

# Hiking the Oak Island - Avonport Dyke

Enjoy spectacular views of the mud flats, the Minas Basin, and Boot Island.

BY PETER WALLACE

**T**he Oak Island-Avonport dyke at the eastern side of the Gaspereau River mouth is a great place for a moderate walk because there are spectacular views of the mud flats, the Minas Basin, and Boot Island. You can even see across the Gaspereau and Avon River estuaries to Grand Pré and the Kempt Shore (bring binoculars). Inland, behind the dyke, there is a small, wooded area, and lots of fields growing various crops. Best of all for spring, there are few bugs and few puddles along the way. No need to walk in rubber boots! The only public land is Oak Island Road, which bisects the fields (see map). The fields, their access roads, and areas up to the high-water mark, including the dyke, are all privately owned lands. Many local people walk their dogs on the dyke, so keep pets under control at all times and be especially careful to pack out all you bring in; the privilege of walking the dyke must not be put in jeopardy.

The mud flats look like they'd be a great place for a stroll in the drier months, or when frozen in the winter. They are not all mud and include areas with grasses. Don't be fooled, the mud layer can be quite

deep, and you can sink quickly (boot sucking). If you do wander out, note that the grass layer is separated from the mud by a small, eroded drop off, which shows the soil under the grass. This soil horizon is akin to peat, it is composed of partially decomposing organics and includes much more than mud. There are many small organisms crawling, hopping, climbing, and burrowing in the grasses and the mud. Watch the oak trees along the road and listen for very vocal ravens supervising their nests and going to and from the dyke. Take a side trip along Avon Station Road to view a very large oak with an eagle's nest—binoculars give the best view. You are almost guaranteed to see eagles soaring here, probably looking for fish or carrion, while also being dive bombed by the ravens.

## Directions

Drive along the Avonport Road, a paved road that becomes a narrow gravel lane at the end. Navigate this final section carefully, as there's not much room to manoeuvre. When parking, don't block the road to the dyke because the fields are actively maintained. It is an easy walk of 5.3 km, but it can be very windy as it



The view from the western part of the dyke across the Gaspereau River mouth toward the Grand Pré area and the old railway bridge.

sticks out into the Minas Basin. Dress well in layers as the only trail is on the top of the dyke. If you go counterclockwise, you return via Oak Island Road to the dyke to close the loop and then turn right to walk back to the start (see the adjacent map).

## Description

The first 3 km of the trail is along the top of the dyke that separates the fields from the mud flats and marsh grass. Parts of the dyke are lined with large quartzite boulders where you can take a few moments to watch and listen to the birds. Often the birds are on the mud flats and/or in the air. Look at the fields and try to determine what types of crops are being grown, after all this is a farming area. On occasion there are fisher people on the dykes. Have a chat with them to get the local lore.

The small, forested area is a typical Acadian hardwood forest of mixed ages and is best viewed along Oak Island Road. Most prominent are the many large red maples, oaks, aspen, the occasional birch and ash, and small conifers (fir and spruce). There are also many smaller bushes such as hawthorn, cherry, honeysuckle and alder, plus various ferns and herbaceous plants, too many to mention individually. Those who use the area regularly report that the occasional deer, among other mammals, frequent these woods and fields—even the occasional bear.

The Oak Island-Avonport dyke is a fantastic area to take children on an easy hike; it's flat with few pud-



Map of the Avonport dyke walk. SOURCE: GOOGLE.COM

dles, has great views since you are higher up than the surrounding fields and tidal flats, and has lots of potential for bird and mammal watching. Even though it's modified by human activity, it's a great place to observe and learn about the Minas Basin tides, which change rapidly before your eyes.

**Peter Wallace is a retired geologist and leads a weekly hiking group of retirees to areas of natural beauty and interest in the region. Peter contributed the map and photos.**



Left: Parking area at the end of the Avonport Road with many oak trees along the road. Right: Dyke trail with a cultivated field to the right.