

# Publishers' Diary: Zipping the Thunderbird

By Gloria Hildebrandt  
Photos by Mike Davis

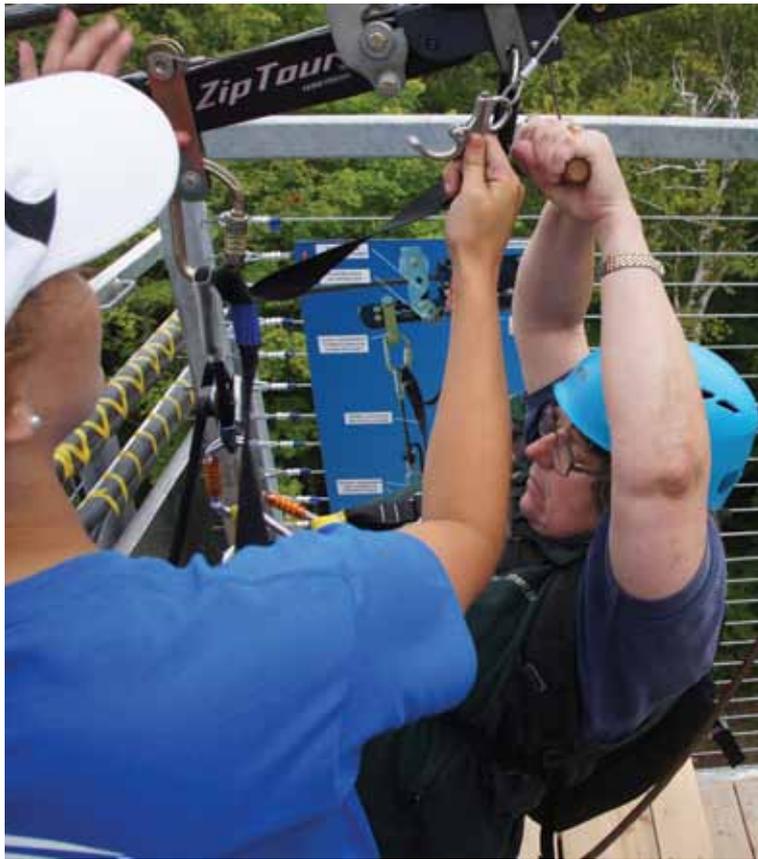
Up to this point, I knew I could always back out. But now that I'm clipped to the zip line, the gate in front of me is being lowered and I'm off, soaring above the trees, the whole wide world open all around me, my destination a tiny, unknown speck in the distance. I am very high, all alone, and I am riding down from the Escarpment on the Thunderbird. I am terrified.



▲ You expect me to go on that? The start of the Thunderbird.

◀ Look up...way up. The 50-foot staircase to the Twin Zip Line platform.





▲ No turning back. Being hooked to the zip line.

Gloria Hildebrandt on a lonely ride on the Thunderbird Twin Zip Line. ▼



In August Mike and I were invited to a media day to experience the newest attraction at Scenic Caves Nature Adventures near Collingwood. The Thunderbird Twin Zip Line starts high on the Escarpment and extends for almost half a mile, dropping down about 300 feet. It is the longest zip line in southern Ontario, and the longest twin zip line in Ontario. It is also the only zip line in Ontario that lets you control your speed. Believe me, I was working the speed control.

Mike was not able to ride the twin zip line beside me because he is too big. It would be great if this restriction could be changed, because there are plenty of people like Mike who are big, athletic, strong, fit and capable of enjoying it. As a population, we are growing, and there is a market among the heavier end of the spectrum. Mike has plenty of experience rappelling, rock climbing and caving, and would be completely at home on the Thunderbird.

It's a great name for this ride. Ojibwa people who lived here centuries ago referred to Thunderbirds and even a Thunderbird's nest on Blue Mountain. On this ride, you fly like a bird and streak like lightning.

The first thing you have to do is get weighed to make sure that you're not over the weight maximum of 260 pounds. Mercifully, instead of giving your exact weight, the scale shows whether you're in the acceptable range or in the red and can't ride. There is a weight minimum, too, of 50 pounds. Riders must also be between four feet and 6'10" tall. Next, you get suited up with a helmet, harness around the hips and legs and a heavy backpack of equipment to attach you to the zip line.



**The short, comfortable training zip line where you learn to control your speed. ▶**

So far, no problem. I could get geared up and decide not to go further. I even agreed not to do the training run because it was short and not far off the the ground, perfectly safe.

Then I saw the spiral staircase to the zip line platform. 50 feet tall. On top of the edge of the Escarpment. But at least I could climb the stairs and see the view from there. I went up the sturdy steel stairs to the platform.

Are. You. Kidding. Me?? People are taking off from this thing? You don't really expect me to go from here, do you? Yet staff were so calm and matter-of-fact that I let myself



▲ Hildebrandt, having survived, talks to Scenic Caves Nature Adventures chairman Rob Thorburn.

be taken through the process of preparing to zip the line.

I think I stopped thinking. I just did what they told me to. I didn't ever make a conscious decision to ride the Thunderbird. I just didn't refuse. And with everyone assuming I was doing it, I was carried by everyone else's confidence.

So I was hooked up to the zip line, just as I had on

the training line. But there was no turning back. They secured me to the line and then they lowered the gate and I was off.

I couldn't enjoy the view because at first I had my eyes shut and then I was watching the trees ahead of me, trying to calculate whether I was going to hit them. The end point gradually came into view. I could see two helpers



on the platform encouraging me to stop braking and to come right to where they were. After the two young men disconnected me from the line and I was standing on my wobbly legs, I startled them by flinging an arm around them, thanking them and crying “I’m so glad to be alive!” A man standing on the platform said “You’re very brave,” as I staggered past him, dazed.

Mike was driven down to the end point to meet me, and when I had caught my breath, he told me that the man on the platform was Rob Thorburn, chairman of Scenic Caves. Back I went to meet him.

Thorburn told me that in designing a new attraction, they make sure it fits within their mandate of appreciating caves, providing great views and excitement, or being surrounded by nature.

“We’re excited to be offering a unique shared zip line experience,” he stated. “Experienced zip liners will appreciate the majestic surroundings and beauty of the ride, and first-timers will love the ease in which they can control a thrilling experience.”

As a first-time zip liner, I didn’t exactly love the ride, but because I survived without injury, I’d like to try it again. This time I’ll appreciate the view. **NEV**

