

# Higher profile for mystery park

## Little known Harper Park is city’s most significant woodland and wetland

It is unfortunate that the most ecologically-important natural area in the City of Peterborough is hardly known to the general public. This week, I hope to remedy that situation. Welcome to Harper Park – by far the largest and most significant area of natural woodland and wetland anywhere in Peterborough.



DREW  
MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Harper Park is a 60 hectare (150 acre) “natural environment park” located in the southwest corner of the city. Roughly speaking, it is bordered by Westview Village condominiums and Holy Cross high school to the north, Harper Rd. to the east, Bridlewood Park to the west (itself, located along Ramblewood Dr., near Spillsbury Dr.) and Fleming Dr. to the south. The park is zoned as a protected natural area in order to conserve the sensitive ecology of this complex of woodlands and locally significant wetland.

Several tributaries of Harper Creek flow through the park, as well as the surrounding area. Harper Creek originates in Stenson Park, just north of Stenson Blvd. One tributary of the creek can be seen flowing adjacent to the CPR rail-line on the east side of Harper Rd. Another flows through a ditch along the north side of Rye St. Both are cold water streams and eventually discharge into Byersville Creek, which in turn empties into the Otonabee River.

### LARGE WETLAND AREA

The upland areas of the park, located mostly in the northern section, are dominated by mature white cedar, sugar maple, red pine and white spruce. At least half the park, however, is wetland. These wet meadows, forested swamp and marsh provide habitat to many locally unique species of plants and animals. The wetland is hydrologically significant because it contains numerous areas of groundwater seepage and springs throughout the park. These springs provide cold water spawning and nursery habitat for fish such as brook trout. According to the Harper Creek Wetland Evaluation prepared by Snider’s Ecological Services for the Ministry of Natural Resources in 2009, other significant features of the wetland include flood attenuation, water quality improvement, groundwater recharge and winter cover for wildlife such as deer. The report also underlines the wetland’s significance in terms of its proximity to human settlement and the rarity of this wetland type within the surrounding landscape.

The plant diversity in the wetland is no less than amazing. Harper Park contains the greatest number of native plant species of any park in Peterborough. According to the Snider study, at least 122 plant species can be found in the wetland alone. These include trees and shrubs such as tamarack, white spruce, white cedar, white birch, yellow birch, trembling aspen, balsam poplar, black ash, red maple and even mountain maple. There are no less than four species of sedge, six ferns, five golden-rods, four asters, four dogwoods and five willows. Other notable species – many of which have a northern affinity –



KIM ZIPPEL Special to The Examiner

One of the tributaries of Harper Creek running through a treed swamp in Harper Park.



SHEA BROWN Special to The Examiner

An aerial view of the springs that emerge to the north-east of Harper Park, just outside the park proper, and provide a cold-water feed to the north tributary of Harper Creek.

include mitrewort, goldthread, showy ladyslipper, great lobelia, Canada mayflower and twinflower. Given the amount of development around Harper Park, it is surprising that there has been very little disturbance within the wetland itself. It should be emphasized, however, that the wetland is very sensitive and disturbances will impact negatively on both the wetland and on the flora and fauna of surrounding areas.

### FLORA AND FAUNA

Harper Park is home to a wide variety of breeding birds and mammals that are seldom associated with urban areas. Among the breeding birds of note, you can find ruffed grouse, sharp-shinned hawk, great horned owl, pileated woodpecker, northern waterthrush, Nashville warbler, ovenbird and purple finch. Mammals commonly seen in and around the park include white-tailed deer (often observed at the edge of the ponds behind the Westview Village condominiums), muskrat, beaver and red fox. Snowshoe hares and the woodland jumping mouse have also been reported. What is most interesting, however, is that the numerous cold water springs that flow into Harper Creek support an ancient population of brook trout.

It is not surprising that few people know of Harper Park. There are no official trails within the Park, nor is parking available. However, with a little effort, you can enter the area. One way is to park on Ramblewood Dr. (located to the east of Spillsbury Dr.) and enter Harper Park through Bridlewood Park. The terrain is a bit rough - this is semi-wilderness - and the ground becomes wetter as you progress eastward. Unfortunately, the park has been somewhat neglected and there are hazards including old and new fencing, garbage, and erosion scars. It can also be difficult to determine if you are on private or public property. There is also an environmental study in progress to the south of the park, but you can avoid this area by staying to the north side of Harper Creek.

### SURROUNDING LANDS

Some of the lands surrounding Harper Park are also of special significance. One particularly important block is located adjacent to the commercial properties with frontage on Lansdowne St. (e.g., Trans-Canada Nissan) and directly west of where Rye St. becomes Harper Rd. This area is zoned as major open space and, unfortunately, is not parkland. It is dominated by cedar and

birch but also contains many areas of cold groundwater seeps and springs, channels of flowing water, patches of sedges and watercress and delicate ferns and mosses. It is not an area that can sustain pedestrian traffic, however, and should be avoided.

### HOME TO TROUT

The cold water that flows out of this area contributes to the northern tributary of Harper’s Creek which runs along a ditch parallel to the north side of Rye St. Surprisingly enough, brook trout can still be seen in this tributary. A group of us watched a couple of dozen beautifully marked trout spawning here in early November. A Harper Park Opportunities and Constraints Report done by ORCA in 2004 identified this northern tributary as having been significantly altered and therefore in need of naturalization, in order to replace the streamside vegetation that has been removed. These plantings would provide shade to maintain cold water temperatures and also provide a buffer to filter contaminants from road and lawn run-off.

Harper Park and the surrounding area are included on the map that was just released by the Kawartha’s Naturally Connected (KNC) process. The

City of Peterborough was one of the many partners taking part in the KNC. Produced by the MNR, the map is the result of extensive consultation, data compilation and modelling. It shows a connected network of natural areas within the Kawarthas with the objective of facilitating more sustainable land use planning. Harper Park and the surrounding open space have been selected by the model for inclusion within the network. This lends further credence to the significance of the park and adjacent woodlands, elevating them from a locally, to a regionally significant natural heritage corridor.

### CONCERNS

Development adjacent to Harper Park is of concern to many people. A proposed road alignment adjacent to the park will involve a new rail crossing of Harper Creek. New light standards, gutters, and planned sidewalks all have the potential to impact negatively on the creek and its trout population. For example, stormwater runoff may create thermal and chemical pollution, especially during winter sanding and salting activities. Plans for a Lowe’s big box store and a Hilton hotel are also of concern. It is therefore of outmost importance that development proceeds slowly and cautiously, with state-of-the-art mitigation measures in place to minimize negative environmental impact.

The Harper Park Stewardship Initiative (HPSI) is a community-driven stream stewardship group whose focus is the protection and restoration of Harper Park’s forested uplands, wetlands and the coldwater stream, and its tributaries known as Harper Creek. The group began in the fall of 2011. Anyone interested in learning more about the Park or to get involved with the group can contact the HPSI at harperpark-stewards@gmail.com

### WISH LIST

It is essential that the public pay attention to what is happening in and around Harper Park, especially in light of the development plans. Personally, I would like to see the city erect signs along Rye St., Harper Rd. and at Bridlewood Park that identify both Harper Creek and Harper Park proper. It would also be wonderful to see interpretive signage highlighting some of the flora, fauna and ecology of the area. Walking trails are also badly needed. These could be routed through suitable upland areas of the Park and possibly along the edge of some of the wetland areas. Boardwalks would probably be required in a number of areas. A viewing tower looking out over the wetland would also be a great addition.

The city made an excellent decision when it purchased the lands in and around Harper Park in order to preserve much of the area as a locally significant wetland, coldwater stream and natural area within the city’s boundaries. We have to assure, however, that careful planning and management is carried out, especially as development moves forward. At the same time, the city should begin to make at least some sections of the park safely accessible to the public for passive recreation.

*Drew Monkman is a retired Peterborough teacher and author of Nature’s Year: Changing Seasons in Central and Eastern Ontario. He can be reached at dmonkman1@cogeco.ca. Visit his website and see past columns at www.drew-monkman.com*