

News from the FWG: Summer through Winter 2003/2004

by Christine Hanrahan

Introduction

This is the second in our projected series of regular updates on the Fletcher Wildlife Garden (FWG), bringing you a seasonal look at this wild-space in the city. Here you will find current information about our events, projects, plans, volunteers, and the flora and fauna.

Volunteers

As always, our loyal band of volunteers deserve gratitude and thanks for their amazing work. They give freely of their time and energy to make the garden a special place to visit, whether working behind the scenes on committees, collecting data, or engaging in the physical labour required to maintain and improve the garden.

AAFC Agreement with FWG

We are delighted that we finally have a formal agreement for the FWG with Agriculture and Agri-foods Canada (AAFC), signed in November. It is backdated to April 2003 and runs for three years at which time it will be up for renewal. Having this agreement allows us to develop some long-term plans with a greater degree of security than before. Kudos to Frank Pope for steering this agreement through to completion. One unexpected result of formalizing the map of the FWG for this agreement is that we discovered our site is smaller than we'd always thought: 5 hectares, instead of 7. The boundaries haven't changed, but the official size has!



BYG - September 2003

Featured Habitat

In each update I will feature a different habitat or section of the garden in order to bring you more in-depth information about each. We start off this issue with news and plans for the Backyard Garden (BYG) which is, unarguably, our showpiece. Below, Jay Ladell, manager for the Backyard Garden discusses his plans for this area:

Backyard Garden

News

“We’d like to invite all OFNC members to visit the Backyard Garden this spring. There are some new things to see at the garden and exciting plans on the slate for the 2004 gardening year. The Rockery has been redone with larger, flat stones to resemble strata and a more natural setting. The angle of the stones both channels water into the garden and allows it to pool after rain for wildlife. The flat stones also act as a natural mulch and habitat for insects. An underground tunnel system has been built and chipmunks have taken up residence nearby. These are some of the many things that the revamped bed demonstrates and more will be established in the future.

“Over the coming season Fletcher will be slowly adding more features that show how to introduce water, shelter and food into a city garden. These will be easy and inexpensive solutions that anyone can add to their existing personal paradise. There will be examples of dripping taps for songbirds and models of brush piles and farmer’s walls for shelter, to name a few of the additions. In many cases, the various existing wildlife features will be highlighted and better explained. The garden will be providing more information about important plants for wildlife, especially those providing fruits and seed. To help with the demonstration process, Fletcher will be adding some signage to inform the visitors about the purpose of the garden while at the same time explaining how to garden for wildlife.

“Fletcher has also added over a dozen more native plant species and will be adding even more. The BYG contains a wonderful collection of more than 100 plants native to Eastern Canada. It gives visitors a rare opportunity to see many species in such a small space. Not only that, but the use of these plants by insects, birds and other wildlife can be observed up close. Please also remember to use our valuable resource library inside for more information on gardening for wildlife and to discover more about the species you see.

“All our dedicated garden volunteers look forward to seeing you at the Fletcher Backyard Garden this spring and summer. Come see the results of their labour of love: it’s your garden to explore.”

If Jay’s summary inspires you to volunteer, please call the FWG number at 234-6767 and leave a message, or contact Jay via email at: jay_ladell@yahoo.com

The revamped rockery is already winning praise. One regular visitor, a geologist with NRCAN, told me that he was very impressed with the way the rock ‘flow’ looked entirely natural.

More on the upcoming Plant Sale

The 2003 plant sale was so well attended that \$2400 was raised, enough to allow us to hire a summer employee.. Jay notes, *“This year’s plant sale is shaping up to be our largest ever with over 50 native species available. In addition, Philip Fry will be once again joining us to offer numerous native plants from his nursery the Old Field Garden. We’ll have tours of the BYG, and lots of advice and information about gardening for wildlife. If you have native plants to offer (please make sure they are native and label the*

Upcoming Events at FWG

International Migratory Bird Day

Saturday, 8 May, 2004

10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon.

Welcome back the birds. Join guided walks around the FWG, browse displays, and learn more about migratory birds. For more information, contact me at vanessa@magma.ca

Annual Native Plant Sale

Saturday, 5 June, 2004,

9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Donation of native plants or seeds is welcome, either before hand or on the day of the sale. For more information call Sandy (730-0714 or sgarland@magma.ca) *More details below.*

pots), there will be a swap area. We welcome donations of empty pots (especially 4" containers), which may be brought to the garden before hand." Please call Sandy at 730-0714 or sgarland@magma.ca.

Volunteer Opportunities

Sunday Morning Volunteers

People unable to volunteer at FWG during the week have the option of joining the Sunday Morning Work Group. These volunteers, usually 4 to 6 people, meet regularly from spring through late fall, and perform a variety of tasks. During late summer and fall they continued digging out swallowwort near the beginning of the Bill Holland Trail. Landscape cloth was placed around the nearby shrubs once the swallowwort was removed in the hope of deterring re-growth. More shrubs were planted in this same area. Other work included planting some Hickory saplings in the New Woodlot; covering the nursery bed with a thick layer of leaves to protect the plants; mulching around shrubs and covering bare spots where swallowwort was recently dug; and digging Garlic Mustard from the Ash Woods to get a start on the 2004 work there. Does this sound like a pleasant and productive way to spend some of your Sunday mornings? If so, please contact Sandy Garland at sgarland@magma.ca, or call the FWG number above.

Sunday Afternoon Volunteer Work

Volunteers continued to staff the Interpretive Centre on Sunday afternoons from noon to 4:00 p.m. during the summer and early fall. A Saturday *Ottawa Citizen* story in late August about



Old Field, September 2003

backyard habitat for birds with photos of the FWG, brought packs of people to the garden the next day, Sunday, and kept the volunteers hopping. Delight and amazement that such a place existed was expressed by many. Sunday afternoon volunteers in the summer are always welcome. Call the FWG number and leave a message.

Other volunteer opportunities

There are always lots of things that need doing around the

garden, including in the Centre, Some of these tasks are short-term, others ongoing. Some of the available tasks include re-organizing our library, helping create displays, re-vamping our small museum, and collecting data on insects in the garden. Some volunteers create their own jobs. Charlie Clifford, for example, has been rejuvenating some of the directional signs, including most recently the Bill Holland Trail sign by the Centre. There are many other opportunities to participate. Call the FWG at 234-6767, or contact David Hobden, chair of the FWG Management Committee at hobdend@achilles.net, 521-4145.

Problems

It would be unusual if FWG was immune to the various problems that plague any modern urban centre such as theft and vandalism, and we are not. However, we've been lucky that the incidents have been relatively isolated and not particularly alarming. The phone number for AAFC Security is posted outside the Centre and we encourage you to call if you see anything suspicious. I don't think the security will get excited about theft of our plant sale items, but they will take very seriously fires or damage to structures.

Plant theft

This is certainly a problem at FWG as it is in the Ornamental Gardens across Prince of Wales Drive. During early fall Jay bought and planted three Butterfly Weed plants in the new rock garden. Two vanished almost immediately and the third lasted only a couple of weeks. Over the years we've generally lost a few plants annually, but three in such a short period is especially frustrating.

This reminds me of the attempted theft of some potted plants destined for the 2003 plant sale. It involved a couple in a big truck on a night of cold, drenching rain trying to make off with more than a dozen plants which they had obviously carefully selected and placed a short distance from the Centre for ready pick-up. Unfortunately for them, it was the night of the Taverner Cup compilation at the FWG and I was looking out the window when I saw them trying to abscond with the plants. Outraged by this, I opened the door and yelled which sent them off in a rush, plants abandoned. Not content to leave it be, I followed them and we had a showdown on Maple Lane! I'm still torn between hysterical laughter and righteous indignation whenever I think of this incident! I can't imagine what compelled them to try and steal from a small, non-profit, volunteer run group.

Thoughtlessness is responsible for other problems elsewhere in the garden with people cutting branches from flowering shrubs, gathering flowers from the Butterfly Meadow, and occasionally digging up material.

Fires

The worst time for fires at the FWG is in late spring and early fall, which seems to coincide with the departure and arrival of Carleton University students, when they are at their least settled stage! We don't know for sure that it is students, but the coincidence is interesting.. They are usually campfires, sometimes built within a small circle of stones, more often just a big untidy pile of branches, and usually accompanied by the tell-tale evidence of broken beer bottles and

empty junk food packages. So far, none of these fires has spread, but this is always a concern

Sign damage

Some of you may have noticed that the blue directional arrows along the Bill Holland Trail had their tips neatly snapped off this winter. Damage to signs seems a given, and again, we have been lucky that nothing major has occurred. Some boundary signs have been removed, and minor vandalism occurred to the two big signs earlier in the spring.

Wedding Bells

Annie Belair, our 2003 summer employee, married Stefan Scutaru. in a mid-December wedding held outside at the FWG. She said it was the perfect place because it holds such great memories for her. Isn't that a terrific tribute to the Fletcher garden?

Plans for 2004

Signage

After years of talking about signs for the FWG we now have an ad-hoc Signage Committee in place, thanks to the encouragement and persistence of Charlie Clifford. Long-term plans are for interpretive signs at appropriate locations. For the near future, we are concentrating on easy to

produce, inexpensive signs.

Two directional signs will be installed. One to be located just inside the FWG boundary and visible from the parking lot, directing people to the centre and the BYG, and one near the pond directing people west along the Bill Holland Trail. A few more boundary signs will be located on the southern edge of the garden. Jay will build a large sign to be placed at the entrance to the BYG providing information about this area. Once the projected changes in the garden are further along he will install more information signs with brochure boxes at the bottom. The present habitat markers will be replaced by information signs consisting of a number corresponding to the number in the trail guide, the habitat name, and a couple of descriptive sentences. Watch for these changes over this coming spring and summer.

Swallowwort Control

In areas where mowing is not feasible or desirable, we're planning to devote as much time as possible to cutting off flowers and seed pods as soon as they appear to try and prevent seed formation. This is a Sisyphean task, as anyone who knows the extent of growth at FWG can attest! However, we are hopeful that with enough willing volunteers to crawl around shrubs and through the woods and thickets, we might make some inroads. .

Plants and Animals

For me, the Fletcher Garden is a



DSV seeds

miraculous place. In these few acres so much goes on that it would take a lifetime of watching and studying just to gain a degree of familiarity with all the creatures that call this place home. There is always something wonderful to see, and I mean that word in its fullest sense - there is much that is full of wonder here. Even casual visitors are struck by the abundant life, whether plant or animal.

Birds

The Green Herons successfully fledged and by mid-August were being seen less frequently in the garden. Although they nested in the same location as in 2002, once the leaves began falling, I noticed what appeared to be another Green Heron nest in the birch grove. After returning in the spring they spent a lot of time between the birch grove and the old field thickets where they eventually nested. There was a fair bit of human disturbance this spring around the old field site which was clearly disruptive to them, and perhaps they attempted nesting in a new location, only to return to their original site when things quieted down. While not strongly colonial nesters as Great Blue Herons are, Green Herons will occasionally nest in small 'colonies' of several pairs. More typical is a single breeding pair, But wouldn't it be interesting if we ended up having more than one pair nesting at the garden?

New species continue to be added to our list. On 20th August a male Indigo Bunting was in the ravine. On 20th September, Dave Moore and Bev McBride found several Lincoln's Sparrows in the Old Field, and a Wilson's Warbler in the nearby thickets, and on 30th September I had a Field Sparrow in the Old Field. On 1st November, Dave Moore saw a flock of Brant flying over the FWG.

Common Ravens were sighted fairly often through the fall and early winter. One gloriously sunny, crisp fall day I watched an interaction between a raven and a Cooper's Hawk which looked like nothing so much as a game of tag! They circled, spiraled, swooped, dove, and swirled around each other, taking turns to be the chaser and the chased, never moving more than a very short distance from their particular spot in the sky. This went on for at least the 10 minutes I stood watching, and who knows for how much longer. Ravens are noted for their playfulness ('Raven the Trickster'), and as anthropomorphic as it sounds, they really did look like they were playing.

The usual fall migrants arrived in good numbers throughout September and October, and for awhile the area was full of White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, smaller numbers of Dark-eyed Juncos and American Tree Sparrows, and large noisy flocks of migrating robins. Fox Sparrows usually appear in ones and twos, but on 27th October, 4 were seen together outside the Centre, along with a large mixed flock of other sparrow species. Red-winged Blackbird numbers dwindled from the highs of 250+ in late summer to small groups of 3 to 5 birds, the last one being seen on 30th October.

On 10th November 19 Mallards gathered in the pond, possibly the biggest number we've had at one time in our pond.

A Northern Shrike was seen on two separate occasions in the Old Field area in November and December. A Sharp-shinned Hawk has been seen a few times this past fall, and a Cooper's Hawk

continues to hang around the FWG and the Arboretum, as it has done for several years. A lone Song Sparrow is still, at this writing (late-January) hanging out in the brush pile on the south

side of the Ash Woods near the OFNC feeder.



Praying Mantis,

Photo by Annie Bélair

other animals are eating around the garden. The information listed in the sidebar is from quick notes I compiled during the summer and fall of 2003 and is obviously nowhere near a complete record. I have other notes from other years and will continue adding to this list as opportunity allows. Many birds of course eat insects, and Downy Woodpeckers were often seen breaking open goldenrod galls to get at the insects inside. At other times, chickadees were noticed probing the bark of trees and exploring clumps of dead leaves for insects. One summer day I watched a chickadee catch, kill and eat a cicada that wasn't a whole lot smaller than it was.

We maintain two winter feeders at the garden, one in the BYG and one, with seed supplied by the OFNC, at the south edge of the Ash Woodlot. Many thanks to Dale Crook who keeps the feeders well-stocked.

Butterflies, other insects, and spiders

Praying Mantis were very common in the late summer and fall of 2003 and could be found on almost every visit. In 2002 in contrast,

Two racing pigeons spent over a week in the BYG before being taken to the Wild Bird Care Centre.. They were so tame that it was feared they would be easy prey for something or somebody.

We've been trying to keep track of what wild foods birds, and

Wild Food Eaten by Birds and Mammals at FWG- Summer and Fall 2003

Amaranth seeds - White-crowned Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco
 Buckthorn fruit - American Robin, Cedar Waxwing, European Starling
 Bull Thistle - American Goldfinch
 Canada Goldenrod seeds - Chipping Sparrow, American Tree Sparrow,
 European Birch seeds - European Starlings
 Gray-headed Coneflowers - White-crowned Sparrow, House Finch, American Goldfinch, White-throated Sparrow
 Hawthorn Fruit - Black-capped Chickadee
 Joe-pye Weed - Downy Woodpecker probing for something, presumably insects
 Lamb's Quarters seeds - White-crowned Sparrow, Dark-eyed Junco
 Malva Seeds - Black-capped Chickadee
 Manitoba maple keys - House Finch, Chipmunk
 New England Aster seedheads - House Sparrow, American Goldfinch, House Finch
 Ornamental Crabapples - American Goldfinch, American Robin, European Starling, House Finch
 Spruce Cones - American Goldfinch, Red Squirrel
 Staghorn Sumac seed heads - Black-capped Chickadee, Red Squirrel
 Tartarian Honeysuckle fruit - House Finch, European Starling
 Virginia Creeper fruit - crows, Gray Squirrels
 Walnuts - Gray Squirrels; a crow was noticed carrying a walnut in its bill

very few mantids were found. It was also a good year for Hummingbird Moths around the region where they appeared to be far more noticeable and abundant than last year. At FWG they were found nectaring on various of the mid-summer blooms. David Hobden saw two feeding on phlox but in general observations were of single insects.

Also very noticeable this fall were numbers of orb-weaving spiders in the Old Field area. Dave Moore

spent quite a bit of time looking for and photographing these arachnids, obtaining some great shots in the process.



Gray Treefrog in nest box,

Photo by Dave Moore

Late summer butterflies included good numbers of Monarchs, White Admirals, and Cabbage Whites, a few Common Ringlets, a couple of American Ladies and on 2nd September one Bronze Copper in the Old Field. My impression was that Clouded Sulphurs were not as abundant as in previous years when they could be counted in good numbers on every visit, something that was definitely not the case in 2003. A few Monarch Butterfly caterpillars were found on milkweeds, always a positive sign.

Reptiles and Amphibians

Gray Treefrogs were another noticeably abundant species this past summer, not only heard calling from a variety of locations, but seen frequently throughout the garden. Two took up residence for a couple of weeks in the back of the brochure dispenser at the entrance to the BYG, while others settled into now-empty birdhouses where they could often be seen leaning out of the entrance holes, seemingly surveying the world. Very tiny young were found on milkweed leaves and the leaves of Flowering Raspberry, amongst other places.

Turtles continue to be scarce, as far as we know, in the pond, but on 4th September, Annie, our summer employee, came across a turtle heading down into the ravine from the pond. She only caught sight of the back end, but her description sounded like a Painted Turtle. There is also a slight possibility that it was a Red-eared Slider, a close relative of the Painted Turtle which it strongly resembles. The slider, native to the Mississippi River drainage in the USA, has been long sold in pet stores and released when owners grow weary of them (Darbyshire 1997). Whether the turtle, whatever it was, had been living in the pond, was checking out a potential new habitat, or whether someone had recently dropped it off there, we'll never know. Neither it,

or any other turtle was seen again in 2003.

Mammals

We rarely see Racoons at FWG and the one I saw climbing down from a crabapple tree in the ravine was only the second I've found here. They may well be more common than this suggests since they are occasionally seen on the farm. Winter weather brought more fox sightings as these animals venture out during the day hunting for food. One very healthy looking animal was observed in the BYG eyeing the squirrels at the bird feeder. A few cottontails continued to be seen, mostly around the BYG, but with the fox now coming around they probably won't last too long.

Although we don't have statistics to back this up, it does seem that Red Squirrels are more abundant now than they were 5 years ago. Conditions are certainly ripe for them to survive well at the FWG, with abundant food, nest and den sites, and as noted in other articles about the garden, they more than hold their own against the larger Gray Squirrel. One late September day I watched a Red Squirrel gathering great clumps of grass which it then carried into the BYG compost bin. Despite long periods of watching in subsequent days, I never saw it return to the compost bin after that day and wonder if it found things just a little too hot down at the bottom.

Invasive Plants

The work outlined in the last update (Hanrahan 2003) continues. Tony Denton has made progress on Buckthorn removal, Sandy Garland has cleared most of the Flowering Rush from the Pond, and Garlic Mustard continues to be pulled and is under reasonable control. What is not under control is Dog-strangling Vine (Pale Swallowwort). As noted elsewhere, volunteers continued digging up the plant in 2003 in selected areas and will carry on with this and other methods of controlling the plant this year. Several small sections of the garden were mowed again in late summer but the plant is so abundant that, while mowing no doubt helps, it will need other methods in conjunction with this to help subdue the species.

FWG Details

The FWG is located off Prince of Wales Drive on the Central Experimental Farm. For more information about the FWG please visit the website at: <http://www.ofnc.ca/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.

Acknowledgments: As always, thanks to the many volunteers without whom the garden would be a much poorer place. Thanks also to Dave Moore and Annie Belair for use of their great photos.

All photos by Christine Hanrahan except as noted.

Correction: Apologies to anyone who rushed to the FWG hoping to see a very rare Least Weasel. Our

species is of course, the Short-tailed Weasel as reported in previous FWG articles. I can only plead sloppiness, since I know better! Thanks to Chris Lewis and Bob Bracken for alerting me to the problem.

References

- Darbyshire, Stephen. 1997. A Red-eared Slider in the Ottawa River. T&L, 31(4):157-160.
- Hanrahan, Christine. 2003. News from the Fletcher Wildlife Garden: Spring and Summer 2003. T&L, 37(4): 170-178.