

News from the FWG: Summer through Winter 2004/2005

By Christine Hanrahan

By the time you receive this update, signs of spring should be spreading across the land. This report, however, looks back to the end of summer through fall 2004 and into mid-winter 2005.

Backyard Garden News

Jay Ladell, the innovative manager of the Backyard Garden (BYG), continues to implement the long term plan for the area, with the help of the dedicated BYG volunteers. A new stone wall now flanks the north side of the garden where a revitalized entrance way is being established.



Malcolm and Dale installing new feeder. Photo by C. Hanrahan

Garden beds have been changed in size and structure, the bird feeder has been moved further into the garden and a refurbished feeder installed (thanks, Dale and Malcolm).

The nursery behind the garden shed has been expanded to twice the original size, with a flagstone path separating the upper and lower beds, and a new watering system installed.

Landscape Ontario provided an ample supply of leaves for the leaf depot just west of the Interpretive Centre. This allowed us to mulch not only the BYG but most of the newly planted shrubs and trees elsewhere in the garden.

Be sure to mark your calendars for the 2005 native plant sale. Jay and Sandy have been growing a variety of seeds in preparation for this and we should have some very interesting new plants for sale.

Management Committee

Many people may not realize that the FWG is run by a hard working committee currently consisting of 9 people including a representative from the Friends of the Central Experimental Farm, and 2 regular guests. It is chaired by David Hobden. Decisions on matters large and small are made during our monthly meetings and if urgent, in between by email communication. Many of the members have been involved for a number of years. However, we welcome new folk such as Colin Freebury who appeared at the FWG in late spring 2004, quickly made himself an integral part of the operation and luckily for us, came onto the committee. Many of the issues that you see highlighted in these various updates arise out of our committee meetings, items such

as signs, events, hiring of a summer employee, habitat maintenance, BYG management, and so on. OFNC members are welcome to sit in our meetings which take place the 4th Wednesday of each month at the garden.

Media

Annie Belair, our summer employee, was interviewed by students participating in a Radio Summer Camp at CKCU, the Carleton University radio station. Annie took them on a tour of the garden and afterwards handled all their remarkably astute questions with savoir-faire. Both Annie and the kids did a fantastic job.

Marianne Neilly, well-known local poet and author, was interviewed by CJOH for their program Regional Contact and was filmed 'on location' at the FWG during the summer. The show aired February 5th, 2005.

Signs

We are still considering new signs, one for the entrance road on Prince of Wales, and one at the parking lot. Charlie Clifford has been spearheading the not-so-easy issue of exploring all the options available including design and construction, installation, material, and cost. We should be making a decision soon. Stay tuned!

Dogs

In an earlier issue I mentioned that dogs and their owners are probably the most numerous visitors to the garden (followed by birders, some of whom are brought by their dogs). While most owners are responsible and scoop the poop and control their pets, a small minority are less so. It is the latter that are occasioning complaints and causing the majority to look bad. Colin Freebury surveyed dog owners one Saturday morning to see what might be done about this, and interviewed 33 people and their dogs. They came from across the city and all felt very strongly that the FWG was a special place which they were privileged to be able to use. They were concerned that the actions of thoughtless owners would impact negatively on the rest and to that end were more than supportive of organizing a clean-up day in the spring. Colin will talk to some of them in early spring and ask them to organize the event.

Problems

Vandalism reared its ugly head in early October when various things were stolen (the leaflet box in front of the Interpretive Centre, a tarp over the nursery beds, and the garden cart), and destroyed (the BYG pond sign and a bird box). At about the same time a game of paintball was held in the Ash Woods and various trees were hit by bright pink paint which fortunately soon wore off. Sometime later, several tarpaulins covering piles of swallowwort near the Ash Woods

Upcoming Events at FWG

International Migratory Bird Day

Saturday, 14 May, 2005

10:00 a.m. to 12 noon

Join us to welcome back the birds by participating in guided walks around FWG. We'll have displays, handouts and more. Contact me at vanessa@magma.ca for details.

Annual Native Plant Sale

Saturday, 4 June, 2005

9:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Donation of native plants and seeds is welcome, either on the day of the sale or before hand. Info: Sandy (730-0714, sgarland@magma.ca) or Jay (jay_ladell@yahoo.com).

were taken. Plant theft continues to plague us. Once again we remind readers that if they see anything suspicious at FWG to please call AAFC Security at 759-1985 and the FWG at 234-6767.

Managing the Habitats

Old Field Buckthorn removal

During 2004, invasive buckthorn shrubs growing in the thickets around the Old Field habitat, were tagged for removal. Many of the female fruit-bearing shrubs were cut down, a process which left large gaps in the all-important thickets around the field. Further buckthorn removal will take place in 2005 and 2006 along with re-planting the thickets with native species. It will take some years before the thickets regain their former density and offer good cover and protected nest sites for birds. However, a great start was made in 2004 with many trees and shrubs planted including hawthorns, red osier dogwoods, eastern white cedars, and both pin and choke cherries.

We are trying to balance the removal of invasive species with retention of wildlife habitat. In the case of the Old Field, the thickets surrounding the site have provided excellent habitat for birds fox, rabbits and other animals. The density and structure of the thickets were such that even when the leaves had fallen they afforded much needed protective cover. Unfortunately, much of that came from the numerous large buckthorns which had flourished there for many years. Because their removal fragments the thickets, cutting them all down at once would result in too great a loss of habitat. As with other invasive species, removal is a long-term project. In 2004, buckthorn work was carried out by Annie Belair, Malcom Leith, Colin Freebury and Tony Denton, while in the re-planting I was helped by Claudia Burns and Colin. Colin and Tony also planted a small thicket of hawthorn shrubs donated by Renate Regier. Colin has initiated a 'Buckthorn control and habitat development' project in one of the Old Field thickets. He will measure how well the newly planted material grows and what effect the buckthorn removal has on wildlife usage, as well as recording any re-growth of buckthorn in the area. Full details of the project can be found in the Interpretive Centre.

Planting in other areas

Considerable planting was also done in the semi-circle west of the Ash Woods, on the southern edge of the Ash Woods, as well as inside the woods where many of the large Tartarian Honeysuckles were removed.

New Woods

In order to maintain Tree Swallow habitat on the south slope of the Pond, we have decided to remove most of the trees planted there. Originally this area was to be part of the New Woods and planted with that in mind. Originally planned as part of the New Woods, many Tree Swallow nest boxes were erected amongst the slow-growing seedlings which were so small that the site was for many years a perfect open space for swallows. We didn't anticipate that the boxes would attract so many pairs of swallows or be so successful. However, as the trees began to attain a significant height, we belatedly realized that very soon the nest boxes would become unusable for swallows as a forest grew up around them. One of our volunteers knowledgeable about such

things, Malcolm Leith, has suggested a way of preparing these now reasonably large trees for removal. We anticipate working on this throughout the spring to fall seasons, eventually transplanting the trees to a more acceptable site and leaving the south slope of the pond for swallows.

Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers are the backbone of this project and without them the whole thing would fail quickly. If you would like to help out, the following are some defined volunteer sessions, but there are always other opportunities. To find out more please contact the FWG (details at end of article).

We are sad to report that Terry Clarke passed away in 2004. Terry and his wife Cathy were volunteers in the BYG. Terry also built a number of our bird boxes including robin platforms and wren and chickadee boxes which he and Cathy helped place around the garden. He was a keen birder and loved the outdoors. Our condolences go out to Cathy.

The usual volunteer opportunities at FWG will continue during the spring through fall of 2005:

- *Friday morning*: regular work in the BYG takes place.
- *Sunday morning*: volunteers work primarily in the rest of the garden, planting, weeding out invasives, and helping with other tasks as required.
- *Sunday afternoon*: During summer months the Interpretive Centre is staffed by volunteers usually from noon to 4:00 p.m.
- *Wednesday evening*: Organized by Jay to do more of the heavy landscaping work in the BYG as well as other tasks as they arise.

Plants and Animals

Birds

Perhaps the most exciting visitor we've ever had at the garden was the Great Gray Owl found by Marilyn Ward and Connie Clarke in mid-December. Since then a Great Gray has been observed at least 6 times at FWG. As everyone knows by now, the winter of 2004-2005 was remarkable for the irruption of this northern species into the southern part of the province including the Ottawa area.

A great Horned Owl first observed around the farm on Morningside Lane in early December was found in the Arboretum several times thereafter. We haven't noticed it at FWG, but most surely it has hunted the area. A year ago this species spent the winter in the garden, reliably found roosting in the same spruce tree beneath which accumulated quite a pile of pellets.



Tree Swallows. Photo by Canute

For the last 5 or 6 years a Northern Shrike has turned up in November and 2004 was no

exception. It was noted only infrequently afterwards, usually around the frozen pond or the Old Field. Another old faithful is the Red-tailed Hawk which generally arrives in late fall and sticks around until spring, as it did for the winter just past. Not a rare bird, but definitely an odd one for the FWG was the ruffed grouse observed briefly in late September. I had been checking out some newly planted shrubs on the edge of the Old Field when the grouse strutted out of a nearby thicket and proceeded to watch me watching her before flying into a nearby crabapple which was the last I saw of her.

There was a dearth of sparrows this fall in the garden, and although we did see some of the regular species such as White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows, they were present in reduced numbers. In addition to the typical winter birds, a few Common Redpolls were found in mid-December, while Dark-eyed Juncos could be found sporadically throughout the winter. Up to 7 robins were frequently found in the area throughout the winter. By the time you read this the early migrants will have returned and nesting season will once again be underway.

Other Fauna

For the past 3 years we have seen a beaver at FWG, and such was the case in November when a young animal was found swimming in the pond. However, it was only observed once.

Cottontail rabbits are at the height of a population cycle and while a few years ago we were



Young Cottontail rabbit, photo by C. Hanrahan

thrilled to see one at FWG, the pleasure has worn off somewhat as we survey the winter damage caused by escalating numbers of these cute but voracious little critters. Oddly, the fox population seems to be going the opposite way at FWG. Whereas in previous winters this animal - or its tracks and scat - was spotted fairly frequently, the past winter has been noticeable for a near absence both at FWG and the farm in general. Given the abundance of rabbits, voles and other small rodents around the garden this winter, it is puzzling that foxes appear to be so scarce.

Coyotes are fairly common in the rural portions of the city and beyond, although not often seen, but it was quite a surprise to find one on the farm in January. The animal was clearly lost and seemed rather spooked by its surroundings, not to mention all the dog walkers along the farm roads. I don't know where it went to, but would be surprised if it didn't venture over to FWG with its greater protective cover. Hopefully it found its way back to wherever it came from.

Yellow-legged Meadowhawks were present in small numbers until the weather turned

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:

<http://www.ofnc.ca/fletcher.php>. There you can sign up for our free newsletter *What's Up at the Fletcher Wildlife Garden*, available electronically. Brochures about the garden are available from inside 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
- David Hobden, Chair, FWG Management Committee: dhobden@magma.ca
- Jay Ladell, BYG Manager: jay_ladell@yahoo.com
- Sandy Garland: Newsletter, information about the FWG: sgarland@magma.ca
- Christine Hanrahan: bird and wildlife observations: vanessa@magma.ca

considerably colder in early November. A few Praying Mantis were noticed in the fall, but not anywhere near as frequently as several years ago when they seemed to be everywhere.

Acknowledgments: As always, grateful thanks to the many volunteers without whom the garden would be a very different place. Thanks also to Canute for his great photo.



Ash Woods, Photo by C. Hanrahan