
The Dream in HIGH PARK

*Beneath the manicured lawns and gardens
lurks a remnant of ecological rarity.
With the help of dedicated visionaries and
staunch community support, Toronto's most
extraordinary green space gets back to its roots*

A

*few days ago, for the first time in
my life, I went to High Park and was introduced to Mr. Howard, who has bequeathed
to Toronto a park that, in after years, will be a boon hardly understood at the present...*
Alderman Frankland, *Toronto Daily Globe*, July 7, 1885

HAD HE VISITED HIGH PARK A FEW MONTHS AGO, 112 YEARS AFTER HIS PROPHETIC observation, Alderman Frankland would have witnessed just how much Torontonians have come to appreciate this treasure in their midst — though he'd be forgiven for thinking they have a funny way of showing it. Here, on a plot of parkland scattered with black oaks and less than 1,400 square metres in size, orange-suited employees of the Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) ignited drip torches and set fire to the ground, monitoring the foot-high flames that incinerated small shrubs and scorched the grass. On the sidelines, squinting through the smoke, were 50 or so adults and children, laughing, chatting, jubilantly hugging, one word running like wildfire through the crowd: "Finally." This was no act of destruction, you see, but one of redemption — and five years in the planning. The first of a series of "prescribed" burns that could become routine in High Park, the carefully planned and controlled fire is



Gera Dillon

By Catherine Collins





Spring Breezes, High Park, J. E. H. MacDonald, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

This evocative painting of High Park as it was back in 1912, prior to the planting of non-native tree species (left) during the 1920s, reveals the park's natural roots as a black oak savanna, rich in wildflowers and waving prairie grasses.

intended to awaken a richness of vegetation that hasn't been seen here for almost a century. Why this matters and what it took to bring about the burn of April 25, 1997 is a story of heritage and prescience and a grand urban crusade to restore to its former glory the most extraordinary city park on the continent.

FOR THOSE WHO HAVEN'T HAD THE pleasure of visiting High Park, or the luck to live beside it as I did for three years, let me introduce you to this great green space that sits amid the traffic, houses and high-rises of west-end Toronto like a gift dropped from heaven. The angel who gave it to us, John Howard, did indeed have a divine sense of future needs. In 1836, Howard, an English emigrée who became a city surveyor for Toronto, purchased 66 hectares of rolling woodlands, ravines, creeks and marshes in the Region of York, seven kilometres west of Yonge Street. Naming his land "High Park" because it had the highest point in the vicinity, he made his home here, building a house called Colborne Lodge that still stands as a historic site, looking south to Lake Ontario a mere ten minutes' walk away. But as Howard wrote in a letter to city officials in 1873, he had "always had a great wish that the park should belong to the city of Toronto as they will require such a place in a few years..." He made good that wish, donating 48 hectares of his estate that year and the remaining 18 hectares upon his death in 1890. The city acquired more land on the east and west sides, including the large lakefront wetland, Grenadier Pond, so that by 1930, High Park had become a 160-hectare sanctuary in which the people of Toronto could lose, or find, themselves.

I did both, every morning for three years. I'd cross Parkside Drive and disappear into High Park's green embrace, feeling its

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cool breath as I ran past the duck ponds on the southeast side, trying to spot the black-crowned night herons who so mastered the zen of stillness they seemed invisible even in plain view. Rounding the south end where the park opens up for one stinky moment to the Queensway, then draws you back in and over to the curving shore of Grenadier Pond, I'd travel the water's edge to the north marsh, scanning for surprises: my first (and only) blue-winged teal, the 47 hooded mergansers who blew in one November, the two red foxes rough-

housing on the ice, the great blue heron who stalked out of the water, a prehistoric spectre out for a stroll. Onto the rollercoaster trail through the oak woods, hushed and sweet, where the resident red-tail hawk sometimes drifts, turning squirrel blood to ice, I'd huff my way up to the mercifully flat tablelands at the Bloor Street end, where the old guys play chess and the school kids play games, and where out of a stand of hundreds of soaring trees I had one I'd lean against, just to think. Down into the Spring Creek ravine on the east, over the little footbridge dividing the north pond where once I crept, heart scarcely beating, within a metre of a mink, up again into the forest rimming Parkside, then I'd be out, better than when I'd come in.

Oh, High Park has been bent to serve more civilized needs — there are the manicured "Hillside Gardens" leading down to Grenadier Pond, the soccer field and baseball diamond on the central tablelands, the allotment gardens for gardenless urbanites, the outdoor amphitheatre for Shakespeare-in-the-park, the greenhouse that grows all the city's flowers, the open-air zoo, and the restaurant serving "hickory smoked ribs." But the wonder of John Howard's gift is that there is still room for mystery and surprise, for encounters with other living things or nothing at all, for city souls to be transported by wildness.

"It's a high-use park — more than a million people a year — yet there's a place for a fragile flower," says Dave Hutcheon, city councillor for Ward One, within which the park boundaries fall. "It can be filled with visitors and you can still feel alone in a cathedral-like setting. That to me is the essence of High Park."

THE IMMENSE BLACK OAKS ARCHING over the uplands, creating that cathedral-like setting, have something else to say about the essence



Though there'll still be room for a lone maple tree (below) amidst the black oaks, controlled burns like the one held on a small plot of land this past spring (bottom, opposite page) will stimulate savanna conditions that are otherwise threatened with extinction, and which support species such as wild lupines (bottom, this page).



of High Park. They tell us that it was once part of a vast ecological system found throughout southwestern Ontario, a landscape that looked very different from the dense “endless” forest depicted by our bushwhacking pioneers. Picture, instead, prairie with no woody vegetation, and savanna where island-like stands of trees, usually oak, rose out of a sea of prairie flowers and grasses. Picture park-like plains, kept open because of fires periodically set by nature and aboriginal peoples, and poor dry soil that supported only a modicum of trees. Picture 50,000 hectares of wild lupine, wood lily, prairie buttercup, Indian grass, little bluestem grass, blazing star and other beauties of the prairie/savanna community. Today, less than half a percent of this habitat remains in Ontario, one of the remnants being 44 hectares of black oak savanna in High Park.



The oak savanna was so vibrant at the turn of the century, it caused visitors to wax poetic over the blaze of blue lupines blanketing the ground, the air above dancing with tiny Karner blue butterflies. Neither of these delicate savanna species could compete, however, with the growing pressure in the '20s to develop the park for recreational activities. As native vegetation was cleared

away for turf grass, the lupines all but disappeared. The Karner blue, which relies completely on the lupine's leaves for its nourishment, was last seen in High Park in 1926, and with the loss of oak savanna elsewhere in the province, is now officially considered extirpated in Canada. As High Park's savanna ecosystem continued to disintegrate, other species lost their foothold — the monkey-flower, Virginia yellow-flax, spicebush swallowtail and meadowlark. “John Howard had stipulated that the park be kept in a natural state,” says Steve Varga, an MNR inventory biologist for the Greater Toronto Area, “but his predecessors in the '50s wanted to create another Central Park. The difference is, Central Park was built out of nothing — it had no natural features like High Park does.”

The march toward formaliza-

Cetera Dillon, Rob & Melissa Simpson/Alan Photos

tion brought non-native and invasive species such as Norway maple, European buckthorn and Tatarian honeysuckle, which closed in the airy open spaces of the savanna and subverted the light-loving native undergrowth. Without ground cover, the sandy soil (High Park sits on the plain of old Lake Iroquois) began to erode, sifting away the rich storehouse of native seeds. "The idea was to bring the park to the people," says Varga, "but in a way it did the opposite. It lost its sense of place. A park filled with Norway maple looks like any park in the world. What gives High Park its sense of place are these big oaks and the really beautiful wildflower displays that could thrive between them. People may not realize this is a black oak savanna, but they appreciate the trees, those big branches spreading out and down. They know it's distinctive, and adds to the beauty. Once they find out what was here, and is still here in places, people really want to go back to the park as it was in John Howard's time."

THE CALL TO RECAPTURE HISTORY CAME in Varga's 1989 report, "A Botanical Inventory and Evaluation of the High Park Woodlands," commissioned by the Department of Parks and Recreation to help formulate a long overdue plan for managing the city's most exceptional natural asset. Not the first study done of the park's ecology but the most comprehensive, it catalogued the precious legacy that had survived the years of mowing, pesticides and competition from alien vegetation: 32 of the park's 41 rare plant species are found in the oak savanna, four of which are national rarities — woodland fern-leaf, wild lupine, shrubby St. John's-wort and cupplant. Describing the park as "our connection to Toronto's wilderness past," Varga recommended, among other things, that the 44 hectares of oak savanna/wood-

“High

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land be recognized as a provincial ANSI (Area of Natural and Scientific Interest) and restored by clearing out exotic and invasive overgrowth, planting savanna species, and conducting prescribed burns to give breathing room to native seeds locked away in the soil all these decades.

Moved by the urgency of the report, Parks and Recreation began to formulate a rescue plan, beginning with the decision to stop mowing the grass in key areas to see what, if anything, was lurking underneath. When lupines and New Jersey tea sprang up, one of the growers

from the High Park greenhouse, Terry Fahey, was inspired to collect seeds from the park, while another, Solomon "The Germinator" Boye, took charge of sprouting them. Driven by "the mission of trying to restore the planet locally," as Fahey puts it, the two persuaded management to seriously pursue native plant propagation. Today, under the guidance of plant production coordinator Arthur Beauregard, the greenhouse is growing close to 100 native species. "We have to preserve systems like the black oak savanna for posterity," says Beauregard. "Who knows what's in the genetic pool? I'm not suggesting we're going to find a cure for cancer in High Park, but the more we encourage the use of native plants, the more we preserve the genetic pool on the planet."

It was an auspicious beginning. But the department, gung-ho to start restoration, underestimated the fierce protectiveness the locals felt for "their" park, some having lived by it for generations, with dear memories of family picnics, fishing with granddad, and skating on Grenadier Pond. In the early '90s, selective thinning of non-native trees, without adequate notice, frightened a group called Friends of High Park into believing, wrongly, that trees were being cut in order to create an oak savanna, instead of making room for the existing one. Another group of objectors, Mother Earth Centre, wanted the park left totally untouched so nature could take its course, even if that meant erasing its natural heritage. As Carol Walker Gayle, an urban forestry planner for Parks, tried to explain at the time, "High Park's savanna is a living museum. If we let it disappear, we'd have nothing with which to educate people."

But education went both ways. At its first public meeting in 1992, Parks learned it had to tread very carefully in this special



Gera Dillon

Many Torontonians treasure High Park as an amazing oasis of wild splendor in the midst of urban noise and pollution, and have rallied to preserve it (opposite page); the expansive spirit of the place is embodied in the distinctive, big spreading branches of the black oak (bottom, centre).



place. While High Park meant different things to different people — bird-watchers, cyclists, hikers, gardeners — they were united in their insistence on having a voice in its future. Thus groups as seemingly disparate as the Toronto Ornithological Society, the High Park Chess Club and even for awhile the Friends of High Park, came together to form the High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee, a fast ally of the restoration project. "The concept of a savanna was very new to people," says Karen Yukich, co-chair of the advisory's Natural Environment Subcommittee. "Most of us are aware of the need to plant trees, but not of the need to foster all the stuff between trees. Once we came to understand the overall strategy, we embraced the concept of stewardship."

With the citizens on board, the Parks department hired a

savanna restoration specialist, Steven Apfelbaum of Applied Ecological Services in Wisconsin. In 1993, he took High Park's pulse and pronounced its black oaks, all of the same age and size, to be spiraling into decline, their seedlings stillborn for lack of savanna conditions. "Essentially, it's a geriatrics case," he explains, "with no youngsters, juveniles or young adults represented."



But he also saw that High Park's pockets of savanna were "unequalled" in the quality and type of plant species they still harbored, and could easily be restored. Given its potential to become a showpiece of ecological rarity, its history, and its capacity to serve so many city people so differently, Apfelbaum says High Park is nothing short of continentally significant. "It's an island in an urban setting, the proverbial baby in the hand basket left on the doorstep," he explains. "It will require perpetual intervention."

Apfelbaum and a team of technical experts from around Ontario earmarked 14 small test plots where they could try different restoration techniques to see which best stimulated the oppressed savanna, then after two to three years, apply them to larger expanses of the park. They had high expectations for a pre-

Jack Schachner/Canada In Socke; Gera Dillon

WETLAND WAKE-UP

A KILOMETRE LONG AND a half a kilometre wide, Grenadier Pond provides one of the loveliest vistas in High Park — until you see photos of that vista nearly a century ago, when the entire sweep of shoreline was lush with marsh, sheltering many more species of waterfowl, fish, and amphibians than it does now. The culprit, as usual, was development. "The pond was absolutely beautiful before they put in concrete embankments and took away all the wetland," says Deborah Martin-Downs, a senior fisheries biologist with Gartner Lee Ltd., which, in conjunction with the city of Toronto, is engineering the rehabilitation of Grenadier Pond.

Along with its beauty, its water quality has declined, largely because of storm-sewer runoff, contaminated with fertilizers and road salts, that flows into the pond from the surrounding neighborhoods (residents near the park could help a lot by cutting back on both substances). The runoff, combined with the prolific droppings of Canada geese and sediments decaying on the gunky pond floor, has overloaded the water with nutrients, causing an explosion of nutrient-loving algae that the pond's zooplankton population cannot control. "The pond takes in more calories than it burns off," says Martin-Downs. "So we're putting it on a diet."

The diet consists of a sedimentation



pond, built last year, which slows the velocity of incoming storm water and allows pollutants to settle. They are also gradually replacing the concrete embankment along the shoreline with wetland plantings, using a gradient of underwater pond weeds to emergent vegetation such as bulrushes and sedges. "The wetland will act as another filter and a barrier to the geese, which love to have a lawn by water," explains Martin-Downs. A new weir, opened this spring, will raise and lower the pond's water levels in spring and fall, as nature would. "The old weir always maintained the same level of water," she says, "but wetland plants like water moving up and down. Their seed banks need a period of exposure to germinate." Pike, a predator species badly needed in the pond, will like the new weir too, since they spawn on flooded vegetation in early spring.

When the city removed the marshy shoreline, the pike dramatically declined, as did the number of migratory birds, and there's not been a peep from a frog. Karen Yukich, of the High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee, looks forward to the day when the frogs return to Grenadier Pond, either on their own, or through re-stocking. "It would be nice to get to the point where all the ecosystems in the park are back to what they used to be...but it's still a wonderful place as it is."

scribed burn since, historically, it had been fire that maintained a thriving understory of prairie meadow. However, deliberately setting a fire, even one less than an acre in size, was a first for the city (requiring the additional services of MNR, the police and fire departments), and made the approval process torturously slow. Parks' Carol Walker Gayle, who's in charge of implementing the test plot program, says, "There was a lot of nervousness about the burn, but not from the citizens."

Quite the contrary, the High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee was

champing at the bit to get on with all aspects of the restoration. Finally, in the fall of 1996, with the blessing of city council and park supervisor Carol Guy, and guidance from the greenhouse staff, a volunteer workforce grabbed pitchforks and headed into the bush to remove buckthorn and gather seeds. Working elbow to elbow every other week, strangers soon became friends, says Christopher Harris, co-chair of the advisory's Volunteer Stewardship Committee. Through winter, his team helped with propagation in the greenhouse.

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Chris Dillman

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"The thing that was so satisfying," says Harris, who moved here eight years ago to be near High Park, "is that we were sowing the same seeds we'd harvested in the fall." More satisfying, they planted 3,000 of the seedlings this spring. And a week or two after the long-awaited burn on April 25, even veteran forester Walker Gayle was thrilled by the sight of savanna flowers rising from the ashes. "Wow," she says, "what a feeling!"

THE FEELING, OF COURSE, IS HOPE — the hope that comes of restoring something precious, of having a purpose that's unabashedly big. "If we can't be optimistic about High Park," says Jamie Bell, co-chair of the Citizens' Advisory, "we've got little reason to be optimistic about the planet." Then world, take heart, because in five years, says MNR's Steve Varga, we'll see acres of savanna colours in High Park — "in May a sea of yellow from buttercups and stargrass, in June orange wood lily and blue lupines everywhere, in July pink-purple clumps of trefoil and white bush clover, and in August all the woodland sunflowers mixed with the blue-red tinge of little bluestem grass." In time, too, we'll see the little Karner blue butterfly dancing again above the lupines, says Tom Mason, curator of invertebrates at the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo, which is partnering with savanna restorationists to bring the butterfly back to the province's savanna remnants. High Park's remnant is too small to feed a self-sustaining Karner blue population and will require an infusion from other genetic pools every few years, says Mason, but the lovely butterfly will nevertheless be a symbol, "attracting people to the plight of the black oak savanna, the most endangered habitat in Canada."

He can count on something else to keep that symbol aloft the lupines — the great swelling of community spirit that has been the most extraordinary aspect of the restoration story. The number of High Park volunteers is growing exponentially, having doubled to nearly 200 since the test plot program got going last October, with people from all parts of Toronto working cheek by jowl with those from the neighborhood, just because it matters. And they're vol-

unteering not only for savanna duty, but to help rehabilitate Grenadier Pond (see "Wetland Wake-Up," page 34), host walking tours and act as safety wardens. Galvanized by that first public meeting five years ago, they've taken ownership of High Park. "I think people were always looking for a way to put something back into the park," says Christopher Harris. "It has given us so much."

I understand him well. For three years I lived and breathed High Park and took so much of it into my heart that when

circumstances forced me to move from the area last year, I felt as if a piece of me had been ripped away. It wasn't until I learned how I could give something back, until I got down on my knees not long ago and planted my first savanna flower, that my sadness finally eased. In helping to restore this cherished place, I too had begun to be restored. ✓

Catherine Collins, a Toronto editor and writer, won a National Magazine Award this year for service journalism.