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LIVING

Peek inside city's natural park

'BioBlitz' of Harper Park catalogued unseen world of plants, animals and birds

We scanned the treetops with binoculars, cupped our ears to amplify distant calls, turned over rocks for hidden creatures and knelt down to inspect tiny plants, all the while recording every species we found. In other words, we "BioBlitzed." On June 4, eight local naturalists took part in a 12-hour marathon to catalogue as many plant and animal species as possible in Peterborough's Harper Park. Although not all of the numbers are in yet, about 250 species were tallied on this cool, June day.



DREW MONKMAN

OUR CHANGING SEASONS

The event – known as a BioBlitz – was organized by the Harper Park Stewardship Initiative and the Peterborough Field Naturalists. We wanted to update the lists of the area's flora and fauna as well as raise awareness of just how species-rich this little known park actually is. Public awareness is especially important in light of all the development happening in the area. So far, the species tally for the day includes 37 birds, seven dragonflies and damselflies, seven butterflies, five mammals, two amphibians, two reptiles, two fish and 180 plant species. This adds up to a grand total of almost 250 species. There will be many more names to add to the list in future inventories, as well, since we haven't yet been able to cover all sections of the park nor have we covered all of the seasons.

Harper Park is a 60 hectare (150 acre), municipally-owned protected natural area 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.

IMPRESSIVE DIVERSITY

"I was impressed by the size of the park area and the diversity of habitats present there, including marshes, conifer swamps, shrub swamps, conifer forest, mixed forest and cultural meadows," said Mike McMurtry, Natural Areas Ecologist with the Natural Heritage Information Centre and one of the participants. "However, given the biodiversity of the Harper Park area and the sensitivity of the headwater wetlands there, it will take careful planning to protect these features from proposed future development and to restore the portions of the streams outside the park that have already become degraded."

Doing a BioBlitz is all about being in the right place at the right time. Not wanting to miss the species-rich dawn bird chorus, four of us arrived at the park at 5:30 a.m. and immediately put our listening skills to work. We were fortunate to have 14-year-old Luke Berg with us. Luke is a very keen and talented naturalist, and his young ears and excellent identification skills were very useful in tallying a number of species. Later in the day, Luke also proved very adept at



DREW MONKMAN photo

Kim Zippel, chair of the Harper Park Stewardship Initiative, and 14-year-old Luke Berg were part of the BioBlitz team.

finding snakes (e.g., five Red-bellied Snakes!) that had taken refuge under rocks. Harper Park offers excellent reptile and amphibian habitat, including a probable snake hibernaculum (overwintering site).

COMMON TO THREATENED

Some of the more noteworthy birds that were pouring out their songs on this June morning included Indigo Bunting, Alder Flycatcher, Great Crested Flycatcher, Eastern Wood-Pewee and Barn Swallow. The latter two species are both classified as a Species at Risk by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). The wood-pewee is listed as being of Special Concern, while the Barn Swallow is actually classified as Threatened – amazing for what used to be such a common bird. Like many other species of birds that depend on a diet of flying insects, these species began declining in

the 70s and 80s.

Heading back to the Visitors' Centre at 7:30 a.m., we were joined by Mike McMurtry, Winona Drouin, Don McLeod and Colleen Middleton. While Mike and Winona tackled plant identification, Don and Colleen focused most of their attention on birds, mammals and fish. Walking along the southern branch of Harper Creek, they were pleased to see a lot of easy-to-identify mammal tracks in the mud. These included Beaver, Muskrat, White-tailed Deer, Raccoon and even Long-tailed Weasel. The highlight, however, was being able to see and count a number of Brook Trout, Harper Park's signature species. Both adults and fry were observed. This self-reproducing trout population exists thanks to numerous cold-water seepages that feed Harper Creek. It should be noted though that fishing pressure is already having a negative impact on the park's small trout

population. The fishes' habitat is also being degraded as a result of stormwater runoff from adjacent Lansdowne West and from residential areas west of the park. Some irresponsible anglers are also trespassing on the property belonging to Cruikshank Cleaning Contractors on Rye St. Given the many pressures these fish are under, "fish-watching" and photography would be a far more responsible and sustainable way of enjoying these creatures than angling is.

GRASSY ABUNDANCE

Mike and Winona had their hands more than full with the hundreds of species of trees, shrubs, wildflowers, grasses, rushes, sedges and ferns that abound here. However, it was really only possible to inventory a part of the diversity in one day. Mike was pleased to find two plants that can be considered rare in Peterborough County. They are the Swamp Fly Honeysuckle

(*Lonicera oblongifolia*) and the Purple Avens (*Geum rivale*). He and Winona were also kept busy by the dozen or so sedges present. Although some were identified visually, others were collected and identified afterwards.

Walking through the interior of Harper Park for the first time – up until the BioBlitz, I had only seen the park's edges – I was constantly impressed by the abrupt transitions in vegetation. We moved from sunlit glades and meadows, to shaded cedar forests, to conifer swamps, dominated by Tamaracks and a huge variety of ferns. I often felt like I was on a portage somewhere in Algonquin Park. However, signs of human impacts were never far.

Kim Zippel, chair of the Harper Park Stewardship Initiative, has probably spent more time exploring the area than anyone. Because of her strong connection to the park, the BioBlitz was a highly emotional experience. "I found my emotions running the gamut, from joy at the ethereal beauty of a pale green

carpet of horsetails to excitement in the discovery of the rich flora and fauna of the wetlands. However, all was underscored by deep sadness when we crossed the many erosion scars, deep and ugly, created by urban stormwater runoff. Toppled trees, yawning trenches filled with foaming detergents and the foul odors of sewer water flowing into the wetlands, were a harsh reminder of a cultural tendency to value dollars over the well-being of other life forms," said Zippel.

UNUSUAL ASH

One of the more unusual things that we encountered during the course of the day was a White Ash tree growing at the margin of an area of mixed swamp with nearby springs. The ash's trunk was horizontal to the ground, while a smaller

section branched off vertically at exactly 90°. At the intersection of the bend, a portion of what looked like the original trunk remained as a stub. Mike suggested that this was possibly an indigenous trail marker tree, and that the strange bend was man-made (i.e., a sapling trained to mark a trail) and not of natural origin. In many ways, the tree evokes a sense of continuity between generations past and future. I can easily imagine the sense of responsibility that First Nations people must have felt toward their own future generations when they used trees like these to preserve and communicate information essential to their way of life. Whether or not this White Ash turns out to be a true marker tree, the fact that it sits beside springs, which sustain the Brook Trout, should be enough reason to preserve it as a symbol of our own commitment to protect the source waters and biodiversity of Harper Park for future generations of citizens to enjoy.

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CRAIG BOGDEN photos

Harper Park (top photo) is a diverse, undeveloped 150-acre green space covering much of the area south of Lansdowne St., east of Spillsbury Dr. and west of Harper Rd. Cinnamon Ferns (above) were among the 250 plant and animal species recorded by a team of eight local naturalists during a 12-hour blitz of the city-owned park.