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HOW VOLUNTEERS ARE HELPING CARE FOR ONE OF TORONTO'S MOST TREASURED GREEN SPACES

By Megan Bocchinfuso | Photos by Jeremy Cove

Spend enough time in High Park and you begin to realize that the park is more than the trails, trees, gardens and wildlife. It is also a place shaped by the people who care enough to give their time to it.

Volunteers can be found doing all kinds of work throughout the park and surrounding community. They are educating dog owners, studying the natural environment, monitoring Grenadier Pond, tending native plants, removing invasive species and helping restore habitats.

Their reasons for getting involved may differ, but the underlying motivation is remarkably similar: they love High Park and want to help preserve what makes it special.

For the volunteers of Paws for Parks, that means helping create a park where people and dogs can enjoy the space responsibly. Tracy Loconte founded Paws for Parks in 2022 after noticing an increase in off-leash dogs outside designated areas. The group focuses on both community accessibility and the care of High Park's natural environment.

The volunteers take a positive, educational approach. They attend local festivals and pop-up events, often alongside community partners, and invite local dogs to become "Bark Ambassadors" by taking the P.A.W.S. Pledge: Pick up poop, Always leash (except in designated off-leash areas), Watch out for wildlife and Stay on official trails.



"The dog kisses from our new Bark Ambassadors always create a memorable moment,"
Loconte says.

For Loconte, some of the most meaningful moments come from connecting with neighbours and hearing their experiences. The group's volunteers also get plenty of enthusiasm from their four-legged participants.

For Tina Soldovieri, volunteering with the High Park Natural Environment Committee has been an opportunity to deepen her understanding of a place she has loved since moving to the neighbourhood in 2002.

Before moving from Chicago, Soldovieri remembers buying a book about Toronto to learn about the city's parks and neighbourhoods.

Living near High Park, she says, "was a dream come true."

Today, her connection to the park extends beyond enjoying trails. Soldovieri contributes to the Natural Environment Committee, supporting stewardship discussions, helping with committee tasks and checking on the beavers in High Park while also working as a naturalist teacher at the High Park Nature Centre.

"I love that we are all different and have different perspectives and priorities," Soldovieri says of the committee, "but everyone is being heard because we all share the same goal: we want

High Park's ecosystems, the Black Oak Savannah, the woodlands and wetlands, to thrive!"

Karen Yukich, Co-Chair and a founding member of the High Park Natural Environment Committee, has been involved for decades. She became part of the committee during the early stages of recognizing High Park's rare oak woodland and savannah and has continued to volunteer ever since.

What many people may not know is that more than half of High Park is designated as an Environmentally Significant Area (ESA) and an Area of Natural and Scientific Interest (ANSI), with Grenadier Pond and other wetlands also recognized for their ecological importance. "Since nature cannot speak for itself, it is up to people who care about the natural environment to speak for it. That is what the Natural Environment Committee is all about," Yukich said.

She says everyone is welcome to be added to their email list and attend their meetings (usually 3 or 4 per year).

A short distance away, another group of volunteers is taking care of the Boulevard Bed Demonstration Garden, where native plants provide a living example of what can grow in High Park's unique ecosystem.

The High Park Steward's have been gardening in the Boulevard Beds since 2001. Many began as stewards working alongside City staff on restoration projects, and eventually found themselves drawn to the idea of caring for a garden on a regular basis.

For Lois Bennett, Mary Cole, Henny Markus, Debbie McLean, Cathy George, Reymond Lise and William Montague, the garden provides an opportunity to work outdoors, learn from one another and contribute to the community.

The Boulevard Bed Demonstration Garden showcases native High Park plants, including serviceberry, sumac, big and little bluestem grasses, butterfly milkweed and wild bergamot. These indigenous species thrive in the park's sandy soil with minimal care, growing naturally beneath its black oaks.

Every Wednesday morning from late April through November, the volunteers weed, tidy, plant and care for the beds. They watch the plants develop through the seasons and continue building their knowledge of native species. They also hope that these beds can help inspire people to use similar native plants in their own garden,



especially if they're living near High Park and have similar soil conditions.

But they are not the only ones enjoying the garden.

Robins can be seen eating berries, hummingbirds visit flowers, baby rabbits have been discovered tucked away, ladybugs feast on aphids, monarch butterflies and tussock moth caterpillars are seen eating milkweed.

For the volunteers, these encounters are part of what makes the work so rewarding. The garden is not only something beautiful for people to look at - it becomes a small but active part of the surrounding ecosystem.

The same can be said for the volunteers who spend their time on Grenadier Pond.

Markelle and Sandra volunteer with the Lake Partners Program, applying their training and interest in protecting Ontario's waterways.

From May through October, they canoe to two locations on Grenadier Pond each month to collect water samples. They also measure water clarity using a Secchi disk before sending their samples for testing. They monitor phosphorus concentrations and compare them with historical annual data dating back to 2002!



“To help improve the water quality, we ask local residents to respect vegetated shorelines, reduce / replace road salt usage on properties, and dispose of garbage and waste appropriately,” they said.

What stands out when speaking with High Park’s volunteers is that none of them talks about volunteering as a solitary activity. They talk about neighbours, learning from one another, discovering something new, seeing wildlife, sharing knowledge and spending time with people who care about the same place they do.

Some of the most meaningful moments for the volunteers of Paws for Parks are the joy of working

alongside people who love both dogs and their community. For Soldovieri and Yukich, it is the exchange of knowledge and perspectives. For Markelle and Sandra, it is the chance to put their skills to work for a local waterway.

For the Boulevard Bed volunteers, it is the satisfaction of watching a plant grow and seeing wildlife make use of the garden.

High Park belongs to everyone who visits, but behind each experience is someone who quietly gave their time to help make it possible. That is the power of volunteers. Not only what they accomplish individually, but what they can create together.



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