

# Where there's smoke, there's renewal

Careless visitors can damage Toronto's parks, but volunteers are hard at work to restore them

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

On a clear morning in late April, circling drones, news helicopters and billowing grey smoke hovered over Toronto's High Park, announcing that the park's rare black oak savannah was once again in flames — a necessary and dramatic disturbance to maintain the savannah habitat and regenerate the endangered prairie grasses below.

"We typically do these in rural areas," burn boss Jason Sickel told the crowd, among them a handful of High Park stewards in neon green vests with "Volunteer" across the back. On the day of the burn, they were tasked with distributing pamphlets explaining to startled park visitors how the smoke of the controlled burn signalled not danger, but renewal.

The burn, which is done roughly every two years, is a conspicuous reminder of how much deliberate intervention it takes to keep nature "natural" in a dense urban environment. Less visible are the thousands of volunteer stewards who spend their weekday mornings, evenings and weekends picking up garbage and pulling invasive weeds that threaten the health and integrity of Toronto's parks and ravines.

"It's death by a thousand cuts," said long-time volunteer steward Karen Yukich about the daily, incremental damage to High Park's natural areas. Yukich, co-chair of the public outreach and education resource High Park Nature, describes people trampling through ecologically sensitive areas, disturbing aquatic habitats and widening paths, which makes them more susceptible to invasive plants. She doesn't even know where to begin with the off-leash dog walkers.

The struggle to defend Toronto's parks against the pressure of an encroaching city goes back a long way, said Yukich, citing a 1923 Toronto Daily Star article penned by Ernest Hemingway, under the pseudonym Peter Jackson. In it, he compares High Park's weakened, city-embattled oaks to "some animal of prehistoric times, built only for a certain environment." When that environment changes, he wrote, the animal dies.

If careless visitors, unknowing or deliberate, are damaging Toronto's parks and ravines, others are hard at work to restore them. The High Park stewards have taken care of the park for more than 25 years, meeting every other Sunday from May to November. At each session, 15 to 25 volunteers work under the supervision of city staff to remove invasive species such as Japanese hedge parsley and European buckthorn — volunteers call this "buckthorn busting" — to plant more than 1,000 native plants each year, and collect seeds to propagate and replant in the park.

"We're going two steps forward and one step backward," said Yukich, who began volunteering in the late 1990s as part of an adopt-a-plot



**Above, a crew member conducts a prescribed burn at High Park to keep invasive species at bay while allowing native species to thrive. A team of volunteers, the High Park stewards, work with city staff to take care of the park from May to November.**

PAIGE TAYLOR  
WHITE PHOTOS  
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program on the degraded tablelands north of the Grenadier Cafe. The site has since been restored so successfully that it is now included among the park's environmentally significant areas.

"There have been improvements but, at the same time, the amount of usage has just increased so much."

Surging park use, especially during the pandemic, has intensified both the need for and interest in volunteer stewardship in parks across the country. The Canadian City Parks Report 2021 says 98 per cent of cities across the country saw more people in their parks during the pandemic. At the same time, another 60 per cent said COVID-19 had strained their park operating budgets with expenses including extra staffing and signage, new public space pilots such as converting streets to parklets and more maintenance requests. The survey, by community park advocacy group Park People, also found almost half of cities saw increased interest in volunteer stewardship.

Not just anyone can walk into a

ravine and start pulling weeds. Toronto residents who want to help must do so through one of the city-approved stewardship programs. According to Kim Statham, director of Urban Forestry, the number of volunteers has outpaced the programs' capacity to put them to work. Last year, Toronto Nature Stewards was created to match more willing volunteers with areas in need by launching a pilot program. For the first time, citizen-led teams will work unsupervised in nine of the city's natural areas.

The Ashbridge's Bay crew kicked off their second season on a chilly morning recently. As groups of birders trained their binoculars upward in search of a migrating common yellowthroat, lead steward Clyde Robinson and his team had their eyes fixed on a patch of garlic mustard, one of the 10 invasive plants they are authorized to remove. Volunteers identify second-year plants — the ones to be pulled — by the telltale white flower that sprouts from them, but the cold spring has delayed the appearance

of the flower. They settle for picking up litter instead.

"Working with my hands is a lovely contrast to all the brain work I used to do," said retired technology consultant Ian MacRae. He had just emerged from a thicket of dogwoods where he had been crawling on hands and knees with a utility blade to cut free a pair of Stanfield briefs tangled in a branch. MacRae, who also volunteers with the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority and the Toronto Botanical Garden, said he almost joined the Thursday evening Ashbridge's Bay session too, but "one per day is enough."

As the group headed back to the parking lot, full garbage bags in hand, Robinson reflected on the success of the program, which has already doubled the number of stewards and is negotiating permission to steward 23 additional sites. "I'm shocked at what we were able to do last year," he said of the more than 420 garbage bags worth of invasive species the group removed from the nine-hectare Ashbridge's Bay site. "Over the years, we can make a big difference in this park."

If nature relies on regular disturbances to flourish and regenerate, sometimes the needed nudge comes in a surprising form. While the prescribed burn at High Park renews and protects the black oak savannah ecosystem, last month a century-old seedbank of bulrushes and cattails sprung to life after being dislodged by an excavating crew near the Don Mouth naturalization site.

Sometimes, what it takes to keep nature natural in the city is the hands of thousands of stewards working every day, May through November, rain or shine.