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GTA

We love High Park for its natural beauty. Will that love be the death of it?

High Park hosts a huge amount of biological richness, but 'intensive trampling' means the park's natural environment is at serious risk, a report warns.

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Leslie Gooding, Sharon Lovett, and Karen Yukich lead groups that protect and help manage High Park's natural areas. A recent TRCA report on High Park highlights the perils facing the park that Toronto "loves to death."

Steve Russell / Toronto Star

By Kate Allen Science and Technology Reporter

High Park, its most devoted stewards sometimes say, is the park Toronto loves to death.

For over a century, High Park has been a beloved space for walking, running, cycling, skating, sledding, and just being alone in the trees, an activity impossible in some of its more manicured city-park cousins.

But High Park is also one of the last vestiges of a beautiful and nearly vanished habitat: the oak savannah, a prairie-like landscape of tallgrass and wildflowers studded with sprawling black oak trees. In the Toronto region, nearly all of the oak savannah that remains exists in High Park; it is a provincially and even continentally significant area.

The Toronto and Region Conservation Authority recently released the most comprehensive biological accounting of High Park in decades, a literal inventory of the creeping, crawling, growing, flying things within its terrestrial borders.

[The inventory](#) describes a 161-hectare park hosting a huge amount of biological richness, including many hectares of surprisingly healthy oak savannah — a remarkable finding, considering High Park is plunked in the middle of North America's fourth biggest city.

But the report, undertaken at the request of the City of Toronto's Parks, Forestry and Recreation division, also makes clear High Park's natural environment is under intense pressure. The TRCA report describes a primary threat in two words: "intensive trampling."

"We believe there are a lot of people ... who, if they had a little more understanding, would take more care," says Karen Yukich, co-chair of High Park Nature, a citizen-led volunteer outreach group.

"They're walking into someone else's home: wildlife. We talk about habitat, but habitat is habitat for something — something lives there. It's not just there as a nice backdrop."



Geese fly over High Park on Sunday. High Park is the city's largest public park and has been a beloved space for visitors for over a century.

Steve Russell

Ontario is famous for its forests, but even lifelong residents might be surprised to learn that the province once hosted large swaths of savannah. Oak savannahs resemble African savannahs, but with their own distinctive grass, wildflower and tree species — mostly black oaks.

Uncrowded and flooded with sunlight, these oaks grow into a distinctive spreading shape sometimes called "wolf trees." Black oaks also have fire-resistant bark: savannahs are dependent on fire to keep the forest from closing in and fundamentally altering the ecosystem.

Estimates of how much savannah Ontario has lost differ, but it is safe to say only a tiny fraction remains.

According to the TRCA, High Park has “by far” the most in the organization’s jurisdiction, which stretches across nine watersheds in the GTA. The province and the city have both officially designated High Park as an environmentally significant natural area. (Outside the GTA, Pinery Provincial Park, on the shores of Lake Huron, has significant intact oak savannahs.)

The TRCA inventory tallied a staggering amount of flora and fauna at High Park, which is located in the city’s west end, stretching from Bloor St. W., south to the Queensway and Parkside Dr., and west to Grenadier Pond. The report counts 620 plant species, more than can be found at Albion Hills conservation area in Caledon, which is more than three times the size and much less urban. Dozens of those plant species are regionally rare, including nine found only in High Park within the TRCA region.

Sixty-two animal species were discovered. The TRCA spotted a snapping turtle and a midland painted turtle, both of which are listed as at-risk in Ontario, as well as toads, frogs and gartersnakes, calling High Park a “haven” for reptiles and amphibians, all of which are sensitive to development. They found almost 50 bird species including two at-risk ones, which will be no surprise to High Park’s legions of birders.



A man enjoys a walk in High Park on Sunday. A new report by the Toronto and Region Conservation Authority highlights the perils facing the park, including “intensive trampling.”

Steve Russell

The report gives ample credit for this richness to restoration efforts at High Park. The city has been carrying out prescribed burns in the park since the late 1990s, a fact Dawn Bazely, a biology professor at York University, likes to trumpet at international conferences: prescribed burns could benefit many landscapes, but governments and the public are often wary of setting them.

“I’m like, hello, I live a block and a half (from High Park) — stop it,” Bazely says. “If we can do it in High Park, you can do it there.”

Citizen volunteers like the High Park Stewards have contributed hugely to restoring natural areas. What was once a manicured lawn north of Grenadier Restaurant has been converted back to savannah with the help of volunteers. They help battle invasive species, a relentless and labour-intensive task, and have replanted native ones.

But the TRCA report makes clear that if humans have helped sustain High Park, they have also degraded it. While the park's oak savannahs are faring decently, the forest and wetlands areas are not.

The "intensive trampling" noted in the report is the result of traffic from human visitors, but also the result of dogs allowed to roam freely outside the park's designated off-leash area, the authors say. Dogs and people trample plants in sensitive areas, and also disturb animals, including ground-nesting birds: the report all but gives up on seeing the return of these species.

Leslie Gooding, co-chair of the High Park Natural Environment Committee, says if visitors simply walked and biked on the approved, official trails and kept their dogs leashed except for in designated areas, "that would be a really big step forward." The TRCA report calls for better enforcement of leash laws.



Fencing near a picnic area in High Park protects a piece of land from being trampled, while a sign urges visitors to help protect trees and wildflowers.

Steve Russell

The report also says public use needs to be better managed, and perhaps even contained. It recommends that some areas of the park be left as refuges for plants and animals, with minimal visitor access, including the sensitive oak savannahs. The report suggests restricting the number and width of informal trails.

Yukich, Bazely and others offer a fix likely to be more controversial: visitor caps. Yukich says we would never let 10,000 people into an indoor rec centre without supervision, while Bazely notes that limiting the number of people on a pool deck is an accepted safety strategy: Why not in environmentally sensitive parks, too?

The TRCA report recommends highlighting the successes of restoration programs and expanding them to more heavily forested areas, though experienced volunteer stewards say this will require significantly more funding and support.

For the time being, "One of the things we might think about is visiting High Park as a form of ecotourism," says Bazely — or even better, as regenerative tourism, which describes leaving a place better than you found it.

Locally, those who live nearby can [plant species native to High Park](#) in their own gardens, the stewards also suggest, expanding the habitat of the park outwards.

“We tend to think that nature happens outside the city, but actually cities can be extremely rich in nature,” says Yukich.



Kate Allen is a Toronto-based reporter covering climate change for the Star. Follow her on Twitter: [@katecallen](#).

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