

## Forest Fire Burns 100 Acres in Spider Bay

By Tom Denune

What's the best way to get help when a forest fire threatens? On Sunday, November 18<sup>th</sup>, an email from Northern's SMS Server caught my attention: "Ground Bush Fire/Heavy Smoke, Other Side of Cowper River, Georgian Bay". I wondered, "Could this be the small stream that empties into Spider Bay near our cottage?" I was home in Ohio, 600 miles away. Did I need to respond? Would anyone else see this notice? Little did I know, that I would spend the next three days in constant communication, texting, calling, emailing and Facebooking, to get help to control the biggest forest fire to hit the Township of the Archipelago and the Massasauga Provincial Park in recent history.

My first call was to Northern 911. Yes, they had received a notice of a small fire from a man named Mike and had notified the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR). I could have stopped my efforts there, but past experience with cottage fires nudged me to start making calls. I was concerned because in mid-November the marinas and most cottages were already closed for the winter and being a Sunday, MNR, Township of the Archipelago and Massasauga Park offices were all closed. On the advice of local cottager, Fred Schweitzer, I decided to place calls to year-round South Chanel residents, Brent Warga and Rick Zanussi. They would still have boats available. Luckily, Rick, answered his phone and had also seen the email notice of the fire. Being a Ward for the Archipelago, he was already making calls. As it turned out, Rick was pivotal in getting an amazing response to control the fire from MNR. His efforts, along with a coordinated response from all the cottagers in Spider Bay, became necessary to contain this quickly spreading forest fire.



Fire Approaching a Cottage by Jack Dancy



Fire Blazing Along the Shore by Jack Dancy

By mid-Sunday afternoon I had reached Mike Atkin, the Spider Bay neighbor, who had reported the fire across the stream from his cottage. By now, he was aware that the fire was much larger than he had originally reported. Other cottagers, John Dancy and his nineteen year old son, Jack, were also in Spider Bay and had gone over the check on Mike's safety. Soon, I was texting and calling to both parties and relaying the status of the fire to Rick Zanussi. Other local cottagers were starting to receive "real time" Facebook messages on the fire from Jack Dancy and they in turn went into action mode – trying to contact the Massasauga Park office, MNR, Reeves and anyone else they could think of. Reports from the scene indicated that gusting west winds were spreading the fire quickly along the whole inner north shore of Spider Bay toward the Bay's east end, extending about one kilometer in length.

Rick Zanussi was able to alert MNR into action even though their fire crews had been disbanded for the winter. By late Sunday afternoon, MNR volunteer office staff from Sudbury and Haliburton were being assembled to be flown in by helicopter, but it was going to be too dark to arrive yet that day. Help would have to wait until Monday. In the meantime, dramatic photos by Jack Dancy, of the night-time fires erupting along the water's edge and of fire approaching two cottages were texted to Rick and on to MNR and the Township of the Archipelago. These photos graphically rallied a concerted and immediate response.

Ongoing efforts by other cottagers were of great help too. Max Huber, who was now in Florida, figured out how to leave a voice mail for the Massasauga Provincial Park warden. Local cottager and Parry Sound resident, David Wright, contacted a buddy, who still had a boat in the water, and headed down the Bay early Monday morning. They spent the day back in the bush fighting the fire with shovels and rakes. John Dancy, who is a Toronto fire chief, along with his son, Jack, joined Mike Atkins in checking early Monday morning on the two cottages that were threatened. Alarming, the fire was within ten feet of these structures. Responding immediately with buckets and foot stomping, they succeeded in saving the two cottages from the approaching flames.

MNR helicopters started to circle the area and John and Jack Dancy marked a clear landing area within the fire zone. The volunteer MNR crews quickly worked on hot spots and returned to the burn site over a period of days. Brent Warga posted some amazing photos of MNR's efforts. An assessment of the damage still awaits. Fortunately, the fire went to tree tops in only a few areas and remained predominately a ground fire, burning small bushes and leaves. Sadly, tree trunks were scorched and wildlife habitat destroyed. The damage to the forest waits to be seen next spring.



**MNR Helicopter with Water Bucket by Brent Warga**



**Volunteer MNR Fire Crew by Brent Warga**

In retrospect, it takes the efforts of a whole community to fight a forest fire. It's important to know your neighbors and how to contact them. In Spider Bay's case, a local address directory and a Facebook Community page allowed cottagers to coordinate response efforts even from a distance. The Spider Bay community is extremely appreciative of Rick Zanussi's assistance and MNR's rapid response with this forest fire at a time when crews had to be assembled from volunteer office staff. The combined heroic response contained a forest fire that could have extended much farther into the Massasauga.

Also important is realizing that the Ministry of Natural Resources will only tackle forest fires, not cottage fires, and that the Township of the Archipelago at this time has no fire-fighting capacity. No matter what, for any fire, do call 911 to alert the Ministry of Natural Resources and other authorities. With a cottage fire, alerting neighbors for help and owning or sharing a community fire pump is our principle recourse. In Spider Bay, cottagers have saved three cottages from fire over the past 35 years in addition to the two saved this time. Our most important defense for emergencies remains having a strong sense of community and being ready to help our neighbors in times of crisis.



**Baby Rattlesnake in Burn Area by Mike Atkins**