



High Park's Black Oak Savannah

Wildflowers, tall grasses and scattered oaks – to people familiar with High Park this may just seem like typical parkland, but it's actually a globally rare Black Oak Savannah. Savannahs and tallgrass prairies once extended over much of the sandy plains of southern Ontario and into the northern states, but almost all this habitat has disappeared with farming and development. High Park has one of the few remaining tracts in all of Ontario and even across North America. That's why in 1989 the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources designated 73 hectares (45%) of High Park as an Area of Special Natural Interest (ANSI), including the Black Oak Savannah.

Since the early 1990s, City staff and volunteers have been restoring and protecting this precious natural resource. Over the years a number of prescribed burns have been carried out to bring back the prairie grasses such as big bluestem, little bluestem, and Indian grass, and wildflowers such as wild lupine, and to encourage the natural regeneration of young oaks. The most effective management techniques are used in the ongoing battle to control invasive weeds such as dog-strangling vine, garlic mustard and buckthorn, while some sections are fully cleared of unwanted vegetation and then replanted with locally sourced native species, including some grown right in the High Park Greenhouse.

All this hard work is paying off. Today the oak savannah is flourishing once again. High Park continues to support many locally rare plant species as well as a few that are regionally rare. But the whole is much more than the sum of its parts – this plant community provides habitat for a rich diversity of wildlife including many migrant and breeding birds, butterflies and other insects, and several mammals.

In effect, what we have here is a living museum. Each year many students and research scientists take advantage of this resource by conducting studies here, and others come to learn from our experiences with using different restoration tech-

niques so they can apply them elsewhere. At the same time, for many people it is simply a place to observe nature and enjoy a peaceful retreat right in the middle of our busy city.

The restoration of the Black Oak Savannah has been supported over the years by hundreds of volunteers. Some participate in the High Park Natural Environment Committee, which has been advising the City of Toronto on the protection and restoration of the natural environment of High Park since 1993. Others provide hands-on assistance through the High Park Stewards (see below). In addition, these two groups have established High Park Nature to promote awareness and respectful enjoyment of the natural heritage of the park through initiatives such as the www.highparknature.org website. This website is loaded with information about the park's wildlife and plant species, the rare Black Oak Savannah, Grenadier Pond and many other park features. It also includes the area's geological origins, its more recent history, and ongoing restoration efforts. There are photo galleries, species checklists, resource documents and links to other useful sites, and new content is being added all the time. Check the home page frequently for upcoming volunteer events and walking tours, along with seasonal highlights and other news.



Prescribed burn (credit: Oliver Pauk)



Wild lupine (credit: Sharon Lovett)