

Hitchhiking robot charms its way across Canada

August 15 2014, by Charmaine Noronha



This undated photo made available by Ryerson University in Toronto on Thursday, Aug. 14, 2014 shows hitchBOT in a car. The talking robot that's been hitchhiking rides from strangers to travel from Canada's east to west coast is nearing the end of its journey. Its final destination is Victoria, British Columbia, Canada which its creators expect it to reach by Aug. 17, 2014. (AP Photo/Ryerson University)

He has dipped his boots in Lake Superior, crashed a wedding and attended an Aboriginal powwow. A talking, bucket-bodied robot has enthralled Canadians since it departed from Halifax last month on a hitchhiking journey to the Pacific coast.

HitchBOT, created by team of Ontario-based communication researchers studying the relationship between people and technology, will reach its final destination Sunday in Victoria, British Columbia, where it will receive a traditional aboriginal canoe greeting at Victoria Harbor.

"What we wanted to do is situate robotics and artificial technologies into unlikely scenarios and push the limits of what it's capable of," said David Smith, the [robot](#)'s co-creator, who teaches at Ontario's McMaster University. "It's challenging but it can also be highly engaging and entertaining as hitchBOT has proven."

The robot looks like it was made out of components scavenged from a yard sale—a bucket, pool noodles, cake saver, garden gloves and yellow Wellington boots—but it has a sense of direction and can even ask and answer questions. His conversation skills might be a bit stilted, but hitchBOT has managed to charm its way across 3,700 miles (6,000 kilometers) since it began its journey in Nova Scotia on July 26.

Smith said hitchBOT has a built-in GPS system and is programmed with mobile technology similar to a smartphone, with [speech recognition software](#) that works in conjunction with language modelling. The robot links questions with answers by looking for certain key words and is programmed to scour Wikipedia to spit out regionally relevant facts.

The team also programmed hitchBOT to track its adventures online and

take pictures to post on Twitter and Instagram.



This undated photo made available by Ryerson University in Toronto on Thursday, Aug. 14, 2014 shows hitchBOT at home with its research team in Port Credit, Ontario, Canada. The talking robot that's been hitchhiking rides from strangers to travel from Canada's east to west coast is nearing the end of its journey. Its final destination is Victoria, British Columbia, Canada which its creators expect it to reach by Aug. 17, 2014. (AP Photo/Ryerson University)

It didn't take long for HitchBOT to become a social media sensation and, truth be told, many of the people who have offered him a ride already knew about him before encountering the bizarre contraption. Smith said its Instagram following was approaching 11,000 people, its Facebook account had garnered more than 41,000 "likes" and it has nearly 32,000 Twitter followers.

"Social and traditional media have really ensured that HitchBOT is well-known," Smith said. "Some (drivers) have tried to search its location. And in most cases, hitchBOT has had multiple offers."

Along the way, hitchBOT was invited to a pow-wow with the Wikwemikong First Nation group, where the robot was dubbed Biiabkookwe, according to its Twitter feed. It later hitched a ride with Belgian tourists.

Currently, Smith said HitchBOT is hanging out with the British Columbia rock band The Wild, which is taking it to its next performance. When it reaches Victoria this weekend, Steve Sxwithul'txw, an aboriginal broadcast producer, plans to pick it up. He said he has arranged a canoe welcome, high tea at the Empress Hotel and ferry ride to Seattle.

Smith said his team monitors hitchBOT via GPS and social media but drivers have been in control of where they take it and leave it. Smith said the team had replacement robots to continue the journey in case anything happened to hitchBOT, but so far, the robot has not been mistreated.

The child-sized robot is able to stand, making it visible to drivers via a retractable tripod. It has a car seat attached to its torso so drivers can strap it into their cars using seatbelts.

The robot, which comes equipped with solar panels on its torso, communicates to people that it can be recharged by plugging it into car cigarette lighters or regular outlets.

Matthew Berry, of Alberta, said some friends picked up the robot while heading to a wedding in Golden, B.C. They picked it up on the border between Alberta and Calgary, where its previous driver was looking to

offload it.

"It was good fun; we took it out onto the dance floor to, well, do the real robot," Berry said. "It was funny because it was a very meticulously planned wedding so I wasn't sure how the bride would react, but she loved it!"

Berry said while the couple was giving their speech, the bride thanked the couple's friends for attending, and the robot interrupted, saying, "I like to make friends."

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