

Toronto's Magazine about parks and urban nature

Spring 1997, Volume Four, Number One

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HIGH PARK

A Park Lover's Quarterly



**Pike take time
to make woo**

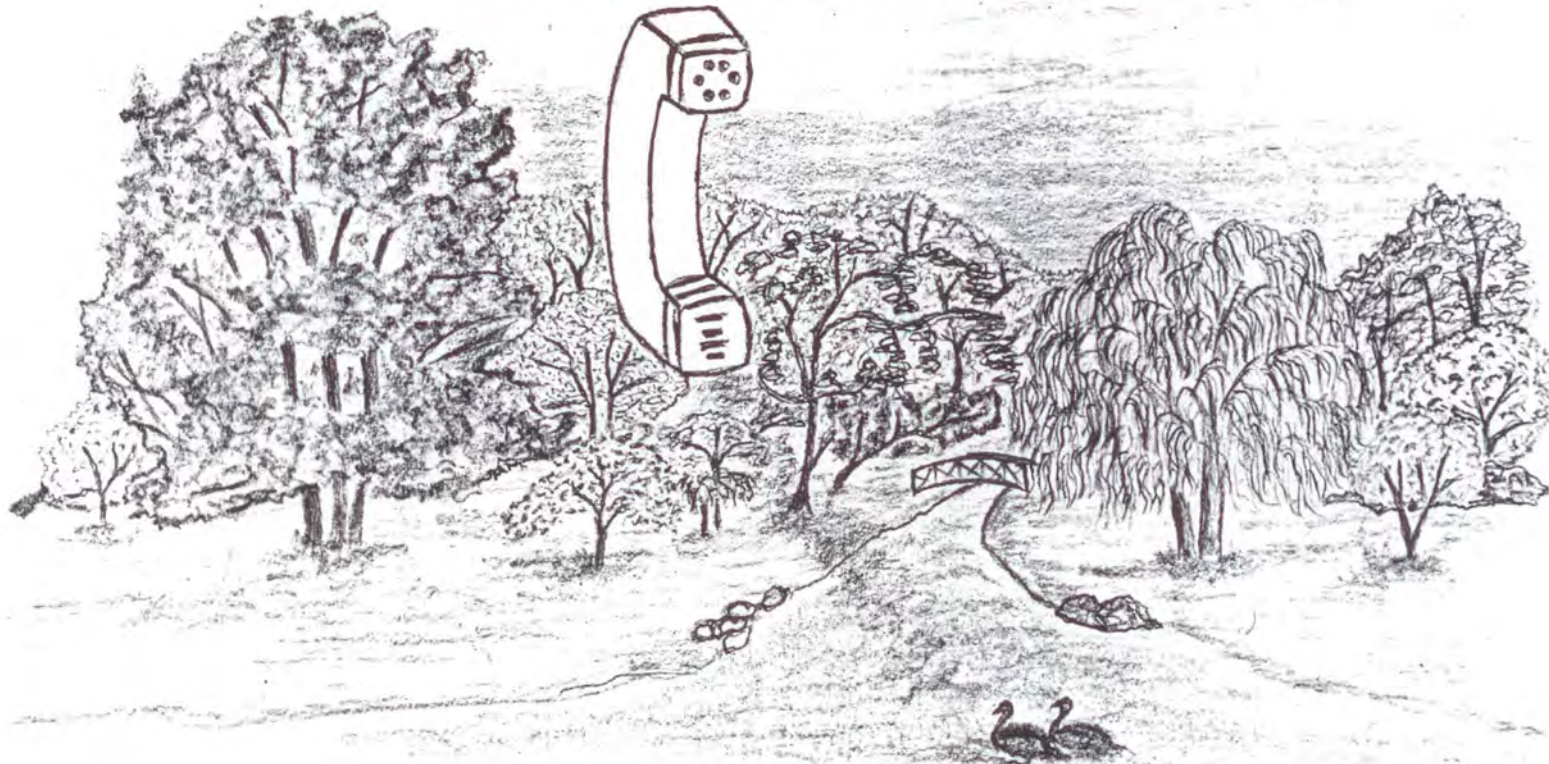
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HIGH PARK

A Park Lover's Quarterly

Editor - Gigi Suhanic

Contributors - Gera Dillon, D.W. Dorken, Mary Lou Kumagai, Mario Maceda, Joan Miles, Ken Winlaw.

Cover photo by D.W. Dorken

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Editorial.....

Ban bikes from trails

Contributor Ken Winlaw encourages increased use of High Park as an effective way of decreasing crime and violence in the park. (See In the park, when it's dark, pg.9)

This always leads to the old, familiar conundrum – increased use means increased wear and tear on the park environment. For evidence, we only need examine the erosion and damage along the trails on the western slope above Grenadier Pond at its northern section.

We're all for increased park use, but there has to be compromise.

The first thing we might suggest is banning those damnable mountain bikes. We'll spare the ecosystem – and spare a strolling senior a mild coronary.

Pike pitch woo in grass

In the spring a young magazine editor's fancy lightly turns to

thoughts of love. It seems the same thing has happened at Toronto Parks and Rec.

If the good folk there have their way, amorous northern pike will have a place to pitch woo in flooded grasslands perfect for pike-style spawning.

That's great for the fish, we suppose. But what about us bipedal, mammalian types?

Take High Park for example. It seems every feathered, furry or finned denizen therein has carte blanche to make whoopee wherever their hearts lead them.

Except for those with opposable thumbs, of course. Anything more than holding hands will get you busted PDQ.

We'd like to see parks and rec invest some of its energies in developing conducive mating environments for that endangered species, the lovelorn taxpayer. Maybe hire a consultant or something.

We're partial to those pink, heart-shaped bathtubs.

**Park
Politics**

*– a guide to grassroots
involvement in High Park*

HIGH PARK CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMITTEE meets the third Wednesday of every other month. The next meeting is May 21, 6:30 p.m. at the Keele Street Community Centre. The committee meets to discuss the work of the High Park subcommittees on Safety and

Recreation, the Natural Environment, and



David Miller

Metro Councillor
Suite 228 – Metro Hall
55 John Street
Toronto ON M5V 3C6
392-4072

Transportation. The annual general meeting is scheduled for June 25. For more information phone Jamie Bell at 604-7421.

HIGH PARK NATURAL ENVIRONMENT SUBCOMMITTEE meets May 8, 6:45 p.m. at the High Park Training Centre, just south of the Grenadier Restaurant and beside the hanging basket garden. New members are always welcome. Topics discussed include cleaning up Grenadier Pond and restoring High Park's oak woodlands.

Pizza Pizza president wants to build more

Pizza Pizza president Michal Overs wants to replace his present home on Grenadier Pond's west shore with a new one.

Overs' application to the city of Toronto's planning department was submitted in March and calls for a two-storey structure, plus an attic and walk-out basement, at 225 Ellis Avenue. The new home is approximately 97 feet wide and 54 feet high, with 8,400 sq. ft. of total livable space, not including the attic and walkout.

Overs' current home at 225 Ellis is a three-storey building with about 5,000 sq. ft. in living space, according to the project architect Carson Woods.

A hearing date was set for April 23 for the city's Committee of Adjustment to review Overs' application.

Overs was seeking permission from the committee to sever some property he owns at 227 and 233 Ellis Avenue and join it to 225 Ellis Avenue.

Overs was also seeking permission to build his new home 1.8 metres from the northern lot line rather than the required 7.5 metres.

Overs recently won a case at the Ontario Municipal Board allowing him to build a subdivision of six homes also on Grenadier Pond's western slope.

Waste not, want not

Compostable toilets may be the answer to the woes caused by High Park's troublesome porcelain facilities.

The city of Toronto is looking at installing compostable toilets at two locations in the park - Colborne Lodge and down at Grenadier Pond. Parks staff are hoping the work will be completed by the fall.

Toilets have been a major topic of debate, especially with several public wash-room buildings in the park closed permanently - for example, one building near Colborne Lodge and another near Grenadier Pond. The washrooms near the lodge were closed because men were having sex in them. In the case of washrooms near the pond, tree roots have destroyed the plumbing system.

Not only are the two areas underserved, both sites have been chosen for compostable toilets because running in a sewer would be next to impossible.

The new toilets would be single occupancy and wheelchair accessible with two stalls per location.

The city is still in preliminary research stages. According to a staff member at the city's engineering department, there so far appears to be only one true compostable toilet - a Swedish design called the Clivus

briefly

Multrum.

"The technology is so great and it has little negative impact on the environment," said Scott Walker, a city engineer.

"It sounds funny but when you get to learn about it, it makes sense," Walker said.

The Clivus Multrum is used widely in cities across Europe. Information material from the Canadian distributor says the toilet functions like "...a forest floor in a polyethylene tank".

It takes toilet waste, a bulking agent like wood shavings or pine bark mulch, and oxygen and converts it into a "safe, usable, compost". There are two end products, a solid compost, and a liquid product.

Colborne Lodge springs into High Park season

Colborne Lodge taps into the Victorian traditions of park founders John and Jemima Howard for its spring calendar of events.

April 26, special tours of Colborne Lodge are available focusing on natural ingredients used in cleaning products 100 years ago.

Earth Day in High Park on April 27 inaugurates the beginning of the walking tour season and summer hours at the lodge. Earth Day events include entertainment, crafts and food markets, guided nature walks, storytelling and displays. Tours of Colborne Lodge are pay-what-you-can. As of April 27 Colborne Lodge is open daily, except Monday.

S a m p l e
19th century spring recipes at the lodge, May 3,4 and 10,11. Visitors are invited to sample specialities made from spring produce such as asparagus and rhubarb. Learn about food planted at the lodge a century ago. Free with admission from noon to 5 p.m.

May 17,18 celebrate Victoria

Day the way the Victorians used to. Children can participate in traditional Victoria Day militia drills conducted by a soldier from nearby Fort York. Cake and sparklers for everyone.

May 24, 25 learn about how the original owners of Colborne Lodge gardened in High Park. Children can plant redubekia seeds in peat pots to take home. Free with admission.

Tennis club aces renos

Following some major renovation work last spring, the courts at the Howard Park Tennis Club in High Park are in top form for a full season of play.

Of the seven courts at the club, located close to Parkside Drive just below Howard Park, five have been completely rebuilt and resurfaced with an acrylic paint. The work was paid for by the club.

"They're in top playing form for the game," said Bill Clancy, a planner with Toronto's Parks and Recreation design division.

Previously, the courts had problems with water pooling. The city of Toronto paid for drainage improvements which have cleared up that problem.

For more information about tennis call the club at 769-5600.

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Whistling pistol a quacky idea

The ears of Canada Geese must be burning. Actually, there must be raging inferno going on in there.

Everybody is talking about the poor bemused birds, plotting new and more bizarre ways to bring about their demise. Lately, there has been much rubbing together of hands over a scheme to round up a certain number of geese, slaughter them and hand them over to foodbanks for distribution to the hungry. This notion is the brain child of municipal government in the U.S. twin city Minneapolis/St. Paul which has run such a pilot project for the last two years, and received a lot of attention for it.

While government officials plot witch hunts, there's still no rest for the weary geese. On the Toronto Islands where the birds' numbers are large, Metro Parks and Culture thinks its come up with a way to make the geese someone else's problem.

Parks and Culture has permission from the wildlife division of Environment Canada to fire off a cartridge from a starter's pistol. The cartridge behaves like fireworks and makes a whistling sound that supposedly effects geese only.

"It tells them they have to move on to greener pastures," said Bill Reed, Metro operations superintendent at the Toronto Islands.

Reed said parks and culture uses the pistol mostly during the periods of May and June with the goal being to discourage the birds from nesting. Birds that nest and successfully raise their young will return to that location the following year. Their young will

return to the place where they learned to fly.

According to Reed the pistol doesn't harm the birds. The cartridge discharges and releases a high-pitched whistle that is intended to only have an effect on the geese. "We got the idea from the Toronto Island Airport," Reed said.

Reed said in the past there have been as many as 2,000-3,000 geese on the islands. He said using the pistol has reduced their numbers significantly.

It could be that the geese are building a tolerance to the sound just as some forms of bacteria are resisting antibiotics.

People who have seen the parks staff shooting off the pistol said it seems to have little effect on the geese, but instead disturbs other birds.

"I would think it had a momentary panic that lasted three seconds. Then the geese settle back down. However, it does effect a lot of other birds. Water fowl like ducks and common terns, they certainly are adversely effected," said Don Barnett. Barnett is a birder. He was recently at the Centre Island wildlife sanctuary when Metro parks staff shot off the pistol.

"It doesn't have any place in a public place. It's invasive in what is supposed to be a wildlife sanctuary. I submit any birds scared off will come back the next day if not the next hour," Barnett said.

Sherwood Park's old-growth forest

Torontonians usually associate old-growth forests with British Columbia, or at the outside, Temagami and Bob Rae chained to a white pine.

Urbanites might be surprised to dis-

cover that right in the heart of Toronto there lives an old-growth forest with towering pines that even Bob Rae might be proud to chain himself to.

Sherwood Park, in the Eglinton-Mount Pleasant area, is home to one of the best old-growth forests remaining in southern Ontario.

One of the features that fits Sherwood Park's forest into this category are the 35-metre white pine trees forming a "super canopy" above the rest of the forest, said Beth McEwen of the Toronto Department of Parks and Recreation.

That's not all Sherwood Forest has to offer. It also has an underlying canopy of ash, oak, pine, hemlock, and black cherry, to name a few species.

Like many of the special natural places in Toronto, Sherwood Forest is under attack. One of the major forces being brought to bear on the forest is over-use, and inappropriate use.

"I believe it's quite critical," McEwen said. "If you walk through the forest it is really heavily used in all areas," she said.

She said signs of damage include loss of ground cover, and damage to older trees. She also said there is a bank of cherry and birch seeds in the ground that are germinating.

McEwen said these seeds are programmed to germinate under catastrophic conditions, and would normally be triggered by disturbances like fire. Because these catastrophic scenarios haven't occurred the seeds are germinating in low-light conditions that will make it impossible for the trees to survive. A pilot restoration project is starting this spring.

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Spawning pike get new park

Randy pike spawning in the Toronto Harbour will soon have their own brand new park to play in.

Urban environmental groups like the Metro Toronto and Region Conservation Authority have recorded northern pike successfully spawning in Toronto's inner harbour near the Spadina Quay. In an effort to encourage the carnivorous fish to make more babies, the city of Toronto's Parks and Recreation Department is devising a new park with a wetland boudoir to massage the fishes' libidos.

"It's a bit off the wall. At the same time people are saying this is going to work," said Bob Duguid, a planner with the parks and recreation department.

"This is going to be neat," Duguid said.

The pike spawning area will be one part of a new park located beside Spadina Gardens at Harbourfront. The site is currently a parking lot. It will be excavated. According to Duguid, channels will be cut into the sea wall to allow for an exchange of water.

Grassy wetlands, pike's preferred spawning habitat, will be planted in the channels. The hope is the fish will enter the channels to lay their eggs. Duguid said there is reason to be hopeful the idea will work because pike are already spawning in channels at the Toronto Islands.

Duguid said it's expected the project will be a high-profile one. "We felt this site provided an opportunity for some public interest," Duguid said.

North T.O. greeners host tours

The North Toronto Green Community continues its explorations of the area's many buried waterways with a lost river walking tour schedule for 1997.

The tour will trace the courses of buried streams like Yellow Creek, Walmsley Brook, and Castle Frank Creek, all tributaries of the Don River watershed.

The walking season started March 16 with a tour of the middle section of Mud Creek. The Mud Creek tour continues April 20 with a walk through its lower section to the Don Valley Brick Works where the creek is being "day-lighted". Meet at the corner of Mount Pleasant Avenue and Merton Street.

The headwaters of Mud Creek and Burke Brook are at the top of the agenda, May 18. The walk begins in an industrial transportation wasteland and ends in magical Earl Bales Park. Meet at the corner of Wilson Heights Blvd. and Wilson Avenue.

June 18, meet to search for signs of Trigger Creek and Burke Brook. Meet at Fairlawn Neighbourhood Centre, 28 Fairlawn Avenue.

The lower section of Walmsley Brook still flows above-ground through a ravine that supports much wildlife. Meet at the corner of Overlea Boulevard and Beth Neelson Drive.

More tours will be scheduled for the summer and fall. All tours are free and start at 2 p.m. For more information about the lost rivers of North Toronto, phone 781-7663.

— Gigi Suhanic



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Memorial garden full of life

Alex Wilson's legacy of renewal will be captured in living colour with the construction of a community garden in memory of the well-loved urban activist.

After three years of tireless work by Wilson's friends, colleagues, and neighbours, the Alex Wilson Community Project took a major step toward completion with the announcement recently of a winning design for the garden located at 552 Richmond Street West.

The winning design by the Kent Ford Design Group is a pastiche of Wilson's life's work that harmonizes his passionate beliefs in communal gardening and restoration landscaping to capture the generosity of spirit of Wilson's work as a prominent urban ecologist and member of Toronto's gay community.

"He was an activist in urban restoration. He was an incredibly beautiful and brilliant man," said Lori Spring, a friend. "The fact that he was out there planting grounded what he did in a wonderful way," Spring said.

Wilson, a professional landscaper, worked hard to promote the practical application of his philosophy that the earth could and should be healed in two ways: through social ecology movements like community gardening that reconnect people with the land; and through the ecological restoration movement which looks to repair the landscape by recreating sustainable native ecosystems.

The inextricable relationship between land and culture were themes he would plumb in his book *The Culture of Nature*, and in *Restoring the Earth*, a two-part series he wrote for the CBC radio show *Ideas*.

He died of an Aids-related illness on Oct. 26. He was 40.

Three years after his death, the spirit of Wilson's work still has the ability to move. The design competition attracted over 140

design teams, and a total of 67 completed entries.

"We were thrilled with the interest. In part it was a testament to the strength of Alex's work," said Lorraine Johnson, chair of the Alex Wilson Community Project. "He was well-known, respected and loved in the landscape community," she said.

Ultimately the Kent Ford group was best able to translate the goals for the garden into something do-able. "Their's was a simple, elegant solution," Johnson said.

The garden, as Kent Ford sees it, is a "literal translation" of the design competition requirements, that will take visitors on a whirlwind tour of three different bioregions from Lake Ontario to Muskoka — lakeshore, farmland, and wilderness.

Pavings the colour of water and dune grasses will greet people at the garden's entrance. A raised boardwalk will lead people through the garden, and also separates the food-growing plots to the east and an agricultural hedgerow to the west. The boardwalk ends at a woodland landscape of native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. The garden will be wheelchair accessible.

Construction of the garden is scheduled for the spring with a grand opening planned for the fall. Land for the garden is being donated by Dianne Croteau and Richard Brault. The garden will be publicly owned and maintained by the city of Toronto which is also contributing \$80,000 toward construction costs.

The '90s have proven that the community gardening movement really packs a punch. Wilson played no small role in that. The Stafford Street Community Garden, the first of its kind in Toronto, was started by Wilson and his partner Stephen Andrews, in the late '80s.

The Alex Wilson Community Project is hosting a free exhibition at the Design Exchange (234 Bay St.), May 26 to July 13.

— Gigi Suhanic

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In the park when it's dark

The sun-dappled clarity of a spring day makes High Park seem a warm and welcoming place. And it is.

Toddlers cavort under the watchful eyes of protective parents, old men in suit pants and fedoras feed their nuts to hyperactive grey squirrels, joggers jog, cyclists cycle, young lovers gambol, and I, who watch all this with bemused detachment, obviously have way too much time on my hands.

Watching all this cavorting, jogging, cycling and gambolling put me of a mind to get off my ever-expanding duff and do some exercise. Well, not immediately. Immediately it put me of a mind to go home and take a good long nap.

But when I woke up, I said to my roommates – 60,000 cockroaches and a herd of mice all called Ralph – “It’s time I got off my duff and do some exercise, I think I’ll go for a run in High Park.”

The roaches were too busy rearranging the furniture to give my comments their full attention. Maybe they’ll leave me a note on the subject later, I thought as I pulled on an antique pair of Adidas. Perhaps the note would be a heart-warming expression of concern over this sudden change of attitude regarding my own health and well-being. But I doubted it. Usually, their notes are more related to the mundane necessities of domestic life, as in: “Ken, Rogers cut off your cable again. The Roaches.” Or, “Ken, we drank all your beer again. (Urp.) The Roaches.”

The mice (all called Ralph), tend to be more sensitive to the follies of their lord and master. Also, because a sense of self-preservation is more developed among the higher orders, they are also sensitive to where their next meal is coming from. The mice, if they hadn’t been so busy changing channels on the remote control (It’s actually kinda cute how they do this – three or four of them point the remote in the direction of the TV set, while another one hops up and

down on the number pad, like it’s a trampoline. I could spend hours watching them, and often do. Where the hell was I? Oh yeah. The mice...) might have responded, had they not been so busy, with incredulity:

“Ken, it’s three o’clock in the morning. You can’t go jogging in High Park,” the mice might have said if they weren’t just glued to that darned Abmaster infomercial. “Who’ll leave stale pizza crusts on the floor for us to gnosh on if you get bashed on the head with an iron bar, or stabbed in the ribs with a home-made shiv fashioned out of a metal bed slat?”

Where the mice would get such detailed knowledge of weapons normally used in prison is perhaps fodder for a future column (**I doubt it – Ed.**) but my rodents’ unspoken ministrations were not my concern at the moment. I was going for a run.

The park at night is an ominous and threatening creature. If the day-time park is a cuddly teddy bear, the night-time park is a sleeping grizzly.

I began my jog (stroll, run, dash for my life) at the park’s north end. A new moon hung like a knife edge over my shoulder and pierced the shroud-like fog. A disconsolate duck quacked at the sound of my passing footfalls, but his heart wasn’t in it. Branches reached skyward like dead men’s fingers. Gnarled Norway maples loomed at me from the darkness. “Yah, I could haf been in the Vizard of Oz,” the maples said with their Scandinavian accents, “but the casting director thought I was too menacing.”

“Hi guys. I’m home from my run in the park, and I didn’t get mugged, or accosted, or stabbed in the ribs with a home-made shiv fashioned out of a metal bed slat, or anything.” Silent pause. “Isn’t that great?”

“Urp,” the roaches said.

– Ken Winlaw



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Boating pleasures on pond lasted for three decades

High Park in History
by Joan Miles

Local legend has it that the British Grenadier soldiers met an untimely death by drowning in "bottomless" Grenadier Pond. That hasn't stopped eager boaters and anglers from their pursuits in High Park.

Residents living on the west shore of Grenadier Pond had and have boating rights on its waters. This opportunity was extended to the general public on June 20, 1958 with the granting of 10-year boathouse concession lease to William Streeter on a site just west of the base of the rock gardens on the east shore of the pond. The concessionaire was required to build and maintain the boathouse at his own expense and to pay business and realty taxes and \$600 yearly to the city of Toronto.



Grenadier Pond's boathouse was torn down in 1989.

The Victoria Day weekend was the opening of the season in subsequent years, and row-boats were rented out every day through the summer. The concession remained open on weekends after Labour Day, through the fall season.

Stephen and Mary Kroshko took over the operation in 1963. Two addition were made to the boathouse during the 1960s.

On June 25, 1971 Robert Muran took over as operator and called the concession Grenadier Boats. He sought and received city approval to erect a ticket booth beside the boathouse. His request alluded to the mayhem which could be averted: "In the interest of safety - for people...standing on the loading deck while other people are disembarking boats with fishing tackle and hooks dinging about, very often very close to their faces and faces of children standing and waiting for boats; for the little people playing near the edge of the deck while boats full of people are arriving and may crush some little hand between deck and the boat; for people being pushed into the water by other people waiting in line."

The boathouse was demolished in 1989.

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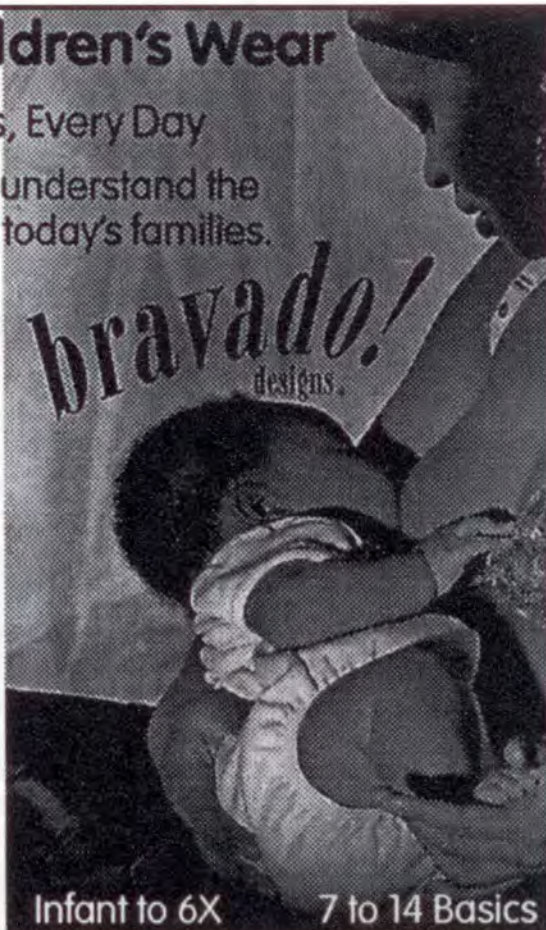
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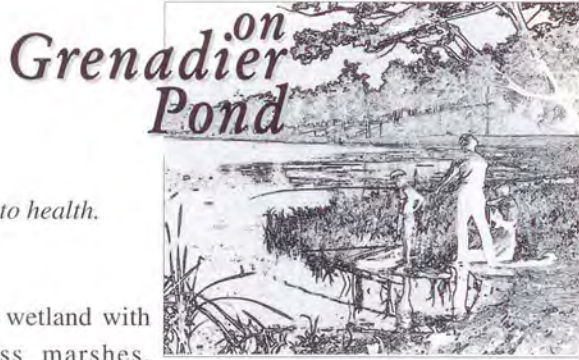
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Wetland glory days return

On Grenadier Pond is a new regular feature to keep people up to date on efforts to restore the pond to health.



Once a glorious wetland with expansive grass marshes, Grenadier Pond lost its soul when city government of the 1950s turned its back on nature, tearing out the wetland and filling the pond edges with cement.

Everyone has experienced a major attitude adjustment where the environment is concerned. Work has been ongoing for the past four years to restore the pond to some semblance of its former self. Wetland restoration projects dotting the pond's edge represent the bulk of that work.

Another project that is much less visible but no less important has been operating quietly since last fall. Toronto's parks and recreation department has installed a new device in the pond that raises and lowers its water level.

Water fluctuations only natural

A natural pond experiences seasonal water fluctuations that have important consequences for the organisms living there. In the case of Grenadier Pond, in its virgin state it was separated from Lake Ontario by no more than a sandbar, so its water levels would have mimicked those of the lake.

In recent years a weir structure has kept water levels constant in the pond. That was replaced last fall with a stop log that now allows the levels to fluctuate within a one-metre margin.

There are lots of reasons why this is beneficial to Grenadier Pond.

Two important results

Christine Tu is a biologist with Gartner Lee, pond consultants to the city of Toronto. Tu said there are two important results that are being looked for.

During the spring cycle, the level will rise a half metre, flooding the restored wetland areas. Tu said Gartner Lee is hoping these new conditions will spawn an increase in the pond's pike population. Pike like to lay their eggs in the nearshore grasses of flooded wetlands. Grenadier Pond was once a pike pond with the carnivorous fish playing a major role in keeping the pond balanced. Loss of spawning habitat decreased their numbers to almost zero.

The other important aspect Tu said is the "drawdown" cycle in the summer when the level drops. Tu said this will allow the areas that were once flooded to become exposed and dry out, resulting in wetland plant germination. There are many species of wetland plants that require a flood/draught cycle to grow. Right now most of the wetland species growing abundantly in the pond, like cattail, favour the flooded conditions of the past.

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Naturalist's notebook

Lupines part of butterfly puzzle

High Park's greenhouses are one piece of an intricate puzzle – that when completed will hopefully bring back to Ontario the endangered Karner Blue Butterfly.

The Metro Zoo has been working on a plan for the past six years to re-establish the butterfly in southern Ontario. The greenhouse's native plant propagation program is the zoo's source for wild blue lupines, the butterfly's only food.

The Karner Blue Butterfly is native to Ontario where it was last seen in 1991. According to scientists it disappeared from the region due to a loss of woodland habitat and wild blue lupines. Small populations of the butterfly can be found in the U.S. in New York State and Wisconsin.

This growing season the greenhouses will be providing the zoo with a small number of plants for experiments with live butterflies. Within the next few years the number should grow to the 100s, said Arthur Beaugard, supervisor of greenhouse production.

Lupines grow naturally in High Park and greenhouse staff have learned to germinate the seed and re-introduce the plants in High Park as part of the oak woodlands project.

Metro Zoo staff said they are at the stage in their experiments where they will be asking the U.S. government to allow them to bring 13

some Karner Blues to Canada.

For the past six years the zoo has been conducting its testing

ECONOTES

CELEBRATE EARTH DAY at High Park, April 27. We'll be there with free, helpful material to encourage your efforts at making your homes and Bloor West community a healthier place to live.

BASEMENT FLOODING with spring rain? Want to keep our lake and beaches cleaner? Downspout disconnections often help both issues. Call you municipality about their free program.

SPRING CLEANING TIPS: Have fun and make money with a street garage sale. Donate clothes or furniture to a local church bazaar, favourite charity or community shelter. For more ideas call TRAC, 392-7850. Dispose of toxic household wastes call Pollution Solutions, 489-8855, or Metro Works, 392-4330 for

depot drops. Recycle renovation materials, 392-7742/510-2223, diapers, 1-800--KNO-Waste.

DAVID MILLER'S ANNUAL ENVIRONMENT DAY, High Park, April 26. Pick-up green tips and drop off household toxic waste, old books, etc. Collect free compost (come early) 10-2 p.m.

HEALTHY HOUSING: Learn more about this subject and enjoy a free visit to CMHC's Healthy House in Riverdale. Call (416)218-3343.

GREEN TOILET rebates and home audits. Call GreenSaver, 461-9670.

FREE FRONT YARD TREE: Increase property value and save on energy bills. City of Toronto, 392-7281.

HOT GREEN WEB SITE. Evergreen Foundation: <http://www.evergreen.ca>.

EcoNotes is a community service from the Bloor West Eco-Village. Contact us c/o Swansea Town Hall, 95 Lavinia Avenue, box 107, Toronto On M6S 3H9.

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This message appears in the Quarterly courtesy of:

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Burn news spreads like wildfire

We humans live, as the ancient curse has it, in “interesting” times. But don’t think that other species get off scot-free – it’s a jungle out there for them, too. Particularly, say the experts, in those parts of High Park they’re trying to restore to their glory days as authentic oak savannahs. It seems that nasty plant-type home invaders have been growing (dare I say like weeds?) everywhere they can find a toe-hold (root-hold?) and choking out the rare and beautiful native species. What to do, what to do?

They’ve tried hand-weeding the vegetative villains and growing seedlings of the local lovelies in park greenhouses for transplanting to the sites. Both methods, with the help of citizen volunteers, show promise. Now they’re about to try fire. FIRE?

As the parks folks are finding out, short of taking off their knickers and wearing them as bonnets, there’s not much they could have done in the park that would have attracted more attention than deliberately setting fires. People are talking. Reporters are phoning. Faxes are faxing. Rumours are spreading like, oh, say, wildfire. After all, everyone has seen the forest fire scene in “Bambi” at least once. Forty-seven times if they have children and a VCR (unless, like me, they fast-forward the scary parts). Well, we can all relax. That’s not the sort of fire involved, according to Toronto Parks and Recreation spokesperson Carol Walker Gayle. In fact, it’s not even close.

Gayle, an urban forest planner (no park ranger jokes, please, she’s heard them all, twice) says that if people are expecting drama, they’re going to be disappointed. It seems the plots to be burned amount to less than an acre total – about the same as a couple of city lots in a ritzy neighbourhood. And the stuff they’re burning is mostly dried out grass and weeds, with a few shrubs for variety. In short, there’s not much, it burns fast, and as for spectacular, it isn’t. It should take about a half-hour per plot, says Gayle.

If you’re still feeling nervous, she says, consider that the burn is being conducted by an experienced team from the Ministry of Natural Resources – “these are the guys who actually fight forest fires in northern Ontario”. And there’ll be a Toronto Fire Department crew and pumper on hand, just in case.

As for the local flora and fauna, she’s confident they’re not in danger. The oaks themselves have very thick bark and the fire’s relatively cool and quick, so they won’t be damaged. Ambulatory wildlife should be okay too. Mid-March to mid-April (the “window of opportunity” for burning) is too early for bird nests, she says, and Chip and Dale and their furry friends will make themselves scarce when all the activity starts.

Ah, but wait – for those who are seeking excitement involving wildlife and high temperatures, all is not lost. A multi-municipality goose committee has been formed to look for solutions to the Canada Goose overpopulation problem. Thinking to kill as many birds as possible with one stone, they suggest culling the flock and donating the resulting harvest to local food banks.

Tempting as is the thought, we suspect this solution will not fly. The best argument against it has to be compassion – for the food-bank users. Who knows where those geese have been? And what they’ve eaten. Only one thing’s for certain – the feathered porkers are so overfed, their cholesterol content must be sky-high. It’s hard enough being down on your luck without being expected to dine on something that not only tastes bad, but is also bad for you. Honk if you think this is one of the most feather-brained schemes you’ve heard in a long time.

Park Pundit by Mary Lou Kumagai

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The Story of Fire*

Sunday, April 27, 1:15 p.m.

Plus other Earth Day events at Colborne Lodge

Signs of Spring*

Sunday, May 4, 1:15 p.m.

Spring Migration (Birds)

Sunday, May 11, 9 a.m.

Bring binoculars

Explore High Park

(Natural & Human History)*

Sunday, May 18, 1:15 p.m.

Spring Flowers*

Sunday, May 25, 1:15 p.m.

Native vs. Non-Native Trees

Sunday, June 1, 1:15 p.m.

Invasive Plants and Weeds

Sunday, June 1, 1:15 p.m.

Lupines and Butterflies

Sunday, June 15, 1:15 p.m.

Is There Life in Grenadier Pond?

Sunday, June 22, 1:15 p.m.

** Especially recommended for families!*

*Organized by the High Park Citizens' Advisory Committee, Colborne Lodge (Heritage Toronto) and the Depart. of Parks and Recreation (City of Toronto)
For more information about tours or other volunteer programs, call 392-7276, ext. 301.*