Celtic Roots Festival returns to Goderich





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Plenty of sunshine, music and community spirit filled Lions Harbour Park as the Goderich Celtic Roots Festival returned Aug. 8-10, blending world-class performances, local volunteer dedication and cultural celebration. *(Scott Stephenson photos)*

By Scott Stephenson
The Citizen

The sun may have been blazing at the 2025 edition of the Goderich Celtic Roots Festival (GCRF) this past weekend, but the hot, hot heat just made the breeze feel even more heavenly for festival-goers. There are certainly many ingredients that come together to create the atmospheric gumbo of the GCRF every year, but having a nice breeze goes a long way.

The overall setting is also a big part of the overall experience. This long-running folk festival feels perfectly at home in Lions Harbour Park - a space that embodies so much of what makes Goderich special - it's a quiet space, populated by verdant trees, with a great view of Huron County's famous summer sunsets. The park is also just a few steps to the lake and not much further to the historic downtown, where festival performers hold evening concerts in the days leading up to the big event.

Over the years, GCRF organizers have fine-tuned the fest's flow to fit into its natural surroundings. The artisan vendor tents, the international food court, the Celtic Cross pop-up pub, and, of course, the five performance stages, are all seamlessly integrated into the natural landscape of the space - there's a place for everything, and everything in its place.

But beyond the location, it's the consummate sense of community that truly sets the GCRF apart. Many performers are billeted with local volunteers and fans, which creates strong personal ties between visiting artists and the local community. During the festival itself, things run smoothly thanks to the camaraderie of the volunteer crews, many of whom have been donating their time and talent to the GCRF for years.

Then there's the Celtic College, which takes place in the week leading up to the festival. It offers students the chance to spend a week learning traditional music and other Celtic arts from world-class talents. As it does every year, the 2025 college came to a head on Friday afternoon with a showcase concert, where students took the stage to share the skills they had honed throughout the week, officially kicking off the festival in style.

After all the lively student tunes, opening ceremonies began with a procession to the main stage led by bagpiper Matt Hoy. Visitors were welcomed by Kimberley Payne of the Goderich Celtic Folk Society, who thanked everybody for coming together to make the festival happen, and asked that everybody's weekend in the park include a thoughtful reflection on the real meaning of the land acknowledgements that have quickly become a proscribed part of public gatherings. "I think that sometimes we go through land acknowledgements on a piece of paper, and it's just rote," she told the crowd. "But what I want you to

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A family that fiddles together

Natalie MacMaster (far left) and Donnell Leahy (far right) join forces with their seven children for a memorable one-night-only appearance at the Goderich Celtic Roots Festival in Goderich on August 9. *(Scott Stephenson photos)*

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Community spirit shines on sunny weekend

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understand, appreciate, and bring to the space this weekend is your belief and your understanding of the reconciliation process. So we acknowledge that the land, we stand on today is a traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Neutral Peoples, and is connected to the Dish with One Spoon Wampum, under which multiple nations agreed to care for the land and its resources by this great lake and the others in peace." Payne went on to advocate for the honouring of government treaties, and the renewal of relationships with Canada's First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples through reconciliation, community service, and respect.

Goderich Mayor Trevor Bazinet also spoke at the ceremony. "Amazing to see so many people here," he remarked. "When I look around, one word comes to my mind, and that's community, and when we talk about community, we talk about volunteers. The town of Goderich is very lucky to have volunteers that put on a festival of this nature. It's a world-renowned festival that has people coming from everywhere."

He asked festival-goers to continue supporting nearby businesses that have seen a dip in foot traffic since the rebuilding of Courthouse Square began earlier this year. "If you have the opportunity while you're enjoying the festival, please go to our downtown," he urged them. "All the businesses are open, their front doors are open, and they would love to see every single one of you there to offer a little bit of support or words of encouragement through our two-year project." Bazinet also thanked the crowd for their donations in support of the 26 Goderich residents who have been unhoused following the recent apartment building fire on Nelson Street.

Before this year's awards were handed out, GCRF Artistic Director and General Manager Cheryl Prashkar offered some insight on how the festival's programming comes together every year. "I'm honoured to represent this organization," she said. "It's an incredible opportunity - I get to meet people from around the world. I also go to a lot of music conferences, and musicians from around the world always want to come here. People ask me 'how do you decide who gets to come here?' But they all just come to us - I never, ever have to look for anybody, because they all just come to us. I know you guys don't believe that, but it's the truth."

This year's winner of the Young Tradition Award is Peterborough fiddler Alanna Jenish, and the Tradition Bearer Award went to festival favourite Benoit Bourque. The Robinson Founders' Scholarship went to Audrey Kreuger of Clinton, who will be studying music at Wilfrid Laurier University next month.

A delegate from the Consulate General of Ireland's Toronto team, Vice Consul General Cahal Sweeney, made it to Goderich just in time to deliver his remarks at the ceremony. "I'm delighted to be welcomed, and to be representing the Consulate General of Ireland here in Goderich. I left Toronto way too late, and Toronto has no traffic in the world, so I got here about five minutes ago," he said breathlessly. "Events like these are so important for remembering our heritage… I think part of the value of festivals like these is that they help us reflect - not just on the past, but on what's happening now, and where we're going. Canada and Ireland are firm, like-minded partners."

Sweeney went on to regale the crowd with tales of the undeniable impact that Irish immigrants have had on Canada's national identity, from the Calgary Stampede to the Canadian flag. "Irish people have distinguished themselves in Canada for generations - we've been moving to this country for three centuries, and we've left an incredible impression on it," he pointed out. "We worked across the country, and made this country great."

Sweeney also wanted to remind Goderich of the place that Canada has held in the hearts of Irish immigrants. "Canada has been a sanctuary for Ireland. In the terrible summer of 1847, 'Black '47', in the midst of the Great Famine, 40,000 people arrived in Toronto, which had only about 20,000 residents at the time. We were sick, starving, dead, or all three. And the people of Toronto, rather than rejecting us, took us in," he told the growing crowd. "That's an incredible legacy Canada has always had - it's a defining feature of the Canada-Ireland relationship, and it's something we're never going to forget. When we needed it, Canada was there for us. And if Canada ever needs us, Ireland is here for you." This promise was met with cheers and thunderous applause.

Of course, it wouldn't be a Celtic music festival without Celtic music, and from the first notes of featured local artists The Maitland Hollar on Friday to the MacMaster Leahy family's stellar Saturday showcase to the closing cacophony of Benoit Bourque's annual Celtic Extravaganza on Sunday night, the 2025 auditory offerings were nothing short of phenomenal. The members of returning acts like Fiárock rocked the house consistently throughout the weekend, and new acts like this year's Robinson Emerging Artist winners, Arthur Coates and Kerran Cotterell, certainly expanded their fanbase during their time in Goderich.

But there was one musical moment that best encapsulated an underlying rhythm that's been a persistent part of 2025 - not just within the comfortable confines of Lions Harbour Park, but all over the country. It came when folk legends Friends of Fiddler's Green launched into a rousing rendition of "The Hand-Loom Weaver's Lament" that brought the crowd to their feet. The song started off firmly rooted in the anti-industrial sentiment of 1820's Lancashire before the Toronto-based band made a masterful detour into today with pointed new lyrics that switched out the worn-out old tyrants of England for the modern American version.

Over the first half of the year, many Canadians have rediscovered the value of national pride - enough so that our collectively-rekindled spirit has begun to carry over into events like the GCRF - even artist Linda Wiebe's official choice for the festival's annual animal totem, the Canada goose, seems to have its elbows up. But Goderich's annual celebration in Lions Harbour Park isn't just a time to be proud of Celtic culture, it's a reminder of the qualities that have made Celtic culture endure for centuries - a respectful relationship with nature and a belief that ours is a magical world. It's about being willing to help a neighbour, having faith in the kindness of strangers, and, whenever possible, choosing singing over fighting, instruments over weapons, and music over noise.





Pictured on left, North Huron Publishing editor Shawn Loughlin presents Dan Fritz his 2024 Citizen of the Year award .

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