

News from the FWG: 2009

By Christine Hanrahan

Another busy year at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden, and so much to report in so little space. Once again, I'll have to curtail details and provide just the highlights.

Backyard Garden News

Creation of the wetland area adjacent to the BYG pond has been a real focus in 2008. Much work has gone into ensuring that the site retains a degree of dampness for the plants such as boneset that have been planted there.

The bed at the very end of the garden, past the pond, which once held a large rosebush, a big clump of Indian Grass and other assorted plants, is in the process of being changed into a "shrubbery". In part this is because it provides a good way to prevent people from using a steep, informal path out of the BYG and into the Arboretum. Over time that path widened and became very muddy and slippery after rain. But the shrubs now being planted will provide fruit and seeds for birds.



BYG in mid-summer, showing the Interpretive Centre

Many of the Friday morning BYG volunteers worked in the Ravine with Tony Denton this year. But more on that later. Although we have some new volunteers, there are never enough because not every one comes every week. It takes a lot of work to maintain the BYG, so if you have Friday mornings free and would like to help out, give us a call or send an email. Volunteers meet from spring through early fall. Contact the FWG at either 613-234-6767 or fletcher@ofnc.ca.

Talks, Walks, and Events

Talks

In January, I gave a talk to the Nepean Horticultural Society, on the Fletcher Wildlife Garden, focusing on its history and tracing the evolution of the garden from the early days to the present. People were more interested in asking questions about birds than about gardening, which was just fine by me!

Walks

We participated in the National Wildlife Week festivities by holding two guided walks at the FWG, one during the week, one on the weekend. The theme of the festival for 2009 was Native Plants, so it was a good fit for us. Both walks were well attended and people enjoyed the butterflies, turtles, birds and of course, plants that they saw.

Events

Native Plant Sale

The plant sale, held annually on the first Saturday in June, is usually well attended, with many repeat customers. However, this year's sale exceeded all others by a wide margin and gave us some healthy revenue for further work at FWG. Great publicity was generated by a committee headed by Barbara Riley and Nicole Gourret. The group worked hard all winter developing plans for a media blitz, and it obviously paid off!

Bird Events

Great Backyard Bird Count. We have been participating in this North America wide mid-winter event for several years now. As the definition of Backyard is quite flexible, it means that our entire 5 hectare site, as well as the Arboretum, can be surveyed. David Hobden organizes the FWG participation and compiles the results. In 2009, we tallied 16 species, one more than in 2008.

On Saturday, May 9th 2009, we again held an open house and guided birding walk to celebrate International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD). The walk was very capably led by Peter Fuller, who has kindly helped us out for the last few IMBD events. Although it rained almost the whole time, the group of 30 stayed out for nearly 2 hours and had a great tally of birds, including many warblers, vireos and other migratory species. Hot coffee, refreshments, handouts, and displays awaited them back at the centre. This will be the last IMBD event. I've decided that after organizing it for over 13 years, I need a break..

Other Events

The FWG once again participated in the Wildlife Awareness Event at Billings Bridge mall, as part of National Wildlife Week, organized by the Ottawa Wildlife Festival (www.ncrwildlifefestival.org/). In 2009, the event was held for only one day. Thank you to the volunteers who helped staff our booth there.



Participants in the IMBD walk

On Saturday, May 23rd, we partnered with the Canadian Museum of Nature to host an event for the International Day of Biodiversity. The 2009 theme was Invasive Species, with a focus on garlic mustard and rusty crayfish. Not having crayfish at the FWG, we concentrated on garlic mustard. In the morning there was a power point presentation on this species, with updates on the latest news in biocontrol. After lunch, provided by the CMN, we headed out into the garden to do some hands-on work. While garlic mustard *in* the Ash Woods and elsewhere has been

brought under reasonably good control (I say with fingers crossed), we were appalled to discover that it was now marching down the east slope of the woods. This is where we spent most of our time. Invitations had been sent to all the Conservation Authorities, the City of Ottawa, NCC, gardening clubs, and other organizations that we thought would be interested in learning about this very invasive species. However, it seems that garlic mustard as an invasive species just doesn't have the same cachet as the "sensational" giant hogweed, and hence, our group was small, though very enthusiastic.

Green Team volunteers

Green Team volunteers from Price Waterhouse Cooper (PWC) came to the FWG for the third year in a row. This time, although fewer than in previous years, we were very happy to have their help in planting many tall eastern white cedars in the Ravine to create evergreen thickets in the gaps left by the Buckthorn removal. PWC also made a generous donation to the garden.

Outreach

As the FWG becomes better known, we are increasingly being asked for information and advice by others wishing to set up native plant gardens, or wildlife friendly gardens, particularly those attractive to butterflies. Over the last year, Elgin Street Public School's, Earth Care Garden, the Children's Garden at Leggett Park, and Kanata Public School's Project Vert, have all sought and been given help for their own projects. Some have had guided tour of the FWG. Some came to our plant sale in 2009 and bought several hundred dollars worth of plants! The Elgin Street school also scoured our website and requested permission to use some of our butterfly and wildflower photos for their signs.

A group called Coop Voisins last year requested help in turning a grassy area into a butterfly meadow. This year one of the group members came to our plant sale and bought a considerable quantity of plants.

The Sawmill Creek Wastewater Management System also requested advice about native plants to grow in the site between Heron Rd. and Hunt Club. FWG donated some flats of wildflowers after the 2008 plant sale.

The City Stream Watch Coordinator for the Rideau Valley Conservation Authority, contacted us for help and advice on dog-strangling vine control, which the organization was targeting at several locations.

Finally, perhaps the best known people turning to us for advice were Hank and Vera Jones, of Allbirch Pollinator Gardens (www.treenuts.ca/apg/). Their names became familiar across the city and beyond when they fought a notice from the city of Ottawa ordering them to cut down their newly created pollinator garden, which was considered "messy". They were interviewed by radio and TV stations; articles and letters were printed in the local newspapers; and support even came from Dr. Peter Kevan, one of the best known pollination biologists in North America. Initially the Jones' sought help for their plight from FWG who donated 140 plants for their pollinator garden. Several of us went to visit them and helped ID their plants and some of the insects visiting the garden. Now they are in the midst of deciding how best to keep the momentum they

gained, going. It might be by establishing a Canadian Pollinator Garden network, or by working with some existing group, such as the Canadian Wildlife Federation, which already has a well-established “Wild About Gardening” website with an abundance of information including information about pollinators.

Photo Galleries

In September 2008, we opened an account with PBase, a photo-sharing website. Initially it was to find a convenient way of storing our insect photos and at the same time allowing people easy access to them. It worked very well, and we gradually expanded the galleries to include mammals, fungi, birds, and wildflowers, found at FWG. Then we added galleries showing the garden through the seasons, and galleries devoted to the BYG. Our FWG Blog has been on PBase since September because we find it works very well and allows visitors to see many photos at once. As of this writing (August 2009), we have 40 galleries and over 1800 images online. We’ve had nearly 100,000 visits to the site thus far. Check out our galleries at: www.pbase.com/fwg and let us know what you think!

Problems

The spring of 2009 proved to be one of the worst for fires at FWG. I don’t think we’ve seen anything like it. The first one occurred while there was still snow on the ground, on March 22nd. At one point, AAFC Security told us they caught upwards of 50 people around a big bonfire on the edge of the Ash Woods. Although the police were called, the “kids” got off with a slap on the wrist. We think it must have been the same group who kept because they targeted the same location week after week. The fires got bigger and bigger, and sometimes they brought over chairs, bureaus, and other assorted items to burn. They also tried hacking down some of our trees, and broke branches off of most of the large conifers surrounding the site. Needless to say they left quantities of garbage. As if that was not bad enough, we found fires at about 5 other sites, though none as large as the above. Eventually, fed up with this, we asked AAFC if they would drop off some cow and sheep manure, which they did. Several of us then spent the afternoon raking it all over the worst hit sites. The smell of manure was eye-wateringly strong. Whether it was that which deterred the partygoers, or whether it was because school (Carleton University) ended at about that time, we don’t know, but the fires stopped.

One night a car was driven through the BYG on the north side of the building and across one of the beds. Fortunately, the ground was still slightly frozen in part and the damage was not as severe as it would have been later in the season. Also in spring, someone tried to burn our new bulletin board on the pergola. And in August, several plants in the BYG were dug up and cut down. Never a dull moment!

Habitats

Butterfly Meadow. Creating a butterfly meadow is not an overnight task. Diane Lepage and her volunteers have been working steadily for several years, meeting every Wednesday evening from late spring to fall. The existing meadow is being expanded by adding several adjacent sites. These were initially filled with dog-strangling vine (DSV) but are now full of lush wildflowers attracting an abundance of insects. Another section was rototilled in late spring 2009 and volunteers sifted through the soil, removing the DSV and planting with butterfly-attracting

plants. I know that Diane would welcome more help, so if you would like to participate in creating great habitat for butterflies and other insects such as this leafcutter bee (and birds), please contact FWG (details below) and volunteer.

Ravine

As noted above, we received much needed help from the Price Waterhouse Cooper team in planting cedars in the Ravine. Tony Denton and his small crew of volunteers have been working really hard in this area, not always an easy site to work in given the slope and mud. There are still buckthorn roots sending up new growth, and seedlings to be removed, as well as more shrubs and trees to be planted. The purple flowering raspberry is really galloping across the south slope, covering the bare patches, but also overtaking newly planted tree seedlings. Sumac is likewise finding the newly created bare patches to its liking, so both these species will need to be controlled judiciously until the trees we've planted have a chance to establish. More volunteers are always welcome for this effort which will be ongoing for quite some time yet.

Amphibian Pond

For years we've talked about the pond and what to do about it. There are times when it seems very unhealthy but at other times it appears to be not so bad. I suppose it depends on our perspective at any given moment. We have long wanted consistent oxygen and Ph monitoring. In 2009, Nicole Gourret and David Hobden undertook to do this. The work is ongoing and a report should be available for the 2010 FWG update. We have also considered digging out the sludge at the bottom of the pond, but this is a tremendous undertaking involving heavy equipment, money, and worst of all, disruption to the pond's inhabitants. In the meantime, large swathes of cattails are being removed in certain areas, as is the water willow along the south shore, and frog-bit in the pond. Interestingly, flowering rush is nowhere near as bad this year as it has been in the past. Quite often I've noticed the muskrats both eating the roots and chewing off the stems. Is this perhaps a new biocontrol method for flowering rush!

Plants and Animals

Birds



Three young Long-eared owls

Photo by Diane Lepage

No sooner had the updated FWG bird list been published (Hanrahan 2009), than additions were made. Several species were added and we confirmed breeding for house wren, common grackle and long-eared owl.

Kestrels are almost absent from the FWG now, after years of being so consistently present. For the last few years I've wanted to replace the old nest box on the barn that has been up for about 15 years. Finally we got a new one and it is

now up and waiting. Thanks to Chris Traynor for the new nest box and to AAFC for doing the work of installing it.

Other Fauna

It was not a stellar year for butterflies in our region and FWG was no exception. In particular, monarchs were noticeable by their almost complete absence in the area. A few were seen sporadically and one notable day in August I saw three around the garden. Eastern tailed blues were once again scarce at FWG. I saw only three there in 2009, at least by the time of writing.

Dragonflies and damselflies were likewise much more scarce than last year. Diane and Sandy, working in the pond were tasked with keeping an eye out for odonate exuviae and found none, unlike in previous years. The most interesting dragonfly was a prince baskettail that came to the white sheet one night while we were looking for moths, and remained until we packed up and left sometime around midnight. The usually common dragonflies at FWG, twelve-spotted skimmer, dot-tailed whiteface and common whitetail, were seen only a few times. However, the big mosaic darners and the common green darner, were quite common, and one pair of lance-tipped darners was seen mating. We even added a new species to our list, lake darner.

Our moth list increased substantially in 2009. This was largely due to Diane Lepage who spent a few nights mothing at the FWG and identifying many new species.

Turning to mammals, the pair of muskrats found in the pond last spring must have remained, although they were fairly adept at keeping out sight, because in mid-summer I found two small youngsters with an adult in the pond. For about a week they were visible in the middle of the day, busily chewing off cattails and the emerging flowering rush. One day I found two raccoons in the Ravine, trying to get comfy in the fork of a large tree, and there might even have been a third. During the winter I was bemused to find deer tracks in the snow on the north end of the Ash Woods. Later, I spoke to someone who said they had several times seen a deer south of the garden, along the canal.

Diane and I built a turtle raft, modeled on the ones in the Larose Forest wetlands, and installed it in the west end of the pond in April. Then we waited to see if it would be used. Initially only green herons and ducks found it acceptable, but eventually the resident large painted turtle began climbing aboard. Then a snapping turtle decided it was just fine. A smaller painted turtle that turned up in early summer also began using it. One day I found a red-eared slider basking on one end, with the big painted on the other. The slider is indigenous to the southern US but is popular in the pet trade, unfortunately. When they get too big or too much trouble to take care of, people end up releasing them in wetlands, lakes, rivers, etc. thinking they'll survive in a natural setting. Maybe they will, maybe they won't, but they are not a native species and shouldn't be released here. This poor creature at FWG likely won't survive the winter, but you never know...

Volunteer Opportunities

If you would like to volunteer at the FWG, why not drop by any Friday morning spring through fall, 9:00 a.m. to 12 noon, and see what it is all about. You can talk to the volunteers, explore the garden and get a feel for what we do. You can also discuss other volunteer opportunities at the

garden while you are there. There is invasive species control, tree planting, or any number of other activities. Regular volunteer groups meet on Friday morning (BYG) and Wednesday evening (Butterfly Meadow), spring through fall.

The FWG is run by a Management Committee and we'd be very happy to see new members. You are welcome to drop by one of our regular meetings (always the 4th Wednesday of each month, at 7:30 p.m. at FWG) and see what the committee does.

Acknowledgments: As always, thanks to all the volunteers who make FWG happen!

Photos: Christine Hanrahan, except where noted.

References: Hanrahan, Christine. 2009. Birds of the Fletcher Wildlife Garden and Vicinity: Update 2009. T&L (43)3:120-127.

FWG Details and Contact Information

The FWG is located off Prince of Wales Drive on the Central Experimental Farm. For more information please visit the website at:

www.ofnc.ca/fletcher.php. Brochures about the garden are available from the Centre on Friday mornings from spring through fall, Sunday afternoons in the summer, or during the week June through August when we have a summer employee.

- FWG phone number: 613-234-6767
 - Sandy Garland: website, information about the FWG and Newsletter: fletcher@ofnc.ca
 - Christine Hanrahan: bird and wildlife observations: vanessa@magma.ca
- AAFC Security: 613-759-1985