

News from the FWG: Spring and Summer 2003

by Christine Hanrahan

Introduction

Welcome to a new series on the Fletcher Wildlife Garden (FWG) in which we'll share with you a season- by-season look at this urban oasis. We'll bring you news of the people, events, projects, plans, and of course, the wildlife, the animals and plants that give life to the garden..

Volunteers

Without our volunteers, the garden couldn't exist. These wonderful people are the backbone of the FWG assisting in so many ways according to their interests and their capabilities.

Backyard Garden Crew (aka The Friday Morning Gang)

Our biggest group is the long-standing Friday morning crew of Backyard Garden (BYG) volunteers, some of whom have been with the project almost from day one. Essential to the smooth running of the BYG is a coordinator for the work, a BYG Manager. We have had some great people involved, but until recently had been without a manager for a year until Jay Ladell offered to assume this role. He has already developed some really exciting and innovative plans for the garden (*read more about Jay in the sidebar*). Visitors over the next while will notice a completely revamped rock garden and a gradual move to all native plants. In the past, because native plants have been so difficult to acquire, we have filled the gaps with non-native plants attractive to wildlife.

Sunday Work Group

A Sunday morning work group was established two years ago to accommodate volunteers unable to come on Friday morning. One of their main tasks is weeding invasive plants such as the garlic mustard in the Ash Woods. Although it is only the second year of removing this plant, Sandy Garland notes *"we are making inroads with the garlic mustard. The plan is to keep it*

Jay Ladell



Jay, our new BYG Manager, notes that he became interested in native plants *"after picking-up a guide on wildflowers only to discover that many of our roadside flowers were actually foreign invaders."* He credits Lorraine Johnson's books for *"really generating my appreciation of native plants."*

Jay has been gardening for about seven years, spending countless hours working the soil, reading widely about gardening, and developing a thorough knowledge of the topic. Several years ago he translated his passion for gardening into a career in landscaping. For the design aspect of gardens he relies on his training in photography (Sheridan College 1989) and visual art.

What does Jay envisage for the BYG? *"My vision is of a place of education as well as beauty. I want visitors to discover that the backyard can be a place where nature and people share space - including birds, insects and animals - even in the city!"* He also sees the garden *"as a center where local gardeners can come to learn how wonderful our native flora really is."*

from blooming so no more seeds are produced. I am noticing far fewer first year plants this summer.” The group has also planted a variety of shrubs, trees and wildflowers including about a dozen hackberry trees across from the Butterfly Meadow. A lot of work in 2003 has taken place around the Interpretive Centre where the nursery bed has been enlarged, burdock has been cut back, and all the trees and shrubs in front of the centre have been mulched.

Interested volunteers can contact Sandy at sgarland@rogers.com or phone the FWG at 234-6767 and leave a message. With enough people, the Sunday volunteers might even continue through the winter with indoor projects such as reorganizing the library, or taking care of seedlings for the 2004 plant sale.

Staffing the Centre on Sunday Afternoon

During the summer we rely on volunteers to staff the centre on Sunday afternoons from noon to 4:00 p.m. If you enjoy chatting with people, especially if you enjoy chatting with them about gardens and wildlife, you might consider joining the roster of volunteers (call 234-6767 and leave a message). Tasks are simple: keep the centre open. Information about the FWG and about different aspects of gardening for wildlife can be found in our many brochures, information sheets and our quarterly newsletter, ‘What’s Up at the FWG’.

Other Volunteer Work

Regular visitors to the garden will have noticed how well-maintained the Bill Holland Trail is these last few years. The man with the mower is Charlie Clifford. Every week or two he is out there making sure the trail is easy to walk (he also installed the directional posts with the blue arrows pointing out the route). More recently, Tony Denton and Rod Craig have been filling in temporarily for Charlie. Thanks, guys, for making the trail such a pleasure to walk.

Charlie also rejuvenated our big directional sign near the parking lot after minor vandalism and a decade of winter weather rendered it pretty shabby looking.

Dale Crook has been mapping the location of every walnut and butternut tree in the garden, and recently began tagging them with yellow numbered tags.

Events -Spring and Summer 2003

International Migratory Bird Day. On May 10th we held an open house with displays and guided birding tours. Approximately 50 people took advantage of the glorious weather and the expertise of Celia Bodnar and Dave Moore to find over 30 species of birds, including many migratory songbirds.

Taverner Cup. May 24th. The garden was once again the location for the compilation of results for the annual Taverner Cup, organized by Jeff Harrison. The centre was open from 9:00 p.m. to midnight as weary birders filed in with their tallies after a day of relentless rain and cold. Some of the money raised from the Taverner Cup helps support FWG endeavours.

Plant Sale. June 7th. Our annual plant sale is becoming a ‘must-attend’ event, eagerly awaited by scores of local gardeners. New and very well received this year were the scores of native plant

seedlings propagated from seed by Jay Ladell. Les Camm made and donated some excellent bird boxes suitable for tree swallows and chickadees, which sold for a very reasonable \$12.00. Daphne Griffith, a local artist and garden volunteer, gave us a lovely découpage mini-armoire for our raffle. Betty Campbell, Elizabeth Gammell and Renate Sander-Regier manned an information table which was non-stop busy, and Philip Fry once again brought his expertise along with a unique variety of native plants from his Old Field Garden. Crowds began arriving long before the 10:00 a.m. opening and kept us busy until noon. It was a great day with perfect weather, satisfied customers and at the end, a pile of money, enough to hire a summer employee (*see more about this below*). Keep your antennae tuned for details of next year's plant sale. I predict it will be another winner! Kudos to Sandy Garland and Jay Ladell for their hard work organizing and many thanks to all the volunteers who helped make this event such a success.

Use of the FWG by Other Groups

The centre is used by several OFNC committees for regular monthly meetings, as well as by groups such as the Ottawa Stewardship Council, and for ad hoc meetings by the Ottawa Wildlife Festival (of which, FWG/OFNC is a member) and the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas. The garden, meanwhile, is often used by local artists who sometimes gather in small groups to paint,, and for walks such as the OFNC Wednesday evening outings in May.

Staffing the Centre

For the last few years we have been able to hire a summer student, thanks to the HRDC summer student employment grants. This year, HRDC was inundated with requests and we were not among those awarded a grant. However, the plant sale generated sufficient funds for us to hire a student. Annie Bélair, or Annie B. as she is known, had been volunteering with the Friday Morning Gang while looking for a summer job. She was a perfect candidate for the FWG position and it was our good fortune that she was still available in mid-June when we realized we had enough money to hire her! The Centre was open Monday through Thursday from mid-June until the end of August. (*For*

Annie Bélair



Our friendly, hard-working summer employee in 2003, Annie B., came to us with an interesting background. With a degree in French Literature, Annie went on to get a Forestry Technician Diploma, and is currently working on her Fish and Wildlife Technician Diploma from La Cite Collégiale. Annie said she'd like to focus her work on surveys and monitoring

projects, particularly involving waterfowl, an interest she developed while working on her diploma. Combining various passions she also wants to pursue writing articles on natural history, possibly in both official languages. Working at the FWG has provided a tremendous learning experience with lots of hands-on work that fits right in with her studies.

Annie's tasks at FWG ranged from tackling invasive plants, translating most of our brochures and information sheets into French (she is fluently bilingual), answering questions from visitors, researching online information, and a variety of other jobs, all of which she carried out with intelligence and care.

more about Annie, see the sidebar.)

Plants and Animals

Birds

Previous articles have discussed the rewards of birding at the FWG (Hanrahan 1997; 1999; 2003). The spring of 2003, however, was outstanding. It all began, appropriately enough, on International Migratory Bird Day, May 10th when a lingering cold spell followed by a warm front overnight pushed waves of migrants into our area. The next day more birds flooded the area and in an hour I'd had over 30 species including Palm Warblers, Magnolia Warblers, Black-throated Blue Warblers, Chestnut-sided Warbler

Bird Houses for Sale!

We still have some of Les Camm's lovely, very well-constructed bird houses available for \$12. All profits go to the FWG. Phone 234-6767 if you are interested

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Northern Parula Warbler, Least Flycatcher, and a host of others. I kept thinking it was like Point Pelee in miniature. And all this in the midst of the city!

Once the migration was over, breeding season got underway with a vengeance. Most of the usual species nested once again (Hanrahan 2003), including Kestrels who successfully fledged at least two young in their nest box high up on the red barn. Our Tree Swallow population continues to grow and this spring Dale Crook and I added seven new nest boxes, six in the Old Field and one by the IC. Five of these were used by swallows and two were seriously checked out by chickadees but rejected, at least this time around..

After concluding that the Green Herons were not nesting in the garden, I was happily surprised to find a nest with two young in a crabapple close to last year's nest site. For whatever reason, these little herons have become a real star attraction here. One

day in late spring while walking the Bill Holland Trail, I came across a father-daughter birding team. After chatting for a few minutes the little girl asked if the green herons were back. I told her I had seen my first one of the year the day before. She was ecstatic! Her father said that they had been birding regularly at the FWG for a couple of years and this was the species that most enchanted them. They knew the best spot to find the bird (west side of the pond) and I left them patiently standing there, happy in the knowledge the herons had again returned. Over the summer I've been stopped a number of times with questions about the green herons. Once I was able to point out a pair standing on top of a tree to a family who had been asking about them. They took it in turn to look

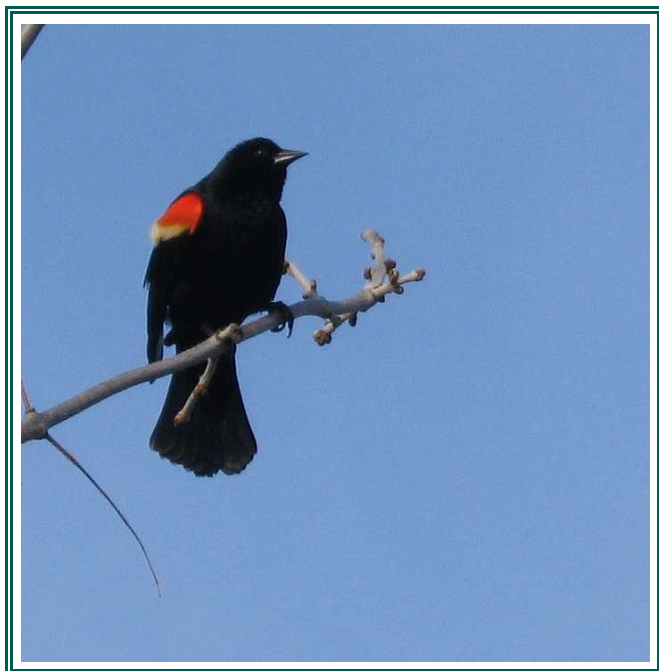


Tree Swallow Box

through my binoculars, marveling at this “miniature” heron with the bright yellow legs!

An overwintering Great Horned Owl was last seen in early May. Its favourite roost site was a spruce tree north of the Ash Woods under which a substantial pile of large pellets formed. Chris Traynor reported finding several very small pellets near the woodlot and suspected Eastern Screech Owl. We may try erecting a few Screech Owl nest boxes in and near the woods and see what happens. It

would be pretty exciting to attract one or two of these amazing little owls.



Red-winged Blackbird

From mid-July onwards, the pond became a nightly gathering spot for well over 200 Red-winged Blackbirds. Starting about an hour before nightfall, they began accumulating in the trees around the pond calling and singing loudly. Eventually they began making their way into the cattails until by the time darkness fell most of them were ensconced deep down in the vegetation, only the odd call, rustling of leaves, and occasional movement from one end to the other, betrayed their presence. One evening I counted 220 but they were only the ones I could see - I knew from various movements that there were many more hidden in the cattails.

Thanks to Susan Goods, we added our 120th species to the FWG Bird Checklist, a Winter Wren found near the Butterfly Meadow on April 25th.

Butterflies

Butterflies were present in good numbers this year, the season beginning on April 30th with an American Lady and a Mourning Cloak soaking up some spring sunshine. It continued through spring and summer with sightings of (in season) Spring Azure, Silvery Blue, Common Ringlet, Cabbage White, European Skipper, White Admiral, Red Admiral, Black Swallowtail, Hobomok Skipper, Little Wood Satyr, Clouded Sulphur, Peck's Skipper, Monarch, Milbert's Tortoiseshell, Atlantis Fritillary, Great Spangled Fritillary and, new for the FWG Butterfly list, a Banded Hairstreak on July 18th. One of the best places to see butterflies is the Old Field habitat.

David Hobden rescued six Black Swallowtail caterpillars and brought them into the centre where they underwent extraordinary metamorphosis from caterpillar to pupa to adult butterfly. Most of the caterpillars crawled out of the aquarium where they had been feeding on their food plants and attached themselves to various places including table legs and walls. There they sat for the several weeks it takes to complete the transformation. One by one they emerged, several days apart, the last one on July 26th.

Mammals

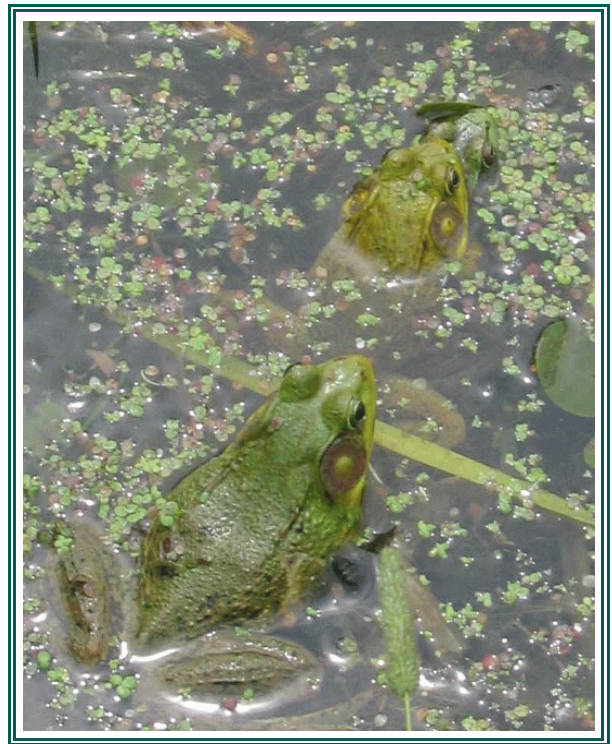
The number of Chipmunks in the garden seems to be at its highest since we began keeping notes on wildlife. However, now that the little weasel has appeared again their numbers may drop. This aggressive little guy has been using the door-frame around the front door of the centre, dragging its prey up the hollow frame, just as one did in 1998. Given that the life-span of any weasel species is fairly low (probably a few years at best) it is tempting to consider that this one is a descendant of the first one we saw there, the instinct to seek the doorframe now inherent! Groundhogs continue to be scarce to absent in the garden, though present on the farm. Red squirrels, however, like Chipmunks, are quite common. One of the nest boxes in the Old Field contained a female with four young which were transferred after some weeks to an adjacent nest box where they remained until old enough to fend for themselves. I watched one of these feisty animals climb a Manitoba Maple towards a goldfinch nest, ignoring both me on the ground and the very agitated female goldfinch above. Of course, red squirrels have a taste for eggs and fledglings, amongst other delicacies.

Reptiles and Amphibians

Our ponds and garden are home to a good number of Green Frogs, Wood Frogs and American Toads. The turtles that used to inhabit the pond seem to have wandered off and we haven't seen a Painted Turtle, or any other species, for several years. However, American Toads are thriving (and no doubt providing food for the Green Heron family). On May 10th the toads celebrated the advent of warmer spring weather with a great flurry of mating. The water was so churned up by their frantic activity that it was difficult to assess numbers, but Dave Moore said he counted 50 before giving up!

Invasive Plants

Dog-strangling Vine (Swallow-wort), *Cynanchum (Vincetoxicum) rossicum*, continues to be our number one challenge. For several years, Naomi Cappuccino from Carleton University and a couple of her students studied various control methods for this species at FWG but no solutions have emerged. Naomi has now finished working at FWG and is turning her attention to potential bio-control agents. Meanwhile, we are mowing the open areas in an effort to at least control the formation of seed heads and subsequent seed dispersal. In less accessible areas volunteers are continuing to hand weed. Some of the literature suggests that hand pulling can control light infestations but the entire root system must be pulled out since it can regenerate from pieces of the root crown. Mowing is generally considered ineffective by many biologists studying the species, but since nothing is known for sure about the efficacy of any of the control methods, repeated mowing over several years might help decrease the population in a particular spot, and at the very least, it will cut down on the number of seed pods.



Green Frogs, FWG

Buckthorn *Alnus frangula* (*Rhamnus frangula*) and *Rhamnus cathartica*. Both species occur in the garden. Work began on removal in 2001 and has continued since. Initially headed up by Dale Crook with Malcolm Leith and Tony Denton, the project is now Tony's and he is doing an excellent job of gradually taking out all the mature buckthorn shrubs. Some trees have been ringed, allowing them to remain as perches and cover for birds for a little longer before they are cut down. Planting with native shrub species around the Old Field where buckthorn removal has created the largest gaps in the thickets continues. The biggest challenge is controlling the seedlings which seem to spring up by the hundreds from one year to the next. By all accounts it will take some years before these efforts result in a buckthorn-free site.

Garlic Mustard *Alliaria officinalis*, grows primarily in the Ash Woods. Consistent work by volunteers has had an effect on this invasive weed, as noted above.

Flowering Rush *Butomus umbellatus*, is an invasive wetland plant which grows in shallow water, often along shorelines. Because our pond at FWG is not very deep, this plant has been able to spread towards the middle, leaving only small areas of open water. Pulling it out by the root seems to be the only control method that we can use at the moment (apart from chemical control which we don't want to use). Sandy Garland has done most of the work using the FWG's small inflatable dinghy to reach the plants.



Garlic Mustard

FWG Details

The FWG is located off Prince of Wales Drive on the Central Experimental Farm (*See map*)
For more information about the FWG please visit the website at: <http://www.achilles.net/ofnc/fletcher.php>
There you can sign up for our free quarterly newsletter *What's Up at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden*, available electronically. Brochures about the garden can be picked up from the kiosk in front of the centre or from inside 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.

Acknowledgements:

As mentioned above, our volunteers make the FWG happen! A fact noted by this heartfelt appreciation from our 2003 Visitor's Book: "*An honour to be the first to compliment all the volunteers who maintain this oasis of colour and creation! One of our favourite cycling destinations in Ottawa. Thank you*" Great work everyone!

All photos by Christine Hanrahan except as noted.

References

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- Hanrahan, Christine. 1999. A Year in the Garden: News and Views from the FWG. T&L, 33(1): 13-20.
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New Woods, 2003