we haven't missed many days. The crew is pretty committed to working on the trail and we try to vary the jobs: If we know rain is coming we try to put them in a position that is pretty well sheltered in a wooded environment rather than being exposed on a coastal area.”

Despite the tests posed by nature, the ECTA maintenance crew and volunteers made a lot of progress this past summer, said Whittick. “We have been focusing on the paths down south in Cappahayden and Renew's,” she noted. “They were heavily overgrown with vegetation, so the crew had to be travelling from Bay Bulls down



**A section of LaManche Path on the East Coast Trail, with a steep cliff plummeting to the ocean on the left and the remains of a house on the right in what is now an abandoned village. Despite damage caused by Hurricane Igor last fall and a soggy summer, the trail's maintenance crew has kept the 260 km trail open for hikers.**

to there, hiking in often five kilometres to clear the bush, then hiking out and driving back again.”

The crew is currently working on the Spurrwink Island Path from Aquaforte River to Port Kirwan. The 18 kilometre path is so long, a boat is being used to ferry the workers to the headlands to get at their jobs.

Whittick added quite a lot of work was also done on the Mickaleens Path in Bay Bulls, which was hit hard by Hurricane Igor. “We had to rebuild some of the treadway there,” she said.

Most of the trail, about 220 kms, stretches along the coastline of the Southern Shore to St. John's. Another 296 kms of trail is under development. The trail has seen more than 40,000 pairs of soles so far this summer. Many of them belong to local hikers, but there are also increasing numbers of out of province visitors. More people are also overnighing it on the trail than ever before. The ECTA has tent sites near the Spout and on Flamber Head Path between LaManche and Brigus South. Some hikers, however, choose their own places to pitch a tent for the night.

“I'm very pleased to say that it is being recognized by many (people) as the tourism icon for hiking in the province, attracting many out

of province visitors who come solely for hiking,” said Whittick. Just last week she encountered a group of 18 people from Ontario who were in the middle of a two week hiking trip along the Southern Shore. “We have an asset that I don't think we fully appreciate.”

But first timers should note that hiking the trail is not exactly a walk in the park. At least two sets of tourists went astray in the fog this past summer, sparking ground searches. Fortunately, nobody was hurt and everybody was found safely, though one pair of hikers did end up spending a night in the damp, foggy woods. “It's evitable that the more people who use it, the more human error you are going to see,” Whittick allowed. “You need to be prepared, you need to have maps, people need to know where you are going and you have to get back on time: All those important things. It is a wilderness hiking trail, it's not a walk around the pond in St. John's. There is intermittent cell phone coverage on the path, you can't always be in communication, so you have to be prepared with emergency blankets. Fog is always an issue and if you don't know where you are it's best to stop and wait until you can figure out where you are going. Hikers know the risks and if you are prepared, you should be fine.”