

News from the FWG: Fall 2006

By Christine Hanrahan

Summer has come and gone at the garden, autumn is well entrenched and winter is just around the corner. As always, much has happened since the last update and this is your chance to catch up with the things we have done, the things we plan to do, and the animals and plants that make full use of the habitat we are maintaining.

Backyard Garden News



Backyard Garden, September 2006

Jay Ladell's five year plan for the garden is progressing and many of the major changes he outlined have occurred, although there is still much to be completed over the next year or two. This fall, Jay added more brick borders to the existing beds, and a new flag stone path was placed along the edge of the Woodland Walk section, which was extended last year.

Jay has found that his time increasingly is taken up by work (the paying kind), his family and other activities and he has less time than he hoped to devote to the BYG. If anyone has good gardening experience, knows about native plants

and can supervise a group of volunteers, you might be the new Backyard Garden Manager we are looking for. Jay assures us he will stay on until a replacement is found and he is willing to work with a new Manager for the first while. Jay is also committed to remaining on the FWG Management Committee.

Work in the BYG takes place on Friday mornings from spring through fall. If you enjoy gardening with convivial company, want to learn more about native plants and/or gardening for wildlife, and have time to spare, why not volunteer? Contact FWG at 613-234-6767 and leave a message.

History

The FWG is now 15 years old. There have been many changes since those early days and looking at old photographs of the site is eye-opening to say the least! Check out the photograph of the BYG as it looked



Helinium autumnale, BYG

back in 1992. At the FWG, we have a binder crammed full of newspaper clippings, minutes from the early meetings, old photographs and other archival material. It is worth looking back occasionally to remind ourselves not only of how far we have come, but of the changes that have occurred in philosophy, planning and approach to the garden. FWG received a lot of press in those far-off days. One of the co-founders, Jeff Harrison, (with Peter and Judy Hall), wrote a weekly environmental column for the Ottawa Citizen with his wife Victoria Dickensen. In 1991, writing about the garden as it then was they say: . "At present



Backyard Garden, 1992

most of the ground cover is grass which is mowed regularly. But that's soon going to change!

What will the wildlife garden have in place of grass? Natural ground covers and a butterfly meadow. [The garden] will also have a new forest of native hardwoods and lots of shrubs along the edges and carpets of wildflowers. We plan to dam the stream above the valley to put in a sedge meadow; down on the flat near the canal, a marsh complete with bulrushes and Wood Duck boxes will be built. Plans also call for lots of different bird nesting boxes including artificial holes for Kingfishers and Bank Swallows and rock cribs for snakes, insects and chipmunks" Well, not all those plans worked out, things changed as the realities and limitations of the site were



Backyard Garden, 1993

discovered, and as our garden boundaries changed. At one point the FWG included the area Jeff describes as a future marsh, but excluded the Old Field. Every so often I'll include some snippets of our history in these updates.

Events

Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) held their annual fall open house to showcase the Central Experimental Farm, and FWG was on the itinerary of places to visit. Unfortunately, very few people stopped by. We counted about 25 visitors in the 6 hours we were open. Our own volunteers staffed the Interpretive Centre, ready to answer questions or give advice on wildlife and native plant gardening. For their part, AAFC set up a small canopy and table next to the FWG parking lot and staffed the area with volunteers who were unsure where the garden exactly

was or what it was all about! Nobody's fault, but a bit disappointing to us. I heard later that the open house was well attended in other parts of the farm. Perhaps the lack of visitors to the FWG was due to distance from the centre of activities (the Sir John Carling Building) and the generally cool and gloomy weather. However, the visitors who did stop by were quite intrigued by the garden and what we were doing and asked some interesting questions.

Managing the Garden

Invasive species

Dog-strangling Vine or DSV (pale swallowwort) continues to plague us, no surprise there. However, a team of volunteers worked incessantly using various methods, to try and exert some control over this species. We will have to wait until next year to see whether any of this hard work has made a dent in the population.

We asked AAFC to mow two small areas where DSV was the dominant plant. This was done in mid-summer and within weeks the DSV had returned as thick as ever, and very quickly produced flowers and later fruit (seeds). Meanwhile, volunteers used scythes (seemingly our new tool of choice) to cut back large swathes of the plant, mainly north of the Ash Woods. Newspaper was placed around trees and covered with mulch in an attempt to prevent new DSV growth.

In the last issue I reported on the allelopathic effect of some goldenrod species on various plants (Hanrahan, 2006). While we don't know for sure that this same effect is exerted on DSV, we did notice that goldenrod certainly inhibited its growth. This may be due more to the dense clonal stands formed by goldenrod which prevents anything from growing amongst them, even the prolific DSV. I have taken photographs of sections of the garden where goldenrod has flourished amidst what was previously a monoculture of DSV and will use for comparison with these same sites in 2007.

Butterfly Meadow

Diane Lepage and her Butterfly Team have worked wonders with this area. They started off in spring by creating a new addition to the Butterfly Meadow, just west of the existing one. Here, next to the hackberry trees, they planted a variety of wildflowers known to be attractive to butterflies, including larval plants and nectaring plants. Once work on this area was completed they began rejuvenating part of the original Butterfly Meadow. A large section was roto-tilled and as many bits of DSV crown root as possible was removed. Clumps of



New Fence, Butterfly Meadow

goldenrod, asters and other species were transplanted to the site, and areas around the nearby trees were covered by newspapers and mulch. Two large manitoba maples were cut down to allow more sun to enter the area and a split rail fence was built. A rock pile gives butterflies and other insects a warm basking place, not to mention quick hiding spots for little critters like chipmunks.

Pond

Once again we have been agonizing over our pond. We veer between thinking it is so unhealthy that nothing will help it, to believing it is not that bad. Sandy contacted Carleton University to see if they had any students who might be interested in doing some research on the pond. Meanwhile, David Hobden, the only FWG volunteer with any real understanding of pond ecology, has been doing some more sampling of the pond this summer. Despite all the worry, we still have a good frog population and the ducks that visit regularly are finding food to eat. A fair number of insects can still be found in the pond or on the emergent vegetation, including lady beetles, mayflies, aquatic moths, and backswimmers. In time, we hope to have a better understanding of how to best manage this small but very important habitat.

Old Field

In order to maintain the old field habitat at an early stage of succession, it should be mowed every couple of years. Without this intervention it will eventually evolve into an area dominated by trees and shrubs. The field was last mowed in 2002 and it is long past due for another cut. In the intervening years, trees have started growing in and around the area. As Habitat Manager for the site I initially planned to have the field mowed in October 2006, but with the phenomenal growth of goldenrods and the decrease in DSV around these stands, I decided to wait one more year. This way I can follow the growth and spread of both species through another growing season and see what, if anything, can be learned from this.

Outside Help

On October 6, a number of students from Nepean High School's Branching Out program arrived at FWG to lend a hand. They spent the morning learning about invasive species, in particular our two favourites, DSV and buckthorn, by doing some hands-on work. They were a big help and we'll always welcome more such visits!

Signs

Our new FWG sign by the parking lot now has a map of the garden in place. The other half of the sign provides space for putting up notices about events at the garden, information about plants and animals, and other interesting items.

Problems

Unlike spring's near record number of fires, for the second year in a row, no fires occurred at FWG during the fall.

Although not in the same category as fires, it is very annoying when visitors destroy vegetation. I'm sure most of them, if they think about it at all, would consider what they are doing, an

improvement. Case in point: a year ago we blocked off part of the Bill Holland Trail along the Hedgerow and re-routed it to avoid pruning back some of the overhanging vegetation. All spring and summer it remained relatively unused, the shrubs were nicely filling in the gaps, and the grass along the trail was beginning to grow again. And then in fall someone decided to re-open the trail. I found numerous large branches from many shrubs bent back or broken right off and tossed aside. The trail was widened to such an extent that other people began using it again, ignoring the blue trail signs directing them towards the south side of the pond. In other parts of the garden I discovered more well trod trails heading into thickets and cutting through the Ash Woods. We try hard to prevent new trails from being formed because the site is too small to sustain multiple trails without serious habitat fragmentation. One year, using cut buckthorn, I created large brushpiles across some of these unwanted trails but they were constantly being dismantled. Some of the newer trails clearly lead into well used hidey-holes where quiet spots to drink beer have been created, and judging from the quantity of beer bottles, these sites are popular.

Plants and Animals

Birds

In mid-August I cleaned out the Tree Swallow nest boxes and the results were surprising. Many nests were poorly constructed with a very thin grass layer and few feathers. However, I know that some of these boxes were successful because adults carrying food back to the nest or young birds looking out, were observed. Unusually, a number of Tree Swallows nested quite late, with



Red squirrel and tree frog

young still being fed in the boxes by the end of the first week in August, after the majority of swallows had left the garden. Thirty-eight nest boxes were checked, and 14 were successfully used by Tree Swallows. House Sparrows nested in five of the boxes, while others were unused or were unsuccessfully used. Some had red squirrels, bumble bees or wasps inside, and two contained White-footed Mice. A complete copy of the nest box report can be found at http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/our_animals/bird-boxes2006.php

The saga of Box 8-98: this box sits amidst a thick patch of wild raspberry and goldenrod and is reasonably well protected from human intrusion. Perhaps because of this, it proved to be a very popular spot. It was first used by a pair of Tree Swallows who successfully raised a brood there. Once they left, a family of red squirrels moved in sharing quarters with two Gray Treefrogs. I didn't clean out the box in August because of all the activity, but in

October, I decided to have a quick check. Inside was a beautifully formed Tree Swallow nest, the best of the bunch for 2006. On top of the nest was a tangle of fine grasses indicating some other occupant had taken possession. Sure enough, gentle prodding produced a White-footed Mouse who popped out and stared at me for about 10 seconds until I closed the box and retreated.

Several interesting observations included a Northern Saw-whet Owl on October 18, and two sightings of a Barred Owl by Marilyn Ward, also in October. A year ago, in October 2005, another Barred Owl put on a show at the FWG for a group of atlas volunteers celebrating the end of the 5-year atlas project.

September saw a good variety of warblers, primarily in the Ash Woods, including a number of Black-throated Blue Warblers. Later, a Common Snipe was reported to David Hobden, but we were unable to verify the ID. A relative paucity of sparrows was reminiscent of last year. Small numbers of White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows arrived in early fall, Song Sparrows stayed around until mid-October, and a few Tree Sparrows were noted in late October. A Red-tailed Hawk, first spotted in late summer, has been seen regularly around the Arboretum and FWG, and was still present in November. This species has been commonly found around the CEF for the last 6 or 7 years, usually in winter, but sometimes from summer right through to spring.

Other Fauna

The last Monarch Butterfly I saw at FWG, was on October 16 in the BYG, nectaring on remaining Phlox blossoms. Eastern Tailed Blues were found right through until September 15, although I continued to see the occasional one on the CEF through to about October 7. Cabbage Whites and Clouded Sulphurs were still present in early October.



Polistes in sign post

The diversity of insects at FWG, while quite astonishing, is only the tip of the iceberg as far as number of species is concerned. Insect identification can be a challenge and we are happy if we can place to family, let alone to genus. Early fall was the time to find good numbers of the brilliant, metallic green Sweat Bees (Halictids), nectaring with many syrphids (Flower Flies or Hover Flies) and various wasps and bees on goldenrod and aster. *Polistes dominula* wasps built a 'highrise' nest structure in the posts holding the Bill Holland sign near the Centre which was quite a sight to see! A list and photos of FWG insects is at: http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/alphabet/insects/index_e.php

Red squirrel numbers appear to have increased dramatically at FWG in recent years. Little wonder when you consider the ample food supply, safe denning and nesting sites and few predators. Some years back an

enterprising squirrel set up home in a nest box at the start of the Hedgerow right next to a large walnut tree and across from a second one by the pond. Several generations of squirrels have since guarded this excellent site! Both Gray and Red Squirrels enjoy the walnuts and thanks to the quantities dispersed and buried primarily by Gray Squirrels, the number of Black Walnut trees at FWG has doubled. Annie Belair did a survey in the summer, and found another 33 trees to add to the 34 trees that Dale Crook counted on his initial inventory in 2004 (http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher/our_plants/nut-inventory.php).

A dead mink was found on November 10 by volunteers working on buckthorn control in the Ash Woods. It appears to be a young female and it had a small chest wound. How it arrived there is a mystery, but was perhaps chased and or killed by a dog. A sad end for such a beautiful animal.

A few toads were still trilling in the pond on September 15, and one was found in a window well of the nearby Insect Quarantine Bldg. on November 8. I put him in the ravine where hopefully he will find a suitable hibernation site. Unlike some frog species, toads cannot produce the 'anti-freeze' necessary to prevent ice formation in their body. Instead, they burrow deep into the ground, or beneath some well protected spot such as a building, to wait out the winter below the frost line.



Connie Clark

FWG Volunteers

We are lucky with our volunteers - many end of staying with the project for a long time. We looked at some of these committed folk in previous issues, and now we look at another dedicated soul, **Connie Clark**. In fact, Connie was involved with the garden long before any of the present volunteers. She was one of the first people to help plant trees in the New Woods area when it was still a grassy lawn and the FWG had barely been born. However, in those pre-retirement days, Connie was pretty busy with other activities and it wasn't until 2003 that she came back to the FWG. Connie's heart is really with the forests and woods, but Marilyn Ward encouraged her to give the BYG work a try. She found it interesting but it was the Woodland Walk section that convinced her to remain. With the treed ravine on one side, tall shrubs on the other and a remarkable diversity of native woodland plants flourishing along the short trail, she was hooked.

Connie actually began working on other parts of the BYG first, doing a little bit of everything. It wasn't until her second year with the project that she took on the Woodland Walk as her area of responsibility. By the third year, she decided to try looking after different sections, and focused on the Heritage Bed and the Rockery. For those of you who don't know Connie, she is a terrific naturalist and her knowledge of plants is extensive, and so the BYG has benefitted greatly from her experience and botanical know-how. The last few years she has also grown hundreds of plants from seed in her home, ready for the annual FWG Plant Sale.

Asked why she continues coming every Friday, Connie replied that she likes the camaraderie, enjoys working in a beautiful setting with constant bird activity, and likes to feel a part of something that is so important. She said that helping create and maintain this little bit of "the country in the city" is compelling. She especially enjoys knowing that through her work, and the work of the other volunteers, she is making an oasis of peace and beauty, in particular for those people who are unable to get out to the countryside, but who can come to the garden and enjoy the sense of being away from the city. It is people like Connie who make the FWG such a great place to volunteer!

Volunteer Opportunities

If you are inspired by Connie's tale of why she keeps on volunteering, perhaps you'd like to volunteer too. We can always use help in removing invasive species, planting trees, working in the BYG, or with any number of other activities. Why not contact us? (Details at end of article). Regular volunteer groups meet on Friday morning (BYG), Wednesday evening (Butterfly Meadow) and Sunday morning (the rest of the FWG), spring through fall.

Acknowledgements: As always, thanks to all the volunteers who make FWG happen!

Photos by Christine Hanrahan except as noted. The two photos of the BYG taken in 1992 and 1993 are by 'Unknown', but possibly by Peter Hall.

FWG Details and Contact Information

The FWG is located off Prince of Wales Drive on the Central Experimental Farm. For more information please visit the website at: <http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher.php>. Brochures about the garden are available from the Centre on Friday mornings from spring through fall, Sunday afternoons in the summer, or during the week June through August when we have a summer employee.

- FWG phone number: 613-234-6767
 - David Hobden, Chair, FWG Management Committee: dhobden@magma.ca
 - Jay Ladell, BYG Manager: jay_ladell@yahoo.com
 - Sandy Garland: website and information about the FWG: sgarland@magma.ca
 - Christine Hanrahan: bird and wildlife observations: vanessa@magma.ca
- AAFC Security: 613-759-1985