

WHEELS



Unforgettable

Of Ontario's 16,000 kilometres of roads, which are the most memorable, for reasons both good and bad? Wheels editor **Mark Richardson** drove far and wide to compile this top 10 list.



THE BUSIEST ROAD

Hwy. 401 at its intersection with Hwy. 400 is not only the busiest road in the province, it's the most heavily travelled in all of North America. Its average annual daily traffic volume is 432,000 vehicles — and that was in 2006, the latest full year for which figures are available. In the spring of 2009, a peak of about 455,000 vehicles per day was counted there.



THE OLDEST ROAD

County Rd. 64 at Carrying Place is believed to be Ontario's very first road, used for thousands of years by natives and cutting across the top of the Quinte Peninsula into Presqu'île Bay. Carrying Place is named after the portage that took place there, linking Kingston with the communities to the west across the north shore of the lake, and the road is also known as Kente Portage.

According to the book *Gunshot and Gleanings of Historical Carrying Place, Bay of Quinte*, produced by the 7th Town Historical Society: "Early settlers in Upper Canada found a wilderness country with no roads. Travel was by water or foot, following existing Indian paths. Journeys from Kingston to York were often made on foot along the lakeshore. Away from the waterways, travel was even more difficult.

"In 1793, an act was passed that required each settler to clear a road across his lot. The Upper Canada Government contracted Asa Danforth, an American, in 1798, to build a road from York to Kingston. He was to blaze a roadway 22 feet wide along the front of Lake Ontario at a price of \$90 per mile. His road entered Prince Edward County at the Carrying Place and then followed the approximate route of Highway 33... and on to Kingston.

"It took Asa Danforth three years to complete the project, named the Danforth Road after the builder."

The road was originally just a muddy track, but was improved when later roads began to be gravelled in the early 1800s.

Toronto can claim the first paved road, though: Lakeshore Road, from Toronto to Hamilton, was paved in 1917.



THE MOST TECHNICALLY ADVANCED ROAD

The stretch of Hwy. 401 just east of Woodstock is made of "perpetual pavement" and is being tested for its durability, to see if it really is longer-lasting. You can't see much difference, though.

The entrance drive to the Waterloo dump — the regional waste management facility — is a test bed for the researchers of the Centre for Pavement and Transportation Technology. Short stretches are made from different materials to allow comparison under identical conditions, and under heavy loads from the garbage trucks.

There's conventional concrete and then three other sections of concrete that include different proportions of recycled curbing and sidewalk. There are four sections of interlocking pavement. There are five asphalt mixes. And there's even a stretch that includes recycled shingles.

Shingles are "very-high-quality material, and they've already been environmentally aged," says the centre's Susan Tighe, who holds the Canadian Research Chair for Sustainable Pavement and Infrastructure Management. "About 3 per cent of the mix is shingles, plus other recycled asphalt materials that would otherwise just be discarded as garbage."

THE LONGEST ROAD

Yonge St. has long been famous as the Longest Street In The World, stretching 1,896 km from its base at Lake Ontario (and the *Toronto Star* newsroom at One Yonge) to Rainy River in the far northwest corner of the province. That's about the distance from San Diego to Seattle. It's named after Sir George Yonge, the former British Secretary of War, and was laid over an Algonquin pathway in 1796 to provide a retreat to the Great Lakes if the U.S. attacked.

Its title was recognized by the *Guinness Book of Records*, but was lost in 1999 after stretches of the road in the Barrie area were redesignated and portions of Yonge Street officially disappeared from Hwy. 11. But here at One Yonge, we don't care. We still think of it as the longest.



THE MOST TEMPORARY ROAD

Ontario's 3,000-km winter road system, which usually opens in January and runs until the end of March, is built from thick ice over the frozen rivers and lakes of the far North. It's a once-a-year supply route for the mines and camps of the area, as well as 31 otherwise-isolated native communities. Anyone can drive on an ice road, although most traffic is heavy supply trucks. The province pays for half the construction and maintenance, the native communities pay the rest.



THE MOST ISOLATED ROAD

Hwy. 599 at Pickle Lake, 291 km north of its intersection with the Trans-Canada Highway at Ignace, must be the road that's farthest from any other settlement while still permanently connected to the rest of the province. The road was opened in 1955 as a supply road to the gold mines, and was linked to the TCH in 1963.

North of town, the road continues as a gravel highway for another 190 km, intended as a link to the winter roads system. It's in winter that the highway is busiest, with tanker and transport trucks, and the general store never closes.

It's also the opportunity for people who live in the interior to make a rare visit to the town, wrote the *Star's* Bill Taylor when he visited in 2005.

"It's not unusual to have someone come in at 3 a.m. who's been driving from who-knows-where out there for 14 or 15 hours and has another four or five to go," said the store's Lynda Schmeichel. "They need gas, sandwiches, something to drink.



ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Every year, the Canadian Automobile Association asks its members to vote for their worst road. The current leader is Finch, between Yonge and Leslie. It's "like a roller-coaster ride, or bumper-car ride," says one voter.

You can't not be available."

"It's insane," said someone pumping gas at the Frontier mini-mart on the edge of town. "They just keep coming and coming."



THE FASTEST ROAD

There's no record of the fastest speed ever ticketed by police on an Ontario highway, although reckless drivers have been caught and prosecuted for more than 200 km/h on many occasions. One of the better-documented cases was that of road racer Stephane Proulx, remembered here by *Wheels'* columnist Norris McDonald:

In the early evening of July 12, 1988, on the 401 near Kingston, OPP Const. Joseph Thomas Albrecht clocked Proulx's motorcycle travelling at or above 200 km/h. He activated his lights and siren and followed Proulx for about 25 km before getting him to pull over.

Albrecht asked Proulx why he hadn't stopped sooner.

"I didn't know you were behind me," the race driver replied. "When you're doing 220, you don't look to the rear."

On July 26, Proulx appeared in provincial court in Kingston before Judge P.H. Megginson, a no-nonsense guy. The prosecutor was another no-nonsense guy. Proulx did not have a lawyer — or a chance. Some 15 minutes later, Megginson threw Proulx in jail for 21 days. When Proulx protested, Megginson said: "You committed a dangerous criminal offence, sir. I have sentenced you — that's it."

Seven months later, Proulx was back in court in Kingston. This was not an appeal of the first sentence; it was a whole new trial.

The judge this time was J.P. Coulson who, judging by the transcript, had an idea who he was dealing with. Proulx was represented by a lawyer from Belleville who happened to be a racing fan. The prosecutor was a no-nonsense guy like McKenna — but not quite.

Thirty minutes later, Coulson dismissed the charge, urging the young accused to slow down on the public highways.

"We would be very proud to have you represent us and do well in international racing... We want you to live long enough to do it."

Off public highways, the highest speeds in Ontario are reached on

drag strips, such as at Toronto Motorsports Park near Cayuga.

The fastest speed ever achieved there was 509 km/h, set by the jet car "Braveheart" in May 2000, covering the quarter-mile in 5.05 seconds.

There was a quicker pass, though, back before rocket cars were banned from racing in 1984. The track record at Cayuga is 4.57 seconds, set by Larry Flickenger in his rocket car "Natural High" in September 1981. It only reached 390 km/h, but then, it shut down at just half the length of the track and coasted the rest of the way. No rocket car has ever made a full quarter-mile pass under power at any drag-strip — they're just too fast.

THE WORST ROAD

Every year, the Canadian Automobile Association asks its members to vote for the worst piece of road in the province. The current front-runner is Finch Ave., between Yonge and Leslie Sts.

"The drive on Finch Ave. is like a roller-coaster ride, or bumper-car ride," says one voter. It is "full of patches, potholes, utility cracks and is bone-shaking even at 20 km/h," says another. And a third: "Drivers are tired of repairing their cars and replacing their tires."

Voting for this year's winner/loser is still open (at caasco.com/worstroads or facebook.com/worstroads) until the end of September.



THE MOST GHASTLY ROAD

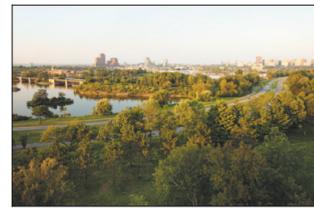
There's no record kept of the worst road accident in Ontario history, or the biggest pileup, but probably the most horrific road incident in recent memory took place Sept. 3, 1999, on Hwy. 401 at the Manning Rd. exit, just east of Windsor.

Unexpected pockets of thick fog dropped onto the highway at 8 a.m. and cars were driven blindly into them. Eighty-seven vehicles slammed into each other in three separate locations over a stretch of two kilometres: eight people were killed, 45 taken to hospital and many more injured. One of the vehicles was a tanker carrying more than 20,000 litres of diesel fuel; thirty vehicles were fused together in the "hot zone."

One of the dead was a teenage girl, trapped in the wreckage near her

brother and father, already dead. "I remember feeling very guilty that I survived and she didn't," passenger Ute Lawrence told the *Star* last year. "Here we are, a middle-aged couple, and here's a little 14-year-old girl... she was engulfed in flames, screaming 'I'm only 14.' Lawrence was later diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and went on to write a book about her experience, called *The Power Of Trauma*.

That stretch of the 401 has since been widened to six lanes. OPP officers can alert Environment Canada directly about the road conditions, where fog still sometimes descends with little warning.



THE MOST BEAUTIFUL ROAD

There's nothing official, but my vote goes to the Ottawa River Parkway just west of the capital. The four-lane road is maintained by the federal government and patrolled by the RCMP. It's smooth and curvy and lined with fresh-mown grass, with a cycle path alongside the shore of the Ottawa River. Across the water, the Gatineau hills rise low on the north horizon, and if you drive to the east, the Parliament Buildings begin to show themselves above the trees, offering a gentle surge of national pride. When you drive to the west, you're going home.

A friend of mine in Ottawa, Mark Berman, commutes along this route each day: "Riding home on the bus after a long day at work, I look around at the other passengers on the bus and I see that as the river comes into view, people smile and the stresses of the day start to melt away. When the sun's setting, it glints in the river and you get these amazing colours coming across the river. You can't help but think about how beautiful it is."

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More online

Mark Richardson offers his personal five most memorable Ontario roads at wheels.ca. Watch the in-car video of his favourite road and see if you can identify it. Look for it now on his blog.

Wheels.ca